



# Sacred board

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## Not on display

**Title/Description:** Sacred board

**Object Type:** Implement

**Materials:** Wood

**Measurements:** l. 1994 x w. 240 x d. 30 mm

**Accession Number:** 913

**Historic Period:** 19th century

**Production Place:** Australia, Kimberleys Region, Oceania, Pacific

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Given the sacred nature of this object it is SCVA policy to keep it off public display. However, access will be allowed to the material in store for study and research purposes. Access will not be restricted but all researches will be fully informed about the sensitive nature of the material prior to access being granted. However once the sensitivity has been explained, access will be granted to all who request it. Images of the object will not be available via the electronic catalogue.

This large and finely engraved sacred board from the Kimberleys region displays a virtuoso rendering of what Davidson has termed the 'angular meander' pattern (1937: 100, 128-30; figs. 24, 57), a design specific to the Kimberleys which can also be found on shields, bullroarers and spear throwers from this northern area of Western Australia (see a shield from Balgo in Berndt and Stanton, 1980: 18). The impact of this design is enhanced by the juxtaposition of parallel bands of engraving, which are composed of diagonal grooves set at right angles to those on the adjacent band.

Decorated boards and stone tablets from central and Western Australia are known popularly as *tjurunga* or *churinga*, a term which derives from the Arunta (Aranda) language, though local names vary. Campbell (1904: 104), who referred to this type as 'dancing boards', stated that they could be up to fifteen feet long and were carved from the hard wood shell of a decayed gum tree. This example probably dates from the nineteenth century, though its particular history is not known. The plain back shows the furrowed marks of stone tool adzing, while the designs on the front may have been engraved with fine stone or glass tools, the latter obtained from European bottles which, since at least the sixteenth century have drifted on to the north Australian coast.

The function and the precise 'sacredness' of these boards is difficult for non-Aboriginal peoples to comprehend. In societies with few material possessions, yet with complex religious and social institutions, such objects as these boards acted as a focus for ritual activities. They were stored in

secret places and brought out to be laid on the ground and meditated upon by male elders (see Berndt, 1974: pls. 52-4); they were also important in male initiation rites, as holy (in the sense of set apart or restricted) objects which at a particular juncture were revealed to the young initiates. In general terms they were a material link with the ancestors, the designs inspired by events and locations belonging to what is called the 'dreamtime', the mythic/historical period when the ancestors and all important features of the landscape were created.

Berndt and Berndt (1964: 368) state more specifically that long sacred boards from this area 'represent, symbolically, the bodies of the great ancestral and mythical beings'. However, despite an inability to understand fully the significance of the boards or to interpret their designs, non-Aboriginal peoples can still derive inspiration and aesthetic pleasure from the dramatic designs on this exceptional example. Such virtuosity has been attempted but seldom achieved by Western artists, even Paul Klee.

Steven Hooper, 1997

Entry taken from *Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Collection, Vol. 2: Pacific, African and Native North American Art*, edited by Steven Hooper (Yale University Press, 1997) pp. 80-81.

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