Moving from Documentation to Knowledge Building: ResearchSpace Principles and Practices

British Museum

ResearchSpace Team
10th December 2018
How can structured data be used in thinking, and how can ‘thinking with data’ inform, through collaboration, the creation of a larger but detailed, panoramic knowledge base.
Object type: shield

Museum number: Oc1978,Q.839

Description: Shield, undecorated, made of bark and wood. Elongated, oval form, with pointed ends, and slightly convex. Bark has rough surface and appears blackened in places with traces of white kaolin on outer surface. Thin handle attached vertically to the reverse of the shield at centre. Both shield and handle are made of red mangrove (Rhizophora stylosa). Pierced hole near

Ethnic name: Made by Aboriginal Australian

Date: 18thC(late)-19thC(early)

Production place: Made in: New South Wales East coast, likely in an area where red mangrove grows (?);
(Oceania,Australia,New South Wales)

Findspot: Found/Acquired: Botany Bay (?);
(Oceania,Australia,New South Wales,Sydney,Botany Bay)

Materials: wood; bark (Rhizophora stylosa (red mangrove))

Technique: carved

Dimensions: Height: 97.3 centimetres
Width: 32.3 centimetres
Depth: 12 centimetres
Weight: 2157 grammes

Curator's comments: Possibly obtained on Captain Cook's first voyage (HMS Endeavour 1768-1771) on April 29th 1770 at Botany Bay, in present day New South Wales, Australia. This is based on voyage accounts from James Cook, Joseph Banks, and Sydney Parkinson. Sketches by Parkinson and John Frederick Miller depict a shield matching this description, with the hole near the shield

Bibliography: Nugent 2005
Nugent 2009
Attenbrow & Cartwright 2014
Nugent 2015

Location: Not on display


Associated names: Associated with: Sir Joseph Banks
Associated with: Captain James Cook
Associated with: HMS Endeavour

Acquisition name: From: Sir Joseph Banks

Acquisition date: 1770 (post)

Acquisition notes: Found unregistered in the collection in 1978 and registered with a Q number in that year.

Department: Africa, Oceania & the Americas

Registration number: Oc1978,Q.839
Before 1770 -> 1770 -> After 1770
A Shield Loaded with History: Encounters, Objects and Exhibitions

MARIA NUGENT & GAYE SCULTHORPE

This article discusses an Aboriginal shield in the British Museum which is widely believed to have been used in the first encounter between Lieutenant James Cook’s expedition and the Gweagal people at Botany Bay in late April 1770. It traces the ways in which the shield became ‘Cook-related’, and increasingly represented and exhibited in that way. In the wake of its exhibition at the National Museum of Australia in late 2015 and early 2016, the shield gained further public prominence and has become enmeshed within a wider politics of reconciliation. A recent request from the La Perouse Local Aboriginal Land Council to the British Museum to review knowledge about the shield has contributed to a reappraisal of claims about its connection to Cook’s 1770 expedition. Preliminary findings of this review are presented. In the process, the article addresses larger questions concerning the politics surrounding the interpretation of the shield as a historically ‘loaded’ object.
The Gweagal shield and the fight to change the British Museum's attitude to seized artefacts

Activists say symbols of resistance taken when Captain Cook's men first encountered Indigenous people in 1770 must come home, and not just on loan.
Lowestoft

Lowestoft (/ˈloʊɪstəf, ˈloʊɪstəf/) is a town and civil parish in the English county of Suffolk. The town is on the North Sea coast and is the most easterly settlement of the United Kingdom. It is 110 miles (177 km) north-east of London, 38 miles (61 km) north-east of Ipswich and 22 miles (35 km) south-east of Norwich. It is situated on the edge of The Broads system and is the major settlement within the district of Waveney with a population of 71,010 in 2011.

Some of the earliest evidence of settlement in Britain has been found in Lowestoft and the town has a long history. It is a port town which developed due to the fishing industry, and a traditional seaside resort. It has wide, sandy beaches, two piers and a number of other tourist attractions. Whilst its fisheries have declined, the development of oil and gas exploitation in the southern North Sea in the 1960s led to the development of the town, along with nearby Great Yarmouth, as a base for the industry. This role has since declined and the town has begun to develop as a centre of the renewable energy industry within the East of England.
Proposition - Narrative in Data
Principles
Historical Narrative

Thin Description
A history of facts organised in a linear way without interpretation or wider context

Thick Description
A history that includes wider social or cultural context and interpretation

(Clifford Geertz)
Research Methods

Quantitative
More associated with datasets and scale
‘Thin Description at scale’
Generality

Qualitative
More associated with narrative and detail
‘Thick Descriptions’
Specificity
Abstraction

- For efficiency and scale?
- For context and meaning?
Essential Records Time & Space

- What was its significance originally?
- What processes were involved in its creation?
- What is its significance today?
- What was its original function?
- What does its presence tell us about the past generally? What are the warnings for the future?
Framing Conceptions of Reality

“*These ritual performances gave them an understanding of themselves in the interplay of social, geographical and environmental forces.*”

Mental Conceptions of the World

Modes of Production

Social Relations

Relations to Nature

Technology

Reproduction of Everyday Life
LATE HOKUSAI: THOUGHT, TECHNIQUE, SOCIETY

The British Museum
SOAS University of London

ENGLISH  JAPANESE 日本語
What Society?
Society

The Four Estates of Moral Purity (1823)
Arguments
Ontology to Interpretation

Ceci n’est pas une diagramme
History?

We have a number of spaces for contemporary art. The thing that I think is missing, and this might be a funny thing for a contemporary curator to say, is that I think we have a shallow understanding of history, and I always worry that there is always a tendency to concentrate on the contemporary, abandoning the historical. If you don't look to the past then your contemporary work will look vapid.

Juliana Engberg, Curator and Maverick
Real World Politics?
## Artwork Info

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<td>© Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn</td>
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The Promise of the Digital

Edward Fry, Andrew W. Mellon
Distinguished Professor of Art History

A vision for computer systems in Cultural Heritage (Museum and Computers, 1968)
- Flexible representations
- Unify knowledge across disciplines
- Enable discoveries
- Integrate biographical materials
  (biographies of places, people, objects, etc.)
Problem of Thick Description

- Thick Description = Better Generalisations and better questions?
- How are they brought together?
Thinking with Data - Not Grunt Work!

“Architects who have aimed at acquiring manual skill without scholarship have never been able to reach a position of authority to correspond to their pains, while those who relied only upon theories and scholarship were obviously hunting the shadow, not the substance.

But those who have a thorough knowledge of both, like men armed at all points, have the sooner attained their object and carried authority with them.”

Marcus Vitruvius Polio
More Narrative in Data
Technology Research Questions and Objectives:

With each artist or research model, we explore software environments and data structures to support these goals:

1. To capture the complexity of the works in contemporary art
2. To capture the complexity of the relationships among the components of the work(s), the variable media, collaborators, and other aspects of contemporary art.
3. To build an easy-to-use interface
4. To support long-term preservation of the resource
5. To provide for low development and maintenance costs
6. To build a model that can be readily shared with others wanting to create similar resources
Technology Mindsets

The whole notion and system of "archive" should be reconsidered beyond cultures and countries, and there will be no one, universal state of "archive", but there will be more de-centralized, multi-perspective approaches to the archive.

The digitally networked archive with social tagging by people’s participation would be one of the actual, significant forms of archives.

Yukiko Shikata
Reshaping the Collectible: When Artworks Live in the Museum

January 2018 – June 2021

It will contribute to theory and practice in collection care, curation and museum management, and will focus on recent and contemporary artworks which challenge the structures of the museum with a particular focus on time-based media, performative, live and digital art.
Gallery Discourse versus Digital Data

Why art has the power to change the world

“Giving people access to data most often leaves them feeling overwhelmed and disconnected, not empowered and poised for action. This is where art can make a difference. Art does not show people what to do, yet engaging with a good work of art can connect you to your senses, body, and mind. It can make the world felt.”

Art helps us identify with one another and expands our notion of we – from the local to the global

Olafur Eliasson

Artist

“Art can motivate people to turn thinking into doing.”
What is the Curatorial?

- Less object orientated
- Collaborative and Participatory
- Conceptual (Ideas and theory)
- Process, knowledge and research
- Social and political discourses
- Interdisciplinary
- Understand the changing world

Rembrandt’s depictions of women | Curator’s Corner

Eszter Szakács
(http://tranzit.org/curatorialdictionary/index.php/dictionary/curatorial/)
Questions?

Get in touch: researchspace@britishmuseum.org