

Basic Detail Report



North Queensland Indigenous Skinbark Canoe

Vessel number

HV000500

Date

early 1900s

Description

The Indigenous skinbark canoe (EO15725) came into the Australian Museum Collection as part of a wide range of Indigenous material collected by Walter Edmund Roth from Northern Australia. Roth (1861-1933), was a teacher, physician, anthropologist and protector of Aborigines. His interest in Aboriginal people was established by the mid-1890s, and he observed and recorded aspects of their culture, largely during his period as the first Protector of Aborigines for the Queensland Government from 1898 until 1906. He was based in Cooktown but travelled extensively with a brief to prevent exploitation as well as record their culture. Part of his responsibilities was to record Aboriginal cultures. Roth appears to have established good relations with indigenous communities, but when he came under political attack due to some images he took that were considered insensitive, he resigned in August 1906 on grounds of ill health and left Australia in December. From 1907 Roth was employed in British Guiana (Guyana) and continued studies of their culture. The canoe may have been made a few years prior to the 1905 date. The type is known locally in western Cape York as a skinbark canoe and is usually made in one piece from the bark of a messmate or stringy bark tree (*Eucalyptus tetradonta*). Both ends have a raked profile that rounds into the straight bottom. The canoe is formed by removing the bark in a single sheet from the tree, then heating it to soften it to flatten it out before shaping. Messmate bark can only be removed easily at the end of the wet season when the sap is up the tree trunk, whereas in the middle and late dry season the bark is too tightly adhered to the trunk to remove without cracking it. The end of the sheet is folded in two and placed in a vice made from two bloodwood or wattle sticks tied with strips of coastal hibiscus bark (*Hibiscus tileaceus*), the profile is cut with a sharp mud shell (*Geloina erosa*) and then carefully sewn together using heat-softened lengths of Water Vine (*Flagellaria indica*). A bone stiletto is used to pierce the holes in the bark. The sewing is an outstanding feature of the even and neat work which would be required to ensure the joint was held closely together to remain strong and watertight throughout. The inner seam on both ends was sealed with sugar bag wax (from wild bees of the *Trigona* spp.) or sometimes with clay. The parallel sides throughout about half of the craft's length are normally held in position with two straps made of hibiscus bark that are tensioned with two sticks that cross each other in an 'X' pattern. A forked end is pushed under the strap and the other end pushed down against the hull on the opposite diagonal side. This is a clever construction detail which helps stiffen the craft and hold its shape, however the sticks are

now missing from this craft and the ties have deteriorated. There are some additional sheets of bark in the interior which the occupants sat on. The craft is on display at the Australian Museum suspended over other artefacts in the display, and the neat sewn ends are an easily viewed feature of the craft.

Dimensions

Vessel Dimensions: 4.5 m x 0.45 m (14.76 ft x 1.48 ft)