

Submission to the National Museum of Australia Review of Exhibitions and Public Programs

Although the National Museum of Australia is still very young it is destined to become one of the great museums of the world. This is because of its emphasis on state-of-the art technology, sound research scholarship and innovative exhibition design. Of course, the unique, eye-catching nature of its building and grounds also makes it a stand-out institution. In its current form, the National Museum of Australia has only been open to the public for a few years but already it has generated much debate about Australia's people, land, environment and history. At the Australian Museum (Sydney) we see this as particularly healthy and believe that museums everywhere should generate and, at times, lead debate. This is especially true about the past, for coming to terms with the past allows us to make more informed decisions in the present, resulting in a more considered future.

We applaud the National Museum of Australia for taking stands and for resisting bland, sanitised history and science. We also applaud the multi-vocal nature of the National Museum, its multi-level presentation of the past and its diverse coverage and recognition of Australian achievement. Unlike some other museums, the National Museum recognises all members of society, past and present, by allowing them to participate in the presentation of Australian life to the public at the individual level and by not focusing on central views about how history and contemporary society should be portrayed. Indeed, it is refreshing to see so much space devoted to everyday people, indigenous Australians, immigrants and women, rather than the usual cast of primarily white male politicians, explorers, sporting heroes, money-makers, pop stars and the like. The National Museum of Australia is not a museum for or about the Australian elite, it is a place where all Australians can reflect on a collective past. It also is a venue where individuals can place themselves within the larger Australian natural and cultural environments, based on their personal experience and identification with some of the people and places portrayed in exhibits. It is a place for everyone, including tourists who can learn about who we are and what it is like to be Australian. It would be a great tragedy if this were to change.

One of the areas that has generated much controversy is the space devoted to Indigenous Australians. Some people have said there is too much space, others question the content or the accuracy of scholarship. Given that Australia has at least 45,000 – 60,000 years of Aboriginal history we do not see the balance as unreasonable. Furthermore, from the outset, it was agreed that Indigenous Australia would be one of the first to be profiled in a major way so as to better inform visitors about past and present Indigenous issues so often debated in press and parliament. The National Museum has achieved a great deal in this regard and should be applauded for its bold, refreshing, highly educational, scholarly and collaborative approach. Indeed, the policy of using Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander curators shows through in the Indigenous galleries in terms of focus and themes. It also is important to note that the National Museum of Australia has the only permanent space devoted to Torres Strait Islander culture and that this gallery is distinctly different from the Aboriginal gallery.

The Australian Museum was one of the first to pioneer a social perspective approach to presenting Australia's Indigenous peoples and we are heartened that the National

Museum took up and built upon this lead. When we were developing our *Indigenous Australians: Australia's First Peoples* Gallery (which opened April 1997) we were instructed by the Museum's then director, Des Griffin, not to avoid the hard and/or controversial issues. Thus we have sections on social justice, spirituality, family life, dispossession, discrimination, massacres (yes, massacres), alcohol and drugs, missionary influence, deaths in custody and land rights, as well as aspects of Aboriginal history, society and creativity more usually expected of a museum. The National Museum has taken a similar but actually less confronting approach. However, unlike the Australian Museum, it has been unfairly criticised by certain right-wing elements for doing so.

Of course, all museums, and especially national museums, should also be willing and able to respond to both constructive criticism and change. Indeed, museums are all about change, documenting changing pasts/presents everywhere. They should never be static, despite some past and present perceptions of this. Recently, museums, worldwide, have also recognised the importance of changing technologies, changing exhibition techniques and new forms of relationship with the peoples whose collections they hold. The National Museum should not be afraid to embrace such change as well as to shift its broader focus. For instance, after such a good start with a focus on Indigenous Australians, it may now be opportune for the Museum to beef up its exhibits and education programs on Australia's land and environment, as well as other aspects of history and contemporary society. This is not to say the Indigenous section should in any way be downgraded but rather that the time is now ripe to focus on other issues in a big way as well. For instance, new collaborative research and exhibition projects could be developed that link together aspects of natural history, Indigenous knowledge and the future of the Australian environment. Furthermore, curatorial support from external scientists and members of certain communities (eg. the Chinese, Greek and Muslim communities for new exhibits on migration and settlement) would both add new perspectives and allow the Museum to expand its reach. If space is a problem, more resources could be devoted to temporary exhibitions. The upcoming 'Desert' exhibition and recent conference (23° South: Archaeology and Environmental History of Southern Deserts) is just the sort of model to follow and expand upon.

In conclusion, the National Museum of Australia should be congratulated for achieving so much in such a short span of time. The quality of the exhibitions and public programs is of the highest standard, including research scholarship, exhibition design and use of multi-media technology. In regard to the latter, 'Circa', is particularly fantastic, as are many of the sections with state-of-the-art technology accessible by children. The National Museum of Australia can and should shift balance and focus as times change but it should never abandon the great things it has done already. If anything, the exhibition program should be broadened so that the Museum can more fully inform the world of the great diversity and uniqueness that can be found right across Australia's natural environment, society and people.

(Dr.) Paul S.C. Taçon
Principal Research Scientist in Anthropology and
Head of the People and Place Research Centre, Australian Museum
(On behalf of and with contributions from the Australian Museum's Branch of
Anthropology)