There are approximately 10 layers to an emu egg shell. From the distinctive exterior (often a rich, deep green), each subsequent layer reveals a subtle gradation of hue, towards the innermost, starkly contrasting white layer. For an emu egg carver, these gradations of colour present opportunities to reveal successive layers of the medium through decorative and figural carvings.¹

The Ian Potter Museum of Art at the University of Melbourne holds one such example of a carved emu egg (pictured right), thought to have been made in the early 20th century by an Aboriginal artist working in the south-east of Australia.² It was acquired by Russell Grimwade (1879–1955) and is the only work by an Aboriginal artist in the Russell and Mab Grimwade ‘Miegunyah’ Collection, which since 1973 has been part of the University of Melbourne Art Collection.

Here the artist contrasts two layers of the egg’s shell through relief carving. Several figural stories encircle the egg’s brown surface to create an overarching narrative composed of individual vignettes. Moments in time are caught: a leaping dog in full flight, the reflex of a man’s arm after the spear has left his hand, the spear piercing a fish in the adjacent scene. As the scenes dance up, around and across the egg, an emu rests, while two people relax in sitting positions, one smoking and one in the act of reclining.

Although reverberations of movement cover the egg’s surface, knowledge that sustains the life of the artwork is absent. Grimwade recorded little if any information about the egg, and emu egg carving has received limited scholarly attention in Australian art history. Despite this, today carved emu eggs reside in most state and national art collections around Australia, and the medium is an integral part of the contemporary Indigenous arts scene. Attracted by hints of a dynamic history, I undertook an attribution project on the emu egg held in the Ian Potter Museum of Art.
Museum, for a Miegunyah Student Project Award in 2018. This article describes my research.

I began by identifying my destination: I was searching for the artist who carved the emu egg. Then I constructed a map to the attribution by conceiving the end-point as the junction of several paths: the history of the medium, the known locations of emu egg production, stylistic connoisseurship, and the provenance of this particular example. Through an attribution, life could be returned to the artwork by repatriating knowledge to the artist’s descendants, thus reconnecting the emu egg to Family and Country.

My first path followed the history of the medium, as I roamed through current literature on emu egg carving. Brenda Croft, who is connected to the Gurindji/Mudburra and Malngin communities, discussed the little-known medium in *Tactility: Two centuries of Indigenous objects, textiles and fibres*, an exhibition held at the National Gallery of Australia in 2003.3 Croft highlighted the past 100 years of emu egg carving in Aboriginal art histories. Wajarri-Badimaya woman Charmaine Papertalk Green extended Croft’s research through poetry to highlight the variety of purposes emu eggs carried for generations of Aboriginal peoples, reflecting specifically on the Yamaji People from Western Australia.4

Non-Indigenous art historian Henry Skerritt has also drawn upon Croft’s research when considering settler influences on the medium’s history.5 During the 1850s, European settlers reframed emu eggs, through silversmithing, as decorative art objects for display. By the late 19th century, Sydney-based Japanese artist Jonaski Takuma reinvigorated the medium by introducing Japanese carving styles. By the early 20th century, the emu egg had come full circle, as Indigenous artists interpreted the egg’s surface through aeons-old carving practices.6 Croft states that between the two world wars in particular (the period in which the egg I was researching is thought to have been made), “the carving of emu eggs provided an important source of income for Aboriginal people in many parts of Australia. It was a widespread practice in the south-east.”7

The vibrant multicultural history reverberating across my egg shell’s surface determined the first path of my trip: was the artwork by an Aboriginal artist? I sought the answer through a comparative iconographic analysis which focused on the artist’s interplay between narrative and the pictorial plane. The figural scenes dance up, around and across the object, encouraging the viewer to consider the artwork from all angles. The presence of several entry points entices the viewer to turn the artwork over and over in their hands.

Importantly, tactile engagement, multiple viewpoints and multiplicity of narratives do not feature in surviving examples of emu eggs carved by non-Indigenous artists from the early 20th century. Instead, non-Indigenous artists, including Takuma Jonaski, carved single scenes designed for static display before a detached viewer. The suggestion of a display method incompatible with non-Indigenous approaches of the time was a point of difference that positioned my artist as Aboriginal.

While the multicultural history of the medium directed this path, at its end I found Indigeneity constructed on the idea of difference. Gomeroi scholar Nikki Moodie identifies this binary conception of Indigeneity through Edward Said’s notion of the Other, from his work *Orientalism.*8 Indigeneity is reduced to a homogenised ‘Other’, understood in opposition, by knowledge of what constitutes non-Indigeneity. By following this path, I found that the discourse around my artwork became centred on ideas of deficit, with Indigeneity understood as the absence of non-Indigeneity.
I was therefore left with an iconographic understanding of what constitutes non-Indigenous art, rather than greater insight into my artist.

For my next path, I sought to reshape my understanding of the historical context by centering Indigeneity. I refined my directions to ask: what Country is my artist from? Although this path remained essentialist in nature, Indigeneity was no longer subordinate, nor homogenised or understood through whiteness. Instead, my artwork could be understood through many artists from many Indigenous communities and Countries. Now, my path was repositioned to highlight Aboriginal diversity.

Non-Indigenous scholar Sylvia Kleinert has also examined the history of carved emu eggs, in the Oxford companion to Aboriginal art and culture. She divides artists from across the 20th century into Wiradjuri style, from central New South Wales, and Paakantji style, from western New South Wales.9 Kleinert defines Wiradjuri style as single scenes carved in detailed naturalism in oval settings. She distinguishes Paakantji as a relief carving style, with two-dimensional figurative narratives encircling the circumference of the egg. Kleinert’s group names reflect the artists’ connections to Wiradjuri and Paakantji Countries.

I restructured my earlier iconographic analysis to consider whether my artist carved in either Wiradjuri or Paakantji style. Like Paakantji artists, my artist also worked in relief style to create two-dimensional figures that stand proud of the exposed inner layer of the egg. However, my artist’s distinctive interplay between multiple figural scenery and pictorial plane remain idiosyncratic. As I strove to position the egg in one of the other grouping, I continued to focus on what the egg was not, rather than on what it was; my journey remained confined by binary constructs originating in non-Indigenous epistemologies that sought to contain Indigeneity in deficit discourse.

With my artist stylistically distinct from prominent styles of the 20th century, I looked instead for stylistic references among artists today. Surveying contemporary Indigenous emu egg carvers also provided an alternative means of understanding the medium’s more recent history of style.

Artist and Barrapparra Barrapparra elder Aunty Esther Kirby shared the story behind her art in Banjilaka, the First Nations exhibition in Melbourne Museum.10 Kirby recounted learning to carve emu eggs from her father, Wiradjuri artist Sam Kirby, while growing up on Balranald Mission on Mutthi Mutthi Country, an area north of Swan Hill. Esther Kirby explained that her father had learned from his uncle, Wiradjuri artist Joe Walsh, during his youth on Warangesda Mission on Wiradjuri Country in central New South Wales, west of Wagga Wagga. In her words, Esther Kirby began carving for ‘my father’s sake [in order to] keep my father’s name going in the art world’. Artworks from the three generations reflect intergenerational continuity, particularly in the carving and compositional styles.

Similar intergenerational reflections are present in the artistic lineages of Paakantji artists William Badger Bates and Gordon Mitchell. Bates recounts learning how to carve from his grandmother, Paakantji elder Annie Moysey.11 Gordon Mitchell describes learning from his father, Paakantji artist Harry Mitchell.12 Stylistic similarities between subsequent generations are evident in these families too. These histories emphasised the importance of artistic lineage in the history of this medium.

The stylistic correlations between past and present artists suggested the possibility that I might be able to find my artist through an artistic descendant active today. However, I was unable to find any works in the online collections of regional, state and national collections that
showed stylistic affinities with the egg now at the Ian Potter Museum. Although carved emu eggs are likely to be held elsewhere, including remaining with families, my comparative visual survey further demonstrated that my artist’s approach to the pictorial plane and narrative format was unique among both past and present carvers.

Although my path through stylistic analysis was at an end, I had gained a closer understanding of the ingenuity of my artist. And the presence of intergenerational styles added greater nuance to my understanding of the history of the medium. Most importantly, the histories of some contemporary artists provided links to artists who began carving emu eggs in the central-eastern region of New South Wales in the early 20th century. Those earlier artists were probably the first generation of Indigenous artists to transfer aeons-old carving techniques to emu eggs. The relative proximity of these artists (in time and location) to Jonaski Takuma in Sydney further supports this possibility. As my artist was working in the same period and general location, he or she was also likely to have been a member of this first generation of emu egg carvers.

Now I was able to position my artist more accurately in the history of emu egg carving, through distinguishing style and correlations in locations. With this information, I could begin to explore the provenance of the artwork. Information about the donor, Russell Grimwade, could be the clue to finding the junction point and a potential attribution.

Grimwade, however, rarely kept documentation on the provenance of works in his collection. Studies of the Indigenous art market from this period suggest that there was only a limited secondary art market, with primary sales to non-Indigenous buyers generally involving exchanges between artist and collector. So Grimwade may have purchased the carved egg directly from the
artist. My research thus far had revealed that the artists producing carved emu eggs in the early 20th century were in rural New South Wales. Since Grimwade lived in Melbourne, his contact with the artist probably came about through travel.

From here, I could ask: did Grimwade visit rural New South Wales between 1900 and 1930? Grimwade’s photograph albums and unpublished autobiography provide information about his travels during this period. The only trip that aligned the location and time was in 1922, when Grimwade visited Gomeroi and Bigambul Countries and the town of Goondiwindi, on the border of New South Wales and Queensland, in order to view an eclipse of the sun. He had financed the trip as part of a scientific delegation from the University of Melbourne.

But my research thus far had not produced any connections to Goondiwindi; I had found no artworks from that region in my survey of institutional collections. However, there were artists in the far south-west of Gomeroi Country who were also emu egg carvers, including Bill Reid (senior). I shifted my search to identify whether there were any artists in the past who may have worked near Goondiwindi. I came across Leonard Waters (1924–1993), a Kamilaroi man who was the first and only Indigenous fighter pilot in World War II. Waters was an emu egg carver who had learned the art while growing up on Euraba Mission, on the New South Wales side of the Macintyre River, which borders Goondiwindi. Importantly, Waters recounted learning how to carve from Frank Woods (1891–1941), an artist connected to Gomeroi Country. This placed Woods as a contemporary of the first generation of Indigenous emu egg carvers. Further, the alignment of historical context with location and production, plus links to a known event in the life of the donor (Grimwade’s excursion in 1922) suggested Woods as my potential artist and the junction of the many paths of my research.

However, I was unable to find an artwork by Woods to confirm my hypothesis. Despite this, my research thus far had demonstrated that stylistic correlations exist between artistic lineages. Therefore, stylistic connections between the egg acquired by Grimwade and those carved by Waters could perhaps confirm (or refute) an artistic relationship to Waters’ teacher, Frank Woods.

Aunty Lenise Schloss, Len Waters’ daughter, generously shared with me two images of emu eggs carved by her father. Like my artist, Waters carved in bas-relief to create two-dimensional figures that both encircled and crossed the circumference of the egg. Waters also had a narrative style that was both dependent and independent, that is, each figure told its own story, but also contributed to a single overarching narrative.

Len Waters’ description of Frank Woods’ carving method provides further confirmation of an artistic connection. Waters stated that Woods was:

really fascinat[ing to] me, the way he used to do his work. He did arts and crafts of all sorts, but the way he did his eggs was something unreal. He used to break wine bottles just to clear the mottled part of the egg off first and then he would get the old black mussel shells and do the carvings with that.

This led me back to a stylistic analysis, although this time focusing on the carving implements. Correlations between tool and artwork are evident in Esther Kirby’s artistic lineage. Kirby states that her father and his uncle Joe Walsh used ‘a pocket knife and a three-quarter file […] sometimes […] glass or [a sharpened] jam tin’. Of her own tools, Kirby states: ‘My carving knife is like a scalpel. I use two different files, an eight inch file and
a six inch file’. Importantly, these tools support the aesthetic focus of Kirby’s own work and that of her lineage: imitative naturalism and a linear and decorative emphasis. By contrast, the mussel shells used by Woods do not have the very sharp, straight point that is ideal for delicately revealing progressive layers of an emu egg’s surface. A mussel shell’s curved edge is also less well suited to linear styles. For these reasons artists carving with mussel shells may showcase elements outside the aesthetic, such as my artist’s distinctively planar imagery and idiosyncratic narrative.

These correlations between artistic style, tools and techniques, the history of the medium, and provenance, all led to a strong possibility that the emu egg bequeathed to the University of Melbourne by Russell Grimwade was carved by Gomeroi artist Frank Woods on the Euraba Mission outside Goondiwindi around 1922. Through this possible attribution, the narratives depicted may be interpreted as scenes of life on the river (later named by settlers as the Macintyre River). While the area, particularly the Euraba Mission, carries a complex history, Woods’ artwork illustrates times when young families catch fish, emu eggs are collected, dogs abound, men relax and smoke pipes, and women yarn.

Although Woods’ carving technique reveals only the outer surfaces of the egg, in my research I peeled back layer upon layer of history, in search of the artist’s hand. These layers revealed a dynamic medium that encompasses diverse styles, methods and approaches—a medium that resonates with multicultural histories of exchange. Throughout this history, Indigenous emu egg carvers today, as well as those from the recent past, like Frank Woods, continue carving practices that extend well beyond this medium and the 20th century, to generations upon generations of Indigenous artists.
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7 Croft, ‘The gift of seeing with fingers’.


12 Kleintert, ‘Art and Aboriginality’, p. 244.


14 Alisa Bunbury (Grimwade curator, Ian Potter Museum of Art), personal communication with the author, 2018.


16 Photographs, Series 22, Boxes 25–59, Sir Russell Grimwade and Lady Grimwade Papers, University of Melbourne Archives; Unpublished autobiography of Russell Grimwade, Series 13/2, Box 8, Sir Russell Grimwade and Lady Grimwade Papers, University of Melbourne Archives. Thanks to Alisa Bunbury for her assistance with archival material concerning Russell Grimwade.


21 Thanks to Lenise Schloss for generously sharing two images of her father’s works via email with the assistance of Peter Rees in January 2019.


23 Bunjilaka, Melbourne Museum, *Esther Kirby, Yulendi Group*.

24 Human Rights Australia, *Toomelah report*. 

Cathleen Rosier

Indigenous artists and the carving of emu eggs