

• ABOVE: Two Jangalas-Warlukulangu by Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri
• RIGHT: The artist's Eagle (Wakuripa) near Yuendumu

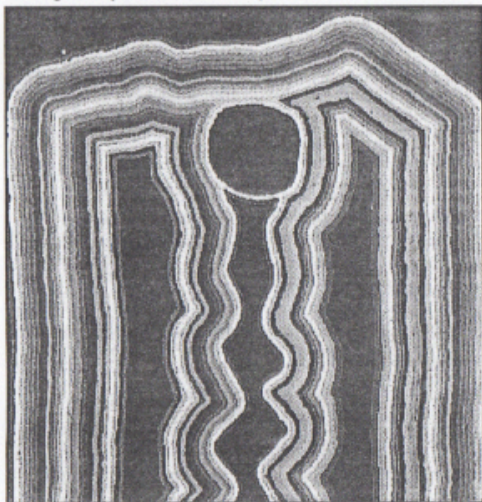
Dreamtime art is a real eye-opener

WHY is it that when we choose to be different (wear the latest fashion, get a mega-tan) we regard it as a positive expression of our individuality, but when others are different

This conundrum, needing to be different but needing to belong, is as old as consciousness itself. And as with individuals, so too with cultures. Colonialism declared other cultures inferior and its nightmare child 'ethnic cleansing' came out of the darkness.

(wear ethnic clothes, have coloured skin) we regard it as threatening?

How can being different be good for us but bad for them? And how is it that, having decided to be different, we feel happier looking exactly like all the other style slaves?



• 'Balgo' - an acrylic on canvas by David Hall.

sons our own doorstep. Even on holiday we are happier to be 'tourists' in another culture because it is easier to speculate than understand.

And all it takes is time. Dreamtime. When you are naked in the Australian bush you carry the story of your culture in your head, occasionally making patterns with coloured sand, seeds and feather on the ground or on your body.

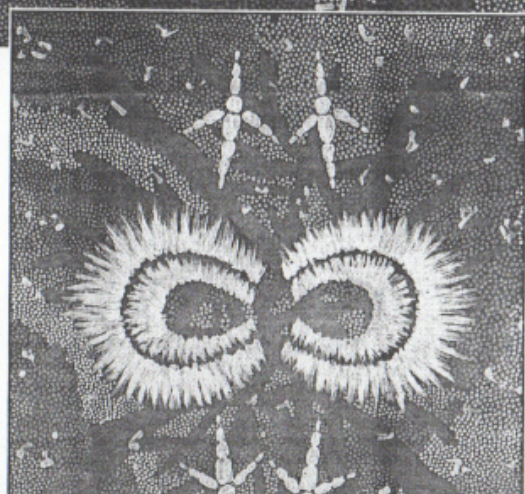
In our own culture we have told these stories through art, books, radio, film and TV. We take it so much for granted we have forgotten its basic and universal value. That's why looking at and learning about other cultures enhances our own. Through the looking glass of another culture we see the peculiarities of our own.

'Songlines' An Exhibition of Aboriginal Art at the Shire Hall, Stafford (August 9-September 27), is quite literally an eye opener.

Twenty-five years ago, a young Sydney art teacher, Geoffrey Bardon, encouraged Aborigine artists in Papunya to paint their stories with acrylic paint on canvas, giving them a portable permanence that could be sold. Although the text panels in the exhibition (which are excellent and must be read) describe these canvases as "something between an Ordnance Survey map and a good food guide" I am a little sceptical.

Many are more 'knowing' than that, showing some very 'western' values and techniques. The use of a dark ground behind the ochre, pink, red, white and blue dots, making them glow and pulsate, I would dare bet is imported from a knowledge of Braque (most likely by Geoffrey Bardon).

One way of clearing your mind's eye of preconceptions is to read the captions: 'Ronnie Tjampitjinpa, Pintupi artist moving between Papunya, Yuendumu and Mount Doreen'; 'Peggy Napaljarri Rockman. Born in the bush at Lima NT c 1935 of the Walpiri tribe, her country Jaluwangu, and she lives at Lajamara.' Just pronouncing these words slowly takes you half way round the globe! Australia is so vast that Aboriginal art is itself 'differ-



ent' from region to region. But there was one difference in this selection that struck me quite clearly; that between the men and the women.

Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri's work for example is clear, schematic and formal, like that of all the men. But the women are more 'fluid' and tell more personal and transparent stories. Gertie Huddleston's description of her painting Fish - "In the wet season there are lots of birds and animals all around the river. Long necked tortoise and fish jump out. We go collecting these fish with rods and dilly bags." You really are there.

As you leave this exhibition stand in the centre of the gallery and look from the paintings out through the door at the cascading dots of white and pink petunias of the floral display in Market Square. Spot the difference?

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