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British Museum's Indigenous Australia exhibition draws crowds

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At the British Museum, from left, Ishmael Marika, Peter Yu, Jason Eades, Vic McGrath, Russell Taylor, Gaye Sculthorpe and Henrietta Marrie. Picture: Ella Pellegrini *Source:* News Corp Australia

'I can't wait to get my hands on the jewellery, to touch it,'' confides Henrietta Marrie. "I am very emotional about it." A Yidinji woman from Cairns, Marrie is referring to century-old Aboriginal body ornaments held by the British Museum that closely resemble those worn by her great-grandfather, a tribal leader called Ye-i-nie, in a famous 1905 photograph. Earlier this month, Marrie clutched a copy of that photograph as she took a London cab to a down-at-heel suburb — all blackened bricks, bitumen and grim council housing towers — in the city's east. Marrie, a member of the National Museum of Australia's indigenous reference group, was heading to the British Museum's stores.

Directly across from a public housing estate, the stores could hardly be more removed from the glamour and monumentalism of the museum, one of the world's most visited cultural institutions, which houses the much-fought-over Elgin Marbles, the Rosetta Stone and enough Egyptian mummies to repopulate a dynasty. The

stores, by contrast, are a byword for institutional sterility (scuffed floors, cracked walls, 1960s venetian blinds, endless gun-grey filing cabinets). In these almost aggressively utilitarian surrounds, Marrie comes face to face with tangible evidence of her people's heritage — evidence that has often eluded her.

The Yidinji wife and mother, whose sunny, friendly manner masks a quiet determination, has been an outspoken heritage activist for decades, advocating for better access to indigenous family histories and artefacts held by state, national and overseas museums and galleries. Yet only in recent years did she realise the British Museum held shields and the same sort of jewellery with which her great-grandfather appeared in that 1905 image, an enlarged version of which can be seen on the Cairns waterfront. (The photograph depicts a slight but noble figure holding a heavy, painted shield and wearing a shell headband, hairband and pendant, as well as a large breastplate engraved with the words, "Ye-i-nie/King of Cairns/ 1905''. His initiation scars are visible across his torso.)

At the stores, Ye-i-nie's purple-gloved great-granddaughter examines fragile-looking hair ornaments, sourced from the Cairns area and made from disc-shaped nautilus shell, and smaller, more delicate headbands.

With the absorbed intensity of a scientist examining Petri dishes, she compares them with the body ornaments in her great-grandfather's portrait; to the untrained eye, they look all but identical.

Also laid out on tissue paper and painted in ochres ranging from dull yellow to red-brown and black are a series of rainforest shields collected in the early 1900s in north Queensland. "To walk in that room and see the shields just blew me away,'' Marrie says later. She had seen them in a catalogue, but seeing and holding them "was just extraordinary''. She felt an instant attachment to the jewellery. "That was really emotional, seeing them and holding them and knowing they're real and they're here. It touched me. It really touched me … seeing something that belongs to us — my inheritance, basically.''

This visit to the British Museum stores, to which Review was granted exclusive access, wasn't merely a behind-the-scenes excursion for Marrie and three other indigenous visitors (artists Abe Muriata and Judy Watson, and NMA delegation member Jason Eades). It was a pilgrimage to rare Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander treasures — most of which have not been publicly shown since they were collected — to which some of the visitors have ancestral links.

Other objects provide evidence of some of the earliest moments of contact between white settlers and black communities — a Torres Strait Islands turtle-shell mask with eyes and pointed nose but no mouth was collected during the voyage of HMS Rattlesnake between 1846 and 1860. For cultures without written records, such

objects take on a heightened significance. As the British Museum's director Neil MacGregor tells Review: "What the objects do is give voice to people who didn't leave written records … It's the victors that write the history. But the people who endure the invasion and the settlement leave the things, and those things tell their side of the story.''

The stores visit came towards the end of a momentous week for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders and artists who were in London in late April to attend the official opening of the museum's landmark exhibition *Indigenous Australia — Enduring Civilisation*. Many of them, including Marrie, met Prince Charles, the exhibition's patron, while the NMA's five-strong indigenous delegation also held talks with the museum's powerful trustees, partly to discuss further collaborations.

A joint project with the NMA, *Indigenous Australia* is the first substantial exhibition in Europe to tell the story of the First Australians through objects. In its opening week, it attracted several rave reviews and twice as many people as anticipated. By the second week, the museum had reportedly started to run short of catalogues — a further sign of the intense public interest the exhibition is arousing, despite being the only show at the museum to charge admission this season.

Nor did it hurt that *Indigenous Australia* was launched by a wisecracking future king, rattling off ranga and budgie-smuggler jokes about his son Prince Harry's recent trip to Australia. Generating further headlines were calls for the repatriation of objects in the museum's 6000-strong indigenous Australian collection — even the indigenous reference group the NMA sent to London is split on this issue.

Then came the equally dramatic announcement by MacGregor that the museum is considering a plan to include the 60,000-year-old indigenous narrative in its permanent galleries for the first time. In an interview with Review, he says the British Museum has always striven to "put the world under one roof", adding that "we need new histories" and "in the story of the cultures of the whole world, the oldest surviving one has got to be a rather important part".

The director's vast, slightly dishevelled office overlooks the museum's entrance where locals, tourists and schoolchildren in high-vis vests surge through the front doors in a seemingly unstoppable stream. Watching them, he reflects that "what has been fascinating about this exhibition, first, was the huge numbers of people. We've already had double the number of visitors we expected, and they're spending longer in the exhibition than we expected.''

Comprising 178 historical and contemporary works, *Indigenous Australia* is both a history of colonial dispossession and a celebration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander survival. These intersecting stories are related through objects ranging from a painted shield that may have been looted in the aftermath of a punitive frontier raid,

to *Yumari* (1981), the 3.7m-long epic painting by Uta Uta Tjangala that is used on the Australian passport. (This painting comes from the NMA's collection.) The exhibition, MacGregor says, is "very clear about the brutal and the humane moments … the curiosity is very intense and the word of mouth has been enormous.'' The director believes the show is pulling in the punters because this "is the first opportunity to think about Australia from the Aboriginal side. This is the first time it's been possible, for a public anywhere in Europe, to think about the story of Australia as told by Aboriginal objects.''

If it goes ahead, MacGregor's radical plan to represent "the oldest of all the surviving civilisations'' in the museum's permanent galleries would give Australia's indigenous history unprecedented exposure. The museum attracts almost seven million visitors annually, more than the total number of tourists who visit Australia in a year. However, MacGregor, the man credited with revitalising the museum, is retiring at the end of the year, so much will depend on his successor, who has not yet been named. Nonetheless, the commitments given in London so far represent an emphatic leap by the venerable but tradition-bound institution, which has been accused in the past of neglecting its indigenous Australian artefacts, one of the strongest collections of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artefacts from the early colonial period.

Curated by indigenous Tasmanian Gaye Sculthorpe — the museum's Oceania curator and its first Aboriginal employee — the *Indigenous Australia* exhibition is part of an ambitious collaboration with Canberra's NMA. The latter will display many of the artefacts in the London show for the first time in Australia, in a closely related but bigger exhibition, *Encounters*, in November. NMA director Mathew Trinca underlines the significance of the linked exhibitions by pointing out: "I think that it is going to be the most important work the museum does this decade, and arguably since its inception.''

A star exhibit of both shows is a large wooden shield collected by Captain James Cook's crew at Botany Bay in 1770. Thought to have been made by the Gweagal people, this unadorned shield, with a ragged spear hole near its centre, is the oldest Aboriginal artefact taken from the mainland.

It is a loaded symbol of those first, fraught moments of contact between the British Empire and indigenous people on Australia's east coast: before they collected it, Cook's crew shot at two Aboriginal men who tried to resist their landing at Botany Bay. Despite the shield's immense significance, it has never been exhibited here.

Another shield in the British Museum show may likewise have been taken at the point of a gun. Its collector, John Ewen Davidson, was an Oxford-educated sugar industry pioneer who took part in expeditions during the 1860s in which Aboriginal people were killed on the notoriously violent Queensland frontier. Davidson, who had

once been sympathetic to the plight of the First Australians, wrote of shooting at two large indigenous groups advancing on his camp in 1866. “We followed them up into the scrub firing at them as they went,’’ he wrote on June 24. “Some were wounded, but I saw some killed: there was plenty of blood on one or two shields which we picked up.’’

The British Museum show is not just about blood and death on a relentlessly expanding frontier, however; it also illustrates how early encounters between blacks and whites involved trade, bartering and gift-giving. Genuine friendships were formed.

We see a page from the carefully compiled notebooks of First Fleeter Lieutenant William Dawes, who took informal language lessons from a young Aboriginal woman, Patyegarang, in Port Jackson in the late 1700s. Decades later, on Australia’s west coast, military surgeon and pioneer Alexander Collie and his Aboriginal guide Mokare became so close, they were eventually buried side by side. An Aboriginal knife and axe collected by Collie (possibly with Mokare’s help) that are part of the exhibition can be traced back to the earliest days of white settlement in Western Australia.

Other historical objects reveal the stunning diversity of indigenous art and craft, from a finely-stitched skirt of emu feathers (1840s), which under sympathetic lighting resembles a shimmering thing of gold, to spectacular Torres Strait Islander masks — one 19th-century mask made from turtle shell, feathers and cloth is more than 2m across and designed to be worn on the head.

As if to reflect the uneasy relationship between indigenous peoples and museums that claim absolute ownership of rare artefacts, Sculthorpe has included two bark etchings from rural Victoria that were the subject of an acrimonious legal case in 2004. The etchings are rare surviving examples of the ceremonial art of southeastern Aborigines from the 1850s. When the British Museum lent them to Museum Victoria 11 years ago, the local Dja Dja Wurrung people took court action aimed at keeping them permanently in Australia.

The attempt failed and in 2013 federal legislation was passed to ensure cultural institutions could import objects on loan without fear of similar legal action. In the exhibition catalogue, Sculthorpe writes that the Dja Dja Wurrung case reflects how governments, museums and indigenous people “are continuing to grapple with and work through the issues involved in ensuring that connections between people and collections are maintained’’.

That is an understatement. Even before it was officially opened, the British Museum exhibition had ignited calls for indigenous objects to be repatriated to their originating communities. On the one hand, Marrie says that “you’ve really got to congratulate

the British Museum for putting on such an exhibition. I think it's very brave and I'm proud to be here.'' On the other, she remains adamant that artefacts should be returned if the communities to which they are linked want them back. "Yes, I believe in it [repatriation] totally,'' she says.

Another member of the NMA delegation, Russell Taylor, declares: "The objective we are striving for is, ultimately, repatriation.'' In particular, he believes the Botany Bay shield should come home. His father was raised in La Perouse, near Botany Bay, and his grandmother spent time there. "so that shield has particular significance to that region. That's the emotional part of the exhibition for me,'' he says.

Like Marrie, he believes collaboration is likely to bring about more change than shouting from the sidelines. "If all we're ever going to do is criticise institutions like the British Museum, it's unlikely that they're going to change how they do business. But by engaging through collaborative exhibitions like this one, that engagement is likely to bring about the change that all of us Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people require.''

The delegation's leader, Peter Yu, "deeply respects'' the pro-repatriation view but says he is a realist. He reasons that if the British Museum has not returned the Elgin marbles to Greece despite years of agitation from that country, it is unlikely to hand back artefacts to Australia.

In a well-attended lecture at the museum, Yu called for a more sophisticated and mature debate about repatriation: "We must move beyond the rhetoric of demanding urgent repatriation as a matter of addressing historic injustice and develop a consensus incorporating our museums, indigenous communities and our governments …

"A mature discussion would appreciate that repatriation is sensitive, complex and problematic. After a history of attempted cultural eradication, contemporary indigenous ownership of the material can often not be clear, and in all honesty we should not shy away from this.''

Yu has been heavily involved in the NMA's consultations with 27 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities that have connections to the British Museum's artefacts, and found there was a distinct range of views about repatriation — some indigenous people thought the objects should be returned, others simply wanted recognition and thanks for allowing the London museum to hold their ancestors' things.

A shy woman with red hair and purple-framed specs, Sculthorpe also calls for a more complex debate on ownership of objects. "People often talk about repatriation in very general terms,'' she says. "I think that there's a lack of appreciation that the

British Museum’s collection is a living and growing collection. We continue to acquire material from contemporary (indigenous) artists, through community art centres. “If there are calls for blanket return of materials, it doesn’t do justice to the complexity of that issue.’’

Laid out across two rooms, the *Indigenous Australia* exhibition is relatively small (the *Encounters* show, which will engage different curators, will be twice as big.) Would Sculthorpe have liked a bigger London show?

“A bigger exhibition would have needed about a year’s more work,’’ she says, smiling broadly. “It’s a very high-profile space that we have and you have to think very carefully about what you choose. And that’s a discipline … But sometimes less is more.’’

It was a self-effacing NMA curator, Ian Coates, who in 2007, while visiting the British Museum in an exchange program, realised its indigenous Australian collection had enormous untapped potential. He came up with the idea for the joint project. Coates also had a “eureka moment’’ when he discovered that several paintings in the British Museum’s collection attributed to a “Mr Roberts” were the work of Tom Roberts, one of Australia’s finest artists. Four of these “lost’’ works will feature in the *Encounters* exhibition.

Review views one of these works, a watercolour titled *On Murray Island (1892)*, in a British Museum library. Suffused with firelight, smoke and virility, it depicts male islanders dancing furiously around a camp fire while wearing fierce-looking crocodile masks — masks similar to those included in the exhibition.

Indigenous Australia’s vigorous ticket sales and largely admiring reviews contrast sharply with the lukewarm to withering reception doled out to antipodean culture’s last major outing at a London museum — 2013’s 200-year survey of Australian art at the Royal Academy. One critic described a John Olsen work, installed overhead for that show, as evoking “the sensation of standing under a cascade of diarrhoea”.

There have been no such cheap shots in the extensive coverage the *Indigenous Australia* exhibition has attracted. *The Guardian* gave it a five-star review, *The Times* called it “riveting’’ and the *Evening Standard* said it was a “deeply engaging’’ show that did not shy away from the devastating impact of colonisation. On the other hand, London’s *Daily Telegraph* felt the exhibition focused too much on dispossession, and, writing in *The Independent*, Zoe Pilger, daughter of left-wing journalist John Pilger, said that to even look “at these beautiful baskets, shields, spears and masks,’’ is “arguably to collude with the ongoing denial of indigenous rights’’, given that some indigenous people want them to be repatriated.

The debate about repatriation and colonial encounters good and bad, hostile and intimate, will carry on at the British Museum as a program of lectures, Aboriginal films, music and dance continues into July. The r-word is likely to get a thorough airing in the run-up to *Encounters* in November.

NMA director Trinca knows this, but he is hoping both exhibitions will provoke a more nuanced debate about black and white Australians' shared history. Sitting in the British Museum's wildly echoing Great Court, the largest covered public square in Europe, he tells Review the exhibition's opening and the visit by the NMA's indigenous delegation "has exceeded my expectations''.

He is delighted the joint project has led the museum's trustees "to the point where they think that the world's oldest living continuing culture should be a part of the permanent storytelling about the human condition in this museum, the world's great universal museum''.

Throwing back an espresso, he adds that it's "incredibly encouraging to come here and find that already visitation to this exhibition is double what had been expected. It shows that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures are of great interest to people around the world. You don't have a more diverse audience than you have at the British Museum.''

Indigenous Australia — Enduring Civilisation *continues at the British Museum in London until August 2. Encounters opens at Canberra's National Museum of Australia in November*