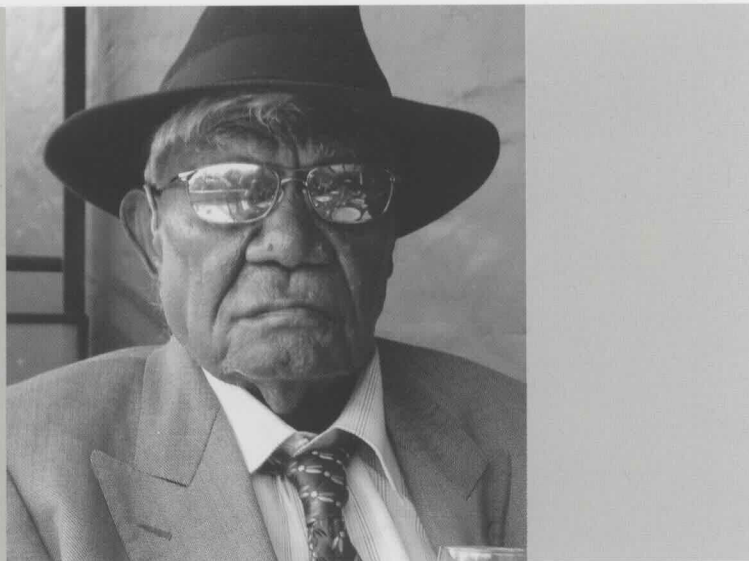


# PADDY BEDFORD

## 1922–2007

**Paddy Bedford.** Courtesy the artist's estate and Jirrawun Arts, Kununurra. Photograph Giancarlo Mazzella.

Georges Petitjean



The announcement of his passing came like lightning from the clear Kimberley sky. The 'old man', as people had come to speak of Paddy Bedford, had lived a rich long life, overcome numerous hurdles and, in recent years, severe surgical procedures. This was back in July, when a major retrospective of Bedford's oeuvre was about to open at the Bendigo Art Gallery, Victoria, having previously toured the Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA), Sydney, and the Art Gallery of Western Australia in Perth. In Wyndham, far north of the East Kimberley, the new Jirrawun studio was in its final stages of construction. This luminous art space would ensure and reassert the commitment of the Jirrawun artists – Bedford was chief among them – to produce and market their art to an international audience. Yet very few Indigenous Australian artists ever had the opportunity to live the success of their art as fully as Bedford did.

Also known as Guwumji–Nyunkuny in his Gija language, Bedford was born around 1922 at old Bedford Downs Station south-west of Warmun (Turkey Creek) in the East Kimberley. A couple of years before his birth, this station formed the setting for a cruel episode in Gija history. A number of Bedford's relatives were poisoned by strychnine in retaliation for the killing of a dairy cow. With these horrific events as a backdrop, the station manager at the time gave Nyunkuny his white-fellow name 'Paddy'. This massacre story features in Bedford's paintings. The depiction of such terrible events also intersects with the *Ngarranggarni*, the Gija Dreamtime in which the land, animals and plants came into being, and in which the Law was laid down.

In his younger years Bedford worked as a stockman on the Greenvale and Bow River stations, and later on Bedford Downs. Aboriginal labour at the time was paid for with tea, flour, tobacco and blankets. To escape the violence of another station manager, Bedford and his family moved to nearby Warmun.

A senior lawman, Bedford was involved in ceremonial painting for much of his life. At the time of the founding of Jirrawun Aboriginal Art Corporation in 1998 (later Jirrawun Arts), artistic director Tony Oliver was so impressed by several paintings Bedford had made on scraps of plywood and other salvaged materials that he encouraged the elderly lawman to produce work on canvas for exhibition.

With several solo exhibitions across Australia, Bedford's work quickly received critical acclaim. His paintings in the 'Blood on the Spinifex' exhibition, held at the Ian Potter Museum of Art, the University of Melbourne, in 2002–2003, presented massacre sites to an outside audience. The 'True Stories' exhibition of East Kimberley art, held at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, in 2003, prompted the acquisition by that gallery of

the 'Jirrawun Suite' of twenty-three gouaches. In the ensuing symposium, Bedford welcomed a large audience and elucidated some of the sources of his art. He spoke of the 'true stories' that he received from his father and how these narratives would continue to live on in his country after his death. Bedford was one of eight Australian Aboriginal artists commissioned to create work for the Musée du quai Branly in Paris, which opened to the public in June 2006. His impressive body of work eventually culminated in the enchanting retrospective that was launched in December 2006 at the MCA. The artist, present at the time of opening, had the opportunity to see most of his work assembled. Undoubtedly, this gave him a great sense of satisfaction. He all but ceased painting after this.

For many people who had the pleasure of meeting this extraordinary man, 'compassionate' was a description that quickly came to mind. Compassion towards other human beings, a strong sense of forgiveness, and generosity in love were the hallmarks of Bedford's radiant personality. His husky voice, high-pitched laughter and gentle touch will live on in the memories of those who knew him. His strength, boldness and compassionate depth will endure with the painted power of his images. These pictures are typified by monumental yet sensitively constructed compositions of predominantly physical forms. Here one recognises the brazen roughness of the ex-stockman. In the subtle balance between form and space, however, one discovers a very poetic and learned approach to the features of country.

As a founding member of the Jirrawun Aboriginal Art Corporation, Bedford was jointly responsible for the creation of an avenue by which Gija artists could produce and sell their work, thus creating the basis for economic independence. His legacy therefore transcends his own paintings, and one hopes this will resonate throughout the Aboriginal art world.

Bedford will be remembered as one of Australia's greatest artists.