

SHARING OUR COMMON WEALTH

CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS

41ST ANNUAL SYMPOSIUM OF THE AUSTRALIAN ACADEMY OF THE HUMANITIES
19 NOVEMBER 2010

Acquiring and presenting Aboriginal art in art museums: my first 30 years

Ron Radford AM
Director, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra

I have been asked to talk about the role I have played in presenting and acquiring Aboriginal art as art, in art museums. I suppose I was asked because I am now the only senior museum professional still working in an art museum who dealt directly with Aboriginal art during the 1970s and early 80s.

I have seen a lot of change, much of which has been inaccurately recorded, even in very recent publications. I vividly remember the difficulties and the uninterested attitudes back then.

However, having agreed to speak about my own role I instead tried at first to document the bigger and more interesting topic of when and how Aboriginal art was gradually accepted, collected and prominently displayed by art museums around Australia. But after commencing this paper I soon realised what a huge task that was, deserving of a much larger treatment and indeed, a book. Of course, others have attempted to do this.

So I have now reverted largely to the original request — that is, to describe my own role in the acquisition and presentation of Aboriginal art in art museums. I am uncomfortable that so much is about me, but that is what I was asked to do.

Nevertheless I still want to touch on some of the steady progression long before my time, some of which has not been documented.

I want to tease out, for example, some of the implications of Baldwin Spencer's commissioning and collecting over 200 bark paintings while at Oenpelli, Arnhem Land, in 1912, and giving them to the National Museum of Victoria in 1917. He was not only the honorary director of the National Museum of Victoria but also a trustee of the National Gallery of Victoria which then shared the same building. He was an avid private collector and patron of contemporary Australian painting and encouraged the reluctant Bernard Hall, director of the National Gallery of Victoria, to collect more earnestly works by artists such as Arthur Streeton, Frederick McCubbin and Hans Heysen.¹

* Ron Radford AM, director National Gallery of Australia since 2005, was curator, senior curator then director, Art Gallery of South Australia 1981–2004, and director Ballarat Fine Art Gallery 1973–1980. He has served on many boards and committees over 30 years, including five years as a member of the Australia Council and Chair of its Visual Arts/Craft Board (1997–2002).

¹ Ron Radford *OUR COUNTRY Australian Federation Landscapes 1900–1914*, Adelaide 2001 pp20, 32

In 1912 Spencer held an exhibition of the Arnhem Land barks which was advertised in the Victorian Artists Society's journal with the slogan "PATRONISE AUSTRALIAN ART". He encouraged established artists like John Ford Paterson, McCubbin, Streeton and Heysen to acquire Aboriginal art. The National Gallery of Australia has recently acquired a small bark painting once owned by Heysen (and displayed in his house at Hahndorf) that almost certainly came from his patron Baldwin Spencer's expedition.²

The Spencer bark paintings were constantly on display in the Museum of Victoria and when I was growing up in Victoria in the late 1950s they seemed to be framed and displayed as art. Of course, as children we did not distinguish between the art and the ethnography visible in the same building and nor should we have.

In 1934 the Ballarat Fine Art Gallery, Australia's oldest and largest regional collection, accepted a gift of a work by Victorian Aboriginal artist William Barak. This seems to be the first Aboriginal work acquired by an art museum.

In 1939 the Art Gallery of South Australia purchased a watercolour landscape by Albert Namatjira. It was the first Aboriginal painting actually purchased by an art museum in Australia.

In 1941, at the insistence of the Yale University Art Gallery's director, Theodore Sizer, eleven Baldwin Spencer barks and three drawings by Tommy McCrae had been included among 144 works in the Carnegie Corporation's exhibition *Art of Australia 1788–1941* that he and Sydney Ure Smith co-curated for a 1941–45 tour of North America. It was first shown at the National Gallery of Art in Washington and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

In 1946 the Adelaide-based anthropologist C. P. Mountford was consultant to the Museum of Modern Art, New York, for the few Australian Aboriginal works in its exhibition *Arts of the South Seas*. In 1948 Mountford led an American–Australian expedition to Arnhem Land and in 1956 distributed the collected bark paintings to museums, including all the state art museums in Australia in the hope of stimulating them to begin active collecting programmes of their own, which they did, most notably at the Art Gallery of New South Wales.

There Deputy Director Tony Tuckson's enthusiastic collecting in the late 1950s of Tiwi burial poles and Yirrkala bark paintings meant that from 1960 onwards Aboriginal art had, for the first time, a highly conspicuous presence in one Australian art museum; in 1960 Tuckson was also commissioned to organise a large exhibition of bark paintings for nationwide tour of all State galleries. Significantly, Tuckson was also an outstanding abstract expressionist painter, and it was in the milieu of international Modernism that then so-called 'Primitive Art' was especially favoured — as for example, already mentioned, by the Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Tony Tuckson's contribution has been well recognised, but even earlier, in 1952, Daryl Lindsay, the director of the National Gallery of Victoria (and also an artist by training, albeit conservative in his own practice though not in taste), had sought bark paintings for its collection. He acquired seven Arnhem Land bark

² Oenpelli artist, *Anteater* c1912, purchased 2010

paintings and the artists and region were carefully recorded.³ In 1946 the National Gallery of Victoria had already bought a watercolour by Edwin Pareroultja, whose work was considered more 'authentic', and better, than that of his fellow Hermannsburg artist Albert Namatjira, and over the next three years similar watercolours by Pareroultja were bought by the Art Gallery of New South Wales and the Art Gallery of South Australia.

In 1949, when Sir Kenneth, later Lord Clark — connoisseur, art scholar and former distinguished director of the National Gallery, London — saw Aboriginal bark paintings in Adelaide at the South Australian Museum, he found their rare beauty a revelation and declared they should be celebrated and collected and shown around the world.

It has taken more than half a century for Theodore Sizer's, C. P. Mountford's and Kenneth Clark's wishes to come true.

However the momentum that was building up in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s for the acquisition and the showing of Aboriginal art in art museums began to dissipate in the 1970s.

Tony Tuckson died in 1973. Frank Norton, the director of the Art Gallery of Western Australia (and another practising artist), who also had been extremely active in acquiring works in the 1960s and early 70s, ceased to collect after 1974 because of illness and retired in 1976.

State gallery directors in the 1970s and the early 1980s were not as interested in Aboriginal art as most of their predecessors.

It also needs to be documented that in the 1970s the emergence of Western Desert paintings caused some confusion among those who had become familiar with the more traditional art forms from Arnhem Land. Art museums were very reluctant to accept them.

Adelaide played a major role in the acceptance of the new movement. There, the Flinders University Art Museum played a role as pioneers in the promoting of Western Desert painting. The South Australian Museum also played a role, as did later the Tandanya National Aboriginal Cultural Institute established in Adelaide in 1989.

When I was director of the Ballarat Fine Art Gallery in the late 1970s I tried unsuccessfully to organise — with the help of the Aboriginal Arts Board of the Australia Council — a tour of the new Papunya Tula dot paintings through the regional galleries of Victoria. There was little interest from the regional galleries in spite of the support offered by Bob Edwards, then Founding Director of the Aboriginal Arts Board. The exhibition did not get off the ground.

In 1980 when I became Curator of Paintings and Sculptures at the Art Gallery of South Australia one of my first proposed acquisitions was Clifford Possum's *Man's Love Story* 1978.

I was not then the designated curator in charge of Aboriginal art. The fine bark paintings owned by the Art Gallery of South Australia, which had been acquired since 1955, were then in the mixed curatorial bag of Decorative Arts and Asian

³ Information from Gerard Vaughan, Director, National Gallery of Victoria

Art. Not one of those bark paintings was on display when I arrived and they had not been displayed for some years.

My proposal for the acquisition of Clifford Possum's *Man's Love Story* argued that as an acrylic painting on canvas it was appropriate for the contemporary Australian painting collection. I have archived what I said in my proposal to the Art Gallery Board in 1980, which I find interesting today, thirty years later.

The Board is respectfully asked to consider this proposed acquisition without prejudice or preconceptions, not as an example of ethnology suitable for an historical or ethnological museum, but as an excellent work of art by a living Australian painter.

I went on to say:

It is proposed that the painting be hung in the Gallery unashamedly with other Australian contemporary abstract paintings.

This does not seem too extraordinary now, but it was then, and the painting's acquisition was opposed by the then director as not suitable for an art museum. He allowed it to go to the Board (unsupported by him) only because he had worked hard to get me to Adelaide to be his curator of paintings and sculptures. I was upset that I was thwarted in my first months at the Gallery. After all, I had for seven years at Ballarat been the director of the largest and oldest Australian regional gallery.

Without the director's support the Art Gallery Board of South Australia was evenly divided as to whether to approve this very unusual work. In the end it was passed by one vote. The director was not pleased.

As signalled in the Board report, I quickly hung the painting in the contemporary Australian gallery with other contemporary Australian works. Clifford Possum's *Man's Love Story* became the first Western Desert painting to hang in a major art museum.

The next year, 1981, with a little less controversy, Bernice Murphy included three large desert paintings in her first *Australian Perspectives* survey of contemporary art, and then acquired one of them, a joint work by Clifford Possum and Tim Leura, *Warlugulong* 1976, for the Art Gallery of New South Wales.

A year after that, October 1982, the National Gallery of Australia opened in Canberra with several bark paintings on display inside the entrance to Gallery One on the principal level, and more prolifically, including a group by Yirawala, in the Australian display upstairs. There items of decorative arts like 19th-century bicornual baskets from the Queensland rainforest were also on display, but borrowed, as were a few early-twentieth-century barks from Oenpelli interspersed among Edwardian paintings by Hugh Ramsay and E. Phillips Fox. In 1982 only one dot painting was displayed by the National Gallery, bought only that year as a gift of the Philip Morris Arts Grant; it was Johnny Warangkula Tjupurrula's *Yala, Wild Potato Dreaming* 1981.

Acquisitions of dot paintings were still thought to be very odd. Like Namatjira's watercolours they were considered less 'authentic' than paintings on bark, and were not appreciated by the art museum profession generally, let alone the general public, yet Western Desert painting at Papunya had been thriving for a

decade. More importantly it represented a tradition that has survived in the desert for tens of thousands of years.

It was only well after the Clifford Possum acquisition that I found out from an assistant registrar at the Art Gallery of South Australia that in 1978 twenty small Papunya paintings dating from 1974 and 75 had been pressed on the Gallery as a gift from the Australia Council.

Bob Edwards was not only Director of the Aboriginal Arts Board of the Australia Council but also an honorary adviser to the Art Gallery of South Australia and had used his influence with certain trustees of the Gallery; the works were slipped through the acquisition process but never shown and only recorded much later. No other State Gallery accepted Bob Edwards's proposed gifts of desert paintings from the Aboriginal Arts Board. I did not know about those twenty earlier works when I submitted the Clifford Possum painting and no one else seemed to be aware of them.

In early 1984, in between gallery directors, I staged an exhibition at the Gallery entitled *Aboriginal Dreamings: Paintings from the Desert*. It displayed for the first time the twenty Papunya paintings with ten others I had quietly purchased. Among the ten was the first painting by a woman to enter an art museum. It was Daisy Leura Nakamarra's *Women Dreaming* 1982.

Aboriginal Dreamings was the first survey of Western Desert painting in a State Gallery. There was no money or support for a catalogue but explanatory wall texts were provided, including the stories for each painting. The exhibition met with some favour from the profession and the general public, which was beginning to become aware of such works and their context.

At the end of the preceding year, 1983, I had curated a large survey entitled *Recent Australian Painting 1970–1983*. It was the first “historical” contemporary painting survey in Australia for many years. Much to the bewilderment of many, it included eight paintings from the Western Desert. I stated in the catalogue:

The transfer of their culture to modern materials remains one of the most important developments in Australian painting of the 1970s.

At the time this was startlingly emphatic but nearly thirty years later it seems very much an understatement. The review of the exhibition in the prominent magazine *Art & Australia* criticised the inclusion of Aboriginal art in such a survey, stating that one of the said paintings was entitled *Camp site* and that ‘camp sight’ summed up the exhibition! Remember this was 1983.

Also at the end of 1983, only weeks before he left the Art Gallery of South Australia, the same director who had originally opposed the Clifford Possum acquisition appointed me Curator of Aboriginal Art.

This was on top of being Curator of European and Australian Paintings and Sculptures and on top of being curator of the South Australian Colonial Collection that had been added to my curatorial responsibilities in 1982. It was an enormous curatorial portfolio and there was no assistant curator at the time. I began to purchase freely every kind of Aboriginal art — bark paintings, Hermannsburg watercolours, urban paintings as well as desert paintings but also sculptures, ceramics and works in fibre.

As the State Government grant for acquisitions at the Art Gallery of South Australia was and still is minute, the Friends of the Gallery helped raise funds for my Aboriginal art purchases, setting up stalls of produce for sale. Remarkable works were purchased through their fundraising efforts. Works were acquired for their sheer aesthetic beauty.

In 1988 most of the paintings acquired after 1985 were included in a survey of Aboriginal painting from all regions in Australia for a non-touring Christmas show at the Art Gallery of South Australia, timed for the end of the Australian Bicentenary year. It demonstrated the new enthusiasm for Aboriginal art and its acquisition by the Art Gallery of South Australia.

However, this brings me to a more important exhibition. The Australian Bicentennial Authority had asked the Art Gallery of South Australia to prepare the official Bicentenary art exhibition for touring to every State Gallery and I was greatly honoured to be its curator. It was called *The Great Australian Art Exhibition 1788–1988* and its substantial catalogue, entitled *Creating Australia: 200 years of art 1788–1988*, was edited by Daniel Thomas who was then director of the Gallery.

I began selecting works for the Bicentennial exhibition in 1986. I was very anxious to include a large and varied selection of Aboriginal art in this all-Australian art survey. I sought advice and support from the then Indigenous Director of the Aboriginal Arts Board of the Australia Council. He told me on no account was there to be any Indigenous art in this survey. He stated emphatically:

While you whities are celebrating 200 years of European culture in Australia we will be celebrating 40,000 years of Aboriginal culture with exhibitions in Europe.

How could I argue with that? But I thought it was a missed opportunity to showcase different kinds of Aboriginal art side by side with non-Aboriginal Australian art. The exhibition was to be seen by hundreds of thousands of Australians in every State capital.

Soon, however, that Director of the Aboriginal Arts Board resigned and I asked his successor the same question about the inclusion of Aboriginal art. In contrast to his predecessor, this Indigenous man was excited by the prospect and thought it an emotionally appropriate opportunity for a popular showing of Aboriginal art and culture around the nation.

In a short span of time I visited every public collection of Aboriginal art in Australia. I also visited many private collections. I seemed to spend months in museum vaults. It was very exciting; I learnt much and was given much wise advice about early Indigenous culture from Indigenous and non-Indigenous authorities.

In the end I chose not only early and recent bark paintings, Western Desert paintings, Hermannsburg paintings and Aboriginal urban paintings, but also decorated shields, Tiwi Pukamani poles, sculptures, baskets, necklaces and pendants of shell and feathers.

These paintings and objects were borrowed from public and private collections from around Australia and in the context of *The Great Australian Art Exhibition 1788–1988* they were not to be seen as ethnographic but rather as major works of Indigenous art and craft. The exhibition installations in each State gallery venue appropriately began with Aboriginal art, but also interspersed Aboriginal works with non-Aboriginal works throughout the exhibition.

The huge exhibition opened its tour at the Queensland Art Gallery in the beginning of 1988 and travelled to all the State Galleries through 1988 and 1989, finishing at the Art Gallery of South Australia towards the end of 1989. It was one of the most exciting and rewarding exhibitions I ever worked on in my curatorial career. The inclusion of Aboriginal art was well received by visitors to the exhibition, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal.

The Australian Bicentenary in 1988 was a watershed year for the appreciation of Aboriginal culture and Aboriginal issues generally. Aboriginal art only then began to become popular with the general public.

In the following year I acquired for the Art Gallery of South Australia two of the rarest Western Desert paintings. Both were by Kaapa Tjampitjinpa and they predate Geoff Bardon's now famous and ground-breaking *Honey Ant mural* at Papunya which is generally seen as the beginning of the movement. Vivien Johnson has elaborated on their early importance in her latest book *Once upon a time in Papunya*.⁴

In 1990 the Art Gallery of South Australia staged the first of the Adelaide Biennials of Australian art, high-profile exhibitions programmed to coincide with the Adelaide Festivals. As part of its brief, and every succeeding brief, the Adelaide Biennial at the AGSA had to include Indigenous Australian art, and since then every Adelaide Biennale has continued to do so. Much later I decided that the 2000 Adelaide Biennial should be a purely Indigenous Biennial. Brenda Croft was its curator and it was called *Beyond the pale*.

At the beginning of 1991 I had become director of the Art Gallery of South Australia. I continued to be involved with the long-planned building extension for the Gallery. In the entrance to a large new wing I was determined to feature Aboriginal art in the impressive atrium and thereby give it the prominence at the Art Gallery of South Australia that it deserved. The extension opened at the beginning of 1996. This beautiful atrium space is still impressive but of course it now seems too small for Adelaide's fine and growing Indigenous collection. In the new west wing, exhibitions of Aboriginal art were also held in the large underground galleries for temporary exhibitions.

In the opening year of this west wing two exhibitions of Aboriginal art were staged. The first was a large survey of Adelaide's by then large and balanced desert dot-painting collection entitled *Dreaming of the Desert: Aboriginal Dot Paintings of the Western Desert*. It was curated by Jane Hylton and was accompanied by a substantial publication with the main text written by Vivien Johnson. It was timed as a 25th anniversary exhibition celebrating the

⁴ Vivien Johnson *Once upon a time in Papunya*, Sydney 2010, pp 18–19, 136, 247. However, in spite of what Johnson has written, these works were displayed soon after acquisition with the consent of the community. Helen Brown, a close friend, had purchased them with Jo Caddy from the Papunya Community where they met Kaapa, not in Alice Springs.

emergence of Papunya dot paintings. The Adelaide collection was shown to be very balanced and indeed the finest and largest collection of desert dot paintings from the 1980s which exists in any museum.

The second exhibition in 1996 was a survey of Aboriginal crafts. *Objects from the Dreaming: Aboriginal decorated and woven objects* was curated by Christopher Menz, then Curator of Decorative Arts at the Gallery. It showed the many major and interesting objects and textiles then owned or about to be acquired by the Gallery at the time.

In 2002 an exhibition of early bark paintings from Arnhem Land was curated by Tracey Lock-Weir, Assistant Curator of Australian Art. The earliest barks in the exhibition came from the famed Mountford expedition of 1948 and two subsequent expeditions shortly afterwards. As mentioned, the barks from the Mountford expeditions were later divided between the various State Galleries and State Museums. But the Art Gallery of South Australia from 1955 onwards under the directorship of Robert Campbell received more than its share as Mountford, a South Australian and friend of the Gallery director, also gave his personal collection to the Gallery. Therefore the Art Gallery of South Australia has the largest collection of late 1940s and early 1950s bark paintings.

It was an insightful exhibition, with the Gallery showing its own works and the South Australian Museum its barks from the Mountford expeditions at the same time. The parallel exhibition was curated by Philip Jones Senior Curator, Department of Anthropology, South Australian Museum. The different approaches of the Art Gallery and the Museum in regard to similar works were starkly obvious at the interesting joint opening, which was attended by many Indigenous people from the Northern Territory and South Australia.

In 2003, the Art Gallery of South Australia organised a large retrospective of Clifford Possum's work. He had just died but he had formally consented to the exhibition in his lifetime. It was curated by Vivien Johnson and after Adelaide it toured to the National Gallery of Victoria, the Art Gallery of New South Wales and the Queensland Art Gallery. It was only the second one-person survey of a Desert painter's work. (A retrospective of the late Emily Kam Kngwarray had just preceded it, curated by Margo Neale in Queensland.)

The Clifford Possum national touring retrospective in 2003 was a fitting conclusion to my promotion of Aboriginal art at the Art Gallery of South Australia, completing the full circle that began with my first curatorial acquisition of his work in 1980.

While the Clifford Possum retrospective exhibition was still touring, I was appointed Director of the National Gallery of Australia and took up the position in Canberra in early 2005.

The National Gallery of Australia was to undergo a building extension. It was known as the 'front-door project'. New visitors could seldom recognise where to enter the National Gallery building and we did not have the front-of-house facilities expected of a present-day art museum.

Before I arrived, the first proposed design was challenged by the original architect, who claimed it destroyed the integrity of the building, and the Gallery Council eventually had to reject it. From my very first months at the National

Gallery I was therefore involved in redesigning the front-door project with Andrew Andersons of PTW Architects. It was to be a costly and complex exercise with a great many practical and heritage issues.

I decided that if we were to go to so much trouble and expense, why not add some new collection-display galleries as well. The original Gallery building was designed in 1969 to show 1000 works but was not completed and opened until 1982. The collection now has some 150,000 works, which poses a challenge of how to extend the Gallery's permanent collection space in future.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art did not have a specially designed space in the original building and, as mentioned, when it opened only a small number of Indigenous works were included in the displays. However, by the time I began at the National Gallery it had long been one of the fastest growing areas of the national art collection and in my opinion, one of the most important, particularly for the National Gallery of Australia.

So, into the design of a new entrance and facilities, we incorporated a specially designed space on the ground level for the *Aboriginal Memorial* which the National Gallery had commissioned in 1987 with the help of John Munding. And on the principal level we incorporated twelve galleries for Indigenous art, the first new collection-display spaces to be added to the original building.

The new so-called front-door extension was formally opened by the Governor General of Australia on 30 September 2010 and is called Stage One of the Gallery redevelopment. Stage Two is to be a series of purpose-designed galleries for non-Indigenous Australian art, which will eventually adjoin the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander galleries that now welcome visitors to the principal floor of the National Gallery.

The new Indigenous galleries were consciously designed as beautiful art gallery rooms lit by natural daylight from above — a similar light to that in which the works were created. Each of the spaces or rooms shows a different region or aspect of Aboriginal Art.

As visitors pass through the new ground-level entrance they instantly see to the right a magisterial space especially designed for one of our most significant works, the *Aboriginal Memorial* of 200 hollow-log coffins commissioned for the 1988 Bicentenary. The space is designed so the decorated hollow logs have a relationship with the Australian landscape on the other side of the external glass walls. Inside you look out through the poles to the native trees and from outside you see the poles through the trees.

Up the escalators to the principal floor visitors turn right onto a bridge that takes them to eleven new galleries for Aboriginal art.

Before they enter the first, they encounter a series of elegant showcases displaying nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander objects. These are the Gallery's earliest Indigenous works, most of which have only recently been acquired.

Then they encounter a dramatic circular gallery showing the earliest Papunya dot paintings of 1971 to 1973. It's the largest art-museum collection display of the beginnings of the movement.

Next, a day-lit gallery is for larger and later desert paintings. Off the side of that gallery is a small room illuminated with soft artificial light for light-sensitive Hermannsburg watercolours and also for Hermannsburg pots.

Another day-lit gallery is for Kimberley painting and to its side is a small artificially-lit room for textiles and baskets.

A further day-lit gallery is for early bark paintings and sculptures made before 1980, and to the side, artificially lit, is a room for Aboriginal prints and drawings of which the National Gallery has a very large collection.

The next day-lit gallery is for recent paintings and sculptures from Arnhem Land and North Queensland. Off that is an artificially-lit gallery of Torres Strait Islander art, showing fragile feather headdresses and dramatic prints and sculptures.

The final day-lit gallery is for the diversity of urban Aboriginal art.

I was closely involved with the inaugural installation, along with our Senior Curator of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art, Franchesca Cubillo, and our two Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Indigenous curators, Tina Baum and Kelli Cole.

In all there are over 600 Indigenous works on display in the new spaces at the National Gallery, the largest display of Australian Indigenous art anywhere.

And so it should be. Following the acquisitions policies recommended by Sir Daryl Lindsay in 1966 for a future National Gallery we have been rapidly amassing Aboriginal art since 1972.

The collection, like the display, is now the largest Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art collection. It contains over 7500 works. Many have been recently acquired with the new galleries in mind, to make the display comprehensive, balanced and up to date. As it happens, half of the works on display in the new first-floor galleries have been acquired in my tenure as director.

But so as not to seem to be ghettoising Indigenous art, throughout the current non-Indigenous Australian displays upstairs, Aboriginal art is also included as it has long been. This is also planned for the Stage Two development of European Australian art.

To coincide with the opening of the front-door extensions, the Gallery symbolically commissioned for outside the new entrance a spherical bronze sculpture by Thancoupie. She is the female Aboriginal artist with the longest sustained career.

The National Gallery's special strengths in Indigenous art include an enormous number of bark paintings mostly painted from the 1960s and onwards. I have already mentioned the largest art-museum collection of early Papunya boards of 1971–1973. The Kimberley painting collection is also the largest of its kind and especially strong in works by Rover Thomas and Paddy Jaminji.

Our already strong collection of Hermannsburg watercolours was recently strengthened by a large gift of 30 works from Gordon and Marilyn Darling of works by Albert Namatjira. We have a very representative urban Aboriginal collection and a huge collection of contemporary Aboriginal prints and drawings.

It is appropriate that the National Gallery of Australia should have such an important Aboriginal and Torres Strait art collection and display it so prominently and comprehensively in galleries especially designed for the different kinds of Indigenous art.

It is a showcase not only for Australians but also for worldwide visitors.

The National Gallery has instigated many important Indigenous exhibitions before and during my time as director. The most significant in my time is the National Indigenous Art Triennial. The first, in 2007, curated by Brenda Croft, was entitled *Culture Warriors*. From Canberra it travelled to the State Galleries and then to Washington DC. The next Indigenous Art Triennial will be presented in 2011.

In 2010 the National Gallery of Australia launched its Indigenous Fellowships with generous sponsorship by Wesfarmers. This unique initiative has been established to increase the number of Indigenous people in leading roles in the visual arts sector. We have just announced the first two Fellows, and the ten Indigenous art leaderships.

It has been a great privilege working with Aboriginal artists. I have been able to meet Emily Kam Kngwarray, Rover Thomas, Clifford Possum, Turkey Tolsen, David Malangi, David Downs, John Mawurndjul and many others, and see them painting. I have visited many Aboriginal communities, and also have longstanding friendships with urban artists such as Tracey Moffatt and Destiny Deacon.

* * * * *

Australians at last appreciate the unique beauty and originality of their Indigenous art. They are now neither scornful of nor indifferent to it.

Rather, Aboriginal art is celebrated. It is now one of the most popular areas in any Australian art museum.

What a far cry from the early 1980s when I began to acquire, promote and display it.

It is true too, as Lord Clark would have appreciated, that there is now growing admiration around the world for Australian Indigenous art.

After 40,000 years of isolation, the world's oldest continuing culture can at last claim its prominent place among the great cultures of the world.