

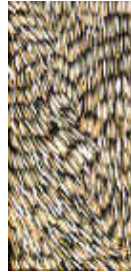


# Australian Aboriginal Artists Working in Traditional Modes

curated by [Dee Shapiro](#)



[Johnny Warangkula Tjupurrula](#)  
*Kulwa, Waterbirds*, 1999  
91 x 60cm



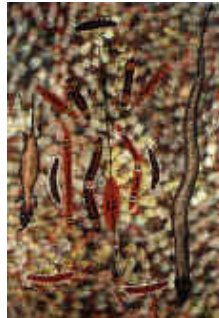
[Gloria Petyarre](#)  
*Medicine Leaves*  
20 x 46cm



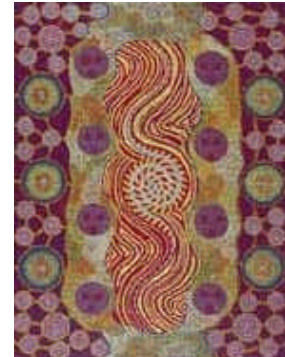
[Ada Bird Petyarre](#)  
*Body Paint Designs*, 1999  
63 x 56cm



[Pansy Napangardi](#)  
*Women Grinding Seeds*, 1998  
123 x 100cm



[Barney Daniels Jungurrayi](#)  
*Mens Hunting Party*  
64 x 94cm



[Malcolm Jagamarra](#)  
*Pirla Warna Warna, Owl Dreaming*,  
1999  
233 x 177cm



[Clifford Possum Japaltjarri](#)  
*Two Tjangala Men*, 1998

130 x 127cm

Because Australian Aboriginal people have had no literary tradition, chronicles of daily tribal life and accounts of history and creation have all been conveyed through a rich oral tradition which includes dancing, chanting, and singing. Its visual component is painting. The works shown here were part of a United Nations exhibition entitled "[Indigenous Art of the Dreamtime](#)," which was on view from August 2 to September 2, 1999. Most of the artists now exhibit their work throughout the world.

During the 1950's and 1960's, tribal Aboriginal people from desert regions experienced serious hunger and health problems. Several tribes were resettled together in a new community called Papunya. A school teacher there, Geoff Bardon, observed children and adults making sand paintings. He encouraged them to work in more permanent form on paper. While marketing these works in Alice Spring, he found that the paintings evoked great interest for their aesthetic as well as ethnographic appeal. Thus began the Desert Art Movement which soon expanded geographically and now includes about ten thousand Aboriginal painters. The artists use a basic set of symbols such as dots, concentric circles, and curved and straight lines. Although there are standard design elements, context establishes multiple meanings. Concentric circles illustrate routes traveled; wavy lines are usually water or rain. Tracks, snakes, and plant life are recognizable in stylized forms.

James Cowan, who has researched and written extensively about Aboriginal artists, has warned against viewing these paintings in isolation from their mythical content, even though many contemporary Western collectors enjoy them for their aesthetic, abstract imagery. He also warns against a too-easy understanding of the words *dreaming* or *dreamtime*, which are often used to characterize the content of Aboriginal paintings. These two words are translations of *jurkupa* [also spelled *jukurrpa*], a word which refers to the spiritual, natural, and moral order of the cosmos. *Jurkupa* does not refer to the dream state or to the content of dreams as Europeans know them. For the Aboriginal, rather, *jurkupa* refers to a state of reality that is both present and "beyond living memory."

It must further be noted that there is no Aboriginal word for *art* or *artist*. What Aboriginal people make in sand—and now on canvas—is real, not artifice, says Cowan. In spite of all these cautions, however, the permanent nature of the work, its high quality, and its inclusion in the art market make it impossible not to appreciate the work on an aesthetic and possibly a collectible level (a piece sold at auction in 1972 at Sotheby's for more than \$200,000). Art and artifacts, despite intent or meaning or message, have a visual impact that insists on a reaction.

—Adapted from the introduction to *Art of the Dreamtime* by Dr. Garry Darby

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#### RELATED BOOKS

Chatwin, Bruce. [The Songlines](#). Penguin, 1988. Paperback, 295 pages, \$13.95

Cowan, James, [Balgo: New Directions](#). Craftsman House, 1999. Hardcover, \$12.95.

Parker, K. Langloh, Ed., [Wise Women of the Dreamtime: Aboriginal Tales of the Ancestral Powers](#). Inner Traditions: 1993. Paperback, 144 pages, \$12.95.

Sutton, Peter, Ed., [Dreaming : The Art of Aboriginal Australia](#). George Braziller, 1997. Hardcover, 266 pages, \$75.00.

Voigt, Anna, et al. [\*Wisdom from the Earth : The Living Legacy of the Aboriginal Dreamtime\*](#). Shambhala, 1998. Paperback, 192 pages, \$29.95.

RELATED WEB SITES

[Art & Australia Magazine on Line](#)

[Craftsmanhouse Books on Aboriginal Artists](#)

[Indigenous Art of the Dreamtime](#) (exhibition web site)

[Jukurrpa Artists](#) (women's co-op)

[Maningrida Arts & Culture](#) (community-based Aboriginal Arts Co-operative)

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