

THE AUSTRALIAN

ARTISTIC LICENCE

An inquiry will probe the tainted indigenous art trade

WHEN *The Australian* revealed the secret scandal of the corrupt state of the indigenous art trade in March this year, the Howard Government paid attention. As Nicolas Rothwell and Ashleigh Wilson wrote in these pages, the dark side of the indigenous desert art market is a national disgrace, awash with fakes, scams, carpet-baggers, con men and artists' fees paid in everything from beer to Viagra. The one productive economic activity and viable source of income for indigenous people across remote Australia, the national trade, worth about \$300 million a year, is under threat from the weight of moral decay. The rot *The Australian* unveiled included threats of violence to protect forging scams and the use of duress to force indigenous artists to mass-produce art and make quick profits for crooks. The reports by Rothwell and Wilson prompted federal Arts Minister Rod Kemp in April to announce an investigation to stamp out dodgy operators and end their exploitation of indigenous artists. Now, after visiting desert communities to take in the

situation first hand, Senator Kemp is on the verge of announcing a sweeping parliamentary inquiry into the indigenous art industry. As Wilson writes today, the inquiry's terms of reference, drawn up with the involvement of Indigenous Affairs Minister Mal Brough, will probe the corruption within the Aboriginal art market and how best to ensure its sustainability.

How much is at risk is clear in two new exhibitions in Paris showcasing Aboriginal art at its best. One is a splendid display of desert art at the Australian embassy. The other is a permanent exhibition in the French capital's brand new Quai Branly Museum, intended as the cultural legacy of President Jacques Chirac and designed to exhibit indigenous art from around the world. Alongside Aboriginal paintings and artefacts on show in its gallery spaces, eight of Australia's prominent indigenous artists have used some of the museum's walls, ceilings and pillars as giant canvases, producing vibrant works visible to the street through huge glass windows. There is no time to lose.