



Photo: Dragi Markovic

(Detail) Lil-lil (club) featuring a finely engraved anthropomorphic figure on both sides of the striking section.

## Reckitt's blue & boomerangs

AND OTHER NINETEENTH-CENTURY INDIGENOUS ARTEFACTS

The recent addition to the National Historical Collection of several late nineteenth-century Aboriginal artefacts from north-western New South Wales will facilitate the telling of a number of stories relating to Aboriginal histories, such as contemporary and regional iconography in south-east Australia and cross-cultural frontier contact. The acquisition also demonstrates the various means available for tracing the provenance of collections that are relatively 'undocumented' in a traditional western sense of the word.

The collection, in superb condition, includes one shield decorated with Reckitt's blue, one rare *lil-lil* club, three intricately incised boomerangs and two fluted fighting clubs. The artefacts were collected by a soldier known as 'Bozza' before the Boer War (1899-1902), and later found after his death at his house in Liverpool, New South Wales.

Despite the fact that the collection came to the Museum with no supporting documentation, the artefacts carry clues that tell us about which region they come from, when they were produced, and perhaps traded. This is possible because Aboriginal groups across Australia have designs that are uniquely theirs and which, when presented in particular orders, make strong statements about group and personal identities. For example, the inclusion of a *lil-lil* club in this collection is a clear indication of regional provenance, as it is a type of club peculiar only to south-east Australia. Likewise, the use of Reckitt's blue on the shield indicates it was produced post contact with European people. Each object has the stamp of its own individual maker, but it is contained within a distinctive regional design.

The strong traditions of painting in northern and central Australia have ensured a good record of the styles and meanings of iconography in these regions, but the south-eastern regions have not been so fortunate. Therefore this collection is relatively rare, as objects from south-east Australia are difficult to obtain. The continued collection of such decorated objects will lead to a collection not only of objects, but also of regional iconography.

The *lil-lil* in this collection is a particularly beautiful, and unusual, example of its type. It is in excellent condition, and since the *lil-lil* in general was noted as a rare item as early as the 1870s, it renders this particular *lil-lil* especially significant. The anthropomorphic design on both sides of the club head is quite unusual, and sets it apart from other collections. The parallels between this *lil-lil* and one of similar vintage held in the Melbourne Museum help to document its cultural significance. The Melbourne Museum *lil-lil* was said by an early authority to represent a lagoon and probably an anabranch of the Broken River (north-east Victoria), and the space enclosed by the lines was said to show the country which the owner occupied. While this north-western New South Wales *lil-lil* lacks any interpretation, the object and description are analogous – suggesting the design on this *lil-lil* could be interpreted as referring to a unique place and/or ancestral being.

Another exciting piece in this collection is a parrying shield which features Reckitt's blue painted onto its outer surface. Reckitt's blue – a bleaching agent applied to the domestic wash – was first manufactured by Reckitt & Sons in England in 1840, and its appearance on this nineteenth-century New South Wales shield signifies contact with European people. The use of this bright blue colour is an extension of the tradition of using organic



Nineteenth-century boomerang featuring an incised, scallop design particular to southern Queensland, northern NSW and northeastern South Australia.

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Wooden parrying shield featuring horizontal and vertical bands of Reckitt's blue – a bleaching agent applied in the domestic wash – signifying contact with settlers.

materials such as feathers, ochres, bush flowers, red *ininti* and giddy-giddy seeds in Indigenous ceremonial art – simply drawing on the art materials of another world<sup>1</sup>. Importantly, this shield is a tangible example of Indigenous agency in the early period of contact, exchange and frontier conflict with Europeans.

Reckitt's blue has appeared on Aboriginal cultural material and in ceremonial art across the Australian continent, for example it is found at Nourlangie Rock in Kakadu National Park in examples of x-ray rock art dating back to the 1880s. It is also found on a number of Aboriginal artefacts from different parts of Australia currently in the National Historical Collection. The use of Reckitt's blue over long distances illustrates a broader pattern of Indigenous appropriation and trade of European commodities, including items such as axes and glass, often prior to contact. This spread of other-worldly items, and news of Europeans, began right from the beginning of the first contact period and flourished

through the impressive Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander trading networks that criss-cross the continent and even connect with south-east Asia and the Pacific.

It is generally agreed that assessing traditional south-eastern Aboriginal art and material culture today is difficult because we rely largely on the accounts and observations of non-Aboriginal people. However, as this collection demonstrates so well, the objects themselves can offer powerful narratives of Indigenous histories and perspectives – including Aboriginal adaptation, appropriation and continuation during and after first contact.

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<sup>1</sup> Judith Ryan, 'From Reckitt's blue to neon: the colour and power of Aboriginal art', in *Colour power: Aboriginal Art post-1984: in the collection of the National Gallery of Victoria*. Melbourne, National Gallery of Victoria, 2004.