

Captivating and Curious

Twenty-five years of collecting has brought to the National Museum an array of objects that can justly be called 'captivating and curious' – and also evocative, poignant, and compelling.

The National Museum's latest exhibition, *Captivating and Curious*, puts on display 450 treasures from the National Historical Collection, including some of its most iconic objects, and some that have never been displayed before and may achieve iconic status in their turn.

A journey through the exhibition's highlights gives a tantalising glimpse of the wealth of material that will be revealed from December to April in the Museum's temporary exhibition space. From tiny leather boots worn by Dextre, a dog owned by pioneer bushwalker and conservationist Myles Dunphy, to the amazingly embellished 'Road Urchin', a travelling home and workshop for the 'saw doctor', Harold Wright, and all sizes in between, the objects in *Captivating and Curious* and the stories behind them will not fail to fascinate and intrigue the Museum's visitors.



'Betty', Kewpie Doll, Gift of the NSW Government, part of the Sydney 2000 Games Collection.
Photograph by Dragi Markovic,
National Museum of Australia

Some of the objects have a 'wow' factor; not least a six-metre high kewpie doll from the closing ceremony of the Sydney 2000 Olympics. 'Betty', as she is called, featured in the Let's Party segment of the ceremony, along with 960 ballroom dancing couples doing the samba to the strains of *Love is in the Air*. Nearly six years on, Betty is a potent reminder of the lighthearted days of national celebration and pride surrounding the Sydney Olympics in September 2000.

A year later there was a shift in mood that still engulfs us all. On 11 September 2001 the terrorist attack on New York's World Trade Centre changed our perceptions of the world: the optimistic mood fostered by the Sydney Olympics was destroyed by the Twin Towers collapsing in ruins. An Australian flag, crumpled and soiled, was retrieved from the World Trade Centre site after the disaster. It speaks of all the horror, pain and disillusion that this event engendered; and the way that this has shaped our world view ever since.

Other highlights relate to less troubled times, more optimistic moments in our history. The Holden prototype car no. 1 of 1948 heralds the development of a major industry – and the appearance of an enduring Australian icon. A restored Ferrier wool press from 1831 speaks of Australia's first agricultural success story – the development of the wool industry that from the mid-nineteenth century ensured that the country 'rode on the sheep's back'.

A story about space exploration is the background to the Orroral Valley Tracking Station console. The Orroral Valley Tracking Station, completed in 1965, was built to support the Earth-orbiting satellites of NASA's Spacecraft Tracking and Data Acquisition Network (STADAN). In 1975 it also played a part in the cooperative USA-USSR Apollo/Soyuz project that saw American astronauts and Soviet cosmonauts linking vehicles in Earth's orbit and conducting joint experiments in space.

Some objects speak of people who have achieved an iconic status in our national history: bushranger Ned Kelly is represented by a transcription by John Hanlon of his Jerilderie Letter of 1879, and Ned's own death mask. In contrast to Ned's defiant words and the reminder of his ignoble end is a movie camera owned by Australia's longest serving prime minister, Sir Robert Menzies. For many older Australians, Menzies, the founder of the political party which occupies the government benches in federal parliament today, is the face (and name) of an era that lasted from 1949 to 1966. Menzies used his camera to record family holidays in England – and also to film burning buildings and bomb devastation in London in 1940 during his visit there at the height of the Blitz.

A camera that belonged to Frank Hurley is a reminder of the career of one of Australia's great photographers and cinematographers. Hurley used the camera on display – a Debie Parvo model 'L' 35mm hand-cranked movie camera from 1922 – to film many productions, including his 1931 film of Sir Douglas Mawson's 1931 Antarctic expedition, *Siege of the South*.

A story from an earlier voyage of discovery is also told by an object in the exhibition. In 1802, navigator Matthew Flinders circumnavigated the Australian continent in the *Investigator*. The following year he again sailed in the *Investigator*, and during the voyage was obliged to cut loose the stream anchor, now on display in *Captivating and Curious*, off the coast of Western Australia. Governor Lachlan Macquarie, on whose watch Flinders



Magazine Cine-Kodak 16mm movie camera, 25mm lens attached (and 63mm lens) used by Sir Robert Menzies in the 1940s
 Photograph by Dean McNicoll, 2005, National Museum of Australia



Azaria Chamberlain's black dress, pantsies and booties, 1980.
 Photograph by Dragi Markovic, National Museum of Australia

made his epic journey – and who was responsible for introducing Regency town planning into Australia, and encouraging emancipated convicts to take the opportunities offered by a new land – is represented here by his ceremonial dirk and its scabbard.

Another explorer of the Australian continent and Surveyor General of New South Wales from 1827 to 1855, Major Sir Thomas Mitchell, is also represented in the exhibition – but not by an object from his journeys into the interior of Australia. Mitchell in 1851 fought a duel with Sir Stuart Donaldson with the duelling pistols on show in the exhibition, after the latter had accused him of overspending public money. What could have ended as tragedy concluded as farce: the only casualty of the encounter was Donaldson's hat.

Poignant stories and situations are also part of *Captivating and Curious*. The preserved carcass of a Thylacine (Tasmanian tiger) bears mute testimony to the effect of European settlement on Australia's native fauna. The initial reason for that settlement – to found a penal station for the convicted felons of Britain in the far-flung Antipodes – is signalled by a black and yellow 'maggie' jacket worn by convicts to make them conspicuous in the landscape and thus deter them from escaping.

As European settlement was consolidated in Australia throughout the nineteenth century, some creature comforts were introduced here, including elegant vehicles such as the early nineteenth-century Rankin Coach. Royalty came to the shores of the newly federated nation in 1901, when the Duke and Duchess of Cornwall and York came to open the first federal parliament in Melbourne's Exhibition Building (now on the UNESCO World Heritage List). Bunting that decorated the streets for that grand occasion is now on show again just over a hundred years later, in *Captivating and Curious*. Another token of distinction for individual Aboriginal people, a breastplate or kingplate, presented to 'King Pepper of the Biria, Burdekin River, 1897', is on display for the first time in the National Museum.

Ceremonial objects of other kinds are also part of the exhibition. A Trade Union banner, elaborately painted with an allegorical figure and a ship, celebrated the solidarity of the Waterside Workers Union in 1920. A decade later, when Australia was in the depths of the Great Depression, Patricia Chalcraft's family made a dress from old curtains and house paint for her to wear to a fancy dress party. Painted on the cloth are depictions of the odd jobs undertaken by the members of the Heidelberg Unemployment Bureau in Melbourne. The family was hoping that Patricia's dress would win the first prize of cash, so that they could buy her some new clothes. She won the second prize: a book.

Another set of clothing with a poignant association is the black dress, panties and booties made for baby Azaria Chamberlain in 1980. The baby's disappearance at Uluru during her family's holiday there, her mother Lindy's conviction for murder, imprisonment and subsequent exoneration is one of the most disturbing stories in Australia's twentieth-century history.

These objects and their diverse stories are only the tip of the iceberg – *Captivating and Curious* has hundreds more objects and their stories on show, all part of the wider story of Australia in the National Museum of Australia's collection.

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Stream anchor from Matthew Flinders Investigator.
Photograph by Dragi Markovic,
National Museum of Australia.



Silver gauntlet won by Frank Arthur, 1928
Photograph by Dean McNicoll,
2005, National Museum of
Australia.

Right:
Letter: John Hanlon's transcription
of Ned Kelly's Jerilderie Letter,
1879
Photograph by George Serras,
National Museum of Australia
Camera: Debrie Parvo model L 35
millimetre camera used by Frank
Hurley, from 1930
Photograph by George Serras,
National Museum of Australia

