

# The Path of Truth-Telling

The story of a lost Indigenous art collection, healing, and reconciliation at Curtin University

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By **Meredith Barnett**

January 1, 2022



For more than 50 years, a collection of remarkable artworks by Australian Indigenous children sat untouched in a university basement. Now, Curtin University in Perth has launched a campaign to give these pieces a permanent home in Western Australia.

The artworks are 122 colorful, fragile drawings of landscapes and wildlife created by Aboriginal children in the 1940s who were taken from their families. From 1900 to 1970, the Australian government forcibly removed thousands of Indigenous children from their families to “assimilate” them into institutions or settlements. In the 1940s, at the Carrolup Settlement, Headmaster Noel White encouraged the children to express their connection to the land through art. The pieces they created offer a rare glimpse into the lived experiences of Aboriginal children during a dark chapter of Australia's history.

Carrolup's school closed in 1950, and the children were sent to other institutions or to work. Much of the art was lost. But some pieces survived, eventually traveling around the globe and landing back in Australia today.

## Unearthing the Collection

In the 1940s, before the school closed, the artworks caught the eye of British philanthropist Florence Rutter. She exhibited them in Europe and sent the sales proceeds back to support the children. In 1956, New York art collector Herbert Mayer bought Rutter's collection of 122 pieces and later donated them to Colgate University in the U.S. They sat in storage until 2004, when a visiting Australian professor recognized the pieces' importance.

After consulting with Nyungar elders, Colgate repatriated the art to Nyungar country in 2014, entrusting custodial

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responsibilities to Curtin University. (Nyungar country is the southwest corner of Western Australia, home to the Nyungar or Noongar Aboriginal Australian peoples.)

Curtin, guided by the Carrolup Elders Reference Group, launched a fundraising campaign in 2020 to build a permanent home for the artworks, called [The Carrolup Centre for Truth-telling](#).

"The Centre will provide opportunities for truth-telling and healing for families of the Carrolup survivors, and to create awareness to the broader community of our often overlooked shared history and impact of colonisation," says Caroline Robson, Manager of Partnerships and Engagement at Curtin.

#### Building Momentum for the Centre

In 2020, Curtin's team launched an awareness campaign about the artworks and the proposed centre, explains Robson, sending 90,000 postcards to individuals across Perth, advertising on TV, online, in airports, and more. They reached more than a million people in southwest Australia, she estimates. In the first phase of fundraising (August to November 2020), Curtin raised \$2.6 million from 675 donors, winning a [silver 2021 Circle of Excellence Award for Targeted Campaigns](#). The goal is \$12.3 million over the next three years.

This is part of Curtin's broader Indigenous reconciliation action plan, which also includes scholarships, career and leadership opportunities for Indigenous staff, Indigenous research support, and more. Robson sees the work as an ongoing process of building equity and inclusion.

"Curtin has an incredibly diverse student and graduate body, which make Curtin and its friends richer in experiences," says Robson. "In the advancement team, we champion causes, programs, and research that will deliver change to those in need and make tomorrow better for us all."

## About the author(s)

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JANUARY 1, 2022

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