

Aborigine art enters the big time

Pictures from Dreamtime



Stockman at work: beercans for paint-pots

SOME of the world's most distinguished painters, increasingly recognised as such in New York, Sydney and London, are Aus-

tralian aborigines, mostly living in small communities in the great Western Desert. Their settlements at Ngukurr ("the place of many stones"), Groote Eylandt (a centre of painting on bark) and Papunya, have become art colonies which may one day be as familiar in art history as Montmartre and St Ives. The current "big names" of aboriginal art, notably Clifford Possum and Billy Stockman, whose works regularly fetch £30,000 (\$50,000) and more, are not faddish, ephemeral superstars. Their work is born out of a cultural tradition which is more than 50,000 years old.

Until September 4th London's Barbican Centre is hosting an extensive exhibition of desert paintings, sculptures and rugs selected by Rebecca Hossack, an Australian-born art dealer, whose London gallery continually shows aboriginal masterpieces

(which are often shipped straight back home by Antipodean collectors).

To the untutored western eye these look

like highly contemporary abstract works: myriad dots, spiralling patterns, circles, lines and curves, although snake-like and bird-like forms are sometimes discernible. To the aborigines these are representational paintings, maps of daily life. Four half-moon shapes around a form like a bulls-eye may represent, in one work, a group of women sitting round a campfire. Elsewhere, a bulls-eye may represent a stone, a well, a rockhole or a breast. Emus, kangaroos, snakes and bees have their own geometric signs.

Miss Hossack describes the pictures as "mythical landscapes of the central Australian desert." They contain a spiritual perception of reality, often translated as "Dreamtime". This refers to the creation of the earth by Ancestor Spirits, and awe at the oneness of all forms of life. For many ab-

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origines, painting a picture is closely related to ageless ceremonies using sand, pigment and blood. As one artist puts it, "You know, white fella, he just put the picture on the wall and he looks at it. He doesn't understand. It's just a pretty picture for him."

The modern phase of aborigine art arose from a project at Papunya settlement in 1971, when a white schoolteacher encouraged locals to try painting. The response and quality of work produced were phenomenal. Painting has enabled many aborigines to retain contact with their heritage in the face of white racism, high unemployment (up to 75% in some areas), widespread demoralisation and alcoholism. Artists' co-operatives have sprung up and proliferated, overseeing standards and guarding the painters' financial interests. As a result some settlements have become self-supporting, and aborigines have gained a more valued profile in national life. Two aboriginal artists represented Australia at the 1990 Venice Biennale.

The chief problem, says Miss Hossack, lies with western critics who are unable to

distinguish between good and bad aboriginal art. Some look at it with the condescension of anthropologists, but sympathetic study reveals immense varieties of individual talents and schools. The women artists of the Balgo Hills, for example, produce works of rich design and colour, whereas Papunya painters are celebrated for their lighter palette and sparse, elegant symmetry. Once the Dreamtime code is cracked, these subtleties can be understood.