

Indigenous Australia exhibition at British Museum raises questions and criticism

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by Katy Scott



IMAGE: Australian Indigenous art – Bark painting of a barramundi fish. (Courtesy: British Museum)

Indigenous Australia: Enduring Civilisation exhibition at the British Museum in London showcases more than 170 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander objects, mostly never previously exhibited. In the weeks leading up to the exhibition, a number of Australian Indigenous leaders have demanded the artefacts be repatriated.

The exhibition is a joint project between the National Museum of Australia and the British Museum. Curator Gaye Sculthorpe is herself of Tasmanian Aboriginal descent.

A group of protesters dressed as thieves interrupted the press opening of the exhibition. They held up Aboriginal flags and read messages from Aboriginal leaders, demanding that the British Museum's collection of 6000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait

Islander objects be repatriated. The protesters were opposed to cultural events, such as the exhibition, receiving sponsorship from BP.

Zoe Pilger, The Independent writer and daughter of Australian writer and filmmaker [John Pilger](#), echoed the call for the artefacts to be returned to their source communities. According to Pilger, those visiting the exhibition will involve themselves in perpetuating theft from Aboriginal people.

Pilger claims the exhibition represses the fact that “white Australia is founded on murder” thereby muting “the drama and dignity of the story of Indigenous colonisation and resistance”.

“This also has the effect of draining the exhibition of vitality – it is quite dull, which Indigenous art emphatically is not,” she writes.

Sculthorpe told Sydney Morning Herald that she can understand that there are varying views on where the earliest acquisitions should be now.

“I think one of the fascinating things about the exhibition and the accompanying book is that it explores the many ways objects did get here,” she said.

She is of the opinion that the British Museum is making a serious attempt to engage Indigenous people in the exhibition. She further explained that the museum is also open to discussing requests to return items it holds.

Approximately 70 percent of the pieces on display will be included in the National Museum of Australia in Canberra’s related show, *Encounters*, in November.