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Indigenous art windfall for National Museum

By Sally Pryor
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When it comes to philanthropy in the art world, museums are not usually the beneficiaries of acts of generosity.

But the National Museum of Australia is about to receive a significant collection of contemporary artworks by a group of West Australians, thanks to a couple of anonymous art collectors.

The 33 works by 13 artists are about to go on show at Outstation, a commercial gallery in Darwin, in an exhibition entitled *History Paintings – all the stories got into our minds and eyes.*

The paintings tell of events over the last 100 years in the Ngaanyatjarra Lands, and in a departure from the customary Tjukurrpa (dreaming) stories usually created for the art market, they tell human stories of first contact experiences, early explorers, missionaries and weapons testing, as well as daily contemporary life.

Gallery owner Matt Ward said the exhibition had been a community-initiated idea that had taken shape over the past six months.

"As it started to evolve, we started to realise that it was a collection that needed to stay together," he said.

Fortunately, two of his clients agreed to buy the entire collection and give it straight to the National Museum in Canberra once the show finishes next month.

The head of the museum's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Program, Mike Pickering, who launched the exhibition in Darwin on Friday, said it was unusual to see such an extraordinary act of generosity towards a museum.

He said the collection was almost ready-made for display, and would form part of an exhibition at the museum in coming years.

"It's a collection that I find particularly interesting because of its strong figurative elements and its historical components," Dr Pickering said.

"The artists are painting about aspects of their own history, mission life, early explorers, stories of history from the indigenous perspective, and they're accompanied by the artists' descriptions . . . so you end up with both fantastic and enjoyable paintings, but also with a full description of what's conveyed through those paintings."

He said this was exactly the type of indigenous art that was gaining ground in the art and museum world, as seen in the recent success of the Canning Stock Route exhibition, which brought the museum's largest crowds to date.

"What we're finding is audiences are increasingly interested in hearing the indigenous voice, with the curatorial voice more in the background," he said.

Museum curator John Carty said the paintings were unique, and told unexpected stories.

"They're not paintings of the dreaming stories, they're actual, deliberate historical narratives," he said. "They're not all historical paintings in that sense, they really overturn and question that notion of history because lots of the paintings are about what's going on now."

One of the paintings depicts the writer Robyn Davidson, who trekked across the desert in the 1970s and wrote a book about it.

There's also a scene of young men playing football, and a Midnight Oil concert at Warakurna in the 1980s.

"It's this 100-year history of life in the Ngaanyatjarra lands, and of Australian history. Each of those things touches on something that's happening in the broader Australian narrative, so on some level, it's a really wonderful perspective on our own history as well," Dr Carty said.

"These paintings otherwise would have had to have been sold separately and dispersed. I think what' important about them is, they're intriguing and charming and interesting as individual paintings, but as a collection they're a really powerful historical document."

■ *History Paintings - all the stories got into our minds and eyes* is showing at Outstation Gallery in Darwin until June 3.

For more information, go to www.outstation.com.au

PICTURE TALE: Eunice Yunurupa Porter's depiction of Lasseter's Story about the prospector's trek across the desert with his horses. Photos: Outstation Gallery

LOCAL RECORD: Jean Burke's My Father's Donkey, above, and Eunice Yunurupa Porter's The Army Plane That Came to Warburton, below.