

**Understanding Museums:
Australian museums and museology**

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Indigenous people and museums

Australian museums have had a leadership role in the wider recognition of the richness of Indigenous Australian culture and in addressing the history of contact between Indigenous Australians and those whose ancestral origins lay elsewhere. This section looks at ethnographic museums and collections, the intersections of culture and museological practice and the repatriation of Indigenous material.

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Understanding Museums - Indigenous people and museums: Introduction

Indigenous people and museums: introduction

by Des Griffin and Leon Paroissien

Australian museums have had a leadership role in the wider recognition of the richness of Indigenous Australian culture and in addressing the history of contact between Indigenous Australians and those whose ancestral origins lay elsewhere.

Recent decades have seen major changes in semi-permanent and temporary Indigenous exhibitions in all major museums, and there have been numerous events and symposia, such as the Australian Museum's two major conferences of Indigenous people in the 1990s, including 'The Future of Australia's Dreaming'. Consultation with Indigenous peoples regarding exhibition content and interpretation has become widely accepted. Many museums now have Indigenous staff and some Indigenous people have been appointed to museum boards.

Changes in Indigenous representation and relationships in museums, and the inclusion of oral histories, have often been accompanied by controversy and conflict. Some prominent Indigenous people, claiming that museums should do more, cite examples of overseas museums that have still not returned human remains and secret-sacred material.

The Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory (MAGNT) has for many years managed a significant contemporary Indigenous art award and associated exhibition sponsored by Telstra. The subsequent tour of this exhibition has played a role in promoting contemporary Indigenous art nationally. Meanwhile all national institutions have expanded their commitment to Indigenous culture and to the touring of significant Indigenous exhibitions abroad.

The 2007 exhibition *Culture Warriors*, featuring the work of 30 contemporary Indigenous artists, was presented at the National Gallery of Australia as the first 'National Indigenous Art Triennial'. The exhibition coincided with the fortieth anniversary of the 1967 referendum. After touring to Adelaide, Perth and Brisbane, the exhibition was shown subsequently in Washington in 2009. In 2010 a new entrance to the National Gallery gave introductory prominence to Australia's Indigenous culture for Australian and foreign visitors alike – displaying the most significant Indigenous items of the collection, including the 1988 Aboriginal Memorial. [\[1\]](#)

Simultaneous with the National Gallery's showing of *Culture Warriors*, the National Museum of Australia presented *Papunya Painting: Out of the Desert*, an exhibition drawing on an important part of the National Museum of Australia's collection – once belonging to the Aboriginal Arts Board of the Australia Council – that 'successfully melded ethnographic interpretation with the aesthetic experience of the art ...'[\[2\]](#)After a subsequent showing in Sydney at the Australian Museum, this exhibition was exhibited at the National Art Museum in Beijing in 2010. In 2008 the National Museum organised an extraordinary exhibition of paintings by the late Emily Kame Kngwarreye from Utopia in the central desert for showing in Osaka and Tokyo before being shown at the National Museum in Canberra on its return.

Chapters by Michael Pickering and Phil Gordon, Bernice Murphy, and John Stanton trace aspects of the collecting and exhibiting of Indigenous art in Australia's museums from different perspectives. Pickering and Gordon address the complexities of the repatriation of ancestral remains and secret-sacred objects. Stanton recounts the revitalisation of museums in this field, and Murphy looks at the repositioning of Indigenous creativity within museum programs and in public awareness.

Complementary developments concerning peoples of the Pacific and of Asia have occurred at a number of museums. Many major state museums have substantial collections of Melanesian cultural material and other material from the Pacific and Asia, and all state art museums hold extensive Asian collections. The Australian Museum initiated important returns of significant cultural material to Vanuatu, to Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands, and collaborated with the National Museum of New Zealand in a special touring exhibition, *Taonga Maori*. The Queensland Art Gallery initiated (in 1993) and continues to stage a major contemporary art event, the Asia Pacific Triennial, which has also greatly enriched its collections.

In 2010 Hetti Perkins, Senior Curator at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, wrote and presented a three-part television series on Indigenous Australian artists, *Art + Soul*. This was but one example of museums taking an increasingly prominent role in addressing wider audiences beyond museum walls on Indigenous art and culture. The Art Gallery of New South Wales installed a new exhibition of their collection to complement the television series.

Footnotes

¹An installation of 200 painted hollow log coffins (Lorrkon) — one for every year since European settlement — created by 43 artists from different clans of the region around Ramingining in Arnhem Land and dedicated to the Indigenous Australians who have lost their lives in defence of country since 1788.

² Luke Taylor, 'Exhibiting Indigenous Art', *reCollections*, Vol 3 no 1, March 2008, http://recollections.nma.gov.au/issues/vol_3_no_1/exhibition_reviews/exhibiting_indigenous_art/

Understanding Museums - Indigenous people and museums

Ethnographic museums and collections: from the past into the future

by John E Stanton

The 1978 UNESCO Regional Seminar on the Role of Museums in Preserving Indigenous Cultures, held in Adelaide, [1] marked a turning point in the relationship between Indigenous communities and the museum sector in Australia, as well as in Oceania between Pacific Island nations and the museums of Australia and New Zealand. It demanded Indigenous representation throughout the museum world – in collections, at senior management level and on boards of trustees. The UNESCO seminar spawned an immediate response from curators of Indigenous collections in the region, with representatives of communities and museums from Papua New Guinea, New Caledonia and New Zealand joining their Australian counterparts at the Conference of Museum Anthropologists held in Melbourne the following year.

The Conference of Museum Anthropologists (its acronym COMA was thought apposite at the time) met annually for over two decades but, once it had achieved its primary aims, local dynamics at the state level took over, to be played out by a new generation of museum anthropologists. COMA conferences were strongly supported by members of the Council of Australian Museum Directors (CAMD), some of whom may have – at least initially – feared the possible outcomes. Instead, museum directors listened to their museum anthropologists and, accordingly, developed policies and programs that promoted Indigenous interests within the sector, both in Australia and overseas. Museums took different approaches to these issues and sought divergent outcomes. COMA remained an informally constituted body, despite the efforts by some members at times to restructure on a more formal basis. This encouraged a wide range of participants, as well as an enthusiastic grassroots response to museum issues of the period.

The annual conference, internationalist in its positioning, was centred on fostering attendance by junior museum staff, as well as a constantly large number of Indigenous participants. Issues of recognition, representation, repatriation, and reaction were discussed from the multifaceted points of view provided by this annual gathering. The *COMA Bulletin*, published on a voluntary basis at first by institutions hosting the conference, but later by Lindy Allen at the Museum of Victoria, disseminated the issues raised at conferences to an international audience.

Many of the issues raised at COMA meetings inspired similar discussions at comparable conferences overseas, especially in the United Kingdom and the United States, where museum-based anthropologists were actively promoting the central role of Indigenous communities in the custodianship and representation of institutional collections.

The vigorous role played by Indigenous curators in many of Australia's museums is indicative of the dramatic changes in museological practice that have emerged over the past 25 years, as well as the commitment of museum-based anthropologists to the restructuring of the relationships between museums and communities of origin (as the communities from which these collections derive have become known). It is not a coincidence that this period has also seen the revitalisation of state and national museums across the continent through new exhibitions, fresh engagements and additional appointments.

The past three decades, in particular, have witnessed extraordinary changes in the relationship between museologists and Indigenous (especially Australian) peoples, as well as the nature of their roles and engagement with the wider museum profession. These changes have reflected broader processes evident elsewhere, but the Australian experience has helped to influence developments at the international level. At the same time, the experience of the past three decades did not occur in a vacuum: it emerged from the economic and social vitality of postwar Australia, the affirmation of a new and unique Australian identity, and a degree of conscious self-reflection not often evident in the earlier era. Australia has only recently celebrated the 40th anniversary of the 1967 referendum that gave Aboriginal Australians formal acknowledgement by the Australian government; and in 1992 the Mabo decision gave recognition to the prior sovereignty of

Indigenous Australians. These two key events in the history of Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal relationships frame – and indeed inform, as it were – the parameters of this paper.

Ethnography means different things to different people. The diversity of museum-based departments of anthropology, their varied emphases and output, are testament to this multiplicity of perspectives. In the Australian context, ethnographic collections are firmly anchored within the discipline of anthropology, which is the study of people and society. Although elsewhere in the world collections that are made in the course of ethnographic fieldwork may be known as 'ethnology', this delimited term is not used in Australia. The strength of ethnographic collections lies, or should lie, within the depth of field documentation, and its use in understanding cultural formations in communities of origin.

Within the discipline of anthropology, one of the key attributes of conducting anthropological research that distinguishes it from other related fields is its objective of encouraging researchers to establish and maintain long-term associations with communities and individuals. In the Australian context, at least historically, anthropologists (trained or untrained, amateur and professional) working within a diversity of settings have collected an enormous quantity of research data, in the form of both recordings (notebooks, photographs, magnetic media and the like) and physical items. These tangible objects I have termed elsewhere the 'material manifestations of culture'. [2]

The origins of the European museum clearly lie with the 'cabinets of curiosities', and there are still a few museums around the world that echo this approach to the 'mysterious'. Anthropology and ethnography have moved an enormous distance from the early collecting environment, where 'crude' oddities became peculiar obsessions. There is, nevertheless, an enduring influence of perceived exoticism because many Australian museums have ethnographic collections – or least ethnographic components of their collections – that were collected in a different era, in rather different contexts to those that prevail in the twenty-first century. This, in itself, presents significant challenges to present day curators; most important among these is the question of what to do with those earlier collections. How can they be used to tell their own story? Whose story, which story? [3] Some of the early collections are well documented. Often they are the only materials extant from the period. But many of them are very poorly documented, and it lies with later researchers to induce meaning and attribution.

Museums are not just about objects; they are about the cultures that produce them, and comprise the photographs, films and other records associated with them. Deeply grained documentation remains a key achievement for ethnographically-based museums, as this documentation ensures a continued relevance in research, teaching, and in the minds of members of the communities of origin. As in the past, field collections are an intrinsic element of anthropological fieldwork, and museum collections provide an outstanding resource through which to understand a society and explain it to others.

The cabinets of curiosities speak more of earlier collectors' preoccupations and preconceptions about the world, and their place in it, than they do about the items they contain. This fascination with categorisation was not the realm of anthropologists or ethnographers alone; many others were collecting and classifying, making order where there seemed to be chaos. A curatorial urge to sort and categorise is very much a heritage of the Enlightenment, even if today it takes rather different forms, including Indigenous perspectives on classification. Contemporary classification procedures may still be founded on typologies of function, media or whatever. Nevertheless, digital technology has encouraged museum ethnographers to think of new ways of classifying items, and of creating thesauri to bridge different, but equally important, systems of classification. Classification remains a fundamental issue for today's curators, especially in considering the impact classification has had on effectively distancing one culture from another – even, indeed, creating the very notion of 'the other'. Some of the classical anthropologists, like Malinowski and others, spent lengthy periods of time in the field, yet were rarely to return to the communities. The kinds of engagement with local communities that they had in that much earlier period were very different from the kinds of engagement nurtured by museum-based anthropologists today.

In the current museum environment there is a steadily increasing engagement with communities of origin that involves a redefinition of roles and responsibilities, and the development of new processes of commitment between the key players. Collections are becoming more accessible. Former distinctions between scholars and 'the observed' are being diffused as more and more Indigenous researchers (who may also be museum staff) participate in a shared trusteeship for the continuing care and use of collections. This is nothing new: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

societies have long emphasised the continuity of knowledge and the enduring care of particular ceremonial items. It is simply that the scope of collections, and the manner in which they are obtained, managed and used, is being redefined.

Anthropology is not only typified by prolonged fieldwork: it is also characterised by extended discussions with a diversity of people, talking to a multiplicity of voices and hearing a variety of voices. What anthropologists then do with that material, and what museum curators do, is a very different matter. Indigenous anthropologists, like Indigenous curators, bring a new dimension of knowledge and comprehension to this debate. But there is an engagement with communities of origin, nevertheless. It is a close engagement; however, what we have to remember is that historical collections very quickly develop an energy and a primacy of their own. The objects contained in them start to accumulate other meanings, new interpretations and novel applications, perhaps imposed by curators or by members of the communities of origin.

Ethnographic collections in Australia are primarily Indigenous collections – or at least they have been – for historical reasons. Anthropology has in the past been concerned with discrete small-scale societies; postmodernity and the global market economy are shaping new practitioners and their research foci, just as Marshall McLuhan [4] predicted almost four decades ago. Ethnographic museums must consider the place of their earlier collections in the modern world, just as postmodern researchers, whether anthropologists or 'cultural studies' advocates, should be aware of how their own collections (multi-media or otherwise) may be used and interpreted in the future. Ethnographic collections should not belong alone to Indigenous environments: they should address the non-Indigenous and, most importantly, the interface between the two, in what James Clifford called the 'contact zone':

When museums are seen as contact zones, their organizing structure as a *collection* becomes an ongoing historical, political, moral *relationship* – a power-charged set of exchanges of push and pull. [5]

This is, however, something for future (and more considered) debate.

Anthropologists and their ethnographic collections have a legacy of partnership, an enduring collaboration, with communities of origin. What is collected in one period may become iconic in another. Anthropologists have seen such momentous changes over recent decades in the lives of all Australians that the materials and associated documentation collected earlier have assumed a new importance not envisaged at the time – the ascription of new meaning, reviewed (indeed, renewed) significance, and the attribution of purpose utterly distinctive from the kinds of meanings and layers of meaning that are added across generations.

Museums Australia, with its publication *Previous Possessions, New Obligations* [6] subsequently revised as *Continuous Cultures, Ongoing Responsibilities*, [7] has spread the accumulated insight and experience of museum anthropologists and Indigenous staff working throughout the sector into the other parts of Australian museology. This perspective has embraced other kinds of collections and other sorts of institutions, from large institutions such as state museums for example, right down to small local community museums. Museums Australia has provided an important and useful template for professional practice in the relationship between museums and Indigenous peoples.

Ethnographic collections very often began as exotic collections of 'the other'. Today though, 'the other' is no longer 'the other' – 'the other' is part of 'us'; alternatively, 'we' are part of 'the other'. The nature of the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars, their methodologies, goals and aspirations, remains contentious, given that Indigenous groups in Australia still sometimes see museums as a product of European thought. But this is changing as more Aboriginal Australians work in senior positions within the sector, not only as curatorial staff but also as conservators, exhibitions staff – even directors. Enduring partnerships can only evolve in such contexts. This is not to suggest that Indigenous museologists are adequately represented – far from it. But neither are adequate numbers retained in universities to receive the advanced level of training now required for museum employment.

There has been a profound shift in the nature of the relationship between collections and people, whether these are the people who use or see the collections, or those who have principal cultural interest in the collection materials themselves. [8] Some Australian museums (and the Berndt Museum is proud to be counted among them) have set a benchmark for best practice in this respect. This, in turn, has influenced museum practice elsewhere in the world quite profoundly.

So no longer is 'the other' in the midst of our museums. As time goes by, the nature of these relationships between collections and people is becoming more and more complex. The complexity is, in part, about histories. It is also about sharing the knowledge associated with collections. It involves issues such as how to handle culturally sensitive items, and concerns such as the repatriation of skeletal and ritual materials, authorial interpretation and advocacy. A key issue remains the logistical issue of maintaining linkages with so many communities of interest. Most museums hold collections from an enormous diversity of regions, if not countries and or continents. It is, quite simply, impossible for curatorial staff in such contexts to maintain meaningful relationships between all of them, regardless of the resources at their disposal. Increasingly, museums must rely on linkages with key peak government and regional bodies, such as national and state museums in countries overseas and, in the Australian setting, Aboriginal land councils and research bodies such as the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies in Canberra. At the core, though, these complex issues are being articulated through, and between, individual staff. For Indigenous Australians, as I have been told repeatedly by those who have taught me over so many years, personal relationships are very, very important. As a result, it is sometimes very difficult in the minds of community members to differentiate the curator from the person, if only because these relationships are most often expressed through the individuals that participate in these bonds. This creates all kinds of extra responsibilities for curatorial staff where individuals have an identified custodial role that is recognised by communities, whether they are Indigenous or not.

This linkage involves special kinds of relationships and particular kinds of obligations that extend far beyond what is commonly viewed as professional curatorial practice. Consulting community leaders, attending their funerals, acting on their requests, are all part of the *mélange* of responsibilities that fall on the shoulders of any curator of ethnographic materials. Indigenous ascription of roles for women, and roles for men, command the awareness of those developing and managing staffing recruitment. These kinds of relationships are heavy responsibilities indeed: it is the duty of incumbents to maintain the relationships that have been built and elaborated, often agonisingly so, to renegotiate the kinds of histories, the kinds of voices that are involved in this process we call museology.

Another significant shift in perspective regarding the purpose and use of ethnographic collections has been the move from a preoccupation about 'preservation' to one of 'cultural maintenance', which implies a less passive role for museums and for their staff in the care and use of these physical manifestations of culture. From the 1940s to the 1960s many anthropologists (and, indeed, members of the taxpaying public) saw ethnographic collections as means of preserving culture. Even the 1978 UNESCO seminar was published under the title *Preserving Cultures*.

Of course it is not simply a matter of the Western world preserving something, putting it in a jar, leaving it there, and looking at it, because all the world's cultures have living successors. Indigenous communities are using the materials held in ethnographic collections to elaborate, reconstitute, or even reconstruct what has been broken and torn and disturbed in their lives. The Berndt Museum's experience with the *Bringing the Photographs Home* Project [9] highlights the ways in which ethnographic museums can work with communities and assist them, according to their wishes, to use historic as well as recent photographs to reconstruct broken family lives. It was a very moving experience for Museum staff to be involved in what was sometimes an emotional, but always very important, element of what museums can do in association with Indigenous communities. Photographs, like ethnographic objects, represent the quintessential materials that can be used to harness and project future understandings of social being.

Authorial voices remain very important in this debate, especially in the context of collections that are ethnographic in nature. These collections have their own histories, a vibrancy that derives from past accounts of manufacture, usage and perhaps abandonment, to new interpretations and novel sources of inspiration. These collections can have a momentum of their own, something that is rather different from the original context of collection, or even the reason for doing so. Museums have to be able to accommodate and facilitate these changing narrations, as much as they must reflect on these insights in communicating the stories within which they are embedded. These histories come not from communities of origin alone. They come from visitors, scholars and, indeed, curators. Curators have a right to tell a story too. Curators are not neutral bodies wafting in the air like ghosts. Curators are people with experiences and aspirations, and their stories should be told, too.

Together, these processes lead Australian museology towards a profound sense of community

engagement – a real practical engagement, not just a theoretical one that just sits isolated in the Museums Australia template for best practice. Routes to engagement need to be reviewed constantly, to be reflected on, and to be a topic sought out for discussion with communities of origin. Proactive may be a dreadfully overused word, but it probably describes how museum professionals should be working.

Ethnographic museums are looking toward their futures. There are many participants in the work of a museum, including many members of the communities of origin. There is also a multiplicity of users, including other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Problems emerge in those contexts, where something that is perhaps appropriate in one community is not appropriate in another. In a global world these are profound issues that have to be addressed first at a community level. They are being addressed, but the involved and time-consuming processes can make the work of curators rather complex. The context of human rights and wider awareness of the full range of cultural rights and responsibilities requires a considered response. As curators of anthropology we are already observing – and in some cases documenting – the impact of inter-generational change taking place directly in front of us. Within this setting, museums will require a flexibility of approach, and a willingness to engage beyond the predictable or readily understandable, in order to position museums and their collections for the future.

The increasingly pervasive influence of the World Wide Web, for example, and its impact on Indigenous societies, is an example of competing interests and contradictory perspectives. [10] The Web is a wonderful tool for communication in the Western world, which is predicated on the free exchange of information, but how can it best be harnessed in a culturally appropriate manner in societies that treasure secrecy and privacy? For many Indigenous people in Australia, as well as others elsewhere, their societies are not predicated on the free exchange of information. How can the Web be controlled so that those kinds of information are not unwittingly made available to people who have no right to them or who are ineligible to know about them? This is an important topic for all of those who work in the cultural sector.

The issue of authority to speak about items held in ethnographic collections is also highly contested. [11] The primary authority, of course, comes from the artists, the originators of works, and this rests on the assertion of cultural knowledge and rights to speak. Museum documentation of items represents a powerful tool for the expression and consolidation of cultural birthright. The memory and the voice of the ethnographic item are enhanced by historical recordings and present-day affirmations and interpretations.

What is an ethnographic collection today? Is it something created in the past, a part of historical and political processes? Or is it something that endures in the contemporary setting? Few if any museum staff today continue the ‘vacuum-cleaner’ approach, travelling into communities collecting everything that somebody has used to tell a story of their culture. For many museums, work is being conducted in very different social contexts. The works themselves, the artefacts, the artworks, still have embodied meanings and enduring histories. The authority of the creator is profound but, removed from its context, is still subject to interpretation. Memory is simply a glimpse; it is not a ‘fact’ that can be recorded. It is a matter of interpretation within a changing context, a selective attribution if not a discriminating account. There are many different voices for a variety of different occasions, with different explanations for different people. Museums need to facilitate this unpredictability of both memory and voice.

Ethnographic museums look at whole constellations of knowledge, knowledge that is shared, knowledge that might be segregated, knowledge that follows different paths. The objects in their collections are media for the communication of information. They convey insight in different ways: what curators of such collections have to always be aware of is the primacy of information. The pre-eminence of documentation is what both makes the meaning, and what conveys the meaning.

Museums of anthropology, then, are the public face of anthropology. They resonate with the rich data collected by anthropologists in the field, and provide a conduit for communicating these insights to the wider public. Anthropology museums provide the raw materials for research and teaching within the academic setting, but they are increasingly valued for their outward focus. They are more and more seen as ‘treasures’ by the public, highly visible and perhaps more readily appreciated than rows of taxonomic expression. Ethnographic collections are a concrete validation of the cultures they express; they are witnesses to cultural diversity and social change. Museum-based anthropologists have a critical role to play in this process; they are keys in the public-scholar interface. Ethnographic collections provide a prime means through which multiple social

expressions can achieve a public presence and, through this engagement, recruit potential supporters and advocates into the highly politicised arena of cross-cultural engagement. This is the stuff of ethnographic collections, a shared journey through which the objects speak to us in many tongues.

Footnotes

¹ R Edwards and J Stewart (editors), *Preserving indigenous cultures a new role for museums*. Papers from a UNESCO Regional Seminar, Adelaide 1978, AGPS, Canberra, 1980.

² JE Stanton, 'Snapshots on the Dreaming: photographs of the past and present' in L Peers and A Brown (eds), *Museums and source communities*, Routledge, London, 2003, pp. 136–51.

³ JE Stanton, 'Telling it right: whose story, which story?' *COMA Bulletin* No. 28, 1997, pp. 32–5.

⁴ Marshall McLuhan, *Culture Is Our Business*, McGraw-Hill, New York, 1970.

⁵ J Clifford, *Routes: travel and translation in the late twentieth century*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 1997, p. 92.

⁶ CAMA, *Previous Possessions, New Obligations: policies for museums in Australia and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples*, Council of Australian Museum Associations, Melbourne, 1993.

⁷ Museums Australia, *Continuous Cultures, Ongoing Responsibilities*, Museums Australia, Canberra, 2005.

⁸ JE Stanton, 'At the grass-roots: collecting and the community in Aboriginal Australia', in S Toussaint and J Taylor (eds), *Applied Anthropology in Australasia*, University of Western Australia Press, Perth, 1999, pp. 282–94.

⁹ Stanton, 'Snapshots on the Dreaming', pp. 143–7.

¹⁰ B Glowczewski, L Pourchez, J Rostkowski and J Stanton (eds), *Cultural diversity and Indigenous peoples: oral, written expressions and new technologies*, UNESCO, Paris, 2004 (CD-Rom).

¹¹ M Ames, *Cannibal tours and glass boxes: the anthropology of museums*, University of British Columbia Press, Vancouver, 1992.

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Understanding Museums - Indigenous people and museums

Transforming culture: Indigenous art and Australian art museums

by Bernice Murphy

Aboriginal art had a restricted presence in Australian museums in the first half of the twentieth century. On one hand it was framed by scientific study and typological displays in natural history museums that could remain unchanged for decades. [1] On the other hand, if Aboriginal art *were* presented to highlight aesthetic contents, it frequently still carried a burden derived from nineteenth-century science's interest in 'primitive' stages of society, [2] and thus was framed as 'Primitive art'. [3]

The transformational changes of the later twentieth century could not have been imagined in the 1940s, when the small bark illustrated here [4] was collected on the American-Australian Scientific Expedition to Arnhem Land (AASEAL expedition) in 1948 led by Charles Mountford. [5]



Figure 1: 'The Man, Mik-mik', Oenpelli, Western Arnhem Land, Northern Territory, [American-Australian Scientific Expedition to Arnhem Land \(AASEAL\) collection](#), National Museum of Australia.

Four decades later, the situation was completely transformed. In the 1980s, following rising attention in metropolitan centres and the supportive work of locally based art advisers in Indigenous communities, [6] some artists from the same region and broad kinship networks as those sampled by Charles Mountford's collecting in 1948 had achieved artistic 'careers', been represented repeatedly in exhibitions, and had reached diverse audiences and collections in the wider world.

This chapter considers Indigenous art's impact in Australian art museums in the last decades of the twentieth century. It highlights how the 1970s and 1980s, in particular, witnessed a series of changes that brought about new kinds of Indigenous engagement and presentation within Australia's public galleries and museums. Such developments could not have been accomplished within previous institutional practices. Historical imagination was challenged in its interpretative tasks. New connections needed to be made, stretching beyond museums and involving near and far-distant communities. In particular, structural change in relation to cultural authority and responsibility for knowledge was required to bring Indigenous perspectives, presence and creativity into mainstream institutions. [7]

Differing museum approaches to Indigenous culture

It is remarkable how contrasting have been the approaches underlying the ethnographic

presentation of Indigenous art in Australian natural history or anthropology museums, and Indigenous exhibitions, often of the same material, in art museums. These differences delineate one of the most complex domains in Australian museography of the last half-century, and one of the least elucidated in museology.

The lack of debate about different museum approaches to Indigenous culture is reinforced by continuing divisions in institutional cultures, research and publications. For example, an important anthology of essays on 'scientific' collecting historically, *The Makers and Making of Indigenous Australian Museum Collections*, appeared in 2008. The editors glancingly acknowledge that there have been competing value systems shaping the conceptualisation of Indigenous 'art' – especially in the period leading up to the Australian bicentenary of 1988:

Central to the rise of Aboriginal art was the effort of many outside anthropology to wrest art from the anthropologists, and the ethnographic museum, and to relocate it in the art gallery. [8]

However, no collections located in art museums are appraised in the publication. Such divisions are maintained only at considerable cost to Indigenous cultural aspirations to be 'viewed whole': as part of a continuing cultural history and comprehensive story of adaptive evolution across a huge land and islands over centuries.

The rise of specialised exhibitions and curatorship of Indigenous art

Continued institutional segregation distorts the historical record of more than a half-century. Australia's state and national galleries have been acquiring Indigenous art purposively since the 1950s. They have established staffing structures and programs providing permanent attention to Indigenous art as a central aspect of their institutional mission; meanwhile the largest institutions have developed dedicated curatorial departments supporting specialised collections and exhibitions.

A growing number of Indigenous curators have been employed by art museums, some of whom have organised or coordinated some of the most outstanding exhibitions in the country in recent decades. Key examples are:

- Hetti Perkins at the Art Gallery of New South Wales (AGNSW), Sydney
- Brenda L Croft at the Art Gallery of Western Australia (AGWA), Perth, then National Gallery of Australia (NGA), Canberra – but in the interim also a guest curator of the Indigenous-focused Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art in 2000
- Margo Neale at AGNSW, Sydney, Queensland Art Gallery (QAG), Brisbane, and then the National Museum of Australia (NMA), Canberra
- Doreen Mellor at Flinders University, SA, then Tandanya National Aboriginal Cultural Institute, Adelaide, and National Library of Australia (NLA), Canberra
- Djon Mundine at Bula'Bula Arts, Ramingining, then for AGNSW, Sydney, Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA), Sydney, NMA, Canberra, QAG, Brisbane, and Campbelltown Arts Centre, New South Wales.

Indigenous exhibitions have also included the curatorial input of Indigenous artists; for example, Fiona Foley, Rea, Avril Quail, Brook Andrew, and again Brenda L Croft, as well as other practitioners – a number of artist-curators having emerged through the Boomalli Aboriginal Artists' Cooperative formed in 1987 in Sydney.

Parallel impact has been achieved by *non-Indigenous* curators who have made decisive contributions as long-experienced practitioners in the area of Indigenous arts: Judith Ryan at the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV), Melbourne; Margie West at the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory (MAGNT), Darwin; Wally Caruana and Susan Jenkins at NGA, Canberra; Michael O'Ferrall at AGWA, Perth; Diane Moon, when based at Maningrida Arts and Culture, NT, and for various institutions as a guest curator – and then at QAG/Gallery of Modern Art (GOMA) in Brisbane; and Anne Marie Brody at NGV, Melbourne, and later for the Holmes à Court and Kerry Stokes collections in Perth. Meanwhile, a younger generation is developing new capacities, and their work will play a decisive role in future years.

Dedicated permanent displays in state and national galleries

In the 1980s and 1990s the state galleries intensified their attention to Indigenous art and took affirmative steps to increase its presence and profile in their institutional development. For example, the Art Gallery of New South Wales moved dramatically to upscale its long-standing commitment to Indigenous art with the opening of the Yiribana Gallery in 1994. Special display galleries were established in the main institutions, backed by a more active acquisitions program, dedicated staff curatorship, and attention to thematic, temporary exhibitions of new work evolving in diverse Indigenous communities and situations.

One of the most important of the dedicated permanent displays within an art museum was in fact a single work: *The Aboriginal Memorial (1987–88)*, owned by the National Gallery. Organised by Djon Mundine for the 1988 (bicentennial) Biennale of Sydney, this work memorialising Aboriginal deaths over two centuries is an installation of 200 painted hollow log coffins (*Lorrkon*) by 43 artists from around Ramingining in Arnhem Land.

Depth of collections

Collections of Indigenous art in art museums have gained dramatically in depth as well as strength since the 1980s. Many institutions now house outstanding *constellations* of works in their collections that enable in-depth coverage of Indigenous regional and urban styles, as well as intensive representation of individual artists.

The Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA) in Sydney has three complete (pre-formed) collections of Arnhem Land art commissioned or negotiated by this essay's author. One was composed by Djon Mundine when he was in Ramingining, and purchased over three years in 1984–1986; a second collection was formed by Diane Moon when in Maningrida and acquired in the early 1990s, but with ownership title later transferred back to Maningrida in a unique 'cultural agreement' with the originating community. The third collection was a negotiated gift in 1993 of an important older collection formed originally in the United States in the 1970s and 1980s. [9] These collections were acquired across a decade (1984–1993) in which Indigenous art became *the* most concentrated area within the MCA-Power Bequest's total international collection.

Anthropology's contribution

The contribution of anthropology to the historical documentation and understanding of Indigenous people is unquestionable. There should be no underestimation of the density of the anthropological archive, the extent of its ongoing influence in recuperative knowledge, or the interpretative richness of its resources available for diverse applications. Anthropologists have also played a key role in advocacy and technical support of many Indigenous causes – especially in providing evidence of cultural continuity and historical documentation for cultural history, repatriation issues and native title claims.

However in terms of *creative futures*, this essay takes issue with an argument that conceptually elevates anthropology's procedures over the very different vantage points of art. This disciplinary challenge dating back to the 1940s when it fuelled manoeuvres behind the academic scenes, [10] has simmered and occasionally been resolutely waged in print over more than a half-century.

The art museum's vantage point

To curators working in art museums, there was a worrying sense that the disciplinary approach of anthropology had insisted on controlling the terms by which Indigenous art was framed and made 'knowable'. Indigenous art seemed irremediably confined and estranged by authoritative interpretation in ethnographic displays. Indigenous voices were rarely admitted in museum texts or publications as more than exotic vocal fragments (in 'language') or intriguing phrases (in Kriol), glimpsed through an edifice of already translated explanation in the speech and thought patterns of the dominant culture.

Art museums come to Indigenous art from a different history and orientation in considering the complexity of visual traditions as expressive of human creativity itself. Art museums favour a *non-determined encounter* with Indigenous art. They seek to present Indigenous cultural objects as human creativity manifested directly, and thereby to some extent cross-culturally – that is, as bearing signs of art *already articulate* and capable of engaging a broader audience. The question of enlarged understanding of form and language is a separate question, dealt with through the diverse processes of inquiry by which art history composes a more detailed historical account of the

origins, context and meaning of objects – including their social connections.

It is important to note also how much art museums were themselves changing in the later decades of the twentieth century, in the expansion of the whole system of contemporary art and its increasingly diverse manifestations – a proliferation of biennales, triennales, alternative artspace, artist-run spaces, art fairs, performance festivals, multimedia events and new kinds of cultural gatherings within and beyond the main institutions. This provided an immensely fertile environment for Indigenous art's expansion in one of *the* most transformative periods for art itself, which was continually tested and redefined by the experimental temper of contemporary art in its direct engagement with a changing world.

From ethnographic representation to creative agency

Australian artspace, galleries and museums sought something different from – and *for* – Indigenous art than scientific study had tended to provide. The 'art world' was drawn towards a *contemporary* experience of Indigenous art and resisted interpretations that *historicised* or over-determined such experience.

This repositioned Indigenous creativity in the highly tuned space of speculative, open-ended viewing shaped by the art museum as a cultural form. In this space Indigenous artists were not obliged to act as stand-ins or exemplars of whole 'cultures' or 'societies', as had been the burden placed upon their forebears' appearance historically in anthropological or natural history museums. Through exhibitions and commissions, Indigenous artists at last gained the agency of shaping their own appearance and representation in mainstream institutions.

The impact of opportunities on productivity

In the 1980s, in a widening array of new works, proliferating exhibitions, and evolving typologies in the work shown in art galleries, Indigenous artists all over central, western and northern Australia dismantled stereotypes of the static tempo or authoritarian shackles of 'tradition', in the new secular works through which they moved out to distant audiences.

Through direct invitation and commissioning, Indigenous artists were facilitated to produce works of increased scale, diversity and impact. They used means that were in many respects quite different from the communicative contexts of continuing custom and social exchange; in other respects their means were extensions or reformulations of those more intimate and exclusive practices. Performance often accompanied works' installation in public galleries, indicating their referential connections and layering in religion and ritual, in kinship and country.

Indigenous artists were quick to appreciate the political potential of these new exhibition opportunities. They recognised the art museum as a potent *civic space*, where their work was in dialogue with the most highly regarded expressive achievements of artists from different cultural backgrounds. It could serve as a powerful public arena for presenting the integrity and individuality of Indigenous art forms, as well as projecting the currency of social exchange and desire for independent cultural recognition they conveyed. [11]

Rise of individual careers: John Mawurndjul, Emily Kame Kngwarreye, Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri

Three biographies suggest the scale of transformation. From within the broad northern region where the 1948 bark was collected, a striking personal development can be followed in the case of Kuninjku artist John Mawurndjul, resident in the vicinity of Maningrida. Mawurndjul's work began to circulate in exhibitions beyond Arnhem Land after 1982. He developed a sense of museum collections and exhibitions as a cultural system in the wider world on a visit to the National Gallery in Canberra in 1983. [12] His work developed remarkably over subsequent years, gaining a more experimental momentum while still being grounded in tradition.

Mawurndjul was included in three highly significant exhibitions presented internationally in the 1980s: in the *Dreamings* exhibition shown at the Asia Society Galleries in New York in Australia's bicentennial year, 1988; in the Paris exhibition, *Magiciens de la Terre (Magicians of the Earth)*, organised by Jean-Hubert Martin, Director of the National Museum of Modern Art, Centre Pompidou, in 1989; and in the important *Aratjara* exhibition [13] instigated by Swiss artist Bernhard Lüthi – an exhibition that, with support of the Aboriginal Arts Board, was shown in art museums in Düsseldorf, London and Copenhagen in 1993–1994.

In Australia meanwhile, Mawurndjul's imposing bark paintings within the multi-sited Biennale of Sydney in 2000, in company with large-scale sculptures from fellow artists around Maningrida, constituted one of the most compelling ensembles in the whole biennale.



Figure 2: Installation view of paintings (ochres on wood) by John Mawurndjul, Biennale of Sydney 2000. Photo: Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney.

Mawurndjul won first prize three years later in the *Clemenger Contemporary Art Award* at the National Gallery of Victoria (in 2003), [14] which included a great suite of 21 works by Emily Kame Kngwarreye that were later acquired by the National Gallery of Australia. In September 2005 Mawurndjul was the subject of a large solo exhibition at the Tinguely Museum in Basel, Switzerland. [15] En route to the opening, he realised a large work as one of eight Australian Indigenous artists commissioned to produce works for the new Musée du Quai Branly in Paris. [16]

The remarkable stylistic development of the late Emily Kame Kngwarreye (who began painting in 1989 when approaching her eighties) [17] may be juxtaposed with the career of the younger Mawurndjul (born in 1952). While remaining members of Aboriginal communities with a still-active religious life in 'remote' Australia – Kngwarreye in the central desert north of Alice Springs, Mawurndjul in the tropical north, east of Darwin – each evolved directly through inherited traditions and pressed forward to depict their sites and 'country' through unheralded revolutions in imaginative perception.

Both artists eventually gained the honour of foreign retrospective exhibitions: Mawurndjul in Switzerland, and Kngwarreye in Japan. [18] In comparison with the collective anonymity and obscurity of cultural production in remote Aboriginal communities on the edge of Australian public awareness in their youth, their works had moved into potent forums of international recognition as *artists*, positioned in dialogue with the great and diverse art traditions of the world. This is an astonishing achievement within a generation!

A similarly interesting biography, beginning earlier, can be constructed for the Anmatyerre-Arrernte painter, Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri. Having emerged through the Papunya Tula co-operative stimulated in the early 1970s by Geoffrey Bardon, he was powerfully represented (in two works created with Tim Leura Tjapaltjarri) in the first *Australian Perspecta* exhibition of 1981 in Sydney (AGNSW). [19] His epochal *Warlugulong* (1967), acquired from this exhibition, began the Sydney Gallery's collecting of Western Desert paintings on canvas. Clifford Possum was later represented in Australia's contribution – all Aboriginal art – to the Bienal de São Paulo, Brazil (1983), [20] with a large work later acquired by the National Gallery of Australia, and eventually hung alongside German star, Anselm Kiefer, as a pivotal painting in the NGA's international survey of contemporary art in the 1990s. He was the subject of a survey exhibition in London in 1988, organised by Iwona Blazwick at the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA), juxtaposed with an

exhibition of Imants Tillers.

Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri eventually gained monographs on his work and a four-cities touring retrospective exhibition in Australia in 2003–2004. [21] In both cases, the artist was interpreted and supported by Vivien Johnson's detailed knowledge of the Papunya movement and of his personal career within that wider context. In 2008 the National Gallery purchased posthumously at a Sotheby's auction his most majestic rendition of *Warlugulong (1977)*, for the record-breaking price for an Aboriginal work of \$2.4 million dollars. Thus within three decades a work by Clifford Possum, painted only six years after the Papunya movement began, was already prized as a 'masterwork' of twentieth-century *Australian* art.

The creation of new networks among Indigenous artists and the rise of urban art

An important aspect of the art world's support of Indigenous art in the 1980s was the establishment of new networks of cross-cultural influence *among* Indigenous artists from disparate parts of the country. This had not generally occurred in earlier periods, where political struggle rather than creativity had forged common cause across Indigenous Australians of vastly different locations and backgrounds.

Such cross-cultural changes *within* Indigenous art were fostered through urban artists travelling to the far north and forming relationships with elders and artists in communities with a still-active ritual life. Many artists – for example Lin Onus, Fiona Foley, Robert Campbell Junior, Tracey Moffatt, Gordon Bennett and Michael Riley – gained great stimulus from visits to Arnhem Land. This expanded their experience and sharpened their own sense of the complex identities contributing to Indigenous art. [22]

It could clearly be seen that an intense preoccupation with community and place, with interpersonal narratives and social history, provided shaping forces and shared sensibilities linking Indigenous art from widely disparate parts of Australia, including the Torres Strait and Tasmania.

A line of rising development in exhibitions of rural and urban Indigenous artists can be traced from a small but important exhibition organised at Sydney's Artspace in the early 1980s by Vivien Johnson and Tim Johnson, *Koori Art '84*. [23] The quickening tempo of urban art's claims in the mainstream was underscored through the formation of the Boomalli Aboriginal Artists Cooperative in Sydney in 1987, and the appearance of Indigenous curatorship, often through a background in art practice – as was the case for Fiona Foley, Brenda L Croft and Avril Quail, all of whom were associated with Boomalli's founding.

Many urban artists brought a stringently critical view of Australian cultural history to their work. This may be traced in Fiona Foley's reworking of the motifs of colonial dispossession in her two-dimensional works and mixed-media installations; in Destiny Deacon's photographs, acerbically charged with golliwog dolls and parodic recycling of racist, subcultural bric-a-brac; [24] in Gordon Bennett's disordering of the 'cultural machinery' of colonial painting; and in Richard Bell's painting and actions that blitz mainstream composure in rumbustious inversions of stereotype. Wearing his notorious 'White Girls Can't Hump' t-shirt in Darwin to receive the 2003 Telstra NATSIAA art award, a major national event organised annually by the Museum and Art Gallery of the NT, [25] Richard Bell also attacked the rising commodification of Indigenous art – for example in a text emblazoned across the painting (*Scientia e Metaphysica [Bell's Theorem]*) that actually won the award, stating 'Aboriginal Art it's a White Thing'.

From artists on the margins to *Culture Warriors* challenging the mainstream

Richard Bell's provocative confrontation with Australian art's history shifted strategically in a later painting (2006) entitled *Australian Art It's an Aboriginal Thing*. This work incorporated a montage of modernist stylistic devices that insurgently disordered the coherent territory of a 'national' art. The painting caught the mood of the first edition of a new project: the National Indigenous Art Triennial, which opened at the National Gallery of Australia late in 2007.

Curated by Brenda L Croft, *Culture Warriors* [26] in some respects built on earlier achievements in her *Beyond the Pale* (Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art) at the Art Gallery of South Australia in 2000. However with the greater scale and impetus afforded by the National Gallery's commitment to a triennial venture, *Culture Warriors* produced the most substantial intermingling of continuing

'traditional' arts practice alongside rural, suburban and high-metropolitan forms: all marking the variety of adaptive energies across the broad horizon of contemporary Indigenous art in Australia today.

Looking back/ looking forward

The exuberant achievements of recent years have been the result of more than six decades of cumulative effort. It is little known that Australian state gallery directors were lobbying the Australian government in the early 1950s to build an Australian pavilion within the Biennale of Venice, and they urged that 'the very best of contemporary Australian works available' should be accompanied by Aboriginal bark paintings. [27] This was decades before an Australian Pavilion was actually achieved in Venice in 1988 (with an exhibition of Arthur Boyd's paintings), or before Indigenous artists represented *Australian art* in Venice in the following Biennale. In 1990 the Australian Pavilion presented Trevor Nickolls and Rover Thomas; [28] this was succeeded towards the end of the decade by a trio presentation of Emily Kame Kngwarreye, Yvonne Koolmatrie and Judy Watson in 1997. [29]

Building on the rising consciousness of Aboriginal art's claims within our major institutions in the 1960s and 1970s – and all state galleries had contributed to this recognition, with Tony Tuckson's commitment in Sydney being the most outstanding – the 1980s and 1990s opened out to embrace diverse attitudes and practices in securing growing audiences for Indigenous art. Australia's art museums – and Indigenous artists themselves – meanwhile sourced ideas in a great variety of disciplines in constructing the diverse exhibitions that marked the later twentieth century, including the contributions of anthropology.

Some of the most substantial, impressive and profound exhibitions staged in recent times have occurred where art museums have committed the full resources of their own historical temperament, museography and experimental orientation to the *experience* of art, drawing on the depth of detailed ethnographical knowledge that natural history and anthropology can contribute, in order to expand the concentration on creative form itself. Outstanding examples of such integration, supported by rich layers of research, were achieved in two beautiful exhibitions co-ordinated by Hetti Perkins at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in recent years – *Papunya Tula: Genesis and Genius* [30] presented in 2000, and *Crossing Country: The Alchemy of Western Arnhem Land Art*, [31] presented in 2004. Meanwhile for forceful concentration on thematic and stylistic development of one artist, enriched by careful contextualisation of sources in supporting material, the exhibition of *Utopia: The Genius of Emily Kame Kngwarreye*, even in a cut-down version at the National Museum in Canberra [32] following its expansive showing in Osaka and Tokyo, impacted on a broad public as one of the great experiences of Australian art in a generation. The Australian curator for this project in 2008, collaborating with Japan's initiating curator, Akira Tatehata, was Margo Neale (NMA).



Visitors at the exhibition at the National Museum of Art, Osaka, 26 February to 13 April 2008. Photo: Benita Tunks. Courtesy National Museum of Australia.

The challenge of language

One of the sharp issues for art museums and anthropological museums alike is raised around the issue of languages. Systematic efforts to liberate the richness of Indigenous thought and expression from its clogged rendition in various forms of Creole (or Kriol) are long overdue. It is time to commission proper translations from native-fluency thought; this has been well provided through various efforts that convey John Mawurndjul's ideas to a wider world. It is important to liberate the nuanced orality of Indigenous *speech*, so often immobilised as printed *text* controlled by the foreign *discourse* of outsiders. It would be unthinkable to interview foreign artists in a portmanteau language that prevented subtlety of thought and expression in terms of first-language fluency. Nevertheless it is still received practice to render remotely located Indigenous artists' thought in Kriol – that is, in a reductive language, acquired in addition to sometimes three or four Indigenous languages spoken already, and therefore a language that cannot convey the richness of concept that is possible only in the layered reference of first-language speech, by which thought itself is fully encoded culturally.

In retrospect

The expansive decades of activity surveyed in this essay have immeasurably enhanced the self-determining options of Indigenous artists (and curators) to pursue multiple kinds of presentation and interpretation of art across a broad spectrum of institutions, places and settings. The vigorous plurality of approaches and contexts now available to Indigenous art has directly stimulated its diversification as well as helping to maintain vital continuities with a rich past. This cumulative history has repositioned Indigenous creativity to a pivotal place in national understanding of Australia's cultural history. In the process Australian art museums have contributed to Indigenous art's rightful recognition among the world's cultural achievements at an international level of esteem.

For sheer diveristy of regional, rural and contemporary Indigenous art's voices today, no single Australian museum can now surpass the historical and stylistic panorama provided by the suite of purpose-built Indigenous galleries of the National Gallery of Australia (NGA extension, Stage 1, opened in 2010).

Footnotes

¹ Aboriginal displays were scarcely changed for 75 years in the Queensland Museum (1911–1986); 68 years in the South Australian Museum (1914–1982); and more or less 56 years in the Australian Museum (1906–1956), despite a rearrangement by culture areas in the 1930s in Sydney. (Nicolas Peterson, Lindy Allen and Louise Hamby (eds), *The Makers and Making of Indigenous Australian Museum Collections*, Melbourne University Publishing, Melbourne, 2008, 'Introduction', pp. 1–26, 3–4.)

² Tony Bennett, *Pasts Beyond Memory: Evolution, Museums, Colonialism*, Routledge, London and New York, 2004.

³ See *Australian Aboriginal Art*, National Museum, Melbourne, 1929, which included an essay titled 'The primitive artist'; and Dr Leonhard Adam, *Primitive Art Exhibition*, 1943, shown under the joint auspices of the National Museum and National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne.

⁴ See also Peter Sutton (ed.), *Dreamings: The Art of Aboriginal Australia*, Asia Society Galleries, New York, 1988, fig. 71, p. 45: *Mother, Daughter, and Snake*, 1948; artist unknown, Western Arnhem Land; ochres on bark, 47.5x 62.5 cm.

⁵ See CP Mountford (ed.), *Records of the American-Australian Scientific Expedition to Arnhem Land*. Vol.1: *Art, Myth and Symbolism*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1956; CP Mountford (ed.), *Records of the American-Australian Scientific Expedition to Arnhem Land*, Vol.2, London, 1960.

⁶ See JC Altman (Chairman), *The Aboriginal Arts and Crafts Industry: report of the review committee*, Department of Aboriginal Affairs, AGPS, Canberra, 1989; Felicity Wright, *Art and Craft Centre Story: A survey of thirty-nine Aboriginal community art and craft centres in remote Australia, undertaken by Desart Inc*, Vol. 1, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC), Canberra, 1999; Vol. 2, ATSIC, Canberra, 2000. See also Fred Myers, *Painting Culture: the making of an Aboriginal high art*, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2002.

⁷ See Des Griffin, 'Previous possessions, new obligations: a commitment by Australian museums', *Curator*, vol. 39, no.1, 1996, 45–62; *Continuing Cultures: Ongoing Responsibilities* – Museums Australia's Indigenous policy for relations between Indigenous people and museums – 2nd (rev.) ed., Museums Australia, Canberra, 2005.

⁸ Nicolas Peterson, Lindy Allen and Louise Hamby (eds), *The Makers and Making of Indigenous Australian Museum Collections*, p 6.

⁹ See Susan Cochrane (ed.), *Aboriginal Art Collections: highlights from Australia's public museums and galleries*, Craftsman House, St Leonards, NSW, 2001.

¹⁰ Professor AS Elkin's attempt from his anthropology Chair at Sydney University to have Charles Mountford unseated as prospective leader of the AASEAL expedition to Arnhem-Land in 1948 was unsuccessful. However a touch of malice is evident in the archival record of Elkin's efforts to gain 'spy' reports on Mountford's progress in Arnhem Land, especially those that provided pleasure in recording the latter's vicissitudes. Some of this ill-will towards the breaching of anthropology's methodology in collecting and exhibiting Aboriginal art continued as a legacy through Elkin's then students, Ronald and Catherine Berndt. It surfaces again a generation later in Berndt's dispute with artist/AGNSW deputy director Tony Tuckson over the latter's attitudes to Aboriginal art in the all-state galleries national touring exhibition, *Australian Aboriginal Art*, of 1960–61 – and is focused on Tuckson's essay in a later in-depth monograph of the same title in 1964, edited by Berndt. Berndt takes issue with Tuckson's position in an Epilogue within the same volume. A contemporary version of this long-standing rebuke of art museums and 'art' attitudes from the vantage point of anthropology can be found in essays by Prof. Howard Morphy since 2001 ('Seeing Aboriginal Art in the Gallery', *Humanities Research*, Australian National University, Canberra, Vol. 8, No. 1, 2001, 37–50). The 2001 essay sets out a critique that is expanded in the latter's monograph, *Becoming Art: exploring cross-cultural categories*, 2008. This critique now has a six-decade history of contest between the intellectual orientation of art museums and the claims of anthropology for primacy in the interpretation of Indigenous art in Australia.

¹¹ See Myers, *Painting Culture*, for a detailed study of the self-conscious Indigenous agency present in early Papunya painting.

¹² Luke Taylor, 'John Mawurndjul: "I've got a different idea"', catalogue essay in « rarrk » - *John Mawurndjul: journey in time in Northern Australia*, Musée Tinguely, Basel, 2005.

¹³ Bernhard Lüthi, with Gary Lee et al., *Aratjara – Art of the First Australians: traditional and contemporary works by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists*, Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf, 1993.

¹⁴ *Clemenger Contemporary Art Award*, National Gallery of Victoria, Ian Potter Centre, 2003. This was the fourth edition of the invitational award, hosted by the NGV – and the first occasion of an Indigenous artist's being awarded the prize.

¹⁵ « rarrk » – *John Mawurndjul*. This exhibition, guest curated by Bernard Lüthi (the crucial instigator previously of the *Aratjara* exhibition for Europe), was shown in Basel at the Musée Tinguely (21 September 2005 – 29 January 2006) and the Sprengel Museum, Hannover (19 February – 5 June 2006).

¹⁶ *Australian Indigenous Art Commission/Commande publique d'art aborigène: Musée du Quai Branly*, Art and Australia, Paddington, NSW, 2006; curators: Brenda L Croft and Hetti Perkins.

¹⁷ See Margo Neale and Emily Kame Kngwarreye, *Emily Kame Kngwarreye: Alhalkere: paintings from Utopia*; Margo Neale, with contributions by Roger Benjamin, et al, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, and Macmillan, 1998; curator: Margo Neale.

¹⁸ *Utopia: the genius of Emily Kame Kngwarreye*, National Museum of Art, Osaka, 26 February – 13 April 2008; National Art Center, Tokyo, 28 May – 28 July 2008; commissioning curator: Akira Tatehata, Japan; Australian curator: Margo Neale.

¹⁹ *Australian Perspecta 1981*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, 29 May – 21 June 1981; curator: Bernice Murphy.

²⁰ *XVII Bienal de São Paulo: Australia*, Sydney, Aboriginal Arts Board, 1983; exhibition, Parque Ibirapuera, São Paulo, Brazil, October – December 1983; commissioner: Thancoupie (Thanaquith people, Qld); curator: Bernice Murphy.

²¹ Vivien Johnson, *Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri*, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide, 2003; toured Adelaide, Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane, 2003 – 2004.

²² See Lin Onus, 'Southwest, Southeast Australia and Tasmania', in Bernhard Lüthi, Gary Lee et al., *Aratjara*, pp. 289–296, 292.

²³ *Koori Art '84*, Surry Hills, Sydney, Artspace, 1984, was curated by Vivien Johnson and Tim Johnson and presented 25 artists (including some artists from the central deserts and Arnhem Land).

²⁴ Clare Williamson and Hetti Perkins, *Blakness: Blak City Culture!*, South Yarra, Vic, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, 1994; Bernice Murphy, 'Passages of the Photographic Image', catalogue essay in *Zeitgenössische Fotokunst aus Australien/ Contemporary Photographic Art From Australia*, publ. German/English, Neuer Berliner Kunstverein/NBK, Berlin, September 2000, pp.167–8, 171; curator: Bernice Murphy.

²⁵ The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Award (NATSIAA) exhibitions, organised by the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory since 1984, have provided an important annual invitational exhibition centred on Darwin, while also enriching the collections of that institution.

²⁶ *Culture Warriors: National Indigenous Art Triennial*, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, 2007; curator: Brenda L Croft.

²⁷ Minutes, Australian Gallery Directors Conference, 4th annual meeting, Perth, 21–23 November 1951, pp. 4, 17.

²⁸ For the 44th Venice Biennale, separate catalogues were produced for Rover Thomas and Trevor Nickolls, the presentation in 1990 organised by the Art Gallery of Western Australia on behalf of the Australia Council; curator: Michael O'Ferrall.

²⁹ *Fluent: Emily Kame Kngwarreye, Yvonne Koolmatrie, Judy Watson: XLVII esposizione internazionale d'arte/ La Biennale di Venezia*, Australia Council, Sydney, catalogue for 47th Biennale of Venice, 1997; curator: Hetti Perkins.

³⁰ *Papunya Tula: Genesis and Genius*, Hetti Perkins and Hannah Fink (eds), Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, in association with Papunya Tula artists, 2000; coordinating curator: Hetti Perkins.

³¹ *Crossing Country: The Alchemy of Western Arnhem Land Art*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, 2004; curators: Jon C Altman and Hetti Perkins.

³² Taylor, 'John Mawurndjul: "I've got a different idea"', in « rarrk » - *John Mawurndjul: journey in time in Northern Australia*.

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Understanding Museums - Indigenous people and museums

Repatriation: the end of the beginning

by Michael Pickering and Phil Gordon

The major federal, state and territory museums have become increasingly active in the repatriation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ancestral remains and secret/sacred objects over the past 20 years. Indeed the Australian museum industry is now internationally recognised as a world leader in this area. What characterises the Australia repatriation experience is a reliance on a *philosophy* of repatriation, typically in the absence of compelling legislation.

Australian museums return remains and secret/sacred objects because intellectual debate and engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples has convinced the industry that this is the ethical course of action. This is in stark contrast to other countries, for example, the United States of America, where legislative controls impose repatriation on an industry that is clearly not always convinced of the merits of the practice.

However, despite Australia's pre-eminence, this reputation has not come about without dispute. Only 20 years ago there was majority opposition by heritage professionals, many of whom worked in, or were associated with Australian museums. They believed that repatriation was the wrong thing to do. Any repatriation was considered to be a surrender to Indigenous political activism. Nonetheless, increasing requests – indeed demands – by Indigenous people for the return of remains and secret/sacred objects compelled the museum industry to explain why it rejected, or was at least cautious of, the principle. In so doing the topic of repatriation was openly debated for the first time. This in turn led to a change in direction. Slowly, repatriation events occurred, not the least being the return of the remains of Mungo Woman in 1989 by Alan Thorne of the Australian National University. The Mungo statement of 1989 was a highly symbolic event.

The Australian Museum in Sydney took the lead in industry acceptance of repatriation, largely empowered by the support and direct input of its director. [1] As a result the principle was embraced by Museums Australia. [2] In recent years the principle of repatriation has been endorsed by federal, state, and territory ministers and governments. [3] This, in turn, has led to provision of improved funding support for repatriation.

While a philosophy of repatriation has been established, the practice of repatriation is still developing. Each repatriation case and event is still unique in its characteristics. Each museum's experiences continue to inform their future practice – indeed the practice of the industry. As a result of improved resourcing leading to greater activity, issues that previously emerged rarely are now becoming regular occurrences, with trends and patterns subsequently emerging.

Repatriation as a business as usual practice of museums is still new. Each museum works under its own philosophical and policy guidelines, influenced also by external political and legislative responsibilities that are imposed upon it by the nation, state, or territory to which it belongs.

Over the last 30 to 40 years many changes have occurred in Australia in the relationships between Indigenous peoples and the broader community. Both political and social rights have been given to or won by Indigenous peoples across a broad range of areas, from land rights through to the acknowledgement that Aboriginal people were and are the original owners of this land via the 1992 Mabo judgment by the Australian High Court. [4]

As museums don't stand alone from these developments in the broader community, they have had to respond to these changes and deeply question their world views and the ways they operate. These are positive outcomes that have enabled museums to grow and maintain relevance, not only with Indigenous peoples, but also to the broader Australian community.

The National Museum of Australia

The National Museum of Australia (NMA) has a divergent history compared with most other major Australian museums active in repatriation. While a 'National Museum' was proposed for decades, it

only came into existence officially in 1980 with the passing of the *National Museum of Australia Act*. This means the National Museum of Australia does not have a nineteenth-century legacy of a history of deliberate collection of human remains and secret/sacred objects that characterises other museums. The ancestral remains and secret/sacred objects in its care are derived from other collections transferred, or temporarily housed under contract. This is an advantage in that the Museum does not have to work as hard to overcome a negative perception of the Museum amongst its Indigenous clients. The Museum's own holdings of human remains and secret/sacred objects derive primarily from the old Australian Institute of Anatomy collections, transferred to the Museum in 1985. The Museum has also been the repository and repatriation point for collections of ancestral remains from overseas.

Interestingly, despite the status of the National Museum of Australia as a federal institution, it has fewer legislated powers and less authority or responsibility for repatriation than the major state and territory museums, other than a minor role as a storage facility for unprovenanced remains referred through the Minister for the Department of Environment and Water Resources under the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Heritage Protection Act 1984*. State and territory museums, on the other hand, typically have roles, responsibilities, and a commensurate authority assigned to them by relevant state and territory heritage management legislation. When the Museum engages with Indigenous communities in the states and territories it is obliged to work in accordance with the legislation and protocols prevailing within the respective jurisdictions. This conflicting federal/state authority is neither useful nor required; it does however serve as a cautionary tale to external federal agencies, also engaged in repatriation, that place pre-eminence on the term 'national' in their dealings with states and territories.

The National Museum has been returning remains and secret/sacred objects to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people upon request since its inception in 1980. In 2001, the Museum established a Repatriation Program Unit to manage the return of Indigenous remains and secret/sacred objects.

The National Museum's repatriation activities are guided by its policies on 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Human Remains' (2005), and on 'Secret/Sacred and Private Material' (2006). [5] The most significant characteristics of these policies are that they allow for the immediate and unconditional return of remains and secret/sacred objects to traditional owners and custodians, and that any other external access to the remains collection is permitted only with the approval of the relevant community.

Unlike many Australian state and territory museums, the Museum does not have an Indigenous committee to oversee repatriation, preferring to deal directly with the identified descendants and custodians of material to be returned.

The National Museum's repatriation process is proactive. The work begins with the identification of provenanced remains. The provenance is then located on appropriate maps. This allows consultation with relevant state and territory heritage authorities that assists in the identification of formally recognised representative organisations and/or individuals. It is expected that the Museum's activities will not conflict with the laws and protocols of the state or territory jurisdictions in which the repatriation activities occur. This responsibility encourages engagement with state and territory government Indigenous heritage management departments, and Indigenous representative bodies such as museums, land councils, native title representative bodies, and legal aid services and so on. Such bodies, established by legislation and/or supported by state, territory, or federal funding, have a responsibility to represent custodians, traditional owners, and native title applicants and/or holders. The identification of such individuals and groups based on cultural, anthropological, as well as legislative criteria is the day-to-day business of such representative bodies. Access to this information – achieved through their endorsement of a repatriation claimant, rather than by disclosure of personal and private particulars – assists the Museum in fast tracking the repatriation process to the benefit of custodians.

At the same time, such engagement provides some protection for the National Museum when it is required to describe who it has dealt with, and to explain the basis for accepting that individual or group as being the appropriate custodians for repatriated items. This occurs, for example, through the regular processes of government audit, discovery of documents for legal process (native title), and enquiries by other Indigenous representatives, Senate inquiries and so on.

Put simply, the National Museum uses the local knowledge and experience that state and territory

representatives and heritage organisations provide in order to assist with identification of prospective custodians or their representatives. The effectiveness of this method is demonstrated by the lack of formal complaint by other majority groups following a repatriation event.

Once a prospective custodian, custodial group, or representative body has been identified, they are advised in writing of the nature of the remains available for return. Correspondence often includes a statement of 'Advice to Applicants' that details how to apply for the return of remains. This asks prospective custodians for any information that may assist in supporting their application. However, the aim is not to make custodians sit an exam for the return of remains that the National Museum considers are their rightful heritage. Provision of such information is not mandatory, and in the majority of cases the Museum itself accepts the potential claimant group's rights of ownership based on information gained in the process of identifying them and, in particular, through the endorsement of state and territory museums, heritage offices and representative bodies. What the establishment of basic criteria does do, however, is discourage frivolous or vexatious claims by people who may not be acknowledged or authorised by the majority of the community to make a claim for repatriation, a critical issue when it is remembered that any repatriation is an empowering event. When a government instrumentality returns materials to a group it is effectively supporting the primacy of that group as the local representative organisation.

An officer of the Museum's repatriation unit then consults further with the applicants and other parties with potential interests. The return of the remains or objects, or alternative management, proceeds in accordance with instructions from the custodians. Except for signing a receipt, the return of remains or objects is currently unconditional. Custodians may do with the material as they see fit.

Where groups do not have the resources to take receipt of items, the Museum sometimes offers to store them temporarily on their behalf. The remains or objects are the property of the community/custodians and the Museum claims no authority over them beyond keeping them safe and secure. This service has been facilitated by the Museum's larger than usual facility to house ancestral remains.

The National Museum of Australia's Repatriation Unit is a service provider, not a research unit. It is charged with the prompt repatriation of remains to custodians. Thus, the Museum does not do 'pure' research on remains or secret/sacred objects. In-house investigations are carried out when necessary in order to facilitate provenancing, reunification of separated elements, and repatriation of remains and objects. However, such inquiry is usually focused in its aims and restricted in its circulation. Access to such reports requires the approval of the community concerned.

In order to maintain the trust and confidence of Indigenous communities, it is important to demonstrate that the unit has no vested personal research interests that might delay or otherwise compromise the prompt return of material or the right of the relevant custodial group to control, and participate in associated research. Thus, where a community requests further research beyond that required for facilitating return, the Unit attempts to put them in touch with suitable external professionals. Such an attitude is not unique to the National Museum of Australia. Research on Indigenous remains is tightly controlled by industry, institutional, and professional policies and protocols requiring community approval. The outcome is that today no Australian museum will allow access to its holdings of Indigenous remains or secret/sacred objects without the approval of the socially associated community.

Over the seven years of the National Museum of Australia Repatriation Unit's operations, the remains of over 750 individuals and over 400 secret/sacred objects have been returned to Aboriginal communities across Australia.

The Australian Museum

One of the pivotal programs that has evolved out of the growing relationship between the Australian Museum (AM) and Indigenous peoples has been in the area of repatriation of significant material as well as ancestral remains to communities of origin. The Australian Museum has been repatriating objects since the 1970s. Repatriation is defined as returning an original object or actual remains to the original owners.

The philosophy of the Australian Museum is that cultural property has ongoing significance, both to the people who created it and to their descendants. Thus the act of repatriation reflects respect for living cultures and a way of supporting Indigenous people in the control of their own cultural

outcomes. As a result of returning artefacts and human skeletal remains to Indigenous Australian communities, the Australian Museum has become an agent of social change by promoting reconciliation through its program of repatriation.

It has now been over 30 years since the Australian Museum first repatriated Aboriginal skeletal remains and a range of objects to various national museums in the Pacific. These events were brought about due to emerging international Indigenous rights, including land rights; the policies of self-determination within the broader Indigenous communities; and the need for museums to address the ongoing changes in the relationships between Indigenous people and the broader society.

This new dialogue has required a dramatic re-evaluation by major museums and the development of a dialogue between museums and other cultural bodies and Indigenous peoples. The Australian Museum is no exception. However, this is still a work in progress. Because the relationship is growing and evolving, the various frameworks of interaction are constantly changing. As Des Griffin, former Director of the Australian Museum, has argued, museums can no longer function on the basis that they alone may determine what use is made of cultural material or what access is allowed to Indigenous people. The continuing responsibility of museums to respond to the concerns of Indigenous people is a moral imperative. [6]

For both the Australian Museum and Indigenous communities the successful initiation of proactive repatriation policies, protocols and practices is not the end of the issue. In many cases it is just the beginning. Marking the initiation and development of relationships can take many forms. For instance, the Museum has been asked to assist in the return of material from private collectors or other institutions to the appropriate Aboriginal custodians or communities. In cases where community facilities are not available, the Museum has been asked to be a custodian on behalf of the communities. The Museum receives this material from Aboriginal custodians or communities on the basis that it is considered a safekeeping place, a place that can be trusted.

Consultation

One of the major factors in the developing relationship is the involvement of Indigenous people in the decision-making process. The Australian Museum has, over a number of years, developed a framework for consultations undertaken to gain their opinion and advice about the current and future protection and management of items of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritage and culture in the Museum's care.

The cornerstone principles of this framework are:

- . Communities will be provided with sufficient information on their cultural material stored at the Australian Museum and offered every opportunity to give their opinion or advice on the management of these collections.
- . Consultation is an ongoing process. It is the Museum's responsibility to provide resources so that the right level of consultation can take place. The intensity of consultation varies due to a number of factors and this usually relates to the outcome required. For instance, if the repatriation of an item of a secret or sacred nature is planned, extensive consultation over a number of years would usually be required. If the material under consideration is less problematic with regard to cultural attributes, or is of a less sensitive nature, then consultation may only need more limited time.

The act of consultation in itself can come in many forms, reflecting the requirements of a great variety of Aboriginal community structures that exist. Responses to this continuing dialogue are constantly changing, and include continual evaluation of the various programs offered to Indigenous people, which are then modified and developed to meet their changing needs.

The future will hold new challenges for all museums in the area of repatriation. One of these will be in the way that museums use Indigenous knowledge in all its many forms. Indigenous intellectual property, how it is used, who owns it, and how traditional owners are going to access and control this material, are significant questions.

Aboriginal Museums Program

Access to collections in a digital form can empower community engagement with collections when it is combined with social media to explore issues of identity. Social media can be a powerful medium

through which communities determine access to digital collections.

One of the more obvious responses by Indigenous people to control of not only their material culture but the associated stories has been through the setting up of their own museums or keeping places. The Australian Museum views the establishment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander museums, cultural centres, and keeping places (community museums) as important cultural institutions where local Indigenous people can house cultural material, host exhibitions, conduct research and become centres of cultural revitalisation. In this way the Australian Museum recognises the importance of Indigenous people maintaining and preserving their culture. Cultural centres range from large multifunctional tourist facilities, through to small facilities with little more than a few display cases. However, what they all represent is the manifestation of legitimate responses by Indigenous peoples to the preservation of their own culture, using their own voice.

The Australian Museum has developed the Aboriginal Museums Outreach Program to assist Indigenous people in the achievement of their cultural objectives. This program provides Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities with access to professional museum training and advice in the planning and management of their own cultural centres and keeping places. The Australian Museum has a unique resource of talented professionals who are able to provide a range of community-focused training from intensive through to short familiarisation visits. Some of the areas in which the Australian Museum offers training to Aboriginal and Torres Strait people are archive and collection management, materials conservation techniques, and public program development.

Limited resources restrict the program in its capacity to offer this service adequately to all Aboriginal communities within New South Wales. The use of new technologies, especially in the initial stages of identifying needs and objectives, partly addresses this problem, without replacing the preferred face-to-face discussions that had continuously proved so successful.

The Australian Museums' 'Keeping Culture' project allows the user to gain first-hand experiences through four case studies of different styles of Aboriginal cultural centres and keeping places. The user is able to explore the experiences of these communities through audiovisual interviews and backgrounds to each of the centre's objectives and histories. [7]

The Museum's Aboriginal Heritage Unit (AHU) worked closely in the production of 'Keeping Culture' with people from four well-established cultural centres and keeping places. These representatives shared their own experiences of setting up and running a centre. This provided insights not only into some of the challenges and opportunities but also the important role these places play in preserving and maintaining culture within Aboriginal communities.

Throughout the development of the CDROM, an extensive consultation and review process was undertaken to obtain continual feedback on the project. A prototype of the CDROM was tested at a meeting of NSW Aboriginal cultural centre and keeping place workers, with feedback given on issues such as design, content, and ease of use.

The wide variety of collaborative projects undertaken by the AHU have resulted in a range of positive outcomes over a number of years. These have come about because museums have been responsive to the changing and evolving wishes of their Indigenous stakeholders, leading museums to engage them as equal partners in a truly win-win situation.

Swapping experiences

What have the National Museum of Australia and the Australian Museum learned over the past seven years of intensive repatriation? One generic outcome, reflected in the experiences of all Australian state and territory museums with which the National Museum and the Australian Museum have engaged, is that experiences, issues, problems and considerations that might once have only arisen rarely, now arise regularly. Similarly, some of the problems that museums may have thought unique to their situation are now seen to be common to all participating institutions. It should however, be noted that all museum repatriation practitioners are not necessarily in agreement, either over the priority of the issues or the means to their resolution. However, all are in agreement that they are topics requiring continued open debate and discussion. Some significant issues have emerged in recent years.

Firstly, the term 'repatriation' needs better definition if it is not to be trivialised. The term 'repatriation' means the return of the original. Several agencies engaging with repatriation assert

that return of copies of documentation, films or photographs constitutes repatriation. While this certainly constitutes restitution of cultural knowledge, it cannot be defined as repatriation. By analogy, the return of casts or photographs of remains or sacred objects, while retaining the originals, could in no way constitute repatriation.

Secondly, the success of museum repatriation programs, and their exposure in the media, seem to have invited greater interference from non-museum agencies seeking to capitalise on the 'good news' aspect of repatriation. As a result museums are encountering more interference in their activities, with increased, and more onerous, reporting requirements. Other non-museum agencies are also attempting to run independent repatriation projects that bypass state and territory museum procedures and legislative processes. As a result of inconsistent methodologies, Indigenous communities are receiving contradictory information; there is inconsistency in who or what organisations are being approached; and the subsequent potential for community conflict over repatriation is exacerbated. Australian museums take care to ensure that state and territory protocols and policies are observed — other agencies are not so cautious. Hearsay evidence suggests that instructions have been given to avoid some state and territory agencies with legislated authority for the care of secret/sacred objects, heritage, and ancestral remains. This interference may lead to museums withdrawing from participation with other agencies.

In addition, little consideration seems to have been given by funding agencies to supporting the post-return management by custodians of remains and secret/sacred objects. Communities need the resources to receive, house and/or finally inter repatriated material. The repatriation process is slowed considerably when communities simply cannot receive items or remains due to a lack of resources. Museums are funded to provide limited support for the actual receipt of the remains or objects, but the longer-term management falls upon the shoulder of the recipient communities, who rarely have the infrastructure or resources to care for the returns in a way they feel is culturally appropriate. In effect only half of the process is being funded.

A number of people are involved in the repatriation process. Each brings to the process, and to their methods of consultation, latent personal and professional biases. It is not surprising that the results of consultations by some professionals often reflect the pre-expressed opinions of the professionals themselves. Over time stronger methodologies and consultative models are being developed, and shared, that will increase the impartiality of consultations.

One particularly interesting concern for museums is the potential for conflict between Indigenous and non-Indigenous policies and philosophies of rights in heritage. Australian museums, amongst other heritage institutions, generally recognise that the rights in cultural heritage exist independently of a detailed knowledge of that cultural heritage. Australian museums recognise that other cultures have a right to be identified as moral, if not yet legal, owners of items of their culture. However, this philosophy may at times be at odds with Indigenous custom. For example, under western heritage philosophies, remains and/or sacred objects could be returned to groups or persons of the correct corporate identity – as with a duly authorised representative of a language group – but of an inappropriate social grouping, sex, or age. This person might have legitimate authority and a commensurate claim to remains or objects under a western legally defined heritage authority code, but a less important status under a customary authority code. It would be easy to artificially empower someone who has a legitimate right to an object under a western heritage policy structure, but less of a right under a customary structure.

Many remains and secret/sacred objects were acquired without the free and informed consent of the original custodians, and in violation of tradition or custom – they were stolen, or traded without authority. However, it must be recognised that some objects, both secret/sacred objects and human remains, were acquired legitimately in accordance with the cultural protocols of both giver and receiver, particularly those acquired over the past 60 years. Records and personal accounts clearly show that some researchers, both male and female, were occasionally given remains and secret/sacred objects with the free and informed consent of the giver and not in violation of tradition.

And finally, as a result of increased community engagement in the activities of museums over the past 20 years, relationships based on mutual respect and trust have increased. Many communities now trust some museums to care for remains and secret/sacred objects on their behalf until such time as resources for their receipt become available. Australian museums are increasingly offering to store remains on behalf of discrete communities or, in the case of unprovenanced remains and objects, on behalf of the Indigenous people of their jurisdictions. The future will thus see increased

transfers of collections to state and territory repositories authorised by state and territory Indigenous spokespeople. Unfortunately it is clear that for some of these institutions, in particular in the Northern Territory, their existing facilities are inadequate to house the number of remains and objects they will be requested to hold. Nonetheless, while finance is being provided on a per capita (object) basis for museums to return remains to the Northern Territory, no support is available for the Northern Territory Museum and Art Gallery or similar authorised heritage agency to improve and maintain its storage facilities. Similar smaller museums are in the same situation.

Conclusion

The underlying theme for the future is the need for improved coordination and allocation of resources based on assessment of future outcomes, not just on short term assessments of numbers of remains or objects returned.

Nonetheless, along with successful repatriations, the identification of problems is also a successful outcome. It is evidence of the debate and retrospective analysis that currently characterises participating museums in Australia. We look to continuing improvements in philosophy, process, and recognition of Indigenous rights in their heritage.

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