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Gaye Sculthorpe, curator, 'Indigenous Australia: Enduring Civilisation', *British Museum*, London. Entry: Paid.

Ian Coates and Jay Arthur, curators, 'Encounters: Revealing Stories of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander objects from the British Museum', *National Museum of Australia*. Entry: Free.

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'You have to listen to both versions, the Indigenous version of our history, and the non-indigenous version of our history, because they're both telling the truth, but they're both not the same story' (Don Christophersen, 2014).

This quote, which closes the exhibition Encounters: Revealing Stories of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander objects from the British Museum (Encounters) at the National Museum of Australia (NMA), directly responds to Geoffrey Blainey's simplistic categorization of Australian history writing as either black armband or three cheers<sup>1</sup>. Christophersen reminds us that in order for one to have a true understanding of these debated histories they need to occupy the same space<sup>2</sup>, as Encounters and its partner exhibition at the British Museum (BM) demonstrate. The quote is one of many which adorn the walls of Encounters highlighting the extensive consultation process the museum undertook with the Indigenous communities represented within it. Its placement at the end of the exhibition helps the viewer understand why there are so many voices in the exhibition, and why this is important.

Indigenous Australia: Enduring Civilisation (Enduring Civilisation) held at the BM ran from April 23<sup>rd</sup> to August 2<sup>nd</sup> 2015, and Encounters at the NMA which will run from November 27<sup>th</sup> 2015 until March 28<sup>th</sup> 2016 are the products of a collaboration which began in 2007 with the aim of making the Australian collections at the British Museum better known and more accessible to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. The dual exhibition project was characterized by an in-depth consultation process over six years involving the twenty-seven communities from the regions represented in the exhibitions. At the same time the project also ran the four year ARC linkage grant Engaging Objects: Indigenous Communities, Museum Collections and the Representation of Indigenous Histories based at Australia National University which sought to interrogate this exhibition making process. A conference discussing this process will happen in March 2016.

Ultimately the exhibitions whilst linked by similar objects, artists and themes, developed quite differently. Enduring Civilisation was challenged by the small space it was given in the BM which meant that at times the exhibition seemed cramped, and a British public whose knowledge of Indigenous Australia and Australian history was quite minimal. The premise of Enduring Civilisation was to introduce the audience to ‘the remarkable story of one of the world’s oldest continuing cultures’<sup>3</sup>, corresponding thematically to the British Museum’s trope of blockbuster exhibitions that explore great civilisations, such as China’s Terracotta Army, Moctezuma: The Aztec Ruler and a forthcoming exhibition on the sunken cities of Egypt. The exhibition guided viewers through the small space using a series of themes, whilst introducing them to basic concepts such as country, the dreamtime, and the ideas behind western desert acrylic paintings. Whilst moving the viewer through these themes and concepts clearly and concisely, the exhibition also moved chronologically

through key moments in history such as the landing of Captain Cook, the stolen generations, land rights and the referendum. This chronological sequence was constantly interrupted by contemporary objects, video and sound such as the Michael Cook painting *Untitled #4* which was placed amongst objects collected by Captain Cook, reappropriating that moment of encounter from an Indigenous perspective. These interventions reaffirmed the aim of the exhibition to show that this is a continuing culture, an enduring civilisation.

*Encounters* which features 151 objects from the British Museum, wanted instead to explore the many stories about these objects, and the moments of encounter that surrounded their production, procurement and journey to the collections of the British Museum, highlighting how the stories form a part of the shared Indigenous and non-indigenous histories of Australia. The entrance of the exhibition leads viewers in and up a central walkway through a large wooden fish trap, to one of the earliest moments of encounter between Gweagal people and Captain Cook (figure two). Where *Enduring Civilisation* organised itself chronologically and thematically as a way of guiding viewers, *Encounters* is organised geographically and because of this as well as the size of the exhibition venue, the exhibition has no fixed route, allowing viewers the freedom to explore. Each geographical space mixes historic objects, with contemporary objects, videos, quotes and photographs to tell the story of that country through many voices and many perspectives, ultimately allowing the viewer to build up a rich history as they move through the exhibition.

Importantly neither exhibitions shy away from the often contentious histories surrounding the acquisition of these objects and their placement in museum collections today. But while many of the reviewers of both exhibitions have chosen to focus solely on these contentious histories and issues of repatriation as a means of

criticising the exhibitions, they have overlooked the actual process of consultation that both of these exhibitions engaged in with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. The exhibitions do not just select positive quotes from consultations to fit their narratives but ones that challenge and contest. They also actively include the work produced from contemporary artistic interventions that were a part of the consultation process. Contemporary Indigenous artists were invited to the BM to produce work that explored the circumstances within which many of the objects were collected, such as Judy Watson's *Hole in the Land 3* (figure three) which overlays images of pituri bags collected on her country onto the plans of the British Museum and features in both exhibitions. The pituri bag shows a use of Aboriginal and settler material, and the print references both the movement of the object off the land and into the British Museum, but also its placement in the landscape of Queensland, as it would have been used. The NMA also chose to hold a companion exhibition to *Encounters* that focused specifically on these artistic interventions, entitled *Unsettled: Stories Within* featuring the work of Indigenous artists Elma Kris, Jonathan Jones, Judy Watson, Julie Gough and Wukun Wanambi. These artworks are critical and deal with social and environmental issues central to Indigenous lives.

Both *Enduring Civilisation* and *Encounters* wanted to 'support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in re-establishing a connection with objects from the British Museum's collection that were made by their ancestors'<sup>4</sup> and both have clearly done this. The contemporary bicornual basket made by Abe Muriata and the accompanying video of him talking about it which closed *Enduring Civilisation*, and the carved pole by Noel Wellington (figure four) in *Encounters* spoke not just of re-establishing connections with collections but connections with ancestors and ideas of what it means to be from that country. It was about how, as one of the quotes

describes, ‘when you talk about country, country talks [to you]’ (Jim Hill 2015) and depicting as fully as possible the many stories that that country has to tell.

#### Figures:

1. Enduring Civilisation: Cook Corner. Photo Rachael Murphy, British Museum.
2. Encounters: Shield and Gararra (fishing spears) Gweagal people. Photo Jason McCarthy, National Museum of Australia.
3. The Holes in the Land 3 by Judy Watson, 2015. Oc2015, 2004.3. Courtesy and Copyright Trustees of the British Museum.
4. Carved Pole 2014 by Noel Wellington Jerrinja people Nowra. Photo George Serras, National Museum of Australia.

#### Acknowledgements

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- <sup>1</sup> Blainey, Geoffrey, 'Drawing up a Balance Sheet of Our History', *Quadrant*, 37:7-8 (1993), 10-15.
- <sup>2</sup> Clark, Anna and Stuart Macintyre. 2003 *The History Wars* (Melbourne University Press: Melbourne).
- <sup>3</sup> British Museum website. Accessed September 12<sup>th</sup> 2015.
- <sup>4</sup> Coates, Ian. 2015 *Encounters: Revealing Stories of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Objects from the British Museum* (National Museum of Australia Press: Canberra) p.16.