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NMA Review Secretariat  
Department of Communications and the Arts  
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Canberra, ACT 2601

### **To the Review Committee**

This submission is in two parts: the first briefly addresses the major terms of the Review, and the second includes discussion on possible future priorities.

#### Part 1.

Museums are institutions which, by their very nature as collectors of the past, operate over a long time frame. The reputation and success of a museum, particularly a national museum, is generally judged on the basis of its collections, exhibitions and programs, publications and research, over some considerable time. It is rare, and in my view somewhat pointless, to conduct a Review so soon after the opening of a major new museum. I do not believe that it is possible or fair to judge a museum on the basis of one round of exhibitions.

A “permanent exhibition” in museum terms would be expected to be replaced in about 10 years, assuming an appropriate level of funding (and lack of distraction on other issues!). Other exhibitions may be replaced in a shorter time frame, either because they were intended as temporary exhibitions, or for other reasons including the need to rotate collections, to portray other themes, or to improve technical and other less successful aspects of current display.

History museums, Natural History museums, and Art museums reflect the cultural history of people, in conjunction with libraries and archives. In my view, the museum faced with the most difficult task, is the History museum. It is perhaps one of the reasons that it took one hundred years since nationhood, for Australia to create a National Museum. It is relatively easy to showcase the art treasures of a nation, although controversy and criticism are not unknown here either. It is far more difficult to portray the history of a nation, or of a district, or of anything else. There are so many histories; there are so many views.

Having said that, in any superficial judgement, the National Museum of Australia has been extremely successful to date, with excellent visitor figures, successful school and other programs, and successful temporary and permanent exhibitions. It has been successful against many criteria, not least that of creating thoughtful discussion, and generating a degree of controversy. This is a mark of success, as museums are not prescriptive, do not try to give ‘the received version’ but try to describe aspects of the past for the present generation. They try to encourage thought, as well as to be educational, entertaining, and fun.

The Museum has undoubtedly been very successful in fulfilling the Government’s stated vision for the Museum. The DCITA Secretariat has stated that the Government’s intention was “ *that the Museum would be an institution combining the best contemporary techniques with new media technologies, in order to offer a range of experiences of wide appeal.*” The Museum has reached new audiences, and audiences outside Canberra; it has permanent, changing and travelling exhibitions, and in my experience, has continued to establish working partnerships with state, regional and international cultural institutions.

It is clear that the Museum has done this well, and judging on the passage quoted above, it has been more broadly successful than it might have been had it presented an idea of a Museum

which saw the National Museum as a quiet place, full of objects in cases, which, perhaps, claimed to tell the definitive version of the story of ‘the pioneering spirit which made Australia’.

The Museum’s displays touch on many stories, and incorporate many ideas, and in keeping with the celebration of Federation, include many icons of our past. I do not believe that it does this uniformly well, and many criticisms, both informed and uninformed are to be expected, and indeed, encouraged. This is true of creativity expressed in many fields, and is certainly reflected in discussions of new exhibitions in other of the world’s notable museums. I am quite sure that future displays will both rectify problems, where appropriate, and continue to build on the present sound foundation. I hope that they will continue to generate discussion and even controversy.

The National Museum is now displaying its first round of “permanent” exhibitions, and many more themes, many other stories, and many more objects will be displayed in future exhibitions. Current exhibitions are just that: current exhibitions, and not a be-all, end-all measure of success.

The sort of controversy faced by the National Museum can be paralleled by similar criticism made of some of the current exhibitions at the Museum of American History, part of the Smithsonian, in Washington DC. The criticism is a measure of the success of both institutions. There is a continuum in the life of a great museum. The pendulum will continue its swing.

(See the article: “PC Smithsonian Museum Rags on America”, by Marc Morano, CNS News.com, at <http://newsmax.com/archives/articles/2003/2/19/171134.shtml>.)

## **Part 2.**

I write as a long-term museum professional, formerly Director of an important if small Museum, the Macleay Museum at the University of Sydney, and for many years previously, Senior Registrar and Collections Manager at the Powerhouse Museum. Collections have been a major part of my life and I am passionate about them. I have visited the stores of the National Museum and am relatively familiar with the scope and importance of the collections appropriately held by our National Museum.

The current displays have tended to adopt a view of exhibition design I would call representational display rather than one which relies on a more object-dense approach to tell a similar story. I would love to see more priority given to object-dense displays. Years of observational evidence of visitor preference leads me to believe that the public responds well to the crowded effect of an object-dense display. Indeed, some of the more popular current displays illustrate this point.

In addition to this general point, there are two, possibly three, collection strengths of national significance which I believe are neglected in current displays. I am aware of the wealth of the Aboriginal art and artifact collections held by the National Museum, and yet comparatively little of this is on display. I would love to see a major, perhaps touring, exhibition of Aboriginal bark paintings and other artifacts displayed as art as well as artifacts of history. Such an exhibition could also draw on the other important national collections of this material. This has real blockbuster potential, within Australia and overseas. This is not to say that I believe that any Museum should depend heavily on the blockbuster concept.

Additionally, Australia’s role in the Pacific, past and present, is not adequately represented in the Museum. Our history and national identity cannot be shown in isolation from our geography. I know that the Museum holds several major collections of art and artifacts from many of the islands of Melanesia, in particular, New Guinea. Similarly, it holds wonderful collections of Polynesian and Micronesian material. Given the past and future importance of

Australia's role in relation to New Guinea, and Australia's current, cynical use of the Pacific in 'the Pacific solution', I believe that the lack of reflection of these holdings in displays is somewhat surprising. These small nations, heavily dependent on financial aid from Australia, also need Australia's assistance in developing their own concept of self worth, and in fostering a greater appreciation in national and international terms of the importance of much of the artistic creativity of the region.

There is a national role here too, in that although there are substantial holdings of Pacific art and artifacts in several of the major state museums there is little of it on display. In some cases, notably in South Australia and Tasmania, important pieces have been displayed in unchanging and dated displays for many years. In many state capitals, again most significantly in Sydney, there are no displays at all.

While it is not the primary purpose of the Museum to aim to attract tourists to the National Capital, there is extremely strong interest in Oceanic Art and artifacts in many parts of Europe, and many tourists visiting Australia expect to see this reflected in our museums, as it is in major exhibitions in many of the most famous overseas museums and art museums. For example, Oceanic material will be featured in a forthcoming exhibition at the British Museum, there are current exhibitions at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in NYC, and at the Louvre, in Paris, and in Basel, and many museums in Germany. A new museum in Paris, the Quai Branly will open in 2004 to showcase such collections, and pieces will be borrowed from Australian collections. Yet the collections held by Australia's National Museum, are not displayed.

Perhaps the issue here is that, in spite of the size of the new Museum, it is still small by international standards, given the general infrastructure of shops, cafes, teaching areas and so on that is required in a modern museum. More of the wealth of the national collections could be displayed were new pavilions developed, dedicated to areas of national importance. For example, these may include Aboriginal creativity and history as displayed in art and artifacts; and the art and artifacts of the Pacific. It could also include another under-represented subject area: past scientific achievement in the context of current scientific research and developments. This too is a topic appropriate for national display, which could draw on additional resources held in other national and state institutions.

There are other segments of the stored collections which would lend themselves well to some form of visible storage display. This has generally been demonstrated to be an extremely successful and relatively cheap way of making collections accessible to a broader public.

Nations evolve over time. So do great museums. Please give the National Museum of Australia the opportunity to evolve into the great museum it gives promise of becoming.

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