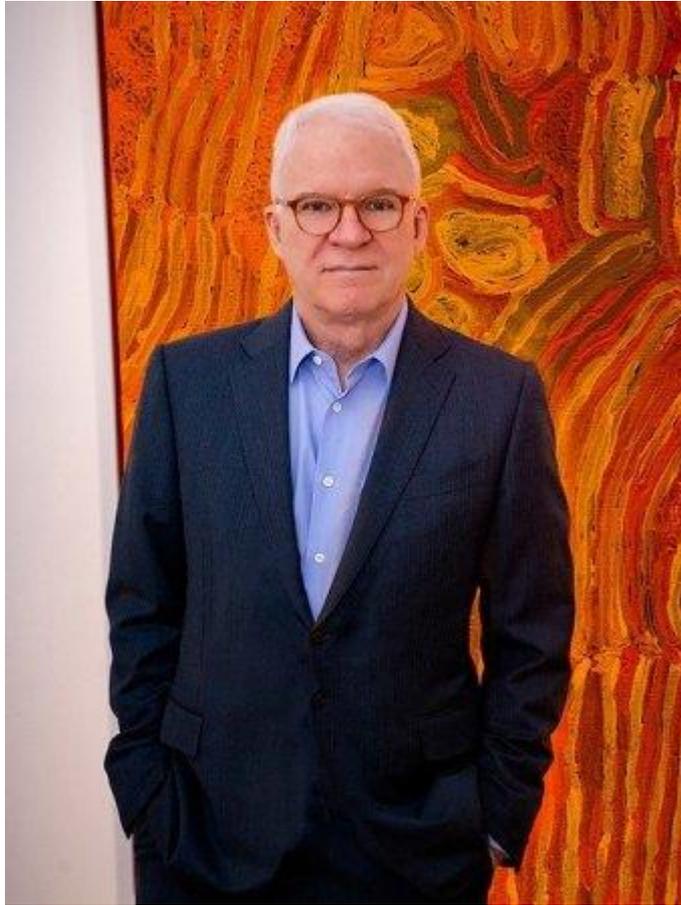


Reference: Warlimpirrnga Tjapaltjarri & Emily Kngwarreye

Steve Martin loans Indigenous Australian art collection to Gagosian Gallery for NYC exhibition

By national arts, entertainment and culture reporter [Michaela Boland](#)

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[Photo: Hollywood actor Martin is a dedicated art collector. \(Supplied: Sandee Oliver\)](#)

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Ten acclaimed Indigenous Australian desert painters are about to be exhibited in a major gallery in New York City and all but one of the artworks come from the personal collection of Hollywood actor Steve Martin.

Key points:

- Ten Australian Indigenous artists will have work exhibited at the renowned Gagosian Gallery in New York City
- Actor Steve Martin has a large collection of Indigenous desert paintings and has loaned his pieces to the gallery
- He told the ABC he was "completely taken" by the story of the artist Warlimpirrnga Tjapaltjarri

- The exhibition could be a game changer for the Indigenous art industry

The world's most influential art dealer, Larry Gagosian, will show the paintings in his Madison Avenue gallery and it could be a game-changer for the fragile Indigenous art sector.

Martin is a dedicated art collector. He's curated exhibitions and has been collecting art by trailblazers like Andy Warhol, Edward Hopper and David Hockney for more than four decades.

Four years ago, he read a New York Times article about an exhibition of Western Desert painter Warlimpirrnga Tjapaltjarri's artworks on display in New York and by the end of that day he'd acquired one for his home.

"I'd truly never seen anything like it before. I still have it hanging in the house," Martin said in an exclusive interview with the ABC.

"I didn't realise it was part of a movement, a group, and then later I started seeing Indigenous pictures.

"People would tweet them and I got really interested in it and I just started searching and thought I really should wise up about this."

Martin's exploration of Indigenous art led him to acquire pictures by other Western Desert painters.

He experimented with a small exhibition of them for his friends earlier this year and from that private show came this exhibition at Gagosian, which will open next month.

In addition to his first picture by Warlimpirrnga Tjapaltjarri, will be works by the late internationally celebrated pioneer Emily Kngwarreye and Yukultji Napangati, who won the Art Gallery of NSW Wynne Prize for landscapes last year and also had an exhibition in New York earlier this year.

Veteran Aboriginal art dealer Christopher Hodges has described the upcoming exhibition as "a moment in the spotlight, at the very serious money end of that spotlight".

Gagosian Gallery is at the apex of the commercial art world, with 17 galleries around the globe, from London to Beverley Hills, Hong Kong to Paris.

On par with the world's top collection institutions, Gagosian Gallery publishes its own magazine, has millions of social media followers and can have a greater impact than any other commercial gallery.

Gagosian curator Louise Neri is Australian-born and particularly invested in this exhibition.

"When we take on an exhibition, it always has an impact way beyond the gallery wall," she said.

The gallery represents many of the world's most commercial artists, among them Damien Hirst, Jeff Koons and Marc Newson.

Founded 40 years ago, Gagosian is renowned for its star-studded openings where artists mingle with blue chip collectors and celebrity clients.

'I was completely taken with the story of the Pintupi Nine'

Martin is one of those notable clients, but he is also recognised as a very serious collector.

"In our home where I have just a few paintings ... these pictures hang beautifully next to [them] ... we have an Edward Hopper painting, a Morandi painting, David Hockney," he said.

"I never talk about our art collection because it's our private sanctuary, but I am so enthused about the Indigenous art.

"There is no doubt these [desert paintings] hang well with others and that one day they will be in the company of great contemporary art at auction and not culled out as a special field.



[Photo: Warlimpirrnga Tjapaltjarri \(pictured in 2014\) led his family group into a community to encounter white Australia for the first time in 1984. \(Supplied: Safia Desai\)](#)

"They will just hang on their own power.

"I have been fascinated by every period of art from the nineteenth century on, although I am fascinated by much earlier works although you can't really collect those.

"The contemporary art world has become quite difficult to manoeuvre for people who aren't billionaires and [Indigenous Australian art] gave me a chance to come to my own conclusions.

"It's still a very interesting intellectual process and I was completely taken with the story of the Pintupi Nine."

[Warlimpirrnga Tjapaltjarri is among a family group referred to as the Pintupi Nine](#), which lived in the Gibson Desert until 1984 with no contact with modern Australia.

"What an amazing tale, I cannot wait to tell it to people," Martin said.

"It reminded me of stories in art that fascinated us, like van Gogh and I find this story equally fascinating and amazing."

Indigenous art 'really does hold its own'

Desert Painters of Australia will be one of Gagosian's regular non-selling exhibitions held as a way of influencing tastes, expanding art collecting and testing the market.

Mr. Hodges said "Gagosian must be going to test the water" in regard to holding a selling exhibition of Aboriginal artwork.



[Infographic: Artist Warlimpirnga Tjapaltjarri's Untitled, 2013, will be on display in New York City's Gagosian Gallery. \(Gagosian: Rob McKeever\)](#)

Mr. Hodges' gallery Utopia Art Sydney represents Mr. Tjapaltjarri and dozens of other desert painters.

"This could be the best chance we have at [reaching collectors] at the serious end of the collecting spectrum," he said.

The ABC was unable to reach any of the artists due to their remoteness, but Paul Sweeney is manager of Papunya Tula Gallery, the Aboriginal artists collective headquartered in Alice Springs which represents several of the painters.

Mr. Sweeney said they were not aware of this show specifically because it had only been organised in the last couple of months.

"Certainly, in terms of international exposure, on that level it is unrivalled really," he said.

"This would have to be the pinnacle."

Art dealer David Hulme said legendary former Sotheby's New York auctioneer Tobias Meyer told him in 2010 Australia's Indigenous art industry needed the backing of a big international dealer to cement its status internationally.

"You need a game changer. Let's think big here and let's say a big player like Larry Gagosian was to represent Aboriginal artists, that would of course change everything," Mr. Tobias said.



[Infographic: Female Indigenous artist Yukultji Napangati's Ancestral Women at Marrapinti, 2017, will be on display in New York City. \(Gagosian: Rob McKeever\)](#)

Martin's Indigenous art advisor D'Lan Davidson agrees.

"When you take Indigenous art outside Australia, it really does hold its own against the greatest contemporary art in the world," Mr. Davidson said.

Indigenous art has had international exposure for three decades, several US museums have deep holdings of it, as does the Quai Branley Museum in Paris and commercial galleries can be found all over the world.

The Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection at the University of Virginia will loan an early Emily Kngwarreye painting to the Gagosian show.

In Australia, the Indigenous art market soared until 2007, but then crashed dramatically, wiping off the value of many artworks, except those in seriously blue-chip collections.

The contraction came about due to over-supply, the global financial crisis, the industry's failure to manage quality control, tightening of the rules around superannuation art collecting and the

introduction of the resale royalty scheme which sees 5 per cent of the gross sale price returned to artists or their estates.

Australian auction houses cancelled regular Aboriginal art sales, many Indigenous galleries closed, Indigenous community art centres reported demand dropped off a cliff, but figures for this contraction are difficult to come by.

"I have observed a strengthening of the Indigenous art market in the last couple of years ... and demand is growing internationally," said Copyright Agency Limited visual arts manager Judy Grady, who tracks sales in her role overseeing resale royalty distribution.



[Infographic: Artist Ronnie Tjampitjinpa's Tarkulnga, 1988, will go on display in New York. \(Gagosian: Rob McKeever\)](#)

Last year, [Emily Kngwarreye's descendants criticised British artist Damien Hirst for releasing a series of multi-million-dollar dot paintings](#) which they said borrowed too heavily from Kngwarreye's work.

Hirst's exhibition was staged at Gagosian Gallery Los Angeles.

"I read those articles feeling defensive about the Utopia painters because Damien Hirst is a very well-known artist, but I respect him and I respect his respectfulness," Ms. Neri said.

"There are these extraordinary coincidences sometimes which artists are really never aware of."

And a final word to Steve Martin.

"These abstract paintings are not so abstract, they're actually narrative and they tell tales.

"That separates them from normal abstract painting, which is visual and intellectual. These are visual, intellectual, but also emotional."