

Papunya's hidden art comes in from desert



Papunya elder Michael Nelson with grandchildren Brendan, 6, and Karen, 4, and daughter Nita McDonald at Papunya. Picture: Chloe Erlich

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A landmark exhibition of Aboriginal art charting the beginnings of the Western Desert painting movement will open in Darwin tomorrow.

Almost a decade in the making, the show features the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory's prized collection of early Papunya Boards, which is considered among the best in the world and has not been properly displayed in Australia.

The boards were painted in Papunya, 240km northwest of Alice Springs, in the early 1970s when the community, now home to about 450 people, had swollen to more than 1000.

According to some of the artists' descendants, old men competed to show off their Tjukurrpa or Dreaming stories, and the painting helped quell conflict between clan groups. Some of the elders incorporated sacred designs into their works on industrial materials such as masonite.

Sid Anderson, a leader who moved to Papunya in the 80s and helped curate the show, says the boards profoundly affected him. "The first time I saw those paintings, it was like some sort of spirit coming in and touching my heart and my mind," Anderson said. "They show our country, our ceremonies ... they're really important for people to see and understand."



Curator Luke Scholes with part of the *Tjungunutja* exhibition.

About 1000 Papunya Boards are known to exist, of which the museum holds 226 of the earliest, and are thought to represent the first time Western Desert ground and body paintings, ceremonial headgear, ritual paraphernalia and other objects were depicted using modern materials.

John Kean, writing in the catalogue for the exhibition entitled *Tjungunutja*, which means "from having come together", says the

works arose from relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people and clan groups that might not otherwise have encountered each other.

“The efflorescence of imagery that struck in the hothouse conditions of the Men’s Painting Room will not be repeated, for these works were created at the moment when the epic songlines that connect Aboriginal Australia were unveiled,” Kean writes.

The boards swiftly won critical acclaim but also controversy due to fears their sacred designs could harm women and children. For years they languished in a penumbra, with experts unsure how to handle them appropriately. But now, following a long consultation process, 63 boards have been declared restricted and 128 of the remainder chosen for *Tjungunutja*.

Luke Scholes, the museum’s curator of Aboriginal art, says help from traditional custodians and artists, including Anderson, Long Jack Phillipus Tjakamarra, Bobby West Tjupurrula and Michael Nelson Jagamarra, was vital to putting the show together.

“If we say that we want to work with indigenous people then this is the way that we have to do go about it — we have to value people’s knowledge,” Mr Scholes said.

West Tjupurrula says the collaboration resulted in a show everyone could feel “proud and happy” with.

Tjungunutja will show until February.