

Pioneer Works

OF CONTEMPORARY ART



Kaapa Mbitjana Tjampitjinpa
Goanna Corroboree at Mirkantji
1971
Watercolour on composition board

The remote Northern Territory settlement of Papunya has been heralded as the birthplace of contemporary Aboriginal art. In the winter of 1971, a group of Papunya Aboriginal men, with assistance of schoolteacher Geoffrey Bardon, began to paint designs on various materials. These designs, inspired by religious conceptions of their desert homelands, had rarely been seen before outside of ritual contexts. Some of the earliest and most important works produced during this period, works on paper, thin plywood and particle board, were recently acquired by the National Museum of Australia.

The works purchased at Sotheby's Aboriginal Art auction in October 2008 include drawings and paintings by three leading artists of the early Papunya movement: Kaapa Tjampitjinpa, Uta Uta Tjangala and Anatjari Tjakamarra. The new acquisitions add substantially to more than 200 holdings of Papunya-related art and artefacts, spread across a number of the Museum's collections. In particular, these new works add to the Museum's Aboriginal Arts Board Collection, which includes the first large canvases dating from 1975.

Goanna Corroboree at Mirkantji is one of the pioneering works of the Papunya painting movement. Kaapa Tjampitjinpa was an influential figure in the initial period of

the movement. In July-August 1971, Kaapa played a leading role in the Honey Ant mural project at Papunya school. *Goanna Corroboree* was also painted during this period. The men who came together on the mural project later formed the Papunya Tula Artists Pty Ltd in 1972, and Kaapa was its first chairman. *Goanna Corroboree* is an example of the very earliest designs which Kaapa sought to depict in his work, as an expression of his own country centred on Mirkantji.

The design of *Goanna Corroboree* clearly shows the ritual origins of these early works that were later to become internationally renowned as contemporary art. In the typically layered manner of Papunya paintings, the work is both a depiction of a ceremonial ground and an ancestral journey. At one level, the painting depicts a hunting scene. The hunter is represented by a clutch of spears, a spear-thrower and a shield on the left hand side. In the centre, below a meandering line, is a picture of a goanna and, on the right hand side, a snake. This scene unfolds around a central design, which represents the path of the ancestral hunter and his prey during the period of ancestral creation, as well as depicting a ceremonial ground with an emu feather pole at the centre.

Goanna Corroboree was among three paintings by Kaapa entered in the Caltex Art Award 1971, one of which, titled *Gulgardji*, shared first prize. Kaapa's other entries in the Caltex Art Award 1971 are held in the Northern Territory Museum and Art Gallery collection. *Goanna Corroboree* had been privately owned prior to its purchase by the National Museum. This purchase brings the last of these history making-works into a public collection, where it will be preserved for the benefit of the nation.

Similarly, the Museum's purchase of a series of 11 Pintupi drawings and watercolours produced in September 1971 are a major addition to the National Historical Collection. Three of these works on paper are among the first by Uta Uta Tjangala who featured in the recent National Museum exhibition, *Papunya Painting: Out of the Desert*. The others in this series are by unknown artists but are attributed to the so-called 'new Pintupi'. All the works on paper are untitled, and represent initial steps by Pintupi artists who were later to establish themselves as leading figures in the development of Papunya Tula Artists Pty Ltd.

In the early 1970s, when the works on paper were produced, these Pintupi artists were regarded as newcomers to settlement life at Papunya. By comparison with other early artists of the movement, such as Kaapa Tjampitjinpa and Clifford Possum, these Pintupi men had limited contact with Europeans. Their traditional country lay hundreds of kilometres west of Papunya in the Gibson Desert, where they had lived as hunter-gatherers until the 1960s. For many Pintupi, Papunya was their first experience of life in a European settlement.

In September 1971, using materials supplied by Bardon, the Pintupi sketched out their designs on paper for Bardon at his flat in Papunya. As these men had very little English there were difficulties in communication, Bardon noted. It is possible to see, for example on the drawings by Uta Uta Tjangala, how Bardon has struggled to interpret and write the artist's name. In various attempts, Bardon has attributed the works to 'JAMBAMIMBA', 'Jambajimba Oota', and 'JAMBIJIMA JUNGALA'. In this way, aspects of the works provide a kind of 'behind the scenes' look into the relationship between the two men as it began to develop.

Two other works by Uta Uta Tjangala, titled *Snake Dreaming for Children* 1972 (acrylic on particle board) and *Untitled* 1986 (acrylic on canvas), were also purchased at Sotheby's auction. The two works represent different periods in Tjangala's career and illustrate how the materials supplied to the artists gradually evolved over time, from furniture off-cuts to high grade Belgian linen as Pintupi paintings were increasingly considered as fine art. Another important acquisition at the auction was an untitled work by Anatjari (Yanyatjarri III) Tjakamarra. Uta Uta and Anatjari were leading figures in the Papunya art movement throughout the 1970s and 80s as the Pintupi moved away from Papunya and established communities on their own homelands. The new works purchased through Sotheby's build upon the Museum's existing and recognised strengths for the period 1974-1981, and add to its corpus of work for these leading artists of the movement. The purchase of this series enhances the National Museum's collections of Pintupi art and artefacts, grounding them in the period of the genesis of contemporary art.

Peter Thorley
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Watercolour by unknown Pintupi artists 1971
Pencil and watercolour on paper