

Wentja Morgan Napaltjarri—the artist of the great heritage

Wentja Morgan Napaltjarri is an artist of enormous integrity and talent, a gifted translator and transmitter of her symbolic and cultural heritage. She was born at Malparinga in 1945, a rockhole site close to the south-west tip of Wilkinkarra (Lake Mackay), in Western Australia. This site was to become one of the main Tjukurrpa (Dreaming subjects) for the artist. It is associated with the Lungkata, the Blue-tongue Lizard Man, and it is on the route travelled by the ancestral women of the Kungka Tjukurrpa, related to the vast and sacred Tingarri cycle of the Pintupi people that in this instance is also connected with young men's initiation and learning. The Tingarri women's journey began west of Jupiter Well and eventually ran due east, concluding south-east of Wilkinkarra. The ancestral elders performed rituals and opened up the country as they journeyed and camped at many rockholes along the way, including Malparinga.

Apart from the place of birth, the other crucial factor in her formation as an artist was her parentage. Her father was Shorty Lungkata Tjungurrayi, a Pintupi man who was one of the outstanding founding figures in the Papunya painting movement, while her mother was Napulu Nangala. Shorty Lungkata Tjungurrayi was born in about 1920 at Walukuritji, south of Kaakurutintjinya (Lake Macdonald), which was also the place where his father died. After he married Napulu Nangala, he and his family walked to Ikuntji (Haasts Bluff) in about 1948, which was a Lutheran mission established two years earlier as a home to Western Arrernte, Pintupi and Pitjantjatjara people. It was a source of permanent water and of provisions, but it also served as a way of controlling the local nomadic peoples to prevent them from interfering with the spreading cattle industry that was destroying the fragile and ancient environment. By the time the family moved to Ikuntji, Wentja Morgan Napaltjarri was about three years old and this was her first contact with white people. She had been raised in a traditional manner learning how to gather bush tucker, hunting for small game by following tracks in the bush, and she was exposed to the ritual knowledge of her people.

The family stayed in Ikuntji for about a decade before moving to the newly established settlement at Papunya, roughly 240 km northwest of Alice Springs. This settlement consisted primarily of Pintupi, Luritja, Warlpiri, Arrernte and Anmatyerre peoples. At Papunya, Shorty Lungkata Tjungurrayi was recognised, within the Pintupi community, as one of the leading senior men, a ngangkari (traditional healer), famous for his hunting, singing and dancing skills, and as a man widely known as an authority on ritual matters.

In 1971 Geoffrey Bardon, who trained in art education at the National Art School in Sydney, took up a posting at the Papunya primary school. Here he facilitated the painting of the Honey Ant Dreaming mural on a school wall as well as the painting of the early painted boards. The former was destroyed, while the latter, of which about a thousand were painted before the introduction of canvases in 1973, became highly prized artworks. These were amongst the earliest acrylic paintings from the central deserts to be made for 'permanent' public viewing, rather than as designs conceived as ephemeral sand paintings or body decorations. The result of considerable negotiations amongst the traditional custodians of the stories (the Tjukurrpa) involved, these paintings may have been the first occasion when much of this imagery—by being shown in public—was revealed to the uninitiated. This caused considerable excitement in the Aboriginal community and Bardon observed that the mural had a far-reaching impact, for people who believed "in a Dreaming 'eternity' caused the artistic ideas developed at Papunya to spread to other Aboriginal communities throughout the Western Desert and Central Desert". Inexplicably the cultural worth of the mural was not recognised and shortly after Bardon left Papunya the mural was treated as unauthorised graffiti and was destroyed when the school walls were repainted in 1974. However, during Bardon's stay in Papunya—between January 1971 and December 1972—an enthusiasm developed amongst many of the mainly Pintupi and Anmatyerre–Arrernte men for painting their designs on panels with acrylic paint. Shorty Lungkata Tjungurrayi was one of the last artists to join Bardon's foundation Papunya painting group.

In November 1972 Papunya Tula Artists Pty Ltd was incorporated (the word *tula* may refer to a small hill near Papunya, a Honey Ant Dreaming site) and subsequently it became an important player, firstly in the Australian and then on the international art market. By the late 1970s and the early 1980s, after the establishment of the *Aboriginal Land Rights Act*, late in 1976, many of the people left Papunya for their traditional lands—for example, Pintupi communities were established at Kintore and at Kiwirrkura, where

artists continued to live and work. However, the Papunya Tula cooperative thrived, despite many of the contributing artists no longer living there.

The Papunya group achieved a remarkable synthesis of ceremony and topography, realised in a meticulous dot-painting technique and frequently restricted to an earthy palette rich in ochres, reds, black and white. Some of the paintings could be interpreted as involving a reenactment of elaborate ground paintings, using a limited number of symbols or motifs, such as the U-shape, concentric circles, semicircles, lines and dashes, human, animal and bird tracks and journey lines, a symbolic morphology also encountered in body designs, all employed to convey a wide range of meanings. A concentric circle may stand for a waterhole in one context, while, in another, it can signify a campsite. Elsewhere it may represent part of a plant, a body part, a hill or a nest. Much depended on the context of the specific narrative. As in Christian iconography, where a particular motif may be read simultaneously on a number of different levels depending on the spiritual enlightenment of the beholder and the liturgical context, similarly in Central and Western Desert painting the same symbol may have different levels of meaning depending on the viewer's level of initiation. A U-shape may be read as a topographical form or as a sacred camping site of an ancestral being or as a secret part of a ceremony known only to a fully initiated person. The paintings can be visual parables, of graded decipherability. It is not that sacred imagery is not sometimes depicted in a composition; rather, disclosure is dependent on the initiatory status of the viewer. Then, at a further level of complexity, the shimmering white dots become a symbolic as well as an effective visual device, veiling the levels of meaning.

Wentja Morgan Napaltjarri began painting for Papunya Tula in 1996. Earlier, apprenticed to her father, she was entrusted with many of her father's Tjukurrpa and the animals that appear within them, including bandicoots, echidnas and goannas.

In many of her paintings Wentja Morgan Napaltjarri employs the roundel or oval shape—also encountered in the work of her father—to depict the rockhole. Frequently, a series of roundels represents several rockholes, and the mandala-like shapes so formed function as a powerful meditative locus. The genius of Wentja Morgan Napaltjarri thus is encapsulated in her conveying of an authentic sacred narrative within a fully realised art object of considerable hypnotic power.

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