

## *Australia: The Vatican Museum's Indigenous Collection*

edited by Katherine Aigner

400 pp., Aboriginal Studies Press & Edizioni Musei Vaticani, 2018,  
ISBN: 9788882714116 (pbk), \$40.00

Review by Louise Hamby  
The Australian National University

Katherine Aigner's passion not only for Indigenous material culture, but also the complex relationships of missionaries and priests from the Catholic church in Australia with these objects makes this publication an important one. *Australia: The Vatican Museum's Indigenous Collection* is a book with many authors and far-ranging topics, but has a very specific focus: the not so well-known collection of Australian objects held by the Vatican Museum. Due to the Vatican's Ethnology Museum being closed for the past 40 years, and many of the valuable texts needing to be translated from German, Italian and Spanish, Australians have not had much information about this collection until now. Aigner states:

This catalogue is a continuation of that collaboration, to reconnect the material culture which had been sent to the Vatican Museum over 100 years ago with the relevant source communities who remain the cultural custodians today (p. 24).

It was through liaising with missionary orders, families and artists in communities in Western Australia, the Northern Territory and elsewhere, along with archival research and working with other writers, both academics and mostly Indigenous local people, that these connections have been made.

The jewels of the Vatican's Indigenous Collection and of this book are the objects, their history and the contextualising chapters. The objects come from the collections of New Norcia, north of Perth, founded in 1847; the Drysdale River Mission, in the Kimberley area of Western Australia, founded in 1908; and from the Bathurst Island Mission in the Northern Territory, founded in 1911. They are lavishly illustrated, tempting one to just look at the pictures. Overall, the Vatican's Australian collection

contains approximately 300 objects, of which 128 are photographed for this book, though a full listing of the whole collection would have been useful. Included in the illustrations are many archival materials and photographs of land and people, which enrich the understanding of the objects. The catalogue section of the book also includes short stories about the objects, some speculative as to their origins or potential makers. The design of the book features many extracts and vignettes of material, though it was not always clear who authored these. Taken on their own they are complete in themselves, like the detailed pieces discussing glass points, pearl shell and coolamons in the section by Kim Akerman. For some sections, this type of material could have been incorporated within the text of the chapter to make the discussion flow.

The first two sections of the book, 'Indigenous Australian Collection' and 'Material Culture', along with the catalogue of objects make this an impressive book. Aigner's desire to cover all of Australia, and to foreground Indigenous cosmology through the essays, was ambitious. She invited authors 'to write about different aspects of this rich Australian culture to educate the European and Australian audiences' (p. 28). The section 'Cultural Heritage' presents more general background material to set the scene. The 'Custodian' section would have been improved by more stories from the actual areas of the collection, although others offer insights into Aboriginal culture. In particular, Bentley James's article about Laurie Baymarrwanga shows the importance of language. Excellent, well-written chapters include that by Tony Swain on Aboriginal cosmology and 'The Yued Clan: Identity and Cultural Renewal' by Father Bernard Rooney. They provide history and background for the collection. Some of the chapters in the book are general in nature and do not add a great deal to the focused story of the Catholic missions, of collecting and of interactions with Aboriginal people concerned with the objects in the Vatican Collection. However, they are valuable in themselves and would work well in a more general volume about Aboriginal cosmology.

The Vatican Collection is significant due to the rarity of some objects and their early date of collection. Many are from a time (in the 1840s) when few significant collections of Australian material culture were being made: in the top end of Northern Territory, it was not until Baldwin Spencer's 1912 collection from Gunbalanya and Hubert Wilkins's 1924 collection from Milingimbi that Arnhem Land collections began to be amassed. Some of these earlier objects are intriguing, such as a group of 13 two-sided depictions on slate ('Wanjina Song Cycle') and a small Wanjina painting on bark. The process of painting on both sides of a surface is seen in other early collections that have come from Methodist missions. For example, Olive Lambert's collection from Milingimbi has paintings completed on both sides of small planks, and Lloyd Warner's has folded, shaped bark painted on

both sides. The lack of detailed information about these objects makes it helpful to look at the objects in other museum collections that share, as Philip Jones points out, 'typological and visual' (p. 138) associations.

When constructing a biography of an object, the value of considering the place of collection, where an object may have been used and where it was used is demonstrated in Philip Jones's analysis of catalogue item #22, a stack of three red ochre forms. By looking at Father Salvado's memoirs from his time at New Norcia from 1850 to 1851, Jones has potentially ascertained the specific type of ochre and how it may have been exchanged and valued by Aboriginal people.

The stack of three lumps of ochre point the way to an in-depth look at the objects documented in the Vatican Collection catalogue. An analysis of the objects, coupled with an Indigenous perspective and archival knowledge, lead to greater understanding of the Australian collection held in the Vatican.

This text is taken from *Aboriginal History, Volume 42, 2018*,  
edited by Ingereth Macfarlane, published 2018 by ANU Press,  
The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.