In 1954 a remarkable woman went to live at a remote central Australian mission called Ernabella to teach Aboriginal women living there art and craft.

Deaconess Winifred Hilliard was a young woman with no real experience of Aboriginal people and had previously only lived in cities or large towns. Deaconess Hilliard was to remain at Ernabella until she retired, 32 years later. During her time there she amassed a remarkable collection documenting many aspects of Ernabella’s history including the church and school. But probably the most significant components of the collection are the many examples of art and craft including batiks and other decorated fabrics, children’s drawings, paintings and various wooden implements and carvings.

Ernabella was first of all a camping ground in Yangtunytjatjara country, located in the picturesque Musgrave Ranges in north-western South Australia. In the 1930s a sheep station was set up on their country, based around a reliable waterhole recorded by early non-Indigenous visitors as Ernabella or variations of this name. In 1937 the Presbyterian Church took over the station’s lease to start a mission station. Today, Ernabella is Aboriginal-run on Aboriginal land and is a small self-sufficient settlement with its own council, school, store, garage and medical facilities.
Sheep continued to be run at Ernabella until the 1970s and with them came employment opportunities for men. At the same time there were only limited opportunities for women, a few domestic and teacher’s aide positions being mostly what was available.

So the mission turned to art and craft to offer women employment. At first art and craft production was intermittent, largely dependent on opportunities like Christmas for which hand-painted cards were produced. These were a success and other avenues were explored. Using their natural skill at weaving, women were employed to spin wool which was used in various woven wool products like large and spectacular woollen floor rugs, of which there is one in the Hilliard collection. Other wool products in the collection include woven tapestries, knee rugs and scarves, as well as examples of fleeces and hand-dyed wool samples.

In 1948 Ernabella Arts was established. Always trying to be economically self-sufficient, numerous art and craft forms have been tried over the years of which many were suggested by Deaconess Hilliard. Her background made her the ideal person to teach the women various arts and crafts, with her training including two years learning various art and craft techniques at the Presbyterian Ladies College, then located in East Melbourne. This gave her a wide-ranging background and as a ‘non-specialist’ she could show the women the various crafts she had learnt so that they could experience them and choose what they wanted to do. For those techniques she was not trained in herself, other practitioners were brought to Ernabella. The most famous example of this occurred in the early 1970s with the introduction of batik. Although familiar with its possibilities, Deaconess Hilliard herself was not able to demonstrate batik, which is ideally suited to be practised in remote areas because of the simple technology required. So two people were brought in to teach the technique. The first was Leo Brereton, a young American batik artist who taught the basics in 1971. In 1975, the Danish artist Vivianne Bertelson went to Ernabella and it was from her that the women largely gained their technical expertise. Bertelson was also able to put Ernabella Arts in touch with reliable sources of materials. The collection includes exactly 100 batiks, ranging from off-cuts perhaps left over from making clothing, to many produced by school children, to spectacular lengths over three metres in length. These batiks are a significant body of work, dating almost from the time batik first started at Ernabella late in 1971. The Museum regards this part of the collection so highly that it is shortly to publish a book of these fabulous artworks, to be launched in April.

Deaconess Hilliard has always had a sense of history and realised the importance of collecting those little things you rarely find in collections or recording the kinds of information that make those everyday things that little bit extra special. Things like a little ornament placed around a newborn girl’s neck or children’s drawings documented as being used as the basis for actual designs of wool rugs. The collection includes examples of the kinds of crafts that were tried at Ernabella but were not a success, for example copper beatings; things that were successful for a time but discontinued, like carvings in stone, and a sample fabric tried as an experiment to see if a mix of techniques (batik and tie-dye) could produce marketable items. All of these and other little treasures in the collection, as well as the more common...
Deaconess Hilliard's role at Ernabella went beyond that of arts and craft adviser. The staff was responsible for the schooling and religious instruction of Ernabella's Indigenous inhabitants. In the early years all books for teaching were produced by or for the Presbyterian Church, and frequently Deaconess Hilliard illustrated them with her distinctive drawings. Similarly, images on some Christmas cards produced by Ernabella to help raise funds were also drawn by Deaconess Hilliard and examples of these, too, are included in the collection.

One of Deaconess Hilliard's interests is photography and her ability as a photographer is evident for those who have had the privilege of viewing her photographs. Her competence as a photographer was recognised in 1963 when she was awarded a certificate of excellence in the Kodak International Color Picture Competition. At Ernabella she photographed artists, the spectacular scenery around the settlement, local flora, and other subjects. Prints of her photographs are an important component of the National Museum's Hilliard Collection, including striking portraits of many of the artists working out of Ernabella during her tenure there. Complementing these are numerous photographs taken in the Ernabella Arts rooms and during artists' travels to exhibitions and workshops. Today the majority of Deaconess Hilliard's original negatives and slides are held by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies.

Deaconess Hilliard's long list of achievements at Ernabella was recognised by both the local Aboriginal people and her own society. At Ernabella she was incorporated into the local social organisation and given the name 'Awulari'. In the wider world, her contributions were acknowledged when she was awarded a Member of the Order of the British Empire (MBE) in 1977 and a Medal of the Order of Australia (OAM) in 1989.

In 1991 Deaconess Hilliard offered some of her collection to the Museum. We were shown a curator's dream — a well-documented and wide-ranging collection. Not only that, we had been looking at building up the Museum's collection of 'contact history' material — Deaconess Hilliard's collection would prove to be an important addition to this important area of the Museum. In 2000, Deaconess Hilliard donated an even larger collection of material that increased the range of items represented in her collection.

Through Deaconess Hilliard, the National Museum is fortunate to hold what is probably the world's most significant collection of art and craft items made at Ernabella. This is significant because Ernabella Arts is probably the longest continuously running Indigenous arts and craft organisation in Australia, making it an important part of the history of this major Indigenous industry.

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