

# The Makers and Making of Indigenous Australian Museum Collections

## **Introduction**

*by Nicolas Peterson, Lindy Allen and Louise Hamby (eds)*

This chapter outlines the history of material culture studies in Australia as the precondition for the development of an interest in collectors and collecting. It then proposes a fivefold periodisation of collecting before briefly considering kinds of collectors and presenting an overview of the chapters in the book.

## **Part I: Collecting in Its Institutional Context**

### 1. Collections as Artefacts: The Making and Thinking of Anthropological Museum Collections

*by Leonn Satterthwait*

Collections are artefacts—constructions that come into being when objects are physically or conceptually brought together. As artefacts, collections have properties, among the most obvious of which are the kinds of things they contain and their proportions. Rarely, however, do these properties reflect in a representative way what it would have been possible to collect. A collection consequently both reflects the situation from which it was derived, and presents a distorted image of that situation. The latter, however, can be highly informative, if only we can determine its character. Since most collections represent samples from unknown universes, this is no easy feat—it requires that we give a presence to the non-present so that what was collected can be compared to what could have been collected to establish the nature of the biases in a collection. Although often difficult, there are nevertheless several ways in which this can be attempted, including through linguistic comparisons. Such an exercise provides the basis for reflecting on a number of matters, theoretical and practical, relating to collections and their creation. These include the very notion of a ‘collection’, differences in kinds of collections, the processes by which an assemblage of items becomes a ‘collection’, and collections as mental constructs, as mentally conceived categories made manifest.

### 2. Reflections in a Cracked Mirror: What Collections Representing 'Them' Can Say about 'Us' and the Role of Museum Collections

*by Richard Robins*

Museum ethnographic collections and their histories are social documents that reflect complex relationships between the community at large and indigenous people. These relationships are reflected in a number of ways including the types of collectors, the time at which the collection was made, number of objects collected, collections emphases and types of objects collected, motives for collecting, and attitudes towards indigenous people. Examination of trends and patterns of collection through time can reveal much about the society of the collectors as well as that of the collected.

The history of the anthropological collections of the Queensland Museum provides an insightful illustration of the nature of the relationship between Indigenous people and the broader society. The collections are relatively small, there are few major donors, few professional ethnographers are represented, the most significant collections relating to Queensland Aborigines are in museums from other States and collection curation has been sorely neglected. This chapter examines Queensland society's attitudes towards Aboriginal people through an examination of patterns of collecting and research to question the role and relevance of Museums.

### 3. An Ark of Aboriginal Relics: The Collecting Practices of Dr LP Winterbotham by *Daniel Leo*

This chapter explores the philosophy, techniques and results of the massive and systematic collecting by Dr L.P. Winterbotham of objects, and knowledge about them, as derived from Australian Aboriginal and Papua New Guinean peoples and communities. Winterbotham was a Medical Doctor, a lecture of Medicine at the University of Queensland, a founder of the Anthropological Society of Queensland, the inaugural Curator of the University of Queensland's Anthropology Museum, and a professional antiquarian focused mainly upon Aboriginal culture and history. The results were that within the space of two decades Winterbotham amassed approximately 18,000 objects, and nearly 5,400 letters that detail his collecting practice and methods. As based on an analysis of both these objects and letters, it can be demonstrated that Winterbotham was part of the 'relic mentality' zeitgeist that gripped twentieth century anthropology. Christianity, Doomed Race Theory, a fetish for material things, and salvage ethnography also underpinned the founding philosophy of Winterbotham, the Anthropological Society of Queensland and the University of Queensland's Anthropology Museum.

## **Part II: Collecting under the Influence of Evolutionism**

### 4. Gentlemen Collectors: The Port Phillip District, 1835–1855 by *Elizabeth Willis*

This chapter identifies some of the earliest settlers who collected objects from Aborigines in the Port Phillip district, describes their collections, and considers a variety of motivations for collecting.

Collectors discussed include Charles Joseph La Trobe, John Helder Wedge, John Hunter Kerr, and George Augustus Robinson. Collections were sometimes begun with an exchange of goods during an initial meeting ceremony. They were developed out of curiosity, or with regret, or to show Aboriginal workmanship and skill, or for an international exhibition, or to strengthen links with educated friends 'at home'. Some of these Victorian collections survive in museums in Britain, Switzerland and Germany.

### 5. 'Annexing All I Can Lay Hands On': Baldwin Spencer as Ethnographic Collector by *John Mulvaney*

As honorary director of the National Museum of Victoria between 1899 and 1928, Baldwin Spencer enriched the museum's ethnographic collections. This chapter examines the extent and nature of the Australian collections which he initiated. It discusses the role of collectors; how items were acquired from Indigenous owners and methods and extent of payment; criteria for selection of items and consideration of those aspects of material culture which were ignored.

6. The Man Who Collected Everything: WE Roth  
*by Kate Kahn*

In 1898 Roth was appointed First Protector of Aboriginals for North Queensland, under the Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act of 1897. Today Roth is best known for his 18 Bulletins and collections, the greater part held at the Australian Museum, Sydney. Most of his material came from Cape York and the Gulf country of North Queensland, but the Museum also holds a collection of stone tools from NSW, Victoria and Tasmania. Roth was interested in everything at every stage of manufacture, from identifying raw materials through to the finished product and its use, together with relevant Aboriginal and scientific names where possible. He took photographs, sketched objects in varying stages of manufacture, recorded Aboriginal languages and kept an extensive skeletal collection, nearly all of which has been repatriated.

7. The Australian Aboriginal Collection and the Berlin Ethnological Museum  
*by Janice Lally*

An overview of the collection of Aboriginal material in the Museum für Völkerkunde in Berlin (now the Ethnological Museum), this chapter examines the sources and systems behind the amassing of Australian Aboriginal material following the establishment of the Museum in 1873. The meaning and value of the collection in the past and in contemporary terms are discussed with a focus on historical scientific networks.

8. Talking into the Wind: Collectors on the Cooper Creek, 1890–1910  
*by Chris Nobbs*

In this chapter, the Lutheran Missionary Otto Siebert's ethnographic work is compared with that of other collectors who visited or worked on the Cooper Creek in north-east South Australia from 1860-1910, beginning with Alfred W Howitt and his informants in the field, his missionary colleagues including Pastor Johann Reuther and the ethnographer Dr Erhard Eylmann. An examination of Aboriginal artefact collections from the Cooper Creek region reveals complex and overlapping histories. A series of vignettes drawn from these collections illustrate how collectors engaged with Yandruwandha, Wangkangurru and Diyari people in quite different forms of exchange which were premised on paradigms that were poles apart.

9. The Dynamics of the Collector–Curator Relationship: Interpreting Henry Hillier's Central Australian Collections  
*by Ian Coates*

Harry Hillier was a Lutheran mission worker and school-teacher at Killalpaninna in northern South Australia and later at Hermannsburg in the Northern Territory. He collected both ethnographic and natural history specimens for sale to museums throughout Britain and Australia. The chapter examines the complex relationships between him and the curators in the institutions to show that this was not one in which Hillier simply supplied the raw material for the scientific authorities in the metropolitan centres but involved the exchange of both objects and ideas with obligations on both sides, bringing with it the potential for great changes in approach over time.

## 10. 'Your Obedient Servant': The John Tunney Collection at the Western Australian Museum

*by Ross Chadwick*

In December 1895 John Tunney was offered the role of Museum collector for an initial period of three months. Ten years later he had collected almost 1700 objects from Western Australia and the Northern Territory. Tunney had no training as an anthropologist and was engaged primarily to collect natural science specimens. The acquisition of Aboriginal cultural material developed at the suggestion of the curator, Bernard Woodward, almost as an afterthought.

Using the correspondence between Tunney and the Museum, and the objects that were collected, this chapter examines the role of a collector in the field under the direction of a curator and museum committee. It investigates the perceptions of Aboriginal people at the time, the attitudes towards what was considered important to collect and the way in which curators and collectors can shape the development and content of collections.

## 11. Professionals and Amateurs: Different Histories of Collecting in the National Ethnographic Collection

*by David Kaus*

The National Museum of Australia holds a number of collections of Aboriginal artefacts made in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Included are collections made by both formally-trained and amateur anthropologists. This chapter looks at two of these collections, one made by possibly Australia's first academically trained anthropologist, Herbert Basedow (1881-1933), and an amateur, Edmund Milne (1861-1917). Basedow's main collecting period was between 1903 and 1928. He was involved in a number of expeditions to the Western Desert, the Kimberley, Lake Eyre Basin, Victoria River district and Arnhem Land. He made a substantial collection of Aboriginal artefacts on these expeditions. Milne was a railways official in New South Wales and was collecting between the 1880s and 1917. Although his collection has a strong representation from New South Wales, Milne assembled a collection of artefacts from all over Australia and elsewhere, most notably the South Pacific and Prehistoric Europe and Egypt. I examine how both men assembled their collections and consider what evidence there is for their motivations in doing so, and compare the content of the collections.

### **Part III: Before It Is Too Late**

## 12. The 'Idea behind the Artefact': Norman Tindale's Early Years as a Salvage Ethnographer

*by Philip Jones*

During the 1920s the young South Australian Museum ethnographer Norman Tindale made two significant ethnographic collections: at Groote Eylandt and Roper River during 1921-1922, and at Princess Charlotte Bay during 1926-1927. The content of these collections both reflects Tindale's professional transition from natural scientist to anthropologist, and illuminates the changing priorities and methodologies of Australian museum ethnography during the early 20th century. As anthropology shifted its ground from museums to universities, Tindale continued to collect and document within the natural science taxonomic tradition, while paying closer attention to sociological themes and to the identities and characteristics of his informants.

13. The Reluctant Collector: Lloyd Warner  
*by Louise Hamby*

William Lloyd Warner was an American anthropologist best known in Australia for his Arnhem Land ethnography, *A Black Civilization*. Few people are aware of his collection of objects and photographs made from 1927-1929. Having no profile this collection is dispersed across the world and institutions without a catalogue. The Warner Collection is a significant one in that it presents a very early picture of life in Milingimbi and provides an excellent comparator for other material collected earlier by Hubert Wilkins, at the same time by T.T. Webb or by Donald Thomson seven to ten years later.

14. Tons and Tons of Valuable Material: The Donald Thomson Collection  
*by Lindy Allen*

Donald Thomson collected around 4,500 objects, took 2800 still images as well as moving film, and wrote over 3,000 pages of field notes during his Arnhem Land fieldwork between 1935-1942. This chapter addresses his motivation for making such a large collection of artefacts at a time when professional anthropological interest in material culture was very limited. An analysis of the Collection not only provides a profile of his collecting activities, such as the places and dates at which objects were obtained, but also helps establish his rationale for collecting. Unlike Spencer and others interested in establishing museum collections, this was not the basis of Thomson's collecting.

15. Only Sticks and Bark: Ursula McConnel—Her Collecting and Collection  
*by Anne Perusco*

As one of the first students of Radcliffe-Brown's Australian tenureship, Ursula McConnel conducted ethnographic fieldwork as a participant-observer in western Cape York Peninsula between 1927 and 1934. She worked chiefly among the Wik peoples, particularly the Wik Mungkan based at Aurukun Mission. As part of her anthropological study McConnel amassed a substantial material culture collection of over five hundred artefacts. Together with Donald Thomson's collection from the same area, it forms a unique record of Wik Mungkan material culture from that period. This chapter examines McConnel's fieldwork methodology and other factors that influenced the composition of her collection, and also traces the history of the collection since its formation

16. The Art of Collecting: Charles Percy Mountford  
*by Sally May*

Charles Percy Mountford (1890–1976) is often underestimated as an anthropologist and museum collector. His, almost accidental, involvement in the disciplines of anthropology and archaeology, and his contribution to the formation of museum collections of Indigenous Australian objects was extensive and controversial. In particular, his focus on the collection of works of art by Indigenous artists has meant that today most Australian capital city art galleries and museums hold and exhibit examples of the so-called Mountford paintings. Yet, given his non-anthropological background (as a tram conductor and post office mechanic in Adelaide) his research and collecting was always destined to attract controversy. Mountford was ostracised by the anthropological fraternity for being an untrained amateur anthropologist – really just a collector. He did, however, have his supporters in the Commonwealth Government of Australia, the

National Geographic Society and numerous overseas institutions. The mutually beneficial relationships he formed with these institutions led to a long career as photographer, anthropologist, archaeologist, expedition leader, and collector. In this chapter I discuss Charles Mountford's career and use the 1948 American-Australian Scientific Expedition to Arnhem Land, of which he was leader, as a case study of Mountford's collecting strategies and the ongoing impact of these events on present-day institutions and Indigenous communities.

### 17. Ethnographic and Archaeological Collections by FD McCarthy in the Australian Museum

*by Val Attenbrow*

Fred McCarthy worked in a number of research areas relating to the life and material culture of Australian Aboriginal people – stone tool classification and analysis, recording and analyzing rock art, and recording and excavating archaeological sites, as well as organizing exhibitions, managing museum anthropological collections, and pressuring for protective legislation for Aboriginal sites and artefacts. He was involved in social anthropological research, but to a lesser degree. Throughout his work at the Australian Museum, where he was employed from March 1920 until October 1960, he made many collections of both archaeological and ethnographic materials and it is these that this chapter focuses on. Amongst the many ethnographic objects he collected, those obtained during the American-Australian Scientific Expedition to Arnhem Land in 1948, are some of the most significant. However, his major collections are of archaeological materials gained from his own collecting and excavation fieldwork. McCarthy worked with wide network of collaborators who came from many parts of the world – ranging from local amateur collectors/archaeologists with whom he collaborated in fieldwork in NSW to researchers in academic institutions and other museum in America, Europe and south-east Asia with whom he had discourses on the classification and nomenclature of Aboriginal stone artefacts.

### **Part IV: Transformed Collecting**

#### 18. 'I Did Not Set Out to Make a Collection': The Ronald and Catherine Berndt Collection at the Berndt Museum of Anthropology

*by John Stanton*

The late Ronald and Catherine Berndt assembled an unparalleled collection of Indigenous Australian art and artefacts over shared career spanning fifty years. Working principally in Arnhem Land and the Western Desert, they founded the Berndt Museum of Anthropology in 1976 to house their collection of 2246 items, along with those of associates of the Department of Anthropology. Now holding over 11,500 items, the Berndt Collection remains the jewel in the Museum's, indeed Australia's, crown. In 1950, they wrote with foresight 'Aboriginal art need not be allocated to the shelves of the past, nor lose its context when removed from its Indigenous and traditional setting. It can, and should, take its place alongside other great schools of art.' This chapter explores the creation of this collection, and something of the rationale for its making.

19. 'The Woman with Men's Business': Helen Wurm  
*by Margie West*

Helen Wurm was appointed by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, as it then was, to make a survey collection of bark painting from across Arnhem Land. Because only one section of this collection has been published it remains relatively unknown. She worked with many artists who are now regarded as among the nation's most gifted practitioners. The appointment of a woman to make this collection was unprecedented yet despite the misgivings some had about her gender limiting access to information, this was not a problem and she was granted privileged access to restricted knowledge by many of the artists.

20. Aesthete and Scholar: Two Complementary Influences on the Kluge–Ruhe  
Aboriginal Art Collection of the University of Virginia  
*by Margo Smith*

The Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection of the University of Virginia is the only public museum devoted entirely to Australian Aboriginal art in America. Comprising over 1600 objects including paintings on bark, canvas, and paper, sculpture, ceremonial objects, regalia and tools, the collection represents a wide range of Aboriginal art produced over time. This unique collection is the creation of two Americans, Professor Edward L. Ruhe and billionaire businessman John W. Kluge, whose circumstances and collecting habits represent very different orientations to Aboriginal art. Ruhe was an academic whose pursuit of Aboriginal art became a scholarly exercise. Kluge is a collector who appreciates the aesthetic properties and visual power of Aboriginal art. As aesthete and scholar, Kluge and Ruhe expressed their passion for Aboriginal art in different ways. Their combined stories mirror the transformation of Aboriginal art from material culture to fine art both in Australia and internationally.