

# ERNABELLA COLLECTION

## A LIVING DOCUMENT

**Ernabella Arts Incorporated is approaching its sixtieth anniversary of operation.** Ernabella work will be familiar to many longstanding and regular readers of the *Friends* magazine, as it has featured here in articles in the past. Many of you will also be familiar with the Ernabella display which has been on show in the *Gallery of First Australians* since opening. The Friends of the National Museum is hoping to offer members the opportunity to visit the Pitjantjatjara/ Yankunytjatjara lands, to see the home of Ernabella's most distinctive artworks, especially the batiks that have been the signature works of the centre for more than a decade. Plans being discussed at Ernabella include an exhibition there, curated by some of the artists who work in the art centre, to celebrate the anniversary.

*Walu or rocky hill behind the art centre.*  
Photo: David Kaus



Photos: George Serras



*Tjunkaya Tapaya*  
December 2005  
Untitled - silk batik  
2m x 1.1m

*These batiks were made after recent workshops with artists from Indonesia. Each colour in the batiks has been produced by dyeing the cloths a number of times in the same colour. This has helped produce the rich tones and strong contrasts of the finished cloths. They were collected at our most recent trip to Ernabella in 2005.*

The place Ernabella, now more commonly referred to by its Aboriginal name *Pukatja*, lies in wonderful country. In her book *The People in Between*, museum benefactor Deaconess Winifred Hilliard<sup>1</sup> quotes pioneer explorer Ernest Giles' reaction on first coming to Ernabella in 1872:

*This was a really delightful discovery. Everything was of the best here – timber, water, grass, and mountains. In all my wanderings over thousands of miles in Australia I never saw a more fanciful region than this...*

My first trip to the Lands left a strong impression on me. It was following many days of torrential rain that had made the unsealed roads difficult to travel. As the skies cleared and the temperature began to rise, so did the many small wildflowers and the scents of the desert. Thousands upon thousands of small-headed wildflowers in pink, mauve, white and yellow, known generally as *tjulpun-tjulpunpa*, began to show themselves, contrasted against the reds and more delicate pinkish tones of the saturated soil and sands. The moist air was laden with the sweet smells of different seeds and resin, the roads still covered with pools of water reflecting the cobalt skies. No wonder to me that the Ernabella artists are so comfortable with a wide and varied palette in their artwork. And for a city woman like me the stillness and quiet was palpable.

I joined the end of a small convoy in case the road conditions proved greater than my driving skills and – delayed by the trials of others – I eventually approached *Pukatja* later than planned. As the sun began to sink, the sky beyond the Musgrave Ranges became a riot of pinks and oranges.

Seeing the objects in museums and on the pale walls of galleries is totally different to seeing them in production or in the stores. I saw lengths of batik that were sumptuous and evocative, conjuring the colours and atmosphere of the desert. And so began my commitment to try to maintain within the collections at the Museum a sense of history in the making.

The National Historical Collection of material related to Ernabella is highly significant. Chronologically, it begins with a collection donated by Enid Bowden that included a small number from Ernabella and other Pitjatjantjara/Yankunytjatjara communities. A little later one of the Museum's 'foundation' collections, the Australian Arts Board (AAB) collection, was transferred to the National Museum of Australia in 1990. It had been set up in 1973 to support the endeavours of

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people 'to maintain their cultures through the practice of established art forms and the development of new'<sup>2</sup>. The AAB purchased objects from centres across Australia. It purchased woollen items from Ernabella – a dozen hooked rugs and a few woven 'knee' rugs, for sheep were still being run at there at the time – as well as four batiks. While important, all these objects told only a small part of the Ernabella story. Then in 1994 and again in 2000 the Museum received the Deaconess Winifred Hilliard collections.

It is clear from the range of objects that Winifred had what National Museum senior curator David Kaus terms a 'sense of history'<sup>3</sup>. One can also see from the objects that were gathered over the many years that she lived and worked at Ernabella, that Winifred is a staunch supporter of the artists and has a generosity of spirit. It was an eclectic group of objects.

She collected from a very wide range of artists, and she collected a great variety of things. This included objects that were commercially unsuccessful or that weren't popular activities among the artists. She also collected those that were abandoned before completion, such as some of the wooden carvings showing the first cut into the branch and how those first strokes would determine the final form of the piece; or those that were near completion but lacked the finish and the burnt decoration.

Winifred Hilliard also collected material from the school and the church – readers, catechisms and gospels in Pitjatjantjara. These things give an insight into the approach of the Presbyterian Mission to forming a working relationship with the community through the use of the local language. They are an important resource and a wonderful historical record of aspects of the operation of the Presbyterian Mission school, with the readers and holy texts written and used in Pitjatjantjara. Things like this have relevance now: it is interesting to read that a recent conference on education highlighted the value of educating Indigenous children in their own language, as well as in English<sup>4</sup>.

More material was accepted into the National Historical Collection in 2006. This latest group of objects brings new and fresh insights into what is happening in this community. Among them are some pieces of ceramics and support material that document a new ceramics project at Ernabella. The project aims to help the community become self sufficient in ceramic production through training in all aspects of the process. The new material also includes some stunning new batiks and some important archival material.

Tjulpun-tjulpunpa, *Myriocephalus stuartii* or poached egg daisy.  
Photo: David Kaus



One of the strengths of the Museum's Ernabella collection is that it is a living document of the community's art and cultural practice. What I mean by this is that the material doesn't just stand testament to those people and the organisations that had the foresight to amass it. Nor does it just give a history of a particular period of Ernabella community art centre. Rather, it represents a special relationship between the community and the Museum that is dynamic and reciprocal. This change in the 'status' of the collection began to take place shortly after the Museum's opening, when the Museum staged *Tracking Kultja: the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultural Festival*. Communities from across Australia came to the Museum for performances, forums and for a village marketplace where they could market their artworks or services.

A large group of people from five communities across the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Lands came to *Tracking Kultja*. They brought with them a wide range of their artworks, sat and carved *punu* (wooden animals and bowls), and presented a very special performance of an *inma* (a ceremony with song and dance). While here, they saw for the first time the exhibition of their work. They

saw more of it in our Open Collections and even more things in the main stores. Canberra has connotations for them as being a place of importance – a place of power. That, combined with recognition that their work is held, with such care and safety, in a national institution made an impression on the artists.

Over the following few years, there were more trips by community members to Canberra, and they brought nieces, daughters or granddaughters with them. At each visit they brought them here to show them their things. And some of the trips were marked by the donation of relevant material, such as the performance outfits worn by two of the young girls for whom it had been their first trip and their first performance to a predominantly white audience, marking their attempt to teach the wider society about their culture.

The intention is for this remarkable collection to grow at appropriate times with material that will record how this group of people navigate the changes in their world. If the Friends are successful in their planning to visit the Lands, I suggest you join them, and then return to see some of the Museum's fine works. I guarantee you'll see them with fresh eyes.

- 1 Hilliard, 1968 *The People in Between*.
- 2 Australia Council Annual Report 1981-82
- 3 Kaus, *Friends* vol 15, no. 1
- 4 Eickelcamp, 2006, 'On a Positive Note: The Anangu Education Service Conference' in *Australian Anthropology Society Newsletter* no.103

L to R

Nungalka Stanley  
Ceramic slipcast vase with 'batik' design

Tjimpuna Williams  
Ceramic slipcast vase with sgraffito design

Nyukana (Daisy) Baker  
Ceramic slipcast vase with 'batik' design

Nyukana (Daisy) Baker  
Ceramic slipcast vase with 'batik' design

Pukatja is part of the Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjatjara lands and visitors must seek a permit.

Photo: Andy Greenslade

