# What Would Indigenous Taxonomy Look Like? The Case of Blandowski's Australia

Khadija von Zinnenburg Carroll

**Summary**

*The Encyclopedia of Australia* by Wilhelm von Blandowski is a large visual atlas of 142 plates dedicated to a comprehensive representation of the continent Australia. Produced in 1862 with a complex mixture of drawing, engraving, and photography, the encyclopedia was only published as a facsimile in 2010, since it was discovered in the Haddon Library. The material is of significance to the history of art, the history of natural science, early photography, the making of visual atlases and encyclopedias, and the social and anthropological concerns of the British and German expeditions. The Humboldtian and romantic influences on the aesthetics of colonial classification in this case-study encyclopaedia question Linnean and Darwinian orthodoxies and indicate an unusual nineteenth century interest in Indigenous taxonomies.

The encyclopaedia compiled by the explorer Wilhelm von Blandowski (1822–1878) has an exceptional focus on local Aboriginal collection practices in Australia. While other expeditions in the nineteenth-century British Empire were ostensibly interested in geology, geography, zoology, and botany, Blandowski's encyclopaedia of Australia from 1862 represents the changing natural and cultural environment of his Aboriginal "friends."

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Plate 1, Title and Contents of Blandowski's 10 years' experience in Australia (1862)

All rights reserved. Created by Courtesy of Haddon Library, Faculty of Archaeology and Anthropology, University of Cambridge Wilhelm von Blandowski, Plate 1, Title and Contents of Blandowski's 10 years' experience in Australia, Australien in 142 Photographischen Abbildungen, 1862.

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Blandowski established the first museum for natural history in Melbourne and was employed by the Queen of England as the first government zoologist in the colony of Victoria. Over ten years (1849–1859) Blandowski compiled images and theories about the environment in the Pacific. His oeuvre during this time is deeply indebted to the artists Andrew Bartholomew, Ludwig Becker, Gerhard Krefft, Gustav Mützel, Fredrick Schoenfeld, James, George, and William Redaway, and others as yet unidentified

The hundreds of illustrations he commissioned represent the Indigenous guides and informants that were commonly used in scientific explorations to obtain specimens and provide identifications and details of habitat. Indigenous environmental knowledge and cultural classifications (names, relationships, cosmologies) thereby found expression in the field records of the natural philosophers and the artists with whom they worked.

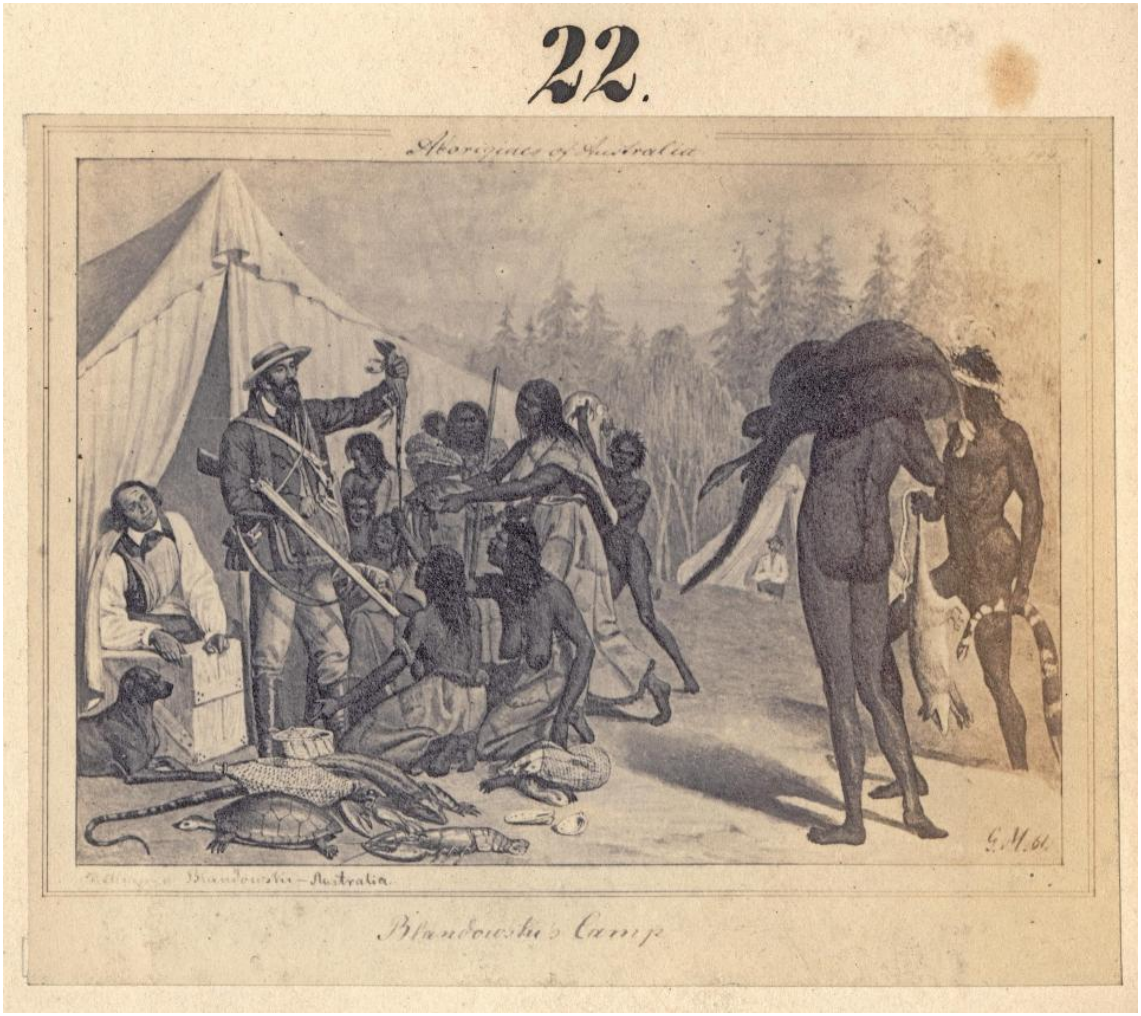



Plate 22, Blandowski's camp (1862)

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Wilhelm von Blandowski, Plate 22, Blandowski's camp (1862), Australien in 142 Photographischen Abbildungen, 1862.

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The Blandowski collections embody systems of local knowledge, yet remained excluded from dominant systems of classification when the information returned to European metropolitan centers. Blandowski's own career arguably fell into obscurity and failed precisely because he tried to foreground Aboriginal classification. The hundreds of field drawings from Australia made by the artists he employed represent a cross section of Aboriginal life and ecology that is not recorded in any other archive and is partially extinct in the natural world. The material he collected is furthermore significant because it presents the demand for an expansion of classification systems used to organize colonial collections in such a way that issues of race, gender, class, discipline (art/science), and geography (Australia/Europe) are no longer premises for exclusion from the history of science.

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**Further readings:**


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Dr. Khadija von Zinnenburg Carroll runs a British Academy research project on classification at Cambridge University and is currently a Humboldt Fellow in Berlin. She wrote her PhD at Harvard University on indigenous taxonomies and recently completed her monograph *Art in the Time of Colony*, which will appear in 2014 in Ashgate's series on *Empires and the*

*Making of the Modern World, 1650-2000*. Khadija's research and teaching interests are the history of nineteenth-century science and art; practices of natural history; museum display cultures; sensory ethnography and the collecting of material culture; curatorial interventions and site specific art; gender and post-colonial studies; historiography and the writing of history; classification and taxonomy; ekphrasis and the relation between verbal and visual representation.

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