

THE YUENDUMU MEN'S MUSEUM

A MAJOR CONSERVATION PROJECT HAS RESCUED A MONUMENT
OF GREAT CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE FOR THE
WALPIRI PEOPLE OF CENTRAL AUSTRALIA.

by CATHERINE MILLIKAN



The Aboriginal community of Yuendumu, 300 kilometres north west of Alice Springs in red desert country, was established as a Northern Territory Government ration station and Baptist mission in the 1940s. Indigenous people of the area, predominantly Walpiri, were brought there, while some arrived seeking shelter from a long drought or were drawn by the perceived opportunities of the time. Europeans gave them food, shelter, basic training in domestic tasks and trade skills, including stone quarrying and stone masonry.

As the mission became more established, Indigenous work groups built stone buildings in the community using stone they quarried from the Yuendumu Hills. A Baptist church was built, and in 1963 construction began on the building that became the Yuendumu Men's Museum, using local ochre-tinted sandstone. Work continued on the museum building, when resources permitted, until its completion, marked by an opening ceremony in 1971.

The Men's Museum was an initiative of a group of senior Aboriginal men, including Darby Jampijinpa Ross, Paddy Japaljarri Sims, Paddy Japaljarri Stewart and Harry Jakamarra Nelson. They built it as a place for secret sacred men's ceremonies, to house sacred objects, preserve culture and

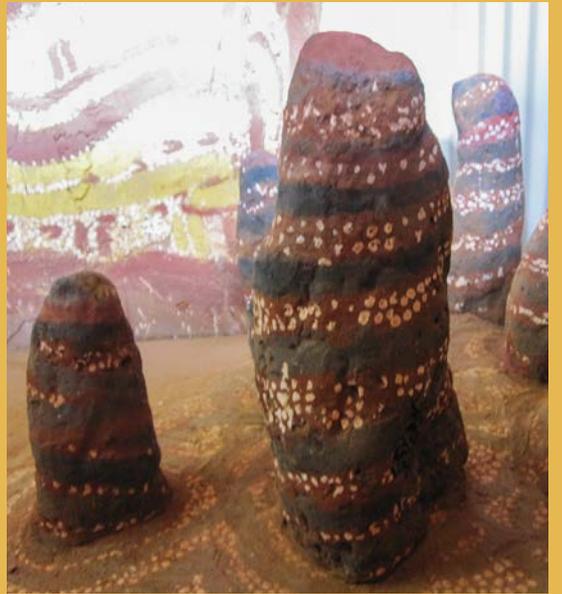
install culturally important wall paintings of their dreaming stories, or Jukurrpa, of the eight Warlpiri skin groups. It is a remarkable story in Australian art and a unique combination of mission-learned trade skills and the imperative of a culture with a deep sense of the sacred.

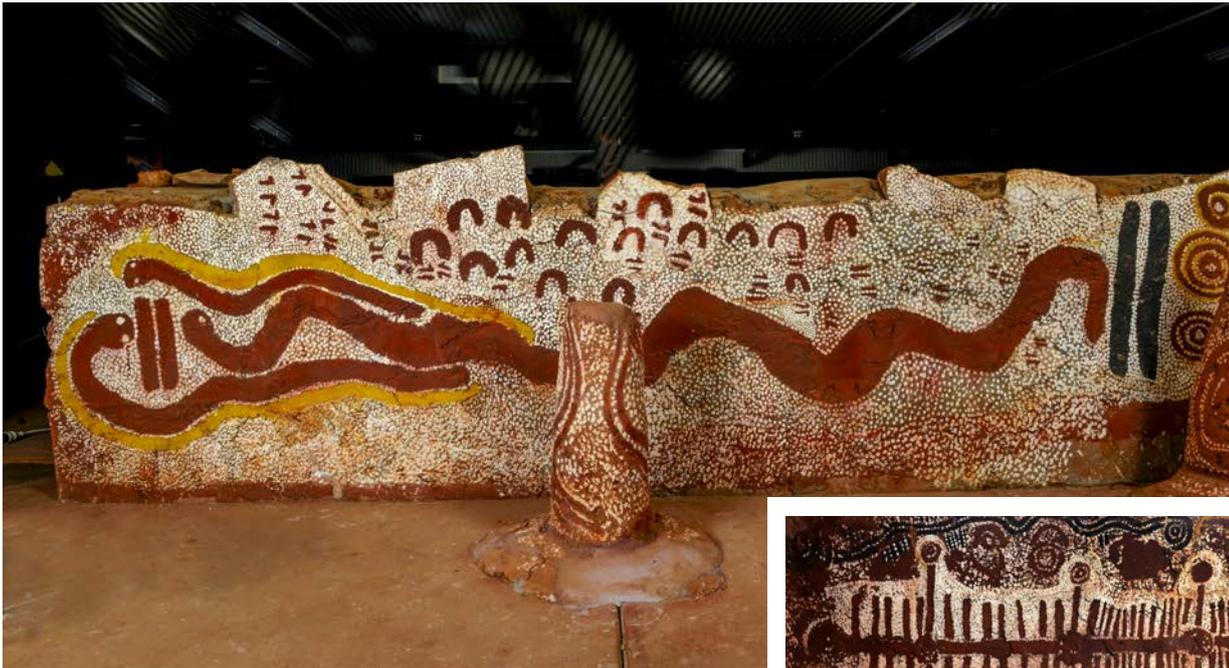
When the museum's simple rectangular form was completed, the senior men turned to the inside. Here, the rich colour of their handcrafted unfinished sandstone walls provided a background for intricately painted Jukurrpa stories. The men covered the museum walls with more than 70 linear metres of extraordinary paintings in red, yellow, black and white.

The museum continued to be used for men's ceremonies into the 1980s after which it closed and subsequently fell into disrepair.

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Opposite
(clockwise from top):
Yuendumu Men's Museum
entrance
Ceremonial termite mounds
One of the mural galleries
*Jukurrpa: Jardiwarnpa Snake &
Hare Wallaby Dreaming*
All photos courtesy Catherine
Millikan





STEPPING INSIDE THIS REMOTE MUSEUM IS TO BE IMMERSSED IN AN **ALL-SURROUNDING AND RICH ILLUSTRATION OF AN ANCIENT AND CONTINUING CULTURE.**

Above:
Jukurra: Jardiwarnpa Snake & Hare Wallaby Dreaming
Photo courtesy Greg Weight

Inset:
Jukurra: Warnu mana Mala Dreaming
Photo courtesy Catherine Millikan

After years of neglect, renewed community interest in the museum led to discussions on its restoration. A working group was formed and in 2006, under the direction of the senior men of Yuendumu, Warlukurlangu Artists Aboriginal Corporation Managers Cecilia Alfonso and Gloria Morales and conservator Catherine Millikan, the process of building restoration and the conservation of sacred installations and wall paintings commenced.

Work progressed in stages over nine years to allow for ongoing community discussions and fundraising. The most urgent preventive works to weatherproof the building were first addressed, along with fencing to stop feral cattle dislodging corner stones and gap sealing against red dust, wasps and large lizards – all of which were removing precious ochres from the Jukurra images.

Extensive condition reporting followed, the site was systematically cleared and conservation treatment plans were agreed upon.

Conservation of the wall paintings and

reconstruction of shattered ceremonial painted termite mounds continued over the following years. With the images gradually returning to clear view, discussions focused on the museum’s future and the senior men decided a wider audience could see the hallowed interior.

The museum re-opened in September 2015 with a ceremonial welcome and acknowledgement of the conservation project and its contribution to the continuing cultural and historical significance of the museum to the Warlpiri people of Central Australia. Art historian Dr Philip Jones, from the South Australia Museum, confirmed the view of all on the day by saying, “The power and vigour of these paintings is astounding. They will assure the museum of a new place in national and international art history.”

With the museum open for viewing, a tour was set up in association with Warlukurlangu Artists, to assist visitors to respectfully go to the Indigenous community of Yuendumu and experience

the Men’s Museum, an Indigenous-guided bush trip to cultural sites and see art in progress at Central desert Indigenous art centres. Stepping inside this remote museum is to be immersed in an all-surrounding and rich illustration of an ancient and continuing culture.

CATHERINE MILLIKAN is a conservator of art and cultural materials who has a particular interest in Aboriginal Art. She and Gloria Morales conserved the Yuendumu Men’s Museum.



EXPERIENCE IT

For tour details and dates, see florenceoutbacktours.com or via the Warlukurlangu link at warlu.com

ADFAS Travel is currently devising a Central Desert Tour. adfasttravel.com.au