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V. Ruth Pullin & Thomas A. Darragh

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The Artist-Collector: Eugene von Guérard and the Berlin Ethnological Museum

V. RUTH PULLIN & THOMAS A. DARRAGH

The nineteenth-century landscape painter Eugene von Guérard was an avid collector. A series of letters held by the Ethnological Museum Berlin, translated by the authors from 'old' German into English, describes his personal collection of Australian Aboriginal cultural objects and its transfer, along with 64 objects acquired on consignment, to the Ethnological Department of the Berlin Museum in 1879. Complemented by the publication of the complete correspondence in a companion paper, this article contextualises the letters within von Guérard's careers as artist, curator and collector, positioning them within the framework of his travels as recorded in his sketchbooks, and in relation to specific consequential experiences and individuals, prevailing colonial narratives and European and colonial collecting agendas and networks. The letters inform, and are informed by, von Guérard's art, collecting and professional practices, with new insights captured in the intersections between them.

I never met in my life a man with so great a passion for collecting. Not merely engravings and sketches that would occupy weeks to overhaul but even shells. Thousands, some exceedingly curious, all scientifically arranged [...]. He is also a numismatic [*sic*] and has gathered together coins that illustrate the art of every period. The walls of his studio are decorated with every implement of war and chase that exists in Australia.¹

I never turn out of the dusty glaring street into his small and quiet studio, hung around with sketches of Italian scenery and the weapons of Australian aborigines, but that I feel it is 'good to be there'.²

The authors acknowledge and thank Gilgar Gunditj (Gunditjmara) elder Aunty Eileen Alberts, for her generous engagement with our research. We are grateful to Anna Weinreich, who drew our attention to the letters, and Dorothea Deterts, Michaela Hussein-Wiedemann, and Hendryk Ortlieb at the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin (Staatliche Museen zu Berlin) for their generous assistance and for the provision of images from the collection, reproduced here courtesy of the Staatliches Museen zu Berlin. We thank the anonymous referees for their insightful and constructive comments. Ruth Pullin thanks Professor Lynette Russell for her generous advice, and the Australian Institute of Art History and the Art Association of Australia and New Zealand for their support with a research grant.

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¹ Thomas Duckett (1839–1868), 12 April [1867]. Thomas Duckett papers. Harris Museum and Art Gallery, Preston, UK. PRSMG Arch141.

² James Smith, 'A Colonial Artist', *The Illustrated Australian Mail* 4, no 1. (22 February 1862): 49–50.

The landscape painter Eugene von Guérard (1811–1901) described his passion for collecting as like a ‘madness’, one he could do only ‘so much’ to contain.³ By the late 1870s he had amassed systematically catalogued collections of over 5000 coins, 1600 shells (modern and fossil), a natural history collection and thirty Victorian Aboriginal cultural belongings – weapons, tools, utensils and personal adornments. References relating to his specialist areas of collection sat on his bookshelves, and his curatorial instincts extended to the organisation of his own corpus – which included forty-seven sketchbooks and hundreds of loose drawings – by numerical sequence, date, region and expedition.⁴ He was a curatorially focused collector and, like most passionate collectors, addicted to the pursuit of rarity and ‘completeness’. Von Guérard’s collections were an expression of his intellectual curiosity, his collecting a way of understanding and actively engaging with human and natural history. He earned international respect for his knowledge of numismatics.

The Berlin Ethnological Museum acquired von Guérard’s collection of Australian Aboriginal material culture in 1879. In correspondence spanning two and half years, from 20 December 1877 until 22 June 1880, von Guérard and the curators in Berlin negotiated the purchase and transfer of both the cultural objects that von Guérard acquired on behalf of the Museum’s director, Dr Adolf Bastian, and the artist’s personal collection of Aboriginal material culture. The complete seven letters written by von Guérard and the four from the Berlin Museum (plus associated administrative notes and documents) have been translated by the authors (principally Tom Darragh), for the first time, from *Kurrentschrift*, an old form of German-language handwriting, into English. They are published in full in a complementary paper in the *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Victoria*⁵ (Figure 1). They contain significant information concerning the origins and provenance of specific objects, the circumstances of their acquisition, descriptions of materials and manufacturing techniques and, in some cases, their makers (Figure 2). This level of documentation distinguished von Guérard from the mostly ‘unsystematic’ collectors active in the years from first contact up until c. 1880.⁶ It was appreciated by the curators

³ Eugen von Guérard to Julius von Haast, 20 January 1885, Haast Family Papers, Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand, 177-0037. Published in English translation in: Thomas A. Darragh and Ruth Pullin, *Lieber Freund! Letters from Eugen von Guérard to Julius von Haast* (Ballarat: Art Gallery of Ballarat, 2018), 63. Von Guérard, one of Australia’s greatest nineteenth-century landscape painters, was born in Vienna in 1811, travelled and studied in Italy between 1827 and 1838, and studied and lived in Düsseldorf until 1852. He spent twenty-eight years in Australia, travelling extensively from his Melbourne base, and in 1882 returned to Düsseldorf, before settling in London with his daughter in 1891. He died in 1901.

⁴ ‘List of Works selected from E. von Guérard’s Catalogue’, Public Library, Museums & National Gallery of Victoria, 29 October 1881. PROV 805, unit 115.

⁵ Thomas A. Darragh and Ruth Pullin, ‘Eugene von Guérard and the Ethnological Museum Berlin: Correspondence 1878–1880’, *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Victoria* 135, no. 1–2 (Melbourne: CSIRO Publishing, in press).

⁶ N. Peterson, L. Allen and L. Hamby, ‘Introduction’, in *The Makers and Making of Indigenous Australian Museum Collections*, ed. Nicolas Peterson, Lindy Allen, Louise Hamby (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2008), 8; Voss, Report to the General Administration, response to 2232/78, 12 November 1878, Zentralarchiv, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin.

Ganz liebevoll
Ihre
Eugene von Guérard

Handwritten letter in German cursive script. The text is written on aged, yellowish paper and is mostly illegible due to fading and bleed-through from the reverse side. A large, bold letter 'N' is written in the left margin. The signature 'Eugene von Guérard' is visible at the bottom right.

Figure 1. Eugene Von Guérard to Dr Voss, 7 July 1879. Page: 12 × 21.5 cm. Zentralarchiv, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin: 1926/79.

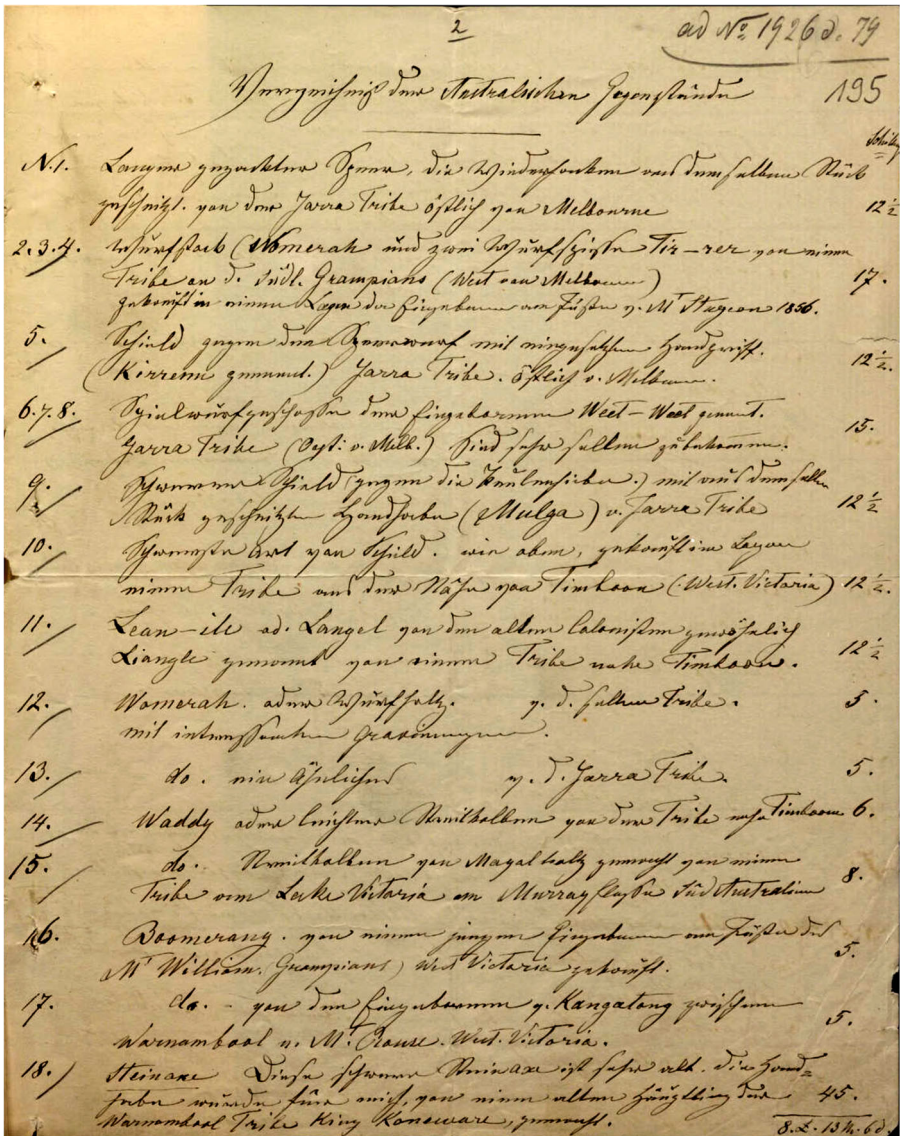


Figure 2. Von Guérard to Dr Voss, 7 July 1879, 'List of Australian Objects', page: 12 x 21.5 cm. Zentralarchiv, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin: 1926/79.

in Berlin at the time and today it has the potential to facilitate the reconnection of source communities with their ancestral possessions. To this extent at least, von Guérard's essentially problematic activities as a collector of cultural possessions – in a period when the traditional owners of those objects were grappling with violent dispossession, brutal cultural disruption and unbridled existential

threats – may be seen to have had a positive outcome for the present and the future.⁷

The letters bring a more nuanced perspective to the cross-cultural encounters behind the activities of one collector: here, the cultural objects described in the letters are discussed only in the context of collecting. With their detailed accounts of the personal networks and the practical arrangements required for this undertaking, the correspondence constitutes a virtual case study of the wider global phenomenon of German-speaking professionals and amateurs collecting First Nations' cultural material for the Berlin Ethnological Museum. Von Guérard's letters provide a rare snapshot of the contemporary market in 1870s Melbourne and, critically, they contain the information required to distinguish the objects that von Guérard collected from those acquired on consignment; the two groups of objects were catalogued as one collection, under von Guérard's name, when they entered the museum.

Collecting networks

Paradoxically, it was von Guérard's passion for numismatics that was both the catalyst for the Berlin Ethnological Museum's acquisition of his collection of significant Victorian Aboriginal cultural objects and the means by which the transaction was finally realised. The artist pursued numismatics at the highest level. He was in regular correspondence with Dr Julius Friedländer, the Director of the Münzkabinett (Numismatics Department) of the Royal Museums in Berlin – an exchange that included sharing news about their mutual friends Sophie Hasenclever, her son Felix, and the eminent geophysicist Georg von Neumayer.⁸ On 20 December 1877 Friedländer wrote to von Guérard on behalf of Dr Bastian inquiring as to his willingness to collect for the Museum's recently reorganised and rapidly expanding ethnological department.⁹ While a copy of this initial letter is not held in the Museum archives – it seems it was sent from Friedländer's home address – von Guérard's reply indicates that it included a list of the objects that Bastian hoped to acquire.¹⁰ Von Guérard replied to Friedländer on 10

⁷ Research is currently being undertaken by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS), to which the authors have contributed; see also: Anna Weinreich et al., 'Artists, Archives and Ancestral Connections: An Aboriginal Collection between Australia and Berlin', in *Southeast Australian Aboriginal Art: Culture-Making and Curating for Country*, ed. F. Edmonds, M. Clarke, and S. Thorner (Canberra: AIATSIS Press, forthcoming).

⁸ Sophie Hasenclever's father, Wilhelm von Schadow, was the revered Director of the Düsseldorf Academy during the years that von Guérard studied there; von Guérard visited Sophie and her husband at Grevenbroich on 25 October 1845: von Guérard sketchbook XVI, 1843. State Library of New South Wales, DGB14, v. 6. [loose sheet]; von Guérard's earliest connection with the Numismatics Department was in 1841, when he sold his father's (Bernard von Guérard, 1771–1836) coin collection to the museum.

⁹ The Ethnologisches Museum Berlin (hereafter EMB), Staatliche Museen zu Berlin (hereafter SMB), opened as the Königliches Museum für Völkerkunde (Royal Museum of Ethnology) in 1886.

¹⁰ Von Guérard to Friedländer, 10 February 1878, Incoming Register 852/78, Zentralarchiv, SMB. Bastian had visited Australia, and Victoria, in 1851. Klaus-Peter Koepping, *Adolf Bastian and the Psychic Unity of Mankind* (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 1983), 8.

February 1878, and to Bastian four days later, to say that he would willingly work for the national museum as far as time allowed.¹¹ But he emphasised that there was no guarantee of success, explaining that

the native Blacks in all the older Australian colonies, especially Victoria, ceased making wood and stone weapons and implements &c long ago and most of those that remain from older times have either been purchased for the various museums in the colonies or exported.¹²

Nevertheless he agreed to try. He added that he had a ‘small collection of weapons and other objects brought together from my previous frequent journeys, which, for the most part, I purchased myself from the Blacks, or obtained from friends (squatters)’.¹³

In accepting the brief to purchase on behalf of the museum in Berlin, von Guérard joined the network of German-speaking collectors in the colonies who were assisting the ethnological department ‘to obtain “authentic” items before it was ‘too late’.¹⁴ In von Guérard, the Museum found a knowledgeable and dedicated emissary to work on its behalf: in addition to the first-hand knowledge he had acquired through direct encounters with Aboriginal people on his sketching expeditions and through friendships with the pioneering ethnographers James Dawson and Alfred Howitt, von Guérard was a museum professional. As the curator of the National Gallery of Victoria’s collections, including its ethnological collection, he worked closely with the anthropologist Robert Brough Smyth. He knew the local market, was scrupulously fair, sought no remuneration and was philosophically committed to the civic role of museums and to the Berlin institution in particular. Essential administrative assistance for the transfer of funds and the collection was provided by von Guérard’s friend and patron, William Brahe, the Consul of the German Empire to Melbourne.

Alexander von Humboldt

Both Adolf Bastian and von Guérard were profoundly influenced by the ideas and methodology of the great Prussian natural scientist, traveller, author, and polymath, Alexander von Humboldt. For Bastian, Humboldt’s emphasis on learning through travel became the template for his research, and the scientist’s vision of the unity that underpinned the diversity of all natural and physical phenomena became the model for Bastian’s commitment to a vision of ‘a unitary humanity – one people in one world’.¹⁵ Humboldt’s ‘great system of plant geography’ was, he argued, ‘the paradigm of other comparative sciences’

¹¹ Von Guérard to Bastian, 14 February 1878, Incoming Register 852/78, Zentralarchiv, SMB.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Janice Lally, ‘The Australian Aboriginal Collection and the Berlin Ethnological Museum’, in Peterson, Allen, and Hamby, *Makers and Making*, 190.

¹⁵ H. Glenn Penny, *In Humboldt’s Shadow: A Tragic History of German Ethnology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021), 7.



Figure 3. Eugene von Guérard, 'Aborigines met on the road to the diggings', 1854, oil on canvas, 46.0 × 75.5 cm. Geelong Gallery, Victoria. Gift of W. Max Bell and Norman Belcher.

and must apply equally to the 'thought processes of man'.¹⁶ As director of the Berlin Ethnological Museum, Bastian was in a race to 'preserve everything possible remaining from the period of the childhood and youth of Mankind contributing to understanding the development of [the] human mind' before it was lost.¹⁷ His goal was not to collect 'trophies' but to gather data for future research that, through its focus on the thinking and ideas behind the objects, would reveal the commonality of humanity in all its variations across time and place.¹⁸

Humboldtian thinking was central to the world that von Guérard inhabited in 1850s Melbourne. He was one of the circle of eminent German-speaking scientists and artists who, inspired by Humboldt, pursued their respective disciplines in the 'new' world of Australia. Humboldt's vision of art and science as complementary disciplines was realised in practice on von Guérard's expedition with the Humboldtian geophysicist Georg von Neumayer.¹⁹ Humboldt urged landscape painters to paint 'descriptions of Nature' with both 'sharpness and scientific accuracy' without losing 'the

¹⁶ Adolf Bastian, *Alexander von Humboldt Festrede* (Berlin: Wiegand and Hempel, 1869) in Koepping, 160.

¹⁷ Bastian quoted in Lally, 194.

¹⁸ Penny, 8, 7.

¹⁹ See Ruth Pullin, *Eugene von Guérard: Nature Revealed* (Melbourne: National Gallery of Victoria, 2011), 246.



Figure 4. Eugene von Guérard, 'Natives chasing game' [Aborigines in Pursuit of Their Enemies] 1854, oil on canvas, 46.5 × 37.0 cm. Rex Nan Kivell Collection, National Library of Australia, Canberra.

vivifying breath of imagination'.²⁰ Just as the Humboldtian imperative to gather and record information underpinned Bastian's collecting agenda, it informed von Guérard's landscape painting practice and his documentation of Aboriginal material culture.

The artist and Aboriginal material culture

Traditional shelters, spears and possum skins appear in one of the first works that von Guérard painted after settling in Melbourne in 1854, *Aborigines met on the road to the diggings* (Figure 3), a work almost certainly based on his encounter with 'eight or ten' Aborigines near their camp on the Moorabool River, on the

²⁰ Alexander von Humboldt, *Cosmos: A Sketch of a Physical Description of the Universe*, vol. 2, trans. E.C. Otté (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1849), 453, 438.

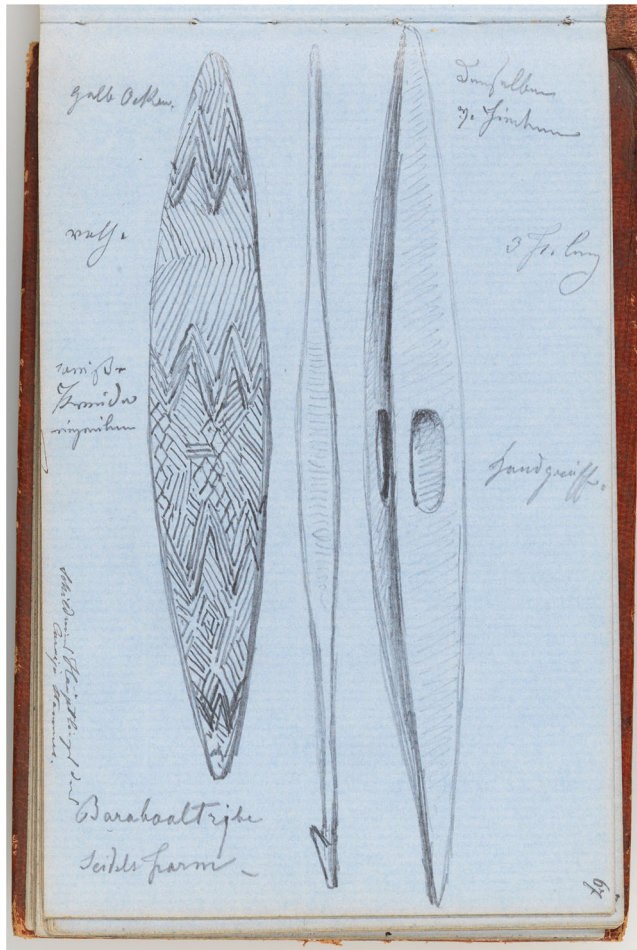


Figure 5. Eugene von Guérard, [Shield, recto and verso, woomera] [1855], pencil on paper. Folio 67, in volume 01: Sketchbook XXII, No. 4 Australia, 1854, 55, 56 and 57, pencil, 10.6 × 15.8 cm. Dixson Galleries, State Library of New South Wales, Sydney. Purchased 1970.

road to the Ballarat diggings, on 11 January 1853.²¹ In another work, *Aborigines in Pursuit of Their Enemies* 1854 (also known as *Natives Chasing Game*), single-barbed spears carried by warriors are articulated in sharp detail against the clear sky (Figure 4).²² The spears, the club and the parrying shield depicted were weapons that von Guérard would have seen at the 1854 Melbourne Exhibition – at which

²¹ 'A Pioneer of the Fifties: Leaves from the Journal of an Australian Gold Digger, 18 August 1853–16 March 1854/ Johann Joseph Eugen von Guérard', unpublished manuscript, Dixson Galleries, State Library of New South Wales, Sydney, 11.

²² The weapons depicted suggest the title *Aborigines in Pursuit of Their Enemies*, 1854; *Argus*, 30 December 1854, 8.



Figure 6. Club. Described by von Guérard as a 'War club made from Mayal wood from a Tribe at Lake Victoria on the Murray River, South Australia'. Number 15 on von Guérard's 'List of Australian Objects'. Indent. no. VI 2572. Staatliche Museen zu Berlin. Ethnological Museum.

he was an exhibitor.²³ John Hunter Kerr's diverse collection of weapons, utensils, woven bags, worked possum skins and playthings was the first 'systematic display of Aboriginal material' to be presented to a wide public in Melbourne.²⁴ At the exhibition von Guérard would also have seen the Aboriginal subjects shown by Ludwig Becker (with whose brother von Guérard had studied in Düsseldorf), along with the drawing 'by an Aborigine', and 'Part of necklace made of native seeds, worn by a Chief of the Murray Tribe' from the latter's collection.²⁵

In those early days von Guérard set out to become as informed as possible, making copies of every illustration in T.L. Mitchell's publications, including those of Aboriginal weapons. He kept the drawings, along with others including Thomas Ham's engraving of 'Instruments used by the Aborigines of the Port Phillip District' in a folio he called 'Australien Reminiszenzen'.²⁶ His earliest known direct study of material culture dates from April 1854, when he sketched bark shelters seen on the west side of the Barwon River near Geelong.²⁷ A pencil study of a shield and a woomera seen at the Seidels' farm in Ceres (near Geelong) dates from either 1854 or early 1855 (Figure 5).²⁸ He recorded the intricate chevron designs on the front of the narrow shield and the handgrip on the back, and he described the yellow and red ochre, the rubbed white chalk and the length of the shield as '3 feet'. The drawing is inscribed 'Barrabool Tribe', with a note that the shield had belonged to a 'Chief of the Corija Tribe' (probably the Gulidjan (Kolidjan) people of the Colac area).

²³ Von Guérard showed seven works: *Official Catalogue of the Melbourne Exhibition 1854, in connexion with the Paris Exhibition, 1855*, Section VIII, catalogue numbers 4–40: 35.

²⁴ Elizabeth Willis, 'Gentlemen Collectors: The Port Phillip District, 1835–1855', in Peterson, Allen and Hamby, *Makers and Making*, 131.

²⁵ Von Guérard, who had studied with Ludwig's brother, August Becker in Düsseldorf, showed August's *Midnight Sun in Norway* at the 1854 Melbourne Exhibition (Cat. No. 328).

²⁶ Eugene von Guérard, 'Australien Reminiszenzen', Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales, Sydney.

²⁷ Eugene von Guérard, 'My My by Geelong', 22 April 1854. State Library of Victoria, H3803.

²⁸ Von Guérard visited the Seidels on 12 March 1854, but the position of the undated sketch in his sketchbook suggests an 1855 date.



Figure 7. Eugene von Guérard, Blackfellows Camp bei Adelaide 25 July 1855, 1855. Folio 37, in volume 03: Sketchbook XXIV, No. 6 Australia, 1855, pencil, 9.8 × 15.8 cm. Dixson Galleries, State Library of New South Wales, Sydney. Purchased 1970.

Collecting on expedition

Von Guérard's landscape painting practice was premised on his extensive sketching expeditions throughout Australia's south-eastern colonies, mostly between 1855 and 1870. It was on these journeys, 'back and forth through the land', that the various objects in his collection had been gathered, he advised Bastian's assistant, Dr Voss.²⁹ He travelled mostly on horseback or on foot, and the objects were brought back to Melbourne often 'with great difficulty'.³⁰ As an artist he recorded his journeys in well-documented pocket-sized travelling sketchbooks, while the documentary evidence of his collecting activities survives in the Berlin letters. Each of these archival sources informs and illuminates the other.

South Australia

Von Guérard's 1855 South Australian expedition included an overland trek from Adelaide to the Murray River at Moorunde (Meru) (near today's Blanchetown). However, the 'War club made from Mayal wood' that he identified as coming from 'a Tribe at Lake Victoria on the Murray River, South Australia', was almost certainly purchased from the Lake Victoria (Barkindji) people he met

²⁹ Von Guérard to Voss, 7 July 1879, Incoming Register 1926/79, Zentralarchiv, SMB.

³⁰ Von Guérard to Voss, 7 July 1879, Zentralarchiv, SMB. For maps of von Guérard's expeditions, see Ruth Pullin, *Eugene von Guérard's Sketchbooks: The Artist as Traveller* (Ballarat: Art Gallery of Ballarat 2018), 307–17.

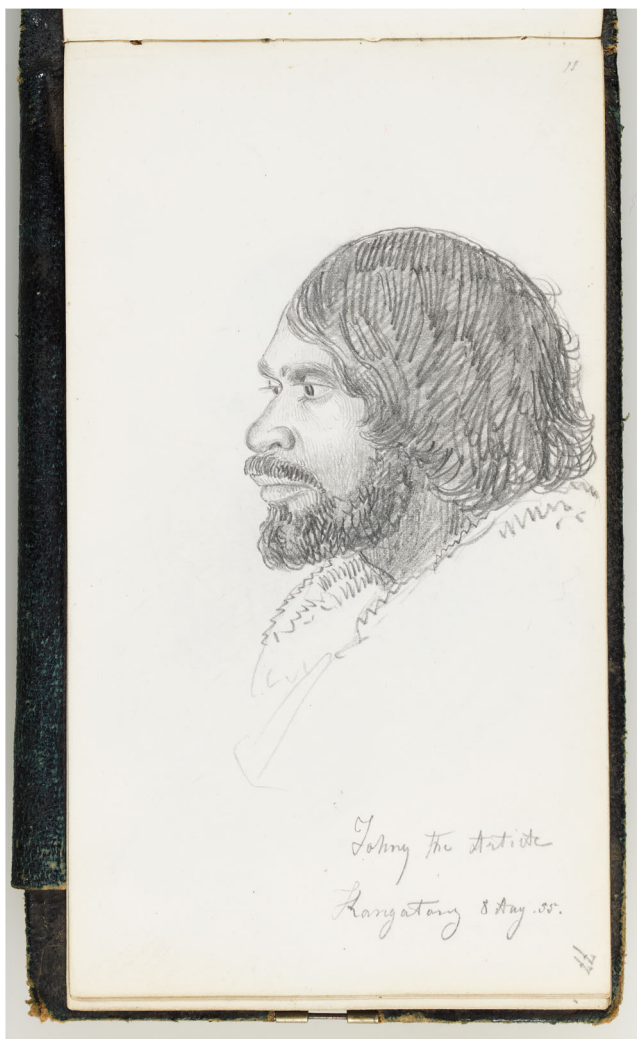


Figure 8. Eugene von Guérard, Johnny [sic] the Artiste Kangatong 8 Aug. 55, 1855. Folio 77, in volume 03: Sketchbook XXIV, No. 6 Australia, 1855, pencil, 9.8 × 15.8 cm. Dixson Galleries, State Library of New South Wales, Sydney. Purchased 1970.

in Adelaide (Figure 6).³¹ On 25 July 1855 he sketched the winter encampment on the site of today's Adelaide Botanic Gardens, to which people from 'as far upstream as present-day Renmark' would come for 'the annual Queen's Birthday distribution of blankets and rations'.³² (Figure 7). On separate visits, on 11

³¹ Von Guérard to Voss, 7 July 1879. EMB object identification number (EMB ID): VI 2572.

³² Philip Jones, in *This Wondrous Land: Colonial Art on Paper*, ed. Alisa Bunbury (Melbourne: National Gallery of Victoria, 2011), 99.



Figure 9. Johnny Dawson, [Portrait of von Guérard Sketching] 1855, watercolour and pencil, 18.2 × 20.2 cm. Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales, Sydney. Purchased 1913.

and 31 July, he sketched portraits of ‘Jimmy’ and ‘Mary’ from the ‘Lack [*sic*] Victoria Murray Tribe’, and 16-year-old ‘Carlolin’ [*sic*].³³ It is likely he purchased the club there, perhaps from ‘Jimmy’. As he had not recorded the price paid for this and other objects, he advised Berlin that he would be guided by the museum and market prices in Melbourne in 1878–79.³⁴ In the case of the Barkindji battle club, that price was eight shillings. It was probably the first Aboriginal object that he purchased.

Mount Rouse (Collorerr) and Kangatong

On 8 August 1855, after leaving Adelaide on a Melbourne-bound coastal steamer, disembarking at Port Fairy in south-western Victoria and making a two-day trek to Mount Rouse, von Guérard arrived at James Dawson’s property,

³³ Eugene von Guérard, Sketchbook XXIV, 1855 and Sketchbook XVIII, State Library of New South Wales, DGB16, vol. 3: 80–85 and DGB14, vol.7: 74.

³⁴ Von Guérard to Voss, 7 July 1879, Zentralarchiv, SMB.



Figure 10. Johnny Dawson, 'Cavalryman and family with a crowd in the background' [Circus audience and performer] c. 1855, pencil, ink, watercolour, 25.0 × 41.0 cm. Indent. no. VI 2585a. Gifted by von Guérard, 1879. Photo: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Ethnological Museum / Heinz-Günther Malenz. <https://id.smb.museum/object/1445244>.

Kangatong. This visit was one of the most pivotal and consequential episodes in von Guérard's Australian career. Firstly, over the next few days, he completed the drawing for Dawson's commission for a painting of nearby Tower Hill (Koroitj), 'one of the most beautiful and interesting specimens of an extinct volcano in all Victoria'.³⁵ It was a significant early commission and its subject resonated powerfully with von Guérard's experiences of volcanic phenomena in southern Italy and the German Eifel. The artist immediately recognised the geological and artistic significance of the subject and it set the scene for his subsequent explorations of Victoria's volcanic Western District. The visit also marked the beginning of his life-long friendship with Dawson, a pastoralist, a conservationist, a pioneering ethnologist, and a staunch advocate for Aboriginal people of south-western Victoria. And it was there that von Guérard's momentous meeting with Gunditjmara artist Johnny Dawson took place, a meeting that resulted in the preservation of Johnny's entire known oeuvre. Von Guérard gave two of Johnny's surviving seven drawings to the Berlin Ethnological Museum, and the other five (on three sheets of paper) were acquired by the State Library of New South Wales after von Guérard's death. In the unique and nurturing conditions that prevailed at Kangatong, von Guérard was able

³⁵ James Dawson, cited in Tim Bonyhady, *The Colonial Earth* (Melbourne: Miegunyah Press, 2000), 341.



Figure 11. Bag. Described by von Guérard as ‘Netbag woven by an Aborigine from Kangatong, from yarn made and coloured by them’. Number 20 on von Guérard’s ‘List of Australian Objects’. Indent. no. VI 2577. Staatliche Museen zu Berlin. Ethnological Museum.

to engage with the Gunditjmara, Kirrae whurrung and Kolorer gunditj people living there, interactions that are recorded in his drawings and the Berlin letters.³⁶

The story of the meeting of Johnny Dawson and von Guérard, their spontaneous connection founded, as Sayers observed, on ‘the unique status which the word “artist” implied’, is now well known.³⁷ That artistic fellowship was

³⁶ For example, Eugene von Guérard, ‘Aboriginal Family Group’, 22 June 1856, pencil, 17.5 × 23.7 cm, The University of Melbourne Art Collection.

³⁷ Andrew Sayers, *Aboriginal Artists of the Nineteenth Century* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press Australia, in association with the National Gallery of Australia 1994), 3.



Figure 12. Stone axe. Described by von Guérard as ‘Smaller stone axe (Merring) furnished with a handle for me by the same old King Koneware [*sic*]’. Number 19 on von Guérard’s ‘List of Australian Objects’. Indent. no. VI 2576. Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Ethnological Museum.

expressed in their portraits of each other, with the first of von Guérard’s two pencil portraits of the young Gunditjmara man inscribed ‘Johnny the Artiste’, and Johnny’s portrait of von Guérard showing the artist seated on his folding stool, sketchbook and brush in hand (Figures 8 and 9). The letters reveal much more: they capture the excitement felt by von Guérard in response to the creative imagination of his colleague, revealing his ability to look beyond the parameters of his traditional training and to respond to an artist whose sensibility was so very different to his own. They identify the genesis of the drawing he gifted to Berlin as a visit to a circus in Melbourne, and they record a rare and extraordinary moment of cross-cultural exchange that would otherwise have been lost to history.³⁸

Von Guérard introduced Johnny to the Berlin curators as ‘a young Aborigine who had a remarkable propensity for the artistic expression of his memories’ and – perhaps aware that his work might not be properly understood in Berlin – he emphasised the value he placed on these exceptional and rare ‘coloured sketches’.³⁹ Johnny (his traditional name is not known) was, he wrote, ‘a young man of 16–17 years’, ‘the natural heir of this property’, and one of the members of the ‘original families who had possession of this stretch of country before the British seized Australia’. He lived at Kangatong ‘which was then in the possession of my friend James Dawson’.⁴⁰ Born at nearby Tarrone in around 1840–42, Johnny was entrusted to James Dawson’s care by his father (known as ‘Black Jack’) to protect his son from an outbreak of small pox and the ongoing violence of the Eumeralla Wars.⁴¹ Dawson encouraged Johnny’s artistic pursuits and, shortly before von Guérard’s first visit, had taken him to Melbourne where they attended a circus featuring horses and acrobatic

³⁸ The equestrian circus also inspired Johnny Dawson’s [European couple and horse; Horse race], State Library of New South Wales, Sydney, PXA 606.

³⁹ Von Guérard to Bastian 25 August 1878, Zentralarchiv, SMB.

⁴⁰ Von Guérard to Voss, 7 July 1879, Zentralarchiv, SMB.

⁴¹ Gilgar Gunditj elder, Aunty Eileen Alberts, descendent of Johnny Dawson (Kangatong). Personal communication with Ruth Pullin, 15 September 2022.



Figure 13. Necklace. Described by von Guérard as 'Kangaroo teeth necklace of incisors held together with kangaroo skin and sinew [...] made at Kangatong'. Number 22 on von Guérard's 'List of Australian Objects'. Indent no. VI 2579. Photo: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Ethnological Museum Berlin / Martin Franken. <https://id.smb.museum/object/2282395>.

equestrians. It was a spectacle that Dawson probably knew would appeal to the young horseman and stockkeeper. This experience – which would have been impossible without the protection of his guardian – inspired the larger of the two of Johnny's drawings that von Guérard sent to Berlin (Figure 10). It is possible that the subject of the smaller drawing, a top-hatted man on horseback, with a tree and a kangaroo nearby, is his protector, James Dawson.⁴²

The circus they attended was almost certainly J.B.W. Priestley's Astley's Circus, which operated on the corner of Spring and Little Bourke streets between September 1854 and September 1855. It was the Melbourne iteration of London's Astley's Amphitheatre, a circus famous for its 'astonishing new spectacle of dancing on horseback'.⁴³ For Johnny – and, it seems, many of the Europeans present – the spectacle of the spectators rivalled that of the circus itself. The cavalry man in the Berlin drawing cuts a swashbuckling figure, with his cocked eyebrow, sword and spurred boots, while his self-satisfied wife and child are 'on show' in all their finery. The event, von Guérard wrote, whirled 'like a mad dream in his [Johnny's] imagination' and, driven by his 'artistic nature', he produced this painting on his return to Kangatong.⁴⁴ Von Guérard's evident fascination with the psychology of the creative process reveals as much

⁴² John Dawson, Drawing, c. 1855, pencil, ink and watercolour, 23.7 × 30 cm, Eugen von Guérard collection, EMB, VI 2585 b. Reproduced in Pullin, *Eugene von Guérard's Sketchbooks: The Artist as Traveller*, 174.

⁴³ Judy Leech, on Caitlyn Lehmann's presentation, 'Hoofing It! Ballet on Saddle and Stage at Astley's Circus', *On Stage Magazine* (Theatre Heritage Australia, 31 August 2019), <https://theatreheritage.org.au/on-stage-magazine/general-articles/item/591-hoofing-it-ballet-on-saddle-and-stage-at-astley-s-circus> (accessed 10 January 2023).

⁴⁴ Von Guérard to Voss, 7 July 1879, Zentralarchiv, SMB.



Figure 14. Eugene von Guérard (artist), Hanhart (lithographer), 'Mt Abrupt, Near Dunkeld, Western District' [c.1857], lithograph and watercolour, 14 × 22.4 cm (sheet). The University of Melbourne Art Collection. Gift of the Russell and Mab Grimwade Bequest 1973.

about him as Johnny. He was intrigued by the 'unusual way' that Johnny conceived 'European scenes and figures' and deeply impressed by his artistic drive, recording that the self-taught artist spent 'the evening hours, after a hard day's work with the large herd of cattle, in the production of similar drawings'.⁴⁵ These letters and a few lines supplied by von Guérard for an article in the *Illustrated London News* are the only known contemporary records of Johnny Dawson's artistic practice.⁴⁶

A further six objects were acquired at Kangatong: a net bag (Figure 11), two stone axes, a kangaroo-tooth necklace, a boomerang, and a reed basket (Bin-nuck) woven by a 'woman of the Mount Rouse Tribe' (Kolorer gundidj) who had found refuge at Kangatong.⁴⁷ Von Guérard had visited Mount Rouse (Collorer) on 6 August 1855 and he referred to an encounter with local people

⁴⁵ Von Guérard to Voss, 7 July 1879; von Guérard to Bastian, 25 August 1878, Zentralarchiv, SMB.

⁴⁶ A Correspondent, 'Sketches in Australia', *Illustrated London News*, vol. XXIX, no. 830 (15 November 1856), 491.

⁴⁷ EMB ID: two stone axes VI 2575, 2576; kangaroo-teeth necklace VI 2579; net bag VI 2577; boomerang VI 2574; reed basket (Bin nuck) VI 2578. The entry on the reed basket, number 21 on von Guérard's 'List of Australian Objects', makes reference to number 17 on the list: von Guérard to Voss, 7 July 1879.



Figure 15. Shield. Described by von Guérard as ‘Heaviest kind of shield, as above, bought in the camp of a Tribe in the neighbourhood of Timboon (West Victoria)’. Number 10 on von Guérard’s ‘List of Australian Objects’. Indent no. VI 2567. Photo: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Ethnological Museum / Volker Linke. <https://id.smb.museum/object/1356572>.

in his 1861 *View of the Grampians and Victoria Ranges from Mount Rouse, West Victoria*, but it is unlikely that he saw any of the few Kolorer gundidj people still living there.⁴⁸

Von Guérard had the privilege of observing the senior Kirrae whurrung man Kaawirn Kuunawarn (c. 1820–89) make handles for the two stone axes he acquired at Kangatong, probably during the von Guérards’ extended stay with the Dawsons in May–June 1856. The artist’s interaction with Kaawirn on that visit included drawing a large, ‘highly finished’ portrait of him in ‘pencil and crayon’ on 26 June 1856.⁴⁹ Kaawirn Kuunawarn (Hissing Swan), also known as King Konewarre, King David or Davie, was one of the key informants for James Dawson’s *Australian Aborigines: The Languages and Customs of Several Tribes of Aborigines in the Western District of Victoria*, and a photograph of him, holding an axe and a boomerang, is the book’s frontispiece. Von Guérard described the larger of the two tomahawks (Merring) as

rare ... of rather great weight and, I believe, of great age. I got it from an old settler in the Western District of Victoria, Mr Dawson, without a handle, but a black chief of the Warnambool Tribe, King Konewarre (David) made me a handle for it in the old and original manner.⁵⁰

He described the process with reference to the smaller tomahawk (Figure 12): ‘The wood from the young wattle (*Acacia*) is stuck together with gum from this tree and bound with kangaroo sinews, the customary manner of the oldest times used by the Aborigines’.⁵¹

⁴⁸ Ian D. Clark, *We Are All of One Blood* – A History of the Djabwurrung Aboriginal People of Western Victoria, 1836–1901, Vol. 1 (Place of publication and publisher unknown, 2016), 284.

⁴⁹ Eugene von Guérard, *Portrait of King Koonewarre* [sic], 26 June 1856, 9’ × 11 ½’. In *Supplementary Catalogue: Australasia – Melanesia – Micronesia – Polynesia, Supplementary Catalogue* (London: Francis Edwards, Bookseller, 1903), Cat. no. 3752, 54.

⁵⁰ Von Guérard to Bastian, 25 August 1878, Zentralarchiv, SMB.

⁵¹ Von Guérard to Voss, 7 July 1879, Zentralarchiv, SMB.

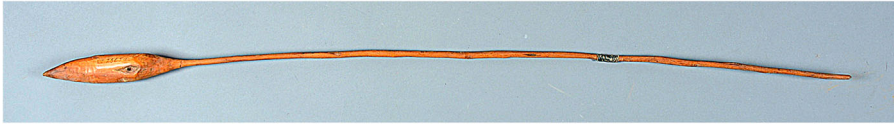


Figure 16. Wut-wut. Described by von Guérard as ‘Throwing game projectiles of the Aborigines, called Weet-Weet. Yarra Tribe (east of Melbourne)’. One of numbers 6, 7 or 8 on von Guérard’s ‘List of Australian Objects’. Indent nos. VI 2565 a–c. Photo: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Ethnological Museum / Volker Linke. <https://id.smb.museum/object/1356573>.

Von Guérard and Kaawirn probably met again in 1873–74 at the Dawson property, Wuurong, on the shores of Lake Bullen Merri near Camperdown, where von Guérard spent three months recovering from a ‘weakness’ in his eyes.⁵² Kaawirn (Old Davie) was a regular visitor at Wuurong and Renny Hill, the neighbouring residence of Mr and Mrs Taylor (née Isabella Dawson), as were others who had lived at Kangatong, including Johnny Dawson and his wife Sarah, and Johnny and Louise Castella (Wombeet Tulawarn and Yarruun Parpur Tarneen).⁵³ Old Davie, Dawson wrote following the death of his ‘faithful friend of forty years’, was ‘as honest a man as ever breathed’.⁵⁴

The necklace ‘made from kangaroo incisors’ that von Guérard acquired at Kangatong was, von Guérard informed Berlin, ‘made by a queen of the tribe at Kangatong’ (Figure 13).⁵⁵ Dawson’s description of Yarruun Parpur Tarneen (Victorious) (c. 1837–82) as the ‘Chiefess of the Mopor Tribe’ suggests that she was the ‘queen’ referred to by von Guérard and the likely maker or owner of the necklace. Like Kaawirn, the ‘very intelligent’ Yarruun and her husband, Wombeet Tuulawarn, were key informants for the accounts of customs and vocabularies of languages recorded by Dawson and his daughter, Isabella. Such necklaces were rare, von Guérard advised Voss, due to the number of kangaroo teeth required, and the laborious work involved in making the setting.⁵⁶ At the time he knew of only one other, a ‘less well preserved’ example in the Melbourne Museum collection.⁵⁷ Robert Brough Smyth published a line drawing of the necklace ‘in the possession of Mr E. von Guérard, the well-known landscape painter’ in his *Aborigines of Victoria* of 1878.⁵⁸ Von Guérard urged Berlin to acquire a copy of Brough Smyth’s book, describing it as the best compilation of information on ‘the

⁵² Von Guérard to Alfred Howitt, 9 February 1874. Howitt Papers, State Library of Victoria, Melbourne, MS 9356, 1045/3a, no. 4.

⁵³ Ian D. Clark, *An Ethnohistory of the Djargurdwurrung People of Camperdown* (Place of publication and publisher unknown, 2022), 201, 203. A photograph of this group with Isabella Dawson is held by the Camperdown & District Historical Society.

⁵⁴ James Dawson, ‘Framlingham Aboriginal Station. Protest Against its Alienation’, *Camperdown Chronicle*, 26 September 1889, 2.

⁵⁵ Von Guérard to Bastian 25 August 1878, Zentralarchiv, SMB.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ Robert Brough Smyth, *Aborigines of Victoria, with Notes Relating to the Habits of the Natives of Other Parts of Australia and Tasmania Compiled from Various Sources for the Government of Victoria* (Melbourne: John Ferres, Government Printer. Published also by George Robertson, 1878), 278, fig. 27.

Australian Aborigines, their customs, ceremonies, religion, weapons and utensils' that has yet been made. It is, he continued 'filled with complete and accurate illustrations, which will give you the best explanation about the items sent. The price is £3. 3s'.⁵⁹ Von Guérard liaised with Brough Smyth on the *Catalogue of the Objects of Ethnotypical Art in the National Gallery* of 1878, and he was responsible for the gallery's display of the recently acquired, and 'extensive', Brough Smyth 'collection of Australian weapons &c'.⁶⁰

From Mount Sturgeon to Mount Zero: Gariwerd-Grampians

In late May 1856, von Guérard set out from Kangatong on a three-week sketching expedition on Djab Wurrung and Jardwardjali country. His journey, along the eastern side of the Gariwerd-Grampians from Mt Sturgeon (Wurgarri) at the southern end of the range to Mt Zero (Mura Mura) at the northern end, can be mapped from the drawings in his sketchbook. A sketch of Mt Abrupt gives a precise date for his presence close to the 'camp of Aborigines at the foot of Mt Sturgeon', where, in 1856, he purchased a 'throwing staff (womerah) and two throwing spears (Tir-er)'.⁶¹ The connection between the site and encounter was made in his composition *Mount Abrupt, near Dunkeld* (Figure 14), with its depiction of an exchange between a Djab wurrung couple and a European traveller in the landscape he sketched on 29 May 1856.⁶² His sketchbook reveals that by 6 June he was close to Mount William when, the letters record, he purchased a boomerang 'from a young Aborigine at the foot of Mt William, Grampians, West Victoria'.⁶³ Unfortunately, the tantalising possibility of a connection between this purchase and a work titled *Aborigines by a Fire before Mt William as Seen from Mt Dryden in the Grampians* cannot be confirmed.⁶⁴ He could have met the 'young Aborigine' at Mr Archibald Macarthur Campbell's Station, Mokepilly, near Mount William (Duwul), where he stayed on 6 June 1856, but given the absence of any visual evidence in his sketchbook, and the fact that a few days later he was busily sketching studies of 'Lady Missis Stuart', a Djab wurrung / Jardwadjali woman he met at Mr Carfrae's property, Ledcourt, it seems unlikely.⁶⁵

⁵⁹ Von Guérard to Bastian, 25 August 1878.

⁶⁰ [Robert Brough Smyth], *Catalogue of the Objects of Ethnotypical Art in the National Gallery Published by Direction of the Trustees of the Public Library & Museums of Victoria* (Melbourne: Mason, Firth & McCutcheon, 1878); von Guérard to von Haast, 16 January 1879, Zentralarchiv, SMB. In Darragh and Pullin, *Lieber Freund!*, 30; Brough Smyth's collection was purchased on 15 November 1877.

⁶¹ '[...] Township of Dunkelt' [Dunkeld], Eugene von Guérard Sketchbook No. XXV, 1856. State Library of New South Wales, DGB16, vol. 4, 10; von Guérard to Voss, 7 July 1879, Zentralarchiv, SMB; womerah and two spears, EMB VI 2561, VI 2562, VI 2563.

⁶² Lithograph published in S. Dougan Bird, *On Australasian Climates and Their Influence in the Prevention and Arrest of Pulmonary Consumption* (London: Longman, Green, Longman, Roberts & Green, 1863), [plates 94–5].

⁶³ Von Guérard to Voss, 7 July 1879, Zentralarchiv, SMB; boomerang, EMB VI 2573.

⁶⁴ Eugene von Guérard, *Aborigines by a Fire before Mt William as Seen from Mt Dryden in the Grampians*, 24 × 32 cm., Phillips Auctioneers, London, in March 1984. Current whereabouts unknown.

⁶⁵ Eugene von Guérard, Sketchbook XXV, 1856. State Library of New South Wales, DGB 16, v. 4: 31, 32.

Timboon (Camperdown)

Von Guérard's sketchbooks are silent on the subject of Aboriginal presence on the large pastoral estates in the Camperdown area. He listed four objects—a shield of the 'heaviest kind' (Figure 15), a 'Lean-ile or Langel, usually called Liangle by the old colonists', a womerah with 'interesting engraving', and a waddy – as originating from 'a Tribe near Timboon', the name by which the area around present-day Camperdown was then known.⁶⁶ The region was important to von Guérard, both for the volcanic landscapes which resonated so powerfully with his European experiences and for the commissions that were forthcoming from now well-established squatters keen to legitimise their claims to Djargurdwurring country. The properties on which he stayed in March–April and November–December of 1857, the first of multiple, extended sketching expeditions, included Peter McArthur's 'Meningoort', John Lang Currie's 'Larra' and John and Peter Manifold's 'Purrumbete'. In the 1850s, most Aboriginal people in rural Victoria lived and worked on great pastoral estates such as these. And while, as Clark notes, little is known of the Djargurdwurring in this decade, contemporary records confirm their presence at Purrumbete and Meningoort at the times of von Guérard's visits.⁶⁷ The heavy shield was 'bought in a camp from a Tribe in the neighbourhood of Timboon', perhaps a camp on one of the properties he visited. The other three weapons, which von Guérard described as 'from the Tribe near Timboon', may also have been purchased directly, or acquired from squatters, many of whose houses displayed 'collections of Aboriginal artefacts and stone tools'.⁶⁸ There is a possibility that he acquired particular objects in 1874 when he stayed with the Dawsons at their Camperdown home, Wuorong, and where James Dawson's own 'fine' collection was held.⁶⁹

The Yarra and Westernport tribes (Wurundjeri and Bunurong)

Von Guérard identified the 'Yarra Tribe, east of Melbourne' as the source community for a long serrated spear with 'barbs cut from the same piece', a spear-shield (Kirrenn) with an inset handle, and a heavy club-shield (Mulga), its handle cut out of the same piece.⁷⁰ Brough Smyth gave the spelling of 'Kirrenn' as 'Gee-am' or 'Kerreem'.⁷¹ While there is no evidence that von Guérard acquired any of these objects directly from Wurundjeri people, his

⁶⁶ Heavy shield, EMB ID: VI 2567; liangle, VI 2568; womerah, VI 2569; waddy, VI 2571. Von Guérard to Voss, 7 July 1879.

⁶⁷ Clark, *Djargurdwurring People of Camperdown*, 59; James Bonwick, *Western Victoria. Its Geography, Geology and Social Condition. The Narrative of an Educational Tour in 1857*, First published Geelong: Thomas Brown, 1858 (Heinemann, Australia, 1970), 43; A small group of Djargurdwurring people around a campfire is visible in the middle distance of von Guérard's *Cloven Hills and Mt Elephant with Part of Lake Bookar* [sic] f. *Meningoort*, [March 1857], pencil on paper, private collection; Thomas Dowling, *King Tom and the Mount Elephant Tribe* 1856, National Library of Australia.

⁶⁸ Von Guérard to Voss, 7 July 1879, Zentralarchiv, SMB; Willis, 115.

⁶⁹ 'Obituary. Mrs W. A. Taylor', *Camperdown Chronicle* (10 August 1929), 5.

⁷⁰ Von Guérard to Voss, 7 July 1879, Zentralarchiv, SMB; EMB ID: serrated spear VI 2560; two shields VI 2564 and VI 2566.

⁷¹ Smyth, *Aborigines of Victoria*, 330, 332.

travels on Wurundjeri country included treks along the Yarra River in March and April 1855, multi-day excursions in the Dandenong Ranges in February 1855 and January 1857, and an extended expedition, led by Alfred Howitt, through the rugged terrain between Ferntree Gully and the watersheds of the Yarra and La Trobe rivers in September 1858.

While von Guérard identified the 'Yarra Tribe' as the source community for three 'weet-weet' (Figure 16), projectile toys that they used in a throwing game, in his 1879 letter to Voss, he had given their source as the 'Westernport Tribe (Bunurong /Boon wurrung people) in the earlier letter of 25 August, 1878.⁷² There he mentioned that the young lady from whom he received the weet-weet was Dr Godfrey Howitt's daughter, Edith, which supports their identification as Bunurong. Edith lived on Bunurong country after her marriage to Robert Anderson, the manager of Howitt's Cape Schanck property, Barragunda, and where von Guérard was a welcome visitor, sketching there in 1858, 1863, and 1873. The throwing sticks were rare, and von Guérard could not 'remember having seen the same objects in any other collection'.⁷³ He referred the Berlin curators to the description of the 'weet-weet' and the illustration (fig. 170) in Brough Smyth's book.⁷⁴

Gunaikurnai

Although von Guérard's sketchbooks, drawings, and paintings record Gunaikurnai material culture (a canoe) and encounters with Gunaikurnai people on his 1860–61 Gippsland expedition, no Gunaikurnai clans are identified as the source communities for the cultural belongings listed in von Guérard's Berlin letters.

Gifts to the museum

The total amount that von Guérard asked for his personal collection, including the seven items from the Solomon Islands purchased in 1872, was £17. Sh.16. The cultural material that he gifted to the Museum included '8 possum skins, as examples of the manner in which Aborigines worked them in order to make fur blankets', emu tail feathers 'used to make waist aprons and head decorations', the 'tail of the Australian lyre bird from the mountain forests near Marysville, 75–80 Engl. miles east of Melbourne', and the two drawings by Johnny Dawson. All were offered as 'evidence' of how pleased he was 'to be of service to a national collection'.⁷⁵

The eight possum skins had belonged to von Guérard's wife, Louise, and it was she who suggested that, despite their worn-out condition, they be offered

⁷² *Ibid.*, 352–53; EMB ID: three projectiles (*weet-weet*) VI 2565 a–c.; von Guérard to Bastian, 25 August 1878, Zentralarchiv, SMB.

⁷³ Von Guérard to Voss, 25 August 1878, Zentralarchiv, SMB.

⁷⁴ Smyth, *Aborigines of Victoria*, 352.

⁷⁵ Von Guérard to Voss, 7 July 1879, Zentralarchiv, SMB; EMB ID: 8 possum skins VI 2580; emu wing VI 2586 a–b; emu tail feathers VI 2581. The tail of the Australian lyre bird was not registered.

to the Museum. For this reason, and because von Guérard makes no mention of the circumstances of their acquisition, it is unlikely that there is any connection between the possum skins in the Berlin collection and either the rug depicted in von Guérard's *Aborigines met on the road to the diggings* 1854, or the possum skin rug he recorded having purchased for £1 from a party of Aboriginal people, two men and five women, in the Black Range, to the east of the Grampians and south of Stawell, on 10 May 1864.⁷⁶ A reference to the event appears in von Guérard's *View of the Grampians with Mount Abrupt and Mount Sturgeon in the Distance* 1875, painted for James Dawson's close friend Edward Wilson from the sketch made on that day.

In addition to gifting objects from his own collection, von Guérard negotiated the donation of a waist belt of human hair from the Malden Islands, from Mr Eduard Schaefer, a Melbourne goldsmith, and four Western Australian message sticks from Miss L. Palmer, whose father was 'the government surveyor in that Colony'.⁷⁷ Miss Palmer's gift was important, von Guérard noted, for its rarity and, as he clearly recognised, its significance for Bastian's research. The message sticks were, he wrote, 'interesting in an ethnological connection as they provide evidence of the higher intellectual development of our Blacks than is accepted in general, showing how they are able to communicate over long distances using external symbols'.⁷⁸ Such information, particularly with regard to the 'precise determination of places of origin', was valued in Berlin.⁷⁹

Commissioned purchases: Henry Hart, dealer

As a result of the difficulties that von Guérard foresaw in sourcing good examples of the material objects requested by Bastian, and because of his own pressing time restraints, he commissioned Henry Hart, 'the best dealer in such things to seek them out for me'.⁸⁰ Von Guérard had known Hart for over twenty years and the dealer had supplied 'many things for the Ethnological Museum of Victoria, which is under my supervision'.⁸¹ An itemised receipt for '64 different weapons and objects' that were purchased from 'Mr S. H. Hart, Royal Arcade, Melbourne', was submitted to Berlin with the letter of 25 August 1878. The invoice, for £23. Sh.12 (which included a small discount), accounted for almost the entire amount, 500 Marks (£25 sterling), that had been placed at von Guérard's disposal.⁸²

⁷⁶ Eugene von Guérard, Sketchbook XXXV 1864: [57], [56].

⁷⁷ Von Guérard to Voss, 7 July 1879, Zentralarchiv, SMB; EMB ID: 4 message sticks VI 2582 a-d; waist belt, Malden Islands VI2584.

⁷⁸ Von Guérard to Voss, 7 July 1879, Zentralarchiv, SMB.

⁷⁹ Voss, Report to the General Administration, response to 2232/78, 12 November 1878.

⁸⁰ Von Guérard to Bastian, 25 August 1878, Zentralarchiv, SMB.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² In 1878 £25 sterling was the equivalent of £2438 today (<https://www.bankofengland.co.uk/monetary-policy/inflation/inflation-calculator>, accessed 31 August 2023), or approximately AUD \$4784.00.

Von Guérard emphasised that he had personally selected the items purchased from Hart and that most were in ‘very good condition and several of them of great rarity’.⁸³ He advised that he placed little value on modern objects that ‘had never been used and that had been made in the old style for sale, as an enterprise’, and he noted that the consignment included several objects that were not yet represented in the Melbourne Museum.⁸⁴ Even when the transaction was completed von Guérard could not resist advising Berlin of two ‘very interesting axes and a hammer from Queensland’ that Hart had just acquired. He illustrated the heavy oblong basalt hammerhead and the tomahawks in line drawings in the letter, and he added the observation that the two pieces of iron used for the tomahawks were ‘probably cut from the wreck of a vessel found by the natives on the coast’.⁸⁵ While Voss noted that the stone hammer would be of interest, and that the iron axes would illustrate ‘the first attempts at the use of iron on the part of a people until then unacquainted with the use of metal objects’, it was felt that the prices asked were too high.⁸⁶

Von Guérard as conservator

Von Guérard’s experience as a museum professional informed the practical measures he took to ensure that the objects in the collection were thoroughly prepared and packed for safe transport: the crate was made of kauri pine and lined with zinc to protect the contents from moisture, vulnerable spear points were wrapped in paper and secured in a little basket at the upper end of the crate, everything at risk of rubbing was wrapped and packed ‘together as firmly and flat as possible, and ‘empty space’ was filled ‘tightly with plane shavings’.⁸⁷ One of the spears purchased from Hart was sawn in half due to its length (12 foot 2 in.), with Voss observing that a single crate for this item would be too expensive: he was confident that both ends could be put together again in Berlin.⁸⁸

Responses from Berlin

Von Guérard’s frustration at the delayed responses to his repeated inquiries regarding the arrangements for the packing and transport of the collection is palpable. There is also a sense that he felt his efforts on behalf of the Museum, and the value of some of the objects sent, were not being appropriately appreciated. On 20 January 1880 he told Friedländer that he had heard nothing ‘from Dr Voss about the ethnological objects sent to the Royal

⁸³ Von Guérard to Bastian, 25 August 1878, Zentralarchiv, SMB.

⁸⁴ Von Guérard to Voss, 9 July 1879, Zentralarchiv, SMB.

⁸⁵ Von Guérard to Bastian, 25 August 1878, Zentralarchiv, SMB.

⁸⁶ Voss Report, 12 November 1878, Zentralarchiv, SMB.

⁸⁷ Von Guérard to Voss, 7 July 1879, Zentralarchiv, SMB.

⁸⁸ Voss, Report, 12 November 1878, Zentralarchiv, SMB.

Museum, whether they were satisfied with them and understood the value of particular things according to their rarity'. He had to conclude, he continued, that his 'whole consignment has not yet been examined with any attention'.⁸⁹ Although he was pleased that the Australian objects he had collected during his travels, often with great difficulty, would be preserved in a national museum, he was disappointed that letters of thanks to Mr Schaefer and Miss Palmer had not been forthcoming. They did arrive, finally, along with one addressed to Mrs von Guérard, in mid-1880. There is, however, no record of a specific letter of thanks to von Guérard despite Voss having noted that 'von Guérard evidently is striving with great enthusiasm to make suitable acquisitions for the Royal Museum at the most reasonable prices possible', and that 'it would be well to include appreciative words about this in the answering letter'.⁹⁰ It is possible that these sentiments were expressed in an unlocated letter that it seems von Guérard received from Bastian late in 1880.⁹¹ Bastian attended the 1879 Sydney International Exhibition in 1879–80 and he visited the Australian Museum, but it seems he did not make contact with von Guérard in Melbourne at that time.⁹²

Sealing the deal: A collector's solution

As is the case with most ardent collectors, it was important to von Guérard that his collection be kept together; he did not want it dispersed as 'single objects'.⁹³ When advised that the museum might not have adequate means at its disposal to acquire his collection, he came up with an unorthodox solution. Aware of the museum's 'magnificent new acquisitions' in the numismatics department and the consequent potential for duplicates, he proposed an exchange of such duplicates up to 'the value of the ethnological objects sent by me'.⁹⁴ With the approval of the General Administration, and in consultation with Friedländer, the exchange took place, and in lieu of the £17 Sh.16 requested for his personal collection of cultural objects, von Guérard received 83 coins, the arrival of which he had eagerly awaited.⁹⁵ They were in his possession by 27 November 1880, but by April 1881 negotiations were underway for the sale of his significant and meticulously catalogued coin collection to the National Gallery of Victoria, in preparation for his departure from Australia.⁹⁶ Von Guérard, his wife, Louise, and their daughter, Victoria, sailed for Europe on the *Carthage* on 4 January 1882.

⁸⁹ Von Guérard to Friedländer, 20 January 1880, Incoming Register 1926/80.

⁹⁰ Voss, Report, 12 November 1878, Zentralarchiv, SMB.

⁹¹ Von Guérard to Haast, 4 January 1881, in Darragh and Pullin, *Lieber Freund!*, 45.

⁹² Von Guérard to Friedländer, 22 June 1880, Incoming Register 2131/80; Lally, 199; Koepping, 19.

⁹³ Von Guérard to Bastian, 25 August 1878, Zentralarchiv, SMB.

⁹⁴ Von Guérard to Voss, 7 July 1879, Zentralarchiv, SMB.

⁹⁵ Von Guérard to Haast, 7 May 1880, in Darragh and Pullin, *Lieber Freund!*, 39.

⁹⁶ Von Guérard to Haast, 27 November 1880 and 27 April 1881, in Darragh and Pullin, *Lieber Freund!*, 42, 47; 3386 coins and medals were purchased on 21 September 1881.

The coins acquired in exchange for his collection of Aboriginal cultural belongings are now held by Museums Victoria.

Shifting meanings

The von Guérard–Berlin letters track the ‘meshwork’ of ‘various actors, agents, structures, processes and institutions, ideas and objects’ behind one example of the way collections of First Nations’ material culture reached European and British institutions.⁹⁷ They are the critical primary documents through which the source communities of ancestral belongings can be identified and through which the movement of specific objects from their cultural owners to a European museum – and the shifts in meaning accrued by them on that journey – can be traced.

From the moment that its traditional owner gifted the kangaroo-tooth necklace in von Guérard’s collection to Mrs Dawson, the process by which an object ‘travels through time and space to emerge as something else completely’, was underway (Figure 13).⁹⁸ As suggested earlier, it is likely that Yarruun Parpur Tarneen (Victorious) (c. 1837–82) was its traditional owner: von Guérard described its maker as ‘a queen of the tribe at Kangatong’, which accords with Dawson’s identification of Yarruun as ‘Chiefess of the Moporr Tribe’. A photograph, probably dating from mid-century, possibly taken by Daniel Clarke, and published in Dawson’s book, shows her wearing, and seemingly forever linked to, her kangaroo-tooth necklace.⁹⁹ If, in fact, the necklace is the one now in Berlin, its meaning had now shifted: it had become a studio prop, one that was also used in the photograph of Kaawirn Kuunawarn.¹⁰⁰ As a gift to Mrs Dawson, its role was that of a valued item of exchange used in a system of ‘reciprocal responses’, through which ‘vital social connections’ were validated and perpetuated.¹⁰¹ Its transfer from Mrs Dawson to von Guérard took it farther from its cultural and geographical origins, to become an object in a private collection in colonial Melbourne. It was valued for its rarity, preserved as a record of a culture and a people believed to be fast disappearing, and treasured by its collector, von Guérard, as one of the ‘old friends’ in his artist’s studio.¹⁰² When it was illustrated in Brough Smyth’s book, it became a subject for anthropological study, and when it reached the Berlin Museum it joined the thousands of objects that would ‘provide the material source for subsequent scientific

⁹⁷ Tim Ingold, cited in Gaye Sculthorpe, Maria Nugent, Howard Morphy, ‘Introduction’, *Ancestors, Artefacts, Empire: Indigenous Australia in British and Irish Museums* (London: The British Museum Press and National Museum of Australia Press, 2021), 18, fn.5.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁹⁹ Daniel Clarke, artist, photographer and from 1865 manager of Framlingham Mission.

¹⁰⁰ Sabra G. Thorner, ‘The Photograph as Archive: Crafting Contemporary Koorie Culture’, *Journal of Material Culture* 24, no. 1 (March 2019): 28.

¹⁰¹ Philip Jones, ‘Reciprocity: Artefacts of Aboriginal Trade and Exchange’, in Sculthorpe, Nugent, and Morphy, *Ancestors, Artefacts, Empire*, 41.

¹⁰² Von Guérard to Bastian, 25 August, 1878, Zentralarchiv, SMB.

research'.¹⁰³ There, like all the objects in the consignment and, as was typical of the weighting of the archival record 'in favour of collectors over makers' or source communities, it was catalogued under the name of its collector and agent, Eugene von Guérard.¹⁰⁴ Today the necklace is on display at the Humboldt Forum in Berlin, where it is presented with contextual information derived from von Guérard's letters and research undertaken by Anna Weinreich in collaboration with Gunditjmara community members, including Yaruun's closest descendant, Titta Secombe.¹⁰⁵ The presence of Yaruun 'in the living memory of their Aboriginal descendants', Weinreich observes, 'sheds new light on objects in the collection' – on the way those objects are understood.¹⁰⁶ The cultural possessions acquired and, crucially, documented by von Guérard are now being reconnected with their source communities.

Contemporary responses to letters that record the collecting of the ancestral and cultural possessions of a colonised people will be conflicted. Nevertheless, despite their fraught context, the artist's attentive documentation of those possessions, their source communities, and the circumstances of their acquisition makes the von Guérard–Berlin correspondence a potent gift to the present. As an artist he brought a unique and far-sighted perspective to his collecting, his singular response to the creative imagination of a Gunditjmara artist resulting in the preservation of all Johnny Dawson's known paintings. Today those paintings speak of the strength and agency of a proud young artist who, with wit and visual acuity, turned his gaze back onto his colonisers.

V. Ruth Pullin
The University of Melbourne
Email: ruth.pullin@unimelb.edu.au

Thomas A. Darragh
Museums Victoria
Email: tdarragh@museum.vic.gov.au

¹⁰³ Lally, 193, 200.

¹⁰⁴ Sculthorpe, Nugent, Morphy, *Ancestors, Artefacts, Empire*, 17. See also: Leonn Satterthwait, 'Collections as Artefacts: The Making and Thinking of Anthropological Museum Collections', in Peterson, Allen, and Hamby, *Makers and Making*, 50–51.

¹⁰⁵ Anna Weinreich et al., 'Artists, Archives and Ancestral Connections' (forthcoming).

¹⁰⁶ Anna Weinreich, in *Em|power|relations*, ed. J. Binter et al. (Berlin: Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, 2022), 61.