

NATIONAL MUSEUM COLLECTORS AND COLLECTIONS



Portrait of Stan Mitchell.
photo: courtesy of Mitchell family

Stan Mitchell, Collector

'Never was there a keener collector than [Stan] Mitchell', wrote author RH Croll in 1937. Stan Mitchell was born to be a collector. His father, James, collected minerals and Stan assisted him to collect some of them. Many of James' best specimens are now in the Melbourne Museum. While on a year-long prospecting sojourn in the Victorian Alps in the late 1890s with his father, 16-year-old Stan was given lessons in geology by James, and furthered this interest by spending his evenings reading books on the subject. Later he studied geology at the School of Mines at Melbourne Technical College where he attained first place in exams in 1907 and 1908. Stan himself assembled an extensive collection of minerals and rocks and he wrote several papers on geology.

Stan's collection of Indigenous artefacts is a large one. The main components are almost 400 ethnographic Aboriginal artefacts, about 200 ethnographic objects from the South Pacific (half of which are arrows) and approximately 20 000 stone implements mainly from Australia. He had a room built on to his Frankston home where he displayed his collection. He kept at least one catalogue where details of many of the ethnographic items are recorded. His collection was purchased from his family in 1964, after Stan's death on 22 March 1963, by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies (now AIATSIS) and was transferred to the National Museum in 1985.

Stan obtained artefacts by a range of means. Many, particularly stone implements, he collected himself. His work led him to travel frequently, and he visited places all over Australia, adding to his collection wherever possible. Wooden implements that he did not collect himself he was given, swapped or purchased from a wide range of people such as other collectors and second-hand dealers.

Mitchell also travelled overseas, to attend conferences and for business. He would take Aboriginal stone implements with him and exchange them with collectors overseas. Consequently, his collection contains a wide range of overseas items, including American Indian and Irish arrow heads, British and European Acheulian hand axes, South Pacific adze and axe blades and a range of other implements from these places as well as others. From Mitchell's unpublished memoirs we are able to glean many details about his life and interests — his family has graciously permitted me to have a copy so we are able to further document this significant collection.

Mitchell's interest in Indigenous cultures was not limited to collecting artefacts. He published several articles and a book on stone implements, rock art and collecting trips. He also drafted a book on wooden artefacts but this remains unpublished. His book, *Stone Age Craftsmen of Today* (1949), reflected his theories on the static nature of Aboriginal cultures and their stone implements. He felt that stone implements did not change over time as their form was determined by the nature of the particular rock from which they were manufactured.



This view stemmed from the work of eminent professional and amateur ethnologists like Sir Baldwin Spencer and AS Kenyon and is no longer regarded as having validity. In *Stone Age Craftsmen of Today*, Mitchell detailed sites where he collected stone implements, and other collectors used the book as a guide to locating sites to add to their own collections. Fortunately, collecting Aboriginal stone implements by amateurs is no longer legal, something Stan opposed when legislation was first mooted in Victoria.

Stan Mitchell was a generous and intelligent man. He was keen to educate the general public about Aboriginal cultures and tried to improve the average person's knowledge and perceptions of them. He may have resisted legislation to protect Aboriginal sites but he endorsed the passing of legislation to protect Australian flora in a letter to the *Herald* in 1931. Presumably his reticence with legislation to preserve Aboriginal sites was because he and his fellow collectors would no longer be able to collect stone implements. He also encouraged the use of Aboriginal names for places in Victoria, something that was again to become important in Victoria in the 1990s, and deplored vandalism of sites. Stan Mitchell's main and significant legacy today is his collections — the National Museum is fortunate to hold his Indigenous artefacts collection.

David Kaus
Repatriation



Stan Mitchell's room in his Frankston home where he displayed his collections.
photo: courtesy of Mitchell family

FRIENDS highlights for Summer

Thursday 5 December	5.30pm – 7.00pm	Friends Lounge and Temporary Exhibition Gallery
Cartoons 2002: Exclusive preview		
Tuesday 10 December	5.30pm – 7.30pm	Lakeside Terrace
Friends Christmas party		
Thursday 12 December	10.30am – 11.30am	Friends Lounge
Exclusive opening of Molas exhibition		
Wednesday 18 December	10.40am – 12.00noon	Friends Lounge
Play lunch with Friends: Merry Christmas		
Thursday 23 January	5.30pm – 7.30pm	Friends Lounge and Focus Gallery
Friends Tour: Thookay Hgaweeyan — Young Voices of Victoria		
Wednesday 12 February	12.30pm – 1.30pm	Friends Lounge
Spin a yarn: Lunchtime chat		
Wednesday 19 February	10.40am – 12.00noon	Friends Lounge
Play lunch with Friends		
Thursday 20 February	5.30pm - 7.00pm	Friends Lounge
Presentation on Molas: An ancient art form		

For more information on any of these events, please telephone Friends of the Museum on 02 6208 5048.

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