

Saleroom

Edited by: kstrickland@afr.com.au

Fortunate confluence for Aboriginal works

Two new European museums give pride of place to Australian indigenous works, writes **Terry Ingram**.

The French-speaking world has taken a shine to contemporary Aboriginal art, providing some offshore reassurance at a time when local demand has shown signs of faltering.

A private museum dedicated to Australian Aboriginal art has opened at Moutiers near Neuchatel in Switzerland, and a public museum in France's third major city, Lyon, has bought 50 works as the basis of an Aboriginal art collection that is expected to grow.

The latter will be part of the Musee des Confluences, a futuristic new building situated in the old industrial quarter of Lyon that is due to open in 2010. It is being developed to house Lyon's natural history and ethnographical collections, which were acquired as early as 1789, augmented by newly bought aboriginal art from around the globe.

Australian Aboriginal art was given a boost in Europe two years ago with the opening of the Musee



A private Swiss museum is dedicated to Australian Aboriginal art.

Photo: REUTERS

du quai Branly on the banks of the Seine in Paris, which featured works built into the fabric of the building by artists including John Mawurndjul and Paddy Bedford.

The Branly and Lyon museums are linked through 19th century industrialist Emile Guimet, who hailed from Lyon but was disappointed with how the city

treated his donations compared with Paris, where a Guimet museum was established and ultimately absorbed into the Branly project.

Established by the Burkhardt-Felder Foundation, the private Moutiers museum is housed in a two-storey converted barn on the grounds of an 18th century villa, the Chateau d'Ivernois, which Gerard

and Theresa Burkhardt-Felder bought five years ago.

The retired couple have strong links to Australia; a Swiss-born merchant banker, Mr Burkhardt-Felder worked here for 25 years. He was a moving force in the development of Mount Edon Gold Mines and chairman of the company before Trevor Kennedy bought into it (Kennedy went on to sell the company to a Canadian outfit for \$197 million in 1997).

West Australian gold tailings helped finance not only the aboriginal art museum but also a classic car museum located next to it. Burkhardt-Felder says 14 of the 23 cars in his car museum, including a buggy with tall wheels used by a country doctor to visit distant patients, were bought in Australia.

The Moutiers museum opened with an exhibition of 53 works, ranging from boomerangs and Tiwi sculptures to a large collaborative work by Wangkatungka artists.

The art will not be lonely in Moutiers; a number of Aboriginal artefacts given by locals who made good in the Australian wine industry are held by museums in nearby Neuchatel.

The Lyon museum bought its Aboriginal art through some of the

same agencies as Branly but also on a field trip led by French art dealer Stephane Jacob in conjunction with some of the museum's curators.

It has a wider brief than the Paris museum and its director has a special affection for the art of aboriginal people everywhere. He is Michel Cote, formerly director of Canada's Museum of Civilisation in Quebec.

Taking its name from the junction of the rivers Rhone and Saone — it is being built on an island in the middle of these two rivers — the Musee des Confluences aims to bring together cultures from around the world, with work to be hung on thematic rather than national lines.

The museum opening has been delayed thanks to greater government stringency on adventurous architecture following the collapse of the new Paris airport terminal 2E in 2004.

A book on the Lyon museum's Australian art holdings has, however, been published. It illustrates most of the artworks and contains essays by scholars associated with the project. These include Barbara Glowczewski, a researcher at the College de France, and Wally Caruana, an Australian curator formerly with the National Gallery of Australia but now working with Sydney art dealer Michael Reid.