

The Telegraph

Indigenous Australia, British Museum, review: 'all too familiar'

Far from celebrating indigenous Australian culture, this show does little more than slam British colonial rule



Kunmanara Hogan, Tjaruwa Woods, Yarangka Thomas, Estelle Hogan, Ngalpingka Simms and Myrtle Pennington, Kungkarangkalpa (detail). Acrylic on canvas, 2013. Photo: The artists

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Your guarantee from any British Museum exhibition is a factual nugget or two you'll be sharing in the days, weeks and months ahead. In the case of Indigenous Australia, it's that around 250 Aboriginal languages were being spoken at the time of British settlement; fewer than 20 still survive.

Or how about another? The first Australian cricket team to tour England was the Aboriginal XI of 1868. Crowds flocked to see these fascinating foreigners, who'd learned the game from English settlers on the cattle stations of Victoria. The tourists even put on novelty displays after matches, which, in the case of the batsman

Jungunjinuke, meant warding off cricket balls hurled at him from close quarters, using his personal “leangle” (war club).



Club belonging to Jungunjinuke, member of the first Australian cricket team to tour the United Kingdom in 1868

This exhibition is the BM's first major show on indigenous Australia in 50 years. Its aim is to showcase that land's historical diversity and remind us that the term Aborigine is actually unhelpful, suggesting as it does a backward, monolithic people. In swamp regions like the Arafura, in the Northern Territory, sophisticated canoes were developed - like the flat-bottomed bark on display, its pointed nose designed to help manoeuvre through dense, surface-level grasses.

Stone was also vital, for the manufacture of spearheads, grindstones and axes, the Mount William stone quarry near Melbourne being a major national source. And, judging by the pendants and necklaces on show, pearl shell was highly prized, far beyond the Kimberley coast from where it came.



Pearl shell pendant with dancing figures, Kimberley region, Western Australia (TRUSTEES OF THE BRITISH MUSEUM)

What begins to emerge is a complex, varied land with multiple trading connections – and a profound relationship with nature. Clearly the British settlers who declared Australia “terra nullius” - a land belonging to no one - were off the mark. Their declaration does, however, help explain one of the flaws of this exhibition. The indigenous Australians didn’t boast grand buildings, monuments or sculptures to awe the coloniser upon arrival. There was, instead of “civilisation”, just a boundless landscape.

By the mid-19th century, this was interpreted according to the prevailing theories of social Darwinism: that white man was superior to black. Today, by contrast, it means an exhibition without aesthetic thrill. For all the importance of scholarship and research, an exhibition is ultimately only as strong as its exhibits. And, alas, the works in the precolonial section of this show aren’t visually arresting.

Australia has a rich artistic tradition: one dating back 50,000 years, in fact. But works tended to be ephemeral, created on sand, trees or people’s bodies. And the notable exceptions – prehistoric rock paintings – remain in situ on the rocks Down Under.

All this, perhaps, is why so much attention is devoted to Captain Cook’s landing at Botany Bay in 1770 and its aftermath: a period replete with artistic documents, and better known in the West because of the British connection.

Here we see the fishermen's spears Cook confiscated from the first locals he met on Australian shore (wrongly thinking them to be poison-tipped). Alongside them is an eerie watercolour by one of his crew of the same locals in their canoes fishing with those same spears.



James Cook with the Declaration, Vincent Namatjira, 2014

Also on show is one of the “proclamation boards” hung from trees in 19th-century Tasmania, in a bid by Governor George Arthur to break the language barrier and communicate with hostile locals. In cartoon-style strips, it depicts idealised images of friendship and equality between colonisers and colonised. The gap between ideals and reality, though, was wide. The Black War of 1825-31 left Tasmania's Aboriginal population on the verge of extinction.

To focus so much on the colonial, though, has obvious drawbacks: it gives undue weight to nine generations of Australians, at the expense of the 2,800 generations before them, and props up the hoary notion that the fundamental moment of Australian history was Cook's arrival.

Recent discoveries in archaeology and radiocarbon dating suggest differently. Surely the first settlers' arrival from Indonesia 60,000 years ago was more momentous; likewise, the great sea-rising that later created the landmass we know today, severed from Tasmania and Papua New Guinea and complete with Great Barrier Reef.

What we get, though, is an all-too-familiar account of dispossession, malfeasance and massacres by the British. Witness the petition sent by Flinders Islanders to Queen Victoria for an end to their everyday humiliations (like the shooting of their dogs). And the early-20th century postcards of Aboriginal families, sent home by visiting Brits who'd found a new tourist attraction.

I don't in any way wish to deny or downplay the grisly history, but wasn't this a show purporting to *celebrate* indigenous Australian culture? To celebrate a people who've thrived and survived for millennia? In apparent deference to political correctness, the BM seems to be minimising the very richness in Aboriginal society that was this show's *raison d'être*.

Things are unrelenting, and soon we're confronted by photos of the Fifties nuclear weapons tests that the Australian and British governments carried out in the Central Desert, which contaminated the land of (unconsulted) local Aborigines.

There are, admittedly, some upbeat moments, notably the paintings by indigenous artists today that appear throughout. Adapting their ancestors' dot-pattern style onto canvas, these provide welcome bursts of colour, but even this story is fraught. As the market for Aboriginal work has grown, fakes have abounded and various artists have been exploited by art dealers.

Given the sensitive subject matter and lack of star exhibits, this was always going to be a hard show to pull off. But surely the curators' tale needn't be one of woe. By undervaluing millennia of achievement, this show feels like yet another injustice meted out against indigenous Australians.