



## NMA PRESS

### WRAPPED IN A POSSUM SKIN CLOAK

What's the most extraordinary thing that's ever happened to you during a museum visit? Perhaps you've been captivated by an artefact that has stirred feelings inside you? Maybe you've learned something new or been inspired to find out more about a topic? Maybe you've shared a special moment with fellow human beings? Perhaps you simply got a car park close to the entrance on a rainy day? *Wrapped in a possum skin cloak*, the latest publication in the NMA Collection Series, tells the story of four women who were inspired to revive their communities' tradition of cloak-making while visiting the collection store of the Melbourne Museum.

*We were making etchings for the museum. Then they asked us to go and view their old collection in the storage room underneath the museum ... they pulled the Lake Condah cloak out of its box. Instead of it being under perspex or glass we were right next to it ... and then the whole room just burst out crying – even the fellow. It was a really strong emotion from the cloak itself that the Old Ones were right there and everyone felt it.* Lee

Part of the reason the experience of seeing the cloak was so significant stems from the history of dispossession and loss experienced by Aboriginal people during the colonisation of Australia. Prior to the mid-nineteenth century, almost every Aboriginal person living in south-eastern Australia wore animal skin cloaks. Although once abundant, only six engraved Aboriginal possum skin cloaks from the nineteenth century are known to survive. Two are held in the Museum Victoria Collection: one collected from Lake Condah in 1872 and another collected from Maiden's Punt (Echuca) in 1853. A possum skin cloak was a highly prized and intimate item:



*You've got the beginning of life and the end of life. The babies were wrapped in the cloaks and the people wore the cloaks right through until the people were actually buried in the cloaks.*  
Trehna

There is another more valuable reason the experience of seeing the cloak was so significant. Opening the box and unwrapping the cloak released a powerful awakening of ancestral memories. In that moment, the resilience of their people and culture was unquestionable:

*To see the cloak so close up – it was really awesome, it was really tangible. It was just like a loop to your Ancestors and you could almost hear them whispering ... I'm firmly in the belief that we have ancestral memories, that it comes from within. The connections to the cloak and to the designs – they're the knowledge from the Old People speaking to me through my spirit.*  
Vicki

A commitment was made between the women to ensure their ancestors' cloaks survived for future generations. Yorta Yorta women Lee Darroch and Trehna Hamm began working on a reproduction of the Maiden's Punt (Echuca) cloak and Gunditjmara sisters, Vicki and Debra Couzens, started a reproduction of the Lake Condah cloak. The women also began creating a series of prints, drawings and other work inspired by the possum skin cloaks and named their project Tooloyn Koortakay – a term Vicki Couzens translates as 'squaring skins for rugs'.

*Our culture isn't dead. It's still happening and a lot of the artwork like the rock paintings and that were always meant to be renewed through ceremonies. So in a way it's renewing an old form that was always done originally until blankets took over ...* Debra

The women didn't quite realise it at the time, but the decision to make the cloaks would lead them on both a physical and





spiritual journey. As they met with elders in their community, scanned the pages of history books, invented new production methods and overcame seemingly insurmountable challenges, the meanings of the designs were revealed.

*Nobody in the books or at the museum knew the traditional meanings of the symbols on the cloaks. That information had been lost over time ... [When] I actually went to burn the design in, I'd spent a lot of time looking at it and I knew the area that it was collected from. I'd grown up here. It came back to me really strongly through the Old Ones, definitely through the Old Ones saying what the designs meant.* Lee

I met Lee in 2002 after they finished making the reproductions of the old cloaks and negotiated to acquire the Tooloyn Koortakay Collection of cloaks, prints, weavings, dance ornaments and tools for the National Historical Collection. The five of us have since been working together to research the history of possum skin cloaks and document the journey of these remarkable women. It may in some ways seem that what started in one museum has simply ended in another museum. But all four women talk about the Tooloyn Koortakay collection as the beginning of a journey – a journey of self discovery, reconnecting to country and reviving the production of possum skin cloaks. All are making plans for the future.

*Having finished the Tooloyn Koortakay project, I just wanted to make more cloaks. It was so inspiring and I felt really great and I had this other idea that I would make a possum skin cloak that would tell the story of each of the clans of language groups – and there's 21 of them. So I'm currently making 21 possum skin cloaks. I've got two and a bit done and I've got 19 to go, so I think I'll probably be making possum skin cloaks for a long time to come.* Vicki

Aboriginal people are embracing museums as places where the treasures of their cultural heritage can be cared for and as places that can assist with passing knowledge and traditions to the next generation, as well as educating wider audiences about their culture. The Museum looks forward to a long and fruitful relationship with the respective communities as we care for and interpret the collection for many generations to come.

Next time you visit the Museum and are drawn to a particular artefact – don't just think about how it looks or read about its historical background. Shut your eyes, listen with your spirit and see where the journey takes you...

*Wrapped in a possum skin cloak* will be launched at the Koorie Heritage Trust in Melbourne on 25 October. Preview copies are available now from the Museum shop for \$19.95. An exhibition featuring the Tooloyn Koortakay Collection including the cloaks and an accompanying film devoted to the women's story is currently on display in the *Gallery of First Australians*. Entry is free. 

*Amanda Reynolds, Curator, Gallery of First Australians*

Photos Above:

Background: Reproduction of a possum skin cloak collected in 1853 from Maiden's Punt (Echuca) 2002 by Treahna Hamm and Lee Darroch  
Photo by Dean McNicol

Top Left: Vicki Couzens 2004

Top Right: Lee Darroch burning possum skins as Treahna Hamm prepares the pelts 2004

Bottom Left: Treahna Hamm sewing possum skins 2004

Bottom Right: Debra Couzens describes laying out the skins 2004

