

# tayenebe

*Tasmanian Aboriginal women's fibre work*

## INTERPRETIVE RESOURCE

### TALKING ABOUT TAYENEBE

The *tayenebe: Tasmanian Aboriginal women's fibre work* interactive website includes extensive information about the exhibition. Please use this Interpretive Resource in conjunction with the website.

[www.tmag.tas.gov.au/tayeneberesources](http://www.tmag.tas.gov.au/tayeneberesources)

### INTRODUCTION

*Tayenebe* is a south eastern Aboriginal word meaning 'exchange'. Over the past three years more than 35 Tasmanian Aboriginal women have journeyed together across the island in a determined process of cultural retrieval. The impetus for the *tayenebe* project has been the desire to reconnect with the cultural craft of Ancestors. 37 Tasmanian Aboriginal woven-twined baskets created during the 1800s from lily, iris, sedges and rushes that survive in museums internationally are particularly inspirational for these makers.

The exhibition *tayenebe: Tasmanian Aboriginal women's fibre work* includes the work of 24 women aged from seven to 87 years of age, alongside historical pieces and contemporary and historical interpretive material.

*people, plants,  
Country*



*exchange*



Photographs: Lucia Rossi



## GATHERING TOGETHER OVER TIME

The story of the *tayenebe* exhibition runs deep across Tasmania. Baskets and objects that are old and new tell stories across time about Tasmanian Aboriginal women and their relationships with people, plants and Country. Central to the exhibition is the concept of *tayenebe*, a word of people of the south-east, the Nuenone of Bruny Island, that means 'exchange.'

During the first decades of the 1800s, as Aboriginal Tasmanians were forced to keep moving from their own territory to new places, their access to plants normally used to make baskets and carriers for food and tools was limited. Preoccupied with survival, there was often little time to maintain cultural practices including the making of baskets.

In recent times, through a series of workshops, Aboriginal women across Tasmania have been sharing and learning ways of making baskets and kelp carriers like those their grandmothers made into the distant past. The significance of this process can be understood in the words of Lola Greeno (Aboriginal Arts Officer, Arts Tasmania), co-ordinator of the *tayenebe* workshops:

*'The importance of reviving Tasmanian Aboriginal women's fibre work, from woven fibre baskets to kelp water carriers, has allowed a number of women that important cultural connection to their craft. The women now have ownership to new knowledge and new work through their developed skills. Tayenebe provided the time for women to reflect on their heritage and to create their own history, while participating in workshops that built their confidence to help other women.'*

LOLA GREENO<sup>1</sup>

L-R: Zoe Rimmer, Colleen Mundy, Dulcie Greeno, Sharnie Everett, Verna Nichols, Vicki West and Lola Greeno  
Photograph: Lucia Rossi

## UNIQUE ENVIRONMENT, UNIQUE CULTURE

Tasmania is a unique environment both in terms of species of plants available and the techniques developed by Aboriginal women to create baskets and water carriers from these. Stretches of coast, sparse forest, low lying hills and grasslands, in the Tasmanian cool temperate climate, provide resources particular to the island state. These resources have been combined to make specific objects that reflect connections to place and cultural practices. The main objects made by Aboriginal women in pre-colonised Tasmania were baskets of various sizes and purpose, woven from irises, lilies, rushes, sedges, and reeds.

The boundary between land and sea was less fixed historically, when women gathered food from the sea daily. Kelp came out from the sea to make carriers for fresh water and land plant fibres, made into baskets, went into the water for collecting seafood. Ranging in scale from hand-sized to a capacity for holding multiple crayfish, baskets were noted historically to carry mussels, warreners, abalone and other sea foods, fern roots, tubers, berries, shell and claw necklaces, ochre, lead ore, tinder, yakka gum, bone points and stone tools.

Traditional techniques for making baskets in Tasmania are unique in Australia. The s-stitch direction twining method contrasts with the reverse direction z-twist used to make twined baskets in Arnhem Land in far northern Australia, and in far north Queensland.

<sup>1</sup> *tayenebe: Tasmanian Aboriginal women's fibre work catalogue p.32*



## CHANGING PRACTICES OF EXCHANGE

Tasmanian Aboriginal containers including baskets and kelp carriers were recorded in journals of European visitors. In 1792, botanist Julien Houton de Labillardière recounted how a number of objects were taken back to the ship by the officers who left behind food and utensils in 'exchange'. This encounter introduced a new form of trade that occurred sporadically in Tasmania up to the 1830s—the raiding of objects, such as baskets, necklaces, spears, waddies from Aboriginal camps, leaving in their place other items the invaders deemed useful for Aboriginal people.

From the first decades of the 1800s, the Government practice of granting land to Europeans significantly dislocated Aboriginal people from their Country, and radically affected the making of traditional objects including containers.

From the period of the Black Line campaign of 1830, that was intended to remove Aboriginal people from the 'settled districts' of Van Diemen's land, cultural objects were souvenired by invaders who left nothing in exchange. Aboriginal people had to modify their practices while living on the run until they were forced to surrender to exile on Flinders Island. In the period between 1830–70, while efforts were made by George Augustus Robinson, 'Conciliator' of the Aborigines, to force the cessation of most cultural practices, the making of baskets was one of the few Indigenous practices openly endorsed by government representatives. Showing great resilience, Aboriginal women started to trade baskets in weekly markets that were held at Wybalena on Flinders Island from 1836 to 1838.

Many baskets taken in the 1800s, subsequently became part of collections in Australia, England and Germany.

Among the women who exchanged baskets in 1800s was Trucanini. Three important stories of her exchanges are on the website.

In the *tayenebe* exhibition, women continue their exchange by sharing culture with museums and their visitors. This is significantly different from the past when Aboriginal cultural objects were collected and exhibited without their maker's names, and usually without their knowledge of the destination of their work.



unknown maker  
Basket, c.1840s  
white flag iris (*Diplarrena moraea*)  
M2735



## MAKING CULTURE TOGETHER: processes of teaching and learning, celebration and innovation

Tayenebe workshops were a space for women to share culture with each other. The process of creating the tayenebe exhibition grew through workshops held over two years with Aboriginal women and girls learning and sharing together across Tasmania about collecting and making objects with plants.

During the workshops many different types of exchange took place between the women including sharing time and stories, techniques and meals.

Here they speak of their experiences and reflect on how the tayenebe project connects the past, present and future:

*'When tayenebe commenced it inspired me, that the need was there for women to get together and share their ideas and techniques, and develop techniques because we all started off with not very much knowledge about how to commence our work. We all sort of knew the stitch, we knew the weave, we knew it was that unique weave to Tasmania, but it was the starting off and the adding in the warps. And I think that's what's been important, that sharing of all the techniques and then searching out collecting places.'*

PATSY CAMERON

*'It's a feeling that when you start you think of the old, old ladies many years ago weaving their baskets and I think that, and it's a thing that once you start you've got to finish it, you've got to keep going because it's in your blood.'*

BETTY GRACE

Betty Grace holding her first twined basket (left hand) and first basket by her mother, Aunty Dulcie Greeno  
Photograph: Lucia Rossi

*'We don't want it to stop, we would love it to continue. It has to. We've come so far, let's not lose it. We've lost enough already, let's keep this going and we need to bring in the younger ones that are really interested, like teenagers that really want to do it. We need to bring them in. The women that are doing this at the moment are all women that are a lot older, but we need to pass this stitch on to our younger generation so it will continue and they've got to be able to pass it on to the next generation. We have to retain what we've learnt. We don't want to lose it again. So I'm teaching as many people as I can. Young and old.'*

NANNETTE SHAW

*'Baskets I make are traditional Tasmanian Aboriginal style baskets. It gives me a great amount of pleasure to still continue to make baskets like our Ancestors made them.'*

COLLEEN MUNDY



## EXTENDING YOUR EXHIBITION VISIT

While these suggestions are arranged here for particular education sectors, many could be adapted for use with different age groups.

### PRIMARY

- **Tayenebe is a word of people of the south-east, the Nuenone of Bruny Island that means 'exchange.'**

Colleen Mundy tells of how she has learned and exchanged knowledge about making baskets within her family:

*'I have been making for about eight years. I didn't start until I was old, I'm 68 now. I really love basket weaving. The plant I love using most is the white flag iris. And when I say the white flag iris, my family have always called that plant a "sag". My great-grandfather Tasman Smith of Nichols Rivulet, was interviewed by Westlake in 1910 and it was recorded that Tasman said "a sag we call it, grows a white flower, a lily" so in respect to my family I continue to call it a sag though that's not the specific name.*

*I like the feel of the material, of the white flag iris, it's got a lovely silky finish to the basket and it's also important to me because Tasman's mother, Fanny Smith, my great-great-grandmother was also a basket weaver and she used that fibre, and my grandmother Pearl Smith still had a dilly bag made by her.'*

Think of some ways that you exchange ideas, stories and skills within your family and with friends.

- **What different types of exchanges did you find out about in the exhibition and on the website?**

In your class share your family stories of exchanging skills such as making things, cooking, games.

Listen to ways that other stories are similar or different from your stories.

- **Look closely at each vessel. Think about why certain plants are used for different types of baskets and carriers.**

Use the website to research the plants each basket is made from. Find the names and regions they grow in. Have you seen any of these growing?

- **Choose one basket or kelp carrier to explore closely. Find out all you can about the vessel and its maker.**

In a small group, tell each other about the vessel you have chosen. This might be like a portrait/story of the vessel. Who made it? Where and when was it made? What plant is it made from? What can you find on the website about the woman who made it?

- **One of the tayenebe makers, Verna Nichols wrote this poem about the stories that baskets hold:**

#### **Always full never empty**

What stories can you tell us?

Empty basket is all some see

If you could talk, what's that you say?

You are filled with laughter, hopes,

Sadness, tears your makers thoughts

Your fibres have been shaped by hands

Loving hands that have caressed

Callused hands through hard work

Hands that softly stroked a baby's back

Hands outstretched to get it back

Arms that ache to hold your people

A hundred years have passed

I hear your story whispered to me

I am listening

Your basket is full

I smile and nod in acknowledgement

Yes I understand

In years to come

Will someone hear

My basket whisper my story?

VERNA NICHOLS 2009

Close your eyes and imagine a vessel filled with your stories.

- Draw or write a story about something or someone special in your own life.

You can use your drawing or story to make a vessel.  
(see below)

- Make a vessel to hold your stories.  
Here are some suggestions:

#### Paper

Materials: painted paper, text such as poem, photos, plans, invitation, photocopies, music sheets, or any other paper that may be recycled. PVA glue and brushes.

1. Tear paper into small pieces.
2. Push recycled plastic bag into a vessel of your choice.



3. Brush the paper with PVA glue and place the torn paper into the vessel pushing and pasting into shape.
4. When dry, lift the plastic from the vessel and peel off.
5. The vessel may be glazed with PVA or shellac

#### Textile

Materials: cotton, embroidery thread, needles.

Collect fabric and buttons that have special meanings or that represent something important to you. These could include: old clothing, ribbons, buttons, beads, fabric scraps. The material could be torn into strips that may be knotted, twisted or plaited.



*knot*



*twist*



*plait*

These materials may hold stories of when they were worn, how old they are. Recycling and making vessels using these materials will give the vessel a story that may be shared or remain a secret.

1. Form a coil by sewing materials together using needle and cotton or embroidery thread.



2. When base size is reached start to form the sides allowing the materials to dictate the shape.



## SECONDARY

- **Tayenebe is a word of the south-east people, the Nuenone of Bruny Island that means ‘exchange’.**

Have a discussion about different sorts of exchanges that *tayenebe* tells us about. Some are recent, some happened a long time ago. Who was involved in each example? What was being exchanged?

- **Tahana Rimmer one of the makers said:  
‘I am making these baskets to learn. It’s the skill. It’s my connecting with culture. It’s family. I think that we’re weaving family into our baskets.’**

Explore the *tayenebe* website and investigate how skills ideas and traditions are being exchanged and passed on through families.



[www.tmag.tas.gov.au/tayeneberesources](http://www.tmag.tas.gov.au/tayeneberesources)

Reflect on ways you connect to your culture. Do you belong to more than one culture? What do you learn about your culture within your family?

What could you make with your family: sister/brother, mother/father, grandmother/grandfather and share with others?

Write a short story or poem, or make a short video about this.

- **Research your family stories of exchange.**  
Talk with different people in your family and write or draw their stories of sharing and learning in the family.  
Create a vessel using textiles or paper that can hold your stories. (see example)

- **Find an interesting plant and imagine it as a vessel.**  
**Draw the vessel.**

Remembering that this is an imaginary vessel, write its story, telling about its use, who it belongs to and any secrets it may hold.



Colleen Mundy, Dulcie Greeno, Vicki West and Zoe Rimmer  
Photographs: Lucia Rossi



## TERTIARY

- **Tayenebe is a word of the south-east people, the Nuenone of Bruny Island that means 'exchange'.**

Discuss exchanges, within and across cultures and time, that *tayenebe* tells us about.

Trace intercultural exchanges and consider how they may have influenced contemporary Tasmanian Aboriginal fibre making practices.

- **Consider how the following quotation could be seen to relate to the contemporary literary and artistic notion of 'sense of place'.**

*'You feel like you are home in your Country.'*

ZOE RIMMER

For example, speaking of the exhibition *Repetitions*, at the Plimsoll Gallery, School of Art, University of Tasmania in April 2008, Jeff Malpas observes 'To become familiar with a place, to learn to inhabit it, is not to dispel its secrets, nor to render it into some simply intelligible form—as if the place could be transformed into a sign, an idea, a mere position—it is to work oneself into that place, to take in its rhythms and movements, to become part of them, and for them to become part of one's self.'<sup>1</sup>

*'When people are removed from their homelands—  
from its resources and foods, its cycles of life—then  
everything changes.'*

JULIE GOUGH<sup>2</sup>

Try to imagine ways that the changes that Julie refers to here have affected the lives of women the *tayenebe* exhibition tells us about. How might these experiences have influenced the process of making vessels in the *tayenebe* workshops?

Sonia Brown weaving with white flag iris  
(*Diplarrena moraea*) at *larapuna*  
Photograph: Anne O'Connor

- **In May 2008 one of the makers, Verna Nichol's spoke about the cultural practice of weaving that has been, 'Not lost, just sleeping'.**

Research crafts practiced in your culture in the past (in the last hundred years).

Choose one that has not been practiced recently and work out how you could revive it.

<sup>1</sup> [www.utas.edu.au/philosophy/staff\\_research/malpas/J.Malpas%20Articles/Repetitions.html](http://www.utas.edu.au/philosophy/staff_research/malpas/J.Malpas%20Articles/Repetitions.html) (accessed 9 June 2009)

<sup>2</sup> *tayenebe* catalogue p.12

This resource was compiled from information and text provided from the exhibition and catalogue: *tayenebe: Tasmanian Aboriginal women's fibre work* TMAG 2009.

