Dr Leonhard Adam (1891–1960) was born in Berlin and studied ethnology, law and Sinology at Berlin University and the Centre for Oriental Studies in Berlin. After completing a law degree, he joined the bar and served as Chief Judge of Charlottenburg (Berlin), while devoting his spare time to the study of primitive art, law and culture.

After fleeing Germany in the late 1930s, he taught in London before being deported on the Dunera to Australia in 1940. Leonhard Adam was interned at Tatura for a short time before going on to study and catalogue a collection of stone implements at the Museum of Victoria. He was appointed to a lecturing position in the Department of History at the University of Melbourne in 1942, a position he held until his retirement in 1957.

During his time as lecturer at the University, he began collecting objects as examples of indigenous art and material culture to aid in his teaching and understanding of indigenous cultures. Upon his death in 1960, the Collection was presented to the University to be used to continue the research into indigenous cultures.

The Leonhard Adam Collection of International Indigenous Culture is now housed at the Ian Potter Museum of Art, and includes a wide range of objects from a large geographical area encompassing Oceania, South America, Africa and South-East Asia. Dr Adam collected this material through a variety of means, including the exchange of items with overseas museums and universities and purchase from dealers and other collectors.

Bounty of the sea

This exhibition focuses on the relationship between indigenous communities and the sea. The sea is used by indigenous communities as a source of food and trade, as a means of transport, and as a tool for education and enjoyment. The sea plays a vital role in the everyday lives of many island and coastal peoples around the world, and in particular, the communities who live in Oceania.

Oceania encompasses four broad geographical regions: Australia and New Zealand, Melanesia, Micronesia and Polynesia. Melanesia encompasses Fiji, New Caledonia, Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu. Micronesia consists of the Federated States of Micronesia, Guam, Johnston Atoll, Kiribati, the Marshall Islands, Nauru, the Northern Mariana Islands and Palau. Polynesia consists of American Samoa, the Cook Islands, French Polynesia, Niue, the Pitcairn Islands, Samoa, Tokelau, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Wallis and Futuna Islands.

The items in this exhibition were collected by Dr Leonhard Adam from communities within the region of Oceania and encompass a variety of uses, materials, techniques and methods of manufacture. Each of the items is related to the sea and reflects the diverse ways in which the sea is a major part of life.
The Leonhard Adam archive

The University of Melbourne Archives and the University’s Ian Potter Museum of Art hold extensive archival material that complements the Leonhard Adam Collection of International Indigenous Culture. Accumulated by Dr Leonhard Adam, these records include lecture notes, research papers and notes for publication, articles, reviews, journals and diaries. Also included are bibliographies, inventories, object lists, expedition notes, correspondence, documents associated with the University, newspaper articles, photographs and sketchbooks. The value of this archival material lies in the diversity of information it provides.

The Leonhard Adam Collection is significantly augmented by the existence of these records. The methods by which indigenous objects were acquired, for example, are documented in detail. In addition to supplementing Dr Adam’s teaching resources, the archive is important in establishing the provenance of many of the objects. Source information is provided in diaries, notes and occasionally on box lids, and takes the form of written and illustrated information, including sketches and maps. Dr Adam was a superb draughtsman and illustrated his own published works.

The archive can also be utilised to provide evidence of activities, interrelationships and information about associated people, organisations, events and places. For example, it reflects the academic life within the University of Melbourne during the 1940s and 1950s.

Similarly, the archive positions the acquisition of the Leonhard Adam Collection within an historical and social context. Dr Leonhard Adam corresponded regularly with many overseas associates regarding the acquisition of objects, anthropological research and indigenous culture. Often this correspondence incorporated personal communication, providing a vivid picture of major world events, such as World War II. The multi-faceted nature of the archive ensures that it holds appeal as a resource to researchers from a wide range of disciplines.

This comprehensive archive reflects the versatile character of Dr Leonhard Adam’s life and work and establishes his authority in the field. It also demonstrates his enthusiastic approach to building a significant international indigenous collection for the University of Melbourne.