

From Field to Museum Studies from Melanesia in Honour of Robin Torrence

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The Dancing Trees: Objects, Facts and Ideas in Museums

ERNA LILJE¹  AND JUDE PHILP² 

¹ Junior Curator Western New Guinea, Museum Volkenkunde, Leiden, Netherlands

² Senior Curator Macleay Collections, Chau Chak Wing Museum, University of Sydney NSW 2006, Australia

ABSTRACT. In this paper we consider the ways that museum objects have multiple and mutable identities through a focus on three objects from the southeast coast of Papua New Guinea. Our approach is to scrutinise the materiality of these three objects to understand the ways that an object changes physically and symbolically from the point of making, to collection, through to museum acquisition and potential exchange, conservation, exhibition and research. Through this approach we show how small ‘fact’ details about objects from museum documentation systems become entangled in ideas and notions far beyond those of the times in which the objects were created and collected. We conclude that to understand museum objects we need to recognise their roles in the socio-cultural worlds of their makers and those of the collector-museum.

A museum’s life revolves around objects, it is contact with them which renders the visit a unique experience for the public. Nevertheless it is not so much the objects’ existence in itself to be crucial, as the knowledge about them and the way in which it is transmitted [sic] (Gnecchi-Ruscone translation [2011: 176] of an observation by Maria Camilla De Palma).

Paradisea raggiana, Choqeri [Sogeri] district ‘fanava’ ... The plumed birds usually congregate in the morning and towards sunset on trees, called by the natives ‘Marrara’ (dancing) trees, sometimes in considerable numbers. The natives in this district catch them with a long string ... when pulled smartly, this catches the bird by the leg. This is how plumes are obtained from the coast natives, who trade with them with the inland tribes (Sharpe, 1882: 443 quoting a personal communication from Andrew Goldie).

Introduction: knowing about objects

This paper is in the realm of historically-oriented museum research that engages with the legacy of scientific knowledge-making practices in the museum context. As De Palma suggests (above) this legacy includes the ways objects are exhibited, as well as the information chosen to be associated with them. We are motivated by three objects obtained between 1875 and 1924 on the southeast coast of what is now Papua New Guinea which were coincidentally on exhibit in three different countries in 2018: a bag in Castello D’Albertis, Genoa, Italy, a feathered headdress in Royal Academy of Arts, London, Britain and another feathered headdress in the Australian Museum, Sydney, Australia. Our ideas are framed around the kinds of information that become attached to museum objects from the time of their

collection to exhibition today. We suggest that in order to make the most of the research value of the tens of thousands of collection items acquired in New Guinea and stored in museums across the world, we should reconnect objects to the cultural aspects not only of the society where they originated past and present, but also of the collecting, and specimen-making society. The need to find balance between knowledge systems can be seen in the work of ornithologist Miriam Supuma (2018) on the ethical and ecological gains that can be made in ornithology by connecting animals with their cultural histories. These ideas are encapsulated in the term ‘dancing trees’ (Sharpe, 1882: 443). *Marrara* relates to what zoologists call ‘lek grounds’, spaces created by particular species for competitive displays for mating. The specific ecological knowledge acquired in the Sogeri region was used by Sharpe as an important note identifying the trees

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Corresponding author: Jude Philp jude.philp@sydney.edu.au

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where the birds gathered to display. Beyond this, however, the name could also relate to ownership and hunting rights of these *marrara* and recall those men and women of the Port Moresby and inland regions who use the skins of *Paradisaea reggiana* in their own dances.

Information that objects bring with them to museum contexts is part of their biography, a concept raised by the authors in Appadurai's seminal *Social Life of Things* (1986). But this suggests a finite group of ideas from the past. We are seeking also to work with the pathways to knowledge that radiate from objects. This distinction allows for change in the object and in ideas through time, such as might come from archaeological perspectives (Torrence, 2003: 109) or future political events (e.g., see Charr, 2020). We first explore how ideas are manifest in the materiality of objects made from hornbill species. We then give an overview of theoretical ideas that have influenced our thinking before moving to discussion of three objects. Each object was collected during a time when it was thought possible to collect 'the facts' about people through the objects that they made (Urry, 1972). These facts may be listed in a register documenting the incoming and outgoing museum items, or on labels explaining the object to a visiting public as well as in narratives, letters and other documents associated with the acquisition. These 'facts' are not always constant but change over time with expanding understanding and different socio-cultural eras. In concluding we argue that a fuller understanding of objects can be given to museum audiences through making obvious the multiple social, cultural and historic perspectives that radiate from an object in the museum context.

Animals in the museum

Hornbills

The Australian Museum cultural collections include two hornbill heads collected by the missionary William Wyatt Gill in the late 1870s (Fig. 1). In storage they both have their 19th century exhibition labels attached: on one is printed 'homicide badge Koitapu tribe, Caution Bay', on the other 'Use: Prowess Emblem Dufaure Island, Torres Straits and Rigo District'. These physical objects are composed of the skin of a *Rhyticeros plicatus* (Forster, 1781: 40) mounted over a piece of wood. In making the object from the hornbill a critical detail has been retained—they have 'eyelashes'. This species of hornbill is one of the few birds that have these 'eyelashes' or, rather, long specialised feathers around their eyes (Graham and Coetzee, 2004). These objects show great skill in their making, involving precision cuts to remove the skin that keeps the line of feathers intact, and re-fixing it while making sure the fringe of eyelash-feathers sits well on the eye socket. Hornbill zoological skins contemporary with these hornbill heads are often mangled or lack this detail of species specificity. As the affixed exhibition label shows the 19th century visitor was not invited to assess the taxidermic prowess of the maker, or contemplate this aspect of species differentiation and its relationship to the object on view. Rather, a cultural description that emphasised features of physical violence within society was given to reveal the 'facts' of the objects (see also Hassett, 2020: 27).

The retention of the labels by curators over successive generations points to the eagerness with which curators seize upon 'facts' associated with a given object and its past. Labels like these rarely form part of the object on exhibition, although in storage they are part of the object history. Because of this we can recognise in the label texts



Figure 1. Skilful indigenous taxidermy of a hornbill head from Central Province, Papua New Guinea. Australian Museum, E347. Photo: R. Torrence.

one way the museum once projected colonial visions of superiority and purposefulness. Science was for many emblematic of this superiority for the European diaspora and home populations—and it is not surprising that observational species knowledge of indigenous peoples was not recognised as science in its time (Olsen and Russell, 2019: 55). This small exploration shows, however, that it is possible to attribute new 'facts' to old objects through, in this case, investigation of their material composition.

Mullet

In the Macleay Museum a fish in a jar of ethanol and water has a small wooden toggle attached to the tail. The fish, a mullet, was instantly recognised by Dairi Arua, a Motuan visitor from Port Moresby to the Macleay in 2008. Dairi Arua was invited to visit Sydney because of his expertise in making material culture items of the Motu. The visit to the store for fishes was part of a gesture to make visual some of the purposes of European collecting endeavours in his country. And so he posed for the camera, making a visual joke pretending to head off with specimen jars of mullet. The mullet is not just a delicacy in his community but his own favourite and something he missed during his time in Sydney. So he laughs that he'll just take them off for supper.

The fish specimen was collected in the late 1870s and catalogued for scientific purposes to a specific species. The toggle, another kind of label, references its collector, Andrew Goldie, a Port Moresby shop keeper (Mullins and Bellamy, 2012). This species is referenced by indigenous people of the southeast coast (including Port Moresby) through the patterns used on bags, skirts, and other objects and in songs, stories and histories (van Heekeren, 2004). Mekeo peoples, from a region about 100 km northwest of Port Moresby, have historical trade connections with Motu. Ecological and behavioural aspects of mullet are referenced in the North Mekeo skirt design *angai kepo afunga* which recalls patterns that the fish create on rocks as they nibble algae (Lilje, 2013: 127). For over one hundred years Mekeo have performed in Port Moresby at dances coordinated and photographed by colonial agents. These references suggest further reasons for Arua's glee when he saw the jar of fish.

It was only in the 20th century, as anthropologists began to see 'whole' societies, that the absence of knowledge in museum collections became fully apparent. The objects on



Figure 2. Not a specimen but an object. *Paradisea raggiana* Probably Western Province, Papua New Guinea. Luigi Pigorini National Museum of Prehistory and Ethnography, Italy. Photo: E. Lilje.

shelves are not pregnant with ‘glee’ or any other emotive or cultural state. The ‘facts’ that accompany them do not allow the museum beholder to look at a mullet-patterned bag and see the symbolic world of the mullet in Motu or other southeast New Guinea people’s lives and how it relates differently to fishing, people and spiritual things. In recognising the difference and diversity of beliefs, and in seeing objects as integrated parts of social wholes, writers like Bronislaw Malinowski changed the focus on ‘ethnographic’ objects from museum collections to lived social spaces (Young, 2004: 427-434). But the ‘facts’ within the museum remained.

In the next section we focus on ideas and ‘facts’ connected to a bag and two headdresses. For any exhibition curatorial choices are made about objects that emphasise a particular ‘fact’ of the object from the viewpoint of either the museum or the peoples from where the object originated (Schildkrout, 1989). We draw attention to this sequentially through the idea of place at Castello d’Albertis, presence at the Royal Academy of Art, and story at the Australian Museum, as we explore how interventions of materials and information change and shape our understanding of these three objects today.

Place: a bag at Castello d’Albertis, Genoa, Italy

On the hillside overlooking the port of Genoa stands the castellated home built by Captain Enrico D’Albertis in celebration of the 400th anniversary of Christopher Columbus’ 1492 expeditions. After retiring in 1874 from service on the Italian royal and merchant navy ships, Enrico funded his own explorations and adventures (Surdich, 1985). He wrote extensively on his travels for popular and scientific readerships, and was as famous for his historical understanding of medieval sailing as for his antiquarian collections. Castello D’Albertis is the house he retired to, where he wrote, entertained and enjoyed the richness of his experiences. The house, now a public museum of world cultures, continues to be a place to converse over the stories of his life and the objects connected to his journeys across the world. It also houses a smaller collection of objects acquired in New Guinea by his cousin Luigi Maria D’Albertis (hereafter simply D’Albertis) who travelled to western New Guinea in 1872 in the company the naturalist Odoardo Beccari. He returned to the island in 1874. From his base on Yule Island, off the southeast coast of New Guinea, c. 100 km northwest of Port Moresby, he spent four years collecting animals and objects across the region.

The majority of his collections was purchased by two wealthy individuals who had trained and mentored him because of their interest and investment in science and

education for the nascent Italian nation: Giacomo Doria at Genoa and Henri Giglioli in Florence. In dividing the collections for sale, animals were predominantly sent to Doria as zoological specimens, while the things made of and by persons were traded to Giglioli as ethnographic items (Fig. 2). D’Albertis also collected human remains as both physical specimens of human difference and as examples of cultural practice. A few things, presumably personal gifts between cousins, remained in Castello D’Albertis when it was given over to the city for use as a museum. Today, displayed in a domestic-museum style sympathetic to its surrounds, these objects are grouped in elegant 19th century glass-topped cases (Gnecchi-Ruscone, 2011).

The animal parts of objects

If one peers into the case (Fig. 3), varieties of the animal parts of objects can be discerned: molluscs’ shells, cassowaries’ feathers and bones, pigs’ tusks and skin. In the right hand corner is an intricately worked bag constructed with a looping technique. It is composed of two-ply string that has been spun by the makers by rolling strands of tree bark-derived fibre across their upper thigh with the flat of the hand. Along with the skin, sweat and hair of the maker thus entwined in the bag’s fabric, an animal’s parts are looped on bamboo threads into the bag’s structure—these are the anuses and tails of pigs. It is in a way a promissory note for the delivery of an animal/s in the future, as bags of this kind were part of the wealth given between parents of children intending to marry. The pigs that were referenced through the anuses of other pigs were consumed long ago by the guests at the ceremonies welcoming the union.

Within the case the bag is simply labelled ‘Nacchi (Nokin); tessuli e maglie; F. Fly, N. Guinea [Nacchi (Nokin), mesh bag, Fly River, New Guinea]’. The story of its use and



Figure 3. Animal parts on display in cabinet in Castello D’Albertis, Genoa. Photo: E. Lilje.

meaning comes not from the Fly River, however, but from Koita traditions much further east. The identification of the pig parts, and the identity of the bag itself, were provided via the commonplace anthropological technique of asking modern descendants for information about objects their ancestors made. In this case it was Max Madaha, a Koita man from Kilakila, near Port Moresby which is several days east of the Fly River by sail. Madaha who was also a hunter, identified the bag from a photograph and supplied the information about marriage (pers. comm. M. Madaha to Philp, 2008). Whether D'Albertis was in error in his Fly River designation or not, in the way that cultural objects can take on new ideas and meanings, it will now also serve as a reference point to a practice of the Koita from whom, perhaps, no bags were ever collected.

In this case the museum label is not the only place to look for 'facts'. Many come from D'Albertis himself through his popular narrative *New Guinea. What I Did and What I Saw* (1881). It follows the model of many other European travellers' tales of this period that presented the author as a determined protagonist, a lone individual who undertook a perilous journey to paradise, and many pages are filled with lyrical descriptions of the sheer beauty and scale of the geographical spaces he had to negotiate physically. In reality these 'individually' endured hardships were generally shared with an international company of people including deckhands and cooks, engineers and shooters from island Southeast Asia, China and Europe as well as local guides. Many of the difficulties they encountered were also geographical features, rivers that went nowhere, mountains that never ended, torrid streams resisting crossing, reefs and sand bars that stopped the progress of boats. But the principal dangers were perceived to be animal—mosquitoes and people, neither of which were well understood.



Figure 4. A feather head ornament exchanged for cloth or iron at Redscar Point, Central Province, Papua New Guinea in September 1849. British Museum, Oc1851,0103.35. Photo: courtesy of ©The Trustees of the British Museum.

We can imagine that for those indigenous peoples who met D'Albertis, and others like him, the desires and needs of these strangers would have seemed relatively familiar because of the similarity of the goods wanted to those of customary trade: bird skins and mammals, safety, food and water. And indigenous people presumably prepared by making sure they had protection from the harm that strangers intentionally and unintentionally bring, such as rape and disease. Explorers often noted the absence of women and the strong perfume of the leaves and flowers that indigenous people wore at these meetings. It is useful to note that botanical specimens were used both as decorative elements of dress and as compounds of magical devices made to protect the wearer or to enhance their potential (Mosko, 2007).

Both Europeans and indigenous people seem to have shared the difficulties of establishing a way to progress these fleeting encounters. Materials, the things that were worn and carried by Europeans and the things that were worn and carried by indigenous people, were a starting point from the outset of British experiences (Fig. 4) (Philp, 2009). When mediation failed, violence frequently followed. For D'Albertis and many collectors warfare, or indigenous desertion in the face of foreign fire-power, was another opportunity for collection (Gnecchi-Ruscione, 2011). There is no suggestion here that D'Albertis shot people in order to obtain their objects, but he did shoot towards people to disperse them, and shot at people when under attack. And he frequently writes of then obtaining objects and human remains in the subsequently deserted villages, writing on one occasion 'Exclaim, if you will, against my barbarity—say that I have sacrilegiously violated the grave! I shall turn a deaf ear; I am too delighted with my prize to heed reproof' (D'Albertis, 1881: 102). These kinds of 'facts' so differently understood by the public of the times, are today employed to give truth to the circumstances of collection.

D'Albertis' 'facts' for bags like this were necessarily simple, given his inability to communicate directly with local villagers. As with the animals he pursued, it was the *distribution* of object types and technologies that was of interest to him. On writing of his second voyage up the Fly in 1876 and a visit to an 'abandoned' village he recounts:

It seems worthy of remark, that in this village I did not see one single netted bag; but I noticed a great quantity of bags, old and new, empty and full, all made of plaited palm-leaves or bark...no less interesting is the fact that there is not a single hammer of silica ... necklaces of dogs' teeth seem to be worn, but they are rare (D'Albertis, 1881: 137).

In displaying the bag in the small wooden cabinet, curator Camilla de Palma allowed the physicality of the ornate house to give context for Italian audiences unfamiliar with Papua New Guinea and indeed with D'Albertis' work there. With its grand rooms designed for conversation and enjoyment of a private collection, the house is a frame of reference for visitors to understand past contexts and present sensibilities. Further references were created by de Palma with the 19th century style cabinets, the maintenance of early original labels affixed to the objects on exhibition, and the staged juxtapositions between displays of D'Albertis' guns and text panels. These included recent quotes from indigenous Papua New Guineans giving their view on D'Albertis' collecting (Gnecchi-Ruscione, 2011). These decisions ensured that the bag assumed ideas and history from the house itself—a place where New Guinea was framed within 19th century Italian nationalism but with recognition of today's sensibilities.

The Castello D'Albertis permanent exhibition curated in 2004 owes much to a new landscape of material culture

theory that has been steadily growing over the past 50 years. This scholarship has ensured collections like that of D'Albertis have been the focus of academic study in a different way from that intended by the original donors and sellers. In anthropological studies the intellectual impact of New Guinea peoples and their philosophies on museum scholarship has been enormous. This influence can be seen in the work of University-based and museum-based scholarship. Chris Gregory's (1982) theoretical commodities' study is particularly pertinent as it was written to understand the complexities of social relations in the multiple economies of colonial Papua New Guinea. Marilyn Strathern's (1988, 1997) gift-centred theoretical models of relationship are studies of the intent and purpose of Melanesians' materially-mediated encounters. Arjun Appadurai (1986) moved the focus onto the object when he brought together a diverse group of scholars to unpack the concept that things can be considered to have a social life as they move through transactional moments. Similarly Nicholas Thomas's (1991) idea of objects entangled in cross-cultural meanings used a focus on specific moments of object transactions to make obvious the realms of value implicit in cross-cultural transactions. These publications stimulated the work of a number of academic curators, leading studies closer to the material facts of the collections.

In a variety of ways curators like Jim Specht and Lissant Bolton (Specht and Bolton, 2005; Thomas *et al.*, 2013), Elizabeth Bonshek (2017) and Joshua Bell (2006), amongst others, have worked outwards from the collections towards the people for whom objects have particular meaning. Their work has brought new social relations and transactional moments to the collections, particularly through funding the contribution of contemporary experts from where the collections originated. This has brought new insights to objects in museum collections and into shaping the collections through acquisitions (Bolton *et al.*, 2017). Anita Herle and others have worked to make the contexts of objects more freely available through their efforts to share the material traces of collectors and their encounters with those makers/former owners through publication of archival papers, photographs, notebooks and journals (Herle and Philp, 2020; Ballard, 2013). Archaeologists using museum collections have lent their material focus too. Sarah Byrne, Rodney Harrison, Robin Torrence and Annie Clarke have worked with the idea of collections as assemblages to trace networks and to find traces of individuals who transacted objects with Europeans (Byrne *et al.*, 2011). Throughout the last fifty years, and long before, practitioners debated the idea of 'art' and what it means when constituted through objects made in non-European art contexts (see, for example, Haddon, 1894; Gell, 1998).

Presence: art and the specimen

Zoologists, practising within a European scientific tradition, have been working since the late 1600s on how to understand and then account for zoological diversity across the world, with a particular focus on the mechanisms for the moment of, or trigger for, the conception of life on earth. In Europe and then in European colonies, museums were firstly places to debate, and later as Government-sponsored establishments of education and research, to explore taxonomic differences between species, based on individual specimens in collections. From the early 20th century research was organised and displayed increasingly in terms of arrangements of specimens to show ecological relationships, and deep time.

The art of specimen making

Natural history specimens in museums can also be thought of as examples of material culture, specifically of the European biological scientific tradition. The wallaby that is the voucher specimen for the one brought back by D'Albertis (and all others alive or dead) is a good example of the fabrication of zoological specimens. The voucher specimen was part of the collections of the New South Wales parliamentarian and squatter, William John Macleay, who retired to Sydney in the 1860s to pursue his interest in natural history and enhance zoological knowledge for public benefit. He assisted and hired a number of scholars to describe and publish zoological specimens from his collections. One of these was Russian naturalist and ethnographer, Nikolai Nikolayevich Miklouho-Maclay who came to Sydney in 1876 to recuperate from an extensive period of fieldwork on the north coast of New Guinea. The two had much in common, a deep curiosity about the world and a desperate interest and investment in the importance of the mission of science. Miklouho-Maclay worked on some of Macleay's natural history collections where, amidst the mammal specimens, he looked for species new to science.

One of these specimens was a wallaby that Macleay had purchased from Andrew Goldie. It was put in a vat of brine and brought back to Sydney, probably during Macleay's 1875 *Chevert* expedition. By the time Miklouho-Maclay arrived in Sydney, Macleay had decided to leave the family collections to the University of Sydney for study, and so he had a number of the specimens that had been stored in spirits taxidermied for exhibition. He had trained his taxidermist Edward Spalding for the task and this specimen shows how he deftly worked the hide (Mather, 1986: 41). This involved removing all the organs and wet matter, scraping meat and



Figure 5. Artist Ann Ferran's portrait of a specimen, NHM.419, makes obvious the emotive characteristics created through European museum taxidermy. Photo: Ann Ferran, 2014. Courtesy of Chau Chak Wing Museum, University of Sydney.

sinew off bone, drying out the pelt and covering it with arsenic soap. Once it was dry, Spalding would have inserted plaster around the skull to achieve the desired contours for the eyes and nose. Forming a shape by twisting together wires to take the place of the vertebrae, he would have inserted this into the body cavity, anchoring it to head, leg and forearm bones. Only then could the whole wallaby be stuffed with a neutral material and stitched up. While the specimen was still relatively moist, final modifications to the ‘attitude’ and shape could be made: plaster holding in glass eyes would be painted black, eyelids and eyelashes carefully arranged, as seen in one of Spalding’s works (Fig. 5), a wallaby specimen from Mudgee in New South Wales, Australia (Blackburn *et al.*, 2015).

Working with the wallaby in this stuffed state, Miklouho-Maclay did what taxonomists continue to do today and carefully described the specimen. Noting and measuring the particularity of specific features in relation to other species (one of his particular interests being the whorls of hair on the back), he determined that it was entirely novel—never described before. He published his conclusion in the journal that Macleay had established and funded, *Proceedings of the Linnean Society of NSW* (Miklouho-Maclay, 1885). And so the taxidermied specimen rests, for evermore, as the reference to this description and, in this case, to the wallaby that he chose to name in honour of his host *Dorcopsulus macleayi*, Macleay’s *Dorcopsis*.

It is with reference to this one fabricated animal that zoologists and others continue to write about *Dorcopsulus macleayi* today. These examples illustrate that specimens can be thought of as examples of material culture, specifically, artefacts of the European biological scientific tradition.

As discussed above, in New Guinea people also created new forms of animals from their skins. Adult male birds of paradise were de-boned, smoked and reset to best capture their appearance during mating when their specialised muscles manipulated their feather mass to extraordinary effect during *lek* displays. Hornbill heads were preserved with particular attention to the redundant eye feathers or ‘eyelashes’ particular to their species, as described above. Fish were also remade, such as the Florence Museum trumpeter fish with its red, yellow and black colouration, that was skinned, stuffed and overpainted with ochre (Fig. 6). Songs and utterances by hunters recorded aspects of biodiversity, habitat and behaviour, movements and relationships between male and female birds mimicked in public performances and gatherings (Supuma, 2018; Sillitoe, 2002). Within the colonial museum, and only slowly changing today, indigenous knowledge was catalogued as small facts—often linking a local language name to a specimen, as with Sharpe’s use at the beginning of this paper. Indigenous knowledge is less likely to be interrogated along with other scientific collection information but becomes ‘cultural’, in a similar way as the animal preparations were—predominantly catalogued into departments dealing with cultural difference. As a material form of knowledge New Guinean-produced birds of paradise skins were collected as scientific specimens until the early 1880s (Swadling, 1996). Over time these were seen to be inferior for scientific study because of the Papuan method of preservation and mounting (Philp, 2021). Such skins can look something like the one in Fig. 2. It could be equally described as a headdress ornament, for in this ‘trade’ form they were inserted into large headdresses made up of a variety of bird feathers and bird skins.



Figure 6. Indigenous taxidermy of a trumpeter fish acquired in the 1870s and now on display in the New Guinea gallery of the Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography, Florence, Italy. Photo: E. Lilje.

Animals as Art

Until D’Albertis’ era these trade skins were highly valued as both ornaments and scientific objects in European tradition. In the 1870s advances in definitions and rules for zoological practice directed museums to acquire skins made in a specific way, as we discuss below (Swadling, 1996; Philp, 2021). Preserved animals, prepared for Papuan purposes, continued to be collected for museums but these were increasingly catalogued into expanding ethnographic collections. They became ethnographic objects, their worth, in the museum and knowledge-making context, lay in their connection to the peoples and places of their origin. European methods of preparation and preservation increasingly became the norm for natural history specimens. It was a style refined over time and eventually led to the use of a partially bony-skin becoming ‘specimens’ and taxidermied ‘mounts’ of specimens being reserved for exhibition to communicate messages to the museum-going public (Philp, 2021).

Across New Guinea men and women use the skins and feathers of birds of paradise to wear on their bodies and in so doing at times create images of triumphant splendor. Their staging, the discussions they raise and costs involved have many parallels to European art traditions. Regardless



Figure 7. The Roro-Lala clan headdress as exhibited for *Sea of Islands* (2019). Museum Volkenkunde, Leiden, The Netherlands, RV_1999_550. Photo: courtesy of Museum Volkenkunde.



Figure 8. Detail of Fig. 7 showing the layering of *koiyu*, lorikeet, and white bird of paradise feathers on the Roro-Lala clan headdress. Photo: courtesy of Museum Volkenkunde.

of whether or not it is appropriate to use the term ‘art’ in relation to them it is certain that they are masterpieces of New Guinean aesthetics, albeit differently conceived, understood and made across the island (Brunt and Thomas, 2018).

Today, on the southeast coast of Papua New Guinea (PNG), the Roro and Mekeo peoples are known for their spectacular fan-shaped headdresses (Figs 7 and 8). Nevertheless very few exist in museum collections. This grand headdress was made and used by people from either Yule Island or the adjacent mainland areas, speakers of Roro and Lala (also known as Nala, Nara, Pokao) languages. It was brought to the Netherlands in 1914 by a father of the

Missionnaires du Sacré-Coeur (a mission established on Yule Island from 1889). The radiating struts were once covered in feathers fastened into place with string binding that remains visible. Weighted with shells near their tips, the struts would have swayed gracefully as the wearer danced. A stately grace, given that the weight and size of the construction demands an upright bearing and poise.

No bird skins are present on this style of headdress, but the individual bird feathers and skin pieces from birds of paradise, recall their flight through forest spaces. Termed *koiyu* in the Roro language, twenty-three rounded forms made from drilled and moulded turtle shell affixed to a carved conus shell backing recall the sea (Brunt and Thomas, 2018: 299). The headdress suffered from some neglect before the mid-twentieth century that resulted in the loss of feathers along the radiating struts. Despite this damage, it is an exceptional headdress measuring an astonishing 2.5 by 2 m.

In the early 1900s anthropologist Charles Seligmann determined from his research that for the people of this area these large feather headdresses were a form of clan ‘badge’ (Seligmann, 1910: 210). Particular designs were reserved for the use of clan members. However neither the clan name, nor exact location, was recorded by van Neck for this headdress. Large feather headdresses were only worn by more prominent people of the clan. Historical photos show that within a community dressed for dancing only a small number wear the large headdresses with others wearing smaller feather headdresses and ornaments. Although primarily associated with prominent men these images (Fig. 9) also show that while it was less common, women could wear large headdresses.



Figure 9. Detail from a photograph of a dance at Waima, Central Province, Papua New Guinea. Photo: Rev. A. M. Fillodean, c. 1890s. Courtesy of Cambridge University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, P.2126.

Collected by Father Henri van Neck before 1913, the headdress was sold to the Rijks Ethnographisch Museum in Leiden Volkenkunde along with 638 other objects. Though detailed in documentation as from Yule Island, it is likely that it received this ‘fact’ because it was the location of the Sacred Heart Missionary headquarters on Yule Island. During his first stint in New Guinea (1902–1913) van Neck was responsible for establishing a church and school at Vanamai, on the mainland c. 15 km from Yule Island. Van Neck had made the collection with the intention of using it for the promotion of the mission’s work in Europe; bringing back artefacts to increase awareness and support of overseas missions, was a popular practice (Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen, RV-1990-550_TXT003607). However circumstances led him to instead sell the collection to the Rijksmuseum Volkenkunde, presumably to raise funds for the chronically underfunded mission (Langmore, 1989: 242). These circumstances speak to van Neck’s commitment to the mission and its people. His return to Belgium in 1913 had been forced by exhaustion, due to his poor living conditions.

From his correspondence with the Volkenkunde Museum we learn that van Neck had motivations in addition to fundraising as he wanted the collection to remain together (van Neck, 1920). He also hoped that when the headdress was displayed it would be together with other accoutrements that might have been worn with a feather headdress. In other words for van Neck the ‘facts’ of the headdress could best be comprehended through the entire assemblage associated with the performer. The distance of time and the consuming nature of his work, however, led to no direct notes on what constituted the ‘whole’. Instead it is this partial, while extravagant, headdress that remains.

Isolated from the objects and people the headdress was once part of, it was a centrepiece for the major exhibition *Oceania* that opened at the Royal Academy of Art, in London in 2018, afterwards at the Musée du quai Branly-Jacques Chirac in Paris, and then as part of *A Sea of Islands: Masterpieces of Oceania* in Leiden. Lead curator for the exhibition Nicholas Thomas has long sought to educate and enliven understanding of Pacific art practice and of the European collections that recorded this in the past. His work has also documented and promoted Oceanic artists whose work responds to and challenges European perception. Staging the exhibition at the Royal Academy in London (an institution of the European Enlightenment’s high art practices) reinforced the message of Art. The exhibition catalogue makes it clear that Oceanic art practice is philosophically different and oftentimes a distributed practice rather than an individual one (Brunt and Thomas, 2018). In this state of isolation, the headdress was seen not towering above head-height but at chest level for most visitors to give a sense of its appearance when worn; it was displayed as a masterpiece of Oceanic art.

Both Erna Lilje in a discussion of the headdress to camera shown on the Royal Society website (Lilje and Royal Academy, 2018) and Michael Mel (2018) noted common attributes of such masterpieces within PNG: these objects are made up of the distributed labours of many people; and they are ephemeral. It is possible that the Roro makers accepted van Neck’s idea to collect this stage of the objects’ lives, and that the collection of them included the agreement of

all participants. If not, at the end of their performance the feathers and *koiyu* would have been returned to their various owners; strings of lorikeet feathers would have been wound back onto sticks and stored for safe-keeping.

The constant state of movement involved in making, and unmaking a headdress is another ‘fact’ of this clan’s work. Even before the time of its making was planned, people worked shells and feathers into singular objects, valuables that would later be brought to the frame. One imagines that discussion would take place over the composition of the headdress before each element was tied in place. The respected and revered person who would carry it upon their head would be still while many hands applied and adjusted other ornaments, fibres, oils, fragrances, ochres and pitch onto the person enclosed within this moment. And then movement again. As Mel recalls in describing Mogeï performances thousands of miles away in the highlands of PNG’s Melpa region:

Bedecked with accoutrements, the decorated body is not and cannot be seen as the self-expression of the person, nor, in performance, as the physical expression of an individual actor. ... plumes came alive as ... both creatures (human and bird) were no longer separate. (Mel, 2018: 75–76).

Exhibitions are rarely able to accomplish transitional moments such as the making and unmaking of a headdress. Snatches of filmed performances are instead used in museum exhibitions to create links between the static and the moving spectacle. Related objects (such as van Neck wanted displayed) often have no place in displays of art as they can mute rather than reinforce the power of the singular statement. The presence that curators created through related publicity as well as lighting and position assisted in ‘making’ this headdress a singular, dramatic and astounding object for the exhibition. There are other reasons to maintain the object in this state. Masterpieces, and particularly rare masterpieces such as this is, have extraordinarily high insurance values. As a physical part of Museum Volkenkunde, a component of the National Museum of World Cultures, it must perform as an exhibition object within prescribed and agreed boundaries—that include conditions that constrain any movement, even a breath of air, that may weaken this historical structure. Within the conservation strategies structured around its long-term continuity as a museum object, it must also remain beyond human touch for the oils of human hands are now understood as a weakening rather than strengthening feature of human intervention.

For this headdress agreement seems to have been reached between Roro people and van Neck to allow this person-less visualisation of their identity to leave their community. In so doing they ensured the headdress would become akin to an historical document resonant with their combined identity and clan affiliation. Thinking about how feathered headdresses were made in the highlands region of Mount Hagen, anthropologist Marilyn Strathern used the idea of portraiture (Strathern, 1997). In this way the headdress on exhibition is a portrait of these unknown men and women. It was *their* presence that was promoted through the exhibition of the headdress. In the final case study, we look at another headdress that continued to work as a dispersable material assemblage within another museum context.



Figure 10. Vaieki junior wearing a headdress at Elevela, National Capital District, Papua New Guinea, 1922. Photo: Frank Hurley. Courtesy of National Library of Australia, nla.obj-158068771.

Stories:

Captain Hurley and the paradise plumes

Frank Hurley is one of Australia's most famous photographers. Fig. 10 is one of his images and shows a young man called Vaieki in Elevela village, near Port Moresby. The image was taken during Hurley's second expedition to New Guinea (1922–1923), when he joined forces with the Australian Museum's ichthyologist Allan McCulloch to collect objects for future exhibitions. Although deeply involved in the project to collect objects, Hurley's principal purpose was to gather footage for his black and white film *Pearls and Savages* (Hurley, 1924). He also made a commercial arrangement with *The Sun* newspaper through which he used his talents as a story-teller to create public interest in the expedition and its results (Specht and Field, 1984).

There is no better image of Frank Hurley and Allan McCulloch's self-styled triumph of their expedition's success than the picture that graced the front page of *The Sun* on their return on 4th February, 1923 (Fig. 11). In the picture a laughing and gesticulating Hurley and museum officer Allan McCulloch stand either side of Hurley's wife Antoinette. Each is wearing a dramatic and large feathered headdress; the subtle differences between the feathered arrangements, give a sense of the variation in this art form.

The collections of hundreds of objects from the expedition that came into the Australian Museum early in 1923 included three headdresses incorporating fifteen plumes of *Paradisea*

raggiana (Australian Museum Archives AMS6 17/1923). By March 1923 Hurley was negotiating with Museum Director Charles Anderson to acquire some Bird of Paradise plumes to add further spectacle to his narratives for the silent black and white film presentations (Specht, 2003). Anderson duly wrote to the Papuan Collector of Customs to clear the restricted plumes for Hurley's use to further ornament 'two New Guinea headdresses which he is retaining for himself.' The Collector of Customs refused, reminding Anderson that legally only scientific institutions could obtain them (Specht, 2003). But he offered a suggestion that the Museum could retain them but loan them to Hurley for the stated purposes 'provided it be clearly understood that the articles will be ultimately returned to the Museum' (Australian Museum Archives AMS A23/4715; C23/15).

The Museum Register reveals the Museum took a different path, through the administrative designation of 'exchange'. By this means Hurley sent the Museum bundles of arrows (of which they already had a plethora) and in return Hurley received 14 Bird of Paradise plumes, 'prepared in the native way', from Elevela, along with the two feathered frames he retained.

On the face of it the values of the things exchanged were not equal; neither in New Guinea nor in Sydney would a bundle of arrows be worth fourteen plumes. However, for the Museum, much of the value lay in the relationship this established with Hurley himself (Torrence *et al.*, 2020). The photographer and filmmaker had achieved considerable fame

through his work on no less than three Antarctic expeditions, as well as receiving the rank of honorary captain as an official photographer during World War I (Dixon, 2011; Specht and Field, 1984). Through his fame and prowess in creating stories around his work, the Museum could attract new audiences. In addition to the value of Hurley's fame, the majority of his New Guinea photographs were sold to the Museum for their use. In the light of this it is easier to understand why the Museum risked government censure and the charge of illegality for Hurley through 'lending' the plumes—in reality, a mixture of feather-strings and bird skins prepared in the New Guinea manner (Swadling, 1996).

Evidently by 1924 the Museum's headdress was missing the Bird of Paradise plumes which in Michael Mel's memories of similar Highlands' headdresses were made to 'live again' in the swaying movements of the decorated dancers (Mel, 2018: 76). The Australian Museum renewed the headdress by doing what people in PNG did: looking to other people's collections (within the Australian Museum stores) to seek out ornaments for this spectacle. It was made anew with 11 valuables originating from various places across PNG (Fig. 12), including trade skins from Asaro in the Eastern Highlands Province, brought in from Goroka by the Southern International Film Company who co-produced *Walk into Paradise* [1956]. This was the version of the headdress shown in the Australian Museum's *Pieces of Paradise* exhibition in 1988. When the time came for the exhibition to be taken down, conservators and curators faced a difficult question. Should the headdress be returned to its original, less-ornamented state? The decision was made to retain this Australian Museum version, but in doing so museum practices had to be followed. The result was a museum spectacle in keeping with PNG aesthetics—for each object a shelf-label linked the viewer to an individual collector, a place and a moment through the notation of the object numbers of each element. The headdress now conformed to a united vision, one where stillness and isolation prevailed, but where multiple relationships were brought together and performed for those who visited the Pacific store. It was this version that was included in the Australian Museum *Rituals of Seduction* exhibition of 2018 that explored PNG Highlanders' knowledge of species ecology, taxonomy and diversity (Australian Museum, 2018).



Figure 11. Allan McCulloch with Antoinette and Frank Hurley on the front page of *The Sun*, 4th February 1923. *The Sun* and Hurley probably staged this photograph to signal what he saw as his triumphant return to Sydney from a successful collecting expedition. This ignored the Australian Administration's impounding most of the collections over concern about the questionable methods Hurley and McCulloch had used to acquire them (Specht, 2003).

In an act that cemented the Australian Museum's creative control over, and making of this object, the headdress was chosen as one of the 100 designated 'treasures' amidst the 300 or so objects and animals exhibited in the Westpac Long Gallery opened in 2017. For this new exhibition Hurley's fame is strongly associated with the headdress, with curator Peter Emmett going as far as saying 'Hurley's photograph (Fig. 10) is as much a treasure as the headdress' (Power, 2017). Strangely, the identity of the headdress changed several times in the flurry of the exhibition launch. Emmett reported that Motuan Vaieki was not only wearing the headdress in Elevala, he was the maker. The Museum's Annual Report (2016-2017) titled it 'Roro headdress. Port Moresby', labelling that was echoed in the Long Gallery exhibition. Despite these interventions it was still recognisable to people of Port Moresby. On presenting this form of the headdress and its history to a Facebook audience of Motu people in 2020, Lilje found only appreciation and satisfaction in the form that it had become. One person reporting that *ibara* like this were no longer made in Port Moresby.

Conclusions

This paper has focused on the multiple and mutable identities of museum items. In doing so we believe we have made explicit the kinds of minimal information of many museum objects and the great archival recognisance that needs to be undertaken to restore even the base-line collecting information, such as a place, a date, a person and a social or natural relationship.

From the point of collection, through to museum acquisition and potential exchange, conservation, exhibition and research, the nature of museum objects is that of changelings. Financial systems and conservation strategies conspire to constrain their movements, small 'fact' details are scrutinised for veracity and become entangled in ideas and notions far beyond those of the times in which the objects were created and collected. These changes materialise the multiple social relations that caused the creation of the object, along with those relations that account for it within one museum or another. Each component, original or otherwise, leads to the multiple historical moments and places associated with the object, whether this is a feathered eyelash or museum label.



Figure 12. Headdress frame (E27490) with additional elements of Chimbu feather sticks (E58233, E58234); shell ornaments from Central Province (E3091, E3092) and New Britain (E47514, E52269), and plumes from Eastern (E58214, E58224), Western (E54751, E54752) and Southern (E49979) Highlands Provinces. Photo: R. Torrence.

The indigenous peoples of Papua New Guinea and indigenous peoples of former British and European colonies are increasingly working with and researching museum collections. Their perspectives and interventions into museum ‘facts’ and histories are balancing the coloniser view that the 19th century museums have brought with them into modern times through their philosophy, organisation and systems. Approached from different perspectives through time, these objects become ever richer objects for study and enlightenment.

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