

Sharing medical knowledge through art

Australian Indigenous bush medicine

Jacqueline Healy

Bush medicine has always been with Aboriginal people. It was before, and we will always be making bush medicine. There are all kinds of bush medicine and they grow all over. You'll find they're different in each place, and we have these ones that I've painted.

Judith Pungkarta Inkamala, 2017

The Medical History Museum in the Faculty of Medicine, Dentistry and Health Sciences is staging a new exhibition, *The art of healing: Australian Indigenous bush medicine*, from 23 April 2018 to 2 March 2019. The exhibition follows the premise of *Tjukurpa* (which has many meanings, including the creation period or Dreaming, as well as the foundation of life and society). That is, the exhibition looks at traditional Indigenous healing practice as simultaneously past, present and future. Through contemporary art and objects, the exhibition presents examples of healing practice and bush medicine from many distinct and varied Indigenous communities across Australia.

For 65,000 years, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have occupied the lands, with distinct cultural boundaries defined by

intimate relationships with Country. As part of its 50th anniversary celebrations, the Medical History Museum expanded its collections policy to encompass contemporary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art. Sharing bush medicine stories through art has become one of the ways in which Elders maintain a strong knowledge and culture for their communities. This use of contemporary art underlines the continuing practice of bush medicine, by revealing it through a current lens. It also demonstrates visually the distinct and varied cultures that make up Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australia.

Some of the artworks have been directly commissioned for this exhibition, while others come from existing projects. Each artist was asked for a work that represented healing practice and bush medicine in their Country. Some have been sourced from artists represented by the extensive network of Aboriginal-owned and controlled art centres, others directly from individual artists. The works use a range of techniques and media, including painting in ochre and acrylic, printmaking, weaving and ceramics. The diversity of artistic styles and materials echoes the regional diversity.

The Yorta Yorta people's ancestral knowledge of healing is celebrated in a major triptych by Treaenna Hamm. *Dhungala cool burn* (pictured opposite) shows women and girls collecting bush medicine along the banks of *dhungala* (the Murray River), placing the medicines in coolamons and in dilly bags that they would have woven. The coolamons in the foreground have been delineated using local river-bark ink, a medium that is also used in bush medicine.

The way plants are gathered and prepared is a major theme of the exhibition. Marilyn Nicholls' *Healing basket* (see inside front cover) is woven from Sedge fibre harvested from a freshwater lake near Swan Hill, and includes two medicine plants: Coastal Rosemary and Eucalyptus leaves, both of which are used for smoking ceremonies to cleanse and heal. Nicholls' method of coil weaving has been used in south-eastern Australia for thousands of years, to make baskets, belts, mats, eel traps and other useful items.

Many of the works in the exhibition illustrate particular bush medicines, and in their accompanying words the artists share with us their knowledge of their uses. The artists of Ampilatwatja have chosen to make bush medicine a major focus of their art, motivated by the wish to share this knowledge



with their children and grandchildren. As Beverly Pula Luck commented: ‘There are lots of different medicines, we know what their stories are, we learnt them from our parents and we teach these stories to our children’. In this exhibition, the acrylic paintings of Rosie Ngwarraye Ross (pictured on page 48) and Beverly Pula Luck depict medicinal plants of their region, finely delineated in a landscape created from a pattern of dots in the vivid colours of the desert.

Iconography used to represent bush medicine differs between communities and language groups across Australia. On Melville Island, the centre of the *Purnarrika* (Waterlily) flower is eaten to cure sore throats and colds. Michelle Woody’s painting in ochre shows an abstract pattern of lines

and circles, reminiscent of body painting. In the Daly River area of the Northern Territory, the fruits of the *Miwulngini*, or Red Lotus Lily (*Nelumbo nucifera*), are collected from the bottom of billabongs. The senior women locate the fruit with their feet as they slowly and carefully walk through the water. A medicine to treat constipation is made from this plant. In a coloured etching by Margaret Gilbert (see page 49), the shape of the lotus leaf outlined in blue appears to float over the images of three lotus pods.

All the works in the exhibition are linked by the strong connection of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to their Country, and the passing down of cultural knowledge to the next generation. We are

privileged that these individuals and communities have chosen to share this rich repository of healing and knowledge with us through their art. The works are a significant addition to the Medical History Museum’s permanent collection, and after the exhibition closes they will be displayed in the Faculty of Medicine, Dentistry and Health Sciences, where they will continue to educate students, staff and the broader community through their aesthetic value and cultural significance.

The artworks also remind us of the importance of cultural and social wellbeing to the physical and mental health of all communities. The health gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians is among our nation’s most dire social problems.

Rosie Ngwarraye Ross, *Bush flowers and bush medicine plants*, 2015, acrylic on linen, 91.0 × 91.0 cm. MHM2017.3, Medical History Museum, University of Melbourne.
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To reduce the unacceptably high rates of illness and premature death suffered by many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, we must combine the trusted ways of holistic healing that have been practised on this continent for millennia with the most recent Australian and international research, education and clinical practice. The training of more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander doctors is crucial here, as is educating *all* Australian health workers about Indigenous cultures. The exhibition *The art of healing* affirms that Australian Indigenous bush medicine is thriving—an intrinsic part of the lives of many communities. We all have much to learn from these traditional healers.

Dr Jacqueline Healy is senior curator of the Medical History Museum and the Henry Forman Atkinson Dental Museum in the Faculty of Medicine, Dentistry and Health Sciences, University of Melbourne.

The exhibition *The art of healing: Australian Indigenous bush medicine* is on display in the Medical History Museum, Level 2, Brownless Biomedical Library, from 23 April 2018 to 2 March 2019. The museum is open Monday to Friday from 10 am to 5 pm, and Saturday from 1 pm to 5 pm (weekend hours vary during university holidays). See medicalhistorymuseum.mdhs.unimelb.edu.au/exhibitions.

