

3 March 2003

attn:
Review Secretariat
Department of Communication, Information, Technology and Arts
GPO Box 2154
Canberra
ACT 2601

Dear

Re: NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AUSTRALIA- REVIEW OF EXHIBITIONS AND PUBLIC PROGRAMS

Museums Australia is the peak professional body representing Commonwealth, state and regional museums and art galleries throughout the country. Its membership of 9000 includes major institutions as well as individual professionals and volunteers with recognised experience and expertise in the museum sector.

Museums Australia welcomes this opportunity to address a submission to the *National Museum of Australia- Review of Exhibitions and Public Programs*.

The position of the National Museum must be seen within the wider context in which museums are currently operating. This is a context of challenge and change.

Museums world- wide have been proactive in addressing criticisms that they have traditionally catered to a privileged, affluent and narrow sector of a nation's populations. In response, policies of *social inclusion* have become the mandate for museums as we enter the 21st century (see the published papers of the Museums and Social Inclusion Conference 2000, Leicester, UK: *Museums. Society, Inequality*, ed. Richard Sandell, Routledge 2002, London).

Fundamental to the realisation of social inclusion in museums is the presentation of stories highlighting the diversity of a nation's population, a nation's history from the multiple viewpoints of its citizens and the celebration of people from all walks of life, all stations, all creeds.

It is the opinion of Museums Australia that the National Museum of Australia has been at the forefront, ensuring that social inclusion is a fundamental principle underpinning its exhibitions. Moreover, it has done this supported by good scholarship and rigorous research.

With social inclusion come differing interpretations of the past. It takes intellectual courage to address the controversy which can be part of uncovering conflicting views of our shared history. The National Museum has demonstrated leadership in facing up to these different views and allowing a view of Australian nationhood which is complex, multi-faceted and rich with meaning to be presented.

From the indigenous galleries that have been established in consultation with indigenous organisations and communities to *Eternity*, that researched the stories of the many ordinary people through extraordinary moments in their lives, the National Museum has created a series of Australian narratives which resonate with all sectors of society. In part this is because of the Museum's willingness to tackle the vernacular with intellectual courage and broad mindedness.

The National Museum has taken an innovative approach with regard to public programs. It has organised and convened regular seminars, symposia, and conferences on emergent issues of significance to the museum sector. Through these forums, it has had forged a role in leading scholarship, generating discussion and enhancing the professionalism of the industry.

Importantly, for a museum with a national mandate, the National Museum has addressed the important issue of outreach in a range of innovative ways. Its program of touring exhibitions, its participation on industry bodies, its support for regional volunteers and indigenous people to attend conferences are all strategies that are well regarded within the industry. The National Museum is one of several major museums that supports the work of Museums Australia through a major sponsorship program.

Museums find themselves faced with competing demands to reach broader publics, preserve growing collections to appropriate standards, make collections increasingly accessible in diverse ways, provide a rapidly changing program of exhibitions, ensure a total 'experience' through the provision of related commercial and customer services, and, be competitive.

I think that is appropriate to question how feasible this is within the limited resources currently apportioned to museums. The National Museum has achieved an astonishing amount since its opening in 2001; it has done so on a limited budget. The challenge for this Review is to determine a realistic and commonly agreed set of goals and strategies for the National Museum backed by adequate resource planning that will not only meet current demands but enable the National Museum to realize its full potential in the future.

We look forward to discussing the points within this letter further on the 26th March.

Yours sincerely,

Carol Scott
President
Museums Australia

