Letters and other gifts: on the first consignment of Aboriginal material culture objects sent to Europe from New Norcia, 1871

John Kinder

ABSTRACT
One of the very earliest collections of Aboriginal material culture objects was sent from Australia (New Norcia) to Italy (Reggio Emilia) as a gift. The sender and recipient had in all likelihood never met in person, and the gift was a function of an expanding friendship network which, through epistolary correspondence, connected people in Australia and Italy and other places. This article explores Stanley’s notion of the ‘epistolary gift’ to understand how this gift came to occur. Letters are gifts presented to an absent other and also contain or accompany other sorts of things brought, as presents, into the presence of the other. The obligations of the ‘system of the gift’, as shared knowledge among members of a friendship network, produce surprising manifestations of gratitude.