

# Turkey Tolson Tjupurrula

TURKEY TOLSON TJUPURRULA was one of the founders of the painting movement that grew up outside Alice Springs in the early 1970s and provided the inspiration and the template for the extraordinary – and continuing – efflorescence of Aboriginal art over the past three decades.

Tolson was born in about 1938, not on his family's traditional country around Kintore, west of Alice Springs, but at Yalyapi – close to the Aboriginal settlement at Haasts Bluff. It

was also near to the old-established mission at Hermannsburg, where his family was able to get rations of flour and tea, to supplement their traditional bush diet. Although the family remained in the area around Haasts Bluff, Tolson was instructed in the sacred designs and stories of his traditional homeland by his father, both during his tribal initiation and on expeditions they made together along the Western MacDonnell Ranges collecting dingo-scalps.

In 1959, shortly after his initiation, Tolson, with his family, moved to the new settlement at Papunya, 260 miles west of Alice Springs. He helped with the construction of the site, and worked in the community kitchen. At the beginning of the 1970s when Geoffrey Bardon, a teacher working with the community, encouraged some of the men to paint their traditional designs – at first on to the walls of the schoolhouse, later on to board, paper or canvas – Tolson became one of the youngest men to take up the work.

His early paintings – recording his country and its creation stories in an abstract form of dots and circles – are severely classical with beautifully controlled “dotting” and a strong

sense of symmetry. His central role in the painting movement was confirmed when he was made Chairman of Papunya Tula Artists, the community's trade association.

In 1984, after marrying for the second time (his first wife had died), he moved to Kintore, the traditional land of his fathers. With his own father's death he was expected to assume ceremonial responsibility for the land. It was a move that seemed to coincide with a new phase in his art. His tech-

nique became freer, his iconography more individual. He produced a series of striking, stylised portraits of his legendary forefather Mitukatjirri Warrior; as well as his most famous image – *Straightening Spears at Illyingau gau* (1990). This painting, a series of shimmering horizontal lines representing spears being heated and straightened over a fire by Tolson's ancestors, was acquired by the South Australian Art Gallery, Adelaide.

In 1999 Tolson was involved in controversy when he was accused of signing canvases painted by one of his daughters – a charge that he denied. Nevertheless the incident highlighted both the important traditions of family collaboration that exist within the Aboriginal community, and the occasional incidence of deliberate fraud by unscrupulous parties.

Tolson's health had been in decline. He had a history of heart trouble, and was receiving dialysis treatment in Alice Springs when he died.

REBECCA HOSSACK

*Turkey Tolson Tjupurrula, artist: born Yalyapi, Northern Territory c1938; twice married; died Alice Springs, Northern Territory 10 August 2001.*