

Artefacts Seized in Australia

The Dja Dja Wurrung Native Title Group in Australia has secured an emergency order to prevent the return of Aboriginal artefacts that were on loan Museum Victoria from the British Museum and Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew. The artefacts, two bark etchings and an Aboriginal ceremonial headdress, were lent to the Museum as part of its 150th anniversary exhibition *Etched on Bark 1854*, and were due to be returned last month. Members of the Dja Dja tribe from western Victoria sought an emergency declaration under an aboriginal heritage protection law. The order can be renewed indefinitely. *The Sydney Morning Herald* reports that Gary Murray, spokesperson for the Dja Dja Wurrung Native Title Group said his people were determined to retain the objects, which had "our spiritual and physical DNA from our ancestors all over them".

Joint Statement issued by the Royal Botanic Gardens Kew and the British Museum:

The Trustees of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, and the British Museum are committed to exercising their stewardship of the collections for the benefit of a worldwide public now and in future generations. Lending objects to exhibitions around the world is a central part of their aim of sharing the collections with the widest possible audience. The objects lent by the British Museum and Kew to the Museum Victoria exhibition 'Etched on Bark' are part of a growing programme of worldwide loans from both institutions.

While seeking to work closely with Aboriginal communities, Museum Victoria is also eager to fulfil its obligations under its loan agreements with the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew and the British Museum, and to return the objects to London. A certificate from the Commonwealth Government Canberra authorises this return.

All of the objects lent by Kew and the British Museum to this exhibition are made of organic materials, and thus cannot be on permanent display whether in London or Australia. Exhibitions of this kind, bringing rare material from collections throughout the world, provide invaluable opportunities to make available to the world public the latest research and interpretations of the objects and the human cultures that produced them.

The Emergency Declaration puts at risk the very legal framework that allows such exhibitions to take place drawing on loans from Europe and America. In Britain as in Australia and North America, Trustees' legal responsibilities prevent them from lending objects if there is any risk of damage or that they might not be returned upon completion of the term of the loan.

It is in the interests of everyone that objects of cultural and artistic significance such as these continue to be able to move around the world and be seen by many different publics.

This matter is being resolved by the Museum Victoria and the Australian State and Federal authorities. The Trustees of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew and the British Museum await

the outcome.

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