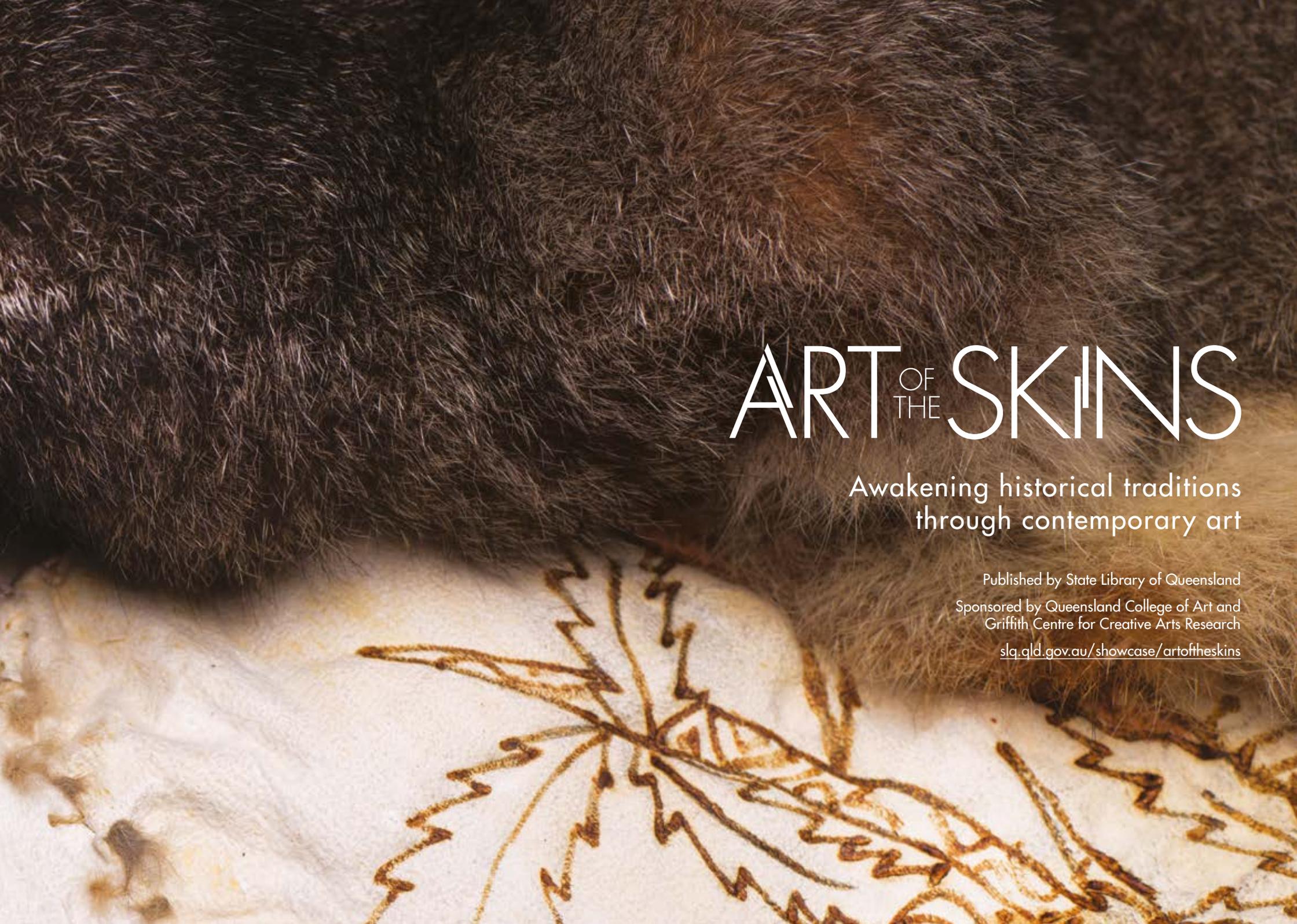




# ART OF THE SKINS



*Brisbane Community Cloak (detail), 2016.*  
Pictured artwork by Ashley and Tait McGregor.



# ART OF THE SKINS

Awakening historical traditions  
through contemporary art

Published by State Library of Queensland

Sponsored by Queensland College of Art and  
Griffith Centre for Creative Arts Research

[slq.qld.gov.au/showcase/artoftheskins](http://slq.qld.gov.au/showcase/artoftheskins)

## SENSITIVITIES

This publication contains images and references to deceased people which may cause sadness or distress, particularly for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

State Library of Queensland would be grateful to hear from any reader with further information regarding historical images, research, or family histories with possum skin cloaks.

Historical references to Aboriginal people can be offensive. We have chosen not to censor the documentary evidence and have used direct quotes, which expose the terminology of the period. In doing so we aim to educate readers, in the hope of moving beyond these attitudes.

The spelling of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander words and names vary. In this publication, they appear as provided by the individual or community, and/or as verified by appropriate sources.

Possums were traditionally used by Australia's Aboriginal peoples as a natural resource for a number of purposes, including material for clothing. Today, possum species are protected in Australia as native species under the provision of the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (Cth). The skins used in the *Art of the Skins* exhibition at State Library of Queensland have been sourced from New Zealand, where they are an introduced species and the culling and overall treatment of the animal are regulated by the New Zealand Society for the Prevention of Cruelty of Animals.

State Library of Queensland has taken every possible measure to ensure that all components of the exhibition have been carried out with utmost respect to Indigenous practices and culture, local communities, animal welfare, and legislation in Australia and New Zealand.



Ochre used at the Wiruungga possum skin cloak workshop, Sunshine Coast, 2016. Photo by Glenn Barry.

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# FOREWORD

I would like to acknowledge the Elders of all of the communities involved in this project, and thank them for their time, knowledge and contributions to such an important project, and maintaining our cultures for future Queenslanders.

*Art of the Skins* celebrates the ingenuity and resilience of generations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in south-east Queensland.

The culmination of months of research, consultation and workshops, this project is extraordinary in that it revitalises cultural practices, but ensures that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people retain authority and autonomy. This has been followed through into the *Art of the Skins* exhibition, curated by kuril dhagun, State Library of Queensland's Indigenous programming team.

Created as a retrospective of the exhibition, this catalogue shares the Aboriginal art of possum skin cloak making, historically practiced in south-east Queensland and more broadly throughout Australia. *Art of the Skins* revitalises this remarkable tradition in a continuation of cultural practice in contemporary society.

Starting in June 2015, the project has garnered immense community support; Elders, families, students, community leaders and local and internationally renowned artists have all been involved in the creation

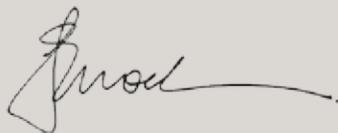
## Left

Wiruungga possum skin cloak workshop, Conondale, QLD, 2016. Photo by Glenn Barry.

of the six cloaks produced through *Art of the Skins* workshops in Brisbane, the Gold Coast and Sunshine Coast. These collaborative workshops saw a rich exchange of knowledge, stories and healing, strengthening the relationships between families and communities, and reinforcing connections to Country.

As one of the largest resurgence projects of its kind in south-east Queensland, *Art of the Skins* highlights the importance of cultural maintenance together with progress and growth — utilising contemporary art, new technologies and modern materials, while showing immense respect for traditional methods of cloak making.

I believe this publication continues the work of the exhibition, artistry and workshops of *Art of the Skins*, telling cultural stories, teaching and expressing connections to Country through art. As you browse these pages I hope that you feel as much pride as I do for our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and cultures; *Art of the Skins* is truly creating a legacy for our future generations.



**The Honourable Leeanne Enoch**

**Minister for Innovation, Science and  
the Digital Economy and  
Minister for Small Business**

# A MESSAGE FROM THE STATE LIBRARIAN

Over the past 12 months, State Library of Queensland (SLQ) has celebrated the theme of 'belonging'. We have explored what it means to be a Queenslanders and to belong — those connections that we share with our families, communities and special places in Queensland.

The *belonging* program has reached out to individuals across the state and beyond to discover our collective and individual identities, and uncover Queensland's distinctive character and diverse voices.

As part of the *belonging* program, *Art of the Skins* engaged with south-east Queensland's Indigenous communities to delve into the theme in new ways. Through lead artists Wathaurung woman Carol McGregor and Taungwurrung-Yorta Yorta woman Glennys Briggs, *Art of the Skins* united more than 120 Aboriginal community members to share their individual, family and historical stories through artistic expression. The result was six collaboratively-created possum skin cloaks, rich with culture, telling a collective story of community and belonging.

These cloaks were displayed in a multi-space exhibition at SLQ in 2016. In SLQ Gallery, the community works were presented amidst historical images, artefacts, oral histories, and a vivid digital installation of contemporary representations of Country; Carol's and Glennys' own cloaks and personal interpretations of belonging were showcased in the kuril dhagun gallery.

*Art of the Skins* has not only contributed to Aboriginal cultural revitalisation in south-east Queensland, but has created new histories of our state to preserve for and share with future Queenslanders.

On behalf of SLQ, I thank Carol McGregor, Glennys Briggs, and each of the more than 120 individual artists and community members who contributed to *Art of the Skins* to share their sense of belonging.



**Vicki McDonald**

**State Librarian and CEO  
State Library of Queensland**



## VIDEO OVERVIEW



Overview of the project with Carol McGregor  
Duration: 2:28

**Brisbane Aboriginal Community**

*Brisbane Community Cloak, 2016*

Ochre, binder and waxed cotton  
thread on possum skins  
220cm x 140cm (approx.)



# ART OF THE SKINS: UN-SILENCING AND REMEMBERING

**Carol McGregor**

Co-curator of *Art of the Skins*

Lead researcher, workshop facilitator and artist

*Art of the Skins* is a significant cultural resurgence project that embraces memories, sharing and belonging. Rich with partnerships, it announces the re-activation of possum skin cloak making and wearing in south-east Queensland.

The beginnings of this project and contemporary possum skin cloak making can be traced to 1993 when a change to the Museums Australia policy provided Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with greater access to museum collections. The shift in policy aimed “to inspire, to reclaim and reignite cultural traditions”.<sup>1</sup>

In 1999, able to take advantage of this policy, Koori Aboriginal artists Vicki Couzens, Treahna Hamm, and Lee Darroch encountered an old possum skin cloak at the Melbourne Museum. Darroch remembers the cloak being pulled from its box: “we were right next to it. It was a really strong emotion from the cloak itself that the Old Ones were right there and everyone felt it.”<sup>2</sup> Couzens describing the experience, states: “To see the cloak so close up — it was really tangible. It was just like a loop to your ancestors and you could almost hear them whispering.”<sup>3</sup>



**Top right**

Ashley and Tait McGregor  
creating their artwork, 2016.  
Photo by Carol McGregor.



**Bottom right**

Cloak making toolkit:  
preparation and sewing  
cabinet, SLQ Gallery.  
Collection of Queensland  
Museum and Carol McGregor.  
Photo by Carol McGregor.

Concerned about the age, rarity, and fragility of their Ancestors' cloaks and that future generations might not get to see them, the artists decided to revive the cloak-making tradition that had been rested for 150 years. Along with artist Debra Couzens they recreated the *Lake Condah* and *Maidens Punt* possum skin cloaks.<sup>4</sup> Subsequently, the artists led a significant possum skin cloak revival movement where the cloaks now form an integral part of modern cultural practice in Victoria, New South Wales and South Australia.

As Koori artists with ties to Victoria, Glennys Briggs, a Taungwurrung-Yorta Yorta woman from North Central Victoria and I, Carol McGregor, a woman of Wathaurung and Scottish descent, met in 2012. We were both enrolled in the Contemporary Australian Indigenous Art (CAIA) degree at the Queensland College of Art (QCA), Griffith University.<sup>5</sup> In the course of investigating the possum skin cloaks that our ancestors wore, Glennys completed a workshop with Darroch, and I spent time at Museum Victoria with the historical collection and with the artists' replicas of the old cloaks at the National Museum of Australia. Both of us were inspired by the contemporary revival, and together we made our first family possum skin cloaks.

Continuing this possum skin cloak research as a PhD student, decolonising methodologies became integral to my practice. Rather than just retell or share our stories, decolonial First Nations scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith calls for us to be part of a larger intent, to create spaces of self-determination, resistance and hope.<sup>6</sup> Seeing possum skin cloaks as an authoritative medium for healing, cultural renewal and reclamation

I began investigating the material culture of historical cloaks and rugs in south-east Queensland. Prior to this research there was a strong belief that there were no cloaks made this far north in Australia.

Anthropological accounts revealed evidence of possum skin cloaks being part of cultural practice in Queensland. The records placed emphasis on quantitative data and observations, with no emic perspectives or insider's point of view.<sup>7</sup> All cloak references I discovered in the archives lacked understanding that the cloaks and their markings held cultural significance. Helen Gibbons noted in *Possum Skin Cloaks: tradition, continuity and change* that before the arrival of Europeans, the cloaks were an essential part of Indigenous tradition, not only for the protection they gave but as a means by which people were positioned in their tribe and culture.<sup>8</sup>

From early 2014, I began conversations and consultations with Gubbi Gubbi/Kabi Kabi, Sunshine Coast, Brisbane and Gold Coast community Elders about researching south east Queensland possum skin cloaks and the possibility of reclaiming this practice by holding cloak-making workshops. Importantly Elders were positive and supportive of the project and some spoke of their awareness of the possum rugs. With these protocols in place, it became essential to share and empower the whole community with this knowledge, along with the skills involved with cloak-making. Artist Maree Clarke describes how it is the job of Indigenous artists to pass on our cultural knowledge and identity to family and communities.<sup>9</sup> The Victorian senior cloak makers, including Clarke, were consulted about the Queensland workshops before and during the project.

State Library of Queensland (SLQ) is the only Australian State Library to have a dedicated Indigenous space. Named 'kuril dhagun', it is also a public programming unit, employing Indigenous staff who curate a program of events, workshops and exhibitions, and work in collaboration with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in various community engagement activities. In 2015, I approached kuril dhagun with a proposal for Glennys and I to hold cloak making workshops and the first Queensland possum skin cloak exhibition. kuril dhagun's philosophy to foster partnerships with Indigenous communities, building capacity and a greater understanding and awareness of Indigenous knowledge, history and culture, meant that the project was embraced and elevated.

For *Art of the Skins*, more than fifty possum skin cloak making workshops were held on the Sunshine Coast, the Gold Coast and in Brisbane. Participants self-identified with which workshops to engage in, embracing the contemporary and often complex nature of our Indigenous communities. It was essential to incorporate specific historical references to Country<sup>10</sup> into the workshop programs for each community, through sharing historical research and incorporating aspects of it into the contemporary cloaks. The Gubbi Gubbi/Kabi Kabi language group, who made the only Traditional Owner<sup>11</sup> cloak for the project, decided to restrict the colour palette and exclusively used *kuthing*, the deep red ochre found on Country which was noted in settlers' references to their traditional possum skin cloaks. Elders were consulted throughout the project and Indigenous researchers, artists and arts-workers were invited to participate on all levels and to

share with their local communities. Some participants are also leaders in other cultural revitalisation practices currently happening across south-east Queensland, such as language and weaving.

The workshop venues varied — some were held outside, some around campfires and kitchen tables, or in institutional spaces like kuril dhagun's Talking Circle and The Arts Centre Gold Coast. Each gathering reflected traditional ways, with families and groups engaging in cross-generational yarning and exchange. Aunty Joyce Watson expressed how:

*Strong emotions flowed through me as my daughter Judy, granddaughter Rani and myself sat as a family helping preserve the ancient art of making a possum skin cloak in the 21st century.*<sup>12</sup>

The interconnectedness between individuals and the memories shared are part of the significant legacy of *Art of the Skins*, standing alongside the physicality of the cloaks.

Making a cloak is a respectful but intensive process. The task of sewing the cloak can be demanding. The skins have to be pieced together, pierced, trimmed and positioned toward each other as they are stitched. Participant Aunty Maureen Newton expressed how being able to make a possum skin cloak using both modern and traditional materials was an experience she would like to repeat in the future.<sup>13</sup> Working with the materiality of the pelts and ochres — with the visceral feel of the fur and rawness of the pigments — was a first for many of the 120 participants who brought their personal

stories to life on the skins. Uncle Nurdon Serico felt very humbled to be involved and was excited to see the achievements made from working together as a community.<sup>14</sup>

When crafting objects in the tradition of your Ancestors in a contemporary space, you can sense the past, present and future intertwining. One young artist feeling the cultural pull of the cloaks excitedly shouted "this is where it's at!" It is rewarding to reflect on this proud expression of culture, as for my family unit to survive, previous generations denied their Aboriginality. Like many participants, through *Art of the Skins* my children and I were able to freely acknowledge our lived experiences. Each cloak resonates with our diversity, our narratives and the complexity of each community's histories — including colonisation.

As in other areas, the impact of colonisation in Queensland was extreme. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples were forcibly removed from their traditional lands to missions and reserves where they were under the control of religious organisations and the government.<sup>15</sup> For Indigenous people living in these circumstances, every aspect of daily life was governed and cultural activities were forbidden and punishable. As people no longer had access to resources, the making of possum skin cloaks declined rapidly and government-issue blankets that did not offer the same protection and warmth as cloaks were distributed in their place. There is little visual evidence remaining of traditional Queensland cloaks, because of the halt in their production and that the cloaks were not collected for preservation by ethnographers or collectors.

Displayed in the *Art of the Skins* exhibition were two Queensland bone awls (a type of needle) that were used to pierce the skins before they were sewn together with kangaroo tendon. On loan from the Queensland Museum, the awls are tangible objects that link us to the historical making of cloaks here and they signify what has been excluded from conventional historical narratives and collections. When looking at our histories through collectors' or ethnographers' eyes such exclusions become obvious. In response, we have to realise that Indigenous communities have the capacity to remedy this situation by continually piecing together knowledge through asking questions and consulting with others. Projects that utilise historical archives such as *Art of the Skins* show why there is a strong need for Indigenous people to have sovereignty over collections that hold objects, photos and records of our Ancestors. Collections that are activated and enriched by contemporary communities become more meaningful and socially relevant.

The six cloaks exhibited in *Art of the Skins* are owned by the communities that created them and will go on to have cultural lives after the end of the exhibition. Whether housed in keeping places or institutions, each cloak has the capacity to be used in culturally appropriate ways such as for education purposes or important ceremonial events. Just like in the old days, the cloaks can weather with wear and future generations may have to reapply the ochres or mend the stitching.

Through *Art of the Skins* the kuril dhagun team and State Library of Queensland have shown how partnerships between institutions and Indigenous communities, artists and researchers can be a huge success.

*Art of the Skins* enables a continuation of cultural practices that connect to living culture whilst holding on to knowledge and inherited memory. It is an empowering form of un-silencing — asserting a voice and having continued presence in today's world. The need to tell our own stories is an important means of resistance and this art form celebrates our memories and cultural survival.

*Our culture is like a boomerang that has been crafted and thrown into the future by our ancestors, returning to us now from the past.*

Jonathan Jones<sup>16</sup>



**Left**

Gubbi Gubbi/Kabi Kabi workshop, Kenilworth, Queensland, 2015.  
Photo by Carol McGregor.

## FOOTNOTES

1. National Museum Australia, 2005. "Previous possessions, new obligations." Accessed 2011. [www.nma.gov.au/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0020/3296/ccor\\_final\\_feb\\_05](http://www.nma.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0020/3296/ccor_final_feb_05).
2. Reynolds, A, Couzens, D, Couzens, V, Darrroch, L & Hamm, T 2005, *Wrapped in a possum skin cloak: the Tooloyn Koortakay collection in the National Museum of Australia*, National Museum of Australia, Canberra, p 3.
3. *Ibid.*
4. Museum Victoria (Melbourne Museum) holds the only two old possum skin cloaks in Australia: *The Lake Condah and Maidens Punt* cloaks. There are four others (including fragments of cloaks) held in collections worldwide.
5. QCA is unique as it is the only Australian creative arts school to have a contemporary Indigenous art degree (CAIA) including a dedicated faculty space for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.
6. Tuhiwai Smith, L 2012, *Decolonizing Methodologies Research and Indigenous Peoples*, 2nd ed, Zed Books Ltd, London, p 36.
7. Hoey, B 2012. "What is Ethnography?" Accessed 9 May 2013. [www.brianhoey.com/General%20Site/general\\_defn-ethnography.htm](http://www.brianhoey.com/General%20Site/general_defn-ethnography.htm).
8. Gibbons, H 2010, 'Possum skin cloaks: tradition, continuity and change' in 'Indigenous Victorians: repressed, resourceful and respected', *La Trobe Journal* 85 (May) pp. 125-140.
9. Clarke, M 2012, 'Ancestral memory: out of the shadows', *Artlink* 32 (2), pp. 54-59.
10. Referring to a specific place within Australia, and not Australia itself. There are more than 260 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander countries and language groups across Australia. 'Country' refers to the land belonging to the traditional language group of that area.
11. People of the same language group (defined by traditional geographic boundaries), who maintain their cultural connections to Country.
12. Watson, J, Waanyi people, email message to author, 2016.
13. Newton, M 2016, descendant of Princess King (Yarga), conversation with and email to author.
14. Serico, N, Gubbi Gubbi/Kabi Kabi Elder, conversation with author, 2016.
15. *The Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act 1897* (Qld).
16. Jones, J 2014, 'Lighting the Fire and the return of the boomerang, Cultural renaissance in the south-east', *Artlink*, vol. 34, no. 2, p. 36.



**Gubbi Gubbi/Kabi Kabi Community**

*Gubbi Gubbi/Kabi Kabi Community Cloak, 2016*  
Red ochre, binder and waxed cotton  
thread on possum skins  
140cm x 105cm (approx.)

# WRAPPED IN HISTORY, CULTURE AND PLACE

In south-east Queensland, possum skin cloak making practices were widespread and are remembered through Indigenous oral histories as well as scarce documentation in historical records. Aboriginal people historically made and used possum skin cloaks, often where there was a cool climate and abundance of possums.

Thomas Petrie (1831–1910), an emigrant from Edinburgh who arrived in Moreton Bay in 1837, recorded entries in *Tom Petrie's reminiscences of early Queensland: dating from 1837* where he recalls that:

*Possum skins were greatly prized as coverings when the nights were cold. They were sewn together, and so made nice rugs.<sup>1</sup>*

The cloaks, which were also referred to as 'rugs' or 'coverings' by settlers, were significant to daily life and their making was an important practice in Aboriginal culture. Cloaks were made from skins sewn together using tools and resources available in the immediate landscape. Created for an individual at birth, the cloaks were continuously added to throughout their wearer's lifetime. Cloak making involved a long process. After the skins were gathered, they were cleaned using grinding stones and scrapers. Holes were pierced into skins with sharp implements such as kangaroo bone and then stitched together using kangaroo tendon fibre. Sustainability and caring for Country is at the heart of Indigenous cultures; these practices ensured that no part of an animal went to waste.



## Left

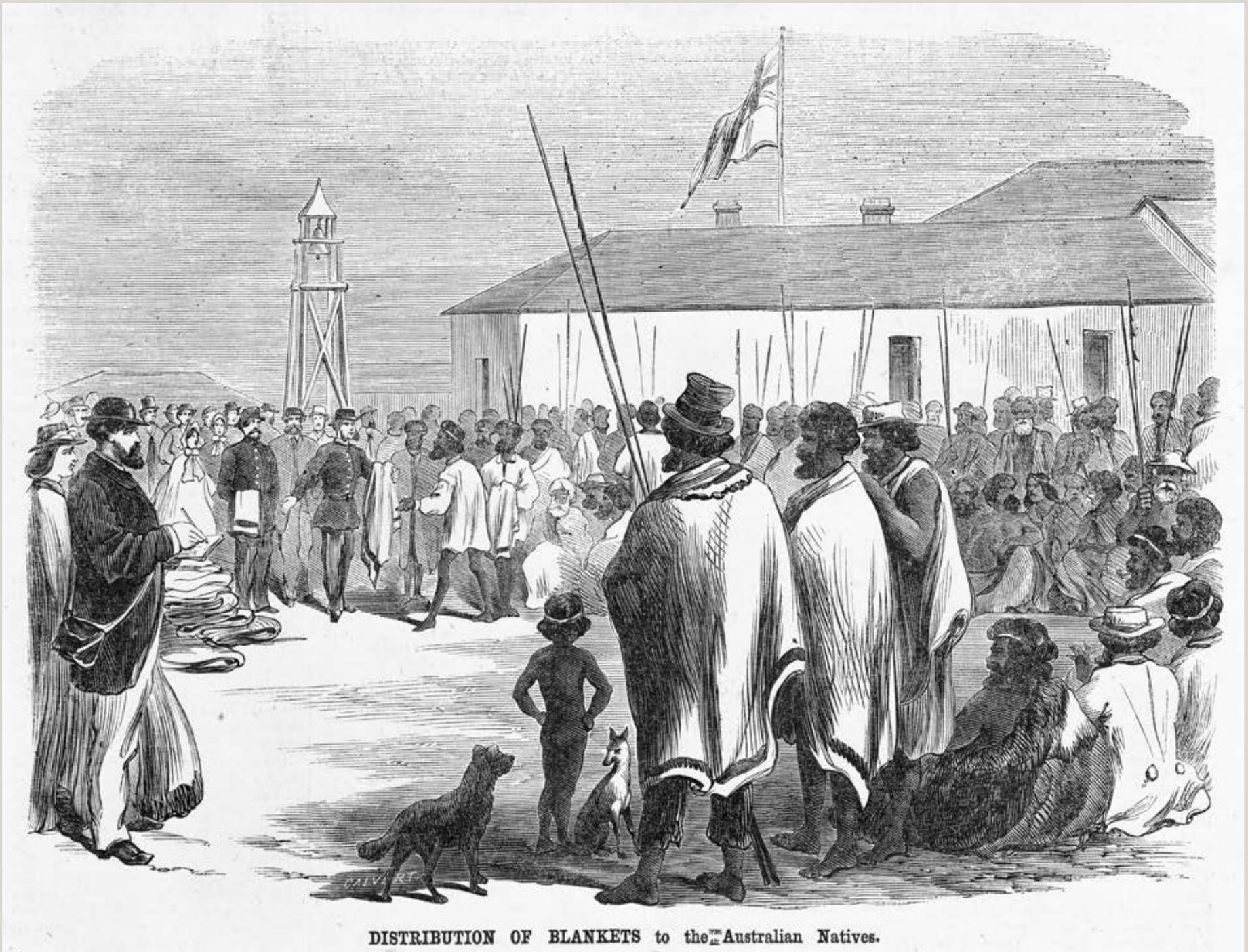
Edward Forster  
*Woman with a possum skin cloak, Maryborough, ca. 1872*  
John Oxley Library, SLQ  
Negative no. 33800

One of the few photographs of an unnamed Aboriginal woman wearing a possum skin cloak in south-east Queensland.

## Right

Samuel Calvert, 1828–1913  
*Distribution of blankets to the Australian Natives (ie. Aboriginal Australians), 25 August 1864*  
Reproduction rights owned by the State Library of Victoria  
Accession no. IMP25/08/64/9

Illustration of 1864 annual blanket day distribution, Brisbane. Amongst the large crowd is an Aboriginal man wearing a possum skin cloak (right side, seated on ground), alongside Aboriginal people wearing the issued blankets in a similar way.



DISTRIBUTION OF BLANKETS to the <sup>7th</sup> Australian Natives.



A local account by Gaiarbau (Uncle Willie Mackenzie) of the Jinibara people of south-east Queensland, recorded by LP Withbotham in the 1950s, gives us a detailed description of the customary methods:

*After cleaning, ashes were well rubbed into cure them [possum skins]. The edges were squared off, and then sewn together with kangaroo tendon which, if too thick, was spilt down to the desired size. The edges were sewn with two stitches, one from each side, through holes made with a bone needle with no eye, which was made from the leg bone of a wallaby.<sup>2</sup>*

The skin side was often decorated with art that distinguished where the cloak-wearer was from. Different stories about the land, culture and people were expressed in intricate artworks incised onto skins with sharp tools such as stones, scrapers and shells and coloured using ochres and other natural dyes.

During his time visiting Gubbi Gubbi/Kabi Kabi Country John Mathew (1849–1929), a Presbyterian minister and anthropologist, recorded that:

**Left**

B. Taylor  
*Group of unnamed Aboriginal people with animals skins in Ipswich*  
Ipswich district, ca. 1905  
John Oxley Library, SLQ  
Negative no. 173094

*Much time was spent in preparing the rugs. The flesh was rubbed off the skins with stones. Generally a rude linear design was scratched on the inside of each skin and coloured with Kuthing, a red clay.<sup>3</sup>*

Possum skin cloaks had many purposes; they were used as clothing, bedding, shelter, to carry babies, and during song and dance. A quote by JW Hinchcliffe in 1907 stated:

*The Elder and married gins [Aboriginal women] beat time with the palms of their hands on possum skins folded and held between their thighs representative of drums; whilst the younger ones beat time on their naked thighs.<sup>4</sup>*

Cloaks were carefully looked after and carried around from place to place, and were a highly sought after item between Aboriginal people, exchanged between inland and coastal areas.

As the settlement of Australia spread, the making and usage of possum skin cloaks declined. In the early settlement days of Brisbane, Aboriginal people were forcibly removed from traditional lands thus interrupting cultural practices.

By the early 1900s the traditions of cloak making were no longer in practice with only a small number of historical cloaks known to remain. The scarcity of surviving 19th century cloaks was exacerbated by their fragility, natural decay, and, in some areas, burying cloaks with their owners was practiced. In Australia, there are two historical cloaks from Victoria held in the Museum Victoria collection, with four cloaks from New South Wales and Victoria in museum collections overseas.

**FOOTNOTES**

1. Petrie, CC & Petrie, T 1975, *Tom Petrie's reminiscences of early Queensland: dating from 1837*, Lloyd O'Neil Pty Ltd, Hawthorn, p 87.
2. Langevad, G & Winterbotham, LP 1982, *Some original views around Kilcoy / transcription and notes by Gerry Langevad; with the editorial assistance of Barbara Langevad*, Department of Aboriginal and Islanders Advancement, Archaeology Branch, Brisbane, p 42.
3. Mathew, J 1910, *Two representative tribes of Queensland: with an inquiry concerning the origin of the Australian race*, T. F. Unwin, London, p 87.
4. Best, Y, Kruger, C & O'Connor, P 2005, *Yugambah talga: music traditions of the Yugambah people*, Keeaira Press, Southport, p 18.

**Wirungga Community**

*Wirungga Community Cloak, 2016*  
Ochre, binder and waxed cotton  
thread on possum skins  
135cm x 100cm (approx.)





# COLLABORATIONS

*Art of the Skins* developed during 2015 and 2016 into a series of workshops across south-east Queensland with the aim to collectively, learn contemporary cloak making techniques and their historical significance.

The workshops fostered broad involvement by supporting the diversity of present day Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Participation was encouraged from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people that had cultural connections or lived within the three locations: Sunshine Coast, Brisbane and Gold Coast.

Throughout the sessions, lead artists Carol McGregor and Glennys Briggs shared their knowledge based on the following cloak making processes:

- talking with community and finding family stories
- sharing local research with the community
- collectively deciding on thematic approach and agreed cultural stories to be included on the cloaks' designs
- preparing artwork on paper and then transferring to skins using burning tool
- decorating designs with paint and ochres.

Adapting techniques that Carol and Glennys had learnt from contemporary Victorian cloak makers, the cloaks were stitched together by members from each group.

## Top left

Damon Anderson burning his artwork, Brisbane workshop, 2016.  
Photo by Carol McGregor.

## Bottom left

Madeline Hodge at a Gold Coast workshop, 2016.  
Photo by Glenn Barry.

## Right

Aunty Joyce Summers and Paula Nihot, Gold Coast workshop, 2016.  
Photos by Glenn Barry.



*Each cloak organically became very unique as the participants created stories, songlines, and memories together on the blank canvas. Many people were not artists and thrill of seeing and feeling their story come to life and materialise on the skins became a potent form of un-silencing.*

**Carol McGregor**

# DIGITAL STORIES



Digital story with Carol McGregor  
Location: kuril dhagun, Qld, 2016  
Duration: 11:38



Digital story with Glennys Briggs  
Location: kuril dhagun, Qld, 2016  
Duration: 5:49



**Gold Coast Aboriginal Community**

*Gold Coast Community Cloak, 2016*  
Ochre, binder and waxed cotton  
thread on possum skins  
170cm x 120cm (approx.)

# THE EXHIBITION

In a trail that weaved from SLQ Gallery to kuril dhagun, the *Art of the Skins* exhibition at SLQ shared historical and contemporary artefacts, accounts and images; oral histories from Elders, artists and academics; and contemporary representations of Country.

**Top right (left)**  
Glennys Briggs,  
*Political Genocide*  
(detail), 2015  
Ink on possum skin  
and cotton

**Top right (right)**  
Carol McGregor  
*Identity Cloak*, 2010  
Ink on paper

**Bottom right**  
Carol McGregor  
*Not Silenced* (detail), 2013  
6000 x STAEDTLER pencils,  
emu feathers, paper, found  
objects: table and school desk  
Photo by Joe Ruckli





## kuril dhagun

In kuril dhagun, *Art of the Skins* showcased a multidisciplinary display of work inspired by the revitalisation of Aboriginal possum skin cloak making traditions.

Artists Carol McGregor's and Glennys Briggs' practices are immersed in the connection between art, artefacts and strengthening local Aboriginal communities through exploring hidden histories and cultural practices.

They aim to represent their shared connection to place, reclaiming the suppressed histories and conveying the resilience of Indigenous cultural identity.

*I am a First Nations artist, practicing in printmaking, painting and sculptural pieces. The cultural influences in my work reflect the strong connection to people and land. Like a time-lapse photograph, my work is ever-changing to reveal a long history. Within my printmaking, each scene sits upon the other like the layers of a midden, each revealing more of the story. Some of the subject matter in my work is at times confronting and disturbing. However I attempt to present the re-visioning of these difficult histories in ways that invite the viewer to acknowledge and accept my Indigenous history. Until many of these issues are addressed and our history is acknowledged and accepted, I will continue my role as an artist and educator.*

**Glennys Briggs**

*As a Wathaurung woman, I connect to my great-grandmother by creating visual interpretations of personal stories, past histories and understandings of the colonising ideologies Indigenous Australians adapted to, in order to survive.*

*My studio-based research and art practice rationale is a desire to unearth and to visually activate histories and memories to strengthen and further inform Australian Aboriginal identity and sense of belonging.*

*I adapt and embrace new technologies to reclaim and connect to cultural expression, creating objects as vehicles of remembering that give physical form to shadows of the past, un-silencing our stories and making the invisible visible.*

**Carol McGregor**

### Left

Glennys Briggs  
*The Cloak of Mourning*, 2013  
Emu feathers and ink on  
leather chamois

# SLQ Gallery

*Art of the Skins* in SLQ Gallery shared the uncovered histories of south-east Queensland's possum skin cloaks and the story of those who have recently revived this practice.

In an intimate entryway, visitors were welcomed by the echoing voices of artists sharing their memories, artwork stories, connections and processes:

*I remember the first time I ever saw one of the dendroglyphs, or the tree carvings, of the Gamilaroi. It was actually like coming home.*

**Debbie Taylor, 2016**

*They follow the songlines of pathways travelled for many generations retracing the steps that have been supporting their needs.*

**Glenn Barry, 2016**

*My totems relate to clan, kinship and identity. My totems are my birthright that I have inherited.*

**Joe Pegler, 2016**

*The Bungil Creek [Roma, Queensland] was such a great environment for a young fella like myself to grow up.*

**Laurie Nilsen, 2016**

*My story represents the circles of women who come together in strength for healing, ceremony, creativity, spirituality and sharing of knowledge.*

**Malinda Flynn, 2016**

*I am fascinated by the place where two things converge... it was the 'in-between' moments that defined the move from one Country to another.*

**Robert Andrew, 2016**

*The water was held in coolamons so our intertwined branches are bending towards Mum's coolamons.*

**Ashley McGregor, 2016**

*We remember playing with the banksia cones and climbing paperbark trees on our family camping trips to the coast and Minjerriba (North Stradbroke Island).*

**Tait McGregor, 2016**

*It seemed right that they [my hands] were 'growing' out of the trees as music is my future and creative pathway.*

**Moss McGregor, 2016**

Historical material from institutional collections and contemporary material created as part of the project filled the passage into the main gallery.

In the course of the project Elders, community members and historians were consulted and research was conducted into State Library of Queensland collections, other external collections and written resources surrounding possum skin cloak making traditions. These diverse forms of research that were presented included photographic images, collection materials and recorded digital stories representing various perspectives.

Historian Libby Connors discussed her research, mainly uncovered from pastoralists' papers, *Tom Petrie's Reminiscences* and a historical account from Gaiarbau (Uncle Willie McKenzie), as recorded during the 1950s by Dr LP Winterbotham.

Gubbi Gubbi/Kabi Kabi Elder Uncle Nurdon Serico shared a personal account of possum skin cloak-making traditions. Drawing on stories and cultural knowledge handed down from generations, he provided insight into the significance of these practices for Aboriginal people and how this relates to traditional methodologies of caring for Country such as resourcefulness and sustainability.

Gubbi Gubbi/Kabi Kabi artist Melinda Serico described learning about cloak making through a historical newspaper article, which inspired her to research her cultural connections and traditional practices further. Her digital story reflects on the important intergenerational exchange that occurred during community collaborations and workshops that she participated in.

Glenn Barry, a Gamilaraay artist and educator, reflected on how the series of Gold Coast and Kenilworth workshops assisted in building relationships between participants, and strengthening the community.

Contributions from Waanyi artists Aunty Joyce Watson, her daughter Judy Watson and granddaughter Rani Grace Watson Carmichael celebrated family and intergenerational story sharing.

Carol McGregor and Glennys Briggs spoke about the fruition of the project, their artistic practices and its impact on community.

The presence of larger-than-life moving images immersed viewers, as the exhibition continued to traverse past, present and future. A photograph of an unnamed Aboriginal woman wearing a possum skin cloak in south-east Queensland (see page 16), one of the few photographs in existence, featured on a gallery wall parallel to footage of workshop participants activating their community's cloaks on Country.

Further inside the gallery, cabinets housed objects reflecting the historical and contemporary possum skin preparation, sewing, and decoration phases.

Objects on loan from Queensland Museum provided examples of tools similar to those likely to have been used in traditional cloak making practices. These artefacts were contextualised with the tools used in *Art of the Skins* workshops to demonstrate how traditions have inspired contemporary cloak making, and the continuation of culture.

At the heart of the exhibition were the community created cloaks, installed in geographic alignment to one another. The Gubbi Gubbi/Kabi Kabi and Wirungga were in the north, Gold Coast on the south and Brisbane in the centre. Each cloak embodied an array of cultural stories, histories and presence of Country. The use of red ochre and emu feet motifs in the Gubbi Gubbi/Kabi Kabi Community Cloak acknowledged traditions unique to this area, whilst the Gold Coast Drum Cloak references the histories of cloaks also being used as drums during song and dance through the flurry of ochre handprints. The Brisbane River Cloak is tied together by the representation of Maiwar, the Brisbane River. Through the inclusion of touch



**Top left**

*Art of the Skins* exhibition opening, 25 June 2016. Photo by LaVonne Bobongie Wall.

**Centre left**

Artists' stories touchscreen in SLQ Gallery.

**Bottom left**

Cloak making toolkit: artwork and design cabinet. Collection of Queensland Museum and kuril dhagun. Photo by LaVonne Bobongie Wall.



Aunty Joyce Watson and Aunty Dawn Daylight at *Art of the Skins* exhibition opening, 25 June 2016. Photo by LaVonne Bobongie Wall.



SLQ Gallery with video installation on gallery walls, 2016.



Brisbane cloaks in foreground of SLQ  
Gallery with video installation by  
Andrew Gibbs on gallery walls, 2016.

screens, audiences were provided with the opportunity to view individual artworks from each cloak and read their stories.

The many narratives were further brought to life by an engaging display, designed by Tiffany Beckwith-Skinner. With years of experience, working across the world in theatre, film, and fashion projects, Tiffany describes her practice:

*I am an artist who creates work to stand in its own right, yet support the art of others. My work is deeply spiritual, and for Art of the Skins I wanted to maintain the many layers of the story and further accentuate the beauty of the cloaks, their meaning and the process involved. I hoped people would feel the working to my nth degree, honouring the exhibit by creating something that would add to the comprehension of its depth of story.*

Using hand woven and coloured raw silk, copper and chipboard, the cloaks are arranged into three states of living; play, story and sleep. The forms that they rested on were inspired by human figures and the natural environment.

Encircling the cloaks was dynamic imagery and sound that merged city, beach, bush and people together to reflect the diversity of communities involved. The film revealed the natural and urban environments which the cloaks were created, alongside documentation and interviews from the workshops.

These contemporary digital installations were created by Andrew Gibbs, an audio-visual artist who explores the relationship between sound, vision and space.

Andrew explains his creative contribution:

*What creates an environment, a space, country? For me, an integral part of the impact of a location is the sensory experience of sight and sound. Of course, our ears and eyes are often associated with storytelling – I wanted to capture the stories of country, stories that have stood for thousands of years.*

*The three channel audio-visual piece that accompanies the wonderful possum skin cloaks is the result of exploring locations around the Sunshine Coast, Gold Coast and Brisbane as told to me by the local Indigenous community. Sound and vision has been captured, blended, mixed and remixed to explore both the macro and micro stories of Country, identity and space.*

The immersive content and vibrant green backdrops featured throughout the exhibition was metaphoric of the regeneration of cultural practices, and reaffirms that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures are continuous; they are alive and constantly growing and evolving.

**Gold Coast Aboriginal Community**

*Gold Coast Drum Cloak, 2016*  
Ochre, binder and waxed cotton  
thread on possum skins  
125cm x 80cm (approx.)





# LEGACY

At the heart of *Art of the Skins* are intangible outcomes such as uncovering previously hidden histories, strengthening bonds in community, empowering individual's cultural identities, the self-representation of Indigenous people and the chance to create modern day histories.

*A great achievement of this project is community involvement and that there are now conversations about creating family cloaks, and passing on these skills, knowledge and stories to our children.*

*Working with families, including my children, involved developing healing dialogues and the passing on of our cultural knowledge and identity for future generations.*

*During the workshops it was frequently expressed "I didn't know there were possum skin cloaks here". It has been rewarding and beneficial to share the knowledge and skills as the need to tell and share our own stories is an important form of resistance and this project celebrates our stories and survival.*

**Carol McGregor**

## **Left**

Jordana and Taëo Angus at a Brisbane workshop, 2016.  
Photo by Carol McGregor.

*Art of the Skins has given me the opportunity to pass on cultural knowledge about possum skin cloaks to the community. In giving back this cultural information, the practices of making the cloaks that has been dormant, has given the community pride and empowerment to know this belongs to them. This practice and the workshops have been met with enthusiasm and has brought the communities closer together, healing old rifts. They can now say this is their culture and that it is something that they can now pass down to future generations as it was meant to be. Their pride will grow when their achievements have been acknowledged and appreciated by the public through the exhibition, presented by State Library of Queensland and kuril dhagun.*

**Glennys Briggs**

Each cloak belongs to the community that created it. At the conclusion of the exhibition at State Library the cloaks will be kept in agreed 'keeping places' — a special space unique to each community, upholding cultural protocols and sensitivities — used to store cultural items ensuring they are properly cared for and maintain cultural lives.

Prior to *Art of the Skins*, south-east Queensland's possum skin cloaks were memories in family histories and documented in historical records held by institutions. Today, there are six new cloaks continuing the legacy of this significant cultural practice.



**Top right**

Anne Ah Kee and  
Leesa Watego, 2016.  
Photo by Carol McGregor.



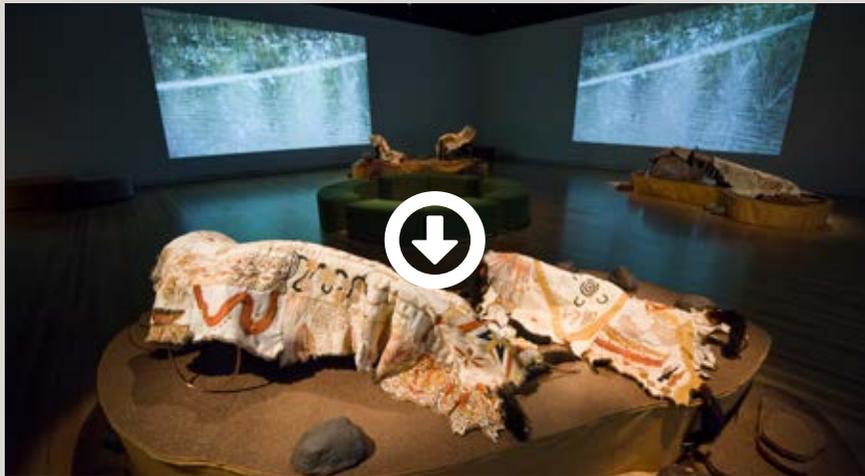
**Bottom right**

Ciarn Nihot at a  
Gold Coast workshop, 2016.  
Photo by Glenn Barry.

# DOWNLOAD LEARNING NOTES

To support The Art of the Skins exhibition, State Library has created learning notes with teaching and learning activities linked directly to the Australian Curriculum. These notes are designed to enhance your onsite experience.

Tailor your kids' experience with before and after visit education notes and activities. Download the pack and see how the stories in the exhibition can influence their perception and creativity.



## Suggested Resources for *Art of the Skins*

PDF 506KB



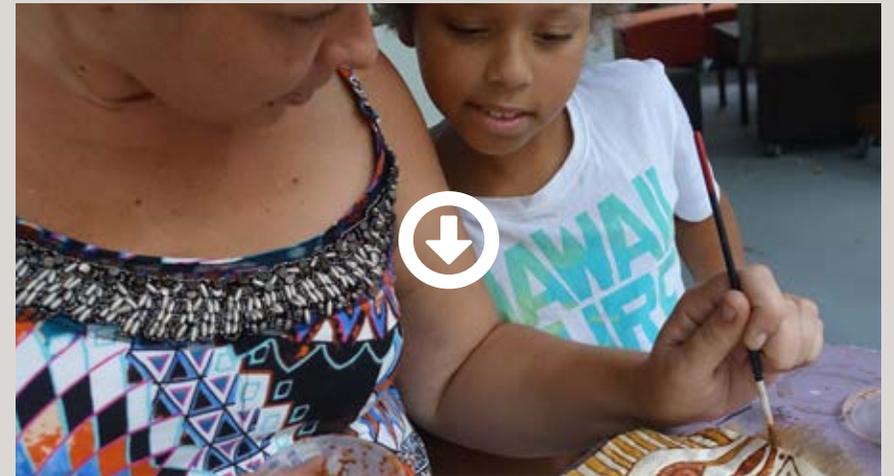
## Junior phase (Prep to Year 4)

PDF 264KB



## Middle phase (Year 5 to Year 8)

PDF 478KB



## Teacher background notes

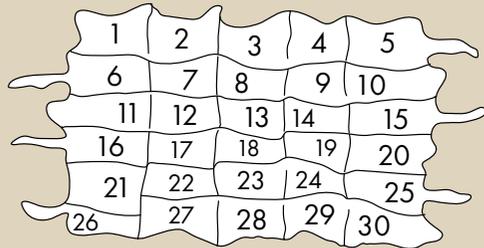
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**Brisbane Aboriginal Community**

*Brisbane River Cloak, 2016*  
Ochre, binder and waxed cotton  
thread on possum skins  
140cm x 105cm (approx.)

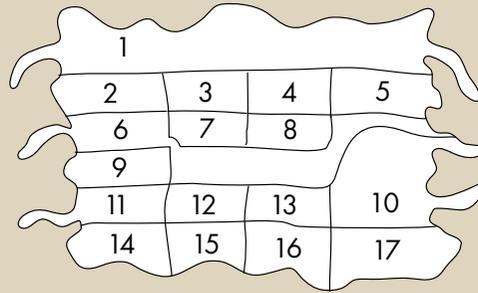
## BRISBANE COMMUNITY CLOAK



**Artists:** Leesa Watego & Ah Kee Family (1), Freja & Sonja Carmichael (2), Aunty Dawn Daylight (3), Antonia & Charli Burke (4), Aunty Joyce Watson (5), Katina Davidson (6), Jenna Lee (7), Malinda Flynn (8), Donna Ives (9), Brooke Graham & Delvene Cockatoo-Collins (10), Debbie Presley (11), Ryan Presley (12), Debbie Taylor (13), Tori-Jay Mordey (14), Robert Andrew (15), Venessa Williams (16), Chantay Link (17), Sophie Taylor (18), Gordon Hookey (19), Elena Wangurra (20), Ashley & Tait McGregor (21), Jason Murphy & Jordana Angus (22), Chenaya Bancroft-Davis (23), Dale Harding (24), Amanda Hayman (25), Carol McGregor (26), Laurie Nilsen (27), Judy Watson & Rani Grace Watson Carmichael (28), Elisa Jane Carmichael (29), Damon Anderson (30)

**Sewers:** Freja Carmichael, Chantay Link, Carol McGregor

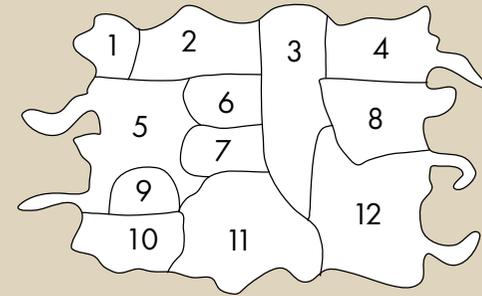
## GUBBI GUBBI/KABI KABI COMMUNITY CLOAK



**Artists:** Melinda Serico (1,17), Margie Kennedy (2,8), Troy Georgetown (3,6,11), Annaleise Krause (4,11), Yvette Thompson (4,16,17), Uncle Nurdon Serico (5), Shelley Monkland (7,9), Bianca Beeton (10), Brayden Krause (11,15), Leisha Krause (12), Boni Robertson (13), Kim Williams (14), Kim Tilley (15,16), Aidan Finn (17)

**Sewers:** Leisha Krause, Shelley Monkland, Bianca Beeton

## WIRUUNGGA CLOAK

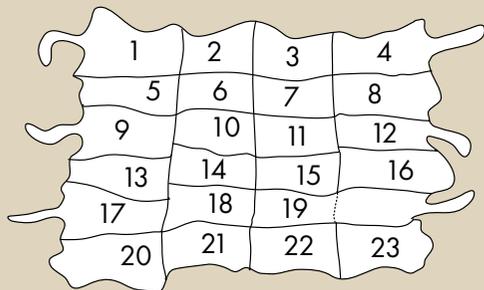


**Story:** Wiruungga Dungguirr

**Artists:** Wiruungga Dungguirr, Donna McKnight, Raina Donovan, Christabel Mary Wilton, Rawhinia Castle, Astar Castle, Katusha Smith, Sharon Hudson, Mariah Hudson, Paris Hudson, Anthony Donovan, Terri-Anne Goodreid

**Sewer:** Katusha Smith

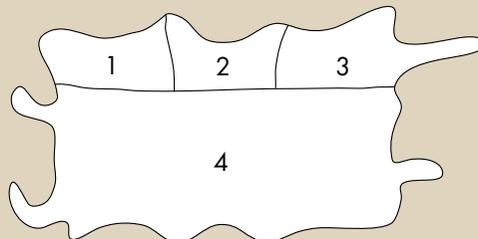
## GOLD COAST COMMUNITY CLOAK



**Artists:** Trisha Newton (1), Paul Craft (2), Glennys Briggs (3), Paula Nihot (4), Julie Ellis (5), Annie Woodcock (6), Jason Passfield (7), Aunty Joyce Summers (8), Aunty Pat Leavy (9), Alicia Jones (10), Mark Williams (11), Glenn Barry (12), Shari & Stephen Chadburn (13), Jennifer (Knwarraye) Niebour Pott (14), Aunty Mary Graham (15), Libby Harward (16), Aunty Maureen Newton (17), Glennys Briggs & Aunty Joyce Summers (18), Sylvester Cook (19), Rick Roser (20), Keisha Wortley (21), Ros Sawtell (22), Aunty Kathleen Lena (23)

**Sewers:** Aunty Maureen Newton, Glennys Briggs, Trisha Newton, Annie Woodcock, Jo-Anne Driessens

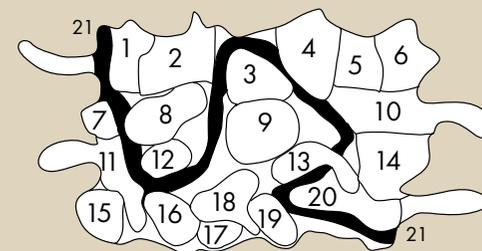
## GOLD COAST DRUM CLOAK



**Artists:** Jenny Fraser (1), Neville 'Torry' Torrisheba (2), Madeline Hodge (3), Community hands (4)

**Sewer:** Aunty Maureen Newton

## BRISBANE RIVER CLOAK



**Artists:** Melissa Stannard (1,5), Jordana Angus (2), Adam Sarah (3,8,12), Ailsa Walsh (4), Kim Ah Sam (6), Jason Murphy (7), Michael Connelly (9), Moss McGregor (10), Mandy Quadrio (11,17), Perry Mooney (13), Shelley Monroe (14), Joe Pegler (15,16), Dylan Mooney (18), Jeremy Anderson (19), Kevin Williams (20), Andrew Gall (20), Janelle Evans (21), Jacob Paulson (21)

**Sewer:** Carol McGregor

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- The creators
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## **Wiruungga workshops**

- The creators
- Wiruungga Organisation
- Regional Arts Australia

## **Gold Coast workshops**

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- The Arts Centre Gold Coast

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**Project manager and exhibition co-curator:** Katina Davidson

**Exhibition co-curator:** Freja Carmichael

**Exhibition digital content:** Amanda Hayman

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**Special thanks to Carol McGregor and Glennys Briggs for their hard work and dedication.**



## **Above**

Glennys Briggs and Carol McGregor at the launch of *Art of the Skins*, 2016.

Photo by LaVonne Bobongie Wall.



*Brisbane River Cloak* (detail), 2016.  
Pictured artwork by Janelle Evans.



# BELONGING