



Search site

Go

## This issue

Papers  
Commentary  
Exhibition  
reviews

[reCollections](#) / [Issues](#) / [Volume 7 number 2](#) / [Papers](#) / [Displaying the decorative](#)

## Displaying the decorative

### An exhibition history of La Perouse Aboriginal women's shellwork

by Maria Nugent

- [Exhibited widely, but not in museums](#)
- [Into the museum, at last](#)
- [Around the art gallery](#)
- [New installations, new cultures of consumption](#)
- [A future exhibition?](#)
- [Endnotes](#)
- [Related links](#)

In June 2011, the National Museum of Australia opened its much anticipated new gallery, *Landmarks: People and Places in Australia*. A place featured in the gallery is Bennelong Point in Sydney, the site of the Sydney Opera House.[2] A centrepiece in the display is a three-dimensional model of the Opera House, encrusted in delicate white shells, some arranged in floral shapes. It is the work of celebrated Bidjigal shell artist Esme Timbery (born 1931) from La Perouse in Sydney. This stunning and unique piece of shellwork is on loan from the Sydney Opera House Trust, which had commissioned it in 2002.[3] The National Museum has its own modest collection of La Perouse shellwork, including some pairs of shelled baby shoes and Sydney Harbour Bridges.[4] None are on display within the Museum's galleries, although one of the bridges, also by Esme Timbery, is highlighted on its website.[5]

[Pegging out the camp](#)

[Displaying the decorative](#)



*Shellwork Sydney Opera House, 2002*

by Esmé Timbery

Sydney Opera House Trust

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The exhibition label accompanying the shelled Sydney Opera House explains that Aboriginal women have made decorative shelled objects since the 1880s, and sold them around Sydney, including at 'Circular Quay near Bennelong Point'. The shellwork trade was especially lively at the Aboriginal settlement at La Perouse, situated on the north shore of Botany Bay, about 14 kilometres from the city. Missionaries were involved with the settlement from the late 1870s, and it is believed they were responsible for introducing the practice of shellworking to Aboriginal women and girls.<sup>[6]</sup> By 1883, the settlement was under the control of the New South Wales Aborigines Protection Board. When a tramline from the city was extended to La Perouse in 1902, a local tourist and leisure industry centred on its beaches and pleasure grounds developed. This was critical to the growth of a local Aboriginal souvenir industry, including the shelled souvenirs made by Aboriginal women.

The piece on display at the National Museum of Australia evokes this broader history of La Perouse Aboriginal women's shellwork production, but is not particularly representative of it. While it is certainly true that Aboriginal women from La Perouse have made shellwork since the 1880s, pieces as large as this one would not have sold in a late Victorian marketplace catering mainly to feminine tastes.<sup>[7]</sup> Aboriginal women supplied that market with miniaturised, decorative objects such as shell baskets and boxes. It is also well known that shellwork was made for a tourist market for much of the twentieth century. But unlike the Sydney Harbour Bridge (opened in 1932), which became a staple of the shellwork souvenir repertoire, the Sydney Opera House never became so.<sup>[8]</sup> The La Perouse souvenir

industry had wound down during the 1960s before this Sydney landmark opened in 1972. Rather, Timbery's beautiful shelled model of the Sydney Opera House belongs to a relatively recent phase in shellwork's social life in which pieces are being produced to cater mainly to curator and collector interest and demand.[9] These days, it is made for display in the public museums and art galleries that had for a long time ignored or shunned it. As an especially eye-catching and aesthetically pleasing object in an exhibition at the National Museum about Bennelong Point and the Sydney Opera House, what this piece registers or witnesses is not only a history of Aboriginal women's commodity and souvenir production. Also on show is its history and status as museum object.

The history of La Perouse shellwork as a museum object dates from the 1980s, a century after it was first produced. Even though Aboriginal women were making shellwork when some of the major collections of Aboriginal material culture were assembled by museums in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, none found its way into those collections.[10] It was only after the tourist trade that sustained its production had diminished, and when only a handful of women were still making it mainly as a hobby for their own pleasure and enjoyment, that it became of interest to museum curators. Its journey into museums belongs to what the Canadian art historian Ruth B Phillips has described as the second 'museum age'. That age, beginning in the closing decades of the twentieth century and continuing into the twenty-first, was heralded by the establishment of new museums as well as increased investment in old ones. Through the influence of the new humanities, especially post-colonial and post-structuralist critiques, and of identity politics more broadly, 'the development of a range of new institutional practices' was stimulated.[11] Not least of these in the Australian context were protocols for working with Aboriginal communities and Aboriginal collections, but also important were 'new approaches to material and visual culture – with their promise of access to multi-vocal understandings of objects'. [12] La Perouse Aboriginal women's shellwork entered public museums in this slipstream, but the specific conditions under which it was taken up were quite idiosyncratic. This late phase within its much longer exhibition history is my focus.[13] Museums, and to a lesser extent art galleries, are sites where multiple and divergent interpretations and constructions of the past can be studied. In tracing the exhibition history of La Perouse

shellwork in public museums and art galleries over the past 30 years, my interest is in what histories — of people, places and communities, as well as of art, object-making and identity — the shellwork has been used to tell. It can be interpreted in multi-vocal ways. This helps to explain its enduring appeal as museum object. Its interpretative potential also reinforces what a fine subject La Perouse Aboriginal women's shellwork would make for an exhibition in its own right, a privilege it has not yet been accorded. To set the context for its history as museum object, I begin by providing a potted history of its exhibition over the century prior to its entering the collections of public museums and art galleries.

### **Exhibited widely, but not in museums**

It is a truism that the meanings of objects are as dependent on the contexts, modes and politics of their display as on their form or the identity of their makers.[14] Yet surprisingly little attention is given to exhibition history, particularly of objects like the decorative shellwork made by Aboriginal women at La Perouse. In recent years, shellwork has received academic attention, but the focus has been on the history of production and its economic and cultural value to producers. The matter of its exhibition and display is more muted. This is despite the fact that these objects were made expressly for display. For as long as Aboriginal women have made shellwork, the objects they produced have been exhibited. Shellwork was displayed for sale and it was bought to be displayed.

Historian and curator Martha Sear has discussed the importance of public exhibitions of 'women's work', which emerged in Australia in the 1880s, for drawing attention to the hidden value of women's labour and its contribution to colonial society.[15] She describes colonial women's work exhibitions as 'unworded proclamations', because they were 'a self-conscious orchestration of objects for a rhetorical purpose'.[16] Shellwork made by Aboriginal women from La Perouse and the nearby suburb of Botany was part of the early exhibitions. It was included in the first women's work exhibition held in Sydney, the 1888 Exhibition of Women's Industries and Centenary Fair. According to the catalogue, six shelled houses and 18 shelled baskets were displayed in Department IV Mechanics, Section P, 'Miscellaneous Industries Not Included Elsewhere'. [17] Noteworthy about this early example is that it was not the shelled objects alone that were on display, but also the Aboriginal women who made them. The women were incorporated into the

exhibition by doing demonstrations. As Sear notes, here 'the dubious honour of being a human exhibit, constantly and impersonally under the visitors' gaze, was only reserved for some: for typists and stenographers, the blind, Aboriginal women and factory girls'.<sup>[18]</sup> But it would be Aboriginal women alone for whom this continued. When another women's work exhibition was held in Sydney a few years later in 1892, the practice of 'live exhibits' was not used. 'The telling exception to this', Sear notes, 'was ... Aboriginal women', who once again accompanied the objects they made and became part of their display.<sup>[19]</sup>

Including Aboriginal women as part of exhibitions was repeated in many places where shellwork was displayed publicly, such as in charity bazaars, fetes and mission exhibitions in the early decades of the twentieth century. Invariably advertisements for, and reports about, these events drew attention to Aboriginal women's presence alongside the objects they had made.<sup>[20]</sup> In these contexts, the objects the women made were typically presented as material evidence for their capacity to 'assimilate' – to become like the Victorian ladies who valued small objects made from shells. Since evidence for this was deemed to reside in the quality and artistry of the handiwork itself, the objects made by Aboriginal women were most esteemed when indistinguishable from those made by non-Aboriginal women. But the identity of the maker still mattered. In this situation, then, Aboriginal women became an essential part of the repertoire and politics of display because their presence proclaimed what the objects themselves could not.

Existing in parallel with the network of charity events at which Aboriginal women's shellwork could be found, were Aboriginal family-run, open-air, weekend stalls at the tourist precinct at La Perouse. This was a local industry, close to where Aboriginal shellworkers and their families lived.<sup>[21]</sup> Within this sphere, the women had more control over the display of their wares, although it is likely they borrowed from the repertoire of display used at fetes and bazaars. At the tourist stalls at La Perouse, the usual arrangement was to display shellwork lined up on blankets spread out on the ground. Photographs from the mid-twentieth century show the shellwork arranged by type. Small items, such as baby shoes or scuffs, were lined up at the front. Medium-sized objects, such as heart-shaped boxes, were arranged in the middle. Larger and more prized objects, such as the shelled Sydney Harbour Bridges or three-dimensional maps of Australia, could be found at

the back.[22] Aboriginal women attended these stalls as sellers, which again served to 'authenticate' the objects as Aboriginal-made.



Selling boomerangs and shellwork at the The Loop, La Perouse, 1950s  
photograph by JH Bell  
Powerhouse Museum Archives

Within the tourist precinct at La Perouse, though, this characteristic was also communicated in other ways. Whereas in charity fetes and bazaars Aboriginal women's shellwork shared the display space with shellwork made by non-Aboriginal women, here it was exhibited in company with souvenirs made by Aboriginal men, such as decorated wooden boomerangs and shields. By both association and location, the objects communicated the makers' identity as Aboriginal, rather than as 'assimilable'. What was on display in the tourist stalls were expressions of Aboriginal identity, however mediated these might have been by the desires and expectations of tourists.[23] Art historian Sylvia Kleinert argues that an Aboriginal tourist industry in south-eastern Australia in this period, and the aesthetic expressions it fostered, represented resistance to assimilation. In her discussion of Bill Onus's tourist outlet, Aboriginal Enterprises, at Belgrave on the outskirts of Melbourne, she notes: 'At a time when assimilation policies expected Aborigines to adopt the ideals and values of white Australians, Aboriginal Enterprises offered a model for cultural maintenance that began to rebuild pride in Aboriginality, contributing toward a new urban Aboriginal presence in Melbourne'.[24] These were complicated politics, as Kleinert makes clear, and as cultural theorist Chris Healy's recent discussion of what he insists on calling 'Abo art' also registers.[25] These Aboriginal souvenir enterprises in south-eastern Australia operated within a much wider sphere of cultural production,

in which Aboriginal art and design motifs were being appropriated by non-Indigenous people in ways that could powerfully subvert and disavow Aboriginal presence and object-making and art practices. This disavowal was however never absolute and, as many have noted, Aboriginal souvenir production anticipated and gradually articulated with new public spheres in which its value, histories and meanings were reassessed. [26] It is to this that I now turn.

### **Into the museum, at last**

Compared with the nearly century-long history of La Perouse Aboriginal women's shellwork being displayed in women's work exhibitions, charity bazaars, tourist stalls and so forth, its exhibition in public museums and art galleries is short. It was not collected by a public museum until the 1980s, and first went on display in a museum exhibition in 1988. Only after the demand for it as a saleable, decorative, display item declined, did it enter exhibition spaces of public museums and art galleries. By then, the art of shellworking was practised by only a handful of women, mainly as an enjoyable pastime for their own pleasure. [27] Its previous categorisation as a souvenir, and its origins as a product of the colonial encounter rather than as an example of pre-colonial material culture and practice, had contributed to its disqualification from foundational museum collections of Indigenous material culture. [28] That it was made by women, and modelled on Victorian-era decorative arts, did not help either. However, as 'museum object' these were the very qualities now valued. Its history and status as commodity, as a product of cross-cultural exchanges and relations, as Aboriginal women's handiwork and labour, were all highlighted and celebrated, not least because they engender a narrative of Aboriginal cultural, historical and economic survival and resilience that was a hallmark of the new Aboriginal history that was developing in the 1980s.

The original exhibition in which shellwork featured was a module about the La Perouse Aboriginal community in a gallery called *Australian Communities* at the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney. [29] The Powerhouse Museum, which opened in 1988, the year Australia commemorated 200 years of European occupation, properly belongs to Ruth B Phillips's second 'museum age'. [30] The Powerhouse Museum was the latest addition to the Museum of Arts and Applied Sciences (a complex of museums dating back to the 1880s) and the newest and most experimental museum in Sydney at the time. Much was already

changing in museum practices by the 1980s, especially within social history museums and, more broadly, in the telling of Australian history, particularly the accounts of Aboriginal people and their perspectives. The Powerhouse Museum was at the forefront of these museological developments, particularly in its commitment to exhibition programs relevant to the Museum's location and its audiences.[31] Including an Aboriginal community as part of the larger *Australian Communities* gallery, which had been designed to celebrate Australian multiculturalism, reflected current Australian debates. Choosing La Perouse as that community reflected the Powerhouse Museum's Sydney location.

To engage in community consultation and collaboration, the Powerhouse Museum employed Peter McKenzie, a photographer from the La Perouse Aboriginal community, as liaison person and assistant curator on the exhibition project. [32] McKenzie was descended from a long line of shellworkers. Some of his aunties and other female relatives were among the women still making it. He was influential in giving shellwork a prominent place in the Powerhouse Museum exhibition, and in assembling what remains a peerless public collection. Curators at the Powerhouse Museum were keen to expand the range of Aboriginal material it held, and the collection of La Perouse shellwork contributed to this.[33]

At the same time, Powerhouse Museum curators were strongly committed to women's social history and to using 'everyday' objects in telling stories about women's experiences and contributions. The Museum's Social History section championed a material culture approach to representing 'ordinary' women's experiences, with curators such as Kimberly Webber, Ann Stephen and Kylie Winkworth taking the lead.[34] They were especially attuned to using women's material culture for social history exhibitions because the Museum of Arts and Applied Sciences, as its name suggests, had long had a charter to collect and research decorative arts and crafts.[35] La Perouse Aboriginal women's shellwork, with its origins in Victorian-era handiwork, was therefore not out of place. It had found, it seems, an ideal museum home.

These two historiographical influences – Aboriginal history and women's history – as well as a strong curatorial push within the Powerhouse Museum to collect material in these two areas, converged in the small La Perouse community history module. Within that modest exhibition, shellwork – a

women's decorative art – was a means for telling a story that gave value to Aboriginal women's contribution to the survival of families and communities through their labour. This supported a broader narrative about the whole community's tenacity and will to survive, both within an expanding and encroaching city and under increased government control and intervention. As material object, decorative shellwork became a symbol of cultural continuity, female resourcefulness and economic survival. These messages were reinforced through weekend demonstrations of making shellwork given by Aboriginal women from the La Perouse community. The demonstrations might have been an echo from another time, but what they were intended to convey was very different. By demonstrating how to make shellwork, they were demonstrating their survival and identity as proud Aboriginal women. This drew more from meanings that shellwork had acquired within the context of a local La Perouse tourist industry. Indeed, the exhibition and accompanying demonstrations replicated the ways in which shellwork was made, displayed and sold at La Perouse, giving prominence to shellwork's significance for the community who produced it more so than for those who bought it.[36]

### **Around the art gallery**

The Powerhouse Museum's lead was not immediately followed by other social history museums. Nor did major public art galleries follow suit in collecting and exhibiting shellwork. Not until the mid-1990s did La Perouse shellwork make its way into art gallery collections and become considered as art, Aboriginal art particularly. Similar to what had happened at the Powerhouse Museum, La Perouse shellwork travelled along two paths on its way into the art world, one signposted 'women's art' and the other 'Aboriginal art'. It was, for instance, included in the expanding and increasingly inclusive reach of Australian women's art that art historians such as Joan Kerr in the 1980s and 1990s were helping to establish, both as a field in its own right and as an integral part of the broader history of Australian art. Kerr's 1995 publication, *Heritage: The National Women's Art Book, 500 Works by 500 Women Artists from Colonial Times to 1955*, included an entry on Olive and Jane Simms, shellworkers from La Perouse who had been active in the early decades of the twentieth century. Ann Stephen, who had curated the La Perouse community module at the Powerhouse Museum, authored the piece.[37] Earlier, Aboriginal women's shellwork had appeared in major publications about Australian

women's decorative arts. Jennifer Isaacs, for instance, discussed it in *The Gentle Arts: 200 Years of Australian Women's Domestic and Decorative Arts*, in which she noted that 'in the 20th century it has been left ... to Aboriginal artists to continue an old shell art tradition as a unique aspect of their own culture'.<sup>[38]</sup>

Shellwork's path into the sphere of Aboriginal art was more complex.<sup>[39]</sup> When 'artefacts' or 'souvenirs' become 'art', the translation or revolution that occurs is 'not in the objects but in our categories'.<sup>[40]</sup> The propulsion of La Perouse shellwork into the Aboriginal art world and market initially occurred outside the major public galleries. Its exhibition during the 1990s within small private or local council-operated galleries around Sydney, and in 'fringe' rather than 'mainstream' art and cultural festivals, contributed to its re-categorisation from curio and souvenir to artwork. Crucial to ushering in this new phase in its 'social life' were some energetic independent art curators, who championed La Perouse Aboriginal women's shellwork as contemporary 'urban' Aboriginal art and sought to redefine and revalue it.<sup>[41]</sup>

The transformation in shellwork's status was not so resounding within large publicly funded cultural institutions, where its categorisation as art and the criteria for assessing and interpreting it remained uncertain for some time. This becomes clear when delving into the exhibition history of a piece of La Perouse shellwork in the collection of the Art Gallery of New South Wales. I am not absolutely clear as to how the gallery came by the piece.<sup>[42]</sup> The collection notes explain it was donated in the mid-1990s by Alan Lloyd, who had been head of conservation at the gallery for many years. The piece is a rare example. It is a quite small shelled Sydney Harbour Bridge, covered in blue velvet and shell grit and decorated with broken bits of a variety of coloured shells bordered by small white ones. Its estimated date of manufacture is 1939, but its maker is unknown.<sup>[43]</sup> For almost 15 years, this was the only piece of La Perouse shellwork held by the Art Gallery of New South Wales, making it an orphan among the extensive collections of Aboriginal art. During the 1990s, it received some (cautiously ambiguous) notice from curators working in the newly established Indigenous section at the gallery, which was to become so influential in establishing the criteria for what constituted Aboriginal art and for how it would be interpreted and appreciated. The piece was, for instance, included in the publication celebrating the opening of *Yiribana*, a separate

exhibition space within a gallery devoted to Indigenous art (the first of its kind in Australia). From that time on, it was put to various exhibitionary uses, underscoring the malleability of its meanings as exhibition object. But rarely, if at all, was it exhibited in a way that made a clear statement about the history and significance of shellwork (or other similar commodities) produced by Aboriginal women under colonial conditions. That, as Ruth B Phillips has noted, has typically been the fate of tourist arts.[44]



*Shellwork Sydney Harbour Bridge*, about 1939  
made from assorted shells, blue velvet, cardboard, 10 x 17  
x 4.5cm  
Art Gallery of New South Wales, gift of Alan Lloyd, 1995

Within the larger narratives about Aboriginal art told through the Art Gallery of New South Wales's exhibitions and publications in the 1990s and 2000s, this piece of La Perouse shellwork, and shellwork more generally, carried two main meanings. On the one hand, it was presented as an example of what is commonly described as 'cross-over', 'transitional' or 'hybrid' art. Such a categorisation emphasises its origins as a product of the colonial encounter. Within the book, *Yiribana: Introduction to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Collection*, published in 1994, for instance, it was coupled with a bark painting depicting a Macassan *prau* as an example of Indigenous artistic response to outside influences. [45] On the other hand, it was used to illustrate the great range and variety of Indigenous art practices. By the time the landmark *One Sun, One Moon: Aboriginal Art in Australia* exhibition was held at the gallery in 2007, claiming to offer 'a view from within a kaleidoscopic art movement', the piece was used to emphasise the message about the diversity of Aboriginal art.[46] Indeed, it was regarded as possessing the very qualities of

response and innovation that the exhibition explored and celebrated: the ways in which 'Indigenous artists have forged distinctive personal visual expressions that embrace the communal, yet demonstrate the role of the individual as an innovator in the perpetuations of tradition'.<sup>[47]</sup> In particular, the presentation of shellwork as a 'borrowed' art practice, now almost exclusively associated with Aboriginal women, engendered this theme.<sup>[48]</sup>

Only a few years later, La Perouse Aboriginal women's shellwork gained greater visibility and prominence at the Art Gallery of New South Wales than had hitherto been the case. The most recent showing of it was in 2010, when it was included in a temporary exhibition called *La Per: An Aboriginal Seaside Story*. This was held in the Australian Collection Focus Room, and was billed as celebrating the 'Sydney Aboriginal community of La Per (La Perouse) by combining historical and contemporary works unique to this seaside community'.<sup>[49]</sup> Here, the gallery's foundational piece of shellwork (about 1939) was exhibited alongside some contemporary shellwork pieces made by celebrated shell artists Lola Ryan and Esme Timbery. During the 1990s, they had become feted artists, enjoying patronage from and collaborating with influential collectors and curators.<sup>[50]</sup> Today, their shellwork is represented in the collections of most major public galleries in Australia. Within the small *La Per* exhibition, though, old and new pieces of shellwork were interpreted by reference to the history, heritage and politics of the place of its production – La Perouse – more so than broader currents within histories of Aboriginal art practices and movements.<sup>[51]</sup> This community-focused, place-based interpretative approach had something in common with the Powerhouse Museum exhibition where La Perouse Aboriginal women's shellwork first appeared in 1988. Its exhibition history within major cultural institutions had, it seems, come full circle.

### **New installations, new cultures of consumption**

As the discussion so far has shown, La Perouse Aboriginal women's shellwork has had a long and instructive exhibition history. This history has not been much analysed. And yet the practices and politics of exhibiting shellwork have been integral to its meanings. Thus any history of Aboriginal women's shellwork production needs to attend to colonial and contemporary cultures of display, desire and consumption in which it is publicly shown and through which it circulates. There are

signs that the history of its exhibition – its history as a display object – is beginning to be registered in contemporary interpretations. This is especially evident in a recent installation of shellwork shoes, a collaboration between curator Djon Mundine and shell artist Esme Timbery. It is a powerful piece of artwork.

For an exhibition he curated at the Campbelltown City Council in 2008, titled *Ngadhu, Ngulili, Ngeaninyagu – A Personal History of Aboriginal Art in the Premier State*, Mundine commissioned Esme Timbery to make 200 pairs of shellwork baby shoes or slippers, although only 120 pairs had been made in time for the exhibition. These were displayed en masse, pinned to the gallery wall in neat rows of 12 pairs by 10 pairs – making a rectangular shape like a painting.<sup>[52]</sup> While La Perouse Aboriginal women's shellwork such as the shelled Sydney Opera House was already acclaimed as art object, Mundine's arrangement turned shellwork into an artwork of a quite different order. Unlike some of the shellwork pieces that Lola Ryan was making during the 1990s in collaboration with artist and collector Peter Fay, this installation does not experiment with new design elements, colours and shapes. Nor does it over-size single pieces for aesthetic effect, like the large shelled Sydney Harbour Bridges for which Esme Timbery was awarded the inaugural Parliament of New South Wales Indigenous Art Prize in 2005. The shelled slippers Mundine commissioned from Esme Timbery, assisted by her daughter Marilyn Russell, belong to the standard, almost foundational, repertoire of La Perouse shellworkers. These are stock pieces Aboriginal women made and sold. Their miniature size and their feminine and domestic form derive from and hark back to shellwork's Victorian-era origins.



*Shellworked Slippers*, 2008  
by Esme Timbery

detail of an installation of 200 pairs of shellworked shoes  
made by Esme Timbery  
cardboard, synthetic textiles, shells, glitter, pva glue, plain  
flour  
Museum of Contemporary Art, purchased with funds  
provided by the Coe and Mordant families, 2008  
© the artist, licensed by Viscopy

Rather than modify the form of shellwork pieces, the aesthetic language used here is repetition and assemblage.<sup>[53]</sup> The impact of the piece derives from seeing so many small shellwork pieces together. Pinned to the wall, front facing forward, in neat rows that highlight variation in colour but regularity in form, they appear like a taxonomic display of butterflies or other insects, putting one in mind of histories of collection and display. More particularly, though, the pieces are arranged just as the women who made them would have themselves displayed them for sale, the only difference being that their displays were on the ground, not on the wall. They laid their wares out in rows on blankets spread out on the grass at the tram terminus at La Perouse on weekends, or by the side of the road at nearby beach suburbs, ready to sell to passers-by.<sup>[54]</sup> In commissioning and curating this art installation, Mundine borrows from the shellworkers' own display practices and turns that into art. He has, in effect, picked up an old blanket of wares and hung it on the wall. And, in this new form, La Perouse shellwork becomes available yet again for consumption by a new cohort of consumers, or, at least, admirers. The installation of shell slippers was immediately acquired by the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney, where it was exhibited in late 2008 as part of the Museum's annual *New Acquisitions* exhibition and is currently on display in the newly refurbished and extended building. There is now a complete set of 200 pairs of shelled shoes. What this piece helps to remind us of is the long history of La Perouse Aboriginal women's shellwork as an object of desire, display and consumption, in which the audience for it and the meanings ascribed to it have changed dramatically over the last century and more, even as the object itself has remained largely true to its original form.

### **A future exhibition?**

With this long and rich exhibition history in mind, it is not hard to imagine or conceive of a future exhibition devoted to Aboriginal women's shellwork. Due to the efforts of many public and private institutions, collectors and curators over the past 30 years, beginning with the curatorial project spearheaded by the Powerhouse Museum in the 1980s, there exists across the country a

reasonably comprehensive and impressive, if scattered, collection of historical as well as contemporary pieces. Added to this, of course, are the standout pieces made on commission, like Djon Mundine's installation of shellwork slippers on show at the Museum of Contemporary Art and Esme Timbery's shelled Sydney Opera House on display at the National Museum of Australia. Supplementing collections of pieces are rich visual sources, including still photographs and moving images, oral history recordings and archival material, which provide detail about shellwork's production, consumption and circulation over many decades.

Such an exhibition, organised around a singular object, would provide scope to present under-appreciated histories of Aboriginal women's commodity production within colonial contexts. The remarkable longevity of shellwork production allows attention to be given to the cultures of display and consumption within which Aboriginal women's shellwork has circulated and acquired value, and the ways in which these were negotiated with acuity by Aboriginal shellworkers, as they sought access to or were invited to participate in new exhibition spaces and markets. [55] Today, public museums and art galleries constitute a fair slice of the demand for La Perouse Aboriginal women's shellwork, and are the main public sites for its continued exhibition and interpretation. Aboriginal shellworkers have become adept at negotiating these contemporary collecting institutions as well. That, too, is part of the story. These are important but underplayed themes within broader cross-cultural histories of Aboriginal women's object-making specifically, and of their lives more generally. Indeed, there must be few objects – and none quite as aesthetically distinctive – so well suited to an exhibition that can explore these intersecting themes. These are beguiling little things that point to bigger histories.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> I wish to thank the anonymous referees for their comments and suggestions. Work on this article was supported by an ARC Future Fellowship (FT100100073).

<sup>2</sup> Landmarks gallery website, [www.nma.gov.au/exhibitions/landmarks/urban\\_life/#row\\_15](http://www.nma.gov.au/exhibitions/landmarks/urban_life/#row_15), accessed 7 November 2011.

<sup>3</sup> Tess Allas, 'Esme Timbery', *Art Monthly Australia*, no. 187, March 2006, 25; 'Esme Timbery', *Design and Art Australia Online*, [www.daaonline.org.au/main/read/6173](http://www.daaonline.org.au/main/read/6173), accessed 20 November 2008.

<sup>4</sup> The shellwork Sydney Harbour Bridges (2007.0020.0001, 0002, 0003) were made by Esme Timbery in 2006 and acquired by purchase. A pair of shell baby shoes (2007.0031.0001) is listed as part of the Jonathon Dickson collection.

<sup>5</sup> 'Shellwork Sydney Harbour Bridge', National Museum of Australia 'Collection highlights', [http://nma.gov.au/collections/shell\\_work\\_sydney\\_harbour\\_bridge/](http://nma.gov.au/collections/shell_work_sydney_harbour_bridge/), accessed 7 November 2011. See also, Christine Hansen, 'Esme Timbery shellwork harbour bridges', *ATSIP Newsletter*, April 2008, National Museum of Australia, Canberra, p. 21.

<sup>6</sup> Peter McKenzie & Ann Stephen, 'La Perouse: An urban Aboriginal community', in Max Kelly (ed.), *Sydney – A City of Suburbs*, UNSW Press in association with the Sydney History Group, 1987, pp. 172–91; Ilaria Vanni, 'Bridging the gap: The production of tourist objects at La Perouse', in S Kleinert and M Neale (eds), *Oxford Companion to Aboriginal Art and Culture*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 2000, pp. 400–02.

<sup>7</sup> Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 1993.

<sup>8</sup> For a discussion of the history of shellwork as souvenir, see Maria Nugent, *Botany Bay: Where Histories Meet*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2005, pp. 81–3.

<sup>9</sup> The 'social life of things' is a phrase popularised by the title of Arjun Appadurai's influential edited collection, *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 1986.

<sup>10</sup> For a discussion of shellwork's economic value to the Aboriginal women who made it, see Maria Nugent, "'You really only made it because you needed the money": Aboriginal women and shellwork production, 1870s to 1970s', *Labour History*, no. 101, November 2011, 71–90. For discussions of Aboriginal tourist objects in museums, see: Ruth B Phillips, 'Why not tourist art? Significant silences in Native American museum representations', in Gyan Prakash (ed.), *After Colonialism: Imperial Histories and Postcolonial Displacements*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1995, pp. 98–125; and Sylvia Kleinert, 'Writing craft/writing history', *Humanities Research*, no. 1, 2000, 77–96. For histories of collecting and collections of Aboriginal material culture, see Tom Griffiths, *Hunters and Collectors: The Antiquarian Imagination in Australia*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 1996; Nicolas Peterson, Lindy Allen & Louise Hamby (eds), *The Makers and Making of Indigenous Australian Museum Collections*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 2008.

<sup>11</sup> Ruth B Phillips, 'Re-placing objects: Historical practices for the second museum age', *Canadian Historical Review*, vol. 86, no. 1, March 2005, 83–110 (p. 84).

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.* (p. 88).

<sup>13</sup> Some aspects of its earlier exhibition history are discussed in Nugent, *Botany Bay*, and Nugent, "'You really only made it'". See also Maria Nugent, 'An economy of shells: A brief history of La Perouse Aboriginal women's shellwork and its markets', in Ian Keen et al. (eds), *Indigenous Participation in Australian Economies II*, ANU E-press, Canberra, 2012, pp. 211–7.

<sup>14</sup> For discussions of the cultures and politics of display, see for instance, Ivan Karp & Steven D Lavine (eds), *The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington, 1991; Conal McCarthy, *Exhibiting Maori: A History of Colonial Cultures of Display*, Berg, Oxford, New York, 2007.

<sup>15</sup> Martha Sear, 'Unworded proclamations: Exhibitions of women's work in colonial Australia', PhD thesis, Department of History, University of Sydney, 2000, p. 4.

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>17</sup> *Exhibition of Women's Industries*, Sydney, 1888, n. p.

<sup>18</sup> Sear, 'Unworded proclamations', p. 174.

<sup>19</sup> *ibid.*, p. 176.

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, 'Our girls: What to do with them', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 April 1911, reporting on a Girls Realm bazaar, noting that: 'The La Perouse Aboriginal Mission has an exhibition of bead and shell work, with an aboriginal woman sitting there'. For other examples, see: 'What to do with our girls: The unique demonstrational exhibition', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 10 April 1909; 'The Mission's Loan Exhibition', *New South Wales Aborigines Advocate*, 30 June 1903, p. 3.

<sup>21</sup> Nugent, *Botany Bay*, pp. 79–83.

<sup>22</sup> See frontispiece photograph in Nugent, *Botany Bay*, of shellwork on sale at the tram terminus at La Perouse in the 1950s. (Photograph taken by anthropologist James Harle Bell: JH Bell collection, Powerhouse Museum, Sydney).

<sup>23</sup> Nugent, *Botany Bay*, pp. 76–8.

<sup>24</sup> Sylvia Kleinert, 'Aboriginal enterprises: Negotiating an urban Aboriginality', *Aboriginal History*, vol. 34, 2010, 171–96 (p. 171). See also, Sylvia Kleinert, 'Keeping up culture: Gunai engagement with tourism', *Oceania*, vol. 82, no. 1, March 2012, 86–103.

<sup>25</sup> Chris Healy, *Forgetting Aborigines*, UNSW Press, Sydney, 2008, pp. 79–90.

<sup>26</sup> See, for instance, Howard Morphy, *Becoming Art: Exploring Cross-Cultural Categories*, UNSW Press, Sydney, 2000.

<sup>27</sup> Nugent, "'You really only made it'" (p. 85); Lola Ryan, 'Shellwork: From bridges to maps', in *Steppin' Out and Speakin' Up*, Older Women's Network NSW, Millers Point, 2003, pp. 11–21.

<sup>28</sup> The absence of these kinds of objects in Australian museum collections is noticeable in the range of essays included in Peterson, Allen & Hamby (eds), *The Makers and Making of Indigenous Australian Museum Collections*. For references to the exclusion from museums of shellwork and similar objects made under colonial conditions by Aboriginal women in south-eastern Australia, see Ann Stephen, 'Jane and Olive Simms', *Design and Art Australia Online*, <http://www.daaao.org.au/bio/jane-and-olive-simms/>, accessed 7 November 2011; Sylvia Kleinert, 'Jacky Jacky was a smart young fella': A study of art and Aboriginality in south east Australia 1900–1980, PhD thesis, Australian National University, 1994, chapter 5, 'A women's sphere', pp. 140–78. For a comparative example, see Phillips, 'Why not tourist art?', and Ruth B Phillips, *Trading Identities: The Souvenir in Native North American Art from the Northeast, 1700–1900*, University of Washington Press/McGill-Queen's University Press, Seattle and London/Montreal and Kingston, 1998.

<sup>29</sup> It is worth noting that at the same time as the Powerhouse Museum was developing a small exhibition about the Aboriginal community at La Perouse, the La Perouse Aboriginal community was itself engaged in a project to establish a local museum and cultural centre. The museum was established for a short time in the late 1980s, although on a much smaller scale than was originally envisaged. In the start-up phase it was partly government-funded, but was supposed to become self-supporting. The enterprise was, not surprisingly, short-lived.

<sup>30</sup> Trustees of the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, *Australian Communities*, Powerhouse Museum, Sydney, 1991, pp. 6–8.

<sup>31</sup> Graeme Davison & Kimberley Webber (eds), *Yesterday's Tomorrows: The Powerhouse Museum and its Precursors, 1880–2005*, Powerhouse Publishing in association with UNSW Press, Sydney, 2005.

<sup>32</sup> For a profile on Peter Yanada McKenzie, see: <http://nga.gov.au/retake/artists/0000000c.htm>, accessed 24 April 2012. His photographs of La Perouse were featured in Penny Taylor (ed.), *After 200 Years: Photographic Essays of Aboriginal and Islander Australia Today*, Cambridge University

Press in association with Aboriginal Studies Press, Melbourne and Canberra, 1988.

<sup>33</sup> Thanks to one of the anonymous referees for this insight.

<sup>34</sup> Thanks to Martha Sear for this insight.

<sup>35</sup> Linda Young, 'Improving: Art in the service of industry, 1880–1940', in Davison & Webber (eds), *Yesterday's Tomorrows*, pp. 110–23.

<sup>36</sup> As part of the La Perouse Aboriginal community exhibition project, a successful public appeal was made for La Perouse souvenirs, including shellwork, to be donated to the Powerhouse Museum. As mementoes, the pieces donated could easily have been interpreted from the perspective of their owners, but it is not clear the extent to which donor memories and stories about the objects were recorded.

<sup>37</sup> Ann Stephen, 'Olive and Jane Simms', in Joan Kerr (ed.), *Heritage: The National Women's Art Book, 500 works by 500 Women Artists from Colonial Times to 1955*, Craftsman House, Sydney, 1995.

<sup>38</sup> Jennifer Isaacs, *The Gentle Arts: 200 Years of Australian Women's Domestic and Decorative Arts*, Lansdowne, Sydney, 1987, p. 167.

<sup>39</sup> For studies of the making of Aboriginal art, see Howard Morphy, *Becoming Art: Exploring Cross-cultural Categories*, Berg, Oxford, New York, 2007; Fred Myers, *Painting Culture: The Making of an Aboriginal High Art*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2002.

<sup>40</sup> Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 'American Jewish life: Ethnographic approaches to collection, presentation and interpretation in museums', in P Hall and C Seaman (eds), *Folklife and Museums: Selected Readings*, Altamira Press, New York, 1995, p. 148, cited in McCarthy, *Exhibiting Maori*, p. 3.

<sup>41</sup> See, for example, Allas, 'Esme Timbery', pp. 24–6.

<sup>42</sup> I have made some inquiries, but have not yet been successful in getting to the bottom of the story.

<sup>43</sup> For details about Lloyd's career, listen to Lloyd being interviewed by Jan Lyell [sound recording], ORAL TRC 5330, National Library of Australia.

<sup>44</sup> Phillips, 'Why not tourist art?', and *Trading Identities*; and Ruth B Phillips and Christopher B Steiner, 'Art, authenticity and the baggage of cultural encounter', in Phillips & Steiner (eds), *Unpacking Culture: Art and Commodity in Colonial and Postcolonial Worlds*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1999, pp. 3–19.

<sup>45</sup> Margo Neale, *Yiribana: An Introduction to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Collection*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, 1994, p. 9.

<sup>46</sup> Hetti Perkins, Margie West & Theresa Willsteed (eds), *One Sun One Moon: Aboriginal Art in Australia*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, 2007, p. 11.

<sup>47</sup> *ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>48</sup> Grace Cochrane, 'Cross-over: Two-way influences in contemporary Indigenous design', in *ibid.*, pp. 261–9.

<sup>49</sup> *La Per* website, [www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/exhibitions/la-per/](http://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/exhibitions/la-per/), accessed 10 November 2011.

<sup>50</sup> Lola Ryan collaborated with artist and art collector, Peter Fay. See Ryan, 'Shellwork'. This included some work for the Australian Maritime Museum in Sydney. See: <http://www.anmm.gov.au/site/page.cfm?u=1415&c=3069>, accessed 26 April 2012. In 2005, Esme Timbery was awarded the inaugural New South Wales Parliament's Indigenous Art Award for a shell-encrusted, blue-velvet-decorated Sydney Harbour Bridge. In 2007, she was featured in an episode of the Australian Broadcasting Commission's *Artists at Work* television documentary series. See Kelrick Martin (dir.), *She Sells Seashells* [television documentary], ABC, Sydney, 2007.

<sup>51</sup> Jonathon Jones, *La Per: An Aboriginal Seaside Story, 17 July -10 October 2010*, Collection notes, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, 2010.

<sup>52</sup> Ngadhu, Ngulili, *Ngeaninyagu: A Personal History of Aboriginal Art in the Premier State*, Campbelltown Arts Centre, Campbelltown, 2008.

<sup>53</sup> This is a signature of Djon Mundine's curatorial practice, as the burial poles in the National Gallery of Australia attest: <http://nga.gov.au/AboriginalMemorial/history.cfm>, accessed 26 April 2012. See also Djon Mundine, 'Two hundred burial poles: The Aboriginal memorial', in Sylvia Kleinert & Margo Neale (eds), *Oxford Companion to Aboriginal Art and Culture*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 2000, pp. 142-3.

<sup>54</sup> See Ryan, 'Shellwork', p. 12, where she says: 'After I was married we used to sell our work on the side of the road at Cronulla'.

<sup>55</sup> Phillips & Steiner, 'Art, authenticity and the baggage of cultural encounter', p. 9.

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