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# Macleay Museum News

Number 10, October 1997

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## *Indigenous Heritage Project*

In 1994, the Senate of the University approved a policy statement regarding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Ancestral Remains and Secret and Sacred objects held by the University of Sydney. This policy established an Advisory Committee "to consult with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities or organisations regarding the return to appropriate communities and the future management of Ancestral remains and secret and sacred objects held by the University".

Now in its third year of operation, many contacts have been made with communities and much research undertaken to provenance the material correctly. Communities in Queensland, Central Australia, NSW and the Kimberleys are among those with whom we have been consulting regarding either Ancestral remains or secret and sacred material.

Two people are employed part-time on the project. Denise Donlon, the Physical Anthropologist, based at the Shellshear Museum, and Rosemary Stack, Indigenous Heritage Officer, based at the Macleay. They work as a team to bring about the best possible results for communities. Denise prepares the community and scientific reports compiled from previous documentation and observation. No other research is undertaken without community approval. The role of the Indigenous Heritage Officer includes making the initial contacts with community leaders; providing them and their people with appropriately researched information including supporting material; making arrangements for the viewing of Ancestral remains; and organising the delivery of suitably authorised information regarding secret and sacred material.

Because of the sensitive nature of the material, the University Advisory Committee includes outside representation, from the Australian Museum, a pioneer in the field of return of Indigenous property, and the NSW State Land Council. As well as conducting monthly meetings to properly guide and support the project team, they have developed procedures and guidelines, clarified research issues and with advice from Denise Donlon and Rosemary Stack, prioritised the repatriation process. Excellent support is also provided by the staff of the Macleay

Museum and John Hobson of the Koori Centre.

Repatriation is many layered and complex. Indigenous communities have many pressures brought to bear on them. They deal with housing matters, health, unemployment. Many are wrongly thought to have vast funds and tracts of land, and everyday they face racism in one form or another. Contact can reopen old wounds and old enmities; return can divide; return can bring joy.

Repatriation is thought provoking. Who is ultimately responsible to provide the means to assist communities to bring back their people's remains and their secret and sacred objects? Is it Indigenous communities, communities which have everyday pressing responsibilities, or governments and non-government institutions which supported and facilitated the collecting of Indigenous heritage? Who helps people to heal the wounds? Who answers the questions of the young such as "why did they take the remains in the first place?". An abiding question with as much sting and antagonism today as yesterday.

The Advisory Committee and Macleay Museum staff take great pride in their participation in this important university initiative. From the development of policy to the development of appropriate guidelines we aim to safeguard Indigenous cultural heritage and Ancestral remains until such time as they are back in their own country. We are committed to ensuring that the way we conduct the repatriation project supports rather than disrupts communities.

## *Cazneaux*



Original photographs and a camera from the Museum's Historic Photograph Collection are included in the exhibition *Cazneaux at the University of Sydney* in the War Memorial Gallery. The exhibition, curated by Pamela Bell (University Art Collection) and Tim Robinson (University Archives), will be opened by the Chancellor, Dame Leonie Kramer, on 23 October 1997. Large prints have been produced based on Cazneaux's original glass-plate negatives, some showing interiors of Engineering, Physics and the Medical School. *Cazneaux* will run until mid December.

*The Main Building as seen by Harold Cazneaux, 1927*

## *Director's Notes and Jottings*

### **Staff Notes**

Since the last Newsletter, **Susie Davies**, curator of the Ethnographic Collection, has left the Museum on 12 months maternity leave. She is the proud mother of a baby girl, Astrid Nicole, born in July. We hope to see Susie back at the Museum part time in June 1998. In the mean time her place has been taken on a part-time basis by **Anna Edmundson**, a graduate of ANU and Oxford who has worked in the National Gallery of Australia, in Borneo and briefly at the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford. Anna has settled in well, and among other duties is working on a joint exhibition with the Oceanic Arts Society planned for 1999.

The second new staff member welcomed to the Museum is **Louise Reid Davies**, who has joined us part time as the curator in the Historic Photograph Collection and with dual responsibility for co-ordinating deaccessioning. Louise was formerly the Director of the Westpac Museum at the Rocks, until Bank restructuring and two small children suggested a change in direction. Louise has a great deal of relevant experience and we feel very lucky to have her.

**Rose Stack**, the Indigenous Heritage Officer also now works one day a week for the Museum as the curator of Aboriginal material. While Rose has been with us for some time in another role, it is great to have her input directly into the work of the Museum.

In July **Julian Holland** attended the CAUMAC (Council of Australian University Museums and Collections) meeting in Perth at which he presented a paper on Canadian university museums and stood down as CAUMAC Treasurer. Vanessa Mack attended the Museums Australia conference in Darwin in September.

**Angus Patterson**, our previous curator of the Historic Photograph Collection, who curated *An Architect's Antidote*, left Australia to return to England the day after the exhibition opened. He is now working at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London.

### **Volunteers**

The Museum has always been fortunate in the quality of our committed volunteers. **Dr Val Havyatt** continues to work one day a week on the Scientific Instrument Collection. Some time ago, **Sarah Walters** and **Audrey Green**, well known to the library community, responded to an appeal in the Newsletter for assistance with our library collection. They have been working steadily one day a week to catalogue the collection and create some records for it. Two student volunteers, **Geoff Barker** and **Ruth Kaye** have been working with Louise on the Historic Photograph Collection. To all volunteers we remain greatly indebted. As with many museums, we depend heavily on the additional work done by our volunteers.

### **Museum Marketing**

The Museum is fortunate in the range of interested friends prepared to help us in different ways. George Jaksic and Warren Wickman of GeoGraphics Pty Ltd have been discussing with us, the Nicholson Museum and the University ways of developing products for sale. In the

mean time Warren and George have assisted us in the design and production of our new brochure which we are now distributing.

### **In the Gallery**

At the end of April the Museum launched our latest exhibition. *An Architect's Antidote: the Buildings of Science Road* traces the development of Science Road especially under the influence of Professor Leslie Wilkinson, the first Professor of Architecture, 1919 to 1947. The opening was performed by Professor Judith Kinnear, Deputy Vice Chancellor, International and Development, and Trevor Howells spoke about the architectural significance of Wilkinson's contribution. A small exhibition, *Yirrkala Tradition: Pictures from Country*, featuring six of the bark paintings from the Berndt collection, curated by Rose Stack will open shortly.

We have continued to participate in regular University events like Courses and Careers Day, and special lectures to groups.

### **University Heritage**

The University has established a Heritage Committee, chaired by Deputy Vice Chancellor Professor Ken Eltis, with responsibility for advising the Vice Chancellor on matters to do with both the heritage buildings of the University and its important collections. I am a member of this Committee, and of the sub-committee on museums and collections. A draft policy on the University museums and collections is currently circulating for comment. This will go to the Senate for approval, probably early next year.

An important role for University museums is to provide professional museum advice and assistance to other university collections. As part of this role, I have been providing assistance during the year to the Dental Alumni Collection held in the Dental Hospital. The Association has funded a project to catalogue the collection so that its extent and value can be properly assessed. The Dental Collection has been put together over the last 20 years by Dr Sydney Levine, OAM, a former senior member of staff in Dentistry. His energy and passion for the fascinating history of dentistry (and yes, it is fascinating) has given the University of Sydney another valuable and unusual asset. Matthew Ryan, who worked for several years at the Powerhouse Museum and more briefly at several other cultural institutions, is working with Sydney and Dr Tony O'Meara on the cataloguing.

### **Conservation Assessment**

As a result of the report to the Australian Vice Chancellors' Committee funded by the Department of Employment, Education and Training, *Cinderella Collections, University Museums and Collections in Australia, 1996*, a sum was allocated for a conservation survey of the condition of university collections. Ten museums around Australia with different types of collections were selected to be surveyed in detail. The mammal collection of this museum was surveyed in July and the report recently received. There were no surprises in the report, which was by and large supportive, but recommended more space for storage and better control of light levels in display areas. Funding and space shortages make it difficult to address these matters adequately.

### **Donations**

We now have a new donations box. A pelican with "a big bill" makes our request to visitors for money to add to its nest egg. More than ever do we need to rely on the assistance of friends of the Macleay. Again we appeal to your sense of generosity, in this period of declining funding for universities. Needless to say, the Museum has not been exempt from the university-wide cuts in funding. The main thrust of our

appeal this year is for conservation of the collection. Donations are tax deductible and greatly appreciated.

**Vanessa Mack**

## *New Fellow*

We are very pleased to welcome the fifth Macleay Miklouho-Maclay Fellow to the Museum. Graham Fulton is working on the bird collection, with special attention to the largely uncatalogued skeletal material, nests and eggs, and on recording data on vulnerability of the specimens held (rare, endangered, extinct) on the catalogue. 'I look forward with relish to investigating the skeletal components of the Macleay bird collection', Graham said. Graham will be working in the Museum part time for about five months.

A graduate of this University, Graham has worked on bird skeletal material at the Australian Museum. Graham also studies living birds. He is investigating the effect of development at Mount Tomah on changes in the local bird population, not only by day but studying owls by night.

A function to welcome Graham will be held in the Museum Gallery on Tuesday 18 November 1997 between 12 and 2 pm. Our previous Fellow, Shane Ahyong, will give a talk on the results of his study of the Museum's crustaceans and Graham Fulton will outline his approach to the bird collection. Those wishing to attend are invited to bring their lunch. Tea and coffee will be available.

## *Collection Data Bases*

As a welcome side effect of the AUMOL project reported in the last Newsletter, the separate data bases of the Museum's collections are being converted to a common data base on common software. We are using Microsoft Access, and have purchased several new machines and upgraded memory in others to run the program. Most of the data has now been converted to the new software. The next stage is to network the data bases, when we can buy a new server for the Museum.

AUMOL, Australian University Museums on Line, the project to create an on-line catalogue with pictures of the holdings of the university museums and collections of four universities, has continued to progress well. We have a test web site in the process of redesign, which will shortly provide access to about 70,000 records and about 12,000 images. The image capture project is well underway and the number of images is expected to increase considerably. The URL is <http://aumol.usyd.edu.au>.

## *Special Visitors*

Dr Philippe Peltier from the Musée des Arts D'Afrique et d'Océanie in Paris and Dr Mike Gunn from the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York visited the Museum recently to select items for an exhibition being planned to be shown in Paris, Berlin, and New York in 2001. They were excited by some of the pieces they saw. Mr Christian Stenerson from the Museum of Ethnology in Geneva also visited to establish a relationship between Geneva and the Macleay. Dr Michael O'Hanlon from the British Museum looked at the New Guinea "man catchers". Professor Peter Hilton and Professor Jean Pederson from New York came mainly to look at the scientific instruments.

Jamjun Pechsiri, a postgraduate student and staff member from the Department of Biology at Thaksun University in Thailand, visited the University of Sydney for three months in an exchange program arranged by the Faculty of Science. Jamjun's program included several weeks part-time in the Museum learning techniques applicable to biological collections. She worked mainly with Stuart Norrington (Vertebrate Collection Manager) on the preparation of study skins and skeletal material, preserving specimens in alcohol and other museum techniques.

## *To Dine For*

The Fijian chief Thakambau once used this fork to eat human flesh.

In a culture centred around the deification of one's ancestors, cannibalism was practised as the ultimate insult to an enemy and the ultimate revenge upon a victim's descendants - the body of a potential ancestor not only desecrated by the victor, but fully consumed. Archaeological evidence indicates that cannibalism was present in Fiji from around 2500 years ago until the late 1800s. By the time the first Europeans traders settled in the region in the early 19th century, cannibalism was a highly ritualised institution which underpinned the intense warfare and political unrest characteristic of this period of Fijian history.

During the time that cannibalism was practised in Fiji, only deified priests and chiefs used special forks like this one for eating human flesh. As living representatives of the ancestral gods, these individuals were considered so sacred that they could not touch food with their hands or lips. Consequently they were fed by an attendant or fed themselves during cannibal feasts using a fork like this one.

Known to Europeans as the 'King of Fiji', Thakambau (Cakabau) was perhaps the most famous of all Fijian Chiefs. As hereditary ruler of the powerful Bau region, Thakambau was a pivotal figure in the factional power struggles among the peoples of the Koro sea during the mid 1800s. Fiji was then in a period of extreme political unrest as warring factions led by various chiefdoms contended for overall power in the islands.



Fijian cannibal fork  
21 x 4 cm (acc. No. 93.1.6)  
(Malcolm Ricketts Photo)

In 1871 Thakambau was instrumental in forming a Fiji-wide government in an attempt to finally end the civil unrest and to preserve Fijian authority against increasing European interests in the region. Thakambau's government failed to achieve its aims and after only two years was forced to secede. In 1874 Britain annexed Fiji marking the end of sovereignty of the Fijian chiefs and indigenous rule.

A fork which had been used by Thakambau, the 'King of the cannibals', would have been a much prized possession amongst a European population whose voyeuristic obsession with the savagery of the Fijian native fuelled a lucrative export trade of exotica. Anatole Von Hügel,

a traveller residing in Fiji in the 1870s noted this fascination when commenting upon the 'curios' collected by European residents: "Every dish was a cannibal dish, every club had been the instrument of some atrocious murder, and every stain on either was caused by blood".

'Cannibal forks' (iculanibokola) were particularly coveted as mementos for early European travellers and settlers, capturing the somewhat gruesome European imagination and graphically representing European notions of the barbarous savage. So great was their popularity at the time that the noted ethnographer James Edge-Partington warned prospective collectors in the late 1880s that they were being made by Europeans for sale to unwitting tourists.

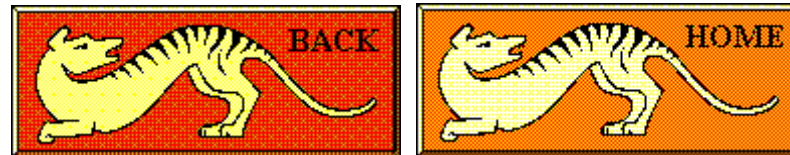
This particular fork was presented to the collector John Archibald Boyd in 1882 on the occasion of his leaving Fiji, with the information that it had been used in cannibal feasts by the chief Thakambau. Boyd was a planter and grazier living on the island of Ovalu who provided William John Macleay with natural history specimens and artefacts from Fiji during the years 1874 to 1882.

This Fijian fork is currently on display as part of the exhibition *Yalo I Viti: Spirit of Fiji*.

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