

Corsali's 'Southern Cross' finds permanent home at NSW State Library

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The earliest printed illustration and description of the Southern Cross by 16th century Italian adventurer Andrea Corsali will go on public display for the first time **TODAY [Thursday 6 December]** at the State Library of NSW.

The State Library just acquired a rare printed edition of a letter Corsali sent to his patron in 1516 where he describes the distinct array of stars pointing towards the South Pole as “a marveylous crosse”.*

According to State Librarian Dr John Vallance: “It is an extraordinarily rare and evocative piece which documents for the first time in a European context the constellation that has become our national symbol.”

“The State Library was determined to secure this letter for the people of Australia – and it succeeded with the support of the State Library Foundation,” said Dr Vallance.

The printed letter, one of only four copies known to exist, is a sensational addition to the Library’s unrivalled collection relating to the exploration of the Southern Oceans and the European discovery of Australia.

Under the patronage of Guiliano de’ Medici, 28 year-old Corsali sailed on a Portuguese ocean voyage from Lisbon to Cochin (Kochi), India. Corsali sent his patron two letters from India detailing the people and places he saw during his travels to India via the Cape of Good Hope, where he observed from his ship the Southern Cross constellation for the very first time.

In the first letter Corsali describes: ‘...this crosse is so fayre and bewtiful that none other heavenly signe may be compared to it as may appear by this figure’.*

The Medici received the letter in October 1516 and just two months later arranged to have it privately printed by a small press in Florence, Italy.

“There was certainly secrecy surrounding this voyage, including why Corsali was sent in the first place,” said Maggie Patton, the State Library’s head curator. “It was a

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likely fact-finding mission with Corsali's letters possibly containing valuable intelligence to benefit the Medici's trade interests in India."

"The voyage nonetheless produced a drawing and a name for what is now the most iconic constellation in the southern sky. It also gave Australia a symbol that is now so familiar and celebrated people have it permanently inked on their bodies," said Ms Patton.

According to Damien Webb, Manager of the State Library's Indigenous Engagement Branch, "the stars which make up the Southern Cross have been an important part of Aboriginal astronomy and cosmology for tens of thousands of years."

"It is a point of convergence in that it has significance regardless of your cultural or religious background. When Aboriginal people look at the constellation we may see the head of an emu, whereas the Europeans saw a cross," Mr Webb said.

Corsali's printed *Lettera* has been in the hands of some great book collectors, including the notable art historian Lord Kenneth Clark, before finding its permanent home at the State Library.

Visitors can see it for the first time in the State Library's new galleries, alongside a later manuscript copy of the printed letter. This manuscript is on long-term loan to the Library from the Bruce and Joy Reid Foundation.

"We are indebted for this loan to the late Dr Bruce Reid AM KNO, a great friend of the Library and one of Australia's most important philanthropists, who shared our passion for the history of exploration," said Dr Vallance.

The State Library's Galleries are open until 5 pm daily – 8 am on Thursdays. Enjoy free exhibition tours Monday to Friday at 12 noon.

* Originally written in Latin, translated into English by Richard Eden in 1555.

Maggie Patton is available for interviews.

MEDIA CONTACT:

Vanessa Bond, State Library Media & Communications
(02) 9273 1566, 0411 259 898, vanessa.bond@sl.nsw.gov.au

