

EXHIBITION REVIEWS

[Re:]Entanglements: Colonial Collections in Decolonial Times

Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, University of Cambridge
(22 June 2021 to 20 April 2022)

The *[Re:]Entanglements* exhibition asks questions about the purpose of historical colonial anthropological collections today. How does colonial history affect the status of these collections? To address this, the curators of the exhibition use the colonial collections and archives of the first government anthropologist Northcote Whitridge Thomas (1868–1936). Thomas conducted four surveys between 1905 and 1915 in Southern Nigeria and Sierra Leone. He traveled widely, collecting materials, photos, and recordings on wax cylinders to help the colonial authority discover how best to govern through indirect rule. The start of the exhibition informs us that the



Figure 1. An early nineteenth-century anthropologist's field kit. Photo courtesy of the author and reprinted with permission from the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, University of Cambridge.

project was ultimately a failed one: the government saw little value in the information gathered and dispersed the collections to various institutions around the British Isles.

Playful string games engage the visitor on the first panel of this intriguing exhibition. The text tells us that anthropologists became fascinated by the wide variety of string games around the world. String-inspired designs adorn the walls, capturing the objects on display. The design connects seemingly disparate artifacts and creates a visual cohesiveness that might, at first glance, seem to be lacking. The first case shows an anthropologist's toolbox from the early twentieth century and some of the collected material. Various forms of cameras stand void of action, wax cylinders next to a silent phonograph, sitting on wooden campaign furniture, published volumes are open but the pages static. A certain listlessness emanates from the case. Outdated technology lies unwanted, as an image of Thomas stares out of the case, alone, although in fact he was accompanied by several assistants.

A display of photographs of people, taken by Thomas, seemingly unnamed but with a number, look out as a video plays. The screen shows how different people interact with the photos. Members of the African diaspora react to the images, offering views from colonial violence and defiance to happiness, and the eyes of Thomas himself. Nameless individuals become types, numbers, information, and data. Yet Thomas recorded many names, and these are on a slightly hidden panel just to the left of the photographic display. However, there is no mention of how the photographs were taken. Was it under duress? Were the people free to choose whether to engage?

Glassless mirrors hang above a large shattered photographic plate adorned with an image of Thomas, flexing a contemporary artist's approach to the fragility and lifelessness of collections. Collected, commissioned, and paid for, these mirrors may never have seen action and are types just like the people in the panel before, whom they will never reflect. Contemporary interventions continue throughout the exhibition: painted panels hang, reflecting the photographic display, carrying numbers; clay faces mirror pot shards, stacked onto each other, pronounced



Figure 2. People as types. The video shows reactions to Northcote Whitridge Thomas's collected images. Photo courtesy of the author and reprinted with permission from the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, University of Cambridge.



Figure 3. Clay hands and faces, with pronounced *ichi*, stare out of a case. Photo courtesy of the author and reprinted with permission from the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, University of Cambridge.

ichi marks (scarification) on their cheeks and foreheads; remade and recovered historical clay and contemporary brass containers sit atop one another. These contemporary pieces change the atmosphere of the space, disrupting the timelessness of many Africa-based exhibitions.

The real showpiece of this exhibition lies behind the many QR codes dotted around the room. Paul Basu, the lead curator, suggests that rather than the Cambridge exhibition being the product of finished research, it is part of an ongoing conversation. A point in time: a question, not an answer. To really appreciate the project, you must travel to the website. The site has all the videos, further contemporary reactions to the Thomas collection and links to an informative and enjoyable podcast (hosted by Chris Wingfield and Benjamina Efua Dadzie). Exhibitions have been held in Nigeria, photographs shown to descendants, and recordings of long-forgotten voices sing aloud.

This exhibition raises several questions that it fails to answer, purposefully leaving dangling threads of inquiry for the visitor to follow. It is engaging. At first glance, I found it reminiscent of displays found within many ethnographic museums. Although, in this space, colonial power is not hidden behind the lens but is laid bare. Indeed, Thomas appears at almost every step, the visible hand of categorization. One does leave this space with the feeling that people were collected. Without the information contained within the website, the exhibition could feel timeless, just another space in which to look at the “Other.” Yet, thanks to Paul Basu and others, the project does offer a sense of hopefulness and ideas on how we can approach problematic collections in a new, enlivening way. It questions how we engage with these collections, and those who collected, to offer alternative narratives and future pathways.

Simon Hilton-Smith
University of East Anglia

Greenwood Rising Center

Tulsa, Oklahoma

On a late spring day in 1921, the booming oil-fueled city of Tulsa, Oklahoma, exploded in what became the worst race massacre in US history. For 18 hours, a white mob rampaged through the prosperous neighborhood of Greenwood, home to some ten thousand African American residents. When it was over, hundreds were dead, thousands were homeless, and the neighborhood, which had been called Black Wall Street for its bounty of successful entrepreneurs, was almost completely destroyed, ransacked, and burned to the ground. Then the incident was forgotten in official accounts.

One hundred years later, in autumn 2021, a new history center opened to finally tell the story of what happened that day, and to honor the resilience of those who came after. The new Greenwood Rising Center, located on the central intersection of Tulsa's Greenwood neighborhood (see Figure 1), is a small but mighty museum using techniques both traditional and cutting-edge to tie the Tulsa massacre to America's ongoing heritage of systemic anti-Black violence, historic amnesia, and the struggle to act for racial justice.



Figure 1. The Greenwood Rising Center, in the heart of the Greenwood District of Tulsa, Oklahoma. Photo courtesy of the author.

The Center's majority-Black leadership and staff have created a community-oriented site unafraid to speak difficult truths. At the same time, their presentation demonstrates clear awareness of how these truths may be difficult for their audiences, both Black and white, and how they will be received in a conservative part of the American heartland and a city that until recently had largely suppressed the memory of the massacre. Communities throughout the US today are consumed by the notion that airing difficult heritage will itself cause corrosive division and must therefore be repressed. The Greenwood Center is a strong argument against this false notion. It is openly restorative, aiming to build bridges toward a truer, more expansive history as a means to heal divisions.

Examples of this ethos of healing are evident throughout. An initial sign tells visitors upfront that Greenwood is not "shying away from our darkest moments," but that they "understand the discomfort that may come from confronting this difficult history" and "value the emotional wellbeing of all visitors." A later architectural design allows visitors to bypass the two galleries depicting images of racial violence and massacre. Since this is the central point of the museum, few who visit would be likely to choose the bypass. However, the Center's recognition that depictions of racial violence, as it notes, "may be difficult for or triggering to visitors" not only demonstrates an ethic of care (both to its Black visitors who may have experienced similar racial targeting and to those white visitors who may resist this explicit depiction), it also implicitly contrasts that care with what white Tulsa offered to Greenwood a century earlier.

Visits begin with a short, emotionally moving overview video using present-day Greenwood residents to turn poet Maya Angelou's famous "Still I Rise" into *Still We Rise*, the video's title and likely inspiration for the Center's name. The presentation makes clear the deeper celebration of resilience that is at work in this place: It is a center dedicated to a historic massacre, in a neighborhood later redamaged by urban renewal, that sees itself as a hopeful symbol for the future reemergence of Greenwood. It is both a site of education and remembrance and a potential economic boon for the area, a place "fostering sustainable entrepreneurship and heritage tourism." This combination of idealism and pragmatism is reflected in the obvious wealth the Center was able to leverage, both in its design and technological resources and in the museological talent it employed to tell its story. This may be a community-sponsored effort, but it is one strongly supported by a plethora of outside foundations.

The first galleries place 1920s Greenwood within its historic and social milieu. The gallery floor is warm wood planking; an entire back wall visually presents slides showing the development of Greenwood from prairie to town to bustling neighborhood, while encircling signage describes the growth of all-Black towns, the impact of the Oklahoma oil boom, and the entrepreneurial spirit of the town's founders. In another gallery, a clever setup enacts a 1920s Black barbershop, with tiled flooring, period barber chairs and tools, a long mirror, and three holographic barbers. Their bantering conversation playfully but skillfully presents "eavesdropping" visitors with the three major debates circulating in Black America at the time over how best to develop their communities. After this historic scene-setting, the mood quickly turns somber in the "Arc of Oppression" galleries (see Figure 2). In a spare black box room with stark white lettering, damning photos, and a chilling Ku Klux Klan uniform, the first gallery documents political disenfranchisement, economic discrimination, social segregation, and terror—the "Systems of Anti-Blackness in America" that, it makes clear, are the real causes of the domestic terrorism of multiple race riots in 1919 and then, two years later, the Tulsa massacre.

Steeped in the larger context informing the massacre, visitors enter an immersive experience of the burning, looting, and killing of 30 May 1921 itself, projected as imagistic videos onto columns resembling the burned-out brick walls of Greenwood's former buildings, accompanied by voice-overs of survivors' testimonies (see Figure 3).



Figure 2. The entrance to the “Arc of Oppression” section of the museum features lyrics to the anti-lynching song “Strange Fruit,” made famous by Billie Holiday. Photo courtesy of the author.

The next gallery, again a black box, features large photographs of the devastation, a catalog of the destruction, and the white response—to “deny, deny, deny” any responsibility and then over time to obscure the event entirely. Here also are depicted the first acts of community resilience—the people who helped others in the immediate aftermath and the entrepreneurs who began rebuilding Greenwood.

The “rising” part of this Greenwood Rising Center, then, happens in the final gallery, which focuses on the rebuilding of the Greenwood district, “rising from the ashes of destruction.” Unlike the rest of the Center, this room is painted white, and its central floor is crowded with shop signs from bygone days. A loop of music plays everything from the jazz standard “There Is a Green Field Far Away” to Public Enemy’s “Fight the Power,” while visitors are given a rather nostalgic glimpse of community life from the 1930s to 1970s. Some of the signage alludes to external oppressions such as the 1920s rise of the Klan, segregation, and civil rights resistance in the 1950s to 1960s, or the destructive 1960s to 1970s urban renewal that cut an elevated freeway through the middle of the Greenwood neighborhood. The focus, though, is on celebrating the people and businesses who have embodied Greenwood’s “enduring spirit”—even as the end of official segregation paradoxically eroded its customer base while ongoing discrimination meant they lacked access to loans. The resilient neighborhood depicted in this gallery went into a long period of decline that the Center hopes to again turn around with increased attention and tourist dollars.¹



Figure 3. Artistic video of the massacre accompanies audio from survivors. Photo courtesy of the author.

The Center provides a space for dialogue and reflection that seeks to place the Greenwood experience within not just past but contemporary anti-Black discrimination as well. This seemed something of a work in progress during a visit in late 2021. A semicircle of tiered seating and four densely text-heavy panels along a wall aim to tie the Greenwood experience to ongoing injustices such as mass incarceration, gentrification, redlining (discriminatory financial lending practices), health, and education disparities. However, the arrangement does not really encourage visitor engagement with either the material or each other. It is likely that this space works best for guided group tours rather than independent visits, but it is easily overlooked if an individual is not intentionally trying to link the past to the present. In a history center that elsewhere does a superlative job of placing Greenwood's story into the larger national scene, this link to the present day and aim for visitor engagement will, I imagine, receive further attention over time.

A final stop, though, does work rather nicely as an individual reflection space. It updates a typical comment book by asking visitors to submit via QR code their reflection on how they will “take action toward racial reconciliation.” Answers are displayed on a light wall in an alcove that evokes a kind of chapel of good intentions (see Figure 4).

In short, what the Greenwood Rising Center does best is bring to light a horrific moment in US history and place it firmly within the systemic anti-Black violence that characterized its era. Its ethic of care toward its visitors provides a “safe place” that allows this difficult history to be

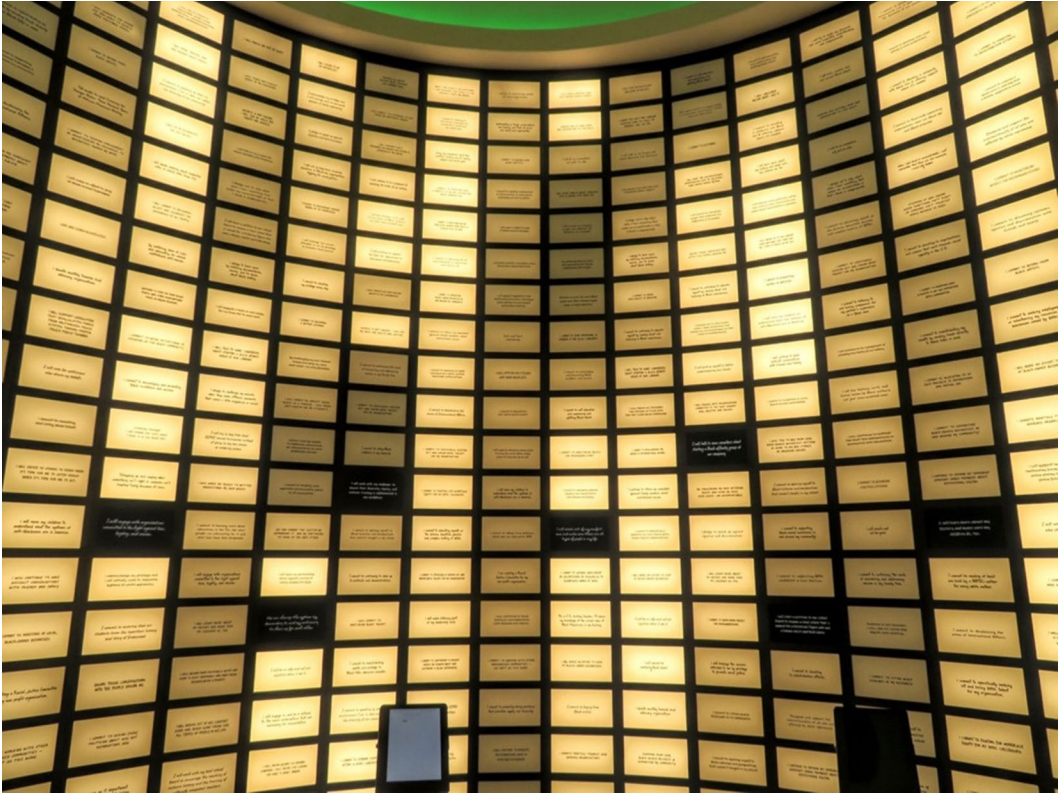


Figure 4. Visitor answers to the question “How will you take action toward racial reconciliation?” Photo courtesy of the author.

absorbed. The second half of this argument—that systems of anti-Blackness continue in specific ways today and need to be addressed by the nation as a whole—is currently less developed. Yet, the Center has both the space and the insight to continue to hone its message. Its online presence is also extensive and provides much additional information.

M. Elizabeth Weiser
The Ohio State University

■ **NOTE**

1. The website highlights the news that the Center finished seventh in a major newspaper’s nationwide poll of best new attractions of 2021, and it had received more than 20,000 visitors in its first four months of operation.



First Americans: Tribute to Indigenous Strength and Creativity

Volkenkunde, Leiden, the Netherlands (May 2020 to August 2023)

More than four hundred years have passed since European colonists set sail on the Mayflower and landed on the shores of what would become known as North America. Their arrival would quite literally change the face of the globe and send shockwaves through nations that had lived on the continent since time immemorial. While most of the history we learn about first contact comes from a European perspective, it is not the only history to exist, nor is it an accurate one. For over four hundred years Indigenous people across North, Middle, and South America have faced the colonial imposition of newcomers with new ideas and lofty goals of civilizing the land and the people that lived in the “New World.” For over four hundred years, Indigenous people have resisted, loved, and fought to exist on the territory of their ancestors. Despite the efforts of Indigenous people, it is not their victories that are celebrated and commemorated around the world but rather the conquest of newcomers that we remember. In 2020, Leiden celebrated “Leiden400,” which marked the sailing of Dutch colonists from the Old World to the “New.”¹ The Volkenkunde, the ethnographic museum in Leiden, took part in this celebration. However, rather than celebrating the colonists who established Plymouth Colony in Patuxet, which is traditional Wampanoag territory, Henrietta Lidchi, the Head of Research and Collections, pushed to represent Indigenous people and ancestors who have resisted colonial infringement since even before 1620.

Lidchi reached out to Joe Horse Capture, an enrolled member of the A'aniih tribe in Montana, to be her cocurator on the exhibition *First Americans: Tribute to Indigenous Strength and Creativity*, which opened in May 2020. The main goal of the exhibition was to highlight Indigenous pasts, presents, and futures through the voices and works of contemporary artists from across the Americas. This goal began on the right foot with the inclusion of an Indigenous curator from the outset and continued to make great strides as the exhibition features no fewer than 28 Indigenous artists. The exhibition was a celebration of Indigenous resilience and showed examples of how Indigenous people are reflecting their world views and claiming space for the future.²

The exhibition space itself was reflective of a bright future; it was imbued with bright oranges and reds that lift the mood of an exhibition space otherwise lacking light. The exhibition spanned two galleries: the first section next to the permanent display of Inuit and North American Indigenous nations and the second section next to the Middle and South American nations. Lidchi and Horse Capture brought together the two galleries by using a repeating pattern inspired by wampum in their text panels in the exhibition space.³ Beyond being used to bring the exhibition spaces together with a recognizable pattern, wampum belts and their designs have a greater meaning to eastern Indigenous nations who use wampum to record treaties, as gifts, as tokens of mourning and, most importantly in this exhibition, to commemorate a meaningful event. The wampum belt symbolism used by Lidchi and Horse Capture commemorates the importance of the four hundred years Indigenous people have fought for their past, present, and future in an exhibition teaming with Indigenous voices and agency.

Some standout pieces include block prints by Jacob Meders (Mechoopda/Maidu) which explore the medium of printmaking and the ways Indigenous people can reclaim a medium previously used to create a false narrative about violent or nonhuman Indigenous people, adding a new dimension to a story hundreds of years old.⁴ Short films by Steven Paul Judd (Kiowa-Choctaw), which play on a loop in the gallery space, are spoken entirely in Choctaw, so visitors are constantly reminded of the Indigenous voices that surround them. Prints by Cara Romero



Figure 1. View of the exhibition *First Americans: Tribute to Indigenous Strength and Creativity*, at the Volkenkunde, Leiden. On the left are the artworks *Trading Views #1–5* (2020) by Jacob Meders (Mechoopda/Maidu), paper and ink. These pieces by Meders were inspired by an etching created by Theodor de Bry. The five prints are a play on the historic prints that were created from European perspectives in order to justify colonization and violence against Indigenous people. Meders changed the narrative to represent Maidu perspectives on colonization and the continuous presence of Indigenous people and culture. Photo courtesy of the author.

(Chemehuevi) play on the concept of “American Girls,” a reference to both the popular American toy and the concept of the “all American girl,” intended to make visitors rethink stereotypes they have absorbed. Finally, texts written in Indigenous languages ranging from newspapers to spelling books illustrate some of the 150 Indigenous languages that are still spoken today in North America, a large victory to be sure, as speaking Indigenous languages was illegal for generations in many parts of the Americas. Each object, sound, and image in the exhibition displays the continued presence and creativity of Indigenous people who are practicing culture in innovative ways while honoring the past, to ensure future generations can continue to thrive.

The goal for the exhibition *Henrietta Lidchi and Joe Horse Capture* set out to achieve has succeeded in a bright and beautiful way. *First Americans* exudes Indigenous excellence and emphasizes the continuous presence Indigenous people have had since time immemorial and will continue to have long into the future.

Sarah Russ
Haarlem, the Netherlands



Figure 2. View of the exhibition *First Americans: Tribute to Indigenous Strength and Creativity*, at the Volkenkunde, Leiden. In the background are the artworks *First American Girls: Wakeah, Naomi, Julia*, 2018, by Cara Romero (Chemehuevi), print on photo paper. The *First American Girls* portraits showcase three Indigenous women standing proud, surrounded by items of cultural significance that have been made by community or inherited from ancestors. These photos exude Indigenous resilience, knowledge, and importance Indigenous that women have within community. Photo courtesy of the author.

NOTES

1. Only 4 of the 76 events that were planned for Leiden400 had Indigenous history as title topics. The other 72 events, including operas, walking tours, and book releases, focused on the pilgrim or European perspective. More event information can be found at the Leiden400 event page at <https://leiden400.nl/en/program>.
2. A taste of the exhibition and all it exudes can be found online on the exhibition website at <https://www.volkenkunde.nl/en/whats-on-0/exhibitions/first-americans>.
3. Wampum or wampum belts are made of quahog shells that are processed into small beads. These small beads are then beaded into specific patterns to represent significant moments in personal or societal history.
4. Block prints were used historically as propaganda to tell a story to European colonists about Indigenous people being violent or part of nature and not human. Meders researched specifically the etchings of Theodor de Bry, whose etching played a big part in constructing the false narrative of violence we are comfortable with today. De Bry's etchings can be found at Leiden University.

Kirchner and Nolde: Up for Discussion

Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen (April–August 2021)

As Denmark rolled back its coronavirus restrictions in spring 2021, Copenhagen's Statens Museum for Kunst (SMK) launched its new season with a bang. Its exhibition *Kirchner og Nolde: Til Diskussion* (*Kirchner and Nolde: Up for Discussion*) was a direct, bold, and unflinching engagement of postcolonial theory with art history. Deeply researched and packed with discussion (as promised in its title), the exhibition never lost sight of its aim to explore how the work of German Expressionist artists Ernst Ludwig Kirchner (1880–1938) and Emil Nolde (1867–1956) contributed to “the colonial mindset of race thinking and oppression” in the twentieth century.

I often hear museum curators bemoan the challenging task of tackling a subject as complex as race and racism in a short gallery label. The interpretation of *Kirchner and Nolde* was far beyond such qualms. The exhibition opened with a powerful curatorial statement, declaring the project to be an exploration of “how colonial past and power are interconnected.” Such work necessarily requires critical attention to “racism, oppression and exploitation.” “Remaining neutral,” they concluded, “is not an option.” The curators presented the viewer with their thinking—not perfect but a starting point, an argument. The audience was thus immediately let in on the “matters of concern” (Latour 2004) driving not just the exhibition's content but also its delivery: a simple and effective intervention.



Figure 1. A view of the exhibition *Kirchner and Nolde: Up for Discussion* at the Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen. Photo courtesy of and reprinted with permission from the SMK.

Further into the gallery, an introductory panel argued that art can be viewed as a “contact zone” (Pratt 1992), a way of bringing the work of artists into discussion with popular culture, anthropology, race science, and colonial power. This concept also inspired the physical layout of the exhibition, themes around six such “contact zones”: the museum, anthropology, popular culture, the studio, the German island of Fehmarn, and Papua New Guinea. The first displays on “the museum” spoke most directly to the exhibition’s overall theme—demonstrating how race and racism saturated the work and life world of the two artists. Uniting ethnographic objects with the artworks they inspired persuasively demonstrated how museums and artists worked together to create racist conceptions of colonized peoples. Almost immediately, the visitor encountered two examples of the highly contested Benin Bronzes lent by the Museum of Mankind in Dresden—although, as the label notes, another bronze is still held by the National Museum of Denmark. The label squarely labeled the bronzes as “stolen.” The display was complemented by an interview with Nigerian artist Enotie Ogbebor, who passionately described to visitors how the bronzes “should be returned.” Their removal and continued retention by European colonial powers is “like taking away the very soul, the essence of our culture, of our traditions.”

Clearly curated during the COVID-19 pandemic, the curators made a feature of that most ubiquitous technology—Zoom—to bring the voices of scholars, activists, and artists from around the world into the discussion. Turning a restriction into an opportunity, the exhibition felt enlivened by these perspectives: the space itself becoming a contact zone for this international network of researchers. An interview with German curator and researcher Natasha Kelly felt especially powerful as she asserted, “there have always been Black Germans or Black people in Germany” alongside paintings and photographs of Black models and dancers in Kirchner’s studio. Again, drawing on postcolonial scholarship, there was a clear move to name and contextualize the lives and identities of these, often nameless, people—as individuals and actors operating in highly unequal hierarchies of power.

The final section of the exhibition presented a deep dive into Emil Nolde’s time working for the colonial government contracted to an anthropological/medical expedition in German-controlled Papua New Guinea. Here the power of art as a colonial force was explicit—as Nolde’s portraits and images of the people of Papua New Guinea served the purpose of helping the German government research and exploit Indigenous peoples in its plantations. The curators observed that Nolde himself was at times critical of the colonial project, observing that European intervention seemed to be “destroying the local society.” I found it hard to view such deeply imperialist nostalgia for an imagined untouched “native” society as in anyway critical or anti-colonial. Compellingly, the works demonstrated how Nolde actively removed any traces of Europeanization from the world represented by his artworks—helping promote a colonial imaginary of an “untouched” civilization living at peace with nature. The exhibition concluded with a display of Nolde’s personal collection of ethnographic materials. It felt like an odd choice, particularly as throughout the exhibition it was frequently alluded to that both Nolde and Kirchner played an active part in supporting the Nazi Party. While the exhibition never claimed to be chronological in approach, it felt like their core argument about the connection between art and society may have been better served by drawing attention to the very real consequences of racism by presenting the artists’ role in the Nazi regime.

Kirchner and Nolde was rich, persuasive, well argued, and moving. It demonstrated how exhibitions engaging with issues of race, colonialism, and power can benefit from an approach that is direct, open, and steeped in research. And judging from the number of other visitors in the gallery, such exhibitions can still be popular and enjoyable. However, as I walked out of the SMK, I asked myself why I was visiting an exhibition about German colonialism in Denmark? Why was it not an exhibition about Danish colonialism and legacies of racism? And why was Denmark’s

own Benin Bronze left out of the show? Perhaps it is much easier to take a strong “museums are not neutral” stance when it is not your own history at stake. I later learned that Emil Nolde was of Danish heritage and had been a member of the Danish Nazi Party. This connection was never made apparent in the exhibition and felt like an uncomfortable omission. Nevertheless, *Kirchner and Nolde* has started a conversation, and who knows where it will lead next.

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Australians & Hollywood

National Film and Sound Archive, Canberra

At a friend’s wedding in California a few years ago, the newlyweds were ready to cut the cake: the American was ready with a butter knife, and the Australian then pulled out a carving knife and said, “That’s not a knife. *That’s* a knife.” Movies become part of our lives and memories, not for the scenes as they are but rather for the personal shared moments they create throughout our lives.

For me, seeing the knife “that’s a knife” wielded by Paul Hogan as the titular *Crocodile Dundee* (Peter Faiman, 1986) confronting New York muggers was an unexpected thrill of the exhibition *Australians & Hollywood* at the National Film and Sound Archive (NFSA). Every visitor will bring their own connections, recollections, or dreams to this exhibition’s abundance. The vision and energy of filmmaking remains in the artifacts, documentation, and ephemera generated by a cast and crew. Taken from the obscurity of private collections and the literal dark and cold of archival storage, and united in an exhibition, the warmth of these shared creative endeavors glows anew.

As the NFSA’s first solo foray into original exhibition-making for two decades, the visual impact of *Australians & Hollywood* forcefully asserts the importance of displaying filmmaking archives. One is confronted at the outset by a wall of gifs, two Oscars, and a red carpet. There is a clear, and probably wise, decision to restrict the date range covered to post-1980s (though I hope the NFSA flashes back in future exhibitions). Replacing the standard label graphic with a gif is a nail-bitingly brave decision executed to perfection. The cavernous and incongruous heritage space is transformed into something that feels like a film set with cleverly conceived sightlines offering dramatic reveals.



Figure 1. *Australians & Hollywood* at the National Film and Sound Archive, Canberra. Photo courtesy of and reprinted with permission from the NFSA.

Hans Ulrich Obrist’s description of the task of curating is particularly pertinent here: “to make junctions, to allow different elements to touch” (Obrist and Ražā 2014: 1). In a film-making archive, the myriad intersecting real and fictional stories multiply potential junctions. The NFSA collects, along with the films themselves, the scripts, storyboards, scrapbooks, stills, props, clapperboards, and much else, along with the promotional lobby cards and posters. So diverse are the formats, this exhibition could have been a confusing mishmash. However, the carefully layered design makes a generous selection both comprehensible and beautiful, while also evoking the adoration movies excite: This is a fan’s bedroom wall.

Obrist is also of the view that “exhibitions are best generated through conversations and collaborations with artists,” whose input should steer the process from the beginning (Obrist and Razā 2014: 33). In a cinema archive, the “artists” are the cast and crew—a connection that remains strong after donation. In *Australians & Hollywood*, beautifully chosen quotes and black-and-white video interviews embrace these voices. (My favorite wall quote was Ben Mendelsohn: “If I could have told the younger me, ‘Don’t worry about it. One day, you’ll be in *Star Wars*,’ I would have saved myself a lot of drama.”) When I was cocurating the joint National Portrait Gallery and NFSA exhibition and publication (Coombes and Grist 2017) *Starstruck: Australian Movie Portraits* with Jennifer Coombes, I realized that an archival exhibition naturally fulfilled Obrist’s collaborative ideal.

The balance of stories of those working behind the scenes and the famous faces plays to the NFSA’s collecting strengths. The behind-the-scenes stills from *Romeo + Juliet* (Baz Luhrmann, 1996) offer intriguing windows into the creative process behind this influential adaptation—I only wish, as with most of the stills in the exhibition, that the photographer was identified. Production designer Melinda Doring’s concept book for *Somersault* (Cate Shortland, 2004) exemplifies the inspiring creative insight an archival collection offers. Seeing the costumes worn in movies is enchanting: objects so palpably grabbed from a moment in time, especially when accompanied by mesmerizing rehearsal footage and costumes from *Moulin Rouge!* (Baz Luhrmann, 2001).

The rationale of *Australians & Hollywood* makes an important turn. The introduction begins with Australians “on the world stage” and then changes focus to celebrating “the artists who found success on their own terms,” the “pivotal moments in Australian cinema,” and those who “made their mark at home, in Hollywood and beyond.” Rather than losing clarity however, this shift from “Hollywood” as a noun to “Hollywood” as an adjective (“to be Hollywood,” as in confident, glamorous, successful) feels appropriately permeable to the true value of Australian film and the NFSA’s bigger mission as an institution. This is encapsulated in a stunning conclusion with the Warwick Thornton video essay created by Genevieve Grieves, an NFSA and Australian Film Television and Radio School joint commission.

Australians & Hollywood demonstrates that the NFSA needs to keep up the momentum to share its collections in this way. Building expertise in exhibitions delivery takes years, and the institution must believe in the power of this mode of public access—for visitors, collection donors, creatives, Australian understanding of our cultural achievements, and the shared moments exhibitions create.

Penelope Grist
National Portrait Gallery of Australia

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Free/State: The 2022 Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art

Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide (4 March–5 June 2022)

The Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art is the country's longest standing survey of contemporary art. Presented by the Art Gallery of South Australia (AGSA), *Free/State* is the 2022 iteration of the biennial exhibition. The exhibition has an ambitious and broad curatorial mission, seeking to challenge histories and art forms, provide an opportunity to reflect on an era of global upheaval, and explore both transcending states and freedom in various ways.¹

Curated by Sebastian Goldspink, an independent Sydney-based curator, *Free/State* is spread throughout the AGSA's galleries. Artworks are distributed among the permanent collection in the Elder Wing, leading the way to artworks spread across a further two temporary exhibition spaces. *Free/State* is a large exhibition, featuring 25 artists representative of each Australian state and territory, all at various stages of their careers and working across different mediums.

Each artist involved was given the freedom to create or contribute work that they felt fitted within the scope of the exhibition. With such a broad theme, this meant that every artist approached a different part of the theme, and sometimes in a different manner. For the most part, this worked well. The artists' work was distributed throughout the galleries in such a way that visitors approached each piece one at a time. Usually, the artwork that was displayed beside another sat in either dialogue with or contrast to the other, providing an opening for visitors to make sense of the theme by considering the ways that each piece approached it.

Ukrainian Australian artist Stanislava Pinchuk's work is powerful in reflecting themes of conflict and upheaval. *The Wine Dark Sea* (2021) comprises several marble blocks with additional



Figure 1. Installation view of *Free/State*, Elder Wing, Art Gallery of South Australia. Photograph courtesy of Saul Steed and the AGSA.



Figure 2. *The Wine Dark Sea* (2021) by Stanislava Pinchuk. Photograph courtesy of Saul Steed and the Art Gallery of South Australia.

smaller blocks balanced on top. Engraved on each piece of marble is an excerpt from Homer's *Odyssey* or a phrase taken from leaked documents from the Australian government detention centers on Manus Island and Nauru. These phrases are intentionally ambiguous and similar in content. The speaker in many is redacted, so the viewer cannot tell which, sometimes violent, quote comes from which source.

Kate Mitchell's work *Open Channels* (2021) contrasts with levity, literally transcending spiritual states through her investigations into the psychic world. Mitchell engages psychic mediums to speak with the spirit world to answer frequently asked questions from Google. These range from the profound (how to achieve equality?) to the mundane (which antiaging cream is best?), working as an entertaining reflection of the problems for which we communally seek answers. The wisdom from the spirit world is displayed as though it is part of a group Zoom conversation, a charming nod to contemporary communication.

Dean Cross, a Worimi man, contrasts a reproduction of Théodore Géricault's *The Raft of the Medusa* (1918–1919), a painting of French colonial disaster, with a version of Norman Tindale's map, the 1974 *Tribal Boundaries of Aboriginal Australia*, on one side of a constructed wall. He places a doorway in the center of the map of Australia, which reveals to the visitor a series of tools used to build fences as they pass through. In this work, titled *gunalgungal (contracted field)* (2021–2022), Cross reflects on how the borders, which are often so important to our island nation's psyche, are built on top of Aboriginal land. Do these borders really mean anything?

The AGSA have included substantial interpretation for each artwork, displaying labels with text, written by the gallery, as well as an excerpt from the *Free/State* exhibition catalog, written by guest writers. While this means that each artwork has a lengthy label providing further information for the viewer, the use of the exhibition catalog essays is not ideal. The exhibition



Figure 3. *gunalgunal (contracted field)* (2021–2022) by Dean Cross. Photograph courtesy of Saul Steed and Art Gallery of South Australia.

catalog is written for a specific audience—one that seeks to engage deeply with art and likely has an existing understanding of contemporary art. However, this is not necessarily the person who comes through the doors. The wall labels use language that is not always accessible, often burying the artists' intentions. This use of the catalog essays is neat but ultimately works against the AGSA's efforts and is likely to leave a casual visitor feeling alienated, reinforcing negative stereotypes about contemporary art.

Free/State is an ambitious exhibition that navigates a host of complex themes. The exhibition could have been a powerful exploration of some of these issues with a narrower thematic focus. Some of the artworks are strong, clearly connecting to the curatorial aims. Others, however, seem more tangentially connected and sit at odds with both the exhibition and other works. Despite this, *Free/State* does what a good biennial should and explores the breadth of work being made by living artists, providing an invitation for visitors to engage with contemporary art.

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■ NOTE

1. More information can be found on the exhibition website at <https://www.agsa.sa.gov.au/whats-on/adelaide-biennial-of-australian-art/2022-adelaide-biennial-of-australian-art-freestate>.

Te Aho Tapu Hou: The New Sacred Thread

Waikato Museum Te Whare Taonga o Waikato (7 August 2021 to 9 January 2022)

Recycling, reclaiming, and representing are the threads that bind Jeanine Clarkin's (Ngāti Hako, Ngāti Pāoa, Ngāti Ranginui, Ngāti Raukawa) large-scale, retrospective exhibition *Te Aho Tapu Hou: The New Sacred Thread*. Interwoven within these threads are Indigenous, feminist, and environmental activism embodied in a multiplicity of forms that manage to defy the wasteful, capitalist, and colonial conformity of the modern fashion industry.

The exhibition is a celebration of Jeanine Clarkin as a fashion activist who, over the past several decades, has designed couture clothing that is both subversive and beautiful. As a daughter of one of the first family recyclers in Taupō, Clarkin grew up in the 1970s and 1980s recycling and reusing materials ranging from bottles to scrap metal and ragbag clothing. From the earliest stages as a young girl, long before vintage clothing was popularized, she upcycled the ragbag clothing from the family recycling collection and branded herself as a designer.

The story of the artist's childhood is told visually alongside the entrance to the exhibition featuring a catwalk of Clarkin's best designs over the past two decades. Her bespoke garments have been cherished by their owners enabling a public appearance in the exhibition. This is a testament to the designer's dedication to slow fashion. *Te Aho Tapu Hou* emphasizes Clarkin's commitment to creating designs that are timeless and made to last despite the capitalist consumption of fashion produced for seasonal collections.

The title of the exhibition purposefully references Auckland War Memorial Museum's *Te Aho Tapu: Traditional Māori Weaving* (July 1987–February 1988) speaking to the whakapapa of fashion from te ao Māori. Over the past two centuries, taonga Māori have been classified by a colonial, Western gaze as "artifacts." Yet, long before European settlement and the establishment of museums, Māori made sophisticated woven garments integrated with knowledge and meaning in the form of *tāniko* patterns to inform and guide future generations. Clarkin's designs extend from this genealogy and inspired many of her first creations and, thus, a new sacred thread, *Te Aho Tapu Hou*.

As one of the first Māori fashion designers, Jeanine Clarkin bravely and boldly trailblazed into the 1990s by reclaiming and representing Māori identity in her streetwear. From kitchen to boardroom, she designed aprons inspired by maro kapua worn by mana wāhine Māori. The designer makes a powerful Indigenous, feminist statement in claiming the maro as an empowering device and the apron as representative of manaakitanga, a nongendered attribute that holds value in all aspects of community life.

Clarkin has become a globally recognized Indigenous fashion icon, who has inspired young, up-and-coming Māori creatives and activists to armor themselves with her fashion designs. This decolonial statement and activism has been captured by Auckland-based photographer Chris Traill, who documented Clarkin's designs over the decades. An entire wall in the exhibition is devoted to Traill's black-and-white photographs depicting early images of now influential Māori figures such as actors Nancy Brunning and Cliff Curtis and artist Brett Graham (see Figure 1).

Peeking around the corner, in the gallery annex, is an aitu designed by the Pacific Sisters. This inclusion in the exhibition expresses the relationship and inspiration that Clarkin shared with the Pacific and Māori fashion design collective of the 1990s. In this area, visitors learn about Clarkin's time in art school, resulting in her intergenerational mentorship of taura (students)



Figure 1. Jeanine Clarkin. Photograph courtesy of the author.

like Kirikiriroa Hamilton-based designer Tihi King, who is included in the exhibition featuring a garment made of black, plastic straws that, from afar, appear to be natural fibers.

The final adjoining gallery is devoted to Clarkin's signature use of upcycled, op-shop, woolen blankets repurposed into the colorful Natural Beauty Collection (see Figure 2). The metaphorically loaded material addresses issues of colonization and land loss due to the abuse of Te Tiriti o Waitangi. This is expressed in the series "Blankets and Muskets" made in 2018.

Clarkin more recently designed COVID-19 masks that visually speak to the uncertainty of the past two years, including the closure of the museum to the public due to the pandemic outbreak. The Waikato Museum Te Whare Taonga o Waikato has purchased the masks from the exhibition for its permanent collection to mark this time in history. Embroidered on the masks are greetings and encouragement, like *Kia Ora* and *Kia Kaha*.



Figure 2. Natural Beauty Collection. Photograph courtesy of the Waikato Museum Te Whare Taonga o Waikato.

Recycling, reclaiming, and representing fashion is a site of activism. Indigenous fashion has developed into a form of decolonial, self-identification that subverts colonial attempts to assimilate first nations, Indigenous, Moana, and Māori cultures to conform to the expectations of the Western normative. As the world becomes more and more globalized, there is a deepened desire to localize. Value for Māori-designed and -made clothing has ignited a rebellion against capitalist mass production, which disrupts business as usual. The exhibition is also a site of activism because it decolonizes the museum and Indigenizes museology by featuring a contemporary Māori fashion icon, who is fortified by her atua, wairuatanga, and whakapapa.

Nālani Wilson-Hokowhitu

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West Encounters East: A Cultural Conversation between Chinese and European Ceramics

Shanghai Museum (28 October 2021 to 16 January 2022)

By the late fifteenth century, long-distance trade routes extended across the ancient world between Asia and Europe, and commercial transactions were encouraged by active cultural, religious, and artistic exchanges between East and West. Chinese porcelain as a representative product of great rarity and luxury captivated the European nobility and eventually became a widespread influence in those countries which imported it. These cultural interactions through the lens of Chinese export porcelain, a symbol of nonverbal language between the Eastern and Western world, were featured in the exhibition *West Encounters East: A Cultural Conversation between Chinese and European Ceramics* at the Shanghai Museum. Overcoming the difficulties of the pandemic, the exhibition displayed 206 sets of objects borrowed from more than ten world-renowned institutions in France, Portugal, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, the United States, Switzerland, and China.

Upon entering the exhibition, a small dim room served as a prologue, showing how Chinese export porcelain entered Europe at the time and providing details of the three sections that followed. The history of China-Western transport was brought to light in the first part of the exhibition. Besides demonstrating the historical development of Chinese-European trade embodied in the customized porcelain, it also manifested the trade networks through evidence from shipwrecks excavated both in China and Europe. This extensive ceramic trade network was an indispensable precondition for Europeans to form cultural connections with China.

With the developing trade in ceramics across the Eurasian continent, Chinese porcelain was no longer confined to the ostentatious collections of the European aristocracy. Thus, the second section highlighted how Chinese porcelain was integrated into the local society, merging with their culture and sparking innovations. This could be seen from oil paintings, furnishings like interior porcelain showcases, and the Chinese porcelain modified or assembled in line with European aesthetics and pragmatic needs. One of the typical exhibits in this section was the 3D digital hall, which reproduced the porcelain dome from the Santos Palace in Portugal, showing the charm of the inlaid Chinese porcelain, and the fusion of Chinese and European art. Actually, the digitized model of the porcelain dome was developed by the Musée Guimet in Paris that originally inspired this exhibition in Shanghai.

The last section of the exhibition followed the dissemination and influence of Chinese porcelain crafts around the world but put a sharper focus on the mutual technological and cultural impacts of Eastern and Western ceramics. As well as imitations of Chinese ceramics from all over the world, Chinese porcelain itself developed new variations inspired by foreign works of art. The interesting ceramic figures in this section reflected the exotic perceptions and imagination at work on both sides of the East-West cultural exchange and provided a space for visitors to reflect on cultural integration and collision (see Figure 2 and Figure 3). Yet, a sense of cultural dialogue and reconciliation was conveyed through this tangible evidence of intercultural exchange from the past, such a precious quality in the world today.

As illustrated above, a clear, overall idea linked these three sections of the exhibition. In the background of the Chinese-European porcelain trade in the fifteenth century was a broader and more profound understanding of Oriental culture that swept across Europe at the time. Similarly, the diverse influences of the foreign porcelain trade made their way back to China, refreshing its sense of the West. Therefore, the exhibition explored the reciprocal influences of



Figure 1. 3D digital room with reproduction of the porcelain dome from the Santos Palace in Portugal. Shanghai Museum. Photo courtesy of the author.

culture and thoughts that worked both ways, giving it a higher value than merely demonstrating the porcelain exchanges initiated by commercial, diplomatic, or religious activities.

Furthermore, this exhibition was indeed seminal for inspiring creative exhibitions on the topic of export porcelain in China. It also has the potential to encourage new ideas for museums to deal with further intercultural exchanges. On the one hand, it incorporated new research and materials not commonly presented in previous Chinese export porcelain exhibitions, including the history of the ceramic trade with Portugal, which will encourage researchers to further their studies, and ultimately enrich these kinds of exhibitions in the future.

Additionally, the East-West cultural exchanges displayed in the exhibition were bilateral and equal, rather than stressing the sole impact of any one side. I believe this is the core value and the most enlightening part of the exhibition. Contemporary museums are supposed to hold an equal and genuine attitude toward different cultures, instead of mirroring the superiority of a particular culture or revealing the history of East-West communication through the lens of only one side. In this way, the audience not only realized the relatively integrated process of cultural interaction but also discovered that despite stereotypes or even distorted images of external cultures that exist all the time, people from all over the world attempt to make contact, keep in touch, and learn about each other. The exhibition could have done more in this vein by interpreting the cultural connotations and psychology behind the decorative patterns of porcelain, rather



Figure 2. Figure of a male Chinese musician produced in Europe. Shanghai Museum. Photo courtesy of the author.



Figure 3. Figure of a Dutch man produced in China. Shanghai Museum. Photo courtesy of the author.

than merely sketching them out as in the captions. If visitors could understand, for instance, why Europeans appreciated and employed certain ornamentation in Chinese porcelain in the recreation of everyday objects, then they would better comprehend the relationship between Eastern and Western cultures.

While a few details like this could be improved and taken further, in a broader sense, this exhibition shows that though telling a cultural story through collections is not easy for contemporary museums, it is worthwhile. Taking a public stand to stimulate curiosity about other cultures and facilitate cross-cultural understanding are essential responsibilities as well as potential challenges of museums across the globe.

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The Shanghai Jewish Refugees Museum's Permanent Exhibition

Shanghai

Located at Tilanqiao historic reserve in Hongkou District of Shanghai, the Shanghai Jewish Refugees Museum was established in 2007, with the Ohel Moshe Synagogue as its core body, one of the Jewish activity centers built in 1927. In 2020 the museum completed its second expansion project (the first was in 2015) and reopened to the public.

While the museum tells the story of around 20,000 European Jews who took refuge in Shanghai in the 1930s and 1940s, its neighborhood is also the only existing historical site in China that reflects lives of Jewish refugees during World War II. Most refugees survived the war, which was called the “Shanghai Miracle” by Holocaust historian David Kranzler (SJRM 2020). They left Shanghai thereafter, but many of them came back from time to time to explore their memories and affiliations with the place. Although the Shanghai Jewish Refugees Museum takes the Holocaust as the background to the display, it chooses the theme of “rescue” as the main melody in its composition, creating a note of warmth despite the suffering. Moreover, the institution is devoted to building a community that shares a common future for humankind. Such a universal orientation promotes/pushes its exhibitions to be unique, and different from the nearly 150 Jewish memorial halls worldwide that mourn tragedies. Up till now, the museum has attracted visitors from more than 120 countries, with one-third of these from overseas. In this review I explore its permanent exhibition from two perspectives.



Figure 1. The Shanghai Jewish Refugees Museum reopened to the public on 8 December 2020. Photo courtesy of the Shanghai Jewish Refugees Museum.

A Small Museum Telling a Big Transnational Story

The display traces the history of the Jewish diaspora during World War II, how refugees came to Shanghai and carved out their daily lives, and the contributions they made to the city's culture. Although the total area of the museum has been expanded to more than four thousand square meters, with exhibition space growing to two thousand square meters, the Shanghai Jewish Refugees Museum is still a small-sized one. Two residential buildings on the sides of the Ohel Moshe Synagogue where Jewish refugees once lived are now incorporated within the museum and transformed into exhibition space. To retain the original architectural features of the two buildings and solve the problem of limited space, the display adopts a one-way visitation route. In my view, this design makes the audience's emotions more coherent, creating an emotional experience step by step.

The entrance is at the North Building starting from the second floor, where a multimedia orientation film guides visitors to follow the movements of Jewish refugees. Here inside walls have been taken down, which allows the museum a relatively large space to create a series of scenes illustrating the stories of Jewish refugees. At the same time, the South Building had to keep the honeycomb space layout, so an independent subtheme has been designed for each small room of about 20 square meters (Chen 2022). Actually, a serpentine line on the floor plan connects these subthemes into six units: Fleeing to Shanghai, Starting a New Life, Bittersweet Memories, After the War, Special Feelings for China, and Toward a Shared Future.

It is worth mentioning that more than 160 stories are told by the exhibits themselves, which together add up to an overall effect of great narrative power. These stories do not describe abstract truths or have complex plots or heroic protagonists but share intimate and precious episodes of history as well as joys and sorrows of ordinary people. There are many oral histories from former Jewish refugees and Shanghai residents, which play a key role in supporting the narrative of the big transnational story. It seems to me that this effectively creates resonances and arouses empathy from the audience.

The Power of Exhibits to Diffuse Important Values

A museum is a place where visitors view history through objects, and it can never tell powerful stories without sufficient exhibits. This was a huge challenge for the Shanghai Jewish Refugees Museum in the beginning in terms of collecting because most of the valuable memorabilia had already been donated to other Jewish memorial halls worldwide or retained as keepsakes by refugees themselves.

Luckily this changed when Josef Rossbach donated his bamboo toy rickshaw to the museum on a visit there in 2010. This was the institution's first real physical exhibit and has been rated a "First-Class Cultural Relic." Rossbach was born in Hongkou District in 1944. His Chinese neighbor was a rickshaw driver and often took Joseph and his own child for a ride after work. For Rossbach, that was an unforgettable and happy memory of his childhood. Therefore, before leaving Shanghai, he begged his mother to buy this toy and treasured it all his life.

Another story can be traced back to 1943. When a Jewish man who was about to leave Shanghai could not take around 1,600 books with him, he entrusted them to his Chinese neighbor Lin Daozhi to keep them. But he never came back. Mr. Lin and his family overcame many difficulties to keep the books for nearly 70 years during and after the war. Finally, the museum learned the owner had died and left no offspring. Now the books are in the institution's custody to keep the promise.



Figure 2. Lin Daozhi and the books he and his family kept for a Jewish refugee. Photo courtesy of the Shanghai Jewish Refugees Museum.



Figure 3. The wall has listed names of 18,578 Jewish refugees in Shanghai. Photo courtesy of the Shanghai Jewish Refugees Museum.

Most of the museum's one thousand objects on display come from donations by former Jewish residents (SJRM 2020). Many of them are personal items rather than artworks, so only ten pieces are listed as First-Class Cultural Relics. Furthermore, donations from the neighbors of former Jewish residents in Shanghai still need to be encouraged in order to better represent the span of Jewish refugee life in Shanghai. The institution is still very much on the “long march” of collecting.

When the audience walk out of the building, they come to an open square and see the Ohel Moshe Synagogue. The Wall of Names in the center of the square contains the last story to be told, which will give visitors the final surprise. The completion of the list wall is due to the joint efforts of the Shanghai Jewish Refugees Museum and former refugee Sonja Muehlberger. After returning to postwar Germany in 1947, Muehlberger has been committed to carrying out historical research and has collected a list of more than 14,000 Jewish refugees in Shanghai during the war. Based on this “Shanghai List,” the museum erected the first-generation wall in 2014. Six years later, nearly five thousand more names were confirmed. A second version of the wall was then erected, expanding the number from 13,732 to 18,578. There is a blank section for more names to be added in the hope that this history will continue to be written.

The vision and values of the museum are to “work together to build a community with a shared future for humankind” (see SRJM 2022). These values are encapsulated in the way in which the museum memorializes the international friendship between Shanghai residents and Jewish refugees in wartime, as well as marking the generosity, openness, and inclusiveness of the city of Shanghai and the Chinese nation. It is worth mentioning that at the early stage of the museum's construction, only a memorial hall was planned on the historical site. A Jewish visitor suggested memorial halls are for commemorating the dead or remembering tragedies, and that was not the atmosphere she sensed in Shanghai. This idea transformed the museum development and drove the team to uphold a warmhearted interpretation of human compassion and salvation rather than the horror of Nazi persecution that dominates many Jewish-related museums (SJRM 2020).

Thanks to these joint efforts by Chinese and Jewish people inside and outside China, on both governmental and civil levels, this young museum, which deals with a heavy history, is becoming much more successful in telling its stories and raising its profile. More importantly, the museum is a testament to that spirit of international cooperation and integration which is still strong 70 years later, inspiring today's generation to contribute to cross-cultural exchanges and mutual understanding. In fact, when a museum grows up from being a recorder and guardian of history to a participant and contributor to writing that history, then we can say it is truly doing its job.

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The Way of Nourishment: Health-preserving Culture in Traditional Chinese Medicine

The Chengdu Museum, Chengdu, Sichuan Province, China (29 June–31 October 2021)

During the COVID-19 pandemic, traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) attracted much attention due to its unique curative effects. Through an focusing on TCM, *The Way of Nourishment* (Figure 1) the Chengdu Museum has played a role in supporting an outstanding cultural heritage inheritance and created a great deal of debate and reflection on our modern way of life, particularly at this extraordinary time.

The place of TCM within traditional Chinese health-preserving culture is definitely a challenging topic. It needs the support of multidisciplinary research, while the visitors ought to be offered interactive elements to better understand this intangible subject. In a sense, it is a remarkable subject for the Chengdu Museum as a regional museum that normally presents exhibitions about serious historical topics. Besides these challenges, the exhibition space is irregular and laid out on several levels. Nevertheless, this show was well organized to overcome these difficulties by separating the space into different functions. Visitors attending the exhibition underwent a unique experience as soon as they moved into the atmospheric introductory room, which seems to have a narrator chanting ancient Chinese poetry. The room was organized and decorated with panels illustrating Chinese calligraphy and green bamboo, which sets the tone for the exhibition—accessible, informative, and poetic.

Following the narrative logic of the cultural concept and practice, the exhibition developed four main topics, Regulating Daily Life to Make the Best Out of Work, Going on a Diet and Adjusting the Body with Herbal Cuisine, Exercising to Strengthen the Body, and Calming Down to Preserve a Strong Internal Spirit. All these sections of the exhibition drew attention to the history and culture of Chinese health formed over thousands of years.



Figure 1. The introductory room of the exhibition *The Way of Nourishment*. Photo courtesy of the Chengdu Museum.



Figure 2. First room of the exhibition. Photo courtesy of the Chengdu Museum.

The first room was well designed with artistic scenery of a highly “Zen” character creating a unique atmosphere. There was only one showcase displaying a selection of 12 ceramic cups with flower patterns representing each month of the year (see Figure 2). The message was clear: human beings are born into this world controlled by nature and are destined to be influenced by natural laws if we want to survive.

Large white curtain panels were used to separate different sections of the exhibition and in particular to create a circular arc space to connect the four topics, the overall effect of which suggested the broad, gentle, and inclusive culture of TCM.

Visitors had an interactive experience in the second room displaying the theme Going on a Diet and Adjusting the Body with Herbal Cuisine. Although the core of this section was about popular science and the knowledge of plants, the subject was not explored in a traditional museum approach with text and objects. Instead, there were 12 transparent boxes filled with Chinese herbal medicines, set on a round, green table to invite visitors to bend over and smell the aroma, inspiring discussion among visitors.

The next section featured multidisciplinary research that presented evidence for the value of food in the preservation of health (Figure 3). Chinese people are used to an herbal cuisine that highlights food as the energy provider for the body. A series of pictures about Chinese herbal medicine in ancient documents and ancient poetry with medicine as the theme were depicted together on a large panel, with accompanying information on associated cultural relics displayed in showcases. This display highlighted the integration of popular science drawn from different disciplines along with the basic knowledge of TCM.

The transition from the second to the third part of the exhibition was well designed as a unique route for visitors. Upon entering this dimly lit sloping corridor, visitors found themselves in a winding path surrounded with bamboo. This led them to a quiet secluded place, which actually formed a separate room for watching videos. Visitors could lie down or sit in the most comfortable position to learn more about TCM by watching interviews with experts.

Toward the end of the exhibition in the last two rooms, visitors found that objects were comparatively densely displayed, including ceramics and gold and silver wares borrowed from



Figure 3. Multidisciplinary research presentation on TCM. Photo courtesy of the Chengdu Museum.

museums in Sichuan, Hebei, and Jiangsu provinces. With no distinction between regions, time periods, or materials, these objects illustrated a variety of ancient Chinese ways of life, aiming to address the last two topics covered by the exhibition—exercise and internal spirit. Particularly in the Song Dynasty (960–1279), the realm of aesthetics elevated everyday life. Drinking tea, burning incense, arranging flowers, and hanging paintings were called the Four Arts of Life, also known as the Four Events. These practices were part of the refined life pursued by the literati and refined scholars at that time that enriched internal self-cultivation and promoted a return to nature.

A series of celadon ceramics, unearthed from cellars at Suining in Sichuan Province dating from the Southern Song Dynasty (1127–1279) were displayed as ware for burning incense, distinguished by the unique shape and color that was similar to jade in color and composition. Burning incense became one of the most important social activities for scholars in the Song Dynasty. The curator presented explanatory labels to explain their function—people normally placed spices in them and burned them to produce a fresh and fragrant flue gas. Different incense has different functions, for example, a pesticide, deodorant, or perfume for clothing and indoor environments. The use of sandalwood, lavender, and other calming spices is conducive to promoting sleep.

Exercise is considered the most efficient way to foster positive energy. Over time practices such as massage, kung fu, and the knowledge of medicine were integrated into one. Ultimately, an exercising-oriented health practice with Chinese characteristics was inspired by Chinese traditional philosophy. To convey this complex topic, the exhibition employed a combination of statues, videos, and illustrations in this part of the exhibition. A pottery figurine dating from the Eastern Han Dynasty (25–220) attracted more attention, due to the vivid posture of the archer and his characteristic modeling and clothing (see Figure 4).

The final section of the exhibition displayed the culture of health in daily Chinese life through a typical scene with explanatory labels and objects that showed drinking tea, playing chess, and playing the zither.

Near the exit of the exhibition, visitors had the opportunity to enter a meditation room, where anybody could lie down and immerse themselves in an environment of self-cultivation. Surrounded by whirling bamboo shadows, sounds of waves on the beach and rain in summer, visitors found themselves calming down in a peaceful space and exploring their internal spirit. In TCM it is believed that maintaining a prudent life, raising moral standards, and fostering refined interests are important ways of caring for mental health. In relating the history and practice of TCM and its health benefits in a time of mass illness, this exhibition has set a great example of how museums ought to rethink their role in benefiting society.

Xiaorui Guan

Chongqing Museum and China Three Gorges Museum, Chongqing



Figure 4. Visitors enjoy a unique experience in the meditation room. Photo courtesy of the Chengdu Museum.