

# Following the Dreamtime trail

What could an American millionaire with homes in London and Salzburg possibly know about Aboriginal art? Quite a bit actually. Donald Kahn's collection of Australian Aboriginal art has toured 12 major cities and spawned Dreamtime converts the world over. But how did it all begin?

**D**ONALD Kahn first laid eyes on paintings by the artists of Australia's western desert at a New York show in 1988. His reaction was immediate. "I stepped back and said 'Wow'," remembers the American millionaire. "I felt like I'd been hit across the face."

The impact was such that Kahn, never an avid gallery-goer, went back three times before deciding to create a collection of Aboriginal art that would tour the world indefinitely. Six years and 36 canvases later, *Dreamtime: The Donald Kahn Collection* has traversed the globe — 12 major cities from Prague to Belfast to Tel

By JANE CORNWELL

writes of an art dealer desperately trying to exact a colourful description ("I can't sell a painting without a story") from the artist, who, in turn, demands a price in





And will continue to do so," he says, "til the work falls off the frames".

## Pleasure

The *raison d'etre* of this Charlton Heston look-alike is simple. "It's just very gratifying to see people take pleasure in what you love," he says. "I wanted to make a little mark by collecting something excellent and having it seen."

The catalogue accompanying the exhibition is careful to point out that though the geometrically arranged swirls and dots may appear abstract to the Western gaze, each provides a spiritual route-map with its own myths and personalities. Writes Kahn: "Their most prominent characteristic is their utter conviction. The painters who made them are in touch with something outside themselves — bigger, more significant, transcendent."

In his novel *Songlines*, Bruce Chatwin

keeping with the commercial market. The irony isn't lost on Donald Kahn, who says he read the book before he started collecting, but counters with: "That sort of thing doesn't mean a lot to me at all, but government cooperatives now ensure artists get the best possible price. I know I can't appreciate the art in the way the Aborigines can. What's important to me is the importance of the Dreamtime story to the artists. It's difficult to explain how a painting appeals to me personally, but I know when I'm looking at a good one."

Kahn can appreciate the difference between what he calls "decorator art" and the Real McCoy. "Early on I was told a shop in Miami had some canvases, so I went to look and almost burst out laughing. It was horrible: done in black, lavender and pink, and characterised by perfect symmetry, which the real thing never is. I doubt that an Aborigine had ever been within a mile of it."

Kahn's "I know what I like" maxim has proven successful: Munich's Villa Stuck, for example, saw 16,000 visitors through the door.

The notion of a rich Yank internationally touring the art of Australia's Aborigines may strike some as anomalous, until two other motivating factors are taken into account: time and money. Kahn worked with his uncle — a former US Ambassador in London who donated his collection of Impressionist masterpieces to New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art — publishing the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and *TV Guide* before entering the computer services and typesetting fields.

It was erstwhile Australian Rupert Murdoch who bought out the family publishing business, in

which Kahn was a stockholder "for a very ample sum" in 1988 — the year the *Dreamtime Collection* began.

Now he and wife Jeanne divide their time between London and Salzburg. His current occupation is "watching his investments", and he applies the same philosophy to art as he does to finance: "You have to decide whether something has staying power and stick to that decision whether it fluctuates up or down, or otherwise it's just a game."

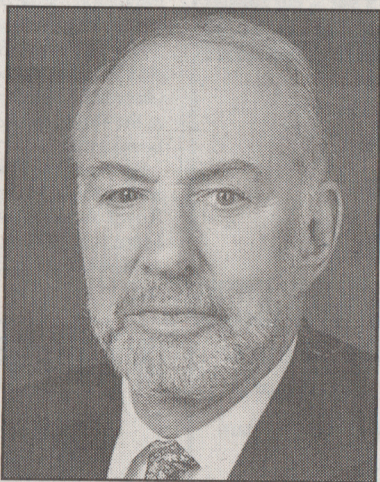
Donald Kahn started the collection with five works bought in New York. A four-week visit to Sydney proved disappointing ("I didn't see anything I liked"), but was salvaged by meeting up with Felicity Wright — then arts advisor in Yuendumu, north of Alice Springs. Thirteen, amongst the dozens of paintings unrolled across her hotel-room floor were purchased. Melbourne, Adelaide and a further trip to Sydney followed, where Norbett Knwera's 16 foot *Five Stories* had to be unrolled onto the footpath for viewing.

## Hossack

in London, Kahn sought out original art dealer Rebecca Hossack (recently appointed Cultural Development Officer at the Australian High Commissioner and "a great gal") who assisted him in acquiring several of the greats of the movement: Johnny Warangula, Billy Stockman and Clifford Possum.

Another impetus for the collection was Kahn's suspicion that this kind of work would not survive the generation that produced it. "I was concerned that the Aboriginal people would become so acculturated to Western society that the connection to the Dreamtime, so characteristic of the work, would no longer exist."

● **INTRICATE** creations like Louisa Lawson's *Water Dreaming* (above) and Clifford Possum's *Honey Ant Dreaming* (below left) are winning fans around the world thanks to Donald Kahn (below).



Donald Kahn hasn't heard of the Mabo treaty and doesn't take a position on land rights. For him, the art's the thing. He feels the artists are happy enough creating work for a market and have some sense of the pleasure they bring to a collector, even though they rarely see the pieces hung on gallery walls.

"I'm confident these paintings will live on as important art," he enthuses. "The men and women who created these beautiful objects are in communion with creative forces that elude most of us. I admire them. I love their creations. I am grateful for their presence in my life."

