

# SPOTLIGHT ON SHONA COYNE

SENIOR CURATOR,  
NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AUSTRALIA



Shona is a naturally gifted communicator who comes from a long line of storytellers. On her father's side, she's part of the Menang clan from the Albany region of Nyungar Boodja, and on her mother's side she has deep Scottish highlander roots. Her passion for respectfully sharing social history shines through all her work. So much so, she caught the attention of the National Museum of Australia with her early collaboration on a small exhibition in Albany, Yurlmun: Mokare Mia Boodja, which means Returning to Mokares Home Country.

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## Give us your bbq pitch. What do you do?

As an independent cultural practitioner and part of the museum's curatorial team, I'm involved in researching themes and stories to create immersive experiences that bring people on a journey through Australia's social history.

It's a real privilege for me to contribute to the preservation of my people's culture, through interpreting and demonstrating First Nations cultural practices to people from other cultures. I'm also working on the repatriation of First Nations ancestral remains and sacred cultural material back to their original communities, as well as assessing cultural material that people wish to donate to Australia's national historic collection. That can be anything from boomerangs to billiard tables.

## Did you always plan to work in museums?

I was really interested in zoology and wildlife conservation, as well as computers and IT in school. I also had this really strong connection to First Nations culture, but I wasn't sure what direction this might take me in. At the time, I was thinking maybe politics, health or cultural heritage. Which probably explains why I hopped about a bit before finding my true calling.

From school, I went from working in a bakery to an Aboriginal medical centre to studying a Diploma in IT Systems Administration to working as an IT service desk manager to communications and economic development roles. I also spent several years working in the oil, gas and renewable energy sector and then onto a Grants Officer role for the South West Aboriginal Land & Sea Council (with a side-hustle working for an apiarist, packing honey). Each and every one of these roles have been a valuable building block, helping me establish a great toolkit of skills and network of contacts.

## So, how did you get into the sector?

I really owe a lot to my Menang family, community and the wider Nyungar nation for the deeply rewarding career I have today. When I saw an ad in my local paper for the Indigenous Emerging Curators Program, I was so hungry for this amazing opportunity to join my local Aboriginal heritage group and collaborate with the West Australian and National Museum of Australia. I had the full support of my family and community and I was lucky to be selected.

## How would you describe yourself?

I'm a social creature, a big-sky thinker and a storyteller. I love meeting and working with people from all walks of life and learning what they are most passionate about, so I get a lot out of travelling to new locations and working with communities, both here in Australia and overseas.

## What do you love most about the industry?

I really value the opportunities to use different mediums of storytelling to respectfully share First Nations stories, influence the hearts and minds of individuals and influence perspectives across local, national and international audiences.

## What's the best part of your job?

The best things by far are the opportunities to work with First Nations communities across Australia, deepening my knowledge of our culture, and building and strengthening relationships with some of the most truly wonderful story keepers in some of the most amazing places.

I was lucky to have worked on a major exhibition called Endeavour Voyage the Untold Stories of Cook and the First Australians. We already know a lot about Captain James Cook and his crew when they first caught sight of the east coast of Australia in 1770, but this exhibition set out to tell the story from the First Nations' perspective, a piece in our history that had been missing until this point. Over three years, I worked with nine different Aboriginal communities to carefully bring their stories together and respectfully share them with the world. It was incredibly challenging and massively rewarding.

## What's your best advice for anyone starting out?

Get involved with your local heritage group. Spend time with your elders and community members – your local story keepers. Our present elders are not going to be here forever and it's important to learn from them, listen to their stories of place and people. Understanding your own cultural heritage and learning how to be a good communicator can really help you work meaningfully with other communities too. And make sure you get a good grounding in IT. My IT background has proven invaluable in this space.

## And what's next for you?

It's uncanny where I've ended up. I'm now managing the Indigenous Emerging Curators Program and about to receive the next cohort of young curators from Western Australia. They'll be coming to Canberra for their two-week intensive induction and I'll be helping to guide them on their own journey. It feels great to be able to give back to that very same program I came through and to show the next generation what's possible.

## Connect with Shona on LinkedIn

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