



Artist's stories will live on forever in Paris museum

By James Button Herald correspondent in London
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A crowd of smartly-dressed French journalists is chatting outside the Australian embassy in Paris. The man they have come to see, John Mawurndjul, stands shyly to one side in white T-shirt and black jeans, sunglasses pushed back into his wild hair, dust on his boots.

The dust hasn't come from his home in Arnhem Land but from a building site two blocks away, where Mawurndjul, one of Australia's leading bark painters, is producing two works for what will be the largest and most remarkable permanent collection of Aboriginal art on display outside Australia.

Next June, on the other side of the Eiffel Tower from the embassy, France will open its long-awaited museum of world indigenous art. Some specialists believe the Musée du Quai Branly, named after its address by the Seine and a pet project of President Jacques Chirac, will change the way the world looks

at Aboriginal art.

The museum will feature more than 300,000 art works and artefacts from Asia, Africa, Oceania and the Americas.

But what makes Australia's contribution unique is that, at the request of architect Jean Nouvel, eight Aboriginal art works made specially for the museum will be embedded in its walls, ceilings and glass frontages.

It is a mix of ancient and modern forms that will show, according to the museum's managing director Stéphane Martin, that Aboriginal art is alive, both "ageless and contemporary".

Spearheads and Cicatrices, a work by the Kimberley artist Lena Nyadbi, will be engraved into the four-storey concrete facade. Inside the museum, an expected 5 million visitors a year will pass photos by the late Michael Riley etched onto a glass wall.

A painting by 70-year-old Pitjantjatjara man Tommy Watson will be set into a stainless steel ceiling, with his vivid dots camouflaging the smoke detector alarms.

The works will even be lit at night so they are visible from the street outside - a 24-hour exhibition of Australian indigenous art. Artist Judy Watson has said it is as if the artists are "swallowing" the building.

"What is very important is that the Aboriginal painters will probably be the only living contemporary artists displayed in the museum," says art historian and leading Parisian Aboriginal art dealer Stéphane Jacob.

"That is because, of all indigenous cultures, only Aboriginal art - and perhaps the Inuit of Canada - has such a mix of tradition and modernity."

At Mr Chirac's request curators Hetti Perkins of the Art Gallery of NSW and Brenda Croft of the National Gallery in Canberra began commissioning the works in 2003.

Mawurndjul, 53, is in Paris this week to paint a wooden column for the museum bookshop and to prepare for his first big retrospective next week in Basle, Switzerland.

In a brief speech in his Kuningku language at the embassy, he said his paintings were about the power of ceremony and the power of water. On the ceiling of the bookshop, he will paint a billabong.

After speaking he returned to the museum and his column. Working silently

and with a rock-steady hand, Mawurndjul painted each line a millimetre from the last. The five-metre column has taken him 60 hours; there are at least as many still to go.

Jacob thinks Aboriginal art is in a vibrant phase. "Arnhem Land communities are still very remote. They still have ceremonies, do walkabout, have initiations, speak language. I think it's a strong culture."

One that is likely to become better known with the new museum. As one of the artists, Gulumbu Yunupingu, said at a launch of the project in Sydney: "These are my stories in Paris forever, when I am gone. From the Yolgnu people of this planet for all the people, no matter what colour or tongue they are speaking."