The Leonhard Adam Collection of International Indigenous Culture

Dr Leonhard Adam (1891–1960) was a distinguished scholar and lecturer in the Department of History at the university. This collection of international indigenous material culture was formed by Dr Adam from 1942 to 1960 with the intention of creating a comparative ethnographic collection similar to those in his native Germany. Limited by funds as well as Australia’s distance from the primary ethnographic marketplaces of Europe and the United States, Adam was opportunistic in building the collection; he sourced pieces locally from donors and dealers. Adam’s international reputation (earned from scholarly contributions to the field of ethnology, including his successful 1940 Penguin publication Primitive art) enabled him to secured significant objects from overseas universities and museums such as the Phoebe Hearst Museum at the University of California Berkeley and the Museum für Völkerkunde, Basel.

The result is a wide-ranging and eclectic collection of over 1300 items made by people from indigenous cultures of North and South America, Africa, Melanesia, Polynesia and Micronesia, Asia, and Oceania. Originally a teaching collection used in the disciplines of ethnography, history and art history, today the collection represents a remarkably diverse and unique ensemble of culturally significant and aesthetically striking objects from many corners of the globe.

Through research and consultation with international institutions and cultural groups, a core group of items have been identified as significant collection highlights. The first major display of these works at the Potter in early 2011 generated much local and international interest, resulting in several artist attributions. This exhibition presents a selection of these highlights supplemented by a new component selected around concepts of decoration, patterning and body adornment.

While celebrating the craftsmanship and unique aesthetic qualities of these objects, we equally acknowledge the contemporary relevance and multilayered cultural meanings they have for indigenous communities and individuals. As the custodian of these important holdings, a priority for the museum is to facilitate access and, ultimately, to incorporate both past and current indigenous perspectives into our interpretation and presentation of the collection.