

ONE of Glasgow's better notions, indeed a tip-top idea spearheaded by Julian Spalding, Director of Museums, was to grab hold of the (albeit) ugly white elephant Cathedral Visitors Centre, and turn it into the world's first Museum of Religion.

Opened in April at a cost of £6m, *St Mungo Museum of Religious Life and Art* initially met with great controversy, but contrary to sensationalist views fully aired in the press, it seemed to me to be a great success. The smaller-than-you'd-expect interior in three floors is not ideal. But then, *St Mungo's* was never designed as a museum. Yet Page and Park, who had the unenviable task of converting it in double quick time, have worked wonders.

Not all is perfect. I'm deeply disappointed with the Westernised, bastardised Zen Garden: wish they'd put the intriguing comment slips where you can actually read them; don't like the top floor; wonder that the exciting new Aboriginal show lacks a brochure or event

Destined to be a family favourite

postcards — but have always enjoyed my visits. The view over the Necropolis alone is worth the trip. In the last three and a half months, 81,000 visitors have also voted with their feet, indicating an estimated 330,000 attendance in the first year.

Above all the museum is excellent for families and teenagers. The publicity encouraged my daughter, on one proverbial jeans and CD city shopping trip, to pop into *St Mungo's*. "Not bad. Quite interesting," she reported back. High praise indeed from any kid.

In addition to displays of a vast variety of art objects associated with different religious faiths — Buddhism, Christian, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim, and Sikh, plus Zen Mexican, Nigerian, Egyptian et al (a mummy mask from 500BC is the oldest item here; *Night Sky Dreaming* 1992 commissioned by Glasgow the newest) — St

Clare Henry gives her views on the controversial *St Mungo* museum

Gallery

Mungo's has a smallish temporary exhibition space on the second floor overlooking a mix of medieval stained glass, Japanese shrines, Turkish prayer rugs, and, of course, Salvador Dali's famous *Christ on the Cross*.

The first temporary show featured Scotland's *Samye Ling Tibetan Buddhist Centre* established at Eskdalemuir in 1967, the first in the west. Now until October 17 the space contains the fascinating *Dreaming The World; Aboriginal Painting*.

This features work from the north/central Australian desert regions of Yuendumu and Arnhem. These bark pictures, acrylics and log coffins explore beliefs and visual symbols of a culture that is more than 40,000 years old.

The work itself is made up of traditional intricate patterns of dots, swirls and cross-hatched lines which tell age-old stories of the lives, loves, fights, crocodile hunts and above all spiritual strength of their ancestors. Patterns of circles denote water holes, hills or sacred landmarks; U-shapes equal people (think of bums on the sand); curves mean rivers or snakes; an arch equals a windbreak; red stands for dawn and dusk; black represents night.

Dreamtime is the word for their faith, which teaches the inseparability of heritage, culture and land. Aboriginals believe the land is alive with the power of

their ancestors despite slaughter more than 200 years at the hands of white settlers, who killed off more than half Australia's 400,000 aboriginals between 1788 and 1888. Now of 16 million Australians only 180,000 are aboriginals -

Dreamings in ochre, brown and white paint are patterns traditionally found on the ground or on the body. The 1980s saw a growth in interest in aboriginal art and these designs are now often transferred to canvas.

Questions of exploitation fade into insignificance compared to the damage done over decades by greedy Australian settlers.

London's *Rebecca Hossack Gallery*, which has pioneered an appreciation of Aboriginal art, has terrific shows of their work at both her Piccadilly and Windmill Street galleries all summer, (prices start at £150) while London's top Hayward Gallery has given its imprimatur to Aratjara. 100 works by aboriginal artists, until October 10.