

Geoffrey Bardon

Art teacher who almost single-handedly started the Australian Aboriginal Art Movement

GEOFFREY BARDON was a key figure in the genesis of the Australian Aboriginal Art Movement. Through his patience, empathy and enthusiasm, a generation of Aboriginal artists was encouraged to set down the ancient images – previously recorded in rock paintings, or in more fugitive forms such as body painting and sand painting – in the portable, permanent and sellable medium of paint on canvas.

Born in Sydney in 1940, Bardon studied law at Sydney University, before an interest in art encouraged him to abandon his legal studies and take a course in art education at the National Art School. Graduating in 1966, he worked as an art teacher at various elementary schools in New South Wales and the Northern Territory, where he was much struck by the sense of alienation and dispossession amongst the urban Aboriginal students he encountered. In an effort to understand more of their

background – and their predicament – he applied for a posting at the remote Aboriginal community of Papunya, 150 miles west of Alice Springs. It was a job that no one else wanted.

Papunya was, in Bardon's words, "a problem place": a government "assimilation" centre where some 1,400 Aboriginals, from several different tribal groups, were gathered, having been forced from their traditional lands – and traditional ways of life. Morale, along with everything else, was low. Bardon worked hard to learn the principal language of the settlement, and to gain the trust both of his pupils and their parents. He shocked many of his white co-workers by engaging closely with the Aboriginal community. He went hunting with them, invited them to his flat and ate his meals in the settlement canteen. He showed an interest in Aboriginal culture and beliefs, in the creation stories of the Dreamtime, and the motifs used to record these during ceremonies.

When he initiated an art project to paint a mural of "the honey-ant dreaming" story on the side of the schoolhouse (providing the paints and brushes himself), the task proved too much for the children. It was taken up by some of the community elders who worked as yardmen at the school. They were excited by the work – and by the realisation that, even removed from their ancestral sites in the desert, they still recorded and revealed their spiritual world.

They – and other members of the community – asked Bardon to provide them with more materials. Over the next two years they created almost 1,000 pictures with acrylic paint on board or canvas, and sold them through an artist's co-operative organised by Bardon. The work, often characterised as "dot-and-circle painting" on account of its two most familiar motifs, while apparently abstract, was crammed with meaning. Its visual power was undeniable

and very soon attracted the interest of the wider art world. It was sought out by galleries and collectors.

Bardon's health collapsed. He left Papunya after barely two years, but he had helped facilitate a great change – giving the long-marginalised Aboriginals a new voice and a new cultural confidence with which to engage not only white Australians but also the world. With typical modesty he described himself only as being a man "in the right place at the right time". The pattern established by Bardon at Papunya was rapidly taken up by other Aboriginal settlements across Australia, as the art movement spread and prospered.

After leaving Papunya Bardon kept in close touch with the community and his many friends there. He made three documentary films about the art movement, and wrote widely on the subject, his books including *Papunya Tula: art of the Western Des-*



Bardon: 'in the right place at the right time'

ert (1991) and the forthcoming *Papunya: a place made after the story*.

In 1988 he was made a Member of the Order of Australia for his services to "the preservation and development of traditional Aboriginal art forms".

REBECCA HOSSACK

Geoffrey Bardon, artist and teacher: born Sydney, New South Wales 1940; OA 1988; married (two sons); died Taree, New South Wales 6 May 2003.