



Lola Edwards and Nancy Hillwood.
Photo: Jason McCarthy

ALBERT NAMATJIRA PAINTING

and Cootamundra Girls

The Cootamundra Aboriginal Girls' Training Home had little use for the frivolous. Its austere exterior suited its grim role as a place where Aboriginal girls were trained as domestic servants under the authority of the Aborigines Protection Board.

One day in 1956 the most famous Aboriginal person of the time, the Alice Springs artist Albert Namatjira, visited and later gave the girls at the Home a painting. The girls, many of them from the Stolen Generations, understood the painting was for them, not the Home, not the Protection Board, and not the State government.

When the Department of Community Services took over the Girls' Home in 1969 the painting was taken from its place above the dormitory doors and disappeared. But the Girls, as they still prefer to be known even though many are now grandmothers, never forgot their Namatjira painting and never stopped looking for it.

In 1994 came a breakthrough. One of the Girls, Lola Edwards, was at a meeting with DOCS in the lead-up to the inquiry into the Stolen Generations when the department's records manager, John Sharman, said he had found where the painting was: upstairs in the executive meeting room. 'He brings the painting out and I almost fell over in shock when I saw it,' Lola told Sally Pryor of the *Canberra Times*.

After ten years of what Lola described as 'soul-searching', the Girls decided that the appropriate place for their Namatjira painting was the National Museum of Australia. Curator Jay Arthur from the Museum's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Program arranged for the painting to be taken into the Museum's collection.

At the handover the Director, Craddock Morton, noted that it was a special occasion marked by both sadness and joy.

'Sadness at your suffering at the hands of both Church and State, sadness at the pain and loss inflicted on your families.

'On behalf of the National Museum I would like to say sorry for what we have done to you. Personally, I feel deep sadness and shame – a feeling that is shared by many Australians, including those who thought it was the right thing to do at the time.

'But joy too. Joy that you are here today at the Museum, joy that you have given each other the strength to come through these experiences. Joy at your capacity for forgiveness. Joy at your generosity in donating this precious object to the National Museum of Australia.

'Let me make this pledge today; with your help, the National Museum will use this wonderful painting as a means of telling your story, accurately and honestly.

For that is the least that a National Museum can do. We need to tell our full history, the history of all Australians, and to encompass the different perspective that comes with it. For too long we have been prepared to use the official record only and to ignore that there is much beside that official record which needs to come out,' said Craddock.

The Canberra Times reported that the handover was 'an emotional ceremony, marked by poems, tears and difficult memories'.

Lola Edwards still had vivid memories of the day of Namatjira's visit – 'My oath I do! We all remember the visit.' Matron call us all up there and said, "One of your people is here". When I walked in, my first reaction was –"Gosh, he's black!" I'd never seen a man so black.'

But while the painting had found a home, it still presented an intriguing puzzle – why did Namatjira visit the home and why did he give the Girls the painting?

To the delight of the Museum and the amazement of the Girls, the answers came in a letter to the *Canberra Times* from a retiree from Bathurst

In the 1950s, Miss Barbara Underhill, later Mrs Webb, worked in the then Bank of New South Wales in Alice Springs and became a close friend of Namatjira, spending

many weekends sitting in the river sand with Namatjira and his family as they painted.

She was transferred by the Bank to Bathurst but took some leave with friends at Cootamundra. Albert Namatjira planned to visit Sydney for interviews about his art and Barbara remembered 'the promise of a new refrigerator!'

Barbara suggested a detour to Cootamundra and was thrilled when Namatjira arrived with his son. She arranged a lunch.

'I told him of the Girls Home and together we decided to donate one of his paintings to the home – all this was recorded in the local paper in 1956.

'I am pleased the painting is at the National Museum of Australia and that my suggestion ended in a happy result,' Barbara told the *Canberra Times*.

Albert Namatjira's painting, so important to the Girls of the Cootamundra Home, is now at the National Museum of Australia, finally and forever.

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