

Conmen make a killing on Aboriginal art market

by Rachel Sylvester

COLLECTORS of Aboriginal art are being tricked into buying sub-standard paintings and forgeries of the "great masters", it was claimed last night.

Traditional Australian art — described by the critic Robert Hughes as "the last great art movement of the 20th century" — is one of the few booming sectors of the fine art market.

Prices have soared in the last five years. Works by masters such as Clifford Possum and Robert Campbell Junior sell for tens of thousands of pounds.

But unscrupulous businessmen are cashing in. Some allegedly speak of "making a killing" from naïve collectors. The paint-

ings — called "dreamings" by the artists and characterised by simple dots and circles — are, superficially at least, easy to copy.

Rebecca Hossack, cultural attaché to the Australian embassy and owner of the Rebecca Hossack gallery, which specialises in Australian art, regularly finds salesmen turning up at the door offering suitcases full of sub-standard paintings.

"Some people are charging more for commercial rubbish than I would ever ask for real masterpieces. These paintings may look like splodges that you or I could do, but when the geniuses do them

they are sublime," she said. Aboriginal art has attracted young professionals, lured into galleries by the brightly-coloured pieces; Miss Hossack has collectors who pay £200 a month on hire-purchase.

The problem, according to Dr Howard Morphy, curator of the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford and an expert on Aboriginal works, is ignorance. "As with all new art trends, expertise is developing," he says. "But there is less expertise in Britain than in Australia, America or Japan."

James, a 38-year-old film director who, has been col-

lecting Aboriginal paintings since 1989, believes he has seen several forgeries in circulation. He was offered one painting, purportedly by Emily Kame Kngwarreye, a wizened octogenarian celebrated for her multi-coloured dot paintings, at a price of about £12,000.

James says: "I am convinced it was not a genuine Emily. It wasn't her style, it wasn't even her brushwork, it just wasn't subtle enough."

He has seen fakes in other people's collections. "The style of these painting is so simple that forgeries can easily be passed off to people who don't know much about the subject. Prices are rocketing and as soon as there's a market like this there'll always be conmen."

Aboriginal paintings are based on ancient sacred sand drawings and still use traditional symbolism: circles represent water holes or clouds, U-shapes depict people sitting. For the Aborigines, art is still a religious expression, which activates the powers of the ancestors.

In 1971 an art teacher, Geoffrey Bardon, gave canvas and acrylic paints to members of the Papunya Aborigine community so that they could make permanent versions of their sand drawings.

Now the Aborigines, beset by unemployment and alcoholism, have seized on art as a way out of poverty. Some with real talent have been very successful: Emily Kame Kngwarreye earns £500,000 a year from her painting and owns 10 cars.

Others have relied on a huge trade in cheap tourist reproductions of masters. In Australia, these are clearly differentiated from the genuine article. The problem in Britain is that some are now apparently being sold as the real thing.



The real thing: gallery owner Rebecca Hossack with genuine Aboriginal paintings