

***The Makers and Making of Indigenous Australian Collections.* Nicolas Peterson, Lindy Allen, and Louise Hamby, eds. Carlton, Australia: Melbourne University Press, 2008. 596 pp.\***

Reviewed by Philip Batty

Australian ethnographic collections lead a precarious existence. Up until recent times, they were often left to languish in dusty museums; neglected and almost forgotten. Indeed, between 1914 and 1982 the South Australian Museum failed to make any changes to its display of Aboriginal artifacts, despite the fact that it possessed the most significant collection of Australian indigenous material in the world. Over the last few decades, this dismal situation has changed dramatically.

Extensive exhibitions of indigenous material culture now grace every state museum in Australia. Museum directors cultivate their “new relationship” with indigenous communities and numerous objects from ethnographic collections are repatriated and thus transformed into icons of national reconciliation between colonized and colonizer. In the commercial arena too, the value of what were previously considered “Australian native curios” has risen sharply. They now fetch such high prices that few museums can afford to buy them. It is not surprising therefore that the first book to attempt a comprehensive overview of Aboriginal materials held in Australian museums—*The Makers and Making of Indigenous Australian Collections*—should be published at this time.

What has brought about such a radical transformation in the status of these ethnographic collections? There are several factors at work here. Since the mid 1960s, Aboriginal people and their culture have moved from a peripheral position on the national Australian stage to a far more central location. Today, it goes without saying that to understand the moral foundations of the nation, one must understand the relationship between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians and acquire at least some knowledge of Aboriginal culture. In a curious but equally significant shift, Aboriginal cultural imagery is now routinely employed in popular representations of Australian national identity; everything from airliners to t-shirts can be found decorated with Aboriginal “graphic design elements.” The inexorable rise of “contemporary Aboriginal art” in Australia since the early 1970s has also played a significant role in generating greater interest in indigenous material culture. Nonetheless, it seems to me—ironically enough—that the current enthusiasm for Aboriginal ethnography is only tenuously connected to the anthropological concerns that motivated many of the original collectors. What were those motivations?

Some answers to this question can be found in the structure of this book. The chapter-essays are chronologically ordered in five loosely conceived periods characterized in terms of the “predominate motivations” that informed the collecting practices of the period. They consists of 1) “unsystematic collecting” (c.1788 to c.1880); 2) “under the influence of social evolutionary theory” (c.1880 to c.1920); 3) “before it is too late” (c.1920 to c. 1940); 4) “research adjunct collecting” (c.1940 to c. 1980); and 5) “secondary collecting” (c.1980 to the present). Included here are most of the stars of Australian ethnography: Baldwin Spencer and Frances James Gillen,

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Walter Roth, Herbert Basedow, Norman Tindale, Charles Mountford, Ronald and Catharine Berndt, Frederick McCarthy, and Donald Thomson. Lesser-known collectors such as Ursula McConnel, Loyd Warner, Henry Hillier, Otto Siebert, Lindsay Winterbotham, and others also feature. A glaring omission is T.G.H. Strehlow who did not get an essay due to circumstances beyond the editor's control. A revised edition could remedy this situation.

Delving into these engaging and erudite essays—all written by specialists in the field—the reader not only obtains an idea of the extremely varied motivations and agendas of each of the collectors. It also becomes apparent—if it was not already—that the changing political and social environments through which these collections have passed not only delineate their value, but also indeed, determine their meaning. This is powerfully illustrated in the only essay in the book that deals with collecting practices before 1880.

In the essay “Gentlemen Collectors: The Port Philip District, 1835-1855,” Elizabeth Willis provides a fascinating account of the fate of two Aboriginal etchings or “native drawings on bark.” Briefly, in 1854, a “gentleman” farmer, John Kerr, asked members of the “Murray and Loddon Tribes” living around his property, to produce a range of artifacts for the 1855 Exposition Universelle in Paris. One of the motivations behind this presentation was to refute the idea—then prevalent in Europe—that white settlers in Australia had “wiped out” the Aboriginal population (despite the fact that in some locations this was indeed the case). Due to official bungling, Kerr's collection was never returned to Australia. Through a series of mysterious events two bark etchings from the exhibition wound up in the collections of the Royal Botanical Gardens, Kew and the British Museum, where they collected dust for 150 years. Fast forward to the 21st century.

By 2004, Willis had managed to locate the barks, now the only examples of their kind in existence. After negotiating with the overseas institutions, she was able to borrow the precious objects and put them on display at the Melbourne Museum. A few days before the exhibition was due to close, an Aboriginal group claiming ownership of the objects took legal action to keep them in Australia. Of course, the Royal Botanical Gardens and the British Museum were horrified. The prospect of losing the barks was bad enough, but the threat this action posed to lending protocols between museums around the world was even worse. The “barks crisis” sparked heated debates, conference papers, and widespread discussions on innumerable internationally located web sites. After lengthy legal proceedings—reluctantly implemented by the Melbourne Museum—the barks were returned to London. No one really knows what the drawings on the barks meant to the artists. We do know, however, that from the moment they were collected, their social, economic, and political status was constantly on the move.

There are many other essays in this book that provide important insights into the history of Australian ethnographic collections. John Mulvaney offers a comprehensive overview of the activities of Spencer (1860-1929) who with his partner, Gillen, amassed the most important collection of ethnographic objects ever assembled in Australia. Detailed descriptions and explanations of these objects appeared in their classic tome, *Native Tribes of Central Australia* (Spencer and Gillen 1899), a book that influenced such luminaries as Sigmund Freud, Bronislaw Malinowski, and Émile Durkheim. Sally May investigates the controversial collector, Mountford (1890-1976), whose long running campaign to have Aboriginal artifacts recognized as “art”

contributed to the later emergence of what is now referred to as the “Aboriginal art industry.” In John Stanton’s essay we discover that the Berndts (1916-90 and 1918-94) “did not set out to make a collection” (p. 527). Like most other anthropologists of their era, they were only interested in objects that illuminated the broader social environment in which they were made. Indeed, Ronald Berndt believed that “ethnographic artifacts” were a “creation of ethnographers.”

This important book is essential reading for anyone interested in Australian ethnography. It is a great pity that it is only available in a poorly produced paperback. With the intense interest in Aboriginal material culture, a hardcover publication with high quality color images featuring the extraordinary cultural heritage of Aboriginal Australia would have been far more appropriate.

## **Reference Cited**

Spencer, Baldwin, and Frances James Gillen

1899 Native Tribes of Central Australia. London: Macmillan.

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