

British museums spar with Aborigines over loaned art

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A spat between two leading British museums and a tribe in Australia over the loan of the earliest known Aboriginal bark etchings intensified Monday with Britain accused of having "colonial" attitudes.

The Dja Dja Wurrung, an Aboriginal tribe originally inhabiting the Bendigo region of central Victoria, have secured an emergency declaration order preventing the return of the 150-year-old artefacts to Britain.

The works -- two bark etchings from the British Museum and the Royal Botanic Gardens in London, and a ceremonial emu figure from the British Museum -- were loaned in March to the Museum Victoria for its 150th anniversary exhibition, "Etched On Bark 1854."

The fire-blackened etchings -- one depicting men carrying boomerangs while the second shows a hunting scene -- were due to return to London last week but are now being held in storage in Melbourne while the wrangle is sorted out.

Gary Murray, secretary of the Dja Dja Wurrung Native Title Group, which secured the emergency declaration, said the artefacts had been insured for about 900,000 pounds (1.6 million euros, 1.7 million dollars, 2.3 million Australian dollars).

"Dollars don't interest us," he said. "Our value is in our spiritual, emotional value."

"It physically connects us -- it could have been my great-grandfather who did the work," he said.

"We have a personal interest as well as an emotional and cultural one and we are concerned that the British haven't seemed to have changed their attitude in 200 years since they colonised us."

Murray said he would explore all legal avenues to keep the artefacts in Australia and would write to British Prime Minister Tony Blair and Queen Elizabeth II, the head of state of both countries.

Emergency declarations -- which last for 30 days -- were made on behalf of the Dja Dja Wurrung in June and subsequently renewed.

Murray said the lack of direct negotiation by the British institutions with them showed "disrespect".

"We don't have the crown jewels, but by Christ if we did, all hell would break loose," he said. "There would be a warship stationed off the port of Melbourne."

"They came and murdered us and dispossessed us," he said. "This is their English inheritance coming back to haunt them."

"We are in for the long haul," he said. "If the world wants to see them they should come here where they came from."

The British museums have warned that international art cooperation could be at risk if the Aboriginal tribe fails to return the artefacts.

"The emergency declaration puts at risk the very legal framework that allows such exhibitions to take place drawing on loans from Europe and America," they said in a joint statement.

"It is in the interests of everyone that objects of cultural and artistic significance such as these continue to be able to move around the world and be seen by many different publics," said the statement issued last week.

Under Australia's Aboriginal heritage laws, the emergency protection order can be extended indefinitely, but the 2,500-strong Dja Dja Wurrung are hoping the Victoria state governor will make a permanent order.

The head of the Museum Victoria Patrick Greene said Monday that the emergency declarations "came really out of the blue" because the legislation was aimed at protecting archaeological sites from development.

He said the museum had both an obligation to honour the contractual agreement with the British museums and a priority to ensure good relations with Australia's Aboriginal community.

