Wonders from Down Under

Works by the Aboriginal people of Australia and the Torres Strait Islands show the richness of their ancestral cultures and the devastating impact of Western colonisation

Ben Luke

EXHIBITION OF THE WEEK

INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIA
British Museum, WC1
★★★★☆

STAGING a museum show about Australian indigenous cultures in London is fraught with problems. The fact is that Aboriginal peoples lived in what we call Australia for more than 60,000 years before Captain Cook and his party arrived in Botany Bay in 1770, shot at the local people and confiscated their spears (they were actually used to catch fish). So began a devastating rupture.

The grim details are well known: British colonisation began in earnest in 1788 and as European settlements expanded, aboriginal people's lands were taken from them. Vast numbers of indigenous men, women and children died from disease, met violent deaths at the hands of colonisers and had their beliefs and rituals destroyed.

Many of the works in this show, the majority of them from the British Museum's own collections, are the result of that colonial presence. Most often they were gained in the name of scientific or anthropological research, or through missionaries, but sometimes they were the spoils of conflict, or taken by force, as was the rough shield in red mangrove wood that was collected by Cook's party and now belongs to the BM. So the title has a double meaning: the aboriginal people's civilisation has endured for thousands of years, and it has also endured colonisation and continued despite it.

The awkwardness of presenting a show on this subject is something the exhibition's curators are all too painfully aware of, as a wall text confirms: "The fact that museums internationally hold this significant cultural material is a subject for debate for many indigenous Australians today," it says.

It is to the BM's credit that it addresses this problem head on. From the start, it's clear that the voices of indigenous Australians past and present are at the heart of the show. The first half is about the breadth and variety of Aboriginal objects, many of them made recently, and the ancient traditions they relate to; the second half is about what happened after the colonialists arrived and challenged that continuum.

Thus, the opening part is a wonderful journey deep into the art and culture of Indigenous peoples in mainland Australia and in the Torres Straits Islands – between the north-easternmost point of the country and Papua New Guinea – while the closing rooms are often unsettling and sometimes devastating.

A map of Australia close to the entrance reflects the hundreds of languages spoken by Aboriginal communities in the country. If you imagine that each of those communities also has a distinct visual language of signs and symbols, some that have been interpreted clearly by scholars, others that remain largely untranslated, then you begin to get a sense of how rich and sophisticated the arts and crafts of Indigenous Australia are. An object made in a coastal community in the north of the continent wouldn't be readable to someone in the arid central Pitjantjatjara territory and vice-versa.

But what all the different communities share is a profound connection to "country" – the land and sea that surrounds them, each aspect of which, from the smallest stone to vast rivers, is precious.

In indigenous communities throughout Australia, the land and their relationship to it is deeply connected to the human and animal ancestors that formed the Earth and the stars. The "dreamings", as these creation stories are known, inform many of the works here, not least the contemporary paintings that appear at various points in the show.

Kungkarangkalpa (Seven Sisters), a work made by several women from the Spinifex community in Western Australia in 2013, depicts in vivid colour and pattern a dreaming that involved a group of ancestral women who, through singing and dancing, created aspects of the landscape. They were followed by a lustful man who they escaped by becoming a constellation of stars. Every aspect of this story, which has vital geographical and moral messages for the Spinifex, is woven into the painting. For many of us, it is a vivid and alluring decorative painting. For the community that made it, it passes on important lessons to the next generation.

This sense of continuity across the ages is profound. A recent painting of a barramundi fish on a piece of bark relates to ancient rock paintings of flora and fauna that go back as far as 40,000 years. Then there are the spear points, painstakingly crafted through "pressure-flaking" a stone object with a sharp tool, and then carefully serrating its edges, made using techniques honed over thousands of years. And yet they would be used just once in the hunt, as they would break off once thrown into the side of a kangaroo or other beast. Fascinatingly, after colonisation, the Aboriginal people would fashion the same objects from the settlers' ceramic and glass, again to stunning and delicate effect.

Among the most striking of the Torres Straits Islanders' objects are masks, such as the one in turtleshell, with intricate patterning just discernible in the smoky surface of the shell. Another turtleshell mask, depicting a crocodile, is similarly dramatic. Parts of the mask of particular significance have been obscured with material at the request of the Mabuiag island community, whose ancestors created it. This seems to me to be emblematic of the show's shift towards a new telling of Australian history: away from the colonial story and towards the indigenous people's viewpoint. It's also there in the often harrowing detail of the colonists' treatment of Aboriginal people and in the pictures and objects that reflect the struggle for land rights in the Sixties and Seventies.

A quite literally totemic object in this regard is a tall wooden "larrakitj" or burial pole made by Gawarrin Gumana in 2002. Two mask-like faces at the top of the poll depict the creation ancestor Barama but also Captain Cook: it's both a marker of Australia's ancient history and a symbol of the flagpole Cook planted in the land. It sums up Australia's current position and the Aboriginal people's enduring struggle to join their long history with recent upheaval. It's a powerful emblem for this deeply engaging show.

■ *Indigenous Australia is at the British Museum, WC1 (020 7323 8000, britishmuseum.org) Thurs-Aug 2. Sat-Thurs 10am-5.30pm, Fri 10am-8.30pm. Admission £10, concessions available*

Signs and symbols: (from far left) a mask from the Torres Straits islands; Kungkara-ngkalpa, a painting by women from the Spinifex people; a burial pole made in 2002