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**MEDIA RELEASE**

**22 MAY 2007**

## **SHOULD INDIGENOUS SECRET SACRED MATERIAL BE SOLD?**

Members of the Reference Group for the Indigenous Australian Art Commercial Code of Conduct (the Code) today called on auction houses dealing in Aboriginal art to prove themselves ethical and responsible members of the Australian art industry.

The catalyst is the offer for sale of works in the current Lawson Menzies Aboriginal Art Auction Catalogue (23 May 2007), which includes images of several objects from Central Australia/Arnhem Land. Indigenous art experts on the Code Reference Group and David Ross, director of the Central Land Council have challenged the sale, saying that the works are restricted, secret and sacred.

The Code (being produced in a partnership between the National Association for the Visual Arts, Desert and ANKAAA) endorses the right of Indigenous people to keep secret and sacred their cultural knowledge and its physical expression. The Code requires all members of the industry, including sellers and buyers, to respect this principle.

In response to the comments made by Lawson Menzies' Indigenous art specialist Adrian Newstead, Tamara Winikoff, executive director of NAVA said today "It is urgent that auction houses should be revising their practices to ensure that no further damage is done to Indigenous cultural standards".

The Lawson Menzies catalogue refers to the works as 'ceremonial story boards' & 'ceremonial bullroarer'. The entire collection (including these objects) is being exhibited for the week prior to the auction. Indigenous protocols require that both secret and sacred objects and images of them should be restricted from public view. The catalogue does not include any warning signs notifying the general reader or Aboriginal people that it contains images that may be of a restricted nature and could cause offence.

'Secret and sacred' refers to information and material that is restricted under Aboriginal customary law. This may be information and material that:

- is made available only to the initiated, used for a particular purpose and/or used at a particular time
- can only be seen and heard by particular clan members (such as men or women or people with certain knowledge), and
- is considered to be secret or sacred by the community to which it pertains.

Winikoff continued, "Many items of a secret sacred nature currently in collections, were acquired without the consent of the family members and/or the traditional owners. They and their descendants continue to suffer cultural damage through the non-repatriation of these objects. In producing the Code, NAVA is committed to

working with all in the industry to assist them to adopt and adhere to ethical practices”.

The Indigenous Australian Art Commercial Code of Conduct, currently nearing completion, outlines the following in relation to the treatment of secret sacred material:

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- where possible the relevant community from whom the cultural property was taken should be identified and notified
- consultation should occur to establish the community’s willingness to receive custodianship of secret sacred remains and cultural property
- where repatriation is requested arrangement should be made in consultation with the relevant communities
- appropriate policies for the handling of secret and sacred material once it is identified should be determined and implemented in consultation with the relevant Traditional Owners
- galleries, private dealers and collectors should not engage in the sale of sacred or secret material”.

**MEDIA ENQUIRIES:**

Tamara Winikoff, Executive Director, NAVA on 0411 162 156