

MISS Australia

A NATION'S QUEST

The Lone Hand is challenged by the 'Chicago Tribune' to produce an Australian girl as beautiful as the selected beauty of America. We take up the challenge, and hope to establish that the Australienne is the most beautiful type in the world.

Lone Hand, 1 November 1907

The challenge to produce Australia's most beautiful woman in 1907 marks the beginning of a fascinating phenomenon explored in the National Museum of Australia's travelling exhibition – *Miss Australia: A Nation's Quest*.

In 1908 Alice Buckridge, a shop assistant from Victoria, was announced as the winner of the competition. The judges were captivated by Miss Buckridge as an ideal Australian beauty to whom 'telegraph operating would come almost as easy as typewriting'. Miss Buckridge charmed the judges when she confirmed that she did not attend dances, loved tennis and roller skating, wore no toilet creams or powder and much preferred water to any other drink.

The judges pronounced that Miss Buckridge was 'the antithesis of the American young woman' and was 'a very Australian girl'. The judges' comments give us an insight into the qualities and characteristics that made up their picture of an ideal Australian woman – healthy, articulate, bright, natural and, undoubtedly, beautiful.

While the Miss Australia competition is representative of only one view of ideal Australian womanhood, in its various forms the competition does highlight the way in which particular qualities have been important to segments of Australia's population across the last century. The competition is also a fascinating event through which we are able to examine how women's roles and identity have altered over the same period.

In 1926 another Miss Australia competition was organised, this time by *Smith's Weekly* newspaper. The competition was 'in quest of the perfect woman of a continent'. This time the winner hailed from Western Australia – a young student, Beryl Mills. ... *an unspoiled girl,*

possessing all those fine instincts of pride and humility, breeding and culture, without the spoiling influence of too much modernity. (Miss Australia magazine, 1926)

A number of intriguing objects from this earliest form of the competition are featured within the exhibition. On loan from a private collector is the only known example of a small statuette of the shapely young Beryl as she poses in a swimsuit draped with her 'Miss Australia' sash.

Material belonging to Miss Australia 1927, Phyllis Von Alwyn from Tasmania, is another highlight of this segment of the exhibition. Phyllis's family have generously loaned a number of objects including her stunning ostrich feather cape, her tiara and the 'keys to the city' of Atlantic City, New Jersey, given to her when she visited as a special guest during the judging for Miss America. Phyllis noted in her diary that during this competition:

Joan Stanbury, Miss Australia 1959, with Miss Ceylon at the International Beauty Congress, August 1960. Courtesy Joan Stanbury





Tania Verstak in Australian national costume, International Beauty Congress, 1962. Courtesy Tania (Verstak) Young

Girls are judged only on face and figure which is quite different from the judging in Australia where intelligence, sport, intellect, personality and social standing are considered.

Phyllis Von Alwyn, diary extract, 9 September 1927

Occurring only once in during the 1930s, Miss Australia re-emerged in 1945-46 as a joint venture between the Sydney *Sun* newspaper and the War Veterans' Appeal. The introduction of the element of philanthropy was a key moment in the development of the competition. Yearly contests were staged throughout the late '40s to 1950, when internal issues brought national competition to a halt. In 1953, Bernard Dowd (manufacturer of Hickory lingerie in Australia) took over the running of the competition and under his management the 'search for Miss Australia' gained new momentum. In 1954 the energy and vision of the Dowd family were matched with the fundraising efforts of the Australian Cerebral Palsy Association (ACPA). From this point on, the history of the quest would be inextricably tied to the ACPA. Miss Australia winners became high profile ambassadors for Australian products and culture at home and abroad, while also providing a public face for cerebral palsy associations in their quest to raise money and awareness for their cause.

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s the Miss Australia Quest enjoyed a golden era of nationwide publicity and popularity. 'Miss Australia' titleholders were crowned in glamorous televised ceremonies becoming overnight celebrities, raising significant funds for charity and winning substantial prizes including cash, travel and fashion. Winners promoted the products of Quest sponsors as well as Australian products overseas including wool, food and wine.

No Miss Australia was more adored than Tania Verstak. When Tania was announced as Miss Australia 1961, it brought issues of immigration and assimilation to the fore. Born in China to Russian

parents, Tania was the first naturalised Australian to win the title. Tania was aware of the significance of her victory and in one of her first interviews as Miss Australia touchingly confided:

I was crying inside, crying for the countless New Australians who were feeling, like me, that NOW we really belonged. We were accepted. Now we were Australians.

Tania Verstak, 1961

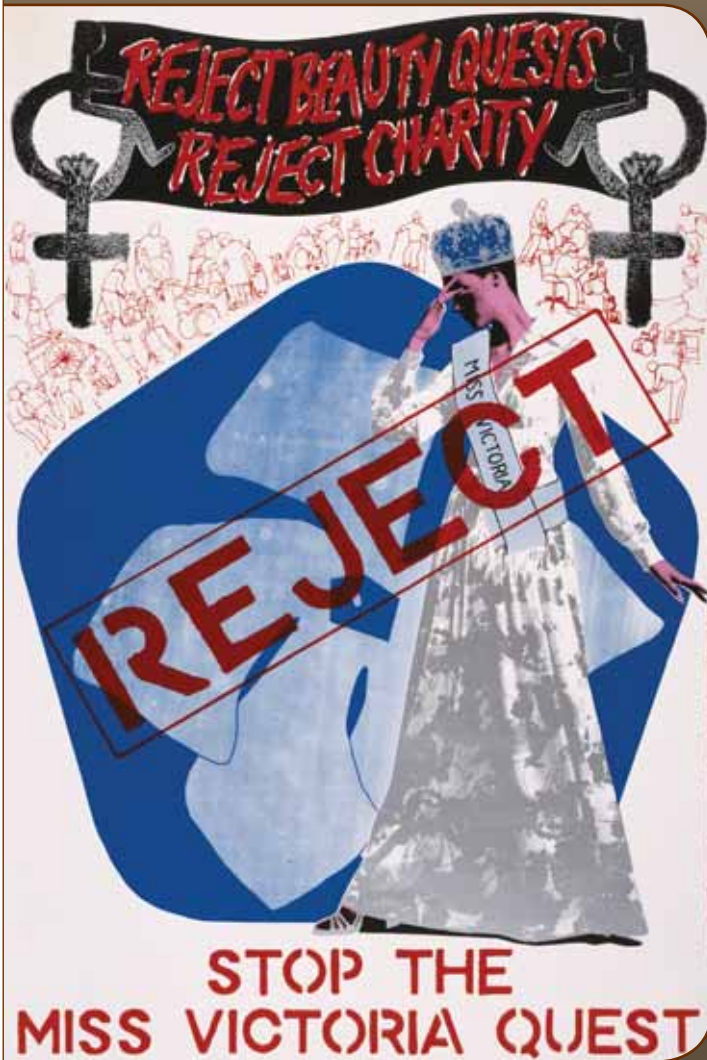
From the 1950s until 1967 Miss Australia winners were sent overseas to compete at the Miss International contest. Tania's popularity only increased when she went on to secure the title of Miss International, the only Miss Australia to do so. When Tania arrived home from her win, a crowd of more than 200,000 lined the streets as she drove to a civic reception at the Sydney Town Hall.

Entrants in the Miss International competition were judged in a number of preliminary contests including one for a 'National Costume'. A photograph within the exhibition shows Miss Australia 1959, Joan Stanbury, wearing the national costume she wore for judging in 1960. While other nations outfitted their representatives in beautiful gowns and feminine outfits, Joan's costume consisted of an English riding outfit with jodhpurs, riding hat and whip!

Beryl Mills, Miss Australia 1926

Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales, FA 920.7/M p. 17





Stop the Miss Victoria Quest, 1984, poster produced by Tanya McIntyre, probably while working as artist-in-residence at Redletter Press, Brunswick, Melbourne. Copyright La Trobe Picture Collection, State Library of Victoria

Tania Verstak (Young) has generously donated her 'national costume' to the National Museum. Tania's costume is alongside that worn a few years later by Jan Taylor, Miss Australia 1964 – another wonderful donation to the National Historical Collection. By 1961 ideas regarding national identity had evolved, and Tania Verstak's costume is a gold poplin cocktail dress complete with appliqué design created by Sydney designer Mona Crawford of wildflowers representing each of the state floral emblems. Interestingly the dress also incorporates a boomerang shape behind the floral elements of the design. The same theme is present in Jan Taylor's national costume. Jan wore a simple linen dress designed by Beril Jents, a leading Sydney haute couture designer of the '40s, '50s and '60s, featuring embroidered floral emblems. The new stylistic approach evident in the dresses worn by Tania and Jan highlights the evolution of ideas concerning national identity, and provides a fascinating contrast with Joan Stanbury's costume from just a few years earlier.

While the quest remained a popular event in the early 1970s, there were increasing concerns within the Australian Cerebral Palsy Association regarding running costs and the dispersal of funds. Protesters also argued that the quest was no longer an appropriate activity for women, and that it had outlived its usefulness as a fundraiser for the disabled. In 1977 Beatrice Faust commented that:

We are told that Miss Australias are not meant to be mannequins or sexpots. They are chosen for their personality and intelligence. This year's interviews were designed to smother any personality or intelligence the girls might have. Beauty contests are the opiate of the misses.

Beatrice Faust, 1977

The exhibition covers the fraught final decades of the Miss Australia competition as organisers struggled to adapt it to suit a new era. In 1998 the decision was taken by organisers to end the competition in 2000.

Although the quest has ended, the trappings of Miss Australia remain and form the core of the exhibition. The crowns, tiaras, sashes, sceptres and robes are tangible reminders of a competition that was a part of Australian life throughout the twentieth century. These manifestations of an ideal of Australian womanhood were popular and powerful national symbols which make for a glamorous, glittering and fascinating exhibition here at the National Museum of Australia.

Miss Australia: A Nation's Quest is on show at the Museum of Brisbane until 4 February 2007; the National Museum of Australia in Canberra from 8 March to 12 June 2007. Entry is free.

Sophie Jensen, Curator

Friends exhibition preview, Wednesday 7 March. See calendar page 29 for details.

Miss Australia Quest 1955 poster. The Spastic Centre



MISS AUSTRALIA QUEST, 1955

In aid of Spastic Children

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