

= Warlugulong =

Warlugulong (1977) is an acrylic on canvas painting by Indigenous Australian artist Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri . Owned for many years by the Commonwealth Bank of Australia , the work was sold by art dealer Hank Ebes on 24 July 2007 , setting a record price for a contemporary Indigenous Australian art work bought at auction when it was purchased by the National Gallery of Australia for A \$ 2 @. @ 4 million . The painting illustrates the story of an ancestral being called Lungkata , together with eight other dreamings associated with localities about which Clifford Possum had traditional knowledge . It exemplifies a distinctive painting style developed by Papunya Tula artists in the 1970s , and blends representation of landscape with ceremonial iconography . Art critic Benjamin Genocchio describes it as " a work of real national significance [and] one of the most important 20th @- @ century Australian paintings " .

= = Background = =

Contemporary Indigenous Australian art originated with the Indigenous men of Papunya , located around 240 kilometres (150 mi) northwest of Alice Springs in Australia 's Western Desert , who began painting in 1971 . The youngest was Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri , encouraged by his older brother Tim Leura Tjapaltjarri . A number of the men developed a distinctive style of narrative painting that , beginning around 1976 , resulted in the production of several " monumental " works that included representations of both their traditional lands and of ceremonial iconography . Clifford Possum was the first to make this transition commencing with a related painting , also titled Warlugulong (1976) , now held by the Art Gallery of New South Wales . The two images are amongst five that the artist created between 1976 and 1979 that linked images of sacred stories to geographic representation of his country ? the land to which he belonged and about which he had traditional knowledge . The artist 's images of this period are visually complex , and contain a wide variety of patterns , unified by strong background motifs and structure .

= = The painting = =

Created in synthetic polymer paint on canvas , and a substantial 2 by 3 @. @ 3 metres (6 @. @ 6 ft x 10 @. @ 8 ft) in size , the work 's title is taken from a location roughly 300 kilometres (190 mi) " northwest of Alice Springs associated with a powerful desert dreaming " . Clifford Possum would often collaborate with other artists , particularly his brother Tim Leura , and the brothers together created the 1976 work of the same name . Art critic Benjamin Genocchio has referred to the 1977 work as also being by the brothers ; however , the National Gallery of Australia credits it solely to Clifford Possum . Like the other four works of the period that are symbolic maps of the artist 's country , the painting is accompanied by annotated diagrams of the images and notes that explain the dreamings that they include .

While the painting has been described as showing the story of an ancestral being called Lungkata starting the first bushfire , it portrays elements of nine distinct dreamings , of which Lungkata 's tale is the central motif . Lungkata was the Blue @- @ Tongue Lizard Man , an ancestral figure responsible for creating bushfire . The painting portrays the results of a fire , caused by Lungkata to punish his two sons who did not share with their father the kangaroo they had caught . The sons ' skeletons are on the right hand side of the image , shown against a background representing smoke and ashes .

Around this central motif are arranged elements of eight other stories , all of them represented at least in part by sets of footprints . Human footprints include a set left by dancing women from a place called Aileron ; another shows a family group travelling to a place called Ngama , and a third trail is that of a Tjungurrayi man , which lead to his skeleton , representing his death after committing the crime of trying to steal sacred items . Animal representations include tracks of a cluster of emus from a place called Napperby , on the artist 's country , as well as those left by the rock wallaby , or Mala , men journeying north from Port Augusta in South Australia , as well as , on the left hand edge

of the picture , those of two groups of dingoes going to a place called Warrabri . A little closer to the centre of the painting are marks representing a dreaming called the Chase of the Goanna Men . Throughout the work , Upambura the Possum Man 's footsteps follow the wandering lines that give the painting its overall structure .

This work excludes elements of several dreamings associated with country further south , which had been included in the painting created by Clifford Possum and his brother a year earlier . The omission led scholar Vivien Johnson to conclude that Warlugulong (1977) portrays a narrower geographic area than the preceding work . The artist also modified some of the iconography , and limited the explanations of the painting , omitting secret @-@ sacred dimensions of the stories to avoid offending other Indigenous men , and in recognition that most of the audience for the work would be uninitiated non @-@ Indigenous people .

Johnson 's analysis of the painting emphasises the relationship between the representation of geographical sites in the Yuendumu region and the dreaming stories associated with those sites . She concludes that there is " a topographic rationale for the order in which the Dreamings appear from left to right (that is , east to west) across the painting [as well as for] the transverse Dreaming trails " . However , beyond this general principle , she argues that the layout of symbols and images is influenced by the desire to present a symmetrical work . There is greater visual symmetry in this painting than in its 1976 predecessor ; symmetry is a strong influence in the works of many of the early Western Desert artists , including Clifford Possum , Billy Stockman Tjapaltjarri and Kaapa Tjampitjinpa .

Warlugulong (1977) is acclaimed as a landmark Indigenous painting ; a great work by one of the country 's foremost artists . Described as " epic " and " sprawling " , Genocchio said of it that is " a work of real national significance [and] one of the most important 20th @-@ century Australian paintings " . The authors of the National Gallery of Australia 's book , Collection Highlights , characterises the painting as the artist 's most significant . Artist and curator Brenda Croft agreed , considering it " an epic painting , encyclopaedic in both content and ambition " and " the artist 's most significant work " . The work and the price it achieved at auction in 2007 are cited as evidence of both the importance of Clifford Possum as an artist , and of the maturation and growth of the Australian Indigenous art market .

= = Sale history = =

Warlugulong was first exhibited at a show in Alice Springs , where it attracted crowds of interested viewers , but failed to sell . Realities Gallery in Melbourne then included the work in a major exhibition of Papunya Tula artworks . It was purchased for A \$ 1 @,@ 200 by the Commonwealth Bank , which hung it in a bank training centre cafeteria on the Mornington Peninsula . The bank sold it by auction in 1996 . The auction house trading the work expected it to fetch around \$ 5 @,@ 000 and did not make a feature of it in the catalogue , but dealers including Hank Ebes , the successful bidder , recognised the painting 's significance and it sold for \$ 36 @,@ 000 plus commission . After hanging in Ebes 's living room for eleven years , it was auctioned in Melbourne by Sotheby 's on 24 July 2007 . It sold for \$ 2 @.@ 4 million , thoroughly eclipsing the previous record for an Indigenous Australian painting , set when Emily Kngwarreye 's Earth 's Creation was bought in May of the same year for just over \$ 1 million . Warlugulong 's buyer was the National Gallery of Australia , which considers the painting to be possibly the most important in its collection of Indigenous Australian art . As of 2014 , the work is on display in the National Gallery .

When the Australian government in 2009 introduced a resale royalty scheme , the sale history of Warlugulong was frequently used to argue in favour of the scheme , designed to ensure that artists and their families continued to benefit from the appreciating value of old works .