

**NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AUSTRALIA
REVIEW OF EXHIBITIONS AND PUBLIC PROGRAMS**

SUBMISSION

by the

**AUSTRALIAN INSTITUTE OF ABORIGINAL AND
TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER STUDIES**

Terms of Reference

1. Examine the aims and content of the Museum's exhibitions, both permanent and temporary, and schools and public programs.
 - i) whether the Museum has complied with its role and functions as set out in the National Museum of Australia Act 1980, its Charter and other relevant documents.

The principal content directions of the National Museum of Australia were established in the Pigott Report and Prof. John Mulvaney's attachment to that report on the Gallery of Aboriginal Australia. In essence these documents draw together three main themes to be explored in the future Museum. These comprise the environmental history of the continent, the extensive period of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander occupation, and the intertwined history of the country since 1788. The legislation of the Museum enshrines these themes. It would appear from the current exhibitions that these themes have remained as core organising principals of the NMA exhibits. It is understood that the continuing worth of these themes was discussed during the new Museum development and their utility was recognised on many occasions. It is not proposed to re-examine this framework here so much as review the consequences of this thematic interest for the current structuring of the Museum.

In essence this structuring framework has allowed the Museum to break from more traditional conceptions relating to the presentation of "the story of Australia" as if there were some agreed single story line that encompasses geological time, Aboriginal settlement, and subsequent European settlement and development of the country. Rather, the exhibitions are produced through a consideration of the interactions between the three primary themes. For any particular storyline it is intrinsically interesting to consider the inter-relations between environment, Aboriginal adaptations, and broader intersections with new cultural templates for land use. Beyond this core analysis the conflicts, continuities, and adaptations between different cultural viewpoints on this country provide a rich body of material by which the Museum can produce new readings of the story of the country.

This organising principal for the Museum also produces a much more "democratic" view of the history of the country. It is not a story focussed around great leaders so much as an exploration of the multitude of different ways in which the country is perceived. This is also a very appropriate audience technique that allows the Museum to speak to a broad community.

From the AIATSIS perspective it is entirely appropriate that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and histories find major expression within the Museum. As a feature of the Pigott Report, John Mulvaney and his Committee successfully documented the magnitude and grandeur of the achievement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in this country as one of the world's great cultural achievements. The need to incorporate this story in the Museum was specifically acknowledged by the creation of the Gallery of Aboriginal Australia in the Museum Act.

Clearly it is important to have a major exposition of these cultures in the nation's capital. The Museum has contributed to putting Canberra on the international visitor map and the interest among international visitors and Australian visitors in Indigenous stories is well documented in visitor studies. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history of this country is still only partially understood and it is essential for all Australians that the Museum develop exhibitions into the future that reveal what understanding we are able to glean. Canberra is also at the heart of diplomatic activity with other countries and the Museum plays an important educative role with high level representatives from other countries.

Importantly also the Act specifies that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples will be able to tell their stories in their own words. In this respect the Act recognises an important principle of self-determination for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people that they must be vitally involved in any public programs of the Museum. It is broadly recognised that non-Indigenous researchers have only just scraped the surface of understanding about the complexities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and histories.

Indeed the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies was created in order to bring together a multitude of disciplines in the consideration of this complexity. Orthodox histories of the country have not yet come to grips with the riches that ethnography, oral history, language research and research of Indigenous religion and arts can bring to an understanding of the cultural life of the nation as a whole.

AIATSIS would welcome the opportunity to work in close collaboration with the Museum in its future programs as resources allow. This relationship could be formalised through the development of a Memorandum of Understanding between the two organisations.

While it is recognised that the Museum has worked hard to maintain Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staffing and worked closely with communities to obtain Indigenous perspectives on content, Indigenous people are still under-represented on the Board and in respect to formal advisory committees of the new Museum.

- ii) whether the Government's vision in approving funding for the development of the Museum has been realised.

It is understood that the current exhibits in the National Museum of Australia are popular with the general public and in our view the public programs are an exciting mix of diverse content, innovative use of a range of formats, and interactivity. In particular the Museum has a democratic quality. With so many individual stories captured through the exhibits there are many places where visitors may find materials that speak to their own experience.

The current programs emphasise a refreshing questioning of Australian history. In this respect the museum is establishing itself as a location for dialogue. It is a place where academics may meet to resolve important questions, or the general public may become involved in considerations of how their life stories meld into the wider whole.

This move is to be congratulated and AIATSIS notes that the current staff, particularly the Director, Dawn Casey, have been active in involving other organisations in these events. AIATSIS shares an interest in promoting dialogue around topics in Indigenous studies and values the opportunities that the Museum provides in reaching out to major audience numbers.

At present there are particularly good working relationships between the Museum, AIATSIS, and the Australian National University in relation to a number of projects including scholarly publications, conferences, public forums and debates, and a major exhibition that was successfully received in China. We are happy to continue working on such projects into the future. While AIATSIS is primarily directed to analysis of research questions, we recognise that exhibitions are not a “book on the wall”. We have very limited capacity to develop public programs ourselves and note that public programs require specialists to work through academic material to make it more broadly accessible. For our organisation, a relationship with the Museum will have an ongoing critical role in bringing the products of new research to a general public. It is possible that productive relationships in the area of web publication of materials may enhance our respective public education potential.

An important joint project is the publication *People of the Rivermouth* with the Museum. The book documents the ongoing relationship between the Anbarra people of north-central Arnhem Land and researchers based at AIATSIS and the NMA. In many respects this book is the result of the maintenance of relationships with a community over more than forty years and a recognition by the community that our respective organisations are appropriate venues for trying to explain their culture to a broader audience. AIATSIS considers that this is exactly the sort of relationship with communities that the Museum should be encouraging across the continent.

These sorts of relationships are very difficult to achieve and maintain and the Museum is to be congratulated for developing a dedicated Indigenous staff who are committed to fostering these links. It is appropriate that the Museum maintain representative numbers of professionally trained Indigenous staff both to work with communities in this way and to initiate scholarly projects with other partners.

2. Consider and make recommendations on the future priorities to be addressed by the Museum, including relevance of its Act, in the development of permanent and temporary exhibitions and schools and public programs.

AIATSIS considers that the Museum has established some very important principals that we believe should be maintained into the future. The understanding of contact history in this country is in its infancy and in this respect dialogue about the issues involved needs to be encouraged. The Museum can potentially take a key role in initiating discussions around important questions of contemporary interest. This does not mean that history will be neglected, rather, contemporary circumstance must be shown to have developed from actions in the past. Such examinations will contribute to making the organisation a relevant and lively place. AIATSIS, and many other organisations, would be happy to contribute to this exercise.

This stance will most likely result in continual change in the Museum's exhibits. Obviously an accommodation will need to be reached between the need to incorporate new knowledge and the funds available to make changes but this can be construed as an investment in ensuring the continuing relevance of the Museum. It is noted that the use of multimedia throughout the organisation and the mix of temporary exhibition spaces combined with more permanent spaces allow for such flexibility.

While the Museum is committed to revealing the diversity of Australia's cultural life, it is also true that questions of space mean that some groups will be able to achieve representation within the Museum and others will not. In the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander case there are major cultural differences across the nation. Analysis of the offerings of the Gallery of First Australians reveals that it comprises a mixture of introductory elements, detailed case studies, and exhibits that are more themed. This is a useful balance and important in terms of public education. However, over time it would be expected that the case study material would be rotated so that the concerns of different communities can be highlighted.

The case study approach is preferable to attempts at assimilating Indigenous materials into more abstract storylines. It is clear that when dealing with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples they wish to see the cultural coherence of their intellectual property respected. This does not negate the opportunity to develop discussions around particular issues, rather storylines need to be built together through a series of case study elements. For example the impacts of the Mabo High Court case could be explicated first in relation to Murray Island, secondly in relation to other islands of the Torres Strait, and be developed in respect to case studies in other states where the impacts of the legislation vary.

In developing case studies the GFA should be mindful of questions of balance between urban and remote communities and explications of issues that may not be well supported by cultural artefacts. In this sense the GFA should maintain an active collection policy in order to support its ability to represent particular issues into the future.

Into the future AIATSIS would welcome a strong commitment by the Museum in the incorporation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices in its public programs. This was the applaudable intention of the Museum Act. The issues that are addressed by the Museum will be required to be identified by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. As a result of this process, some difficult issues will be raised. For example the issue of the Stolen Generations is a central concern for many Indigenous people. AIATSIS has made a major commitment to this topic through its family history program in recognition of the increasing need for individuals to use public records to trace their family histories. However, it is acknowledged that the issue is emotive for a general public. But rather than avoiding such topics the Museum should engage with them, review the different points of view, encourage both academic and community debate and gather the materials that support a detailed exposition.

Perhaps what is most debilitating about analysis of some topics are the levels of misinformation. The National Museum of Australia has a role in developing well informed and even-handed expositions of such topics.

In order to perform this function the Museum needs to maintain skilled staff who can craft exhibitions in a sensitive manner. They must have the skill to identify key storylines and be equal partners with other partners in the intellectual development of the exhibit. Similarly there must be collection expertise which allows the Museum to draw together materials that support exhibits. In many cases negative public reaction may be turned to something more positive through the careful development of argument and storyline and avoidance of emotive terms. Some Aboriginal people may have very strong things to say about particular issues but these may be properly contextualised, the authors acknowledged, and alternative views revealed.

While not proposing an exhaustive list, topics that might receive more attention in the Museum are the White Australia policy and a broader explication of the historical roots of racism, the participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in key Australian industries such as the pastoral industry, and the 1967 Referendum. For the future there are an extensive number of other industries such as pearling, forestry, mining, fishing and tourism where Indigenous involvement has not yet been adequately researched. The early Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander involvements in exploration by Europeans, even early prospecting for minerals are stories that have yet to be told. Present issues such as new land management practices, the native title process, and interesting issues concerning the Museum's program of repatriation are all worthy of being developed. We are happy to workshop further research issues at any time.