

Basic Detail Report



00054864

Title

Carved Pearl Shell Gwarn and Riji

Date

2015

Primary Maker

Bruce Wiggan

Medium

Pearl Shell and natural pigment

Dimensions

175 x 130 x 28 mm 342 grams

Name

Shell

History

A Gwarn is a unique ceremonial and culturally significant shells specific to Western Australia. They are distinctive to Aboriginal culture especially to the Bardi people and known as 'riji' or 'jakuli' in the Bardi language. Incised pearl shells with a mixture of ochre and resin rubbed into the grooves of engraved ceremonial stories, to highlight inscribed designs. Riji were traditionally worn by the men who had been initiated to a high level and were worn as pubic coverings tied on with a belt made of hairstring. Riji are connected with water, spiritual powers and healing due to the shiny, glowing quality of their surfaces. In Bardi culture the light reflecting of the shells is linked to lightning flashes which are seen during the monsoon season as well as linking them to the flash of light of the cheeks of the Rainbow Serpent who is connected to water and rain. They are usually incised with sacred patterns and tribal insignia or inscribed to tell a story. Riji were objects of great value and were traded with inland Aboriginal people along ancient trade routes and songlines over vast areas of the continent. They have been found at Yuendumu in the desert, south-eastern Arnhem Land, Queensland and South Australia. Certain Aboriginal artists with cultural knowledge and permissions are still making Riji today, and many can be seen in Broome. Some use the older, sacred patterns, while others choose to use more modern designs.