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Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri

Aboriginal artist of rare gifts

CLIFFORD POSSUM TJAPALTJARRI was one of the best-known and most highly regarded painters of the modern Aboriginal art movement.

He was born circa 1932 on the Napperby cattle station, north of Alice Springs, and grew up there as well as in the surrounding bush country, and later – in the mid-1940s – at the Aboriginal settlement at Jay Creek.

His father – “One Pound” Jimmy Tjungurrayi – a respected elder of the Anmatyerre language group, became almost the public face of Aboriginal Australia when his countenance was used on a series of Australian stamps during the 1950s and 1960s. Clifford inherited much of his father’s sense of dignity and bearing. As a young man he worked as a stockman first at Hamilton Downs and then at Napperby. He underwent tribal initiation and became the custodian of various important “Dreaming” stories – relating to sites spread across the Central Desert.

As a stockman, Clifford Possum began wood carving in his off-time. His first creation was a wooden saddle for his own use, but after that he began making animals, boomerangs and coolamons (carrying vessels) for sale. His artistic and commercial instincts were further stimulated by contact with members of the Hermansburg watercolour painting school founded by Albert Namatjira, which achieved wide-spread recognition in the years after the Second World War.

He began painting realistic scenes on to his carved artefacts.

This impulse, however, seems to have ebbed by the beginning of the 1970s when he was living with his wife, Emily, at Papunya – a settlement established west of Alice Springs that brought together Aboriginal people from several different language groups.

In 1971 Geoffrey Bardon – an art teacher working at Papunya – encouraged some of the men to begin painting, initially on the wall of the school house, and subsequently on board and canvas. Possum was among the first to take up the challenge. Almost from the outset his work – with its subtle blending of traditional Aboriginal iconography (evolved over many millennia in sand paintings, rock paintings and body decorations) with elements of Western realism and painterliness – proclaimed an individual talent.

Between 1976 and 1980 he produced – sometimes in collaboration with his “brother” Tim Leura Tjapaltjarri, who died in 1984 – a series of large, highly complex but beautifully controlled paintings mapping the sacred sites of his country. These are considered to be amongst the masterpieces of the Aboriginal art movement.

The creation of one of these paintings – *Wartlugulong* – was recorded for a BBC documentary, *Desert Dreamers* (1976). The work was subsequently shown at “Perspectiva” (1981), a biennial survey



Possum in London in 1990. He presented the painting, ‘Possum Dreaming’, to the Queen at Buckingham Palace

of contemporary Australian art held at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney. It marked an early step in the acceptance of Aboriginal art into the contemporary art scene.

Other exhibitions followed in the Australian state capitals. In 1983 his works were included in the São Paulo Biennale, the same year that he became the first Aboriginal person to win the Alice Springs painting prize.

In 1988, he was given a retrospective at the ICA in London, and two years later he was back for a one-man exhibition at the Rebecca Hossack Gallery. On the latter visit he met the Queen at Buckingham Palace and

presented her with one of his paintings. He dressed for the occasion in a hired morning suit and tennis shoes – painted with his “Possum Dreaming” motif – and a paintbrush stuck through the band of his top hat.

His high standing was confirmed when in the late 1970s he was elected Chairman of Papunya Tula Artists (the association funded and run by and for the painters at Papunya). He served for several years before moving with his family to Alice Springs and establishing himself as an independent artist. Although this allowed him to profit from his rare gifts, it also left him vulnerable to unscrupulous

operators and the temptations of easy money. During the late 1990s he was embroiled in several scandals, where his work had been forged, or he had signed blank canvases which had then been painted by others.

Nevertheless his best work always proclaimed its true authorship and retained its value. Last year his *Honey Ant Dreaming* fetched A\$140,000 (£55,000) at auction. In 1997, when British Airways was adopting its new image, a Clifford Possum painting was chosen as one of the new tail-fin decorations. Possum was given free travel on the airline for life.

In the Queen’s Birthday Honours

this month he was appointed an Officer of the Order of Australia for his services to the Aboriginal art movement. He was to have been invested last Saturday by the Administrator of the Northern Territory at the care home where he had been staying since suffering a recent stroke, but he lapsed into a coma and, on Friday, died.

REBECCA HOSSACK

Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri, artist: born Napperby, Northern Territory c1932; AO 2002; married (one son, two daughters, and one son deceased); died Alice Springs, Northern Territory 21 June 2002.