



# THE INDEPENDENT

No 5,540

www.independent.co.uk

TUESDAY 20 JULY 2004

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## Arts 13

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ART FOR SALE

### Wandjina

@ Rebecca Hossack Gallery

TWO PEOPLE are largely responsible for bringing an awareness of Aboriginal culture to this country: the late swashbuckling, bisexual writer Bruce Chatwin, in his magical book *Songlines*; and the Australian art dealer Rebecca Hossack, who, for many years, has brought images created by the indigenous peoples of her homeland to a wider audience, educating us in the "Dreamings" and myths that form the very essence of their being, and of which their art is such a vital expression.

This is the first exhibition in London to explore the myth of the Wandjina - the sky spirits associated with the weather - the ancestral spirits of the Aboriginal people in the Kimberley region of Western Australia. The Wandjina are distinguished by the long rays that emanate from their halo-like headdresses, which represent both their hair and the clouds, as in *Ponwai Wandjina* (above, 2003) by Lily Karadada. They have tiny eyes and noses, delicate hands and no mouth. It is said that if they were painted with mouths, it would rain for ever.

The style is basically linear, rather than dense with pigment, and based on the ancient rock paintings of central and northern areas of the Kimberly region, many of which are believed to be about 3,000 years old. "Wandjina" is a generic term for this group of ancestral beings who come out of the sky and sea, bringing with them the rains, controlling the elements and endowing the land and its species with fertility. It is believed that they have shaped the landscape, leaving their images in ochre and white clay on the caves and rocks of the region.

Paintings on bark and

later on board began to be produced in Kalumburu only as late as 1975. Most of the Wandjina images are now produced by members of the Karadada family, who have all cultivated marked stylistic differences, with the women family members proving some of the strongest artists.

The imagery tends to be simple, painted in thick red-ochre outlines on white ground. This exhibition features etchings and linocuts. Martin King, an exceptional Australian printmaker, has been responsible for encouraging the Karadada to make etchings for sale in galleries. This is not as uncomplicated as it seems. Transporting paper over rough terrain, preventing it from becoming dirty, can be hard; and you might return after several months to find that one of the family members has gone walkabout in the middle of the project, or that the dog has been sleeping on the paper.

Members of the Karadada family are also responsible for the sacred task of the upkeep of the Wandjina cave paintings, which they retouch with natural ochres gathered from the creek beds, with charcoal used when they need black. That there may be a gulf between the original ancient icons and their modern counterparts is not the point; what is important is that the power of the Wandjina is still relevant to the indigenous peoples of Kimberley, and that they live on, inspiring their highly original and decorative art.

Prices range from £195 to £400, including frame and VAT.

To 31 July, Rebecca Hossack Gallery, 28 Charlotte Street, London W1 (020-7255 2828; [www.r-h-g.co.uk](http://www.r-h-g.co.uk))

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