

New book about rare Indigenous objects in British museums



Gaye Sculthorpe, head of the Oceania section at the British Museum, has researched Australian Indigenous objects in British and Irish collections.

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A child's plaster doll with black skin that belonged to Tasmanian Aboriginal girl Mithina (Mathinna), and shellwork booties intended as a gift for a baby princess, now the Queen, are among the rare and unusual objects in a new book about some of the 39,000 artefacts from Indigenous Australia held in British and Irish museums.

A decade-long research project led by an Australian curator at the British Museum, Gaye Sculthorpe, has attempted to locate First Nations ancestral property held across Britain and Ireland in major institutions, universities and local museums.

The illustrated book, *Ancestors, Artefacts, Empire: Indigenous Australia in British and Irish Museums*, does not attempt to itemise the thousands of artefacts, but it does draw attention to 160 significant objects and provides details of 78 museums in which - Indigenous material culture is held. Taken together, it is an astonishing collection.

Speaking from London, Sculthorpe says the means by which Indigenous objects were acquired involved "everything on the spectrum", from gift to purchase, exchange, and theft. Objects were collected as specimens for scientific research but also as souvenirs.

The book likely will prompt calls for the return of objects to Australia, Sculthorpe says, but that's a matter for discussion by the relevant First Nations communities and the museums.

"It's not for us to say what should happen; it's really a matter of what people want, what does each museum believe," she says.

"I think those discussions will arise, but it's a matter for the relevant parties to discuss their interest. In some cases, people want to borrow things; they may be interested in finding out more information."

Through her detective work, and by visiting and contacting museums around Britain, Sculthorpe has identified historic treasures such as boomerangs and spear-throwers that were owned by members of the Aboriginal cricket team that toured Britain in 1868.

The objects were in the Royal Albert Memorial Museum in Exeter, but the connection with the 1868 cricketers was not known until Sculthorpe recognised the name William Hayman, who managed the tour and donated the objects.

The Derbyshire Record Office holds objects related to Mithina, the Aboriginal girl taken to live at Government House in Van Diemen's Land in the early 1840s and then abandoned. The objects include a pincushion – with a label, "Pincushion made by METHINNA a Tasmanian girl" – and a plaster doll that likely was hers.

Another discovery was a water carrier made from bull kelp, collected in 1792 from Recherche Bay in Tasmania during the expedition led by Bruni d'Entrecasteaux. Now in the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris, it is the earliest surviving object from Aboriginal Tasmania.

Sculthorpe says the "incredibly rare" water carrier had been misplaced with the African collections. "There's a series of errors in records that have ended up in the African section," she says.

"They knew what they were looking for, because I had a drawing from the 1890s.

"It's the earliest surviving Tasmanian Aboriginal object from this historic period, and it's the only 18th century example. "There are very few Aboriginal objects from the 18th century in any museum anywhere. And it's so beautiful."

Ancestors, Artefacts, Empire, edited by Sculthorpe, Maria Nugent and Howard Morphy, was launched this month at the National Museum of Australia, as part of the UK/Australia Season, a program of events about cultural and historic connections between the two nations. An estimated 39,000 Indigenous objects are held in British and Irish museums, including a single collection of 16,000 stone tools at the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford, collected by "amateur geologist" Ernest Westlake in Tasmania in the early 1900s. Other significant collections include the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology in Cambridge, the British Museum and the Royal Collections, and also many small, local museums.

The objects date from the earliest British contact with First Nations peoples right through to contemporary Indigenous art being held in the Tate, including work by Gordon Bennett, Emily Kame Kngwarreye and John Mawurndjul.

Sculthorpe says the historic objects generally have been well cared for, but particularly in the smaller museums they lacked accurate information about their origins. Often, the museums do not have dedicated curators of Indigenous material, instead giving responsibility to a curator of “world cultures”.

Part of the book’s purpose is to prompt accurate identification of the objects.

“It can be a slow process,” Sculthorpe says. “You need to start doing research to get the records right, so the relevant museum will know it’s from this part of Australia. Like all museums, they need more money, but generally they care for these objects and are keen to learn more about them, and to connect with the descendants of the people who made the objects.”

The book grew out of a research project conducted by the Australian National University, the National Museum of Australia and the British Museum to discover more about Indigenous cultural heritage in Britain. “It became apparent that many institutions across the UK and Ireland have objects of great significance to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people,” Sculthorpe says.

Ancestors, Artefacts, Empire: Indigenous Australia in British and Irish Museums, 256pp, \$120.