Tayenebe
Tasmanian Aboriginal women's fibre work

Tasmanian Aboriginal women and girls have revitalised the fibre skills of their ancestors, in an exhibition from the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery that demonstrates unique connections with the land and sea. **Andy Greenslade**, curator at the Tasmanian museum's partner organisation the National Museum of Australia, describes the cultural significance of these ancient practices.

As I EASE up the drive of one of the cottages at Larapuna, in the Mt William National Park in north-eastern Tasmania, there's little sign that a big workshop is in progress here. The stiff breeze coming off Bass Strait has a bite to it, and despite the clear and sunny skies, the air is distinctly chilly. Inside the cottage, a group of women sits in a circle weaving, in easy conversation – the state of the fibres, the evenness of the weave, the latest stand of grasses to be collected.

This is the last of seven workshops that make up *tayenebe*, a project to revive traditional weaving practices in the Tasmanian Aboriginal community. A collaboration between Arts Tasmania, the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, and the National Museum of Australia, the workshops have been held at different locations across Tasmania, with over 30 women and girls attending each group.

This 10-day workshop is the longest and most ambitious, yet it has a very high participation rate. Everyone is determined to continue their weaving after the workshop finishes, but from now on it will be within their circle of friends and families.

There is a powerful atmosphere here. This is the last workshop and there is a desire to get the very best out of it. It is the only workshop held on traditional country for the majority of participants. It has been an emotionally charged time, because news arrived during the workshop of the passing of Auntie Muriel Maynard. An important and respected elder, Auntie Muriel's interest, commitment and love of weaving were strong. She was a fine weaver. Although too unwell to participate fully in *tayenebe*, Auntie Muriel supported its aims. As a measure of their respect, the weavers

[Weaving] tells me a lot about our early people, about our mothers and their families and their movements in the seasons

Audrey Frost, weaver

above: Eva Richardson, *Water carrier*, 2005. Bull kelp (*Durvillaea potatorum*), tea tree (*Melaleuca sp.*), river reed (*Schoenoplectus pungens*).

opposite: Tasmanian Aboriginal baskets of white flag iris (*Diplarrena moraea*). Left to right: by Vicki *maikutena* Matson-Green, Patsy Cameron (also second from right), Dulcie Greeno, Audrey Frost. Photographer Simon Cuthbert, TMAG

jointly created a basket, each completing two or three rows with their individual styles and skills.

The purpose of *tayenebe* springs from pioneering work begun by Alan West in the early 1990s. Former curator and now research associate at the Museum of Victoria, West started researching the plants and weaving techniques of baskets made in the 1800s.

Building on West's work, Jennie Gorringe, an arts worker at the Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre, became involved in one of the first efforts to revive traditional fibre skills. Gorringe arranged events and camps for local women, inspiring them to become engaged in weaving practice. Then in 2005, Moonah Arts Centre held an important exhibition by three skilled weavers: Eva Richardson, Colleen Mundy and Lennah Newson. Sadly, Lennah Newson passed away before *tayenebe* began, but perhaps her passing gave it greater impetus.

This groundwork was important in reviving the tradition, but expertise was still not widespread, and some traditional methods remained undiscovered. *Tayenebe* sought to address this. Based on a workshop format conceived by Arts Tasmania's Lola Greeno, the project sought to revive many of the old ways across different locations and with a mix of participants. This approach led to a depth and variety in the reinvigoration of the tradition. For example, variations in plant stocks in the different locations influenced the weaving works – the use of sea plants as well as land plants resulted in a revival of the use of bull kelp for containers.

'Tayenebe' is a south-eastern Tasmanian Aboriginal word meaning 'exchange' – appropriately, since the success of the project depended on sharing and exchanging many sources of knowledge and experience. Although the historical baskets in museum collections contained information vital to reproducing the exact style, they contained much more than technical data. The women who studied these precious objects saw them as a link to the Old People, a manifestation of the women who made them.

Only 37 baskets and fibre works from the 1800s survive in collections today. Of these, only five are by known makers – two by Trucanini and three by Fanny Cochrane-Smith. The rest are likely to have been made by some of the 70 women resettled at Wybalenna on Flinders Island and later at Oyster Cove south of Hobart from 1835 to 1874, having been taken there by George Augustus Robinson. Unlike these earlier weavers, the women who took part in *tayenebe* will not be unnamed.

Over 100 baskets were created during *tayenebe*, and 70 of these are on display in the exhibition. Some have a traditional purity of technique and material and sit eerily alongside the old baskets, the time between their making seemingly evaporating. Others are contemporary in style, the material often dictating the final form. Still others are experimental in their combination of materials or expression of ideas.

Materials are used to illustrate connections to wider culture. For example, the addition of a strand of fibre in a twisting figure of eight by Vicki *maikutena* Matson-Green reflects the flight of the moonbird, or mutton bird, which was thought to fly to the moon before returning to its nesting ground the next season. The inclusion of a swirl of maireener shells on the inside of Patsy Cameron's basket creates a vortex representing the Milky Way, the materials and design creating connections between the land, sea and sky.

There are examples of unique Tasmanian Aboriginal kelp containers. These have the leather look of the dried sea plant, warm in tone and shiny, its curved forms belying the firm and brittle nature of the dried fronds. There is no known kelp container in Australian collections, so the shape of these containers was informed by prints from Baudin's voyage of exploration (1800–1804), and an image of a container (about 1850) held in the British Museum. These records show differing versions of the form.

A viewing of this subtle and elegant exhibition makes it clear that the works are not merely the product of weaving tutorials focusing on technique alone. Rather, they are suffused with ideas, speculations and connections. The weavers state their strengthened link to culture through the act of weaving, walking the country in search of fibres, and knowing that they are pursuing a process that was once an everyday part of life for their ancestors. ■

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