



Emily Kam Ngwarray
(Indigenous Australian (Anmatyerr), 1910 - 1996)

Biography

Emily Kam Ngwarray is without a doubt one of the most acclaimed female First Nations artists. She may be considered one of the greatest contemporary Australian artists and her influence on the world of both indigenous and non-indigenous Australian art is indisputably great.

Emily was born in Alhalkere in 1910, 230 km north-east of Alice Springs on the edge of the Simpson Desert, Northern Territory. Unusual for a woman, she became a camel driver and stockhand at Bushy Part Station and Mt Riddock Station. This hard work contributed to her physical strength later in life. Encouraged by the return of traditional lands to indigenous Australians under the Aboriginal Land Rights Act in 1976, Emily returned to Alhalkere and was one of the founders of the Utopia Women's Batik Group in 1978.

Following its first exhibition in Alice Springs in 1980, this movement had limited commercial success. This led, however, to an initiative in 1988 of the Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association (CAAMA), called *A Summer Project*, which distributed 100 blank canvases and acrylic paint among the Aboriginals in Utopia.

The resultant 81 works, including Emily's first painting, *Emu Woman*, made art history. Her work attracted immediate attention. The experimental, yet determined work spoke of a rare talent. At the same time, she became one of the founders of indigenous women's art in the Eastern and Central Deserts of Australia.

Having started at nearly eighty years old, her painting career lasted a mere seven years. One of her most remarkable attributes was her capacity to develop new styles; even adopting a new style a fortnight before her death. Yet her vast output was a result of her enormous physical and mental energy, as well as her forceful personality and deep love for her ancestral country. Most of her work can be distinguished by an exceptionally wide palette of bright colors; of special significance are her more minimalist abstract works of two colors, inspired by traditional body painting.

Characteristic in Emily's paintings is a style referred to as her 'dump-dump' style. This originally involved coarse wide brushstrokes and build up layers of colored dots on a grid pattern surface to represent elements of landscapes and vegetation. This was followed by an even more diffuse pattern of layered dots with magnificent colors dominating.

During the last two years of her life, she broke with her bright color schemes by making minimalist “line” paintings in black, brown or blue on a white background with horizontal or vertical stripes inspired by women’s ceremonial body painting. This led to her *Wild Yam Dreamings*; layers of intricately crossing lines that represent the roots of the Yam plant, an edible and spiritually significant indigenous vegetable. From this period, comes her most important masterpiece, *Big Yam Dreaming* (1995), which was donated to the National Gallery of Victoria.

Outside of Australia her work increasingly receives the recognition it deserves. In 2008, the National Art Center in Tokyo opened the exhibition *Utopia: the Genius of Emily Kam Kngwarray* the largest collection of works by a single Australian artist ever exhibited outside Australia, with an estimated value of no less than \$30,000,000.

Her masterpiece *Earth's Creation* (4 panels, each 275 x 160 cm) has been exhibited at the Central Pavilion of the 56th Venice Biennale in 2015. In the same year her work was part of the Signs & Traces exhibition in Poznan, Poland.

Also, recently, the Tate Modern announced that it will stage a major solo exhibition dedicated Emily Kam Kngwarray. Opening in 2025 and organised in close collaboration with the National Gallery of Australia (NGA), this will be the first large-scale presentation of Kngwarray’s work ever held in Europe, providing a rare opportunity for international audiences to learn more about this celebrated painter. The Tate exhibition follows the opening of the [NGA's Kngwarray exhibition](#), which ran from 2 December 2023 to 28 April 2024

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“We didn’t have any tents — we lived in shelters made of grass. When it was raining the grass was roughly thrown together for shelter. That was in the olden time, a long time ago.”

Selected Literature

Neale M, *Emily Kame Kngwarreye: Alhalkere, Paintings from Utopia*, Macmillan Art Pub., Melbourne, 1998

Neale M (ed), *Utopia; The Genius of Emily Kame Kngwarreye*, National Museum of Australia, Canberra and The National Museum of Art, Osaka, 2007

Cole K., Green J., *Emily Kam Kngwarray*, National Gallery of Australia, University of Washington Press, Seattle, 2024

Selected Collections

National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, Australia
Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory, Darwin, Australia
Parliament House Art Collection, Canberra, Australia
Campbelltown City Art Gallery, Sydney, Australia
Benalla Art Gallery, Victoria, Australia
Allen, Allen & Hemsley, Sydney, Australia
BP Australia, Australia
Transfield Collection, Sydney, Australia
The Collection of Colin & Elizabeth Laverty, Sydney, Australia
The Kasumi Co. Collection, Japan
Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection of the University of Virginia, Charlottesville, USA
Collection of Steve Martin & Anne Stringfield, New York, USA
Kelton Foundation, California, USA
KLM Royal Dutch Airlines, Amsterdam, The Netherlands
Hank Ebes Collection, Melbourne, Australia
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Australia
Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia
Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth, Australia
Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, Australia
Artbank, Sydney, Australia
Donald Kahn Collection, Lowe Art Museum, University of Miami, USA
Fred Torres Collection, Australia
The Luczo Family Collection, USA
Auckland City Art Gallery, New Zealand
The Robert Holmes à Court Collection, Perth, Australia
Fondation Burkhart-Felder Arts et Culture, La Grange, Motiers, Switzerland
Thomas Vroom Collection, The Netherlands
Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide, Australia
Museum of Victoria, Melbourne, Australia
ATSIC Collection, Canberra, Australia
Kaplan and Levi Collection, Seattle Art Museum, Seattle, USA
The Araluen Centre of Arts and Entertainment, Alice Springs, Australia
Powerhouse Museum, Sydney, Australia
University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia
University of Sydney Union, Sydney, Australia
University of Wollongong Art Museum, Wollongong, , Australia
University of New England, Maine, Australia
Victoria University of Technology, Melbourne, Australia
Flinders University Art Museum, Adelaide, Australia
Dr Peter Elliot Collection, Sydney, Australia
Delmore Collection, Alice Springs, Australia

Chartwell Collection, Waikato Museum of Art and History, Te Whare Taonga, Waikato, New Zealand
The Vatican Collection, Vatican City
TarraWarra Museum of Art, Healesville, Australia
Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, Australia
Jacqui McPhee Collection, Perth, Australia
Stefano Spaccapietra Collection, Switzerland
Sol LeWitt Collection, New York, USA
Art Gallery of Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia
Bendigo Art Gallery, Bendigo, Australia
Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts, Perth, Australia
The Oval Paintings Collection, Bishop Museum, Honolulu, Hawaiï
The Menil Collection, Houston, USA
SmithDavidson Collection, Amsterdam, The Netherlands
National Museum of Australia, Canberra, Australia
The British Museum, London, United Kingdom
Musee du Quai Branly, Paris, France
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, USA
The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, USA
Papunya Tula Artists, Alice Springs, Australia
Gabrielle Pizzi Collection, Melbourne, Australia

Selected Exhibitions

2025

Solo Exhibition, Tate Modern, London, United Kingdom
The Stars We Do Not See, Art Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Australia, Touring exhibition: Denver Art Museum, Colorado; Portland Art Museum, Oregon; Peabody Essex Museum, Massachusetts, USA; Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, Canada

2024

The Art of Giving, Art Gallery of Macquarie University, Sydney

2023

Solo: *Emily Kam Kngwarray*, National Gallery of Australian, Canberra, Australia
Sharjah Biennial 15, Thinking historically in the Present, Painting: Multi Color Yam acquired via SmithDavidson Gallery
Utopia in Colours, Musee de l'art aborigene australien, Fondation Burkhardt-Felder Arts et Culture, Motiers, Switzerland

2022

Solo: *Emily : Desert painter of Australia*, Gagosian, Paris, France
Origins, SmithDavidson Gallery, New York, USA
Indigenous Art from the NGV Collection, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Australia

2021/23

A Year in Art: Australia 1992, Tate Modern, London, United Kingdom

2021

Voyage across Aboriginal Australia – Founders, Favourites, Fondation Burkhardt-Felder Arts et Culture, Môtiers, Switzerland

2020

Origins: Australian Aboriginal Art from the SmithDavidson Collection, SmithDavidson Gallery, Amsterdam, The Netherlands
Knowing my Name: Australian Women Artists 1900 to Now, Australian National Gallery, Canberra, Australia

2019

Desert Painters of Australia, Works from the Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection of the University of Virginia and the Collection of Steve Martin and Anne Stringfield, Gagosian Gallery, New York & Beverley Hills, USA

2015

Signs and Traces: Contemporary Aboriginal Art, Cultural Institute Zamek, Poznan, Poland
La Biennale di Venezia, Central Pavilion, Venice, Italy

2010

Remembering Forward: Australian Aboriginal Painting since 1960, Museum Ludwig, Cologne, Germany

2009

Mythology & Reality: Contemporary Aboriginal Art from the Gabrielle Pizzi Collection, TarraWarra Museum of Art, Healesville, Australia

2008

Emily Kngwarray and her Legacy, Art Front Gallery, Tokyo, Japan
Solo: *Utopia: The Genius of Emily Kame Kngwarreye*, National Museum of Australia, Canberra, Australia; Museum of Modern Art, Osaka; National Art Center, Tokyo, Japan



1998/99

Solo: *Emily Kame Kngwarreye / Alhalkere Paintings from Utopia*, Queensland Art Gallery; Art Gallery of New South Wales; National Gallery of Victoria, Australia

1997

La Biennale di Venezia, Australian Pavillion, Italy

1995

Solo: *Emily Kame Kngwarreye: Paintings from 1989-1995*, Parliament House, Canberra, Australia

1994

National Gallery of Victoria, Australia

1993/4

Aratjara: Art of the First Australians, Kunstmuseum Nordrhein Westfalen, Düsseldorf, Germany; Hayward Gallery, London, United Kingdom; Louisiana Museum, Humlebaek, Denmark

1992

Crossroads, Towards a New Reality, Aboriginal Art from Australia, National Museum of Modern Art, Kyoto and Tokyo, Japan

1990

Contemporary Aboriginal Art, Carpenter Centre for the Visual Arts, Harvard University, Cambridge, USA

First solo exhibition: Emily Kame Kngwarreye, Utopia Art Sydney

1989

Emily Kame Kngwarreye and Louie Pwerle are the first recipients of the CAAMA/ Utopia Artists-in-Residence Project funded by the Robert Holmes à Court Foundation