

F.D. McCarthy's String Figures from Yirrkala: a Museum Perspective

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ABSTRACT. In 1948 F.D. McCarthy collected 196 string figures in the course of the American-Australian Expedition to Arnhem Land. This paper presents an account of the current status of this collection, together with a catalogue to supplement McCarthy's published data.

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The Australian Museum houses one of the most extensive ethnological collections of Aboriginal material culture. In the middle of 1988 I attempted to list miscellaneous items unregistered in this collection. Such objects were left aside by former registrars because of lack of documentation, and were waiting for conservation treatment or were simply forgotten. Among those objects was a wooden box containing 196 string figures which were collected by F.D. McCarthy at Yirrkala in 1948. This is probably the largest, well-documented collection of Aboriginal string figures in Australia (Meehan, personal communication, 1989). Because of the outstanding historical and ethnological value of this collection I decided to bring it to the attention of other anthropologists.

The Collection

F.D. McCarthy collected string figures at Yirrkala as a member of the American-Australian Scientific Expedition to Arnhem Land. His comprehensive and richly-illustrated study was published in the second volume produced by the expedition members

(McCarthy, 1960). In the opening chapter entitled 'The story of the expedition', Mountford (1956:xxx) stated that after study, the ethnological collections made by the expedition would be divided between scientific institutions in the United States of America and Australia, but no inventory of items was published indicating which were to go to the US or which were to remain in Australia. The entire collection of string figures, however, stayed in the Australian Museum, where it remained unregistered until 1988. This has made the collection not only inaccessible but effectively unknown.

There are three major records of the Yirrkala string figures kept in the Australian Museum: i) the string figures themselves mounted on the cardboard or brown paper on which various field notes are made (Figs 1,2); ii) 185 photographs (archive numbers V8960-V8964) showing figure makers during their performances and sometimes different stages of the figure making (Figs 3,4); and iii) a photocopy of McCarthy's field book, which opens with the enthusiastic statement 'I began collecting string figures as soon as we reached Yirrkalla' (McCarthy, 1948).