

NEOS KOSMOS

The complete Hellenic perspective.

Reclaiming our cultural heritage

The burning cultural issue of the 21st century



Cathedral Cave stencils hands coolamon oval decorative shell pendants Che-Ka-Ra

24 March 2015
BY ANNA COMINOS

Does this post-colonial-era of globalisation obliterate the empirical order of contemporary culture as we know it?

It's a question that is constantly discussed today and is worthy of public address, debate, consideration. In talking to any archaeologist or museumologist it appears to be the burning cultural issue of the 21st century.

To launch Melbourne's Greek Centre's Seminar Series recently, the esteemed Aboriginal historian and activist Dr Gary Foley presented his talk 'Reclaiming Your Cultural Heritage: the Return of Aboriginal Artefacts from the British Museum vis-a-vis the case of the Parthenon Marbles' to a capacity audience.

After a 'Welcome to Country' (which contextualised where we sat to listen to Foley's talk) he told the case of the Dja Dja Wurung Barks and the British Museum. In 2002, after a long history of Aboriginal activism that saw the creation of legal aid centres, the National Black Theatre and the Tent Embassy opposite Australia's Parliament House in Canberra, Foley was appointed Senior Indigenous Curator of South-Eastern Australia at the prestigious Melbourne Museum (now Victoria Museum).

The Melbourne Museum had an infamous past when it came to Aboriginal exhibitions, for a period displaying the remains of Aboriginal woman Trugganini in a jar, even though she had expressly desired for this not to occur after her passing like her husband's remains.

In 2003, a fellow curator from another unit mentioned that while she had been studying at the British Museum, she had seen three Aboriginal bark paintings in a cupboard, which had been collected from Victoria. These remarkable bark paintings were burnt-etched and not painted and had been 'collected' when the Aboriginal nations were being invaded by the British. Foley and his team could place that they were from the Dja Dja Wurrung heritage.

The three bark paintings were of major significance to the national cultural heritage of Australia and with 150th celebrations of the Melbourne Museum, the museum director began to negotiate with the British Museum for the loan of the barks. Foley was aware that a little known or used law existed, the then National Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Act, where Aboriginal people were able to make an emergency declaration and in effect seize stolen cultural objects.

With the will of the Dja Dja Wurrung people, they caught the British Museum by surprise, seizing the barks and drawing world-wide attention to the problem of stolen Aboriginal cultural artefacts and human remains in museums worldwide.

For a brief period it seemed the Djar Djar Wurrung tribe had outmanoeuvred the two museums. The British Museum insisted that the Melbourne Museum take legal action against the Dja Dja Wurrung to lift the emergency declaration immediately. The Melbourne Museum became terrified that this reclaiming of stolen artefacts would jeopardise its future loan ability from other international museums, despite recognition in Australian law of the need to protect Aboriginal ownership of stolen cultural property. So bowing to pressure from the British Museum, the influential and well-resourced Melbourne Museum took the Dja Dja Wullung people to court, Dr Foley resigned and later the federal government rescinded the Protection Act.

How do the 'Three Barks' connect to the Parthenon Marbles in the British Museum? The state of the British Museum's paranoia is that if one collection slips its ropes by being returned to its original owners, then the British Museum may have to return the Parthenon Marbles to Greece.

In his introduction to Dr Gary Foley, president of the Greek Community of Melbourne and Victoria Bill Papastergiadis alluded to the legal challenges for the repatriation of the Parthenon Marbles to Greece and announced that the Greek Centre building on

Lonsdale St, in the heart of Melbourne and with one of the largest diasporic Greek communities outside of Greece, was to carry a relief of the Parthenon Marbles externally.

Therefore visual resistance to cultural imperialism is more than a white-collar issue - it touches on the essence of who we are and how we understand our contemporary being, argued Gary Foley.

Foley's charisma and ability to speak his experiences plainly gave the audience at Lonsdale Street's Greek Centre the realisation that the British Museum is not a 'cosmopolitan jewellery box of internationalism' but a 'war chest of a time long gone' ... when Britannia ruled the waves and the rape and pillage of indigenous cultures was state-sanctified.

Perhaps in this time of global interconnectness, we can fire up the adult conversation, how relevant it is for the British Museum to have in its possession original 'sacred' artefacts, which include Aboriginal remains and the misplaced skull of Aboriginal resistance fighter Pemulwuy and the broken friezes of the Parthenon Marbles, in the year 2015.