

CIDOC 2018 - Proposal

Mike Jones

Research Associate, Museums Victoria

Consultant Research Archivist, The University of Melbourne

Victoria, Australia

m.jones@unimelb.edu.au

www.mikejonesonline.com

Biography

Mike Jones is an archivist, collections consultant, and historian based in Melbourne, Australia. In 2018 he is working on finishing his PhD at the University of Melbourne looking at the history and documentation of archives in museums. He is also a Research Associate at Museums Victoria, and continues to work as a researcher, archivist, and freelance consultant. In recent years Mike has published and presented widely in Australia and internationally, and is an active participant in communities and associations related to archives, museums, libraries, and the digital humanities.

Title

Collections in the expanded field: relationality and the provenance of artefacts and archives (Full length paper)

Abstract

In 2017 archaeological evidence was published which indicates modern humans first arrived in Australia around 65,000 years ago. Through the countless generations since Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples built deep connections to the landscape, developed rich material culture infused with story and myth, and used oral and ceremonial traditions to transmit knowledge over thousands of years. Yet, since European invasion at the end of the eighteenth century the provenance of ethnographic and institutional collections was largely been documented with reference to white collectors and colonial institutions.

Attitudes are starting to change. Recent decades have seen significant work on the repatriation of ancestral remains and moves away from the idea of the authoritative institution toward participatory museums, keeping places, and the co-creation/co-curation of knowledge. But, though these activities rely on effective access to collections, their origins, and their stories, the structure and content of much museum documentation continues to lag behind contemporary practice.

This paper looks at the documentation of key Australian ethnographic and anthropological collections, such as those associated with John Helder Wedge, Baldwin Spencer and Francis Gillen, Alfred Haddon, and Donald Thomson. Examining this material through the lens of changing attitudes toward provenance – including archival notions of parallel and societal provenance – in conjunction with recent developments in material culture theory highlights the limitations of existing documentation. The author concludes by arguing for a more relational approach to provenance which better encompasses the complexities of representing often-competing institutional, archival, oral, and community perspectives.