

Muni (Rita) Simpson
Language: Manyjilyjarra

Muni (Rita) Simpson was born around 1941 at Junpunkinja near the Percival Lakes, more than 400 kilometres west of Wilkinkarra (Lake Mackay). Known as Wirnpa country, it is a key rainmaking and ceremonial site of this far Western Desert region.

Simpson belongs to the Martu community. While this name dates only from the early 1980s, the Martu are closely related people from the western edge of the Great Western Desert who migrated west in the mid-twentieth century, mainly to the mission at Jigalong. As with their relatives, the Pintupi to the east and Kukatja to the north-east, most Martu had left the desert by the end of the 1950s, Simpson walking out with her family to Jigalong in 1957. In the 1980s most moved back to the desert to outstations such as Punmu and Parnngurr, close to their homelands.

The Martu are the most recent group to join the Desert Painting Movement, even though they had long been aware of its success. In the 1970s there was strong opposition to the fledgling Papunya Tula movement from many communities across the desert for fear that the public display of Tjukurrpa (Dreaming) stories would violate Law. While most communities enthusiastically joined the movement in the 1980s, the Martu refused. Land title negotiations have generally been a stimulus to the production of Aboriginal art, and it was during their land title claim in 2001 that the Martu community at Parnngurr asked WA artist Galliano Fardin to conduct painting workshops. In 2003 another meeting at Parnngurr discussed the possibility of establishing an art centre. Finally, in October 2006, Martumili Artists was founded.

Simpson was among those who led the Martu back to their homelands, setting up camp at Punmu in 1982. She paints, she says, "to tell the kids where we are from, where all the older people really come from. Painting makes me feel purkurlpa (good inside)."

(Author: Ian McLean)