

NATIONAL MUSEUM COLLECTORS AND COLLECTIONS

The National Museum holds a significant collection of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander material including around 21,000 ethnographic, art and 'contact history' items, and approximately 94,000 stone implements. The collection has a number of strengths — central and northern Australia are better represented than other areas, and art objects, men's weapons and tools, and ceremonial objects are the most common categories.

The biases in the National Museum's collection have come about largely through the interests of the collectors. The collections are representative of the places where their collectors made them. For primary collectors — those collecting directly from Indigenous people — objects were collected where they worked, on farms or pastoral stations or anthropologists carrying out fieldwork, for example. For secondary collectors, it was a matter of obtaining what they could find in shops, purchase through auction or obtain from other collectors.

Collectors rarely articulated why they assembled their collections, and so we must evaluate other material they left behind, such as their writings, to see what it can tell us. This is an area where little research has been undertaken and only a few collections have been studied in detail, despite widespread interest in the collectors themselves.

We can only speculate why earlier collections overall are not well documented. We can assume amateur collectors interested in Aboriginal (mostly) and Torres Strait Islander cultures collected artefacts as a way of manifesting this interest. With anthropologists, collecting artefacts was often a natural sideline to their research. Particularly in the early twentieth century, anthropologists made some large collections. The National Museum is fortunate to hold a number of such collections by anthropologists including Herbert Basedow (1881–1933), RM Berndt (1916–90),

Representatives from the NPY community of central Australia examining the historical material during Tracking Kultja 2001.

photo: George Serras



Detail of Artwork.



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AP Elkin (1891–1979), Ursula McConnel (1888–1957), MJ Meggitt, Howard Morphy, Olive Pink (c.1886–1975), WEH Stanner (1905–81) and W Lloyd Warner (1898–1970). Among the dealers, collections acquired from Dorothy Bennett and Jim Davidson are of note.

Amateur collectors — those who collected as a hobby — came from a wide range of backgrounds. Some are relatively well known such as SR Mitchell (1881–1963), author of *Stone Age Craftsmen of Today* (1949). Other amateur collectors represented in the Museum’s collection include Mitchell’s friend, surgeon Bob Wishart (1895–1963); George Horne (1861–1927), another surgeon who co-authored *Savage Life in Central Australia* (1924) with George Aiston; Edmund Milne (1861–1917), a senior New South Wales Railways official; businessman RH Goddard (1888–1958); pastoralist and author K Langloh Parker (Catherine Stow, 1856–1940); missionary Alf Dyer (1884–1968); and Deaconess Winifred Hilliard, arts adviser at Ernabella from 1954 to 1986.



Beata Tworek looks at the Open Collections display.
photo: George Serras

Understanding the histories of the collectors and their collections can also lead to more than just information about the objects. For example, when I researched the Edmund Milne Collection, not only did I uncover new information about objects in his collection, I also found out that Milne was an important figure in the history of Indigenous studies. Milne gave public lectures, illustrated with objects from his collection, about Aboriginal cultures in rural New South Wales and Sydney between 1906 and 1915.

The little amount of documentation that accompanied most of the Museum’s collections is surprising. While there are a small number of notable exceptions, Indigenous collections are not as well documented as we would like, particularly those made by amateur collectors. Collections made by anthropologists are usually better documented, but still not always at the level curators document collections today.

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Repatriation