

Aborigines grab art on loan from Britain

By Dalya Alberge, Arts Correspondent

July 26, 2004 - The earliest surviving Aboriginal bark etchings have been seized in Australia along with a ceremonial headdress while on loan from the British Museum and the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew.

The Dja Dja Wurrung, who can trace their history to the 1790s through white man's records, have secured an emergency declaration order that prevents the return of artefacts made by their ancestors 150 years ago in the Wimmera, in western Victoria.

The move has sent a tremor through the international museum community because it will have such an impact on future loans to exhibitions as collectors, both private and public, are likely to refuse to part with prized objects which could be seized under another country's laws.

The fragile pieces, fire-blackened bark etched in the 1850s with images of kangaroos and hunting scenes, had been dispatched to the Museum Victoria in Melbourne in March. They were due to return to Britain this week. Instead, the British institutions are consulting their lawyers.

The declaration, under an aboriginal heritage protection Act of 1984, can be extended indefinitely, but the 2,500-strong Dja Dja Wurrung are calling for a permanent order.

The cultural objects specified in the emergency declaration are the only three Aboriginal bark etchings known to have survived and experts said that had they not been preserved by British institutions they would never have survived to the 21st century.

One, on loan from Kew, depicts men carrying boomerangs. Another, on loan from the British Museum, shows a hunting scene. An emu-shaped headdress belonging to the British Museum has also been seized.

The emergency order was described yesterday as "cultural hijacking" and has dismayed British experts.

Tristram Besterman, director of the Manchester Museum, was particularly shocked because he has tried to foster a more sympathetic relationship between the West and indigenous peoples in relation to their heritage. Last year he repatriated four Aboriginal skulls and two limb bones to Australia and in the early 1990s, he sent back Maori tattooed heads to New Zealand.

More can be achieved through a "proper spirit of discussion", he said, rather than by "extortion and blackmail".

Lissant Bolton, the British Museum's Australian-born Curator of the Pacific and Australian Collections, said that the bark etchings were sent to Britain by John Hunter Kerr, a Scot, in the 19th century. He had good relations with the Aborigines.

Professor Monique Simmonds, Chief Scientist at Kew, emphasised that the etching was acquired in good faith: "It was given to us." She gave warning that the move would take its toll on future exhibitions. "Very few people will be willing to lend things." She added: "Thank goodness they were kept in good conditions, they would never have survived."

Maurice Davies, deputy director of the Museums Association, which represents Britain's 1,500 public collections, said: "I can understand the motivation of people in Australia in trying to seize the items, but it adds to the difficulty of international lending generally. The world gets more litigious and more and more unacceptable things happen, such as physical threats to items because of terrorism."

Gary Murray, secretary to the Dja Dja Wurrung Native Title Group, was unrepentant. "They belong in Australia. If we had your Crown Jewels, you'd be knocking our doors down," he said.

The group said that it was prepared to go to court to lay claim to artefacts, which they believe belong in a proposed museum of their own heritage. Mr Murray said: "If the British museums want to invoke legal rights, we've got pro bono lawyers at a major law firm who are prepared to represent us. We are not fearful of the legal process. We're in for the long haul." A spokesman for Museum Victoria said: "Museum Victoria is proud to work closely with Aboriginal communities to ensure the preservation and display of Aboriginal heritage and culture. However, Museum Victoria also acknowledges its obligation to abide by its loan agreements with the British Museum and the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew."

Mr Murray is calling on John Howard, the Australian Prime Minister, to ask the British Government to return the barks and the hundreds of Aboriginal remains held by the Natural History Museum. He is also due to write to the Queen and Tony Blair.

HOLDING ON TO THE SPOILS OF HISTORY

- Elgin Marbles: Britain has rejected Greece's proposal to place the ancient sculptures on loan in an "annexe" of the British Museum in Athens
- Rosetta Stone: the Egyptians' request for a loan for a new wing of the Cairo Museum next year has been turned down by the British Museum
- Benin Bronzes: Nigeria claims that the 16th-century treasures, discovered in 1897 when British Forces entered Benin City, are among the most sensitive of Africa's cultural heritage objects
- Tabots: the Ethiopian Orthodox Church in London is campaigning for the return of these sacred treasures, looted by British troops who invaded Ethiopia in 1868 to free British subjects held by Emperor Tewodros

- Lindisfarne Gospels: the British Library has rejected calls for their repatriation to the North East, where they were created in the 7th century
- Lewis Chessmen: the British Museum and the National Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh have dismissed claims for the 12th-century treasures to be returned to the Western Isles, where they were discovered in the 19th century

Source: The Times