

Aborigines demand that British Museum returns Truganini bust



A bust of Tasmanian Aborigine Truganini is at the centre of controversy. Photograph: Reuters

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To Tasmania's Aboriginal community it is "racist art", an enduring symbol of the persecution, murder and dispossession their ancestors suffered under white colonial rule.

More than 130 years after her death, a bust of Tasmania's most famous Aboriginal woman, Truganini, is at the centre of controversy, with demands it be returned to her homeland by the British Museum which owns it.

Now representatives of the community have flown to Britain in the hope of reclaiming the plaster cast, along with remains of other ancestors still held by medical and academic institutions in the UK.

The delegation is part of a long-running campaign by the Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre in Hobart to free the spirits of their ancestors so they can rest in peace.

The story of Truganini, widely described as the last "full-blood" Aborigine from Tasmania, then Van Dieman's Land, came to exemplify the barbarous treatment meted out to Aborigines with white settlement on the island.

Born around 1812 on Bruny Island, south of Hobart, she was the daughter of the chief of the island. But, before she was 18, her mother had been killed by whalers.

her first fiance died while trying to save her from abduction, and her two sisters had been sold as slaves.

As conflict continued between settlers and the Aborigines in 1830, Truganini and her husband Chief Woureddy were moved to Flinders Island, with about 100 others. Thinking this would save her people, she persuaded many to follow, but they succumbed to influenza and other diseases.

Eventually, those remaining were moved to a settlement at Oyster Cove, where, in 1873, she was the sole survivor of her people. She died in 1876, aged around 73, in Hobart. Denying her dying wish that her ashes be scattered in the channel that separates Tasmania from mainland, she was buried, only for her skeleton to be exhumed by the Royal Society of Tasmania, and later placed on display.

Today, there are around 30 copies of the busts of her and Woureddy by English sculptor Benjamin Law in 1835, including at the British Museum, which does not have them on display.

"We are outraged that these busts have been put on display without permission in museums across the world. To our community they represent the attempts to exterminate our people," said Sara Maynard, 26, a legal field officer at the Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre, and part of the two-person delegation to Britain to retrieve them. "It's like displaying victims of the extermination of Jews as art without permission."

There is also anger that Truganini is, they claim erroneously, often described as the last "full-blood", which implies Tasmania's present Aborigines are, somehow, impure or tainted. "This is why we call it racist art," said Maynard. "We want to collect all the busts and take them home for the community to decide what to do with them."

Last month, the centre successfully stopped a Sotheby's auction of a pair of the busts in Melbourne.

In London, later this week, the delegation hopes to meet with the British Museum. The museum said yesterday it had not yet heard from them.

There are also plans to lobby the Wellcome Trust, and Oxford and Cambridge Universities, which, it is claimed, still have remains of unknown ancestors.

Aboriginal remains were dug up and taken to Britain for scientific purposes during the 19th century, and many skulls and bones, though not on display, have been used for research.

Maynard said: "They were grave-robbled. Some of them 150 years ago. And it is a tragedy that many of those ancestors have ended up in Britain."

Yesterday, remains held by the National Museum of Scotland were handed over

in a box draped in the Aboriginal flag in a small ceremony in Edinburgh.

Today, the Royal College of Surgeons will hand over remains of another ancestor. In 2002 it repatriated a hair sample and skin from Truganini, along with several bones from unidentified Aboriginal people.

Repatriation is a hugely-charged issue in Tasmania. "For our community, it is very important that we come to collect our ancestors and bring them back to Tasmania, to finally lay them to rest, to finally let their spirits be at ease," said Maynard.