

Isabel Wolff on the increasing commercial exploitation of Aboriginal paintings

Dash for desert dots

One art form that has flourished for more than 50,000 years is only just beginning to catch on. The Australian Aborigines, whose people have been painting, sculpting and carving since the Stone Age, are now seeing their work filling art galleries, museums and smart drawing rooms across the Western world.

Although the bark paintings and totemic carvings of Australia's "top end" are very saleable, it is the dot paintings of the central desert which are making the most impact. Done in acrylic on large canvases, these have been seen by some as constituting a new school of Australian abstract art. But despite the preponderance of highly coloured dots, squiggles, circles and broken lines, abstract is the one thing they are not.

The paintings are in fact religious maps. They transpose on to canvas the traditional designs created on the ground at sacred ceremonies: mosaics of stones, bark and twigs which are ritually erased by milling feet.

To the untutored eye they look colourfully chaotic, but once you know what the component parts symbolize, you can easily decode them. Circles stand for water holes, clouds or composites; U-shapes represent men and women sitting; wavy lines can be rain-water or snakes.

The paintings have one common theme: they all relate stories of the "Dreamtime" of Aboriginal mythology, when ancient beings roamed the world, singing the landscape and everything in it into existence. There are many hundreds of dreamings — "kangaroo dreaming", "sweet potato dreaming", "bush cabbage

dreaming" — and these are passed down through families.

As the artists work, they sing and chant the songs and stories associated with these myths. No one may paint another person's dreaming; nor is it permitted, under pain of death, to paint any secret or proscribed designs. In Alice Springs, one of the main centres of Aboriginal art, elders of the Papunya tribe regularly police the galleries to check that no one is breaking the rules.

Aboriginal artists such as Clifford Possum, Bessie Liddle and Timmy Japangardi have been doing "dot" paintings since the movement started in the early Seventies. So why is it that the art world is only now beginning to accept "dot" painting? Chris Anderson of the South Australia Museum was the co-curator of the "Dreamings" exhibition which has just returned to Adelaide after a sell-out tour of the United States. It is, he says, the combination of an apparent modernism with an ancient cultural and anthropological pedigree that has made dot paintings so sought after.

"People don't just want pretty pictures; they don't want art for art's sake any more. They want meaning in art, and here are paintings which do look very pleasing, yet come out of a rich and strange cultural context."

Critics have had great difficulty in evaluating Aboriginal work. In America they seemed unsure whether to appreciate it in visual or anthropological terms. No doubt a consensus will emerge, but in the meantime there is a risk of over-production. Given the conventional career prospects of the average Aborigine, it is hardly surprising that so many —

more than 6,000 — are starting to paint. But this means that the market is in danger of being flooded with mediocre work.

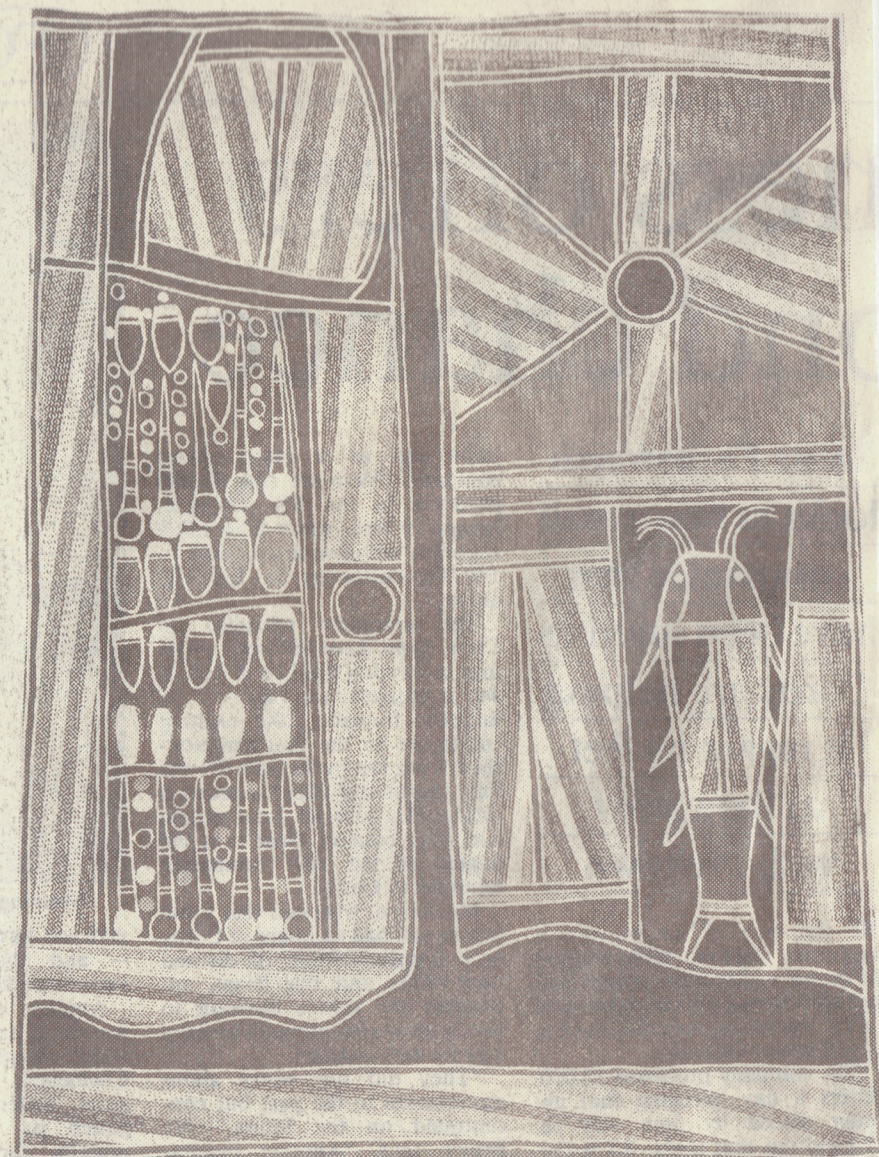
Another problem is the exploitation of the artists, given the wide price differentials in Australia and internationally. A painting bought for \$600 in Alice Springs might sell for five times that much in New York or Los Angeles. "No one really seems to know what they're worth. People are just trying to get what they can," Anderson says.

That may be good news for investors and dealers, who know that they can buy cheap in one place and sell expensive in another, but it means that the painters often get a raw deal. They have reacted to the uncertainty by setting up artists' co-operatives to fix prices and regulate quality.

Doubts have been expressed in the Aboriginal community as to whether or not the art business is really a good thing. Freda Glynn, who runs CAAMA, the Aboriginal radio station in Alice Springs, is philosophical. "Some people might say that we are selling our culture, but the point about the art is that it comes from within us — we're the only ones who can do it.

"It's not like working on a cattle station, or a brick-factory or a farm, which is imposed on us. The art belongs to us, just as the dreamings belong to us, and it's something we can succeed in on our own."

● "Songlines", an exhibition of Aboriginal art, continues at Rebecca Hossack's Gallery, 35 Windmill St, London W1 (01-409 3599) until Saturday.



Abstract or religious map? "Sacred places at Milmindjarr", by David Malangi