

which provided the most authentic source of ancient motifs. The exhibition's discussion of the meaning or function of these symbols does not offer new insights into such questions, nor do the materials presented display great differences from those used for the court and imperial family.

Though Schuster assembled quite a variety of western and southwestern folk embroideries, the works provided in the image gallery are limited. The examples of bed valances, clothing, bolster covers, and one mirror cover provided in the image gallery do not demonstrate the wide variety of traditional folk embroideries, as the exhibition text claims. The clothing category consists of images such as bags, bibs, vests, and handkerchiefs. After viewing all of the images, one would probably have difficulty picturing what formal and informal clothing would be for men and women in the western and southwestern regions during the early 20th century.

The maps show a general view of where Schuster collected his materials. The online exhibition indicates that much of the collection was well-documented, containing records of how objects were made and functioned, and even the names of makers. Especially for scholarly purposes, it would be helpful if future incarnations of the project were to illustrate the embroideries he collected in each different region, along with this additional contextual information. This could significantly enhance the understanding of these regional styles and their decorative techniques. The exhibition could also compare the different regional styles and the style of those works made for the court.

*Chinese Textiles from the Collections of The Field Museum* overviews an impressive collection of Chinese folk textiles in the Field Museum, one that remains relatively little known to scholars and curators of art history and anthropology. While the Schuster collection is emphasized, the exhibition also offers images of household and religious items, clothing for the court, theatrical costumes, and accessories collected between 1908 and 1923 by Field Museum curator Berthold Laufer and textiles gathered by other collectors.

#### Notes

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- At the time I compiled this review (December 2005), the exhibition could be reached via the home page of the Department of Anthropology, found within the Research and Collections section of the Field Museum website ([www.fieldmuseum.org](http://www.fieldmuseum.org)).

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***Ara Irititja: Protecting the Past, Accessing the Future—Indigenous Memories in a Digital Age. A digital archive project of the Pitjantjatjara Council.***

KIMBERLY CHRISTEN

On October 1, 2003 the *Ara Irititja: Protecting the Past, Accessing the Future—Indigenous Memories in a Digital Age* touring exhibition began its nearly year and a half in-country tour at the South Australian Museum (SAM) in Adelaide. *Ara Irititja*'s production began in 1994 as part of the Pitjantjatjara Council's "Return of Significant Cultural Property" project. Working with local anthropologist Ushma Scales, Pitjantjatjara elders Peter Nyaningu and Colin Tjapiya sought to capitalize on the growing awareness by museums and archives of the need to return cultural objects and human remains to their proper source communities. Although by no means uncontroversial, museums across Australia, including SAM, have engaged with local communities to assess the possibilities and practicalities of repatriation. The goal of the Pitjantjatjara project was to return previously inaccessible materials to local communities in a form that was both easily accessible to a range of community members and adaptable to the remote locations in South Australia, the Northern Territory and Western Australia in which they live.

Just how to do this was not as clear-cut. John Dallwitz, who had previously worked on heritage projects and had produced a photographic display for the South Australia government, to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the Pitjantjatjara Land Rights Act, consulted with *Anangu* ('Pitjantjatjara/Yankunytjatjara people') and conducted a feasibility study to determine the best course of action. The conclusion was that instead of a physical repatriation

of some objects, what *Anangu* wanted was a more extensive community archive that would be easily accessible, culturally appropriate and transportable. SAM could offer space to work on the project, but funding was out of their reach. Taking the challenge, the newly formed *Ara Irititja* team (including Pitjantjatjara community members) set out to determine the range of *Anangu* cultural materials in existence in museums, archives and family homes throughout Australia and secure funding for the project.<sup>1</sup> What has emerged over the last decade is a collaboratively built and community-directed innovative archive system, multiple exhibits and a website.

The website dedicated to this project provides an overview of the project's scope and allows users to interact with a downloadable-demo of the archive.<sup>2</sup> In what follows, I review the publicly accessible website in the context of the more extensive *Ara Irititja* ('stories from along time ago') digital database project and its traveling exhibit. In doing so, I highlight the broader implications of this innovative collaborative project for indigenous communities seeking to both reclaim and repurpose previously collected materials.

Before software could be created or the information architecture designed, the *Ara Irititja* project team needed to re-collect and digitize the objects, photos and films that existed outside of the museum. Leaving their local communities, the team, which now included former Pitjantjatjara schools' teacher, Ron Lister, traveled around Australia and reached out to people abroad who had connections to the Pitjantjatjara. Like other Aboriginal communities, *Anangu* lived under the often-repressive control of the governments' assimilation policies for decades (1930s–1970s). During this period, missionaries, government teachers, and other officials lived with and acted as "protectors" of the Pitjantjatjara. But with self-determination politics (1970s–1990s), land rights (1970s–present) and a newfound national push for reconciliation (1990s–present), the project's team set out at just the right moment to re-collect what had been taken. Reflecting on the detective-like work of reclaiming photos, Dallwitz explains that he "found a huge number in private collections and there were many elderly people who were teachers or missionaries or nurses, who had been out there and who were still alive and who still had their collections in the bottom of a wardrobe or a suitcase or a back shed."<sup>3</sup> Most people were more than

happy to "return"—in digital form—the photos and objects they had collected while living on Pitjantjatjara lands. This form of reconciliation seemed simple.

Armed with scanned images of these originals, the *Ara Irititja* team in consultation with the Pitjantjatjara Council set out to create an archive system that would work within *Anangu* cultural parameters for the viewing and circulation of objects and images. The software—designed specifically for this project—allows community members to update, change, and add to existing knowledge about photos, audio tapes, and video clips. The present database holds over 50,000 images and sound recordings in their virtual form (*Heritage South Australian Newsletter*, 27(2005):1–16, p. 16). Only a fraction of these have been physically repatriated to the Pitjantjatjara. Instead, access to images of many objects and the aural reproduction of songs and stories allows remote communities to "house" these cultural materials in a way that is secure and controllable. In addition to the computer stations at the museum in Adelaide, eleven mobile *niri niri* computer workstations—built specifically for the desert environment—are dispersed in remote community living areas throughout the Pitjantjatjara lands. Wrapped in protective "shells"—like the scarab beetles from which they take their names—the workstations hold a computer, data projector, printer, and uninterruptible power supply unit all shielded from the sand and dust that infiltrates almost everything in the desert environment. As self-contained units, the *niri niri* can be transported in Toyotas between communities and stored for extended periods of time. (Figure 1)

This mobile digital archive, and the website that allows outsiders to view it, is more than a salvage project. Its use of Pitjantjatjara language, knowledge structures, and modes of sociality unite technological innovations with community desires. Years in the making, the database has become an icon of indigenous inspired technological solutions to practical problems. The database was built using Pitjantjatjara access parameters—gender, kin relations, and country knowledge—to sort and present data. The main page of the website has a Flash-powered demo of the archive's interface and capabilities. The main screen defines access privileges in four categories: open access (view but not edit), operator (view and edit), sorrow (view and edit items containing deceased people),



1. Lena Young (in the foreground), pictured with members of her family and the wider Watarru community as they experiment with the *niri niri* (scarab beetle) workstation on the day of its arrival in their community, July 2004. Watarru is one of the most remote Anangu communities to have the database system. Photograph by John Dallwitz. Courtesy of the Ara Irititja project.

and offensive (view and edit offensive items). A password is necessary to access the archive. Specific communities employ their own restrictions and set passwords for users to access appropriate materials. (Figure 2)



2. The Ara Irititja "Password" screen. Reflecting Anangu systems governing traditional knowledge and cultural property, this point of entry into the database provides different kinds of users with different levels of access to the data gathered on the system. Courtesy of the Ara Irititja project.

The "open access" mode allows for the widest scope of viewership, but does not allow one to edit. Therefore this group of users can search the archive, view the images, and listen to the audio, but cannot add to it—this is mainly an educational function for children and those without much local knowledge. This same type of interface is also being adopted by other Aboriginal communities to engage with tourists and promote cultural literacy among youngsters.<sup>4</sup>

Access to the "operator," "sorrow," and "sensitive" fields are structured to allow knowledgeable community members to edit, delete, and add commentary to the "information" field. Once a password is entered, the user can enter the database through several paths. Data is sorted into six fields: photo, movie (*uritjara*), sound (*kulintjaku*), documents (*nyiri*), object (*kutjupa-kutjupa*), and map. In each of these fields, hundreds and often thousands of images are archived. Users can search the data in a number of ways—if one only knows part of a name, a general date, or place she can search through these partial bits of information. In each field of the database, users with access can add their own knowledge to the archive. In the photo portion of the archive, for example, there are eleven fields for precise data: item number, photo CD number, collection, location of original, copyright, format of original, photographer, date, location and *Ini tjuta* (names of people in the photo). "Information," however, is an open-ended field so that "everyone's story can be entered" eventually creating an "essay of some substance" for the community. The information field allows multiple storylines to coexist creating a narrative history of each photo from multiple memories. This feature allows community members to create a layered history, where individual memories are pieced together—not forming a complete whole, but producing a quilt-like narrative sewn from various fabrics. Foreshadowing Wikipedia's community produced encyclopedia design functionality, this design function calls attention to both the dispossession and tragedies wrought on Aboriginal communities, and also the dynamic traditions that have survived in the harshest of conditions.

Scrolling down the page, a screen shot from *Ara Winki: Life of the Pitjantjatjara Lands*, brings this idea to life. *Ara Winki* ('all of our stories') is a permanent public interactive educational display housed at both the SAM and the public library in Alice Springs. Visitors to either of these locations can navigate through the touch screen by throwing

rocks (virtually) and forging paths in the sand similar to those on Pitjantjatjara lands. Taking its cue from *Ara Irititja*'s design, *Ara Winki*'s interactive design and user-friendly display give museum or library visitors a chance to view and engage with *Anangu* cultural practices, both past and present.

Navigating through this website it is obvious that *Ara Irititja* is not simply a "learning site." Certainly one could glean some brief understanding of Pitjantjatjara culture and people. Or one might stumble across an interesting fact about Australian settler history. To me, these are secondary. What is primary is this site's function as a tool for demonstrating the ways in which technology and cultural practices can be made to work together to fulfill community goals. Rightside Response (the multimedia design firm who produced the website and the traveling display), the *Ara Irititja* team and Pitjantjatjara community members demonstrate how indigenous communities and engaged collaborators can work with technology and across cultural, linguistic and economic barriers to create an innovative design and database system. After clicking through the demo, one can see how Pitjantjatjara understandings of knowledge-sharing and information design depart radically from that of the colonial museum models on which archives are still often built.

One integral part of this integrative shift has been the collaborations between museums, indigenous communities and design firms such as Rightside Response who actively "incorporate Aboriginal sensitivities and protocols within the design of multimedia programs and online pathways" ([www.rightside.com.au](http://www.rightside.com.au), accessed December 15, 2005). Philip Jones, Senior Curator at the SAM suggests that, "museums carry a special responsibility for ensuring that collection websites reflect the logic and history of their collections, rather than simply passing their digital assets to software developers."<sup>5</sup> In Australia, like other settler nations, cyberspace is also a place for (partial and practical) reconciliation.

The *Ara Irititja* project and its website chronicle what David Bell calls the "material story" of cyberspace—stories that "re-place cyberspace in its political-economic context, and rewrite its "material story" as the outcome not only of technological development, but also of the interplay of technology with society, culture and politics" (*An Introduction to Cybercultures*, Routledge, 2001, p. 16).

These productions are part of past and ongoing legacies of colonial power. Museum spaces have always been used as repositories for the ideological as well as the physical conquests of colonial elites. Yet, these newly produced online venues resonate with the sea change in museum productions over the last twenty-five years. What online spaces like [www.irititja.com](http://www.irititja.com) bring to bear on the sometimes over-hyped democratic appeal of cyberspace is the very material, social and political ways in which collaboration is put into practice in ways that reclaim a space *alongside* the still hegemonic claims of digital elites.<sup>6</sup>

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1. Information for this paragraph was compiled from personal communication with John Dallwitz (January 2006), from Dallwitz' essay "The Diversity of Practice," (*Artlink* 20(March 2000):81–83) and from Chris Nobbs' "*Ara Irititja: Protecting the Past, Accessing the Future—Indigenous Memories in a Digital Age*" (*Artlink*, 24(March 2004):50–51).
2. The website associated with the broader project reviewed here could be accessed, at the time of this writing (January 2006), at [www.irititja.com](http://www.irititja.com). Unless another citation is given, quotations given here derive from publicly accessible pages within this web site.
3. The preceding paragraph draws upon material available in a transcript of a 2001 Australian Broadcasting Corporation program "Pitjantjatjara People Use Technology to Reclaim the Past" that was accessed at [www.abc.net.au/7.30/content/2001/s387647.htm](http://www.abc.net.au/7.30/content/2001/s387647.htm), December 2005.
4. For related approaches, see collaborative projects involving the author ("Gone Digital: Aboriginal Remix and the Cultural Commons," Kimberly Christen, *International Journal of Cultural Property*, 12(2005):315–345) and Jane Hunter ("Software Tools Designed to Facilitate Indigenous Knowledge Management and Digital Repatriation," Paper presented at the Libraries and Indigenous Knowledge Colloquium, State Library of New South Wales, Sydney Australia, December 9–10, 2004).
5. The quotation from Jones is taken from his "Click Go the Spears: Three Approaches to Placing Artefacts on the Web," (Paper Presented at the "Perpetuation of Myths in Museum Documentation and Archives Symposium" at the University of South Australia, Adelaide, March 18, 2002).
6. Works reflecting the "sea change" I am describing here include James Clifford's *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Harvard University Press, 1997) and Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums and Heritage* (University of California Press, 1998). Lawrence Lessig's *Free Culture: How Big Media Uses Technology and the Law to Lock Down Culture and Control Creativity* (Penguin, 2004) provides a point of reference for my concerns regarding exaggerated understandings of the democratic possibilities of cyberspace.

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**Sounds From the Vault. An online exhibition of the Department of Anthropology, The Field Museum.**

**Staying in Tune: Traditions and Musical Instruments of the Francophonie. An online exhibition of the Canadian Heritage Information Network and the Virtual Museum of Canada.**

SUNNI FASS

In today's world of technological advancements and the pervasive influence and availability of cyberspatial real estate, museums and other cultural/educational institutions are increasingly looking toward the Internet as a tool for making their collections accessible. Virtual exhibitions offer new possibilities for the display of objects as well as for audience-building. These initiatives make existing gallery installations visible to a wider audience, they can move beyond spatial and conservation limitations to display objects that would otherwise remain in storage, and they permit the inexpensive incorporation of multimedia or interactive components. Online exhibition formats also present solutions for institutional collaborations, providing a means to construct meaningful assemblages of artifacts housed in geographically disparate locations.

The display of musical instruments is particularly well-served by the opportunities offered by the "virtual museum." With their significance in aural, visual, kinesthetic, social, and often even spiritual dimensions, instruments open up a wide range of interpretive strategies that can be challenging to cohere and mobilize in traditional brick-and-mortar gallery spaces. For the creative curator, however, online exhibitions proffer a variety of options for embracing, synthesizing, or overcoming the combination of museological and organological issues and challenges associated with presenting musical instrument collections.

In the review that follows, two online musical instrument exhibitions will be considered and compared: *Sounds From the Vault*, a presentation of Chicago's Field Museum and *Staying in Tune: Traditions and Musical Instruments of the Francophonie*, hosted by the Musée Virtuel du Canada/Virtual Museum of Canada and available in both English and French.<sup>1</sup> Although both exhibits incorporate some common elements, these virtual projects differ in their goals and scope, both in terms of their approaches to online exhibition and in terms of their uses of resources unique to cyberspace to bring instruments to life.

With the exhibit *Sounds From the Vault*, the Field Museum adds musical instruments to an impressive roster of (at time of writing) more than 15 other small online exhibitions that are each designed to illuminate different components of the Field's considerable collections. *Sounds*, like these other virtual exhibitions, is a good example of how an online format can be used by a brick-and-mortar institution to complement existing installations or provide public access to collections not currently on display. This particular exhibit does the latter, inviting visitors to venture deep into collection storage and investigate several musical artifacts from various research perspectives. Navigation into the exhibit actually takes the viewer quite literally through this passage into the depths of the museum, with two theatrical opening screens that involve clicking to open a set of large, heavy doors and then clicking on a bright red and blue disc hanging at the end of a dark corridor lined with archival shelving and storage. Presented with an enlarged version of the disc that pictures small images of various instruments, the viewer can then choose which artifact to investigate—a *bonang* from a Javanese gamelan, a set of Venezuelan *maracas*, a clay flute from Nicaragua, and an hourglass drum from the Merauke region of New Guinea.

Each choice takes the viewer on a slightly different journey, with certain common elements. The total exhibit is quite small, with each instrument explicated over approximately five screens that each feature one image and about a paragraph of text; screens are arranged linearly, with "continue" and "previous" navigation options. All of the narratives seem designed to put the viewer in the shoes of a curator, illustrating either the different ways in which artifacts can be illuminated through research