Trademarks: international indigenous culture from the Leonhard Adam Collection

This exhibition presents over eighty objects and works of art made by indigenous people from around the world. The university’s Leonhard Adam Collection of International Indigenous Culture comprises over 1,300 items from North and South America, Africa, Asia, Melanesia and Oceania, including a significant Australian component. Trademarks showcases the breadth and diversity of this remarkable collection.

The collection was brought together in the 1940s and 1950s by Dr Leonhard Adam through gift and donation, purchase from dealers and other collectors and, most significantly, via trade with overseas universities and museums. Adam’s international reputation in the field of comparative ethnology enabled him to propose exchanges with important international museums such as the Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, and the Ethnographic Museum in Basel. Australian indigenous material was traded with these collections.

Adam’s ambition was to create a small-scale collection similar to those in Europe for the comparative study of world cultures. Using exchange networks rather than on-the-ground fieldwork distinguished Adam from Australian anthropologists such as Charles Mountford and Donald Thomson. While Adam’s approach was at odds with Australian anthropology methods, it had a unique value, Adam’s broad international reach bringing to Australia little-known and exceptional examples of material culture from many corners of the world. During his lifetime, Adam’s collection wasn’t truly appreciated for its cultural value and agency, and few scholars have given it serious attention in the fifty years since his death.

Collections of indigenous material with little existing provenance or support information such as the Leonhard Adam Collection pose significant challenges for museums in our quest to present holdings accurately and in culturally appropriate ways. During the development of this exhibition, Potter staff undertook the important task of tracing trade pathways and acquisition histories, contacting relevant institutions and individuals to research works and seek artist attributions. Our wide-ranging correspondence has already yielded a number of artists’ names, original acquisition dates and cultural attributions. We hope our continued inquiries will lead us into direct contact with source communities. Our aim is to engage in dialogue and continue to evolve the circular motion of trade and cross-cultural communication that formed this remarkable collection sixty years ago.
Dr Leonhard Adam (1891–1960)

German-born ethnologist Dr Leonhard Adam developed his collection of indigenous cultural material at the University of Melbourne from 1942 to 1960. Using the collection to complement his teaching activities, Adam’s ultimate aim was to establish Australia’s first ethnographic museum.

As a young man, Adam had a keen interest in indigenous cultures and spent time studying first-hand the vast collections of the Berlin Museum of Ethnology. Adam studied ethnology under leading anthropologists as well as economics and law at the University of Berlin. He pursued both law and ethnology in his early career; an area of expertise was the comparative study of law and primitive jurisprudence. Awarded his doctor of laws in 1916, he was appointed a district judge in 1928 and later became a chief judge.

With the establishment of anti-Semitic laws under Hitler in 1933, Adam’s professional activities became untenable. He applied for asylum in England and was welcomed by his British colleagues in 1938. It was in the British Museum’s Ethnographic Department that Adam completed the first edition of his book *Primitive art* (published by Penguin in 1940).

Removal from England as an ‘enemy alien’ on board the infamous *Dunera* brought Adam to Australia in 1940. He was interned at Tatura until 1942 when a campaign that considered it ‘a slur on the intellectual life of Australia if a man of Dr Adam’s gifts and scholarship should remain behind barbed wire’ saw his release. He was established at Queen’s College, the University of Melbourne, as resident tutor. Appointed research scholar in the university’s Department of History the following year, Adam continued to conduct evening classes at Queen’s, using the college’s small ethnographic collection along with blackboard drawings to illustrate his talks.

Through the continued support of Professor Maxwell Crawford, Adam secured permanent employment in the Department of History in 1951. By this time his work in building a collection of international indigenous culture was well underway, and it was encouraged by a small acquisition budget.

In 1957, in lieu of retirement, Adam’s position at the university was converted to that of part-time curator of the ethnographical collection. He worked to establish an ethnographic museum that would house his collection together with Australian material collected by his colleague Donald Thomson. Dr Leonhard Adam died in 1960 at sixty-nine years of age. The first curated display of the collection was shown in the University Gallery in 1973.