



STUDY GUIDE

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SYNOPSIS

Papunya Tula art, commonly known as dot painting, is world renowned. *Mr Patterns* tells the story of Geoff Bardon who, together with the Papunya artists, was a catalyst for what many consider the greatest art movement of the 20th century.

Posted as an art teacher to the government settlement at Papunya in Australia's Western Desert, Bardon found more than 1000 Aboriginal people living in a state of dislocation, their culture being systematically wiped out through assimilation.

He encouraged the people to paint their traditional designs using western materials. Starting with children's classroom projects in the early 1970s, he became increasingly involved with tribal elders whose designs told stories of their ancestral Dreamings. In defiance of white authorities, Bardon also encouraged the artists to value their work commercially as well as spiritually, believing that by selling paintings the people could become independent of welfare as well as bring Indigenous art to the attention of the wider community.

By the time Bardon left Papunya in mid 1972, the Painting Men had formed their own company and the Western Desert art movement had begun. But for Bardon, the personal cost was enormous...

CURRICULUM LINKS

This program will have interest and relevance for teachers and students at upper primary, secondary and tertiary levels. Curriculum links include Studies of Society and Environment/Human Society and Its Environment (SOSE/HSIE), Visual Arts, Cultural Studies, Aboriginal Studies, Australian Studies, English and Media Studies.

Note: *Mr Patterns* has been classified PG with the consumer advice: medium level coarse language. A non-expletive version of the program is available.

KEY VOCABULARY LIST

The spellings used in this guide are as per Geoff Bardon's book *Papunya Tula: Art of the Western Desert*. Included below are alternate spellings that may be useful for research purposes.

Male Skin Group Names

Tjakamarra/Tjagamarra/Jagamarra

Tjapaltjarri

Tjapananga

Tjupurrula

Tjampitjinpa

Tjapangati

Tjungurrayi

Tjangala

Key Words

Aranda/Arrernte—a language group

Anmatjira/Anmatyerre/Anmatjerre/Anmatjere—a language group

Coolamon—wooden food or baby carrier

Luritja/Loritja—a language group, also known as Kukatja

Pintupi/Pintubi—a language group

Tjukurrpa—dreaming

Secret/Sacred—term used to refer to restricted information/knowledge

Wailpri/Warlpiri—a language group

Woomera—spear thrower

Yuwa—yes

BEFORE WATCHING

Political Climate in Australia at the Time

The recent Native Welfare Conference agreed that assimilation is the objective of native welfare measures. Assimilation means, in practical terms, that in the course of time, it is expected that all persons of Aboriginal birth or mixed blood in Australia will live like white Australians do.

—Paul Hasluck, Minister for Territories, in a statement to the House of Representatives, 18 October 1951.

The traditional Aboriginal people of Australia's Western Desert were brought in from the desert by Welfare Branch officers and missionaries. The missionaries and the government set up settlements to accommodate the traditional people so that they could be 'assimilated'.

- How did the government policy of assimilation influence white Australians' attitudes towards Indigenous Australians in the early to mid 20th century?
- Research the role of missionaries in the Western Desert in the mid 20th century. Comment on their role in the assimilation of Indigenous Australians.
- What was the White Australia policy?
- Refer to the chronology in *Papunya Tula: Genesis and Genius* and in small groups discuss critical events such as the inclusion of Aboriginal people in the 1967 referendum and the start of the Aboriginal Tent Embassy in Canberra (1972).



(l to r) Curator Hetti Perkins in front of a Ronnie Tjampitjinpa painting (“Untitled”, 2001) PHOTO BY C MOORE HARDY. Filmmaker Nic Testoni, Papunya artist Long Jack Phillipus Tjakamarra and filmmakers Catriona McKenzie and Jo Plomley PHOTO BY KIM BATTERHAM. Michael Nelson Tjakamarra painting at Papunya in 2004 PHOTO BY JO PLOMLEY.

Western Desert History and People

The Western Desert tribes of Australia include the Wailpri, Loritja, Pintupi, Aranda and Anmatjira Aranda. These are five distinct tribal or language groups that live in different regions in the Western Desert of Australia—which starts west of Alice Springs and extends to most of Western Australia. By the early 1950s most of these tribal people had contact with white people, either through missionaries or working as stockmen on cattle stations. The last group to be contacted were the Pintupi who were encouraged to come to Haasts’ Bluff in 1956. Some of the Pintupi did not have contact with white people until 1966, and in 1984 a family of Pintupi people known as ‘the lost tribe’ made contact with an outstation for the first time.¹

Traditional people of the Western Desert lived a nomadic life, moving from waterhole to waterhole over vast distances. They were hunters and gatherers and generally lived in small family groups with little outside contact.

The groups did come together for ceremonies and rituals associated with their Dreamings—a rich and complex system of beliefs that explains the world and its creation and sets out the social system and laws. Ceremonies included storytelling through singing, dancing and sand and body painting. Many facets of traditional life continue in contemporary Aboriginal communities.

Papunya

Papunya was the last settlement to be established by the government under the policy of assimilation and was officially opened in 1960. It is located 250 kilometres west of Alice Springs; the location was chosen because of the availability of good drinking water. The Aboriginal population at Papunya when it opened was 676 and by 1970 it exceeded 1000.²

The Aboriginal people at Papunya were made up of the five Western Desert tribes, who were not used to living together. They were not allowed to leave the settlement. They were encouraged to live in ‘transitional huts’—small buildings made out of concrete and corrugated iron. Most of the Aboriginal people preferred to live in humpies that were similar to the dwellings they traditionally lived in.

The mortality rate of Aboriginal people at Papunya was very high.

- Find Alice Springs on a map of Australia; find Papunya.
- Write a short story describing what it might be like to see a white person for the first time if you were a Pintupi man/woman.
- Describe what it might be like living in Papunya after having lived a traditional lifestyle.
- Do you think Aboriginal people liked living in Papunya? Why/why not?
- Explain why many of the Indigenous people at Papunya got sick.
- Describe how an Aboriginal child would learn about the world when they lived a traditional life and compare this to how you learn about the world today.

Key Interview Subjects

Geoff Bardon—left Sydney to teach at the government settlement of Papunya in 1971. There, he became the catalyst for the Western Desert art movement.

Hetti Perkins—curator of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art, Art Gallery of New South Wales.

Michael Nelson Tjakamarra—considered one of the most successful Papunya artists of his generation. His work includes the design for the mosaic in front of Parliament House, Canberra.

Long Jack Phillipus Tjakamarra—one of the original Painting Men of Papunya. He worked as a yardman at the Papunya School and was a senior of the Aboriginal community. He continues to have a successful career as an artist.

Fay T Nelson—former Head of the Aboriginal Art Board, she was involved in the early marketing of Aboriginal art.

Dick Kimber—a local historian with close ties to the Indigenous communities of Central Australia and a deep understanding of their culture.

AFTER WATCHING

Indigenous Warning

At the beginning of the film you see this warning:

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander viewers should be careful watching this program as it contains images of people who have passed away.

- Why do you think this warning has been included? Why do you think that it is also spoken in language (Luritja)?

Papunya

There is a considerable amount of archival footage in the film that shows Papunya as it was in the 1970s, along with different interview subjects describing what it was like for the Aboriginal people living there.

- Discuss how you feel about Papunya as a place. Is this different from what you thought before you watched the film?
- In the film you see footage of Aboriginal people living in humpies on the outskirts of Papunya. Many Aboriginal families at Papunya did not want to live in the huts provided by the government. Explain why.

Geoff Bardon with Papunya artists, early 1970s. COURTESY BARDON FAMILY.



- Geoff Bardon says, 'White people had all the power and all the money and all the possessions and all the control'. Comment on this statement.
- Geoff Bardon gives two different explanations of where rain comes from. What are they? Explain the different perspectives.
- Do you think the Indigenous community at Papunya still practised their culture despite the policy of assimilation?
- Geoff Bardon says, 'I didn't set out to rock any boat, but it just seemed silly to have the young people drawing cowboys and Indians all day when they had an intact culture of their own'. How does this statement fit in with the policy of assimilation?
- Part of the conflict in the film is because not everybody liked what Geoff Bardon was doing in Papunya. What were the main reactions?

Geoff Bardon

Geoff Bardon was born in Sydney in 1940 and studied law at the University of Sydney and art at the National Art School. He taught in New South Wales before teaching at Papunya. Throughout his life he continued to work on films and books about his time at Papunya and Western Desert art. He was made a Member of the Order of Australia in 1988 for his services to the preservation and development of traditional Aboriginal art forms.

- In the film Hetti Perkins says Geoff Bardon describes himself as 'the right man, at the right place, at the right time'. Explain what this statement means. Do you think the white authorities at Papunya in 1972 would have agreed with this statement?

Western Desert Art

Western Desert art is considered to be one of the greatest art forms of the 20th century. From its humble beginnings at Papunya, Western Desert art now hangs in galleries around the world.

The Honey Ant mural is seen as the beginning of the Western Desert art movement. It was a bold statement at the time—as the goal of assimilation was to discourage traditional ways and culture. The Honey Ant mural brought the Indigenous community together at Papunya, and reminded them of their homelands. The men who painted the mural were to become commercially successful artists.

Geoff Bardon gave the mural artists and other Aboriginal men western materials such as boards and paints to paint their traditional designs. Each of these men began to paint their Dreamings, stories that they 'owned'.

Some of the Dreamings that the artists painted are said to have a secret/sacred element to them. This means that there are designs or stories in these paintings that should only been seen by the initiated men of these communities. Using western materials raised issues concerning secret/sacred elements that hadn't been encountered by the artists in their traditional life. Traditionally these designs would have been done on the body or in the sand and wiped away after the ceremony, or in caves that were in secret locations.

The artists soon limited their work to those stories that were 'safe' for the public to see.

Today, the movement continues to grow and evolve. Some of the artists now live west of Papunya in communities at Kintore and Kiwirrkurra, which are closer to their Dreamings. The Papunya Tula Artists organisation continues to operate and has a gallery in Alice Springs. The Papunya community also owns a gallery called Warumpi Arts in Alice Springs. All the profits of these organisations go back to the artists and their communities.

- Draw some traditional designs in the sand. For example, a snake track, dog paw track, emu track, kangaroo track.
- Do you think that everyone at Papunya was happy about the Honey Ant mural? Compare the reactions of the Indigenous community to the response of the white authorities.
- Why did the Aboriginal men show Geoff Bardon the design for the mural?
- The artists at Papunya did not always use western materials for their art. Describe how their traditional techniques are different to the new techniques that Geoff Bardon introduced to them.
- By using western materials the artists' work became 'permanent and portable'. Explore what this would mean for the saleability of the art.
- Research the Papunya Tula art movement. What were the key events that brought it to the world stage?
- Describe some of the theories about Papunya Tula or Western Desert art.
- Write an essay that explores the link between Western Desert art and the artists' land/country.
- Describe the problems raised by using western materials with regards to the secret/sacred content of the artworks? How did the artists solve this problem?



"Painting man" Johnny Warrangkula Tjupurrula in the early 1970s. Tim Payungka Tjapangati's "Goanna and Dingo Dreaming" is in the background PHOTO BY ALLAN SCOTT, COURTESY THE BARDON FAMILY.

- Explain the different theories that surround the 'dotting' element of Western Desert art?
- Aboriginal art has been described as a 'primitive' form of art. Do you agree with this? What alternative interpretations could you offer? How would you justify these?
- Geoff Bardon did sketches of the paintings with explanations of the symbols and stories. Why was this important?
- Compare and contrast Western Desert art from the 1970s and contemporary Western Desert art, using examples. Explore the different techniques and styles used in each of the paintings.
- What other forms of Australian Aboriginal art were known in the early 1970s? How are the paintings of the Papunya Tula artists similar to/different from these forms of art?

The Painting Men of Papunya

These men were the group of artists that worked with Geoff Bardon at Papunya.

Old Walter Tjampitjinpa
 Johnny Warrangkula Tjupurrula
 Long Jack Phillipus Tjakamarra
 Old Tutuma Tjapangati
 Old Mick Tjakamarra
 Bill Stockman Tjapaltjarri
 Johnny Lynch Tjapangati
 David Corby Tjapaltjarri
 Charlie Tarawa (Tjaruru) Tjungurrayi
 Yala Yala Gibbs Tjungurrayi
 Mick Namarari Tjapaltjarri
 Charlie Egalie Tjapaltjarri
 John Tjakamarra

Uta Uta Tjangala
 Shorty Lungkata Tjungurrayi
 Anatjari No III Tjakamarra
 Tim Payungka Tjapangati
 Kaapa Tjampitjinpa
 Dinny Nolan Tjampitjinpa
 Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri
 Tim Leura Tjapaltjarri

- Individually or in small groups, select one of the artists above. Conduct research and give a presentation about him to the class. You might look at the tribal group he comes from, list the Dreamings that he paints and show some examples of his work.
- In what ways do Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri's works represent or interpret his world?
- Examine the artwork opposite ("Children's Water Dreaming with Possum Story"). Research what this artwork is about and the conditions under which it was made. Who are the different audiences for this artwork and what are the levels of access they have to its meaning?
- Research contemporary Western Desert artist Michael Nelson Tjakamarra and his work, and write a one-page biography.
- Explain how 'the cultural frame' provides a way to understand Michael Nelson Tjakamarra's work, his role as an artist in his community, and the effect of his audience on his work.
- In the film Geoff Bardon describes how the artworks were being sold for less than \$50. Today Western Desert art sells for hundreds of thousands of dollars. Explain how the dollar value of artworks can reflect society's attitude towards the cultural value of art.
- In the film Hetti Perkins says Geoff 'realised that there was an aerial perspective which has been a hallmark of Papunya Tula painting over the years'. Compare the perspective used in Papunya Tula paintings to the perspective used in western art.
- Write a short essay that describes how the artists at Papunya have influenced contemporary Australia.
- The original group of Papunya artists were all men. Contemporary Aboriginal artists are both men and women. Why do you think only the men at Papunya worked with Geoff Bardon? Research some female Western Desert artists. Are there any differences between the stories that the men and women paint? What are they and why?



"Children's Water Dreaming with Possum Story" by Old Mick Tjakamarra, 1973.

Media Studies

- Who is the main storyteller in *Mr Patterns*?
- How do the filmmakers give you an insight into Geoff Bardon's point of view?
- How do the filmmakers establish Geoff Bardon as a filmmaker? Do you think this is an effective technique?
- *Mr Patterns* explores Geoff Bardon's friendships with some of the Aboriginal artists. Explain why the filmmakers did this.
- Nearly all of the interview subjects in *Mr Patterns* are first-hand witnesses. Why do you think the filmmakers decided to interview these people even though they did not necessarily know a lot about art?
- Why do you think Hetti Perkins was interviewed for this film? What does she contribute?
- What were the main reactions to what Geoff was doing in Papunya in 1971–72? How does this contribute to the dramatic climax of the film?
- At the end of the film Geoff Bardon says, 'A visitor to me said that you can see Papunya in a minute, there's nothing there, and yet it's now known—in irony—that there's the treasures of Aladdin's cave'. Write down your response to this statement.

- Why do you think the filmmakers 'thank the Painting Men of Papunya' in the end credits?
- Which parts of the film resonate with you?
- How does the music influence your emotional response to the film?
- How have Aboriginal people been represented in the media in the past? How does that compare to how they are represented today? Discuss why these changes came about and give some examples.

Note: Geoff Bardon was a filmmaker. His three films are listed in the reference section and are held at ScreenSound Australia.

Chelmsford Hospital

After leaving Papunya in 1972 Geoff Bardon returned to Sydney and, on the advice of a doctor, went to Chelmsford Hospital, a private hospital in the outer suburbs of Sydney.

Dr Harry Bailey operated the hospital between 1963 and 1979 and during that time administered what is known as deep-sleep therapy (also called deep-sedation therapy) for a variety of illnesses. The therapy involved administering large doses of sedatives and barbiturates, which induced a coma. Patients were kept in this state for two to three weeks during which time they were given electric convulsive therapy or ECT (also known as electroshock therapy) and/or psychosurgery. This was often done without the patient's consent.

Forty-eight people died as a direct result of their treatment at Chelmsford, with many more deaths indirectly attributed to the treatment. This was ignored by authorities and the medical community, and is considered the greatest medical scandal in Australian history. Dr Bailey suicided in 1985.

- Find some news items or newspaper clippings about Chelmsford Hospital. Why have the events that occurred there been described as 'the greatest and most tragic scandal in Australian medical history' (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 30/7/1988, p 69)?



Endnotes

1 Hetti Perkins and Hannah Fink (eds), *Papunya Tula: Genesis and Genius*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, 2000

2 op cit

Works of art

© the artists licensed by Anthony Wallis Aboriginal Artists Agency Sydney.

FURTHER READING AND RESOURCES

Books

Geoffrey Bardon, *Aboriginal Art of the Western Desert*, Rigby, 1979

Geoffrey Bardon, *Papunya Tula: Art of the Western Desert*, McPhee Gribble, 1991

Geoffrey Bardon with James Bardon, *Papunya: A Place Made After the Story*, Miegunyah Press, 2004

Vivien Johnson, *Aboriginal Artists of the Western Desert: A Biographical Dictionary*, Craftsman House, 1994

Vivien Johnson, *The Art of Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri*, G+B Arts International, 1994

Vivien Johnson, *Michael Jagamarra Nelson*, G+B Arts International, 1997

Sylvia Kleinert and Margot Neale (eds), *The Oxford Companion to Aboriginal Art and Culture*, Oxford University Press, 2000

Douglas Lockwood, *The Lizard Eaters*, Cassell Australia, 1964

Fred Myers, *Pintupi Country, Pintupi Self: Sentiment, Place and Politics among Western Desert Aborigines*, Smithsonian Institution Press, 1986

Hetti Perkins and Hannah Fink (eds), *Papunya Tula: Genesis and Genius*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, 2000

Judith Ryan, *Mythscape: Aboriginal Art of the Desert from the National Gallery of Victoria*, National Gallery of Victoria, 1989

Norman B Tindale, *Aboriginal Tribes of Australia*, Australian National University Press, 1974

Videos

Geoffrey Bardon (director), *A Calendar of Dreamings: Aboriginal Artists of Central Australia*, 1977

Geoffrey Bardon (director), *Mick and the Moon*, 1978

Geoffrey Bardon (director), *The Richer Hours*, 1971

Ian Dunlop (director), *Desert People*, Film Australia, 1966

Ian Dunlop (director), *People of the Australian Western Desert*, Film Australia, 1966

Michael Riley (director), *Dreamings—The Art of Aboriginal Australia*, Film Australia, 1988

Websites

Aboriginal Art Online—www.aboriginalartonline.com

The Araluen Centre—www.araluencentre.com.au

The Art Gallery of New South Wales—www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au

Australian Museum—www.amonline.net.au

Desart—www.desart.com.au

Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory—www.magnt.nt.gov.au

The National Gallery of Victoria—www.ngv.vic.gov.au

Papunya Tula Artists—www.papunyatula.com.au

ScreenSound Australia—www.screensound.gov.au

Warumpi Arts—www.warumpi.com.au

Photo opposite: Geoff Bardon. COURTESY THE BARDON FAMILY.

Photo page 1: Geoff Bardon (right) with tribal elder Old Tom Onion at Papunya in 1971. PHOTO BY ALLAN SCOTT. COURTESY THE BARDON FAMILY.