

PRISM

Volume 2. 2026



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DR MICHELLE STEVENSON

Foreword

Welcome to Volume 2 of *PRISM*, where academics, curators, collection managers and creative practitioners from the Victorian museums sector invite you to explore some of the multiple ways of knowing in museum practice today. Our authors explore the entanglements between objects, knowledges, experiences, communities, visitors and places, and the many ways in which they find homes, both permanent and temporary, in museums.

Nick Crotty reveals how an unexpected discovery of a mysterious card marked 'Silver death' inside a collection object led him on a journey of detailed archival research and materials testing. Combining these threads allowed him to suggest how the card had found its way into the museum, understand how to safely manage its potential hazards and ultimately decide that it was something worth preserving as part of the State Collection in its own right.

Tongan storyteller Veisia Tonga provides an insight into 'tapu' and the cultural knowledge and protocols that form a part of it, weaving together her own experiences with her aunt's experiences of a repatriation of royal remains, held in Hawai'i, back to Tonga. In doing so she illuminates the challenges faced by many First Peoples working in museums as they actively hold multiple knowledges and practices.

Dr Rory Hyde reflects on a design studio project that actively encouraged students to embrace different ways of knowing, using the framework of the 'Counter-museum' to deliberately rethink what a museum can be. Counter-museums can hold multiple truths, in places of active participation and with things that are in a constant process of becoming.

Dr Daniel Haumschild and Dr Simon Holloway take yet another approach to understanding museums, tracing the life cycle of a single object — a deportation notice printed in the Łódź ghetto in August 1944 — and examining its encounters across time and place, exploring how its meaning changes with each.

Meanwhile Kate Phillips explores how exhibitions can serve as forums to bring together multiple knowledge systems, and how this approach was central to developing Museums Victoria's *Our Wonderous Planet* exhibition. The framework of shared values across First Peoples and natural science knowledge systems, combined with a focus on visitor perspectives, has resulted in an exhibition that strongly connects with visitors.

Tim Stranks traces German naturalist William Blandowski's fourth and final expedition for Victoria's Public Museum, which took place along the lower Murray River from 1856–1857, drawing on 20 years of deep research in archival and museum collections from across the globe. Stranks's own journey during the course of his research saw him re-examine the material through the lens of the expedition as a partnership between Blandowski and First Peoples communities. What emerges is an account of the value in reconnecting separated collections, setting the foundations for reconnecting these collections with community and Country.

The final paper in *PRISM*'s second volume, by Millu Wudungi Brendan Kennedy, Aunty Glenda Nicholls, Rebecca Carland and Dr Anja Schwarz, explores how provenance research undertaken in partnership with First Peoples communities can reframe natural history collections, revealing the cultural knowledge and authority within them. In doing so it repositions these collections as living archives that can support cultural continuity for First Peoples source communities.

This volume of *PRISM* explores some of the diverse ways in which museum practitioners, communities and academics are working with multiple knowledge systems and approaches to better understand, care for — and in some cases, to cede authority for — the objects, knowledge and experiences in our custodianship. I hope that *PRISM* encourages you to consider, and then reconsider and reframe, the entangled connections that are an inherent part of the work of museums.



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CONTRIBUTORS

Dr Michelle Stevenson Dr Michelle Stevenson is head of the history and technology department at the Museums Victoria Research Institute, leading a dedicated team of curators, collection managers and project specialists. Michelle is committed to exploring history and heritage through engaging and accessible storytelling, meaningful community engagement and preservation of objects and places. Her PhD examined the history and heritage of skiing in Australia, and she is the co-chair of the Australian World Heritage Advisory Committee.

Nicholas Crotty is the Scienceworks collection manager at Museums Victoria. He has been working with the museum's history and technology collections since 2006, and prior to this was involved in the relocation of museum collections from the old Swanston Street building to the current Melbourne Museum site in Carlton Gardens. Nick is Museums Victoria's numismatics and philately expert and manages these collections, along with the museum's science and technology collections.

Dr Rory Hyde is associate professor in Architecture, Curatorial Design and Practice at the University of Melbourne, and a member of the Museums Victoria Research Institute committee. From 2013 to 2021 he was the curator of Contemporary Architecture at the Victoria and Albert Museum, and design advocate for the mayor of London. ORCID: 0000-0001-9023-3243

Kate Phillips is a highly experienced museum communicator specialising in science and nature projects that explore our dynamic, interconnected planet. She collaborates with creative teams, bridging specialised content and public audiences. She has curated over 20 exhibitions, including Our Wondrous Planet, Gandel Gondwana Garden and the Museums Victoria Research Institute Gallery, and she facilitates Climate Cafés for young people.

Veisia Tonga is a Tongan storyteller, artist, writer and researcher based in Naarm/Melbourne. Working across installation, weaving, and text, her practice draws on archival research, oral histories and Tongan knowledge systems. Her work explores pre-contact life, diaspora and cultural continuity, using plant materials as carriers of memory and meaning. Bridging visual and written forms, Veisia creates works that honour lineage while reimagining Tongan cultural expression across time, place and community.

Dr Daniel Haumschild is head of exhibitions and storytelling at the Melbourne Holocaust Museum, and is a professor of Genocide Studies at Yeshiva University in New York.

Dr Simon Holloway is manager of community and corporate programs at the Melbourne Holocaust Museum, and is a sessional lecturer at Melbourne University.

Tim Stranks is the research program manager in the Museums Victoria Research Institute. He has worked in various research and collections roles at Museums Victoria for more than 35 years. His current research interests focus on William Blandowski's time in Australia (1849–1859). Tim's research takes an interdisciplinary approach to examining Blandowski's expedition collections and associated archives, with a particular emphasis on the relationships between European and First Peoples partners and the ways they cooperated to share scientific and cultural knowledge.

Millu Wudungi Brendan Kennedy is a renowned artist, language expert and political actor from Robinvale, Victoria. His totem is the Pathangal (pelican) and his name, Millu Wudungi (Murray River man), reflects his long-standing commitment to the Millu and his ongoing fight for land and water justice for the Traditional Owners of the Murray-Darling Basin. As chair of the Murray Lower Darling Rivers Indigenous Nations (MLDRIN), he plays a vital role in advancing First Peoples' water rights. His cultural practice encompasses language revitalisation and visual storytelling through art, sustaining ancestral knowledge and expressing enduring connections to Country.

Aunty Glenda Nicholls is a master weaver who grew up in the Swan Hill area. Her cultural name is Jule Yarra Minj (little river girl) and her maternal Ngarrindjeri totem is the Writcharuki (Willy-willy Wagtail). She creates elaborate sculptural works connecting the present with her ancestral past. In her practice, she combines cultural weaving techniques acquired from her ancestors, mother and grandmother with her knowledge of the waterways, plants and grasses on her Country.

Rebecca (Bec) Carland is the senior curator of history of collections within the Research Institute at Museums Victoria. She was the Australian institutional lead on the provenance research project Berlin's Australian Archive. Her curatorial practice centres on how collections have evolved across all disciplines. Often this work focuses on addressing colonial legacies and their impacts within collections. She also curates Museums Victoria's scientific art collection and is field historian for the sciences department at the museum.

Dr Anja Schwarz is professor of cultural studies at the University of Potsdam, Germany. She co-directed the provenance research project Berlin's Australian Archive. Her main research projects in recent years have focused on the colonial entanglements of German natural history and on the figure of Tupaia, a Polynesian master navigator who joined the crew of Captain James Cook on his first voyage to the South Seas.

DR RORY HYDE

Towards a counter-museum

The design studio

In the second half of 2025, I ran a design studio as part of the Master of Architecture at the University of Melbourne, with the aim of reimagining what a museum can be. The studio was titled 'Counter-museum', to encourage the students to challenge the traditional model of the museum, and invite them to turn it inside out, by conceiving new relationships with collections, with publics, with conservation, with expertise and even with larger overarching themes of truth and democracy.

The title, 'Counter-museum' is adopted from the French-Réunionese political theorist and curator Françoise Vergès,¹ who proposes a new kind of institution founded on principles diametrically opposed to those of the Western 'universal' model. Her definition is deliberately ambiguous, refusing to be categorised or reduced to a checklist. Instead, Vergès describes it poetically, as '*an emancipatory utopia that would awaken the senses, letting imaginations and dreams unfold.*'²

The challenge set to the 12 participating students was to translate this contemporary curatorial thinking into an architectural proposition. The students were predominantly international, each with their own cultural background and experiences of museums and of architecture. They were directed towards Vergès's writing, as well as a stack of books from other key thinkers and makers in this space, including Alice Procter, András Szántó, Brook Garru Andrew and Jessica Neath, Zarina Muhammad and Gabrielle de la Puente, Dan Hicks and Mati Diop.³ They were shown through the back-of-house collection stores at Melbourne Museum, where they encountered the wonders and realities of a major public museum, and through the Potter Museum of Art exhibition *65,000 Years: A short history of Australian art*, where they saw the power of curatorial decisions around selection, display, interpretation and conservation.

¹ Vergès, F. (2023). *A programme of absolute disorder: Decolonizing the museum* (M. Thackway, Trans.). Pluto Press, p. 17.

² Vergès, F. (2023), p. 24.

³ Procter, A. (2020). *The whole picture*. Cassell; Szántó, A. (2020). *The future of the museum*. Hatje Cantz; Garru Andrew, B., & Neath, J. (Eds.). (2024). *Marramara: Indigenous artists making history visible*. NewSouth; Muhammad, Z., & de la Puente, G. (2024). *Poor artists*. Particular Books; Hicks, D. (2020). *The brutish museums*. Pluto Press; Diop, M. (Director). (2025). *Dahomey* [Film]. Les Films du Bal & Fanta Sy.

A challenge for a studio such as this was to not let the theory overwhelm the freedom required to create, as it can be hard to know where to start. One way to address this is to prescribe aspects of the project brief in advance. I specified the site, the Biosciences 4 building on the Parkville campus — an unloved 1980s brick and concrete teaching building, ripe for reinvention. I also directed them towards the university's collections as the content for their museums. Each student was given an example object from a different collection — medical, geological, classical, agricultural, rare books and more — to focus their attention on a specific object type and mode of display.

We had many great discussions in class about how to challenge the authority of institutions, how to make them more relevant to the public, how to overcome gatekeepers, how to reduce barriers to entry, how to invite communities inside, how to recognise other forms of (non-Western) knowledge and, connecting it all, how to spatialise such abstract considerations. Holding these ideas and parameters in their minds, I set the students the main task titled 'The museum as ...'. They were to come up with a concept in a single word — to complete the sentence and to distil their research into one generative idea. This refers to Charles Saumarez Smith's broad summation of the evolution of the museum over the past three centuries, from the museum as palace, to the museum as classroom, to the present condition of the museum as playground.⁴ The students were asked simply, 'What comes next?'

Together these projects form a catalogue of strategies to challenge the orthodoxy of museum architecture and institutions.

Student projects

The Museum as Liberty, by James Winata, dissolves the physical boundaries of the building, allowing the collections to extend into the landscape around. Winata is critical of the elitism of arts institutions, who make grand claims for their publicness while catering to a narrow, educated, wealthy audience. When closed, the collection is stored on racks in a climate-controlled spine that runs down the centre of the building. When open, these racks can slide out, forming new spaces between them, allowing different activities and events to take place. This, Winata argues, 'liberates' the works from their institutional framing, and allows visitors and artists to generate new combinations and associations of their own.⁵

The Museum of Zero, by Jingxuan Yan, is comprised of the activities ordinarily prohibited in the museum. Visitors can yell, sleep on the floor, climb the walls, touch the objects, eat a meal, dance and make a mess. It challenges the role of the museum as a space that dictates forms of behaviour and etiquette, where food, children and loud voices are implicitly unwelcome. '*This thesis rejects the museum's role as a gatekeeper of culture*', writes Yan, and instead '*imagines it as a participatory commons where cultural value emerges from use, misinterpretation, and collective authorship*'.

⁴ Saumarez Smith, C. (2021). *The art museum in modern times*. Thames & Hudson.

⁵ All direct quotes here are from the students' submission booklets, 2025.



Figure 1: *The Museum as Liberty*, by James Winata. Copyright James Winata.

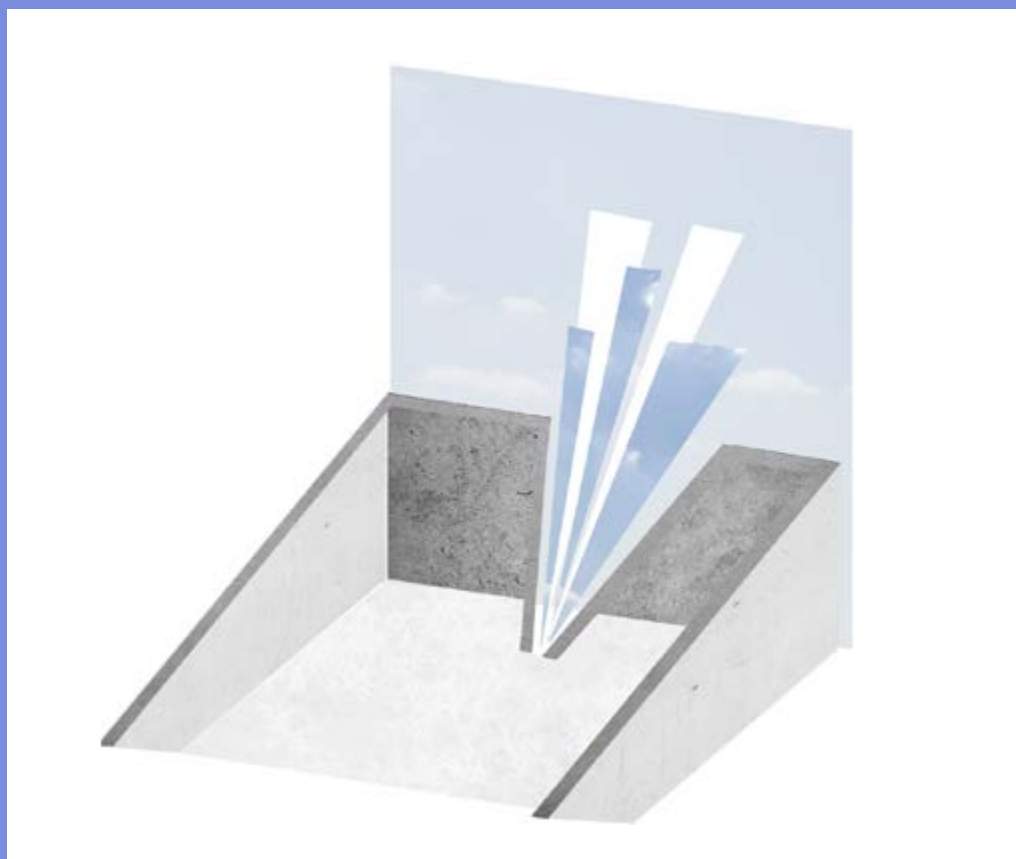


Figure 2: *The Museum of Zero*, by Jingxuan Yan. Copyright Jingxuan Yan.



Figure 3: *The Museum as Midden*, by Nan Wang. Copyright Nan Wang.

The Museum as Midden, by Nan Wang, excavates the earth beneath the existing foundations to reconnect the museum with a deeper concept of time and culture. This concept originated with the shell specimens in the FA Singleton Earth Sciences Collection, which have been used to understand the significance of middens as sites of First Peoples' gathering, celebration and culture over thousands of years. Using the shell and the midden as a metaphor, this project is conceived as a layered strata, illustrating deep time and First Peoples' ongoing connection to Country.

The Museum of Yes and No, by Henry Jorgensen, asks, 'How can a museum be trusted if only a singular "truth" is presented?' It responds to instances where museums were entangled with politics, such as the Trump White House targeting the Smithsonian Institution over apparent 'anti-American ideology', and Shell's sponsorship of the climate gallery in London's Science Museum. But rather than seeking to establish a definitive position, the museum is planned in two halves: one of fiction, fabrication, deception and concealment, and the other of neutrality, fact, authenticity and transparency. In the centre is the 'grey' zone, where these two sides meet. This space is absent of artwork and is instead centred on a circular space of discussion and debate.



Figure 4: *The Museum of Yes and No*, by Henry Jorgensen. Copyright Henry Jorgensen.

The Museum as Blur, by Evelyn Gunawan, collides the typical museum program — galleries, cafe, shop — with a skate park and co-working space, thereby blurring the boundary between art and the everyday. At the centre of the museum, a skateboard half-pipe extends up to the level of the gallery, encouraging visitors to compare the balletic energy of the skaters with the artworks on display. And in turn, by inviting inside those who have been increasingly marginalised by the city, the institution takes on characteristics of the skaters' subculture, guided by respect and mutual support. *'Here, art and daily life collide without hierarchy',* writes Gunawan, *'and the museum shifts from a place of separation to a place of integration.'*

The Museum as Catalyst, by Forrest Lai, is defined by a giant digital billboard that can be programmed by the public. It takes a different site to the other projects in the studio, facing the Victorian Parliament, where it is visible through the window of the parliament's canteen. Lai is from Hong Kong, where he has been active in the pro-democracy protests. This experience led him to explore the role a museum could play in advocating for rights, acting as a *'catalyst for democratic encounter'*. Behind this billboard is a series of public spaces and galleries, displaying a collection of artworks that promote debate, dialogue and organisation. This is an institution that offers the tools for protest.

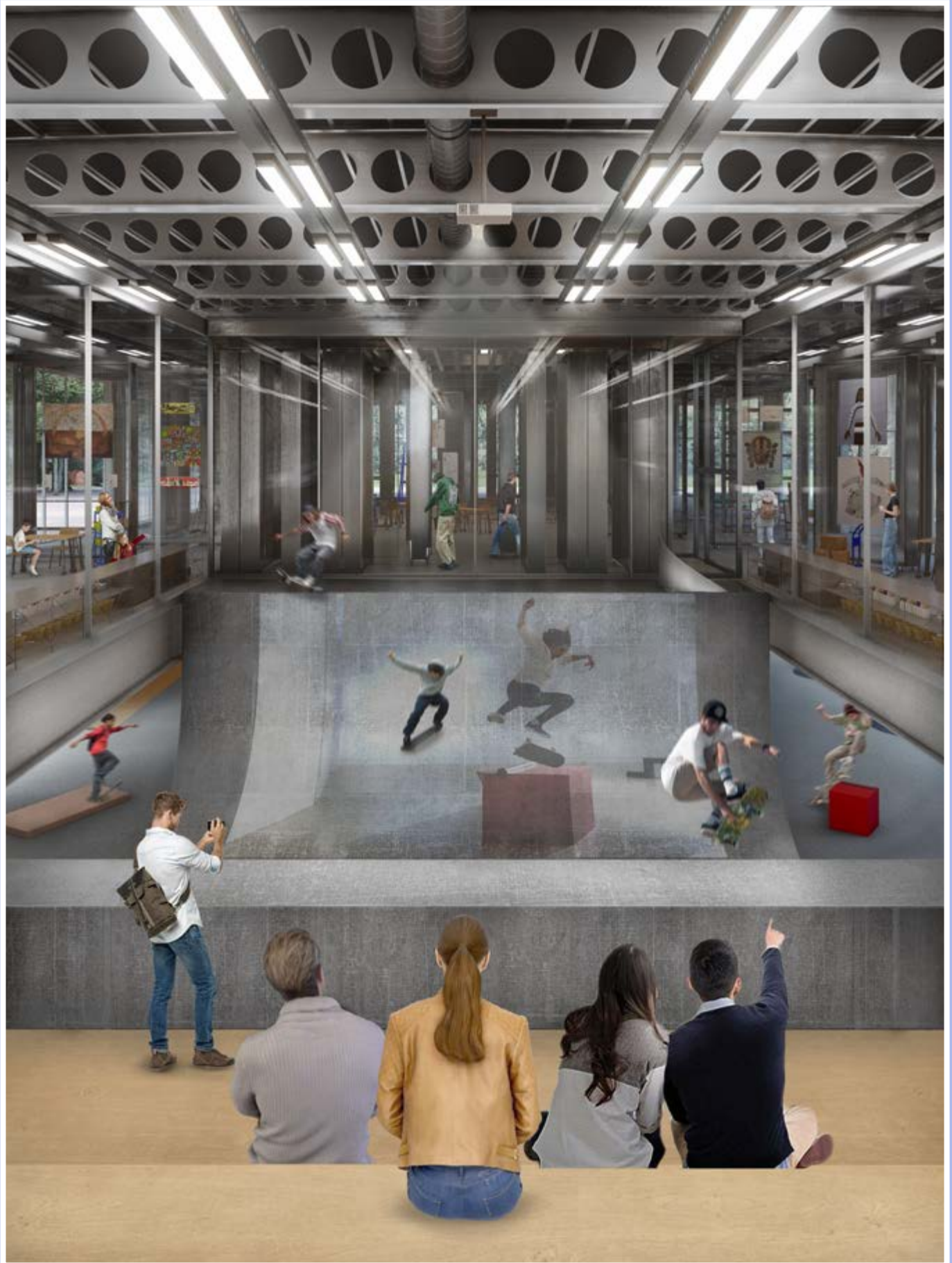


Figure 5: *The Museum as Blur*, by Evelyn Gunawan. Copyright Evelyn Gunawan.

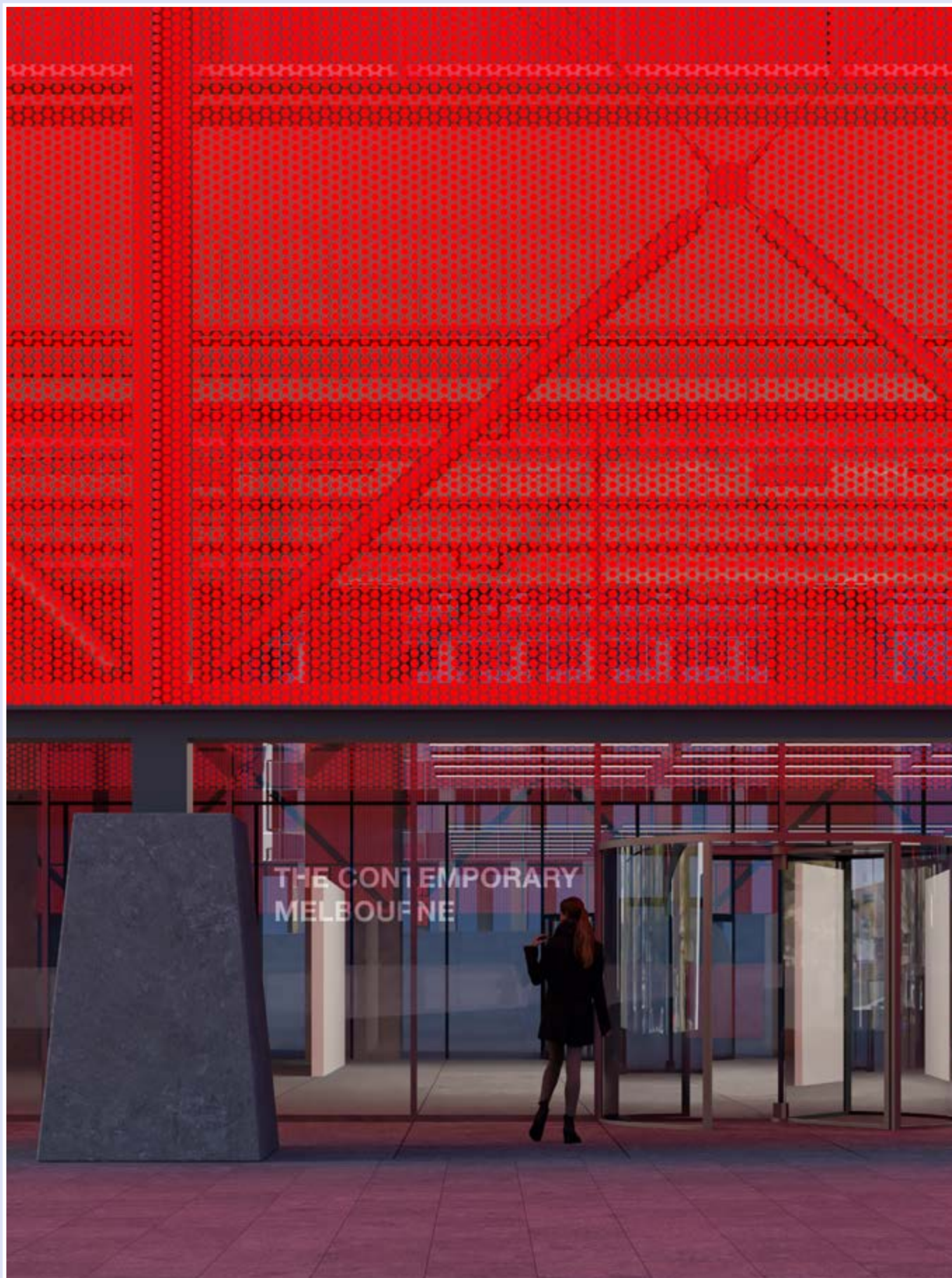


Figure 6: *The Museum as Catalyst*, by Forrest Lai. Copyright Forrest Lai.

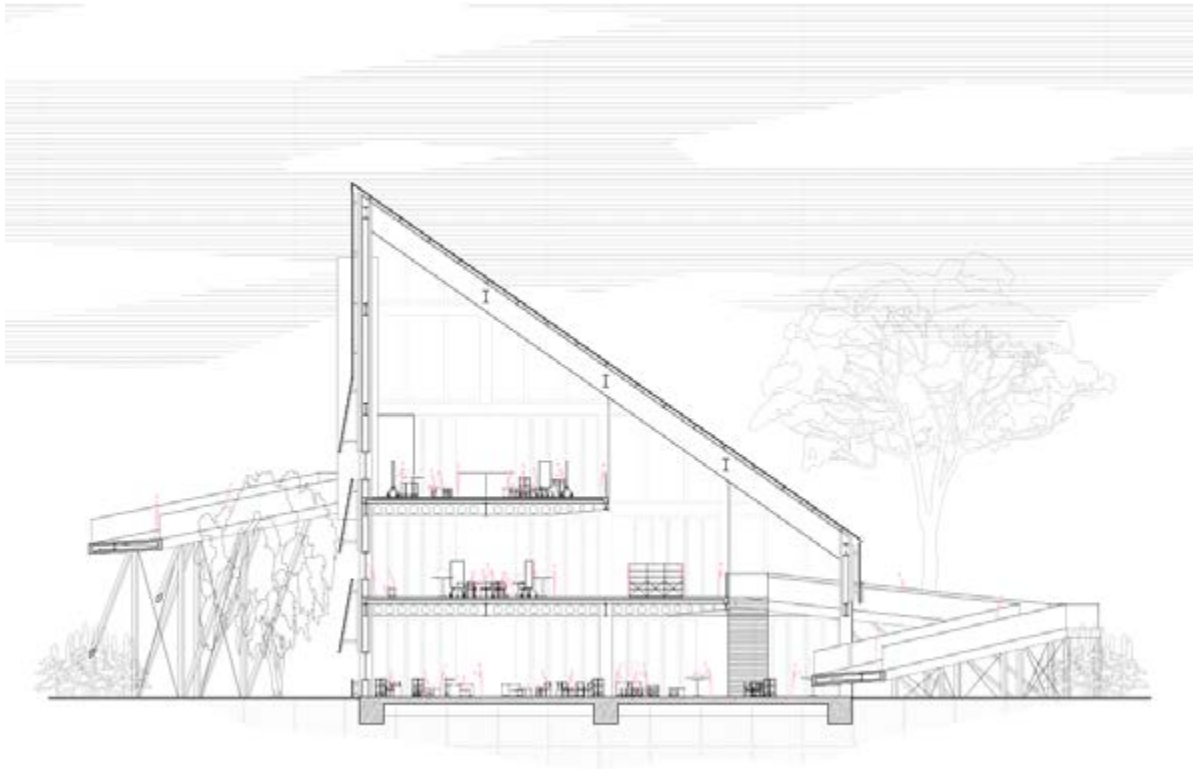


Figure 7: *The Museum of Becoming*, by Siuyan Liu. Copyright Siuyan Liu.

The Museum of Becoming, by Siuyan Liu, starts by noting the vast stores of museum objects hidden from public view. Many of these objects remain uncatalogued, unstudied and unknown, thereby revealing the claims made by institutions — that they are providing care and interpretation — as fatuous.

In response, Liu proposes a museum where the transformation of these objects from unknown to known is dramatised by the architecture. The ground floor is where unknown objects are received, displayed without hierarchy. Visitors can choose from these objects, taking them up to the first level for further study. Once these objects are 'known', they move to a temporary display gallery on the top floor. And the cycle repeats. By inviting visitors into this process to handle, analyse, document and interpret these objects, Liu also critiques the museum's claim to unique expertise, transforming the museum into a *'living system of learning'*.

Reflection

It was thrilling to see the ease with which these students swept away long-held assumptions of what a museum should be. They were undaunted by the status quo, and simply asked, 'Why not?' Why not have a skate park in a museum? Why not let visitors catalogue the objects? Why not open the museum up into the park? Why not let visitors sleep, eat and yell?

I felt that by virtue of being architecture students rather than museum professionals, their thinking was liberated, allowing them to sidestep the tightly-held challenges and obligations of a working museum. They could casually dispense with institutional requirements for collection management, conservation, ticketing, sustainability, 'professionalism' and much else, with apparent ease.

This 'ease' could be a sign that museum architecture today isn't working hard enough. There is a gap between the advanced curatorial thinking taking place inside these museums and their architectural expressions. While museums lead the way in developing protocols for First Peoples engagement, restitution, cultural safety, audience participation, new media and innovative research, the architecture remains stuck in an 'expressive' mode, seeking to project ideas of spectacle and grandeur, in an apparent attempt to attract tourist dollars.

I believe the success of these student projects is in their bridging of this gap. Together, they give architectural form to radical curatorial thinking, reminding us — publics and museum workers alike — of the larger purpose of these institutions, not merely as places of entertainment, but as places where we collectively make sense of who we are.

This bridge, from 'spectacle' to 'criticality', is not a simple one, and there are many people who would prefer things to stay the way they are. From Woodside's greenwashing sponsorship of the Western Australian Museum⁶ to the White House's attacks on the National Museum of African American History and Culture under the Orwellian title of 'Restoring Truth and Sanity to American History',⁷ museums are on the front lines of the new culture wars. It seems that any efforts to democratise the institution, to present uncomfortable truths, to challenge the power of wealthy donors, to enable freedom and imagination, are inevitably quashed, as the conservative impulses for connoisseurship, hollow spectacle and nationalism are quickly reasserted.

To criticise the museum is to love the museum. To ask questions of it, to expect more from it, is not an attempt to diminish it, but a desire to reimagine it. This reimagination is of great importance, as unless these institutions are founded on truth, openness, inclusion and an honest reckoning with the past, their emancipatory potential will remain unrealised.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Rebecca Carland and Charlotte Day for their generous feedback on the student work in progress, and to Charlotte Day and Nurin Veis for hosting tours of their respective institutions.

⁶ Cox, L. (2025, August 13). WA Museum partnership with Woodside criticised as record-breaking marine heatwave decimates coral reefs. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2025/aug/13/wa-museum-partnership-with-woodside-criticised-as-record-breaking-marine-heatwave-decimates-coral-reefs-ntwfb>

⁷ White House. (2025, March 13). Executive order: Restoring truth and sanity to American history. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/03/restoring-truth-and-sanity-to-american-history/>, accessed March 2026.

VEISINIA TONGA

A story of repatriation

The English word 'taboo' comes from the Tongan word 'tapu'. It is believed that Captain James Cook adopted it after his visits to Tonga in the 1770s. The true meaning of the word, unfortunately, is lost in the translation.

In English, it has come to mean something forbidden. However, in Tongan, it means more than just 'forbidden'. It refers to someone, something or some place that is sacred or revered. It is something to be treated with veneration and respect, with prescribed cultural protocols for how we interact with it. These are taught to us by our elders.

Our funeral rites have various tapu that we observe. Even though modern Tongan funeral rites are a mix of ancient traditions and Christian funerary protocols, the core of our traditional funeral rites are still observed and practised. The roles that we play in the funeral are predetermined by how we are related to the deceased. It is a democratising tradition, and it is not unusual to see the neurosurgeon cousin standing by the fire cooking and cleaning while the janitor cousin sits as a guest of honour. We know what our expected role is because it is predetermined by where we stand on the family tree of the deceased.

The body of the deceased is rendered tapu, and there are strict protocols for how we interact with it.

The 'Ulu motu'a (eldest male from the deceased's paternal line) of the clan acts as the funeral director. He ensures that everything goes to plan and is responsible for notifying the wider kainga (extended family), receiving tributes and feeding everyone attending the funeral. He is the talking chief for the clan during the ceremonial parts of the funeral. He is helped by the liongi — those in the family who are lower-ranked to the deceased. They provide and cook the food, clean and do all the menial tasks. They oversee what happens outside. The maternal clan are responsible for what happens inside. They dress and look after the deceased and are responsible for

the koloa (cultural tributes) that are presented by the various clans. These tributes are reciprocated by a return of koloa. The funeral often lasts for several days and is followed by a longer period of mourning, during which a number of tapu are observed.

Funerals for Tongan royalty add many extra layers of tapu and ritual. From the chiefly Ha'a Tufunga clan, royal undertakers are selected. They become the Nima Tapu, the Sacred Hands, who are the only ones allowed to touch the sacred body of the deceased king. This responsibility has been carried by this clan for generations. They prepare the royal body for burial, wrapping it in oil and tapa to encase the king's mana and protect the living.



Figure 1: Royal Tombs at Mala'e Kula, Nuku'alofa, Tonga. The men dressed in black are the Nima Tapu, the hereditary custodians responsible for the care and handling of the Tongan monarch in death. Mala'e Kula is the royal burial ground of the kings and queens of Tonga. Pacific Docs; photographer: Kalo Foleti; copyright Kalo Foleti.

Once they fulfil their duties, their hands become tapu because of contact with the king. For a prescribed period, they are forbidden to use their hands and are fed and cared for by others until the tapu is lifted. In the past, the role carried an even heavier burden. Because their hands had come into contact with the divine ruler, the Nima Tapu could not return to ordinary life. Some were killed and buried alongside the kings they prepared, while others had their hands chopped off.

We observe the same tapu towards the remains of our ancestors as we do towards our living royals.

As a young person in Tonga, I knew that in the heart of Nuku'alofa, the modern royal tombs stood in a park called Mala'e Kula, which translates to the Red Cemetery. I remember that when you walked past, talking loudly and making noise was kept to a minimum. It was also tapu to eat or laugh near the park, and both young and old observed this practice.

No-one ventures into the park because it is only open when a new royal is interred, yet the tapu is still observed by everyone walking past. Conversations end and a respectful silence falls whenever you pass the park. There is no-one policing this rule. We are simply told about it when we are young, and we observe the tapu, partly out of respect and partly out of fear of reprisal from an angry royal spirit. On the edges of the park there are several schools, and it is almost eerie how silent the students become when they walk past. All conversation stops, and it only begins again once they have passed beyond the park.

It is within this understanding of tapu that this story sits.

In the late 1980s, my aunt, an anthropologist, was working with the Pacific Collection at the Bishop Museum in Hawai'i. It was during this time that she became aware that some of the royal remains of Tonga's ancient rulers were held in the museum's collection. I can only imagine how she must have felt.

These royal remains were brought to Hawai'i by American archaeologists in the early 1900s. They had been taken from the ancient terraced tombs in Mu'a, the location of the ancient capital and the royal fortress on Tongatapu, the main island of Tonga.

Among the remains held at the Bishop Museum, there was an unusual royal figure: a tamapua (doll), who according to legend had once been appointed king. The ancient Tu'i Tonga line were considered divine rulers, and it was customary that on their deathbed, a Tu'i Tonga would appoint the next ruler. As the story is told, a young Tu'i Tonga, dying from illness, appointed this tamapua as king, and his people honoured his final wish. The tamapua was treated as royalty and interred in the royal terraced tombs in Mu'a.

Buried within these tombs, alongside the ancient kings, were a number of Nima Tapu — the same lineage of royal undertakers who still hold this responsibility today.

You can imagine my aunt's anguish and distress when she realised that the place where she worked housed remains that carried the highest level of tapu in our culture.

In 1990, an opportunity arose. President George HW Bush signed the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act into law, requiring federal agencies and museums that receive federal funding to return Native American cultural items to their rightful communities. These items include human remains, funerary objects, sacred objects and objects of cultural significance. The law also created processes for repatriation and imposed penalties on institutions that failed to comply. It was primarily designed to address the long history of Native American ancestral remains and sacred objects being taken and stored in museums and research institutions, and it made it a criminal offence to traffic in Native American human remains or cultural items obtained in violation of the act.

For my aunt, the passage of this law opened a door. It created a pathway for the return of ancestral remains and gave her hope that the sacred remains of Tonga's ancient rulers might one day return home. Even though this legislation was primarily aimed at Native Americans and other Indigenous peoples who had been colonised by the United States, she saw within it an opportunity. She believed it might provide a pathway to return the remains of our ancient kings to their original resting place in Tonga.

She approached her supervisors at the Bishop Museum and proposed that Tonga's royal remains be repatriated. To her surprise, they agreed. She then arranged

contact with Princess Pilolevu Tuita, the Princess Royal of Tonga, and several cultural leaders, and arrangements were made for a delegation to travel to Hawai'i so they could accompany the royal remains home.

But the responsibility weighed heavily on her. She agonised over the protocols, how the remains should be handled and even how they should be packed for the journey back to Tonga.

During this time, she began to have a series of vivid dreams. In these dreams, she believed the ancestors were coming to teach her what needed to be done. The dreams always ended the same way. A large tapa cloth would be thrown over her, covering her completely, and she would wake suddenly in her bed, gasping for breath as she struggled to push her way out from beneath the heavy cloth.

She believed these dreams were guiding her. Through them, she began to remember the rituals that needed to be performed before the remains could be returned home.

Following these instructions, she arranged for members of the Nima Tapu to prepare the remains properly. They would takai lolo (anoint the remains with sacred oil) and then carefully wrap each one individually in tapa cloth, as was the ancient custom. The wrapped remains would then be placed into a large wooden crate for the flight back to their original resting place.

On the final night before their journey home, my aunt and the delegation from Tonga gathered to prepare the remains for travel. They packed the crate with great care and respect. First, a tapa cloth was laid at the bottom. Then the bundles containing the remains were gently placed on top. When everything had been arranged, another tapa cloth was laid over the remains to cover them.

But there was a problem. The final tapa cloth was too large. It overfilled the crate, making it impossible to close the lid.

It was late at night, and everyone was exhausted from the emotional and physical work of preparing the ancestors for their journey home. After several attempts to adjust the cloth, they decided to leave the matter until morning. They carefully placed the tapa cloth back over the remains and left the crate open. Then one by one they respectfully backed out of the room, leaving the ancestors in peace for the night.

The next morning, when they returned, they found the container closed.

My aunt asked the museum staff what had happened to the tapa cloth that had prevented the crate from being shut the night before. The staff told her it was still inside and that it now fit perfectly.

She and the delegation were moved to tears.

They knew that the ancient kings wanted to return home so much that during the night, they must have jostled each other to make room for the tapa cloth so that they could finally go home.

For them, it was a sign.

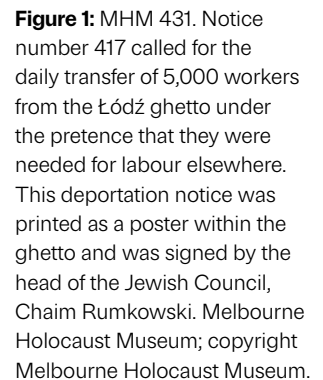
DR DANIEL HAUMSCHILD & DR SIMON HOLLOWAY

The evolution of objects

When a deportation notice was printed in the Łódź ghetto in August 1944, it was meant to dictate instructions to those imprisoned. It conveyed the order that 5,000 people would be deported from the city every day, to an undisclosed location elsewhere. It stipulated that workers were desired, that families would be kept together and that a certain allotment of luggage would be allowed. Few knew that this was all a lie, and that the destination was the Auschwitz-Birkenau death camp, where those unable to work would be murdered.

For those who read the poster, like teenagers Bono Wiener and Abram Goldberg, the authoritative voice would have been easily understood: obey these words as the law. Yet one's relationship to any object is not fixed. Bono and Abram removed the poster from the wall, choosing to employ it for their own aims rather than capitulate to its demands. In the controlled and highly surveilled circumstances of the Łódź ghetto, the relocation of this poster saw its meaning transformed and repurposed.

This article follows the lifecycle of the poster as both a specific and emblematic example through which to explore the mutable relationship between a person and an object. It is the very pliability of material history and culture that sits at the core of our work at the Melbourne Holocaust Museum. Initially, the poster served as an instructional document, dictating what people should do. The moment Abram and Bono took it, its function changed and it became a piece of evidence, testifying to the crimes committed in the Łódź ghetto. The intended audience was no longer the Jews of Łódź, but 'the world', and the information conveyed relates more broadly to the Holocaust as a whole.



As such, while the intention that the exhibition communicate information was being realised, the role of collection items in that process was as a kind of prop: something to which the survivor guide might make reference, with the intention of illustrating a point germane to their specific experiences. This remained the case even as the Jewish Holocaust Centre expanded and a new permanent exhibition was established in 1990 — an exhibition that provided greater detail regarding each object and allowed for additional research in a larger adjoining library.

The curator's intentions in positioning objects, and the subsequent juxtaposition of those objects with others, influences the range of meanings that those objects might have. This is expressed by Steven Cooke and Donna-Lee Frieze in their history of the Jewish Holocaust Centre, *The interior of our memories*:

*The choice and placement of objects in a museum and the narratives of people, place and events through which they are understood and given meaning, provide a tangible location through which to recover the motivations of those involved in their production. They reflect the world view of those involved with their conception, design and installation.*¹

The next stage in the poster's evolution occurred in 2010, when the Jewish Holocaust Centre underwent another redevelopment. This was motivated by the diminishing number of Holocaust survivors, and the need to collect more information about the survivors themselves, as well as information about their objects. While the exhibition was still structured chronologically, it allowed for an exploration of the Holocaust by theme.

One of those themes was 'ghettos', and it was here that the deportation notice was again displayed, this time against a wall. The positioning was designed to be reminiscent of its original function within the ghetto, and thus to convey information not only through its content but through its positioning as well. In this instance, the poster was placed adjacent to two other documents, both of which communicated upcoming deportations. To the left were three posters of a different nature: a notice concerning a speech that would be given regarding 'the current situation', a reminder for people to salute Germans in uniform, and an announcement to the effect that the potato ration for November and December of 1942 would be 26 kilograms per person (a quantity roughly equal to 500 grams per day).

In 2020, the Jewish Holocaust Centre was shut down pending a major redevelopment and expansion of the premises, and its archives went into storage. During the few years that it was inoperative, it was rebranded as the Melbourne Holocaust Museum (MHM) and a large, state-of-the-art facility was erected, into which a new permanent exhibition would be installed. In the temporary absence of a museum, the education team began work on a program that could be delivered without recourse to guided tours or original artefacts. Called *In Touch with Memory*, this program made use of carefully facsimiled versions of a number of items in our collection — including the Łódź ghetto poster. The program continues to this day and maintains its focuses on the educational benefit of a tactile experience of material history.

In Touch with Memory encourages students to investigate and analyse objects with the intention of working out what they are as well as determining what they mean. To this end, students are encouraged to think about objects thematically and engage with their content on a human level. As an illustrative point, because this poster evidences deception, it facilitates an understanding of why many did not know precisely the danger they were in and helps us appreciate why violent resistance was not more common. The intention here is not only to teach students the history of the

¹ Cooke, S., & Frieze, D.-L. (2015). *The interior of our memories: A history of Melbourne's Jewish Holocaust centre*. Hybrid Publishers, pp. 96–97.

Holocaust, but also to facilitate a deeper understanding of the ways in which it became possible. As such, the value of this poster has evolved from a didactic tool that is meant to be received to a locus of engagement for curiosity and guided investigation. Rather than simply representing history as a set of facts, the poster now encourages audiences to take a historiographical stance as well.

This hands-on education program generated consequences for the current exhibition approach. When the enlarged museum reopened in 2023, curators were afforded greater flexibility in both the number and arrangement of museum collection items for display. Today, the Łódź ghetto deportation notice shares a room with other documents, photographs and artefacts that document and recall ghetto life — as well as film and audio from survivors and from the period.

Throughout the museum, labels stipulate the nature of items in such a way that visitors can derive information without necessarily being guided, while mounted interactive displays allow visitors to find additional information. In a few places there are drawers that visitors can open, the contents of which pose provocative questions that allow for a certain degree of ethical or philosophical reflection. This approach is more similar methodologically to the educational programs generated during the redevelopment than to the exhibition strategy that had been previously deployed in earlier iterations of the museum. The poster serves as both factual evidence of the history of violence during the Holocaust and as a call for investigation, inquiry and curiosity.

Considered in this way, the current presentation of the poster recalls the evolution of its use. By providing information about its original purpose within the ghetto, we highlight the distinct informational function of the poster. By linking it to the experiences of the two men who took, concealed and then salvaged it, we highlight its testimonial function in supporting an understanding of Abram's and Bono's experiences. By placing it within a museum, in which it is juxtaposed with other items that pertain to the ghetto experience, it can serve a didactic function, providing historiographical information relating to the Holocaust as a whole. And finally, by embedding it within an educational program it is able to realise a pedagogical function, by which it sheds light on themes and facilitates specific learning goals.

When considering the evolution of this item, we can highlight what must be considerations for all objects put on display within this museum. We must ask ourselves: what is the purpose of displaying this item? Is it to facilitate an understanding of the history? Is it to support a deeper understanding of individual survivors? Or is it to say something about the nature of the survivor community, or the nature of the Jewish community today? Curiously, this very item has been positioned with each of the above-mentioned intentions at different stages in the history of its deployment.

A successful museum will enable meaning-making on a number of levels simultaneously. If we do our jobs well, these objects and their positioning within the space will not only facilitate a greater understanding of the degree to which the Holocaust was a *human* history, but will also serve as a call to arms in the creation of more just and more tolerant societies today.

NICHOLAS CROTTY

Silver Death



Figure 1: ST 25401, Alethoscope – Single Lens, Italy, 1860–1870. Museums Victoria; photographer: David Demant; copyright: Museums Victoria.

In February 2023 I was in the Scienceworks collection store looking at broadcast receivers in the longspan racking. After 20 years of working in this store, I still find surprises. I came across a wooden cabinet covered with a glossy, honey-brown varnish. There were two doors at the front, which could be locked with a tiny silver key. Intrigued, I opened the cabinet and found two rows of 12 wooden slots inside, containing 14 photographs adhered to cardboard.

The cabinet was used with a single lens alethoscope (also known as a graphoscope).¹ The alethoscope had been made in Venice, Italy in the 1860s by Carlo Naya, a photographer and optical instrument dealer. To operate it, a photograph adhered to cardboard was placed inside the device, where a lens would magnify the image and simulate stereoscopy, giving the photograph a three-dimensional quality when seen through the viewer at the front. The alethoscope was placed on top of the cabinet for viewing.

The alethoscope had been purchased by the museum from a Mr Little of Noble Park in 1963, along with seven large photographs of Japan and Fiji taken in the 1880s and seven prints of Irish landscapes and streetscapes dating to about 1910.

¹ Museums Victoria. (n.d.). *Item ST 25401 alethoscope – single lens, Italy, 1860–1870*. Museums Victoria Collections Online. <https://collections.museumsvictoria.com.au/items/384562>, accessed 1 March 2026.

I was fascinated and looked closer. At the back of the bottom shelf, I saw something crumpled. I reached inside and pulled out bits of torn yellowed paper and a thin, dirty, off-white piece of cardboard. The cardboard was about the size of a playing card, blank on one side and with a distinct hemispherical curve. At the centre of the curve, in crisp black print, were the confronting words:

"SILVER-DEATH"

No collection manager ever wants to find the word 'death' written on an object in the store. I wondered if it was toxic and could be lethal. It appeared to have been designed for a specific use, and the card might have been impregnated with silver. Alternatively, it could be a label that had detached from another item, which has since disappeared, deteriorated or dissolved.

The Scienceworks collections focus on science and technology items from across the globe and contain just about every kind of toxic material that exists: corrosives, carcinogens, explosives, flammables, toxins and poisons. I looked closely at the card. It read:

POISONOUS

- Not to be taken -

"SILVER-DEATH"

BAIT CARD

For Destruction of Silverfish



Figure 2: HT 58347, Bait Card – 'Silver Death', Silverfish, Kosmos Manufacturing Co., Melbourne, 1930s. Museums Victoria; photographer: Nicholas Crotty; copyright: Museums Victoria.

The Long-tailed Silverfish (*Ctenolepisma longicaudatum*) is part of an ancient group of animals that evolved hundreds of millions of years ago. Introduced to Australia, the species was first described in 1905 and is considered a synanthrope — associated with and benefitting from humans. It is a pest species that is highly resistant to insecticides. It has a voracious appetite, eating paper products and cellulose-based textiles such as rayon.

From the very start, the museum has had displays that taught visitors how to manage pests at home or on their farms and consequently acquired many samples of poisonous substances. The collection store is filled with glass bottles of white oil, naphthalene, dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane (DDT) and even highly toxic liquid nicotine. Many of the samples were products made by Victor Leggo & Farmers in Yarraville and donated to the museum in late 1936. Some of them could be deadly. I knew that this piece of card might be extremely dangerous.

Excited and terrified in equal parts, I turned to the internet to find out more. But first, even though I had been wearing nitrile gloves, I washed my hands.

The search begins

The internet search brought up several interesting results, including a series of late 1930s and early 1940s advertisements and articles in local newspapers promoting a 'New Scientific Remedy', found on Trove, as well as a link to an eHive database.

The first advertisement, from *The Argus*, dated 7 November 1940, read:

"SILVER DEATH" WILL KILL THOSE SILVERFISH

Rid your home of Silverfish by using Silver-Death Bait Cards — the tempting food which lures, then kills, the pest. From 10 to 15 cards distributed in each infected room will rid your house of silverfish.

The cards are coated and impregnated with a special chemically prepared paste which provides tempting, though fatal, food for Silverfish. Fifteen cards in one packet.²

So, the mysterious card was a bait card. It was used to kill silverfish in the home and came in a pack of 15 cards for a sixpence. It was not a label; the card itself was the object. However, the '*special chemically prepared paste*' sounded ominous.

Another article, from *The Mail*, dated 6 November 1937, said that they could be bought direct from the supplier, Kosmos Manufacturing Company, in Swanston Street, Melbourne. The article stated that Kosmos had used a formula developed by the division of economic entomology of the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR, later known as CSIRO) for a paste that was highly '*attractive but lethal*' to silverfish.³ CSIR proved that colonies of silverfish had been well controlled by such bait, with the pests preferring to eat it more than other food sources. In addition, these cards killed the initial infestation as well as their offspring.⁴

² Silver Death will kill those silverfish. (1940, November 7). *The Argus*, p. 6. <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article11305910>

³ Silverfish pests can be controlled by proper baits. (1937, November 6). *The Mail*, p. 12. <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-page4628813>

⁴ Silverfish pests can be controlled by proper baits. (1937), p. 12.

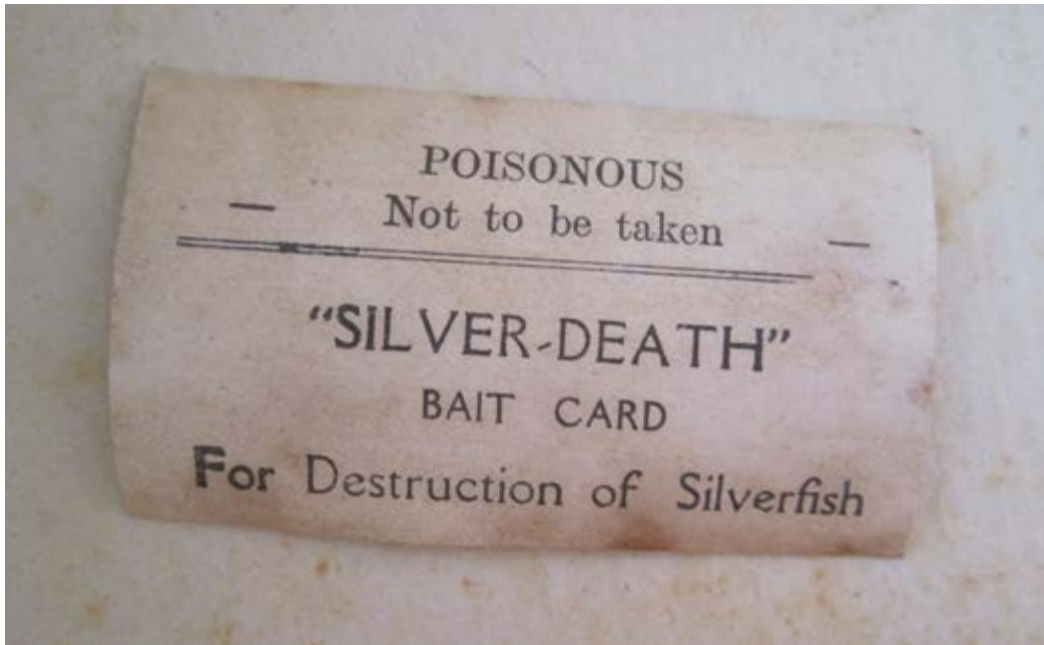


Figure 3: 42535.6, a bait card for silverfish. Miss Porter's House, Newcastle, NSW; photographer: Marion Bannister; copyright: Miss Porter's House, Newcastle, NSW.

A second card

The eHive database link took me to an Edwardian era National Trust property in Newcastle, New South Wales called Miss Porter's House. Described as '*a time capsule of life in the 20th century*', it features furnishings and household items purchased by the family from 1910 until 1997 as well as a historic fernery and period garden.⁵ It is listed on the UNESCO Australian Memory of the World Register, as the building tracks the lives of three women (the widowed mother, Florence, and her two daughters, Ella and Hazel) in a regional city over most of the 1900s. Custodianship of the Porter family's belongings was transferred to the National Trust in 1997 by the surviving daughter Hazel, and the property is now looked after by a group of dedicated and enthusiastic volunteers.

These volunteers had done an amazing job of cataloguing each item in every room. The record for '*a collection of items allocated the number 42535 and being the contents of the box numbered 42534*' described: '*A third item, numbered 42535.6, is a bait card for silverfish.*'⁶ Under '*Inscription and Marks*', they had written:

*Part 6: "POISONOUS / Not to be taken / "SILVER DEATH" / BAIT CARD / For Destruction of Silverfish".*⁷

It was a match. I had discovered another bait card!

⁵ Miss Porter's House – National Trust NSW. (n.d.). eHive. <https://ehive.com/collections/5831/miss-porters-house-national-trust-nsw>, accessed 1 March 2026.

⁶ Dish cloth; 42535. (n.d.). eHive. <https://ehive.com/collections/5831/objects/524498/dish-cloth>, accessed 1 March 2026.

⁷ Dish cloth; 42535. (n.d.). eHive.

I emailed Miss Porter's House at the end of a long day and asked if they could send me a photo of their card. I received two responses back that night — from the chair of the Miss Porter's House management committee, Annabel Senior, and from the collection data manager, Marion Bannister. Marion included a photograph with her email. The Miss Porter's House bait card looked identical to ours. Their card was off-white and slightly dirty, with black writing set out in the same way. It even had a curve!

The following day I replied with excitement and asked if their card was blank on the back or showed evidence of the mysterious chemical paste. I also recommended that they wore gloves when handling it. Within an hour I had a response. The back of their card was blank and did not show any evidence of a paste. They already knew to treat such an item with caution.⁸

Chemical investigations

At Museums Victoria we are fortunate to have a materials scientist on staff who can analyse our objects at an elemental level. Dr Rosemary Goodall used X-ray fluorescence (XRF) and Fourier transform infrared (FTIR) spectroscopy to analyse the card to see what kind of pesticide was used. Unfortunately, the results were not conclusive, and indicated that the paper was standard, with trace amounts of iron and barium and a weak trace amount of bromine. No toxic residues (arsenic, mercury or lead, for example) were found. However, the XRF does not detect organic compounds easily and the data from FTIR is drowned out by the cellulose in the paper card. It could be that other chemical compounds were used on the card but have since evaporated. The card may have given off a vapour (as naphthalene does) or it could have been designed to be eaten, with its attractive food paste component perhaps having been laced with a toxin such as para-dichlorobenzene, cyanide compounds or even strychnine. All of this sounded particularly nasty. Yet Dr Goodall confirmed that there was no silver mineral in the card. It would seem that 'Silver Death' only referred to killing silverfish.

The card enters the database

I spoke to Deborah Tout-Smith, senior curator of home and community at Museums Victoria, whose role includes curating the domestic life collections. Like me, she was immediately drawn to the mysterious card and especially the sinister product name 'Silver Death'. She agreed that the hazard could be reasonably managed, and that the bait card could become part of the state collection. I created a record and the card became HT 58347.⁹

Because the analysis could not confirm if the bait card was hazardous or not, I cautiously listed it as having suspected pesticide contamination in the collection database. I treated the card as if it were toxic, using nitrile gloves when handling it and storing it in a ziplock bag within a hazardous substances cabinet.

⁸ Marion Bannister later informed me on 9 June 2026 that Miss Porter's House in fact had four of these bait cards, all in the same condition.

⁹ Museums Victoria (n.d.). *Item HT 58347 bait card – 'Silver Death', Silverfish, Kosmos Manufacturing Co., Melbourne, 1930s*. Museums Victoria Collections Online. <https://collections.museumsvictoria.com.au/items/2576737>



Figure 4: 'Silver Death' advertising, *The Argus*, 7 November 1940, p. 6. Trove; copyright: Public Domain.

Investigations continue

The Kosmos Manufacturing Company produced a product based on the research of CSIR that sold well across Australia. By November 1945 they had increased capital from £2,000 to £5,000 by creating 3,000 ordinary shares.¹⁰ However, by May 1954 the business was voluntarily dissolved.¹¹

Dr Goodall's successor, Dr Callum Gassner, recently had another look at the data and thought that the presence of barium could mean that barium fluorosilicate was used as a toxic paste. Barium fluorosilicate was patented as a pesticide in 1827, mainly as an insecticide for silverfish.¹² It was often used as bait in a paste made of sugar, flour and gum arabic mixed in water. Applied as a paste to wooden furniture, it could conceivably have been used on a card and placed inside cabinets and other locations around the house.¹³

If ingested by humans, exposure to barium fluorosilicate can cause intense abdominal pain, vomiting or diarrhoea, muscular weakness or paralysis, cardiac arrhythmia and, in severe cases, death.

¹⁰ Kosmos Manufacturing Capital. (1945, December 11). *The Sun News-Pictorial*, p. 17. <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article279264938>

¹¹ Notice 9478. (1954, June 2). *Victoria Gazette*, p. 3715. https://www.austlii.edu.au/au/other/vic_gazette/1954/428.pdf

¹² The Society for the Preservation of Natural History Collections. (2025). Barium fluorosilicate BaSiF₆, sodium fluorosilicate, Na₂SiF₆. https://spnhc.org/biocides/#Barium_fluorosilicate_BaSiF6.2C_sodium_fluorosilicate.2C_Na2SiF6, accessed 1 March 2026.

¹³ The Society for the Preservation of Natural History Collections. (2025).

I contacted CSIRO about their formula. I received an email from their enquiries team with a link to the 1936 annual report.¹⁴ Under the heading 'Entomological Investigations', I found an entry about research into silverfish eradication. They had found that earlier pastes using starch and arsenic were not effective, but:

*a mixture of flour paste and sugar was shown to be more attractive than unsweetened paste; and a satisfactory poison bait was made by adding barium fluosilicate to this.*¹⁵

The paste was painted onto pieces of cardboard, and these were distributed to infected homes to remarkable success. The entomology team provided advisory work for all types of pests to:

*private individuals, business houses, and Government Departments in Canberra and elsewhere.*¹⁶

They gave advice and also applied treatments during their experiments. It is very possible that the owners of Kosmos Manufacturing used this knowledge from the 1936 annual report, or possibly from articles published in journals around that time, and in 1937 built a booming business around it.

An April 1970 letter to the editor in *The Canberra Times* provided further confirmation. Joan Faulkner of Ainslie in the Australian Capital Territory offered two recipes for homemade silverfish bait. Using flour, water and sugar in one recipe, she suggested that barium fluorosilicate or barium carbonate could be added and painted onto thin cardboard, allowed to dry and placed behind picture rails and in warm places. Joan remembered a commercially made product called 'Silver Death', but she added '*it is quite a while since I saw them*'.¹⁷

Conclusion

I am certain that Mr Little never imagined the investigations that would emerge from a small, whitish card left at the back of his alethoscope 60 years ago. His concern was likely that the silverfish in his house would destroy the photographs he sold with his cabinet.

Silver Death has long since disappeared from Australian shelves, yet these bait cards live on in museum collections where their potentially toxic legacy continues. Investigations into such chemical oddities provide a collection manager with information on how to work with such hazards safely and serve as a useful reminder that museum collections are ever surprising.

¹⁴ The Council for Scientific and Industrial Research. (1936). Tenth annual report of the council for scientific and industrial research for the year ended 30th June, 1936. p. 28. <https://csiropedia.csiro.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/10th-CSIR-Annual-Report-Year-Ended-30th-June-1936.pdf>, accessed 1 March 2026.

¹⁵ The Council for Scientific and Industrial Research. (1936), p. 36.

¹⁶ The Council for Scientific and Industrial Research. (1936), p. 36.

¹⁷ Faulkner, J. (1970, April 7). Silverfish bait. *The Canberra Times*, p. 2. <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article107918027>

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KATE PHILLIPS

Foundations of *Our Wondrous Planet*: Guiding values and concepts for a new exhibition

Introduction

Our Wondrous Planet is a landmark biodiversity exhibition that opened in September 2025. With 1,800 square metres of exhibition space, it's the largest redevelopment since Melbourne Museum opened at Carlton Gardens in 2000. When we started developing it, the exhibition team faced the challenge of shaping an authentic approach to a vast and multifaceted subject. We advocated for an exhibition that invited visitors to see nature as a living entity of which they are a part, and to recognise their relationship with it as being grounded in care and respect. The exhibition experience would lean into a re-enchantment with the world by highlighting the beautiful, complex and 'magical' relationships that sustain life.

Our approach rested on a foundational commitment to ensure that the exhibition's content and its development process reflected our values — both institutional and personal. The exhibition would honour and communicate First Peoples' cultural knowledge and values, be grounded in contemporary natural sciences and remain firmly audience centred. By attending to the physical, social, cognitive and emotional dimensions of the visitor experience, we aimed to create an experience that was both powerful and motivating.

Here I outline some of the key concepts and values that the team brought into the development of *Our Wondrous Planet* and show how they were expressed throughout the exhibition.

From a First Peoples' perspective, we all come from Country. Country is everything we can see — the land, the water, the air — and is deeply interconnected. Our relationship with Country is based on integrity: respecting all forms of life, honouring ancestors and celebrating family and community. It is a way of moving through the world with reverence, grounded in the understanding that we are all one and that we share this home together. This relationship is reciprocal. To belong to Country is to recognise yourself as part of everything, not separate from it. When people truly understand this, the way they see the world — and the way they move within it — changes completely.

A contemporary natural science perspective recognises that life on Earth has evolved over billions of years. Life comes from a common origin and is interdependent. Life is a constant interplay between networks of living organisms in dynamic environments. Human activities occur within these networks. Humans are animals — one species amongst many — and not, as previously believed, at the top of a hierarchy as superior ‘masters’ with special status.

Contemporary science reveals a complex and compelling story — one that underscores the shared origins of all life, including humans, and our mutual dependence on one another for survival on Earth. Scientists have also been at the forefront of understanding and warning of the dangers of the climate crisis and of biodiversity loss: intertwined challenges that share many overlapping solutions.

The team accepted these two perspectives as complementary ways of understanding ourselves. Together, we hoped they could enrich visitors’ understanding of our relationship with the living world, drawing on the wisdom and knowledge of both traditions.

In the most important ways, First Peoples and natural science worldviews align in themes of interconnectedness, respect for other beings, mutual dependence and celebration of life. In particular, the idea of the connectedness of people and the living world is a strong shared theme. Both forms of human knowledge are built on close observation of the living world over time. However, they differ in some areas, such as origin stories (creation versus evolution) and the ideas of human purpose that flow from them. We also acknowledge that the history of science is enmeshed with the history of colonisation, and these echoes influence our relationships today.

At points during the exhibition development, we tried to integrate First Peoples’ and science perspectives into a single story or interactive. This worked well in some instances, but not in others. Despite our strong shared base, there were uncomfortable moments where the content did not fit together well and we had to find another solution. In these instances, we separated the content streams, allowing some exhibition elements to present a First Peoples perspective and others to present a science perspective, each retaining its own standpoint. This approach can be seen in the ‘Our moment’ area, where four animated stories are shown via a projected wall animation.

We know that many of our visitors have a strong passion for the living world, particularly for animals they know and love. Some past museum exhibits with messages of environmental degradation and extinction have left visitors feeling sad, powerless or inclined to disengage. Today’s news also bombards the public with evidence of the climate crisis, and eco-anxiety is on the rise — particularly in young people.¹

The exhibition team asked, ‘How do we inspire people to act for a better future for our threatened planet?’ and ‘How do we cater for our audiences, which include children?’ We were influenced by current research in psychology and behaviour change, which we combined with what we learned from in-house visitor evaluations to try a new approach. The research emphasises positive messaging:

¹ Fava, N., Gao, C. X., & Baker, D. (2023). Climate of distress: Responding to the youth mental health impacts of climate change. Orygen. <https://www.orygen.org.au/Policy-Centre/Policy-Areas/Social-and-environmental-factors/Climate-of-distress-policy-paper>

Love messages ... speak to our 'biophilic' side — the part of us that loves nature ... And that feeling, used wisely, is the largest untapped motivator for biodiversity action and policy we have. As brand values go, you can't get more powerful than wonder, awe and joy. Wielded expertly, the love message can, quite literally, conquer all.²

And tangible psychological drivers:

Understanding what drives environmentally protective or destructive behaviour is important to the design and implementation of effective public policies to encourage people's engagement in pro-environmental behaviour. Research shows that a connection to nature is associated with greater engagement in pro-environmental behaviour.³

We started with the idea that people look after the things they love and feel part of. If visitors can really feel their connection to all living things, we can shift mindsets from curiosity to care. We identified that our primary role was to create an experience that inspired feelings of connection to the living world. And then, in a few key places, we sought to highlight meaningful actions for biodiversity conservation and climate mitigation.

Our approach integrated interpretive elements to create meaningful interactions within immersive worlds. Responsive projections, sounds and haptics allowed the visitors to both sense and influence their environment. Layered interpretive graphics and objects deepened this engagement and understanding. By combining films, lighting effects and soundscapes into large-scale sets, we created exhibition worlds thrumming with life. In the following examples, we show how this approach can generate feelings of wonder, love and motivation in an exhibition experience.

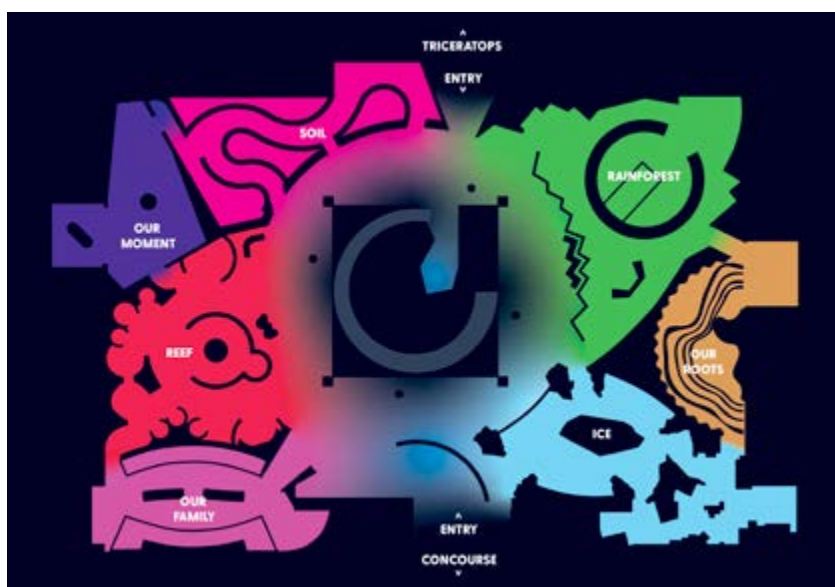


Figure 1: *Our Wondrous Planet* exhibition floorplan showing key areas, 2025. Gemma Field; copyright Museums Victoria.

² Futerra. (n.d.). Branding biodiversity. Futerra Think Tank. <https://www.wearefuterra.com/thinks/branding-biodiversity>

³ Whitburn, J., Linklater, W., & Abrahamse, W. (2019). Meta-analysis of human connection to nature and proenvironmental behaviour. *Conservation Biology*, 34(1), pp. 180–193. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cobi.13381>

The exhibition includes four immersive 'biomes' — generalised environment types (reef, soil, rainforest and ice) — that were selected for their significant role in sustaining the health of the whole interconnected planet. Three additional areas were identified to create a deeper focus on human relationships with nature: 'Our family', which reveals the tree of life and the shared origins of all living things; 'Our moment', which explores tangible actions we can take for a more sustainable future; and 'Our roots', which embodies First Peoples-led connection to Country. A spectacular central projection joins the gallery together by telling stories of our planet's sweeping interlinked systems — from atmospheric and ocean currents to migration patterns and threads of First Peoples knowledge honouring life and interconnection.



Figure 2: The 'Our family' Orangutan showcase, Melbourne Museum, Melbourne, 2025. Museums Victoria; photographer: Tim Carrafa; copyright Museums Victoria.

Feelings of connection

'Our family' shows that humans are part of an amazing family of life. *Our Wondrous Planet* includes more than 850 animals from the State Collection, with 'Our family' being the area of greatest concentration. Here, traditional museum taxidermy is presented in a new context — one that is inviting, respectful and created to inspire wonder. The design includes warm colours, curved showcases that gently embrace the space, intimate views of the animals (both models and taxidermy), a gentle wash of dappled lighting and carefully orchestrated animal sounds to bring a sense of vitality. Exhibition interpretation features short explanations of different animal groups, written in first person so the animals 'speak' directly to visitors. Visitors are invited to look more closely at the animals and explore their shared features. This approach invites curiosity and empathy while remaining grounded in science. This marks a clear departure from Melbourne Museum's previous biodiversity exhibition, *Wild: Amazing animals in a changing world*, which occupied a white, architectural space and took a more detached interpretive tone.



Figure 3: The entrance to 'Our family', at the start of the exhibition, Melbourne Museum, Melbourne, 2026. Museums Victoria; photographer: Thomas Breakwell; copyright Museums Victoria.

Animal spirits provide safe passage as visitors enter the space. For First Peoples visitors, the way we display taxidermy animals needed to consider cultural protocols and cultural safety. For some First Peoples community members, totemic systems require them to protect and honour particular animals, including some that are on display as taxidermy. Being mindful of this, the team came up with a few solutions. A sign at the entry to the gallery lets people know that there are preserved animal specimens inside, so First Peoples community members have a choice about what they see. And to honour the lives of the animals, an introductory wall of animated animal spirits leads visitors in with the accompanying text:

With each step, the spirits of these animals guide us in safe passage — as we honour their journey, they lead us through, echoing the rhythms of Country and the interconnectedness of all living beings.⁴

The flowing movement of the animated animals invites visitors to follow them into the space.

⁴ [Our Wondrous Planet introductory text]. (2025). Melbourne Museum, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia.



Figure 4: The curving path of the 'Soil' biome, Melbourne Museum, Melbourne, 2025. Museums Victoria; photographer: Tim Carrafa; copyright Museums Victoria.



Figure 5: The hand decomposition interactive in the 'Soil' biome, Melbourne Museum, Melbourne, 2025. Museums Victoria; photographer: Tim Carrafa; copyright Museums Victoria.

Humans and nature are not separate

The exhibition uses immersion and interaction to support the idea that humans are embedded in the living world. 'Soil' is one of four immersive 'biomes' — generalised environment types — chosen for its significance to the whole globe. 'Soil' is a magical and dynamic display with models of soil fauna and props representing soil constituents such as minerals, water, plant roots and fungal mycelium bound together by a pulsing network of connectivity. Interpretive text explains these sophisticated and dynamic soil interactions, where lifeforms often work together in mutually beneficial relationships. The visitor moves through this environment along an 'earthworm pathway', interacting with elements on the curving interpretive plinth.

Decomposition becomes both real and enchanting in this interactive. Visitors are invited to '*see how soil recycles your gift of life*' by placing their hand on a digital handprint and watching it decompose as its particles move into the surrounding soil.⁵ Throughout the exhibition, every visitor action has the potential to benefit the environment or reveal a fascinating hidden strength in the environment. These interactives highlight processes viewed through the lens of natural sciences combined with First Peoples' values such as reciprocity and responsibility. Here, visitors contemplate their own bodies being recycled, sending nutrients through the mycelium network to plant roots.

In other interactions in the exhibition visitors remove invasive urchins, help coral to reproduce and feel a mother Okapi calling to its baby with vibrations below the range of human hearing. Each interaction reveals things we don't normally see and so has a sense of enchantment. They support positive feelings of understanding and caring for our living family, with physical touch and activation making visitors feel part of the spaces.

⁵ [Our Wondrous Planet, 'Soil' biome label text]. (2025). Melbourne Museum, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia.

Sharing First Peoples' deep connections to Country

First Peoples' knowledge and values underpin the exhibition. Exhibits in each area highlight First Peoples' stories and connections to Country. Figure 5 shows 'Our roots', a space where visitors are invited to relax and reflect inside the heart of an old tree. Old trees have been significant to generations of First Peoples over time, as described by the exhibition's First Peoples story shaper, Rhiannon Williams. In 'Our roots', which includes a soundscape, lighting sequence and text, the message is that connection to Country is as fundamental as breathing.

First Peoples from international communities were invited to participate in the exhibition, including representatives of the Sámi, Norway's indigenous people. Rhiannon Williams and Justice Nelson, head of First Peoples experiences at Museums Victoria, visited Norway to make this invitation in person. It was vital to Justice and Rhiannon that this process was done face-to-face, following First Peoples protocols, and with genuine exchange, listening and respect. As First Peoples working on exhibitions, Justice and Rhiannon invited input rather than translating the stories of other people. This way of working supports unity, trust and community among First Peoples across the globe.

In the film playing in the 'Ice' biome, Sámi man Nils Peder Isaksen Gaup talks about the intimate relationship between his people and their reindeer herds, the rhythms of their lives following the reindeer to their feeding grounds and how this is being impacted by climate change.



Figure 6: The 'Our roots' space, Melbourne Museum, Melbourne, 2025. Museums Victoria; photographer: Tim Carrafa; copyright Museums Victoria.



Figure 7: Part of the 'Ice' biome, featuring Sámi man Nils Peder Isaksen Gaup, Melbourne Museum, Melbourne, 2026. Museums Victoria; photographer: Thomas Breakwell; copyright Museums Victoria.



Figure 8: The interactive actions table in 'Our moment' showcases actions to support biodiversity and reduce climate change, Melbourne Museum, Melbourne, 2025. Museums Victoria; photographer: Tim Carrafa; copyright Museums Victoria.



Figure 9: The 'Forever world' interactive in 'Our moment', Melbourne Museum, Melbourne, 2026. Museums Victoria; photographer: Thomas Breakwell; copyright Museums Victoria.

Highlighting sustainability and supporting motivation to act

We understood that the exhibition itself must align with its message. In addition to showcasing actions to support biodiversity,⁶ we needed to embody them with sustainable exhibition design and construction. The environmental impact of materials was considered throughout the exhibition development, prioritising either highly durable materials to last the life span of the exhibition without requiring replacement or those with a sustainable material life cycle. One example of this is in the 'Our moment' area. The table is made of recycled plastic and houses an interactive exhibit of current sustainable actions, technologies and social changes. The table shows that everyone is shaping the future through their actions today, and that these diverse contributions can take many different forms. Visitors see and read about inspiring examples of action and then are prompted to think about how they might implement related actions in their lives, bringing their own skills and interests to work for positive outcomes. Actions can be 'collected' on a phone to act as a reminder after the visit.

⁶ Selinske, M. J., Garrard, G. E., Gregg, E. A., Kusmanoff, A. M., Kidd, L. R., Cullen, M. T., Cooper, M., Geary, W. L., Hatty, M. A., Hames, F., Kneebone, S., McLeod, E. M., Ritchie, E. G., Squires, Z. E., Thomas, J., Willcock, M. A. W., Blair, S., & Bekessy, S. A. (2020). Identifying and prioritizing human behaviors that benefit biodiversity. *Conservation Science and Practice*, 2(9), e249. <https://doi.org/10.1111/csp2.249>



Figure 10: An Asian Elephant in the 'Rainforest' biome, Melbourne Museum, Melbourne, 2025. Museums Victoria; photographer: Tim Carrafa; copyright Museums Victoria.

'Forever world' is an interactive wall where visitors bring vitality back to a marine environment, a rural area and a cityscape. By moving their hand across the wall projection, they reveal a series of changes that support biodiversity and reduce human impacts. Visitors are encouraged to transform each scene. When the whole landscape is revitalised, they see a message of success: '*We made it all happen; life is buzzing.*'⁷ It was important that this exhibit showed positive change on a landscape-scale, including both societal shifts and individual actions. In the process of making changes to produce thriving, biodiverse environments, we wanted visitors to see themselves as active participants in the world, with the power to influence it positively.

We were sensitive to the idea that gamification of an exhibition dealing with serious themes could be viewed as trivialising the situation we face (in terms of the joint issues of biodiversity loss and climate change), but the power of interactive elements to connect with our core exhibition audiences created another avenue for engagement. Throughout the exhibition we deliberately resisted the urge to start with messages of loss and crisis or calls for urgent action, even though this is ultimately how we want people to respond. Instead, we hope that exhibits like this one will inspire visitors to see what is possible and envision themselves being active in biodiversity restoration. This approach reflects contemporary research on the psychological dimensions of conservation message framing — that the most effective methods activate visitors' love of nature and inspire positive emotions and hopeful energy.^{8 9}

Evoking the living world, not replicating nature

Rather than replicating nature through dioramas, the gallery evokes living ecosystems in an abstracted way. Using spatial and lighting design, illustration and multimedia, each specimen is surrounded with an immersive sense of place inspired by sounds, hues and forms of nature. The result is a gallery infused with life. In the 'Rainforest' biome an Asian Elephant is surrounded by illustrated vignettes of the many other lives that elephants influence, from tiny dung beetles to the tall trees of the forest itself.

The 'Ice' biome features unique and charismatic animals adapted to life in the cold. A polar food cycle plays out before visitors' eyes as an animation of a Blue Whale swims past. Its pink poo becomes fertiliser for algae, which in turn feeds krill, which in turn feed the Blue Whale itself. A visitor watches as polar ice freezes and generates slow-moving currents. This initiates a massive circulation of ocean water on a global scale, overturning and refreshing the oceans. This circulation is vital for ocean life, including fish populations, and is just one of the many reasons why Earth's icy polar regions are valuable to humanity.

⁷ [Our Wondrous Planet, 'Our moment' label text]. (2025). Melbourne Museum, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia.

⁸ de Lange, E., Sharkey, W., Castelló y Tickell, S., Migné, J., Underhill, R., & Milner-Gulland, E. J. (2022). Communicating the biodiversity crisis: From "warnings" to positive engagement. *Tropical Conservation Science*, 15, pp. 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1177/19400829221134893>

⁹ Jacobson, S. K., Morales, N. A., Chen, B., Soodeen, R., Moulton, M. P., & Jain, E. (2019). Love or loss: Effective message framing to promote environmental conservation. *Applied Environmental Education & Communication*, 18(3), pp. 252–265. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1533015X.2018.1456380>



Figure 11: A visitor takes in the 'Ice' biome, Melbourne Museum, Melbourne, 2025. Museums Victoria; photographer: Dianna Snape; copyright Museums Victoria.

Conclusion

Our Wondrous Planet's underlying philosophy, imbued with First Peoples' values, aims to foster a deep, empathetic connection to the natural world and to encourage immediate action, claiming a role for the museum as both an educator and an agent of change.

An extensive two-year audience research programme was integrated into the project during development and directly after opening to test concepts against visitor outcomes. The success of the gallery has partially been measured through visitor numbers, indicating reach, but primarily through analysing visitor impact surveys to evaluate the gallery's effectiveness in raising awareness and inspiring hope.

In the first six months after opening, *Our Wondrous Planet* welcomed over 334,000 visitors, including over 14,000 school children. The gallery is already the most frequently chosen 'favourite exhibition' at Melbourne Museum, underlining the degree to which it is appreciated by our diverse audiences. Engagement from educational audiences has been particularly strong. Initial feedback led to the school visit length being doubled, as the first school groups reported that their students didn't want to leave and needed more time for exploration and discovery — a wonderful indicator of engagement and connection.

Visitor impact surveys of over 470 visitors reveal that the gallery has had a significant effect in relation to its objectives of inspiring wonder and interconnection, as well as increasing understanding of meaningful actions for a sustainable future:

- *'This exhibition helped me appreciate how wondrous and extraordinary the natural world is': 89% strongly agree.*
- *'I feel more aware of how all living things are connected, including myself': 78% strongly agree.*
- *'I learned that many people are already taking meaningful action to protect our planet': 70% strongly agree.*
- *'I feel hopeful about the future of our planet': 59% strongly agree.*

And this visitor comment summarises one person's impressions after visiting with her family:

Visiting the Our Wondrous Planet museum exhibit was honestly such a highlight of my week. I loved how immersive and thoughtfully designed each section was. From the moment I entered, it felt like I wasn't just looking at displays — I was travelling through worlds. The way they combined visuals, sound, light and interactive elements made the experience engaging not just for adults, but for kids as well. It brought back that childlike feeling of curiosity, where every corner had something new to discover.

What I appreciated most was how educational it was without feeling heavy. I have my hubby and twins with me (1yo). The information was explained in a simple and interesting way, and it made me realise how incredible our planet truly is. I walked out with a deeper appreciation of Earth, and even found myself thinking about how I can contribute to preserving its beauty and diversity. It was both inspiring and grounding. Overall, the exhibit was not just beautiful — it was meaningful. I truly enjoyed my visit, and I would recommend it to anyone who wants to learn something new while being amazed at the same time. I hope more people get to experience this because it's the kind of exhibit that leaves you with wonder in your heart long after you've left.¹⁰

Grounding our exhibition development in shared values and a deep attunement to visitor perspectives has transformed our approach. Early evaluation shows this strategy genuinely connects with visitors — school students and families alike — leaving them inspired, uplifted and ready to act. We will continue to evaluate the exhibition's effectiveness by exploring visitor experiences and what they learn and do. We will also strengthen visitors' knowledge and connection to the living world — and to the museum's conservation research — through talks, articles and online films that add current perspectives to a long-term exhibition. Together, these additional offerings will ensure the exhibition stays relevant, dynamic and impactful over time.

¹⁰ Museums Victoria. (2025). Visitor comment. Visitor impact survey.

Acknowledgements

Everything in exhibition development is a team effort, and the talented and diverse team who brought *Our Wondrous Planet* to life deserve thanks. In particular I would like to recognise the work of Rhiannon Williams and Justice Nelson, First Peoples members of the exhibition team, who ensured that this perspective was at the heart of the project, led First Peoples engagement and supported communities in sharing their stories in the exhibition. I would also like to thank Tracey Taylor and Miriam Capper for their leadership and development of the exhibition content, and for their feedback on this paper.

TIM STRANKS

William Blandowski goes bush! The lower Murray expedition, 1856–1857

First Peoples Acknowledgement

I respectfully acknowledge the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung and Boon Wurrung Bunurong peoples of the eastern Kulin Nations where I work, and First Peoples language groups and communities across Victoria and Australia. I also wish to acknowledge the different First Peoples groups across Victoria, New South Wales and South Australia that William Blandowski partnered with during his 10 years in south-eastern Australia from 1849–1859.

Cultural Warning

This paper includes the names of First Peoples who have now passed. It also includes images of dead and preserved animals, some of which may be part of First Peoples animal totem systems or have other special cultural significance. This paper also uses historical language from original accounts that is offensive.

Introduction

In an introduction to the proceedings of a symposium published to mark the 150th anniversary of William Blandowski's 1856–1857 expedition to the Murray River, the symposium convenor Harry Allen (from the University of Auckland) lamented that while a number of aspects of the expedition had been covered in various articles, there was, 'as yet, no recent discussion of the expedition available'.¹

The 170th anniversary of the expedition will be marked in 2026, shortly after the completion of the major project Berlin's Australian Archive: Addressing the colonial legacies of natural history, which ran from 2022 to 2025. To help mark those milestones, I now present a new narrative for the expedition. This account focuses on key elements of the expedition until its winding up in December 1857, including lodgement of the natural history collections at the museum in Melbourne by January 1858.

¹ Allen, H. (2009). Introduction: Looking again at William Blandowski. *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Victoria*, 121(1), p. 2.

This account is drawn from my research interests in zoological collections and the history of the museum from the 1850s to the 1890s. This work has been carried out over the past 20 years, which has allowed valuable time for reappraisal and reflection. My hope is for this paper to provide a useful history of the museum's first place-based interdisciplinary partnership with First Peoples (and hopefully in turn lead to further discussions).²

The research has involved revisiting old sources of information about Blandowski's expedition to the lower Murray and attempting to reassemble all of the surviving evidence about the expedition from various Australian and European institutions.³ A number of newly uncovered collections and associated records have resulted from recent work on the Berlin's Australian Archive project, which involved collection surveys at key institutions in the German capital.

Crucial records relating to the expedition that were known to exist at one time are currently missing and remain to be traced, or must now be considered lost or destroyed. Examples include the daily diaries of Blandowski and his second-in-charge Gerard Krefft (a rough written narrative by Krefft exists, but only covers the expedition from its starting point in Melbourne in December 1856 to a staging point at Lake Boga in March 1857); a large number of official letters and progress reports to the Surveyor-General's Office and other state government agencies; a vital set of archives about different First Peoples groups in the region and their cultures; and many of the original field sketches and illustrations, including all of Blandowski's original photography from the expedition.

This account intends to build on the previous efforts of others in the field and several recently published monographic works.⁴

The Museum of Natural History was established in 1854; however, Victorian government-wide funding cuts during 1855 saw museum operations curtailed. By mid-1856, the struggling museum had been physically relocated to the University of Melbourne, where Frederick McCoy took over and transformed the organisation into the Public Museum (later known as the National Museum) at the University. Blandowski was deposed as museum curator, lost control of the institution and was effectively sidelined.⁵

Blandowski retained an official position in the Victorian public servant lists as an assistant surveyor in the Surveyor-General's Department (under Andrew Clarke) and continued in his role as government zoologist. He still had some authority to contribute to museum collections and was eventually able to negotiate with the government to undertake a fourth and final expedition into the Victorian regions — on this occasion to north-western Victoria from December 1856 to December 1857.

² The preferred naming convention used at Museums Victoria for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is 'First Peoples'.

³ The area that Blandowski referred to as 'Lower Murray' is now known as 'central Murray'.

⁴ These major works include: Allen, H., & Weldon, E. A. (2009). (Eds). Special issue on Blandowski's expedition to the Murray River: European naturalists and their contribution to science in Australia between 1850 and 1859. *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Victoria*, 121(1), pp. 1–204; Allen, H. (2010). (Ed.). *Australia: William Blandowski's illustrated encyclopaedia of Aboriginal Australia*. Aboriginal Studies Press; and Wosz, E., & Hermannstädter, H. (2013). (Eds). *Naturalista, czyli Wilhelm von Blandowski w Australii / Wilhelm von Blandowski: Ein Naturforscher in Australien*. Muzeum w Gliwice, Gliwice, Poland and Museum für Naturkunde Berlin.

⁵ The institution originally known as the Museum of Natural History developed into the Public Museum or National Museum at the University of Melbourne, and ultimately into what we know today as Museums Victoria.

The Victorian Government, who supplied the funding for this expedition, provided Blandowski with a set of instructions around natural history collecting at the 'junction of the Murray and Darling rivers' for the Public Museum. Blandowski, however, took a much wider and more interdisciplinary approach, particularly regarding his relationships with First Peoples.



Figure 1: W.v. Blandowski, Gleiwitz [Photographic self portrait], 1869. Source: Museum für Naturkunde Berlin, Ornithologische Sammlung, Registration: Zool. Mus., Orn. 18,5.

This paper aims to clarify the expedition's route from Melbourne to the 'junction' and back, and the 12-month-long journey in between. The expedition has previously been presented as an episode which primarily took place at the river junction (or more precisely at a location which was known to local First Peoples as Mondellimin, near present-day Merbein and Mildura). This overlooks the important episodes which took place at the first expedition base camp at Gunbower (over two months from January to February 1857), as well as the intervening journey along the central Murray, before they reached the better-known camp at Mondellimin (where they spent eight months from April to December 1857). The study also takes a closer look at expedition work on both the Victorian and New South Wales sides of the central Murray, together with activities in New South Wales on the lower Darling.

The expedition relied on a small team led by Blandowski and his second-in-charge, Gerard Krefft. This team included a succession of behind-the-scenes workers who laboured throughout the expedition, and I have attempted to identify some of these previously unknown Europeans. The expeditioners worked with different First Peoples groups at each stage, and were especially immersed with the groups living in the Gunbower and Mondellimin vicinities. I have tried to raise the profile of each of these First Peoples groups, who were responsible for collecting many of the natural history specimens and for sharing associated knowledge through the different seasons on Country. I have also tried to identify individual First Peoples along the way where possible, noting that they were integral to the expedition's success.



Figure 2: Gerard Krefft, Naturalist [Photographic portrait], 1850s. Photographer not known. Source: Australian Museum Archives, V7359.

Blandowski's expedition of 1856–1857 took place at a moment in time. His central Murray expedition occurred 20 years after Thomas Mitchell conducted his 'Third Expedition' to the Murray and Darling rivers in 1836, and some 10–25 years after Charles Sturt completed his expeditions to the region (the 'Second Expedition' from 1829 to 1830 and the 'Third Expedition' from 1844 to 1846). Despite the years that had passed, Blandowski drew on the experiences of both these European explorers to help shape his own expedition.

In the years between the expeditions of Mitchell and Sturt and Blandowski's own expedition, the region had undergone major change. Squatters had taken over lands for large sheep and cattle stations (occupying much of the frontage along the rivers), land clearing and timber cutting had resulted in loss of original forest and bushland, and waterways were altered by the destruction of reed beds and removal of snags to make way for riverboat traffic and encroaching agriculture. Each of these changes had different effects on the natural history that Blandowski's team was to see.

Blandowski and Krefft witnessed First Peoples' living culture as it endured in 1856–1857. First Peoples were largely displaced by squatting, with their access to traditional hunting, fishing and ceremonial grounds affected. Dispossession meant that many had little choice but to camp on squatters' properties (where they provided essential labour) or at church missions (where their lives became heavily regulated).

I have retained the use of the original names for the different groups of First Peoples that Blandowski and Krefft recorded at particular places and times along the central Murray and lower Darling rivers. These names include the 'Gunbowers or Loddon tribe' met at Gunbower Station in January–February 1857, the 'Yarree Yarree Aborigines' or 'Murray natives' at Yerre Yerre Station in April–December 1857, the 'Darling tribe' at Yelta mission and near the junction of the Murray and Darling rivers in the same period, and 'Wombangee' on the lower Darling in May–June 1857. I have not included portraits of any individual First Peoples who were identified or named during the expedition. Further engagement with relevant First Peoples communities in north-western Victoria and south-western New South Wales is needed to determine the affiliations of the historic groups with present-day Traditional Owner groups, and identities of individuals.

I have noted a number of First Peoples' cultural practices which were observed and recorded; however, I have refrained from providing detailed descriptions. Some of these practices include *Typha* or bulrush harvesting and fibre making, large fish- and duck-net manufacture (and the trade in these cultural belongings along the rivers), canoe-making, animal hunting and collecting methods, and names for animals. These are cultural stories for the relevant First Peoples communities to hold and share.

In their landmark 2019 publication *Australia's First Naturalists: Indigenous peoples' contribution to early zoology*, Penny Olsen (Australian National University) and Lynette Russell (Monash University) stated that Blandowski was '*perhaps the first European to employ whole Indigenous Australian tribes, purely as collectors of animals*', and that he was among the '*most successful natural history collectors who recognised that many of the Indigenous people not only made superb guides but also were reliable collectors of specimens and sources of information on animals*'.⁶ This paper affirms their assessment of the significance of First Peoples' contributions to the outcomes of Blandowski's expedition to the central Murray in 1856–1857.

The lower Murray expedition, 1856–1857

Part 1 – Background to the expedition to the central Murray

The Museum of Natural History in Melbourne opened in March 1854, as part of the Surveyor-General's Department, with initial funding of £2,000 from the Victorian Government. William Blandowski was appointed as the founding curator and also held the role of government zoologist.

In the Museum's first two years of operation, Blandowski undertook three expeditions around Victoria to build natural history collections: central Victoria (1854), Mornington Peninsula and Western Port (1854–1855) and Mount Macedon (1855).⁷ These expeditions gave him a wealth of experience working in regional areas and partnering with local First Peoples in the search for collections and knowledge.

In mid-1856, Blandowski faced major challenges as funding from the Victorian Government dried up and the Museum of Natural History was taken out of his

⁶ Olsen, P. & Russell, L. (2019). *Australia's First Naturalists: Indigenous Peoples' Contribution to Early Zoology*. National Library of Australia Publishing, p. 73 and p. 132.

⁷ Details of Blandowski's first three Victorian expeditions were provided in Darragh, T. A. (2009). William Blandowski: A frustrated life. *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Victoria*, 121(1), p. 33–38.

curatorial control and relocated to the University of Melbourne (with professor of natural science Frederick McCoy taking over). Blandowski was effectively sidelined and left without meaningful employment.

The respective approaches of Blandowski and McCoy to building the museum and its collections were entirely different. Blandowski had more modest ambitions, focusing on Victorian natural history, and was willing to travel throughout the state and endure hardships to build up reference collections ready for later study. McCoy had grander desires, envisioning a 'national museum' with large collections of comparative material from throughout Australia and overseas. He was unwilling to travel any distance for fieldwork, preferring to remain at his study desk and relying on others to bring him collections. In a critical tone, McCoy described Blandowski as '*best fitted for work in the field*' and '*unwilling to attempt the naming or literary investigation of the objects, as it requires much patient study in the closet and a large library*'.⁸

In August 1856 Blandowski sought approval from Surveyor-General Andrew Clarke to resume his expeditions, and in-principle approval was quickly granted. Blandowski later reported that '*Capt. Clarke (vide letter of 15th August 1856) wished to have me out of town with all speed, and he accordingly offered me a small party under the mask of an Exploring Expedition*'.⁹

In October 1856 Blandowski received advice from Clarke about support for the expedition. Funding was to be drawn against the existing museum budget and was limited to Blandowski's existing salary (£400 per year), salary for a party of three labourers (£15 per month each) and a field allowance (£300 per year) meant to cover all other expenses.¹⁰ Blandowski received final instructions for the central Murray expedition on 2 December 1856:

*I received orders from the Government to proceed to the junction of the Darling and Murray Rivers, for the purpose of making investigations on the natural history of that district, and also, with a view of collecting as many specimens as possible for the National Museum, and marking the distribution of animal life along the route.*¹¹

Part 2 – Departure of the expedition

Blandowski reported that:

*I left Melbourne on the 6th December, 1856, with a very complete field equipment, consisting of five horses, two bullocks, two drays, four tents, a full set of tools and implements, and also a photographic apparatus.*¹²

⁸ McCoy, F. (1855, June 29). [Letter to colonial secretary William Haines]. Public Record Office Victoria. (Letter 55/8337 in File 55-12888, Unit 205, VPRS 1189/P0000, Colonial Secretary – Inwards Correspondence).

⁹ Blandowski, W. (1860, October 5). [Letter to governor Henry Barkly.] Public Record Office Victoria (Letter 61/273 in File 70-13610, Unit 470, VPRS 3991/P0000, Chief Secretary – Inwards Correspondence).

¹⁰ Clarke, A. (1856, October 14). [Copy of Letter 56/1051, Surveyor-General Andrew Clarke to W. Blandowski, in File 58/2282, secretary of the Board of Science Robert Brough Smyth to chief secretary William Haines, Report of the Board of Science and minutes of evidence]. Museums Victoria Archives.

¹¹ Blandowski, W. (1858). Recent discoveries in natural history on the lower Murray. *Transactions of the Philosophical Institute of Victoria, from September to December, 1857, inclusive*, 2(2), p. 125.

¹² The well-equipped expedition party is illustrated on Plate 20 in Blandowski, W. (1862). *Australien in 142 photographischen Abbildungen nach zehnjährigen Erfahrungen zusammengestellt von Wilhelm v. Blandowski*. Gustav Neuman.

The expedition team departing Melbourne included three other men: Gerard Krefft (an artist who had come to Blandowski's attention at the Public Library in Melbourne), Ninian Batchelor (taxidermist) and '*a young gentleman, Mr Tuck*'. As the expedition progressed, team members successively left and joined.¹³

'Young Mr Tuck' has now been identified as Gustav Tulk, eldest son of the librarian of the Public Library in Melbourne, Augustus Tulk. Young Gustav was about 16–17 years old at the time of the expedition's departure.

The expedition travelled northwards from Melbourne, passing through the townships of Kaylor, Sunbury and Lancefield. They crossed over the Great Dividing Range and followed along the Campaspe River to near its junction with the Murray River at Echuca (where Krefft reported that '*bushfires were raging in all directions and impeded our progress several times*'). Three weeks after leaving Melbourne, the expedition approached their first base camp at Gunbower.¹⁴

Part 3 – Gunbower base camp

On 28 December 1856, the expedition stopped by Gunbower Island, which was bordered by Gunbower Creek on the south side and the Murray River on the north. They set up a camp on a tight and narrow bend of Gunbower Creek and stayed for two months.

The Gunbower base camp was established beside the main homestead of Gunbower Station, held by absentee squatter George Houston with day-to-day management from Robert Gardiner. The station covered 180,000 acres [72,850 hectares] and carried 8,500 sheep at the time.¹⁵

The original location of the base camp has been confirmed — it was situated between the present-day townships of Gunbower and Leitchville. The station homestead was located approximately 3 kilometres from the eastern shores of Kow Swamp.¹⁶

Krefft provided a total count of First Peoples at Gunbower Station at the time: 45 people at what he referred to as '*Gardiner's Station*' (the main homestead) plus another 12 people at '*Gardiner's Out-Station*' (likely a second homestead or shepherd's hut on the west side of the station).¹⁷

Blandowski recorded the identity of the First Peoples group that they met at Gunbower Station as the '*Gunbowers or Loddon tribe*', while Krefft referred to them as one of the '*tribes inhabiting the reed beds*'.¹⁸

Krefft reported that on the day after the expedition arrived at Gunbower, '*a host of men, women and children arrived who made their mia mias not 15 yards from our tent*' and that they became involved in natural history collecting almost immediately. An initial focus was birds and mammals, and as '*almost all the natives carried firearms*' and

¹³ For example, Blandowski's regular driver, James Manson, later joined the expedition at Mount Hope, replacing Batchelor.

¹⁴ Maps showing the expedition route and key locations were provided in: Allen, H. (2009) Figure 1; and Allen, H. (2010). Editor's note. In H. Allen (Ed.), *Australia: William Blandowski's Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Aboriginal Australia* (p. vi). Aboriginal Studies Press.

¹⁵ See Billis, R. V., & Kenyon, A. S. (1974). *Pastoral Pioneers of Port Phillip* (2nd ed.). Stockland Press. Gunbower Station was previously held by George Rowan and managed by John Hinkins. An account of Gunbower Station life from 1845–1847 and interactions with local First Peoples is provided in Hinkins, J. T. (1884). *Life Amongst the Native Race: With Extracts from a Diary*. Haase, McQueen & Co.

¹⁶ The only known illustration of the main Gunbower station homestead and base camp site at the time is considered to be an original watercolour by Krefft, G. (circa 1857). *Station on the Murray*. Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW, PXD-9.

¹⁷ Krefft, G. (1866b). On the manners and customs of the Aborigines of the lower Murray and Darling, *Transactions of the Philosophical Society of New South Wales, 1862–1865*, p. 358.

¹⁸ Blandowski, W. (1858), p. 136; Krefft, G. (1866b), p. 361.



Figure 3: *Station on the Murray* [Watercolour on paper, probably showing Gunbower Station, on Gunbower Creek, in January–February 1857], not dated. Gerard Krefft. Source: Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales, reg. no. PXD 9/25.

Blandowski was initially offering 'about 1 shilling for each skin', the flow of specimens into camp soon became overwhelming. The terms of exchange were rapidly switched to supplies such as flour, sugar, tea and tobacco.¹⁹

The expedition soon established a regular daily routine: observing killed and living animals brought in by First Peoples, preparing illustrations, and preserving specimens by skinning, drying, stuffing or pickling in spirits for eventual transfer to the museum in Melbourne.

One of the main First Peoples guides, collectors and knowledge-holders for the expedition at Gunbower (and one of the few First Peoples participating in the expedition whose identity is known) was a senior man named Sergeant (his First Peoples name is not known).²⁰

Sergeant took a group of 10 First Peoples and escorted Krefft on a short excursion from the Gunbower camp to Mount Hope and Pyramid Hill. Their hunt focused on several large animals (Red Kangaroo, Dingo and Emu) that were uncommon at Gunbower at the time, but that First Peoples guides knew could be found further inland.

¹⁹ Krefft, G. (circa 1857–1858). *Narrative of an exploring expedition led by W. Blandowski, 1856–7* [Unpublished manuscript]. Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales, A.267 & A.268. This unpublished narrative provides an almost daily account of the expedition at Gunbower.

²⁰ For an original watercolour portrait by Krefft, see: Krefft, G. (1857). *Sergeant, Gunbower Creek, February 1857*. Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales, PXD-9.

The expedition here relied on First Peoples partners to find rare, unusual, cryptic or nocturnal animals (and this remained the case throughout the expedition). This significantly expanded the scope of the collecting and the number of different animals collected. First Peoples were also willing to share their own cultural knowledge about the different animals, including many First Peoples names for each variety.

First Peoples would not collect all animals, and there was a taboo on killing bats at Gunbower. When Krefft captured an unusual 'little grinning bat' (probably the Eastern Horseshoe Bat, *Rhinolophus megaphyllus*), a First Peoples man 'begged very hard for the little creature's life'. Krefft promised to let it go but then waited until the man was out of sight before wilfully killing it. Krefft recalled some years later that, 'There was a regular row about it and the bat was held up, examined, and passed from hand to hand', with First Peoples in camp all agreeing that 'the expedition on which I was then engaged would come to grief'.²¹

Krefft showed his unflinching determination to collect these protected animals, and in doing so he ignored the explicit wishes of the local First Peoples and was willing to incur their wrath. Krefft's actions contributed to a rise in tensions with the First Peoples at Gunbower, and this would have hindered Blandowski's efforts to build a respectful and trusting partnership.

Blandowski and Krefft observed summer activities in the Gunbower area during January–March 1857, when the water level in the creek was dropping and swamps and billabongs were drying out. A major activity observed at Gunbower was the seasonal harvesting of *Typha* bulrushes (known by the local First Peoples name 'Wongal' or 'Vangall'), production of fibre and twine, and making of large duck nets, fish nets and other cultural belongings.²² The expedition left the Gunbower base camp on 1 March 1857.

Part 4 – Travel along the Central Murray

Blandowski's expedition route was informed by European explorers who had gone before. Krefft complained that the expedition had to carry Blandowski's extensive library, 'including all the exploring expeditions from Sturt to Leichardt'.²³ Among these books were Mitchell's *Three Expeditions into the Interior of Eastern Australia* (1839), and Sturt's *Two Expeditions into the Interior of Southern Australia* (1834) and *Narrative of an Expedition into Central Australia* (1849), which each held vital information about navigating the Murray and Darling rivers.²⁴ Mitchell's accounts proved invaluable, and several of the lower Murray expedition accounts mention following Mitchell's old tracks on both sides of the Murray River.

²¹ Krefft, G. (circa 1857–1858); Krefft, G. (1873, 6 December). Natural history – the bat tribe (continued). *The Sydney Mail and New South Wales Advertiser*, p. 725.

²² The harvesting and use of *Typha* was illustrated on Plates 32 and 41 of Blandowski, W. (1862).

²³ Krefft, G. (circa 1857–1858).

²⁴ Blandowski's personal library held copies of the following key references: Mitchell, T. L. (1839). *Three expeditions into the interior of eastern Australia, with descriptions of the recently explored region of Australia Felix and of the present colony of New South Wales* (2nd ed.). T. & W. Boone, two volumes; Sturt, C. (1834). *Two expeditions into the interior of southern Australia, during the years 1828, 1829, 1830, and 1831, with observations on the soil, climate, and general resources of the colony of New South Wales*. Smith & Elder, two volumes; and Sturt, C. (1849). *Narrative of an expedition into central Australia, performed under the authority of Her Majesty's government, during the years 1844, 5, and 6*. T. & W. Boone, two volumes.

By the time that Blandowski's expedition arrived on the central Murray, some 20 years after Mitchell had travelled through, all the frontage along the river had been taken over by squatters and turned into very large sheep and cattle stations. In the process, First Peoples were displaced from their Country and the environment was drastically altered.

Between leaving the first base camp at Gunbower on 1 March and arriving at the second base camp at Mondellimin on 8 April 1857, Blandowski's expedition successively passed from station to station, encountering different First Peoples groups and gathering different collections and knowledge.

From Gunbower in the east to Mondellimin in the west, this series of stations and collecting localities included: Campbell's Gannawarra Station, Ebden and Keene's Reedy Lake Station, Beveridge's Tyntyndyer Station, Coghill's Piangil Station, Hamilton's Narrung Station, McCallum's Youngera Station, Grant's Bumbang Station, Morey's Euston Station (New South Wales side of the Murray River), Keane and Orr's Kulkyne Station, and McGrath's Carwarp Station.²⁵

In March 1857 the expedition paused at Lake Boga, the former site of a Moravian church mission which had been set up by two missionaries, Andreas Täger and Friedrich Spieseke, and had operated from about October 1851 to July 1856. The expedition noted the deserted nature of the mission, abandoned by the missionaries approximately eight months earlier.²⁶

The expedition journeyed along the Victorian side of the Murray, except for a shortcut into New South Wales to present-day Euston, to visit Morey's Euston Station and a nearby small settlement which included a Native Police force controlled by Crown Lands Commissioner Stephen Cole. This shortcut would have saved some travelling distance and avoided rough travel through dense Mallee scrub and sandhills on the Victorian side. The expedition passed back into Victoria in the vicinity of Keane and Orr's Kulkyne Station (near present-day Kulkyne).

Part 5 – Mondellimin base camp

The expedition stopped short of the Murray and Darling rivers junction, and on 8 April 1857 established a base camp 'at a place called by the natives Mondellimin' where they remained for eight months.²⁷

The Mondellimin camp was set up on a sheltered landing area on the Victorian side of the Murray River (now known as Blandowski Walk or Chaffey Landing, near Merbein). The camp was located on Hugh and Bushby Jamieson's Yerre Yerre Station (later renamed Mildura Station) and roughly 6 kilometres away from the Jamieson brothers' main station homestead.²⁸

²⁵ A full list of the pastoral stations that the expedition passed by, and a count of the number of First Peoples encountered at each station, is included in Krefft, G. (1866b), pp. 358–359.

²⁶ For a history of the Lake Boga Moravian mission, see: Jenz, F. (2010). *German Moravian missionaries in the British colony of Victoria, Australia, 1848–1908: Influential strangers*. Brill. Especially Chapter 3, Lake Boga – A putrid stain, pp. 71–105; and Kenny, R. (2003). La Trobe, Lake Boga and the 'enemy of souls': The first Moravian mission in Australia. *La Trobe Journal*, 71, pp. 97–113.

²⁷ Blandowski, W. (1858), p. 126. The Mondellimin camp was illustrated on Plate 21 in Blandowski, W. (1862); and also in Mr Blandowski's encampment on the Lower Murray. (1858, 6 February). *Illustrated Melbourne News*, p. 65.

²⁸ The location of the Mondellimin camp was identified in Orchard, K. (1997). Regional botany in mid-nineteenth century Australia: Mueller's Murray River collecting network. *Historical Records of Australian Science*, 11(3), pp. 389–405.

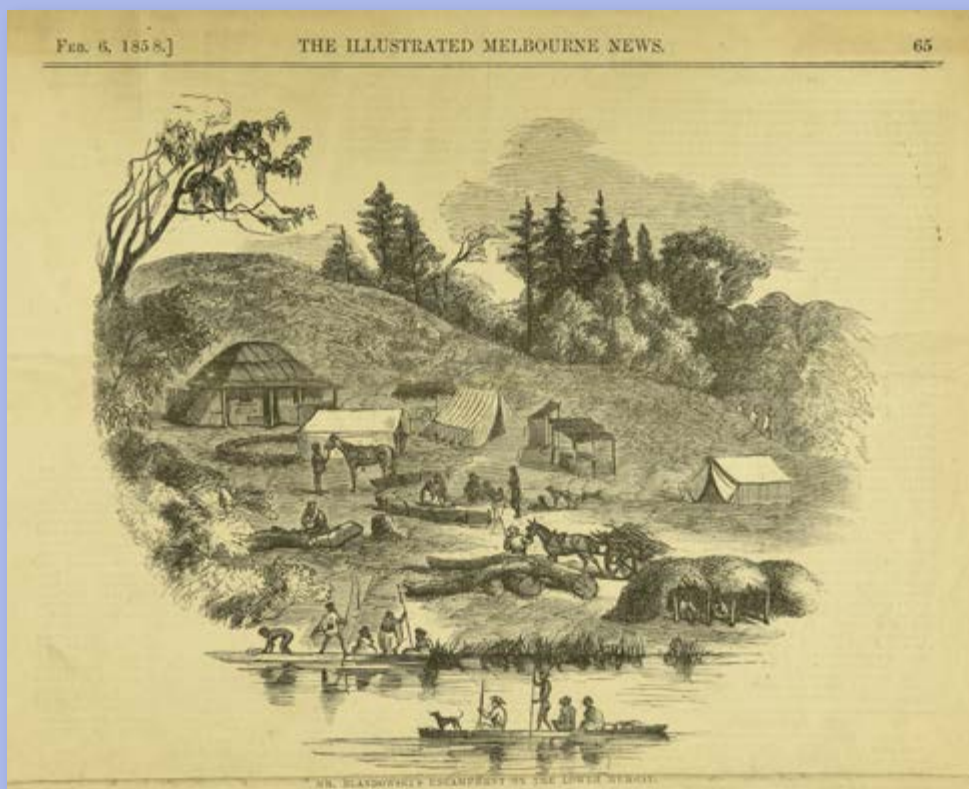


Figure 4: *Mr Blandowski's encampment on the Lower Murray* [Wood engraving], circa 1857–1858. Gerard Krefft (artist attributed) (engraver not known). *The Illustrated Melbourne News*, 6 February 1858, page 65. Source: Museum für Naturkunde Berlin, Historische Arbeitsstelle, Blandowski Collection, Collection ID B001-03-361.



Figure 5: *Gall Gall Station, the property of Mess. J. H. Williams, Lower Murray* [Watercolour on paper showing Gol Gol Station, occupied by John Williams, his wife Elizabeth and his brother Henry], 1857. Gerard Krefft. Source: Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales, reg. no. PXD 9/29.

The camp was directly opposite the station of John Williams, his wife Elizabeth and his brother Henry, which was on the New South Wales bank of the Murray River and known as Gol Gol Station.²⁹ Figure 5 shows Krefft's view from the Mondellimin campsite across the river to the Gol Gol Station's main homestead.

Krefft counted a combined total of 35 First Peoples living on the Williams's 30,000 acre [12,140 hectare] cattle station on the New South Wales side of the river and the Jamiesons' 150,000 acre [60,702 hectare] sheep station on the Victorian side. The First Peoples group encountered there at the time was living on both sides of the Murray River.

Blandowski recorded the identity of the First Peoples group that they met at Mondellimin as the 'Yarree Yarree Aborigines' and Krefft also described this group as 'Murray natives'.³⁰

Krefft described the initial encounters:

*in a few days some twenty of them, including men, women, and children, were assembled near our huts; they could not at first understand what brought us there, but when we purchused some of the native animals captured by them, they ever after brought in a good supply and became our permanent huntsmen. The boys would go out to collect insects, the women to look for small mammals, and the men looking for the larger game.*³¹

Blandowski reported on the formation of the mammal collections there:

*they are entirely the results of the exertions of my friends the Yarree Yarree Aborigines, and for which I have given them flour, sugar, tea, blankets, clothing, and other small presents, amounting in all to about £200 in value.*³²

The identity of two First Peoples partners at Mondellimin is known — their European names were provided, but their First Peoples names remain untraced. Krefft prepared two watercolour sketches of Jimmy Bigfoot carrying a large kangaroo into camp (one sketch for Blandowski's portfolio, and a copy that Krefft retained in his personal collection).³³

Krefft also mentioned 'a man named Piper ... who was then about 25 years of age'. This appears to be the same man that Krefft referred to in a later newspaper account, where he described 'a man named Youngman Piper, a relation of Sir Thomas Mitchell's famous companion Piper [who] accompanied me during several excursions on the Lower

²⁹ An original watercolour illustration by Krefft, G. (1857). Gall Gall station the property of Messrs J. & H. Williams is held in the Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW, PXD-9. Details of Williams's Gol Gol Station are from Whitworth, R. P. (1866). *Bailliere's New South Wales Gazetteer and Road Guide*. Bailliere: Sydney, p. 213; and details of Jamieson's Yerre Yerre Station are from Anon, (1848, 12 December). Supplementary list of claims to leases of Crown Land beyond the settled districts, Wimmera District, *The Argus*, pp. 1–2. The location of the old Gol Gol Station homestead is near present-day Coomealla, not at the site of the current Gol Gol township.

³⁰ Blandowski, W. (1858), p. 136; Krefft, G. (1866a). On the vertebrated animals of the lower Murray and Darling, their habits, economy, and geographical distribution. *Transactions of the Philosophical Society of New South Wales, 1862–1865*, pp. 1–33.

³¹ Krefft, G. (1866b), pp. 364–365.

³² Blandowski, W. (1858), p. 136.

³³ The Krefft illustration of Jimmy Bigfoot is held in the National Gallery of Australia (Accession Number 86.1942A&B), with a copy at the Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW (PXD-9). The image was also incorporated into an artistic representation of the Mondellimin camp which appears as Plate 22 in Blandowski, W. (1862).

Murray'.³⁴ The possible connection between Youngman Piper and another Piper (guide, diplomat and translator for Mitchell during his three major expeditions in south-eastern Australia between 1836 and 1846) is intriguing and remains to be researched.

The expedition remained at Mondellimin for eight months, building a strong and enduring partnership with the Yarree Yarree in particular, and assembling significant natural history collections and associated knowledge (including records of First Peoples' knowledge of natural history and their names for animals).³⁵

Part 6 – Excursions from Mondellimin and Blandowski's return to Melbourne

Whilst based at Mondellimin, Blandowski completed two major excursions. He explained his rationale for leaving camp and exploring the surrounding country in an earlier expedition proposal:

*I for my person would be entirely engaged in searching and investigating the country within a radius of 50 miles around the camp including an area of about 2000 to 3000 square miles.*³⁶

Blandowski's first excursion was for three weeks in April–May 1857, 'for the purpose of examining the banks of the river westwards along the Murray, to the neighbourhood of Moorundee [sic]'. He estimated the total distance covered was over 600 miles [965 kilometres]. Moorundie (near present-day Blanchetown, South Australia) had been a First Peoples ration depot operated by Edward John Eyre (protector of Aborigines and resident magistrate) from 1841–1844, as well as a staging post for Charles Sturt during his expedition to central Australia in 1844–1846.

Blandowski's second excursion was for 24 days in May–June 1857, 'up the Darling River towards Mount Murchison'. He estimated the total distance covered was 700 miles [1,125 kilometres]. He visited Hugh and Bushby Jamieson's second property, Mount Murchison Station (near present-day Wilcannia), attracted by the fact that the station at the time sat on the edge of the 'unsettled districts' on colonial maps.³⁷ Blandowski recorded the identity of the First Peoples group that he met at Mount Murchison as the 'Wombangee tribe, Darling River'.

Given the extended distances, the difficult terrain and the need to pass through various First Peoples' Country, it is unlikely that Blandowski travelled alone and is more likely that he was assisted by First Peoples guides.

Following the excursions, Blandowski rejoined the expedition team at Mondellimin from about 20 June 1857.

³⁴ Krefft, G. (1866b), p. 372; see also Krefft, G. (1873, 16 August). Natural history – savages, fossil and recent. *The Sydney Mail and NSW Advertiser*, p. 210.

³⁵ A significant collection of Krefft's original sketches of animals collected at Mondellimin and annotated with 'Yarree Yarree native names' is held in the Museum für Naturkunde Berlin.

³⁶ Blandowski, W. (1855, August 13). [Letter to surveyor general Andrew Clarke, re: propositions for the management of the Museum of Natural History]. Public Record Office Victoria (Letter 55/11008 in Unit 197, VPRS 1189/P0000, Colonial Secretary – Inward Registered Correspondence).

³⁷ Blandowski, W. (1858), p. 126.



Figure 6: *View on the Lower Darling: the Albury, Steamer, at Wentworth* [Hand-coloured engraving], circa 1872. Hoddell and Butcher. Source: *Town and Country Journal*. Private collection.

Blandowski left Mondellimin to return to Melbourne on 6 August 1857. By August, water levels in the Murray were sufficiently high (due to snows beginning to melt in the Victorian Alps and meltwaters starting to flow into the upper Murray) and riverboats had begun their seasonal operations again. Figure 6 shows the River Murray Navigation Company's steamer *Albury*, which picked up Blandowski at Mondellimin and took him down the river as far as Goolwa. From Goolwa, Blandowski sailed to Port Adelaide on the *Corio* and then across to Melbourne on the *Havilah* (arriving on 18 August 1857).³⁸

Blandowski returned with several consignments of natural history collections destined for the Public Museum (probably the specimens accumulating at Mondellimin from about May to August 1857). He had been away from Melbourne for more than eight months, and would have needed to provide a progress report to the new Surveyor-General George Darbyshire and other stakeholders in the government, including the president of the Board of Lands and Works David Moore, in his efforts to try to obtain further support and funding to keep the expedition going.

³⁸ Blandowski, W. (1858), p. 126.

Part 7 – Krefft left in charge of the Mondellimin camp

With Blandowski away in Melbourne, Krefft was left in charge of daily operations at the Mondellimin camp and appears to have gained a certain degree of independence.

Krefft visited the Yelta Church of England mission, located about 10 kilometres downstream from the Mondellimin camp on the Victorian side of the Murray River, close to the junction of the Murray and Darling rivers. The mission was established in 1855 by Reverend Thomas Goodwin and his assistant John Bulmer, and operated until 1868. Most of the First Peoples camped at Yelta at the time were considered to be from the 'Marowra tribe' (or 'Darling tribe') and originated from the northern side of the Murray River and the lower Darling.³⁹

Krefft counted 35 First Peoples at the 'Darling Junction', which likely included the people living at Yelta mission. Among the First Peoples that Krefft met at Yelta and inhabiting the country near the Darling junction was 'Old Jacob, a Darling chief', who shared cultural knowledge (his First Peoples name is not known). In July 1857, Krefft and Goodwin observed a large seasonal corroboree on the New South Wales side of the Murray River and on the lower Darling, which involved about 200 First Peoples and included Old Jacob.⁴⁰

Krefft also visited other localities on the lower Darling, interacting with the 'Darling tribe(s)' there and recording cultural knowledge. He visited at least two large stations on the lower Darling: Dugald Fletcher's Tapio Station and James Scott's Para Station, approximately '30 miles' [48 kilometres] and '68 miles' [109 kilometres] above the Murray-Darling junction respectively.⁴¹

The expedition was searching for specimens of one of the small mammals on the lower Darling — the Numbat *Myrmecobius fasciatus* — and Krefft reported that 'A quarrel existed between the Darling natives and the [Murray] tribe which accompanied me, so that I was not able to procure any live specimens of this singular animal'. This indicates that Krefft was gathering collections and knowledge near the Murray and Darling junction from both the 'Murray tribe' and the 'Darling tribe'.

Part 8 – Blandowski reports on expedition progress

Soon after arriving back in Melbourne on 18 August 1857, Blandowski presented his *Preliminary Report to the President of the Board of Lands and Works* to colleagues at the monthly meeting of the Philosophical Institute of Victoria on 2 September 1857. The progress report covered the first eight months of the expedition (December 1856–August 1857).

³⁹ For a history of the Yelta mission see: Massola, A. (1970). *Aboriginal mission stations in Victoria: Yelta, Ebenezer, Ramahyuck, Lake Condah*. Hawthorn Press; and Shaw, E. (1957). *Early days among the Aborigines: The story of Yelta and Coranderk missions*. Barr.

⁴⁰ Krefft, G. (1866b), p. 359, pp. 366–367; Thomas Goodwin provided some further information on Old Jacob and his death in 1857: 'Jacob was a fine old man ... He was a great warrior, and looked upon with fear by the rest of the tribe ... He appeared healthy and strong to the last, but he died very suddenly of apoplexy' in Church of England. (1858). *Fourth annual report of the Melbourne Church of England mission to the Aborigines of Victoria*. Mason & Firth, p. 10.

⁴¹ Krefft, G. (1866a), p. 12.

Blandowski reported that:

*I now beg to lay before you the result of my labours, observing, in the meantime, that the mechanical part—viz., that of preserving the specimens—was done by my white labourers alone, whilst the specimens were obtained by the assistance of the aborigines, to whom I am indebted for all the information and discoveries I have made, so that I can but claim a small share of the credit of having, with my party, been successfully exploring the desert of Australia for eight months.*⁴²

On 3 September 1857, the Philosophical Institute organised a 'most sumptuous dinner' for 30 gentlemen at Charles Wedel's Criterion Hotel in Collins Street to congratulate Blandowski 'on the zeal he had displayed in conducting his explorations, and in bringing to light the zoology of the country'.⁴³

Whilst Blandowski attempted to shore up support for the continuation of the expedition, Krefft remained working at Mondellimin and occasionally updating Blandowski on new discoveries in the field.

Krefft again relied on First Peoples in the search for the much sought after Pig-footed Bandicoot, *Chaeropus ecaudatus ecaudatus*.⁴⁴ Krefft reported on the capture, which took place on the New South Wales side of the Murray River, in a diary entry for 4 October 1857: 'After returning from a short excursion into the scrub, I fell in with a party of natives who had succeeded, at last, in securing a pair of the *Chaeropus*'.⁴⁵



Figure 7: *Choeropus occidentalis* [Watercolour, ink and pencil on paper, showing what is now known as the Pig-footed Bandicoot, *Chaeropus ecaudatus ecaudatus*], not dated. Gerard Krefft. Source: Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales, reg. no. PXD 132/63. A newly rediscovered illustration, located in James Stuart's album of natural history drawings of marsupials, rodents and reptiles (previously held by the Linnean Society of New South Wales).

⁴² Blandowski, W. (1858), p. 127.

⁴³ Complimentary dinner to Mr W. Blandowski. (1857, 4 September). *The Age*, p. 5.

⁴⁴ Early expedition accounts record the scientific name of the Pig-footed Bandicoot as *Chaeropus ecaudatus*, *C. castanotis* or *C. occidentalis*; however, the current accepted scientific name is *C. ecaudatus ecaudatus* (a subspecies).

⁴⁵ The rare extract from Krefft's diary appears in: Krefft, G. (1866a), p. 12.

The good news took a couple of weeks to reach Blandowski in Melbourne. On 20 October 1857, the *Argus* newspaper reported that: 'We understand that Mr Blandowski has just received information from his assistants that they have succeeded in procuring two living specimens of this remarkable animal, near the junction of the Darling and Murray rivers'. This species was high on Blandowski's wish list of animals to collect from the lower Murray; although he missed seeing live specimens, he eventually saw preserved ones when they were sent down to Melbourne.^{46 47}

Part 9 – The end of the expedition

With Frederick McCoy's expansive plans using up all the Public Museum budget for 1857, and no further provision to cover any more of Blandowski's expedition expenses, McCoy exerted pressure on the government to bring the year-long expedition to an end. On 16 October 1857 David Moore, the president of the Board of Lands and Works, wrote to Blandowski ordering him to discontinue: 'I have to request that you will take immediate measures to recall the labourers at present employed on the Lower Murray'.⁴⁸

Krefft appears to have broken up the base camp at Mondellimin in mid-November 1857 and gradually travelled to Melbourne by an overland route, bringing back all the natural history collections made between August and November 1857, together with all the field equipment (perhaps including what Krefft referred to as Blandowski's 'prancing charger' — his favourite black horse).

Blandowski reported that his remaining team of three men (Krefft, James Manson and Charles Dorgeloh) arrived in Melbourne on 15 December 1857, marking the end of 12 months of fieldwork for the expedition. The three men remained working for Blandowski at his private residence in Melbourne from at least 16 December 1857 to 15 January 1858, continuing to sort and register the last of the collections and finalise the catalogue.⁴⁹

After finishing with Blandowski, Krefft took up a short appointment with McCoy at the museum. Krefft worked for four weeks during February–March 1858 to process, sort and identify the expedition collections. He prepared various 'Lists of Specimens of Natural History to be Kept for the Museum' (including mammals, birds and reptiles) and selected specimens to be stuffed and mounted by the museum taxidermist Charles Fulker.⁵⁰

By January 1858 all the natural history collections from the lower Murray expedition had been delivered to the Public Museum at the University of Melbourne in Carlton, out of Blandowski's hands and into McCoy's possession.

⁴⁶ *Chaeropus ecaudatus*. (1857, 20 October). *The Argus*, p. 5.

⁴⁷ For details see: Stranks, T. (2015). Blandowski and the Pig-footed Bandicoots from his 1857 expedition to the Murray, *Museums Victoria Collections*. <https://collections.museumsvictoria.com.au/articles/14266>

⁴⁸ See: Moore, D. (1857, October 16). [Copy of Letter No. 494, President of the Board of Lands and Works David Moore to W. Blandowski, held in File 58/2282, secretary of Board of Science Robert Brough Smyth to chief secretary John O'Shanassy, Report of the Board of Science and minutes of evidence]. Museums Victoria Archives.

⁴⁹ Blandowski, W. (1858, January 20). [Letter to chief secretary William Haines]. Museums Victoria Archives (Letter No. E765, Chief Secretary – Inwards Correspondence).

⁵⁰ Krefft, G. (1858). [Letter to director of museums Frederick McCoy, seeking employment]. Museums Victoria Archives (Museums Victoria – Inwards Correspondence); and James, J. (1858, January 29). [Letter from museum secretary John James (on behalf of McCoy) to G. Krefft, offering temporary employment]. Museums Victoria Archives (Museums Victoria Letterbook – Outgoing Correspondence).

The animal specimens and associated knowledge now sat some 250–550 kilometres away from their origins on the central Murray and lower Darling rivers, and far away from Country and connections to respective First Peoples communities.

A page bound into the front of the catalogue volume summarises the '17,434 specimens booked under 3,000 numbers' collected at the two main base camps at Gunbower and Mondellimin (and beyond) between December 1856 and December 1857.⁵¹



Figure 5: *Choeropus occidentalis* [Wood engraving on paper, showing what is now known as the Pig-footed Bandicoot, *Choeropus ecaudatus* ecaudatus], circa 1858–1859. Gerard Krefft. Source: Museums Victoria, Scientific Art Collection, reg. no. BA 509. One in a series of artist proofs produced by Krefft (Brunswick, Germany) and enclosed in a letter posted to Frederick McCoy (Melbourne) in 1859.

Part 10 – A postscript: The fish naming scandal

Blandowski felt entirely uncomfortable working at the Public Museum under McCoy and continued to run his curatorial practice from home throughout 1858. Without physical access to the expedition collections, he otherwise kept busy writing reports and preparing illustrations.

Blandowski finalised his preliminary report on the lower Murray expedition to be published in the *Transactions of the Philosophical Institute*. He decided to honour several members of the institute by naming new species of fishes discovered on the expedition after them. In March 1858, when the council of the institute saw the proofs, they immediately objected to the fish descriptions. John Bleasdale and Richard Eades took the strongest offense at the language used to describe the species named after them: *Cernua eadesii* (Silver Perch) and *Brosmius bleasdalii* (River Blackfish) respectively. The former was described as 'a fish easily recognised by its low forehead, big belly and sharp spine', and the latter as 'a slimy, slippery fish, lives in the mud, is of violet bluish colour on the belly'.

⁵¹ See the 'Recapitulation' page in: Blandowski, W., & Krefft, G. (1856–1857). *Catalogue of all specimens of natural history collected by Mr Blandowski's party during an expedition to the lower Murray in 1857*. Museums Victoria Archives.

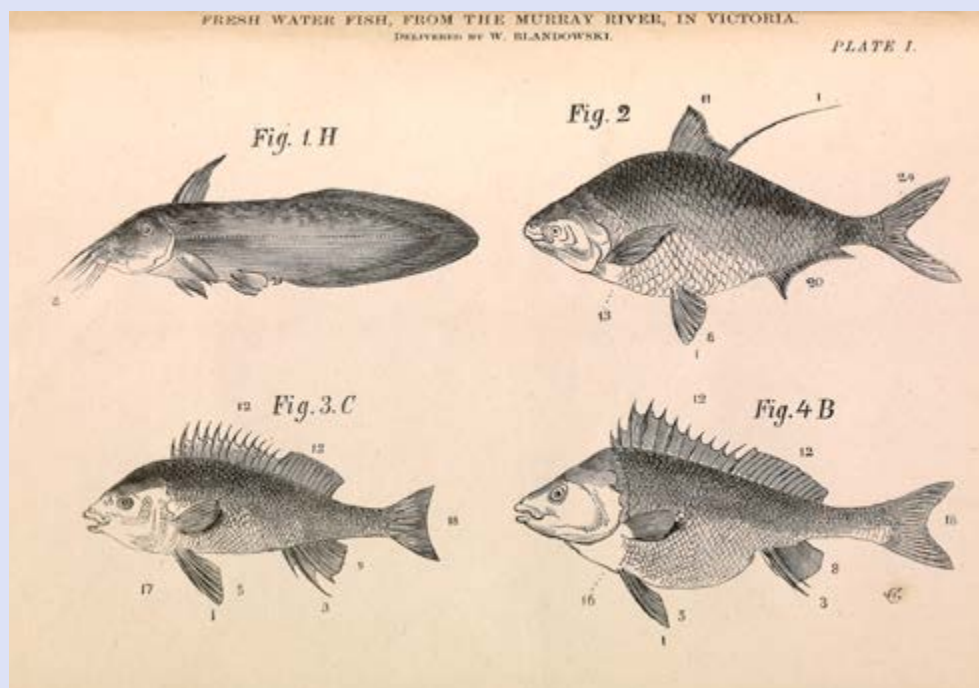


Figure 9: *Fresh Water Fish, from the Murray River, in Victoria, delivered by W. Blandowski – Plate 1* [Wood engraving on paper], circa 1858. Friedrich Grosse (engraving) after Nicholas Chevalier (drawing). Source: Museums Victoria, Scientific Art Collection, reg. no. BA 505. After original field sketches by W. Blandowski. From a series of four plates, featuring the 19 different varieties of fishes recorded in the Murray River by the expedition, which were produced for Blandowski's Preliminary Report in the *Transactions of the Philosophical Institute*. The plates were printed but later suppressed, and never appeared in the *Transactions* published in April 1858. The monograms for both Grosse ('FG') and Chevalier ('NC') appear on these plates, indicating the involvement of both artists. Plate 1, Figure 2 shows *Megalope Caillentassart* [now Bony Bream or Bony Herring, *Nematalosa erebi*] which Blandowski described as a 'fish found in the neighbourhood of Euston' and 'most numerous in the Darling, but also found above and below the junction of the Murray and Darling rivers.'



Figure 10: Bony Bream or Bony Herring, *Nematalosa erebi*. [Preserved and dried specimen], circa 1857. Source: Museums Victoria, Ichthyology Collection, Registration no. A 16515. Photographer: Nishath Nizar. After almost 170 years, this specimen still has one of the species' defining characters (the delicate elongated ray or filament on the dorsal fin) intact.

The episode resulted in a public scandal, and the council decided to suppress the entire section dealing with the 19 varieties of fishes. The preliminary report was finally published in May 1858, including a slip advising that, '*Pages 131-134 inclusive, with four plates, are omitted from this volume of the Transactions, by an order of the Council, of date, 7th April 1858*'.⁵² ⁵³

Conclusion and next steps

Before leaving Melbourne in December 1856, Blandowski received his official commission from the Victorian Government to '*investigate the natural history of the Central Murray, collect as many specimens as possible for the Public Museum in Melbourne, and record animal distributions along the way*'. The extent of the assembled collection provides evidence that the expedition met its primary scientific objectives.

The natural history collection from the expedition was lodged at the Public Museum (which by the time of the expedition was becoming known as the National Museum, situated at the University of Melbourne). A portion of the collection remained at the museum; however, during the late 1850s to mid-1860s Frederick McCoy ordered hundreds of specimens from the expedition to be sent away as part of an exchange program with other museums and institutions (including specimens now considered highly significant, and those that are now classified as extinct or endangered). Work is continuing to track these expedition collections, which are currently dispersed in Australia and overseas.

Many of the expedition's achievements relied on First Peoples collecting animals and bringing them into camp, and First Peoples sharing knowledge about these animals with Blandowski and Krefft. These partnerships provided critical insights into biological diversity, whether a particular species was common or rare, where animals lived, what they ate and how they behaved. Some of the records show that certain animal species were becoming increasingly rare or had even disappeared completely from areas where they were previously known, indicating a concerning level of environmental change even at that time.

Blandowski's interests went far beyond natural history collecting, and his sense of the interconnectedness of different scientific fields meant that he inevitably made extensive observations on First Peoples' culture (and differences he encountered with different groups along the central Murray and lower Darling rivers). His meaningful and enduring partnerships with First Peoples (in particular at Mondellimin and Gunbower) resulted in a mass of cultural information.

Some of Blandowski's and Krefft's knowledge of natural history and First Peoples cultures appeared in brief articles published by both in the decade following the expedition. Other knowledge exists in manuscript form only, such as Blandowski's *Australien in 142 photographischen Abbildungen* produced in 1862 (a limited-run prospectus for a much larger publication on Australia which never eventuated).

⁵² Blandowski, W. (1858).

⁵³ The 'fish scandal' has been covered extensively by several authors, including: Allen, H. (2001). William Blandowski's fish: An ethnohistorical account near the junction of the Murray and Darling Rivers. In: A. Anderson et al. (Eds.), *Histories of old ages: Essays in honour of Rhys Jones* (pp. 211–224). Pandanus Books, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies; Humphries, P. (2003). Blandowski misses out: Ichthyological etiquette in 19th century Australia, *Endeavour*, 27, pp. 160–165; Humphries, P. (2009). Wilhelm Blandowski's contribution to ichthyology of the Murray-Darling Basin, Australia. *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Victoria*, 121(1), pp. 90–108; and Darragh, T. A. (2009), pp. 11–60.

This album includes a series of artistic compositions commissioned from Germany-based artist Gustav Mützel, with many of these based on original field sketches and photographs by Blandowski or Krefft which are now considered lost. Some of the First Peoples' knowledge recorded by Blandowski only existed in an archival holding, which was originally lodged at the Königliche Bibliothek (the Royal Library) in Berlin in the 1880s following Blandowski's death, but is now classified as lost. The loss of knowledge sources such as 'Blandowski's ethnographic archive' is a tragedy; however, the information about First Peoples that still survives in other sources shows the richness of culture in the region during the period, even at what was already a time of displacement and dispossession.

Much work has taken place over the past 20 years to try to determine the fate of the expedition collections and associated archives, including efforts to document what has survived over the years and explore what may have been lost. Limited space here prevents any detailed discussion; however, I have drafted a finding aid (prepared during work on the Berlin's Australian Archive project in 2022–2025, and a companion piece to this paper). Ongoing research will examine collection and archive provenance (including what remains in Melbourne and Berlin), what other material has been distributed around the world and what appears to have been misplaced or entirely lost.



Figure 11: *Hapalotis conditor*, Building Hapalotis [Watercolour and ink on paper, showing what is now known as the Greater Stick-nest Rat, *Leporillus conditor*], circa 1857. Gerard Krefft. Source: Museum für Naturkunde Berlin, Historische Arbeitsstelle, Blandowski Collection, Collection ID B001-03-295 (Old signature ZM_B_VIII_228). This illustration includes a sketch of First Peoples hunting Stick-nest Rats by encircling their nests with long nets (recorded from the lower Darling, 'about 10 miles from the Darling junction'), and a First Peoples name for the rat (recorded from the Yarree Yarree); this cultural knowledge has been redacted pending consultation with relevant First Peoples groups.

In some cases, due to gaps in the expedition records, the detailed information about where and when particular collections and observations were made (and exactly who was involved at the time) is not clear, and studies require a critical and nuanced approach. It is perfectly clear that the collections and archives do not just relate to the expedition's eight months at Mondellimin from April to December 1857. The records also cover the time spent camped at Gunbower for two months from January to February 1857, as well as other locations along the central Murray and lower Darling during the expedition's year-long duration.

These approaches include trying to determine which First Peoples groups were involved as expedition partners at certain times, and on whose Country the expedition was working. This will necessitate work with relevant First Peoples communities to confirm the identities of each of the groups that the expedition met at Gunbower and Mondellimin (and in between, along the central Murray) and those they met on the lower Darling. The historical names for the different groups that the expedition worked with (e.g. 'Gunbower or Loddon tribe', 'Yarree Yarree or Murray tribe' and 'Darling tribe') obviously require updating, but have been retained here pending further work.⁵⁴ In a similar vein, the identities of the few named First Peoples individuals who were instrumental in guiding the expedition at certain points (e.g. 'Sergeant' at Gunbower, 'Jimmy Bigfoot' and 'Piper' at Mondellimin and 'Old Jacob' at Yelta) should be updated with their proper First Peoples names and any biographical information if traceable.

There is value in continuing to uncover as many of the distributed collections and archives as possible, linking them with what we can already access and considering them as a whole (in much the way that Blandowski himself originally did). This re-examination will improve our understanding of the expedition, and there is important information still to be gleaned from the faunal collections and documentation, along with the records of First Peoples' lives along the Murray and Darling rivers.

Blandowski's expedition in 1856–1857 was the fourth and final time that he 'went bush' in Victoria on a museum expedition, leaving Melbourne to immerse himself in life along the central Murray and lower Darling rivers. On 17 March 1859, he departed Victoria and sailed back to Europe, hoping to write up and publish his comprehensive studies about the Australian land and its peoples. Shortly afterwards, on 28 March 1859, Ferdinand Mueller, as president of the Philosophical Institute of Victoria, gave an annual address to the members of the institute, acknowledging Blandowski's contributions and sending good wishes:

*Having spent almost ten years of toil in advancing our insight into the singularities of nature which here surround us, Blandowski left our shores to enter ... upon a new, and may we trust a fruitful field for his researches.*⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Further community consultation is required with relevant Traditional Owners affiliated with Gunbower and the surrounding neighbourhood where the expedition worked (including Yorta Yorta, Barapa Barapa and Wamba Wamba groups who have interests in the area); and for those in the Mondellimin, Yelta and surrounding areas on both the Victorian and New South Wales sides of the Murray River and lower Darling River where the expedition worked (including Nyeri Nyeri, Ngintait, Latji Latji, Marrawarra, Barkandji, Kureinji, Tati Tati groups and possibly others).

⁵⁵ Mueller, F. (1860). Anniversary address of the president. *Transactions of the Philosophical Institute of Victoria*, 4, pp. 5–6.

Acknowledgements

This paper had its origins in my research for a presentation at the symposium marking the 150th anniversary of William Blandowski's 1856–1857 expedition to the Murray River (organised by the Royal Society of Victoria and Museums Victoria, September 2007). It also relates to curatorial work for another event linked with the 150th anniversary – the *Blandowski's Expedition to the Lower Murray, 1856-57* exhibition. The exhibition was co-curated by myself and John Kean, in collaboration with Mark Grist (Wergaia, Wamba Wemba and Nyeri Nyeri) and Rebecca Carland, and staged at the Mildura Arts Centre (September to November 2007) and Bunjilaka Aboriginal Cultural Centre, Melbourne Museum (December 2007 to March 2008).

I thank staff at Museums Victoria, Public Record Office Victoria, State Library Victoria, Mitchell Library at the State Library of New South Wales and the Australian Museum, Sydney for access to Blandowski collections and associated records. I am grateful to Harry Allen (University of Auckland) and Tom Darragh (Museums Victoria) for sharing their Blandowski experiences and ongoing advice.

My Blandowski research has been spurred along by two key events. First, a history study for the Murray Explored project based at Cohuna in October 2016, marking the 160th Anniversary of Blandowski's visit to the Gunbower region during his 1856–1857 expedition. This work was supported by the Gannawarra Shire Council, Museums Victoria, Parks Victoria, North Central Catchment Management Authority and Barapa Barapa Water for Country Team. I am especially grateful to the late Aunty Esther Kirby OAM (Barapa Barapa, Wamba Wemba and Yorta Yorta) for her wisdom, encouragement and patience.

Second, my work for the Berlin's Australian Archive: Addressing the Colonial Legacies of Natural History project (2022–2025) which was supported by the German Lost Art Foundation | Deutsches Zentrum Kulturgutverluste. My particular thanks to the project co-directors Anja Schwarz (Universität Potsdam) and Eva Bischoff (Universität Trier) for their generous support, and to project coordinators Anna Weinreich and Fiona Möhrle for their constant guidance. I am grateful to current and former staff at several Berlin institutions, including the Museum für Naturkunde Berlin | Museum of Natural History Berlin (particularly Mandy Ullmann, Michaela Lederle, Sandra Miehlbradt and Sabine Hackethal from the Historische Arbeitsstelle – Archive; and Ina Heumann, Katja Kaiser and Anita Hermannstädter from Humanities of Nature); Ethnologisches Museum Berlin | Ethnology Museum Berlin (especially Dorothea Deterts); and Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin | State Library Berlin (Wolfgang Crom) for access to Blandowski collections and associated records held across Berlin, and sharing their expertise and hospitality during my successive visits in 2017, 2023, 2024 and 2025.

An immense vote of thanks to my Museums Victoria colleagues — Rebecca Carland, Caine Muir (Yorta Yorta, Wadi Wadi and Ngarrindjeri), Kimberley Moulton (Yorta Yorta), Brendan Kennedy (Tati Tati and Wadi Wadi; and Millu Wudungi — Murray River man); and Aunty Glenda Nicholls (Wadi Wadi, Yorta Yorta and Ngarrindjeri) — for teaching me about new ways of looking, listening and learning (and transforming me from where I was positioned 20 years ago).

**MILLU WUDUNGI BRENDAN KENNEDY
AUNTY GLENDA NICHOLLS
REBECCA CARLAND
DR ANJA SCHWARZ**

Berlin's Australian Archive: reframing nature as cultural belonging

Acknowledgement

The authors respectfully acknowledge that the natural history collections discussed in this paper include animal bodies, ancestral belongings and records of language and cultural practices from many First Peoples groups along the Millu/Dhungala/central Murray River and Baarka/lower Darling River. We pay respect to the Traditional Custodians. We particularly acknowledge the Nyeri Nyeri, Yorta Yorta, Barapa Barapa and Wamba Wemba Peoples and recognise that these collections are not simply scientific specimens, but remain connected to living cultures, communities and Country.

Introduction

Our work on the 1856–1857 Murray River expedition began from First Peoples' insistence that natural history collections are never 'just' nature, and that cultural collections are never 'just' culture. Rather, nature and culture are inseparably intertwined and belong to Country. The removal of minerals, plants and animals from Country also removes them from living cultural relations.

For contemporary natural history museums, such collections constitute, quite literally, a record of life on Earth. Specimens gathered over centuries allow us to trace evolutionary change, understand extinction, map shifting climates and respond to emerging biosecurity threats. A bird skin collected in the 1890s, a pressed plant from a now-cleared grassland, a drawer of insects from a vanished wetland — each contribute evidence to the long environmental history of the continent. These collections underpin research in taxonomy, conservation biology, genetics, epidemiology and climate science. They inform environmental policy, guide species recovery programs and help us understand the accelerating ecological transformations of the Anthropocene. Without natural history collections, we would be navigating ecological crises with amnesia.

Yet this scientific significance has often obscured the deep entanglement of natural history collecting with imperial and colonial ambitions. It has also obscured the continuing significance of these collections to First Peoples, for whom they remain ancestral belongings embedded within enduring systems of knowledge, law and responsibility that have persisted despite the disruptions of colonisation. Far from representing only the past, these collections are living archives that continue to sustain cultural continuity, relationships to Country and intergenerational knowledge.

This article reports on a provenance research project funded by the German Lost Art Foundation that, from 2022 to 2025, sought to collaboratively engage with colonial-era natural history collections from Australia now held in Germany. It begins by examining natural history as a colonial practice and outlining the roles of German naturalists in the Australian colonies. It then maps the current state of provenance research into colonial natural history collections in Germany and elsewhere before presenting an account of our collaboration. The article's narrative shift towards a dialogic structure in the last third of the text reflects both the evolution of the project and the challenge of presenting its outcomes in ways that remain accountable to the different perspectives, responsibilities and relationships that collaborators brought to it. Accordingly, the next four sections are jointly written by Rebecca Carland, an Australian museum professional, and Anja Schwarz, a German university academic. They are followed by excerpts from recorded conversations with Aunty Glenda Nicolls (Wadi Wadi, Yorta Yorta and Ngarrindjeri) and Millu Wudungi Brendan Kennedy (Tati Tati, Wadi Wadi and Mutti Mutti) who, throughout the project, offered cultural expertise on museum holdings related to the Murray River expedition and here present the project's outcomes from their perspectives. We conclude with reflections on how projects such as ours can reposition natural history collections as living archives that support cultural continuity, and have the potential to transform both the institutions that house these collections and the scientific practices they sustain.

Scientific imperialism: natural history as colonial practice

From its establishment as a scientific discipline, the field of natural history was closely entangled with imperial expansion. Late eighteenth-century expeditions outside Europe frequently included naturalists, geologists, botanists and zoologists tasked with documenting flora, fauna and geological features. Framed as scientific and philanthropic endeavours, their work advanced scientific knowledge while also identifying resources for extraction and regions suitable for settlement. Within already established colonies, naturalists worked closely with colonial administrations and operated through imperial infrastructures such as shipping routes and postal systems, often maintained by military force. Their research supported resource exploitation. For instance, geological surveys enabled systematic mining, while global networks of botanical gardens facilitated the transfer, study and commercial cultivation of plants in the colonies and in imperial centres, reshaping ecosystems in both places.

In Australia, as elsewhere, these activities depended heavily on the knowledge and labour of First Peoples, who guided expeditions, negotiated access to land, helped locate and preserve minerals, plants and animals, and shared their knowledge

about them. Yet their contributions remain largely obscured in historical records. Even when acknowledged, as in the work of William Blandowski, whose expedition became the focus of our project, naturalists' accounts of these collaborations often shed little light on the complex conditions under which natural history collections were assembled. On the one hand, these encounters created possibilities for working together, mutual recognition and First Peoples' agency. At the same time, however, expeditions were often undertaken in regions already profoundly affected by colonial warfare and settlement. The science produced under these circumstances reflects the contingent nature of these collaborations and continues to bear the imprint of these conditions. While minerals, animals and plants were often collected with the expertise of First Peoples, the authority to name and classify them remained concentrated in metropolitan centres such as Berlin, London and Paris. Like the physical removal of minerals, plants and animals from Country, taxonomy functioned as an instrument of empire, detaching living relations from local knowledge systems and reconstituting them within European frameworks. To this day, many so-called type specimens — the reference objects defining global biodiversity — remain housed in institutions in the Global North.

German naturalists in Australia

Natural history collections from Australia have historically held particular significance for British and continental European natural history museums, and other related museums. James Cook's decision to name the site of his first landing 'Botany Bay' in 1770, due to the '*great quantity of new plants*' collected there, foreshadowed the enduring European perception of Australia as scientifically rich and rewarding.¹ Throughout the nineteenth century, Australian plants and animals played a central role in the emerging fields of plant and animal taxonomy, as classification systems were expanded and revised to accommodate unfamiliar species. Such collections enhanced the reputations of the naturalists who compiled and identified them, as well as the prestige of the institutions that housed them.

German-speaking naturalists were involved in the Australian colonies from the outset, taking on a range of roles.² Our project has focused primarily on William Blandowski, who was appointed government zoologist for the colony of Victoria in 1854 and led the first government-sponsored expedition along the Millu / Dhungala / Murundi (Wadi Wadi / Yorta Yorta / Ngarrindjeri names for the Murray River) in 1856–1857, and on his expedition draughtsman Gerard Krefft, who later served as curator and secretary of the Australian Museum in Sydney from 1861 to 1874.

The careers of Blandowski and Krefft reflect a set of conditions that drew a disproportionately high number of professionally trained German naturalists to the Australian colonies. One key factor was the significant transformation of natural history in the early nineteenth century across continental Europe and Britain. Once the preserve of aristocratic elites, natural history was increasingly embraced as a

¹ Cook, J. (1768–1771). *Journal of H.M.S. Endeavour* [Manuscript]. Manuscripts Collection, National Library of Australia. <https://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-228958440/view?partId=nla.obj-228958639>

² Home, R. W. (1995). *Science as a German export to nineteenth century Australia*. Sir Robert Menzies Centre for Australian Studies, p. 17.

respectable pursuit among the middle classes. In the German states, this broadening of natural history expertise across class boundaries was closely tied to major university reforms, which, from 1810 onwards, enabled children of the professional and administrative classes to pursue university education.³ The motivations that led these university-trained German naturalists to relocate to the Australian colonies were complex. Some, aligned with the 1848–1849 uprisings across the German Confederation and the Austrian Empire, sought a more favourable political climate. Many were pursuing recognition in their scientific fields and greater economic security. The colonies offered new professional opportunities, particularly in geology, botany and zoology, where their expertise was in demand for government surveys, scientific institutions and commercial enterprises.

While based in the Australian colonies, most of these German-speaking naturalists continued to maintain close ties with their German homelands: they corresponded with peers, shipped collections and took an active interest in emerging German colonial ambitions.⁴ In turn, German publics followed their careers with enthusiasm, often celebrating them as ‘pioneers’ of a distinctly German contribution to the broader, pan-European colonial project.⁵ These naturalists reveal how German natural history was deeply engaged in colonial science across imperial boundaries long before and also outside of Germany’s formal colonial empire. The Australian collections held by German institutions stand as enduring evidence of this entangled colonial legacy.

Rethinking natural history in postcolonial provenance research

German museums were comparatively slow to address the colonial nature of many of their collections, particularly when compared with Australian institutions. Throughout much of the twentieth century, claims to belongings from their communities of origin were largely met with indifference. Decisions about how to respond to requests for information, access or return were typically left to staff at individual institutions. This changed markedly in the 2010s, when the legacies of German colonialism became the subject of public debate and provenance research into colonial collections underwent increasing institutionalisation.

The growing number of requests from communities worldwide for the return of Ancestral Remains and culturally significant items has been a major factor driving this shift, most recently reflected in the *Joint guidelines* for dealing with collections from colonial contexts (2025), adopted by federal, state and local governments in Germany.⁶ Particularly significant in the Australian context were the returns of Ancestors to the Torres Strait and mainland Australia in 2013 and 2014, following the first major German provenance research project on Ancestral Remains conducted at the Berlin-based hospital Charité.⁷ Since then, an increasing number of German institutions

³ Home, R. W. (1995), p. 17.

⁴ Kirchberger, U. (2020). Temporalising nature: Chronologies of colonial species transfer and ecological change across the Indian Ocean in the age of empire. *International Review of Environmental History*, 6(1), pp. 101–125. <https://doi.org/10.22459/IREH.06.01.2020.05>

⁵ Schwarz, A. (2025). ‘Pioneers of culture’: Australian natural history and the German colonial imaginary. *Continuum*, 39(1), pp. 196–209. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10304312.2024.2394957>

⁶ German contact point for cultural property and human remains from colonial contexts. (2025). *Joint guidelines for dealing with cultural property and human remains from colonial contexts*. https://www.germancontactpoint.org/relevant_documents/20251126_Joint%20Guidelines_for_Dealing_with_Cultural_Property_and_Human_Remains_from_Colonial_Contexts.pdf

⁷ Charité – Universitätsmedizin Berlin. (n.d.). *Human remains project*. Fächerverbund Anatomie. https://anatomie.charite.de/ueber_den_

have been willing to respond to community demands for the return of Ancestors and, increasingly, cultural belongings.

Yet provenance research into colonial collections in Germany and elsewhere has focused primarily on Ancestral Remains and ethnographic collections. While the German Museums Association provides guidelines for the care of collections from colonial contexts,⁸ these offer only limited direction for tracing the colonial provenance of natural history collections and provide almost no guidance on recognising natural history collections as potential cultural belongings.

Natural history collections are seldom considered in relation to colonialism for two main reasons. First, minerals, animals and plants are predominantly understood as objects of scientific and public interest — not for how they relate to human societies past or present, but for what they are taken to represent beyond human intervention. Second, as noted in the introduction to this essay, such collections are often framed as part of humanity's shared biodiversity heritage rather than as the belongings of specific groups and are rarely understood as constituted through their belonging to Country.⁹

This limited recognition of the cultural, political and relational dimensions of minerals, plants and animals continues to shape contemporary provenance research infrastructures and restitution practices. It also informs the organisation of archives, the classification of collections and the structure of collection databases. As a result, connections between natural history and colonialism often remain difficult to discern in collections and exhibitions.

This practice is, however, slowly beginning to change. Australian institutions such as the Australian Museum and Museums Victoria have been leading this shift, with First Peoples-led collection management and exhibition development,¹⁰ while institutions across Europe and the United Kingdom are also beginning to critically reassess their collections, displays and interpretive strategies. At Berlin's Museum of Natural History, for example, extensive research has examined the colonial history of the iconic *Giraffatitan* skeleton displayed in the museum's atrium. A dedicated exhibit now recounts its excavation in the former colony of German East Africa, in present-day Tanzania.¹¹ At the Natural History Museum in London, initiatives such as the 'Black history at the Natural History Museum' project have foregrounded the previously overlooked work of Black and Indigenous individuals, highlighting, for example, how the taxidermy skills of formerly enslaved man John Edmonstone (life dates unknown) enabled Charles Darwin's (1809–1882) Galápagos collections.¹² Meanwhile at Manchester Museum, the 'Decolonise!' trail invites visitors to critically engage with objects from Africa and Asia — interventions designed to disrupt traditional

[faecherverbund/human_remains_projekt](#), accessed 15 November 2025.

⁸ German Museums Association. (2021). *Guidelines for German museums: Care of collections from colonial contexts* (3rd ed.). <https://www.museumbund.de/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/mb-leitfaden-en-web.pdf>

⁹ German Museums Association. (2021), p. 110.

¹⁰ Both institutions now have dedicated First Peoples departments leading practice in collection management and exhibition development: Museums Victoria (Justice Nelson, head of First Peoples engagement, and Shannon Faulkhead, head of First Peoples collections and research) and the Australian Museum (Laura McBride, director, First Nations).

¹¹ Heumann, I., Vennen, M., & Stoecker, H. (Eds.). (2024). *Deconstructing dinosaurs: The history of the German Tendaguru expedition and its finds, 1906–2023*. Brill. <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004691063>

¹² Natural History Museum. (n.d.). *Black history at the Natural History Museum*. <https://www.nhm.ac.uk/discover/black-history-at-the-natural-history-museum.html>, accessed 3 September 2025.

Eurocentric narratives embedded in natural history displays.¹³ These efforts mark an important shift towards recognising that natural history collections are not neutral repositories of knowledge, but are instead entangled with the political and historical forces that shaped their formation. There is still, however, limited recognition in Europe of the ongoing connections these collections have to Country, and of the cultural knowledge and continuing Indigenous authority embedded within them.

Berlin's Australian Archive — shifting authority

For German project leads Anja Schwarz and Eva Bischoff, the impetus for Berlin's Australian Archive: Addressing the Colonial Legacies of Natural History came from insights shared by First Peoples museum professionals, including Walbanja-Yuin woman Sarah Kiangia Judge, an environmental scientist at the Australian Museum. Judge emphasises her *'cultural relationships with living, breathing, creative Country — the dynamic world that shapes all things, all happenings, and all lives'*. From this perspective, animal bodies in museum collections are not inert specimens but *'living beings with stories, Ancestors, and important ecosystem roles that support us all'*, recognised as *'teachers, Ancestors, and law/lore keepers of First Nations people'*.¹⁴ In light of this, Schwarz and Bischoff asked what it would mean to begin recognising natural items held in a major institution such as Berlin's Museum für Naturkunde (MfN) as potential cultural belongings. They were struck by the scattered references to First Peoples within the collections, and by the limited recognition in German institutions of First Peoples' authority in relation to these materials.

In 2020, Schwarz and Bischoff convened a two-day online workshop bringing together researchers and collection specialists from major natural science institutions in south-eastern Australia and Berlin. Recognising the need for expertise at the intersection of natural history, museum practice and First Peoples engagement, they invited collaborators from Museums Victoria and the Australian Museum. From the outset the project developed as an exercise in collaborative provenance research: not simply tracing collector histories, but working across institutions, disciplines and communities to reassemble a dispersed archive and attempt to newly recognise its ongoing connection to Country. Early work centred on reconstructing connections between minerals, animals and plants held in collections, archival documents and illustrations, undertaking a systematic stocktake across the 11 departments of the MfN. This revealed the extent to which collections had been separated by discipline-specific cataloguing systems — ranging from hand-written registers to disparate digital databases — producing a 'flattening' effect, whereby materials removed from Country were further detached from their historical and cultural contexts once inside the museum.

¹³ Manchester Museum. (n.d.). *Decolonise!* <https://www.museum.manchester.ac.uk/decolonise/>, accessed 3 September 2025.

¹⁴ Judge, S. K. (n.d.). *Who is country?* The Australian Museum. <https://australian.museum/learn/first-nations/burra/who-is-country/>, accessed 21 February 2026.



Figure 1, Left: A stylised view of 'Blandowski's Camp', from his unpublished manuscript, *Australien in 142 photographischen Abbildungen nach zehnjährigen Erfahrungen zusammengestellt* (1862) held in the Staatsbibliothek Berlin. **Right:** Zoological material and fieldnotes from the expedition held at Melbourne Museum, 2020. Museums Victoria; photographer: Jon Augier.

Collaboration with Australian partners was essential in shaping both the direction and the ethics of this collaborative provenance work, as was the oversight of our advisory board.¹⁵ Over many hours of virtual meetings and face-to-face workshops in Berlin, representatives from Museums Victoria¹⁶ and the Australian Museum¹⁷ enabled the team to focus their attention on provenance information that could reliably point to communities of origin. They also helped to identify content of possible benefit and interest to those communities and assisted the Berlin institutions in building relationships with relevant communities.

It was through these exchanges that the 1856–1857 expedition along the Millu / Dhungala / Murundi was identified as especially significant for the project. Over 12 months, the expedition had worked closely with numerous First Peoples whose labour, knowledge and guidance enabled the collection of approximately 17,000 zoological, botanical and geological entities. Blandowski openly acknowledged these contributions in his published report and also compiled an extensive visual archive documenting daily life, industry and ceremony.¹⁸ Following his death in 1878, after his return to Germany, items and archival materials related to the expedition were dispersed across German and Australian institutions.

¹⁵ Lynette Russell (Monash University), Laura McBride (Australian Museum) and Kimberley Moulton (Museums Victoria/Tate Modern) after she stepped away from the main project team.

¹⁶ The Museums Victoria team leading the Australia-based fieldwork consisted of Kimberley Moulton, senior curator of south-eastern Australian collections (later replaced by Caine Muir, Back to Country curator); Rebecca Carland, senior curator of history of collections; Timothy Stranks, lead researcher; and Jessica Alderton, Berlin's Australian Archive project coordinator.

¹⁷ The Australian Museum team was led by Laura McBride, director of First Peoples, and Mariko Smith, strategic lead, with input from archivist Vanessa Finney and repatriation officer Clayton Simpson.

¹⁸ For a detailed updated reading of the expedition based on the findings of this project see Stranks, T. (2026). William Blandowski goes bush! The lower Murray expedition, 1856–1857, in this edition of *PRISM*.

These are now held at Museums Victoria, the Australian Museum in Sydney and the State Library of New South Wales, as well as at the MfN, the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin and the Staatsbibliothek Berlin (State Library Berlin). A self-published account of the expedition is also preserved at the Haddon Library in Cambridge, alongside copies held in Berlin, Melbourne and Sydney. This widespread dispersal fractured the intellectual and cultural coherence of the collection and obscured its ongoing connections to Country. It also underscores the importance of inter-institutional and international approaches to provenance research on Australian natural history collections.

In examining these archival materials, two types of documentation emerged as being potentially significant for River Nations. First, documentation relating to the cumbungi (*Typha*) industry along the Millu / Dhungala / Murundi contained information about traditional fibre harvesting, net-making practices and the food sources this labour produced. This documentation included scientific illustrations, notes, fibre samples, nets, fish and ducks. Second, Blandowski's scientific illustrations contained detailed linguistic annotations that appeared to record species-level word lists across multiple language groups.

In line with the core intent of the project, Museums Victoria invited respected experts and Elders from the Murray River region to join the project as collaborators and to guide the relationship-building phase. Millu Wudungi Brendan Kennedy, a leader in language revitalisation, and Auntie Glenda Nicholls, a master weaver and cultural practitioner, travelled to Berlin in 2024. Their visit required the MfN to engage with questions of cultural safety for the first time. The first-ever smoking ceremony was hosted on museum grounds, while access protocols for culturally sensitive materials were reconsidered.

Together with the rest of the project team, Millu Wudungi Brendan Kennedy and Auntie Glenda Nicholls determined that certain natural history illustrations should not be made publicly accessible online because of their cultural significance.

These engagements also prompted a conceptual shift within Berlin-based institutions. At the MfN, collections long understood as documenting 'natural history' began to be understood as cultural belongings, while human-made items from the Murray River expedition held in the nearby Ethnologisches Museum began to be recognised in relation to the animal drawings held in the MfN archives.

In some ways, it is perhaps unsurprising that Blandowski's 'collections' exceed present-day institutional and national boundaries, and that materials associated with him are now dispersed across Australian and German natural history museums, ethnological collections and state libraries. William Blandowski does not fit easily within contemporary national or disciplinary categories. He was not simply Australian, British or German, nor was his work confined to either natural history collecting or ethnography. Appointed government zoologist, he was tasked with assembling natural history collections during a government-sponsored expedition in the British colony of Victoria. At the same time, he pursued an ambitious publication on Australia for German-speaking audiences that sought to follow a Humboldtian model, treating geography, climate, biology and culture as interconnected spheres of knowledge.



Figure 2: Millu Wudungi Brendan Kennedy performing a smoking ceremony at MfN to '*cleanse negative energies and to arrive properly at the place*', May 2024. Museums Victoria; photographer: MfN Staff Photographer.



Figure 3: Project collaborators Aunty Glenda Nicholls and Millu Wudungi Brendan Kennedy viewing Blandowski/Kreffft illustrations at MfN Berlin, May 2024. Museums Victoria; photographer: Tim Stranks; copyright Museums Victoria.

As a result, items originating from the Murray River expedition — and of significance to River Nations — are dispersed across institutions, often in counterintuitive ways shaped by historical cataloguing practices. A glass vial containing plant fibre, for example, is held at the Ethnologisches Museum, while detailed drawings documenting cultural practices are held at the MfN and the State Library. A more complete understanding of these materials emerges only when they are considered together: the plant fibres held at the Ethnologisches Museum become legible as part of Blandowski's documentation of net-making when considered alongside the drawings held at the MfN. Many of the fish and birds depicted in these drawings are specimens now held at Museums Victoria and were caught by First Peoples using these nets during the Murray River expedition

Building on these insights into the entangled cultural character of natural history collections, workshops for Berlin-based museum staff explored Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property (ICIP), the concept of 'Country' in south-eastern Australia and approaches to culturally responsive collections care. Aunty Glenda's demonstration of feather-flower making — an intergenerational cultural practice — provided an embodied reminder that the collections are connected to living traditions rather than a concluded past.



Figure 4: Aunty Glenda Nicholls running a feather-flower making workshop for museum and library staff at MfN, Berlin, May 2024. Museums Victoria; photographer: Tim Stranks; copyright Museums Victoria.



Figure 5: Participants of the Berlin's Australian Archive workshop following the Welcome Ceremony and cultural performances, Old Camp, Tati Tati Country, Robinvale, March 2025. Photographer: Rob French; copyright Museums Victoria.

The most important moment in the project came when Millu Wudungi Brendan Kennedy invited the extended German and Australian project team (including collections and scientific staff from the Berlin museums) to share our findings with River Nations cultural practitioners, artists, weavers and language revivalists on beautiful Tati Tati Country. The three-day workshop held in Robinvale-Euston in March 2025 was a profoundly generous and powerful cultural exchange.

Authority was not merely abstractly acknowledged but enacted, as River Nations delegates articulated how these materials relate to continuing cultural responsibilities and community priorities. At the workshop, materials held in Berlin relating to the *Typha* industry were brought vividly to life when Tati Tati participants presented an eight-metre-tall bullrush, pulled moments earlier from the nearby river bend. This act highlighted the immediate relevance of these historical records to Country and sparked discussion of the significant ecological changes the river had undergone in the 170 years since the expedition.

Senior weavers attending the workshop continued to knot and weave throughout the presentations, demonstrating their ongoing connection to the net-making practices documented in the historical records. It was evident that the gathering was also creating a space for the refining and sharing of practice amongst these cultural weaving leaders.



Figure 6: *View on the Lower Darling: the Albury, Steamer, at Wentworth* [Hand-coloured engraving], circa 1872. Hoddell and Butcher. Source: *Town and Country Journal*. Private collection.

During an extended yarning circle, participants emphasised the need to ensure the cultural safety of the knowledge embedded in the collections and proposed the development of a Millu / Dhungala / Murundi River Peoples research group to guide decisions concerning ICIP and access. In this context, collaborative provenance research found its clearest expression: not only tracing where collections came from, but recognising their ongoing belonging to Country and Community. Through these processes, the Berlin's Australian Archive project demonstrates how collaborative provenance research can move beyond documentation to become a practice of reconnecting belongings to Country by recognising the Indigenous expertise that underpinned their formation.

Millu / Dhungala / Murundi Kulingi yarna (Murray River people talking)

Those involved in the project came to it for different reasons. We were engaged in what Unanga scholar Eve Tuck and colleagues have called 'contingent collaborations', which 'require an ethic of incommensurability that recognizes what is distinct between various projects of social justice and decolonization'.¹⁹ For project collaborators Millu Wudungi Brendan Kennedy and Aunty Glenda Nicholls, this work forms part of decades-long efforts to revive culture and pursue self-determination and sovereignty. Their perspectives therefore cannot be seamlessly woven into an account written largely from within, or adjacent to, the settler-colonial institution of the museum. Accordingly, the following reflections are drawn from conversations recorded on the banks of Millu following the three-day gathering on Tati Tati Country in March 2025. They should not be understood as participant reflections alone, but as assertions of positions that remain distinct from, while allied with, those of the core project team.

¹⁹ Tuck, E., Smith, M., Guess, A. M., Benjamin, T., & Jones, B. K. (2014). Geotheorizing Black/Land: Contestations and contingent collaborations. *Departures in Critical Qualitative Research*, 3(1), pp. 52–74, p. 57.

Millu Wudungi Brendan Kennedy is a renowned artist, language expert and political actor from Robinvale, Victoria. His totem is the Pathangal (pelican) and his name Millu Wudungi (Murray River man) reflects his longstanding commitment to the Millu and his ongoing fight for land and water justice for the Traditional Owners of the Murray-Darling Basin. As chair of the Murray Lower Darling Rivers Indigenous Nations (MLDRIN), he plays a vital role in advancing First Peoples' water rights. His cultural practice encompasses language revitalisation and visual storytelling through art, sustaining ancestral knowledge and expressing enduring connections to Country.

Artist and master weaver Aunty Glenda Nicholls grew up in the Swan Hill area. Her cultural name is Jule Yarra Minj (little river girl) and her maternal Ngarrindjeri totem is the Writcharuki (Willy-willy Wagtail). She creates elaborate sculptural works connecting the present with her ancestral past. In her practice, she combines cultural weaving techniques acquired from her ancestors, mother and grandmother with her knowledge of the waterways, plants and grasses on her Country.

Significant belongings in Berlin

The part of William Blandowski's collection in Berlin that I was really interested in was the fishing net, because I do fish-net weaving. So that was a bit of excitement when I saw the fish-net and figured out what it was made out of — cumbungi — looking at the mesh size, looking at and researching what kind of fish was caught with that specific net. The fish-net was a two ply ... I found that really interesting, looking at that and wondering, now, how is it so light that it could float on top of the water to catch the Bony Bream, you know, with the antenna on the top. (Aunty Glenda Nicholls)

The actual drawings, the depictions were amazing. For me, that's what stands out: the Gerard Krefft paintings and drawings of the time from the Blandowski expedition, particularly in Merbein and Mondellimin along the river. So, looking at those and looking at the cultural belongings, and also the archive, particularly the language, was what interests me the most. (Millu Wudungi Brendan Kennedy)

Beyond the collection — 'the intangibles'

People say we need to bring it home, and that will probably happen, but that takes time. (Aunty Glenda Nicholls)

The returning of the other belongings, that's like, okay, that could be something we could aspire to, but it's all the things we create along the way. All the conversations, all the dialogue, all the knowledge-sharing, all the wellbeing that it creates by coming together and that sharing. Those are the intangibles that I think will be created and what we'll take out of it. (Millu Wudungi Brendan Kennedy)

Cumbungi's found right along the waterways here. So, assuming that the fish-net could have been made anywhere ... there's a whole process of harvesting the cumbungi, making the string, making the fibre, weaving the net and then using the net. So, it would have taken a whole community — families — to harvest the cumbungi, to make that string, and then to weave the net. Those nets must have been pretty prized tools. They're tools we don't use today, but back then they were essential. There's a lot that's not written. Back then it was a man's world, so men only seem to be doing things. Not the women. Women were very protective of some of the things that were women's business. So, there's a lot that's not recorded. (Aunty Glenda Nicholls)

I'm not making those kinds of nets, but I'll turn it into art so that it's still there for everyone to see. It gets people thinking — how did you do that? Why are you making fish-nets? And the stories come out. It was a tool that our people used years ago. (Aunty Glenda Nicholls)

Building blocks for the future

This journey doesn't stop with me. It's very important for me to be able to pass on that knowledge to the community because, at the moment, I think I'm the only one that does fish-net weaving in my area. A lot of the workshop participants have realised that what they've learned they'll take that back to their communities and build on that knowledge themselves. We've started something that's going to be a building block for others. I would like to see future generations carrying it on. That's why we need to bring the younger ones on the journey with us — so they can continue it. (Aunty Glenda Nicholls)

I think for me what's emerged from the project is inspiration: what inspired Blandowski in the first place, and now that's inspired the museums to come together and then bring opportunities out here to have workshops, and then how that has inspired the Murray River peoples. I've just been sent as a scout, really, to then come back and talk to our people about it, creating this opportunity, this workshop, and contributing to the workshop and sharing, and advocating and providing guidance and support for our people to have access to the information. It has been great for us, great to be the host. It's great to create a culturally safe space for everyone to come and feel welcome and feel respected and recognised for the knowledge and the history of what everyone brings here. I didn't expect it to be as successful and enjoyable, and the creativity, the knowledge-sharing and the interest that was shown by everyone that attended. People will go away, they will remember this workshop and they will feel energised and informed, and come away with a lot more knowledge and be inspired by this workshop.

It always leads and builds to other opportunities in the space, in the research space, in the universities, in the museum space, in the cultural heritage space. So, it gives us more opportunities to come together and to have dialogue and exchange with each other. We are a culture on the way back. We were almost wiped to extinction, but we are on the way back. So, every opportunity and every event like this is unprecedented.
(Millu Wudungi Brendan Kennedy)

Outcomes and futures

The reflections above underscore that the significance of these collections cannot be understood solely through archival reconstruction or institutional interpretation. Their meanings continue to unfold through the knowledge, practices and responsibilities held by the communities to whom they remain connected. Listening to these perspectives reshapes how a project like Berlin's Australian Archive must be understood — not simply as research about historical materials, but as part of an ongoing cultural process in which relationships to Country, knowledge transmission and future custodianship are actively negotiated.

One of the most tangible outcomes of the project has been the creation of a provenance research guide, published by the German Lost Art Foundation.²⁰ Developed from the practical challenges encountered during the project, the guide is intended to support future researchers — Indigenous and non-Indigenous alike — in navigating the methodological, ethical and relational complexities of working with natural history collections shaped by colonial encounters. It positions provenance research not as a purely archival exercise, but as a collaborative process requiring an openness to multiple knowledge systems and sustained dialogue with communities who have always upheld their relationship to Country. Complementing this work is the development of a finding aid for the 1856–1857 Murray River expedition, designed primarily to support members of the River Nations in accessing these materials. One of its central aims is to make collections that have long appeared impenetrable — shaped by specialist scientific language, disciplinary silos and institutional hierarchies — more navigable and meaningful to those seeking to engage with them. By translating and contextualising archival and taxonomic information, the finding aid helps bridge these barriers while making transparent where the project has been able to trace relationships between minerals, animals and plants, records, associated knowledge and their ongoing connections to Country. In doing so, it seeks to support First Peoples in identifying materials connected to their own lands and cultural histories, enabling pathways for community-led research, interpretation and decision-making.

For European museums, these outcomes point towards a necessary shift in institutional culture and practice. Engagement with colonial collections cannot remain project-based or symbolic; it must be embedded in staff training, documentation, cataloguing practices and decision-making structures that recognise ICIP and support

²⁰ Möhrle, F., Schwarz, A., & Bischoff, E. (Eds.). (2026). *Provenance research guide on natural history collections from colonial Australia*. German Lost Art Foundation.

long-term relationships with communities. The work demonstrates that natural history institutions, no less than ethnographic museums, must grapple with their role in historic extraction and knowledge displacement.

For Australian institutions, the project highlights their role as experienced partners in this work, drawing on decades of engagement in repatriation, community consultation and Indigenous-led practice to support European colleagues navigating processes that remain relatively new within their own institutional contexts. At the same time, these collaborations are not presented as a completed model or endpoint. Australian museums, too, continue to confront the enduring legacies of colonial collecting and are themselves still learning, adapting and being guided by communities with each project undertaken. The exchange therefore operates as a reciprocal process, underscoring that this work is ongoing everywhere.

The project also contributes to expanding debates around repatriation and restitution. As discussed in this article, much of the material addressed — minerals, plants and animals held in collections, along with illustrations and archives categorised as natural history — has historically fallen outside repatriation frameworks focused on Ancestral Remains or explicitly cultural objects. As our collaborators have clearly articulated, everything from Country is Country. By demonstrating that these materials carry embedded cultural knowledge, language and histories of collaboration, projects like Berlin's Australian Archive challenge the assumed boundary between 'scientific' and 'cultural' collections and invite new models of shared custodianship, community-directed governance and, ultimately, return.

Finally, the project raises questions about scientific authority itself. Recognising First Peoples as contributors to the production of natural history knowledge unsettles long-standing hierarchies that have elevated scientific frameworks rooted in colonial histories above local expertise. While both scientific classification and local expertise offer systematic ways of understanding the world, they operate under different logics: scientific taxonomy aspires to universality and comparability, whereas local knowledge has obligations to specific places and contexts. The value of one does not necessarily equate to the other, but both offer insights that can inform research in complementary ways. Rather than diminishing scientific inquiry, this recognition enlarges it, inviting research practices grounded in reciprocity with Country and attentive to the cultural conditions through which knowledge is generated.

Perhaps the most powerful outcome, however, occurred beyond institutional frameworks. Seven months after the project gathering on Tati Tati Country, more than 120 River Nations culture keepers, practitioners and kin reconvened independently, without the presence of the partner museums. This continuation signalled that the work had begun to move into community hands, where its meanings and futures could be shaped according to local priorities. Such moments resist easy measurement, yet they point to the reparative potential of collaborative provenance research: creating conditions for knowledge to circulate back into living cultural systems rather than remaining confined to institutional archives.