

# signature

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# Collecting Aboriginal ART

Long-term expert Adrian Newstead demystifies Australia's indigenous art.

**D**iverse and full of visual surprises, Aboriginal art is based on clan patterns, ancient iconography and mythological stories that have been passed down through a 40-thousand year history. Each group has its own recognisable style and each artist's work is individually identifiable.

Throughout Arnhem Land, artists paint on bark or paper with earth pigments. Their imagery includes the classic X-ray art of the western region and other distinct regional styles derived from cave and ceremonial body painting.

In the Kimberley, ochre canvases and boards, originally carried in ceremonies, have been adapted into a contemporary painting style.

Desert acrylic sand paintings, created by tribal people throughout the central, eastern and western deserts, are derived from ceremonial, low-relief ground constructions made in the desert sand. Like Arnhem Land works, they are referred to as 'traditional' because they come from communities where

Aboriginal people continue to practise their ancient ceremonies to this day.

The best urban Aboriginal work is strongly identity based and references traditional themes, politics, or contemporary situations and issues. When looking at contemporary Aboriginal art, it is particularly important to look for an individual style reflecting the artist's heritage.

Many major state art galleries and museums have developed fine collections of Aboriginal art, and are great places to become acquainted with Aboriginal artists and styles. You can often be put on a mailing list of major Aboriginal galleries to receive invitations to openings.

There are also many beautifully illustrated books that cover regional art styles and individual important artists.

As with any artwork, an individual piece attracts buyers due to its aesthetics, but its financial value depends on the fame of the artist, the quality of the piece and, importantly, the documentation that accompanies it.

The most important Aboriginal artworks have markedly increased in value over the past 30 years. The highest price paid for an Australian Aboriginal artwork so far is \$2.4 million (*Warlugulong* by Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri, bought by the National Gallery of Australia in 2007), but you can pick up a painting for as little as \$50.

Not all art is 'collectable'. Prudent buyers should seek the best advice from specialist galleries. By doing so, you will not only get an enormous amount of pleasure from living with a piece of the world's oldest continuous living culture, but can also rest assured that your investment is secure. ●

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#### FOOTNOTES

Adrian Newstead established Coo-ee Aboriginal Art Gallery ([www.cooeeart.com.au](http://www.cooeeart.com.au)) at Bondi Beach, Sydney, in 1981. An Aboriginal art consultant, dealer and art commentator, he has 30 years' experience working in the field of Aboriginal and Australian contemporary art.

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CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:  
Sculpture: Owen Yalandja: Yawk Yawk, set of three, Kurrajong with ochre pigment and PVC fixative; Desert painting: Estelle and Anne Hogan: Minga & Tarlu, synthetic polymer paint on Belgian linen; Bark painting: Peter Maralwanga: Kawalan Crocodile and Goanna, natural earth pigments on bark; Contemporary: Ian Waldron: Kuaan, acrylic on canvas; Print: Arone Meeks: Spirit Ark, linocut on paper.