

# Curating an ocean of objects

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## Abstract

It has long been argued that shipwrecks have the capacity to intimately connect us to the past—a specific moment in time buried under silt and sand. Similarly, objects from these directly datable contexts can tell us about wide-ranging connections in the maritime world for a given period. The majority of maritime museums rely on these attributes for exhibition narratives.

Museums are for interpreting and perhaps more importantly, reinterpreting objects. This paper, explores the extended narratives of objects from shipwrecks and other sources and suggests ways in which hidden histories can breathe new life into maritime exhibitions. Some of the objects we have chosen for our exhibitions come from shipwrecks and underwater excavations, others from terrestrial archaeological excavations, but many are not archaeological finds. Bringing together two recent trends in the historical disciplines of Object Centred history and Ocean Centred histories (the ‘New Thalassology’) raises bigger questions about what the strengths and limits of ‘maritime archaeological’ museums and exhibitions might be.

This presentation reflects on the experience of curating three exhibitions and current preparations for a new Museum for Western Australia opening in 2020.

## A new museum for Western Australia

The New Museum Project represents the greatest moment of change in the WA Museum's history, however, the Museum has been changing for some years: not just in preparation for this project, but in preparation for the future. Key to this has been an increased focus on public value, on looking outwards; on engaging people in what we do and creating content with them, rather than for them. This approach is crystallised in our mission statement which was developed in 2010:

*We will inspire people to explore and share their identity, culture, environment and sense of place, and contribute to the diversity and creativity of our world.*

This is an articulation of our brand values and an essential commitment to change across the whole organisation: being clear about what the Museum is for and what it can do.

There are five priorities in our WA Museum 2025 strategic plan – which reflect our core values.

1. **Sustainable Growth** – the New Museum development must be sustainable in terms of the need to minimise recurrent costs, optimise usage and maximise the commercial opportunities for revenue generation.

2. **Heart of the Community** – it is very important that the WA Museum is owned, valued and used by all Western Australians. As such, the concept of utilising the collective community in the creation and sharing of knowledge and ideas becomes paramount.
3. **World Leader** –We already are in some areas: notably maritime archaeology; biodiversity survey and earth and planetary sciences.
4. **Our commitment to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples** and ensuring that their perspectives and cultural values are expressed in all that we do.
5. **New Museum Project** – but in particular, how it enshrines, facilitates and furthers the work of the WA Museum and its commitment to broadening and deepening its audience development. This project must start with the needs of its users and prime stakeholders – the people of Western Australia. We often talk of a museum by, for and with the people: it is their Museum, telling their stories, about their place, and so they must help us create it.

The NMP has a strong program of public consultation, engagement and co-creation to connect, research and partner with communities and individuals. We have established four (4) community panels – Peoples’ Panel; Children and Young People; Teachers and Educators and Access and Inclusion panels which, in addition to our WA Museum Aboriginal Advisory Committee, have been working with us to generate ideas and review concepts for content and experiences in the New Museum. Our second aspiration is that the New Museum reflects the essence ‘of Western Australia’. It must convey the spirit of this extraordinary State, its scale, its age and its people. This could mean many things to many people so this illustration is just an example:

These are some of the Aboriginal ‘petroglyphs’ on the rocks of the Burrup Peninsula near Karratha in north west WA’s Pilbara region: a 50,000 year-old chronicle by Aboriginal peoples of animal imagery that clearly charts major changes in sea-level over this period: a human and environmental story told across geological time. But the Burrup is more than this: it also the site of major industrial activity: it is a gas hub, a salt extraction centre and, at Dampier, a major port for iron ore export. It is a maritime centre from the present to the past.

The final project aspiration is an Activated Museum and this means a variety of things. Ultimately, it means that all spaces of the Museum can be ‘activated’ in many ways, to facilitate creative interaction, visitor empowerment, community ownership, collaboration and co-creation. To achieve this, the public spaces will need to be highly adaptive, flexible and active. Active, however, does not mean that every square metre will be packed with ‘exhibits’. Diversity and pace change are critical and there will need to be areas for rest and reflection; for exploration and play; and for learning and engagement.

It is also a great opportunity to ‘turn the Museum inside out’ with physical, visual and virtual links between outside and in.

At the heart of the Museum is, of course, its collection. The majority of the collection (about 8 million objects) are stored in the WA Museum’s Collections and Research Centre (or CRC) in Welshpool on the south east side of Perth. The CRC is much more than a store. Museum curators based there are researching the State’s biodiversity and history; working

closely with Aboriginal people on collecting and repatriation programs; and developing and conserving collections that act as the material evidence of the past and present for the benefit of future.

A novel approach will also be used to showcase the work of our people and collections. *Revealing the Museum* is a behind-the-scenes exploration of the complex world of objects, meaning, collecting, and the role of the museum in contemporary society. It will connect visitors with Museum staff and the work that they do, foster an appreciation for the history of the Museum and the heritage of its site and encourage conversation about the nature of collecting and the role of museums in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. These are stories that are little known, as is the Museum's role within them, and the concept of *Revealing the Museum* is seen as major interpretive objective of the New Museum.

### **Thematic cross threads**

Work by the content team in consultation with a range of stakeholders has refined the thinking so that the three key themes: Being Western Australian, Discovering WA and Exploring the World, plus the *Revealing the Museum* concept are threaded through each of the five major areas of content for the New Museum which we have given the following working titles:

**Origins**

**Changes**

**Life**

**Voices**

**Connections**

Aboriginal Perspectives is a significant component of the Being Western Australian theme. This ties in with the WA Museum organisational priorities and through the content work and in consultation with Aboriginal people, it has become clear that Aboriginal voices should be heard throughout the Museum and not just in dedicated spaces.

Also determined through the content research and planning is the concept of the Indian Ocean World as a significant component of the Exploring the World theme. This recognises the influence of WA's position as the Indian Ocean's eastern sea-board, and Perth's as a major Indian Ocean city. The proposed Connections gallery is heavily influenced by maritime museum themes but is a 21<sup>st</sup> century example of a holistic approach to museology.

### **Connections gallery**

Outward looking and celebratory, Connections is the gateway to a world of experiences, histories, ideas and opportunities. It places Western Australia in the global and regional context, and will create a unique opportunity for the Western Australian Museum to position itself as a leader in telling the story of the Indian Ocean. It challenges the stereotype of isolation, and creates the opportunity to develop story and experience through relationships with international partners around the Indian Ocean rim as well as with our own communities. It will bring together some of the great highlights from the WA Museum's collection such as our shipwreck material, with new collecting opportunities pursued in creative industries,

innovation and design.

The main story areas include:

**Indian Ocean world** is the centralising experience for the Connections content area. A hub that transits visitors through story areas, highlighting the deep importance of the Indian Ocean not just to Western Australia, but to the world, from the ancient past to the present and into the future. The focus will go from broad Indian Ocean or world issues, to Western Australia and out again, but always with the Indian Ocean as its central axis.

**Global systems** will explore how Western Australia is connected through, and impacted by, major environmental and physical global systems. This will be a space with which visitors will actively engage to discover points of connectivity that have created the unique environments of Western Australia from ancient resource deposits, plants and animals to planetary weather systems.

**Arrivals and departures** looks at the global drivers for people travelling to and from Western Australia. From the arrival of the first peoples more than 50,000 years ago to current migrants and visitors, it will explore how our responses to these drivers have created Western Australian society today and will help to determine our future.

**Our place in the world** uncovers and unravels the allegiances and alliances that have helped to shape Western Australia and its people, and investigates how these have been influenced by geography and time. We will explore how our global relationships and decisions have had major impacts on how the world sees us and how we see the world.

The creative spirit of Western Australians is celebrated in **Innovation and creativity**. This will be a dynamic and participatory space where visitors are encouraged to use the collection in their exploration of Western Australian creativity and investigate and help celebrate how ingenuity and innovation are shaping the future.

### **Travellers and traders in the Indian Ocean world**

The Indian Ocean plays a significant role in Western Australia's history and connection with the world. It is vast and diverse, full of vibrant stories and hidden treasures. The people who live around and across this body of water have been connected with each other for thousands of years, in often surprising ways. Travellers and Traders in the Indian Ocean World will be one of the first major Indian Ocean exhibitions to be staged by a museum anywhere in the world. Co-curated with the British Museum, this exhibition brings together objects from the British Museum and Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, many of which have not been seen before in Australia, with objects from the Art Gallery of South Australia, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Museum Victoria, Berndt Museum at the University of Western Australia, Western Australian Museum and private collections. Visitors will navigate themselves across the Indian Ocean and encounter a diverse range of fascinating objects, carefully selected for their ability to tell multi-layered stories.

This exhibition is one of the Western Australian Museum's major contributions to the state's celebrations commemorating 400 years since Dutchman Dirk Hartog landed in Western Australia. The exhibition begins with an exploration of the Dutch stories of discovery, trade and empire in the Indian Ocean that are so familiar to many Western

Australians. Although a highlight of Australian history, the Dutch period is a relatively recent part of a much broader picture. Visitors will also discover that people have been voyaging around the Indian Ocean for at least 60,000 years, as witnessed by the arrival of the first Australians. For just as long, people have relied on the ocean as a source of food and treasured objects, as a place for making a living and recreation.

This exhibition is an attempt at 'historicizing' the ocean and it helps bring focus to large-scale historical processes of commercial, biological, and cultural exchange that other geographical constructs often obscure. Michael Pearson notes that the Indian Ocean is 'by far the oldest of the seas in history, in terms of it being used and traversed by humans' (2003:3). In terms of a new thassology there have been four events which allow of us to think of the Indian Ocean as a connected world:

1. The Indian Ocean Basin has been described as 'the world's oldest oceanic world', the 'newest Old World', the 'cradle of globalization', and the 'first global economy. These concepts are founded on the establishment of relatively routine and organized trade using the Indian Ocean as a long distance (and coastal) highway.

In terms of being the oldest oceanic economy, the example cited for is the 'Uruk world system' of the northwest Indian Ocean. Here three earliest civilizations intersected: in the Tigris-Euphrates area of Mesopotamia, the Indus River valley (Harappa) of northwest India and neighbouring Pakistan, and the Nile delta of Egypt (Vink 2006:54).

2. This ocean's connectivity is also a result of the emergence of an India-centred trading network and subsequent 'Southernization' effectively integrating the societies and cultures of what the Arabs called al-bahr al-Hindi ('Indian Ocean'), the Persians darya'i akhzar ('Green Sea'), and the Chinese the Nan-yang ('Southern Ocean'). Southernization began with technological and commercial innovations in textile manufacturing, metallurgy, astronomy, medicine, mathematics, and navigation, all pioneered in the Indian subcontinent and Southeast Asia (Shaffer 1994:1; Vink 2006:55).
3. The spread of Islam and Muslim political, commercial, and religious networks from the early seventh century CE. By the late thirteenth and early fourteenth century, Muslim maritime networks, created a world-system connecting Europe with Asia and Africa.
4. The arrival of the Portuguese followed by other Europeans from the late fifteenth century onwards was the most recent change in the Indian Ocean world, although Europeans were forced to accommodate themselves to pre-existing structures. By the nineteenth century, industrial capitalism and colonialism makes a critical change to an Indian Ocean system which persists today: the decisions and actions of nations external to the Indian Ocean region now account for what occurs within it.

This exhibition examines these changes based on the notions of travel and trade over 5000 years. We examine the trade of specific commodities (e.g. Chinese porcelain; spices from Indonesia; Indian cotton textiles; slaves from East Africa) as the starting-point for the analysis of one or more societies, economic systems, groups involved in production,

transportation, marketing, and consumption. It also includes the spread of ideas and cultural practices (eg and 'Islamic', 'Hindu or 'Buddhist' Indian Ocean) and the dissemination of plants and animals across the region via the ocean. Perhaps most importantly, It will allow individual visitors to make their own personal connections through an intimate engagement with a selection of fascinating objects

### **Lustre: Pearling and Australia**

People have always been fascinated with mother of pearl shell. Reflecting light, the radiant brilliance and shimmering lustre inspires and appeals to our sense of beauty. No more so than in the north of Australia where extensive pearlshell beds were discovered by the first peoples of the land and later by colonists seeking riches for their empires. Pearlshell, pearls and pearling, often the centerpoint of myths and legends, tales of intrigue romance and piracy or of racial encounter and cultural mystique, are integral to the rich history of northern Australia. It is here that these naturally beautiful objects, appreciated by cultures across the world, are created and thrive in the pristine waters of the northern coastline, stretching from Shark Bay across the north of the continent to the Torres Strait.

By weaving together two intersecting strands of the pearling story—the indigenous and non-indigenous—Lustre investigates how pearlshell and their offspring have been (and continue to be) collected, appreciated and traded as valuable resources for over 20,000 years, where in the Kimberley ranges, several hundred kilometres inland from the-then-distant sea, fragments of shell were first found. It is a co-curated exhibition, created in association with Yawuru people from Broome. The exhibition also provided opportunities for young Aboriginal people to participate in an 'emerging curators' program. This program taught Aboriginal custodians of pearling stories curation, museological and exhibition design skills.

Lustre commences with a welcome from Aubrey Tigan, a Mayala man and pearlshell carver who presents the story of Aalinggoon, creator of pearlshell. Aubrey introduces riji, the uniquely engraved pearl shell of the south Kimberley coastal groups, appreciated as powerful cultural items and objects of great art, traded through exchange networks that stretch across Aboriginal Australia. Set within the context of British colonial expansion, Lustre presents the history of pearling that would eventually lead to the global distribution of shell through trading houses and museums around the world. Commencing in Shark Bay, the story of pearling focuses on Broome, a small, dusty coastal town that would become known as the "pearling capital of the world", but extends across the north, through Darwin, to the Torres Strait, as the pearlshellers sought to expand their business.

Exploring the technologies from free-diving, hard-hat diving and skin-diving for pearlshell, through to the modern farming of cultured pearls, Lustre presents the history of an industry that shaped the communities of northern Australia. This history has in the past been dominated by the ventures of the pearling masters, but Lustre honours the contribution and skills of Aboriginal and Asian indentured labourers, recognising the hardships that many who worked in the industry faced. Stories of the people of the pearling industry are central to the presentation of the exhibition—the stories of pearling masters, Aboriginal and Asian workers and their families who populated the industry.

Finally the exhibition examines the appeal of pearlshell and pearls across times and

cultures. The exploitation and artistic use of the pearl shell *Pinctada maxima*, one of the largest and most lustrous nacre-producing bivalves shells found in vast quantities along our northern shores, is an ancient story dating back over twenty thousand years that is full of wonder, intrigue, romance and greed and that has yet to be fully appreciated in Australian history.

A major maritime archaeological addition to this exhibition was the creation of a touchscreen pearling map based on archaeological, historical and anthropological datasets. The pearling map of the Kimberley is extensive, encompassing trading sites, art sites, lay-up camps, archaeological remains, shipwrecks, pearl shell middens, indigenous water sources used by the pearlers, pearl shell beds, cultured pearl farms, and the leases in the pristine waters of the Kimberley. This map continues in a similar vane across the north, creating a trail of sites from Shark Bay to the Thursday Island. Together these tangible sites, with many associated intangible, cultural values, tell a compelling, and unique Australian heritage story worthy of world recognition.

### **Immerse: Exploring the deep**

People have been pioneering ways in which to explore and ultimately utilise the resources found on and below the sea-bed. Helmet and corselet or 'hard-hat' diving was introduced to the Shark Bay pearling industry in Western Australia in the 1860s and since then Western Australians have been at the forefront of subsea technological innovation. There are many uses of technology underwater, many of which relate to the oil and gas sector. It is also emphasised that the technologies and skill sets developed here can be utilised in other industries as well as for specific scientific endeavours; from the searching for historically significant shipwrecks such as HMAS Sydney, investigating the flora and fauna of the world's oceans, to finding a renewable source of energy offshore. This 2011 exhibition showcased the clever ways in which humans work underwater and the technology they have designed which allows them to do so. It was the first Australian exhibition to publicly showcase the subsea industry and provided a unique opportunity to tell for the first time, the story of Western Australian marine utilisation. The exhibition aims were to inspire young people to continue technical and marine-related subjects in education, including consideration of a career in subsea technology; to raise community awareness by platforming the technology used within the industry with a focus on Western Australian innovations and contexts; and provide a historical overview. There is a very low level of community awareness about the world-class subsea technologies that are developed for, or deployed off our coastline, or the workings of the offshore energy and petroleum industry.

More than two thirds of the earth's surface is covered by ocean. If you could drain all the water away what would you see? A whole new uncharted terrain— an undiscovered planet. Many people use the analogy of the exploration of the sea being as remote and difficult as the exploration of space. And while it is a given that we still have so much to learn about our oceans, we are also at a point where technology has revealed new insights and continues to do so at an unprecedented rate. With these discoveries also comes great responsibility. Much of our exploration of the sea is in the quest for further non-renewable resources, and, for the vast majority of people what occurs below the blanket of the ocean is unwitnessed and little

understood. This exhibition had two purposes:

The first, to publically showcase a selection of technologies deployed in scientific and industrial pursuits which also highlights the range of activities occurring in the ocean. Secondly, we attempted to provide an unbiased view of these activities and to challenge visitors to take the issues such as our insatiable desire for non-renewable resources and our impact on the carbon cycle on board. This exhibition did not seek to go into depth on these important matters but nor did it ignore them. We put the onus back on the individual visitor to leave our exhibition with hopefully more questions than when they came in and the tools to explore those questions further.

The WA Museum for the most part has engaged in shallow water archaeology with the majority of sites investigated <20m e.g. Batavia is 8m. The discovery of HMAS Sydney and sites in the deepwater graveyard off Rottnest in WA as well as the midget submarine responsible for the attack on Sydney Harbour in WW2 were explored in this exhibition and they point us in the new direction of our field. These discoveries are nearly always the result of partnerships. A government archaeologist does not have the equipment or finances to act independently in deep water contexts and this was one of our motivations to partner with the Society for Underwater Technology and ultimately to produce this exhibition. Similarly, the discovery of underwater sites is now more likely to be made by companies and consultants working in the offshore oil and gas sector. The archaeologist's challenge is to encourage open communication between these parties to ensure that these discoveries are reported. With only a fraction of known shipwreck losses actually found on our coast the collaborative possibilities are exciting.

The Immerse exhibition uses technology to segue way into broader contemporary issues with one of the biggest of recent times being oil spills, the Montara well in the Timor sea in 2009 and most recently in the Gulf of Mexico. Eleven people were killed when the Deepwater Horizon rig exploded on 20 April 2010 in the Gulf of Mexico, leading to more than 750 million litres of oil spewing from an undersea well. BP sued the owner of the Deepwater Horizon rig and the maker of the device that failed to stop the oil spill, alleging that negligence by both companies helped to cause the disaster. Two Remotely Operated Vehicles or ROV's from the U.S. Coast Guard that located two places where oil was leaking from the Deepwater Horizon well pipe and it was ROV's and their operators who worked around the clock for nearly three months to support the operations to cap and contain the devastating spill. By focusing on the technology we were able to tell the story of resource extraction and the dangers and implications of working in a sub-sea environment. We had a similar approach in addressing climate change. Greenhouse gas emissions are one of the key issues confronting the LNG industry in Australia as LNG plants are major producers of greenhouse emissions, principally in the form of CO<sub>2</sub>. The sources of CO<sub>2</sub> are the incoming native gas stream, the burning of gas in the turbine drivers, and from flaring. However, a positive outcome is that the development of LNG will provide a more greenhouse-efficient fuel than oil and coal. It has the potential to displace higher emitting fossil fuels and support moves to renewable energy systems. Nevertheless, LNG companies still need to deal specifically with ongoing measures to reduce greenhouse emissions. This should include mechanisms for continual review of new technologies and opportunities to reduce emissions,



as well as benchmarking against other facilities with a view to achieving international best practice in terms of greenhouse gas emissions. In terms of economic sustainability, Australia's increasing dependence on imported oil and the risks to Australia of global geopolitical and financial impacts on this dependence have been substantially offset by the major gas and condensate projects. These projects provide substantial export revenues to Australia and therefore positively contribute to our overall trade position.

One of the most exciting objects of the exhibition was the Carnegie wave generator CETO is a unique fully submerged wave power system capable of producing zero emission renewable power (similar to hydroelectricity) and directly desalinated freshwater from the ocean's waves. Wave energy is a renewable energy resource created by large storms hundreds of kilometres offshore that generate and transmit huge amounts of energy which travels great distances (via swell) and mixes with local influences (seas) to arrive at our shores.

This exhibition was ground breaking for a maritime museum but we are an organisation best placed to tell it. The relationship between finding shipwrecks and finding sub-sea resources is an important one to be noted and provides another way in which to tell shipwreck and maritime archaeological stories.

## REFERENCES

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## SPEAKER PROFILE:

Corioli Souter is Curator at the Department of Maritime Archaeology at the Western Australian Museum and adjunct lecturer in the Department of Archaeology at UWA. During her employment, she has taken part in over 40 archaeological research projects in Australia and abroad. Trained as an historical archaeologist and gaining her excavation experience in the desert in the Northern Territory, she later pursued postgraduate qualifications in maritime archaeology (Post Grad Dip 1996; MA Research 2007). Her current research interests are the archaeology of the Indian Ocean and the history of collecting in Western Australia. She also has established collaborations with terrestrial archaeologists for the investigation of shipwreck survivor camps and other maritime terrestrial sites such as those found in the Wallabi Group in the Abrolhos, the Dampier Archipelago, as well as the South west and Kimberley coasts. Over the last few years, Corioli has developed and co-curated several exhibition projects including 'Immerse: Exploring the Deep' (2011), 'Lustre: Pearlising and Australia' (2015) and 'Travellers and Traders in the Indian Ocean World' (2016), a collaboration with the British Museum.