

# Trading places



From the earliest days of the fledgling colony, legitimisation of Australian Indigenous art has been driven by its international appeal. Overseas sales are believed to have underpinned the success of Sotheby's fine art sales since the mid 1990s and *New York Times* art critic Robert Hughes famously described Aboriginal art as the "last great art movement of the 20th century". Now a decade into the 21st, Adrian Newstead investigates the international appeal of Aboriginal art.

**Above:**  
Adrian Newstead with  
Aboriginal artist Wimmitji,  
1993

**Opposite top left:**  
*Arts d' Australie* -  
Stephane Jacob, Paris

**Opposite top right:**  
Aboriginal exhibit at Musee  
du Quai Branly, Paris

**Opposite right:**  
Tommy Watson with the  
buyer of Watson's first  
major work, *Kukutjara*  
2003

**International interest in Aboriginal art has changed dramatically during its 200-year journey from the ethnographic to the contemporary.** Baldwin Spencer and Charles Mountford, who first promoted Aboriginal art to international audiences, would hardly recognize it in the starkly contrasting bark paintings and faintly resonant abstracted landscapes that predominate today. Neither would those who put together the earliest overseas collections, such as Czech artist Karel Kupka, or Americans Ed Ruhe and Louis Allen, and those with even deeper pockets that followed them. Fellow Americans Donald Kahn, Richard Kelton and John Kluge gave up trying to track the pace of change long ago.

The entire Aboriginal art market was worth less than \$1 million in 1970 and the greatest overseas collections of bark paintings and early Papunya boards had been assembled long before 1980 when the size of the Aboriginal art market had reached \$2.5 million.

As the number of privately owned galleries grew, the size of the market reached \$18.5 million at the end of the following decade on the back of Aboriginal art's incorporation into mainstream Australian fine art and the international investment boom in fine arts. International tourism had grown by 25 per cent during the final years of the 1980s and the introduction of Aboriginal artworks into Sotheby's and Christie's fine art catalogues over the following years served to increase its imprimatur and international cache.

The emergence of "star" artists, and the specialist secondary market, saw an escalation in the prices of artworks. Emily Kngwarreye and Rover Thomas became the first artists to achieve retail prices in excess of \$10,000 making galleries selling Aboriginal art profitable for the first time. Yet intense dealer rivalry developed around the emerging Utopia and Kimberley artists creating deep enmities between those who worked in the field, galleries and auction houses. It was only a matter of time before the most significant sector of the collecting community would change from impassioned ethnophiles, to collectors with an eye to "investment".

Austrade and the Visual Arts and Crafts Board of the Australia Council convened a Visual Art Export Panel, during an era prior to Export Market Development Grants. Australian galleries participated at the Chicago International Art Fair (CINAF) and SOFA, as well as art fairs in Cologne, Dusseldorf and Madrid. The Panel supported Gabrielle Pizzi, who showed in Cologne

and fought for Aboriginal art to break free of being defined as "folk art", Roslyn Oxley launched Tracy Moffatt's international career and Paul Greenaway showed indigenous artists in Madrid for the first time. Commercial presentations like these resulted in a growing number of important articles in international newspapers, including a cover story in *Time* magazine.

However, other than *Dreamtime*, staged at the Asia Society in New York during the late 1980s, and the exhibition *Aratjara - Art of the First Australians*, which toured Germany and the UK during the mid 1990s, few institutions in Australia mounted exhibitions for overseas. Fortunately, important international art patrons, including Americans Richard Kelton, and Mary Reid Brunstrom and Dutch collector Thomas Vroom, worked privately with institutions such as the Pacific Asia Museum in Los Angeles and the Wadsworth Athenaeum in St. Louis to realise exhibitions that significantly advanced the international exposure of Aboriginal art.

In Australia itself, inflammatory differences surfaced around the way in which art was produced and the relationships that existed between artists, galleries, agents and art centres. The media, having twigged to the interest that could be generated by public "scandals" relating to the arts, exposed the careers of a number of high profile artists, their families and dealers, to public scrutiny during the mid to late 1990s. Foremost amongst the artists whose praxis or attribution was called into question were Emily Kngwarreye, Kathleen Petyarre, Turkey Tolson and Clifford Possum. As the media circus, dominated by Eurocentric opinion, rolled on, confidence in Indigenous and ethnic visual art practice was seriously undermined. While Sotheby's Tim Klingender postulated that up to 80 per cent of the company's Indigenous art sales were being generated by overseas buyers, in 1997 Germaine Greer wrote in an internationally circulated opinion piece: "As far as the international art market is concerned, recent Aboriginal art is a con. Our desperate haste to get the visions out of Aborigine heads and into a saleable form could be compared with the way we rip the guts out of the country to overload the market with cheap iron ore." London art dealer Rebecca Hossack responded by saying: "Each time articles like this appear in the national and international press it kills the market in London stone dead."

Throughout the 1990s the vast majority of overseas