

## ‘Re-carving life: Indigenous artists and the practice of carved emu eggs in the early twentieth century’, Cathleen Rosier, 2018.

It is important to begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which I conducted the Miegunyah Student Project Award; the unseeded land of the Wurundjuri people of the Kulin nations, and pay my respects to the elders, past, present and emerging, and extend this respect to Indigenous Peoples engaging with this research.

Secondly, I’d like to acknowledge the opportunity provided by the Miegunyah Student Project Award to conduct this research.

### PROJECT OUTLINE

A dominant theme in the Grimwade Collection is the depiction of life during 19<sup>th</sup> century from non-Indigenous viewpoints. I was therefore drawn to the only work by an Aboriginal artist, *Emu egg with carved relief*, which is thus an enigma in this collection. Here, the once known artist carves two-dimensional figural scenes in relief style across the surface of an emu egg.

Multiple stories osculate between an independent and dependant narrative style; the scenes include a man spearing a fish, an emu sitting, a dog, a boar, n man smoking a pipe and a woman sitting. The artist arguably requires the viewer to tacitly engage with the object, as the figural scenes dance up, around and across the object.

The idea of loss surrounds this artwork; little is known about the artist and little is thought to be recoverable. I proposed a provenance project in order to counteract this loss discourse. Through provenance, stories surrounding this object are reconceived as sleeping. And through my research journey I sought to awaken the artist.

I began my journey by determining my destination; I wanted to find out who the artist was and where they were from. Through this trip, I could then return knowledge of this work to descendants of the artist and relocate the artwork back with Family and Country.

I designed my research map on the interplay between definitive and interpretative knowledge surrounding this artwork. The Ian Potter Museum can definitively confirm that the work is a carved emu egg acquired by Russell Grimwade before his death in 1945. However, the current attribution to an Aboriginal artist from South East Australia in the early twentieth century is less verifiable.

### RESEARCH UNDERTAKEN

I began the research journey by conducting a literature review on current research examining carved emu eggs. As part of the review, I endeavoured to reveal the white racial frame brought to this research by white scholars. In order to do so, I engaged with interdisciplinary research from Indigenous scholars. This approach demonstrated the biases present in current art historical research by white academics whilst also centring and highlighting research by Indigenous scholars.

I then proposed to shift the methodological approach to the history of this medium. Current research emphasis a Western focus through distinguishing stylistic schools. I proposed to centre the history of the medium through the framework utilised by his and her-stories from contemporary Indigenous artists practicing in this medium. I was therefore able to centre the project on the notions of Family and Place, with the concepts of continuity and connectedness directing the history of the artwork. One outcome of this methodological shift was demonstrating the ingenuity of the artist's practice within the historical context of the period.

Although this path drew me closer to understanding the historical context surrounding the general time of production and likely location of our artwork, I was still unable to find a possible artist. I then returned to the beginning of my research journey and the other piece of definitive information about this artwork; collector Russell Grimwade. Through Grimwade, I could then seek an intersection between the historical context of the medium, the possible location of production, the knowledge of an artist producing in that location and the potential place of purchase.

His and her-stories of contemporary Indigenous artists connected apical artists practicing in this medium to the region of New South Wales around the early twentieth century when Grimwade was thought to have purchased the artwork. I thus sought to connect Grimwade's travels at this time to NSW. By examining Grimwade's journals and photographic albums from the 1900s to the 1930s, I pinpointed the potential purchasing location to Goondiwindi in 1922, on the border of NSW and Queensland. Through this knowledge, I proposed that the work was likely produced around 1922 in or nearby Goondiwindi.

To determine the artist, I then returned to the methodological approach of continuity and connectedness and the importance of Family and Place to contemporary Indigenous artists. I then sought the past by examining his and her-stories of contemporary Indigenous artists practicing in the region surrounding Goondiwindi. Through this approach, I found Gomeri man, Leonard Waters, whose history of artistic practice in carved emu eggs was connected to the Euraba Mission just outside Goondiwindi. Through Waters, I located Gomeri artist Frank Woods (1891–1941), who had been producing carved emu eggs in the Euraba Mission during 1922.

## RESEARCH FINDINGS/OUTCOME

Through the intersection of artist, place, time and collector, I proposed that the artist who produced *Carved Emu egg* was Gomeri artist Frank Woods (1891–1941). I proposed that Russell Grimwade acquired the work off Woods in 1922 when Woods was based in the Euraba Mission, near Goondiwindi on the border of New South Wales and Queensland. I will be writing an article on this research for the University's Cultural Collections Magazine, where I endeavour to engage further with the processes of reconnecting this artwork on Gomeri land and with Woods' descendants, including his artistic descendants.