

Ethnographic Artefacts: the Iceberg's Tip

If the shallows can supply such 'inestimable stones'
what may not the deep have held? (G.N. Teulon *in* Curr, 1887:187)

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ABSTRACT. The Australian Museum has over 2000 ethnographic artefacts from south-eastern Australia and these form a major data base for any inquiry into the material culture of this region's Aboriginal inhabitants. Unfortunately this collection is not totally representative since most of the ephemeral items discussed in the ethnographic literature, items that greatly add to our understanding of the richness of Aboriginal life, are not represented. This paper provides an explanation as to why this is so.

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Perhaps the first scholars in the Australian context who could be termed *material culturalists* were D.S. Davidson and F.D. McCarthy. These anthropologists were interested in defining the basic culture of the Aborigines who first settled the Australian continent as well as in identifying internal and external influences leading to changes in Aboriginal material culture. The decades of the 1930s and 1940s saw material culture studies expand as institutional support improved and public interest was fuelled by the publication of books and articles. Davidson's distributional research laid the foundation for the material culture inquiries McCarthy would later undertake. Davidson's contribution to Aboriginal ethnography lay in his *Geographical Distribution Theory*. This theory sought to reconstruct the historical development of a culture trait or complex by interpreting the chronological relationship between the relative geographical position which the trait had successively occupied (Davidson, 1928:17). He developed

Wissler's idea of culture areas for Australia because he thought group unity was not characteristic of any continental area (Davidson, 1928:7; Peterson, 1976: 53). The term *culture area* designated a region:

...in which the sum total of the culture of its inhabitants is characterised by general peculiarities which will allow for its ready differentiation from another region selected on the same basis... It is only the composite features of all the traits taken in the aggregate which may serve as a basis for separating one area from another.

Culture complexes were formed when traits (either concrete objects or abstract notions) became closely associated and acted as units. The history of a complex was, in effect, the sum history of its traits. Davidson sought to ascertain whether the origin of a trait was indigenous to Australia or whether it had been introduced. By focusing on a trait's geographical distribution, Davidson argued that the historical process of diffusion