

Colour From The Desert

ANOTHER FAMOUS AUSTRALIAN ALBERT NAMATJIRA!

EVER since early Colonial days, the Australian "blackman" has maintained his reputation as a capable sportsman. But while our aborigines have won championships in many fields of sport, few have entered the lists of Western culture.

In the last issue of *Dawn* we told how Harold Blair, an Australian aborigine, had brought fame and credit to himself, his race, and his country as a great singer.

Now we bring you the story of Albert Namatjira, an aborigine from Central Australia, who has attracted similar fame by his unusual ability as an artist.

Albert Namatjira is regarded as a marvel of the modern art world. He is 52 years of age, a tribesman from the lonely redlands of his country's hinterland.

A little more than two years after his first lessons in watercolours, this humble aborigine became famous throughout the Australian art world, and to-day his fame has spread far abroad.

Almost all his paintings are sold the first day they are exhibited, and this has been going on since 1938, when the public first marvelled at his genius.

The credit for discovering Namatjira must go to Rex Battersbee, a Victorian water colourist.

In 1934, Battersbee and another artist, John Gardner, visited the remote McDonnell Ranges near the Hermannsburg Mission in Central Australia. There they painted for a month or more, and then as a concession to the Mission folk and the Arunta natives there who had helped them, they staged an exhibition of their works.

This display lasted for two days and during that time more than three hundred aborigines viewed the paintings. One of these was Albert Namatjira.

Part of every native's tribal education is to learn to paint symbols of legends and native gods and to decorate weapons and their bodies with traditional designs.

Namatjira, whose tribe, the Arunta, is probably the most highly developed of all inland native groups, was no exception to the rule.



But while attending the Mission, he went further than the limits of native art and attempted to capture scenes and objects after the style of the white man. He knew nothing of water colours, however, and worked mostly with pencil or charcoal, or the crude ochres and dyes available to the natives.

The exhibition he had seen made a very deep impression on him and increased his desire to illustrate, more accurately than before, the beauty and colour of his homeland.

This desire became so strong that he eventually asked the Mission superintendent to secure some artists' materials for him so that he "could paint like the white man."

When he got these materials, Namatjira found he needed expert guidance to handle them successfully.

Then in the winter of 1936, Battersbee went back inland to do more paintings.

The news soon reached Namatjira and he came out of the bush to ask the white artist for some of his knowledge.

Battersbee was very willing and allowed him to sit at his side while he worked. He went to great pains to explain the secrets of perspective, washes, tones and composition to this very eager pupil.

Albert learned quickly and when Battersbee returned to the land of the Arunta a year later, he was amazed at the workmanship and feeling in the water colours that Namatjira proudly displayed.

After another year, Battersbee collected the best of his pupil's works and exhibited them in Melbourne, and this display caused a mild sensation.

Every critic praised the richness of colour and composition of every picture.

Every picture was sold—Albert Namatjira was at last definitely on the road to success.

To-day, anyone who admires Australian art would be very proud to own a Namatjira picture.

Despite the fame and fortune that came to him, the artist was happy to stay with his people and to continue living the simple life that is the heritage of the natives of Central and Northern Australia.

His success inspired other aborigines in his tribe to take up "the white man's painting," and already some of them are following close in his footsteps.