

Holmes a Court shares indigenous art trove in Sung Into Being



Janet Holmes a Court shows off one of her favourite works, *The shade from the hill comes over and talks in language* (1984) by Rover Thomas. Picture: Lyndon Mechielsen

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Arts patron Janet Holmes a Court has opened up her vast collection of indigenous artworks for a new show in Queensland detailing a formative period in Aboriginal art.

More than 100 paintings and sculptures by eight Aboriginal artists have travelled across the world and are showing at the Queensland Art Gallery, in the exhibition *Sung Into Being: Aboriginal Masterworks 1984-94*, until October 22.

Holmes a Court began collecting in the 1960s with her late husband Robert, Australia's first billionaire businessman.

Holmes a Court, a philanthropist, said the pieces in *Sung into Being* represented "one of the great art movements of the 20th century". She said she and her late husband, along with many others including

curators Diane Moon and Anne Marie Brody, had helped to draw attention to indigenous artists over the years.

But in recent years, as market hunger fuelled growing demand for indigenous art, she had also watched the growing commercialisation of the industry.

“I guess the big change from the 70s and 80s until now is it’s become terribly commercial,” she told *The Australian*. “Lots of the work is being churned out, if you like.” The Queensland show features artists from the Kimberley and Arnhem Land, among them Rover Thomas, Jack Wununwun, John Bulunbulun and Terry Ngamandara Wilson.

Thomas, a distinctive Kimberley artist who died in 1998, was one of the first indigenous Australian artists added to the extensive Holmes a Court collection.

Another artist in the show, Les Mirrikkuriya, presents a “health message” in his bark paintings, according to Holmes a Court.

“It warns young people about the dangers of petrol sniffing,” she said. “It’s a health message against it. If you sniff petrol, you’ll face consequences.”

Bulunbulun’s work demonstrates the connection between north Australian indigenous people and the Macassan traders of Indonesia. “There were people coming back and forth to Australia from Indonesia for thousands of years,” Holmes a Court said.

“(Eventually) they would’ve been Muslim people from Indonesia and they came at a time when boatpeople were welcomed by Aboriginal people.”

Bulunbulun’s work includes a large canvas and 21 small barks illustrating the songs and dances of the Yolngu clan’s Yirrija moiety, celebrating the Southeast Asian traders over the years.

The knives, guns, pots, and people climbing the mast and rigging of a Macassan sailing boat in Bulunbulun’s work highlights the relationship between the peoples.

Bulunbulun's brother Wununwun's *Manikay Song Cycle* consists of a single large canvas and 30 small bark paintings telling the song cycles of Yolngu creation stories. "There are dozens of different Aboriginal groups and each one of them has its own individual style," Holmes a Court said.

"It's exciting for us — it's been seen by people all over the world, and now it's in Queensland and I hope it gets to travel (more) widely. These are very interesting paintings."

The exhibition also features England Banggala's paintings. Banggala lived at the Gochan Jiny-jirra outstation on the Cadell River, along with Mirrikkuriya and Ngamadnara Wilson, where they cultivated their wildly different styles.