

# Where do objects in the Pitt Rivers come from?



The Pitt Rivers Museum was founded in 1884 when Lieutenant-General Augustus Henry Lane Fox Pitt Rivers, an influential figure in the development of archaeology and anthropology, gave his collection to the University.

It is generally believed that Pitt Rivers did not collect much material abroad. However, he did obtain objects whilst on active military service in Europe, Malta, and during the Crimean War. Later he collected objects during working trips and holidays abroad, but the vast majority of his collection came from dealers, auction houses, and from fellow members of the Anthropological Institute.



Hei tiki pendant, New Zealand, Pitt Rivers founding collection, 1884.77.6

Although it would seem reasonable to assume that the bulk of the collections at the Pitt Rivers Museum come from General Pitt Rivers himself, in fact the founding collection constitutes only around 7% of the Museum's total collections, which now number over 300,000 objects. The largest number of accessions of objects into the Museum took place in the 1930s, and the Museum is still actively collecting today.

Most people associate the Pitt Rivers Museum with ethnography, but in fact 35% of the collections are archaeological. The number of European objects contained in the collections is also perhaps surprising. These constitute a quarter of the total number of objects.

## How are objects acquired?

When looking at how objects in the Museum were obtained, it is difficult to generalize because the Museum has been acquiring objects for more than a century, from a variety of sources. Objects have come from archaeological digs and anthropological fieldwork trips (collected by anthropologists whilst living in a community they are studying); they have been purchased by explorers or travellers; they have been brought back by colonial administrators; and they have been acquired at sales and auctions in the UK. For this latter group of objects, it is often difficult to trace the context in which they were originally collected. Objects are both purchased by, and donated or bequeathed to, the Museum. They may arrive as

individual objects, or as part of a large, well-documented collection.

Many of the objects in the Museum were used in daily life; for example, the biggest single group of objects is the collection of stone tools. Everyday objects are not necessarily precious or valuable in monetary terms, and they would probably have been thrown away if they had not been collected. Their value is in demonstrating how people lived and thought in different cultures. Their original owners were often happy to give or sell the object to an interested collector.

Below are some examples of objects on display in the Museum's lower gallery. These illustrate both good and bad collecting practices carried out in the past.

## Ancient Egyptian Pottery

More than one third of the Museum's collections are archaeological. Many have been excavated on archaeological digs, with the object locations properly recorded. However, some have a more hazy history. For some objects acquired in the early days of the Museum, we know little about their provenance. It is even possible that some could have been looted from an archaeological site to be sold on the antiquities market.



More than 700 of the archaeological objects in the Museum were excavated by Flinders Petrie (1853-1942) and his team, who dug important ancient Egyptian sites, such as Hawara, Meydum, Abydos, and Amarna.



Jug excavated at Illatum, Egypt in 1889 by Flinders Petrie, Egyptian Middle Kingdom, 1889.27.33

Petrie was renowned for his understanding of the way in which everyday objects – for example pot sherds – can inform us about life in the past. He realized that this type of evidence was extremely important and informative.

Indeed Petrie's scientific excavation techniques were unique amongst contemporary Egyptian archaeologists. He emphasized recording the locations of *all* the objects on a site, rather than just digging up trophy objects.

Some of the objects excavated by Petire ended up in his own personal collection, but the majority went to the Egyptian Museum in Cairo and to other museums around the world.

Unfortunately not all the archaeological objects in the Museum have detailed information about where they come from. When there is no record of an object's context or where it was excavated, an object is of limited use to scholars.

## Benin

In 1897, a British military force embarked on a 'Punitive Mission' that sacked the city of Benin, in present-day southern Nigeria. The reason given by the British for the expedition was the murder of members of a British trade delegation.

Thousands of objects were taken from Benin, brought back to Britain and Europe, and given to museums or sold. In recent years, it has been argued by some people that these objects were looted and ought to be returned or 'repatriated'.



In the Museum there is a display of nearly one hundred objects from Benin.

Thirty-nine of these were taken from the city by Captain George LeClerc Egerton who was Chief of Staff on the British Expedition. These objects have remained in Egerton's family ever since. They now belong to the Dumas Egerton Trust. In 1991 they were loaned to the Museum for 100 years.



Pendant Mask, Benin, Nigeria.  
Collected by Harold Moseley Douglas,  
Governor of Benin City after the Punitive  
Expedition, 1983.25.1

## Fly Whisk

On display in the Museum is a fan-like object made of ostrich feather. This object was used for whisking away flies. It is from Sudan, and belonged to a Nuer prophet named Car Koryom. Neither fly whisks nor ostrich feathers were common amongst the Nuer, so the whisk may be seen as a high-status object reflecting the prophet's importance in Nuer society.



Fly whisk, Sudan, 1928.67.2

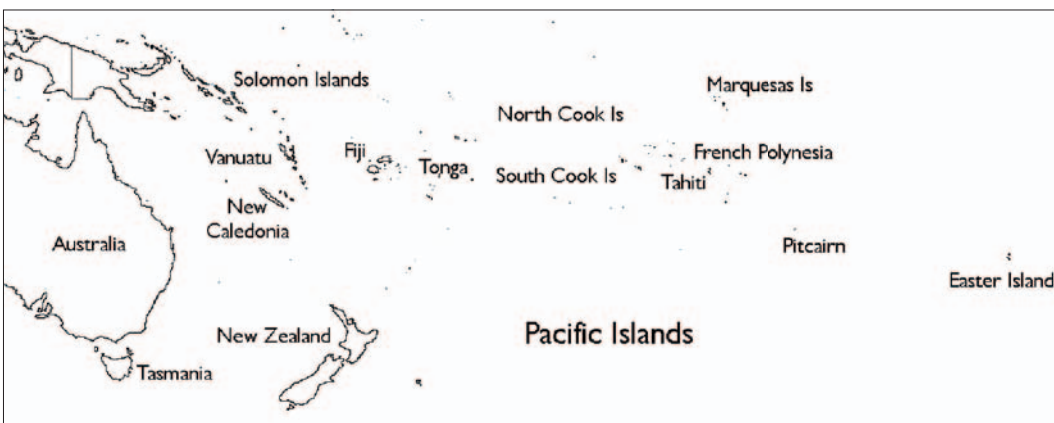
The British colonial administration in Sudan began to take a confrontational approach to Nuer prophets in 1928, viewing them as a dangerous underground movement. Thus despite the fact that Car had previously been viewed as harmless, and indeed active in preventing and settling local disputes, he was arrested.

Although he made a daring escape, he was forced to leave his insignia behind – this flywhisk, a headdress, and a ceremonial staff. To the British administrators these objects were seen as trophies symbolizing their success in controlling local populations and politics.

They arrived on loan to the Museum later in 1928. It is thought they were delivered directly to the Museum by the Governor of Upper Nile Province, C. Armine Willis, during a period of leave in England.



## Forster Collection



Many of the objects in the Museum were acquired fairly – either freely given by people to a collector, or purchased at a fair value.

The Museum's Forster Collection is one of the world's greatest collections of eighteenth-century Pacific art and material culture. The objects were acquired during Captain Cook's second South Sea voyage in the 1770s. They were collected by Johann Reinhold Forster and his son George, who worked as naturalists on the voyage.

The objects they acquired were fairly traded. The voyagers took with them nails, tools, daggers, swords, clothing, cloth, mirrors, and beads with which to trade with

the local population. They traded these objects for essential supplies of food, water, and timber, and also for the 'curiosities' that are now in the Museum.

Mahine was a high-ranking individual from the Society Islands who travelled with the voyagers. He appreciated that the value in Tahiti of the red feathers acquired on Tonga was greater than anything from Europe. It was only when the voyagers had these red feathers to exchange that the Tahitians began to sell their ornate mourning dresses, like the one pictured here.



Mourning Dress, Tahiti  
PRM 1886.1.1637

## Collecting Today



Figures from a set entitled 'Tea Party' by MaHlambisa.  
Purchased for the Museum in Cape Town by a member of staff  
in 1996, South Africa, 1996.24.15

The Museum is still acquiring objects, through donations, bequests, and purchases, and also from staff and students during their fieldwork.

The Museum's acquisitions take place within the framework of an Acquisitions and Disposals policy. In accordance with the Museum Association's Code of Ethics, the Museum does not accept items with dubious provenance, and takes care to verify the ownership history of an object, rejecting any item suspected

to have been stolen or taken in a time of conflict. The Museum also follows the 1970 Unesco Convention (on the means of prohibiting and preventing the illicit import, export and transfer of ownership of cultural property). Adherence to this Convention means rejecting any item where it is suspected that, since 1970, it has been stolen, or illegally excavated, removed from a site, or traded. When an object is given to the Museum now, we systematically record the information given by the donor about the object's history and context. This information is added to the Museum's computer database.

## Further Reading

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## Websites

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DCF What's Upstairs?

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