

# TRANSCRIPT for the podcast **Object: stories of craft and design**

## **Season 1: Episode 2 Living Treasure: master of Australian Craft Lola Greeno**

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**Lisa Cahill:** Growing up, most of us have a version of the family holiday. For artist Lola Greeno, it went like this.

**Lola Greeno:** Once a year we would pack up, the whole family would pack up, and go to the muttonbird island. for four weeks. And you know, to us, that was like a working holiday.

**Lisa:** Lola grew up in a close-knit Aboriginal community on Truwana, Cape Barren Island, off the north east coast of Tasmania. From early on, she learned to hold great respect for her cultural beliefs and practices, like bush tucker, snaring, mutton-birding and shell gathering.

**Lola Greeno:** I wanted to learn about the shell necklaces with Mum and luckily I did because they were the most important lessons to learn about.

**Lisa:** All knowledge and skills to hand down, on country, to the next generation.

**Lola Greeno:** That other knowledge is taking the family to the beach with me and picking up the shells and identifying them in that sort of way. It's not just sitting around a table inside of a building, making a bracelet or doing a workshop.

[music]

**Lisa:** This is Object - a podcast about design and contemporary craft in Australia. I'm your host Lisa Cahill from the Australian Design Centre. In Series 1, you'll meet the master craftspeople we call Living Treasures.

What makes them a Living Treasure?

What has driven them to a lifetime love of their craft?

Is it the material, the process, or both?

How do they contribute and advocate for the arts?

And what's their advice for makers who follow in their footsteps?

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**Lisa:** Let's meet Living Treasure Lola Greeno. Lola Greeno is a highly respected and an award winning Tasmanian Aboriginal shell worker, sculptor, installation and fibre artist.

The Australian Design Centre recognised Lola Greeno as a Living Treasure: Master of Australian Craft in 2014, and her Living Treasures exhibition toured seventeen Australian towns and cities to 2019.

**Lisa:** Lola Greeno champions the traditions and culture of the Indigenous women of Tasmania's Cape Barren and Flinders Islands, particularly shell necklace making - the oldest continuing cultural practice in Tasmania.

**Lisa:** Maireener shells, sometimes called rainbow kelp shells, are used to make shell necklaces. Lola strings these tiny, iridescent spiral shells together, as well as making contemporary designs with materials like echidna quills, kangaroo vertebrae, possum skin, and mutton bird feathers.

Lola's work is held in several national collections including the National Gallery of Australia.

In this episode of Object, you'll learn about the role of insects in making a traditional shell necklace, how Lola creates for kids as well as adults, and what she wants every Tasmanian Aboriginal woman to know. Living and working on Palawa land in the north of Tasmania, Lola is an elder of the Truwana people from Cape Barren Island.

[music]

**Lisa:** Welcome Lola.

**Lola Greeno:** Ya pulingina. ['Hello, welcome' in palawa kani language]

[music]

**Lisa:** It's a pleasure for me to be back in Launceston and to sit down with you Lola, on your country. Can you tell me where you work, and what does it look like in your studio?

**Lola:** I live in Launceston and my house is right on the edge of the river Tamar River, Kanamaluka. So I get to look over the water. I don't really have a studio, a particular room for a studio. And luckily, I guess, because shells are so portable, I can move them around into any room.

Lots of days... but if you'd have come to my house two days ago, the dining room table would have been covered in display bust with shell necklaces on them, ready to be photographed to send off samples to Sydney.

So that's the way it works a lot of the time. And other days, if you come a day before I'm going to go out into the schools, you'll see four baskets sitting on the floor all packed with kits to go out into the school, to work with kids.

**Lisa:** So it depends on the day. Depends on the stage that you're at.

**Lola:** Yes, absolutely.

**Lisa:** How are shell necklaces unique to Tasmanian Aboriginal women?

**Lola:** Tasmanian Aboriginal shell necklaces are unique to us. Unique in the way that our earlier women, like Truganini, Fanny Cochrane Smith, way back to those - right through my generation of families. They collected maireener shells in a very unique way, where the women obviously had to study the environment first.

You gotta remember the traditional necklace was just threading the King Maireener.

**Lola:** So the biggest of the species of the Maireener in Tasmania is called the King Maireener. And if you look at some of the old images of one of the tribal men wearing just the King Maireeners, and these handmade string, tied with a knot between each one. That would have taken days.

They used to make really long necklaces too. Some of the earlier ones I read were six foot long, I think. You know, long. And you see some of the ones that Truganini wearing or even Fanny Cochrane Smith worn with several strands around the neck.

So all of those practices and processes are unique to us.

And these shells don't breed everywhere. It's got to be a special place to breed. So they would have had to know their areas, their cultural place. They would have had to know their country.

They wouldn't have been able to look at tide charts like I do today. And they would know by the moon and the stars and when that was going to be a low tide. They would have lived on the edge of the shore and collected their shells and taken a shore. And had to rot them out by the insects, whether it was flies or ants.

Then they had to light a fire and I'm suggesting they probably would have placed their maireener shells in a bigger shell, like an abalone shell, and sat it near the fire to get that green smoke, to smoke the shells. And then rubbed the outer coating off one by one.

And threaded onto sinew from the kangaroo tail. So that was the traditional way of the shell necklace.

**Lisa:** Going back a bit, Lola... I'm interested in your family and your early years and how you learnt to make these necklaces?

**Lola:** I come from Cape Barren Island and from my grandfather, his family goes right back to Mannalargenna, which is the tribal warrior of Northeast and the islands.

We lived in a, not a huge weatherboard house, but we had quite a bit of land around it. I think we had about five acres of land. And the front of it fronted onto the beach, which was lucky.

What I remember is that my mother's grandmother was involved in making the shell necklaces. I believe it went back about six generations. She left jars of shells in a house. My mum was given a house to live in by her uncle. And so my grandmother left jars of shells in there, which was very symbolic, in a sense of handing it to mum.

**Lola:** I wanted to learn about the shell necklaces with Mum.

And, luckily I did because they were the most important lessons to learn about. How she went and picked the Maireeners from the seaweed the traditional way, how she got them to what we call 'rot out' and put them in jars outside, under a tree.

And I said to her, Sometimes I have difficulty, that the insects won't come and do their job. And she said, Well, you put some raw meat in the jar and that'll attract them. And all of those very useful hints.

**Lisa:** So what kind of knowledge is needed to gather the shells?

**Lola:** Well, the first knowledge you need to know about the environment, obviously. The first thing we do, if we're going to go back to the Island - you should be looking for a spring tide. And sometimes you may only get three or four in a calendar year. So we want the best tide, especially for the green maireeners.

It's gotta be less than 0.5 of a metre. You don't really want it any deeper than that because we walked in the water to do some videoing and, you know, I was almost falling over.

So if it gets up around your knees, and you're not so steady on your feet. Especially if there's a soft seabed under you. Or a bit boggy, you can be very unsteady. So that's the safety aspect.

And also, not to over-collect from the one area. Leave it, leave some there for it to re-breed. Because they breed over a twelve month cycle and their full yearly cycle finishes at the end of April. They should have grown to their full potential. After the end of April, they're meant to go out in the deep water and what they call drop their 'spat', which is their eggs. And so they breed and then they come back into shallow water again at the end of the year.

**Lisa:** And I imagine the collecting process would be fairly physically taxing as well?

**Lola:** It is because, you know, you've got the tide That goes out. We always try to get there half an hour before that tide's registered. Say if it was 9.30, we'd get there half an hour early. So you'll just get it as it's going out.

And you've probably got an hour and a half, two hours, to get that before it starts coming back in again. So you're bending over all that time, down to your ankles. It is backbreaking. As I said, and trying to stand steady on your feet as well.

**Lisa:** While the waves are lapping around you..So is the sea telling you something about specific kinds of shells as well?

**Lola:** It does because there's two types of seaweed or kelp that they grow on. So the bubble one you'll always find the blue maireeners, and the green ones are on what we call the 'ribbon weed'.

**Lisa:** Your work goes through four stages to make a necklace. The harvesting, collecting, cleaning and preparing for stringing... Lola, what tools do you use for each of those stages?

**Lola:** I use a tailor's awl to pierce most of the shells. Rex has been helping me as well to drill some of the shells, especially the strong ones. Because then you get a much, direct round hole, so it doesn't shave the thread as it's been threaded. So that's been quite successful. So I've been using a Dremel drill.

**Lisa:** So you learnt to make shell necklaces with your mum. What happened next?

**Lola:** So mum and I did some work together and I think the first exhibition we had was in Queensland in a commercial gallery. And then those necklaces went to the National Gallery of Australia collection.

**Lisa:** So that was back in 1991, that exhibition in Queensland?

**Lola:** Yeah.

**Lisa:** Was that exhibition, back in the early 90s, did that have an impact on you? Was that kind of the start of your career as a maker?

**Lola:** I think it was probably the start. Because Mum was very excited and she got me excited about us working together. The very first shells I made with Mum, I felt like they were mother-daughter patterns, the very first ones.

[music]

**Lisa:** So over the past 30, 40 years since that time, you've made a lot of work. Can you describe some of the objects you've made from that time sort of up till now?

**Lola:** One of the pieces that's currently on tour with [Made/Worn](#) with the cut shells - they were given to me. And this lady, it was just a little

market stall and she saved these for me. “And do you reckon you can do something with these?” And I said, “I certainly will.”

And when I took them home, then I decided to use some white cockles in between to make them into a more effective design pattern from the shells. And they're quite beautiful, startling, in some of those images that you've got on the web or in publications.

**Lisa:** Yeah, it's a beautiful piece.

**Lola:** In that same collection is one that I came up with using the King Maireeners. They're very scarce and hard to get.

So I wanted to place a number [of the shells] that sat around the front of your neck or chest, because I've made it a bit longer. And then I finished it off with the smaller blue maireeners or the green maireeners. And it's been very sought after, I might add. The number I've made have gone out there. And that's very special too.

So it does make you think you can always go back to your traditional way, starting from the traditional shell.

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**Lola:** As needles came into play, the women then experimented using more shells. There's another one called the Rice shell, which is the tiniest shell. And that's threaded directly with the needle onto the thread And a Toothy. And there's a shell called Gull shell and Black Crow and Penguin shells. 'Penguin' for example, is more for the shape and not the color of it, obviously.

I think there's about thirty assorted shells now that are used in the necklaces.

And bringing through to between that and today, I created one called the Cape Barren Goose Necklace, which I really did more for the kids. So that when you look at the goose it's got almost an orangey-colored beak. We've used one, like an oat shell, for that. And the grey gull shell represents the grey feathers. And it was displayed somewhere with language next to it, to help the kids count in language, using the shells. That was pretty special.

**Lisa:** Lola, your work involves the continuing traditional cultural practice of shell necklaces, and also new creative expressions that use other natural materials like echidna quills and mutton bird feathers and

gumnuts. What are the cultural protocols that you observe in your making?

**Lola:** As a young kid living on Cape Barren, apparently my Uncle Ted was one day, had an echidna and he was cleaning it. And so he had it dipped in a bucket and was pulling the fur and the quills out. But I ran in and said to Dad, "Do you know what Uncle Ted's doing?"

**Lola:** He said, "No, what's he doing?" And I said, "Oh, he's out there cleaning the chook, Dad. But first of all, he's got to take out all the splinters." (laughter)

Apparently they called them porcupines. So apparently the meat - I haven't eaten it - it's very much like pork. So they scalded it and cleaned it, and him and Mum ate it. That's how that came to be. You know, the quills are a pretty natural part of the..you know, connected to a story in the family because they used to eat it, it was one of their foods.

But the ones I get now, of course, I apply to DPIWE ([Tasmanian Department of Primary Industries, Parks, Water and Environment](#)) to pick up the roadkill. But I'll take them home and bury them. I tell people I give them a spiritual burial. They can be in the garden for couple of months and it's good for my garden because I leave everything there and just retrieve the quills and give them a scrub and then make something. It was funny, you know, using them the first time because you know, they roll all over the table. I thought, How am I going to keep these in one place?

**Steven Goddard:** One of the things that really struck me about the exhibition in the end was the variety of materials that were included.

**Lisa:** Steven Goddard is a graphic designer, lecturer and exhibition designer who designed Lola Greeno's Living Treasures touring exhibition.

**Steven:** Feathers or echidna quills or with animal vertebrae or kelp. There's this extraordinary creativity in the materiality that she employs.

**Lisa:** So as well as your work or your creative work, you also worked as a Program Officer for Aboriginal Arts Tasmania for 13 years, from 2000 to 2013. What did that work mean for you?

**Lola:** That was amazing because when I got there, they'd had a non-Indigenous person in that position, a 0.2 position, which was hardly anything. Probably back in 2000, people said to me, What do you want to do? And I said, look, I think we should really be trying to ensure that every Tasmanian Aboriginal woman knows how to make a shell necklace

And we also should look, review our old baskets. The plants used in those, those five unique plants, are still growing and we just need to know where they were. And we did, we did both of those.

So we wanted it to go across families and down through families. I feel that that's been very successful in a sense leading the way for that. We revived the shell necklaces by offering residencies, and with the basket exhibition was called *tayenebe*, which was sharing knowledge and skills.

And that exhibition also toured the country for a few years. And that made women proud, and it has encouraged a lot more to do this and carry it on, because it was lost in families. Some through stolen generation cases and other through, mothers had died before they had a chance to teach their daughters about it.

**Lisa:** And you continue to educate children and adults about Tasmanian Aboriginal culture and shell stringing through this sharing of stories in educational workshops. And I know this work is ongoing and critically important for you. You find it rewarding?

**Lola:** I do. Absolutely. The kids are so rewarding. I mean, the day I walked into this class at Riverside Primary the room was decorated in bush tucker, posters, shells, paintings, ocre, cards... And I was almost mesmerised, I almost couldn't concentrate, but I did. Of course.

And then, they started producing these bracelets. And one of them came up with this really...I was staring at her across the table, thinking, Oh my gosh, that's beautiful! How do these kids come up with their lovely patterns and ideas? She'd used one of these big black shells and then sat under a little white shell, and it looked like a pearl oyster floating inside of something. And it was just so special.

**Lisa:** Lola, when you step back and see yourself as one part of a lineage of makers who come..who have come before you, who comes after you?

**Lola:** Who comes after me will be my daughter, obviously. She loves making them when she comes home. And my granddaughters obviously. I want them to be excited about this and they're responsible to carry this on so that this practice doesn't die out. It has to continue. Really important.

My granddaughters have been, and collected. In fact, one of my granddaughters just really went for it. And so she was the star of picking the shells this time, which was great.

**Lisa:** How old is she, Lola?

**Lola:** She's 15. She's very clever. We did a little, a little tiny little workshop on Flinders with some friends from Melbourne and she just went for it. She said, Nan, you want me to do another necklace with those tiny little shells?

**Lisa:** You said, no, they're mine. (laughing) So Lola, is there one thing that stands out from all that you've achieved?

**Lola:** I think the Living Treasure show was the most significant thing that I've done in my life and very proud to have been involved in that. I think, you know, earlier working, you don't quite understand what this means. I understood about putting an exhibition together and I even remember asking one of my ex-lecturers, How many pieces should I be looking at for a solo show?

[music]

**Richard Mulvaney:** We were just delighted when the Australian Design Centre first approached us with the idea of honouring Lola this way, as the 2014 Australian Living Treasure.

**Lisa:** Richard Mulvaney was the Director of the Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery in Launceston, Tasmania.

**Richard:** In many ways, Lola has been the last person to champion herself. She is shy and really, probably not personally aware of what a great artist she was. So it was a proud moment that day when the exhibition opened. And more importantly, it was for Lola to be seen by her family, her friends, her peers, and then of course the wider

Tasmanian community in her own town, was, I thought, just really wonderful recognition for her.

[music]

**Lola:** And then thinking, yeah, but we can divide it into sections. And that part was about the family history.

**Lola:** So having the grandchildren make some bracelets in it and my daughter making a necklace and me. And we had one of mum's in it.

That's where it went out around the country and it really did open it up to the world. I mean, when I first started our local museum hardly had any of our shell necklaces. I know they didn't have one of my mum's at that stage.

And so they gradually bought a few from the local elders. But you know, now I think my necklaces are in every state and territory just about. Probably not in the Northern Territory or WA (Western Australia). We have to do something about that. (laughing)

**Lisa:** And in the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra.

**Lola:** Yes, absolutely.

**Lisa:** In fact only recently, you shared a photo with me of one of your necklaces projected onto the front of Parliament House in Canberra. How did that come about?

**Lola:** Actually the Parliament House Library has just purchased a necklace. And they said, it will be registered in our collection and we may want to put it in this festival. And I said, Oh yeah, that's fine. I'm used to being exhibited. But then all of a sudden, she sends me this beautiful image of it being shone, as a light festival. and I thought, Wow, that was very special.

**Lisa:** It's a beautiful, beautiful image. So, we'll be able to share that with this recording for people to see. And Lola, we spoke about acquisitions a moment ago and how your work is in many public collections. But I think I may be right in suggesting that having the whole of the Living Treasures exhibition acquired by the Queen Victoria Museum and Gallery here in Launceston is probably very important to you.

**Lola:** Yes, absolutely. Because it wasn't known. Like I think I said, before Living Treasures, we weren't on the map.

Nobody knew of us as important and we do have a really significant history to go with our shell necklaces. Not always in other Indigenous communities around the country. Ours is very special and we need to keep telling that story.

[music]

It's a family story. It came from my grandmothers. And most importantly, from my mother, me learning. Now, my granddaughter did her first workshop on Flinders a couple of weeks ago, and I hadn't written anything down for her. And she talked as though I was talking. She was trying to describe the penguin shell. She said, "If you hold it up in your thumb and your forefinger, it's a shape of a penguin, as though it's walking down the beach. It's not the color of a penguin." And I thought, Wow, she's just taking this on, you know, oral history. That's the way we're meant to hand it on. And that will be her family story, that she will have.

That's the strength in the family story. And everybody's story is going to be different. But I'm pretty proud of where mine came from.

[music]

**Lisa:** That was Lola Greeno, looking back on over 40 years of practice. I was really struck by Lola's long standing commitment to passing on this cultural tradition - from working with her own grandkids, to school kids, to her dream of having every Tasmanian Aboriginal woman knowing how to make a shell necklace.

You can see photos of Lola's work on the Show Notes page, including her stunning King Maireener necklace, and there's a behind-the-scenes video of Lola's Living Treasures exhibition that shows her work in detail. Just go to <http://australiandesigncentre.com/podcast>

And in the next episode of Object, you'll meet master potter, Prue Venables.

**Prue Venables:** I just thought, nah. This is what I really want. And suddenly I had two jobs in potteries and was learning a whole lot of

things. But I didn't feel that I was understanding how I could make work that would belong to me.

**Lisa:** Object is a podcast by the Australian Design Centre. We'd like to thank the Australia Council for the Arts for funding support for this podcast. You can follow the Australian Design Centre on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. Object is produced by Jane Curtis in collaboration with Lisa Cahill and Alix Fiveash. Thanks for listening.