THE NATURAL OBJECT: EXHIBITING THE MACLEAY MUSEUM’S SPECIMEN COLLECTIONS

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This paper reflects on five years of research involving natural and cultural objects at the Macleay Museum, University of Sydney. What I call the ‘natural object’ is also known as taxidermy, a statue of an animal formed from its own skin. In taxidermy, nature is both the subject and the means of exhibiting the subject. Within the museum context natural objects are understood to speak for nature, in a similar way as cultural objects have been employed to speak for a specific human society (Danto 1995). By calling taxidermy a ‘natural object’ I want to draw attention to the fact that it is a product of a particular time, place and purpose.

Taxidermy is made differently depending on whether it is for decoration, education or research. The natural objects I work with at the Macleay Museum were created for a nineteenth century natural history museum, a period when there was little separation between the educational and research spaces of the museum. In contrast, the Powell–Cotton Museum where the 2015 Museum Ethnographers Group conference was held is a twentieth century natural history museum. By the twentieth century many museums began to reorganize their exhibition spaces. Exhibition halls employed new techniques to deliver ideas to a public audience, while storage and laboratory spaces were restricted to those conducting scientific research. The difference between these two periods can be discerned in the material form of the natural object, as I will demonstrate through an examination of the context of manufacture and materials of natural objects in both the Powell–Cotton and Macleay museums.

Academic discussion about the production of natural objects in the nineteenth century has tended to focus on the business side of things (Coote 2013, Harrison 2011) and the morality of a culture of big game shooting that gave businesses access to sensational material (cf. Jones 2015: 227–269). Ethnographic analysis of the natural object has generally been concerned with understanding the nineteenth century shared space of the natural with the ethnographic in the museum, and the shared spaces of their collection in the field (cf. Brown 2006; O’Hanlon 2000). Except in relation to its proximity to things seen as explicitly cultural, the natural object has thus largely been ignored.
The collections of the Macleay Museum are the primary focus here. Between 2009 and 2013 I managed a project generously funded by Sir Michael Hintze called the *Preservation of Victorian Taxidermy: seeking a better understanding of preservation and collecting methods of nineteenth century taxidermy*. Our aim was to research methods and purposes of taxidermy in the Victorian period in order to understand more about the Macleay collections, their historic pasts and their material futures. The research culminated in the *Stuffed Stitched & Studied* exhibition held at the Macleay in 2014–2015. Prior to that exhibition, Yolŋu elder and University of Sydney academic Joseph Neparrŋa Gumbula had worked with the Macleay curators and collections on another exhibition which included the Macleay’s taxidermy material. His work with the collections influenced the thinking for *Stuffed Stitched & Studied* as I will now discuss.

*Cultured nature*

The history of ethnography in museums is rich with analysis of how cultural objects can be made into museum creations through their exhibition (cf. Vogel 1989). In 2009 Gumbula refuted the idea of the ‘museum object’ through an exhibition of natural and cultural objects in which Yolŋu space was asserted. In *Makarr–garma*, curated with the assistance of Rebecca Conway, Gumbula reconfigured the Macleay temporary gallery space as a Yolŋu place populated with human and non-human actors. In Gumbula’s concept the natural and cultural objects are reflections of the same thing, as he put it ‘everything is telling us who we are’...

…the animals are related to human beings. As Yolŋu you imitate your being as the animals to incorporate that sense of expertise, you know them because they are your daily partners. You talk with them through the songline of the Manikay (Gumbula 2009).

The exhibition was part of Gumbula’s long-term project to locate Yolŋu collections and resources in the world’s museums and archives and return knowledge of them to north-east Arnhem Land communities. Part of the process was also to provide knowledge to institutions about the people and places in photographs, singers and names of songs in recordings and the purposes of production and names of cultural things in their collections. If something was not appropriately exhibited, stored or recorded Gumbula helped curators to understand why.

Gumbula and his family have long worked with *balanda* (foreigners) to share understanding of their world. The connection with the Macleay Museum was just one small part of a life’s work.¹ Over the nearly nine years of Australian Research Council funded work (2008–2015), Gumbula painstakingly worked
with a number of Australian and overseas curators in interpreting his world
to foreigners, and interpreting foreigners actions to his community. *Makarr–
garma* was also part of this community–based work.

The title of *Makarr–garma* was a play on Yolŋu language to suggest a space
for a ceremonial meeting. In exhibition design and planning meetings, Gumbula
explained why this needed to be the focus. Meeting spaces are shared between
insiders and outsiders; they are places where distant kin meet for ceremony and
where peace is negotiated in times of dispute. What was not said at exhibition
meetings, but obvious to all of us, was that when the exhibition was in planning,
Australia was engaged in a dispute with Northern Territory communities. The
Intervention, as it was informally called, had been a daily news feature, often
with sensationalist language and images. As this blog excerpt explained, the
consequences of the action were extensive:

In June 2007, the Federal government staged a dramatic military-like takeover
of Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory, which was orchestrated around
a moral panic concerning allegations of paedophile rings and the sexual abuse of
children. Exploiting a growing public awareness of serious social problems in remote
Indigenous communities, the subsequent measures known as the Northern Territory
Intervention were exempted from the Racial Discrimination Act (Accessed 9 January

In some Aboriginal communities and by some individuals across the Northern
Territory, the Intervention was welcomed as a way to make change. For others, and
for Gumbula, it was a hurtful and racist act that stigmatized and misrepresented
his community. *Makarr-garma* was, for Gumbula, an opportunity to offer
healing between the two worlds, Yolŋu and balanda, to extend a welcome and an
invitation to learn about their world and their society.

Conceptually the exhibition was organized around a single day, from
*munhakumirr* ‘dawn’ through *waluy–dalyu* ‘when the day begins to shine’ to
*dämbuy–waluy* ‘midday’, *wärrarramirriy* ‘sunset’ to *munhagu* ‘night–time’.
Objects and animals were placed in front of painted backdrops that represented
these parts of a day. A separate section, *wuŋli wanjany waltjan* ‘a mirror of the
year’, reflected on the whole day through historic and contemporary photographs
of community life and land. As with the photographs which documented
Yolŋu life regardless of whether they were from the 1930s or 2000s, there was
no distinction between an animal and a representation of an animal, or indeed a
person. As Gumbula explained in the introduction to the exhibition:

...Yolŋu people are two groups of people, we are Dhuwa people and we are Yirritja
people. Dhuwa and Yirritja—the key element to understand Yolŋu knowledge. The
ancestors gave us this structure and shaped people to have that identity. This identity
isn’t only to do with the human beings, it is also animals, land, and the great numbers
of things surrounding Yolŋu people. These are the two worlds: this is Dhuwa and this
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is Yirritja. This guides ceremony, how to perform our Manikay (songs), the artwork that goes with it and what we do in everyday life.... I know it’s sort of strange to understand and complicated to explore these levels of Yolŋu people (Gumbula 2009: 4).

In the exhibition Gumbula created a Yolŋu space where the natural objects were lively and animated and interacted with cultural objects and with and between people through careful placement. Repeated across the exhibition were natural objects, photographs of people and cultural objects in conversation. Thus a lobster specimen (Figure 1) was positioned facing a small figure on which was painted a clan chest design relating to snakes. ‘These two animals always fight’ explained Gumbula, so they have to face each other (Gumbula pers. comm 2009). The liveliness and interaction between natural and cultural objects was an expression of the sensible arrangement and order of the Yolŋu world.

This liveliness was also in direct contrast to the linked exhibition that had gone before it, People, Power, Politics: the first generation of anthropologists at the University of Sydney (2008), which Gumbula had visited.² It was following that visit that we invited him to respond with his own exhibition using material from his Country in north-east Arnhem Land that had been collected by this first generation of anthropologists at Sydney University.³ As he had with

Figure 1. Lobster and figure in Makarr–garma. Courtesy and copyright, Macleay Museum.
natural objects, Gumbula liberated the ‘cultural’ objects and images from their historical context. His exhibition drew attention to the Yolŋu cultural world as a living, vibrant place, one filled with the ancestors of the past as much as the future generations to come.

Natural objects

Whilst Gumbula was working on the *Makarr–garma* exhibition with Conway, others in the Museum were planning the *Victorian Taxidermy Project*. The final output of this project *Stuffed Stitched & Studied* (2014–2015) was an exhibition about the historic contexts of western science. Gumbula had brought a particular focus to the natural history collections, and his interpretation of what we referred to as ‘specimens’ exposed the many different understandings people bring to museums.

Visitor responses to natural objects are often emotive, as many teenage and adult visitors have said to me ‘I don’t like these dead things, it’s cruel’. Cruelty, and the evident ‘dead-ness’ of the specimen are two areas that have been keenly studied in academic works about taxidermy (cf. Kayla McKinney 2015, Jones 2015)

In trying to explain the purposes of taxidermy, natural history museums often provide information about the collector, the taxidermist or the broad history of taxidermy itself, but more often than not this is only a single panel, a small section of interpretation within a larger display. The majority of the information invites the audience to see the natural objects as dead examples of living creatures, through associated displays or accompanying information giving details of the species’ geographical and behavioural traits.

This kind of text is influenced by twentieth century scientific interest in the ecology and behavioural relationships between animals in a particular habitat. In the natural history museum of the nineteenth century, however, taxidermy was exhibited explicitly to extend knowledge of a classificatory system through which the natural world was understood. As Lynn Nyhart makes obvious in her discussion of natural history, there was a break in how and what natural history museums displayed at the beginning of the twentieth century (Nyhart 1996: 437). Where science was part of the visitor experience in the nineteenth century, it was pushed to a ‘behind the scenes’ activity in the twentieth century. Through the *Victorian Taxidermy Project* we grew to appreciate why and how the natural objects created in the nineteenth century were physically different, something I will explore further below. In order to explain this different history and understanding of the natural object to the visitor, *Stuffed Stitched & Studied* deliberately took away the liveliness of the natural object. Through design and text we sought to give visitors an insight into the purposeful role these natural objects played in the application of scientific knowledge.
Nineteenth–century natural objects

The particular kind of scientific knowledge applied through the Macleay collections was taxonomy, specifically the Linnean system of classification. The Linnean system is so intertwined in the history of the Museum itself that a short historical summary is useful here. The story begins in London shortly after the death of Carl von Linné (1707–1777), creator of the modern classification system applied to the animal kingdom *Systema Naturae*. Botanist James Smith, with the encouragement of fellow Royal Society member Joseph Banks, purchased the biological collections that Linnaeus (aka von Linné) had used to devise his system. Around this most important collection, a society was founded. The Linnean Society of London was the first to be solely devoted to biological subjects, specifically to issues of taxonomy. From 1798 until 1825 wine merchant, civil servant and entomological collector Alexander Macleay was Secretary to the Linnean Society. His era was one of frenetic collection, but also of the purposeful application of intellectual ideas to arrangement and labelling. This visual application of classification through the manipulation of entomological specimens into particular groups persists in the ways entomology collections are stored today.

Alexander’s extensive entomology collections were judged one of the three best in Europe by the time he moved them, and his family, to the colony of New South Wales to take up the position of Colonial Secretary in 1826. Alexander’s collection and interests clearly influenced his children: his son William Sharp obtained some fame as a natural philosopher from the 1820s for his development of Linnean principals into a Quinarian System (Holland n.d.; Di Gregorio 1996); his son George sent numerous Australian animals to London Zoological Society’s zoo and museum; and his daughter Fanny was employed in curating his botanical collections (Earnshaw and Hughes 1993).

Alexander’s nephew William John Macleay (hereafter Macleay) inherited his uncle’s famous entomological cabinets, much increased by the collections of his cousin William Sharp. Macleay’s enthusiasm for extending knowledge in the biological sciences was extensive. Throughout the 1870s and 1880s he engaged in a variety of activities customary to zoological, botanical and ethnological collectors and institutions: Macleay sent out collectors, purchased from overseas suppliers, exchanged internationally and funded and led an expedition. He did this in part because he had decided to donate the material from three generations of his family’s work to the University of Sydney for the benefit of research and teaching. It is at this point that the materiality of the object becomes especially important, the way in which animals were prepared for scientific collections were specific and particular (Larsen 1996).

At the hand of a collector, specimens within drawers of entomological cabinets may be arranged in a variety ways. Those reflecting pre–Linnean systems and collections made purely for enjoyment are often visually splendid. Influenced
by arrangements from literature, such as Albertus Seba’s *Natural Curiosities* (1731) and Ernst Haekel’s *Kunstformen der natur* (1904), large glamorous specimens were decoratively surrounded by smaller groups. Circular patterns, even letters were, in some collections, picked out through arrangements of size and colour. Those of the Macleay cabinets are altogether different. They are Linnaean in character and scientifically purposeful, with individual specimens pinned in lines reflecting a working arrangement of individual species relevant to a particular family or order grouping. These drawers often appear messy with specimens pinned in haphazard lines precisely because they show working ideas (Figure 2). In the collection developed for the University, Macleay sought to join these specimens with ‘representative’ examples from across the animal kingdom in order to teach the scientific work of classification, and to expand the research material available to the Linnean Society of NSW, a Society he formed and funded in 1874.

Research museums, like that which Macleay created, have several distinct kinds of natural history specimens, few of which are ever exhibited: wet (in jars of ethanol); pinned (insects generally dried and pinned to a board); cleaned
bone material; skins and mounted specimens. These last two preparations largely constitute the material of taxidermy. Skins are ‘flat-packed’ animals, prepared for travel and/or storage at the time of their death. They have as little done to them as possible but great care is (or should be) taken to remove all moisture. If prepared in the field the collector would have to remove the brain, heart, guts, mouth parts, eyes and flesh before drying out the skin as thoroughly as possible. In humid climates this was a complicated and difficult task but drying agents such as alum might be applied, or light cotton or jute stuffing inserted to assist. Because of the danger of getting this wrong, or for the skin to become mouldy or suffer insect attack on the journey back to the collector, containers of alcohol (ethanol or spirit of wine mixed with distilled water) were also used to transport the specimens from the field. Specimens could then be prepared by the taxidermist in a controlled environment, but as the importation of alcohol often involved customs tax, many seemingly avoided this additional cost to collecting.

Unless the skin was intended for display there was no further reason to change the specimen at this stage, although generally the skin would be cleaned and, in the nineteenth century, a solution of arsenic and other agents applied to keep the specimen dry and free from insect infestation. It became standard in the twentieth century for scientists to use this kind of preparation, the skin, for their research. Visitors to museums rarely saw these specimens in the nineteenth or twentieth centuries. Instead they were shown ‘mounted’ specimens, flat-packed skins that were manipulated to make a life-like statue of the animal. But crucially in the twentieth century the natural object was not prepared in the same way, particularly for those museums which reorganized their spaces on William Fowler’s ‘new museum’ model, and separated out their research and exhibition material into distinct spaces (see Nyhart 1996: 437). The specimens collected by Macleay and those of the privately wealthy conservationist and naturalist Percy Powell–Cotton are good examples of the ‘before’ and ‘after’ of these changes.

The change was partly a reflection of the diversity of scientific interest in the investigation of the natural world, and partly one result of museum development responding to long-standing ideas about public education, display and research in the museum. In the nineteenth century the natural objects on view for the public were the same as those accessed by scientists and their arrangements reflected classificatory and geographic orderings of a world that was still dramatically in the process of being established. This kind of display can be seen at the Tring Museum in Hertfordshire and the Natural History Museum in Genoa. In the 1900s the public slowly lost direct visual contact with ‘the science’ of a museum, as natural objects were created purely for exhibition purposes in public areas. The diorama, involving the placement of natural objects posed in theatrical scenes against painted backdrops becoming typical of this era (Tunnicliffe 2005).
The Macleay Museum

From the mid–1870s Macleay sourced specimens to be used in his own research and for the Museum to be built at the University of Sydney. Skins were turned into mounted specimens in a taxidermy workshop at the back
of the family’s Elizabeth Bay property by the professional collector Edward Spalding who Macleay and his curator George Masters trained in taxidermy. Other specimens were purchased from international dealers subsequent to the Museum’s opening in 1892.10

Macleay personally influenced the way in which skins were turned into mounted forms so to illustrate classificatory principles. Many were unique specimens from which classifications had actually been made. These specimens, known as type specimens, were not only representations of scientific principles; they were also artefacts through which new scientific statements had been made. In the case of the animal represented in Figure 3 the statement was ‘this is a Dorcopsis macleayi’ (a type of wallaby). All other animals related to this one could and needed to be understood in respect to this particular specimen. Given the importance attached to these natural objects it stands to reason that particular care was taken in how they were mounted.

Taxidermy however is a technical art, and no matter how much Macleay may have been invested in the process, the results were dependent upon the skills of a series of workers. The natural object is a combination of their work. The first in the chain is the person who killed the animal employing methods that may have mutilated the pelt. This is an area where two cultural forms of killing and preparing meet. The most spectacular example are the Birds of Paradise in natural history museums which show the preparation methods common to people across New Guinea from at least the fifteenth century, distinctive because of the complete absence of bone material and feet (Swadling 1996). In the common European method, for birds, the feet and some bones including the skull and wing bones were kept within the skin. This could cause mutilation of the pelt if the wet material from the head was not removed through the beak but taken out by removing the head altogether. This latter method meant that the two separate parts of the bird needed to be reattached at a later date and at time resulted in distorted neck dimensions and posture. In the New Guinean and European methods the skin of the birds’ body was cut and then pulled back so the interior fully cleaned and dried, before being shipped from field to the collector’s base.

Whether the animal was received dried or in spirit, the taxidermist preparing it for mounting needed to clean and dry it and prepare an internal armature to support the skin. It is at this point that Macleay’s purposes (and others like him) can clearly be seen in the final natural object. Birds belonging to the order of passerine, such as a Bird of Paradise were mounted with their feet clawing a perch. This was not just because it was the usual attitude of the animal: it was to reflect an aspect of their biology and classification, the three forward and one backward facing toes. While biologically this enabled the bird to perch, it raised problems for the taxidermist who needed to counterbalance the weight so that the body of the bird, from beak to legs, could be placed forward from the perch without tipping. The problem was solved by threading wires attached
to the internal armature through the legs and anchoring the whole to a perch, concealing the wires by the arrangement. Where animals were presented in gendered pairs, a male might be manipulated to show it’s mating display, while the female may be manipulated to present an upright and facing forward view.

Another aspect that needed to be preserved for scientific research were the dimensions, a difficult exercise for skins if all bones had been removed, as the skin can shrink and later distort when rehydrated prior to taxidermy. Skin collections in the Museum show that Macleay purchased flat-packed skins of mammals and birds with the bones of the limb and crania still intact. These were not removed prior to mounting, but manipulated to become part of the internal armature.
Consequently the head shape was faithfully maintained, along with the size of limbs. The final natural object also kept intact the classificatory markers of claws or toe-pads. In order to ensure that teeth did not fall out of the mandibles, the mouth of most mammals is stitched together, occasionally revealing a single tooth if this was a particular diagnostic feature of the animal (Figure 4).

Macleay’s specimens are both particular to his museum and vision, and typical of late nineteenth century methods. Similar specimens can be seen in Tring and the Grant Museum (University College London); museums created through taxonomic research. This kind of natural object also dominates the older halls of the Natural History Museum in London. To understand how different they are from natural objects of the twentieth century created to show bio-geographical data more clearly, one needs only to look towards some of the animals exhibited in the Powell–Cotton Museum, which quite literally formed the backdrop to the 2015 Museum Ethnographers Group conference. These represent both a break with the nineteenth century standard and are typical of specimens created for the purpose of education and enjoyment.

**The twentieth-century natural object**

Percy Powell–Cotton, like many natural history field–collectors, was particularly interested in questions of geographical specificity. Variations in animals across habitats, specificity of a group of animals to a particular ecology and behaviour between animals were all questions that would be of increasing importance for museums in the new century. A new style of taxidermy, based on modelling, came to be used that reflected some of these biological interests. In the early twentieth century there emerged a new exhibition style for the delivery of broad educational messages to the visiting public: the habitat diorama. Using deep glass–fronted cases, the diorama employed a series of shelves disguised as trees, plants and mountains against a trompe d’œil painted backdrop. This allowed curators to exhibit dramatic scenes and panoramic vistas with natural objects placed on their suitably disguised shelves as if they were animals in their habitat (Kamcke and Hutterer 2015: 13–19). Working from the late nineteenth century into the twentieth, Percy Powell–Cotton was ideally placed to experiment with the form when he began to invest in the expansion and new fit–out of his collections for the visiting public. In 1896, 1909 and 1922–38 galleries were built which included specimens he had personally collected. He had money, space, a familiarity and interest in geography and natural history and a large number of animals at his disposal that could be displayed within and against a backdrop of their habitat and in relation to other animals of a given region (Ward 1913: 87). The specimens displayed show both older methods of taxidermy that would have been familiar to Macleay and those prepared using methods which became dominant in the twentieth century.
Roland Ward, a highly successful taxidermist of the time, was the man chosen by Powell–Cotton to make his natural objects. Ward was an enormously successful businessman–taxidermist, a highly trained and skilled artist and a hunter. He applied all three talents in his taxidermy, specialising in imparting emotive expressions and attitudes. In the perspective of Karen Jones, Ward was a necrogeographer, able to suspend the hunter’s paradise in perpetual animation (2015: 228).13 His style of taxidermy suited manipulating skins so the natural objects reflected an event, such as the group ‘buffalo mauled by a lion’ which is exhibited in the Powell–Cotton Museum (Figure 5).14 For a time he had a healthy line in animal furniture and nick–knacks made from animal parts. He
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worked to order for the Natural History Museum and he worked on the animal dioramas for Powell–Cotton.

In the early twentieth century leading taxidermists, like Ward, were exploiting sculptural techniques to create the desired life–like and dramatic postures from the skins flooding into European and American markets. Using observation from life, an artistic skill he practiced at London Zoo, he faithfully worked up a muscle–rich body shape with moulds and stuffing over which the skin was stretched. Wrinkles and emotive expressions were all employed to create as life–like an object as possible. No longer did a lion’s mouth have to be stitched together over the crania and jaw so to best show the comparative shape of the head; the lion could be made to roar to impart an idea of the ‘wild’. These were less ‘specimens’ and more ‘replicas’.15

The skins prepared for Powell–Cotton created taxidermy that best showed animal posture, relationship to the environment and discrete stories between the animals in the shared vitrine. In Gallery 3 of the Powell–Cotton Museum is one extreme example of the role of taxidermy in replicating a biogeographical space, which contrasts with the Macleay–type natural object created for classificatory research. This diorama features a wonderfully populated savannah at the back of which is placed a group of giraffes. Here Ward has been extremely innovative. To be able to show a number of very large animals together within a set case height and width, one of the adult giraffes was created from the skin of the head and neck which is mounted out from the wall. Using trompe d’oeil technique the remaining body was painted in.

While Powell–Cotton’s museum is a dramatic view onto a different kind of natural object, his was also a museum for research. The Museum was evidently influenced by Fowler’s development of museum spaces, with spaces maintained for research and attendance to classification away from the visiting audience. Preserving type specimens and extinct animals with male, female and juvenile representatives in the research collections mean that his specimens continue to be an important scientific resource long after his death (Almquist 1973).

Nature and culture and the museum

This paper explored the natural object. I have argued that we should be more attentive to the different kinds of natural objects that exist to understand their use and context. Exploring taxidermy made for natural history museums, I employed ethnographic analysis, specifically an attention to the materiality of the specimen, to understand the specific purposes of the production of natural objects over time. Concentrating on the internal structures employed in animal skins, allowed a view to the changing purposes of the natural history museum. In the nineteenth century the stiff, forwardly–posed and perched natural objects were produced to suit the comparative method for determining evolutionary
relationships and taxonomy. This kind of natural object was equally available to scientists’ for research and to the public; education and scientific research were intertwined in the exhibition. In contrast the twentieth century’s taxidermist used casts and modeling to create a dramatic replica for museum dioramas that recreated an animal’s natural environment. Exhibition areas offered a window into the spaces scientists travelled to in their research, through creating dramatic scenes of biologically diverse, geographical spaces. Research specimens, and the scientists who worked on them, were moved largely out of sight.

In *Stuffed Stitched & Studied* we sought to explain this to our audience, by making the nineteenth century quality of our natural objects explicit through x-rays, half-stuffed and wonky taxidermy, recipes and explanations of methodologies. We also invited a contribution from PhD student Leah Lui–Chivizhe who was researching environmental knowledges in relation to the turtle shell masks of her Torres Strait Islander heritage. Her part of the exhibition brought together ethnographic, scientific and artistic objects from the Macleay collection to encourage reflection on environmental knowledge and cultural practice relating to turtles in the Torres Strait. As part of the *Stuffed Stitched & Studied* exhibition, her work was an essential inclusion so to be able to emphasize the cultural world in which science was enacted, and to reposition classification through the manipulation of animal parts as a world–wide practice.

Gumbula’s exhibition, explored in the first half of this paper, was both a complete novelty and a continuation of the Macleay Museum’s focus. From the 1960s the Museum’s curators have been concerned with the interplay of science and history through exhibitions which explored ethnography and Indigenous knowledges, the biological world and the natural history specimen. Gumbula’s exhibition of the natural and cultural in a Yolŋu day is also an example of the increasingly common practice of ethnography in the modern world: curators who used historic material made by their kin a century ago from an ‘ethnographic’ museum collection to communicate ideas about the current social and political place of their culture. *Makarr–garma* demonstrated how nineteenth century collections of natural and cultural objects can be lifted out of their pasts and used to explore contemporary issues and ideas. By making obvious the incorporation of the environmental spaces on which culture is lived through natural objects, Gumbula didn’t recreate a diorama in the Museum, so much as teach us how to behave on Yolŋu Country.

**Acknowledgements**

This is a revised version of a paper given at *Nature and Culture in the Museum*, the annual conference of the Museum Ethnographers Group, held at Powell–Cotton Museum, Kent 20–21 April 2015. I am grateful to the conference organizers and participants and editors of this paper for helping to give my thoughts shape. My thanks
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to curatorial colleagues at the Macleay for their intellectual contributions to the research and thinking that went into the paper, Robert Blackburn, Jan Brazier, Rebecca Conway, Anthony Gill and Matt Poll. Leah Lui-Chivizhe's work on Stuffed Stitched and Studied was also invaluable.

This article is dedicated to the memory of Dr J.N. Gumbula who passed away in 2015. His generosity and patience in teaching others, and his enormous contribution to the Macleay Museum and to ethnographic museums across the world is gratefully acknowledged.

Notes

1. See Hamby and Gumbula 2015. This chapter not only gives a view into the extraordinary reach of Gumbula’s work in a number of disciplines, it also shows the influence of Millingimbi–based cultural styles in the shaping of Arnhem Land collections internationally.
2. Curated by Rebecca Conway, textually and visually the exhibition gave the anthropologists’ view looking out of a tent to people in ‘the field’. It was designed with the expectation of a local view to be curated by a cultural expert such as Gumbula.
4. The exhibition was curated and written by Jude Philp, Anthony Gill, Leah Lui-Chivize and Rob Blackburn.
5. The Chevert Expedition (May–October 1875) was the first Australian overseas expedition. Both natural and cultural collections were made from sites on the south–eastern Australian coast (from Port Jackson to Cape York), in the Central and Eastern islands of the Torres Strait and at Mawatta and Hall Sound on Papua New Guinea’s south–western coast (Davies 2011). From 1877 the results were published in the journal Macleay had established, the Proceedings of the Linnean Society New South Wales. 
6. F.P. Dodd’s entomological collection, made from 1895, was arranged in this way. See the on–line exhibition The Dodd Collection (2015) at https://www.google.com/culturalinstitute/exhibit/KALSjjRMfGL4IQ?position=0%3A0 Bornemissza’s collection at the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery is a modern example. (Accessed 9 January 2016).
7. The Victorian Taxidermy Project revealed that large insects were also taxidermied in the eighteenth and nineteenth century.
8. This discussion predominantly describes the collection of mammals. Fish collection and preparation was different due to the different physical form.
9. This flat–packed skin is the reason behind the occasional ‘bad’ or ‘weird’ piece of scientific taxidermy, particularly when the taxidermist was unfamiliar with the movements and features of the live animal from which the skin came.
10. The decades over which the collection was purposely assembled coincided with changes in the teaching of biology. Within twenty years of opening in a purpose–built museum, the gallery was moved to an attic. Now after 100 years of cramped space the
University is returning the whole building to its original use. It is planned to reopen as the Chau Chak Wing Museum in 2018 encompassing the collections of the Macleay, Nicholson and University Art museums.

11. Kamcke and Hutterer (2015) have surveyed the much older tradition from which the biological groupings in habitat dioramas emerged.

12. My thanks to Inbal Livne for her insights into the collection.

13. There is a danger in focusing too much on hunting and trophy-keeping in understanding natural history museum displays, as these are activities primarily concerned with large mammals which generally form only a small corpus of a museums’ holdings. Similarly ascribing the trophy hunters ‘victory and implied masculinity and of his mastery over space both wild and domestic’ is difficult to sustain when the zest is for the capture of the jellyfish or intestinal worm (Jones 2015: 244). My emphasis here is that while scientific exhibits fed into the nineteenth and twentieth century passion for hunting and trophy keeping, the taxidermy product was not the same—even if the taxidermist was.

14. The lion mauling the buffalo is one that attacked Cotton–Powell, and was shot by a member of his party http://www.quexpark.co.uk/museum/museum–galleries/gallery–3.html accessed 9 January 2016.

15. For an explanation of his vision see Rowland Ward (1913).

References


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About the Author

Jude Philp has been senior curator of the Macleay Museum for the past ten years. Her research centers on museum collections relating to the nineteenth century histories of Torres Strait Islanders and people of the south–east coast of Papua New Guinea.

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