



# Contexts for Conservation

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## **Conservation community consultation during the Bunjilaka Redevelopment Project at Melbourne Museum**

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### **Abstract**

The development of the First Peoples exhibition within the Bunjilaka Aboriginal Cultural Centre at Melbourne Museum, a venue of Museum Victoria (MV), provided the opportunity to consult and collaborate with Victorian Aboriginal Community members. This paper will provide an overview of four collaborations; work with the Yulendj reference group, with Gunai artist Steaphan Paton during the acquisition process, with Yorta Yorta elders on a historic possum skin cloak and finally with Baraba Baraba and Wemba Wemba community members in returning and filming objects on country. The consultations were documented and have been included in MV's database and digital asset management program. This exchange of knowledge and skills enhanced the preservation of Indigenous collections at MV by incorporating cultural considerations into conservation practices.

### **Keywords**

conservation, consultation, collaboration, victorian, aboriginal, community, ethics, exhibition

### **Introduction**

First Peoples is the new permanent exhibition within the Bunjilaka Aboriginal Cultural Centre at Melbourne Museum, a venue of Museum Victoria. It was developed between 2009 and 2013 and is the largest exhibition in Australia to focus on the culture, history and languages of Aboriginal Victoria. The exhibition comprises four sections:

- *Wominjeka* means 'welcome' in the Kulin family of Victorian Aboriginal languages and introduces visitors to the diverse culture and communities of Victoria. Experiences include the interactive language map, a contemporary hand carved message stick, graphic and textural representations of basket and shield designs and the historic Yorta Yorta possum skin cloak;
- *Generations* displays historic and contemporary large scale photographic reproductions with stories exploring themes of connection, family, culture and resilience. It also contains an immersive multimedia experience featuring Victorian Aboriginal community members of all ages sharing their views on cultural identity.
- *Many Nations* is an object rich display featuring over 500 historic and contemporary objects in large scale cases representing the diversity of 250 nations within Australia and the Torres Straits. The objects are grouped according to themes of celebrating

culture; keeping places; working country; animal creations; marking identity and toy stories and are supported by comprehensive digital labels.

- *Our Story* invites visitors to recognise the history of Victoria's First People as a shared history and includes the astounding kinetic sculpture of Bunjil's wings to represent the creation of country, people and culture. This section chronicles stories of 2000 generations via historic and contemporary objects relating to sustainable resource management, trade and ceremony through to 200 years of colonisation depicting the resilience and adaptation of modern Aboriginal people who are continuing cultural practices (Reynolds 2013).

### **The First Peoples voice**

The exhibition was co-curated by Museum Victoria staff and the Yulendj reference group, consisting of sixteen elders and Aboriginal community representatives from across Victoria. Yulendj means 'knowledge' and 'law' in the Kulin nation and the members: Aunty Dianne Kerr, Aunty Carolyn Briggs, Uncle Larry Walsh, Uncle David Tournier, Uncle Albert Mullett, Uncle Sandy Atkinson, Aunty Rochelle Patten, Aunty Esther Kirby, Aunty Eileen Harrison, Aunty Eileen Alberts, Brendan Kennedy, Titta Seacombe, Lisa Jones, Justice Nelson, Len Tregonning and Lee Healy collaborated across the project team from curatorial and design to conservation and public programs. This collaborative model improved research and identification of collections and saw the exchange of knowledge and skills between Museum staff and community and the creation of a new narrative which incorporates 40 Victorian Aboriginal languages in exhibition text, audio and visual media.

### **Museum Victoria**

Museum Victoria supported the involvement of the Victorian Aboriginal community in this project. The Museum's current Strategic Plan and Community Engagement Framework documents outline key values and objectives that state:

- engagement with Indigenous Communities is recommended during the development of our exhibitions or programs,
- Indigenous beliefs should have primacy in determining practice
- Community partnerships increase understanding and respect for history, culture and traditions (*MV Strategic Plan 2008-2013; Appendix B: Specific Communities Action Plan 2008-2011; Collections Conservation Policy 1999*).

The Museum also formed the Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Advisory Committee (ACHAC) in 1984 which has been a source of community engagement especially during the establishment of the Bunjilaka Aboriginal Cultural Centre in 2000 (Edmonds and Wild 2000).

### **Ethics**

In Australia, the activities of conservators are guided by the Australian Institute for the Conservation of Cultural Materials (AICCM) *Code of Ethics and Code of Practice*. Conservators perform appropriate treatments to the highest standards ensuring that the evidence of the history and provenance of cultural material is preserved. After thorough investigation, examination and consultation, conservators only undertake treatment that is judged suitable to the preservation of the aesthetic, conceptual and physical characteristics of the object. Treatment is only undertaken when necessary and when non-interventive techniques best serve to promote the preservation of the object no treatment is performed.

The AICCM *Code of Ethics and Code of Practice* also expresses the respect that conservators have for Indigenous cultural material and their requirements, particularly secret/sacred items. Conservators are trained to be informed and respectful of the cultural and spiritual significance of Indigenous material and when possible, to consult with all relevant stakeholders. Though they recognise the unique character and significance of an object with regard to the people or person who created it, the incorporation of cultural wishes and needs into collections care and conservation treatments has not been extensively investigated in Australia (AICCM 2002).

### **Community consultation**

In line with these principles conservators have and do consult with Indigenous communities around the world but what is lacking is publicly documented information on the complex practical and ethical processes involved. Much has been written on the topic of the tangible and intangible nature of cultural objects and the fact that objects are linked to cultural identity. There is an understanding that in a museum environment objects are removed from their cultural context and conservators have traditionally worked on them in this removed way (Edmonds and Wild 2000; Smith and Winkelbauer 2000). The National Museum of the American Indian in the United States of America, the Otago Museum and private projects conserving Thangkas (Tibetan Buddhist banners) are examples of how conservators work with communities during the development of exhibitions and the preparation of loans to identify appropriate treatments. Conservators work with community representatives during complex treatments and have also refrained from treating certain objects because they are not members of the associated cultural group (Cotte 2011; Johnson, Heald, McHugh, Brown, Kaminitz 2005; Kaminitz 2007; Smith and Winkelbauer 2006).

In practice, conservators are limited by exhibition timeframes and the lack of a developed and integrated consultation model and policy. Conservators have expressed the difficulties of identifying appropriate community members with whom to consult without the assistance of other museum staff and experts. It is a collaborative process and depends upon the strong links that curatorial and collection management staff have developed over long periods of time. The conversations are complex and require expertise in the interpretation of sensitive information. However, being directly involved in these conversations also allows the conservator to ask specific preservation and treatment questions that may otherwise get missed through third party conversations (Edmonds and Wild 2000).

### **Establishing conservation community consultations during exhibition development**

The notion of conservation being involved in community consultations and collaborations was pursued from the onset of the Bunjilaka Redevelopment Project. A proposal was developed and presented to the project and permanent Museum curatorial team, project steering group and the manager of Bunjilaka. This document highlighted the importance of conservation being involved in the consultation process and the many benefits including:

- The opportunity to gain information and enhance conservation practice by incorporating the knowledge and wishes of the Victorian Aboriginal community;
- The exchange of knowledge and skills between community and Museum staff
- The establishment of ongoing relationships for the care and preservation of the Museum's Indigenous collections;

- The development of procedures and standards for the conservation treatment of the Museum's Indigenous cultural material;
- The improvement of the Museum's collection management processes

The proposal detailed the role of the conservator, stages of involvement during the consultation process, documentation requirements, budget and resource estimates. It also highlighted that whilst consultations may seem time-intensive, less time would be spent undertaking research to identify objects and materials. Furthermore treatment processes would be clarified early on and in some cases time may be saved by refraining from routine treatments such as cleaning. After lengthy discussions the proposal was accepted and the establishment of the Yulendj reference group provided a structured and efficient manner to proceed.

### **Yulendj reference group**

During subsequent specific workshops and meetings conservation ethics and practices were introduced to the Yulendj group. The members were captivated, excited and involved as they had little knowledge of the profession and the care that was taken to preserve cultural materials. As object lists were finalised discussions were focused on the preparation, treatment and display of the many selected Victorian objects delving into topics such as cleaning, stabilisation, exhibition lighting and display duration (see Figure 1). Broad questions were initially prepared for the consultation process such as:

- Is the object significant and why?
- What level of conservation treatment is acceptable? For example: Surface cleaning? Does it matter if there are cracks? Should broken elements be adhered or flaking paint layers be consolidated?
- Are there any considerations for this object that may require restrictions (such as access or display restrictions)?
- Should any traditional materials, care and repair techniques be used?
- Are there any types of materials or repairs that should not be used?
- How should the object be displayed (orientation or display supports required)?
- What are the community's wishes when this object is in storage? Are there particular objects that should not be placed next to this one?
- Are there any materials which should not be in contact with the object?
- What are the language names for the materials and object?

The community members were pleased to have the opportunity to be involved in the decision making process and made numerous comments about why this hadn't happened in the past. There were certainly emotional moments for all and times when intangible and spiritual insights were being shared which were important to consider when planning conservation work.

Yulendj reiterated that all objects represent spiritual connections to country; the ancestors and laws, ceremony, traditions, stories, identity and the artists' lineage. Each object represents a person and their life story. This identity is represented in the distinctiveness of each piece, the natural resources and tools used to craft them, their function and designs. Objects are alive and when treating and caring for them it is important to understand these aspects to avoid any irreversible changes.

The members felt strongly and unanimously that the approach of minimal intervention was most appropriate and that interventive treatments should only be performed in extreme cases where the object was at risk of losing structural integrity. They supported preventive methods of handling, storage and display as suitable long term practices and attested to the inclusion of community expertise in the care of collections as Aboriginal cultural traditions are alive and continue into the present.

### **Further consultations and collaborations**

Members from the Gunai/Kurnai, Yorta Yorta, Baraba Baraba and Wemba Wemba communities were involved in the acquisition of Boorun's canoe, the mounting of a historic possum skin cloak and the filming of objects back on country. The following accounts provide an overview of the experiences.

#### *Boorun's canoe*

*Boorun's canoe* was a project led by Gunai artist Steaphan Paton in collaboration with Gippsland photographic artist Cameron Cope. Steaphan sought to learn cultural knowledge from his grandfather, senior Gunai/Kurnai elder Albert Mullett, and to continue the long practiced skill of canoe-making. The canoe was made from a single sheet of stingy bark from forest in Bruthren, Gippsland with Steaphan's brother and cousins. The young men led by Uncle Albert cut and pried the sheet from the tree using axes and long sticks. It was placed on a fire, shaped, tied off with prepared stingy bark rope and plugged with locally found clay.

An acquisition proposal for the canoe was put forward with the intention to float it. Conversations with Steaphan began including site visits to Bruthren and Cherry Tree Creek near Lake Tyres in Gippsland. These visits aided the formal risk assessment process and highlighted the many issues involved in the floating such as water logging, sinking, structural damage, salts, microbiological deterioration, handling, transportation and responsibilities to name a few. The significance of the object was in the making and floating. The reinvigoration of traditional practices and the family event was of more importance than the physical condition of the material canoe.

Museum Victoria formally acquired the canoe the day before the floating. Transportation involved housing the canoe in a purpose built stillage strapped to the roof of a 4WD. Access to the creek was down a windy, narrow and extremely bumpy sloping dirt track. The floating involved Steaphan's extended family as it was a momentous occasion. It had been 100 years since a traditional vessel made by the Mullet family had been on the waters at Cherry Tree Creek. The canoe was successfully buoyant and frequented the water over the weekend (see Figure 2). Numerous modifications were made to improve water proofing and repair to damaged areas. These changes were thoroughly documented and samples were collected.

Upon conclusion of the event collaboration continued during the drying process including the removal of excess lard to the external surface. Further exchanges continued during exhibition preparation on topics such as object freezing, numbering, mounting and display discussions. Steaphan was included in all decisions and was specific with his intentions. As a consequence a long term preservation plan was developed which outlined Steaphan's

perspective with respect to the natural deterioration of the canoe and his involvement in future conservation decisions.

The outcome of this collaboration strengthened the bond between the Museum and the community. The artist and his family felt connected, included and respected and future access and contribution are planned.

### *Historic possum skin cloak*

The historic Yorta Yorta possum skin cloak was selected for display in the First Peoples exhibition. It is one of two intact Victorian Aboriginal possum skin cloaks in the world. The cloak was purchased from the RE Johns Estate in 1853 and comes from Maiden's Punt near Echuca in Victoria (*Register Entry n.d*). The cloak measures 2510 x 2045 mm and is made from 82 panels of possum skins sewn together with fine plant fibre twine and is decorated with incised designs on the exposed skin side. The cloak is structurally stable but regarded as fragile. The skin is dehydrated, brittle, torn and worn. The fur is matted and contains numerous losses. There are many repairs throughout the cloak and there is a large section of loss through the central region. X-ray fluorescence identified the presence of the mercury, arsenic, lead and bromine on the surface of the skin and fur (Goodall 2012).

Yorta Yorta elders Uncle Henry Atkinson, Uncle Alf 'Boydie' Turner, Aunty Zeta Thompson and Uncle Donnie Briggs were consulted during the preparation of the cloak for display and long term storage. The condition of the cloak was discussed during the initial consultation and the elders all unanimously agreed that no repairs should be performed by community members or conservators in the future for aesthetic purposes. However they approved of humidifying and flattening creased edges as this issue was a result of long term folding and storage. They spoke in detail about the intangible nature of the cloak and their responsibilities as current custodians. They were satisfied with the proposal of creating a new handling/display/storage board that would see the cloak fully extended as it had been stored folded in a box for a long period of time due to space restrictions. They were thrilled that a new crate would be made to house the cloak at full extension and approved the cloak moving to an offsite facility that could accommodate a crate of this size. Furthermore this consultation saw the push for a new display case as the current recycled one was too small and would see the cloak folded once again. The elders also accepted the invitation to assist in mounting the cloak.

Closer to the exhibition opening and after the manufacture of a new display case and mount the elders travelled back to Melbourne. They were briefed on working with hazardous substances and wore appropriate personal protective equipment. They handled the cloak and positioned it on the fabric covered board. They assisted with the local humidification of the folded and creased edges throughout the cloak. They also located and stitched cotton thread between the original stitches to the underlying fabric to help support the cloak whilst on display on a 15 degree angle. Aunty Zeta also marked the stitch location on a large A3 photographic overlay to be used for future handling and storage instructions.

The sense of ownership, connection and gratitude was immense. The elders played a significant role in the future preservation of this historic item.

### *Taking objects back to country*

Featured throughout the First Peoples exhibition are many multimedia components showcasing Victorian Aboriginal community members. The filming of the multimedia

component of the Darti koko woortongi barnin ('by and by many blacks will arrive') segment gave rise to the opportunity to take three historic objects from the Museum back to country. The objects that were selected were stable and could withstand their proposed use with controls in place. The objects were items collected from the Swan Hill region in 1888 and 1910 and included a paintbrush made from the primary wing of a mutton bird bound in plant fibre string and decorated with ochre, a shield made from a single piece of wood with incised designs and a container or tarnuk made from a tree burl. They were taken for filming to a bush setting along the Murray River in the Gunbower State Park near Koondrook, Victoria.

Community elder Aunty Esther Kirby co-directed the film with Singing Bowl media and Museum Victoria staff. Uncle Fred Egan, Jason and Malika Kirby and Alicia and Marcia Shepherd represented three generations of the Baraba Baraba and Wemba Wemba communities in scenes recreating the famous Blandowski illustrations of Victorian Aboriginal people handing down cultural traditions through story, song, dance and ceremony.

The objects were handled and used in these scenes and became natural inclusions in a bush setting as a portrayal of living on country and upholding culture. Stories were told through the use of the objects and the younger participants felt connected, empowered and inspired to recreate objects and designs. It was interesting to witness a young man initially nervous about handling a highly significant shield turn into a warrior of the past as he realised the shield was robust and could withstand him using it for the purpose of the film (see Figure 3). Witnessing a young girl learning to make an emu feather skirt based on a historic one her grandmother studied in the Museum was equally moving. Offering access to the historic objects outside of the Museum context strengthened bonds and connection to living culture.

### **Museum documentation**

Each consultation and event was captured via an audio device, images and standard note and report writing. Museum Victoria has included this documentation in its KE EMu database and MV Images, the Museum's digital asset management program. This recorded information played an important role when scheduling exhibition treatment, display, design and mount-making processes. It will also assist the conservation team with future decision making processes and direct access to community wishes. This material could also play an important role in the online engagement of Museum Victoria's audience.

### **Conclusion**

Australian Aboriginal cultural materials provide a connection to culture, identity, wellbeing and country. The First Peoples exhibition highlighted the importance of conservation playing a key role in consulting and collaborating with Victorian community members. This positive experience though complex at times highlighted the fact that these objects are not just historic records of the past but a representation of the present and future. Access to objects and involvement in preservation decision making facilitates reconnection, ownership, pride, trust and inspires remaking. By engaging with stakeholders conservators are not just preserving materials but the intangible connection to a living culture. The consultation process is an integral part of reconciliation and the exchange of knowledge and skills between community and Museum staff. This has enhanced conservation documentation, processes and practices, seen the establishment and strengthening of relationships and the improvement of collection management processes.

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## Biography

Samantha Hamilton is an Object Conservator at Museum Victoria and holds a Bachelor of Arts in Fine Arts and Bachelor of Applied Science in the Conservation of Cultural Materials. In 2004 she was awarded an Andrew W. Mellon fellowship at the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington D.C USA, training in advanced archaeological, ethnographic and textile conservation; and was a recipient of a scholarship from the Friends (ANU) of the Australian Archaeological Institute in Athens, training in advanced stone conservation at the Museum of Byzantine Culture in Thessaloniki Greece. Samantha has extensive experience working on multidisciplinary collections in public cultural institutions and private practice. Samantha's long standing research interests are in collaborating with Australian Aboriginal communities and establishing conservation engagement programs.

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Figure 1 Portrait of Yulendj members Lisa Jones Uncle Larry Walsh and Many Nations Curator Rosemary Wrench in the First People collection store at Melbourne Museum, April 2012 Photographer: Benjamin Heally Source: Museum Victoria



Figure 2 Steaphan Paton in *Boorun's Canoe* at Lake Tyers, Victoria Photographer: Cameron Cope Source: Museum Victoria



Figure 3 Jason Kirby with Museum Victoria shield. Photographer: Samantha Hamilton Source: Museum Victoria