Collective Memory

Like other Australian Aboriginal artists, Emily Kame Kngwarreye (pronounced koom-WAH-ree) rooted her paintings in ancient stories, or Dreamings. For millennia, Aboriginal people have communicated these tales through body painting, dance, and other ephemeral art forms.
Yam Story ‘96, 1996

Take a closer look

Emily Kame Kngwarreye (ca. 1910–1996) was among the first generation of Aboriginal artists to portray Dreamings in more permanent materials. She earned international acclaim for her bold compositions, handling of paint, and use of color. Here, intertwined lines set against a dark background suggest the aggressive, subterranean root system of the desert yam.

Something to talk about

In addition to providing practical information about the landscape, Dreaming stories offer lessons in moral behavior. Many cultures use historical, religious, and imagined stories similarly. What stories do you know that present such lessons?

Who knew?

Dreamings are passed down within families. The custodians who inherit a story are the only ones who can represent it. Viewers outside the clan may recognize the narrative, but will never know its full meaning. Kngwarreye was custodian of the Yam Dreaming.

Emily Kame Kngwarreye, Yam Story ‘96, 1996; Acrylic on canvas; 47¼ x 36 inches; National Museum of Women in the Arts, Gift of the Collection of Margaret Levi and Robert Kaplan; © 2012 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / VISCOPY, Australia