

UK

8 September 2011 Last updated at 13:17 GMT

UK saleroom withdraws Aboriginal stone from auction

A sacred stone not supposed to be seen by Aboriginal women has been withdrawn from a British auction following a public outcry in Australia.

The stone had been listed for sale at Canterbury Auction Galleries in Kent for up to £6,000 on Wednesday.

However on Tuesday night the Australian High Commission called the gallery to explain its significance.

It was withdrawn and efforts are being made to repatriate it to the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory.

The stone, known as tjuringa, is used in the most profound ceremonies within Aboriginal culture and then secreted away, with only senior elders knowing how to retrieve it.

Tradition dictates that it must only be handled by Aboriginal male elders - and Aboriginal women who see it will be struck down and die.

Anthony Pratt, the managing director of the galleries said the stone had been brought in by a woman, who has not been identified, on regular valuation day in Sandwich, Kent.

'Revered'

"It wasn't quite what you'd expect to turn up in Sandwich. It's pretty unremarkable. It's not a work of art by any stretch.

"It's a flat, oval stone with a bit of decoration on the front. When I spoke to the high commissioner's personal assistant, they said that the vendor has good title to sell it.

"But they said it is revered and told me about its importance.

"We didn't want to offend anybody just for a sale so the decision was taken to withdraw it from the auction," he said.



The sacred Aboriginal stone is only meant to be handled by male elders

The seller, also from the Sandwich area of Kent, was given the stone as a gift in 1961 by Archer Russell, an Australian naturalist and writer.

It is understood to date from some time before the 19th Century and belong to the Arrernte people of central Australia.

Bernice Murphy, the national director of Museums Australia, told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation: "It's more important to Aboriginal culture than the Elgin Marbles to Greece because this kind of object has a continuing religious association."