



Project Gallery

‘Making the Museum’ and the archaeology of the Pitt Rivers Museum collection

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Emerging from a shift in the relationship between archaeology and museums, the ‘Making the Museum’ project investigates the makers of the archaeological and ethnographic collections of the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford, positioning archaeological theory and method as essential tools for uncovering the ‘hidden histories’ of these makers.

Keywords: Western Europe, Archaeology of museums, history of archaeology, archaeological theory, museum anthropology, hidden histories

Introduction

Recent years have seen archaeologists turn to museum collections that have not traditionally been perceived as ‘archaeological’ in nature (Flexner 2022). Studies have developed an archaeology of archives (Baird & McFadyen 2014; Hitchcock 2021; Hodgett 2022), delved into photograph collections (Baird 2011; Riggs 2018) and used these sources to critically interrogate the ‘hidden histories’ of archaeology—unearthing the stories of people whose presence and labour has been systematically erased through colonial archival, documentation and publication practices (Quirke 2010; Riggs 2018). Recognising that museum and archival collections might act as archaeological field sites in their own right marks a significant departure from prevailing perspectives on the relationship between museums and archaeology; museum archaeology is frequently misconstrued as limited to the pragmatic storage and display of excavated and fully processed archaeological assemblages, or else dismissed as relevant only to antiquarian ‘collecting’ practices (Stevenson 2022). But the museum has the potential to be a potent site for archaeological research; a space for archaeology to grapple with its own colonial history and make contributions towards more inclusive practices.

‘Making the Museum’

‘Making the Museum’ (2024–2027; <https://www.prm.ox.ac.uk/making-museum>) emerges from this context and in response to wider efforts towards decolonising museum praxis at

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the Pitt Rivers Museum (PRM) (see <https://www.prm.ox.ac.uk/critical-changes>). The project begins with the following provocation: Lieutenant General Pitt-Rivers did not make the museum that bears his name, nor the objects within it. The real makers of the museum are the people who lived (and live) outside its walls, whose lives are captured in the



Figure 1. Tane Mata Ariki te mata o Rongo, identified by Robbie Teremoana Atatoa: 85mm × 620mm × 260mm (Royal Museums Greenwich ZBA5526).

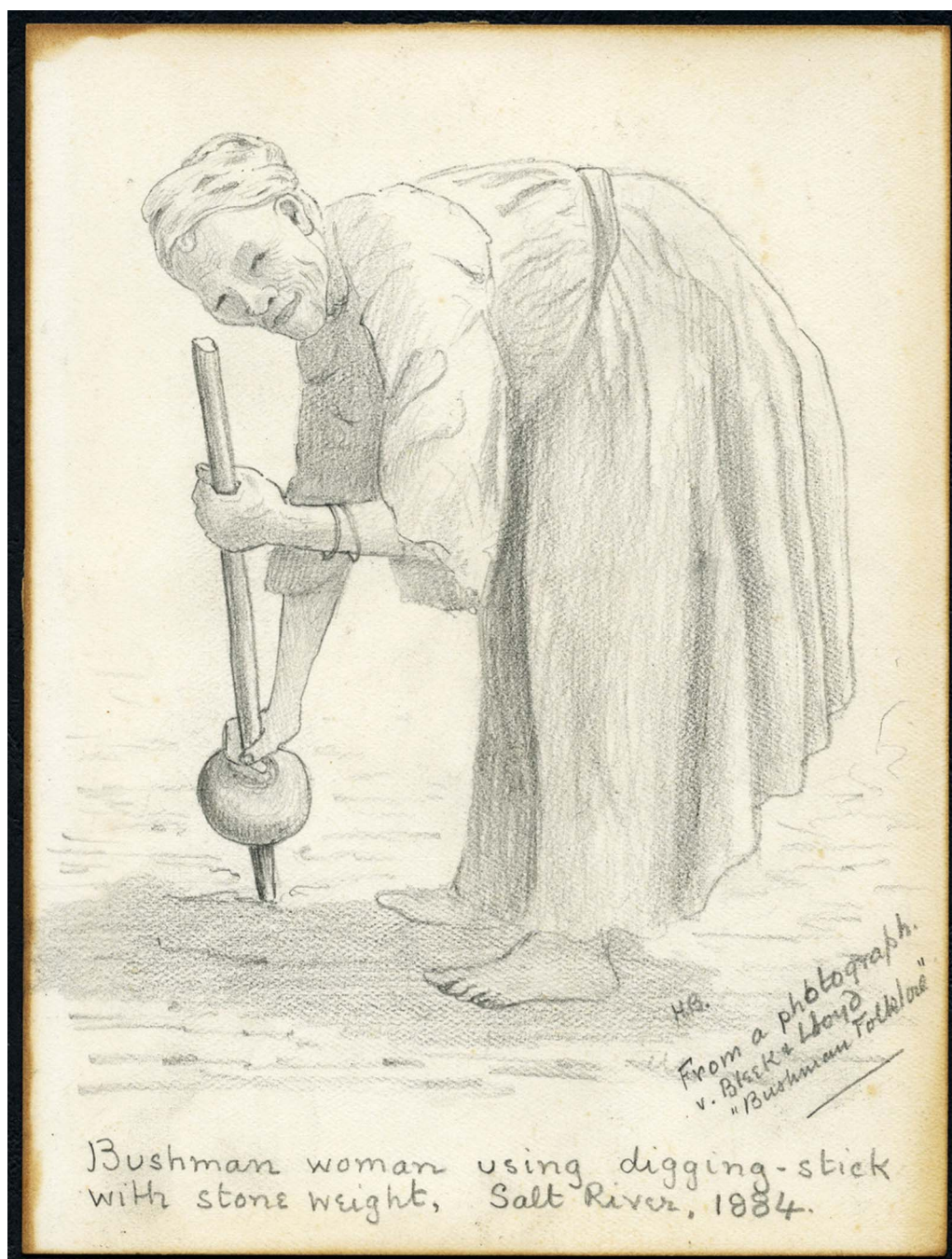


Figure 2. /Ogen-an, sketched by Henry Balfour (Pitt Rivers Museum 1998.357.2).

photograph collections, and who made and used the objects on display. Yet, the PRM database holds only a partial record of the lives of these 'makers' of the museum. There are more than 324 000 objects in the museum collection but only 4.6 per cent of these objects have



Figure 3. The digging stick from the Dunn Collection (Pitt Rivers Museum 2004.142.1091.1-2).

any associated information about the people who made them. Until now, there has been no systematic research on this maker dataset.

Surfacing the identities of makers requires markedly different research methods from those traditionally used to explore museum collections. The names of field collectors, curators and museum donors abound in the PRM database—99 per cent of object records have a named donor and 84.3 per cent have a named field collector—and these digital records are supplemented by extensive archival and published sources (e.g. Gosden *et al.* 2007). In stark contrast, biographical details about makers are rarely so well documented. The majority of the PRM’s documentation was formed during historic periods where “attitudes towards ownership, recognition and consent” were radically different from the present (Kahn 2021: 64). From field collectors choosing not to record—or not caring to establish—the names of makers, cataloguers omitting details perceived as irrelevant and curators displaying objects as indicative of ‘cultural types’ rather than the product of individual craftsmanship; these historic and often deeply racist attitudes are embedded in fundamentally uneven levels of museum documentation.

The archaeology of museum collections

Submerged maker identities can be recovered. Our project begins by reviewing the existing information about makers held in the PRM database; identifying geographic regions or time periods in which information about makers is either unusually sparse or plentiful. These data are then used to develop case studies where focused archival and object-centred research—undertaken in close collaboration with traditional knowledge holders and practising makers—is used to unearth new stories about makers.

For example, the PRM collection includes 40 098 objects from Oceania but only 1.8 per cent of these objects have a named maker. A recent project at Royal Museums Greenwich collaborated with knowledge holders from the Te-Moananui-a-Kiwa (peoples of the Pacific Ocean) to examine toki (adzes) in their collections. Robbie Teremoana Atatoa was able to identify carved motifs unique to the Island of Mangaia and the Maurua star compass maker’s mark of a ta’unga (expert) carver named Tangitoru—concretely identifying the maker of one

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Figure 15.2: A photograph of /Ogen-an (Mikki Streep) taken in 1884. She was the mother of two of the /Xam prisoners (Willem and Klaas Streep) whom Bleek and Lloyd had met at the Breakwater Prison in November 1870.

draw and sketch, and it is these drawings for which they are best known today.²

It is clear, though, that the /Xam records remained Lloyd's foremost occupation. On 2 August 1880 an insert in one of the notebooks indicates that she read an excerpt to Sir Bartle Frere, his adjutant Major Parr, and his overseas guests Baron von Seckendorf and Prince Heinrich of Germany.³ She chose one of /Han-kass'o's accounts of springbok-hunting.⁴ They would also no doubt have been shown her accumulating collection of Stow's rock art copies. In October and November 1880 she translated some of the stories told by /Han-kass'o: the final part of one of his many stories of the Mantis, the latter section of a tale entitled 'The Son of the Mantis, the Baboons and the Mantis', and two legends ('The Man who ordered his Wife to cut off his Ears' and 'How the Mason Wasp punished his Wife for making Personal Remarks').⁵

In 1884 Lloyd got one last opportunity to interview /Xam informants. A group of /Xam had been brought down from Bushmanland by the Cape government and were based in the suburb of Salt River just a kilometre or two along the Main Road from Mowbray. A journalist known to the Bleek-Lloyd family later reported:

One day they [the Bushmen at Salt River] received an invitation to dine at this house [Charlton House]. The few who received the invitation seemed little

disposed to come. However at the time appointed not only they arrived, but their brothers and sisters and cousins and aunts, and wives and husbands and parents, not to mention friends. They had a fine feast.⁶

Some time after this feast, Lloyd interviewed members of the group and invited them to comment upon Stow's rock art copies. The relevant notebook, as I indicated in an earlier chapter, has gone missing. An old woman known as /Ogen-an or Mikki Streep, the mother of two prisoners that Lloyd and Bleek had met at the Breakwater in earlier days, stayed on at Charlton House. She was then some 54 years old.⁷ Lloyd reported that she 'could not make herself happy at Mowbray. She longed to return to her own country, so that she might be buried with her forefathers.'

Before she left, however, Lloyd arranged for a photograph of her (Fig 15.2) to be taken at Oaklands on the Claremont Flats, the property of EH Dunn. The digging stick that she is holding was collected by Dunn on his travels through Bushmanland in the early 1870s (he later took it to Australia before donating it to the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford, where it is still on display today).⁸

FINDING A PUBLISHER

A few years earlier Lloyd had begun to explore the possibilities of publishing the materials that she and Wilhelm had collected. In a letter to a subscriber of the *Folklore Journal* in June 1881 she wrote, 'The story of the Rhinoceros and her Daughter ... is not yet published [as] we have as yet no type at Cape Town in which the Bushman texts can be printed,' but optimistically predicted that this 'will, I trust, in a few months time be remedied.'⁹ A few months later, as it became increasingly clear that it was going to be difficult to acquire the technology needed for the production of this unusual type in Cape Town, she began to look abroad. In September 1881 she approached the printer Stephen Austin.

In 1874 ... you were so good as to give me by letter some advice concerning a type-founder (Messrs Higgins) from whom, as time went on, we were hoping to be able to order the type needful for printing the Bushman texts collected by the late Dr Bleek and myself. The time has now come, when I must take some active steps regarding printing, and it has struck me that, as the communication between the Cape and England is now so regular and rapid, it might be possible to print in England, while at the same time living here, where the whole mass of material is, and having the proofs sent out to me, here, for correction ... The Bushman text and its translation into English [would be] on opposite pages to each other.¹⁰

2004.142.1091

Figure 4. Photocopied excerpt from the RDF naming /Ogen-an (Pitt Rivers Museum RDF 2004.142.1091).

toki (Figure 1) through material traces alone. Building on this work, we have recently begun working with Atatoa to identify the makers of similar toki in the PRM collection. Archaeologists are uniquely positioned to assist these identification efforts, using their expertise in giving voice to the past through the interpretation of material culture in situations where written records are absent or cannot be relied upon.

Archaeology also offers new theoretical approaches to collections-based research. Key here are the concepts of formation and assemblage. While archaeologists might be more accustomed to thinking about the formation of the archaeological record in the ground, taking this awareness and using it to examine the processes that deposit objects in museum collections and lay down stratigraphic layers of museum documentation can identify the points at which information about makers has been systematically overlooked, and inform the development of better documentation practices in the present. The concept of assemblage invites researchers to take a holistic approach to collections that are dispersed within the depositional contexts of the museum—seeking out previously unknown connections between museum objects, photographs, archival sources and museum documentation to uncover new information (Hitchcock 2021; Hodgett 2022).

When applied to the PRM, these approaches reveal that the names of local people are often hidden in plain sight—for example, the pencil drawing of an unnamed woman demonstrating the use of a digging stick made by PRM curator Henry Balfour and accessioned into the PRM's photograph collection (Figure 2).

Although there is nothing in the PRM database to suggest the association, the exact digging stick depicted is independently accessioned as part of the Edward John Dunn collection (Figure 3). While very little is known about Balfour's sketch, the Dunn collection has attracted the interest of multiple researchers, generating a small archive of Related Document Files (RDFs)—photocopied excerpts of published works discussing the collection. Several of these documents reproduce an instantly recognisable photograph taken by the linguist Lucy Lloyd in Cape Town in 1884 (Figure 4). Balfour's pencil drawing of the unnamed woman is clearly based on this photograph. It is in these RDF files that we find details about the woman depicted; her name is transcribed as /Xaken-an, /Ogan-an, /Ogen-an and Mikki Streep. We learn that she is a /Xam woman around 54 years old and the mother of two prisoners held at Breakwater Prison in Cape Town (RDF 2004.142).

Conclusions

It is in the margins that details of hidden lives and labour can be excavated (Callaci 2020: 127). Unearthing the hidden histories of makers requires a willingness to turn to sources and methods different from those used to write the histories of field collectors and museum curators.

By thinking about museum collections as dispersed assemblages and looking beyond the boundaries of individual objects or museum departments, it becomes possible to mobilise a whole series of partial sources—small details within images, material traces on objects and scribbled notes in margins. Taken alone, each snippet may reveal relatively little but, fragment by fragment, these details assemble a broader picture of the real makers of the museum.

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