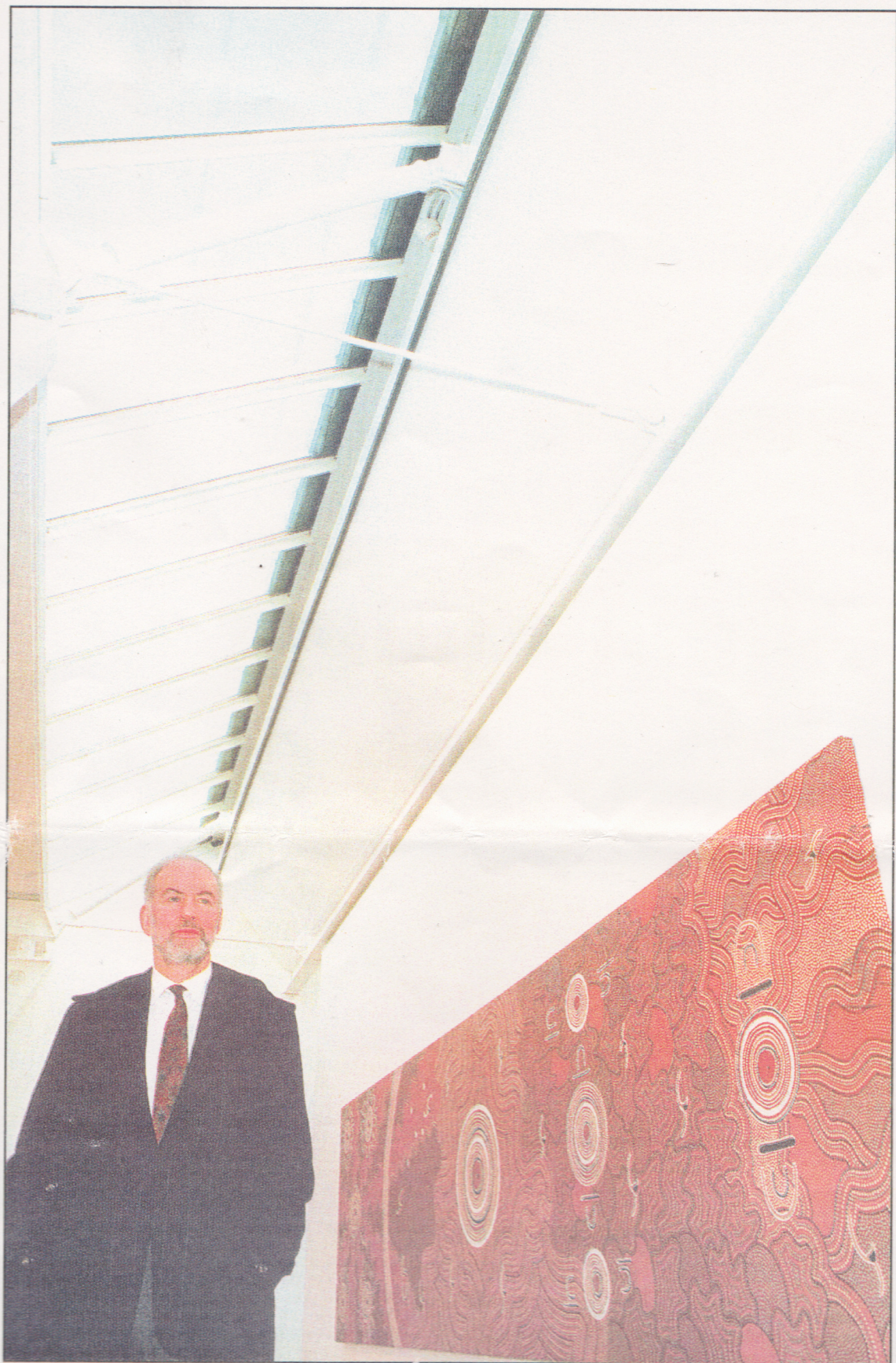


MY FIRST PICTURE/6

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A symphony of life in dream time



And there's more outback: David Kahn at the Fruitmarket Gallery, Edinburgh, with an Aboriginal print from his collection.

Music and theatre he could relate to but pictures meant nothing — until he found Aboriginal art. Now Donald Khan has a whole collection, discovers **Clare Henry**

ONE day in November, 1988, in New York, a friend took Donald Kahn to see an exhibition, *Dreamings: The art of Aboriginal Australia*. Kahn was by no means a keen gallery-goer. "Theatre, yes, since I was a little boy, courtesy of my parents. Growing up in New York there was always plenty of that. I discovered music at university and I like opera — but pictures? No, I'd never had an interest." But when he came upon the Aboriginal show it had a profound effect.

"I saw the exhibition three times. The paintings were extraordinary. Very, very beautiful. They impressed me to a degree I had never experienced. Their most prominent characteristic was utter conviction."

On his last visit he made his decision. "I wanted to get some for myself; their quality was so out of proportion to their price. Mine might not be in the same league as those in that museum show, but I'd try."

He also decided then and there to build a collection that would tour key venues world-wide. "At first it felt a bit like taking on an ambition to become an astronaut. But I went ahead and did it."

Kahn's wife Jeanne is equally passionate about the paintings. "The minute we saw them, we knew they were important. Even if you didn't know much about painting, you sensed that. We quickly discovered how to winkle out what I call 'decorator' Aboriginal art. We learned fast."

They began straight away by buying from New York's Tambaran Gallery where Kahn found his first five pictures by the Western Desert artists Pansy Napangati, Sonda Nampijinpa, Brogus Tjapangati, Ronnie Tjampitjinpa and Frank Tjapangati.

THE modern Aboriginal movement began in 1971 when a young Australian teacher encouraged elders of the Papunya community in Australia's Northern Territory to paint traditional subjects on canvas or board rather than, as through the ages, on large natural

surfaces such as rock faces, the ground, or the human body.

The work of these desert artists can be seen as a kind of symbolic landscape painting recording the *Tjukurrpa* or "dreamings" of ancestors who travelled the land long ago. The dot patterns which make up the pictures constitute the topography or iconography of a 50,000-year-old Aboriginal tribal philosophy.

Kahn admits Pansy's five-foot acrylic, *Kungka Kutjarra in Winpirri* 1988, is his all-time favourite. Its star-spangled subtle blue brown pattern of dots depicts designs associated with the Winpirri rock hole far northwest of Alice Springs. The women are shown as U shapes; the central roundel is the rock hole with the jagged lines depicting water running down. Sinuous red lines represent surrounding sandhills while the bursts of yellow stand for spinifex grass, in flower after the rain. "It's all very marvellous. She's a great painter; bred in the bone."

Strangely, in such a macho society, women artists have come to the fore in a spectacular way, often in old age. Emily Kngwarreye, now 80, started painting only 10 years ago. Louise Napaljarri Lawson, now in her late sixties, is the senior woman at Lajamanu, and an important figure in ceremonial life there. Women generally have only been painting as artists in their own right since the early 1980s, but Pansy began in Papunya in 1970, learning by watching older artists such as Johnny Tjupurrula. "My own interpretation of the matter," says Kahn, "is that once the Aboriginals began to work on board or canvas instead of rocks, sand mosaics or body decoration; as soon as it was down to individual effort and did not depend on group dynamics — that was a liberating influence for women. They can do their own thing and avoid the male-dominated rituals and ceremonies."

In London they sought out the main

Australian art dealer and so met Rebecca Hossack, now "a close friend; a great pal. I was anxious to get a painting by the major figure of the Western Desert, Johnny Warrangula, whose work had so impressed me in the very first exhibition, and by a marvellous coincidence she had received a letter the day before offering a key work. Thus Kahn bought a pale concentric-circle concoction titled *Water Dreaming* 1988, plus eight other pictures including work by Emily and Louise.

BUT his main clutch of works came from a trip to Australia six months after the project started. Ironically, it began badly. "I arrived in Sydney full of enthusiasm but, to my dismay, didn't see anything I liked in the private galleries. I began to think my fascination for Western Desert painting was a mistake."

He was on the point of abandoning the

search. "I had travelled 10,000 miles only to find it had lost its magic." A last-minute contact, a German artist recommended by family friends, saved the day. He put Kahn in touch with Felicity Wright, arts adviser in Yuendumu, north of Alice Springs, who was taking paintings to exhibit in Melbourne. Kahn flew immediately to Alice Springs to preview the show. There in Wright's hotel room, with pictures unrolled across the floor, he bought another 13 works, eight by women artists. He also witnessed a sand-painting ceremony where a group of men created a landscape covering 10 x 20 yards with earth, charcoal, and bird down. "They sang and danced the story into being but when finished, the work was gone. That's part of the ceremony."

Kahn then travelled to Melbourne, Adelaide, and back to Sydney where Norbett Knwer-raye's magnificent 16ft-long paint-

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ing, *Five Stories*, was so large it had to be unrolled on the pavement for viewing.

For someone who had no previous history of collecting, Kahn has done well, amassing what museum experts and gallery directors call "a bloody good collection of top quality; the best stuff by key artists". The collection has already toured to the Lowe Art Museum, Miami; Museum Villa Stuck, Munich; Carolino Museum, Salzburg, plus museums in Tel Aviv, Prague, and Warsaw.

Millionaire Kahn, who was in the publishing business before designing computer systems and now "watches his investments", currently lives between London and Salzburg. What will happen to the paintings after the tour? "We don't

think it will ever finish. Aboriginal painting never gets out of date; never goes out of style!" At home in Salzburg they have pictures by

the Austrian Paul Flora and in the London flat just one Aboriginal work, by the best-known artist Clifford Possum, who was received at Buckingham Palace on the occasion of his 1990 London Hossack Gallery show. "I also have a pair of white tennis shoes that Clifford dotted up and gave me! He's a great fella. I'm going to frame those shoes!"

The collection is now complete, Kahn says. With 34 paintings, it's of a size to tour, yet gives an overview of Western Desert painting. So why did he do it? "The quality of the work speaks for itself. And showing your collection in important museums and galleries is quite a thrill. A lot of very wonderful things have happened; things that stem from the collection. And I wanted to make a little mark by collecting something excellent and allowing people to see it."

■ Kahn's collection can be seen at Edinburgh's Fruitmarket Gallery until January 28.