

Albert Namatjira

Reader Warning:

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander users are respectfully advised the following resource contains images of and information about people who have died.

Albert Namatjira (1902 - 1959)

Albert Namatjira was one of Australia's best known Aboriginal artists. He was known for his watercolour paintings of Australian landscapes, which he made in a Western style rather than using traditional techniques. Namatjira's paintings are featured in most of the country's most important art galleries.



Born Elea Namatjira on 28th July 1902, in the Arrernte (Aranda) community of the Macdonnell Ranges in Central Australia, Elea was renamed 'Albert' after his parents moved to a Hermannsburg Aboriginal mission and adopted the Christian faith. Mission life was very different to life in the desert community.

On Namatjira's 13th birthday, he began his initiation, an important Aboriginal tradition and rite of passage. Namatjira returned to the bush, where he was taught about traditional laws and customs by elders of the Arrernte people. During this time, his love and deep respect for the bush and desert landscape grew. He would later paint these landscapes and the Dreamtime places of the Arrernte people. At 18, Namatjira married his wife, Rubina, who was from a different tribal group; this was against the laws of his people. For this, in 1928, Namatjira was banished for several years and he worked as a camel driver across Central Australia.

A Talent Arises

In 1934, Namatjira met two artists from Melbourne who were visiting the mission. They exposed him to Western-style painting. A couple of years later, Namatjira volunteered to show one of these painters, Rex Battarbee, some good locations to paint. In exchange, Battarbee taught him how to paint. This is when Namatjira's gift for painting was discovered. He held his first art exhibition in 1938, where his paintings sold out. Following the success of the exhibition, Namatjira held others in Adelaide and Sydney, right through to the 1950s.

Success and Changing History

Despite his huge success, Namatjira returned home often to get away from

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the busy towns. With the money Namatjira had earned from his success, he wanted to lease a cattle station. However, as he was an Aboriginal he had no rights to lease land. He then tried to build a house in Alice Springs but he was prevented by laws forbidding him from owning land. As Namatjira had become such a well-known, respected and skilled artist, he was a household name. Many people owned prints of his paintings. When word got out about Namatjira's problem, there was public outrage. In 1957, Namatjira and his wife were the first Indigenous people to be granted Australian Citizenship. This allowed Namatjira to vote, enter a hotel, buy alcohol and build a house - it was a significant event, as Aboriginals had very few rights. It took the government another ten years to grant the rest of the Aboriginal population the same rights.

Did you know?

- It is estimated that Namatjira painted around 2000 paintings.
- He is now widely regarded as one of the greatest Australian painters and advocates of Indigenous rights.
- Namatjira influenced the wider white Australian community to think about the injustices experienced by the Indigenous population.
- Namatjira was also the inspiration for the Hermannsburg School of Painting, which encouraged other Indigenous people to paint.

A Sad Ending

With his new rights, Namatjira was able to buy alcohol. However, he was expected by his people to share this among his community. In doing so, Namatjira was breaking white man's laws. In 1958, police arrested him, charging him with supplying alcohol to Aboriginal people. He denied the charges, taking the case to the Supreme Court and High Court. However, his appeals were unsuccessful and he was sentenced to jail for six months but released after two for medical and humanitarian reasons. The effects of being locked up took their toll and Namatjira became very unhappy. He suffered a heart attack at home with Rubina and was taken to Alice Springs Hospital. During his time in hospital, his old friend, Batterbee, came to visit. Namatjira surprised him with three landscape paintings he had produced, with a promise of more to come. Sadly, on 8th August 1959 this promise would never be realised as Namatjira died from heart disease complicated by pneumonia. He was just 57 years old.

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Albert Namatjira Questions

1. What was the name given to Albert Namatjira when he was born?

2. What was the name of Namatjira's people?

3. What important tradition took place after Namatjira 's 13th birthday?

4. How many paintings was Namatjira estimated to have completed?

5. What happened when Namatjira tried to lease a cattle station?

6. What happened when Namatjira tried to build a house for his family?

7. What significant event happened in 1957?

8. What year was the rest of the Aboriginal community granted the same rights?

9. What kind of rights came with gaining an Australian citizenship?

10. Describe how you would feel if you didn't have the same rights as the next person to buy things you needed, to build a house or to own land?

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5. Use a dictionary to find the meaning of the word 'accomplished'.

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9. Use a dictionary to find the meaning of the word 'despondent'. Why do you think Namatjira became despondent? Give reasons to explain your answer.

10. Do you think it was right that Namatjira was sentenced to jail? Give reasons to explain your answer.

Albert Namatjira Answers

1. What was the name given to Albert Namatjira when he was born?
When he was born he was named Elea Namatjira.
2. What was the name of Namatjira's people?
His people were called the Arrernte (Aranda) people.
3. What important tradition took place after Namatjira 's 13th birthday?
His initiation took place after his 13th birthday.
4. How many paintings was Namatjira estimated to have completed?
It is estimated that he completed around 2000 paintings.
5. What happened when Namatjira tried to lease a cattle station?
Namatjira's was not allowed the lease as he did not have the rights according to white Australian law.
6. What happened when Namatjira tried to build a house for his family?
Namatjira was not allowed to build a house or own land according to white Australian law.
7. What significant event happened in 1957?
Namatjira and his wife were granted Australian citizenship after public outcry at his predicament and lack of civil rights.
8. What year was the rest of the Aboriginal community granted the same rights?
The wider Australian Indigenous community was granted Australian citizenship in 1967.
9. What kind of rights came with gaining an Australian citizenship?
The right to vote, the right to own a house and land, the right to go to a hotel and to purchase alcohol.
10. Describe how you would feel if you didn't have the same rights as the next person to buy things you needed, to build a house or to own land?
Open discussion.

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4. How was Namatjira first introduced to painting?
Namatjira was introduced to painting by two artists who were visiting the mission. One of the artists, Baterbee, tutored Namatjira in exchange for him taking Baterbee to different locations to paint.
5. Use a dictionary to find the meaning of the word 'accomplished'.
Accomplished means to be highly skilled or trained in something.
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Open discussion.
10. Use a dictionary to find the meaning of the word 'despondent'. Why do you think Namatjira became despondent? Give reasons to explain your answer.
a. Despondent means to have lost hope or courage and to be in low spirits.
b. Open discussion.

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