

Art sale devastates Wurundjeri people

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A message from the past intended to inform the present has been lost.

The recent auction of the cultural document Ceremony [1897], a work in earth, ink and charcoal on paper by Wurundjeri elder William Barak, to an unknown collector has left the Wurundjeri community devastated.

The Wurundjeri Tribe Land and Compensation Cultural Heritage Council Incorporated only became aware of the work because of a story in the Financial Review on May 25 about the coming auction. The revelation was bittersweet as the council had been unaware Ceremony existed, and did not have the funds to purchase the cultural document.

With short notice, the council launched a crowdfunding campaign to repatriate Ceremony, attracting 260 pledges, ranging between \$5 and \$10,000 - reaching \$45,392 in two weeks - but fell short of the funds needed.

Had the council been aware of the existence of Ceremony, and been given time to approach the National Cultural Heritage Account, to develop a consortium of public institutions, and to reach more people via the crowdfunding campaign, there is no question the funds could have been raised. (The work sold at auction for \$512,400 including premium.)

Wurundjeri Elder Allan Wandin said: "It's likely that galleries and museums across Australia, and beyond, would have been aware that Ceremony was on the market. We, the traditional owners, found out by chance. There is something very wrong with that."

Wurundjeri elder Aunty Alice Kolasa further stated: "Other traditional owner groups should never have to experience the type of pain we are experiencing right now. The pain is worse because we've just been told we're not allowed to know who bought uncle's work or where it will be. I never got a chance to see Ceremony in person. My sons didn't get to see it or my grandchildren. We may never ever get that chance now."

The council is calling for a review of Aboriginal cultural heritage legislation, in particular uniformity of legislation between all states and territories, the establishment of a mandatory register of significant cultural documents - such as Ceremony, which are held in private collections - as well as mandatory notification to the relevant traditional owner groups when such objects enter the market for trade.

An elder of the council called Aboriginal Victoria to clarify whether a "stop order" could be applied to prevent the cultural object from being removed from the state

(provision is made for such orders under the Victorian Aboriginal Heritage Act 2006). But the elder was advised that the Act didn't apply in this circumstance.

According to the owners' family oral history, William Barak exchanged the drawing with the glass engraver Frank Piggott Webb (1859-1942) for one of his glass works. Such an exchange was not uncommon as Barak was known to trade or gift his works. What is perhaps less well known is that Barak's works were deliberate attempts to preserve and transmit Wurundjeri culture and lore to future generations of his people.

Barak created a corpus of 50 or so works that documented his culture and set them strategically adrift into the world at a time when speaking traditional language and practising culture were banned in Victoria. These works are messages from the past intended for contemporary Wurundjeri people, who deserve free and open access to them as a right, not a privilege.

A written request by the council to Bonhams to facilitate communication with the former owner reportedly was agreed to by Bonhams. But Bonhams advised the council in May that the owner did not wish to disclose their details.

The sitting members of the Wurundjeri Council's Committee of Management described the rebuff as "harsh treatment given the reported connection between our families".

The council made representations to public institutions such as the NGV, Melbourne Museum, the State Library, various philanthropic bodies and philanthropists, the corporate sector, as well as local and state government. Tragically, our cultural heritage legislation and policies failed Indigenous and non-Indigenous Victorians alike leading up to and inclusive of the auction, which took place on June 7.

As this loss sinks in, it may be timely for all Victorians and Australians more broadly to reflect on the meaning of reconciliation.