let me tell you a story

Indigenous Australians have had narrative art for millennia, yet only put paint to canvas last century. Now, says Katrina Burroughs, **collectors are seeing the light. Portrait by** Steve Double.

One of the world's most ancient artistic traditions has lately become the darling of the contemporary art market. Aboriginal art is an engaging contradiction: its iconography dates back 50 millennia, and yet the paintings – the shimmering dots of the Western Desert, the powerful ochre colour fields of Kimberley in the north of Western Australia – only date from the second half of the 20th century, when the indigenous peoples of Australia first put paint to canvas, board and paper.

And only in the first few years of the 21st century has the art form made its mark in the global art market. In London, the Australian gallerist Rebecca Hossack started mounting exhibitions in 1988, but, she admits, "Until recently, it was such an uphill struggle. At times, I thought I was voiceless." At auction, indigenous painting was rarely sold outside Australia, and when it was it would be lumped with the rest of Australian art or dumped in unsexy ethnographic sales. When Sotheby's started a dedicated department in Melbourne in 1997, Aboriginal art was still a niche interest, largely patronised by museums and a few private collectors in Australia.

Since 2000, however, collectors around the world have began to wake up to the attractions of Aboriginal art, and values have ascended accordingly. The climb has been sudden and steep. A painting by Kimberley artist Rover Thomas (1926-1998), *All That Rain Coming From Top Side* (1991), that fetched Au$5,000 (about £2,100) 10 years ago, sold for Au$786,500 (about £335,000) at Sotheby's in 2001. (The successful bidder was the National Gallery of Australia.) In the summer of 2004, Sotheby's held previews of a sale of Aboriginal art in New York and London, and the ensuing surge in interest in the field was, reports Tim Klingender, Sotheby's director of Aboriginal art, "sudden and global".

This powerful, apparently abstract, work is attracting a very particular type of buyer. Few Aboriginal gems end up hanging beside Old Masters or Impressionists. No, these ancient forms tend to appeal to people who collect the most graphic forms of contemporary art. Paul Hattori is a Japanese-born Londoner who used to be head of Credit Derivatives at Dresdner Kleinwort Benson and now acts as a litigation consultant in the field of complex credit products. He had been collecting cartoons since the 1980s and only discovered Aboriginal art when he visited Melbourne in 1999. "Because my mother is an artist, I tend to go to galleries wherever I travel, and I went round the dealers in Sydney, Canberra and Melbourne," he explains. "The art was just so exciting and vibrant." Hattori now has a constantly growing collection which stands at around 20 pieces so far.

Hattori's favourite paintings come from Papunya, a tiny community in the heart of the Central and Western Desert and 150 miles north-west of Alice Springs where, in 1971, Aboriginal art experienced an extraordinary renaissance. A teacher, Geoffrey Bardon, was enthralled by children's drawings in the sand and suggested they recreate the compositions with watercolours. Soon the men of the community were painting stories of the Dreamtime (epic creation myths) on walls, and finally on masonite boards. Works from the first three years of this creative outpouring by artists such as the celebrated Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri (c1932-2002) are the most sought after. In July, a small but particularly fine Clifford, *Emu Corroboree Man* (1972), was sold by Sotheby's Melbourne for $411,750 (£177,500).

Many types of Aboriginal artistic expression, such as the Papunya board paintings, came about in response to interaction with the white population. (Before first contact, the same imagery was made in ephemeral or non-transportable forms – drawn in the sand or painted on the body.) The distinctive bark paintings of Arnhem Land, at the Top End of the Northern Territory, were made from the 1950s onwards, their ancient imagery committed to pieces of eucalyptus to

Main picture: **Richard Hains with works by Emily Kame Kngwarreye (near right) and Walangkura Napanangka (far right).** Above: **Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri's *Emu Corroboree Man* (1972).** Far right: ***Spirit Figures* (c1960) by Paddy Compass Namatbarra (The Bark Paintings from Arnhem Land).**

explain indigenous culture to incomers. In one famous case in 1966, art was used as a trusted method of communication with white settlers when the Yolnu people of northern Arnhem Land sent petitions in the form of bark panels to Canberra in protest against mining around their sacred sites.

For new collectors, the undisputed queen of Aboriginal art is Emily Kame Kngwarreye. Born in the eastern region of the Central Desert into the community of Utopia 150 miles north-east of Alice Springs, Kngwarreye (pronounced Ung-warh-ay) painted her first work on canvas in 1988, when she was in her 70s. (This late flowering of creativity was not unusual: former stockman Rover Thomas took up painting in his late 50s and, in fact, Emily had always made art but in traditional ways.) During the next eight years, she produced perhaps 6,000 canvases of vigorous brilliance. A commercial phenome- non, Emily was earning her community Au$500,000 (£201,000) a year from her art by the time she died in 1996. Her most sought-after works are now regarded as true masterpieces and one of her large-scale paintings has sold privately for more than Au$1.2m (over £500,000).

An early Kngwarreye, one of the first Aboriginal works commissioned by influential collectors the Holmes à Court family, forms the basis of Richard Hains's collection. Hains (pictured left), a London-based financier, runs a "very private" hedge fund with two brothers who work from their native Melbourne. Despite the fact that he has successfully operated in the

international equity and foreign-exchange markets for 20 years, and confidently pursued outside interests such as building a gold mine in Mongolia and writing a novel and screenplay that are presently with a New York agent, Hains had concerns about dipping a toe into the art market. "The art world is peppered with pitfalls," he says. "There's an expression in poker that if you don't know who the sucker is around the table, you're the sucker. I felt a bit the same in the contemporary art environment." When he began to take an interest in Aboriginal art five years ago, he was looking for something "culturally very strong" and was inspired by "the earthy colours, the ochres and the whites and the vivid oranges – the whole room lights up with them".

The big question collectors face is how to display these punchy paintings. To combine them with wallpaper prompts an unseemly aesthetic wrangle. But they fit very well in a modern apartment or in the austerity of a high-ceilinged Georgian interior, such as Hains's 18th century house in Gloucestershire. Most collectors dispense with frames, unwilling to cover the beautiful complex patterns that extend around the canvas edges. And some Aboriginal art leads a nomadic existence in its new home. Hains says: "One of the fascinating things about the art is that it's all painted on the ground and doesn't have a right side up – you could hang these painting any which way and you'd be correct. I move my art from wall to wall, upside down and inside out."

Above: Jimmy Pike holding his painting *Kanyjimangka* (1996). Below: Torres Strait Islander Dennis Nona's *War Ar Karrom*.

Aboriginal art covers a vast and under-researched territory, with as varied a landscape as western art, but much of it still uncharted. "It's as big a topic as European art," Rebecca Hossack contends. "There are just as many different 'countries', customs and languages among the Aborigines as there are in Europe. Think about comparing a Reynolds with a Van Gogh. There is just as much difference between Papunya Tula paintings, which tend to be in a soft muted palette, and the Warlayirti artists of the Balgo Hills, who use incredibly bright blues, pinks and yellows." For this reason – the sheer baffling variety of the output – many new collectors concentrate on a handful of big names or stick to a geographically specific "school".

Mike and Sally Turnbull, respectively a banker and an ex-solicitor, caught the Aboriginal bug early on, in 1993, starting a collection that now threatens to swamp their Chelsea home. Sally explains: "We have a terrible weakness for them. Every time there is a show we end up buying another painting." The Turnbulls' collection is unusually wide-ranging, taking in bark paintings from Arnhem Land, a painted tree trunk from Wandawuy and various wood carvings, as well as works by Emily Kame Kngwarreye and Papunya artists Dorothy Napangardi and Maggie Napangardi. Highlights include a Jimmy Pike (1940-2002), an artist from Western Australia's Great Sandy Desert, who started painting while serving a sentence in Fremantle prison.

The Turnbulls' Jimmy Pike is apparently a rendering of a fertility rite, although to the westerner it is frankly impossible to decode – like the majority of Aboriginal art. Few owners, however enthusiastic, can tell you precisely what their exuberantly patterned canvases depict. Aboriginal paintings are often aerial views of the artist's land showing contours, water sources, animal and plant-life, and they may be scattered with symbols and motifs telling the stories of the spirit ancestors. "To western eyes, contemporary Aboriginal paintings can often appear as glorious abstracts," Hossack explains, "and yet to the artist they represent something between an Ordnance Survey Map, the Book of Genesis and the *Good Food Guide*."

Although prices are heading northwards, the field is still rife with opportunities. Tipped for a precipitous rise in value is the work of Torres Straits Islander Dennis Nona, whose linocuts are currently on show at the Rebecca Hossack Gallery. Nona's delicate depictions of myths associated with the Torres Strait Islands (north of Queensland) are still selling for £300-£800, but – if Hossack's previous protégés, who include Emily, Clifford Possum and Jimmy Pike, are anything to go by – they might be worth five times as much in five years' time. At auction, you can still acquire stellar examples of works by the greats for under £20,000 – which can't be said of many of the mainstream categories of art. Are there any forms of Aboriginal art that are best left in the desert? Hossack advises steering clear of a new wave of oddly restrained compositions produced with an eye to the western art market. "Some artists have been encouraged to produce incredibly cool, clinical abstracts, but these are a debased, diluted form of the art. When the art is really good it is so culturally strong that you can feel it jumping off the wall. It isn't understated and intellectual."

"Aboriginal art represents something between an OS Map, the Book of Genesis and the *Good Food Guide*."

Tim Klingender of Sotheby's agrees: "There are a lot of terrible examples out there. Less than one per cent is great, and these paintings have an extraordinary, unmistakable, magical quality. Five per cent is very good, five per cent good, right down the scale to the touristy dross. Just as in any field, the great stuff will soar in value and the majority of works will soon be forgotten." ✦

DREAMTIME

Christie's Melbourne, 00613-9820 4311; www.christies.com. Next Aboriginal sale, August 2006; for catalogues call 020-7389 2820. **Hamiltons Gallery,** 13 Carlos Place, London W1 (020-7499 9493; www.hamiltonsgallery.com). "Paintings by Papunya Tula artists", summer 2006. **Mercer Art Gallery,** Swan Road, Harrogate, West Yorkshire (01423-556188, www.harrogate.gov.uk/museums). "Songlines: A Celebration of Contemporary Australian Aboriginal Art", until January 15 2006. **Rebecca Hossack Gallery,** 35 Windmill Street, London W1 (020-7436 4899; www.r-h-g.co.uk). "Prints by Dennis Nona of the Torres Straits Islands", until November 30. RHG has two Aboriginal "Songlines" shows a year, in May and June, and will be exhibiting a special project by Spinifex people at the London Art Fair at the Business Design Centre, London N1 (www.londonartfair.co.uk), January 18-22 2006. **Sotheby's Melbourne,** 00613-9509 2900; www.sothebys.com. Aboriginal and Oceanic Art auction, November 15. 10th annual Aboriginal sale, July 21 2006, previewing in London and New York in June 2006; for catalogues call 020-7293 5000.

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