

First peoples

Rosemary Wrench

The *First peoples* exhibition opened at the Bunjilaka Aboriginal Cultural Centre in the Melbourne Museum in September 2013. *First peoples* has four sections: *Our story*, *Generations* and *Deep listening* all focus on the culture and history of Victorian Aboriginal people. The fourth section, *Many nations*, highlights Victorian material culture within a display of the diverse and rich cultures of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians.

Seventy-eight objects and 70 photographs from the Donald Thomson Collection are included in *Many nations*, the largest display drawn from this significant collection since it was established and placed by the University of Melbourne and the Thomson family on long-term loan to the Museum of Victoria in 1973. (Thomson's field notes, diaries, drawings, photographs, film and recordings remain the personal property of the Thomson family, while the artefacts are owned by the University of Melbourne.) The Thomson items are among 500 objects from across Australia in an exhibition that celebrates the extraordinary skill and cultural knowledge of the individuals who created and used them. The objects were made for diverse cultural practices including protection, keeping and holding treasures, celebration and decoration,



as teaching tools for children, hunting, storytelling and everyday use. Senior designer Corinne Balaam has created a beautiful display befitting these remarkable handcrafted pieces, most of which are publicly exhibited here for the first time.

The material culture on display originates from over 250 recorded locations across Australia and spans many generations. The 78 objects selected from the Thomson Collection were created and used by members of 35 different cultural and language groups. The cultural knowledge recorded by Thomson during his time spent with Aboriginal communities across Arnhem Land, Cape York Peninsula and the Western Desert from the 1920s to the 1960s was

invaluable in realising some of the key aims of the exhibition, including the use of Aboriginal languages and the creation of detailed narratives.

A feature of the exhibition is the replacement of printed labels with digital ones. This enabled us to generate 500 detailed labels, which include contextual photographs, maps, film and multiple high-resolution images of the objects. These can all be enlarged on the screens, enabling the visitor to focus on the detail or particular features of the object. The use of digital labels and contextual images gave us the scope to present an individual story for each object, thus emphasising each one's unique identity. The narrative styles and the images in the

Previous page: The *Many nations* section of the *First peoples* exhibition, Bunjilaka Aboriginal Cultural Centre, Melbourne Museum, October 2013. Photograph by Diana Snape.

Below: A young girl using the digital label screens attached to the *Toy stories* case in the *First peoples* exhibition, Bunjilaka Aboriginal Cultural Centre, Melbourne Museum, September 2013. Photograph by Rodney Start.



labels are as diverse as the material culture on display. This diversity gives visitors an opportunity to discover layers of information, revealing the different and vast stories and histories embedded in each object. The digital format also lets us add new information when it comes to hand during the life of the exhibition. For example, earlier this year a Victorian artist expanded the quotation cited on his object label, a visitor provided the maker's name for another piece and an Aboriginal community member from Western Australia confirmed the language words for the material used in two other objects. All of this information was updated on the digital labels on the same days it was provided to me.

The screens for the labels are mounted at a height accessible to children, whose familiarity with screen-based technologies makes the format a wonderful medium through which the museum's youngest visitors can engage with Aboriginal culture and the exhibition. The representation of Aboriginal children is a feature throughout *First peoples*, and is achieved through the inclusion of their objects, stories, games, photographs and voices.

The Donald Thomson Collection contains a number of precious pieces made for, and used by, children. Some of these are included in the main showcases, where they are displayed alongside their adult versions. *Toy stories* is a smaller and lower-positioned case, which features eight different children's toys from across Australia, including a number collected by Thomson. Photographs, oral histories and community engagement resulted in the development of screens with a short animation for each toy in the showcase, aimed at four- to nine-year-olds. The children's objects, stories and images are placed prominently throughout *Many nations* and the engagement with and appreciation of them from our visitors young and old has been joyous. Their presence among Thomson's collection

of objects, photographs and field notes reveals the respect and connections Thomson had with the Aboriginal communities with whom he spent time.

Detailed research undertaken during the development of the exhibition enabled us to add information to that recorded by Thomson; this has been an important outcome of the project. Aboriginal language is given primacy throughout *First peoples*, in the naming of objects, places and materials, and in quotes used in the narratives. Eighteen of the Thomson Collection objects selected did not have a language name recorded, but research for the exhibition enabled us to update 14 of these, leaving only four more to be identified.

Museum Victoria has a vast collection of material culture made by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, including over 6,400 pieces collected by Thomson. The methods and processes used to narrow down the suitable or available objects from tens of thousands to a more manageable 25,000 and ultimately to 500 involved a lengthy, multi-layered approach, including a physical audit of the collection.

But even before devising the detailed framework for selecting

Right: A Ritarungo child's *ngaimbak* (armband), Caledon Bay, Northern Territory, 1943. Reg. no. DT1067, Donald Thomson Collection, University of Melbourne, on long-term loan to Museum Victoria.



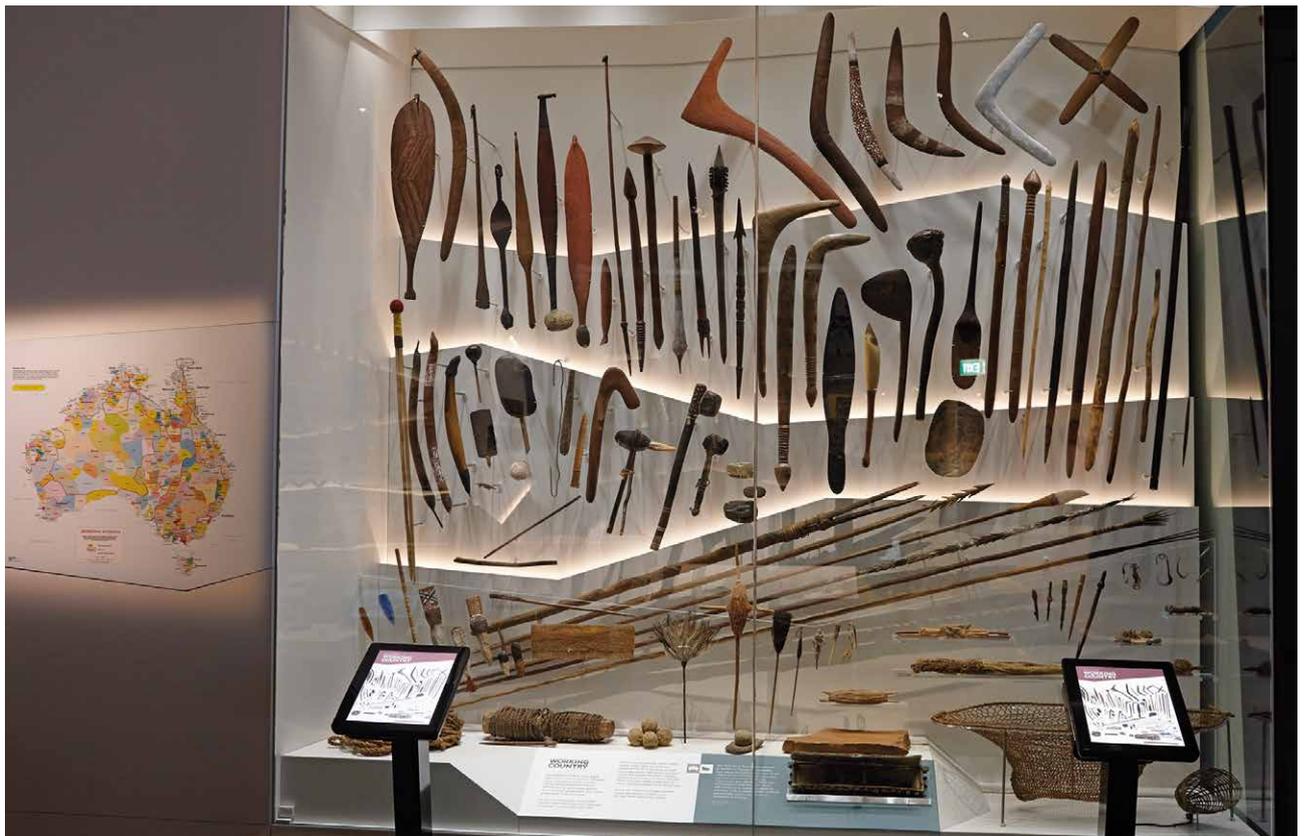
Below: *Working country* case in the *Many nations* section of the *First peoples* exhibition, Bunjilaka Aboriginal Cultural Centre, Melbourne Museum, October 2013. Photograph by Jon Augier.

objects and stories, there were several pieces that I knew *had* to be included. These had been chosen long ago by community members from Arnhem Land and Cape York Peninsula, and by Thomson himself through his detailed and descriptive recording of these people's knowledge. These items were made by the renowned

dugong- and turtle-hunters of northern Australia; they include lengthy cable ropes, floats and wooden and metal harpoons—all examples of extraordinary design and technology. The dugong-hunters were respected across northern Australia and Torres Strait for their hunting prowess and manufacturing skills;

over many years I have observed the continuation of this respect from community members when they see these items and photographs in the museum's collection stores.

It is an honour to be able to display this important material culture in the ground-breaking *First peoples* exhibition. The rich and varied



Right: An Anindilyakwa man's *mungariw'kur* (harpoon rope), Groote Eylandt, Northern Territory, 1935. DT1648, Donald Thomson Collection, University of Melbourne, on long-term loan to Museum Victoria.

Below: A Koko Ya'o man's *kopoi* (dugong rope) (detail), Lockhart River, Queensland, 1929. DT3324, Donald Thomson Collection, University of Melbourne, on long-term loan to Museum Victoria.



narratives reveal stories connected to creation, hunting, design and manufacturing innovations, and cultural knowledge and management of the environment and animals. These objects and narratives are included in the *Working country* showcase, alongside a diverse range of material culture from over 80 communities representing the sophisticated and diverse manufacturing techniques used by Aboriginal men and women living and hunting on the land, rivers and oceans of Australia.

Thomson's earliest writings and his collection and images were a significant resource or 'marker' for identifying the stories relevant to many of the 500 other objects in *Many nations* that research assistant Louise Gray and I drew upon while exploring historical and contemporary documentation—both written and oral. This research, combined with continuing discussions with Aboriginal community members from Victoria and across the country, has resulted in a gradual process of reconnecting these beautiful cultural objects with their stories. One of the most rewarding outcomes of the development of the exhibition has been the sharing of knowledge and connections, both new and renewed, which have flowed in all directions.



During the development phase and since opening *First peoples* we have been fortunate to host visits to the stored collections and the exhibition from Aboriginal community members and students involved in several University of Melbourne projects. These interactions are invaluable in creating strong and meaningful connections between the collections and the exhibition, and senior members and future leaders who represent a range of interests in their respective communities. The development of the digital labels and the use of technology throughout the exhibition provide an important avenue to continue this engagement into the future.

Rosemary Wrench is the senior collection manager of the Donald Thomson Collection at Melbourne Museum. She was senior curator of the *Many nations* section of the *First peoples* exhibition. Recently the *First peoples* exhibition received three awards: Museums Australia Museums and Galleries National Award (MAGNA) 2014 for best permanent gallery and exhibition in 2013 and the overall winner for national best project for 2013, and the American Alliance of Museums 2014 Excellence in Exhibitions Competition, overall winner and a special distinction honour award for innovative integration of design and content.

First peoples is on display at the Bunjilaka Aboriginal Cultural Centre, Melbourne Museum, Carlton Gardens. It is open daily from 10 am to 5 pm and admission is included in museum entry. See <http://museumvictoria.com.au/bunjilaka/visiting/first-peoples/> for details.