



CATALOGUE LAUNCH

AUSTRALIA

Vatican Museums Indigenous Collection

PRESS RELEASE

Vatican City-Australia, May 2018

AUSTRALIA. *The Vatican Museums Indigenous Collection* is the title of the first Catalogue of the Australian Collection held at the *Anima Mundi* Museum of the Vatican Museums. The volume will be presented to the public on Tuesday, May 29, 2018, at 5pm in the 'Salone di Raffaello' of the Vatican Pinacoteca during Australia's Reconciliation Week.

The Week marks two major events in Australia's history. At the 27 May 1967 referendum, non-Indigenous Australians voted overwhelmingly to alter the Australian Constitution to allow the Australian Government to make laws for Indigenous Australians and include them in the census. On 3 June 1992, the High Court of Australia ruled on the rights of Indigenous Australians to native title or historic ownership of the Australian continent. Reconciliation Week is therefore a time to recognise Australia's Indigenous culture and foster positive efforts toward further reconciliation.

Participating in the presentation on May 29, 2018 will be His Eminence Cardinal Giuseppe Bertello President of the Governorate of Vatican City State, Dr. Barbara Jatta, Director of the Vatican Museums, Fr. Nicola Mapelli, Head of the *Anima Mundi* Museum of the Vatican Museums, Ms. Katherine Aigner Editor of the Catalogue, H.E. Ms. Melissa Hitchman, Ambassador to the Australian Embassy to the Holy See, Mr. Craig Ritchie Chief Executive Officer of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies and Mr. Pedro Wonaeamirri, artist with the Jilamara Arts & Crafts Association, Melville Island.

The Catalogue (in English and Italian) edited by Ms. Katherine Aigner, is a joint publication of the Edizioni Musei Vaticani and Aboriginal Studies Press. It harnesses scientific rigor and passion to present the cultural works of the Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples conserved in the Vatican Museums. Years of research, travel, and consultation with those communities led to the creation of a Catalogue that intertwines specialized knowledge with Indigenous stories and spirituality, activities and customs. They reveal the awareness of Australian Indigenous identity, values, dignity, and attachment to nature. The volume also features extraordinary vintage and contemporary photographs of spectacular Australian landscapes and Indigenous peoples.

The Catalogue opens with the history of the formation of the Australian Collection. In the mid-nineteenth century, Pius IX received the first artifacts donated by Indigenous Australians. More objects were acquired in the following decades, and other works were donated for the Vatican Exposition commissioned by Pius XI in 1925. Additional gifts were received by the Popes during their trips to the Australian continent. Paul VI was the first to visit Australia, doing so in 1970. He was followed by St John Paul II, who traveled there twice, in 1985 and 1995, and by Benedict XVI in 2008. Further donations were received on the occasion of the canonization of the first Australian saint, St. Mary of the Cross McKillop, in 2010. Today there are about 300 pieces in the collection; some of them are part of the permanent Australia display in the *Anima Mundi* Museum, curated by Ms. Katherine Aigner.

This extraordinary and multi-coloured display of art and artifacts is living testimony of the catholicity—that is, the universality—of the Church through the application of iconography and the syncretism of Indigenous and Christian beliefs. Currently the *Anima Mundi* Museum is closed for renovation, but some works from the Australian Collection will be on display during the presentation of the *Australia* Catalogue.

The publication highlights the respect the Catholic Church has for Indigenous Australians and its recognition of the profound value of their culture and spirituality. The decision by the Pontiffs to assign to the Vatican Museums the gifts they received ensured those works of art were endowed with an exceptional mission: to become true cultural ambassadors, useful instruments for promoting respect and mutual understanding. Fr. Nicola Mapelli and Ms. Katherine Aigner went a step further and used the collection to reconnect with the descendants of the communities from which these artifacts originated.

Reconnection is therefore the key word of this catalogue. It is the guiding principle for developing a process of reconnecting cultural artifacts and works of art with their communities of origin. Reconnecting creates an intergenerational dialogue from which emerges themes especially relevant today: the importance of land, law, and culture, and the conservation of cultural heritage.

The *Australia* Catalogue is one expression of the Vatican Museums' response to the warning by Pope Francis in the Encyclical *Laudato Si'*: "*Together with the patrimony of nature, there is also an historic, artistic and cultural patrimony which is likewise under threat ... Ecology, then, also involves protecting the cultural treasures of humanity in the broadest sense* (143). By bringing together a scientific methodology that also speaks to the wider public, this catalogue helps us understand how important it is to protect the artistic and cultural patrimonies we have received from those who have gone before us and to hand them on to future generations, recognizing that today more than ever, beauty is to be found in diversity.

While 25,000 visitors will have the opportunity every day to view the Australia Collection once the *Anima Mundi* Museum reopens, Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull has welcomed the Catalogue for those unable to visit the Museum in-person as a "*remarkable guide*" to the "*Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander custodians who have cared for our country for over 60,000 years... and their elders who continue to hold the knowledge of their rich and diverse cultures*".

"*As Director of the Vatican Museums – said Dr. Barbara Jatta – I sincerely hope that this publication will raise awareness of the collection of Indigenous Australian art and cultural heritage, even among those individuals who are unable to visit the Vatican Museums and, above all, that it will foster deeper involvement with Indigenous communities themselves*".