

Apology to Tasmanian Aboriginal People

Delivered by Brett Torossi, Chair of the Board of Trustees of the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery

15 February 2021

We are here today on the lands of Tasmanian Aboriginal people, the traditional owners and custodians of the land and waterways of *Iutruwita* (Tasmania). We wish to pay our deepest respects to Tasmanian Aboriginal people, and Elders past and present. The Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery sits on the land of the *Muwinina* and *Mumirimina* people. We wish to pay our respects to all of these people, and acknowledge their sovereignties in land and sea and sky, never ceded.

To belong to a place is something non-Aboriginal Tasmanians are only beginning to comprehend. We acknowledge the beauty of this land and the way the river upon which we live, and *kunanyi* that watches over us, have shaped our lives and the lives of all who have come before us. We see that belonging lives at the heart of responsibility and connection.

Today we find the courage to take responsibility for the past. Today we own our actions and culture that have caused such pain to Tasmanian Aboriginal People. This moment is long overdue.

Today is a day of enormous importance and gravity. Today we, the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, apologise to Tasmanian Aboriginal people for nearly 200 years of practices that we acknowledge were morally wrong.

For many years Tasmanian Aboriginal people have called for the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery to tell the truth about its part in a difficult and traumatic past. We cannot move forward together without truth telling, without addressing the past, and the previous museum practices that have caused profound suffering for Tasmanian Aboriginal people and their community.

On behalf of the whole organisation, the Board wants to acknowledge openly, permanently record, and apologise for the institution's actions and declare that such behaviour will never happen again.

The Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, and people in a variety of roles associated with this institution, were part of, and deeply implicated in, acts which were heedless of, or knowingly contrary to, the wishes and cultural practices of Tasmanian Aboriginal people. These injustices, and the consequences for Tasmanian Aboriginal people must be owned and acknowledged not simply as facts of history but with our hearts and our minds.

Beginning in 1803, the violence of European invasion and colonisation began a process of loss and dispossession for Tasmanian Aboriginal people across *lutruwita*. During this time, from the very beginnings of colonisation, the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery participated in practices, including the digging up and removal, the collection, and the trade of, ancestral remains of Tasmanian Aboriginal people (or respectfully, the Old People.) This was done largely in the name of racial sciences – practices of ethnography and anthropology which were racist, discriminatory, and have long been entirely discredited.

These practices showed profound disrespect for Aboriginal people, their families and communities, and their vital spiritual and cultural practices. The remains of Aboriginal people were exploited as artefacts and objects of research, their burial sites were violated, and the importance of Aboriginal spiritual beliefs and cultural heritage were ignored, trivialised and dismissed. There is ample, undisputed evidence of this. Aboriginal people have known this. Members of the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, its former directors, and staff have known this. The evidence is in the minutes of the institution itself, in reports, in letters, diaries, and in newspapers – it is on the public record. But it has also been hidden and forgotten, and too often denied. We know Tasmanian Aboriginal people do not forget that this is what has occurred.

It is well documented that staff, and those associated with the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, solicited and paid for the removal of Tasmanian Aboriginal ancestral remains for collection and trade, and used ancestral remains and material culture in museum and scientific exchanges across the nation and around the globe. There was also resistance to the repatriation of ancestral remains of Tasmanian Aboriginal people back to *lutruwita* so that the Old People might rest again in the earth of home.

It is beyond dispute that the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery disrespected the remains of *Trukanini*. It created public displays and interpretation of her remains. Her wish to be buried in the D'Entrecasteaux Channel, so her body could not be cut up, was disregarded. If we imagine such a practise being enacted on our own grandmother, if we imagine the burial sites of our loved ones being dug up, and their bones being traded and used for scientific research, or put on show in museums and galleries across the world, we begin to understand the appalling hurt our predecessors caused the Tasmanian Aboriginal people.

It is amply clear that the Board of the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery did not fully respect the Tasmanian Aboriginal Community's wishes to actively engage and find appropriate ways to repatriate the remains of loved ones. We did not enable community requests, and legal codes and the bureaucracy were too often used as a shield and an excuse.

Ancient cultural artefacts of spiritual and ceremonial value were removed without consultation with Tasmanian Aboriginal people. The removal of the *Preminghana* petroglyphs from the West Coast in the 1960s is a key example of such practices.

The Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery created inappropriate displays and exhibitions concerning Tasmanian Aboriginal people, and promulgated false ideas of 'extinction'; that is, that there were no Aborigines in Tasmania after *Trukanini*.

For much of its history, the institution did not recognise or respect the deep, continuing knowledge of Tasmanian Aboriginal people, and did not ask them to be the curators of their cultural material held in the collections, or to tell their stories.

We acknowledge that all of these actions have been damaging to Tasmanian Aboriginal people and to the Community. We acknowledge and own the pain that we have caused.

As a museum in the European tradition, we also traded in the remains of the ancestors of other nations, and brought them to this Country. We acknowledge the insensitivity and disrespect shown by these practices to Tasmanian Aboriginal people and to the peoples of other cultures and lands.

It is heartbreaking to consider the trauma inflicted on Aboriginal people by all these practices, trauma that echoes down through time, and cannot begin to be healed without full and fearless recognition.

For all of these actions and for your pain, suffering and ongoing trauma, we, the Board of the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, are truly and completely sorry. Although words can never erase the actions of the past, they have a permanence and potency. We know we have caused heartbreak, and we acknowledge this honestly.

We understand that some Tasmanian Aboriginal people may not wish to accept our apology; indeed may reject it.

We want to find a way of being together that is open-minded and whole-hearted, without ever forgetting the past. We understand that this may be hard, and difficult emotional business for Tasmanian Aboriginal people, and it asks for trust where there has been none.

We offer and hope that this apology will be received in the spirit that it is given. We give it unreservedly without asking for anything. We know and mourn that it is so belated.

The Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery commits to changing its practices. We commit to creating a shared and consultative vision – based on respect and good faith – to tell the rich, varied and difficult stories of these islands. We want the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery to be a safe place for Tasmanian Aboriginal people in the future.

The Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery has supported repatriation programs over the last thirty years and, through knowledge shared by Aboriginal people, we have learned to better respect Tasmanian ancestral remains, and secret-sacred heritage materials.

Through participation in the creation and development of the Aboriginal Advisory Council, Tasmanian Aboriginal people have engaged with us and have helped guide the organisation. We wish to acknowledge the extraordinary bravery and trust of the earliest members of the Tasmanian Aboriginal Advisory Council who paved the way for a new direction, giving us a keen awareness of what could be possible for the future.

Tasmanian Aboriginal people have been appointed to roles within the museum, greatly improving truth telling and respectful treatment, display and interpretation of cultural heritage. For this we are deeply appreciative.

Since 2003, learning and exchange have deepened. Through Aboriginal-led exhibitions and projects, such as *ningina tunapri* and, later, *parrawa, parrawa!*, *tayenebe* and *kanalaritja*, we have taken positive steps and have jointly fostered and supported new and more respectful ways of working together.

These positive steps do not in any way offset, or make-up for, the injustices and practices of the past.

We are returning the *Preminghana* petroglyphs. We will continue to work with the community to complete that process as soon as possible. Trustees have also recently discussed the Greenes Creek Petroglyphs and their repatriation.

We have committed to working alongside museums and galleries around Australia to enhance engagement with all First Peoples by implementing the Australian Museums and Galleries Association Indigenous Roadmap.

We want today, and every day forward, to do better. Through speaking the truth, we wish to make visible and real the past that haunts this institution so that a new way of seeing and living together in community is possible.

On the 29th of May 2017, over three years ago, the Uluru Statement from the Heart was delivered by the First Nations National Constitutional Convention to the Australian people. The Aboriginal writers of the statement placed history and truth telling, of Aboriginal sovereignty and power, at the very forefront of agreement making. All over this nation, and on this island of *lutruwita*, Aboriginal people have called for truth telling about the difficult past and its ongoing damaging legacies today.

We commit to a different future working with you to ensure we:

- Recognise the right to self-determination of Tasmanian Aboriginal People and all First Peoples
- Recognise that the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery is the custodian of art and cultural materials that are owned and stewarded in perpetuity by the Tasmanian Aboriginal people and First Peoples around the world
- Recognise that the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery is the custodian of contemporary art and cultural materials purchased from First Peoples around the world
- Will acknowledge Country at all Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery sites and online, and ensure Tasmanian Aboriginal Community is always and obviously present
- Will listen deeply to, and learn with, Tasmanian Aboriginal people, respecting the cultural knowledge and spiritual values of the Aboriginal Community
- Will work as a facilitator with the Aboriginal Community in Tasmania on projects and initiatives that tell First Peoples' stories
- Will work in partnership with the Community, and use our exhibitions, programs, research capacity and the resources of the State Collection to tell the truth about Tasmania's history of colonisation and the resilience of Tasmanian Aboriginal people
- Review and revise Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery policies so they are culturally appropriate, and implement new protocols for how Tasmanian Aboriginal people and First Peoples are welcomed and included

- Will improve the cultural competency of the Board, staff and volunteers
- Work to share access to First Peoples material(s) held at the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery with communities across Australia and overseas, and support repatriation when return is requested
- Take a leadership role, as the State museum and gallery, in encouraging the adoption of culturally appropriate policies and practices by museums and galleries across Tasmania and Australia
- Embed these practices in the governance and leadership of the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery
- Never forget our shared past or the long history of Tasmanian Aboriginal people and *lutruwita* (Tasmania).

In conclusion, in the year 2021, the Board of the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery on behalf of the whole organisation, wants to openly and whole heartedly acknowledge, permanently record, and deeply apologise for the institution's past actions relating to the Tasmanian Aboriginal people.

I am sorry. We are sorry.

In offering these words today, we take responsibility for all that has kept us apart.

From this day forth, this apology will live as a permanent and enduring record of this day and reinforce our profound commitment to the Tasmanian Aboriginal people. We commit, now and always, to a future that defends, sustains and illuminates Tasmanian Aboriginal culture here at the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery and throughout Tasmanian life.

We don't know what togetherness looks like, but perhaps we can find that place together.

We hope that today marks a more honest way of being with the past, and a new sense of responsibility and belonging to all who call this beautiful island of *lutruwita* home.

Thank you everyone for your presence here today and for hearing our apology.