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Garage find sees former Hasluck staffer donate unique Aboriginal artworks

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Four Aboriginal artworks collected by the former Governor General and Minister for Territories, Sir Paul Hasluck, have been donated to the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) in Canberra.

The unique paintings were discovered in the Canberra home of Miss Ellestan Dusting - the long serving press, private and personal secretary to Sir Paul - and donated to the Institute by the plenary guardians/managers of her estate.

Miss Dusting, now in her 80s, had been caring for the paintings and other Aboriginal artefacts for decades and had stored them in the garage of her Red Hill home.

The artworks include a major painting by Aboriginal artist Simon Nganbe (also known as Simon Ungbear) from Wadeye in the Northern Territory. Painted on masonite some 50 years ago, it measures 183 by 123 centimetres – or six feet by four feet.

Painting in the early 60s, the artwork was presented to Hasluck towards the end of his term as Minister for Territories. Titled *The Legend of Kumangoor* it is painted in ochre, white, grey and black.

Two other works donated to AIATSIS came from various NT communities while the third – ‘Honey Ant Dreaming’ - was painted by WA artist (Yuelamu/Coniston) Rosie Nabanardi.

In welcoming the gifts, AIATIS Chairperson, Professor Mick Dodson AM, noted the significance of the donation of such rare and valuable Aboriginal artworks.

“Had they not been donated they may have been lost to Australia,” he said

“Given that AIATSIS holds the world’s largest collection of materials relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, it is appropriate that we are now keeping these paintings safe for posterity as well as in a custodial role for the original artists and their community,” Professor Dodson said.

The plenary guardians of Miss Dusting's estate contacted AIATSIS after discovering the paintings and several other Aboriginal Artefacts in the garage.

Collections Manager of AIATSIS' Audiovisual Archives, David Jeffery said when located the largest of the paintings was covered by layer upon layer of dust.

“However, luckily, apart from that it is in relatively good condition but will need to be cleaned by a professional conservator.”

“The painting is of considerable interest to many Wadeye residents both because it represents one of their central traditional stories and because of the official visit by Paul Hasluck to their community.

A photograph of the painting is featured in the Kunamkek –Yile Ngala Museum at Wadeye.

“However, traditional owners agree that it is appropriate that the Institute conserve and continue to hold the painting,” Mr Jeffery said.

Mr Jeffery noted that other Aboriginal artefacts also held by Miss Dusting have been passed onto the National Museum of Australia and the National Library.

Miss Dusting served six Australian Cabinet Ministers in both Labor and Coalition Governments.

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***Please note:** Hi Res Photos and raw video footage of the artworks are available on request.*