

**M O'BRIEN:** Ngai pirrku mankulankula  
Ngai nari Kumatpi Marrutya  
Ngai wangkanthi marni naa pudni  
Kaurna yarta- ana  
Irdi yarta.  
Hello, it's Micky O'Brien here, ambassador of the Kaurna people, and today we're on Kaurna country and I'm known as the impatient one.  
Ngadlu wangkanthi  
Naa marni  
naalitya  
Marni naa pudni  
parrku pirrku  
Warra mankunthi  
Kaurna yarta.  
So we can say hello to you and we also welcome you to this podcast recorded on Kaurna country.

**M LLOYD:** Welcome to the South Australian Museum podcast. I'm your host, Meg Lloyd, and I'll take you through the curious and complex collections of the South Australian Museum. This episode contains references to and discussions of the human remains within our collection and of colonial collecting practices, which may be particularly difficult for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander listeners. This happens particularly after the 14-minute mark. Last week we looked at collecting biological specimens. Please, go back and listen to Episode 1 if you missed our story about exploding whales. The South Australian Museum is a natural history museum and its collection tells a story about life on Earth, from fossils to the evolution of animals, but it also contains a Humanities Collection of Aboriginal and World Cultures material. The Australian Aboriginal Cultures Gallery takes up two floors of the museum, but only a tiny

portion of the collection is on display. I spoke with Collection Managers Alice Beale and Tara Collier and Curator Doctor Jared Thomas about the Humanities Collections, and the Aboriginal Cultures Collections, specifically. Alice and I met in the off-site storage facility where most of the collection is housed, at a makeshift studio desk surrounded by boxes, drawers and objects arranged carefully on shelves.

**A BEALE:** Hi, my name is Alice Beale. I'm the Senior Collection Manager for the Humanities and World Cultures at the South Australian Museum and I'm responsible for looking after all of the cultural collections here. So the three primary collections that I care for are the Australian Aboriginal Material Cultures Collection, which is approximately 30,000 objects from Aboriginal communities around Australia. I also care for the World Cultures Collection, which is approximately 22,000 objects made by humans from around the world. Predominantly it's from Papua New Guinea and the Pacific region, but we also have collections from Africa and Asia as well. And then, finally, I look after the Archaeology Collection, which is – well, we stopped counting at about 2 million – 2 million objects, mostly stone tools and mostly from South Australia. So from our Australian Aboriginal Collection and our World Cultures Collection, we estimate there is about 5 percent on display at any one time. For each of those collections that's about 2 to 3,000 objects. Most of that will be on display in the galleries in town, but some of it is then also on display in other institutions, because we loan objects to other institutions to meet their needs for exhibitions or galleries. So most of the objects in the World Cultures and Aboriginal Collections are made out of organic material, so wood, plant fibres, feathers and the like, and they tend to be a range of things from everyday items, so utensils that you use as part of your life, forks and spoons that have been made in various different cultures, or, in the

Aboriginal Collection, objects such as spear throwers or boomerangs used for hunting. So things that help you live. But then we also have items that are for personal adornment or to adorn your canoe or your house or we will have objects that are artworks, so creative expression, masks and paintings and the like. So they're the type of collections that won't survive very long in the general environment because they are made out of organic materials and organic materials break down. However, in our Archaeology Collections we can have collections that go back tens of thousands of years. For example, we have the Wylie Swamp boomerang, which is the oldest known wooden boomerang in the world, it's about 10,000 years old, and that, even though it's an organic object, survived because it landed in a peat bog and was preserved in an environment that didn't have a lot of oxygen and the bacteria didn't get to it to break it down.

**M LLOYD:** The Wylie Swamp boomerang was found south of Adelaide, near Millicent, on Boandik country. If you are here in Adelaide, you can go and see it on display in the Australian Aboriginal Cultures Gallery at the museum on the ground floor in an alcove behind the grinding stones. It is a delicate looking piece of pale brown wood, deeply cracked and worn away, as you would expect from spending 10,000 years in a peat bog.

**A BEALE:** So most objects, particularly organic objects, are best looked after in the environment to which they have become accustomed to. So we can keep our collections at a standard temperature, between 18 and 22 degrees, and Australian standard humidity, between 40 and 60 percent. So what we're looking for is stable. Sometimes, however, in order for an object to be the object that it was meant to be, you have to break those rules somewhat, and the primary example of that is the Yidaki Project. There was a desire with the Yidaki Project to play the

yidakis, known by the European word of didgeridoo as well. In order to do that we consulted with the Yolngu community, and specifically Djalu Gurruwiwi, who pointed out to us that, in fact, we hadn't actually cared for the yidakis properly.

**M LLOYD:** Yolngu country is in Arnhem Land, up at the very top of Australia, where stringy bark trees grow and are transformed into musical instruments in a continuation of traditional cultural practices.

**A BEALE:** We hadn't kept them in playing condition, because to be kept in playing condition they needed to have a high moisture content in the wood and we'd kept them in these beautiful dry environments that had allowed them to survive, but not be played. So in order to bring them up to playing condition we had to construct a – we called it the humidicrib. We had to construct a crib that we could attach a humidifier, which pumped warm water vapor. So the first thing that occurred was that we brought them back up to – I think we aimed for about 80 percent moisture content in the wood, which we did by slowly raising the humidity in the humidicrib by no more than about 5 percent per day, and this allowed the collection of objects to slowly take on the humidity, the moisture, without having an adverse effect, and the adverse effects could have been anything from warping or cracking or paint loss, to the yidakis. So once we got them up to the appropriate humidity, we took them to a recording studio where the community played songs that were important to their culture and to the yidaki in question, but also played the note of that particular yidaki. From there they actually had to be put back into the crib. We needed to bring them down, to reduce the amount of moisture in them, as slowly as we put it in there. So they went back into the crib and very slowly, by 5 percent a day, we reduced the amount of moisture that was being pumped into the humidicrib so that they

could then be displayed with their sound, and then travel around the world and then Australia.

**M LLOYD:** Yidaki: Didjeridu and the Sound of Australia was held at SAM in 2017 and then went on to tour around Australia and Japan. The exhibition featured not just the sounds of the yidaki, but a continual rolling track of a storm, which culminated every 15 minutes in the thunder breaking, the lights flashing and parts of the floor rumbling. The exhibition had no labels, only the guiding voices and faces of Yolngu people and videos around the space, teaching you through storytelling, the way they wanted to tell the story of the yidaki. This is one example of a recent project which has steered the museum in a new direction, but there are many more. I spoke with Tara Collier and Doctor Jared Thomas from the Humanities team about the historical effects of the collection and the ongoing changes within the museum.

**T COLLIER:** Hello, my name is Tara Collier. I'm the Collections Manager for the Australian Aboriginal Collections here at the South Australian Museum.

**M LLOYD:** Tara mainly works in the off-site collection space with Alice, and always knows where to find the most unique and interesting objects, like, when I asked to see boomerangs and she showed me a set painted with images of dinosaurs.

**T COLLIER:** I'm mainly based with other staff down here at our off-site store. So we take part in looking after the collections here at the museum. My role, specifically, is the Aboriginal Collections. I feel privileged, very privileged, to look after this unique collection.

**J THOMAS:** So my name is Jared Thomas. I'm a Nukunu person from the Southern Flinders Ranges and I'm employed here at the South Australian Museum.

**M LLOYD:** Jared's role is a William and Margaret Geary Curator of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art and Material Culture and he curated the 2019 exhibition, Yurtu Ardlu.

**J THOMAS:** From a young age I wanted to work towards addressing racism. So initially I thought I could do that through playwrighting. I saw a play by an Arrernte playwright called Roger Bennett, and the play was called Funerals and Circuses, which had an incredible impact. So I saw that in 1992 on a school excursion to the Adelaide Festival and, I guess, from a young age, I had an acute awareness of racism and its effects and I saw that play and non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal people addressing racism together for the first time.

**T COLLIER:** Because I've always wanted to work in the SA Museum, when I was 14 I did work experience for a week. At the time, when I was living in Port Augusta, I approached one of the teachers and said, "Look, I'd really like to do work experience, but is it possible I can do it at the SA Museum?" And at that time the teacher, she said to me, "Well, if you can get a couple of other students that would be keen on doing work experience in Adelaide, you've got a deal." I'd never been to the museum, and I've always wanted to go to the museum, and the only time, the holidays, when I was younger, I didn't have that opportunity and I've always wanted to go. My head was filled with Egyptian Collections, Egypt, Howard Carter, Tutankhamun, but I think at that time, when you're young and you're learning about new and amazing things, I initially came because I wanted to look at the Egyptian Collection, as an Aboriginal child, like, 14, the world is your oyster,

had this opportunity, but at the same time it's interesting because it actually changed my course in what interests, I became interested about my own culture, well, hang on a minute. So, yeah.

**J THOMAS:** Yeah, so representations relating to Indigenous people form – they influence public discourse and the types of conversations that happen around the kitchen table about Aboriginal people, and they also impact on policy. So the museum plays a role in representing Aboriginal people and that representation of Aboriginal people has occurred for 150 years and, of course, with many of those representations, Aboriginal people weren't in the position to represent ourselves, and the people that were framing those representations were often influenced by dominant ideologies relating to Aboriginal people. In a lot of instances, like, non-Aboriginal people that were representing us, didn't get it right or maybe they didn't tell the story that we would want to tell, and the holistic story. We had people, non-Indigenous people with status, making – putting forth their ideas about Aboriginal people which often did Aboriginal people a disservice. So working in a museum, it can be challenging when you're confronted with some of those representations, but I feel privileged to have the opportunity to reframe and offer new representations and interpretations of our cultures. At the moment the South Australian Museum is proactive in redressing that situation. So we have a Reconciliation Action Plan, we have a Reconciliation Action Plan Committee, the Director of the museum is leading that work. So there's a big shift. I mean, this type of work wasn't happening 20, 30 years ago.

**T COLLIER:** In the past, the museum took a lot of donations coming through and since policy changes in the museum, there's been a change in, okay, well, the purpose of collections, how will this incoming acquisition

benefit the existing collection? So everything has to be, in a sense, tied or connected, that gives greater depth to the collection, and I think what makes that is that it gives strength to collections and storylines and narratives that are related to a specific community, location and you get all these different layers of meaningful stories.

**J THOMAS:** I think one of the things with the museum is being, kind of, proactive in the dehumanisation of the Aboriginal people and, kind of, relegating us to like a Stone Age past, and probably hasn't been so proactive in showing the situation and the aspiration of contemporary Aboriginal people, and this is something that we're starting to do a lot more. So any of our exhibitions over the last three years have shown the continuity of cultural practice amongst Aboriginal people, but also how we're very contemporary. We're both ancient and modern simultaneously, and that's the case with all humans, really. There's probably things that listeners do in their own homes which are an extension of practices that their ancestors were doing, like, 300 years ago, but they're also online, you know, engaging with new technologies. So we're all, kind of, like, ancient and modern simultaneously, and that's something that we're starting to do through the museum in terms of framing Aboriginal stories, showing how we're contemporary people, but we continue to practise the traditions of our ancestors. So Yurtu Ardlu was an initiative of Ku Arts. Probably before that, Uncle Roy Coulthard, who is Adnyamathanha man, he had an interest in working with Nukunu carvers and Nukunu carvers wanted to work with Uncle Roy. Nukunu are a neighbouring group of Adnyamathanha and also Kurna.

**M LLOYD:** Nukunu country is north of Adelaide and Adnyamathanha is slightly further north than that, in the Flinders Ranges.

**J THOMAS:** So there was discussion about that and Uncle Roy wanted to transfer some of his skills and knowledge to Nukunu. So there was some preliminary work that was just done between my dad and uncles and Roy, and then that got picked up as a Ku Arts' initiative. The first goal was just to get some ongoing workshops occurring. Before I came to the museum, we were lucky to get interest from the museum in having an exhibition of the outcomes of those workshops. As part of the Ku program, for the first time Adnyamathanha and Nukunu carvers were able to access the storage facility, and they were able to use those collections as a reference point to their own carving development. So look at some of the symbols, some of the form of those objects and then be able to apply that knowledge into their own carving practice, and this was the great thing about bringing contemporary Aboriginal people into contact with the collections, is that they could further talk about the objects and add to the provenance information. So some of the provenance information around those subjects was lacking. Sometimes it might mention the artist with a few of the objects. It was agreed that the details relating to objects were incorrect. People said that with some of those objects, they were actually carved by Adnyamathanha person rather than someone in Central Australia, and, you know, looking at those objects they match with the works of the Adnyamathanha person that they believed carved them. So these were walking sticks. The first lot that came in in the 1920s were collected by an anthropologist and the second lot were donated by a missionary in the 1940s. The walking sticks featured symbols that are significant to Adnyamathanha people. So, like, Yulu, the kingfisher, Akurra or Wapma, the snake. Also spiders that feature significantly in Adnyamathanha cosmology, and then we saw patterns between the broader collection of Adnyamathanha objects. So it was just an opportunity to put these objects in context and to revise the information that existed about them, and for Nukunu to create new

objects and place them into the museum 80 years after the last objects to come into the museum were collected. We took the Adnyamathanha objects out to country and it was a really interesting exercise because, of course, we were concerned about the preservation of those objects, but really important that they return to country and Adnyamathanha people had the opportunity to engage with them on country, and some of those objects were carved by Roy Coulthard's father. So for him to be able to hold his father's objects out in country was, you know, really spectacular and it was interesting, like, the view of Adnyamathanha people, while they liked having those objects back home, they were really insistent that they come back into the museum as quickly as possible for preservation.

**M LLOYD:** The South Australian Museum has a strong repatriation policy and works at returning objects to their communities. However, there are some instances where, as with the carvings here, the museum will caretake objects on behalf of communities. The objects which are secret sacred or which can only be viewed by certain people or demographics are stored in more culturally-appropriate ways, with restricted access and in separate areas to the general collection.

**J THOMAS:** Yeah, the museum is in a really great position to be an agent in addressing racism. Because we can reflect on some of the poor practices of our past. Of course, there's human remains within the museum. So, you know, I work for an institution where at least 20 of my ancestors reside, and I have to walk into the institution, you know, four days a week, at least.

**M LLOYD:** Old collection practices can still cause harm today. Previous practices which treated Aboriginal people as a scientific interest reflect harmful attitudes towards Aboriginal people. People today are still affected

by and still hurt by the actions of the past, and that hurt is the main reason the museum is changing its practices. The South Australian Museum has an Ancestral Remains policy that places Aboriginal people at the centre of decisions that must be made about ancestral remains. If you'd like to read more on this, you can read the policy and the Reconciliation Action Plan on the SAM website.

**T COLLIER:** My great-great-grandfather was born at Killalpaninna Mission in northern South Australia in Lake Eyre. I've always identified as [00:22:21] and so it's interesting because since working at this place I've actually seen a photo of my great-grandfather when he was in his 20s and I've always seen a photo of him when he was elderly. And so it's quite emotional when you get to see data or information of your family member because, firstly, you're working in a museum, but at the same time I wouldn't have this information if it wasn't for the museum. So it's kind of between a rock and a hard place, I think, it's emotional. I mean, with the collecting history, it's quite a dark history for most – as a museum's colonial past, colonial histories, imperial histories, but I think this is a way of Aboriginal people trying to gain back that control and that control of the narrative, yeah.

**A BEALE:** At our Collection Facility, which is separate from the museum, we always have an open-door policy for any community who have objects in our collection. A mix of things happen when people see the objects. I've never had a visit where we haven't learnt more about the collection because, ultimately, they know far more about these items than we ever will. Some people find it incredibly confronting and some people, it brings them incredible joy, because they do get to see objects made or used by their ancestors.

**T COLLIER:** Yeah, it is complex, yeah, it is, and it's hard not to – it's at the core of it too, because at the end of the day we're talking about cultural identity, and a lot of people, especially that have been affected by the Stolen Generation, I think it's quite a heavy discussion, because even though, directly, we have family members that have been affected and so it's all connected in that way. That's why I say I feel privileged to work in the collections, because I think that I get to be with objects that are made from – possibly family members and that are no longer here, and I get to look after them. So I feel quite proud.

**J THOMAS:** Yeah, I think it's a real privilege to be in the collections with Aboriginal people, and I've gone in with groups of people that think that they're just having a look – well, they – not just think – they think they're having a look at objects made by ancestors from their language group, but they often don't know how closely connected they are to those objects. So one of my best days was going into the collection with (? Ngaduri [00:25:30]) women and one of them picked up a basket and read the tag and discovered that it was made by their grandmother, and then the two other women had the same realisation almost simultaneously and, yeah, just seeing that kind of, yeah, just that complete joy that they have in discovering, you know, that their grandmother was such a great weaver, in that case, and that they're part of that tradition.

**M O'BRIEN:** [Aboriginal language]. It's Micky again, and today I want to talk to you about the murlapaka, being the dry-bark shield that our people had, not only as a symbol of our people with the design on the front, but also it was also an item that meant protection, but also it was a doing item, an item that could be used for carrying things, also for digging holes. And so why do I mention these things? Well, that shield itself came from a tree and when you cut that shield from that

tree you leave the image of that shield in the tree. That tree becomes a special tree, a sacred tree, but that shield is still connected to that tree and it carries with it the knowledge of the land, because the tree itself was connected to the land. The land is the oldest thing in the world and, therefore, it carries all that knowledge and wisdom and so we're reminded when we carry that shield of its knowledge, its wisdom, what it represents, but also the shadow, the shadow of that shield in the tree and the connection that it has and always has when we see these images in these trees. And so we see many of the shields that come into the museum. And so, therefore, by looking at these shields, look further than just the wood, look at the design, maybe understand where it has come from, the technology to remove that shield, to use the ochres upon it, to carve it, to straighten it and to also hand it down through the families. And so, look, maybe listen and maybe observe a little bit more into what that shield represents on its history, its knowledges and the people, because our people have always shared our knowledges with those who come. And so I say thank you, ngaityalya, for listening.

**M LLOYD:** How does an object end up at the museum? As you walk around the museum and view the objects in the galleries, think about the journey that any of those objects have made. The eco-systems that the lizard came from that we now have more knowledge about, the artifacts that provide a link to long-lasting, ongoing cultures for people living today. What is the best way to care for an object? Do you preserve it for as long as possible or do you let people interact with it? Perhaps new methods of collection can tell us not just about the technological advances in preservation, but about new ideas, new uses for an old collection. Next week, we'll look at how you make sense of the cathedral of science that is the museum, by talking to staff who manage the database and digitization of the collections. Thank you

for listening to the South Australian Museum podcast hosted by me, Meg Lloyd, and recorded on Kurna country. Original theme music by Peter Saunders, Yidaki music by Djalu and Larry Gurruwiwi, audio production by Jake Holmes. This podcast has been made possible by the support of the National Science Week. See their website [www.scienceweek.net.au](http://www.scienceweek.net.au) for amazing science events happening all over Australia. Thank you to all of the SAM staff who trusted me to record their stories. For more information about our museum, please visit our website [www.samuseum.sa.gov.au](http://www.samuseum.sa.gov.au) or get in touch by emailing [programs@samuseum.sa.gov.au](mailto:programs@samuseum.sa.gov.au). Ngaityalya nakutha, thank you and see you later.

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