Pitt Rivers
MUSEUM
Anthropology and World Archaeology

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ABORIGINAL AUSTRALIA

Aboriginal Australia in the Pitt Rivers Museum

Australia might be regarded one of the last places on earth to be explored by Europeans. However, for its Aboriginal inhabitants, Europe and the white man did not exist for the first 70,000 years of human history in their country. In fact, the Europeans were not the first outsiders to reach Australia; long before the Dutch explorers of the 17th century and Captain Cook's famous voyages in the 1770s, Melanesian and Chinese seafarers and fishermen interacted with the Aboriginal people of the northern shores.

More than 200 years have passed since the establishment of the first European colony in Australia, and in that time many objects have been collected and brought back to England for museum collections. The history of this collecting mirrors the European view of Australian and Aboriginal culture. Early contacts between European and Aboriginal people were disastrous in their effects on health and civil liberties and many colonists believed the indigenous way of life was dying.

Today, however, it is recognized that Aboriginal culture is strong, vibrant and progressive, and there is some understanding in Australian public life of the need to address old wrongs. Aboriginal culture is now considered a vital part of Australia's past, present and future, and Aboriginal art in particular is acknowledged to be among the world's greatest living artistic traditions. Aboriginal people actively produce objects that may be bought and taken home by visitors for museums and galleries around the world to display.

The Pitt Rivers Museum's Australian collections feature more than 15,000 objects, 1350 photographs, and various manuscript archives of curators and collectors of relevant material. Indigenous Australians are not a homogenous group, but rather many interconnecting communities, spread out across the country. The Museum's collections contain objects from all parts of Australia and reflect both Aboriginal and white settler cultures. The earliest collections date back to the 1820s, and several hundred Australian objects were

included in General Pitt Rivers' original gift to the University in 1884 (the 'Founding Collection'). More recent additions include acrylic paintings from the western desert movement and boomerangs acquired in the 1990s, plus a series of distinctive bark paintings from Groote Eylandt collected and donated by the noted anthropologist Peter Worsley in 2009.

In general, the amount of Australian material entering the Museum's collections has been lower since the Second World War. This means there are fewer objects reflecting the current lifestyles of many Aboriginal people. However, many aspects of *traditional* Aboriginal material culture – including that of the Torres Strait and Tasmania – can be found here.

Basketry

Baskets, bags and dishes made from natural materials are a significant feature of Aboriginal life, and are often decorated with clan or family designs. They are used for many purposes including food gathering, storing and transporting goods, or even carrying babies.

Traditional Australian basketry is well represented in the Museum. This bicornial basket is made from woven lawyer cane, a climbing palm known locally as 'Wait-a-While' or 'Hairy Mary'. Its crescent shape is characteristic of northern Queensland and this 19th-century example was donated by Dr. James Francis Turner, the Bishop of Grafton and Armidale, New South Wales (1869–92), shortly before his death. Baskets of this type continue to be made by men and women alike.

Basket painted with a red design; 1893.38.24 ▶

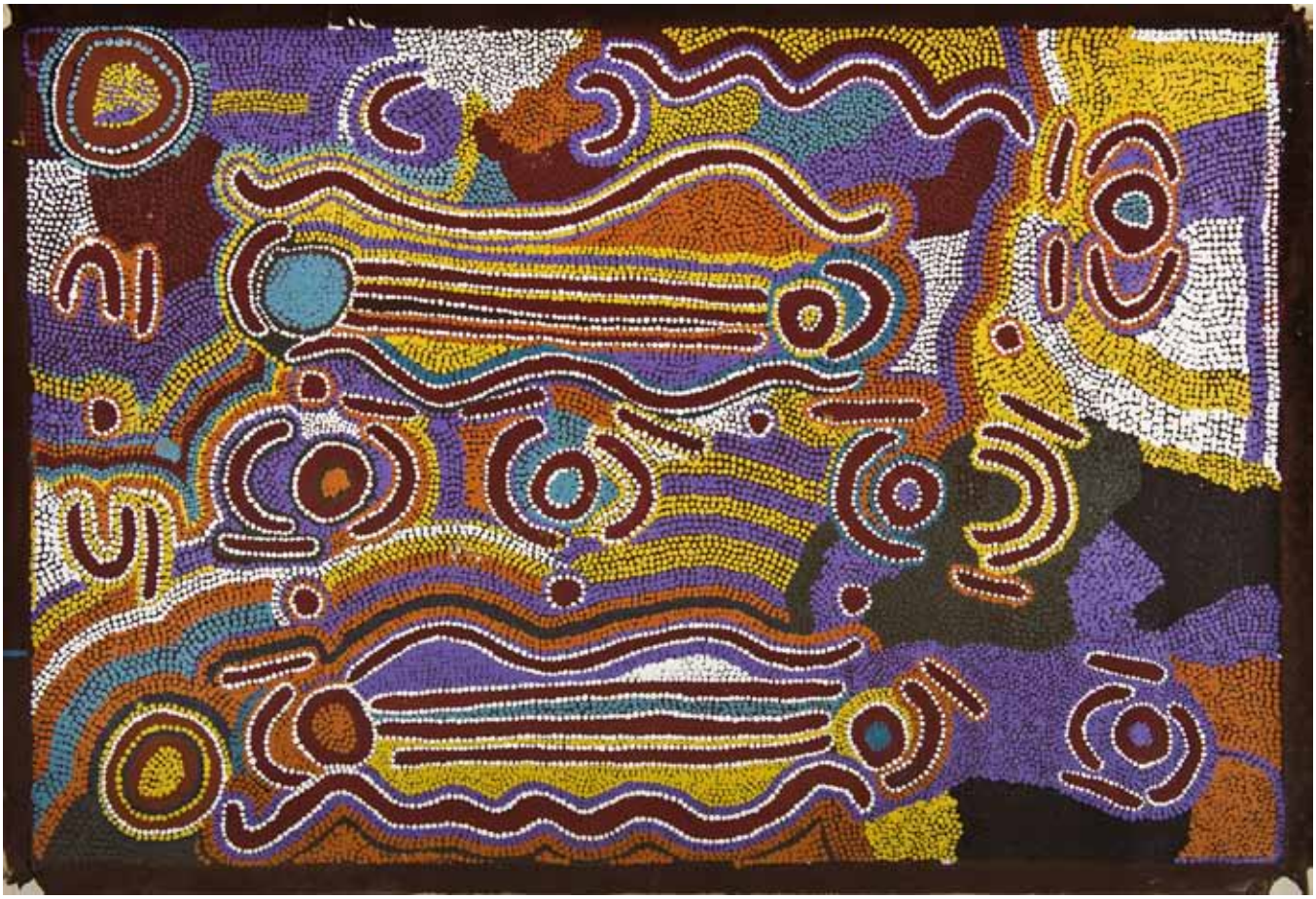
Aboriginal Art

Many Aboriginal artworks depict scenes and figures from the Dreaming. The Dreaming is the word outsiders use to describe the way Aborigines look at the world. It is based upon timeless stories featuring mythological creatures and ancestors, whose actions resulted in the creation of the landscape, animals and the Aboriginal people.

This painting by Yirawala (1894–1976) is in the distinctive 'X-ray' style of Western Arnhem Land in Northern Territory. It shows Ngalyod the Rainbow Serpent, a hybrid of a snake and a crocodile and one of the most recognisable of the creator ancestors. In some origin myths the people who have been swallowed will later be regurgitated to form the founding human populations of different lands. The presence of the Rainbow Serpent is manifest in features of the landscape but also in more ephemeral expressions of nature: reflections in waterholes, the flash of lightning, and the rainbows that follow storms.

▲ **Painting on bark by the artist Yirawala; 1982.12.1**

Aboriginal artists traditionally used paints made from natural earth pigments such as red and yellow ochre, clay, and charcoal. Bark was a popular and portable surface for painting on – as used for by most of the artworks on display – but paintings were also created on rock and cave walls, wooden sculpted posts, huts, the ground, and even the human body.



▲ **Painting on canvas by the artist Judy Napangardi Watson; 1994.43.1**

In the 1970s Aboriginal artists at Papunya near Alice Springs, encouraged by school-teacher Geoffrey Bardon, began to experiment with brightly coloured acrylic paints. The movement later spread to other communities including the Walbiri settlement of Yuendumu on the edge of the Tanami desert. Acrylic painting on canvas was taken forward by senior women of these communities such as Judy Napangardi Watson (born c. 1925), one of the original artists.

This particular painting tells the story of a group of women travelling the land collecting bush tucker, and follows the tradition of desert art where shapes and patterns of dots are used to represent people, water, stones, animals and objects.

Dr. Howard Morphy was a Lecturer/ Curator in Australian and South Pacific culture at the Pitt Rivers Museum from 1986 to 1996 and remains an Honorary Curator. He bought this painting in 1988 at the Ramingining Aboriginal Community in Central Arnhem Land. Ramingining was established after the Second World War and the art centre, set up in the 1970s, remains an important way of promoting artists and generating local income.

The painting by Ken Minyipirrawuy (d. 2002) demonstrates the geometric style of the Yolngu people of Central and Eastern Arnhem Land. The upper part represents the coastal plain of Central Arnhem Land, as created by the journey of the ancestral Djang'kawu Sisters. Wherever the sisters put their digging sticks, they created water holes, represented by circles. The sisters named the various plant and animal species they encountered, such as the stick insects (*warrala warrala)* shown in the lower section.

◀ **Painting on bark by the artist Ken Minyipirrawuy; 1988.36.2**

Weapons

This surgical knife (overleaf) was made by a community living north of the MacDonnell Ranges in the centre of Australia. R. F. Wilkins donated it to the Museum in 1900, along with several hundred other Australian artefacts collected by artist and explorer Harry Stockdale.

As well as being a collector and a dealer, Stockdale was also an artist and his detailed diaries and illustrated notebooks from this an other trips to the Kimberley region of north-western Australia, form a meticulously detailed account of Aboriginal people and objects, the weather, and the local flora and fauna.

The knife's blade is made of recycled glass. Since first contact, Australian Aboriginal people have ingeniously adapted discarded European goods from campsites, shipwrecks and rubbish to their own ends. Salvaged clear, green and brown bottle glass was often used for knife blades, spearheads and arrowheads because

it could be flaked using a large pebble, in much the same way as quartz, from which most traditional blades were made. In the case of 'Kimberley points' (spear- and arrowheads), a sharp stick or animal bone was used to 'pressure flake' very fine, serrated edges. Knife handles were made of gum (as here) or wood. The sheath, bound in string and decorated with feathers, is made from paper bark *(melaleuca).* The leaves of this shrub are thought to contain medicinal properties and are chewed to alleviate headaches.

Aboriginal Australians remain innovative recyclers of industrial waste materials but unfortunately modern bottle glass is too thin to be flaked in this way.

Glass knife and sheath; 1900.55.225 ▶

Shields in Australia are works of art as well as being functional objects. This parrying shield was used by the Djirbalngan people of the Cairns rainforest region on northern Queensland for actual and ritualised combat. Although it is more than a metre long it is made of lightweight wood, and its curved shape echoes the natural shape of the Giant Fig root from which it was carved. Such shields were not considered complete until they were painted with patterns identifying the individual warrior and his clan.

◀ Parrying shield; 1900.55.165

Musical instrument/Spear thrower; 1898.75.25

The Museum purchased this object in 1898 from Dr Emile Clement (1844–1928), a Prussian-born archaeologist, naturalist and ethnographer. Clement was a prominent collector of Western Australian Aboriginal artefacts and natural history specimens during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, which he sold on to museums in Britain and Europe.

This interesting piece is from Nullagine in Western Australia, a gold-rush town founded in the 1890s. It is actually two objects in one. Essentially it is a spear thrower or *woomera,* its paddle-shape typical of the area. How does it work? The peg at one end is inserted into a purpose-made conical depression in the butt of the spear, while the opposite end has a large blob of spinifex gum to act as a counterbalance. The device prolongs the period of contact between the thrower and the spear, thus increasing the weapon's velocity and accuracy. The side displayed here is carved with faint zigzag designs, but the opposite side has 35 grooved notches, which are scraped with a stick to produce a musical sound. This double use as a 'musical rasp' has been historically traced to the Gascoyne-Kimberley area but spear throwers were used widely.

An Aboriginal man with shield and boomerang (1998.249.35.2)

In southern Australia, some 300 miles north of Adelaide, a town was founded in 1947 to house a military base for launching missiles, rockets and satellites. It was named 'Woomera' in recognition of this ingenious Aboriginal weapon.

This image is from the Museum's photograph collection, donated by John Bagot in 1893. The photographer is unknown but it was probably taken in the 1880s or early 1890s. It shows a man from the Murray River region in South Australia wearing a kangaroo skin and holding a small shield and boomerang.

The term, ‘boomerang’ originates with the Turuwal people of the Sydney area. Strictly speaking, it refers only to Australian throwing sticks, which Aboriginal peoples developed themselves at least 8,000–10,000 years ago for use in hunting. Boomerangs are often carved or painted with ochre or clay. Such designs are often connected to the ‘Dreamtime’ myths that link Aboriginal clans to their ancestors and the creation of the land.

Unlike the throwing sticks of Ancient Egypt or India, the boomerang has a characteristically elevated and curved flight path due to the convex surface of its arms, which act like wings to provide lift, and the precise degree of its curvature, which ensures stable rotation in the air. However, not all boomerangs come back to the thrower; returning boomerangs are very much in the minority, having only developed in eastern Australia in the past few hundred years for sporting use.

Boomerang competitions remain popular today, with modern versions available in all shapes, sizes and colours and made from materials such as plywood, plastics or fibre-glass.

Further Reading

Howard Morphy and Elizabeth Edwards (eds), *Australia in Oxford*, Oxford: Pitt Rivers Museum / University of Oxford (1988).

Howard Morphy, *Becoming Art: Exploring Cross-Cultural Categories,* Oxford: Berg (2007).

Wally Caruana, *Aboriginal Art*, 2nd edition, London: Thames & Hudson (2003).

The objects featured in this Introductory guide can be found at the following locations:

The Court (ground floor)
Case no. C118A - Plaited and Twined Baskets

Lower Gallery (first floor)
Case nos. L126A and 128A- Aboriginal Art
L186A Surgical Instruments

Upper Gallery (second floor)
Case nos. U3A – Shields
U57B – Spear Throwers
U75B – Throwing Sticks and Boomerangs

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Supported by ARTS COUNCIL ENGLAND

