

Crown Jewels Down Under

by Isobel Harbison
Circa Art Magazine
27 July 2004

A battle has begun between the British Museum Goliath and an unlikely underdog opponent comprising the Dja Dja Wurrung Native Title Group. Australian Aboriginal artifacts, on loan from the British Museum and the Royal Botanic Gardens to the Museum of Victoria in Melbourne have been seized by the representatives of the Aboriginal tribe that originally owned them. The Dja Dja Wurrung Native Title Group from Central Victoria have secured an emergency declaration order preventing the return of the artifacts to Britain. According to Australia's Aboriginal heritage laws, the emergency protection order can be extended indefinitely, but the Dja Dja Wurrung are petitioning for a permanent order.

The artifacts, including two early bark etchings, a ceremonial emu and a traditional head dress, made by the ancestors of the Dja Dja Wurrung were on loan from the British museums to celebrate the 150th anniversary of the Museum Victoria. A representative of the Aboriginal group, Mr Gary Murray has appealed to the public claiming: "We believe strongly that they [the artifacts] connect us to our country, our culture and ancestry... If you haven't got a past then you haven't got a future and it is our future at stake here." Murray added that "If the British found the Crown Jewels in Australia they would be sending the warships in to get them back. We are trying to do this in a fair-minded way. We are not holding anyone to ransom and we are not hijacking art."

Ding, Ding, Ding, Mr Murray wins round one.

The British Museum and Royal Botanic Gardens are battling their corner in a diplomatic but nonetheless convincing manner. If the Dja Dja Wurrung community members win any legal battle, and indeed it seems set to become a legal battle, then this will surely have considerable repercussions on the very nature of ethnographic collections and repatriation of important cultural heritage materials. The two British Museums have released a joint statement stressing the importance and educational value of international loans, but claim that this "emergency declaration puts at risk the very legal framework that allows such exhibitions to take place drawing on loans from Europe and America."

Ding, Ding, Ding, the British museums take round two.

Standing between Ayres Rock and a hard place is Patrick Greene, the Chief Executive

Officer of Museum Victoria. Legally bound to the British museums, and culturally bound to the Aboriginal community, Greene claims that the seizure "came really out of the blue". He explained that "first of all, we have a contractual arrangement with the British Museum and the Royal Botanical Gardens at Kew and we will stand by that and we will do everything to make sure that we do comply with that and return the items. The second priority is to ensure that our relations with the Aboriginal community - which are very good and which have been built up over many years - also remain good." According to the Sydney Morning Herald however, the museum has warned the Dja Dja Wurrung that it is contractually obliged to return the artifacts to Britain and therefore may be taking legal action against the community.

Ding, Ding, Ding round three goes to the three large museums.

However the Dja Dja Wurrung have by no means lost the match. In response to the British museums claims that their display of the artifacts in Britain would be to the "betterment of mankind", Murray responded "I say, bullshit, you've had enough time'." In response to the claims that Britain is host to a larger global audience he replied "I say `bullshit' again. They haven't got a monopoly on the universe. The universe is also here". Murray asks "You go to Britain to see the Crown jewels, so why would you want to go to Britain to see the bark etchings that come out of Boort, that belong to the Dja Dja Wurrung people?"

A winning blow. Ding, Ding, Ding, round four goes to Murray and the Dja Dja Wurrung community.

© Copyright 1999-2004 CIRCA Art Magazine
CIRCA, 43/44 Temple Bar, Dublin 2
Tel / Fax: +353 1 6797388;
Email: editor@recirca.com