Corroboree, by Tommy McRae  
University of Melbourne Archives

Tommy McRae (Australian, c. 1835–1901)  
**Corroboree**, c. 1890  
ink on paper  
21.6 × 27.3 cm  
Foord Family Collection, 1961.0008, item 1  
University of Melbourne Archives

Tommy McRae, an Indigenous artist of the Kwat Kwat people, was born near Wahgunyah in north-eastern Victoria. As well as working as a stockman, he was a prolific draftsman, filling his sketchbooks with narrative images such as *Corroboree*.

*Corroboree* shows a line of Wathaurong men performing a ceremonial dance, with one white-skinned, hat-wearing man among them. This is almost certainly William Buckley (1780–1856), an escaped convict who lived among Indigenous Australians from 1803 to 1855, and a favourite subject of McRae. Buckley’s exploits predated McRae’s artistic career, so his drawings are based on stories told of Buckley’s life.

In the selected drawing, Buckley is not only living alongside the Indigenous community, but participating in the corroboree in traditional dress and body paint, suggesting the extent to which he was welcomed into the tribe. In the background is a ship – perhaps the *Calcutta*, which had brought Buckley and other convicts to Australia at the beginning of the century.

Almost all McRae’s known artworks were in pen and ink, drawn in sketchbooks and sold to locals, thus teaching them (and us) much about the lives of Indigenous Australians in the 19th century. Created during a lifetime that saw the colonisation of Australia and the dispossession of its Indigenous owners, McRae’s drawings are important documents of the meeting of two cultures.
Teaching ideas
The University of Melbourne’s curriculum is rich and varied, and changes from year to year. For more teaching ideas, contact a collection manager.

Art, Market and Methods
Tommy McRae’s ability to create a market for his humorous narrative sketches was based partly on his ability to tap into the tastes of 19th-century colonial Australians. Discuss which features of these works would have particularly appealed to McRae’s patrons.

Australian Art
Discuss Tommy McRae’s unique standing in Australian Indigenous art and consider how artworks using European materials can still have a distinctive Indigenous identity.

Australian History
Discuss how objects can communicate moments in history, using Corroboree as a case study. Find four or five other objects from the University of Melbourne’s collections that can tell the story of a point in time in Australian history.

Controversies in Australian History
Tommy McRae worked as a stockman as well as a quite successful artist. Regardless, he still saw his children taken away under government regulations in the 1890s. Use McRae as a case study in discussing the experience of Indigenous Australians during this period.

Aboriginalities
Use this image to study the word ‘corroboree’, its etymology, and what it meant to 19th-century Indigenous Australians. Examine the identifying features in the drawing, such as clothes, ornaments and dancing style.

Historicising the Colonial Mythscape
Using the story of William Buckley, the ‘Wild White Man’, as a case study, compare Tommy McRae’s representations of Buckley with colonial accounts of his time with the Indigenous tribe.

A Postcolonial International Relations?
Explore ways in which Indigenous artists have responded to the colonisation of Australia, from early artists like McRae to postcolonial art of the 20th and 21st centuries.

Exhibition Management
Although Corroboree is a single sheet, it was probably cut out of one of Tommy McRae’s sketchbooks. Discuss the complexities of exhibiting bound material, and consider techniques for displaying books and sketchbooks that have several important pages.
Intersecting Objects

Attributed to Ludwig Becker (German/Australian, 1808–1861)
Portrait of William Buckley (lithograph, detail)
frontispiece from John Morgan (English/Australian, 1792–1866)
The life and adventures of William Buckley: Thirty-two years a wanderer amongst the Aborigines of
the then unexplored country round Port Phillip, now the province of Victoria
Hobart: Archibald MacDougall, 1852
Grimwade Collection
Rare Books Collection
University of Melbourne Library

To learn more, visit the websites of the University of Melbourne Archives and the Rare Books Collection.

References
Mark Richmond [Corroboree by Tommy McRae], in Chris McAuliffe & Peter Yule (eds), Treasures: Highlights of the cultural collections of the University of Melbourne, Melbourne University Publishing, 2003, p. 40.

Further reading