Full Citation Details:
CURRENT WORK IN THE ANTHROPOLOGY DEPARTMENT
NATIONAL MUSEUM OF VICTORIA

Staff

Staff in the department consists of a curator, an assistant curator and three assistants. One of the assistants is employed exclusively on the Donald Thomson Collection. Two part-time workers assist in a voluntary capacity.

Collections

There are approximately 87,000 artefacts in the Museum's collections, the Australian Aboriginal component being the most important, numerically. Disregarding stone artefacts, the other Australian Aboriginal specimens, some 25,000, account for 29% of the whole. The core of the Australian material resulted from the field collections of Spencer and Gillen. Almost all aspects of Aboriginal material culture are represented and there is a very wide Australian geographic coverage.

Exotic artefacts, which make up about 15% of the collections, are principally from Melanesia, Polynesia and Africa. Many other areas are represented by small collections.

Recent Acquisitions

A number of collections have been acquired in recent years, the most important being the Page Collection, the Rev. E.A. and Mrs Wells' Collection and the Donald Thomson Collection.

The Donald Thomson Collection is on long-term loan (at least 25 years) from the University of Melbourne.

Page Collection: This is a collection of 470 artefacts from the Trobriand Islands assembled between 1968 and 1971. The material was deliberately collected to give a comprehensive coverage of Trobriands material culture and includes many daily-use items often overlooked by collectors. The Page material adds to an earlier (1919) Robert Mond Collection which contains the Trobriand Islands artefacts donated to the National Museum by Professor Malinowski.

The Rev. E.A. and Mrs Wells' Collection: In the 1950's and 60's Mr and Mrs Wells collected material in north-central and eastern Arnhem Land. Earlier this year the Museum received their collection of...
some 200 artefacts including 65 bark paintings. The latter filled a gap in the collections and we now have an important collection of barks ranging in time from the Spencer material of 1911 to the present, with periods in between represented by other acquisitions such as those from P. Cahill, W. Chaseling, T.T. Webb and D.F. Thomson.

The Donald Thomson Collection: This collection is probably the most significant one to come into a public institution in recent decades. It has research value of a very high order and since its arrival at the National Museum in 1973 has attracted the attention of a steady stream of scholars.

The collection consists of 5700 meticulously labelled specimens collected mainly from Arnhem Land and Cape York in the 1930's and 40's but also includes items from the Great Sandy Desert and some Melanesian material.

There is an associated collection of field notes and other documentation of about 7000 pages and an unsurpassed photographic record of some 10,000 negatives which reflect Thomson's interests in material culture, technology and ecology.

Storage and Cataloguing

Re-allocation of space following the removal of the National Gallery of Victoria from the Museums' site in 1968 resulted in the Anthropology Department acquiring new halls for both display and storage. New office, library and laboratory space also became available adjacent to the reference collection area.

The additional space provided an opportunity for the housing of all the reference material in one very large hall. This was a major undertaking involving the assembling in one place of ethnographic material previously stored in a number of locations throughout the building. Since 1969 all the material has been relocated and, except for collections from the Middle East, Africa and the Americas, on which work is proceeding, has been sorted systematically.

Simultaneously with the relocating and sorting, attention has been directed to the compiling of a two-part (subject and number) card catalogue system. Non-lithic Aboriginal material has been catalogued except for the Thomson artefacts but we expect that a complete catalogue will not be finished for some years. In the meantime all new acquisitions are being catalogued according to a computer format devised at the Australian Museum after a pilot study funded by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies.
Conservation

Fumigation: In October 1976 an infestation of insects was detected in the reference collections area. The problem was caused by the common clothes moth (*Tineola bisselliella*) and the drug store beetle (*Stegobium panicum*). The infestation was so widespread and the possibility of damage so serious that the Museum was closed for one weekend while the storage hall was fumigated with methyl bromide gas. The action should prevent similar problems for many years.

Churchill Fellowship: A member of the Anthropology staff, David Wood, was awarded a Churchill Fellowship in June 1976, to study conservation procedures in Rome and London in 1977. On his return Mr Wood will be provided with suitable facilities to work full-time on the conservation of ethnographic material. The need for trained personnel to work in this area at the National Museum is critical.

Public Education

Displays: The Museum's Oceania Display (excluding Australia) was dismantled early in 1976 and the area allocated to another department as a reference collections storage hall. Planning is in an advanced stage for a new, replacement exhibition to feature Melanesian and Polynesian cultures. Unfortunately lack of space in the present building means that the new exhibition will be located in the Australian Aboriginal display hall. Consequently the Aboriginal display will be restricted to one half of the area it now occupies.

A temporary exhibition *Papua New Guinea in Retrospect* was mounted to coincide with Papua New Guinea's independence in 1975 and stood for nine months.

Another temporary but major exhibition about Arnhem Land Aboriginal culture, featuring Donald Thomson's involvement with the Arnhemlanders in the 1930's and 40's, was opened in July 1976 by Mr Justice A.E. Woodward. Photographs formed the basis of the exhibition and these, together with the artefacts used, were drawn from the Donald Thomson Collection. Entitled *Black and White: Arnhem Land*, the exhibition will be on display until about March 1977 and will then be available as a travelling exhibition.

Visiting school groups: In the year to June 1976, school children visiting the Museum totalled 76,000. Of this number, 45,000 had some contact with teachers employed in the Education Service. This contact ranged from the presentation of loosely structured lessons on the one hand to the distribution of work sheets and similar material on the other.
About 40%, or 18,000, students were in groups which requested lessons or material relating to Australian Aborigines. This department regards the Education Service as most important. Suitable artefacts and visual material are provided on request and members of the Anthropology staff act as consultants to the two teachers who specialise in Aboriginal studies.

Research

Film making: A film of Gippsland Aboriginal men making a bark canoe and another documenting the manufacture of a coiled rush basket by a Lake Tyers woman are currently being edited and prepared for release by Alan West. Both films were made to record manufacturing techniques which are in danger of being lost. There are very few men now in southeastern Australia who, as young men, participated in canoe making and while more women have made coiled baskets in recent times the knowledge generally is not being passed on to younger generations.

A booklet is being prepared on coiled basketry.

Ethnobotany: Alison Oates is currently collecting and photographing plant specimens in a long-term study of food plants traditionally used by Victorian Aborigines.

Grooved axe study: Christine Hogarth and Alison Oates are involved in a study of the typology and distribution of grooved axes in Australia. A preliminary report on their research should be available in 1977.

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