
Macleay Museum News

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Collected

Boomerangs, spears, spear-throwers, shields, baskets and bark paintings - these are among the rich array of Australian Aboriginal artifacts in the Museum's latest exhibition. ***Collected: 150 Years of Aboriginal Art and Artifacts*** showcases the Museum's outstanding collection of Australian ethnography.

Collected includes many pieces which are unique in both their quality and decoration. Some are the earliest examples of their type from a particular area. Especially significant are the bark paintings collected in the vicinity of Port Essington on the northern Australian coast before 1878. These are among the earliest surviving bark paintings in Australia and although they have lost some colour and detail over the years, they are beautiful in their simplicity.

*Right: Early bark painting collected before 1878
64 x 31 cm (P997)*



The exhibition is arranged geographically, enabling similarities of design to stand out. Areas of strength in the collection are King George's Sound and the Kimberley in Western Australia, Port Darwin and Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory, and the rainforest areas of north Queensland. New South Wales is represented by only a few objects.

While many of the pieces were collected on behalf of Sir William Macleay in the later nineteenth century, some items are thought to have been collected as early as the 1850s. Other pieces only came into the Macleay collection last year (see [below](#)). Some of the artifacts were transferred to the Museum from University departments, notably Anthropology and Geology, in the 1960s. These items had been collected

in the field, some of them by notable anthropologists, in the previous decades.

Collected: 150 Years of Aboriginal Art and Artifacts was opened by Her Excellency Prof. Marie Bashir AO, the Governor of New South Wales, on 29 March. 'The past 30 years have witnessed an unprecedented interest in, and respect for Aboriginal art, extending beyond anthropologists, collectors and investors to the wider community,' Prof. Bashir said. 'I believe that this has encouraged a greater will to understand and to accept the richness of Aboriginal history, through their art and artifacts, and to go beyond that to ponder the issues of the relationship of Aboriginal people to land and spirit, and also to dispossession, to the losses real and symbolic, which followed white settlement.'

Speaking of the exhibition going 'beyond visual interest and joy', Prof. Bashir noted the collection 'unquestionably has inestimable value given the significant changes in lifestyle which has eventuated from contact by indigenous people with European settlers.' She spoke of 'our indebtedness to the benefactors, collectors and also members of the public, who have contributed to this precious collection ... Above all, we are indebted to the generosity of the Aboriginal people who have been prepared to share their culture with and entrust their artifacts to non-indigenous brothers and sisters. I am sure that they are confident of the respect and sense of privilege with which the University of Sydney as custodian holds these treasures.'

The exhibition was curated by Susie Davies and Rosemary Stack and will run until the end of 2002. Further information about ***Collected*** can be found on the Museum's web site.

Director's Notes and Jottings

Staff Notes

If there is a down time in the Museum it is the period over Christmas and January. The number of visitors is low, and staff are busy with catch-up, end-of-year business. Not this year. We closed ***Adorned*** in late December, so we could begin the dismantling process to allow the packing and return of items in January. This sounds a simpler task than it is, as the condition of each item must be checked, before return to store, or in this case, carefully identified to the right owner, packed and returned. By the middle of January, most of the items were safely returned, and we turned our attention to the necessary refurbishment required before a new exhibition can be installed. Even buying the fabric for the cases is a time consuming exercise, (though we are delighted with the result, and in particular, with the relatively low cost of the calico sheeting we chose.) This year, in addition and in preparation for the proposed publication on our extremely important Aboriginal collections, over 100 artifacts were professionally photographed in the gallery by David Liddle. Geoff Barker coordinated the exercise from our end, but all staff were to some degree involved. The results are stunning, but the pressures of the exhibition itself, mean that we have gone no further in the planning for the book.

In February and March we have been consumed by exhibition preparation: Rose Stack and Susie Davies finalising well over 100 object, theme and sub-theme labels under great pressure; Stuart Norrington designing and building object supports; trades people delivering and installing plinths, etc; Lucy Bannyan our designer, on deck to assist with the installation; Geoff Barker preparing the required photographs;

Julian Holland and I checking all labels; Marianne Czolij getting invitations ready and so on. And the exhibition, *Collected: 150 years of Aboriginal Art and Artifacts*, looks terrific. We warmly invite all readers to visit it at least once, as you will not see objects like these very often or so closely.

In December last year, I was fortunate to be invited to give an address at the opening of a new university museum at Nagoya University. This meant a quick visit to Japan - Nagoya and two days leave in Tokyo. The NUM is quite small, mainly geological, but with small collections of scientific instruments and ethnography. The director, Dr Mamoru Adachi is very keen to build up the relationship between university museums in Japan and Australia, particularly the NUM and the Macleay. This will probably lead to loans of specimens, and possibly staff exchanges.

On more mundane staffing matters: I have been granted permission to take leave without pay for one day per week for the rest of this year. In my place, though not as Director, Geoff Barker will work an extra day, which suits both of us very well. Geoff has also been asked to work one day per week in the Publications Unit at the University to catalogue and scan their library of images.

The Web

Geoff Barker has continued to develop the Museum's web pages, with help from other staff, and the virtual visitor rate has continued to rise. We record about 160 visits per week, which average about four minutes a visit. Not long, but above average for many web visits. All the back issues of Macleay Museum News are now available on-line, and Julian Holland has recreated on-line the 1995 exhibition on phrenology, Reading Heads & Ruling Passions. We plan to continue to do this, as a great deal of research goes into an exhibition and if it can have a longer life on-line, this is a very good thing. The website is rated 50th in the list of the top 100 by the British Journal of Photography. The Museum's web site also hosts a page for the Australian Science History Club.

Recent Acquisitions

The Museum does not actively pursue donations, partly because we have so little storage space, and also because of a careful Collection Policy, which emphasises that acquisitions should compliment our existing largely 19th and early 20th century collections. Over the last two years we have been fortunate to be offered several relevant pieces which we have gratefully accepted.

Among the more interesting are a beautiful Fijian tapa, c. 1920 from Dr Edith Lees, of Agricultural Chemistry and Soil Science, which has an excellent provenance through her aunt. Edith also generously gave us the money to conserve and prepare it for display and it is now on display in the gallery. Alison Holster presented the Museum with some interesting pieces from the Solomons and New Guinea collected in the 1930s by Professor Edward Ford, former Professor of Preventative Medicine and Head of the School of Tropical Health, together with original photographs. These were briefly displayed to accompany a small ceremony unveiling two photographic portraits, of Professors Ford and Burkitt, in the Ford Burkitt Library. Julie Evans gave the Museum a shield from Western Australia and two boomerangs which were acquired by a family member during a train trip across the Nullarbor Plain in 1927. She exchanged them for a flannel nightgown with a decorated Aboriginal man who got on the train at one of the water stops. The shield is now on display in *Collected*.

Dr George Humphrey from Biological Sciences has given two photographs, originally given to him by Russian Antarctic explorers, of

Scott's second expedition to the South Pole in 1915. As we have quite a significant collection of Antarctic photographs, these were very welcome. Four cameras owned by Cecil Harnett, a well known Sydney photographer of c. 1910 were given by a relation, Hattie Harnett, through the good offices of Trevor Sutton in Engineering. We hold a good collection of the work of Cecil Harnett.

Weekend openings

We do try to open on a few weekends of the year, to give some limited opportunity for those who cannot come during the week to see our exhibitions. We take advantage of other functions at the University, as we cannot afford to publicise this on our own. The Museum was open during AntiqueFest on Sunday 11 March and will open again on Sunday 29 April, 11 am to 4 pm, to coincide with the CarillonFest and an Organ Recital. We will also open for Information Day in August.

Fellowship

As mentioned in the previous edition, the Museum hosted a very well received and popular lecture with our two previous Fellows, Dr Stephen Wroe (1999) and Michael Letnic (2000) in late November 2000. Steve spoke about his work on Australian giant marsupial carnivores, in particular, the 'marsupial lion', and Mike talked about his work on the plant pituri, which was widely traded as a narcotic in pre and post contact times. This work will result in several articles and a display *Shaping Australia, Aboriginal trade routes in the pre-colonial period*. This display will be installed after Easter. The Fellow for 2001 will be appointed in April.

Departmental Collections

The Macleay has some limited responsibility to advise on other university departmental collections. In the last six months, we advised on possible displays for the Anderson Stuart building, and on their fine microscope collection; packed and moved the Dental Historical Collection for the Faculty of Dentistry; and inspected and advised on the Mechanical Engineering model collection. These more dispersed segments of the University's heritage are very vulnerable to staff changes and increasing competition for space, but many of the collections are quite significant.

University Tours

At the beginning of 2000 we reported that we were now responsible for running the University's historical tours program. Marianne Czolij does most of the hard work in coordinating our splendid group of volunteers. We are now running many tours for visitors to University departments, the International Office, and many of our overseas groups are school or university students from China, Japan and Korea. Marianne and I are developing a certain expertise as tour guides ourselves for shorter tours or last minute bookings! The museum earned about \$5000 from this endeavour last year. If you know of a group which could be interested in an historical tour, which may include the three University museums, please give them our phone number.

Vanessa Mack

Going for Gold (& Civilisation)

Australia's National Museum finally opened in Canberra recently after decades of spasmodic development. Among the features is a temporary exhibition, *Gold and Civilisation*, organised by Art Exhibitions Australia. This exhibition features two items lent by the University. Although the gold rush did not begin until 1851, gold had been discovered in New South Wales several times previously. The Rev. W.B. Clarke (1798-1878) engaged in numerous geological investigations after his arrival in Sydney in 1839. He sent a small glass phial of flakes of gold to his mother in England in 1841. When Clarke, sample in hand, told the Governor of his discovery - New South Wales was still a convict colony - Gipps is said to have replied 'Put it away Mr Clarke or we shall all have our throats cut!'.



The phial of gold (on the balance pan) and the nugget (on the glove) during weighing at the National Standards Commission

Some uncertainty surrounds the nugget and it is presently undergoing scientific investigation on minute samples taken before it was lent. Before the loan, both the nugget and the phial of gold were weighed to a high degree of precision. The National Standards Commission in North Ryde generously undertook this task without charge.

The gold rush began when Edward Hargraves, recently returned from the California gold rush, announced the discovery of payable gold he had made in conjunction with John Lister and William Tom. Hargraves subsequently was rewarded with a five thousand pound prize while Clarke, the Tom brothers and Lister were awarded only 500 pounds each. Controversy flared for many years afterwards.

Hargraves informed the government through the Colonial Secretary, Edward Deas Thomson (Alexander Macleay's successor in that post). It seems that Hargraves presented Deas Thomson with some samples personally as well as those for the government. A substantial nugget of gold believed to have been given by Hargraves to Deas Thomson and to have come to the University from his daughter, Lady Macleay (the widow of Sir William Macleay) in 1892 has been lent for *Gold and Civilisation*, along with W.B. Clarke's phial of gold flakes.

Moulding the Past

The Museum receives a great range of enquiries for advice and assistance. One of the more unusual came from the Roads and Traffic Authority last year. Stuart Norrington, Vertebrate Collection Manager and man of many talents, was approached by Bill Evans, the

Heritage Survey Coordinator for the Roads and Traffic Authority. The request was to provide castings of three large names engraved on a vertical rock face located outside Linden Station adjoining the Great Western Highway in the Blue Mountains.

Considered of historic importance, the rock face was in peril of being damaged by earthmoving equipment during the course of road works to widen the highway. A tender had been issued to move the section of the rock face containing the engravings and a cast was required in case the movement resulted in the engravings being damaged.

Little is known about the origin of the engraving which reads 'H Cox', 'R Dooley' and 'J.Russell / R.I.P'. These names are apparently lost to history. The roadside cutting had apparently been made around 1900 when the highway was still a rough track. A horse head engraved between the names possibly leaves a faint clue about the accident that ended Russell's life. As for the other two names, were they friends who engraved the wall as a record of their lost friend's passing?

Stuart was joined by Felicity Quinlin, a final-year student in the University's Archaeology Department, as a keen and willing volunteer. The inscription was cast with a barrier layer of methylcellulose. This water-soluble layer would not damage the soft sandstone or kill the lichen growing on the surface. On top of this two thin coats of a flexible silicon moulding agent were applied. Allowed to dry overnight the mould was finished with a jacket of fibreglass resin and matting to support the mould in the correct shape of the rock face.

The second day started with clouds of gloom growing ever larger. The fibreglass jacket was finished just as the rain began to fall. The jacket was carefully removed. Then with rain increasing, the silicon moulds were removed. A quick wash down with de-ionised water to remove the methylcellulose completed the task (followed by a loud thunderclap and a torrent of rain just as Stuart and Felicity headed back to Sydney).



Felicity Quinlin applying the fibreglass jacket

Back at the Museum a cast was prepared from the mould. The RTA, which paid the Museum a fee for the skilled labour and materials, was pleased with the result. The original rock face is still awaiting being cut and relocated but this can be done in the knowledge that the

inscription has been replicated.

On the Brink

On 14 June 1918, the supply ship *Makambo* ran aground on Lord Howe Island. While people were salvaging the goods, the ship's rats went ashore and took up residence. This was a disaster for the native plants and animals of the island, not least the large and impressive stick insects known as 'tree lobsters' endemic to the island.

As an isolated island – 700 km north-east of Sydney – Lord Howe Island was home to unique species of plants and animals that had evolved in isolation from serious predators. There is no evidence of human visitation to the island before it was discovered by Lieutenant Henry Lidgbird Ball in command of the First Fleet ship *Supply* en route from Sydney to Norfolk Island on 17 February 1788.

Unique species of birds inhabited Lord Howe Island when it was first discovered. Like the Dodo of Mauritius, rapid extinction overtook several species. Having been free of predators the birds were unafraid of people and were easily caught or clubbed to death. Of the fifteen species of land birds indigenous to the Island, the flightless White Gallinule became extinct early in the 19th century and the more abundant Lord Howe Pigeon a few decades later. Both were killed for food. A local subspecies of parakeet became extinct from being killed as a horticultural pest. The rats from the *Makambo* did away with five more kinds of birds by the late 1930s. The Woodhen, already reported to be rare in the 1880s has fortunately been preserved and through strenuous efforts is now relatively common on the island.



Lord Howe Island's stick insects entered the scientific record when specimens were collected by officers of the surveying vessel, HMS *Herald*, under Captain Henry Mangles Denham. At the end of April 1853 the *Herald* arrived at Lord Howe Island where it remained for several months engaged in survey work. In September, the *Herald* sailed for the Isle of Pines near New Caledonia. The local Roman Catholic priest, Father Montrouzier, was an active naturalist. Specimens of the Lord Howe Island phasmid were passed to him and his description was published two years later in a provincial French journal.

The Museum has eight specimens of the phasmid, including three adult males and one juvenile. At least two of the specimens appear to have come from Captain Denham and are presumably contemporary with Montrouzier's specimens now believed lost due to damage in the Second World War.

*Female Lord Howe Island stick insect
collected about 1853*

As a result of the rats from the *Makambo*, the stick insect – no doubt a tasty morsel – rapidly became extinct on Lord Howe Island. The only possibility of its continued existence was the steep and rugged pinnacle of Ball's Pyramid (named by the immodest Lieutenant himself) some 17 kilometres south east of the Island.

Several expeditions have visited Ball's Pyramid over the last 40 years in the hope of finding specimens of the phasmid. A couple of dead specimens were found in the 1960s. In February this year curator of the Museum's invertebrate collection, Margaret Humphrey, was a member of a scientific expedition to Ball's Pyramid to make a further search.

Ball's Pyramid is not a place for sleepwalking and as the phasmids are nocturnal other signs were looked for. Likely droppings were found under a melaleuca bush and also some eggs. Then at night two members of the party found two live females and a juvenile on the bush. So the Lord Howe phasmid was not extinct, but were there any males left? In fact males may be unnecessary as the females can probably reproduce by parthenogenesis. The opportunity now exists to bring this unique and spectacular example of Australia's invertebrate fauna

back from the brink of extinction.

[Visit Macleay Museum Invertebrates](#)

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