

Trademarks

International indigenous culture from the Leonhard Adam Collection

Joanna Bosse



During the 1940s and 1950s, over 1,300 objects made by indigenous people from around the world were collected by Dr Leonhard Adam (1891–1960), a German ethnologist working at the University of Melbourne. Adam built the collection to complement his teaching activities in the Department of History, and his ambition was to create a small-scale collection similar to those used in Europe for the comparative study of world cultures. Underlying the pedagogical use of the collection was Adam's grander goal to establish an ethnographic museum based at the University of Melbourne. His vision was for the museum to house both his collection as well as the important collection of Australian indigenous material collected by his colleague, anthropologist Donald Thomson. Adam's museum was never realised, but the collection is today part of the University of Melbourne Art Collection under the custodianship of the Ian Potter Museum of Art. A major new exhibition at the Potter, *Trademarks*, showcases over 80 objects from this remarkable collection, many of which have never been on public display.

A German of Jewish descent, Leonhard Adam came to Australia as an 'enemy alien' on board the

infamous *Dunera*. His international reputation in comparative ethnology was well established by this time, especially after the popularity of his book *Primitive art* (published by Penguin in 1940). Following his internment at the Tatura detention camp for two years, in 1942 Adam was employed at Queen's College as resident tutor. The following year he was appointed research scholar in the Department of History and in 1951 through the continued support of Professor Maxwell Crawford, Adam secured permanent employment in the department.

Due to Adam's international contacts, he was able to build his collection through trade networks with world-class overseas collections as well as through purchases and gifts from local individuals. Adam exchanged mostly Australian indigenous material with international museum directors and anthropologists for what was 'surplus' (or represented by multiple examples) in their collections. As a result, indigenous objects that were extremely scarce on the open market, such as Hamatsa masks from British Columbia and Native American Indian baskets from California, were sent to Melbourne by the Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia,

Vancouver, and the Phoebe Hearst Museum, University of California, Berkeley, respectively. In return, similarly precious bark paintings from Groote Eylandt, Millingimbi and Yirrkala were sent to New York, Milwaukee, Knoxville, Vancouver and Basel, amongst other cities.

What is becoming clear is that in addition to Adam's role in amassing an ethnographic collection of impressive breadth, diversity and value through these trade networks, he was also responsible for supplying some of the world's best ethnographic collections with early examples of Australian indigenous art. For instance the bark painting from Millingimbi sent by Adam to the American Museum of Natural History in New York in 1952 was one of the museum's earliest received items of Australian indigenous material.

A major component of the research for *Trademarks* has involved tracing Adam's exchange networks to recover provenance and information about the works' original acquisition, in order to uncover information about the cultural identity of the objects and the people who made them. The lack of documentation and accompanying information for the vast majority of the collection—

Opposite: Attributed to Tom Patch Wamiss (Kwakwaka'wakw/Dzawada'enuxw people, Gwa'yi, Kingcome Inlet, British Columbia, Canada), Hamatsa mask representing Gwaxgwaxalanuxsiwe, Cannibal raven at the north end of the world, early to mid-20th century, red cedar, paint, red cedar bark and rope, approx. length: 120 cm. Reg. no. 1960.0558, Leonhard Adam Collection of International Indigenous Culture, University of Melbourne Art Collection.

Right: Artists unknown (Wintu, Achomawi or Atsugewi peoples; Yurok, Hupa or Karuk peoples, north-west and north-east California, United States of America), two baskets, late 19th century, vegetable fibre, natural dye, approx. diameters: 12.5 cm and 20.2 cm. Reg. nos 1960.0522, 1960.0523, Leonhard Adam Collection of International Indigenous Culture, University of Melbourne Art Collection.



a consequence of museological practice at the time as well as the collection's acquisition via secondary sources—has been a key challenge for the Potter's curators and collection managers, and a major impediment to the collection's display over the past five decades. Since 1973 there have been seven exhibitions drawn from the collection, and only once, in 1988, was the full breadth of its international holdings publicly presented.¹ The extraordinary diversity of the collection's international holdings compounds the difficulty of undertaking research and selecting appropriate methods for its display and interpretation.

The curatorial focus on tracing the pathways of trade and exchange is motivated by the desire to display and interpret the objects in the Leonhard Adam Collection as accurately and ethically as possible. Re-establishing the relationships with originating institutions has already resulted in much new information, such as the specific cultural identities of the makers, and production and collection dates for objects. Most rewarding of all has been the attribution of the work of three individual artists: for instance we have learnt that three of the ceremonial house panels from Kwoma in Papua New Guinea were

made by the artist Nayikiya, from the Meyibabobor Teeki clan of Bangwis village; and that the famous Native American Tewa-Hopi potter, Nampeyo, made the Rain bird bowl that was collected by anthropologist Samuel Barrett in 1911 and sent to us from the Milwaukee Public Museum, Wisconsin, in 1953. The next step is to seek to engage directly with indigenous communities, to receive advice about our custodial responsibilities and record information about the works and their cultural significance to indigenous people. This is a very deliberate strategy towards a more consultative approach that includes indigenous perspectives and priorities.

The exhibition includes works from indigenous nations across the world including Canada, the United States, Venezuela, Peru, Cameroon, Central Congo, Indonesia, Papua New Guinea as well as Australia. Highlights include a group of 12 twined and woven fibre baskets from the Native American Indian tribes of California; Native American Hopi *katsina* dolls and pots; a Hamatsa raven cannibal mask attributed to Kwakwaka'wakw artist Tom Patch Wamiss from Gwa'yi, Kingcome Inlet, British Columbia, Canada; a male antelope headdress from the T'ji wara people of the Republic of

Mali; a *wusear* (figure for sacred flute) made by the Biwat or Iatmul people of Papua New Guinea; and Anindilyakwa bark paintings from Groote Eylandt in the Gulf of Carpentaria.

Trademarks: International indigenous culture from the Leonhard Adam Collection is on display at the Ian Potter Museum of Art, University of Melbourne, until 24 July 2011.

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1 Earlier catalogues and exhibitions include: Grazia Gunn, *Groote Eylandt art*, Parkville: University of Melbourne, 1973 (exhibition held 28 June – August 1973); Wayne D. Orchiston, *Warfare in Melanesia: The Leonhard Adam Ethnological Collection, Part two*, Parkville: University of Melbourne, 1975 (exhibition held 4 September – 10 October 1975); *The Leonhard Adam Collection: University Gallery, the University of Melbourne, 7 September – 21 October 1988*, Parkville: University Gallery, University of Melbourne, 1988 (exhibition curated by Gael Ramsay); *Bounty of the sea: Selected works from the Leonhard Adam Collection of International Indigenous Culture*, Parkville: Ian Potter Museum of Art, 2002 (exhibition held 4 May – 7 July 2002, curated by Christine Elias); *Creation tracks and trade winds: Groote Eylandt bark paintings from the University of Melbourne Art Collection*, Parkville: Ian Potter Museum of Art, 2006 (exhibition held 23 September 2006 – 21 January 2007, curated by Joanna Bosse).