



Bill Whiskey Tjapaltjarri

(Indigenous Australian (Pitjantjatjara), 1920 - 2008)

Biography

Bill Whiskey Tjapaltjarri (c. 1920–2008) was an esteemed First Nations artist from Australia, renowned for his vibrant and intricate dot paintings that depict the rich spiritual and cultural heritage of his people. Born around 1920 in Pirupa Akla, near Kata Tjuta (the Olgas) in the Northern Territory, Tjapaltjarri was a member of the Pitjantjatjara people and deeply rooted in their traditions.

Tjapaltjarri's early life was marked by a deep connection to his ancestral lands and the Dreamtime stories that shaped his cultural identity. He worked as a stockman and cameleers in his youth, traversing the vast landscapes of Central Australia, which would later become a profound influence on his artistic work. Despite the challenges and disruptions faced by Indigenous communities during this period, Tjapaltjarri maintained a strong link to his heritage and traditions.

It wasn't until his later years, he was 85, that Tjapaltjarri began to paint. Encouraged by the thriving First Nations movement and the recognition of Indigenous art on a global scale, he picked up painting in the early 2000s when he was already in his eighties. His decision to start painting was a natural extension of his role as a keeper of stories and knowledge within his community.

Tjapaltjarri's art is characterized by its vibrant use of color and intricate dot patterns, often depicting the sacred sites and stories of his homeland. His paintings reflect the topography and spiritual significance of places like Kata Tjuta and Uluru, capturing the essence of the Dreamtime narratives and the profound connection between the land and its people. Each piece is a testament to his deep spiritual knowledge and his mastery of the dot painting technique.

One of his most famous works, "Rockholes and Country Near the Olgas," exemplifies his unique style and profound connection to the land. The painting, like many of his works, uses a mesmerizing array of colors and dots to convey the spiritual and physical landscapes of his ancestors.

Bill Whiskey Tjapaltjarri's art gained international acclaim, and his works were exhibited in prestigious galleries and collections worldwide. Although Bill Whiskey only started painting in the last

four years of his life, his contributions are significant, and he quickly became one of the most respected figures in contemporary First Nations art. Whiskey's paintings became some of the most sought-after Aboriginal artwork in Australia and abroad. Despite his age, Whiskey was able to complete a number of large canvases within a body of work of no more than 200 works.

Towards the end of his life, he had a sell-out exhibition in London. Six of his artworks went for over a quarter of a million dollars each. This is for someone who's had no formal training, no real knowledge of the art scene at all. He didn't go to London for that exhibition but his artworks were just snapped up by all the glitterati in London. All the art people immediately recognized that Bill was a major talent. Whiskey was a two time finalist in the Telstra Awards, his works have been exhibited internationally in Copenhagen, Singapore and London.

Bill Whiskey Tjapaltjarri passed away in 2008, but his artworks remain a powerful testament to his life, his culture, and his deep connection to the land. His paintings not only preserve the stories of his people but also serve as a bridge between cultures, fostering greater appreciation and understanding of First Nations art and heritage. His legacy continues to inspire new generations of Indigenous artists and art lovers globally.

Selected Collections

Kerry Stokes Collection, Perth, Australia
The Reg Grundy AC OBE, Australia
Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide, Australia
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Australia
Steve Martin & Anne Stringfield Collections, USA
Seattle Art Museum, Seattle, USA
Glenstone Museum, Maryland, USA

Selected Literature

McGregor, K., Zimmer, J., *Bill Whiskey Tjapaltjarri*, Macmillan Art Pub., Melbourne, 2009

Selected Exhibitions

2024

Big Weather, The Ian Potter Centre: NGV Australia, Federation Square, Melbourne, Australia
Selections from Australia's Western Desert from the Collection of Steve Martin & Anne Stringfield, The National Arts Club, Gramercy Park, New York, USA

2023

Dreaming with your Eyes Open, SmithDavidson Gallery, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

2022

Origins, SmithDavidson Gallery, New York, USA

2010 - 2016

Rockholes and Country Near the Olgas displayed in the residence of the Australian Ambassador to the United States of America, Washington, D.C., USA

2008

Masterpieces from the Western Desert. Bill Whiskey Tjapaltjarri & Wentja Napaltjarri exhibition, curated by POB Contemporary and COSA Gallery. London, United Kingdom
Desert Mob, Araluen Arts Centre, Alice Springs, Australia

2007

Desert Mob, Araluen Arts Centre, Alice Springs, Australia

2006

Colliding Worlds, National Aboriginal Cultural Institute - Tandanya, Adelaide, Australia
Desert Mob, Araluen Arts Centre, Alice Springs, Australia
Finalist, 23rd National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Award, Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory, Darwin, Australia

2005

Finalist, 22nd National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Award, Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory, Darwin, Australia