

# Meerreeng-an Here Is My Country: the Story of Aboriginal Victoria told through Art: A Collection-based Resource for the Victorian Aboriginal Community

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## Abstract

This presentation discusses how the book *Meerreeng-an Here Is My Country* uses collections to tell community stories and portray the richness and diversity of Aboriginal culture in south-eastern Australia. Artworks and artefacts from the 19<sup>th</sup> century through to the present are interpreted by statements from artists and stories from Elders. To demonstrate the continuation of culture, old and new works are mixed together, from shields and cloaks to contemporary paintings about issues such as the Stolen Generations and land rights. Works were sourced from public collections around the world. Cooperation from community and from collecting institutions was essential to the success of this project.

## Presentation

Vicki Couzens is listed as co-presenter today but she is currently in Delhi as part of an Indigenous arts project coinciding with the Commonwealth Games and so is unable to be here.

As we begin this part of the session, I wish to acknowledge the traditional custodians of this Land, the peoples of the Kulin nation, particularly the Wurundjeri and the Boonwoorrong, the people belonging to this Land which we know as Melbourne. I also convey my respects to the Elders, both past and present.

For the last two years, I have had the great privilege of being Project Manager and co-editor of the *Meerreeng-an* project at the Koorie Heritage Trust.

*Meerreeng-an* is a unique published resource on material cultural heritage produced for Aboriginal communities in south-eastern Australia,

particularly Victoria. *Meerreeng-an Here Is My Country: The Story of Aboriginal Victoria Told Through Art* was released by the Koorie Heritage Trust in June.

The Koorie Heritage Trust is a not-for-profit Aboriginal community organisation based here in Melbourne. The Trust was set up in 1985 and its aims are to protect, preserve and promote the living culture of Aboriginal people of southeastern Australia.

Its collections include 3,800 artefacts and artworks, both traditional and contemporary and everything in-between, oral histories, photographs, and a specialist research library. We have exhibitions on-site and off-site, community arts and education programs, and a family history service.

In Aboriginal Victoria, there are 38 cultural groups, whose members share kinship, a language heritage, stories, songs and spirituality through connection and belonging to a defined area of Country. The Indigenous population of Victoria is currently more than 30,000.

In Aboriginal Victoria, traditional art designs reflected identity, clan group, Country, totems, stories and ceremony. Designs were based on line, in geometric patterns or more free-form flowing curves.

Wooden weapons were decorated with carved geometric patterns of diamonds, chevrons, zigzags and crosses, or stripes and blocks of the same shape incised in repeating patterns. Designs could be in-filled with red, white and yellow ochres.

Each individual stroke of the carving tools can be seen on many weapons.

Ochres and repeating patterns were also used in rock paintings and on carved trees, together with human figures, hand stencils, animal shapes and other symbols. Scenes of ceremony and hunting were drawn on the sheets of bark used to build houses.

Each skin in a possum skin cloak was, and is, incised with intricate designs, in geometric

patterns or curving symbols, representing Country and identity. Coiled baskets were, and are, decorated with repeating patterns, woven into the body of the basket using reeds of a different colour.

Contemporary Victorian Indigenous artists have had very few resources to consult about the art traditions of their own cultural groups. Access to collections is limited and the only published comprehensive works relating to Victorian Aboriginal art date back more than 100 years and are not easily accessible. As well, these century-old books are largely based on information supplied by non-Indigenous settlers and missionaries.

Staff at the Koorie Heritage Trust have been acutely aware of the need for a modern-day published resource on Victorian Aboriginal artworks and artefacts, a resource for the Victorian Aboriginal community itself.

We wanted to pull together images of works held in the Trust's own collections and in other collections in Australia and overseas, so that artists and craftspeople had an accessible visual resource which they could use as a reference for traditional methods, techniques, materials and designs. We also wanted to show how art traditions down here are so different from the current dominant art-form of dot painting, a comparatively recent art-form derived from sand drawings in the western desert of central Australia.

In 2008 we were successful in receiving funding for project staff from Arts Victoria and the Helen Macpherson Smith Trust granted sufficient funds to cover photography, design and printing. We also received small amounts of funding from the Felton Bequest and a private donor.

Initially our idea had been to concentrate on traditional-style objects, shields and clubs, possum-skin cloaks and baskets and the like from the early-mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, with some contemporary works included to show that Victorian Aboriginal art is a living entity.

Our idea was to have several artefacts per double-page spread, a bit like a Sotheby's catalogue, beautiful images with basic captions, organised in

a fairly didactic way with pages of shields, pages of clubs, pages of baskets etc.

However, as work on the project progressed, the book transformed into something quite different.

There were so many links between the 'old' and the 'new' that contemporary artworks became more and more important. We found such a wealth of beautiful and emotive quotes in our oral history files that the statements and stories derived directly from Aboriginal community members also became more central.

Many in community said to us that traditional language should be included so that became an added element to consider. We were also trying to represent every region of Victoria and as many cultural groups as possible and this also affected the selection of content.

Whilst this change of emphasis was occurring, Vicki Couzens joined the project as community Project Officer. Vicki is a senior Keerraay Woorroong Gunditjmara woman, a well-known artist, a language worker and with contacts everywhere in the Victorian community. Her role became pivotal to the success of the project in terms of community cooperation and support and her input was central to the final structure of the book. Vicki's skills and knowledge complemented my background as a curator, collection manager and publications manager with links to staff in many key institutions.

Comments and contributions by other Indigenous staff at the Trust were invaluable, particularly our CEO, Jason Eades, and several Elders who have been associated with the Trust for many years acted as advisors (particularly Jim Berg). And every time an artist or Elder came into the Collections Unit, we'd sit down and show them the latest draft of the book and get their comments and feedback. Support from staff, both paid and voluntary, within the Trust's collections Unit was inexhaustible and invaluable.

What we ended up with was a number of disparate elements which had to be woven together into one coherent structure. It was a bit like putting a

jigsaw puzzle together, only with an infinite number of ways in which it could be done.

We had collected together images of over 600 artworks and artefacts from 16 different museum and library collections and several private collections. We eventually cut that down to 340 works. We had works, stories and quotes from more than 140 individuals spread over time from the 1830s to 2009. We had language words from 16 of the 38 Victorian cultural groups.

Sometimes the focal point of the particular section of the puzzle we were working on was an artwork and we looked for a quote or a story to match it. Sometimes the focal point was a story and we looked for artworks or artefacts to illustrate that.

After many, many attempts at trying to force our puzzle pieces together, the right story cycle appeared, presented in nine themes, each with a title drawn from a quote by an artist or Elder.

Each of the 9 themes begins with a double-page spread featuring detail shots of artworks showing distinctive patterns and designs of Aboriginal Victoria, language words related to the content of the theme and an introductory quote from a community member.

These are the nine themes and the quotes from which the titles came.

### **Here Is My Country: Creation and Country**

The first theme reprises the title of the book - Here Is My Country - I'll come back to the source of that title shortly.

### **Laws For Living: Culture and Kin**

Knowledge is given to us by our ancestors as custodians and is passed on through stories. The relationship of the land and its people is told through the generations. This knowledge gives the laws for living, for relationships, for healing in song and dance.

Dr Doris Paton, Gunai

### **Remember Those Ceremonies: Ceremony and Dance**

Barak painted the living things. He wanted people to remember those ceremonies.

Joy Wandin Murphy, Wurundjeri, speaking of her ancestor, William Barak

### **Wrap Culture Around You: Cloaks, Clothing and Jewellery**

For me the possum skin cloak is symbolic of wrapping love and that culture around you, it's symbolic of the warmth and the safety of belonging and of knowing who you are.

Vicki Couzens, Keerraay Woorroong Gunditjmarra

### **The Earth Is Kind: Foods, Fishing and Hunting**

The earth is kind and constantly replaces what is taken. Richard Mullett, Gunnai, writing of the cycle of life.

### **A Strong Arm and A Good Eye: Weapons and Tools**

Before we had guns and traps and that, we used to make bundies, hunt with sticks, bundies. The only thing you needed with them was a strong arm and a good eye - if you didn't have those you went hungry. Theo Saunders, Gunditjmarra

### **Our Hearts Are Breaking: Invasion, Conflict and Resilience**

The title for this theme was adapted from more than one quote. In this instance I will read to you the quote which appears on the theme introductory page, written by singer and songwriter, Archie Roach, Tjapwurrong.

And mother land has shed her tears  
For lives that never stood a chance

### **Our Past Is Our Strength: Culture and Identity**

We all come from our Aboriginal Ancestors and we all come from a traditional past. This is our bond, this is our strength.

Lyn Thorpe Yorta Yorta

### **My Spirit Belongs Here: Country and Kin**

I am a boorai (child) of this land

My old ones tell me my spirit

Belongs here

Joy Wandin Murphy Wurundjeri

The title of the book and of the first theme comes from a quote recorded by George Robinson, Chief Protector of Aborigines in Victoria. On 20<sup>th</sup> June 1841, Robinson was in Jardwadjali Country in

western Victoria where he met 4 people including Yeremungmurrerger, a young man aged about 21 years. Robinson writes: *When I asked their names and where the country was they belonged to ... the man with emotion struck the ground and said, 'Here is my country, deen deen - here here'.*

*Meerreeng-an* means My Country in Jardwadjali, the language of Yeremungmurrerger.

Each double-page spread in *Meerreeng-an* has four layers – images of artworks and artefacts, text/and or stories from artists or Elders, language words related to what is shown on the page, and artwork captions. As much as possible, we show 'old' and 'new' items of the same type on the same pages. All interpretive text comes directly from community.

Instead of a completely didactic and academic presentation of images of clubs, shields and baskets as originally envisaged, *Meerreeng-an* became the community's own story of Aboriginal Victoria from traditional times through to today, told entirely through the artworks and words of artists, Elders and other members of the Victorian Aboriginal community. A far stronger publication and resource for the community than it would have been if we had stuck to our original ideas.

We published 3,500 copies, 3,000 in paperback and 500 in hardback. Three months after publication, we have less than 1,000 left. The Victorian state department of Education bought over 1,500 copies and is sending one copy to every Victorian government school, both primary and secondary.

Each contributing community member or cultural organisation received at least two free copies of *Meerreeng-an*. This means that nearly 500 free copies are out there and available within community.

An exhibition based on *Meerreeng-an*, and funded by the Helen Macpherson Smith Trust, opened at the same time as the book launch on 18<sup>th</sup> June 2010 and is on show at the Koorie Heritage Trust until the end of October. The exhibition features about 100 of the works primarily from the Trust's own collection.

Three years ago, if someone had asked me to manage a project which needed words sourced from 16 languages, require contributions and permissions from 140 artists and Elders, seek images and permissions from 16 museums, galleries and libraries, several private collectors and 8 Victorian Aboriginal cultural organisations, I would have said, 'no way, that's impossible'.

But it wasn't. Community members came to see this project as an opportunity to tell their own story in their own words and through their own artworks and everyone we approached (bar one) gave us permission to use their artworks or their words. The level of cooperation we received from museums, galleries and libraries was outstanding, especially from our working partners, Museum Victoria and the National Gallery of Victoria.

Staff at the Victorian Aboriginal Corporation for Languages gave us unstinting help in sourcing language, and, thank goodness for the digital age, where low-res images can be emailed from the other side of the world and make the selection of artworks infinitely quicker and easier. Plus we had a project staff with complementary skills and a good working relationship. What the Trust achieved with this project was far more than any of us ever anticipated.

At the start, we hoped that the images and information in *Meerreeng-an* would provide inspiration for artists and craftspeople. Before the book was even published, Len Tregonning, a Gunai man, had made reproductions of three 19<sup>th</sup> century tools from images collected for the book. The original tools are the three on the left of this picture – an engraving tool with double kangaroo teeth in a wooden handle, an engraving tool with the lower jaw of a brush-tailed possum in a wooden handle, and a bone awl. The originals are housed in Museum Victoria and the Pitt Rivers Museum.

The second bone awl, the one on the right with the little piece of string, is the one Lenny made last year. Lenny's reproductions are part of the *Meerreeng-an* exhibition currently on display at the Trust.

Wood-carvers such as Mick Harding, a Taungurong man, are now wanting to try out these reproduction engravers and see if they can reproduce the type of carved decoration we can see on this 19<sup>th</sup> century wooden shield. This is exactly the sort of spin-off we had hoped for when we began this project.

### **About the Author**

Chris is currently Assistant Curator at the Koorie Heritage Trust in Melbourne and was the Project Manager and co-editor of the *Meerreeng-an* project from 2008 to mid-2010. She also curated the KOORIE exhibition at Museum Victoria for the Trust back in 1988. Chris worked as a collection manager/curator in the Indigenous Cultures department of Museum Victoria for 11 years, curated two major Bicentennial exhibitions in the late 1980s, lectured in Museum Studies at Deakin University for 6 years and managed the publications program at the Cancer Council of Victoria for 2 years.

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