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Partnership, Collaboration, and Community Engagement: Reflections on Applied Repatriation in a Small Museum

Abstract

The Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection of the University of Virginia is the only museum outside of Australia dedicated to the exhibition and study of Indigenous Australian arts and cultures. From 2019 to 2021, Kluge-Ruhe partnered with the Return of Cultural Heritage program of the Australian Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies to facilitate the return of cultural heritage items to Arrernte, Warlpiri, and Warumungu communities in Australia. Through such collaborative partnership with larger organizations, small museums like Kluge-Ruhe can plan, document, and implement large-scale, long-range projects like unconditional repatriation to Indigenous Australian communities. Such endeavors also help prepare smaller institutions for future projects, including internal policy writing and continued community engagement.

Keywords: *Indigenous Australians, repatriation, unconditional return, cultural heritage items, AIATSIS, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection, Arrernte, Warlpiri, Warumungu*

Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection: Small Museum Challenges in Repatriation

In 2019, the Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection of the University of Virginia (Kluge-Ruhe) embarked on the unconditional return of seventeen sensitive cultural heritage items to Arrernte, Warlpiri, and Warumungu communities in Australia. As a relatively small collecting institution—with a staff of five and no funds specifically earmarked for the expense of returning cultural heritage materials and supporting their receipt by Indigenous Australian communities—the museum partnered with the Australian Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS), Australia’s only national institution focused exclusively on the diverse histories, cultures, and heritage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, in order to make these returns possible.¹ The AIATSIS Return of Cultural

Heritage (RoCH) program is dedicated to the return of Indigenous Australian items held in overseas institutions.

While there are excellent examples of how larger collecting institutions proceed with incredibly impactful repatriation work,² these ventures often feel unclear and unwieldy to small museums. The stumbling blocks around repatriation vary between institutions, but for many small museums the common refrain is often that staff bandwidth for research and community engagement is limited, there are budgetary concerns, and they have little experience forging new relationships with communities with whom they have had limited or no contact in the past. My hope is that the repatriation project presented here may serve as an example for other small cultural institutions that are interested in pursuing the unconditional return of cultural heritage materials to Indigenous communities, especially those that are not sure where to start or feel they must have the process completely defined before taking the first step.

In observance with cultural protocols and out of the utmost respect for the privacy of the Arrernte, Warlpiri, and Warumungu communities, there will be no discussion, description, or images herein of the sensitive cultural heritage materials that were returned. Rather, these absences can serve as a reminder that oftentimes the most important work that cultural institutions can undertake involves cultural heritage items that are restricted to access outside of a select group of people and have few to no public-facing outcomes.

Kluge & Ruhe: Private Collections, Public Museum

Kluge-Ruhe is the only museum outside of Australia dedicated to the exhibition and study of Indigenous Australian art.³ The permanent collection currently includes more than 3,600 works spanning the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, representing the arts and cultures of Indigenous communities across Australia.

The museum was founded in 1997 through a monumental gift from John W. Kluge (1914–2010) and opened its doors in Charlottesville, Virginia, in 1999 as the second of two museums at the University of Virginia. Kluge, who emigrated to the United States from Germany in 1922, became keenly interested in Australian Aboriginal art in 1988 after viewing the exhibition *Dreamings: The Art of Aboriginal Australia* at the Asia Society Galleries in New York City. In 1989, shortly after experiencing this remarkable introduction to Australian Aboriginal art, Kluge became invested in building his own private collection through substantial commissions with community-based art centers and purchases from dealers and galleries

in the secondary art market. Under the guidance of curatorial advisors, Kluge began acquiring artwork and visited Australia, eventually amassing a collection of more than 1,600 items between 1989 and 1997.⁴

Kluge's largest individual acquisition came in 1993, with the purchase of Edward L. Ruhe's private collection, including Ruhe's personal library and archive. Born in Allentown, Pennsylvania, Ed Ruhe (1923–1989) was a professor of English at the University of Kansas who traveled to Australia in 1965 as a Fulbright visiting professor.⁵ While in Australia, Ruhe became deeply interested in Australian Aboriginal arts and cultures and began collecting bark paintings, sculpture, and items of cultural heritage directly from artists, community-run art centers, and dealers. Until his death in June 1989, Ruhe continued his scholarly endeavors, researching and corresponding widely with others who were also studying and exhibiting Indigenous Australian art.

While perhaps it can be said that Kluge's collection pursuits were driven largely by aesthetics and the visual majesty of Indigenous Australian art, it is clear from Ruhe's collecting habits and research interests that his pursuits were more scholarly in nature.⁶ At the time of his passing, Ruhe had assembled a collection of nearly one thousand works of art, a comprehensive library of books, and an extensive archive of ephemera and personal correspondence that spanned nearly twenty-five years of research, study, and vigorous promotion of Australian Aboriginal art.

Partnering for Unconditional Return: AIATSIS & the Return of Cultural Heritage Program

Kluge-Ruhe began partnering with AIATSIS in 2019 to facilitate the return of restricted cultural heritage items through their RoCH program.⁷ Originally launched in 2018, with two years of funding provided by the Australian government, the RoCH program was established to locate and aid in the return of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural heritage materials (not ancestral remains) from private and institutional collections outside of Australia. The RoCH program demonstrates the Australian government's commitment to the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.⁸ As the agent for the RoCH program, AIATSIS acts to support communities as they assert their custodianship over cultural heritage materials held off Country.⁹ After its initial success, the RoCH program was subsequently funded for an additional four years beginning in July 2020. This second phase of funding allowed the program to continue fostering

relationships between collecting institutions outside of Australia and Indigenous Australian communities, as well as aiding in the unconditional return of cultural heritage items to Country.¹⁰

Initial conversations between Kluge-Ruhe and AIATSIS began in April 2019, when staff of the RoCH program contacted the museum during their research into collections of Indigenous Australian cultural heritage in overseas institutions. Despite John Kluge's desire "to build a comprehensive and 'complete' collection of Aboriginal Art,"¹¹ the foundational gift to the University of Virginia in December 1997 reflects the collecting practices of two white men, each of whom focused on the art and culture of communities of the Northern Territory across four decades of collecting. While it appears that neither Ruhe nor Kluge had a strong desire to acquire items of a sacred, secret nature, both held small numbers of restricted ceremonial men's items in their respective collections. These sensitive cultural heritage items were included in the donation that established Kluge-Ruhe.

The museum had previously identified items with secret, sacred, or restricted designations from Ruhe and Kluge's collections and housed them separately from general collections storage in observance of cultural protocols that might restrict the items from being viewed or handled by women or uninitiated men. While Kluge-Ruhe had long been interested in the return of these items to their respective traditional owners and cultural custodians, there were many instances in which the original acquisition records of Ruhe and Kluge did not include cultural information. As with many small cultural institutions, the museum did not have the staff or budget to pursue a large-scale, long-range project that could research and identify the traditional owners to which these restricted cultural heritage items belonged, nor could they carry out sensitive and necessary consultation with Senior members of the identified stakeholder communities.¹²

Despite the lack of experience around cultural returns, the unconditional repatriation of restricted or sensitive cultural heritage items closely aligns with Kluge-Ruhe's mission "to expand knowledge and understanding of Indigenous Australian arts and cultures to cultivate greater appreciation of human diversity and creation."¹³ Working with RoCH to return restricted cultural heritage items to communities and to Country offered an opportunity for the museum to fulfill its mission by respecting Indigenous peoples as the authorities on their respective arts and cultures and its commitment to supporting Indigenous Australian communities in keeping culture strong.

Of the cultural heritage items that Kluge-Ruhe staff had flagged as restricted men's items, seventeen had clear or likely cultural affiliations with one of three communities: the Arrernte people, whose Country is the Central Desert

region of the Northern Territory; the Warlpiri people, whose Country is northwest of Alice Springs in the Tanami Desert of Central Australia; and the Warumungu people, whose Country is an expansive area of land in the northern part of central Australia that includes Tennant Creek. With the hope of having an impactful first round of proactive returns to communities and under the guidance of RoCH staff, the museum sought to return to the Arrernte, Warlpiri, and Warumungu communities their respective cultural heritage materials.

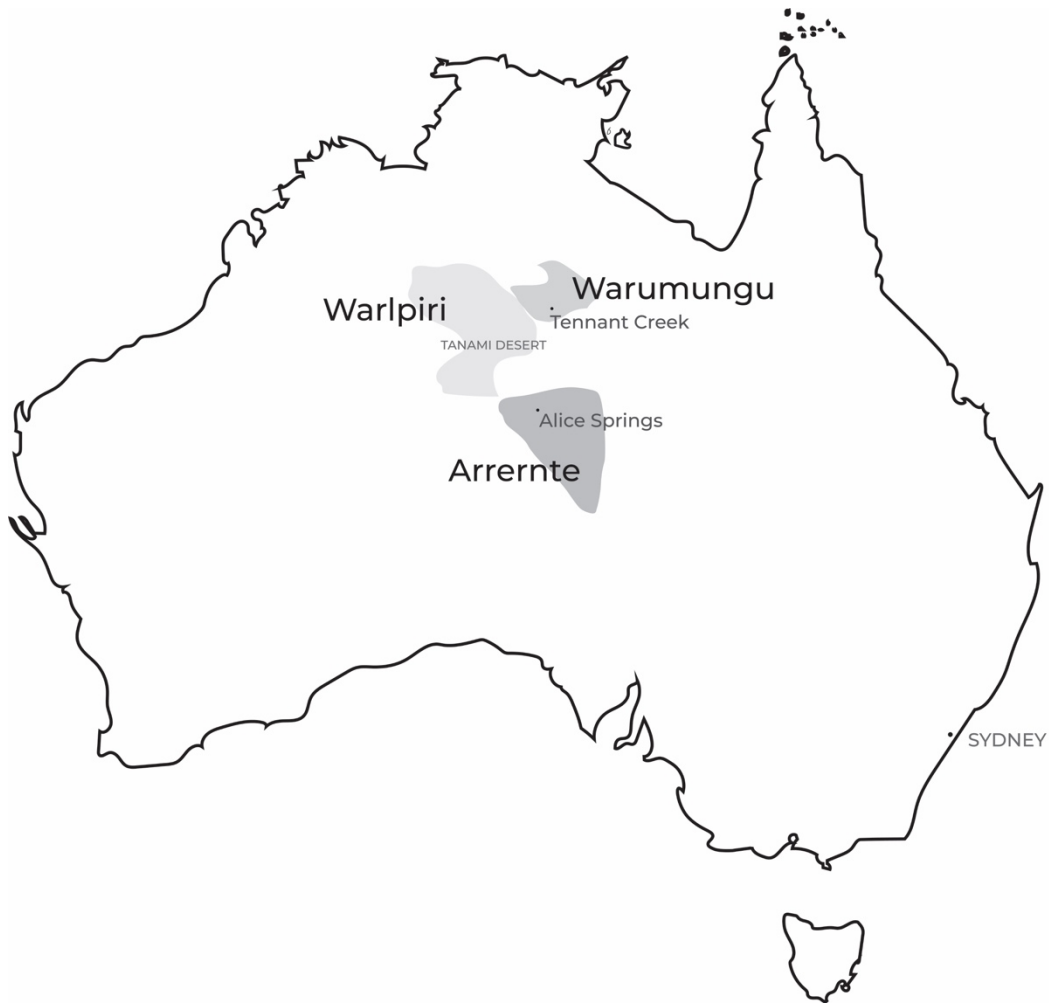


Figure 1. Map of Arrernte, Warlpiri, and Warumungu homelands. Courtesy of Laura Snyder, Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection

Process & Progress: Many Steps on the Way Forward

After introductory conversations with RoCH program staff in spring 2019, the project commenced in May 2019 with a deep dive into the Edward L. Ruhe archives aimed at firmly establishing the cultural provenance of the selected restricted men's items. Ruhe's personal archive of correspondence, acquisition records, and extensive inventories was part of the foundational gift to the museum. Kluge-Ruhe staff were able to locate archival documentation in the form of inventories and Western Union telegrams that effectively confirmed cultural affiliations with the Arrernte, Warlpiri, and Warumungu communities and established shipment import dates into the United States.

During this initial phase of the project, it became clear that Kluge-Ruhe would need to provide high-resolution images of the selected cultural heritage items to AIATSIS to support RoCH program staff during the upcoming community-engagement phase of the project. For the cultural heritage items selected for this return, cultural knowledge is held by and restricted to initiated male members within each community. Due to the restricted nature of these items and Kluge-Ruhe's continued desire to adhere to cultural protocols, the museum engaged a male photographer to work with the museum's male curator to unpack, photograph, and rehouse each item. To avoid exposing the images to any female participants on the project team, the images were delivered directly to male colleagues at RoCH, who then shared them with Senior men in the relevant communities.

As archival research and imaging were nearing completion, the COVID-19 pandemic began, stalling the outset of community engagement. While American and Australian governmental responses to the pandemic were different, Kluge-Ruhe and RoCH staff were in strong agreement that in-person community engagement would need to be paused until such time when it could be realized without health or safety risks to the Senior knowledge holders in each community. Fortunately, discussions between Kluge-Ruhe and RoCH staff continued largely unfazed given that online meetings had already been established necessary to bridge the enormous geographical distance and many time zones between the two organizations. When community engagement began in the latter half of 2020, partially online, the first phase of engagement was to introduce representatives of the Senior men in each community to the project and support their review of collection materials and a Collection Research report prepared by RoCH staff. This period provided the Arrernte, Warlpiri, and Warumungu communities with the opportunity to express whether they were currently able to explore a partnership with

Kluge-Ruhe and AIATSIS with the explicit goal of returning cultural heritage materials.

The second phase of community engagement was conducted with Senior men from each community on their respective Country. This stage was extensive, involving Senior cultural authorities and relevant custodians who will become future authorities, and included close examination of photographs and historical documentation provided by Kluge-Ruhe. This phase of engagement was of particular significance as it addressed whether each community would like to have these items returned to them (or to a nearby keeping place at another cultural institution) and verified their desire to partner with AIATSIS to submit a formal repatriation request to Kluge-Ruhe.

In February 2021, RoCH staff submitted a formal letter of Request for Repatriation and a confidential Repatriation Research Report to Kluge-Ruhe and the Vice President and Provost of the University of Virginia. Throughout the community engagement process, the Senior men within each community chose carefully what information to share with institutional participants to not only safeguard their sacred knowledge, but also demonstrate their deep connection to the items being considered for return and the importance of returning these items to their custodianship. In the Repatriation Research Report, Senior representatives from the Arrernte, Warlpiri, and Warumungu advised that the objects requested for return to their respective communities were of high cultural importance and significant to their people, culture, and traditions.

The RoCH letter of request and accompanying report triggered the museum's formal internal deaccession process. While the museum's collections management policy defined and governed the deaccessioning process for the purpose of unconditional repatriation, Kluge-Ruhe had never exercised the procedure and needed to further investigate the requisite steps involved in transferring custody and legal title while continuing to move the project forward. As a museum at a state-funded university, it was necessary for Kluge-Ruhe to obtain additional University of Virginia (University) approvals to execute the transfer of physical custody of these items back to the Arrernte, Warlpiri, and Warumungu communities. Within weeks of receiving the letter of request and research report, the museum's collections committee convened to vote on the deaccessioning of these designated cultural heritage materials from the permanent collection.

Concurrently, Kluge-Ruhe staff consulted with the University's Office of General Counsel to determine the approvals process and what administrative paperwork would be required to formally transfer the legal rights to the cultural heritage materials back to their respective communities. Between March and May

2021, Quit Claim Deeds were drafted for each group of cultural heritage items. These Quit Claim Deeds were circulated to the Arrernte, Warlpiri, and Warumungu communities by RoCH staff, with Senior men from each acting as signatories. This particular phase of the project was incredibly important for two reasons: it signaled that these long-absent cultural heritage materials were officially going home to Country and it also signaled the restoration of each community's cultural authority.¹⁴

In July and August 2021, Kluge-Ruhe worked with a reputable fine art shipper and an international customs broker to begin the process of packing, crating, and transporting the Arrernte, Warlpiri, and Warumungu cultural heritage items back to Country. Out of an abundance of respect for cultural protocols, male art handlers were hired to pack and crate these sensitive cultural heritage items for their journey home to their communities. The return passage home began "early" for the Arrernte and Warlpiri cultural heritage materials as their export out of the United States only required a simple electronic declaration with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service declaring the species of plant and animal materials involved in their creation. The Warumungu community's return was a more protracted process as the export of their cultural heritage items required a Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) permit due to the presence of component parts from specific protected species.

Drafted in 1963, CITES is now observed by 184 nations with the aim of protecting endangered plants and animals from the many threats associated with international trade.¹⁵ In the case of the United States, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Services acts as the permit-granting body for CITES applications. The application process for a CITES permit is rigorous, requiring extensive documentation around provenance and possession, descriptive information, and whenever possible, photographic documentation. In an effort to continue carrying out careful observance of cultural protocols, Kluge-Ruhe declined to provide the usually requisite images. Instead, the museum detailed the process of unconditional returns to community, described the importance of observing cultural protocols, and offered archival documentation including Ed Ruhe's personal correspondence, inventories with detailed provenance information, and Western Union telegrams highlighting the movement of the items out of Australia in the 1960s. In September 2021, after a relatively short wait considering the disorder that the COVID-19 pandemic created in many federal agencies, Kluge-Ruhe received the mandatory permit and by November 2021, the Warumungu cultural heritage items were finally homeward bound.

Under normal circumstances, AIATSIS would have sought to support two Senior leaders from each community to travel to the United States to collect their respective cultural heritage items and conduct culturally appropriate ceremonies in preparation for their return to Country. Unfortunately, the ever-lingering COVID-19 pandemic prevented this. Instead, despite the staggered shipping dates, AIATSIS was able to receive all three crates and store them at community approved locations until such time as they could be stored and cared for on Country in accordance with the traditions and customs of the Arrernte, Warlpiri, and Warumungu peoples.

Looking to the Future: Thoughts on Repatriation and Relationship Building

Casual observation of public opinion on repatriation often reveals the belief that the unconditional return of cultural heritage items, whether to countries or communities, is reductive in nature. Negative perspectives around repatriation rarely engage more than the notion that cultural heritage returns remove items from museum collections and therefore public view. Reviewing comment sections on social media posts and newspaper articles exposes concerns that repatriated items will return to communities and the public will no longer have access to the items they feel entitled to view, regardless of the context in which they are presented.

It is critical that these sentiments are understood and reframed by museum professionals, be they collections managers, curators, or educators. It is the continued responsibility of cultural institutions, regardless of size, to highlight that the foundation of all cultural return projects (and ideally all collections-based and curatorial projects) is relationship building.¹⁶ Repatriation, regardless of its scale or scope, creates the opportunity for collecting institutions to recontextualize and reinterpret existing collections in the absence of returned cultural heritage items and build new collections with contemporary work acquired from those same communities. This recontextualization and reinterpretation of collections paves the way for institutions to amplify Indigenous voices as the experts on their own cultures and practices, creating the space necessary for the public to engage with artists, makers, and traditional knowledge holders on relevant collections still held in storage rooms and exhibition spaces around the globe.

Cultural heritage returns offer vital opportunities for museums to recognize, or continue to recognize, that cultural heritage items are not static in nature. Rather, these items are as alive and dynamic as the communities to which they

belong. Their meanings and inherent cultural values are fluid—what was once secular, may become sacred or restricted and vice versa. As generations of Indigenous peoples continue to grow and lead the way into the future and traditional knowledge stays strong and interwoven into the lives of younger generations of cultural practitioners and knowledge holders, so too will the meaning, power, and use of cultural heritage items shift, change, and grow.

All the while, it is imperative to acknowledge that communities may not have the time, resources, or cultural practitioners available to consider the return of their cultural heritage items. It is the responsibility of collecting institutions to continue holding these items in care and esteem until such time that a community may become ready to receive their cultural patrimony without undue burden. In projects as sensitive and significant as repatriation, institutional timelines must take a backseat to the fact that the most important outcome in museum work should always be relationship building. In the words of cultural leader and community engagement specialist Jade Lillie, “Keep adapting. Keep shifting but always come back to knowing that the relationship is the project.”¹⁷

For small museums that find themselves unsure how to begin, know that it is possible to undertake museum projects involving community engagement without complete certainty of the process. Small museums should reconsider this vulnerable position as an opportunity to be better collaborators with potential partner organizations and better partners to the stakeholder communities they seek to engage. An institutional openness to starting a project without a rigid or defined framework creates space for communities to determine project parameters more clearly for themselves and to consider how they themselves will feel most comfortable building trust-based relationships with institutional partners that for too long have not been deserving of that brand of faith. There is no one-size-fits-all approach to any project or program with relationship building at its heart. Just as community engagement and a focus on relationship building are indispensable to cultural return projects, it is also important to note that relationship building between small museums and larger cultural institutions can result in vibrant synergies that lead to inspired avenues for partnering with communities. Collaborative partnerships with larger organizations can offer smaller institutions the opportunity to expand their reach and expertise without sacrificing their own strengths.

This first successful return of cultural heritage items to Country has given Kluge-Ruhe the incredible opportunity to connect to communities it had little contact with before. Working with AIATSIS from 2019 to 2021 allowed the museum to build the foundation for a new path forward with Arrernte, Warlpiri, and

Warumungu communities, fostering trust and mutual understanding around the importance of returning sacred cultural items. The Arrernte, Warlpiri, and Warumungu communities placed their trust in the staff at Kluge-Ruhe and AIATSIS to care for and steward their cultural heritage with the utmost respect, to follow cultural protocols, and to communicate with transparency around the process of return.

As a central tenant of the collections and curatorial work undertaken at Kluge-Ruhe, there are levels of knowledge and meaning that are secular and can be known by staff and visitors alike, and there are still other deeper and more profound layers of knowledge and meaning that are specific to knowledge holders within community. The position of not knowing, especially for museum professionals that are non-Indigenous, should never diminish the care, respect, or esteem the cultural heritage materials receive while in the custody of cultural institutions. Rather, this state of “not knowing” that outsiders experience is to be expected and honored while cultural heritage items are held in museum collections away from their cultural custodians.

As Kluge-Ruhe continues to work toward the complete repatriation of the sensitive cultural heritage items it intends to proactively return, it faces the new challenge of drafting policies that allow for the careful and transparent evaluation of future cultural return projects, especially unsolicited requests initiated directly by Indigenous Australian communities. As with any policy writing endeavor, the museum aspires to create flexible strategies that allow enough latitude to acknowledge that each appeal will be unique and that not all requests will arrive with the same types of documentation, cultural information, and forward planning.

Nicole Wade is the senior collections manager and registrar at the Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection of the University of Virginia. She has spent sixteen years stewarding museum collections at the University of Virginia, the last twelve of which have been focused on providing ethical care and stewardship for the cultural heritage items of Indigenous Australian communities held at the Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection.

The Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection stands on the traditional homelands of the Monacan Nation.¹⁸ We acknowledge the Monacan People as the Indigenous custodians of the land in and around Charlottesville and pay our respects to their Elders past, present, and emerging.

Notes

¹ For additional information about the Australia Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies see, <https://aiatsis.gov.au/about-aiatsis>.

² For an example of applied repatriation in a large cultural institution, see Michael Pickering, “Despatches from the Front Line? Museum Experiences in Applied Repatriation,” in *The Long Way Home: The Meaning and Values of Repatriation*, ed. Paul Turnbull and Michael Pickering (New York: Berghahn Books, 2010), 163–74.

³ For more information about the Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection of the University of Virginia, see <https://kluge-ruhe.org/about/mission-vision-values/>.

⁴ For more information about the history of the Kluge-Ruhe Collection, see <https://kluge-ruhe.org/about/history-of-kluge-ruhe/>.

⁵ For more information about the Fulbright Program and its role in raising the visibility of Indigenous Australian art in the US, see Caroline Jordan and Diane Kirkby, “‘No One Here . . . Understands the Problem of Aboriginal Art’: The Fulbright Program, Aboriginal Studies and Aboriginal Art, 1950–65,” *Australian Historical Studies* 53:1 (2022): 119–45, DOI: [10.1080/1031461X.2020.1856899](https://doi.org/10.1080/1031461X.2020.1856899).

⁶ For more information on the collections of John W. Kluge and Edward L. Ruhe, and the founding of the Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection, see Margo Smith, “Aesthete and Scholar: Two Complementary Influences on the Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection of the University of Virginia,” in *The Makers and the Making of Indigenous Australian Museum Collections*, ed. Nicolas Peterson, Lindy Allen and Louise Hamby (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2008), 556–89.

⁷ For additional information about the Return of Cultural Heritage program and their return projects, see <https://aiatsis.gov.au/about/what-we-do/return-cultural-heritage>.

⁸ For more information on the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People, see https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/wp-content/uploads/sites/19/2018/11/UNDRIP_E_web.pdf.

⁹ The term “Country,” as used here, refers to the ways in which Indigenous Australian peoples relate to the land, seas and waterways, sky, and everything held therein. The term speaks to the constellation of connections between Indigenous Australians and their homelands that include place, cultural practices, customs and law, identity, and more. See <https://kluge-ruhe.org/aboriginal-art-101/>.

¹⁰ For additional information about the success of the Return of Cultural Heritage program, see <https://aiatsis.gov.au/about/what-we-do/return-cultural-heritage/about-roch>.

¹¹ Smith, “Aesthete and Scholar,” 574.

¹² I use the term “Senior” to refer to those individuals within a community who are recognized for their cultural knowledge, wisdom, leadership, and authority.

Senior men and women within a community keep culture strong by providing mentorship and guidance to younger generations, protecting Country, and stewarding cultural knowledge. How or when an individual is considered Senior is dependent upon the community and can be unrelated to one's age. The term "Elder" is used in the same manner and is the preferred term in some communities.

¹³ For more information about the Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection's vision, mission, and values, see <https://kluge-ruhe.org/about/mission-vision-values/>.

¹⁴ Pickering, "Despatches," 171.

¹⁵ For additional information about CITES, see <https://cites.org/eng/disc/what.php>.

¹⁶ For a resource on engaging with Indigenous communities, see *The Relationship is the Project: Working with Communities*, ed. Jade Lillie, Kate Larsen, Cara Kirkwood, and Jax Jacki Brown (Australia: Brow Books, 2020).

¹⁷ Jade Lillie, "The Relationship is The Project," in *The Relationship is the Project: Working with Communities*, ed. Jade Lillie, Kate Larsen, Cara Kirkwood, and Jax Jacki Brown (Australia: Brow Books, 2020), 159–64.

¹⁸ For more information about the Monacan Nation, see <https://www.monacannation.com/>.