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Indigenous Textiles as a Developing Niche Market with Special
Reference to Australian Aboriginal Textiles.

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Since the restructuring of the global textile and clothing industries in the eighties the demand for design and craft has become an important part of the clothing industries competitive strategy. This has created a space for a developing niche market for indigenous textile design and craft.

The globalisation of fashion and textile production, which relies on low cost production and flexible specialisation, has meant that on one level we have seen a refocusing of traditional textile design and craft in order to respond to the demands of the industry - textile crafts skills have in many cases been harnessed to produce design for the west often severing a link to traditional or indigenous culture however new models of production that celebrate textile traditions and focus on community gains have emerged since the eighties.

In Bolivia for instance weavers using traditional skills produce Western designs for "Abriego" the Danish fashion label which is based on an ethical model set up to sustain traditional life. The collection is marketed throughout Europe and is sold in Liberty in London.

On the other hand we have seen the demand for indigenous design and craft, which both celebrates triumphant textile traditions and techniques and in the case of Australian aboriginal textiles we have seen since the seventies the development of new textile traditions which formed part of the reawakening and flowering of Australian aboriginal culture. These textiles form part of the international developing niche market for indigenous design and craft.

In our postmodern world we yearn for deeper meaning beyond the surface level of textile design -we yearn for Heart- to be reconnected to the interconnectedness and expansiveness of life.

Australian indigenous textile are sophisticated works of art in their own right they draw on 60,000 years of culture and rhythms and depicts the sacred stories based on the dreaming when the topography of the land and culture emerged. They speak to us with deep meaning beyond the surface design about the sacredness of land, spirit and sense of place as Mirriam-Rose Ungunmerr explains

"What I want you to know about is another special quality of my people .I believe it is most important .It is our most unique gift .It is perhaps the greatest gift we can give fellow Australians .In our language it is the quality of Dadirri -the spirit within.

It is inner, deep listening and quiet still awareness."(ungunmerr 2003)

The informal introduction since the seventies of non traditional textile techniques such as batik and later screen printing to desert communities on an informal basis by non indigenous womenworking in various communities such as Utopia in Central Australia, Ernabella in South Australia and Merrepen Arts in the Northern Territory is well documented. Batik and screen-printing provided a new and unique vehicle for ingenious women to combine appropriate, on-traditional and new technology to depict their sacred designs onto silk cotton and canvas. This craft based textile production provided important financial returns to a community.

It is the unique fusion of these forms of technologies that underpin the success of the textile enterprises. The development of an art centre infrastructure funded externally and supported by art co coordinators within communities provide artists access to materials and new technologies, which underpin both the marketing and production strategies. These include online galleries and Internet shopping.

Textile from different Desert and urban communities have developed distinct styles artists draw on and depict both their individual and community totems and sacred stories from the dreaming. At Merrepen Arts centre Daly River Northern Territory women artists make batiks, which provide an insight into the life and work of the individual artist and their community.

Korrie Artists from The indigenous Art centre at RMIT University in Bundorra

Melbourne have specialised in screen printing and their work has been exhibited internationally and formed integral part of The Australia Dreaming exhibition -Australia out to Dry at The Commonwealth Institute London 2000 to celebrate the Sydney Olympics and most recently the Commonwealth Games in Melbourne.

The respect for Australian Indigenous design and its history has meant that legal protection through a number of safeguards has enable some communities to create collaborative cross cultural partnerships and projects such as the recent collaboration between the Fregon community and craft producers in Kashmir.

National organizations such as Arts law centre of Australia and the Australia Council of the Arts provide legal advice and information concerning the respect for indigenous culture and heritage. Indigenous cultural and indigenous

Property (ICIP)and copyright initiatives protect the work of individual artists and guard against massed produced pirate copying this ensures that financial returns go back to the individual artist and creates community gains. Arts law of Australia has been instrumental through initiatives such as Artists IN The Black in providing legal and design copyright for indigenous artists in accessible formats such as comics.

Currently Indigenous textile art and craft carry a certificate of authenticity produced by individual communities, which names the artist and the community where it was made.

Australian Indigenous design is now mainstream and is an important part of Australian fashion. Successful collaborative fashion projects between indigenous and non-indigenous designers since the seventies such as Jenny Kee (label Flamingo Park), Linda Jackson (Bush couture) 70,s 80,s and most recently Peter Morrissey collaboration with Jacinta Numina Waugh 2001 have created new fashion design directions and made an important contribution to Australian fashion and Haute Couture.

Australian indigenous textiles are an important platform for cultural celebration and

is an important vehicle for reconciliation at home. These new textile traditions sustain and support traditional life and provide unique case studies of the lives of the individual maker. They enhance our lives by providing a depth of meaning beyond the surface - it is the rhythms and depictions of stories from the Dreaming and the spirit within based on 60,000 years of cultural expression.

35 m Slide illustrations together with textile samples will be used as part of the presentation