



'THOSE OBJECTS AND STORIES ARE PART OF WHO WE ARE ... THEY HAVE A LIFE AND THEY HAVE A HISTORY ... THEY'RE CONNECTED TO PEOPLE STILL LIVING TODAY WHO SPEAK THE LANGUAGES OF THOSE OBJECTS.'



EXHIBITION

Making an exhibition

The creators of *Encounters* reveal how this powerful exhibition, featuring significant Indigenous objects from the British Museum, came to life.

BY MEREDITH MCKENDRY

Rare objects from the British Museum are on their way to Australia for the first time since they were collected in encounters between early European settlers and first Australians. Opening in November, the exhibition entitled *Encounters: Revealing Stories of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Objects from the British Museum* will feature 150 Indigenous objects from the British Museum acquired from the 1770s onwards, significant objects from the Museum's collection, together with contemporary objects from Indigenous communities.

Encounters is the result of extensive research and community engagement. Over three years, the *Encounters* curatorial team – Dr Ian Coates, Dr Jay Arthur, Barbara Paulson and Cinnamon Van Reyk – filmed more than 200 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in 27 communities across Australia, from

Tasmania to Cape York to the Kimberley and beyond. The elders and cultural knowledge holders shared their stories about the objects in the exhibition, and also reflected on museums, history and cultural identity. This experience reconnected them with aspects of their cultural heritage and prompted reflection on the continuing legacies of first encounters with European settlers.

In her filmed interview for *Encounters*, Bunuba elder June Oscar encapsulates the importance of talking with communities about the British Museum objects in the exhibition: 'Those objects and stories are part of who we are ... they have a life and they have a history ... they're connected to people still living today who speak the languages of those objects.'

Here, we go behind the scenes to find out how such an important exhibition comes to life.



Reconnection

For Dr Jay Arthur, co-lead curator in the Museum's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander program (ATSIP), the heart of the exhibition is the reconnection of the communities with the historical objects from the British Museum:

It was essential that the exhibition provide information, not only about the objects, but also the communities' continuing relationships with the objects and how they feel about them. Few communities knew the objects existed, so for them it's the joy of seeing them, the grief of them being so far away, of being taken back to the time when the object was collected in the 19th century – a difficult and often painful time in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history. Their first-person voice is really important – we have prominent quotes from people in the community accompanying the objects in the exhibition, as well as film.

It was also very important to show the continuing living culture of these communities through the contemporary objects from each community that are included in the exhibition. The historical objects are then seen as part of a continuous cultural narrative.

The exhibition is structured into modules, each representing a place, with the object from the British Museum surrounded by contemporary objects from that community, as well as films, images and quotes to give the cultural context in which they're placed. One of my favourite objects is an emu feather skirt from 1842, with a moving quote imagining what the people were singing when they were making it, what stories they were sharing, and the loss of not knowing.

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Creating Encounters

Dr Ian Coates, who is co-lead curator on the Encounters project and head of the Museum’s Collections Unit, was instrumental in conceiving the idea to develop the joint exhibition:

It came about from a curatorial staff exchange with the British Museum, in which I researched their collection of Australian material to enrich the information about these objects on their website. The collection had been little researched, and as many of the people who had donated or sold things to the British Museum were often prominent, I was able to flesh out the history of people involved in the collection of materials and provide a richer story of how they were acquired.

Also, the objects were fantastic and hadn’t been displayed since the 1970s, when they were framed ethnographically. British Museum curator Lissant Bolton and I thought, wouldn’t it be great to do an exhibition at the British Museum? Then we thought, why not think bigger and take it to Australia too and reconnect the material with Indigenous communities?

It has been an incredible privilege to work with these collections, and I feel a responsibility to make them more accessible to Indigenous communities. In the past, objects have been sealed in a black box with no access, but now museums are interested in making materials more available and working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. The British Museum and the National Museum of Australia are very different institutions, with different histories and policies, but we both embrace the importance of working together on this exhibition.

It was hard to choose which objects to feature in the exhibition – all of the material in the British Museum is significant, and there was a variety of factors involved in the selection. We chose objects that showed the diversity of encounters that occurred across different parts of Australia. We wanted to also include dramatic early material, such as the material acquired from Botany Bay in 1770 and Perth in the 1830s. The objects had to be robust enough to travel, and they do not include any secret/sacred objects or human remains. We are also including a range of contemporary Indigenous material that connects to the objects on display or plays around with traditional objects and frames them in a new way. Two of my favourite objects in the exhibition are the decorated spear-thrower from Birregurra in Victoria and the dugong charm from Tudu in the Torres Strait.

Encounters is important because the objects provide tangible links to encounters between Indigenous peoples and settlers in a variety of settings. The colonial moment was messy and unresolved, and this exhibition helps to add texture to the history of what happened, to acknowledge the past.

The title *Encounters* comes from three different encounters that are present in the exhibition – the historical encounters from which the objects came, the encounter between the communities now as they reconnect with these objects, and the encounter of the visitor as they view the objects in the exhibition. We are all connected to the history of this nation.

Shared stories

Assistant curator Dr Lily Withycombe has been involved in transcribing and editing the films for the exhibition and website:

The stories of the people involved in *Encounters*, past and present, are at the core of the project. Film enables us to present the thoughts, opinions, memories and reflections of community members in the first person. More importantly, the personal stories give deeper insights into the objects on display. The objects are incomplete without these stories, which reconnect people, objects and communities.

For the exhibition, the curators chose objects with a strong provenance, and a known collector and date of collection. They approached the community associated with the place from which the object was taken to see if they were interested in being involved in the project. Following discussions with the curators, community members were asked if they would like to be filmed. Curators brought a small film crew with them, either from the Museum or provided locally, and interviewed a number of people – men, women, elders, youths – about their thoughts on history, custodianship, loss, forgiveness and the role of museums.

Even though communities had been sent booklets of information and images earlier, often our filming captured the moment where an individual saw an object connected to their community, that they previously hadn't known existed, for the first time. This moment of recognition is incredible to observe – these objects, treasured by the British Museum curators for years, became something different when the community members recognised them as something made by their ancestors. The object then transformed from an inanimate object held in an overseas museum to an animate object, charged with living memory. Film can capture this moment perfectly.

Back at the Museum, every interview was transcribed, and a short film created by the media team and the curators. Around 30 clips from filmed interviews will feature in the exhibition. Every filmed interview will eventually be available on the *Encounters* website, forming an incredible archive of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander opinions, thoughts and feelings on the eve of these objects returning to Australia from the British Museum for the first time.

Bringing the objects home

Head Registrar Sara Kelly is in charge of making sure these precious materials make it safely from the British Museum, and other institutions, to Australia:

At this stage, just over half the objects in the exhibition will be coming from the British Museum. The consignment will also include a small number of loans from two other British collections – the Royal Collection Trust and the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology in Cambridge.

The objects will travel according to the best international museum standards of transport and handling, which are well established. Some of the key considerations are: well-insulated crates; minimisation of the handling of crates through, for example, the use of the most direct route; the use of couriers to accompany crates in transit (and then to supervise installation); maintaining security standards by not advertising routes, dates and times of travel – basically keeping the logistics confidential and on a need-to-know basis.

The process is complex but is being attended to by professional and experienced staff from both the Museum and the British Museum. It is time-consuming work and a great deal of attention to detail is required.



NURLU (HEAD ORNAMENT), 1968, BY JACK LEE AND JIMMY DAWIDYI, GARADJARRI PEOPLE AND YAWURU PEOPLE, BROOME, WESTERN AUSTRALIA. NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AUSTRALIA.



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Designing history

Caolán Mitchell, *Encounters* designer and director of exhibition design firm Thylacine, worked with the curators from an early stage to develop the exhibition design:

The design of the exhibition was developed around a series of key themes – the historical objects from the British Museum, the encounter and connection to place/country and contemporary community voice/dialogue with the object. These themes inform the layout, form and rhythm of the exhibition.

The core 'encounters' of the exhibition are presented in displays that use relationships to place as a key identifier. A large mural or projection of the landscape is employed as an initial feature.

Each 'encounter' surrounds the object from the British Museum, as a contemporary conversation and response to the historic object. The British Museum objects have their own aesthetic identity within the exhibition.

The unfolding story of these 'encounter' modules surround a central sculptural feature in the gallery space that takes the form of a giant woven fish trap. The trap form is 30 metres long and 3.6 metres high, is covered in an open lattice of plywood and runs through the centre of the exhibition space. Openings in the form allow visitors to enter the fish trap at various points through the exhibition.

The fish trap feature is a response to the exhibition's content, which for many will be a culturally significant and emotional experience. It is a calm enclosed space, in contrast to the active open space surrounding it. Seating in the trap provides a place for visitors to gather their thoughts. A central audio experience features quotes from particular communities and elders about the exhibition and the significance of the historic objects.

In conventional exhibition design processes the designer is required to interpret a pre-defined story structure without much room to inform or shape the narrative through the design process. In this exhibition we (as the designers) were brought to the project at an early stage. It has been extremely valuable from a design perspective to work alongside the curators in the shaping of this complex story, which we believe has resulted in the creation of a more integrated, holistic and embodied experience for the visitor.

The *Encounters* exhibition opens at the Museum on 27 November 2015. For more information, visit nma.gov.au/exhibitions/encounters.