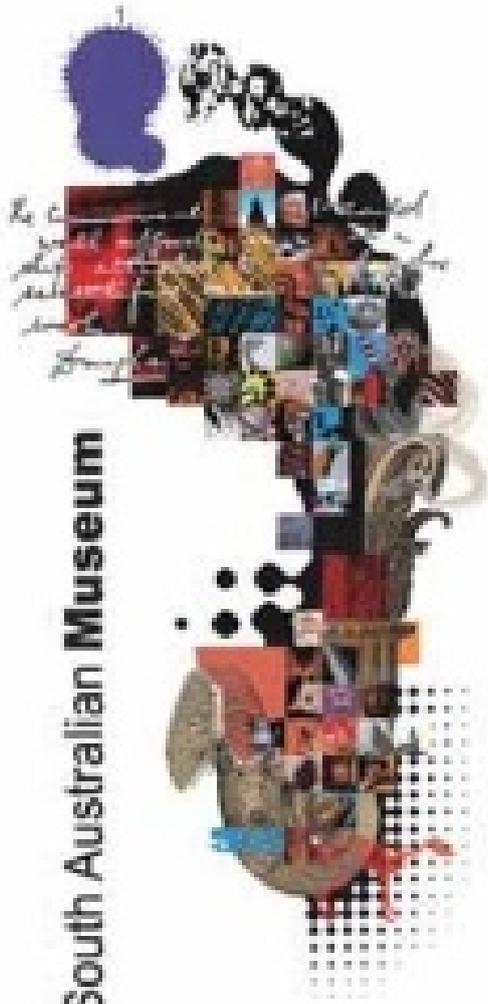


South Australian Museum



SA MUSEUM

Management and Repatriation of Aboriginal and
Torres Strait Islander Secret Sacred Objects

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Responsible Executive Position
Brian Oldman, Director

[Management and Repatriation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Secret Sacred Objects Policy](#)

Approval/Effective Date: 30 April 2020

Approved by: SA Museum Board

Policy Contact
Professor John Carty, Head of Humanities

Review date: April 2023 (3 year cycle)

1. Context

The South Australian Museum Board recognises some Aboriginal objects in its collections form part of sacred customs and traditional ceremonies and are revered as secret and/or sacred objects by Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people and communities. The Museum Board recognises its obligation to sensitively care for and provide culturally appropriate access to secret sacred objects.

The Board respects the authority of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples as the traditional owners of these secret sacred objects and will take their advice on the appropriate care, access and repatriation of these objects.

The Museum Board supports repatriation of secret sacred objects to their custodians and communities of origin. The Board uses repatriation to promote healing and reconciliation and has adopted the principles set under the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, which says in part:

Indigenous peoples have the right to manifest, practice, develop and teach their spiritual and religious traditions, customs and ceremonies; the right to maintain, protect, and have access in privacy to their religious and cultural sites; the right to the use and control of their ceremonial objects; and the right to the repatriation of their human remains.

States shall seek to enable the access and/or repatriation of ceremonial objects and human remains in their possession through fair, transparent and effective mechanisms developed in conjunction with Indigenous peoples concerned.

2. Purpose

The South Australian Museum's collection of Aboriginal ceremonial cultural objects brings with it significant responsibilities. The most important of these is to ensure that Aboriginal custodians are empowered in the decision-making around these collections. The Museum will work with Aboriginal custodians, Traditional Owners and Aboriginal representative bodies to ensure protocols are in place to protect the cultural integrity of the objects, while also ensuring a culturally safe working environment for staff.

3. Scope

This policy guides the management and return of secret sacred objects held in the South Australian Museum collections. This policy replaces the South Australian Museum's *Statement on the Secret/Sacred Collection 1986*.

All secret/sacred objects in the Museum's care shall be governed by this policy.

Records held in the Museum archives may contain confidential information about Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander sites, objects, remains or traditions that must not be divulged contrary to Aboriginal tradition. Access to Museum archive records is managed under the Museum's records

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policy¹ and in accord with the *Aboriginal Heritage Act 1988*. The Head of Humanities will work with the Archives to ensure that the status (and any associated restrictions) of specific objects is reflected in the status of related materials in the archives (including photos of objects, film of ceremony and written descriptions in records).

4. Policy Detail/Statement

The Board accepts that some cultural objects are unsuitable for public enquiry because:

- Indigenous people have the right to keep secret their sacred and ritual knowledge in accordance with their customary laws and traditions;
- The handling and use of some cultural objects may be restricted by gender;
- In addition to gender restrictions, some cultural objects may also only be seen or discussed by senior or initiated community members.

Where any of the above apply, these objects will be considered secret sacred objects. Management of secret sacred objects requires the Board and Museum staff to follow special procedures or protocols that are discussed regularly with the relevant Aboriginal custodians.

Identification of Custodians

- The Head of Humanities is responsible for the conduct of appropriate and diligent research to identify the relevant custodians, traditional owners and Aboriginal representative bodies who have social, economic or spiritual affiliations with and responsibilities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander secret sacred objects in the Museum's collection.

Cultural Protocols

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures are complex, dynamic and evolving; therefore, protocols may change according to the particular generation. With this in mind, consultation needs to take place on a community-by-community and ongoing basis.

- The Head of Humanities is responsible for ascertaining up-to-date cultural protocols, identified through consultation with the relevant custodians of the objects.
- All cultural protocols will be formally documented and reviewed over a twenty-year cycle; with at least five percent of the collection reviewed each year.
- The Head of Humanities will ensure all protocols are documented in a restricted area of the collection management system and implemented in the access and care of all secret sacred objects.

All internal discussions concerning secret sacred objects should respect cultural protocols. For example, information about men's objects should only be discussed by male staff members.

¹ South Australian Museum *Access to Personal Information Policy and Procedures 2015*

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Acquisition and Holding

- All secret sacred objects in the Museum's care, regardless of acquisition status, shall be governed by this policy.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander secret sacred objects held by the Museum form part of the Australian Aboriginal Cultures Collection.
- There are approximately 4000 secret sacred objects in the Australian Aboriginal Cultures Collection and the Board will not seek to grow the secret sacred component of the collection.
- At the request of the relevant custodian, the Museum may receive (at no cost to the custodian) secret sacred objects in order to remove the objects from private collections or general circulation. These objects will not be accessioned into the collection but will be catalogued to ensure full records are created and managed and the museum has an official record to ensure traceability.
- The Museum may establish a protocol with relevant custodians to hold objects offered from private collectors or being removed from general circulation.
- All secret sacred objects, regardless of acquisition status, will receive standard collection and conservation management care applied in accordance with the relevant cultural protocols.

Deaccession

- The Board is responsible for deaccession of secret sacred objects in accordance with the *South Australian Museum Collection Policy and Procedures*. All Board and sub-committee discussions concerning secret sacred objects should respect cultural protocols. For example, information about men's objects should only be discussed by male Board members, and information about women's objects should only be discussed by female Board members.

Restricted Store

- All Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander secret sacred objects shall be housed in a secured area, separate from the general collections of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural objects.

Access to secret sacred objects

- In association with the relevant gender protocol senior Humanities staff will be responsible for approving access to secret sacred objects. The Head of Humanities (male) and Senior Collection Manager Humanities and World Cultures (female) respectively are responsible for approving access to secret sacred objects and the relevant restricted store. In the event of staff changes, the principle of senior male Humanities staff oversight for men's objects and senior female Humanities staff oversight of women's objects will be observed.
- Access will only be granted in accordance with the documented cultural protocols provided by the relevant custodians.
- Upon written request, the relevant custodians, or their agents who have written permission from the custodians, may have access to secret sacred objects associated with the relevant custodian's cultural authority.

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- All visitors (and contractors) accessing the store must be supervised by a museum staff member approved by the Head of Humanities.

Conduct in the restricted store

- All persons entering the secret sacred store shall be inducted into the appropriate conduct in the store and conduct themselves in accordance with the relevant cultural protocols.

Display

- The Museum will not generally display identified secret sacred objects but will be guided by custodians in relation to museum display or providing secret sacred objects to another person or organisation for display.

Responsible research

- The Secret Sacred collection is not generally open to researchers for research.
- Custodians may manage or request research of secret sacred objects directly associated with their custodianship.
- Research on the secret/sacred collections will not be undertaken without the express, written permission of the relevant custodians.
- The Museum may conduct research relevant to matters of provenance, or critical to maintaining its collection management responsibilities.

Repatriation

- The Board is responsible under s13(2)(c) of the South Australian Museum Act for considering requests for repatriation of secret sacred objects.
- Where the request is made from the appropriate custodians (refer to 'Identification of custodians') the Board will consider return of the object in a timely manner.
- All requests for repatriation will be managed by the Head of Humanities and presented to the Board via the Cultural Objects Committee and Aboriginal Advisory Committee.
- The Cultural Objects Committee will consider whether the request is made by the appropriate custodian.
- The Board shall not place conditions with regard to repatriated secret sacred objects.
- Where repatriation has been requested to coincide with cultural ceremony, the Board may consider the request out of session.
- The Museum shall provide copies of all relevant documentation about the secret sacred object as part of the repatriation.
- The Museum shall keep copies of all documentation of secret sacred objects that are repatriated.

Inventory and audit

- An up to date inventory of all secret sacred objects will be maintained electronically on the Museum's primary collection management database system.
- Access to the data will be restricted to staff in accord with the associated cultural protocols.
- Auditing of the inventory will be consistent with the Museum's Collection Policy and Procedures and the relevant collection management plan.

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National Indigenous Repatriation Program

- The Museum will apply the national policy protocols of the *Australian Government Policy on Indigenous Repatriation 2016*.
- The Museum will participate in the Australian Government's Domestic Indigenous Repatriation Program.

5. Roles and Responsibilities

5.1 Museum Board

The Museum Board is responsible for ensuring obligations under Australian heritage protection laws are reflected in Museum policy and for considering requests for repatriation of secret sacred objects. The Board will seek advice from the Aboriginal Advisory Committee prior to deciding a repatriation request.

5.2 Aboriginal Advisory Committee

The Aboriginal Advisory Committee is responsible for providing advice to the Museum Board. The Committee will take into account both a desire for openness and the sharing of information while recognising the sensitivity and cultural restriction of some information.

5.3 Cultural Objects Committee

The Cultural Objects Committee is responsible for reviewing requests for repatriation and ensuring all requests are presented to the Board in a timely manner. The Committee will take into account both a desire for openness and the sharing of information while recognising the sensitivity and cultural restriction of some information.

5.4 Museum Director

The Museum Director is responsible for compliance with this policy and ensuring the Museum Board and Museum staff are fully inducted into responsibilities under heritage protection legal frameworks, internal policy and cultural protocols associated with cultural collections.

5.5 Museum Discipline Team and Responsible Senior Staff for this Policy

The Head of Humanities is responsible for identifying all cultural objects in the museum collections that require restrictions in accordance with Aboriginal tradition.

The Head of Humanities is responsible for identifying the custodians of secret sacred objects and advising the Cultural Objects Committee on requests for repatriation.

5.6 Museum Employee

All SA Museum employees are responsible for complying with all Australian heritage protection laws, including the *Aboriginal Heritage Act 1988*, museum policy, public sector policy and *The Code of Ethics for the South Australian Public Sector* issued under the *Public Sector Act 2009*.

5.7 Museum Volunteers and Contractors

All SA Museum volunteers (including honoraries, students and contractors) are responsible for complying with cultural protocols associated with secret sacred objects as well as all Australian

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heritage protection laws, museum policy, public sector policy and the *Code of Ethics for the South Australian Public Sector* issued under the *Public Sector Act 2009*

6. Approval and Review

This policy supersedes the *Statement on the Secret Sacred Collection; February 1986*.

This policy should be reviewed by the Board no later than every three (3) years.

Approval and Review	Details
Approval Authority	South Australian Museum Board
Advisory Committee to Approval Authority	South Australian Museum Aboriginal Advisory Committee
SA Museum – Responsible Executive Position	Director
SA Museum – Responsible Discipline Head	Head of Humanities
Approval/Effective Date	30 April 2020
Next Review Date	30 April 2023
Approved Amendment Date	Amendment Details

7. Supporting Documents

- *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Heritage Protection Act 1984 (Cth)*
- Australian Government Indigenous Repatriation Policy 2016
- *Aboriginal Heritage Act 1988*
- *South Australian Museum Act 1976*
- *ICOM Code of Ethics for Museums*
- *South Australian Museum Collections Policy and Procedure 2018-2023*
- *South Australian Museum Cultural Rights and Consultation Policy*

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8. Glossary of Terms and Definitions used in this Policy

Aboriginal Advisory Committee: means an advisory committee established by the Board under section 9 of the South Australian Museum Act 1976.

Aboriginal representative body: means a Recognised Aboriginal Representative Body as defined by the *Aboriginal Heritage Act 1988*, or a Registered Native Title Body Corporate defined by the *Native Title Act 1993* (Cth) or where neither are established, an incorporated Aboriginal organisation constituted to manage Aboriginal heritage in respect of a specified area of land or specified Aboriginal objects.

Aboriginal object: means an object of particular significance to Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people in accordance with Aboriginal tradition.

Aboriginal site: has the same definition as a **significant Aboriginal area** under the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Heritage Protection Act 1984*.

Aboriginal tradition: means the body of traditions, observances, customs and beliefs of Aboriginal people generally or of a particular community or group of Aboriginal people, and includes any such traditions, observances, customs or beliefs relating to particular persons, sites, objects or relationships.

Accession: as defined by *Museum Collections Policy and Procedure*

Board: Means the Museum Board under the *South Australian Museum Act 1976*.

Cultural Object: means an object made by humans for a practical and/or spiritual purpose.

Custodian: means a person entitled by cultural tradition to make decisions for, or have custody of, a cultural object.

De-accession: as defined by *Museum Collections Policy and Procedure*.

Museum: Means the South Australian Museum under the *South Australian Museum Act 1976*.

Repatriation: means the unconditional return of a secret sacred object to Country of origin.

Secret Sacred Object: means an object of particular significance to Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people in accordance with Aboriginal tradition and that must, in accordance with Aboriginal tradition, be kept secret from a person or group of persons.

Traditional Owner: means an Aboriginal person who, in accordance with Aboriginal tradition, has social, economic or spiritual affiliations with, and responsibilities for, an Aboriginal site or Aboriginal object.