

John and Barbara Wilkerson's New York 5th Avenue double brownstone home office is styled by Studio 54 architect R. Scott Bromley. Rarefied interiors are adorned with folk art, an array of wooden masks and the now famous collection of early 1970s Papunya Tula art Icons. John Wilkerson's passion for Aboriginal art began over twenty years ago in Darwin. In a recent interview on the occasion of the NGV's 40 year Papunya Tula retrospective, to which he is a major lender, Jane Raffan discovered the love affair might be over. Disturbingly for the Aboriginal art market, restrictive Australian government policy has forced a shift in his collecting pursuits.

You are well known for your collection of early American folk art. What was it about Aboriginal art that triggered the impetus to start down such a radically different collecting pathway?

Like many serious collectors, we had the 'aha' moment, and it happened for us at the Darwin Museum and Art Gallery. We entered this small Museum, Barbara went to the right, I went left and when we came face to face 30 minutes later it was instant love; for the art and each other I hasten to add. I still have the small spiral bound notebook where my enduring fascination with a Johnny Warangkula Tjupurrula painting was first noted. Seeing this enigmatic painting in Darwin nearly 20 years ago was the triggering moment for our aboriginal art collecting journey. Later that day we also saw an extraordinary installation in the NT Parliament building and we left there enthralled with the imagination and beauty of a Bandicoot Dreaming painting by Mick Namarari Tjapaltjarri.

First acquisitions are often described by collectors as setting off urgency in their new found collecting quest. Did yours have this effect, or was your approach more tempered?

Barbara and I made a few purchases in Darwin and Alice Springs after the Johnny Warangkula epiphany. Years later we sold a couple of these paintings which could charitably be described as interesting. But, the acquisitions we made from Papunya Tula Artists and specifically from Daphne Williams who happened to be there one day post-retirement, remain close to our heart and have prominent positions in our home. We knew so little about the field when we met Daphne that we could not decide from among 10 large canvases on display at the gallery. She insisted we roll them up, take them to our Alice Springs hotel room and think about it. What a joyous evening it was; Chinese take-out food, Australian beer and two naïve enthusiasts debating which paintings to embrace. It was not until we returned to the States that we seriously focused on developing a collection strategy for our new found passion. Ultimately we decided not to focus on contemporary works, but rather the earliest and, to us, the most profound paintings of the Western Desert Movement, early boards.

As a collecting couple, how do you and Barbara influence each other's decisions, and to what extent?

We are fortunate having similar tastes in art and we also recognize and respect our relatively few points of significant difference. We seldom acquire without both of us embracing the piece. Our differences are seldom over an individual piece, but rather one of us may be considerably more passionate about a particular category of our various collections. The important point is to be possessed by passion.

As your confidence and knowledge of the field grew, did you find yourself wanting specific works and directing the process more, or were you comfortable to continue being guided?

To develop a meaningful collection, a body of exemplary work that not only thrills the collector but influences how others think is a serious time-intensive endeavor. Doing it right necessitates objectivity, passion, discipline, constant study and

something I am attempting to master, patience. We have always sought out expertise as we assembled collections in whatever field. The acquisition of expertise is a profoundly wise investment. For a couple in New York to successfully collect Early Boards required us to have an advisor with integrity, a great eye and a keen sense of the market. We continue to work with Irene Sutton and we have also benefited over the years from the expertise of Tim Klingender and Wally Caruana. If anything, the more we know the more we realise how much we don't know. As such, we rely even more heavily on our cadre of thought partners.

In his famous book Songlines, Bruce Chatwin observed that Australia is a continent of "Iliads and Odysseys". There were plenty of hazards in these epics tales. What have been the most difficult and or frustrating episodes in your journey building the collection?

Great question. I am a classically trained economist and have spent my career attempting to discover

An American love affair



There is no reason for a sane and rational US collector to collect Australian Aboriginal art that falls within the purview of the cultural heritage regulations

Opposite top left: Barbara Wilkerson explaining the *The Trial* by Charlie Tarawa Tjungurrayi 1972

Opposite bottom left: Barbara and John Wilkerson with (from left) Bobby West Tjupurrula, Joseph Jurra Tjapaltjarri, and Ray James Tjangala during the events surrounding the exhibition of their collection, *Icons of the Desert: Early Aboriginal Paintings from Papunya*. Photo: Courtesy of John and Barbara Wilkerson

Opposite right: Uta Uta Tjangala Ceremonial story 1972 synthetic polymer paint on composition board, 78.0 x 30.0 cm John and Barbara Wilkerson, New York, USA Image courtesy National Gallery of Victoria.

causal relationships. But collecting Australian aboriginal art, particularly Early Boards, doesn't lend itself to linear thinking or easy to comprehend cause and effect analysis. When you mix ingredients such as complex sacred and secret aboriginal traditions, cultural heritage regulations, and well-intended bureaucrats charged with protecting difficult to define precious objects you have a recipe for ambiguity. I should have studied behavioural economics which would have better prepared me to understand this field. But having said this, our collecting journey has been a joyous experience and we have no desire for the journey to end.

Do you have a favourite piece? Are there any purchases you regret or any you regret not acquiring?

Without question the painting done by Johnny Warangkula Tjupurrula is my favourite. And yes there are a few pieces that would have been important contributors to the collection we were assembling but for one reason or another we were not successful in acquiring them. And no, I am not identifying them because they may again become available and we don't need more competition.

Are you still adding to the collection, and if so, will it conform to the existing focus or are you looking in new directions?

We will definitely entertain acquiring exceptional Early Boards if they round out the collection and have the proper export permits. But let's face it, forming the collection Barbara and I conceptualized and formed is no longer possible. As for what I am now collecting, this is something that will become public once the core of the collection has been formed. We are thrilled to be learning about still another subject, developing a unique collecting strategy and making it happen.

Collecting has been described as a communicable obsession. Has your passion for Aboriginal art infected others you know?

Absolutely. I know a number of serious collectors who saw the Icons Exhibition and subsequently acquired significant paintings. This is gratifying since Barbara and I believe education is a fundamental responsibility of collectors and you do this by sharing. The Icons exhibition was all about education and we know someone learned when they saw the exhibition and subsequently acquired. But acquisition is not the metric we use to gauge influence. It is more important for a painting or an exhibition to have a long half-life and the memory affects your view of humanity.

Aside from the obvious problem of distance, how would you categorise the main complexities and/or impediments for US collectors who might want to begin collecting Aboriginal art?

There is no reason for a sane and rational U.S. collector to collect Australian aboriginal art that falls within the purview of the cultural heritage regulations. These well intended regulations are seriously out of date and in some instances they work against the best interests of the artists. It is amazing to me that there is public funding to stimulate the artists to paint and simultaneously

there are regulations suppressing demand. There is much written about the law of unintended consequences and this is a good case study. I think it is useful to consider that John Kluge formed the amazing Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal collection of perhaps 1,600 objects, mainly paintings, and through his generosity the collection is housed at America's University of Virginia where an exceptional staff curates travelling exhibitions, features cutting edge Aboriginal artists, sponsors scholarly symposiums and generally promotes understanding of indigenous people and lessons we can learn from their 40,000 year history. Increasingly these topics, sustainability for example, are completely aligned with contemporary social issue discourse. But today the Kluge Ruhe collection could not be assembled and housed outside of Australia and in my view the artists, their communities, Australia and citizens of the world are poorer for this. Shouldn't Australia be enthusiastically encouraging worldwide exposure to one of their country's most powerful artistic expressions? Museum Directors are respectful of but rightfully intimidated by cultural heritage regulations. But when they realise the regulations are anti-collector, museums outside of Australia move on to friendlier turf.

In 2008 it was reported in a major newspaper that your purchase of a painting by Tommy Lowry Tjapaltjarri had been awaiting the decision on an export licence for over a year, despite its date of execution being 1984, four years outside the date limit set by the Protection of Moveable Cultural Heritage Act. Was it eventually approved for permanent export and can you comment on any of the issues put forward in the process?

After considerable effort on our part the Tommy Lowry Tjapaltjarri painting was not approved for permanent export. This is a wonderful painting, one of my favorites, and to be quite candid with you, the considerable pain from this experience endures. I simply cannot deal with this question. Suffice to say, the painting was available at auction and not one Australian museum bid. The under bidder was not a museum. Yet the denial decision seemed to rest on the fact that this painting should reside in an Australian Museum where we all know, at best it would be on public display very few days over any 5 year period. This is not an attack on Australian museums but rather a statement of reality; their collections are too vast to display and the storage room is a painting's home for 98% of the time.

A more recent example of how Australian regulations impact serious collectors occurred on November 21, 2011, at the aboriginal art sale at Bonhams. Barbara and I would have loved to embrace the Anatjari painting, *Kuningka*, highlighted at this sale, but it was denied an export permit. This is one of two very similar Anatjari paintings, the other proudly owned by the National Museum of Australia. This beautiful example of Anatjari's work would have been a strong complement to the paintings in our continuously travelling exhibition of Early Boards. It is a wonderful painting but it did not sell at Bonham's auction because government regulations deliberately and intentionally excluded foreign museums and international collectors. Please hear this: Australian museums were 'no shows' at the Bonham's sale. To my knowledge, not one Australian museum or



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Opposite top:
John Wilkerson, Cornell PhD Class of 1970, speaks at the opening reception for *Icons of the Desert: Early Aboriginal Paintings from Papunya* at the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University, in February 2009.
Photo: Robert Barker, Cornell University Photography

Opposite middle:
Shorty Lungkata Tjungurrayi
Pintupi c.1920-1987
Untitled 1972
synthetic polymer paint on composition board
74.0 x 41.2 cm
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Gift of Mrs Douglas Carnegie OAM, 1989
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Opposite bottom:
Installation views of *Icons of the Desert: Early Aboriginal Paintings from Papunya* at the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University, 2009.
Photo: Courtesy of Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University

their representative submitted a bid, yet the experts designated to opine on this painting deemed it too culturally significant to leave Australia. Serious collectors intent on scholarship and education and perhaps more importantly, museums worldwide, were excluded from bidding. The artists, their families and Australia are the unintended losers as this drama plays out.

What has been the main impact of these episodes on your collecting pursuits going forward?

Certainly the export restrictions affected our collecting and for this reason we have shifted our enthusiasm to subjects where we are welcomed and not seen as exploiters. Our love is for scholarship and education and our ability to further pursue these in the area of Australian aboriginal art of most interest to us has been largely extinguished, by government design.

Many early Papunya Tula works denied export licenses were not shown interest from public institutions – a particular aggravation for auction houses. Sotheby's is on record stating cultural heritage laws have negatively impacted the market. In the UK, works denied export licences must be acquired by the state, thereby compensating a buyer for the stymied acquisition.

Would you like to see amendments to the PMCHA legislation in Australia that offers similar protection for buyers?

It is presumptuous for an American to dictate how Australia deals with this issue. But I do think those in charge should recognize we live in market-based economies and those who tinker with markets have responsibilities. To pass regulations and not ensure they are kept current hurts the people, culture and communities. Speaking for myself and based on my knowledge of several other global collectors, the regulations have gutted the market. I would hope there are influential Australians who would agree the fairest approach and one enabling Australian institutions to achieve their responsibilities is to provide them the right to match successful bids on any object designated as culturally significant within perhaps 6 months of a sale. If an object is deemed to be so significant that it cannot leave the country, then the government should provide the acquisition funding. The Australian government, in my view, put in place the easy piece – protection regulations. And, as so often happens with government regulations, the powers-to-be failed on the tough piece which required them to provide funding. This is sad but not surprising. I would also like to note that the regulations in place today cover such a broad number of objects that the somewhat more market-based approach I am describing would cause everyone to focus on the most culturally significant objects rather than anything more than 20 years old and valued at more than \$10,000.

Your collection was showcased in the 2009 Icons of the Desert: Early Aboriginal Paintings from Papunya exhibition. Nicolas Rothwell (The Australian) lauded it as "paradigm-changing" and "having the impact of Picasso's introduction to the world in New York City in 1939". What were your hopes for the show and how were they met and/or exceeded?

Our intent was to bring this powerful art form to the attention of 20,000,000 citizens worldwide and to date we have reached 17 million. Awareness of this amazing culture and appreciation for the stories, the imagery and the artists was our goal. We did not intend to change the world with one exhibition but we hoped to have much fun, meet new interesting people and inch forward the world's appreciation of this art. And our mission is not complete. The exhibition in various forms continues to be shown in the US, Australia and Europe.

The recent Papunya Tula 40 year retrospective, Tjukurrjtjanu Origins of the Western Desert (NGV, 30 September–12 February 2012) included 19 works from your collection; a clear testament to its significance. Can you comment on the exhibition's impact on you, aside from the gratification of seeing your efforts rewarded by this distinction?

Barbara and I flew to Melbourne for the NGV exhibiton curated by Judith Ryan and Philip Batty. We were impressed with their vision for this exhibition and hope it will travel not only to France but eventually to the U.S. and somewhere in Asia. It is a first class curatorial statement and should be seen by many more people than our Icons exhibition. We loved the show, particularly the opportunity to view the works of these seminal artists over a period of years. To see them all together was instructional, inspiring and dazzling.

It is documented that plans to tour Icons to Australia collapsed early due to problems over the culturally sensitive material. The Icons website indicates that discussions are underway for the exhibition to tour to several international locations. Is this still the case, and have these discussions progressed to a stage where you can comment on the proposed countries and venues?

We so much wanted Icons to tour Australia but the current NGV exhibition is accomplishing much of our aim so despite the bumps in the road we encountered, success was achieved. Parts of our collection continue to travel and we love to hear from respected institutions with public reach.

There is a growing trend within Indigenous rights movement in Australia to propel a conservative policy about access to the culturally sensitive early works from 1971-72. This was highlighted by the book accompanying the Icons exhibition, in which several works were published in a separate sealed section for distribution in America, but not Australia.

You have stated that the beauty of the art motivated your purchases, and that your collecting journey is "an act of love", and that you want to "share the art with everyone". Preventing the Australian public from seeing these works and sharing your admiration of them must have been a difficult decision. How did you and Barbara come to terms with the polemics over restricted access to the works and the eventual decision about the publication?

This was the most challenging aspect of the entire Icons exhibition but all of us involved feel proud that we worked with the various involved constituencies to come up with a going forward strategy that was sensitive to and respectful of the indigenous families. In fact, we believe the arduous path we eventually



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image: Paddy Bedford Viewing, Bonhams, Cnr. Madison and 56th St., New York. November, 2011

passed over brought clarity to exhibition policy in Australia. For the time being I believe, there is some consensus on how secret and sacred boards may be exhibited.

You've also stated that you feel "public discussion about what may be exhibited in Australia and the rest of the world should be encouraged". In Australia, certain proponents have called for the restriction of any further exposure of all early material, and not just culturally sensitive material, suggesting that continued display would water down Indigenous culture. Will Owen, another prominent US collector and prominent Aboriginal art commentator has decried such a view. What are your feelings on this?

This is a free world and all are welcome to an opinion. My view is that these paintings were painted to be sold and they were. As time passed, internal discussion resulted in limiting what was so evident in the earliest of the Early Boards. The society was self governing on this subject and this was their prerogative. I find the evolution of this story fascinating and it provides great insights into the richness of the culture. The more discussion that occurs on this subject, as long as it is civil, the better, as far as I am concerned.

There is a growing trend worldwide of art collectors building private museums, or opening their homes to the public. What are your feelings about this phenomenon? Do you have a similar interest, or feel any obligation in this regard, or are you satisfied with the efforts made to promote the art to the American public via the Icons exhibition and publication?

Private museums are nothing new and are expressions of discontent with policies of existing museums, expressions of vanity or maybe even doing something that just sounds interesting and fun. I harbour a fantasy of taking industrial loft space and using it to store and display our collections. Imagine how enjoyable it would be to pull up a chair in 5,000 square feet of uncluttered space, put on Leonard Cohen singing Hallelujah and saying "this is Nirvana".

Outside Australia, the Seattle Art Museum (SAM) is leading the world in its commitment to and staging of Aboriginal art as a contemporary practice. At the moment the Kluge-Ruhe Museum is the only institution permanently exhibiting Aboriginal art on the east coast, but as part of a university collection it has the effect of operating within an ethnographic paradigm, even though its programs do regularly engage with cutting edge art (street artist Rennie Reko and Judy Watson being recent examples). Would you like to see an east-coast public institution follow the SAM's example and offer a gallery of Australian Aboriginal art in a contemporary context?

What SAM is doing is great but we are a long way from that happening on the East Coast. In my view it would be a major accomplishment to get the Metropolitan Museum to embrace the field and periodically exhibit great Australian aboriginal work. I cannot imagine anything more pivotal in our field than such a statement. I should mention that MOMA recently exhibited a wonderful Emily K. painting from the Kluge-Ruhe collection. This was an important step forward for aboriginal art in that the painting was seen outside of an anthropological/ethnographic context. We hope for and need more deserved breakthroughs like this one.

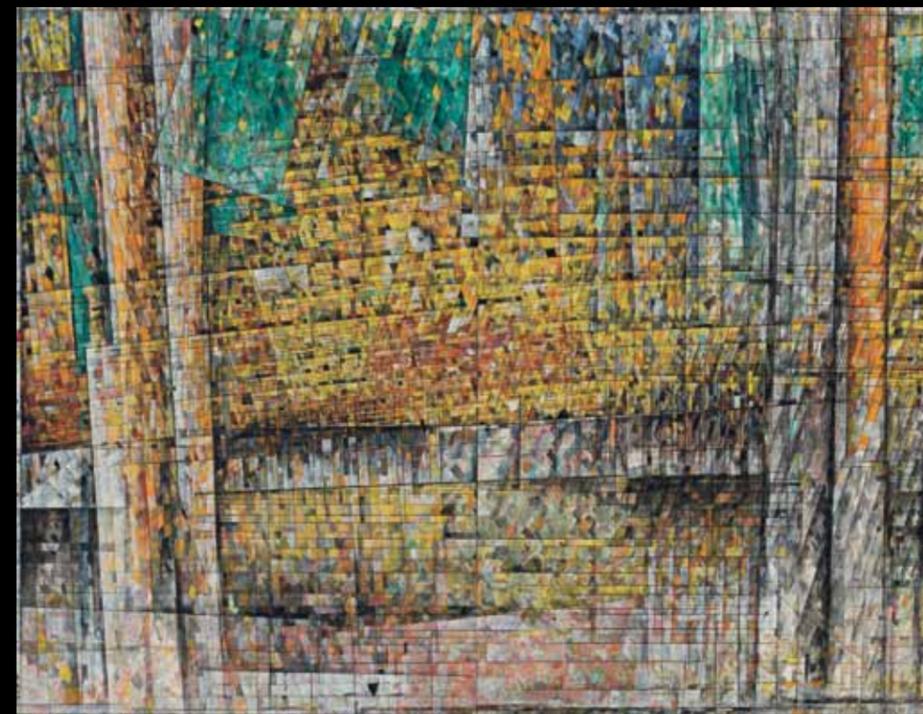
You have recently renovated your NY home; the architect's PR shots show a sophisticated and very elegant renovation, but with few paintings in situ. How many works are in your collection/s and how much is normally on display in your home or offices? What strategies do you employ for storage, displaying and conserving the paintings and other collection objects?

The New York townhouses have art on every floor. The building was designed to display art, with interesting niches and alcoves throughout. The art remains mostly stationary and ranges from Indigenous to American Folk Art. In the lobby of the townhouse; however, we have a wall called Gallery 117 where we display art and photography. This wall rotates artists about every 10 weeks or so.

What do you envisage for the Collection's ultimate future? Do you have plans for a grand philanthropic gesture, or will it stay in the family? Would you be tempted to donate the collection to an Australian national institution devoted to Aboriginal art?

So many obvious practical considerations will influence our decision. At one time I seriously considered an Australian home for our collection. But given our passion for connoisseurship, scholarship and education through sharing I think the collection is better situated outside a system burdened by poorly administered and underfunded protectionism.

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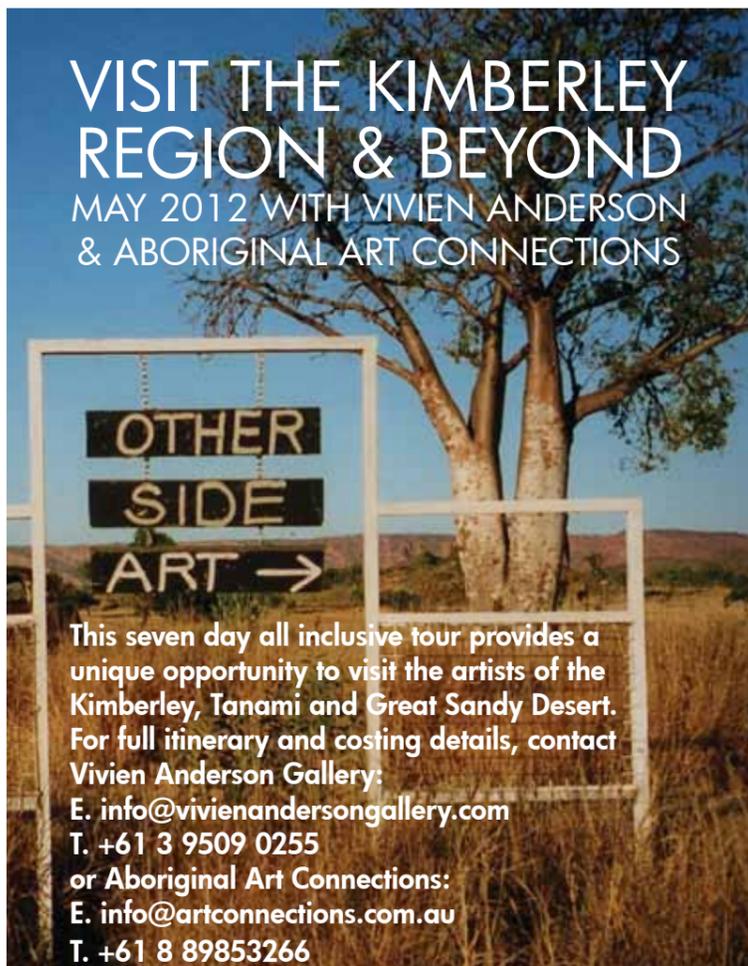
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