

Basic Detail Report



Melville Island Indigenous sewn bark canoe

Vessel number

HV000567

Description

The Melville Island Indigenous Sewn Bark Canoe is part of the collection at the Pitt Rivers Museum at Oxford University, England where it is numbered 1915.10.17. It was donated to the museum by Henry Fry. The canoe is about 4.0 metres long and around 750mm deep. It is built from an undetermined species of tree bark and has branches lashed onto the edges, while the fore and aft ends are sewn together. The stitching is in an intricate double over-under pattern creating a diamond shape series of stitches around the centreline join between both sides. The branches or saplings which extend for almost the full length of the craft keep the sides virtually parallel. The branches are lashed to the outside of the hull with fibres that are passed around the branch and through the bark sides. Four woven ropes run across the hull and are tied to the side branches. Both ends are shaped in profile with a fishtail outline. The top and bottom of the tail shape is not symmetrical about the centreline, and compares well with the shapes seen on the Tiwi canoes HV00528 and HV000529 in the National Museum of Australia collection. In contrast, the canoes from Bathurst Island HV000159 and Melville Island HV000368 in the South Australian Museum collection both have straight or slightly curved boat-shaped endings. HV000368 also has small branch frames which are not apparent on any of the other bark canoes from the Tiwi Islands that are currently documented on the ARHV. The bark likely to have been used for the canoe is either a woollybutt (*Eucalyptus miniata*) or stringy bark (*Eucalyptus tetradonta*). It is cut and peeled off the tree, often in one piece that circles the trunk. The bark sheet is inverted so that the inside of the bark becomes the outside of the canoe, and the ends are thinned to make them more pliable for forming. The dead and loose material on the outside of the bark is removed by fire, and the heat from the fire makes the bark more pliable and helps as the ends are folded together, then cut to the distinct fishtail profile. The ends are sewn together along the top edge and around the fish-tail cuts with a split cane (identified on other canoes as *Calamus australis*) over stitching the open seam. This is further sealed with wax from a honey bee comb or other natural resins. On the inside clay, fibre and resin can be used as well to caulk the seam. Both ends have sides which bend sharply outwards over a short distance, before the remainder of the hull forms a parallel-sided section, supported by the sapling branches on the edge and ties athwartships. These are secured to the edges of the bark hull with more cane stitching. This combination of bark panel and ties forms a quite rigid structure and allowed the craft to be used around the island and across the narrow strait to Bathurst Island. It is possible it may have been capable of use in open water, such as the crossing of the Clarence Strait between Melville and Bathurst Islands and mainland Australia. These islands are known as the Tiwi Islands, and the indigenous communities of the region used these craft for transport, fishing and hunting both turtle and dugong. Sewn bark canoes were probably the original method of canoe construction for the

Tiwi community and would have been the sole known method of building a canoe until Macassan traders introduced the dugout log canoe, possibly as early as the 1600s. It is understood that sewn bark canoes were still made in conjunction with the newer dugout log canoes. The canoe is thought to have been on display in the Museum since its donation in 1915. In 2013 it was removed for examination and conservation, and then returned to permanent display on the ground floor (Court) of the Museum.

Dimensions

Vessel Dimensions: 4 m x 0.75 m (13.12 ft x 2.46 ft)