

Visual Arts

Top End secret artists' business

by: Amos Aikman *The Australian* December 10, 2012 12:00AM



Some of Papunya artist Long Jack Phillipus's works will be shielded from the public for cultural reasons. Picture: Amos Aikman
Source: The Australian

IN the early days of the Papunya Tula painting movement, which gave rise to much of modern Aboriginal art as we know it, spirituality, law and culture flowed forth.

Artists painted with abandon, not imagining their work would be widely shown. Images of dreamings, sacred objects and secret ceremonies made their way from the natural, often immovable or erasable surfaces they once occupied, and on to materials such as masonite, chipboard and even asbestos.

In small groups beneath shady trees, senior men revealed their inner lives, singing men's songs as they worked.

Some of the images were innocuous. But others portrayed the very frameworks of Aboriginal belief: rituals passed down through generations, rites prescribed by bloodline, secrets guarded by gender. These became not just depictions, but sacred objects imbued with spiritual power; objects that could harm or be harmed if viewed by one not permitted by lore to do so.

Quickly, the artists began restricting access to and display of their sacred works. Over time, the style of painting changed. But the early works remained, leaving at the very foundation of modern Aboriginal art a conflict between the desires to see and show and those to shield and preserve.

"These paintings, our law, culture and language, they are the basis and the foundation of who we are as a people," says NT Minister for Indigenous Advancement, Alison Anderson, an indigenous woman who grew up at Papunya and a painter herself.

As the popularity of Aboriginal art grew, the wishes of painters were not always respected. The tide tended to flow towards showing works in a perceived culturally sensitive way, rather than to not showing them at all as their creators might have preferred.

"People have been going around willy nilly exhibiting sacred material," Anderson says.

Now, however, after long consultation, that tide has turned for a significant body of early Aboriginal paintings. The move, involving a major institution, has set a precedent that others should follow, its proponents say.

Under the terms of an agreement revealed by The Australian, about a quarter of what is arguably the single most important collection of early Papunya boards -- the one at the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory -- has been declared sacred, off limits to all but senior men. The boards include some early works by Long Jack Phillipus, one of the first Papunya Tula artists, now in his 90s, and one of the most senior figures in the community today. The remainder will go on show and later on touring international exhibition with their blessing.

"It's to our benefit that our sacred works remain sacred, that the value of secrecy remains, because that value of secrecy makes us who we are, like our language law and culture," Anderson says.

"Otherwise, we will just end up like everyone else: lawless, cultureless. I've been waiting to say that for a long time."

The Papunya Tula art movement began when school teacher Geoffrey Bardon encouraged locals to paint in a traditional way. About 900 early Papunya boards were created, of which MAGNT has 226; it has never shown a significant number together.

Despite concerns periodically resurfacing over how the collection should be managed, it took a dramatic theft and recovery in 2009 for decisive action to be taken. Anderson, then Labor minister for indigenous policy, defied her own government's election promise to have a full public showing of the works by declaring the entire collection sacred. She also directed the Aboriginal Areas Protection Authority to inquire into its cultural significance and suggest a management plan.

Anderson has since switched sides to join the conservative Country Liberal Party.

AAPA's report, completed in consultation with a range of experts and Aboriginal leaders, formed the basis for declaring 63 works off limits earlier this week.

In characteristically understated style, MAGNT director Pierre Arpin predicted it would provoke a "lively" debate in the field.

"It will be interesting to see how institutions across Australia may need to look at their own collections and consult with the community," he says.

Anderson argues most collections containing sacred objects now need to be reassessed, "while we've still got a couple of old people around".

In Aboriginal lore, the right to depict or perform a particular ritual is not automatic, but conferred by a complex system of lineage, learning and permission from elders.

"I get my permission from the old fellow, and some of the younger ones get theirs from me," says Michael Nelson, the desert artist whose mural is at the entrance to parliament house in Canberra.

Sid Anderson, Alison Anderson's brother and himself an important central Australian leader, warns the consequences of allowing such cultural secrets to escape can be significant, even deadly.

"It will damage the culture, and the fellow who did it will lose the respect of his community," he says.

Once a sacred object has left a particular area, for cultural and sometimes for social reasons, it can be difficult to return: there may be spiritual objections, the right person to receive it might not be easily found, or there may simply be nowhere safe for it to be stored. The situation creates a quandary in which museums, galleries and some individuals who have spent a lot of time around Aboriginal people hold sacred objects they don't know what to do with.

"Sometimes there's no one to give these works back to," says Emily Rohr, director of Short Street Gallery in Broome, WA.

"It would be great if there was some sort of appropriate strategy for dealing with them. Maybe it would be storing them on communities, maybe they should even be destroyed in a culturally appropriate way."

For Fred Myers, professor of anthropology at New York University and a contributor to AAPA's report, there are further issues to be resolved regarding gender restrictions on viewing or studying publicly held works.

"These are public galleries. There may be an issue insofar as these are publicly held works if a female researcher wanted to look at them," he says.

In the past, some sacred works have been shown in restricted rooms. But AAPA's report decreed the 63 works at MAGNT should not be shown at all.

The future for the remaining 163, now cleared of cultural obstacles, looks bright. Tourism Minister Matt Conlan describes the Papunya boards as the NT's "crown jewels".

"These pieces of art will sit proudly alongside anything," he says.

A small number of boards are likely to go on display almost immediately, but many require restoration. A full showing will likely have to wait until the latter part of next year, Arpin says.