Fowler Museum at UCLA Permanently Returns Culturally Significant Objects to Australia’s Warumungu Community

LOS ANGELES – Today in a handover event held at The Fowler Museum at UCLA 20 items of significant cultural importance were returned to the Warumungu community of Tennant Creek in the Northern Territory, Australia. The permanent, voluntary, and ethical return of the items by the Fowler Museum at UCLA, a renowned museum dedicated to global arts and cultures with an emphasis on Africa, Asia, the Pacific, and the Indigenous Americas, was initiated by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS).
AIATSIS is Australia’s only national cultural institution whose work is solely dedicated to the diverse history, cultures, and heritage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australia. The AIATSIS Return of Cultural Heritage (RoCH) program team have worked closely with Warumungu Elders and the Fowler’s collections team since March 2021 and together identified 20 objects of cultural importance to the Warumungu community.

Ten of the returned Warumungu objects were gifts from private collectors while the other 10 arrived in the Fowler’s collections via the Wellcome Trust. After Sir Henry Wellcome, a pharmaceutical entrepreneur and artifact collector, died in 1936, the trust dispersed his collection, with the Fowler receiving 30,000 items from around the globe in 1965.

The repatriated objects include clubs, Wirli or Nurrulumuru (fighting picks), Marttan (knives), Murkutu (sheaths), Kupija (adzes), and a Wartilykirri (hooked ‘number seven’ boomerang), all of which are being unconditionally returned to Warumungu’s Nyinkka Nyunyu Art & Culture Centre and will be cared for in accordance with the traditions and customs of the Warumungu community.

Key attendees included Warumungu Elders Clif Plummer Jabarula and William (Bill) Ah Kit Jakamarra; California State Senator Ben Allen; California Tribal Affairs Secretary Christina Snider-Ashtari; Silvia Forni, the Shirley & Ralph Shapiro Director of the Fowler Museum; Lionel Popkin, Interim Dean of the UCLA School of the Arts and Architecture; Cindy Fan, UCLA’s Vice Provost for International Studies and Global Engagement; Carole Goldberg, Distinguished Research Professor of Law; Tanya Bennett, Australian Consul-General, Los Angeles; and Leonard Hill, Interim CEO AIATSIS.

The Fowler’s approach to exhibitions and programming increasingly relies on co-creation with curators and artists from the communities of origin of the historical works in the Museum’s collections. The foregrounding of Indigenous perspective is a methodology that shapes many of the Fowler’s current and future projects. This ethical return alongside a year of exhibitions and programming demonstrates the Fowler Museum’s commitment to responsible stewardship and the preservation and exploration of global arts and cultures.

The return of cultural heritage material is a key aspiration of Australia’s First Nations people. It supports the maintenance and revitalization of the world’s oldest continuous living cultures. It facilitates the intergenerational transfer of knowledge, supports reconciliation, truth-telling, and healing. The Australian Government’s, AIATSIS led, RoCH program works to identify and facilitate the return of cultural heritage material held in overseas collections. The program emphasizes the power of collaboration and the significance of ensuring that First Nations peoples are centered in conversations about where their cultural material is best placed and best cared for.
Quotes Attributable

Mr Michael Jones Jampijinpa, Senior Warumungu Man

“It’s very important that a lot of these artefacts are coming back for Warumungu people. A lot of those artefacts that museums have went before us and we didn’t even see them. But we know what they’ve been used for (in the past) and how important it is.

I believe in the old days our people had songs and they told us the story about all those things. Us Elders we can teach our young mob about those things because they can’t just learn about whitefella stuff, they got to learn our ways too, our culture.

I’m happy that a lot of these artefacts are coming back and thank you to all the museums. They’ve thought about how they want to give them back. That’s important.”

The Honourable Linda Burney MP, Minister for Indigenous Australians

“The return of these items to the Warumungu community is a wonderful moment which I hope brings joy to the Traditional Owners.

Bringing history back home is an opportunity for all of us to recognise our shared history and so that it can be celebrated by future generations to come.

Congratulations to the Warumungu Elders for their successful work with the Fowler Museum and AIATSIS to bring these items back home.”

Tanya Bennett, Australian Consul-General, Los Angeles

“I am honoured to represent the Australian Government to support this landmark return of cultural heritage material to their traditional owners, the Warumungu community. This is a significant event for Australia and California. It underlines the importance of working in genuine partnership with Indigenous Peoples to share knowledge and foster understanding and respect.

Australia is committed to embedding First Nations perspectives in our international engagement. Today’s events demonstrate the value of this approach and I extend my sincere thanks to AIATSIS, the Warumungu community and the Fowler Museum for their leadership in ensuring the safe return of these artefacts to their original custodians.”

Silvia Forni, Shirley & Ralph Shapiro Director, Fowler Museum

“Museums have the responsibility to facilitate connections and cultural exchange. This involves not only showcasing the rich diversity of human cultures but also acknowledging historical injustices. The repatriation of ancestral objects is a crucial aspect of this process. By returning these items to their communities of origin, we honor their cultural significance and foster mutual respect. This approach to cultural stewardship ensures the Fowler Museum remains a space for learning and collaboration.”
Leonard Hill, Interim Chief Executive Officer, Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS)

“By returning cultural heritage material to their rightful owners, we ensure that those items are cared for and respected within their original cultural contexts. We also foster on-going dialogue, collaboration and relationships between communities and institutions, encouraging the exchange of knowledges and expertise in safe-guarding cultural heritage for future generations. The return of cultural heritage material promotes an equitable and inclusive approach to heritage preservation that centres the voices of First Nations peoples. In embracing the repatriation of cultural heritage material, we affirm our commitment to the shared heritage of humanity.

I am immensely proud of the work we do at AIATSIS in facilitating the return of cultural heritage material and of the partnership forged between the Warumungu Community and Fowler Museum; a partnership which embodies our collective commitment to truth-telling, understanding and reconciliation between nations and peoples.”