



NSW Coast Indigenous Tied Bark Canoe

Vessel number

HV000499

Description

The Indigenous tied-bark canoe (EO78217) came into the Australian Museum collection between 1975 and 1982, but is much older than this period. It came to the museum as part of the Alexander Morrison Collection of Indigenous

material, through a dealer John Magers. This collection is a wide range of implements and artefacts from NSW and Queensland regions that was collected in the late 19th century and early 20th century by Alexander Morrison. He was from Singleton in the NSW Hunter Valley, where he ran a printing business, published a newspaper and became the district coroner for about 30 years. Morrison was an avid collector of many things, and appears to have been influenced by a widespread community interest in Indigenous people to begin collecting Australian Indigenous artefacts as well. A lot of material came from the St Clair Mission near Singleton, and included people from the Wonnarua, the Awabakal, Worimi and Darkinjung communities. It is thought that many of the objects were made for Morrison on commission to represent an object that was used in their traditional lifestyle. There are records of this collection being displayed only once by Morrison. For the visit of the State Governor Sir Harry Rawson on 27 April 1904, a ceremonial arch was erected in the main street of Singleton. The arch decoratively displayed artefacts from Morrison's collection and was the focal point for the processional route of the Governor. On each side of the arch there is a canoe at the top, but the indistinct nature of the image makes it difficult to confirm if this canoe was included. The single sheet of eucalyptus bark is most likely to be a stringy bark, the tree most widely used for bark canoe construction. Carefully prised off a tree chosen so there were no branches or other flaws in the sheet, the bark is inverted, cleaned of loose exterior material and thinned slightly at the ends. The usual method of forming the ends involved having the bark soaked in water and then heated over a fire so that it became more supple and was then relatively easily folded fan like at each end, with around 5 or so folds. These are then pegged with a short branch and bound with strips of bark to hold them in place. The folding pulls the bottom upwards creating an overhang for both ends, giving a good shape to operate in waves in protected waters. The sides between both needs remain relatively parallel and rise up at the sides to give sufficient freeboard. The craft is missing any branches or beams to act as frames or any bark ties between the top edges which work together to support the hull and are clearly visible in different forms on the many illustrations of canoes done by artists in the early days of colonisation. However there is evidence of holes in the topsides at two points which would be suitable for bark ties, suggesting they were in place or were intended to be used. The size of the craft is perhaps a little small to easily support a large adult, however it could support a youth and has dimensions similar to a tied-bark canoe recorded by artist Oswald Brierly in 1864 on the south coast of NSW. The actual origins of the craft and where it came

from are not clear. The details of the shape and structure suggest a craft from the Sydney region or to the south on the coast, where it is confirmed they built with tied ends that pulled the ends upwards as the sides were folded in. This is distinct from craft in the Kempsey and coastal areas north of there where it is confirmed that they put a distinct crease across the hull in their tied and folded ends to get the bow and stern to stand upwards. At this point, it is not clear if craft from the Hunter and central coast region were of the Sydney or Northern rivers style. If they are of the southern type then the attribution to the area is valid, otherwise it may come from elsewhere to the south, and was possibly collected by Morrison or Magers from another source. The craft is in storage at the Australian Museum and has been studied by Indigenous communities looking to building these types of canoes again.

Dimensions

Vessel Dimensions: 3.5 m x 0.44 m (11.48 ft x 1.44 ft)