

Landmarks: People and Places across Australia, a gallery bringing together over 1500 objects, explores the history of Australia since European settlement.

OBJECT BIOGRAPHY

Phar Lap's Heart

Foaled in New Zealand in 1926, the great chestnut Phar Lap was one of the most successful racehorses of the 1920s and 30s, and has since become a national icon.

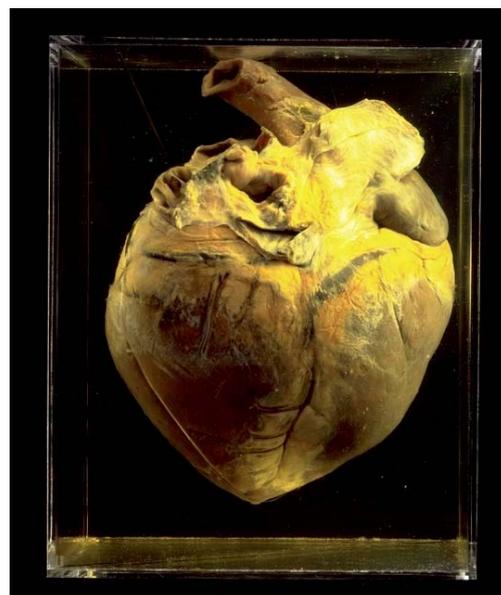
His mounted and preserved heart, weighing an astonishing 6.35 kilograms, is one of the most popular exhibits at the National Museum of Australia. It is featured in Landmarks: People and Places across Australia, a gallery bringing together over 1500 objects, exploring the history of Australia since European settlement.

Landmarks takes a place-based approach to exploring national history, and the heart will feature in an exhibit about Flemington racecourse. Every year, on the first Tuesday in November, Flemington becomes a site of national communion as the nation pauses for the running of the Melbourne Cup.

The exhibit examines how different technologies have allowed Australians to connect with a place that many have never visited in person, but which captures the national imagination nonetheless.

In this way, Flemington racecourse holds some parallels to the story of Phar Lap – while not everyone has seen the mounted hide in Melbourne, the skeleton in Wellington, or indeed the heart in Canberra, most Australians know the story of Phar Lap.

He was purchased sight unseen as a yearling by American businessman David J Davis, on the recommendation of down-on-his-luck Sydney trainer Harry Telford. When the rangy,



Phar Lap's heart, mounted and preserved in the Landmarks gallery, weighing an astonishing 6.35 kilograms. Photo: George Serras, National Museum of Australia.

ungainly horse arrived, Davis refused to pay for his training, so Telford decided to lease the horse and train him himself.

Between 1928 and 1932, Phar Lap won 37 of his 51 races, including 14 in a row. He won the 1930 Melbourne Cup carrying nine stone 12 pounds (62.6 kilograms) by several lengths. The next year his handicap was set at an impossible 10 stone 10 pounds (68 kilograms), and he ran eighth.

Phar Lap is the only horse in Australian racing history to have been favourite for the Melbourne Cup three years running. His remarkable success and rise from humble beginnings made him popular with Australians enduring the Great Depression. In 1932, Phar Lap travelled to America, where he won the prestigious Agua Caliente Handicap. Sixteen days later, he died suddenly at a ranch in California.

The post-mortem declared, "that the death of the racehorse Phar Lap was caused by a colicky condition manifesting itself in the form of an acute inflammation of the stomach and intestines. ... The factors responsible for the acute inflammation have not been determined and probably will never be determined".

In 2008 staff of the Australian Synchrotron Research Program and Museum Victoria conclusively proved that Phar Lap died from arsenic poisoning, and that the fatal dose was administered some 30 - 40 hours before his death. How it came to be administered, however, might remain forever unknown. That Phar Lap's death has been, and probably will continue to be, touched with mystery has undoubtedly contributed to his popularity.

Almost immediately, requests were made to his owners for parts of the 'wonder-horse'. His 14-pound (6.35 kilogram) heart was removed within hours of death, and mounted in preserving fluid by the stable vet Bill Nielsen. It was sent to the University of Sydney, where it had been requested for examination by Dr Stewart McKay and Professor Welsh. It was at that time that the now-missing segment was cut out, to demonstrate the thickness of the heart walls.

At McKay's suggestion, Harry Telford then donated the heart to the Australian Institute of Anatomy (AIA), where it was a popular display in the Museum of Applied Anatomy, shown next to a horse's heart of 'normal' size (around 4 kilograms). When the AIA closed, the heart became part of the National Museum of Australia's collection, where it has continued to enthral a new generation of visitors.

Parallels can also be drawn between Phar Lap and the Melbourne Cup; both have transcended the sport of horse-racing in their popularity, and both have become symbols of national identity.

The Melbourne Cup was first run in 1861 under the auspices of the Victoria Turf Club, which in 1864 merged with the Victoria Jockey Club, forming the Victoria Racing Club (VRC).

The race has been consistently popular throughout its 150 year history - in 1880, it attracted an estimated 100,000 punters, when the population of Melbourne had not yet reached 300,000. Initially run on a Thursday, it has been run on the first Tuesday in November since 1875, with the exception of the World War II years, when it was held on Saturdays.

The forthcoming Landmarks gallery showcases some other key objects associated with the Melbourne Cup, including the 1934 trophy won by racehorse Peter Pan, one of only 5 horses who have won multiple Cups (1932, 1934). Besides the wealth of objects, the exhibit offers visitors the chance to learn more about the history of the Cup through a multimedia interactive, including an exclusive interview with race caller Greg Miles, 'the voice of the Melbourne Cup'.

Curator's notes:

I was one of the many National Museum visitors who had asked to see Phar Lap's heart. It happened on a trip to the nation's capital shortly after the Museum opened – little did I dream then that one day I would be the curator responsible for this iconic object!

Being responsible for interpreting an object that occupies such a prominent place in the national imagination has been both an honour and a challenge. How to bring something new to an iconic object that generations of Australians have loved and visited?

One of the contributions I am most proud of in my time working on Landmarks is the idea of incorporating something to compare the heart to. Everyone knows that Phar Lap's heart is 50% bigger than a normal horse heart, but this does not mean much to most of us in real terms – how many people have seen a 'normal' horse heart anyway?

Initially it was suggested that we display a real horse heart. The Museum actually holds the heart that was displayed alongside Phar Lap's heart at the Australian Institute of Anatomy. However, due to the fragile and unique nature of Phar Lap's heart, we need to keep it separate from other objects, and there was no way of incorporating a second heart, preserved separately, into the display. Instead, we have got the neat solution of a sliding panel, so you can superimpose the outline of a regular horse heart or a human heart over Phar Lap's heart, and directly compare them.

Hopefully this will give a new generation of visitors the awe-inspiring realisation of what a truly phenomenal horse Phar Lap was, from his heart to his hooves.

Object biography and curator's notes prepared by Isa Menzies, Curator, National Museum of Australia.

Landmarks: People and Places across Australia is the National Museum's newest and most ambitious gallery to date, bringing together over 1500 objects to create a history of Australia since European settlement.

For more information about the exhibition visit
<http://www.nma.gov.au/exhibitions/landmarks>