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Enduring civilisation, entangled histories: Indigenous Australia: Enduring Civilisation at the British Museum

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Abstract
With about 6200 artefacts, as well as photos and archival materials in its Australian collection, the British Museum (BM) is a rich mine for stories about Australia. However, while most of this collection can these days be seen online, it has featured little in the Museum’s headline stories of Mediterranean and Middle Eastern civilisations or been able to compete with its African galleries.

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With about 6200 artefacts as well as photos and archival materials in its Australian collection, the British Museum (BM) is a rich mine for stories about Australia. However, while most of this collection can these days be seen online, it has featured little in the Museum’s headline stories of Mediterranean and Middle Eastern civilizations or been able to compete with its African galleries. Thus the appointment in 2013 of Gaye Sculthorpe as the curator of its Oceanic collections was a very welcome move. Sculthorpe – a descendent of Tasmanian Aboriginal woman Fanny Cochrane Smith (1834–1905) – was a former curator of the Indigenous section at Museum Victoria (1987-2003), a member of the National Native Title Tribunal (2004–2003) and a Board member of Museum Victoria (2006–2013). No wonder she sourced stories for these objects in the communities from which they came. Now accepted ‘best practice’ in the museum fraternity, it is rapidly transforming Indigenous people from colonial objects of the museum gaze to its postcolonial subjects. They are the new curators and clients of museum collections, and rarely to the extent that occurred in Sculthorpe’s debut exhibition at the BM, ‘The BP exhibition Indigenous Australia endur ing civilisation’.

The exhibition was much anticipated by those who hoped that it would counter the bucketing Aboriginal art had received in London two years earlier. Then seasoned British art critics such as Brian Sewell and Waldemar Januszczak savaged the Western Desert painting in the ‘Australia’ exhibition at the Royal Academy: “The stale rejiggings of a half-remembered heritage … corrupted by a commercial art market”,¹ ‘tourist tat’ and ‘spotty meanderings … dull canvas approximations, knocked out in reduced dimensions, by a host of repetitive Aborigine artists making a buck’. The Aboriginal, not to mention larger Australian, artworld was duly enraged, but for all its trying, said Januszczak, it had only ‘managed to create what amounts to a market in decorative rugs’.² Another British critic, wondering what the Australian artworld saw in Aboriginal art, thought there must be ‘an element of penance in the way that Australia has elevated Aboriginal art in the last twenty years’.³ However, it seems there is no penance for Australia’s original sin. Zoe Pilger, writing for the Independent, damned ‘Enduring civilisation’ before it even opened with a raft of caustic accusations:

Indeed, this exhibition is half in denial. It both acknowledges the violation of the indigenous people and censures that violation. It uses terrible metaphors: the histories of the indigenous people and the colonisers are "entangled", "interlinked", born of "encounters" and "misunderstandings". These words are ways of repressing the fact that white Australia is founded on murder. The drama and dignity of the story of indigenous colonisation and resistance is thereby muted. This also has the effect of draining the exhibition of vitality – it is quite dull, which indigenous art emphatically is not.

At least Pilger admired the art. While she had trouble enduring the ethnographic objects – most of which were collected in the eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth centuries – which comprised most of the exhibition, the smattering of recent large Western Desert canvases by the so-called Spinifex people elicited her delight. Critics writing for the Telegraph and Guardian, Alastair Smart and Jonathan Jones respectively, also singled out these colourful acrylic paintings as the highlight of the exhibition, while ignoring the other contemporary art that, I can only presume,
seemed to them too contaminated with Western ways. Despite being made with modern industrial materials for the Western fine art market, these Western Desert painters have successfully branded their products as authentic Aboriginal art. Pilger saw something ‘striking’ and ‘joyous’. Smart and Jones called them ‘welcome bursts of colour’ ‘upbeat’, ‘captivating’ and ‘fascinating’. The irony is that the ‘stale rejiggings of a half-remembered heritage’ in the Royal Academy exhibition, drawn from masterpieces in Australian state galleries, were of higher quality and much better displayed as aesthetic objects than those in ‘Enduring civilisation’. Sadly, as someone whose aesthetic sensibility has been spoilt by the generous space of the white cube, I find the darker lighting, cluttered displays, multi-coloured walls and tight maze-like spaces of museum design – very evident in this exhibition – challenging to endure.

However, the explanation for these very different reactions to contemporary Western Desert painting is not display design; it is the dissimilar curatorial contexts of the two exhibitions. Conceived by two senior white curators – one with a specialist interest in British colonial art in the Australian colonies – ‘Australia’ was as an overview of the history of Australian art since its colonization. Thus critics judged the Western Desert paintings in aestheticised and art historical contexts. As if remembering the curation of Aboriginal art in ‘Australia’, Jones congratulated the BM for not ‘treating Aboriginal art as an aesthetic fetish’. Sculthorpe placed the Western Desert painting within a set of multiple Indigenous perspectives on the conflicted and complex meetings of cultural differences in the crucible of British colonialism. If ‘Australia’ defined culture in the transcendental terms of ‘fine art’ – the civilizing of a country – ‘Enduring civilisation’ defined it in more sociological terms, in which material culture, be it designated fine art or not, is an artifact of ongoing social and political relations. Nevertheless, while the exhibition embedded the Spinifex paintings in their own stories – the legacy of British atom bomb testing and native title claims – the critics understood these large colourful paintings as transcendental symbols of contemporary Indigenous confidence and hope.

Interestingly, while both exhibitions addressed the 200-year histories of British occupation of the Australian continent, each handled the colonial-era material best. This made some sense given that both institutions are monuments to British imperialism in this former centre of Empire. It also suggests that the institutional narratives of Australia have failed to escape the shadow of the Enlightenment and its colonial legacy. This was reflected in the titles of both exhibitions – ‘Australia’ (south land) is a Eurocentric name coined in 1800, and ‘civilisation’ is a classic concept/conceit of the Enlightenment that legitimised European colonialism.

However, ‘Enduring civilisation’ had much more to say than ‘Australia’ – both in the actual exhibition and the excellent catalogue. If Australia maintained a strict temporal and racial categorization in its display, ‘Enduring civilisation’ mixed up these conventional differences of Western discourse. Consequently it produced a much more engaged exhibition in which history was an ongoing conversation between present and past. This in part explains the ironic note of its title: had Aborigines endured civilization or were they the architects of the most enduring civilization, 60,000 years in the making? Were they victims of a greedy more powerful civilisation, or agents of their own destiny? The refusal to decide between these positions – or the desire to have it both ways – was the strength of the exhibition and signaled the maturity of Sculthorpe’s approach.

Pilger and Smart were too overwhelmed by the native victim narrative to see the ironic doublings of ‘Enduring civilisation’, and thus were unable to imagine the idea of Indigenous agency. Smart welcomed the contemporary Western Desert paintings as
one bright spot in the ‘unrelenting’ and ‘all-too familiar account of dispossession, malfeasance and massacres by the British’. He wanted more focus on pre-colonial Aboriginal culture. ‘By undervaluing millennia of achievement,’ he believed that ‘this show feels like yet another injustice meted out against indigenous Australians’ – as if there had been no Indigenous achievement in the modern era.

Pilger took an opposite tack. One might have expected her to complain that the ‘joyous’ Western Desert paintings took our eye off the ‘grisly history’ of colonialism. However, she is too partisan to admit this. The focus of her review was the demand of repatriation, which has been an ongoing issue since the 1980s. This current cause célèbre threatened to overwhelm the exhibition. No critic, indeed not even the exhibition, could resist its siren. It strikes a raw nerve in all museums but especially the BM, as its collections have benefited so much from Britain’s imperialism. At its core it is an archive of imperialism’s loot: it should really be named the British Empire Museum.

Jones channelled the obvious: with much of the Museum’s holdings pillaged by colonists under the pretext of terra nullius, the ownership of the art on display – which ‘includes some of the oldest portable Aboriginal artefacts, owned by the BM since the 18th century’ – is ‘inherently problematic’. Pilger is much more combatant. This ‘rape’ and ‘plunder’ ‘is not simply a political issue, but an existential one. It undermines the very nature of Indigenous being.’ Her logic recalls old-fashioned nationalism cast though it is in the glow of New Ageist sensibility: ‘Like the people, the objects are inseparable from the country. To separate the people from the country is to separate them from themselves.’ Today 90% of Australian Aborigines live away from their ancestral lands. Some, like Sculthorpe, even live in London.

Pilger, who had done her homework, knew exactly at which objects to shake her spear: ‘a rare bark etching [of a kangaroo hunt] ... and a bark figure of an emu … made around 1854 … acquired (according to the catalogue, there is no record of how) from the Dja Dja Wurrung people of Victoria by a Scottish settler, John Hunter Kerr’. Kerr managed the station of Fernyhurst near Boort in Victoria’s Riverina where the objects were made and collected.

Looking at the objects in question one might wonder what the fuss is about, but the same could be said about certain saint’s relics in Europe’s churches. Pilger singled out these two bark pieces because they had been subject to a repatriation claim in a court case in 2004. According to the claimants, the Dja Dja Wurrung Native Title Group, ‘like all First Nations Peoples’, they ‘have a cultural and spiritual duty and obligation to repatriate all our Human Remains and Artefacts spiritually and physically connected to our Country and our Esteemed Ancestors’. This legal action marked the moment when issues of Indigenous repatriation shifted from human remains to also include artefacts.

Before 2004 only a few specialists knew of the BM’s bark etching and emu. They, along with a similar bark etching that had recently been discovered in the back rooms of the Royal Botanic Gardens, first came to the notice of the Dja Dja Wurrung Native Title Group after being lent to Museum Victoria (Melbourne) for an exhibition in 2004 – Etched on Bark 1854: Kulin barks from Northern Victoria, curated by Elizabeth Willis. From the anthropological literature one could infer that the bark etchings were from shelters and the emu bark object was used in ceremonies. This was hardly enough to mount a case for repatriation. They were not the Elgin Marbles of the Riverina. The Dja Dja Wurrung Native Title Group’s claim failed, Willis argued, because it made exaggerated claims for these objects that had no ‘correlation
with what nineteenth century European observers recorded as the nature and use of these and similar objects.  

However, arguments about historical veracity miss the objects’ contemporary value – a value clearly demonstrated in the curatorial strategy of ‘Enduring civilisation’. Unlike the Elgin Marbles, during its 150 years of caring for the bark etching and ceremonal object, the BM had not included them in the stories it tells. On the other hand Willis did have a story to tell and it was a good story that greatly stirred local Aborigines. However, her employer, Museum Victoria, ‘which of course had contractual relationships with the lending bodies’, did not press any claims and the objects were duly returned to Britain. Perhaps Museum Victoria believed it had enough objects to tell its stories anyway: of the three Kulin bark etchings that survive from this time, it has the most magnificent, the so-called Lake Tyrell bark which was made nearby about 15 years after the BM barks.

The BM catalogue might indeed be, as Pilger noted, silent on how the bark etching and object were acquired – there is a lack of original documents – but Willis points out that few such objects ‘are as well-provenanced’ as these items. Further, the exhibition catalogue (which references Willis’s research) does not shy away from the issue of repatriation or the controversy surrounding these objects. Willis details how that the three items, along with others now lost, were especially commissioned for the 1855 Paris Exposition Universelle, from which the Royal Botanic Gardens acquired them before two were transferred to the Museum of Mankind (BM). Further, argues Willis, the bark etchings – which are too short to be from shelters – were probably made to illustrate how the other objects on exhibit were used, as if the whole ensemble was especially designed as a scaled-down version or model of Aboriginal material culture for the Paris exposition. Further, she argues, it is very likely that all the items were acquired ‘in exchange for some kind of mutually-acceptable payment, and with the active involvement of the Indigenous men, women and children’ who made them. Willis convincingly describes it as a collective project jointly planned between the collector and the artists, all of whom were well known to the other. In other words, Fernyhurst is a prototype of the modern Indigenous art centre in which were made the large Spinifex acrylic paintings that Pilger admired.

Willis’s scholarship establishes that these objects were most likely made for display in a Western museum, unlike the shield that the Museum believes was likely collected by Captain James Cook or one of his men in Botany Bay in April 1770 and the centre piece of one of the most interesting displays and stories in the exhibition. Cook shot its owner, driving him, his wives and children from their camp, after which he pillaged their artefacts leaving a few trinkets in recompense.

For Willis, the cross-cultural transactions and their aftermath were the most interesting stories in these objects. However, this story of adaptation, modernisation and initiative is not one that neatly fits with the usual activist scenario, be it Pilger’s journalism or frequently heard Indigenous complaints. Willis reported one of her Indigenous colleagues skepticism towards her argument:

He asserted that, because colonial power relationships between White and Black were so uneven [unequal], the Indigenous people of Boort, ipso facto, must have been forced to give up their objects for display – they could not have possibly resisted the demands of the squatter and could not have possibly given up their objects happily and in a cooperative manner.
To which Willis replied:

This view, coming out of the universalized strong story of powerlessness and dispossession, goes completely against the historical evidence we have about the situation at Fernyhurst in the 1850s, and totally discounts historical instances of Aboriginal agency and ability to negotiate and to make autonomous decisions.\(^9\)

There is truth in both scenarios. This ambivalent discourse, caught as it is between black and white, agency and victimhood, indigeneity and modernity, is what gives postcolonial stories traction in today’s globalized politics. ‘Enduring civilisation’ was the better for taking this path. Far from ‘draining the exhibition of vitality’, the ‘entangled’ histories of these particular Kulin objects make the case for their repatriation more pressing, as they speak to more than pre-colonial Kulin practices (as the Dja Dja Wurrung Native Title Group argued in court); they also speak to the entangled histories of contemporary Indigenous lives, modern Australia and indeed the world. Equally, it makes a case for telling these stories throughout the world, and especially in London, the former centre of Empire.

The great blindness in Pilger’s accusation quoted earlier is that entanglement is a colonialist paradigm. If only it had been: then the devastating logic of terra nullius would have had no oxygen. Pilger doesn’t explain how the metaphor of entanglement represses ‘the fact that white Australia is founded on murder’. Murder is invariably an act committed within entangled peoples – usually family – and its result is to further entangle the parties. The very atrocities of British colonialism on which Pilger wants our eyes glued are a prime site of the entanglements that ‘Enduring civilisation’, to its credit, addresses. Australia is not alone in being founded on murder. What nation and what law are not? Indigenous culture is not some New Age wonderland. It too has its Macbeths and Lear, and Shakespeares too. In 1841 British squatters shot Munangabum, the renowned Dja Dja Wurrung leader, but in 1846 a rival clan murdered him.\(^10\) Colonialism is a complex story, and it is by acknowledging these complexities that the best case for, and also against, repatriation can be made.

The BM may well have obtained the bark painting and emu sculpture with due civility – even if the terms of trade were heavily weighted towards the colonists (though whoever acquired the Lake Tyrell bark got a better bargain) – but this does not give them the automatic right of custodianship. Custodianship is not simply a matter of having a secure vault: it also comes with the responsibility to keep the stories alive. This was the point of the Dja Dja Wurrung Native Title Group’s call for repatriation. The BM’s best counter was to appoint Sculthorpe and throw its weight behind ‘Enduring civilisation’. What will be the next chess move in this increasingly entangled story?

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