

Batik cloth, date unknown, artist unknown.
Winifred Hilliard No. 2 Collection
photo: George Serras



NATIONAL MUSEUM COLLECTORS & COLLECTIONS DEACONESS HILLIARD COLLECTION

In 1954 a remarkable woman went to live at a remote central Australian mission called Ernabella to teach Aboriginal women living there art and craft.

Deaconess Winifred Hilliard was a young woman with no real experience of Aboriginal people and had previously only lived in cities or large towns. Deaconess Hilliard was to remain at Ernabella until she retired, 32 years later. During her time there she amassed a remarkable collection documenting many aspects of Ernabella's history including the church and school. But probably the most significant components of the collection are the many examples of art and craft including batiks and other decorated fabrics, children's drawings, paintings and various wooden implements and carvings.

Ernabella was first of all a camping ground in Yangtunyjtjara country, located in the picturesque Musgrave Ranges in north-western South Australia. In the 1930s a sheep station was set up on their country, based around a reliable waterhole recorded by early non-Indigenous visitors as Ernabella or variations of this name. In 1937 the Presbyterian Church took over the station's lease to start a mission station. Today, Ernabella is Aboriginal-run on Aboriginal land and is a small self-sufficient settlement with its own council, school, store, garage and medical facilities.



Batik silk, date unknown, by Nyukana (Daisy) Baker. Winifred Hilliard No. 3 Collection. photo: George Serras

DEACONESS HILLIARD COLLECTION

Sheep continued to be run at Ernabella until the 1970s and with them came employment opportunities for men. At the same time there were only limited opportunities for women, a few domestic and teacher's aide positions being mostly what was available.

So the mission turned to art and craft to offer women employment. At first art and craft production was intermittent, largely dependent on opportunities like Christmas for which hand-painted cards were produced. These were a success and other avenues were explored. Using their natural skill at weaving, women were employed to spin wool which was used in various woven wool products like large and spectacular woollen floor rugs, of which there is one in the Hilliard collection. Other wool products in the collection include woven tapestries, knee rugs and scarves, as well as examples of fleeces and hand-dyed wool samples.

In 1948 Ernabella Arts was established. Always trying to be economically self-sufficient, numerous art and craft forms have been tried over the years of which many were suggested by Deaconess Hilliard. Her background made her the ideal person to teach the women various arts and crafts, with her training including two years learning various art and craft techniques at the Presbyterian Ladies College, then located in East Melbourne. This gave her a wide-ranging background and as a 'non-specialist' she could show the women the various crafts she had learnt so that they could experience them and choose what they wanted to do. For those techniques she was not trained in herself, other practitioners were brought to Ernabella. The most famous example of this occurred in the early 1970s with the introduction

of batik. Although familiar with its possibilities, Deaconess Hilliard herself was not able to demonstrate batik, which is ideally suited to be practised in remote areas because of the simple technology required. So two people were brought in to teach the technique. The first was Leo Brereton, a young American batik artist who taught the basics in 1971. In 1975, the Danish artist Vivianne Bertelson went to Ernabella and it was from her that the women largely gained their technical expertise. Bertelson was also able to put Ernabella Arts in touch with reliable sources of materials. The collection includes exactly 100 batiks, ranging from off-cuts perhaps left over from making clothing, to many produced by school children, to spectacular lengths over three metres in length. These batiks are a significant body of work, dating almost from the time batik first started at Ernabella late in 1971. The Museum regards this part of the collection so highly that it is shortly to publish a book of these fabulous artworks, to be launched in April.

Deaconess Hilliard has always had a sense of history and realised the importance of collecting those little things you rarely find in collections or recording the kinds of information that make those everyday things that little bit extra special. Things like a little ornament placed around a newborn girl's neck or children's drawings documented as being used as the basis for actual designs of wool rugs. The collection includes examples of the kinds of crafts that were tried at Ernabella but were not a success, for example copper beatings; things that were successful for a time but discontinued, like carvings in stone, and a sample fabric tried as an experiment to see if a mix of techniques (batik and tie-dye) could produce marketable items. All of these and other little treasures in the collection, as well as the more common



items, together form a significant corpus of material. The value of the collection is further increased by the information recorded about individual items and the overall context of the art and craft industry at Ernabella and the community's broader history as recorded by Deaconess Hilliard in various publications including her book *The People in Between*, published in 1968. This is not to mention their association with Deaconess Hilliard herself. Those who enjoyed *The People in Between* will be pleased to know she is working on a follow-up book.

Deaconess Hilliard is an active 82-year-old who still maintains contact with her Aboriginal friends at Ernabella. She also gives talks about her time at Ernabella, something she has done for many years now. She grew up in Melbourne where she went to school. She completed her five year deaconess and missionary training at the Presbyterian Ladies College, graduating on 29 November 1950. After working variously within the drawing offices and as an instrument repairer during the Second World War, she undertook her deaconess training. After graduating, her first two appointments were at Carlton in Melbourne and at North Albury, on the New South Wales side of the River Murray.

Deaconess Hilliard was hoping to follow an aunt's footsteps by working as a missionary in Korea when she was asked to go to Ernabella to teach Aboriginal women art and craft. She accepted the placement and arrived there in July 1954. It was shearing time and most families were at camps away from the settlement. This gave Deaconess Hilliard time to become familiar with her surroundings and she got to know the artists as they gradually returned to Ernabella.

When Deaconess Hilliard arrived at Ernabella, she had little idea of what to expect and arrived with little knowledge about Aboriginal people. In some ways this was fortunate, as she kept an open mind and as she became increasingly familiar with the people at Ernabella was able to appreciate the individuality of the women and their vibrant and dynamic culture. As far as the art and craft itself was concerned, this translated into her making suggestions and providing guidance, but leaving the major decisions concerning the craft room and the art and craft itself to the local women.

Deaconess Hilliard had only one week's overlap with her predecessor, Mary Bennett. Although her title, Craftwork Supervisor (now called Art Co-ordinator) suggests her role was to supervise the workers, her philosophy was to work with them rather than be their 'boss'. Communication was in both Pitjantjatjara and English. It was the policy of the Presbyterian Church that its missionaries learn Pitjantjatjara so for several months after arriving, Deaconess Hilliard had instruction in the language and, nearly 20 years after leaving Ernabella, retains her fluency as a Pitjantjatjara speaker.

Deaconess Hilliard's role at Ernabella went beyond that of arts and craft adviser. The staff was responsible for the schooling and religious instruction of Ernabella's Indigenous inhabitants. In the early years all books for teaching were produced by or for the Presbyterian Church, and frequently Deaconess Hilliard illustrated them with her distinctive drawings. Similarly, images on some Christmas cards produced by Ernabella to help raise funds were also drawn by Deaconess Hilliard and examples of these, too, are included in the collection.

One of Deaconess Hilliard's interests is photography and her ability as a photographer is evident for those who have had the privilege of viewing her photographs. Her competence as a photographer was recognised in 1963 when she was awarded a certificate of excellence in the Kodak International Color Picture Competition. At Ernabella she photographed artists, the spectacular scenery around the settlement, local flora, and other subjects. Prints of her photographs are an important component of the National Museum's Hilliard Collection, including striking portraits of many of the artists working out of Ernabella during her tenure there. Complementing these are numerous photographs taken in the Ernabella Arts rooms and during artists' travels to exhibitions and workshops. Today the majority of Deaconess Hilliard's original negatives and slides are held by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies.

Deaconess Hilliard's long list of achievements at Ernabella was recognised by both the local Aboriginal people and her own society. At Ernabella she was incorporated into the local social organisation and given the name 'Awulari'. In the wider world, her contributions were acknowledged when she was awarded a Member of the Order of the British Empire (MBE) in 1977 and a Medal of the Order of Australia (OAM) in 1989.

In 1991 Deaconess Hilliard offered some of her collection to the Museum. We were shown a curator's dream – a well-documented and wide-ranging collection. Not only that, we had been looking at building up the Museum's collection of 'contact history' material – Deaconess Hilliard's collection would prove to be an important addition to this important area of the Museum. In 2000, Deaconess Hilliard donated an even larger collection of material that increased the range of items represented in her collection.

Through Deaconess Hilliard, the National Museum is fortunate to hold what is probably the world's most significant collection of art and craft items made at Ernabella. This is significant because Ernabella Arts is probably the longest continuously running Indigenous arts and craft organisation in Australia, making it an important part of the history of this major Indigenous industry. 📍

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