

WADGAYAWA NHAY  
DHADJAN WARI

THEY MADE THEM A LONG TIME AGO

# Media Release



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## Significant Aboriginal objects come back to Country after 200 years

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Aboriginal communities, families, Elders and makers will for the first time have direct access to 30 ancestral objects removed from Country around 200 years ago when the exhibition *Wadgayawa Nhay Dhadjan Wari (they made them a long time ago)* opens at the State Library of NSW, from Saturday 7 October.

“These extraordinary objects – adornments, weapons, containers and tools – were collected from the Sydney region and coastal NSW between 1790s and 1890s,” says Noeleen Timbery, La Perouse Local Aboriginal Land Council. “Some were probably stolen, but our people also traded their objects and made them for sale.

“When they were taken away, no information was recorded about the people who made them or how they were acquired, and they have been largely ‘asleep’ in overseas institutions ever since,” she says.

The exhibition is part of a larger project, funded by the Australian Research Council (ARC), to bring a selection of objects back to Country and rebuild knowledge and understanding with Aboriginal communities working alongside historians, archaeologists, anthropologists, scientists and curators.

Noeleen says this work to bring objects back on Country must be led by Community “so they can be wrapped again in knowledge, language and culture. This is a first step in a much longer journey. We do not yet know where that journey will lead, but we know it has begun and we won’t turn back.”

The 30 objects, held by five cultural institutions across the United Kingdom, were selected by members of the La Perouse community to travel back to Sydney.

“Despite the impact of colonisation, our old people were able to thrive in coastal Sydney. They made these objects. The knowledge of our people continues to be passed down throughout our community. To us, these objects hold a spiritual connection, representing our unbroken links to our Country (land, waterways and skyways),” says Ray Ingrey, Gujaga Foundation.

When exploring the exhibition, visitors will mostly see traditional objects from Port Jackson (Sydney Harbour) and Botany Bay, as well as a few from the Shoalhaven River and Port Stephens regions.

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“It was important for us to have both men’s and women’s objects, as well as objects made from a variety of materials,” says Ray. “And we wanted to include objects that we still make, such as shields, and those we don’t but which we hope to begin to make again by learning from these survivors.”

According to historian, Associate Professor Maria Nugent, Australian National University, “the project has attempted to trace the journeys of each of the objects from Australia to England, and we look forward to sharing this new information in the exhibition.”

The exhibition includes a bark container (or ‘workbox’) – the only known surviving one of its kind – which would have been used to carry work tools such as fishing lines and hooks, as well as food like shellfish and water. They resemble the design of bark canoes (nawi) used in the coastal Sydney region.

“This object became part of the British Museum in 1872. It was probably collected by William Grant Milne as part of the *Herald* expedition (1852–1861) which spent time in Sydney, and surveyed Port Jackson and New South Wales between 1857 and 1858,” says Maria.

There are also objects likely to have been collected within years of the British arriving, such as the parrying shield made of grey gum or the spearthrower with a Venus shell insert held together with gum resin.

“*Wadgayawa Nhay Dhadjan Wari* has been designed primarily to showcase the beauty, sophistication and also the ordinariness of these objects, and to create space for the descendants of these makers and Elders to spend time with these extraordinary belongings,” says Damien Webb, the State Library’s Manager of Indigenous Engagement.

“It’s also a rare opportunity for the people of NSW to see belongings which were previously only glimpsed (and sometimes misunderstood) in the notes and sketches of non-Aboriginal colonial figures,” he says.

“This is part of the State Library’s ongoing work to reconnect First Nations peoples with our ancestors’ stories, and ensuring our voices and stories are alive in the Library’s collections, and we are honoured to have a small role in this important project.”

*Wadgayawa Nhay Dhadjan Wari* is a free exhibition at the State Library of NSW from 7 October 2023 to 28 January 2024. 1 Shakespeare Pl, Sydney. [sl.nsw.gov.au](http://sl.nsw.gov.au)

### MEDIA INQUIRIES:

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This exhibition is presented in partnership with Associate Professor Maria Nugent (Australian National University, project lead), Ray Ingrej (Gujaga Foundation), Noeleen Timbery (La Perouse Aboriginal Land Council) and other members of the La Perouse Aboriginal Community.