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Exclusive National Indigenous art

Half-million dollar price for Indigenous painting that hung in a suburban house



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A painting by an acclaimed Indigenous artist that was last sold in the 1970s for less than \$800 and hung in a suburban home for decades is on sale at a Melbourne gallery for \$500,000.

An expert describes the piece, called *Mikantji and Tywerl*, as one of the most significant works in the history of Aboriginal art.



D'LAN Davidson, director of D'LAN Contemporary gallery, with the painting *Mikantji and Tywerl*, by Kaapa Tjampitjinpa. JUSTIN MCMANUS

For half a century, its whereabouts was not widely known. The mixed media on fibreboard work, created by the late [Kaapa Tjampitjinpa](#) in 1971, had for decades hung in the hall of an

Adelaide house.

The original owner, anthropologist Margaret King-Boyes, died in 2011 and her family is now selling the painting.

Kaapa was one of the founders of the Papunya Tula Western Desert art movement that also nurtured his cousin [Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri](#).

Bruce Johnson McLean, the National Gallery of Australia's head curator of First Nations art, described early works such as the one on sale by Kaapa as Australian cultural gems that started an incredible movement.

'It shows the very beginnings of that movement and the nascent style and helps us trace the trajectory of Aboriginal painting from the desert.'

Bruce Johnson McLean, National Gallery of Australia

The Papunya Tula movement began in 1971 when teacher Geoffrey Bardon encouraged a group of men in Papunya, 240 kilometres west of Alice Springs, to paint a school wall.

"It was at the first point where Aboriginal artists in that region began translating their world into art," Johnson McLean said. "So this is art from the desert in its, I guess, purest form."

Art historian Dr John Kean, who was an adviser at Papunya in the late 1970s, said Kaapa diverged from the landscapes of his relative Albert Namatjira and started depicting ceremonies.

Mikantji and Tywerl depicts water dreaming and carpet python dreaming ceremonies at two sites: Mikantji, north-west of Yuendumu, and Tywerl, east of Napperby. A dancer in the centre wearing a headdress and body paint kneels before a ground painting.

Also depicted are two snakes and a ceremonial pole, which Kaapa compared to a telegraph pole, sending out messages about maintaining the country and the abundance of animals and plants.

The piece is one of eight Kaapa paintings sold in Alice Springs in 1971. Another of them, *Men's Ceremony for the Kangaroo 'Gulgardi'*, won the Caltex Art Award in Alice Springs.

A photo depicts how Kaapa, with some of the \$750 in total he earned – from selling the eight paintings and from the prizemoney – bought groceries including a side of sheep.

Six of those eight pieces now hang in institutions including the National Museum of Australia and the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory. The seventh is owned by a New York collector.

The newly rediscovered piece, *Mikantji and Tywerl*, will be on sale at D'Lan Contemporary gallery in Melbourne's Exhibition Street from June 2 to July 22, with a price tag of \$500,000.



National Gallery of Australia head curator of First Nations art Bruce Johnson McLean. ROHAN THOMSON

Kean, who has just released a new book on the movement – *Dot, Circle and Frame: The Making of Papunya Tula Art* – was hired to write the catalogue text. He said Kaapa would probably have been paid about \$100 for the painting in 1971. He could find no records of prices of the individual pieces.

Kaapa died in 1989 and did not live to see the large amounts paid for pieces by Papunya Tula artists, he said.

Kean's book profiles Kaapa and fellow Papunya Tula founding artists Tim Leura Tjapaltjarri, Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri and Johnny Warangkula Tjupurrula.

Warangkula's 1972 piece *Water and Bush Tucker Story* sold this month in New York for more than \$1.1 million.

D'Lan Contemporary gallery director D'Lan Davidson said there had been keen interest in the Kaapa painting from international collectors and Australian institutions.

Alhalkere My Country 1992, a piece by Indigenous artist Emily Kame Kngwarreye, who is not from the Papunya Tula artists, is on sale at D'Lan Contemporary for \$1.65 million.

Davidson described Kaapa as “one of the founding fathers” of the First Nations contemporary art movement in Australia.

The National Gallery of Australia's Bruce Johnson McLean said the NGA had about 100 boards from Papunya in its collection that dated from 1971 to 1973.

“It's really the birth of the Aboriginal art movement from central Australia. It's more and more becoming recognised as the pivotal moment in Australian art history,” he said. “The moment that led to the birth of what many people consider today as Aboriginal art.”

Johnson McLean said *Mikantji and Tywerl* was one of the largest and most significant of that group of works.

“Which makes it one of the most significant works in the history of Aboriginal art, if not Australian art,” he said.

“It shows the very beginnings of that movement and the nascent style and helps us trace the trajectory of Aboriginal painting from the desert.”

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