

Release of Report on the Papunya Boards held at the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory - 3 December 2012

At a press conference held at the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory (MAGNT) today, a report was released that outlines the status and confirms the restrictions surrounding a number of key works in the MAGNT's collection. The early Papunya Boards are a vitally important body of work that are considered to represent the very beginnings of the modern Aboriginal art movement.

They are also vitally important in terms of the record of country and ceremony that they depict, with many of the artists choosing to illustrate their detailed knowledge of country and ceremony in this artistic form.

The Aboriginal Areas Protection Authority (AAPA) was requested to enquire into the secret and ceremonial nature of the collection of early Papunya Boards of the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory and to advise on its future management.

These enquiries were assisted by Aboriginal consultant advice provided by surviving Papunya Boards' artists; by the living descendants of deceased artists; and by senior men who have authority to speak for the cultural information depicted in the collection.

There were more than 20 individual and group consultations with 30 artists, descendants and senior men.

Of the 226 paintings considered, senior men advised that 163 are appropriate for public display by the MAGNT, and that 63 paintings should not be available for public display.

The restricted status of 63 paintings arises from depictions of sacred and ceremonial objects and matters. Access and viewing of such material is traditionally barred from women, children and uninitiated men.

Aboriginal artists, descendants and custodians have advised the AAPA of their belief that retributions will occur if the restricted paintings are inappropriately displayed or managed. Those at risk of traditional punishment are the artists, their families, and their direct descendants.

It is also believed that viewing of these paintings by women and children or by uninitiated men exposes them to significant danger in terms of the spiritual 'power' associated with those paintings. Only those with traditional authority can view the restricted images.

The artists, their families and senior men have long-held concerns about these paintings and this report now provides recommendations to meet those concerns regarding restrictions. It should be noted that, not long after their creation, the artists themselves took widespread action to restrict access and display of the restricted paintings.

This report acknowledges that the management of the Papunya Boards collection is the responsibility of the MAGNT, and recommends that the MAGNT should establish a management plan specifically for the Papunya Boards collection.