Communicating the Arts
“Inclusivity, Empathy and Wellbeing”.

2019

October 9

Australian National Maritime Museum
Helen Anu
‘Creating opportunity for meaningful dialogue’.

Djambawa Marawili AM. Image Justin Overell
Our Stories - Our Voices

Indigenous Curators working with a unique Indigenous Collection and their communities.

Since its opening in 1991, the Australian National Maritime Museum remains the Australian government’s most visible national cultural institution on the foreshores of Sydney Harbour and has a unique responsibility to share the nation’s distinct maritime stories with communities nationally and internationally.

We are the custodians of around 4,000 Indigenous maritime objects containing distinct Freshwater and Saltwater narratives. This collection plays a pivotal role in ensuring greater learning and respect for our unique and diverse Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander maritime heritages and knowledge that have been present since time immemorial.

We are the oldest continuing culture on the planet and I say, the First People on water!

The protection and promotion of our traditional and contemporary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural expressions are crucial for the wellbeing of our Peoples.

Through our programs, exhibitions and employment opportunities we continue to engage with and support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples to practice their culture and share their knowledge both in and outside their communities.

In 2014 the museum undertook a new approach to looking at the way it interpreted the museums Indigenous Collection by establishing an Indigenous Programs Unit. One of the key directions given to the newly established unit was to work with one of the nation’s most culturally significant Aboriginal collections known as the Saltwater Collection, and we are the keeping place for them.

This study will highlight the Re-telling of the story and message of the Saltwater Collection in the form of an exhibition. Through this process, we are able to share some of the cultural principles that opened up pathways for change, interpretation, understanding, authenticity and engagement from this particular Aboriginal region of Australia and therefore informing our visitors.

Outlining experiences through:
1. Pre-Development
2. Exhibition Development
3. Post-Development
In 1996, an Aboriginal Traditional Owner discovered an illegal fishing camp hidden in mangroves on his sacred land in Blue Mud Bay, in North-East Arnhem Land. Also, found was a severed head of a crocodile, considered a desecration of Baru, their Ancestor.

Clan leader Djambawa Marawili AM appealed to Traditional Owners of 15 Clans in the region to reveal and paint their ‘inside knowledge’ sacred patterns that document their ROM or Lore.

He reinforced the obligations that Traditional Custodians carry and I quote: “The land and sea can’t speak for itself, so we have to speak for it.”

Together they created stunning series of 80 paintings to demonstrate the rules, philosophies and stories that link their people to the coast, the rivers and the oceans. The bark paintings became known as the Saltwater Collection, which were presented to the Federal Court in lieu of written documents. They were title deeds to their Saltwater Estates.

The artists used organic materials - nuwayak or sheets of bark harvested from stringy bark tree. The paints used are ochre natural earth pigments from sacred deposit sites then painted using a marwat - a fine human hair paintbrush. All traditional practices of painting used by the Yolŋu people from the region today, either as body markings for dance ceremony or as art.

On 30 July 2008 after a decade, long struggle started by the Saltwater Collection to the High Court of Australia handed down the landmark Blue Mud Bay Decision. Confirming that traditional owners of the Blue Mud Bay region in North-East Arnhem Land, together with traditional owners of almost the entire Northern Territory coastline, have exclusive access rights to tidal waters overlying Aboriginal Land.

Between the years 1998-2001 the local Aboriginal arts centre Buku-Larrŋgay Mulka coordinated a national tour of the works. During that time in the year 2000, the museum purchased the works with the assistance of Stephen Grant of the GRANTPIRRIE Gallery and acquired into the National Maritime Collection at the request of the artists and Traditional Owners who instructed they were kept together in one keeping place and not to be separated.

The exhibition was successful as an educational campaign, but for the Traditional Owners it did not resolve their long-standing issue with protection for their Saltwater Countries and rights as Traditional Custodians.

The barks are activism through art that overturned western law, and primarily they are documents of Yolŋu lore. Under Yolŋu Lore, the ‘Land’ extends to include sea. The cycle of life for the Yolŋu is held in Songs and Designs or Patterns.
These barks are historic as they are sacred and these particular sea rights paintings will never be produced again! Underpinning this all was the message of Respect for time in millennia the Yolŋu have been custodians of these waters and would manage their wellbeing.

- WHY RE-TELL THE STORY

In 2018 the Yolŋu traditional owners would celebrate the 10th Anniversary of the landmark Blue Mud Bay Decision determining their Sea Rights.

It was perfect timing for the museums newly established Indigenous Unit to focus on revisiting the spectacular collection with a new approach to interpreting the story and message.

To take the lead and demonstrate that as part of our long-established cultural protocols Indigenous people will speak for ‘Our Stories with Our Voices.’

Re-telling the story provided an opportunity to generate a new and extensive consultation process as well as taking a fresh approach to forming a rich body of educational, scientific, environment, cultural and spiritual messaging through an Indigenous lens.

The benefits of stronger Indigenous engagement brings new knowledge sharing, creates space for other opportunities such as new acquisitions, consultancy and outreach.

Previous project teams were primarily non-Indigenous museum staff including external academics and Anthropologists who were historically connected with the research towards the actual Blue Mud Bay legal case.

Overall, the previous exhibitions had successes but we reviewed these areas:

Interpretation – Lacked an authentic Indigenous Voice as the first person. Labels and Themes carried heavy European text with academic jargon and ethnographic terminology that did not reflect a Yolŋu Aboriginal voice or describe Aboriginal Concepts and Philosophies. Therefore, it wasn’t as engaging.

The works presented as a straight hang and Cultural Sensitivities weren’t always observed with orientation of paintings in order to save space. In turn, it actually confused audiences reading them.

There was no real ambience, as the exhibitions had no tangible ‘connection to water’.

Indigenous Businesses were not procured across the project.
• **A NEW WAY OF TELLING OUR STORIES**

As a major exhibition that needed a community voice, it was important to have as long lead time as possible, which started four years prior.

We reviewed the previous exhibition project and focussed on:

- Reimagining the Representation of Engagement and its benefits.
- Respecting Concept of Aboriginal Time, and that the dynamics of every Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community is different.
- Presenting Community Voice First and engaging the artists and traditional owners throughout the entire process.
- Creating additional Indigenous positions as project creatives to lead exhibition direction.
- Embedding Indigenous values in museum and gallery practices.
  - Includes Conservation understanding two-way learning.
- Creating opportunity for Indigenous Businesses
- Developing Policy around artists Copyright Protection
  - Licencing, Publications and merchandising.
- Creating an museum Indigenous Educator position
- Continued Engagement with Community post project.

The biggest driver for me when Re-Telling the story was a particular audience feedback that stays with me today. ‘SEEN ONE BARK, SEEN EM ALL’!

Our challenge was finding solutions: to address both public and internal perceptions of Aboriginal bark paintings. Flipping perceptions on their heads became the fuel to move ahead with renewed vision for representing the communities’ stories.

**Strategic Approach:**

- Shifting attitudes had to start within the organisation. Shifting the dialogue around Indigenous maritime heritages as being all Australians heritages.
- The Indigenous Programs worked with HR to implement mandatory online Cultural Awareness Training for existing and new employees and held one on one workshops with guest Indigenous Facilitator.
• **Indigenous Procurement Policy**
  We recommended changes to reflect government requirements of three per cent of government contracts to go to Indigenous businesses. Museum became a member of Supply Nation as part of the museum’s overall procurement practice.
  - Supply Nation is the Australian leader in supplier diversity bringing together the biggest national database of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander businesses.

• **Project departments Procuring Indigenous Businesses**
  - Conservation – from Prototype to bark mounting
  - Marketing & Brand
  - Store - art and products purchased direct from community arts centres
  - Interpretation & Design - engage Indigenous 3D Designer
  - Media and Promotions – Indigenous Film Company

• **Learning Department** – Employed Indigenous Education Coordinator
• **Conservation** – Developing Policies around Indigenous Collections.

  **Curatorial Approach:**
  Extensive community consultation. ’Deep Listening’ meaningful time spent with community to listen ensuring that genuine voices are heard and represented.

• Made Yolŋu Language the lead exhibition title. Gapu-Monuk (Saltwater)
  Setting the tone for new interpretation labels placing ‘Language first’ and bracketing English second when telling Indigenous Stories.

• Enforcing designer’s use new Yolŋu language text that includes Glyphs.

• Complex academic jargon re-written to reflect an Indigenous Voice.
• Indigenous Designer engaged to develop Curators brief and balancing the cultural protocols and integrity of the paintings and other cultural properties

• Engaging with other Community Stakeholders
  I engaged and worked with four Indigenous Sea Rangers groups to document the aerial photography of the 15 Sea Countries.

• Utilised museum collection for related objects to enhance the exhibition narrative

• Acquired new works from the community - Mokuy sculptures.
Incorporating the contemporary story of the Legal Battle as an added angle of the exhibition meant working with the Northern Land Council who carried the legal case from Federal Court to High Court.

Through every concept, I consulted with the Traditional Owners for their perspectives and cultural approvals. Appropriate songs, images, language, use of deceased names, right down to the TV commercial and even the font or visuals on the language text, I ran it past the Traditional Owners.

WHAT HAPPENS AFTER THE EXHIBITION ENDS?

- Maintain an ongoing engagement with the Community. Creating space for continued dialogue – ie Symposiums, Articles for Publications and also for Indigenous staff to visit community.

- The museum committed to fly the Sea Rights Flag permanently on our Federal Flag poles in recognition of Yolŋu ownership of their waters and reflect the Saltwater Collection. We organized its designer and Traditional Owner from Blue Mud Bay to ceremonially raise it.

- Indigenous Lead Tours of Exhibition.

- The Museum Store – Registered as a member of the Indigenous Arts Code.

- Ensuring the practice of ethical art trade.

- The Indigenous products now make up over 10% of all retail sales. That’s a massive increase over the last couple of years when it was only 1%.

- Registration Department: The Museums inventory updated with new information shared or ‘corrected’ by community throughout the exhibition project adding to the rich narrative of the collection.


The Gapu-Monuk Saltwater Exhibition Project was overall an opportunity for the museum to implement the strategic direction it had initiated when establishing the Indigenous Unit and engaging in best practice both internally and externally.

Winner: 2019 Museums and Heritage Awards in London. Project of the Year (less that £1m).
Winner: Best Indigenous Project or Keeping Place MAGNA Awards 2018 (Museums and Galleries National Awards – Temporary or Travelling Exhibition Level 3. Project Budget $150-$500K).