



## **SPECIAL SECTION: LEADING THINKERS IN THE FIELD—HOWARD MORPHY**



### **Anthropology, Art, and Ethnographic Collections** A Conversation with Howard Morphy

*Jason M. Gibson*

**Jason M. Gibson (JG):** *In your book* Museums, Infinity and the Culture of Protocols: Ethnographic Collections and Source Communities (Morphy 2020), you begin with an anecdote of visiting the Pitt Rivers Museum as a young child. Did museums play a part in sparking an interest in humanity, and its diversity, or were you fascinated by the Other?

**Howard Morphy (HM):** No, no, it was very much humanity as a whole. You must remember that I was born soon after the end of World War II and I was brought up by parents who really treated the human race as a whole. My parents both came from working-class backgrounds; my father before the war worked as a railway clerk for the Great Western Region and was a trade unionist and stood as a candidate for the Labour Party. And then came the war and the incredible disruption to people's lives. He met my mother, who was the person who made the announcements at Paddington Station, and just immediately after the war ended they got married. My father then decided that being a trade unionist was a hazardous profession for creating a family and took the opportunity immediately after the war—because so many people had died, so many schoolteachers had died—to train as a teacher. On my birth certificate my father's profession is given as a student. I grew up in Oxfordshire, where my father got his first teaching job, in a family that never owned a car. My father came from a background of farm laborers and millers, and we spent much of our childhood cycling around Oxfordshire visiting villages, learning about the history of agriculture, and occasionally going to visit stately homes. My father's passion was history broadly, but there was a library of books on the history of the railways, windmills, agriculture, the English countryside, natural history, and folklore. We had many of the classic books on English folklife and social change—Flora Thomson's *Lark Rise to Candleford* had a big impact. I became interested in history and the material evidence of past ways of living in Britain.

I was very lucky in the school I went to, Magdalen College School, Oxford. Back then you could get government scholarships to go there, but now it is a fee-only public school. It was then



that I started to visit museums on school expeditions. We went to the Natural History Museum one year, the Science Museum another year, although we never actually went to the British Museum. I just loved those visits to museums, and I came back with handfuls of postcards and memorabilia. I was particularly interested in natural history, the history of science, all those kinds of things. Oxford is, of course, a wonderful environment for museums, and at the school I had projects that involved going and writing about paintings and objects that were in the Ashmolean Museum. Each year there were the Christmas lectures held in the University Museum in the same place where the famous debates between Thomas Huxley and Bishop Wilberforce about Darwin and evolutionary theory took place. Added on to the cathedral-like structure of the University Museum, in a kind of Victorian, almost railway, shed was the Pitt Rivers Museum. I would go early to listen to these lectures and walk around the museums. So, at about the age of 12 or 13 I got to know the Pitt Rivers Museum quite well. I found it to be a place of absolute magic. It displayed the diversity of world cultures including those of the British Isles, albeit with an emphasis on past times. People don't realize that 30 percent of the Pitt Rivers Museum collection is from the British Isles and Western Europe.

The way the Pitt Rivers exhibited things, in a sense, flattened difference because it had a typological organization that focused on categories of objects. As an example, you could go and see traps for insects from all over the world and would find that there were interesting ways of trapping things in the Cotswolds that had analogues in China, and so on. To me, it was a museum of world cultures, and I didn't really separate the present from the past in my imagination.

**JG:** *Are these reasons you later studied anthropology?*

**HM:** Absolutely not. I was primarily interested in history and biology. I applied to go to university to study law, but at that time I was working with Young Oxfam. I often spent my holidays with Oxfam opening donations and sending letters and requests. And one of the things we did was run a folk club called Fennario Folk after a line in Bob Dylan's song "Pretty Peggy-O." It was in the Norman basements of the Mitre Hotel dripping with sweaty walls and a very smoky atmosphere. I just loved doing that. It introduced me to the British folk music of that era, which also had a connection between present and past. I got very involved with Oxfam and I decided that, rather than studying law, I wanted to do something that would really be useful in helping with development processes in places like Africa. I thought, "What are we doing in these countries if we don't know the background of the people that we're going to be working with?" I felt that it was essential if you're going to have effective development programs, you needed to really know the societies that you were helping from afar. If not, it could be a continuation of some sort of Western colonial process in a different guise if you weren't careful. So, I went to see my geography teacher and I said, "I want to do human geography at university because I'm really interested in the diversity of world cultures." He looked at me and said, "Well actually, human geography is a poor person's anthropology." I'd not heard of anthropology. I took his advice and applied to study anthropology, and I got several offers. At University College London (UCL) I was interviewed by two outstanding anthropologists, Mary Douglas and Phyllis Kaberry. I didn't warm as much to Mary as I did to Phyllis. I wasn't interviewed anywhere else, they just offered you a place—but that whole interview process impressed me. I decided UCL was the place that I would go.

**JG:** *Later you studied with the anthropologist/archaeologist Pete Ucko and conducted your early work on the small wooden-gypsum sculptures known as "toas" of the Lake Eyre region in central Australia. What attracted you to those objects and to Australia's material culture in general?*

**HM:** Peter Ucko was also a student of anthropology at the University College London before he went on to do his doctorate. UCL's anthropology teaching included both biological anthropology and social anthropology and strong elements of what we call material culture. Peter was always someone who was in between social anthropology and archaeology. He was the first dedicated lecturer of material culture at UCL and was a superb teacher. The undergraduates' course as a whole was a wonderful journey across disciplines. It was a wonderful environment. We had the Royal Anthropological Institute down the road in Bedford Square as our student library, and we were much welcome there. It was a good environment to work in where we were connected to the history of anthropology. Peter was obviously very interested in things that then would've been called anthropological-archaeology and in developing practical ways of engaging with the past and in understanding cultural differences. On one occasion we prepared something called an ethnographic feed-in where we practiced different food preparations and the cooking techniques from different parts of the world—from prehistory to the present—and documented the processes. Members of the staff provided recipes and methods from their fieldwork.

**JG:** *It sounds like Peter Ucko was very important in terms of your early move toward material culture studies as a part of your anthropology training.*

**HM:** Very important, but none of these things were separated off. I was very interested in the kinship and social organization studies taught by Phyllis Kaberry. She was someone who had done this important pioneering fieldwork in the Kimberley region of North West Australia, and then in Papua New Guinea and later Cameroon. I really enjoyed analyzing the formal structure of kinship systems and how they related to human behavior. That connects to my engagement with material culture. I see material objects as sources of evidence in the present, and from the past. I see the analysis of form broadly conceived—including the material properties of the things, their functional properties, their shape, design, color, and so on—as a major way to gain insights into systems of production as well as systems of meaning associated with the material world. Peter Ucko was someone who believed in formal analysis, and at the heart of his “methodology” was the relationship between form and function and how that related to the creation of conceptual categories and types. Again, that was something that I've moved forward with in different ways from that moment on, really.

**JG:** *So how did you integrate the analysis of the toas into this interest?*

**HM:** Clearly Indigenous Australia has been important in the history of anthropology, so although we didn't have courses on Australian Aboriginal society, Indigenous Australia was very much present in courses in religion from Mary Douglas, in kinship with Phyllis Kaberry, and in art with Peter Ucko. After my first degree I was lucky enough to be awarded a scholarship to do a master's degree—an MPhil—mainly by thesis, no coursework at all and a really substantial thesis has to be produced—and I wrote a theoretical treatise, quite a large one in the first six months or so. In those days you were allowed to go ahead with it, and I don't think Peter really saw anything of what I'd written. He was my primary supervisor but not the person who oversaw the thesis writing task, who was Phyllis. I handed him this treatise that was basically on how you had to see material culture as the fulcrum of action, and I thought it was a good thesis. It was influenced in part by the theories of Gregory Bateson and others. Peter looked at this and said, “Well, this looks to be full of good ideas I'm sure, but this is not a thesis at all, it's entirely theoretical. You really should have case studies.” So, I went to the Royal Anthropological Institute Library and looked for data. I looked through the pamphlets and then suddenly, in a sense, I struck gold. I

found an offprint from the proceedings of the South Australian Museum on the toas of the Lake Eyre region by Stirling and Waite. It had illustrations of 460 or so toas, these interesting-looking material objects. I felt this was an incredibly good body of material, that no one had analyzed or hardly referred to since the pamphlet was originally written in 1918.

I could also see that there were manuscripts in the museum associated with the collection—written by the missionary R. G Reuther. Peter put me in touch by with Bob Edwards, who was then the curator of the South Australian Museum. Bob was just incredible: he said yes and was really excited. I then got a grant so that they were able to produce color photographs of all the toas and send them to me. I also got photocopies of all of Reuther’s manuscripts that had been recently translated from German into English by the Reverend P. A. Scherer, another Lutheran pastor. I had this incredible archive from the South Australian Museum to analyze. I examined the toas not from a perspective of works of art but as a semiotic system, a system of meaning using different forms of imagery, and I adopted an approach to understand the toas as a system of communication. I had done a lot of the theoretical work that I could apply to it in the original rejected draft; so that’s how I became engaged with “Australia.”

**JG:** *Your interest in Australian people and material culture came from this starting point. You also gave lectures at Chelsea College of Art on Australian Aboriginal bark paintings while working on your thesis and shortly afterward were offered your first job in a museum, at the British Museum. What was your role at the British Museum at that time?*

**HM:** This was wonderful and, again, serendipitous. The British Museum discovered that a considerable percentage of their collection, in particular the collection that was classified as “ethnographic,” had not been registered. Works were *appearing* in places that cast suspicion—it happens in museums every so often—as to where these objects had come from. So, they started a project that was colloquially referred to as a “no-number project,” and I was one of the first four people employed on it. I was lucky because I had had lessons as an undergraduate with Bryan Cranstone, who was the curator of Oceania there and had also given me a holiday job to organize or to develop a showcase on Pacific fishhooks, so I’d already had those kinds of connections. I was appointed with Stephen Hooper, subsequently a very distinguished Pacific and Fijian art historian and curator at the Sainsbury Research Unit.

The project required us to register the unregistered collections. Many of the collections needed work. For example, the Andaman Islands collections, which are phenomenally important, were unregistered because they didn’t fit into the main subject categories that the collections were divided into at the time. They didn’t fit into the main category of Asian Civilization, and although through Radcliffe-Brown’s work the Andamanese were important to the history of anthropology, their material culture had attracted less interest. The collection had just been neglected even though it included important documentary material including fantastic glass plate negatives, which were a great resource. We were able to research and provide catalog entries for these using the archival resources that were there. It was great training, and it gave me a feeling for the rich potential of museum collections *cultures*.

**JG:** *You completed your MPhil thesis in the early 1970s and your doctorate in 1978, but this was based on fieldwork in Australia. How did this come about?*

**HM:** When I was at the British Museum, I had done a lot of work on documented collections, but I felt that I really wanted to undertake some fieldwork. I saw an advertisement for what were then called Commonwealth scholarships at the Australian National University (ANU) in the tearoom,

and I thought, well, let's give it a go. I wrote to ANU with the proposal to use linguistic methods in the study of the artistic systems of Vanuatu. I'd got familiar with aspects of the material culture of Vanuatu from the no-number project.

I heard absolutely nothing, absolutely nothing at all, until one day I had a letter from someone called John Mulvaney, who had just started a new department in prehistory and anthropology at ANU. He wrote to me and said he'd been looking through earlier applications for people who had applied for PhD scholarships and was interested in mine. He knew about my master's thesis from Peter Ucko, who'd just been appointed as Principal of the Australian Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies. John said, "I think that it is very, very important that we should have doctoral students now working on contemporary bark paintings in context of society and change. So, if you'd like a scholarship to study bark paintings in Arnhem Land, we'd be happy to award one." I happily accepted the offer, and Frances, my wife, who was in the meantime finishing her own master's thesis on historic northwest collections in I museums, was very happy to accompany me to Australia.

We ended up at ANU before any of the anthropology staff had arrived, so I was there as an anthropology scholar in the Department of Prehistory and Anthropology with no anthropology staff. However, soon after I arrived it was announced that Anthony Forge had accepted the chair in anthropology. Serendipity again, because I'd given seminars on toas and my analysis of them in a seminar program that Anthony had run at the London School of Economics (LSE) Department of Anthropology. So, I knew Anthony through that. I ended up then with Anthony Forge and John Mulvaney as my primary supervisors, and it was a great combination. The person who gave the paper at the LSE after mine was Alfred Gell, who was three or four years ahead of me in his career, having just come back from Papua New Guinea. He soon joined the department as a lecturer.

**JG:** *Your work is very much grounded in experiences with the Yolngu people of northeast Arnhem Land in northern Australia. Looking back, how do you think Yolngu people have influenced your thinking about museums and collections?*

**HM:** The Institute of Aboriginal Studies, which was the main funding body, had just received a proposal from the Reverend Edgar Wells to go to Yirrkala. He wanted to take the photographs from the Reverend Wilbur Chaseling collection to Yirrkala to redocument them. Chaseling had been the missionary at Yirrkala in the 1930s, and there were collections in Brisbane, in Sydney, and some I think in Melbourne, but they were entirely without any documentation. Edgar Wells was the Mission Superintendent in 1962 when paintings were produced to be placed beside the altar of the newly built Yirrkala church. He was also there when Yolngu people made the 1963 bark petition to Australia's federal government requesting recognition of their rights in their traditional lands. He had also been one of the main promoters of Yolngu bark paintings at Milingimbi and Yirrkala. Edgar wanted very much to go back to Yirrkala and, echoing my experience in applying to ANU, the institute said he could have a grant on the condition that he take *me* with him as his research assistant. Fortunately for me he accepted. In preparation for the visit, I visited the various museums and made an archive of photographs of the Chaseling collection so that it could be redocumented. When I went to Arnhem Land with Edgar in 1973, I was unconsciously involved in an early iteration of what would subsequently be seen as a component of the process of reconnection with and repatriation of material from museums to communities.

**JG:** *This sounds well before its time. Very much like the kind of contemporary work of return that is de rigueur within museum studies, anthropology, and related disciplines at present.*



**HM:** It was, and it was Edgar Wells's idea that I happily went along with. I was accompanying—I didn't realize it—someone who had heroic status at both Milingimbi and Yirrkala. At Milingimbi because he'd been there as a missionary for some ten years or so and worked closely with people and helped develop the marketing of art from Milingimbi, and at Yirrkala he was involved very much in the land rights battles. However, initially I arrived at Yirrkala without Edgar. I was going to meet him at Brisbane airport, and we were going to travel together with his wife, Anne, to Yirrkala where the mission was expecting us. Just before their flight there was an announcement: "Would Howard Morphy in the airport please come to the desk?" I came to the desk and was handed a phone. The voice on the other end said, "Hello, this is Edgar Wells, I'm afraid Anne's feeling sick, so we're going to have to delay our journey for three or four days, but you go on ahead." This caused real consternation at Yirrkala because he was coming as a distinguished guest of the mission, and instead, an unknown anthropologist came alone and arrived in advance of him. I was left entirely by myself, and I went out for a walk that evening down to the beach, and then a very distinguished-looking Yolngu person with a beard came up to me and introduced himself in immaculate English. It was Wandjuk Marika, who was just about to become the chairman of the Aboriginal Arts Board. So, again, serendipity. I did then go on to Milingimbi with Edgar and then Maningrida, but at Yirrkala I had also met a person who had been very close to Edgar, Narritjin Maymuru. I spent quite a while talking to Narritjin, and I just was so impressed by his intellect and his capacity to communicate. He was quite serious. I could see you had to work hard to open that gate of confidence, but I decided that's where I want to do fieldwork, there at Yirrkala.

**JG:** *How do you think these early experiences enriched or changed your approach to museums and collecting institutions more broadly over time? If you go back to think about where you started in the UK and your engagement with museums and then after this time of deep anthropological work, how did that experience change the way you conceptualized museums and collecting institutions?*

**HM:** In a way I suppose the biggest change started after my first conversation with Narritjin. When I came back to really start doing fieldwork with Frances, I brought with me beautiful color photographs of the bark paintings that had been collected by the anthropologist Donald Thompson. I had such excellent support from museums, you wouldn't believe it. Anyway, I started going over a set of Yolngu paintings from Yirrkala including the Thompson ones and those collected by Chaseling. I was going through them in turn and suddenly Narritjin looked at me and said, "I know what you're trying to do. You're trying to show me that our art has changed; we will show you it hasn't." Narritjin would always throw those kinds of things at me about the continuity and unchanging nature of Yolngu art. Yet, at the same time, here was someone who was very innovative as an artist, and he was someone who had so engaged with outsiders. He performed ceremonies about the Macassans; he worked closely with Fred Gray and with generations of missionaries and with the various anthropologists who would visit the region. He clearly *meant* something by saying, "I will show you it hasn't changed," but he also recognized the fact that the whole time he was part of a dynamic society that was looking at ways in which to engage with a changing world of which he was a part.

In the context of Yolngu society, one got rid of any simplistic boundaries between pre-mission time, pre-Macassan time, post-mission time, and so on. It enabled me to see trajectories in human cultures/societies that, although being disrupted by tragic events, by invasions, by significant technological change, and so on and so forth, tend to be able to recover and reconnect. These trajectories link the past with the present with the future in mind. That kind of rhetoric is very much a Yolngu rhetoric. It worked very, very well in helping me understand how museums and their collections, independent of their origins as institutions and the purposes for which

they were built, were *very* important for the makers and their descendants as a resource to bring people's pasts into the present.

**JG:** *So that's coming at museums from your experience with Yolngu, although in a sense you were studying art in most of the work that was studying material culture. Is that correct? Did Yolngu think the material culture they were producing, including bark paintings, could sit in a collecting institution? How is this material best celebrated?*

**HM:** I think it's fair to say there's no preference. People are very happy to see their works in museums and art galleries in Australia and around the world, and they're creating their own local cultural institutions. I have no problems in seeing their works as works of art; they have no problems in recognizing the Art Gallery of New South Wales as a cultural institution that other Australians value very highly. They see art as being part of Western value creation processes, but they will go with it because they also think that their aesthetic cultural production is something of high value to them as a society, and in terms of the technical excellence and the significance of the meaning of these material products.

**JG:** *Different values inscribe to material objects according to which type of collecting institution they reside in.*

**HM:** That's true, but the Western cultural distinctions between ethnographic museums, history museums, folk museums, and fine art museums needn't determine the way that material objects are seen and contextualized. Yolngu want them all to be seen as works in their context, and that means seeing them as Yolngu works that have meaning, that have rights invested in them, and that must be understood in relation to the cultural context that they are embedded in within their society. Although someone like Narritjin Maymuru said early on it was good that bark paintings were collected by the Art Gallery of New South Wales because they were works of fine art with European works of fine art, at the same time, it was important that the information that goes with them placed them firmly also in Yolngu society and their understanding of it. That has been a very consistent message and the exhibition that we've been working on now with Kluge Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection at the University of Virginia, and the Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Arts Centre is a Yolngu-initiated exhibition on their sacred art and bark paintings, and it is going to be traveling to different art museums in the US, but it is being contextualized very much as it would be in a Yolngu cultural context.

**JG:** *These engagements can be transformative for all parties, can't they? In fact, these experiences might reveal a trend over time of Indigenous and other source communities working toward a transformation of collecting institutions themselves. The ever-growing history of engagements between communities and institutions is seeing both changed.*

**HM:** I think it's very much the case, but it's a very hard battle to change institutions. It's a hard battle that all artists have with the different criteria used for inclusion in what we call fine art museums, ethnographic museums, and so on. Fine art museums are to an extent based on exclusion—on determining what is art and evaluating objects on qualitative criteria, almost ranking them.

An art museum might have a category of mask that fits in with a Western category of mask/masquerade and in a contemporary context can be a component of, say, performance art, but it's also something that can be extended to some types of object that people were collecting in Africa, or the Northwest Coast of America. If the African mask is considered an outstanding

example with aesthetic appeal, then it might merit a place in an art museum. The other material that was associated with a masquerade and *everything* else, the food bowls and costume—no, no that's not for us. Almost by definition art museums must make those selections because numerically, they have much more limited collections, and their audience is, to an extent, attracted by prestige objects of high financial value. That kind of model of an art museum has spread in some ways globally, and I would argue that there is an equal need for the more comprehensive ethnographic museum.

The criteria of ethnographic museums in some ways matches those—perhaps ironically—of many source communities. Their idea is that collections are representative, and often have documentary information that goes with them. And that this information is as important as the material objects themselves. These are a record of people in the past, we can see our relatives there because there are different objects made by different people, we can see our grandmother's baskets being woven, and so on. And you can feel them. They are almost by definition comprehensive—no collection could ever be comprehensive—but there's that kind of sense. Collections made by anthropologists like Walter Baldwin Spencer, Donald Thomson, and Ronald and Catherine Berndt in Australia were primarily collections that covered the life of the people that made them at a particular time. Today, those collections are seen to be incredibly valuable by source communities.

**JG:** *It is somewhat ironic that the value of Indigenous art continues to climb in all its different forms of value, whereas ethnographic and anthropological collections (and approaches) are being severely challenged in current times.*

**HM:** That is an important issue. But, nonetheless, people I have worked with are happy that works should be selected out and be part of a cross-cultural category of “fine art” objects from all the cultures of the world. I don't think people object to that, and I don't object to that. I love art museums, and I'm very happy that there are these processes of selection that over time are continually being challenged, that enable one to look at individual artworks in ideal viewing conditions. I do think it is essential—and it's increasingly recognized—that those works need to be contextualized and framed in a much wider kind of context than they sometimes have been.

**JG:** *You've written a lot about the history of museum anthropology as a discipline in the making of ethnographic collections in general. I think it is fair to say that you try to present a balanced appreciation of these traditions and perhaps even a defense of anthropological collecting. I'm thinking about your involvement in publication of the letters between Walter Baldwin Spencer, Francis Gillen, and collectors of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Australia. Do you generally think there's a lack of understanding about the complexity of these histories within museology?*

**HM:** Having worked in museums on and off for many years, I think, for a long time, curators of ethnographic collections have not had the views that people have attributed to them. So, when I talk about people like Bob Edwards, who was the successor to Norman Tindale of the South Australian Museum—Bob was a person, is a person, of enormous cultural significance in Australia to the development of museums over the last 50 years or so. He has had Indigenous Australia interest at his heart for most of that particular period. He has been involved in challenging categories that are often said to be categories of museums, for example, the separation of Aboriginal people in different parts of Australia, the elevation of desert cultures as an image of authenticity etcetera. Bob was always challenging those kinds of ideas. From the beginning, as its founding director, he made sure that the Aboriginal Arts Board was very comprehensive and inclusive of Indigenous Australians across the country.



Australia in a sense was leading the world in those kinds of areas. People outside ethnographic museums, however, had no idea of what this engagement was, and I think that has been a problem. People generally considered ethnographic collections to be kind of curiosities, but on the whole people working in those museums did not see them as curiosities at all. They saw them as material of fundamental importance to the understanding of human cultures, and of value in the future to people who were connected to those cultures. That really became explicit I think from the 1930s, which was a time when Australia was still engaging in the last of the frontier wars in parts of Australia. In places like northeast Arnhem Land, people were, from the very beginning, working with collectors like Donald Thomson and Reverend T. T. Webb, and they were seeing the collections that were being made as something that was for their future—something that was showing their value even though it often was being disregarded in the southern states of Australia. Nonetheless, it was part of this process of persuasion through cultural production that began to change attitudes more widely. So, the great collections of Aboriginal art, which are now recognized as Aboriginal art and segregated out as art collections, were largely made in those early years by anthropologists and missionaries who were collecting for, I suppose, what would be called ethnographic museums or cultural museums. The attitudes that people had were just completely different to the ones that people now understand them.

There is wonderful quote from Baldwin Spencer in a letter that he wrote in 1908 to a friend of his from university, where he says, “There is nothing like trying to arrange a big collection for revealing to you your colossal ignorance: when you sit down to write a descriptive label then you begin to realize how defective your knowledge is.” I mean, this was Spencer through and through. He wasn’t trying to impose his categories, his value structure on the material culture of the peoples of Central Australia, but very much trying to understand those values at a time when overall the vast majority of non-Indigenous Australians were completely disregarding them, where Indigenous Australians were people who were hopefully soon going to be forgotten. And that was the environment in which people like he and Gillen were working. In fact, the impact that their work had was incredibly important. In a sense, Museum Victoria was keeping the image of Indigenous Australia there present. And for the 1956 Melbourne Olympics the South Australian Museum anthropologist C. P. Mountford’s photographs of rock art from the Gunbalanya region (of Northern Australia) were one of the key icons used.

So, in a sense, these people were going against the way that Australia in general had moved. Were there collections in art galleries of Aboriginal art during this period? No. Did people write about Aboriginal art, did Australian art historians include even any mention of Aboriginal art in their surveys of what art in Australia was? No. The neglect of Indigenous Australia was enormous and was described by another anthropologist, W. E. H. Stanner, as “the great Australian silence.” I think these people were really different. When you read Gillen’s letters to Spencer, you get a completely different view. You have to get past certain offensive language terms that are completely unacceptable today. If you get those out of your mind, you’re actually seeing a very different kind of relationship in place. Of course, it’s not like today, but I mean if you look at today the engagement of the public with Indigenous Australian values and material culture is not as great as many people think.

**JG:** *Museum engagement with what we now call source communities has nonetheless increased in recent decades. There is a growing sense of responsibility to these communities. I have personally encountered elders who have visited museums and then asked, “How will my grandchildren know that I’ve been here? How will they know?” Museums are being reminded of their responsibility to document present engagements for the future.*

**HM:** Exactly. I mean you can tell from someone like the late Joe Gumbulla, in all his writings (see Gumbulla et al 2009), that he saw the collections that had been made by his fathers and grandfathers. They were deliberately made for people to reengage with them.

**JG:** *In your experience, how are returned and repatriated collections being reincorporated back into the lives of people? There is an assumption among the public that this a natural and straightforward process, but you and I both know that it's far more complex.*

**HM:** I mean you obviously have more experience directly of that than I do of a different kind with your work on the Strehlow collection (Gibson 2020), but the number of requests for repatriation from communities are tiny, absolutely tiny, compared with the size of the collections. The repatriation claims that recur, as a kind of ugly sore in the history of museum collections, like the Bronzes from Benin, are examples that people come up with again and again and again and again. And in the context of Australia, the focus from some communities—and again, that's not all communities—has been on particular categories of things, or in relation to ancestral remains. Now, in those areas in Australia, for example, the sacred objects from Central Australia, I think the message was made quite clear long ago to Australian institutions that these are important materials, and most institutions are very willing to return. And this is the same with human remains. In those areas where we know there's been long-term emphasis, we can ask, is this straightforward? Even in those cases you suddenly realize that it's incredibly difficult. Why? Because getting things out of museums is easy. What happens to them when they are with communities? What resources do the communities have? What kind of resources do they need?

In your work, for example, where you deal with collections that can stretch back 150 years or so, you can see people want to have more knowledge about them. Even in the cases of reasonably well-documented collections, however, actually finding the individual maker of certain objects is difficult. Knowing the individual maker of an object is also often quite important, and knowing what and where this object should be located and placed, and how we bring it back in, it's a really difficult task. Where a request comes from the communities knowing what and why they want something and how they're going to incorporate it, that's relatively easy because they can then actually build programs of return that enable that to happen in a planned and affordable way for them. As long as the resources are made available. As for digital repatriation—well I don't like the phrase digital repatriation because it's not actually "repatriation." It is in fact the digital return of photographs/information. It is an incredibly successful method in lots of ways because then people can make informed choices. They can know where things are, and they can build relations with museums.

We can look at places where these things have been negotiated for a long period of time, such as the Museum of Anthropology in Vancouver (University of British Columbia), which is a very good example. That institution has been used very much as a holding place for important material objects that are being, if you like, curated for future purposes, but also by bringing traditional owners into that institution where possible. There are very, very few claims/requests for repatriation from that huge collection of material. Another part of the solution is the creation of local cultural centers and museums. In the US that is beginning in certain places to have significant results because it does turn out that people want to incorporate returned collections often with ongoing present cultural and business enterprises. This might include the return of objects to use as they were used a hundred years ago, but often involves returning them to completely different kinds of uses and creating museums as part of the economic life of that community and place. It is a vast topic of research that really needs a lot of work.

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***Museums, Societies and the Creation of Value***

Howard Morphy and Robyn McKenzie, eds. (London: Routledge, 2022)

What does value mean within and beyond museum contexts? What are the processes through which value is manifested? How might a deeper understanding of these processes contribute to the practice of museum anthropology? These questions are explored in *Museums, Societies and the Creation of Value*, which looks at collaborative work in museums using ethnographic collections as a focus. Most of the chapters involve collections from Australia and the Pacific—reflecting the origins of many of them in two conferences associated with the project “The Relational Museum and Its Objects,” funded by the Australian Research Council and the Australian National University and led by Howard Morphy. Bringing together early career researchers, as well as museum-based scholars who have many years of thinking through and learning with community-based research partners, makes evident how the processual shifts in museum anthropology toward a more collaboratively grounded practice have become normalized, but crucially also highlights the value of “slow museology,” as the editors note in their introduction (3), acknowledging Raymond Silverman’s (2015) term. While the editors caution that the core values of ethnographic collections and museums are not universal, the inclusion of chapters from beyond the Australia/Pacific region highlights that the foundational underpinning values and aspirations for cross-cultural work—“the desire for understanding” and “the desire to be understood” (22) are shaping much of the innovative museum-based work currently being carried out worldwide. Examples include Gwyneira Isaac’s chapter on 3D technologies of reproduction and their value for Tlingit of Alaska, and Henrietta Lidchi and Nicole Hartwell’s examination of how materiality and memory intersect in collections associated with nineteenth-century British military campaigns.

Howard Morphy and Robyn McKenzie’s introduction provides an overview of shifting practice and discourse in museum anthropology, from the creation of the public museum with its

connections to Enlightenment ideals and colonial encounters, through to contemporary critiques of terminologies: both “ethnographic” and the concept of “source community” are examined in this very comprehensive summary. The introduction also succinctly highlights themes that cut across several of the chapters, notably, the role of the visual and the ways in which image work can be productively used within and beyond the museum (chapters by Christopher Morton, Joshua Bell, and Jessica de Lary Healy); this sets up a discussion of the digital and the ways in which technological innovation can create new kinds of value through the production of 3D imagery and replication (Isaac). Other themes developed directly or indirectly by several contributors include the agency of people and objects, the connection between the material and the process of creating value, and the place of repatriation in contemporary museum work. What we can take from the introduction, and which is articulated so well in the chapters themselves, is the key point that values shift and cannot be assumed to be shared, yet they can be put to work if we take the time.

The book is organized into four sections, each of which contains a brief editorial introduction and three or four case studies that unpack what value can mean: Making and Remaking of Collections; Creating Value—Inside and Outside the Museum; Engagement and Return; and Indigenous Agency. Collections work is at the heart of this book, with each contributor asking searching questions about how the legacies of past practices and institutional conventions limit what is ethically possible today. Gro Ween, for example, draws attention to the challenges of accommodating multiple Sámi dialects in contemporary cataloging projects in her evocative discussion of responsibility and learning as it relates to Sámi repatriation (58). Jason Gibson traces shifting attitudes to curating restricted items in the Melbourne Museum, noting that the engagement of Aboriginal men in guiding their care points to their active involvement in the value-creation processes in which they are entwined (118). Drawing on long-term fieldwork with research partners from the Purari Delta, Bell asks how curators might tackle collections work that has the potential to generate conflict within communities when multiple values and perceptions collide. Searching questions are also raised about how values have become embedded in our institutions, and given this, the extent to which museums *can* change. Jilda Andrews’s chapter reflecting on her experience as a Yuwaalaraay person researching museum collections is extremely powerful in this regard. Her engagement beyond museums supported the production of vibrant artistic responses to collections yet laid bare institutional structures that failed to recognize these contemporary Indigenous processes of value creation.

As is apparent from the case studies in this book, contemporary museum engagement work is fraught yet full of potential. None of the contributors shy away from critiquing their own practices and those of the institutions in which, or with whom, they work. Moreover, by highlighting how deeply embedded Indigenous people are in shaping value creation processes within and beyond museums, and by illustrating this work so richly and with such a wide variety of critically engaged examples, the book makes an important contribution to museum anthropology and indeed to scholarship on value within anthropology more broadly.

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