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Contact:
Brooke Morgan, Illinois State Museum
217-785-8930
brooke.morgan@illinois.gov

Illinois State Museum to Return Artifacts to Australian First Nations

SPRINGFIELD, Ill. – The Illinois State Museum will return 42 culturally significant objects currently in its collection to Australian First Nations after ten months of consultation with the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) and Aranda and Bardi Jawi communities. AIATSIS, based in Canberra, Australia, partnered with the communities to research, identify, and request the unconditional repatriation of secret/sacred, ceremonial, and secular artifacts from museums around the world.

Significantly, the Illinois State Museum is the first institution in the world to repatriate artifacts as part of the Australian Government’s Return of Cultural Heritage Project, which aims to return Australian Indigenous materials from overseas.

“Not only is this exciting from the standpoint of getting to be the first to return culturally significant items as a part of this program, this repatriation will serve as a model of successful collaboration and best practices for other museums,” said Cinnamon Catlin-Legutko, Director of the Illinois State Museum. “It will allow us to lead a meaningful movement and demonstrate the importance of continuing the Return of Cultural Heritage Project to bring colonial objects from international institutions back to their communities of origin.”

The Australian objects were collected by University of Chicago linguistic anthropologist Gerhardt Laves, who worked with Australian Aboriginal communities between 1929 and 1931. Laves was the first person trained in modern linguistic fieldwork to record Australian Indigenous languages. His field notes, which are curated at AIATSIS, have preserved a wealth of detailed information still used today by linguists and Aboriginal speakers.

The Australian artifacts were transferred from the University of Chicago to the Illinois State Museum in 1942 for incorporation into the museum’s rotating exhibit series on international cultures. Australian objects were last exhibited by the museum in 1981.

The Illinois State Museum removes objects from its collection through a process called “deaccessioning,” wherein a curator makes a formal request to the board of directors and provides justification for the removal. Deaccessioning for the purpose of repatriation is a widely accepted practice in museums. At their September meeting, the museum’s board of directors unanimously approved the deaccession request. The objects will be returned directly to Aranda and Bardi Jawi representatives and reincorporated into their traditional cultural practices.

Aranda and Bardi Jawi representatives will travel to the Illinois State Museum Research & Collections Center in Springfield in October to take custodianship of their items that were collected from their ancestors almost 100 years ago.

“Returning these items – it’s just the right thing to do,” Catlin-Legutko said. “We’re pleased to host representatives from Aranda and Bardi Jawi next month to complete this repatriation.”

The Illinois State Museum’s extensive collections and research activities provide the foundation for exhibitions and public programs that tell the story of the land, life, people, and art of Illinois. The Illinois State Museum is headquartered in Springfield. ISM facilities are located in Springfield, at the ISM-Dickson Mounds near Lewistown, and at the ISM-Lockport Gallery in Lockport. For more information on the ISM, go online to www.illinoisstatemuseum.org.