

Major wing of New York's famed Met reopens with work by First Nations artists



Michael Kozlowski
June 7, 2025 — 5:00am

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New York: When an institution as large and prestigious as the Metropolitan Museum of Art embarks upon a major project, it takes time. The remaking of its Michael C. Rockefeller wing, which houses the Met's enviable collection of 650 works from Oceania, began 10 years ago at a planning retreat outside the city.

Shuttered since the pandemic, the wing reopened last weekend, including new works by Aboriginal Australian artists at a time when Indigenous art is earning a growing following in the finely tuned and highly competitive New York art world.



The Met's curator of Oceanic art Maia Nuku with Slit Gongs from Vanuatu at the newly reopened Michael C. Rockefeller wing.

Credit: Andrew Kelly

"There's a lot of interest and patronage," says Maia Nuku, the Met's curator for Oceanic art. "There are particular collectors who have been really invested in making sure these works of art come to major US institutions ... It's been ticking away."

Some of those people, including American actor Steve Martin and gallerist D'Lan Davidson, gathered at the Asia Society's head office in Manhattan last week for a conversation about the ethics and resonance of collecting Australian Indigenous art.

But there are swings and roundabouts. A major Sotheby's auction of Indigenous Australian art on May 20 was a fizzer, with just 24 of 65 lots sold. It was the first such auction in New York since the prominent Indigenous art champion and consultant Tim Klingender [died in a freak boating accident](#) on Sydney Harbour in July 2023.

There is a degree of macabre symmetry with Michael Rockefeller, the member of the storied Rockefeller family for whom the Met's wing is named. He was believed to have died when his boat capsized off the coast of then Dutch New Guinea in 1961 – although there has long been a sense of mystery hanging over his disappearance. Unlike Klingender, his body was never found.



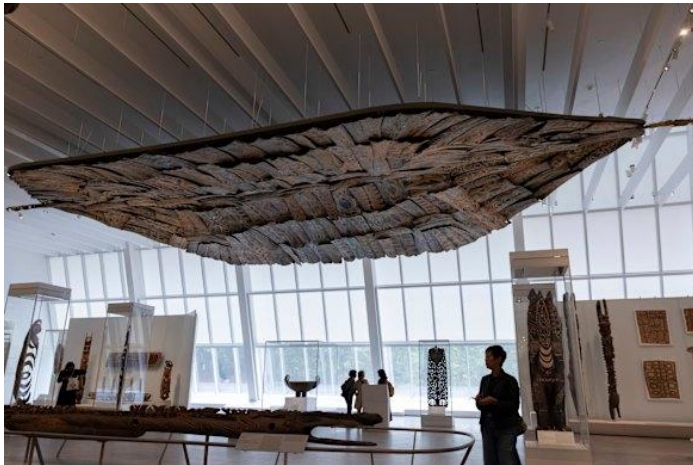
Yinimala Gumana from Yirrkala, north-east Arnhem Land, with the two works by Yolngu artist Nonggirnga Marawili.

The Australian section of the Rockefeller wing is modest, but in a prominent location. It features two newly acquired bark cloth paintings by the late Yolngu artist Nonggirnga Marawili from her series Baratjala, including a bright work from late in her career when she began experimenting with vibrant pinks extracted from discarded magenta printer cartridges, mixed with natural clay and ochres.

“She didn’t want to limit herself to the ochres and the browns,” says Nuku.

David Wickens, curator at Buku-Larrnggay Mulka at the Yirrkala Art Centre in north-east Arnhem Land, said the acquisition was a significant moment. The Met has also commissioned a work from one of his artists.

“This is great representation for First Nations Australia. It doesn’t get much bigger than to be showing in this space,” he said. “We’re expanding the footprint internationally, particularly in New York, and it’s bearing some pretty serious fruit and putting First Nations on the world stage where they belong.”



The Kwoma Ceiling takes pride of place in the Michael C. Rockefeller wing of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Credit: Andrew Kelly

Pride of place in the reimagined Rockefeller wing is the vast Kwoma ceiling, made up of some 170 individually painted panels from a single village, Mariwai, in north-eastern Papua New Guinea. The artwork, which evokes a men’s ceremonial house from the region, was commissioned in 1971, before PNG’s independence from Australia. It arrived at the Met in 1982 when the Rockefeller wing opened.

After consultation with chiefs from the community, some of whom were in New York for opening events last week, the work has been refined to better reflect cultural and spiritual mores.

Altogether, there are more than 650 works from Oceania in the Rockefeller wing, which also houses the Met’s collections from Africa and the ancient Americas. The Oceanic collection has been recalibrated to improve its focus on women’s stories and narratives.

“The Pacific, it’s always about balance and reciprocity,” says Nuku. “The women’s work is often embedded into the textiles, and then the sculptural work is often where the men’s stories are.”



Mexican artist Mark Saldana of Queens looks at Bisj (Ancestor Poles) of West Papua.

Credit: Andrew Kelly

On a recent Friday night, a black tie reception to mark the long-awaited opening attracted a who’s who of the New York art world, members of the Rockefeller family and a number of Australians, including consul-general Heather Ridout, American Australian Association president Steven Marshall and Davidson, the Indigenous art dealer.

Between espresso martinis and dancing, guests took the opportunity to check out the gallery, which formally opened to the public on Saturday. Nuku hopes visitors will appreciate what she calls the visual through-lines between the Oceanic cultures.

“When you walk through the eight galleries, you do a little journey through the Pacific. It’s this kaleidoscope of cultures, and we’re celebrating each individually,” she says.

“The sea is the highway. It’s a connector. It doesn’t separate, it actually sort of connects all these islands, and people understand in the region that we all share a common ancestry.”