

Memoirs of the Queensland Museum | **Culture**

Volume 13

## **Excavating MacGregor: reconnecting a nineteenth century collection from Papua New Guinea**

© Queensland Museum  
PO Box 3300, South Brisbane 4101, Australia  
Phone: +61 (0) 7 3153 3000  
Web: [qm.qld.gov.au](http://qm.qld.gov.au)

National Library of Australia card number

ISSN 2205-3220

E ISSN 2205-3239

### NOTE

Papers published in this volume and in all previous volumes of the *Memoirs of the Queensland Museum* may be reproduced for scientific research, individual study or other educational purposes. Properly acknowledged quotations may be made but queries regarding the republication of any papers should be addressed to the Series Editor. Copies of the journal can be purchased from the Queensland Museum Shop.

A Guide to Authors is displayed on the Queensland Museum website [qm.qld.gov.au](http://qm.qld.gov.au)

**A Queensland Government Project**  
Typeset at the Queensland Museum

# Foreword

The Queensland Museum has expanded from modest beginnings in 1862, to a multifaceted state-wide network. In the same period our collections have grown to represent histories and cultures of importance to Queensland. However, in the twenty-first century, it is important that we also acknowledge the difficult legacy of the collections. In the case of the Official collection from British New Guinea, brought together by the first Administrator of the colony, Sir William MacGregor, which this volume explores in forensic detail, it must be recognised that these cultural objects were acquired in unequal, and at times violent, interactions with local people.

This volume of the Memoirs of the Queensland Museum – Culture series, *Excavating MacGregor: reconnecting a nineteenth century collection from Papua New Guinea*, presents a detailed analysis of the acquisition of the Official collection. Using the mix of objects in the collection and their physical attributes, together with painstaking archival research, the research explores relationships between colonial officers and the Papuan community, and also considers the variable and problematic colonial interactions through which the large and varied array of objects was obtained.

The archaeologically based methodology of investigating the Official (MacGregor) collection as an assemblage is part of the ARC funded Discovery grant (DP150103518) “Excavating MacGregor: Re-connecting a colonial museum collection”. A key research goal was to “bring the collection out of the cupboard” so that it was accessible to the descendants of the people who made and used the items, researchers, and the public at large. This extensive study explores approximately 11,000 objects dispersed through 5 museums across the world. The Queensland Museum holds a significant component, established to preserve “a ‘type’ collection of all kinds of material culture that would inform the descendants of the Papuan people about their history” (Torrence et al., this volume: 7). In light of MacGregor’s stated intention that the collection was made for the Papuan people, Queensland Museum committed to return two thirds of the objects to Papua New Guinea, most of which was transferred to the Papua New Guinea National Museum and Art Gallery between 1980 and 1992. For Queensland Museum, the repatriation of a collection held for almost 100 years was an important milestone in our history.

The renewed focus this research project has given to the portion of the Official collection held by Queensland Museum, and the virtual reuniting of the collection to understand it in its entirety, is another important step forward. Through the analysis of the collection, it has been made more accessible to community. The work done to better document the collection also demonstrates the ongoing benefits for the Museum and its collections of research collaborations with universities and the opportunity to undertake collection-based research through funding such as that provided by the Australian Research Council.

Queensland Museum is pleased to present this volume exploring the Official collection, and the underpinning research that highlights the remarkable material culture of Papua New Guinea.

**Dr Jim Thompson**

CEO Queensland Museum Network

September 2022