

# **A Comparative Study of Australian Indigenous and Non-Indigenous Art**

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## **Abstract**

In light of the growing interest in indigenous art, this paper investigates differences that are evident through the operation of the market for indigenous and non-indigenous art. It is hypothesized that both demand and supply side factors have spurred the development of the market for indigenous art which is characterized by relatively high participation rates by the indigenous population existing in remote locations and far removed from the large urban centers where artists typically concentrate (Throsby & Hollister 2003). It is found that the market for indigenous art has indeed boomed in recent years with a large majority of traded indigenous art produced post-1970. Furthermore, indigenous artists make up almost a third of all Australian visual artists whose work sold at auction between 1995 and 2003, while the works produced by these artists represented 12.8% of total Australian works traded at auction. Given then that indigenous Australians account for only 2.4% of the overall Australian population, it is apparent that indigenous art and artists have had a significant impact on the growth and development of the Australian art market.

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

The Australian art market has grown in size particularly since the early 1970s following a world wide trend that has seen art markets across the globe become more significant in terms of the volume of art works traded and the prices obtained for works sold at auction. One aspect of particular interest about the expansion of the Australian art market is the boom that has occurred in trade of indigenous art works. In both the primary market represented by sales of fine art taking place in commercial art galleries as well as in the secondary market represented by sales at auction, the significant growth in trade of indigenous art is apparent.

According to the Australian Federal Government's arts funding and advisory body, the Australia Council, art produced by indigenous artists which was sold by private commercial galleries between 1999 and 2000 was valued at A\$35.6m representing 16.4% of the value of total private gallery sales in Australia (Australia Council, 2003). Whilst not being quite as pronounced in the secondary market, trade in indigenous art is still considerably higher than expectations and represents 12.8% of the volume of works traded and 10.4% of the value of Australian art auction sales. This is shown using an extensive dataset containing auction sales records for solo produced two dimensional works such as paintings, drawings and prints produced by Australian artists and sold at auction between 1995 and 2003. When we consider the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) data which shows that at the 30 June 2001, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population of Australia was estimated to be 458,520, or 2.4% of the total Australian population (ABS 2002) it is clear that indigenous artists are making significant contributions to building the stock of Australia's cultural heritage represented in works of fine art. The growing recognition of indigenous art has resulted in the greater representation of indigenous art works in international museums and art galleries, as well as within collections held by wealthy individuals, and of course in private commercial galleries plus also auction markets where works are traded.

This paper focuses on the secondary market for traded Australian art works and presents empirical findings from a quantitative study examining both the scale of the indigenous art market in terms of its size and growth in recent times as well as the participation by various artist cohorts involved in the production of fine art works that find their way to auction. Attention is given to characteristics

associated with the artists and the works themselves as well as with the auction house in order to gain insight into the nature of the Australian fine art auction market. Of particular interest are the artist level attributes including whether the artist is indigenous or non-indigenous.

Consistent with findings from the data used in this Australian Art Sales Digest (1998) shows the growth in indigenous art sales at auction between 1988 and 1997 using auction price data from within Australia (but excluding international sales at auction for indigenous Australian art). Interestingly the Australian Art Sales Digest data shows the shift within the indigenous art market from the watercolour works characteristic of the Hermannsburg movement, and the rising presence of both traditional works such as bark paintings using natural ochre's and arguably of even more significance the contemporary works using synthetic polymers, which together have driven the expansion in the market for indigenous art.

A clarification in relation to the definition of Australian art works, is that Australian art is assumed to include works produced by Australian artists including artists born overseas that have naturalized or have spent considerable time in Australia and produced works whilst living within the country. In a similar somewhat crude manner, artists who are indigenous are assumed to produce indigenous or aboriginal art, whilst non-indigenous artists produce what has been broadly classified as non-indigenous art. This simplifying assumption has been used principally to facilitate categorization of data as either indigenous art or non-indigenous art. It is however worth noting in regard to this point, that both indigenous and non-indigenous artists have borrowed and extended the styles and ideas developed by each other in their own works.

For some indigenous artists rather than sole reliance on traditional media and medium, new technology and media are incorporated into their work including the bright synthetic polymer paints associated with more recent styles and developments of indigenous art such as the works produced by the Western Desert Papunya Tula art movement which emerged in the early 1970s to become one of the worlds most significant art movements in the later part of the twentieth century. Furthermore many indigenous artists have engaged in the production of works that appear more in the tradition of Western painterly style and compositional form, such as the Hermannsburg movement led by the renowned watercolourist Albert Namatjira. Today many of Australia's leading contemporary artists such as Gordon Bennett, Tracey Moffat, Destiny Deacon and Andrew Brooke are also indigenous artists producing works not typically associated with indigenous art and which are more contemporary in style <sup>1</sup>.

Similarly non-indigenous artists such as the Australian modernist Margaret Preston have been artistically inspired by indigenous artistic practice. In the 1920s Preston strongly advocated that all Australian artists adopt traditional imagery and techniques of Aboriginal art as the basis of a distinctive national art style. Although Preston's calls were largely ignored at the time she was later criticized for her indifference to the cultural significance of the design elements whose appropriation she advocated (Kleinert & Neale 2000). Aside from Preston other non-indigenous artists have also borrowed on the styles and techniques such as the dot and x-ray styles developed by indigenous artists to incorporate these into their works. While some non-indigenous artists such as Tim Johnston who have borrowed on indigenous techniques and Dreaming have been mindful of the need to obtain appropriate permissions from the indigenous community, regrettably issues around copyright violation have been particularly problematic with indigenous art whereby many works have been either unlawfully replicated or designs have been incorporated into products such as souvenirs without proper legal authority <sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> The leading contemporary indigenous artists mentioned produce works without relying on traditional techniques and which are not typically associated with indigenous art. However the works by these artists often deal with themes relevant to contemporary indigenous society such as black identity, colonialism, racism, etc.

<sup>2</sup> For examples of copyright violation of indigenous art that demonstrate the extent of the problem and highlights what some of the implications are for artists, The House of Aboriginality website, available online at [www.mq.edu.au/hoa](http://www.mq.edu.au/hoa), contains information and some noted cases concerning indigenous copyright infringement. This site is a resource for copyright and cultural issues in the merchandising of indigenous imagery and was established by Macquarie University.

Yet while unauthorized and direct replications of an art work clearly violate intellectual property rights much of the history of artistic evolution has rested on artists borrowing, expanding, modifying, refining and re-interpreting the ideas, styles and subjects of other artists. Indeed, creativity and cultural diversity has flourished in environments where the exchange of ideas and technologies has been facilitated as for example occurred during the Renaissance. It is also interesting to consider the impact that the introduction of new technology in the form of new media and medium has had on indigenous societies. For example, sandstone used by Inuit in creating their renowned sandstone sculptures was first introduced in 1948 by the non-indigenous artist James Houston and resulted in the Inuit producing highly crafted sandstone carving and sculptures that are prized and sought after. In a somewhat similar fashion the synthetic polymer paints introduced to Aborigines at Papunya by the teacher Geoffrey Bardon in 1971, had a similar impact in so far as the introduction of new technology in the form of paint and canvas enabled an explosion in new artistic creativity to occur.

The introduction of new technologies and techniques along with the process of artistic evolution itself can make the boundary between artists expressing their creative freedom and violating copyright belonging to other artists difficult to distinguish (Frey 2000). The complexity of indigenous copyright also becomes further apparent when one considers that indigenous art is often communal in terms of its initial production and ownership whereas copyright and artists moral rights tend to be more focused on protection of individual rights more so than collective rights. Indeed, the communal nature of indigenous artistic practice has resulted in a considerable number of art works that are co-created (these works have been excluded from the data used in this study). While an extensive literature on copyright and the creative industries exists (of particular note are the contributions by Towse 2001), given the complex and multi-faceted nature of this area a fuller investigation, particularly on issues pertaining to copyright associated with indigenous art and culture is required. In recognizing the importance of this issue the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights has flagged the need for the international community to strengthen respect for the cultural and intellectual property of indigenous peoples (UNESCO 1995). Whilst an investigation of effective copyright and intellectual property rights for indigenous communities is beyond the scope of this paper, it represents an area highly deserving of further research.

The plan of this paper is as follows. Section 2 will address some of the earlier research that has considered the economic implications of indigenous art and artists with a focus on the concept of cultural diversity which is often discussed in terms of the impact of globalisation and the commodification of culture. In section 3 key characteristics of the data set are described. In particular focus will be on the size and scale of the Australian art market, the location of the market as well as attributes pertaining to the artists, the works of art and the auction houses where works are sold. Leading on from this section 4 will address participation by indigenous artists in the production of fine art. Finally section 5 will provide concluding comments and an outline of future areas for research.

## **2. PREVIOUS STUDIES**

Different perspectives on the rise of indigenous art have been postulated from different quarters. These range from aesthetic arguments about the intrinsic qualities of indigenous art to debate over the impact of globalisation which has expanded markets and facilitated trade in art and culture. Certainly globalisation has been a factor underlying the rise of indigenous art, particularly when we consider that a majority of indigenous art collectors which provide a market for indigenous art works are based in the developed Western world far removed from remote indigenous societies where much of the art is created. Yet being able to pinpoint the multitude of reasons that have impacted on both demand and supply of indigenous art and contributed to its rise are complex.

In November 2001, UNESCO unanimously adopted a Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity at the 31<sup>st</sup> Session of the General Conference in Paris. This gave formal recognition to the importance of

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cultural diversity in an evolving global context. The preamble to this declaration states the intention of *'raising cultural heritage to the level of common heritage of humanity....(and) as essential for humankind as biodiversity is for nature'* (UNESCO 1995, p.2). In broadly defining culture to encompass a range of characteristics which derive from previous World and Intergovernmental Conferences on Cultural Policies, the UNESCO declaration defined culture as *'the set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of society or a social group, which encompasses in addition to art and literature, lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions and beliefs'* (UNESCO 1995, p.2). The declaration acknowledged globalisation as both a challenge for cultural diversity on the one hand whilst also creating the conditions for greater cross-cultural dialogue and exchange among cultures on the other.

Without becoming bogged down in evaluating the various manifestations and conations of globalisation that are often presented, globalisation for the purposes of this discussion, can simply be regarded as a phenomena that has rapidly increased trade on an international scale. In becoming the dominant economic paradigm of the twenty-first century, globalisation has been facilitated by the rapid development of new information and communication technologies along with measures aimed at trade liberalization and the removal of regulation to facilitate free market operations. Globalisation is primarily concerned with market efficiency compared to the allocative distributions it produces which often perpetuate inequality of wealth distribution within society. It is in relation to the allocative outcomes of globalisation that passions between the left and right are frequently ignited. Yet despite the lack of congruence between proponents and critics of globalisation there does appear to exist a more widespread consensus within society that globalisation is here to stay. The main arguments postulated around globalisation's impact on cultural diversity have focused on trade in culture but have tended to pay less attention to how culture is generated or produced which is also critical to diversity. The issue of cultural diversity itself is also complex and can be analysed from a number of perspectives as Cowen (2002) has done. As such question raised about the impact of globalisation on diversity must clearly address what kind of cultural diversity it is that we are considering.

One of the main criticisms against globalisation that is commonly encountered is that globalisation is a threat to cultural diversity that acts to homogenize culture by increasing the sphere of influence of the mass market. While there is a plethora of evidence to support the assertion of an expanding mass cultural market that is of questionable quality it does not necessarily follow that this crowds out from the market better quality high-end art and cultural outputs. Certainly the implications of globalisation for cultural diversity are less clear-cut across niche sections of the cultural market including indigenous art. Proponents such as Cowen (1998, 2002) who view the unhindered operation of free markets as facilitating culture and cultural diversity within society, are able to present a compelling counterview to the argument that globalisation is a threat to cultural diversity.

Also Throsby (2001) who takes a different position to Cowen by giving credence to concerns about the impact that globalisation has on the fairness of outcomes and increasing inequities that present a challenge to contemporary economics also argues that globalisation in itself does not necessarily signal the end of cultural diversity across different societies. Throsby eloquently argues that in responding to the pressure of globalisation that may threaten to homogenize culture, the singular characteristics that may be crucial to defining different cultural groups within society may in fact sharpen as the threatened groups seek to differentiate themselves and their own unique cultural identification, thereby preserving cultural diversity across societies. While raising concern over distribution aspects often neglected by economists who tend to focus more on efficiency arguments, Throsby sees importance for the role of cultural policy which is a position shunned by Cowen. Despite the differences that exist between the positions advocated by Throsby and Cowen similarities are also apparent. What is of interest then is to consider how globalisation impacts on culture and cultural diversity, and more specifically how it may impact on trade in fine art works across different societies and nations. In order to explore these propositions the case of Australian indigenous art is considered.

As Cowen points out (2002) cultural diversity has multiple and sometimes divergent meanings depending upon the context in which it is being considered. He points to cultural diversity that exists within a given society to refer to the richness of choice offered by the market to a particular society. Considering the diversity of cultural offerings within society Cowen argues that globalisation acts in a way that expands the menu of choice hence facilitating greater cultural diversity. In supporting this position Cowen points to an indigenous example of market success achieved by the Inuit in creating sandstone sculpture. Inuit sandstone sculptures are highly sought after by collectors and are sold for impressive sums. Cowen argues that income generated for Inuit communities through the sale of their art works has enabled them to maintain many of their traditional ways of life in remote locations demonstrating in this case the ability of the market to facilitate cultural diversity. This example from Cowen raises an important issue concerning trade in indigenous art and how this may benefit indigenous people.

In Australia concern has been voiced over the potential exploitation of indigenous artists who often fail to adequately profit from their artistic endeavors despite the fact that their works may become highly valued and sought after. While indigenous artists are certainly not the only artists to witness others profit from their works the remoteness of many indigenous artists has placed them in a vulnerable position when it comes to marketing and selling their art works. Indeed despite the boom in Australian indigenous art it is questionable how much return from this boom indigenous artists and their communities have seen. Concern over this issue has fuelled debate calling for the introduction of resale royalties to be paid to artists for works they have produced that are subsequently sold at auction.

Cultural diversity can also be considered from the perspective of diversity across societies rather than diversity within societies which has now been discussed. It is diversity across societies that globalisation disfavors. Yet despite the compelling arguments that support the view that globalisation does not favour cultural diversity across societies the matter is far from clear cut. For example it can be argued that aspects of Porter's (1998) analysis where he identifies clusters of creativity, may be extended to apply to remote indigenous communities that have demonstrated a dynamic capacity to respond to growing demand for their art works and interest in their culture.

Cowen identifies that cultural diversity within and across society tend to move in opposite directions to counter one another where as one society trades new art works with another society the diversity within society goes up but consequently the diversity across the two societies goes down as the societies become more similar. From the perspective of indigenous art which has clearly boomed and facilitated cultural diversity within dominant Western societies, the implications as far as diversity across societies are ambiguous. Indeed in his analysis Cowen (2002) acknowledges that large dominant cultures such as those found in Western Europe and the United States along with Japan and China are in a stronger position to be able to absorb new cultural influences to expand their diversity offerings, while minorities including indigenous societies are potentially far more vulnerable to be engulfed by the dominant society if contact is intense and sustained and changes the values held by the minority society.

So then while globalisation may spur a cultural boom within a given society such as a remote indigenous community responding to increased demand for its art works, it may also be that by its very nature globalisation sows the seeds that will threaten the destruction of the minority society it has initially propelled. Firstly, as the booming cultural market expands artists may have a commercial incentive to 'sell out' by toning down their creations for the mass market and comprising the integrity of their works to ensure commercial viability over artistic and creative merit. Indeed the history of art contains many examples of artists ahead of their time whose works were largely ignored until some time later such as Van Gogh who despite now being recognized as a modern master never sold a single work during his lifetime. It is argued that by being motivated to achieve instant market gratification the creative vision required to produce masterpiece works may become suppressed within artists.

Secondly, cultural successes arising from indigenous communities are often based on a combination of effective but limited cross-cultural contact and isolation. As the uniqueness of a particular indigenous society is exposed and potentially exploited through copyright violation which remains particularly problematic for indigenous communities, creativity may be lost by the loss of uniqueness. Also as poorer indigenous cultures become more modern and richer which clearly provides some tangible benefits they may become closer and more integrated into the dominant culture which may also threaten traditional ways of life.

Another aspect to consider in driving the rising popularity of indigenous art is embodied in the multiculturalism. While Cowen (1998) touches upon some aspects of the multiculturalist position he is somewhat narrow in his interpretation. According to Cowen multiculturalists are generally opposed to globalisation and capitalism which they view as a threat to cultural diversity. The case Cowen presents is a somewhat narrow interpretation of the multiculturalist position and lacks sufficient reference to the springs of a fuller multiculturalist debate. Certainly it is clear that interest in indigenous peoples' knowledge and culture is stronger than ever before. This greater knowledge by mainstream society has brought about greater understanding and appreciation of indigenous traditions and ways of life which has aided efforts of reconciliation, indigenous self-determination and also facilitated the recognition of indigenous land rights beyond any left wing agenda. As such it is arguable within a multiculturalist framework to assert that increased Western contact has resulted in greater understanding which serves to ultimately improve social outcomes for indigenous people (which still fall well behind mainstream society) and which aids greater cultural diversity. The growing interest in indigenous culture and society is witnessed not only through the growing market for fine indigenous art works but also through the large tourism market that now operates in areas occupied by indigenous people and through the resulting commercialization of indigenous art for souvenir production. Furthermore, initiatives such as the introduction of indigenous studies in school curriculum ensures that future generations are aware of the importance of indigenous heritage which also facilitates an appreciation of cultural diversity as part of national cultural identity.

Moving on now from the discussion concerning globalisation and cultural diversity it is worthwhile to reflect on some of the aesthetic arguments and propositions raised by art historians to see how understanding from different levels and perspectives can assist us in further understanding the increased demand for indigenous art. In addressing some of the complex issues raised in cultural economics that often fall outside the traditional vein of economics, an approach which is welcoming towards other disciplinary perspectives can prove beneficial.

Jones (1990) has addressed from an art history perspective the reasons underlying why consumer preferences for art are constantly moving and why new sources of art are continually sought out. Aspects of this analysis can be applied to further assist in explaining the causes underlying the marked increase in demand for indigenous art since the mid twentieth century. Firstly, Jones (1990) has argued that it can be observed that as consumption has increased in general, culture has become increasingly commodified. Facilitated by globalisation this commodification of culture, is evidenced by the fierce competition that exists between consumers to obtain scarce cultural capital in the form of original art. Yet given the nature of art works which derive their economic value from not only their aesthetic value and their acceptance as art, but also from the qualities of uniqueness and rareness both of which serve to limit supply, it can be observed that the market for established and accepted art works is in chronic shortage. In response to this market forces serve in part to drive the search for new sources of works from different cultures and ethnic traditions that once discovered can go through a process of legitimization by art critics and those regarded as the cultural elite within society to become accepted and recognized as art forming part of the stock of humanity's artistic heritage (Lowenthal 1992). Once then legitimized the new stock of art works are able to go some way towards relieving, albeit temporarily, consumers desire for original art works which is ever growing. This view ties in with the rising influence of globalisation that impacts on art markets as new original art works regarded as culturally significant are sought out by ever expanding insatiable markets.

### **3. DATA**

The extensive data set used in this study will now be described. The size and scale of the Australian art market which has increased over the past decade will be addressed. Also of interest is the dominance of auction sales occurring within Australia compared to overseas. Following from this some of the key descriptive statistics arising from the data set across key areas including artist level attributes, work level attributes and auction house attributes will be discussed focusing on differences between indigenous and non-indigenous artists and art works.

#### **DESCRIPTION OF THE DATA SET**

The data utilized in this study are derived from Hislops Art Sales Index (2004). This data source contains auction records for millions of art works traded at auction around the world since the early twentieth century. From the Hislops data there are in excess of 70,000 records that exist for art works produced by Australian artists traded at auction internationally, which cover over a forty year period spanning the years 1962 to the present time. For this study which is focused on uncovering current trends within the Australian art market, it was determined that the most appropriate data to use would be that which was close to the present period hence records from the period 1995 to 2003 have been selected. Unlike the study by Worthington and Higgs (2005) which uses sales from 60 well known Australian artists and which includes only 3 indigenous male artists to investigate the financial returns and price determination for the high end of the Australian art market, this study aims to be much broader and inclusive to cover all two dimensional works produced by solo Australian artists. The benefit of this more inclusive approach is that in seeking to understand the market as a whole a more accurate representation is able to be captured as well as the advantage of being able to avoid subjective judgment over which artists to include and exclude from a limited sample of so-called 'well known' artists that will vary depending upon the criteria and judgments made in constructing such a list of artists.

Whilst the majority of sales covered in the data are paintings also included are drawings, etchings, lithographs, prints, photographs, miniatures, tapestries and collages, however 3-dimensional works such as sculptures are excluded, as are co-created works involving collective input by 2 or more artists. The reasons for preferring to focus on the auction sales occurring within the recent past are twofold. Firstly, lower valued works are better covered within the more recent data and secondly, given that indigenous art has risen in popularity since the mid to late twentieth century, by giving attention to the recent past a higher proportion of art works by indigenous artists are covered in the data than if either a longer period was selected or if an earlier period was chosen.

The number of auction records for solo two dimensional art works sold over the period from January 1995 to December 2003 is 27,622 which represents a considerable sample size and covers Australian works auctioned worldwide in the major auction houses as well as in some of the smaller houses. The total number of Australian artists involved in the production of these auctioned works is 1,853. This Australian data from Hislops Art Sales Index was extracted and converted into a relational database utilizing a custom built visual basic program which was in a format allowing additional details and explanatory variables to be added.

Characteristics of the observed data used in this study can be grouped into three main category areas namely work level attributes, artist level attributes and auction house level attributes. The characteristics included in the work level attributes cover details including the title of the work, the type of work along with the medium and media used by the artist, the total surface area including the height and width of the work and also the period in which the work was created.

The artist level characteristics considered include who the artist is, along with demographic information regarding the artist's gender and whether they are indigenous or non-indigenous. Attention is also given to whether an artist is living or deceased along with the artist's year of birth

(and year of death where this is applicable). Furthermore, an addition characteristic has been incorporated into the data as a proxy measure to signify the artist's fame and reputation, this being whether the artist is represented in the collection held by the National Gallery of Australia.

Auction level attributes include characteristics such as the auction house, location of the auction house, the date a work was sold, and where provided high and low estimates for the work, as well as the price in both local currency and in real USD.

### 3.2 SIZE AND SCALE OF THE MARKET

The Australian segment of the fine art market is a small component of the world art market and presents an interesting opportunity for meaningful research given some of the characteristics of this particular market segment that differ from the generic characteristics of the world art market, notably in relation to the high proportion of indigenous art in the recorded data and the relatively high representation of indigenous artists beyond what may otherwise be expected given their representation as a proportion of the overall Australian population. Another point of interest is that as a producer of art works that are in international demand Australia is a relative newcomer and at this point in time can boast no old or great masters. Although given that most of the noted Australian artists were active in the twentieth century (and for indigenous artists who have predominately been active since the 1970s) as more time passes this situation may well change particularly given the proximity of the twentieth century to the contemporary period where as Sagot-Duyaroux, Pflieger and Rouget (1992) note that the closer to the present time the less the rank of artists within the history of art is settled.

Since 1995 to 2003 the value of indigenous art which has sold at auction has more than quadrupled while the volume of sales almost doubled. Significant growth has also occurred in the non-indigenous section of the art market which has also shown a marked increase in value and a lower but steady rate of growth in sales volume. Table 1 shows the value of sales in indigenous and non-indigenous art over the period on a yearly basis to reveal the growth that has occurred in the Australian art market over a 9 year period. The increase in value which is occurring represents real growth in market as the prices and subsequent valuations are given in constant 2003 USD to account for general price level increases.

**Table 1: Value of Australian art auction sales**

Year	Indigenous		Non-indigenous		Total
	Value of sales (in 2003 USD)	Value of sales as % of total sales for the year	Value of sales (in 2003 USD)	Value of sales as % of total sales for the year	Value of sales (in 2003 USD)
1995	\$585,469	5.1%	\$10,801,104	94.9%	\$11,386,573
1996	\$791,114	4.8%	\$15,631,341	95.2%	\$16,422,455
1997	\$1,986,993	14.4%	\$11,800,297	85.6%	\$13,787,290
1998	\$2,614,475	13.6%	\$16,608,399	86.4%	\$19,222,875
1999	\$2,511,490	8.7%	\$26,270,525	91.3%	\$28,782,015
2000	\$3,035,030	9.4%	\$29,146,713	90.6%	\$32,181,742
2001	\$2,723,021	10.9%	\$22,198,879	89.1%	\$24,921,901
2002	\$3,068,793	10.6%	\$25,872,971	89.4%	\$28,941,764
2003	\$5,157,166	12.6%	\$35,840,917	87.4%	\$40,998,083
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$22,473,551</b>	<b>10.4%</b>	<b>\$194,171,147</b>	<b>89.6%</b>	<b>\$216,644,698</b>

As well as the increase in the monetary value of the market that has occurred over the period it is revealed in Table 2 that the market is also expanding in terms of the volume of trade that is represented in the number of sales taking place. The growth in the volume of sales is less than the

growth in the value of the market suggesting that the prices and value of Australian fine art is appreciating over time. While an analysis of the investment returns on art is not the focus of this current paper, it is an area that the author intends to explore in subsequent research.

**Table 2: Volume of Australian art auction sales**

Year	Indigenous		Non-indigenous		Total
	Volume of sales	Volume of sales as % of total sales for the year	Volume of sales	Volume of sales as % of total sales for the year	Volume of sales
1995	226	9.6%	2,126	90.4%	2,352
1996	229	8.7%	2,393	91.3%	2,622
1997	395	17.3%	1,891	82.7%	2,286
1998	451	14.6%	2,642	85.4%	3,093
1999	512	14.2%	3,096	85.8%	3,608
2000	499	14.3%	2,980	85.7%	3,479
2001	375	11.0%	3,044	89.0%	3,419
2002	367	11.6%	2,791	88.4%	3,158
2003	482	13.4%	3,123	86.6%	3,605
<b>Total</b>	<b>3,536</b>	<b>12.8%</b>	<b>24,086</b>	<b>87.2%</b>	<b>27,622</b>

Disaggregating the auction sales data to look at the period in which art works are produced an interesting trend is revealed in that a large volume of traded works are produced post-1970. While this is the case for both indigenous and non-indigenous art this trend is particularly dominant with indigenous art. Table 3 provides a brief overview of the period in which works of art were produced that subsequently sold at auction. What is of interest is the clear evidence of the boom in indigenous art that rapidly gained momentum in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The growth in creation of indigenous art is clearly apparent in that slightly over 75% of all indigenous art works that sold at auction over the period being considered were produced since 1970 compared with 30% of non-indigenous art works which sold being produced post-1970.

**Table 3: Period in which Australian works of art that sold at auction created**

Period in which sold art works produced	Indigenous		Non-indigenous	
	Number of works sold	Percentage of sales by indigenous artists	Number of works sold	Percentage of sales by non-indigenous artists
Pre-1900	10	0.28	1,399	5.81
1900s	2	0.06	754	3.13
1910s	-	-	1,008	4.19
1920s	5	0.15	1,691	7.02
1930s	3	0.08	1,319	5.48
1940s	166	4.69	1,560	6.48
1950s	152	4.30	2,062	8.56
1960s	363	10.27	3,730	15.49
1970s	707	19.99	3,133	13.01
1980s	717	20.28	2,655	11.02
1990s	1,207	34.13	1,312	5.45
2000s	36	1.02	190	0.79
<b>N*</b>	<b>3,536</b>		<b>24,086</b>	

\*Note: the total number of sales for indigenous and non-indigenous artists does not equal the sum of number of sales for indigenous and non-indigenous artists across the defined periods due to the sales of works for which the period is unknown that are excluded from explicit mention in this Table.

### 3.3 LOCATION

A further interesting characteristic of the Australian fine art market is that despite being part of a much larger international art market, Australian art both indigenous and non-indigenous is predominately traded within Australia. The dominance of sales of art works occurring within the nation of origin occurs not only in Australia and appears to be a worldwide trend existing across national art markets around the globe. This may in part be because the domestic demand for the art of a particular nation such as Australia is greater compared to the international demand that exists for the nations art. Yet despite this there is considerable antidotal evidence to suggest that many international buyers also purchase Australian art which is sold at auction in Australia. This is particularly the case with indigenous art for which there is strong international demand across the globe. For instance at a recent Aboriginal Art auction held by Sotheby's in Melbourne in July 2005, it was reported that an estimated 70% of the works sold, including major works such as *Emu Corroboree Man*, the first work produced by Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri and other early works by him at the beginning of the Papunya Tula movement, were purchased by international collectors outside Australia from the United States and Europe (The Age, 2005).

As the impact of globalisation continues and art markets become more internationalized the significance of domestic markets may well diminish. Indeed there is evidence to suggest this may already be occurring in the primary market for indigenous art where recently German and Austrian based private galleries and collectors established links with remote indigenous communities located in Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory to directly purchase art works (ABC Online 2005).

**Table 4: Country where Australia art work auctioned**

Country	Indigenous		Non-indigenous	
	Number of works sold	Percentage of indigenous sales (%)	Number of works sold	Percentage of non-indigenous sales (%)
Australia	3,488	98.6%	22,638	94.0%
England	12	0.3%	696	2.9%
New Zealand	8	0.2%	497	2.1%
United States	18	0.5%	85	0.3%
France	6	0.2%	53	0.2%
Other	4	0.1%	120	0.5%
<b>N</b>	<b>3,536</b>		<b>24,086</b>	

While the fact that the bulk of Australian art is auctioned within Australia, as shown in Table 4 may come as no surprise, what is also of some note is that relatively few works are sold in the United States which is a major art centre at the pulse of the international art world. Although again reflective of the strong international demand that exists for fine art works worldwide, it is typical that prior to an auction of significant Australian art works by one of the major auction houses, a selection of the works to be auctioned will be shown at exhibitions in their showrooms around the world including in New York, Los Angeles, London and Paris.

### 3.4 ARTISTS

The data set contains relevant information on all the identified Australian artists who produced art works which were subsequently sold on the secondary market by their owners at auction. Table 5 gives a summary of the demographic composition of the 1,853 Australian artists whose works have sold at auction over the period January 1995 to December 2003. Given the impact that an artists death has on sales and prices of their works (for example, Ekelund, Ressler & Watson 2000 and Worthington & Higgs 2005) the demographic details have been broken down to show both living and deceased artists by their gender and indigenous/non-indigenous status, as well as looking at the contribution each artist cohort has made to total sales at auction over the period.

**Table 5: Demographic details of Australian artists who produced works that sold at auction**

Artist Cohort	Indigenous				Non-indigenous			
	Number of artists	% of indig. artists	Number of sales	% of sales by indig. artists	Number of artists	% of non-indig. artists	Number of sales	% of sales by non-indig. artists
Male living	153	25.9%	659	18.6%	406	32.2%	7,550	31.4%
Male deceased	144	24.7%	1,901	53.8%	386	30.6%	13,478	56.0%
Female living	98	16.6%	348	9.8%	128	10.1%	776	3.2%
Female deceased	18	3.0%	318	9.0%	131	10.4%	1,741	7.2%
<b>N*</b>	<b>591</b>	<b>70.2%</b>	<b>3,536</b>	<b>91.2%</b>	<b>1,262</b>	<b>83.3%</b>	<b>24,086</b>	<b>97.8%</b>

\* Note: the total number of artists and also the number of sales for indigenous and non-indigenous artists does not equal the sum of number of sales for male and female living and deceased artists across both indigenous and non-indigenous artists due to the artists and sales by artists for whom the artists gender is unknown that are excluded from explicit mention in this Table.

From Table 5 the dominance of male non-indigenous artists is revealed. It is shown that in total, male non-indigenous artists (living and dead) account for just over 50% of all Australian artists with sales at auction between 1995 and 2003, but even more marked is the market share for works by male non-indigenous artists which stands at 87%.

A further interesting point is that across both indigenous and non-indigenous artists, an almost identical share of sales between living and deceased artists exists. For art works produced by indigenous artists and sold at auction 62.7% were produced by artists who were deceased at the time of the sale, while similarly for non-indigenous art works sold at auction, 63.1% were produced by artists known to be deceased at the time of the sale. Interestingly with the indigenous artists a relatively high proportion are recently deceased within the last decade compared to non-indigenous artists suggestive of the fact that many indigenous artists came to be artists producing works in strong demand relatively late in life.

The gender composition of artists is also interesting to consider where overall female artists account for only 24% of all artists while only 11.98% of sales at auction over the period are for works known to be by female artists. The gender imbalance is clearly evident although the reasons underlying the persistence of the gender effect are difficult to fully understand. In considering whether shifts are occurring in the gender composition of artists as women have come to achieve greater representation and levels of equality across areas of productive pursuit within the workforce it is important to look closely at contemporary art works and works produced in the more recent past that account for a relatively high proportion of the total works sold. By considering art works sold at auction produced since the 1970s which overall represent 36% of the total works sold Table 6 provides a breakdown of sales of works by indigenous and non-indigenous artists and also by the artists gender. Consideration of gender impact is of relevance given the historical disadvantage that female artists around the world have faced dating far back in the recorded history of art <sup>3</sup>. With the advances made by the Women's Movement since the 1970s in achieving greater levels of equity between the sexes it is of interest to consider whether the market outcomes for works by female artists are improving over time.

<sup>3</sup> For an insightful analysis into the effect of gender in marginalizing the perception of achievements by female artists since the Middle Ages refer to Whitney Chadwick's *Women, Art and Society*.

**Table 6: Volume of auction sales for art works produced since the 1970s**

	Indigenous		Non-indigenous	
	Number of sales	Value of sales (in 2003 \$US)	Number of sales	Value of sales (in 2003 \$US)
Artists gender				
Female	655	4,894,286	660	2,543,380
Male	1,997	14,064,102	6,627	56,987,953
<b>N*</b>	<b>2,667</b>	<b>18,984,098</b>	<b>7,290</b>	<b>59,538,638</b>

\* Note: the total number of sales and also the value of sales for indigenous and non-indigenous artists does not equal the sum of number of sales for male and female artists across both indigenous and non-indigenous artists due to the sales by artists for whom the artists gender is unknown that are excluded from explicit mention in this Table.

From Table 6, it is apparent that despite advances made in recognizing women's rights, a gender dynamic continues to operate within the art market, in that works produced by female artists appear to have less market impact relative to the works produced by male artists in terms of sales volume and value. Also of note in relation to the economic position of practicing professional artists within Australia is research by Throsby and Hollister (2003) in which they found that from 1987 to 2001 the number of practicing visual artists in Australia increased by 50% from 6,200 to 9,300. Interestingly 60% of visual artists from their comprehensive study, were females which further exacerbates the position of relative disadvantage faced by female artists.

So despite the rise of the Women's Movement and greater equality achieved by women since the later part of the twentieth century, this does not appear to have transpired in female artists (especially non-indigenous female artists) gaining ground to achieve the same level of success as their male counterparts. This assertion is based on the lower values and volumes traded for works produced by female artists. While it can be argued that the benefits from profitable auction sales accrue to the owners of the works and not the artists particularly in the absence of resale royalties for artists, the impact that demand has for an artists work on the secondary market and the prices which are achieved have important ramifications on demand and hence the price of an artists work in the primary market which provides direct income to artists who sell or consign their works to dealers trading in the private gallery system.

Given then that around 60% of current professional and practicing artists are female and that works by female artist produced post-1970 and sold at auction represent only 13% of works sold from this period and account for only 9.5% of the value of all works sold produced post-1970, this clearly demonstrates that female artists do not enjoy the levels of success achieved by their male counterparts. Although interestingly works produced by female indigenous artists fair considerably better within the market than works produced by female non-indigenous artists suggesting that the gender difference in market outcomes is to a large extent being driven by the non-indigenous section of the market. The data reveals that despite very similar sales volumes being produced by female indigenous and non-indigenous artists, the value of works created by indigenous female artists are considerably higher.

### 3.5 WORKS OF ART

Within the dataset the 27,622 sales for two dimensional works of art made by solo Australian artists can be categorized into 8 key groupings pertaining to the type of work they are namely: painting, drawing, collage, etching, prints, photographs, other works including miniatures and tapestries, and works that are missing this level of detail in the recorded data. Paintings account for 87% of the total works sold at auction.

Given the dominance of paintings it is also worth considering the various medium and media that are used by artists to create paintings. The data reveals that indigenous artists predominately work on canvas, linen, board and paper as well as the traditional medium of bark. For non-indigenous artists

there are many entries for which data on the medium is missing, however a large share of works by non-indigenous artists are produced on board followed by paper (which is commonly used in watercolour works). In relation to the media used by artists it is clearly shown that indigenous artists demonstrate a preference towards the use of synthetic polymer paints which are often associated with bright colourful works that typify the Western Desert movement in indigenous art. Also popular with indigenous artists are natural pigments and ochre's which are used in more traditional indigenous works particularly in bark paintings followed by watercolours used by many of the Hermannsburg landscape artists. Again for non-indigenous artists the majority of details pertaining to the media used by the artists are missing from the data, however based on the sales of works for which there are details it appears that the media used by non-indigenous artists is varied reflecting the eclectic nature of much of the art work that is produced by non-indigenous artists.

Continuing to focus on the painting component of the selected sample it is also interesting to consider the size of works produced. Table 7 provides a brief summary of the volumes of paintings sold according to the surface area size groupings that works fall into. What is of interest in uncovering trends which highlight differences between indigenous and non-indigenous art and the practices of artists, is that the data shows some marked differences between the sizes of works produced by indigenous and non-indigenous artists with a greater proportion of indigenous art works being larger in size relative to non-indigenous works. It is revealed that 72% of non-indigenous art works sold at auction over the sample period fall within the size range of up to 5,000 cm<sup>2</sup> compared to 46% of indigenous art works. Furthermore 30% of indigenous art works are greater in surface area than 10,000 cm<sup>2</sup>, compared with only 13% of non-indigenous art works.

**Table 7: Size for Australian paintings sold at auction**

Surface area measured in squared cm's	Indigenous		Non-indigenous	
	Number of works sold	Percentage of painting sales by indigenous artists (%)	Number of works sold	Percentage of painting sales by non-indigenous artists (%)
0-999 cm <sup>2</sup>	272	7.86	4,381	21.40
1,000-1,999 cm <sup>2</sup>	373	10.78	4,164	20.34
2,000-2,999 cm <sup>2</sup>	409	11.82	2,685	13.12
3,000-3,999 cm <sup>2</sup>	307	8.88	2,074	10.13
4,000-4,999 cm <sup>2</sup>	293	8.47	1,467	7.17
5,000-5,999 cm <sup>2</sup>	257	7.43	814	3.98
6,000-6,999 cm <sup>2</sup>	98	2.83	545	2.66
7,000-7,999 cm <sup>2</sup>	158	4.57	549	2.68
8,000-8,999 cm <sup>2</sup>	134	3.87	276	1.35
9,000-9,999 cm <sup>2</sup>	105	3.03	298	1.46
10,000-10,999 cm <sup>2</sup>	133	3.84	429	2.10
11,000-11,999 cm <sup>2</sup>	152	4.39	415	2.03
12,000-12,999 cm <sup>2</sup>	59	1.70	186	0.91
13,000-13,999 cm <sup>2</sup>	64	1.84	74	0.35
14,000-14,999 cm <sup>2</sup>	101	2.91	206	1.01
< 15,000 cm <sup>2</sup>	527	15.23	1,829	8.94
Missing	19	0.55	76	0.37
<b>N</b>	<b>3,461</b>		<b>20,468</b>	

### 3.6 AUCTION HOUSES

The auction house descriptives are also quite revealing in terms of what they tell us about art auctions across the various auction houses and also across different auction locations and highlight further differences between indigenous and non-indigenous art.

Clearly the Australian auction market is dominated by the two major international auction houses Sotheby's and Christies and to a lesser extent the locally based auction house Deutscher Menzies. Table 8 outlines the relative market positioning of the major and minor auction houses engaged in the trade of Australian art both within Australia and internationally. The dominance of Sotheby's and Christies is hardly surprising given their long established reputations which acts as a quality signal to the market and concurs with earlier research about their relative importance in price determination (Hidgson & Vorkink 2004; Higgs and Worthington 2005).

What is of note from Table 8 is that while the market spread is more evenly distributed across the larger players in the non-indigenous section of the art market, Sotheby's strongly dominates in trade in indigenous art.

**Table 8: Sales of Australian art works by auction house**

	Indigenous		Non-indigenous	
	Number of works sold	Percentage of total sales	Number of works sold	Percentage of total sales
Sotheby's	2,201	7.97	5,086	18.41
Christies	190	0.69	5,326	19.28
Leonard Joel	166	0.60	4,325	15.66
Deutscher-Menzies	413	1.50	2,827	10.23
James R Lawson	78	0.28	2,079	7.53
Australian Art Auctions	12	0.04	1,081	3.91
Lawson Menzies	146	0.53	865	3.13
Goodman	42	0.15	883	3.20
Phillips	142	0.51	357	1.29
Other	146	3.42	1,257	5.22
<b>N</b>	<b>3,536</b>	<b>12.80</b>	<b>24,086</b>	<b>87.20</b>

#### 4. PARTICIPATION BY INDIGENOUS ARTISTS IN FINE ART PRODUCTION

It is shown through the extensive dataset used in this study, that indigenous art represents 10.4% of the value of the Australian fine art auction market with the volume of indigenous art traded in the Australian art auction market at 12.8%. Furthermore, indigenous artists account for 32% of the Australian artists contained in the sample who have had works traded at auction between the years 1995 to 2003. All things being equal, we would assume that the proportion of indigenous artists whose works trade at auction, would be the same as the proportion of the indigenous population relative to the non-indigenous population <sup>4</sup> (and for corresponding similarities in the volume of traded indigenous art compared to no n-indigenous art). Yet with ABS population statistics revealing that 2.4% of the Australian population is of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander decent (ABS 2002) it is apparent that indigenous art and indigenous artists are represented far more within the dataset than one would normally expect which is a particularly encouraging finding when it is more common to find the indigenous population overrepresented in social statistics that have negative connotations and social implications (refer to Table 9 below).

<sup>4</sup> Given the social problems experienced by Australia's indigenous population reflected in high rates of alcoholism and domestic violence and low life expectancy, literacy and unemployment rates (etc.) it could be argued one would expect indigenous Australians to have a lower rate of art works they have produced sold at auction. However, despite their relative social disadvantage compared to the non-indigenous population, indigenous Australians maintain a rich artistic and cultural heritage. (Refer also to Table 1).

**Table 9: Social Statistics in Australia for Indigenous and Non-indigenous Populations**

	Indigenous	Non-indigenous
% of the population as at 30 June 2001	2.4%	97.6%
The Good		
% of Australian artists whose work was sold at auction between 1995-2002	32%	68%
% of Australian Rules Football league players in 2005	7.4%	92.6%
The Bad		
% of prison inmates in 1998	19%	81%
Average weekly income in 1996	\$365	\$493
Alcoholism rates amongst adults in 2001	12.2%	10.6%
Female life expectancy at birth in the period 1999-2001	63	82
Male life expectancy at birth in the period 1999-2001	56	77

Sources: ABS (2003), ABS (2002), ABS(2005) AFL (2005)

In considering the reasons underlying the relatively high representation of indigenous art on the Australian art market two main reasons which complement one another are postulated and considered in turn. The first main reason is supply side in its focus. Art is central to the traditional aboriginal way of life. Amongst many indigenous people particularly those whom maintain cultural traditions, there is a high rate of involvement and engagement in artistic practices and production. This widespread involvement by indigenous people with art has spurred the production of fine art works by indigenous communities for both local consumption and increasingly for broader consumption facilitated through the market.

The second main reason for the growth in trade of indigenous art is demand oriented. Since the mid to later part of the last century there has been increasing interest and attention given to indigenous art. Evidence of this is also apparent in the growth of auction sales for indigenous works of art produced since the 1970s up to the current time. While today the achievements of indigenous artists are well regarded, broader attitudes were not always so understanding. Indeed, after European settlement of Australia aboriginal artifacts were collected by many explorers and settlers and sent to scientific museums around the world as items of ethnographic curiosity, recognition of such items as art and the understanding that indigenous people were people with art was much slower in coming to be appreciated. Such societal attitudes were not uniquely directed towards Australia indigenous art, but indigenous art more generally reflected in similar attitudes that once prevailed regarding the artistic creations by Inuit, Maori and Native American artists.

Indigenous community practices and cultural traditions are centred around Aboriginal Dreaming. The significance of Dreaming, has been and in some respects still remains little understood by non-indigenous communities. Dreaming places great value on art works as a means of cultural expression and practice. For indigenous people art is a means by which the present and past are connected. Furthermore, as noted Australian Aboriginal art historian Wally Caruana (2003) explains, art is a way in which Aboriginal people connect with and activate the power of ancestral beings. Art then, for indigenous people takes on a central significance in expressing connection to the land and environment. The importance of art to indigenous people has undoubtedly contributed to, and is reflected in their rich artistic heritage, that has driven the production of indigenous art. In relation to the production of indigenous art it is also worth noting that until the settlement of Australia by

Europeans in the late eighteenth century, indigenous art was made with the purpose of fulfilling traditional cultural needs. So while a large amount of indigenous art is created for a general art market in full knowledge of the required restrictions and expectations, there are other indigenous art works produced where there is an expectation that cultural conventions will be strictly adhered to so that such works will only be created, displayed and viewed by those initiated to the proper level of awareness (Caruana, 2003).

The demand and supply side factors described above are inter-related in the sense that increased awareness of the aesthetic value and cultural significance of indigenous art has served to spur demand for indigenous art that has resulted in more indigenous art finding its way to the market. Furthermore, there is evidence from the dataset used in this study which reinforces the position of the Australia Council and other Australian arts organizations, of higher participation rates by indigenous people engaged in cultural production of fine art works.

Data which focuses on works produced by Australian artists which have sold at auction, is broken down to consider differences existing between the cohort of indigenous and non-indigenous artists engaged in fine art production as well as the differences in the works themselves that these artist cohorts produce. Indeed Australian data provides a rich source to allow for initial testing of the proposition of differences in participation rates and success in cultural production between artists based on aboriginality that may later be extended to test across other nations that also comprise both indigenous and non-indigenous artist populations.

The combination of increased market demand for indigenous art along with the cultural and traditional values of indigenous people have resulted in the relatively high representation of indigenous artists, both male and female and art sales by these artists within the data set. This is partly explained by the collective and communal nature of many traditional indigenous societies. Furthermore, it is also worth considering also in many traditional indigenous communities there is a division of labour that is based on gender where men and women perform certain specified tasks and duties. In some indigenous communities this has resulted in a gender dominance in certain artistic forms of expression. For example, male Navajo Indians in North American dominate in the production of dry painting and works in stone, bone, horn, wood and metal while females dominate in basketry, needlework, weaving and pottery (Feest, 1992). While a gender division in traditional Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities has been seen to exist this has not been so pronounced in the forms of artistic endeavour although there is a dominance by female artists in craft areas such as basketry and beading. More important than gender alone traditional law and custom embodied in Dreaming guides the subjects that male and female artists belonging to a particular tribal community are able to express artistically in their creations.

Yet even in the face of threats to traditional customs and ways of living that persist in the presence of both relative social disadvantage and standards of living on the one hand and pressures to modernize and become more intergraded into mainstream society on the other, many indigenous communities have flourished artistically and created art works in remote outback desert settlements as well as in large urban centres that have received critical acclaim and come to the attention of the international art world.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

This paper presents empirical findings from a quantitative study examining both the scale of the indigenous art market in terms of its size and growth in recent times as well as the participation by various artist cohorts involved in the production of fine art works that find their way to auction. This dual focus enables an exploratory investigation and analysis of a national art market which comprises both indigenous and non-indigenous art and artists to draw comparisons and distinctions where differences exist and more importantly to provide grounding for further research that will apply more advanced econometric techniques to investigate the market in more depth.

Having discussed some of the key factors identified in auction data from 1995 to 2003 that characterize the market for indigenous and non-indigenous Australian art, this exploratory study has provided insight into the Australian art auction market and the growing importance of indigenous art. Some of the interesting findings revealed include that despite the market dominance by male non-indigenous artists who produce paintings, the data also shows a clear upward trend in the volume and value of indigenous art signalling its growing importance within the Australian art market. Also worthy of consideration are the findings around the market outcomes for works by female artists. While female artists do not achieve the level of market success enjoyed by their male counterparts it is interesting that works by female indigenous artists achieve far greater levels of market success compared to works by non-indigenous female artists. Although overall works by female artists both indigenous and non-indigenous are under-represented within the data including works produced in more recent times, relative to the participation rate by female artists more generally in the visual arts. Given then the persistent discrepancies that exist between artists that are being driven by gender, this stands out as an area worthy of closer investigation through future research.

Particularly telling of the development in the market for indigenous art is the fact 76% of the indigenous art traded at auction has been produced since the 1970s compared with 17% of non-indigenous art being produced over the same period. Not only does this signify the increasing importance of contemporary indigenous art as well as more traditional works but it also demonstrates the success of indigenous artists in responding to increased market demand for their art work which has led to a growing number of indigenous artists emerging to create art for new non-indigenous audiences who seek out their works as connoisseurs of fine art and collectors. The expanding market for indigenous art is driven by globalisation as wealthy art collectors from across the globe seek out original indigenous art works.

While today the threat to indigenous peoples' culture and land as well as their other legal rights as distinct groups of citizens has shifted somewhat, the relative social disadvantage faced by indigenous people around the world continues to linger. Indeed, like many former colonial nations Australia's indigenous population has suffered considerably as a result of European settlement. Despite the shift in policies from assimilation and integration which aimed at bringing indigenous as well as other minorities into the mainstream of the majority population by destroying their traditions and cultural identity, policies have shifted with varying degrees to favour measures designed to bring about indigenous self determination where indigenous ways of life, land rights and indigenous identity are recognized.

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