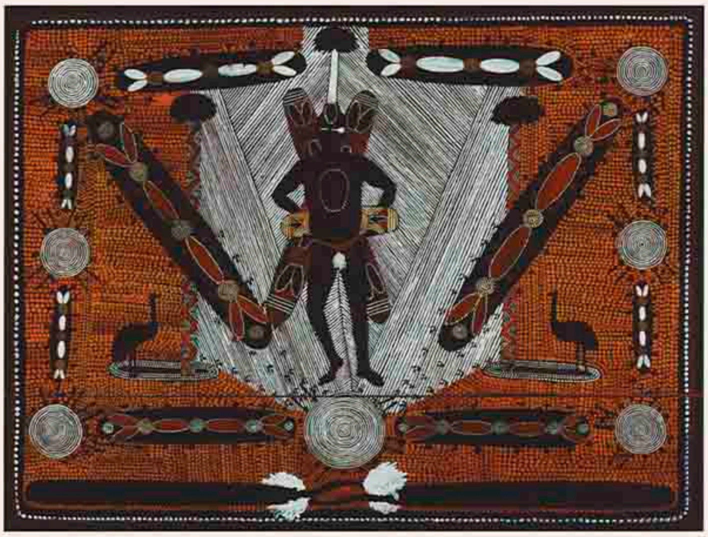


1 *Emu Corroboree Man* by Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri (c. 1932-2002), 1972. Synthetic polymer paint on composition board, 46 x 61.5 cm. Sotheby's, Australia, 'Aboriginal Art', 25 July 2005, AUS$411,750. This very early painting from the modern Aboriginal art movement was originally sold for AUS$100 in 1972

Aboriginal art

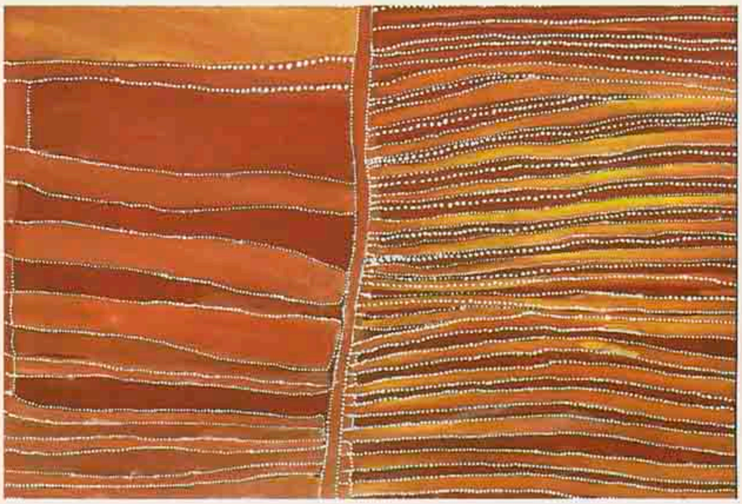
Although some museums and art fairs still categorise Aboriginal art as ethnography, the market for it has grown in the past thirty years from nothing to nearly $100 million a year. **Rebecca Hossack** explains why it appeals to so many collectors, and picks out undervalued areas.

In 1972 an American naturalist travelling through central Australia bought a small painted board in Alice Springs for AUS$100. This July the picture – Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri's *Emu Corroboree Man* (Fig. 1) – was sold at Sotheby's in Melbourne for AUS$411,750. The choice exhibits in this sale had toured previously to London and New York, and the buyer was, indeed, a collector from America. It is an extreme example of a common phenomenon. The Aboriginal art market is in overdrive. Demand continues to grow, prices continue to rise, and – most pleasingly – the quality of much of the new work continues to match that of earlier times. The total value of annual sales is estimated by Adrian Newstead, director of Lawson-Menzies auction house (and one of the first Aboriginal art dealers), to be close to AUS$80 million. The secondary auction market now tops AUS$11.5 million a year.

All this has been achieved in a little over thirty years. Although some of the Aboriginal communities of the northern coast had been producing and selling paintings on bark since the 1950s, the desert-painting movement began only in the early 1970s. It started at Papunya Tula, an Aboriginal settlement some 150 miles north-west of Alice Springs in the Central Australian Desert, and was inspired by young Sydney-born community-teacher Geoffrey Bardon. He encouraged some of the senior Aboriginal men to set down their traditional 'Dreaming' designs in acrylic paint, at first on board and later on canvas. (For the previous forty thousand years or more such ceremonial images had been recorded only in the fugitive media of body-paint and sand-designs.) The first painted boards sold in the Alice Springs general store for only a few dollars. But very rapidly the force and quality of the work – the strength of its design, the infinitely varied rendition of its principal 'dot' and 'circle' motifs, the palpable but unspecified sense of spiritual power – attracted attention both amongst art lovers and art dealers. No less significantly, it attracted the attention of other Aboriginal communities. During the following decade and half, art centres were established across the Aboriginal settlements of Australia, and painting work began. The existing bark-painting communities of Arnhem Land were also revitalised. Each community – steeped in its own specific traditions of language, culture, ceremony and iconography – produced work of a distinctly different temper. The diversity, as well as the strength, of the Aboriginal art movement became established.

The market grew organically from its modest beginnings. It received early support from the government-funded Australia Council, which established 'Aboriginal Art Australia', a network with galleries in all the state capitals. As the Seventies advanced, many of AAA's employees – notably Gabrielle Pizzi in Melbourne and Ace Bourke in Sydney – left to set up independent galleries. Prices advanced quickly from tens to thousands of dollars. In the past decade they have leapt on to tens of thousands, and – in a few cases – hundreds of thousands. By the mid-1980s several established contemporary Australian art galleries were including Aboriginal art in their exhibition schedules. In the past five years or so, a new sales strategy has emerged, with many artists preferring to work not through their community art centres, but with exclusive independent agents. At worst these can be unscrupulous carpet-baggers, but at best they provide the painters with excellent materials, clear time and space, and access to galleries and individual collectors.

2 *All that Big Rain Coming from Top Side* by Rover Thomas (c. 1926-98), 1991. Natural earth pigments and gum on canvas, 180 x 120 cm. Sotheby's, Australia, 'Aboriginal Art', 9 July 2001, AUS$778, 750, the world-record price for Aboriginal art at auction



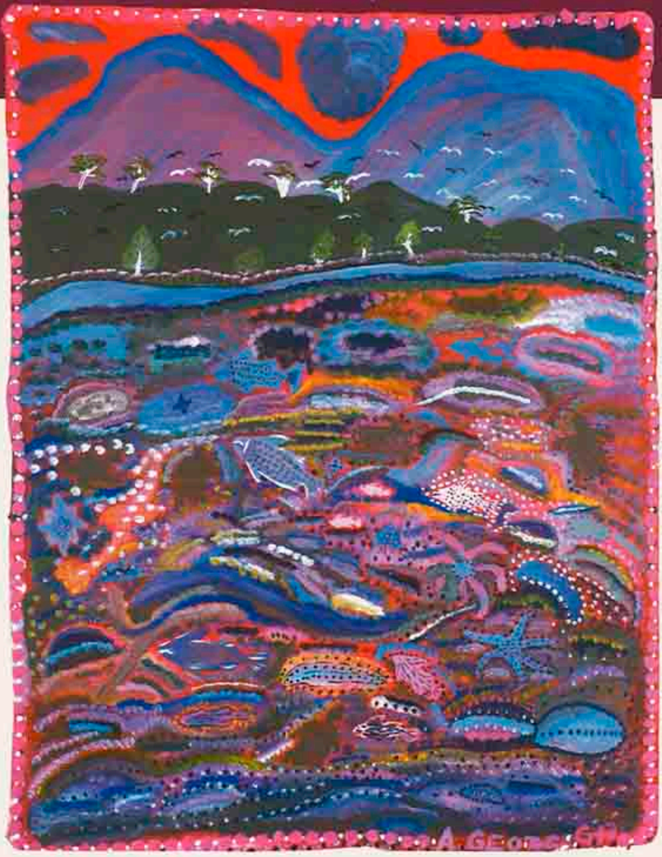
Although many of the earliest collectors were – and remain – Australian (including the wealthy Holmes a Court family), the work sparked international interest from the start. Amongst the most avid early collectors was a trio of Americans known as the 'Three Ks': Donald Khan, Richard Kelton and John Kluge. But beneath them was an ever-growing band of small-scale aficionados. By the mid-1980s, commercial galleries in London, New York, Paris, Holland, Germany and elsewhere were exhibiting Aboriginal art. According to Justin Miller, chairman of Sotheby's Australia, overseas buyers now account for almost fifty per cent of sales in the auction market.

Star names and hip collectors

The western artistic tradition has always set great store by individual, named artists, and this has been projected onto the Aboriginal art movement. Individual stars soon began to emerge – amongst them Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri at Papunya, Emily Kngwarreye, Ginger Riley and Rover Thomas, who was the Australian representative at the Venice Biennale in 1990. In 2001, Sotheby's (the first auction house to hold sales dedicated to Aboriginal art) sold Thomas's *All that Big Rain Coming from Top Side* (Fig. 2) for AUS$778,750, still a market record. Prices for other leading artists, while yet to achieve such sums, have scaled considerable heights. The auction record for both Emily Kngwarreye and Johnny Warankgula stands at AUS$400,000. As the movement has developed, the narrative of its history has evolved, and this has played a part too in directing the market's rise. The early board paintings produced at Papunya Tula now fetch premium prices.

The movement has continued to receive considerable state support in Australia. The National Gallery at Canberra was the first to establish a separate Aboriginal art curatorship. The others have all followed suit, and all have impressive Aboriginal art collections that they display prominently. This has yet to be matched internationally. Art institutions outside Australia, lagging behind the perceptions of the market, still remain unsure whether to view the work as contemporary art or ethnography. Melbourne-based gallery owner Gabrielle Pizzi was not allowed to exhibit Aboriginal art at the Cologne Contemporary Art Fair on this account. Major works in a contemporary idiom have been commissioned from eight Aboriginal artists for the new Musée Quai Branly in Paris, but the museum is billed as an ethnographic collection. The British Museum and the Victoria and Albert Museum have acquired contemporary Aboriginal art, but the Tate has yet even to acknowledge its existence. The only UK public art gallery where contemporary Aboriginal paintings are permanently displayed is the Gallery of Modern Art in Glasgow. They were bought by the great, maverick curator Julian Spalding in the early nineties.

Despite this, the international market continues to grow at a fearsome rate. I have been exhibiting Aboriginal work commercially in my London gallery since 1988, and have seen both unit sales and prices rise by over 1,000 per cent. In Australia all four of the principal auction houses – Sotheby's, Christie's, Lawson-Menzies, and Bonhams-Goodmans – now hold dedicated Aboriginal sales, and frequently preview them in Britain and America. Many of the buyers are impassioned devotees, intent on building up collections. But there is no doubt, too, that Aboriginal art has become hip. Australian celebrities such as Kylie Minogue and Elle Macpherson have affirmed their national pride and their cultural credentials by buying Aboriginal art. Moreover, the apparently abstract nature of many of the paintings – particularly those with a limited range of colours and a simple geometric composition – chimes with the modern design aesthetic. A large white-on-black canvas by Dorothy Napangardi or Ronnie Tjampitjimpa can look stunning in that mythical loft apartment. Add to this the fact that the pictures – on account of their ceremonial origins – are deemed to have an unspecified 'spiritual' dimension, and they become even more attractive to the twenty-first-century mind.


3 *Saltwater Country* by Gertie Huddlestone (b. *c.* 1935) and Angelina George (b. *c.* 1932), 1992. Acrylic on canvas, 120 x 130 cm. Sold by the Rebecca Hossack Gallery, 1994, £1,800. Private collection. Photo: the Rebecca Hossack Gallery

There are, of course, dangers in success. The extraordinary growth of the market over the past decade has encouraged investors – or speculators – intent only on turning a fast profit. Competition for trade amongst the auction houses has occasionally led to prices being over-hyped. The market, however, has shown its maturity by refusing to be forced. A Rover Thomas picture at a Sotheby's sale, tagged as the first Aboriginal picture likely to be sold for over AUS$1 million, failed to reach its reserve of AUS$700,000.

Masterworks by Rover Thomas, Clifford Possum and others will in time breach the million-dollar barrier, but it is perhaps rather further down the price scale that the real interest lies at the moment. Currently undervalued – in my opinion – are works from the Spinifex People of western Australia; the bark-painting community at Maningrida; and Ngukurr, where the justified fame of Ginger Riley has rather eclipsed other artists, such as Sambo Burra Burra, Amy Johnson and Gertie Huddleston (Fig. 3).

In 1988 Rebecca Hossack opened the Rebecca Hossack Gallery, London, which deals in non-western, especially Aboriginal, art.