

SANDRA HARRIS
looks at the new enthusiasm for
Australian Aboriginal paintings

JOYOUS ART



PHOTOS: COURTESY OF THE REBECCA HOSSACK GALLERY

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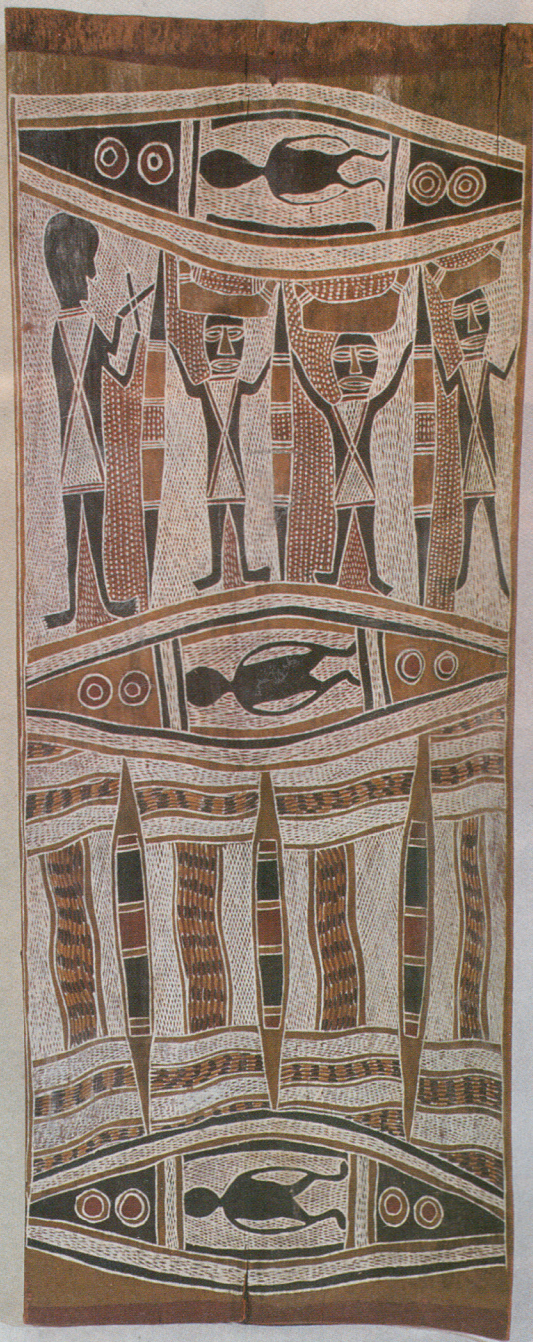
(Main picture) Bertha Kaline Naparrula's painting tells the story of a spirit being called 'Wirri-manu'. The three birds by Susan Manditjarra Napangarti portray a well-known legend of the Willy Wagtail.



IT'S BEEN A long time coming. The ancient forefathers of today's Australian Aborigines may well have been the world's first artists. In fact, according to latest archaeological research in the Kakadu region of Australia's Northern Territory, the land made famous by Crocodile Dundee, they were, pre-dating Europe by 20,000 years.

But it was only 20 years ago when Geoff Barden, a school-teacher in the Papunya district, near Alice Springs, gave a group of Aborigines some paints from his school's art room and suggested that these people could well have something to offer artistically that the West saw their first examples of Aboriginal art. Their paintings, which at first look like a cheerfully chaotic display of dots and circles, could be confused with a new school of abstract art. But abstract is the one thing they are not.

Aboriginal paintings, like Aboriginal folklore, tell stories. Some may sing the songs of "The Dreamtime", the Aboriginal mythology of creation when ancient beings roamed the earth shaping the hills and valleys, rivers and plains into existence with their songs. Others, particularly those painted by women, are much more pragmatic. They tell of the joys and the cares of looking after children, of the best places to find food and water, or looking for witchetty grubs or the succulent honey ant. What at first looks like a confusion of squiggly lines become rivers or rain or



The intricate detail of a bark painting from Yirrikhala in the Northern Territory.

wind; diagonal arrows are emu tracks, "u"-shapes are women sitting, concentric circles are campsites or water-holes.

One of the foremost authorities on the art-form is Rebecca Hossack, whose gallery in London's Windmill Street was the first outside Australia to exhibit Aboriginal paintings. She is passionate about her artists and



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"Snake Dreaming", by Clifford Possum.

believes that Clifford Possum and Billy Stockman, whose work she now can't afford to buy, are two of the greatest artists in the world. She points to "Snake Dreaming" by Clifford Possum, a painting that speaks of Australia in the purest and most mystical way, and she dares you not to agree that this is an artist whose work is a most valuable contribution to his country's culture. She is determined to make sure that only the very best examples of the genre are displayed in her gallery and has not only nurtured and encouraged Stockman and Possum, who are to all intents and purposes the Leonardo and Michelangelo of the modern Aboriginal art movement, but she has uncovered a new breed of painters, the women of the tribes who as little as 15 years ago would never have been allowed near a paintbrush, but who are now attracting serious notice by international collectors.

Pansy Naarnarti is the best known of the group, hailed as the Clifford Possum of Aboriginal women artists, while Susan Manditjarra Napangarti, 28 years old and producing beautiful, delicate paintings such as her "Legend of the Mother Bird", is another. Their work is featured now in major galleries throughout the world, reproduced in thick glossy catalogues and discussed in serious investment terms, but the painters themselves take very

little notice of it all. These women simply do not see themselves as being endowed with a special talent. Most of the time they began by finishing off paintings their men had started in order to get the promised fee. Even today they would probably be baffled by earnest discussions about whether the paintings they produce could be called "art" or "craft". To them they are neither, merely a way of making enough money in a dignified and enjoyable way to feed their families and provide for those closest to them.

Some collectors and art critics find this total lack of pretension and artistic arrogance highly confusing. Is art still art when the painter can be replaced by his wife? Is a canvas as valuable, and even more important, as good an investment, when the artist cheerfully and honestly admits he or she does it for the money? Rebecca Hossack, equally cheerfully, points out that everybody does it for the money really, and that part of the charm of Aboriginal artists and their work is the honest joy that goes into it. Much more important, in her view, is that these newly discovered artists shouldn't be allowed or encouraged to become commercial in the worst way, that is producing work that is slapdash, uninspired and not true to the tradition of the Dreamtime. "What you have to understand,"

she says, "is that all the rules we have traditionally used to evaluate good art and bad art, such as originality or individuality, simply do not apply in Aboriginal art. There is no such thing as an original or individual painting because the stories that are told are all ancient ones and must not be changed or 'individualised' by the painter."

It is all very daunting, especially for a novice like me who knows she likes what she sees, but isn't quite sure why. According to Ms Hossack this doesn't matter. What does emerge, she explains, is that even with all the traditional yardsticks removed, there are some artists who are special, whose work simply elevates them above the rest. Possum, most particularly, but names like Mick Tjapaltjarri, Turkey Tolson and Uta Uta Tjangala may be difficult for the fabled gentlemen of the art world to pronounce but they are learning, and they are learning fast. It took time.

When the first "Dreamings" exhibition toured the US in 1988, critics and collectors got frightfully confused about how to evaluate the pictures. Should they be seen merely as works of art or should they be seen in anthropological terms? In the end it was decided that they can only really be seen as a blend of both, which is probably the best way of handling such a new/old art-form.

Even so, Rebecca Hossack still finds the habit of lumping all Aboriginal art into one homogeneous lump quite extraordinary. "There are the bark paintings," she says, showing me a selection of such detailed and precise work that it could have come from the Egyptian Gallery at the British Museum; "there are the batiks and soon we'll be showing Aboriginal sculpture."

Despite all the ditherings and deliberations of the scribes of the art world, you get the feeling that the artists themselves are remarkably unaffected by their views or opinions and are even less impressed by notions of great

talent some of them are said to possess. Technique they admire, talent they don't really go along with.

"There is a quality," explains Ms Hossack, "that you can actually see in some paintings. It is called 'Birryun' and the nearest translation I can give you is 'shininess'."

"Once seen you'll know what I mean, it's a technique that only few can do but it lightens and brightens a picture in the most extraordinary way. Aborigines who can't do Birryun admire

those who can. It's a difference they can see for themselves."

Collectors of Aboriginal paintings are an interesting bunch. They include the Australian some-time tycoon, Robert Holmes à Court, whose wife Janet has amassed probably the best private collection in the world, Tina Turner and Her Majesty The Queen.

Her Majesty's collection numbers but one painting by Clifford Possum and it was given to her by the artist, but she had the charm and wit to invite him to

meet her after he had written requesting the privilege, and when he did arrive at Buckingham Palace in full morning gear, complete with shoes hand-painted in "kangaroo dreaming", and paintbrushes in his grey topper, she took particular pleasure in spending many minutes in conversation with him.

It was, Clifford Possum told Rebecca Hossack who accompanied him, "a number one day". I think it would have been a pretty nice one for the Queen as well.



Ancient cave painting found at Kakadu National Park, Northern Territory, and (below) "Cave Dreaming" by John Roger Tjaka-marra.



PHOTOS: PICTUREPOINT