
Return of artefacts disputed

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THE Melbourne Museum has been accused of abrogating its responsibilities for the preservation and research of cultural heritage over its decision to return a rare set of Aboriginal artefacts to their traditional owners.

Honorary curator Alan West resigned two weeks ago over the decision to repatriate Aboriginal remains and accompanying artefacts to the Djadja Wurrung people of the Avoca River area in northwestern Victoria, where they were accidentally uncovered in a hollow tree trunk 99 years ago.

However, the museum rejects his views, which it says are more in keeping with the early part of the past century.

In a blistering attack on the museum, Mr West sent a memo to all staff saying that in sanctioning the repatriation the museum "chose to ignore its mission objective and guiding values. Expediency prevailed over principle."

"The action is referred to as repatriation but this term is really a smokescreen to hide the museum's facilitation of unashamed vandalism," the memo said.

Mr West, who has had a 35-year association with the museum and was once its head of anthropology, said the reburial of the remains was tantamount to their destruction.

His views have been labelled racist and destructive by the Djadja Wurrung people, who say it is culturally not possible for them to separate the remains -- of a 10-month-old baby -- from the "grave goods" with which they were originally buried in the mid-19th century.

The museum rejected any suggestion that it had acted improperly. The director of research and collections at Museum Victoria, the body that oversees the Melbourne Museum, said the museum had clear repatriation procedures and worked with the community, not outside it.

Mr West's views were dated, Robin Hirst said.

"The social landscape has changed, attitudes have changed and our understanding of Aboriginal communities has changed," Dr Hirst said.

"We are now moving much more as a partnership with Aboriginal communities and, while one can appreciate arguments on both sides of the fence, the museum has made a clear decision to move forward and respect the wishes of the traditional

owners of this material.”

The decision had been approved by the museum’s Aboriginal advisory board and by its governing board, he said.

The museum was working closely with Aboriginal communities to ensure that keeping places were available to traditional owners who wanted safe storage under their custodianship for artefacts that were returned from the museum’s collection.

Dispersed remains

Berry Collection: An assortment of 400 Aboriginal remains was discovered in storage at the University of Melbourne in 1984 and eventually sent to the Melbourne Museum last year. Used for research into the discredited science of eugenics by former anatomy professor Richard Berry from 1900 to 1929, the remains are believed to be those of Yorta Yorta people from the Murray River region. Identification has been problematic because most of the remains are tagged only with the locality of the towns they were from. Most of the collection was gathered from unclaimed bodies in coroners’ courts.

Ngarrindjeri remains: Hundreds of Ngarrindjeri remains are awaiting repatriation at the South Australian Museum. Material in the collection was lodged with the museum over many years after remains were uncovered by roadworks and other isolated disturbances. The museum has been awaiting instructions from the traditional owners as to their return for the past few months.