

Dreamings in New York:

Aboriginal art on the world stage

In January 2009 the National Museum of Australia officially opened its new permanent gallery, Australian Journeys. The gallery explores the passages of migrants, traders and travellers to, from and across Australia, and traces how people and their objects connect Australia with other places in the world.

Among the 42 exhibits — and more than 750 objects — visitors to Australian Journeys can engage with a display that explores the emergence of Australian Aboriginal art on the world stage.

In September 1988, the *Dreamings: The Art of Aboriginal Australia* exhibition of 103 works including acrylic paintings and shields from Central Australia, bark paintings from Arnhem Land, and figures and sculptures from Lake Eyre and Cape York Peninsula opened at the Asia Society Galleries on Park Avenue in New York. The exhibition drew large crowds and by the time it had travelled to Chicago and Los Angeles, it had attracted over half a million visitors.

Dreamings was curated by anthropologist Peter Sutton, who began developing it during the mid-1980s. Sutton and his team from the South Australian Museum, along with several Aboriginal language speakers and an American — Mr Pekarik, Director of the Asia Society Galleries — travelled around Australia discussing the exhibition with Aboriginal artists and communities. Sutton, his co-curators and the artists knew the scale and content of *Dreamings* would be a first for many American audiences but none of them anticipated the overwhelming response.

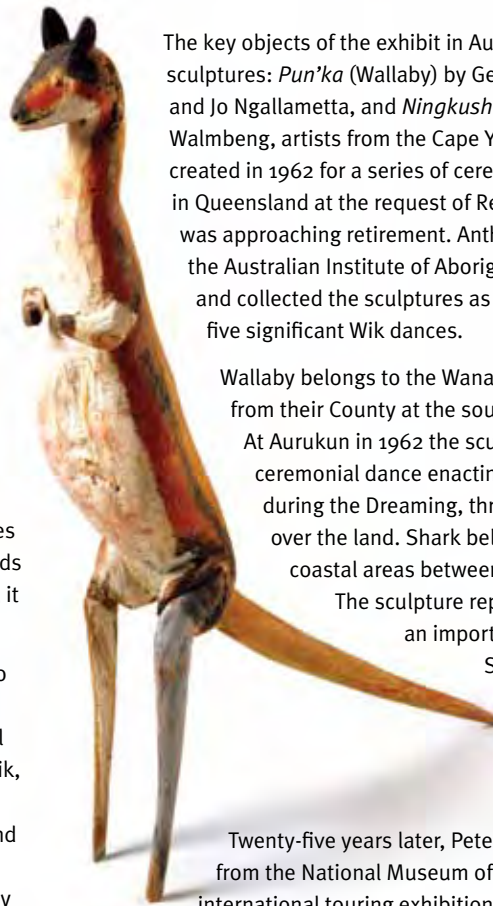
Dreamings attracted record crowds at all venues it toured. Queues formed to hear the artists speak at the associated symposium and see the sand-paintings being created on the gallery floors. The accompanying book, *Dreamings: The Art of Aboriginal Australia*, sold out and the exhibition captured media attention with reviews in major newspapers and journals and coverage by national television and radio stations.

Above centre: Pun'ka (Wallaby), 1962, by George Ngallametta with MacNaught and Joe Ngallametta, Thawungadha, western Cape York Peninsula

Below left: Aboriginal artists Djon Mundine (left) and David Malangi (centre) and curator Peter Sutton in New York for the Dreamings exhibition and symposium, 1988

Below middle: Papunya artists Billy Stockman Tjapaltjarri (front) and Michael Nelson Tjakamarra create a sand-painting at the Asia Society Galleries, New York, for the Dreamings exhibition, 1988

Below right: Ningkushum (Freshwater Shark) by Lesley Walmbeng, Cape Kerweer, western Cape York Peninsula



The key objects of the exhibit in Australian Journeys are two sculptures: *Pun'ka* (Wallaby) by George Ngallametta with MacNaught and Jo Ngallametta, and *Ningkushum* (Freshwater Shark) by Lesley Walmbeng, artists from the Cape York Peninsula. The sculptures were created in 1962 for a series of ceremonial dances at Aurukun Mission in Queensland at the request of Reverend William Mackenzie, who was approaching retirement. Anthropologist Frederick McCarthy from the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies filmed the ceremonies and collected the sculptures as part of the process of documenting five significant Wik dances.

Wallaby belongs to the Wanam ceremonial group and comes from their Country at the south entrance of the Holroyd River. At Aurukun in 1962 the sculpture was used to lead a ceremonial dance enacting the fight between two wallabies during the Dreaming, through which the species was spread over the land. Shark belongs to the Apelech people living in coastal areas between the Love and Kendell rivers.

The sculpture represents the estuarine shark, an important food source for Wik people.

Shark appears in many Apelech ceremonies, representing the group's major ancestor who became a shark after he walked the land as a man.

Twenty-five years later, Peter Sutton selected Wallaby and Shark from the National Museum of Australia's collection for the international touring exhibition, *Dreamings*.

The *Dreamings* exhibition was not the first event to take Australian Aboriginal art to an international audience but it changed how people, both in Australia and overseas, viewed Aboriginal art. Art critics in particular began thinking about Aboriginal art not as ethnographic objects made by a 'primitive people' but as examples of fine art.

Susannah Helman, Curator, Australian Journeys
Kirsten Wehner, Senior Curator, Gallery Development
and Cheryl Crilly, Curator, Australian Journeys

