

A THOUSAND JOURNEYS

The Helen Read Collection

When Helen Read was employed as a nurse and pilot by the Pintupi Homelands Health Service for Kintore and Kiwirrkurra in 1985, appreciation of contemporary Aboriginal art was not widespread. Mostly, if at all, people outside Aboriginal communities encountered Indigenous culture in museums as ethnographic evidence of Australia's first inhabitants – as remnants of a bygone era. Working with the Luritja and Pintupi, flying cultural custodians and community health workers between clinics and carrying out health-related tasks on the ground, Read – who had first trained as an artist – developed a different perspective. She saw a vibrant and dynamic culture expressed in many forms, utmost exuberantly in art.

Read's experience of Western Desert painting during her first year in remote Australia changed the course of her professional life. In 1986, with the aim of raising awareness of Indigenous art and health, she established a company specialising in art tours. These facilitated relationships between remote art centres and collectors and dealers and introduced many influential people to Aboriginal people and their communities for the first time. Read also began collecting works assiduously herself, forming a unique cultural chronicle of the period, and of the artists and events encountered.

A Thousand Journeys, curated by Pauline Guthrie for Tin Sheds Gallery at the University of Sydney in 1998, was the first of two exhibitions to be drawn from the Helen Read Collection. The show toured in regional New South Wales and Victoria and was presented finally at Flinders University City Gallery in Adelaide. At its conclusion, exhibition works were transferred to Flinders University Art Museum, where they have since been on loan as a valued resource for teaching, learning, and research.

The exhibition was conceived as both a travelogue of the people and places visited by Read and a guide for new audiences to the abundant and diverse modes of art production across Australia's northwest. The distinct regional styles seen in the works of artists from the Kimberley, Great Sandy and Tanami Deserts, Arnhem Land, and Tiwi and Elcho Islands introduced practices other than dot painting, which was fast becoming synonymous with Aboriginal Australia at the time.

At Flinders University, these works, in conjunction with the museum's permanent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander collection, have been pivotal in teaching a history of Australian Indigenous art – in communicating its scope, conveying its linkages to land and exploring the contemporary contexts in which it was made and marketed. To disciplines other than visual art, such as history, politics, law and medicine, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander collections have brought Indigenous perspectives and experiences to these fields through stories embedded in the works.

In this new iteration of *A Thousand Journeys*¹, the project has been developed with a focus on painting, and the number of artists and communities included has expanded, with a greater representation of women. Still, the show is filtered through Read's collection and framed as a tour of late twentieth-century works from the country's northwest reaches. In assembling these works, the exhibition revisits a particularly fertile period in Aboriginal Australian art history, when art centres in remote Indigenous communities were flourishing, Australian state and national galleries were rapidly expanding their collections, local and international buyers were investing heavily, and the secondary market was buoyant.

Distinguished anthropologist Howard Morphy has noted three significant factors that led to the inclusion of Aboriginal art in the proverbial white cube: 'the critique of the concept of "primitive art", an associated change in conceptions of what can be called "art", and an increased understanding of art as a commodity'.² Indeed, in less than a decade after Read's first acquisition in the mid-1980s, the reception and status of Aboriginal art had shifted dramatically. *A Thousand Journeys* is a timely reflection on this recent and rapid phenomenon.

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