

# **SOUTH AUSTRALIAN MUSEUM**

## **STATEMENT ON THE SECRET/SACRED COLLECTION**

APPROVED BY THE BOARD OF THE SOUTH AUSTRALIAN MUSEUM  
ON 20<sup>TH</sup> FEBRUARY 1986.

**STATEMENT FROM THE BOARD OF THE SOUTH AUSTRALIAN MUSEUM**

## ON ITS SECRET/SACRED COLLECTION

(Replaces Statement Issued on 15 November 1984)

### 1. Background

Within its ethnographic collection of material from all over the world, the South Australian Museum has a large collection of items pertaining to Australian Aboriginal ceremonial life and to Aboriginal religion. Most of these items were obtained by the Museum before the second World War by purchase from explorers, missionaries, anthropologists and Aboriginal people themselves. Some were donated by Aboriginal people for safe-keeping.

Access to items in this collection is restricted because of the Museum's desire to respect Aboriginal beliefs concerning viewing and usage rights. Within this collection though, is a category of object which the Museum has singled out for special consideration. These are the tjurunga, sacred stones and boards from the Aboriginal societies of Central Australia. These are considered by people in this area to be representations of parts of 'Dreamings' or ancestral beings, and as such are physical, ritual embodiments of the Aboriginal relationship to land and the spiritual world. The Museum recognizes that these objects are significant components of religious life in many contemporary Aboriginal societies in Central Australia.

The Museum has developed special safe storage rooms for objects of this type held in its collection and they are never publicly displayed.

Access to the collection will be restricted to Aboriginal men with

rights to the collection, the Curator responsible and only to others approved by him.

The Museum takes the view that with these objects, unlike other parts of the collection, the question of legal ownership should give way to one of custodianship or trusteeship. The Museum Board has stated its willingness to discuss claims to rights in these objects and, if requested to do so, to transfer custody of them to the appropriate Aboriginal persons in cases where rights under Aboriginal customary law can be substantiated.

## 2. The Current Project

In early 1985 the Museum appointed a Curator to investigate all issues relating to the 'secret/sacred' section of the Anthropology collection. With this project the Museum has first attempted to find out as much as possible about particular objects in the collection and to locate Aboriginal people with potential rights in them. Second, it has initiated elaborate and extensive consultations in Aboriginal communities during which a joint attempt is made to identify specific objects and to establish the interests and rights of the various parties.

Consultations were begun in mid-1985 with Warlpiri and Anmatjirra elders from Yuendumu, Mt. Allan and their surrounding outstations in Central Australia. Rights in some 40 objects have been established and key individuals located and consulted. Formal claims on some objects were made as a result of these meetings. At the end of 1985, the

Museum Board approved the transfer of those objects from the Museum to individuals in this area and this transfer will occur in April 1986.

It is the desire of both the Museum and the Aboriginal people involved that only those with rights in objects under Aboriginal customary law, are able to gain access to them and to make claims. Thus, a stringent procedure for jointly corroborating 'traditional' rights has been developed. This procedure has worked successfully in the meetings in Warlpiri and Anmatjirra communities. With other communities other procedures may be required.

In addition, the Museum is aiding communities in the development of safe store-houses or 'keeping places' for secret/sacred material.

### 3. The Museum Position

#### a) Trusteeship of Secret/Sacred Collection

The Museum intends in general to retain its role as trustee of the secret/sacred collection. As part of this trusteeship, access to the collection will be restricted to Aboriginal men with rights in the collection, to the Curator responsible for the collection and only to others approved by him. The reasons for this position on trusteeship are that

- Aboriginal elders from several communities have requested that The Museum continue to hold objects, which are currently in the collection. In addition to the safe storage this provides, men are able to view and handle their objects in a special private area in the Museum. Visits to

the Museum by Aboriginal men from Central Australia to see secret/sacred objects have been happening for many years. The most recent instance was the visit by a group from the northwest of South Australia in mid-1985.

- There are a large number of objects from many different Aboriginal communities, groups and individuals. The Museum is able to provide secure storage for these objects until the necessary information can be gathered and the right people consulted on the objects.

- There are many objects in the collection about which there is virtually no associated documentation. Experience has shown that Aboriginal people in Central Australia are loath to even discuss these, much less claim them. Information about these may come to light during the course of investigations on other, known objects.

Until claims (if any) are made to objects and until those claims are substantiated, the Museum has an obligation, on behalf of Aboriginal people and to the public in general, to retain custodianship of this vital part of Aboriginal culture.

b) Transfer of Objects

The Museum is willing to investigate claims by Aboriginal people to objects of a secret/sacred nature, which are in its collection. It is making the contents of the collection known to the

appropriate Aboriginal people in Central Australia and it has begun a programme of consultations concerning rights in particular objects with Aborigines. These consultations are to ensure, both for the Museum and for the Aboriginal people involved, that only persons with appropriate rights in objects gain access to them.

A transfer of objects to Warlpiri and Anmatjirra individuals has been approved by the Board and will take place early this year. Warlpiri and Anmatjirra people have expressed great satisfaction with both the transfer of items and with the consultations undertaken thus far by the South Australian Museum.

Approved by the Board of the South Australian Museum on 20<sup>th</sup> February 1986.

LD Russell

DIRECTOR, SOUTH AUSTRALIAN MUSEUM

**STATEMENT FROM THE BOARD OF THE SOUTH AUSTRALIAN MUSEUM**

**ON ITS SECRET/SACRED COLLECTION**

The Museum has a collection of sacred stones and boards from the Aboriginal societies of Central Australia. These objects, often termed tjurunga, are considered by people in this area to be representations of parts of 'Dreamings' or ancestral beings, and as such are seen as physical embodiments of the Aboriginal relationship to land and to the spiritual world.

The Museum recognizes that these objects are significant components of religious life in many contemporary Aboriginal societies in Central Australia. It thus treats them in a different manner from its other collections by housing them in a special, restricted area and by not publicly displaying them. In addition, the Museum Board has indicated a willingness to discuss claims to rights in these objects and to transfer custody of them to the appropriate Aboriginal persons in cases where rights, defined according to Aboriginal customary law, can be substantiated. In general, however, the Museum intends to retain its role as trustees for the collection.

A project to investigate all issues relating to these objects and their custodianship was begun in 1985. A Curator was appointed for that purpose. This project includes gathering all known information on the objects and locating Aboriginal people with potential interests in them.

Consultations in the field have begun with discussions occurring in July last year between the Museum and Warlpiri and Anmatjirra elders.

The purpose of the consultations is first, in cooperation with Aboriginal men, to identify specific objects, and second to determine the interests of various people, if any, in those objects. The Museum has developed a stringent procedure of substantiating traditional rights, to ensure, in line with Aboriginal wishes in Central Australia, that only those persons with rights in particular objects gain access to them. Many objects are difficult to identify because of their age and lack of accompanying information, thus making proper identification of custodians almost impossible.

The first set of consultations has resulted in formal claims to some objects. The Museum Board has approved a transfer of those objects to the Aboriginal people involved and this transfer will occur in April. Consultations with Aborigines in other communities are continuing.

Approved by the Board of the South Australian Museum on 20<sup>th</sup> February 1986.

L.D. Russell

DIRECTOR, SOUTH AUSTRALIAN MUSEUM