

NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AUSTRALIA — EXHIBITION BRIEF
AUSTRALIAN JOURNEYS and CREATING A COUNTRY

1. OVERVIEW

The *Review of the National Museum of Australia* (2003) made a series of recommendations for the Museum's development over short and longer terms.

Among the recommendations, the review panel advised the Museum to reconsider selection of themes and narratives for the existing Horizons and Nation galleries. It argued that these galleries should:

- address primary themes in the Australian story
- present the stories in a coherent, clear and engaging way, backed by rigorous scholarship; and with objects that inspire and absorb, and
- establish a plan for stage-by-stage implementation. ¹

In addition, the review panel advised that:

The Museum's authority will stand principally on the power and quality of its displays. Central to this is the choice of themes and narratives that are of vital significance to the society, to its people's self-understanding. Those themes and narratives form the indispensable core to the permanent exhibitions. Equally important is the effectiveness with which they are presented — the quality of the Museum's story-telling. ²

In its Collections and Gallery Development Plan 2004–2008, the Museum defined a four-year timetable to address the Review's findings. The plan proposed that Horizons should be redeveloped as Australian Journeys to represent voyages of discovery, exploration and settlement of the Australian continent. This includes the settling of Australia by migration from Britain, Ireland, continental Europe and Asia, and the journeys of Australians to other parts of the world.

The plan further proposed redeveloping the Nation gallery as Creating a Country to provide a general history of Australia's economic, social and political conditions. Key moments in Australian history and experience are to be explored through specific places and their pasts. Creating a Country is intended to have a continental breadth in understanding the distinctive, located aspects of the nation's history.

Both galleries will remain physically distinct and separate, with their own storylines. However, the development plan also provides for the redeveloped galleries to be conceptually linked by

¹ *Review of the National Museum of Australia*, Canberra, DCITA, 2003, p. 69.

² *ibid.*, p.20.

audiovisual technology. The Always Online project will establish interactive stations in each gallery to explore different aspects of the people and places included in their respective storylines. Moreover, these media points will also enable visitors to view collections in regional Australia and overseas that are relevant to each gallery's themes and narratives.

2. RATIONALE

The development of Australian Journeys and Creating a Country is guided by the premise that Australian history is particular, distinctive *and* connected to international forces and conditions. This suggests that these two galleries at the National Museum should:

- explore central or key themes in Australian history acknowledging the diversity of people's experiences in particular places or regions, and
- represent the connections between historical experience in Australia and related global conditions and circumstances.

The Museum is seeking to avoid contested and circular discussions about what constitutes an Australian identity or a national character. Such ambition inevitably leads to concepts of 'Australianness' that are singular and narrow, and about which it is difficult to achieve a consensus.

Australian Journeys and Creating a Country can usefully move the emphasis away from abstract questions of national identity by accenting place and location as frames for understanding the past. Such an approach allows connections to be drawn between common experiences in different places, including those geographically distant from each other. This resonates with Graeme Davison's suggestion that the National Museum might usefully 'play host to several interpretations of the national past' while avoiding the compromises that are often 'bland and uninspiring'. ³

2.1 Place and cultural landscapes

In a 2003 paper in the *Griffith Review*, Mark McKenna discussed inclusion of a reference to the nation's territory, or 'land', in any new preamble to the Australian Constitution. He wrote that:

By emphasizing the centrality of the land to any new constitutional preamble, perhaps non-Aboriginal Australians are also wishing to end the sense of alienation and exile that is embedded within their colonial experience. Home is no longer elsewhere. The mother country is here. ⁴

McKenna suggests a way in which cultural landscapes inform our self-understanding as a community. Recent scholarship that examines histories of place and environment also emphasizes the 'located' character of Australian experience. The work of Peter Read, Tom Griffiths, Tim Bonyhady, Libby Robin and Jay Arthur, among others, encourages the Museum to describe its national reach through located histories, rather than defining or representing a national type or identity.

Griffiths has written directly on the possibility of strengthening the theme of 'land' in the Museum's exhibitions, a point taken up by the *Review of the National Museum*. ⁵ Instead of defining ourselves by arguing shared traits or national character, we might usefully explore the Australian past through stories of specific places and locales. Such a focus enlarges the

³ G Davison, 'National Museums in a global age: Observations abroad and reflections at home' in D McIntyre and K Wehner (eds), *National Museums: Negotiating Histories*, Canberra, NMA, 2001, p. 26.

⁴ M McKenna, 'Poetics of Place', *Griffith Review*, Summer 2003, p. 192.

⁵ *Review*, pp. 31-32.

Museum's sensitivity to regional experience, rather than generalizing historical conditions across the country.

A focus on place also helps reveal the layered historical meanings of landscapes and acknowledges the Museum's obligation under its Act to include Indigenous and non-Indigenous voices in representing the past. Consciously locating histories of people and their experiences allows for the past to be reflected through a common prism of place, maintaining narrative unity while encompassing different experiences.

2.2 Transnationalism

A long tradition of scholarship has sought to connect Australian history to global contexts, from studies of imperialism to transnationalism. In its submission to the *Review of the National Museum*, the Humanities Research Centre at the Australian National University called for the Museum to have an international focus:

[The Museum] ... should continue to work ... in the national interest to educate Australian audiences about our own country, the dynamic region in which we live and to educate those audiences to create a better understanding of Australia in the context of our changing world. In other words the National Museum should have an international focus not necessarily so appropriate to State and regional museums. ⁶

While accenting particular experiences across the country, a focus on place can also connect Australian experience to international interests and circumstances. Conventional histories often generalise the relationships between Australia and other nations, as, for example, in their examination of the imperial and post-imperial relationship with Britain. However, these approaches offer limited opportunities for visitors to engage emotionally or experientially with the past. Emphasising historical connections between *specific* places here and overseas may help visitors more clearly grasp the historical links between Australia and the rest of the world.

Australia's international connections can be made real through the stories of immigrants' place-making in Australia and how places overseas, such as London, Gallipoli and Bali, have become significant to the nation. A focus on place shifts the emphasis away from the detail of journeys to reveal the ways in which migrants and other travellers have accommodated themselves in the continent. It also encourages an understanding of the connections between the home and host communities of immigrants and travellers, revealing their impact on Australian life and society.

Australia has also been an emigrant nation, as the Australian Bureau of Statistics has shown. ⁷ The stories of young pilgrims at Anzac Cove, painters and writers in Europe, and scientists in Antarctica have been integrated in the national record. Australians have also fought two world wars, supported small nations in the Asia-Pacific and administered territories such as Papua New Guinea, affecting the course of other nations' histories.

2.3 Ethnographic history

The practice of ethnographic history provides a model for investigating past events and their contexts, with sensitivity to the historical contingencies of time and place. In *Dancing with Strangers*, Inga Clendinnen suggests the productive engagement of history and anthropology

⁶ Humanities Research Centre, Australian National University, unpublished submission to the *Review of the National Museum of Australia*, 2003.

⁷ 'There is a tendency for Australia to be categorised as a purely immigration country; in fact it is also a country of significant emigration.' Professor Graeme Hugo, 'A Century of Population Change in Australia', *Year Book Australia*, Canberra, Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2002.

to 'get inside' experiences of the past. History, she writes, can be 'culture-insensitive' while anthropology is often disinterested in temporal change:

Both can be insensitive to the reciprocating dynamic between action and context. Together, however, they are formidable, and in my view offer the best chance of explaining what we humans do in any particular circumstance, and why we do it. ⁸

Ethnographic history encourages examination of particular experiences in their place or location. This approach builds a complex relationship between the 'ethnography of the historical moment' set against the continuity of cultural landscapes. It promotes care and precision in representing the past, without losing a sense of historical continuities between experiences in different times and places.

Such an approach informs the practice of history in the museum, which depends on material culture to evoke people's lives in the past. Ethnographic history's emphasis on event and context resonates with the common curatorial practice of investigating an object's specific meaning within a broader historical frame. Museum curators make the argument that an object carries palpable traces of its passage through a series of cultural and physical contexts, and therefore evokes a physical connection to time and place. ⁹

Integrating a focus on place with an ethnographic approach to historical events helps detail the circumstances of change and continuity in the historical record. Moreover, it re-inserts place as an active presence, or 'character', in the past and acknowledges the temporal and geographical specificity of encounters between peoples, places and ideas.

3. INTERPRETIVE APPROACH

Australian Journeys and Creating a Country are planned as distinct galleries with their own internal coherence. The gallery spaces are physically separate and each must therefore explore a different aspect of Australian history. Visitors should be able to understand and enjoy each gallery's unique and internally cogent narratives.

The exhibitions will be developed for broad and differentiated audiences: for all major age cohorts, including children; for different socio-economic and educative levels; and with regard to gender and other key determinants. Exhibition research and development will follow the Museum's existing interpretation, research and collections policies.

While maintaining separate narratives, Australian Journeys and Creating a Country will be conceptually linked to each other. Both galleries will explore the Australian past through the prism of place, adopting an ethno-historical approach to understanding the context of events. Elements of the exhibitions will focus on how Australian experience has emerged in and created specific cultural landscapes. Some, but not all, of these landscapes will be explored in both galleries through the Always Online project, with each gallery offering a distinct but complementary context for that 'place'.

In Australian Journeys visitors might encounter Port Jackson as a site of British imagining of and arrival in Australia. In Creating a Country, visitors would find Port Jackson again, but this time represented with a focus on the experiences of the sailors, marines and convicts who struggled to establish a settlement there at the end of the eighteenth century.

Australian Journeys and Creating a Country will also be linked to collections and sites outside the Museum. At certain stages in each of the galleries, interactive multimedia stations will let

⁸ I Clendinnen, *Dancing with Strangers*, Melbourne, Text Publishing, 2003, p. 3.

⁹ A Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 1988, passim.

visitors access information, explore objects and view landscapes related to the place interpreted at that point. Australian Journeys will link to places and collections overseas, such as the British Museum and the Smithsonian Institution; in Creating a Country, connections will be drawn to places and collections in regional Australia, such as at Bendigo, Birdsville or Kalgoorlie.

For example, visitors exploring a display on the Bendigo goldfields in Creating a Country will be able to examine the rich local records held at the Bendigo Fine Art Gallery; in Australian Journeys they will be able to review historical collections at the Guangdong Museum of Art.

Below are two examples of how select 'places' can work to connect Australian Journeys and Creating a Country:

Place	Overseas collection	Australian Journeys	Creating and Country	Local collection
Bendigo, 1851	Guandong Museum of Art	Chinese immigration	Alluvial mining	Bendigo Art Gallery
Adaminaby, 1949	Latvian Museum of Architecture	Post-war refugees	Snowy Mountains Scheme	Cooma Historical Society

4. AUSTRALIAN JOURNEYS – INTERPRETIVE APPROACH

Australian Journeys will establish a clear narrative flow from the primary entrance to the gallery near the SAS Visions Theatre. The gallery's physical form is suited to a broad chronology beginning with the first encounters between European seafarers and Indigenous people, extending through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to the present day. While most people would be expected to follow this narrative, visitors who approach the gallery from the other end (via the stairs near the Boab Tree on the ground floor) will read it as a step back in time.

In researching the stories for inclusion in Australian Journeys, curatorial staff will reflect on five basic conceptual questions:

- how Australia has been imagined internationally: by people who never set foot on its shores, by international visitors, and by Australians living overseas
- conquering distance: how both technological and imaginative leaps have altered perceptions of distance, time, and Australia's 'place' in the world
- old worlds, new ways: the importance of both continuity and reinvention to people's experiences of moving within and beyond Australia; and how the continual introduction of different ways of experiencing, creating and understanding the world has shaped Australian life
- personal and collective transnationalism: the affinity and connection that Australians, and others with links to Australia, feel to many places at once, transcending time, distance and national borders, and
- Australia's contributions to the world: through politics, arts, sport, science and technology, industry and trade, democracy and the environment and others.

These questions will be of lesser or greater significance to individual stories; that is, not all journeys are necessarily determined by *all* these concerns. However, the five issues serve as methodological guides to ensure the stories developed in the gallery are rich, varied and broadly representative.

The main narrative will be based on the stories of people's journeys to and across the Australian continent over time. However, these will be counterpointed with storylines based on the returns or travels of Australians and others to other places round the world. In both cases, the intention is to accent the dynamic process of people's accommodating to, and impacting upon, the landscape in which they find themselves. In these terms, the stories of migration to Australia will focus on migrant's 'making' and in turn 'being made' by these places. Their encounters with people are also important to the sense of their 'settling in' to the country. The land was a dynamic agent in these encounters, provoking migrants and other travellers to psychologically and physically accommodate themselves to its environmental circumstances.

The gallery's themes draw on connections between specific places in this country with places overseas. While the content is therefore expansive in its scale, the material culture selected for these stories will be more personal and intimate. Objects that take visitors inside the migrant experience of settling into a new land, while retaining an emotional connection to a homeland, will support the displays. These personal objects show the particular responses of people to a specific place, and are instructive in showing how they have made their lives in that place. The object culture for the gallery will be largely drawn from the National Historical Collection and augmented by regional and overseas collections as required.

5. CREATING A COUNTRY – INTERPRETIVE APPROACH

Creating a Country presents a general history of Australia, introduced by a preamble that represents three key moments that links the terms 'continent', 'nation' and 'Australia'. Ten key themes in Australian history are then interpreted through a focus on events in particular times and places. The intention is to represent the diversity of experience across the country, located in temporal and geographical contexts, while establishing clear continuities in Australian history.

In researching the stories for inclusion in Creating a Country, curatorial staff will reflect on four basic conceptual questions:

- the significance of the story in terms of the nation-state and its governance
- the sense of diversity or differences between people involved in the historical encounter
- the character of economies and working life related to the historical moment, and
- the features of everyday life and popular culture related to the particular time and place.

These questions will be of lesser or greater significance to individual stories; that is, not all historical events are necessarily determined by *all* these concerns. However, the four issues serve as a methodological guide to ensure the stories developed in the gallery are rich, varied and broadly representative.

The gallery is a large and potentially grand interpretive space. Most visitors will get their first view of Creating a Country as they approach on the ground floor via Old New Land. Before they descend the stairs into the exhibition, there will be a strong and emphatic introductory experience: presentation of a visual feature on the 'Big Map' multimedia screen, focusing on Flinders, Barton and the 2001 Centenary of Federation, as outlined above. The audiovisual program will orient visitors to the temporal range of the gallery and its thematic treatment of the nation's history through people's experiences of place.

The intention is to use this space more directly as a physical and conceptual introduction to the gallery itself. From this vantage point, views across and within the gallery will be opened up, encouraging visitors to apprehend the sheer scale of the themes addressed in the exhibition. Visitors will be able to look across the gallery and see large images projected on the rear wall that establish the physical and historical diversity of Australian landscapes. They will also look down on the gallery floor, from the landing and bridge to the First Australians gallery, and see

large elements of the material culture in the exhibition. Visitors should have a sense of being 'in' or 'immersed' in the gallery before they descend the stairs.

Within the gallery, the ten key themes will be addressed by ten modules, or sections. Each module will be based around four place-based examples of the theme to which it is devoted (note: the places listed below are indicative and depend on the availability of artefacts to support storylines). On descending the stairs near the lift, visitors will encounter the first module, 'On the Edge of the World', that establishes a sense of Australia's colonial foundations, expressed through several experiences of that theme located in time and place. From this first module, sightlines to the main elements in subsequent sections draw visitors through the narrative; however, given the shape of the gallery, each module will cohere as a separate element, clearly announcing the key idea or themes it addresses. Though passage through the modules will be clear and evident, visitors may move between each as they wish. Rather than impose a single flow of visitors between modules, the gallery will rely on the clarity of each theme's expression in the individual modules.

Iconic and physically impressive artefacts, suggesting a more enlarged, expansive mood that mirrors the scale of Australian landscapes, will dominate the material culture in *Creating a Country*. While *Australian Journeys* will tend to use personal and more intimate objects to detail stories of passage, *Creating a Country* will include very large elements – such as vehicles and machinery – that evidence the connections of historical themes to the material conditions of the continent. Key objects, such as the No. 1 Holden Prototype, will act as natural draws to visitors moving between modules. The scale of the material culture is intended to accentuate the gallery's spaciousness.

While key interpretive elements of *Creating a Country* will be drawn from the National Historical Collection, the gallery will necessarily rely on loans from other institutions. However, the exhibition's place-based focus will allow for a broad web of relationships between the National Museum of Australia and regional collections. Loans negotiated with regional museums and other local collections will express the Museum's commitment to representing the stories of all Australian communities. Rather than seen as a liability, the loans program should be regarded as a virtue of the gallery and part of its communicative strength. The program should also serve as part of the Museum's outreach program, expressing its national mandate through collaboration with State and regional institutions.