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Possum paints the skies

By MATTHEW
WESTWOOD

THE work of one of Australia's leading Aboriginal artists, Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri, soon will be flying on the tails of British Airways planes as part of the airline's image makeover.

BA will use elements of Possum's dot painting *Water Dreaming* to replace the traditional Union Jack livery on five aircraft tail fins, including 747s.

The deal was finalised last weekend when BA representatives visited Possum in Alice Springs. The agreement — for an undisclosed figure — had been negotiated during Possum's recent visit to London, where his work is on show at the Rebecca Hossack Gallery. Hossack, who is also cultural attache at Australia House in London, says Possum is delighted with the airline venture.

A 1972 Possum painting, *Bushfire Dreaming*, was sold at a Sotheby's auction of Aboriginal art in Melbourne on Monday night, fetching \$58,600. It is one of the highest prices paid for a Possum at auction, a spokeswoman says.

The BA rebranding will apply indigenous art images from around the world to the tails of 308 aircraft. The revamp is intended to present the airline as a member of the world community.

The artists were selected by

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...were selected by corporate identity consultants Newell and Sorrell. Among the chosen designs are the bright, geometric patterns of South African twins Emmly and Martha Masanabo, Celtic calligraphy by Timothy O'Neill, a Bauhaus-inspired panel by German ceramic artist Antjo Breggemann and a woodcarving by native Canadian Joe David.

Possum's *Water Dreaming*, an acrylic on canvas dot picture was chosen to represent Australia because of its recognisable Aboriginal origin.

"We were looking for art that was very obviously Aboriginal, but had a style of its own," says Newell and Sorrell art researcher Tere Gil. "Clifford's work is very strong graphically; there is a lot of contrast in it. There is a lot of scope in his work to use it for printed material."

The firm had considered using other Aboriginal artists, including the late Emily Kame Kngwarreye, but her work was felt to be too delicate for the purpose.

The appropriation of Aboriginal images for commercial use has raised the issue of copyright infringement and the possible desecration of religious images. Hossack says, however, that BA has negotiated carefully with Possum all uses of the painting, which could include taking designs for airline stationery and merchandise. BA has purchased not only the painting but also the rights to the work.

"Clifford is a professional Australian artist and, of course, there is a sacred element to his work," Hossack says. "There is a sense of spirituality, in the same way that you feel on a Renaissance painting. But, like all great art, it is wonderful for it to be seen and shared."

Hossack is dismissive of the Aboriginal designs applied to the fuselage of two Qantas jets. "The British Airways thing is true art. It is the [work of an] individual creator, not [commercial] design," she says.