# Emily Kngwarreye

Emily Kame Kngwarreye was one of the world's great painters. A tiny Australian aboriginal in her eighties, she carried aboriginal art beyond the limited sphere of ethnographic curiosity into the broad stream of contemporary culture. Her work, instantly recognisable through its glorious sense of rhythm and light, has drawn admiring comparisons with Monet, Matisse and Jackson Pollock.

Emily Kngwarreye (pronounced Ung-wahr-ay) was born in about 1910 at Alhalkere (Soakage Bore) in a desert area – now known as Utopia – north-east of Alice Springs. She did not see a white man until she was nine, and then her first sighting was of a policeman on a horse (another unknown phenomenon) leading an aboriginal prisoner in chains; she thought he was a devil-spirit.

With the establishment of cattle stations on much of her traditional tribal land, however, the young Emily got a job as a stockhand. This in itself was exceptional, as most aboriginal women found employment in domestic service, and it shows something of her strength of will and independence of character.

She was educated too in the traditional tribal wisdom of her people, learning the stories and ceremonies that combine creation myths, topographical information, and gastronomic hints. She rose to an important position as a tribal elder and the keeper of several "song-cycles" such as the Emu and Yam Dreamings.

Although aboriginal ceremonial practices have always involved elaborate body-painting and the marking out of sand-pictures on the ground, art as we think of it did not touch the aboriginals of the Western Desert until the 1970s. At Utopia it began in 1977 with a batik-making programme.

Jenny Green, who was working at Utopia as a linguist, encouraged the local women's group to transfer some of their traditional body-marking and ceremonial motifs on to silk. Emily, although in her late sixties, took to this new activity with dedicated passion.

**Emily: a rare feeling for colour and a bold sense of composition**

In the Australian summer of 1988-89 the women's group, under a new art-adviser, Rodney Gooch, experimented with painting in acrylics on canvas. Emily responded enthusiastically to the greater freedom of this new medium. Besides, she claimed to have always disliked the fumes of the batik-wax.

From then on, right up to the week of her death, she painted with extraordinary vigour and invention – at Soakage Bore, at the neighbouring cattle-station, Delmore Downs (where she was befriended and supported by Don and Janet Holt) and in Alice Springs. Her subjects are the flora and fauna of her country, their life-cycles and mythical meanings.

From the start Emily's paintings were distinct and recognisable, marked by a rare feeling for colour and a bold sense of composition. Her painting style, however, developed and refined itself continuously.

In her early work she employed linear patterns overlaid – but not obscured – by careful dotting. During 1990 this underlying tracery began to disappear beneath a profusion of dots. Emily took to doctoring her brushes, cutting the bristles short to create a broader hollowed-out dot.

By 1992 her technique was becoming even freer. She applied bold circular dabs of paint, often "double-dipping" the brush into different colours before applying the mark. This allowed her to create a yet more intense sense of the desert's reverberating light and colour.

In 1994-95 she shifted her style again, employing simple black and white stripes and powerful organic traceries, often on dark grounds.

It was an amazing sight to see Emily paint – the energy flowing out of her seemingly frail figure across the canvas. She worked sitting on the ground, with her canvas held close to her body, while she dabbed on the paint with an economic intensity. She worked from the outside inward, turning the canvas gradually, and changing her brush hand to facilitate the task.

Although she spoke no English, her sense of fun, as well as her unforced dignity, was readily communicated.

Her exceptional talent was recognised from the first. Australian public galleries and private collectors from around the world were quick to acquire her works. She had successful solo shows in Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide, Brisbane, Canberra and London.

In 1992 she received an Australian Artist's Creative Fellowship worth A$110,000 (around £55,000). In 1995 she was accorded the rare accolade of a solo show at Parliament House, Canberra. And earlier this year she was chosen as one of three aboriginal women artists to represent Australia at the 1997 Venice Biennale.

Her great success brought pressures. There was a constant – sometimes importunate – demand for more and more work both from art-dealers and from her own extended family. Although she had no children of her own she was responsible for as many as 80 kinspeople, amongst whom she happily divided her money according to traditional practice. (It is estimated that she earned as much as A$500,000 a year from her painting.)

Despite her wealth she continued to live the traditional aboriginal life, gathering bush-tucker, and sleeping under the stars in her bough-shelter at Soakage Bore. She was part of the country she painted.

The only painting by Emily currently on public view in Britain is at Queen's Hall Art Centre, Hexham, until 28 September.

**Rebecca Hossack**

*Emily Kame Kngwarreye, artist: born Soakage Bore, Australia c1910; died Alice Springs 2 September 1996.*