

Spirit of Australia

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BACK ON TRACK

An upcoming exhibition at the National Museum of Australia presents the story and legacy of the Canning Stock Route through Aboriginal eyes.

Martu children at Well 33 with the painting *Kunkun* (2008)





Curators prepare the Canning Stock Route exhibition, 2008; Mayapu Elsie Thomas painting *Kurrkumalu*, 2007 (below)

IN 2006 AUSTRALIA commemorated an iconic chapter in its pioneering heritage with the centenary of surveyor Alfred Canning's ambitious expedition to carve out an almost 2000km livestock track across the continent's western deserts. The commemoration of the Canning Stock Route, which links 54 wells between Halls Creek in the Kimberley and Wiluna on the edge of the Gibson Desert, was viewed through the prism of white Australia.

But this year, 100 years after livestock first commercially traversed the narrow, dusty track, a remarkable exhibition at the National Museum of Australia will present the Canning Stock Route through Indigenous eyes.

Yiwarra-Kuju (One Road): The Canning Stock Route, opening next month, is the culmination of a four-year mission to chart the impact on the nine Indigenous groups whose traditional lands were both dissected and linked by the stock track. It is a daring and confronting exhibition; Aboriginal men were coopted into helping Canning identify the wells that made his stock route possible, and a lively oral history of the black-white tensions that underpin the track have been meticulously recorded and retold. ➤



The project, which commenced in 2006, resulted in an unprecedented collection of paintings, oral histories, new media works and artefacts, all produced by Indigenous artists, curators, technicians, translators, photographers and filmmakers. The National Museum considered the collection so culturally rich and so well-documented that in late 2008 it purchased it in its entirety.

Michael Pickering, director of the museum's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island Program, says the stories that lay behind his institution's acquisitions ultimately determined if they were of interest.

"So there may be art works by artists, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, and they could be worth a trillion dollars. That's not as important as the story behind the art work, because the art work, in our case, is going to be used as the icon for communicating the background story. This is a collection of stories first and foremost. Some people judge a book by its cover. We judge the cover by the book."

The multimedia exhibition is drawn from the collection and, after opening at the museum, will be staged across Australia. The project began as a collaborative idea between FORM – which nurtures artistic projects in Western Australia – and the nine Aboriginal language groups connected to the stock route. Each group is today represented by an artistic or cultural organisation, such as Mangkaja Arts at Fitzroy Crossing, the Tjukurba Gallery at Wiluna and the Pakaku Indigenous Protected Area at Mulan.

Perhaps the true artistic genesis of the project was an epic six-week "Return to Country" road trip along the track in >



Top: Eubena Nampitjin, *Kinyu* (2007); below: Rosie Williams, Dulcie Gibbs & Rita Muni Simpson; Jakayu Biljabu with *Wikirri* (2007)





Patrick Tjungurrayi, *Canning Stock Route Country* (2007); right: Nora Nangapa, *Minyipuru* (2008)

July 2007 with about 70 artists. Custodians of the land—most of which has returned to original owners under Native Title – guided the convoy through the Gibson, Little Sandy and Great Sandy Deserts.

Some of the artists reconnected with family members who had dispersed because of the track. Others were returning to places they'd visited as children. All were there to tell a story – through a painting or by reclaiming an oral history – about what the stock route meant to them. The artists produced more than 100 canvases and the first of 20,000 photographs that now belong in the collection.

Co-founder, co-curator and manager of the stock route project Carly Davenport, says Aboriginal artists – aware that their ancestors had for generations walked from waterhole to waterhole along the desert track – were eager to contribute to the story. “When we began researching we didn’t know it was the centenary of the stock route. We started to develop the project and we discovered that the government had actually planned for the centenary. And then we realised that there was no plan that was actually incorporating Aboriginal voices. It’s a story that’s not in the history books. So it’s through the paintings that the stories are now coming out.”

NGARRALJA TOMMY MAY, an established artist from Mangkaja Arts in Fitzroy Crossing, elaborates. “That stock road, I know that *kartiya* (white) fella been putting all the road, still I reckon only lately. Before that it used to be blackfella country. That Canning Stock Road, it wasn’t Canning Stock Road before – I say only yesterday. Before this, nothing. Blackfella country, *jila* [spring], *jumu* [soakwater], rockhole. Now it’s Canning Stock Road for anybody to use.”

Many Aboriginal men and women worked as drovers on the route. But for other Aborigines the stock route was, right up until the 1960s, the point of first contact with the white man. For some groups, meanwhile, the Canning Stock Route came to symbolise displacement as family members drifted into other language groups.

Putuparri Tom Lawford, a translator who helped collate the oral histories, says some people were eager to tell their stories. For others

it was immensely painful. “There were good ones [stories], sad ones – it’s up to us to tell them to our future generations. The blackfellas were forced to help [Canning with the stock route]. They were chained up and tied to a tree overnight. And they let ‘em go in the morning, and they were thirsty, and they track ‘em down to the water.”

Artist Yanjimi Peter Rowlands, says his father told him about finding a wireless radio on the stock route and hearing a voice. His father and his friends thought the radio was the spirit of a white man. “They tried burying it, but it was still talking. The men dug it up and began hitting and spearing it, and eventually broke it into pieces.”

Lena Long is a cultural adviser and translator for the project. Her mother was a drover. “Mum was riding a horse. At the time she was waiting for me. She had the labour pains one night. She told Tilly Stevens, ‘Must be my baby coming’ and it was me. I was born that time at Well 7 and she said ‘Got to go on the horse tomorrow,’ got straight back on the horse. She used to be a good horsewoman, used to chase kangaroo and all with a big stick.”

The exhibition has sparked opportunity for emerging Indigenous artists, curators, filmmakers and photographers. The commercial benefits to the desert arts groups could also be significant. Meanwhile, curating, preserving and readying works for exhibition has delighted and challenged museum staff.

“These works are painted in the desert, many on unstretched canvases on the ground. Kids walk on them, dogs sit on them and some arrived with sand and grass seeds – all sorts of little inclusions – in them,” says Mark Henderson, one of the museum’s conservators. “Our challenge is to maintain the integrity and the original character of the works while preserving them for future generations.”

The exhibition will be colourful and confronting. The collection, meanwhile, seems destined to become an invaluable cultural resource that tells the other side of a revered Australian story. 🌐

Yiwarra-Kuju (One Road): The Canning Stock Route, National Museum of Australia, Canberra, from July 30. www.nma.gov.au