

NEW
ACQUISITIONS

GALLERY OF FIRST AUSTRALIANS

On 27 July the Museum was successful in adding seventeen Aboriginal breastplates to its collection, bringing the Museum's total holdings to exactly fifty of these amazing cross-cultural artefacts. These were bought at auction, with all but two coming from the collection of the late L Richard Smith.

So what are breastplates (they are also referred to as kingplates, brass plates or gorgets)? Essentially, they are crescent-shaped, flat or slightly curved metal plates with text, and are frequently illustrated with images including Australian fauna and flora, crowns or people. Breastplates were suspended around the neck, usually with chains. They were given to Aboriginal people for a range of reasons, from 1816 to sometime probably in the mid-twentieth century. At first they were mainly given to people whom the colonists perceived as leaders, to ensure their co-operation in their quest to secure land. Both men and women also received them for acts of bravery, or for being faithful servants. The reaction of the people they were given to ranged from pride to refusing to wear them. One has two of three holes broken, suggesting it was worn for some time. Others exhibit no evidence of being worn, although they could have been worn with soft cords, maybe even bush string.

Today the reaction of Indigenous people to breastplates is equally diverse. Some despise them as symbols of the often appalling treatment of their ancestors. Some people who were given breastplates were in fact not leaders in their communities, and their inappropriate empowerment often was a major factor in the breakdown of social structures. For other people they are a valued and tangible piece of history, directly linked to a real person. For the Museum all of these reasons are important. The breastplates can be used to illustrate programs like exhibitions that look at the history of relations between Aboriginal people and colonists, the military or later settlers, depending on when they were awarded.



When we found out about the auction, Jo Duke, James Warden and I identified the breastplates we thought the Museum should try to acquire. Our list went to the Collections Group, which endorsed the list. Mat Trinca did the bidding. When making the initial selection we wanted breastplates from areas not already covered, and examples made from materials or of shapes not represented in the National Historical Collection. While we did not secure all on the list, those that we did purchase expand the collection on all counts. Highlights include one that has had the original name scored through when it was presented to someone else; a hand-beaten plate with the place name spelt incorrectly (Wgga Wagga); and two very elaborately shaped ones from Wurtimurti.



Now for the challenge of documenting them. Fortunately, breastplates usually have the Aboriginal person's name and a place on them. Sometimes they also have a date or maker or presenter's name as well. While this information does not guarantee success in locating information, it can frequently be more than what we often have to start with when documenting historical Indigenous artefacts. This work commenced even before the breastplates arrived at the Museum. The publicity generated over this significant acquisition led me to having a discussion with the descendant of the 'owners' of two of the breastplates, who told me how she used to clean them with ashes every Sunday morning in the 1930s as a young girl. This is a great example of how members of the public can help the Museum add to what we know about items in the collection. One idea we are talking about is placing all of the Museum's breastplates on the website and asking for additional information. 🗨️

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Photos: Dragi Markovic

