

Community Consultation and the First Peoples Exhibition

SAMANTHA HAMILTON, MUSEUM VICTORIA



Community consultation is a complex undertaking and extending that to include conservation practices requires changes to policy and widespread support. Samantha Hamilton explains how conservation knowledge was shared in the development of the *First Peoples* exhibition recently opened at Melbourne Museum.

Bunjilaka is the Aboriginal Cultural Centre at Melbourne Museum. It consists of a permanent exhibition space showcasing some of the Indigenous collections of Museum Victoria (MV), as well as two galleries for temporary exhibitions. From 2009 to 2013 a new permanent exhibition, *First Peoples*, was developed. MV recognised the importance of involving Victorian Aboriginal Community members in this project, as outlined in our Strategic Plan and Community Engagement Framework and our continued association with the Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Advisory Committee (ACHAC). Community consultations were established to exchange information and enhance the conservation treatment of Indigenous cultural material by incorporating cultural considerations into the care and preservation of MV's collections. In addition the Yulendj reference group, consisting of fourteen elders from throughout Victoria, was established to co-curate the exhibition.

During various workshops I was able to introduce conservation ethics and practices to the Yulendj elders. They were captivated as they had little knowledge of the profession and the care that was taken to preserve their cultural materials. During subsequent meetings we discussed the preparation, display

and treatment of the many selected Victorian objects. The elders were pleased to have the opportunity to be involved in the decision making process and provided great insight into the many intangible aspects helpful for conservators to consider. They highlighted that objects represent spiritual connections to their makers, ancestors and laws and that when a treatment is being considered it is important to understand these aspects so as not to cause any irreversible changes.

During the exhibition acquisition process I also had the opportunity to meet and work with all of the artists who contributed their art works. I was able to gather information about the history and manufacture of these works, including the tangible and intangible aspects. We developed conservation plans based on the artist's intention with respect to the natural deterioration, aesthetic, maintenance and future care and treatment of their objects. One example involved Boorun's canoe, a project led by Gunai artist Steaphan Paton in collaboration with Gippsland photographic artist Cameron Cope.¹ Steaphan sought to learn cultural knowledge from his grandfather senior Gunai/Kurnai elder Albert Mullett and to continue the long practiced skill of

Below: Floating Boorun's canoe on Cherry Tree creek, Gippsland in February 2012 for a project led by Gunai artist Steaphan Paton in collaboration with Gippsland photographic artist Cameron Cope.

Photo by Samantha Hamilton. Source: Museum Victoria.

canoe-making. MV acquired the canoe in February 2012 just prior to the canoe floating on Cherry Tree Creek near Lake Tyres in Gippsland, Victoria. It was exciting as well as nerve racking to be the conservator on site witnessing the floating and the modifications that occurred to make it waterproof.

Featuring throughout the *First Peoples*, exhibition are many multimedia components showcasing Victorian Aboriginal community members. The filming of the multimedia component of the Darti koko woortongi barnin segment gave rise to the chance to take three historic objects from the Museum back to country.² The film was based on scenes from the famous Blandowski illustrations of Victorian Aboriginal people handing down cultural traditions through story, song, dance and ceremony. The objects were taken to a bush setting along the Murray River in the Gunbower State Park near Koondrook, Victoria and were used by three generations of members from the Baraba Baraba and Wemba Wemba communities. It was fantastic to witness a young man initially nervous about handling a highly significant shield turn into a warrior of the past as he realised the shield was robust and could withstand him using it for the purpose of the film.

Each consultation and event was captured via audio and visual means as well as standard note and report writing. MV has included this documentation in its KE EMu database and MV Images, the Museum's digital asset management program. To complement the enhancement of conservation documentation, the consultation process saw the establishment of relationships, the formation of stronger bonds and an exchange of knowledge between community, staff and Museum Victoria.

Samantha Hamilton, Conservator, Objects Collection, Development and Access, Museum Victoria.

First Peoples opened at Melbourne Museum in September, for details: <http://museumvictoria.com.au/bunjilaka/visiting/first-peoples/>

¹ Cameron Cope's slideshow about the making of Boorun's canoe: <http://tinyurl.com/lmp2b34>

[http://museumvictoria.com.au/bunjilaka/Boorun's canoe](http://museumvictoria.com.au/bunjilaka/Boorun's%20canoe)

² <http://tinyurl.com/mmggy6e7>