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# Macleay Museum News

Number 7, April 1996

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## *Women Taxidermists in Colonial Sydney*

A fox-head silver stirrup cup, an elephant-foot stool, arrangements of wool-work flowers and leather fruit, and a kookaburra hand screen ( *at right - lent by J.B. Hawkins Antiques*) are some of the curious and peculiar objects brought together for the Macleay Museum's latest exhibition.

[‘Most Curious and Peculiar’: Women Taxidermists in Colonial Sydney](#) traces the careers of two professional women taxidermists in colonial Sydney, Jane Tost (c.1817-1889) and her daughter Ada Rohu (c.1845-1928). Their work is set in the context of the natural sciences and taxidermy in Victorian culture.



***‘Most Curious and Peculiar’*** was officially opened on 29 February by Ann Moyal, AM, well known for her pioneering publications on Australian colonial science and her interest in the relationship of women to science and technology.

"This exhibition shines a torch on a new arena of activity [in the history of science] - ‘curious and peculiar’ perhaps, but one in which a cluster of women shone. ... The revelation of Jane Tost’s work in this exhibition, and that of her daughter Ada, focusses yet another aspect in

the mosaic of women's participation in Australian nineteenth century science", Ann Moyal told the gathering at the exhibition opening.

Jane Tost was a member of the Ward family, the leading taxidermists in England. Her brother Henry worked with the famous bird artists John James Audubon and John Gould. Jane's nephew Rowland Ward ran the largest taxidermy firm in the world, which operated between 1872 and 1976.

Jane Tost stuffed birds and mammals for the British Museum in London in the 1840s. In 1856 she emigrated with her family to Tasmania to work at the Royal Society of Tasmania's Museum in Hobart Town. Jane Tost was probably the first woman employed in a professional capacity in any Australian museum. In the 1860s she worked at the Australian Museum in Sydney, receiving equal pay to her male counterparts.

In 1872 Jane's son Charles and son-in-law James Coates were fatally injured in a theatre fire in Sydney. Jane and Ada then opened Tost & Coates Berlin Wool and Taxidermy Studio in William Street. The firm became Tost & Rohu after Ada married the naturalist Henry Rohu in 1878. Tost & Rohu was purchased by the bookseller James Tyrrell in 1923, but the name continued into the 1930s.

Tost & Rohu catered to many different markets. They preserved and mounted skins for gentlemen naturalists, set up displays for museums, prepared specimens in cases to send to exhibitions, taught taxidermy and fancy work, imported glass domes, mounted huntsmen's trophies, made and sold fur and feather apparel, and traded in natural history specimens and Aboriginal and Pacific Islander artefacts.

Three squirrels and a plains pocket gopher purchased from Tost & Coates by the Australian Museum in 1878 are included in the exhibition. Other Tost & Rohu items are a lion-skin rug, a mounted gazelle head and a rug made from the fur of several animals dating from about 1910.

Other Sydney women who engaged in similar work to Jane Tost and Ada Rohu are also represented in the exhibition, including Mrs Palmer, Helena Scott and Sophie Steffanoni.

*'Most Curious and Peculiar'* was co-curated by Martha Sear, whose research as a PhD student in the History Department provided the basis for the exhibition, and Susie Davies, the Museum's curator of ethnography. The exhibition was designed by Lucy Bannyan of Bannyan-Wood, with graphic design by Marianne Hawke.

Martha Sear will be giving some special tours and talks on the exhibition. Visitors wishing to attend one of these talks, for which there is a charge of \$5.00, are invited to ring Vanessa Mack on 351 2274 to check times and make a booking. General admission remains free.

*'Most Curious and Peculiar': Women Taxidermists in Colonial Sydney* runs until 31 January 1997.

## *Director's Notes And Jottings*

It is with pleasure that I welcome you to the fourth year and seventh edition of *Macleay Museum News*. The Newsletter will continue to be published twice a year, around April and October.

This year has begun with a flourish, with the opening of the new exhibition which we modestly believe to be our best yet. Please come and see for yourselves, and tell your friends! We try to do more with a reduced budget and no more staff, so breathing is not often something the staff have time to do. Our plans for the year include an education program (see below) and continued refurbishment of the long term exhibitions in the gallery. We hope to complete four cases this year, with some adjustments to several others. At the same time, we are endeavouring to work on the collection management side of the Museum, improving the documentation for audit and access reasons, and consolidating and weeding the collection in line with the Collections Policy (under development) and with the Recommendations of the Macleay Museum Review.

Shortly before Christmas we placed a small show case in Fisher Library, University of Sydney, illustrating some of the native rodents from the collection for which the CSIRO and other bodies had recently suggested Aboriginal names as a way of drawing positive attention to these animals. The backdrop to the case was painted by Aboriginal artist, John Hunter. The exhibition is part of the drive to increase the profile and visibility of the Museum both in the University and in the wider community of friends.

The air conditioning of the gallery is now complete and final adjustments are under way to ensure the humidity control is stable. The gallery now feels pleasantly fresh all the time. We are extremely grateful to the University and to AAA Airconditioning who between them improved the design of the installation so it is all but invisible in the gallery. Although it has taken too long, it's been worth it!

In February the Museum hosted a visit to the University of the Ambassador of the Russian Federation, His Excellency Alexander Losyukov, his wife Mrs Natasha Losyukov, and the Russian Consul Mr Yevgeny Nesterov. They met with the Director, the Chancellor Dame Leonie Kramer and other University personnel interested in the Russian Federation, to discuss the possible donation to the University of a sculpture of Sir William John Macleay's Russian colleague, Baron Nikolai Miklouho-Maclay. The Museum has a small display devoted to the work of this eminent anthropologist and marine biologist.

The UMREC Report -- the report of the University Museums Review Committee 1996, entitled *Cinderella Collections: University Museums & Collections in Australia* was released on Tuesday 27 February with good coverage in the Press, much of which involved this Museum. It is too early yet to assess its effects at any level, Federal, State or within the University community, although a committee of the NSW Vice Chancellors' Committee has been established, and the Director, Vanessa Mack, has been asked to represent the University of Sydney on this committee. Within the University, we hope that the very existence of the report will help to increase knowledge of the significance of the collections held by this University both in the established museums (the Nicholson, the Macleay and the University Art Collection) and in the many departmental collections. Copies of the report are available from the Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee, GPO Box 1142, Canberra, ACT, 2601.

## *Aboriginal Art at the War Memorial Gallery*

Four of the most significant bark paintings in existence, two other barks from Arnhem Land and twenty engraved pearl shells from the Kimberleys have been lent by the Macleay Museum for inclusion in the current exhibition in the University's War Memorial Art Gallery.

The small but elegant space has recently been refurbished to public museum standards with the assistance of significant donations from the Chancellor's Committee and the general public. The Gallery was opened by the Chancellor, Emeritus Professor Dame Leonie Kramer, in November 1995 and will show exhibitions drawn from the two thousand and more artworks in the University of Sydney Art Collection.

The current exhibition, which offers a concise survey of Aboriginal art from 1878 to the present, was curated by Pamela Bell, Curator of the University of Sydney Art Collection. It shows the development of bark paintings from the ghostly markings delineating individual animals of the 1878 works to the sophisticated presentation of archetypal Aboriginal creation myths in complicated designs, every line of which lends significance to the whole. The exhibition also includes desert paintings by Emily Kame Kngwarreye and a series of watercolours by artists from Hermannsburg, as well as political posters produced at the University's Tin Sheds, which are included in the University Art Collection.

The War Memorial Gallery, near the Great Hall, is open 12 noon to 4.00 pm on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday or by appointment. School programs are available. Aboriginal Art runs until 24 April. For more information contact Pamela Bell, Curator, University of Sydney Art Collection on (02) 351 4004.

## *Crustacean Project*

*Shane Ahyong, the current Macleay Miklouho-Maclay Fellow, reports on progress to date:*

Significant progress has been made in the identification of the decapod crustaceans (crabs, shrimps and lobsters). The decapod collections were initially estimated to contain 600-1000 specimens. So far, 2900 specimens have been identified representing some 400 species. Nevertheless, species identifications are near completion. Most specimens were preserved dry and their condition ranges from fully intact to highly fragmented. Consequently, identification sometimes proved difficult. Specimens, mostly crabs, come from southern Africa, the Mediterranean, California, the Gulf of Mexico, the Caribbean, and of course the Indo-West Pacific. The many localities and collectors of the specimens reflect the broad associations of the Macleays, providing further insight into some of the exploratory movements of the period. W.S. Macleay and W.A. Haswell made significant contributions to 19th century carcinology and several type-specimens remain in the Museum's collection.



### *Miklouho-Maclay's 150th*



Celebrations will be held in Australia and Russia in July to mark the 150th anniversary of the birth of [Nikolai Miklouho-Maclay](#), the Russian scientist and ethnographer who spent a considerable period in Sydney in the 1870s and 1880s. A reception in honour of the occasion will be held in the Museum on 17 July. We hear that other events in Sydney are planned. Further information can be obtained from the Secretary of the Miklouho-Maclay Anniversary Committee, Mrs Wendy Paton, 23 Pymble Avenue, Pymble, NSW, 2073 (phone and fax: (02) 449 2741)

## *Notes*

### **MM on the WWW!**

Soon you will be able to visit the Museum on the Internet.

Work is in progress to establish a home page which will provide a detailed overview of the Museum and its activities to a world-wide audience. Internet users will be able to read about the history of the Macleays, take a tour of the Museum gallery, and inspect some of our recent exhibitions. Contact numbers and e-mail addresses for members of staff will be listed, and if you feel inclined, you will be able to sign a visitors' book.

In this way we hope to attract many more visitors to the Museum, both virtual and actual. The address of the homepage will be published in the next issue of *Macleay Museum News*.

### **A new chapter ...**

In accordance with the terms of the 1993 review of the Macleay Museum, selections from the Museum's extensive library of books, journals and pamphlets are on offer to interested institutions.

Most of the publications relate to the Museum's historic photograph collection and cover the history of photography and photographic techniques in Australia and overseas. There are, for instance, many issues of *The Photographic Journal* between 1920 and 1982 (many years complete) and copies of *The British Journal of Photography* between 1900 and 1911 in need of a new home. The library also covers much local and industrial history including histories of NSW railways.

This offer is on a first-come, first-served basis. Expressions of interest have already come in from several organisations.

For more information, please contact Angus Patterson, on (612) 9351 2274.

## *Tale of a Telescope*

If anyone has ever invented a time machine, it is the astronomical telescope. The further into space we look the more ancient the stars we see. But historical artifacts can also conjure up moments in the past. The Macleay Museum has only one [telescope](#). It is a magnificent mid 19th century brass instrument, signed 'WEST, 92 & 93, FLEET ST LONDON.'

The telescope was purchased in London by Sir William Macarthur in 1857 for thirty four guineas. This was a mistake. H. West wrote from the shop on 29 July to explain:

‘Sir / I am in receipt of yours and cannot for a moment think how you could have the impression that the price of the Telescope was thirty four Guineas. It is somewhat fortunate my young man saved the ticket that was on the Instrument with its price therefore enclose it for your inspection which I trust will at once convince you it is an error on your part. Also you must be fully aware we should not ask one price and charge another but suffice it to say it is not possible to make such an Instrument for less than 37 Guineas. It is a 3¼ object glass and mounted in the best way and an Instt which will be sure to give satisfaction and recommend the maker.’

This letter, together with the original price tag is preserved in the Macarthur Papers in the Mitchell Library (ML A2936, pp. 493-5).



Presumably Sir William paid the difference and shipped the telescope back to Camden Park. How much the Macarthurs used the telescope has yet to be discovered. According to family tradition, it was used at night for guests to view the lights of trains climbing the ranges about Glenbrook after the line was put through from Parramatta in the 1860s. Perhaps in the day time it was set up on the drive in front of the house to view the church spire at Camden. At some point it needed some servicing or perhaps a new case as the lid of the case bears the trade label of the prominent Sydney jewellers and opticians Brush & MacDonnell, who were also leading retailers of scientific instruments in the 1850s and 1860s.

During the Second World War, the telescope was lent to Capt. M.J.G. Colyer for training the Volunteer Defence Corps in mapping and observation. Colyer graduated from the University of Sydney in 1896 as a Bachelor of Engineering (Civil Engineering) and in 1910 joined the Australian Intelligence Corps. He was the only Australian to serve at the siege of the German base at Tsingtau in northern China during World War 1 and subsequently served with the A.I.F. in Gallipoli, Egypt and France.

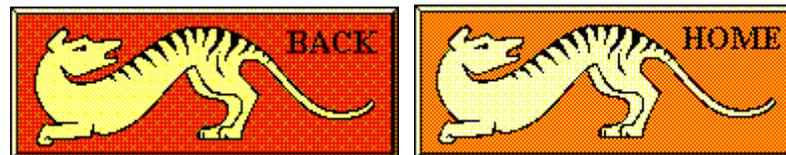
After the Second World War the Macarthur-Onslow family did not wish the telescope to be returned. (James Macarthur's daughter Elizabeth married Captain Arthur Onslow, a grandson of Alexander Macleay. In 1892, some years after Onslow's death, Elizabeth changed her name to Macarthur-Onslow.) Major E.O. Milne, who had served in WWI, took responsibility to find a suitable home for it. 'I concluded that the University might find more practical use for it than anyone else', Milne reported in the accompanying letter when he delivered the telescope in September 1961. It was officially donated to the University in the name of Major-General Denzil Macarthur-Onslow. 'The telescope will not only be of interest from the historical point of view but may be made use of by some of the departments in the University and by the University Regiment', the Registrar informed the donor.

Held for some years by the University Archives, the telescope was exhibited in the Macleay Museum's centenary exhibition in 1988 and formally transferred to the Museum in 1990. It is a prominent feature of the Museum's display of [historic scientific instruments](#).

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