

Black histories

RAY NORMAN EXPLORES REGIONAL CULTURAL
TRADITIONS, IDENTITIES AND JEWELS



Contemporary mairreeners made by Lola Greeno, 1998, and worn by Delia Summers. Outside made with green/blue mairreener (Rainbow Kelp) shells; inside made of small beige Rice Shells. Photo: Peter Clark.

SINCE COLONISATION TASMANIA HAS SEEN ITSELF AS BEING AT THE EDGE OF THE WORLD; it is therefore a place where the re-evaluation of regional cultural traditions in a global context seems to cut a little closer to the bone than it might elsewhere. A particular view of the world begins to reveal itself when we juxtapose the Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery's (QVMAG, Launceston) contemporary jewellery collection with their collection of Palawa ¹ and mairreeners ² (Tasmanian Aboriginal shell necklaces) and with the collection of mairreeners held in the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery (TMAG, Hobart).

"Mairreeners are shell necklaces," says Palawa elder Patsy Cameron. "[However] the word mairreener is used for both the necklaces and the [rainbow kelp shells] used to make them." A complication here is that rainbow kelp shells are not the only shells used to make necklaces. Also, Cameron cautions that 'jewellery' is not a Palawa concept and that 'shell necklace' in Palawa terms has wider cultural implications: mairreeners within Palawa culture are always in some way ritual objects and typically gifts. From a Num (non-Palawa) perspective, using mairreener to include all Palawa shell necklaces seems an adequate device to distinguish mairreeners from necklaces.

All of this begs a question or two! Do non-Indigenous Australians comprehend our own jewels/jewellery in a traditional or cultural context? Do they decode the ritual significance(s) in the wearing of jewels? ³ Do they even think about it? How important is any of it to them in a cultural-cum-spiritual context?

Such jewels are loaded with meanings but we do not often talk about them.

It would seem that there is indeed ritual, spiritual and cultural significance(s) in Westernised cultures of making and meaning albeit that such things are rarely referred to in overt ways. It would also seem that such things exist as a kind of 'white noise' that can be selectively heeded or ignored. For example, a rosary is never a necklace albeit that a rosary may be worn as one. Likewise, a wedding ring is a kind of mairreener in so much as there is ritual/cultural significance in the wearing of one and furthermore it signifies a rite of passage. Such jewels are loaded with meanings but we do not often talk about them.

The QVMAG's contemporary jewellery collection is one of Australia's most important in that it catalogues a vision of the development of 'Australian' contemporary jewellery from the 1970s to the present. But the vision is essentially—and almost idiosyncratically—Eurocentric, internationalist and neocolonial. Launceston, indeed Tasmania, figures among Australia's least multicultural regions, so it is not too surprising that the collection reflects such a vision of the world. Tasmania's colonial history is much darker than black. Tasmania is probably the only place on the planet to have pronounced extinguishment upon its Aboriginal people. Buried deep in the Tasmanian subconscious is the myth of Truganini ⁴. According to the myth Truganini was the last Aboriginal woman in Tasmania.

By the late 19th Century colonial Tasmanians had appropriated Palawa mairreeners as a kind of Num (Palawa for white-fellow) emblem of 'Tasmanian-ness' and they were sometimes referred to at the time as 'Hobart Necklaces'. The existence of such necklaces is just a faint memory today but ironically they mimicked shell necklaces worn by Truganini and others. There was a laxity about admitting to Hobart Necklaces' Palawa roots albeit that shell necklaces figure so prominently in Tasmanian colonial art depicting Palawa people—notably Duterrau's painting *The Conciliation of 1836*.

There may even be necklaces stored away in the Tasmanian Museum & Art

Gallery's and the QVMAG's reserve collections that are indeed Hobart Necklaces but thought to be Palawa mairreeners. There is evidence ⁵ that non-Palawa people have been making such necklaces—and up until very recently.

The Truganini myth was deeply etched into the imagination of colonial Tasmanians and it would appear that shell necklaces were important souvenirs in Tasmania since early colonial days. Truganini is almost always depicted wearing a mairreener and this could only have made such necklaces all the more interesting as relics and curiosities in an eclectic Victorian society where colonial plunder and bric-a-brac had a special currency.

In the Tasmanian State Archives there is a photograph, circa 1898, that depicts "souvenirs designed and manufactured" ⁶ by A. Butterfield, a Hobart jeweller. It is significant that a shell necklace of the kind worn by Truganini frames an array of antipodean colonial knick-knacks. The necklace works as a kind of signifier of 'Tasmanian-ness' in a way such necklaces have continued to do. ⁷ Interestingly, the images of Truganini (Queen Truganini) and William Lanne ⁸ (King Billy) in the photograph and the images below their portraits underline the symbolism of the text and provide yet another layer to it.

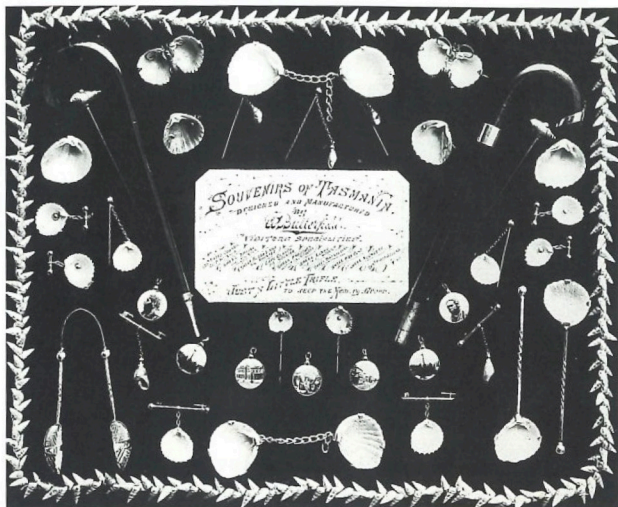
In the photograph the central image (bottom) seems to be a landscape; the two images flanking it appear to be images of a colonial building; the two images that flank these appear to be an image of a tower—possibly Hobart's Shot Tower—and the two flanking these appear to be Truganini (right) and William Lanne (left). This can be read from the centre out as the land, its colonisation and exploitation, the gun and the Palawa people—the vanished race. Butterfield was clearly exploiting the curiosity value of the shells, their importance to Palawa people and their 'Tasmanian-ness'. In projecting 'Tasmanian-ness' in this way and sidestepping the necklace's Palawa origins he was reassigning its meanings and placing it in a colonial context. Nevertheless, the necklace's curio value largely depends upon its Palawa associations—an exotic antipodean otherness.

How can we, in a global postmodern culture at the end of the 2nd millennia, make a distinction between Palawa mairreeners and Hobart Necklaces? Clearly, mairreeners have a special significance in the Palawa community and they have continued to evolve as an important part of Palawa culture. Thus the distinctions we make would have some bearing on the ways Indigenous cultures in Australia are acknowledged. Nevertheless, it would seem that the colonial appropriation of the Palawa people's shell necklaces is close to being culturally genocidal.

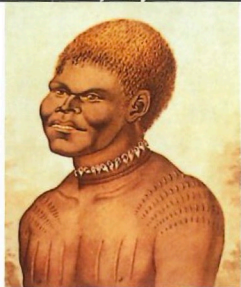
Interestingly, New Zealanders seem to have found a way to use jewels to signify their 'Kiwi-ness'. The wearing of the 'Greenstone', the Tiki and like pendants seems to be a bi-cultural signification of 'Kiwi-ness'. It also seems that Maori and Pakeha cultural realities are being simultaneously acknowledged in a cooperative way. Curiously, such an accommodation of difference seems to be out of our reach in Australia despite Multiculturalism. This could have everything to do with the Maori people being seen as noble savages and Aboriginal people being seen as ignoble savages by our colonial forefathers. So it seems that we must wear our colonial histories until we can truly say sorry.

Mairreeners within Palawa culture are always in some way ritual objects and typically gifts; often as a gift of welcome or departure; at other times tokens of love and esteem and possibly markers of a rite of passage at the time of colonial contact. Importantly mairreeners take on a political significance in that they stand out as evidence of an evolving cultural continuum against the outrageous assertions that Palawa culture faded into oblivion—and extinction—with the death of Truganini.

Mairreeners are cultural treasures with at least 40,000 years of history. They are a part of a living tradition within Palawa culture as well as the political reality in Tasmania. In the context of Indigenous people's land rights, and the Mabo and Wik debates, their political potency cannot be ignored. Importantly, mairreeners exist as an expression of the continuing development of a Palawa cultural reality. As such they sit outside an Artworld paradigm albeit understandable within it as a kind of



Above: The work of A. Butterfield, Hobart jeweller, c.1898. The text reads: "Souvenirs of Tasmania designed and manufactured by A. Butterfield. Visitors specialties. Tas. Photo Charms (Gold Mounted), Shell Spoons (Sil. Mounted), Shell Sugar Tongs (Sil. Mounted), Cape Clasps (Sil. Mounted), Shell Brooches (Gold or Sil. Mounted), Shell Links (Gold or Sil. Mounted), Shell Breast Pins, Shell Hat Pins, Shell Necklets, Tas. Wood Sticks, Just a Little Trifle to Keep the Memory Green". Tasmanian State Archives, reference no: NS-635/8.



Above right: Bara-Ourou, a man from Maria Island, drawn by an artist aboard the voyage led by Françoise Peron and Louis Claude Freycinet. Published in Paris, 1824. Le Museum d'Histoire, Le Havre.

Duchampian⁹ ready-made in the euphemistic 'White Box'.

In 1995 Marian Hosking—a Num—risked rebuke to celebrate contemporary Indigenous culture at the opening exhibition of Gallery Funaki in Melbourne. She exhibited a provocative work entitled *Tribute to Ruby Hunter: a gift for a woman from a woman* that is a kind of mairreener. Oddly, the opening coincided with the celebration of Naidoc Week.¹⁰ Upon hearing about Hosking's necklace, understandably some Palawa mairreener makers expressed reservations about its conceptual context. It is one thing to acknowledge cultural difference and it is another to objectify it. If cultures can be shared then perhaps this can only happen in a post-imperial cultural reality. This appears to be a little way off at least in a 'One Nation' monocultural Australia. But it seems that Hosking was hoping to play a part in the construction of a more inclusive understanding of 'Australian-ness'.

Yet, Hosking's necklace is somewhat imperfect in that it tends to objectify Ruby Hunter and that it also commodifies the mairreener form. This ultimately locates the necklace in an Artworld paradigm where it needs the 'White Box' and the absence of the body to have meaning. To bring a little privileged knowledge to Marion Hosking's work, it sprang from her experience at a jewellery symposium *The Body in Question* in Launceston, 1991. Palawa women took part in the symposium alongside her and 20 other jewellers. The Palawa women's mairreeners were also included in the symposium's exhibition *Precious and the Body*. Her work had been gestating for sometime and it is ironic that it should emerge during a JMGA conference entitled *Cultural Diversity: A Collaborative Identity* as possibly the only significant work that overtly tackled the complex issues of cultural diversity and indigenous

culture in Australia. There were other works that confronted socio-political issues but her necklace stood alone as a metaphor for the dilemmas attached to a material cultural production, cultural difference and the perception of jewellery in the context of a globalised Artworld.

It seems that jewellery practice can be looked at in new ways and one may be to do with the cultural-cargo jewels carry. If we refer to precolonial/premodern cultural realities to find—and perhaps reinstate—jewellery's meanings in the context of micro (*inward and personal*) and macro (*outward and regional*) cultural precincts, how 'jewellery' might find meaning changes dynamically. In this context Modernity and its Universalist baggage becomes almost synonymous with colonialism, neo-colonialism and 'black' histories. What jewellery is in contemporary Australian culture and 'how it means' is an open question.

The final words in the text in the Butterfield photograph—"Just a Little Trifle To Keep The Memory Green"—has a somewhat ironic ring in the context of current Australian political agendas. Also, in the light of Palawa dispossession it is ironic that it was a Tasmanian Senator who interceded to pass John Howard's Aboriginal land rights legislation and his compassionless 'Ten Point Plan'.

endnotes

1. Palawa—Nation name drawn from the documented language of the Aboriginal people of southern Tasmania meaning 'the original black man'—Cameron, Patsy (Palawa elder) pers. comm. 18 November, 1994.
2. Mairreener—Palawa word for necklace pronounced Mair-ree-ner. The word is still in use but on the part of non-Palawa people there appears to be some confusion with the word mariner as there is a similarity in the pronunciation and both have a connection with the sea. Cameron, Patsy, pers. comm. July, 1992. Greeno, Dulcie pers. comm. September, 1992.
3. Jewel—referring to an understanding of an object—worn and not worn—that carries meanings of preciousness, intrinsic and other.
4. Truganini died in 1876 and her death was seen as the passing of the last 'full blood' Tasmanian Aboriginal. Despite being dispossessed, the Palawa people did not die out with her or at any other period in Tasmania's history. Fanny Cochran Smith survived Truganini by 29 years and there are some eight thousand descendants who remain today.
5. Lindsay Broughton (Num artist) speaks of his mother making such necklaces in the 1950s, as he has recently done for an installation; and Emily Creighton (Num woman) continues to make such necklaces on Cape Barron Island. Broughton, Lindsay pers. comm. July, 1998. Creighton, Emily pers. comm. July, 1998.
6. It is possible that he did make it and that he used shells from the commercial harvesting of kelp shells reported on by Earnest Mawle in 1918—seemingly by non-Aboriginal people. 'Notes on the Kelp Shell, *Cantharidus irisodontes*', *Australian Zoologist*, vol. 1, part 6, Sydney.
7. 'Hobart Necklaces' seem to have been readily available until WWI. Also, in Launceston necklaces made on the Bass Strait Island by Palawa women were sold in various shops up until the mid 1950s. Up until the early 1990s the QVMAG in Launceston occasionally sold such shell necklaces albeit that their Palawa authenticity is somewhat ambiguous.
8. William Lanne, died 1869. He was also known as King Billy—his Palawa name was Lanney and his surname was derived from this tribal name. Matson-Green, Vicki and Lehman, Greg November 1993, pers. comm.
9. 'Duchampian'—referring to Marcel Duchamp and his Dada ready-mades (urinal, bottle rack, et al) that became Art in the Modern Art Museum or 'White Box'.
10. NAIDOC—National Aboriginal Islander Day Observance Committee

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