

# HONOURING THE PAST/ MAKING A FUTURE



THE TASMANIAN  
ABORIGINAL SHELL NECKLACE  
TRADITION

JULIE GOUGH

*A lot of my work is about cultural awareness, letting people know what we did, what we are doing, and it's about passing on to future families, for them to know about where we come from. I think you've always got to be grounded in your own culture. You know, what means so much to you and your family. I think that's really important to be preserved for younger generations.*

LOLA GREENO

Lola Greeno comes from a long line of shell stringers within a tightly knit network of Aboriginal families who have quietly maintained the shell necklace tradition in Tasmanian waters since time immemorial. It is only in recent years that the significance of this cultural practice has begun to be understood beyond the Aboriginal community. Greeno is in no small part responsible for the recognition and respect accorded Tasmanian Aboriginal people and culture today, in particular by those who are aware of the devastating effect of British colonisation on Tasmania's Indigenous people since the early 19th century.

Since European visitors recorded their incursions onto Tasmania's shores they made note of Aboriginal shell necklace work. French voyagers between 1797 and 1802 specifically brought items to exchange with the local population that included axes, handsaws, fish hooks, knives, handkerchiefs, cloth and clothing, glass beads, medals, mirrors and tin pots. They departed with Aboriginal cultural objects including kelp water carriers, baskets, spears, waddies (hunting sticks), kangaroo skins and shell necklaces, and they documented cultural practices and other manufactured items including necklaces made from fur, sinew, twined plant string and even a pendant consisting of a button and coin.

Shortly after the French departed the British set up their first official encampment in 1803 at Risdon Cove, upstream and across from the place that eventually became Hobart, now the state capital. Little or no cross-cultural exchange occurred between the British colonisers and Tasmania's Aborigines until the 1829–39 interactions by the government-appointed Conciliator of the Aborigines, George Augustus Robinson.

In his journals he recorded how resolutely Aboriginal people managed to maintain cultural activities and respected protocols during this precarious time.

Our ancestors, including those directly affected by Robinson's dispossessions and relocations from their traditional lands, did not stop making during the hardest times. It is in the spirit of acknowledging their determination that the transmission of the knowledge and skills of shell necklace making continues. By their making, Tasmanian Aboriginal people made a future.

Aboriginal people who survived to the 1830s lived in exile, either on Flinders Island, in single family units on mainland Tasmania or across the Bass Strait islands including Cape Barren Island, where they forged a new community of Aboriginal people and straits-people that included ex-sealers, sailors and convicts. From this period Aboriginal cultural material – baskets, necklaces, waddies, model canoes and kelp carriers, even knitting – became objects for gifting and trade with outsiders.

Shell necklaces have always been portable objects, able to be made and exchanged while on the move. Quaker missionaries James Backhouse and George Washington Walker spent extended periods with Aboriginal people in north-west and Bass Strait Tasmania in 1832 and 1833. They provide the best outsider accounts of shell necklace making at this time.

*Both sexes wear strings of shells as necklaces. The shells are of spiral form varying from that of a pea to a horse bean. In their natural state they are not remarkable for beauty, but when the outer coating is stripped off they show varied colours of considerable brilliancy. The Aborigines prepare them for use by burning grass over wood embers, when the action of the pyroligneous acid removes this coating from the shell. Some of their necklaces were formed of kangaroo sinews, one twisted round another so as to resemble braid, and then dyed with red ochre, their favourite colour, and hung in several folds round their neck.*

NOTES FROM GEORGE WASHINGTON WALKER'S JOURNAL (1832)

Contact with outsiders since the 1790s, particularly seafarers, brought access to metal needles, thread and containers, all of which facilitated the women's shell work.

—  
wallaby jawbone and  
kangaroo sinew, 2013



While necklace makers had traditionally employed fibres such as twined plants, bark or kangaroo sinew and punctured shells using eye-tooth of wallaby, the smaller string width of cotton thread allowed use of greater varieties of shell in increasingly smaller sizes. Such 'new' equipment and materials increased the quantity of necklaces being made and facilitated experimentation and personalisation of shell work.

Contemporary shell necklaces are most commonly made from around a dozen different shells that live on diverse beaches across a variety of habitats. Some live under the sand, some in the littoral zone between land and sea, others live on different sea plants, some live on rocks. Makers must hold intricate knowledge of shells and their habitat. The necklaces are object evidence to this knowledge. They are both record and communicator, demonstrating that natural land and seascapes are also our 'culturescapes'.

In 2006 official recognition of the rights specific to Aboriginal people to collect shells was legislated and published by the Tasmanian Parks and Wildlife Service. *The Fisheries (General and Fees) Regulations 2006* now lists 24 shells Aboriginal people are permitted to collect, along with "all species of seagrass, seaweed and other aquatic vascular plants".

“Living shell collection requires arduous cleaning processes sometimes taking months to fully remove the animal, and with maireeners there is the additional, secret means of removing the outer surface to reveal the inner, magically opalescent sub-surface of the shell, the gem within, attested by the necklace work *purrelade*.”

JULIE GOUGH



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warrener shells,  
(from top) polished,  
stripped and natural

**LIST OF SHELLS MOST COMMONLY THREADED  
BY CONTEMPORARY ABORIGINAL NECKLACE ARTISTS**

BLUE GULL SHELL/BLUE PERIWINKLE/  
BANDED PERIWINKLE/BLUE AUSTRALWINK  
*Nodilittorina unifasciata*

BROWN GULL SHELL/CHECKED AUSTRALWINK  
*Nodilittorina praeternissa*

CATS' TEETH/ESTUARINE MUD WHELK SHELL  
*Batillariella estuarina*

CATS' TEETH/VARIEGATED LINED MUD WHELK SHELL  
*Rissoina Rissoina lineata*

CATS' TEETH/VARIEGATED MUD WHELK SHELL  
*Rissoina Rissoina variegata*

CROW/BLACK CROW/BLACK NERITE SHELL  
*Nerita atramentosa*

DARK AND YELLOW BUTTONS/CONNIWINK  
*Bembicium melanostomum*

KELP SHELL/BANDED KELP SHELL  
*Bankivia fasciata*

KING MAIREENER/CHOICE KELP SHELL  
*Phasianotrochus eximius*

MAIREENER (NECKLACE/ELEGANT KELP/  
BEAUTIFUL KELP) SHELL  
*Phasianotrochus bellulus*

MAIREENER (PINK TIPPED KELP) SHELL  
*Phasianotrochus rutilus*

MAIREENER (POINTED KELP) SHELL  
*Phasianotrochus apicinus*

MAIREENER (RAINBOW KELP) SHELL  
*Phasianotrochus irisodontes*

OAT SHELL  
*Dentrititrella pulla*  
*Mitrella species*

OTHERSIDE PENGUINS/PYGYM MARGIN SHELL  
*Mesoginella pygmaeoides*

PENGUIN/FLY-LIKE MARGIN SHELL  
*Austroginella muscaria*

PIPPIES/WEDGE SHELL  
*Paphies cuneata*

RICE/RYE SHELL  
*Truncatella scalarina*

STRIPY BUTTONS/STRIPED-MOUTH CONNIWINK  
*Bembicium nanum*

TOOTHIES/DELICATE AIR BREATHER SHELL  
*Marinula xanthostoma*

YELLOW BUTTON/GOLD-MOUTH CONNIWINK  
*Bembicium auratum*

**ALSO UTILISED BUT LESS FREQUENTLY:**

JEWELLED TOP SHELL  
*Calliostoma armillata*

LIMPET  
*Acmea vincentiana*

STRIPED DOG WHELK  
*Nassarius pauperatus*

TOP SHELL  
*Clanculus dunkeri*

WHITE DOG WHELK  
*Nassarius nigellus*

To make shell necklaces requires intimate knowledge of places to collect, seasons, beaches, sea plants and correct tides for live shell collection. Making necklaces thus takes time, with four stages from collecting to completion of a strand. These stages are: harvesting and collecting shells, cleaning and stripping, sorting and preparing for stringing, and finally the threading, using patterns and combinations of different shells.

Today the most valued shells are the maireeners, which are brilliantly iridescent when stripped. The maireener can be collected dry (dead) on beaches and in rock pools or, with more effort, removed at regular seasons alive from sea plants at particular beaches during very low tides. The shells collected in this way are prized by Aboriginal people for their brilliance in colour and condition; and also esteemed are makers with the ability to form an entire necklace from matching, familial shells. Makers carefully determine and encode the shell types, patterns, lengths and fittings, while knowledge regarding collection sites, shell cleaning and preparation, sale and distribution all evidence healthy continuities, connections and complexities within and across cultures.

Though for most of us a shell necklace captivates with its beauty and mystique, for the makers it is a profoundly meaningful emblem of their integration with the land and with history. It is the embodiment of one's family line, a chain of knowledge preserved through the generations in defiance of the disruption Australia's Indigenous people have endured in recent centuries. In the spirit of this continuity it is essential that this practice evolves under the stewardship of contemporary makers in contemporary times. For instance, the custom of gifting shell necklaces by Aboriginal people to visitors and officials predates the British arrival in Tasmania and continues to this day. Shell necklaces have been presented in recent years to Princess Mary of Denmark and to Camilla, Duchess of Cornwall – in the latter instance in conjunction with a petition to Queen Elizabeth II. In 2009 the National Trust of Tasmania acknowledged the significance of this tradition, listing Tasmanian Aboriginal shell work as a Tasmanian heritage icon.

Thus Lola Greeno is not just an artist, but also a cultural warrior. In the past three years she has conceived, developed and guided the latest iteration of cultural restoration:



*luna tunapri*, a project developed in conjunction with the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery. This project aims to teach Tasmanian Aboriginal women who, though family circumstance, have not had the opportunity to learn traditional shell stringing. This reveals a great strength and confidence in sharing, gifting the skills beyond immediate families to others seeking the knowledge. Previously, Greeno has also instigated workshops such as *tayenebe* (exchange) to reawaken the plant weaving skills of the Aboriginal community, *Project Maireener*, *Our marerlopepetar* and the protocol guide *Respecting Cultures*. Aboriginal Education Tasmania has also recently produced a resource kit about shell work.

Sharing happens through story, from communal and past experiences. In this way shell necklace making is alive, embedded within extended and expanding family relations and connecting with lineages, places, seasons and resources. Lola Greeno has dedicated decades to the caretaking and continuation of our cultural traditions.

*luna tunapri is part of my dream. One thing was the revival of the baskets, the next one was to make sure that women in other areas of Tasmania got the opportunity to participate in the shell necklace cultural practice. Then its their choice whether to carry it on.* •

LOLA GREENO

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