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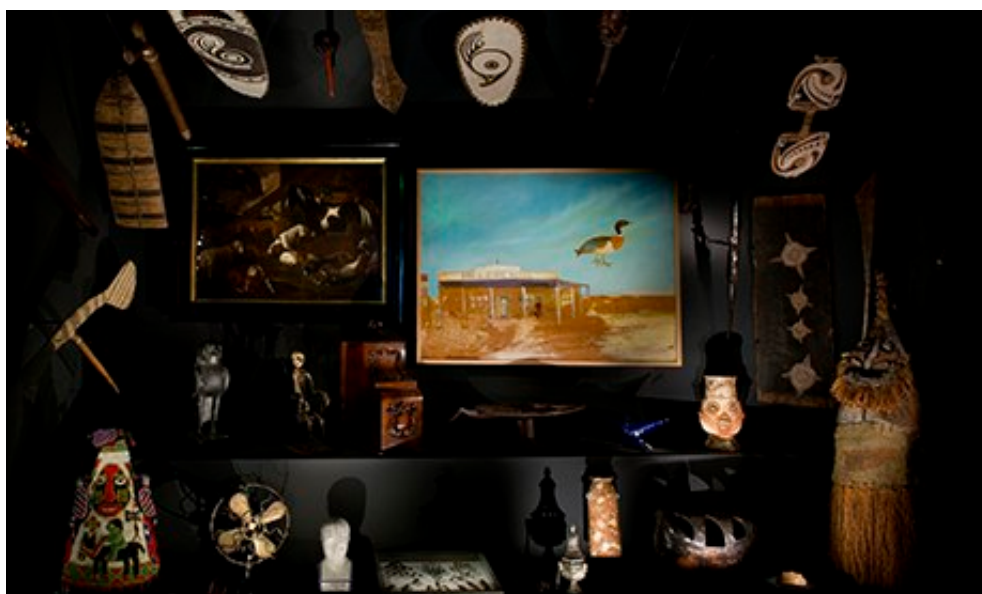
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Théâtre du Monde – review

Indigenous artists shine as more Australian art goes on show at La Maison Rouge in Paris

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Guardian Weekly, Tuesday 10 December 2013 14.00 GMT



A selection of artefacts from the Théâtre du Monde exhibition including an ensemble of clubs, dance paddles, ceremonial axes and Sidney Nolan's Dog & Duck Hotel artwork. Click on the magnifying glass for a larger version. Photograph: Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery

[Australia](#), which has just closed at the Royal Academy of Arts, was the first major exhibition in London to feature art from this continent, reaching from the arrival of the first settlers in about 1800 to the present day. It brought together 200 works by 146 artists. Meanwhile the [Maison Rouge in Paris](#) is presenting the collection of David Walsh, founder of the Museum of Old and New Art, alongside works from the [Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery](#).

Not all the artists selected by the Paris show are Australian. Walsh, a Tasmanian

mathematician who made his fortune gambling, is just as interested in Wim Delvoye, Jan Fabre, Damien Hirst and the surrealists as he is in his compatriots.

But the curator, Jean-Hubert Martin, has added *tapas* – barkcloth paintings – from the Solomon islands, Fiji and Samoa, and various objects from New Guinea and Queensland. So the two shows share a fair amount of common ground, in particular the fact that they both feature indigenous and non-indigenous artists.

The Royal Academy exhibition began with a tedious succession of rooms devoted to the 19th century, with mainly landscapes. The accompanying text panels assert that such and such a painting demonstrates the artist's sympathy with the indigenous peoples. I was not convinced. The latter are simply picturesque, much as the emus and kangaroos. They are painted at a distance, appearing as dark silhouettes. One of the Australian paintings most frequently reproduced – Evening Shadows by H J Johnstone, painted in London in 1880 – shows two women and a man near a bark hut. But most of the picture is taken up by trees and the sky reflected in a pond.

The next generation, corresponding to Australian impressionism, was only interested in towns, seaside pleasures and atmospheric effects. Only Sidney Nolan (1917-1992) stands from the crowd. He devoted a series of paintings to the bushranger Ned Kelly, but unfortunately some of them were on show in London. Nolan dared to come to grips with the reality of his country, its violence and inequality, and its indigenous peoples, at last. The Maison Rouge show confirms his importance as an artist. Walsh owns about 10 of his works, almost all of which are stunning. Just as in London works hanging alongside can hardly compete.



A shield, dated around the turn of the century, from Papua New Guinea opposite a 19th century Tasmanian bookcase that contains, among other artefacts, a lock from Hobart prison.

Photograph: Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery/Museum of Old and New Art, Tasmania

The only ones that do not suffer, because they possess comparable psychic force, despite being completely different, are the work of indigenous artists. The contrast is particularly striking in Paris, when you move from the room containing superb tapas with their geometrical designs to the next one, in the middle of which stands a horrific sculpture by international art celebrities Jake and Dinos Chapman. With its gory, mutilated corpses it is designed to shock. But it fails to do so, being no more than the fruit of facile precepts.

In London the indigenous artists were in separate rooms and they only rate one chapter in the catalogue. Apart from Nolan, the non-indigenous artists' perception of nature is visual: it is a beautiful spectacle to be looked at.

The Aboriginal artists experience nature by walking through their surroundings, smelling, hearing and touching nature, just as much as by seeing it. They do not look at it, they are in it; they do not represent it, they feel it. The difference is all too apparent because, feeling it so intimately, they make you feel it too.

Using mineral or plant pigments, and organic media, the pictograms are organised like maps or music. The areas covered are vast, like real space and just as empty and monochrome. These qualities persist even in the most recent works: the immense black and white composition by Emily Kane Kngwarreye, and those by Doreen Reid Nakamarra and Dorothy Napangardi. Dead Man, by Bardayal Nadjamerrek hangs in a small room devoted to artists from Arnhem Land, at the northeast tip of the Northern Territory. It was painted in 1968. The work of his non-indigenous contemporaries pales in comparison. Australia's great art is here.

Théâtre du Monde is at La Maison Rouge, Paris, France until 12 January

This article appeared in Guardian Weekly, which incorporates material from Le Monde



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