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 lace up the drive of one of the cottages at Larapuna, in the St William National Park in northeastern Tasmania, there's little sign that a big workshop is in progress here. The still breeze coming off Bass Strait has a bite to it and despite the clear and sunny sky, the air is distinctly chilly. Inside the cottage, a group of women sits in a circle weaving. In easy conversation - the sound of the fibre, the Winner 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 there 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 many arrived during the workshop of the passing of Auntie Mabel 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 jointly created a basket, each completing two or three rows with their individual styles and ideas. The basket is made up of the same materials and techniques as the others, yet it is unique in its own right.

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 1940s. 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, Moornah Arts Centre held an important exhibition by three skilled weavers: Eva Richardson, Colleen Murdy and Shannel Newsom. Sadly, Shannel Newsom passed away before the workshop 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 Greener, 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 shows survive in collections today. Of these, only five are by known makers - two by Trucinia and three by Fanny Cochrane-Smith. The rest are likely to have been made by some of the 30 women resettled at Wyabaleena on Flinders Island and later at Oyster Cove south of Hobart from 1935 to 1974, 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 of these are on display in the exhibition. Some have a traditional purity of technique and material and sit neatly 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 maikulatuo Matson-Green reflects the flight of the moonbird, or mutton bird, which was thought to fly to the moon before returning to its nestling ground around the next season. The inclusion of a swirl of seaweed shells on the inside of Patsey 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.

above: Eva Richardson, Water Carrier, 2005. Garden City pottery, tea tree (Mellia tetragona), paper willow (Salix herbacea) and saltbush (Atriplex sp.), acrylic resin (photograph: Robert Small).}

opposite: Tasmanian Aboriginal baskets of white flag (Diplomadis monosperma). Left to right: by Vicki maikulatuo Matson-Green, Patsey Cameron (also second from right), Dulcie Greeno, Audrey Frost. Photographer Simon Cuthbert, TMA

its curved forms helping 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 1855) 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 fibre, and knowing that they are pursuing a process that was once an everyday part of life for their ancestors.

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