

Monday 26 February 2018

Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs
Via email: IndigenousAffairs.reps@aph.gov.au

Dear Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs,

RE: Inquiry into the growing presence of inauthentic Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander 'style' art and craft products and merchandise for sale across Australia

I write regarding the inquiry into the growing presence of inauthentic, or not ethically produced, Indigenous art. A recent CHOICE investigation into this matter gathered evidence that may be useful for the Committee as it conducts its inquiry into the growing presence of inauthentic Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander 'style' art and craft products and merchandise for sale across Australia.

This is an issue that causes harm to consumers who want to purchase ethically produced Indigenous art in order to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists and communities. For these consumers, the proliferation of inauthentic art causes a loss of confidence in the market as a whole, while also harming individual Indigenous artists who are attempting to compete on an uneven playing ground that disadvantages them.

Research by CHOICE shows that this is an issue that consumers care about. CHOICE asked questions about Indigenous art in our regular nationally representative survey, Consumer Pulse. We found that a majority of Australians (62%) believe that Indigenous artists, community and culture are being undermined by the abundance of fake Aboriginal style art.¹ Australian consumers point to issues in determining the provenance of a particular product, with the majority stating they do not believe that it is

¹ Consumer Pulse January 2018 is based on a survey of 1,029 Australian households. Quotas were applied for representations in each age group as well as genders and location to ensure coverage in each state and territory across metropolitan and regional areas. Fieldwork was conducted from the 3rd to 15th of January 2018. Figure taken from survey respondents who chose 'agree' or 'strongly agree' in response to the statement 'Indigenous artists, community and culture are being undermined by the abundance of fake Aboriginal style art'.

easy to distinguish between fake Aboriginal style art and authentic Indigenous artworks.² Additionally, 44% of people believe it is misleading to sell fake Aboriginal style art even if it doesn't expressly claim to be authentic, with 24% of survey respondents feeling neutral about the issue.³

The results from the CHOICE survey indicate that consumers are confused about how best to identify ethically produced Indigenous art. 43% of our survey respondents said that they would rely upon an Authentic Aboriginal art label or statement when buying an Indigenous art product.⁴ This is concerning because no national label currently exists and regulators, such as New South Wales Fair Trading, say any mention of one should immediately raise a red flag.⁵

CHOICE also conducted a brief 'shadow shopping' exercise to determine what information was provided to consumers about the provenance of artworks. In January 2018, CHOICE rang 47 stores in Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria, Western Australia and the Northern Territory in tourism hot spots, asking for 12-inch boomerangs which were made, painted by, or reproductions licenced to, Indigenous artists. Of the stores that answered the phone, about 40 per cent could not name the artist or where they were from. Around 60 per cent who provided answers for the artist or provenance named Murra Wolka (often describing it as "the tribe name"). Murra Wolka are in fact an Aboriginal-owned wholesaler who pay Aboriginal artists royalties for using their artwork on souvenirs.⁶ No retailer knew how much money would be going back to the artist, if any, and it was often unclear if the product was an original hand-painted item, or a reproduction.

The results of this investigation demonstrate that it is difficult, and in some cases impossible, for a consumer to uncover relevant information when shopping for Indigenous art and souvenirs – who the artist is, where they are from, and how much

² Ibid. 62% of survey respondents chose 'disagree' or 'strongly disagree' in response to the statement 'It is easy to distinguish between fake Aboriginal style art and authentic Indigenous artworks.'

³ Ibid. Figure taken from survey respondents who chose 'disagree' or 'strongly disagree' in response to the statement 'It's not misleading to sell fake Aboriginal style art as long as it doesn't claim to be authentic'.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ http://www.fairtrading.nsw.gov.au/Consumers/Buying_services/Travel/Travel_tips.html

⁶ <http://murrawolka.com>

money they would make from the sale. The lack of clear information makes it harder for consumers to make informed decisions, and may be damaging consumer confidence in the market and in claims made by genuine artists.

For further information about CHOICE's research please contact eturner@choice.com.au.

Yours sincerely,



Erin Turner,
Director of Campaigns and Communications