'You really only made it because you needed the money': Aboriginal Women and Shellwork Production, 1870s to 1970s

Maria Nugent*

For almost 150 years, Aboriginal women around Sydney have engaged in an informal cash economy by making and selling small shell-decorated objects. The longevity of the practice, which spans the period from the 1870s to the present, provides a rare opportunity to present a detailed historical case study of aspects of Aboriginal women's work in settled Australia. This discussion pays careful attention to the changing contexts within which these commodities were made and sold, along with Aboriginal women's responses to new and changed conditions in ways that sought to sustain this valued economic activity. The approach used in this article combines interpretation of archival, pictorial and oral history sources about markets and makers with analysis of the objects themselves.

The history of Aboriginal women's craft production for economic reasons under colonial conditions remains little studied. Scholarly interest in Aboriginal labour history over the last three or four decades has resulted in important studies on Aboriginal people's participation in colonial economies, such as in the pastoral or pearling industries, or on the theme of exploitation within certain occupations, such as Aboriginal girls as domestic servants or Aboriginal boys as farm labourers. Yet, comparatively less attention has been given to Aboriginal people's, and especially Aboriginal women's, commodity production as an economic enterprise, particularly during the second half of the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries.¹ In historical studies of Aboriginal souvenir production, more emphasis has been given to commodities made by Aboriginal men, such as boomerangs, rather than those made by women. Moreover, the contemporary period spanning the second half of the twentieth century to the present has been studied the most comprehensively, and geographically the concentration has been on northern and central Australia.² By contrast, this article considers a chapter in the history of commodity production by Aboriginal women that focuses on the south-eastern part of the continent, specifically the urban context of Sydney and surrounds, with an emphasis on the Aboriginal settlement at La Perouse, in the period from the mid-nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth.

In this article, the example of shellwork (sometimes also referred to as shell-art) is used as a case study to explore some of the ways in which making decorative objects could contribute to the economic livelihood of Aboriginal women living on small reserve settlements in New South Wales. Shellworking involves encrusting small, mainly decorative, objects that were modelled either from wire, wood or cardboard (the base material changed over time) with a variety of seashells arranged in mosaic style, usually in floral patterns. *Cassell's Household Guide* told its readers in the mid-1870s that 'several classes of choice ornaments may be manufactured of shells.' Success in this work mainly depends on taste in arrangement'.³ Describing the practice as carried out by Aboriginal women in the 1930s and 1940s, Beryl Beller explained:

When we were young our mothers would take us to the beach to collect shells. We would walk along the shoreline after the tide went down to collect shells that were not broken and shell grit. The women would sit around in a circle and sort the shells into sizes and colours. The different shells they used were muttonfish, starries, beachies, buttonies, courie, pearl, fan conk, small cockle and small pippies. They would then cut out cardboard shapes like the Sydney Harbour Bridge, hearts and babies shoes. They would glue them into their shapes and cover them with the shells we collected.⁴

Although Aboriginal women in south-east Australia made various other commodities, such as feather flowers and rush baskets, which have been discussed by Diane Barwick, Sylvia Kleinert and others,⁵ I want to suggest that shellwork is a particularly valuable example to study because it has been in almost continuous production since the 1870s (perhaps earlier) to the present day. Moreover, Aboriginal women's shellwork lends itself to detailed study because its production, makers and markets are relatively well documented in archival sources, such as missionary magazines, government records and newspaper reports, and there also exists a rich oral and visual archive. These sources can be complemented with analysis of surviving twentieth-century examples of Aboriginal women's shellwork, some of which are held in public museums and art galleries, such as the Powerhouse Museum and the Art Gallery of New South Wales.⁶ By closely studying various surviving pieces, along with images and descriptions, it is possible to trace some developments over time in designs, materials and methods of manufacture.

To date there has not been a detailed study of the history of Aboriginal women's shellwork from its mid-nineteenth-century origins to the present. This might be symptomatic of shellwork's rather marginal status in both a historical and historiographical sense. It is marginal for being a decorative *craft* object produced by Aboriginal women. In general, Aboriginal women's craft commodities produced under colonial conditions have not received the same critical attention as aspects of the history of Aboriginal men's productive labour. Moreover, as Sylvia Kleinert has argued in a sustained way, Aboriginal craft objects have not in general been accorded the same status as art, or as objects associated with ideas about 'authentic' indigenous society and culture. This is a situation that Sylvia Kleinert, Ruth B. Phillips and others have bemoaned in relation to the histories of Indigenous people in Australia, Canada and elsewhere, because it has meant that important aspects of their experiences and ability to survive under radically altered conditions has not been adequately appreciated.⁷

Indeed, discussion of Aboriginal women's shellwork was initially confined to general histories of women's art and craft in Australia, a development which owes much to the pioneering work of feminist art historians like Joan Kerr who accorded Aboriginal women a place in compendia of Australian women artists.⁸ Or it appeared as part of studies of specific Aboriginal communities in which it was produced, and, this was the source of my own introduction to it, when I began working on the history of the La Perouse Aboriginal community in the mid-1980s.⁹ Largely missing from these discussions is analysis of the economic value of shellwork production to Aboriginal women within the colonial context of their lives, however precarious or unreliable as a source of ready cash it might have sometimes been.¹⁰ This is not to say that economic imperatives alone explain the continued production of these

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decorative objects. Women certainly participated in this activity for social, personal and cultural reasons as well as economic ones.

Past inattention to the history and meanings of Aboriginal women's shellwork has begun to be remedied in recent years. Twenty-five years ago, the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney mounted an exhibition about the La Perouse Aboriginal community, in which shellworking was given a prominent place and brought to public attention. As part of this, the Museum assembled the first publicly-held collection of Aboriginal women's shell-work, including pieces from the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s as well as contemporary pieces made during the exhibition's development in the 1980s. Yet, it is really only in the last five to ten years that its public prominence has grown, particularly because of promotion by Aboriginal art curators. Aboriginal women's shellwork has increasingly acquired the status of an urban Aboriginal art form.¹¹ Today, almost all leading public Australian art galleries have contemporary examples of it in their collections which they occasionally exhibit, and some is stocked in their shops for sale.¹²

Partly as a response to the intense contemporary interest in shellwork, and the emergence of new narratives about it that do not always appreciate its earlier history as a commodity produced under colonial conditions, I present an 'economic' interpretation of its history, one that gives emphasis to Aboriginal women's labour, their access to and participation in formal and informal cash economies, and their acuity in responding to new markets and consumers for the products they made.

Since publication in the mid-1980s of Arjun Appadurai's classic essay on commodities in *The Social Life of Things*, it is commonplace to account for transformations in the value and meanings of objects as they enter into, move through, and are exchanged within multiple economic, social and cultural contexts.¹³ This approach remains relevant to and productive for interpreting the history of Aboriginal women's shellwork, as it does for other commodities produced in colonial contexts. These small decorative items have circulated quite widely, in Australia and beyond, through a series of markets, ranging from Sydney's streets to missionary exhibitions to agricultural shows, open air tourist stalls and city department stores. In each marketplace, the meanings and values ascribed to Aboriginal women's shellwork differs, sometimes only superficially, even as the form of the object itself remains true to its origins in Victorian-era feminine decorative arts and crafts.

In order to capture key transformations in the production, circulation and consumption of Aboriginal women's shellwork over a hundred or so years, the following discussion is organised around three phases. The first concerns what I am calling the foundational phase, in which the practice was introduced by non-Aboriginal women to Aboriginal women, who commenced making it to sell in and around Sydney. This roughly covers the period from the 1870s to the turn of the century. It is the most difficult phase to reconstruct because the records are not as rich as for later phases, but I argue it is a critical phase in which the practice was established as a vital means by which Aboriginal women could contribute their labour to the economic livelihoods of their families. The second phase, from about the 1890s to the 1920s, is a period in which the industry was strongly influenced by missionaries, particularly young single female missionaries living at the La Perouse settlement. This period witnessed the opening up of new markets, some of which Aboriginal women had direct access to, others not. The third phase spans

the middle of the twentieth century from about the 1930s to the late 1960s. This was the period in which Aboriginal women's shellwork was incorporated into a growing local Aboriginal tourist industry at La Perouse. This period brought with it significant transformations not only in the markets for shellwork, but also in methods of production, including as part of Aboriginal family operated businesses.

Although the account I present is organised around these three phases, the history of shellwork production is not so neatly contained as this schema suggests. There is overlap between the meanings and values that Aboriginal women's shellwork holds at any one time. Nonetheless, by paying attention to changes in markets, makers, consumers, production methods and materials over a century or more, my aim is to highlight the malleability and adaptability of these curios as objects of desire and consumption. Such an approach allows an emphasis on the ways in which Aboriginal women engaged with popular tastes and fashions as they made and modified their commodities to satisfy as well as to create markets for it. This aspect has been downplayed in the Australian literature on shellwork because stress is given to themes of continuity, tradition and survival. Contemporary interpretations of shellwork as an Aboriginal 'tradition' leads to an emphasis on its value as a vehicle for preserving and transmitting local knowledge among Aboriginal people and across generations about the natural resources (i.e. shells) upon which it depends, the environments in which shells are gathered, and the weather patterns affecting their supply.¹⁴ Yet, there is also an important, somewhat overlooked, story to tell about the ability of female Aboriginal shellworkers to ensure that this craft practice survives as a saleable commodity. Paradoxically, the object itself does not draw much attention to this theme of change and responsiveness to external influences. As will be shown, even though the conditions of production and the sites of consumption changed across the century, the basic form of shellwork items made by Aboriginal women remained stubbornly fixed from the 1870s to the 1970s. It has carried the imprint of Victoriana throughout its social life.

Uncertain Origins, 1870s to 1890s

The precise ways in which Aboriginal women in and around Sydney acquired skills in making Victorian-era decorative shell-art remains unclear. Unlike some other objects that Aboriginal women made for sale in the late nineteenth-century period, such as the rush baskets produced by women at the Coranderrk settlement on the edge of Melbourne, the shellwork that began to be produced in the 1870s and 1880s, and which has endured to the present, does not appear to have had any *direct* precedents in pre-contact Indigenous society. Certainly, shells were used for female body decoration in pre- and early contact times, and the recent revival by Tasmanian Aboriginal women of making shell necklaces like those that their ancestors wore is one example in which a pre-contact practice is reinvigorated in the present.¹⁵ But there is no known practice of making decorative objects for display like those that began to be produced in the Victorian era. Rather, this was a practice among Aboriginal women that emerged as a result of the colonial encounter.

In seeking explanations for origins of La Perouse shellwork, art historian and curator Ann Stephen noted a craze for shellwork among genteel Victorian women in Sydney and elsewhere. Women's craft magazines of the period often included patterns and instructions for making shell art, such as highly decorative and intricate

Figure 1: Illustration of Shell-Flowers, Shell-Box and Shell-Basket

Source: *Cassell's Household Guide*, Volume 2, Cassell, Petter and Galpin, London, c. 1869-71, p. 356.

flowers and baskets combining a selection of small shells of various colours (Figure 1).¹⁶ In the mid-1870s, *Cassell's Household Guide* provided step by step instructions for making a bouquet of shell-flowers, which involved making small flower heads by arranging similar sized and coloured shells as petals and attaching them to wire stems by using a combination of cotton, glue and wax.¹⁷ Given the popularity of the craft, Stephen suggests that it was probably learnt by Aboriginal women from the white women with whom they came into contact. The contexts for this might have been schooling, or living in white households, either through being 'adopted' or by employment as domestic servants.¹⁸

As a craft practice that was *introduced* to Aboriginal women by white women, rather than being an existing practice *modified* under colonial conditions, shellwork has much in common with the quillwork that aboriginal women in Canada made from the eighteenth century onwards, and which the art historian Ruth B. Phillips has discussed in detail. Through careful research, Phillips was able to show that

quillwork originated with French Catholic nuns, who taught the practice to First Nations women. Over time, First Nations women were able to make the practice their own, so much so that it came to be almost exclusively associated with them. It was typically made and sold as an 'authentic' indigenous souvenir. In time, this served to obscure its missionary origins.¹⁹ Aboriginal women's shell-work in New South Wales follows a similar trajectory. While the craft of decorative shell-art passed from white women to Aboriginal women in the Victorian era, during the twentieth century it was most strongly associated with Aboriginal women.²⁰ This was partly influenced by the fact that Aboriginal women continued to make it even after its popularity as a craft activity more widely had waned. This, along with other factors, has contributed to the ambiguity, as well as ambivalence, concerning its origins within a colonial context.

At the same time, this confusion is symptomatic of a broader historiographical or interpretive issue for Aboriginal history, in that the entangled relations that characterise the colonial encounter, along with the objects to which they give rise, do not comfortably fit with a contemporary impulse to emphasise and celebrate cultural difference and indigenous identity. Yet, it is this very issue that makes the history of shellwork so compelling. Here is an object that embodies the complex history in which Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people's lives overlapped, and at the same time, the processes by which Aboriginal people sought to make a distinct space for themselves in ways that could shore up their survival as Aboriginal people. In this sense, shellwork ought to be conceptualised as an 'entangled object' to use Nicholas Thomas' memorable phrase.²¹ It is a commodity that carries the weight of colonial relations, and that quality is sometimes reflected in the uncertainty and confusion that surrounds the history of its origins. Interestingly, some other examples of shellwork produced by colonised people in other colonial contexts have been freighted with similar confusion about their source. Until quite recently, shell mementoes known as 'sailors' valentines' made in ports around the Caribbean, particularly Barbados, in the nineteenth century were believed to have been made by sailors themselves. It is now established that local women living in those port towns made them from locally collected shells to sell to sailors to take home as souvenirs.²² Like other shell work, sailors' valentines are composed by arranging shells mosaic-style in intricate floral patterns and sometimes to spell out mottoes, which are glued onto wood cut in an octagonal shape (*Figure 2*).

Leaving aside the question of origins, what can be established with certainty is that from the period between the late-1870s and early-1890s, shellwork production contributed in notable ways to the livelihoods of Aboriginal women and families living at Botany Bay as well as in other settlements along the coast.²³ A couple of brief references to it in government papers indicate this. In a report to the newly appointed Protector of Aborigines in NSW, concerning the years leading up to 1881, a local policeman stationed at La Perouse stated that Aboriginal women and girls living there contributed to the livelihood of their families 'by making shell baskets, which they sell in Sydney and the suburbs'.²⁴ That is as much as he had to say on the matter, but it is a snippet from which to begin to construct a history of the development of Aboriginal women's shellwork production as an economic activity. The point to underline here is that the main market for it was 'Sydney and the suburbs', which suggests that it operated as some kind of informal cash economy in which women

Figure 2: Sailor's Valentine circa Early-Nineteenth Century

Octagonal plaque, shell-work with wooden frame, 355cm wide.
© Victoria and Albert Museum, London, W.233-1923.

hawked their wares on public transport, in the city streets, and door-to-door in the suburbs. A decade later in 1892, the Report of the NSW Aborigines Protection Board recorded that: 'those [Aborigines] at La Perouse are generally employed fishing, some also make native weapons and gather honey for sale. The women and children make shell ornaments and gather and sell wildflowers'.²⁵ So, over this decade, the shellwork industry had remained economically valuable to Aboriginal women, although supplemented by other ways of earning some income that also drew on freely and locally available natural resources.

Under Missionary Tutelage, 1890s to 1920s

From the 1890s, more formal markets for Aboriginal women's shellwork opened up, largely through missionary involvement and influence. While church groups, evangelists and missionaries had been involved in affairs at La Perouse during the 1880s, by the mid-1890s a permanent missionary presence had been established there.²⁶ The missionaries who lived at the Aboriginal settlement were mainly single women, and they worked most closely with Aboriginal women and children. Among the activities they fostered, in addition to bible study, church attendance and prayer meetings, were sewing and craft classes. It was within this context that Aboriginal women's shellwork production was encouraged.

In 1901, the missionary organisation based at La Perouse – the NSW Aborigines Mission, later Australian Aborigines Mission – began producing a monthly newsletter, which regularly reported on the shellwork trade. Through it, it is possible to follow some of the fortunes of Aboriginal women's shellwork production, its markets, the networks through which it circulated, and the values variously ascribed to it. This record is complemented by newspaper items, most of which

were also penned by members of the missionary organisation, who repeatedly made claims about the economic importance of Aboriginal women's commodity production to the viability of the community in the face of governmental pressure to close down or relocate the settlement. While these accounts reflect the priorities and preoccupations of the missionaries, they nonetheless provide some insights into the ways in which Aboriginal women's shellwork circulated in this period, its meanings and markets, and Aboriginal women's responses to the circumstances in which they found themselves.

Early references to shellwork in the missionaries' magazine suggest that the informal economy through which Aboriginal women had been selling their wares for two decades at least continued to operate at the turn of the century and in the decades that followed. For instance, in 1903 one writer expressed outrage that the NSW transport department had introduced a scheme to force Aboriginal people to pay fares on trams. He/she explained that:

[The Aboriginal people at La Perouse] are in many cases but half fed and clothed and they are to be still further impoverished by demanding from their already limited incomes (procured in some instances by selling shellwork, etc., in the city) fares for tram tickets.²⁷

Similar claims about the economic value of shellwork production were made in press reports in the same period. In 1902 a writer to the *Sydney Morning Herald* claimed that:

Out of the 51 dark people at La Perouse at present only two are receiving Government rations. Many of the men are licensed fishermen, most work on road work, or in other avenues of employment, and not a small amount of money is obtained from the sale of shell work, in which they are adepts. To remove them to Kurnell would mean to seriously interfere with their sale of fish, sale of shell work &c.²⁸

While claims like this were repeatedly asserted in this period, they were often made without much detail or evidence to substantiate them. So, it is not possible to know the exact monetary contribution that was generated by this activity. As far as I know, the same kinds of records that the anthropologist Diane Barwick was able to draw upon to reveal just how vital Aboriginal women's craft production was to the viability of the Coranderrk settlement during its early phase in the 1860s and 1870s do not exist for La Perouse Aboriginal women's shellwork. Barwick claimed, for instance, that the rush baskets and rugs Aboriginal women and some infirm old men made for sale at Coranderrk were more profitable in the early years of the settlement than men's participation in seasonal employment.²⁹ While a quantifiable assessment like this cannot be made for shellwork, on the evidence it was a similarly valued and worthwhile economic activity for Aboriginal women to engage in.³⁰ Like rush baskets and rugs, it was a staple that complemented the seasonal nature of men's employment. And it existed alongside other economic activities that Aboriginal women, not only at La Perouse but also in the nearby settlements along the Georges River, participated in, such as gathering and selling wildflowers.³¹

The influence of missionaries on Aboriginal women's shellwork in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century period is evident in the styles that were produced. In this period, Aboriginal women added to their original repertoire of shell

baskets and shell ornaments, letter holders, biblical mottoes, and decorative flowers. The missionary magazine, the *Aborigines Advocate*, is replete with descriptions of shelled objects being given as gifts to missionaries as well as being bought by visitors to the mission. In 1903, for instance, Mr Colebrook, a leading figure in the NSW Aborigines Mission was given 'a beautiful letter basket, beautifully made of shells', while his wife Mrs Colebrook was presented 'some very pretty shell flowers'.³² Ruth B. Phillips argues that the influence of missionaries on Aboriginal women's craft production in colonial Canada is clearly seen in the ubiquity of quilled and beaded baskets and boxes, which she refers to collectively as 'tidies'. These were complemented by purely ornamental or decorative objects. Such objects, she argues, catered to Victorian ideas about home-making and domesticity, to which 'members of native communities in which missionaries had been active had been more directly exposed'.³³

The outlets for this expanded repertoire of shellwork increased in this period, mainly facilitated by missionary networks and activities. Whereas in the 1880s and 1890s, the city and the suburbs appear to have been the main, perhaps the only, marketplaces for it, in the opening decades of the twentieth century Aboriginal women were increasingly given space in missionary exhibitions as well as agricultural shows to sell their wares. In 1903, La Perouse shellwork was displayed at the Church Missionary Society's Mission Loan Exhibition held at the Sydney Town Hall.³⁴ CMS exhibitions were held regularly in Britain, North America, New Zealand and other parts of the world, and were 'very popular forms of instruction, evangelism and entertainment ... from the 1890s until the Second World War'.³⁵ The displays that were organised by various mission groups, working in different parts of the world, had a dual function. They aimed to portray something of the 'cultural' or 'traditional' life of the people among whom missionaries worked, as well as to exhibit the contemporary manufactures produced by them under missionary tutelage. In this context, Aboriginal women's shellwork was mainly intended to demonstrate the ability of Aboriginal women to acquire the skills and arts of feminine domesticity, and thus was presented as material evidence of the fruits of missionary activity.

While Aboriginal shellworkers were not afforded a very active role in these large missionary exhibitions, and it is not clear if they received any returns from sales, there is evidence that they made good use of various other missionary activities to find buyers for their wares. The annual convention of the Australian Aborigines' Mission at La Perouse provided a profitable outlet, for instance. Over the course of a week, hundreds of Christians would congregate for meetings and other activities in the La Perouse Mission Hall. Local shellworkers would set up ad hoc stalls around its perimeter, laying out their wares on the grass. One report in 1908, noted that: 'We could fill our columns telling the good work done by the Sports Committee, the crowded reserve, the customers who found their way to the shell work sellers'.³⁶ This is a glimpse into the continued informal and opportunistic markets for shellwork that Aboriginal people accessed, and which existed alongside the more formal ones that some shellworkers were able to tap into through their alliances with missionaries.

During this period Aboriginal women's shellwork could also often be found displayed as part of exhibitions of women's work. A series of fetes and bazaars organised by the charity organisations, such as the Girls Realm Guild, regularly included shellwork and other decorative objects made by Aboriginal women, usually displayed alongside similar objects made by non-Aboriginal women. These activities

were not confined to Sydney, or country New South Wales. Some Aboriginal women's shellwork was shown in London, including at Covent Garden in 1910 as part of a Girls Realm Guild exhibition of Australian manufactures, where apparently it was much in demand.³⁷

The Royal Agricultural Show (RAS) in Sydney provided yet another space each year for a similar display of Aboriginal-made objects, but in a somewhat more secular environment. Shellwork was included as one object among many presented in a regular display of Aboriginal people's handiwork from throughout New South Wales known as the 'Aboriginal Exhibit'. This could be found in the Industrial Pavilion, although, as one newspaper article pointed out, 'in a quiet corner of it'.³⁸ Many of the objects were made on Aboriginal settlements throughout New South Wales, mainly under missionary tutelage, including as one description noted 'mats, and articles made by children attending schools on ... mission stations'.³⁹ One report described the shellwork on display in some detail, using it as putative evidence of 'progress':

Crude it may be – but it is art fashioned almost entirely upon raw materials that nature provides. The shells and pebbles from the beach have been made into all kinds of ornaments, and the designs have been worked out in mosaics with a tasteful blending of colours. By a happy chance there is a stall quite near to this one on which the shell work of English workers challenge those of the black man [sic]. It is more advanced, for the shells are made up in the most perfect imitation of flowers. But the work of the aborigines is clear evidence of an attempt to cultivate the arts with some imagination, imitation, and a sense of beauty – all of which go towards creating the highest culture.⁴⁰

While missionaries facilitated the production of shellwork and other items, and organised them for exhibition and sale, they sought to downplay their role in the early stalls at the RAS, insisting in reports that Aboriginal people alone were responsible for organising and arranging the Aboriginal Exhibit. They repeatedly claimed that the exhibition space had been given *gratis* by the RAS Council not to the Mission, but to Aboriginal people themselves. Moreover, they asserted that the money the Aboriginal Exhibit made went back to the Aboriginal people who had contributed to it.⁴¹

If this is so, then on these counts the situation at the RAS in Sydney is different from that described by Joanne Scott and Ross Laurie at the annual agricultural show in Brisbane during the 1910s. Beginning in 1909, the Brisbane Show included an 'Aboriginal Court', which was a reasonably large exhibition space, prominently positioned, and very popular with audiences. Like the 'Aboriginal Exhibit' at the RAS, the emphasis was on displaying objects made by Aboriginal people that demonstrated their capacity to acquire skills and abilities valued in the wider settler society and to contribute to the settler economy. However, Scott's and Laurie's research suggests that the show was controlled and choreographed largely by the state government and church groups, which used it as an opportunity to promote their assimilation and education programs on Queensland's Aboriginal reserves and settlements. Aboriginal people themselves appeared to have very little agency in it.⁴² There are elements of this in the Aboriginal Exhibit at the RAS, particularly when it came to the display of Aboriginal children's handiwork and schoolwork, and in a later period when the NSW Aborigines Welfare Board assumed a greater role.

Yet, it is worth keeping in mind that the RAS was only one marketplace among others in a yearly cycle that was available to Aboriginal women to sell their wares. To take the year 1910 as an example: Aboriginal women's shellwork could be found for sale at a mission exhibition in the Sydney Town Hall, the Aboriginal Exhibit in the RAS at the Sydney showgrounds, various fetes and bazaars throughout Sydney, in an exhibition of Australian manufactures in London, and in ad hoc stalls at the annual Christian Convention at the La Perouse Mission Hall. In the periods between these 'organised' markets, Aboriginal women continued to hawk their wares on the trams, in the streets and door-to-door, where their dealings with buyers were reasonably direct. In the more 'formal' markets, Aboriginal women did not have complete control over the ways in which their objects were displayed, or representations of themselves as makers of it. Nor could they much influence the reception and assessment of their wares by audiences and consumers. Nonetheless, each market provided some return to them and some motivation to continue to make these curios as commodities.

The Aboriginal Court was discontinued at the Brisbane Show in 1917. The Aboriginal Exhibit, or at least some form of it, continued at the RAS in Sydney over the decades that followed. Missionaries gradually had less of a role to play from the 1930s as the NSW Aborigines Welfare Board intervened. Over time, however, particularly by the 1950s and 1960s, the stalls selling shellwork at the RAS were run by individual Aboriginal families from La Perouse, such as Joe Timberly and his family. This reflected a development in the production of shellwork more broadly, in which it had become part of Aboriginal family-based enterprises, and this helped to contribute to its endurance.

All in the Family, 1930s to 1960s

Whereas in the early phase Aboriginal women travelled to the city and suburbs to sell their shellwork wares, and in the middle period missionary-sponsored markets were important (but by no means the only) outlets, in the third phase Aboriginal women found a steady market for their shellwork closer to home at La Perouse. This was due mainly to the development of La Perouse as a tourist location, facilitated by the extension of the tramline from the city. This history is well documented.⁴³ However, the degree and nature of its influence on Aboriginal women's existing practices of commodity production has not been examined in as much detail as it warrants. Not least, this transition provides some evidence of the ability of Aboriginal women to remake, or remodel, their shellwork so that it was transformed from feminine domestic handicraft into tourist object.⁴⁴

Most obviously, the shellwork repertoire changed in this period, just as it had under the earlier influence of missionaries. For instance, Aboriginal women began to make souvenir-style shellwork in the shape of recognisable tourist sites or Australian icons. This included two-dimensional ornaments, such as shell-encrusted maps of Australia, kookaburras, boomerangs and horseshoes (Figure 3). The repertoire also eventually included the now much celebrated three-dimensional shelled Sydney Harbour Bridges (Figure 4).⁴⁵

And yet, by most accounts, the most popular shellwork continued to be small heart-shaped boxes and baby shoes, both of which were strongly associated with the Victorian era shell-art with its emphasis on domesticity and femininity (Figures

Figure 3: Jane Simms at La Perouse Holding Shell-Work Boomerang and Horseshoe

Source: *United Aborigines Messenger*, 1 June 1929, p. 7.

5 and 6).⁴⁶ In some ways, these could function as souvenirs or mementos without much change to their form or design. The smallness of the shoes, in particular, contributed to their appeal as a souvenir, a feature that Susan Stewart has pointed out more generally in her study of nostalgia, the souvenir and the miniature.⁴⁷ Indeed, in a general sense, even the most explicitly souvenir-style shellwork in this period retained some hallmarks of shell art from the Victorian era. Not only did the decorative miniature quality remain, so too did the technique of using different sized, shaped and coloured shells to ornament objects with mosaic-like designs in floral patterns. In this way, the material modifications of shellwork were reasonably subtle. Aboriginal women appear to have modified their wares with just the right degree of calibration. At the same time, their shellwork became souvenirs by proxy – by virtue of being sold alongside the objects made explicitly for tourists by Aboriginal men, such as decorated boomerangs and shields.

Perhaps what is more important to note for this period is not so much the introduction of new items, or the continuation of designs from an earlier phase, but rather what had definitely dropped from the shellwork repertoire. As far as it is possible to tell, the explicitly religious items were not so common as previously, and I have found no reference to shell-baskets or shell-flowers being made after the late 1920s.⁴⁸ In general, it seems fair to say, Aboriginal women were less inclined to make the very intricate and delicate pieces, like shell-flowers, which required a wide

Figure 4: Sydney Harbour Bridge, circa 1939

Assorted shells, blue velvet, cardboard, 10 x 17 x 4.5cm. Maker unknown. Collection: Art Gallery of New South Wales (Gift of Alan Lloyd, 1995).

Figure 5: Miniature Slippers

Velvet, seashells. Made by the Koori Community of La Perouse, NSW, 1952. Powerhouse Museum, Sydney, 86/503. Photo: Marincio Kojdanovski.

Figure 6: Trinket Box

Shell, cardboard, velvet. Made by the Koori Community of La Perouse, NSW, 1940-45. Powerhouse Museum, Sydney, 87/1471. Photo: Kristen Clarke.

variety of shells and which were time-consuming to make. The move rather was towards more simple designs that could be cheaply and relatively easily made. Oral histories of Aboriginal women who made shellwork in the mid-twentieth century period indicate that they were using cardboard as the base material for their pieces. This could be easily picked up around the place, particularly after weekends, at local shops or when it had been left behind as rubbish by tourists. In an interview with curators at the Powerhouse Museum, shellworkers Mavis Longbottom and Lola Ryan explained that: 'we'd go and pick cardboard up from the shops ... we'd go to the shops and get [it], because you see in those days it wasn't corrugated cardboard either, you know it was real good, hard tough cardboard'.⁴⁹ Likewise, in place of using shell-grit to fill the spaces between the mosaic designs, Aboriginal women lined their shell-work ornaments with fabric. They were also able to get this fabric for nothing, or at least very cheaply as off-cuts from local factories in the 1940s and 1950s.⁵⁰ The emphasis was on making the objects as cheaply as possible with readily available materials.

In adopting shapes such as kookaburras, boomerangs and maps of Australia to encrust with shells, it seems that Aboriginal women were borrowing ideas from Aboriginal men who were engaged in the souvenir trade. Again this development is borne out in some oral histories. For instance, one Aboriginal woman explained that 'we had a father who was very clever at drawing things and you know, he used to do all the patterns [for the shellwork] for us'.⁵¹ Such innovations in shellwork design suggest a greater degree of interaction between Aboriginal men's and Aboriginal women's commodity production activities than had been the case when shellworking was practiced in a sphere shared largely by Aboriginal women and white women. The phenomenon of Aboriginal men and women, boys and girls, working together in commodity production has been noted by Sylvia Kleinert in relation to her work on Lake Tyers. She argues that: 'Unlike the agricultural and domestic work demanded by the Station or the itinerant labouring undertaken away from Lake Tyers, the production of artefacts allowed Aborigines to work collaboratively'. She refers to a married couple that produced tourist boomerangs together, the husband shaping the boomerangs and his wife decorating them.⁵² But it is a theme that has not been explored in much detail. Perhaps because of historical precedence, in which men's and women's activities were demarcated in quite obvious ways, the tendency has been to assume that souvenir production was also organised according to separate male and female spheres.⁵³ However, there was more interaction than usually acknowledged between men and women participating in the tourist trade, which contributed to the cross-fertilisation of ideas and designs that is evident in changes to the shellwork repertoire.⁵⁴

This interaction becomes especially noticeable when the focus shifts to the emergence and history of Aboriginal-owned and run enterprises in the mid-twentieth century period, many of them family-based. Sylvia Kleinert's recent discussion of Bill Onus' souvenir shop in the Dandenongs outside Melbourne, and Jennifer Jones' forthcoming work on the Gillawarra Gift Shop on the Purfleet Reserve near Taree, provide important new perspectives on these enterprises. To this one could add any number of other cottage industries, many operating on Aboriginal reserves in New South Wales, such as cane chair manufacture at Forster and Taree on the NSW mid-north coast, or Joe Timbery's Museum and Shop on the La Perouse settlement.⁵⁵

The importance of Aboriginal family businesses in the history of Aboriginal women's shellwork production becomes particularly clear in relation to supplying metropolitan retailers with Aboriginal-made souvenirs in the 1940s and 1950s. While the weekend tourist market on the headland at La Perouse remained a major point of sale for shellwork in the mid-twentieth century period, shops in the cities, not only Sydney but also Melbourne, sold it. For instance, a Melbourne newspaper in 1944 advertised: 'Aborigine-made Shell Work, Boomerangs and Novelties. Firms interested in stocking these goods kindly write to "The Souvenir Shop" (reg), La Perouse, NSW. We can arrange transport permits'.⁵⁶

To meet the demand, Aboriginal families worked together in a cottage industry style arrangement, which not only helped to sustain those families but also the longevity of the shellwork industry. In a reminiscence published in 1988, Gloria Ardler remembered that: 'My dad and mum and aunty had a little business going with their shellwork and boomerangs. They sold them to David Jones and sent work to Melbourne and even overseas'.⁵⁷ Another woman recalled in an oral history interview that: 'We had a contact, a jeweller, I couldn't even tell [you] what his name is now, but he'd buy from us and he'd sell to Americans'.⁵⁸ Americans, here, refers to war servicemen stationed in Sydney during the 1940s, who are repeatedly identified in oral histories as providing the largest market for shellwork and other Aboriginal souvenirs in this period. So, whereas formerly, Aboriginal shellworkers had been partially dependant upon missionaries to get their work into a domestic and international marketplace, it appears that missionaries were now replaced by middlemen. However, this retailer demand eventually began to fall away due to competition from cheap overseas imports. In a further blow, the local tourist trade at La Perouse began to decline once the tram from the city stopped running in the early 1960s, leading to a reduction in visitor numbers.

Nonetheless, some Aboriginal women continued making shellwork, mostly they say for their own enjoyment. As it turned out, they kept the practice going long enough for it to be 'discovered' by art curators, and to enter yet a new, perhaps quite unexpected, market: the contemporary Aboriginal art market. In the process, it is undergoing a new phase of modification, in which some existing designs are being adapted to suit the tastes of curators and collectors.⁵⁹ The ability of Aboriginal women shellwork producers to respond to this development with acuity is, as I hope I have shown, no new thing.

Conclusion

Despite its delicate appearance, Aboriginal women's shellwork is a remarkably sturdy object if one considers its long and enduring history of production. One way in which to appreciate its long life as a commodity is to explore the markets through which it has circulated over a century or so. In this paper, I have considered the 'social life' of shellwork through three key phases: its origins within encounters between white and Aboriginal women in the Victorian era around Sydney, its development under missionary tutelage, and its transformation into a souvenir within the context of Aboriginal family-run enterprises. While perhaps never a big money spinner, in each phase it seems Aboriginal women had sufficient economic, as well as social, reasons to continue to make shelled ornaments and objects. As one shellworker, Lola Ryan, put it when recalling her reasons for making it in the 1940s and 1950s, 'you

really only made it because you needed the money'. (Later, in the early 2000s, her motivations had changed. She made it more for her own pleasure and satisfaction, and at the request of art collectors.)⁶⁰

By articulating some key phases in Aboriginal women's shellwork production over a hundred years, my aim has been to complicate the ways in which the history and meanings of this practice is currently being portrayed. In particular, this discussion has sought to work against a tendency to fold Aboriginal women's shellwork into a broader history of Aboriginal people's souvenir production, in which Aboriginal men were responsible for making objects like boomerangs and Aboriginal women were occupied with shellwork production. These are often presented as though they are separate spheres of work, which only overlap in the stalls where the souvenirs were sold. This fails to recognise the ways in which the practice of shellworking moved from being undertaken largely in feminine worlds shared by Aboriginal and white women to subsequently become part of a tourist industry, in which collaborations between Aboriginal men and women were significant as Aboriginal families became centres of enterprise. In a similar vein, I have sought to show the ways in which an over-emphasis on shellwork's place within an Aboriginal tourist trade can obscure its earlier origins in the colonial encounter between white Victorian women and Aboriginal women. To my mind, this obfuscation registers some uneasiness about shellwork as a product of the colonial encounter, its quality as 'entangled object'. That some shellworkers still practicing today are now feted as artists, and the objects they make appraised as artworks, is yet further evidence about the remarkable endurance of this commodity, the malleability of its meanings, and its makers' ability to respond to new markets for it. At the same time, though, this welcome development threatens to obscure shellwork's significant earlier history.

Maria Nugent is Research Fellow in the Australian Centre for Indigenous History, School of History, Australian National University. She is the author of Botany Bay: Where Histories Meet (Allen & Unwin, 2005) and Captain Cook was Here (CUP, 2009).

<maria.nugent@anu.edu.au>

Endnotes

- * The author thanks the two anonymous referees for their assistance with this paper. The quote in the title comes from Lola Ryan. See the transcript of an oral history interview with Lola Ryan and Mavis Longbottom, 26 November 1986, La Perouse Aboriginal Community Oral History Collection, Powerhouse Museum, Sydney, MRS 278/1-9. A copy of the transcript is in the author's possession.
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