
British Museum Exhibition Reignites Barks Debate

By Patrick Steel
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The British Museum faces renewed calls from Australian indigenous activists over the return of objects from its collection, which feature in its upcoming exhibition [Indigenous Australia: Enduring Civilisation](#), opening on 23 April.

Two aboriginal barks, an etching and a figure of an emu, made by members of the Dja Dja Wurrung community and dating from the 1850s, will feature in the exhibition. The barks were at the centre of a legal dispute in 2004 when, after the British Museum loaned them to the Melbourne Museum, indigenous groups fought to keep them in Australia.

The court ruled that the objects should remain with the British Museum, and this led the Australian government to introduce the Protection of Cultural Objects on Loan Act in 2013 to prevent similar legal action being taken over future exhibitions.

The barks may also be included in a related exhibition at the National Museum of Australia in Canberra in November, although the British Museum has yet to finalise which objects it will loan.

Gary Foley, an associate professor at the Moondani Balluk Indigenous Academic Unit of Victoria University in Melbourne, said the inclusion of the barks in the exhibition was "disgraceful".

He told Museums Journal: "It's like rubbing salt in the wounds of 10 years ago.

"The barks are an important part of the cultural history of Australia, they are the only surviving example on the planet of aboriginal bark art. They should be in the possession of the Dja Dja Wurrung people.

"I think the British Museum will regret its decision to hold these exhibitions. It will get more bad publicity than good. But I don't see any joy for the Dja Dja Wurrung people in the short term."

Foley is seeking support from Melbourne's powerful Greek diaspora. Speaking last month at the [Greek Centre in Melbourne](#), he found common cause with Greek calls for the return of the Parthenon Marbles, and said that many of the people he had spoken to had offered their assistance to his campaign to secure the barks.

“We are anticipating a possible intervention on the part of the Greek government in support of us,” he said. “We are very conscious that we are not alone in having a problem with the British Museum and material it refuses to repatriate.”

Gaye Sculthorpe, the British Museum’s section head for Oceania and the exhibition’s curator, said: “In any exhibition of old materials these issues are likely to arise. One of the wonderful things about these materials is that indigenous spokespeople are able to talk about the importance of these objects.

“The exhibition comes out of a broader research project, working with colleagues at the National Museum of Australia and the Australian National University, and we have had a lot of community meetings across Australia.

“Many people are happy we are doing the exhibition and think that while the objects are here it is important that their stories are understood more widely.”

Sculthorpe said that the Dja Dja Wurrung was one of the communities that the museum had had conversations with but, she said, the discussions were private.

Asked for her views on Foley’s position, she said that it was up to the British Museum’s trustees to make those decisions and she could not speak for them.

“There are 170 objects in the exhibition and all the attention has been on two,” she said. “I don’t deny the Dja Dja Wurrung their interest, but there are many other stories in the exhibition, and we hope that it will be one step in improving understanding of those cultures.”

The British Museum will be holding an event on 2 May to look at some of the issues around colonial legacies in contemporary museum practice: [Challenging Colonial Legacies Today: Museums And Communities In Australia And East Africa](#).