

INTERPRETATION AUSTRALIA ASSOCIATION

SUBMISSION TO THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AUSTRALIA: REVIEW OF EXHIBITIONS AND PUBLIC PROGRAMS

Introduction:

Interpretation Australia Association

The Interpretation Australia Association (IAA) is a national membership-based organisation dedicated to the advancement of the profession of heritage interpretation. Formed in 1992, the Association currently serves more than 400 members in Australia, New Zealand and other countries. Each state and territory has a Chapter comprised of members who live in the respective state. The Chapters organise activities during the year such as field days, guest speakers and social activities. The Association organises national conferences and training workshops which are held on alternate years in a different State.

Members of the IAA work in the public and private sector, for Commonwealth and State Government agencies such as museums, Environment and Heritage agencies, Park and Wildlife Services universities, local government, and as consultants. The work they undertake includes developing and providing interpretation programs such as guided walks and talks, museum exhibitions and public programs, undertaking research, and providing professional support for members of the association and students. Members work in interpretation development, visitor research, writing, graphic design, multi-media and drama. They develop and produce interpretive plans, interpretive media, education and public programs.

Who are interpreters?

Interpreters rank with the historians, geographers, biologists, physical scientists, writers, artists and curators in comprehending the human condition.

Interpreters work in Australia's most important places. They deal in stories, ideas and experiences. They explain, guide, reveal, arrange, question, share and provoke. They are central to the national conversation about meaning and significance.

Above all interpreters engage with people. They know their visitors' needs and interests. They must know how to create communication links between people and place, past and present, people and people. They know the important questions visitors want answered.

Interpretation Australia Association and the NMA review:

The IAA has followed the announcement of the review and public discussion about the Museum with a close professional interest. Members of The IAA were involved in developing the exhibitions and public programs in the Museum in many ways, from undertaking research to writing text, designing and installing exhibitions, and evaluating the exhibitions and public programs and visitor response to the exhibits. Members are also engaged in ongoing

employment in various positions for the Museum, both as consultants and ongoing employees. Many members have visited the Museum from interstate and there has been much discussion by members across Australia about the exhibitions and public programs, and the response of visitors to these exhibitions and public programs.

Due to the limited time available to prepare this submission it is prepared in two parts. Part 1 addresses the key terms of reference. Part 2 focuses specifically on the *First Australians: Gallery of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples*. Part 2 assesses the effectiveness of the interpretation in this Gallery against the six principles developed by Freeman Tilden¹.

Part 1: General comments on the Terms of Reference

1. Examine the aim and content of the Museums exhibitions, both permanent and temporary, and schools and public programs, including

(i) whether the Museum has complied with its role and function as set out in the *National Museum of Australia Act 1980*, its Charter and other documents

As a preliminary comment it would have been extremely useful for the Terms of Reference to have specified what '... *other documents*' this point was referring to, and to ensure that copies of these documents were easily accessible or at least on the DCITA website with the Terms of Reference. Without knowing what other documents are it is difficult to comprehensively address this Term of Reference.

The functions of the Museum in the Act of particular interest to The IAA are those referring to the exhibition of material, engagement in research and disseminating information about Australian history. In the interpretation profession these are all components of 'heritage interpretation'.

Tilden defined **heritage interpretation** as

An educational activity which aims to reveal meanings and relationships through the use of original objects, by firsthand experience, and by illustrative media, rather than simply to communicate factual information.²

The Interpretation Australia Association defines **heritage interpretation** as

a means of communicating ideas and feelings which help people understand more about themselves and their environment.

¹ Freeman Tilden, *Interpreting our heritage*, 3rd Ed. UNC Press, Chapel Hill, 1977, Howard Gardiner, Freeman Tilden is acknowledged as the first person to have considered and presented the role of modern concepts of effective communication in the broader concept of heritage education.

² Ibid

There are many different ways of communicating these ideas, including guided tours, talks, drama, exhibitions and public programs, signs, brochures and electronic media. Interpretation is the key to understanding ourselves and who we are. In the case of a national perspective, as required at the NMA, effective interpretation requires and challenges us to work out what Australia means, as a continent and as a nation. Interpretation makes sense of life, of systems and structures.

Interpretation Australia believes that the aim and context of the Museums exhibitions should be considered and reviewed with these definitions in mind. These definitions provide the basis of what contemporary Museums should aim to do. Museums aim to provide the opportunity for visitors to discover not just facts, but the meanings and stories behind the facts. These meanings and stories are explained through a range of experiences that encourage them to use most if not all their senses to consider and understand the topics on display. This is demonstrated in the range of interpretive techniques used in contemporary Australian museums including the Museum of Sydney, Hyde Park Barracks and the Australian War Memorial.

Museums in 21st century Australia are not just about providing an opportunity for visitors to view objects and read labels but are about providing a range of exhibitions and experiences through a variety of media to educate and challenge visitors, particularly if the Museums deal with sensitive or controversial topics.

From the perspective of Interpretation Australia, the Museum has fulfilled its Charter by developing a broad range of programs for the many different audiences who visit Canberra. The Museum does fulfil all the functions of the Act as defined in Section 6 (1).

The Museum is to be commended particularly for the diversity of the public programs developed for visitors. Activities that have been commented on by members include the public seminars, publications, regular children's story telling, and the recent Playschool display. The involvement of the Museum in the children's activities at Floriade has also been noted. Permanent exhibitions including K-space and the Garden of Australian Dreams have been popular with members' children.

The involvement of the Museum in the workshops and forums of the University of the Third Age is an innovative program that not only provides the older members of the Canberra community an opportunity to learn more about the Museums exhibits and exhibitions and public programs, but provides the Museum with the opportunity for these visitors to contribute to the Museums information about Australia's social history.

From a practical point of view it is inevitable that these programs be Canberra focussed, but the development of the Museum's website has extended the accessibility of the programs and material availability. Increased funding to enable the Museum to develop more outreach activities to make the materials resources and programs available interstate, through both schools programs,

touring exhibitions and interactive and animated website programs would enable the Museum to extend the availability of its programs even further.

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

A useful starting point to comment on this Term of Reference is the media release by Senator the Hon Rod Kemp Minister for the Arts and Sport on 14 May 2002 where he notes that after a comprehensive review of the operations of the Museum the Government increased its funding by \$37.2 million for the following four years to help the museum to attract a record number of visitors as it did in its first year of operation.

Senator Kemp in this press release reinforced the importance of a vital arts and community sector.

The budget statement overview for 2002-3 presumably states the Government's vision for the Museum when it states that the Museum

*... aims to be a centre of excellence in communicating knowledge and understanding of Australia's history through exhibitions and the effective use of communication technologies.*³

This vision is further defined in the outcomes of the NMA in the budget statement:

Outcome 1: Australians have access to the National Museum's collections and public programs to encourage awareness of Australia's history and culture.

The performance information included in this budget statement indicates that a high percentage of targets are being achieved⁴

Key figures in this table to consider against this Term of reference are the **75%** of visitors who indicated that the Museums exhibitions and programs contributed to a new or different awareness of Australian history, and **70%** of visitors were satisfied or better with the quality of the Museum's exhibitions or programs.

Such a high level of satisfaction from the visitors would indicate that the visions of the Government are being realised.

A key issue to be considered in whether the Government's vision for funding for the development of the Museum is being realised is the cost of the interpretation. This should be assessed against both the numbers of visitors

³ p. 365

⁴ p. 373

to the museum and the satisfaction of the visitors with the Museums programs. The costs of interpretation include both the setting up and ongoing maintenance costs of the exhibitions, and the costs involved in the more interactive public programs including children's storytelling, guided tours and public performances.

Members of Interpretation Australia are particularly aware of the cost of installing museum exhibitions. Interactive exhibitions may be more time and dollar consuming in their creation than many visitors realise. There are several stages in developing exhibitions. These include:

- researching the information to be presented, which will often required tracing original source material and discussions with specialists;
- consideration of the interpretive methods to present this information; more often than not this is dependent not only on the budget available for particular items but the overall budget;
- design of the interpretation, which may include using specialists such as graphic designers or audiovisual or other consultants, depending on the display to be developed;
- seeking permission if copyright images or personal communications are used;
- installation of the design/exhibition;
- ongoing maintenance, for which a budget is required both for staff time and capital cost for any maintenance and updates required.

With such a major undertaking as the NMA it is obvious there is not going to be staff time or capital funds available to regularly update the exhibitions. The National Museum of Australia should be at the forefront in the use of technology and communication medium for all its exhibitions and public programs. It should set the standard for all other Museums in Australia for exhibitions and public programs. It should be a Museum that both Australian and overseas professional working in interpretation are keen to visit and learn from.

The Museum achieves a high standard in some but not all of the exhibitions and public programs it operates. Interpretation Australia is aware that from the evaluation undertaken both in-house and by other professional organisations such as Museums Australia that there are key interpretation mediums still to be addressed. These include the sound overload in some areas, the readability of text labels, the inadequate space for school and other groups in some areas, and the overload of objects in some areas.

However, Interpretation Australia acknowledges that with the realities of time and budget constraints we are aware that, as often happens with experimental and innovative approaches, the desired outcome may not

always live up to expectations. However the Association is very keen to see the Museum continue to progress in its use of interpretive techniques and approaches.

The Association would also like to acknowledge however that many of the interpretive techniques used have been successful in both engaging and educating visitors. Some of the exhibitions commented on by members as being successful include the introductory video, the map which outlines the spread of rabbits across Australia, and the introduction to the Gallery of First Australians where human movement sets off the video. The analysis of the *Gallery of First Australians* in Part 2 highlights some of these successes in more detail. The range of public programs with face to face activities with story telling for children, and a range of talks, seminars and performances for adults would also rate highly with the Association as successful interpretation.

With the size and extent of the Museum exhibitions it is important that they remain relevant and interesting to visitors not only in the short term (2-5 years) but also in the long term, that is up to 10 years. Interpretation Australia believes the Museum has been successful in installing exhibitions that are both robust and likely to withstand the passage of time in terms of relevance and interest to visitors.

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

From the perspective of Interpretation Australia, in the short time the Museum has been in operation it has achieved great success in terms of the number of visitors, the interest and discussions generated by its exhibitions and public programs, and its very useful contribution to research and public debate through public forums and publications such as *Negotiating Histories* and *Frontier Conflict: the Australian Experience*.

The National Museum has an important role in Australian society in not only presenting the known, accepted and understood views of Australian's social, environmental and Indigenous history and heritage, but in extending and challenging these views in the light of ongoing discussion and debate about our country's changing and evolving society and history. The Museum is one of several Museums that present ideas about Australia's history and society that may be challenging to some members of our community. Other comparable Museums include the Museum of Sydney and the Melbourne Museum, the Melbourne Migration Museum and the Inveresk Rail Yards in Launceston. With the ongoing development of new Museums around Australia the National Museum not only makes a valuable contribution to the debates about our evolving society but sets a high standard for other Museums to aim for.

The success of the NMA not only for contemporary society, but for the community of the future to look back on, is that it presents exhibits and exhibitions and programs that may challenge people to think about our society's response to a range of issues. These include our early farming practices, key events in contemporary society (such as Azaria Chamberlain's death) and the history of the Indigenous members of our community.

Interpretation Australia considers that in regard to future priorities, the outreach program should be extended to make the Museum's collection and exhibitions and public programs available to those who are unable to physically visit the Museum. This material should be available not only via the web, but also available for people to view and experience in person. The touring programs of the National Gallery and the Australian Archives are examples of programs the Museum could follow.

It is important that the Museum continue its current mix of permanent and temporary exhibitions. The temporary exhibitions such as the present cartoon display are an ideal format for a touring display. Having temporary exhibitions also provides the Museum with the opportunity to link in with other Museum touring exhibitions, and to capitalise on key anniversaries such as the 20th anniversary of Playschool.

As the Act was drafted 20 years ago it may be appropriate to consider a review of the Act itself. The sections of the Act of particular interest to Interpretation Australia members are Part II: 5 Gallery of Australians and Part II: 6 Functions of the Museum.

In regard to Part 11: 5 it is important that Indigenous Australians be consulted in any review of this section. From Interpretation Australia's perspective it is important that the Indigenous communities be closely involved in the collection, management and display of any material relevant to their community, and this could be more clearly addressed in the Act. It may also be appropriate for this section to address the issue of providing ongoing support through funding and research and links with organisations such as AIATSIS for the Indigenous community and other researchers of issues relevant to the heritage and culture of Australia's diverse Indigenous community.

Interpretation Australia believes that the wording of Section 11: 6 on the functions of the Museum is appropriate, as it provides guidance without being prescriptive of the important interpretive and educational roles of the Museum. In reference to the comments above about the future directions of the Museum, it may be appropriate to include under functions specific reference to outreach, education and touring programs.

Interpretation Australia members have followed with interest the debate in the last twelve months about the exhibitions and interpretation in the *First Australians: Gallery of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples*. From an interpretation perspective Interpretation Australia believes this Gallery is an outstanding success, as it presents Aboriginal culture as a vibrant and

contemporary culture with a long and complex history. Interpretation Australia believes that with the space and budget allocated the Museum has effectively interpreted the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history, heritage and culture as required under the Act.

This submission has focussed on the *First Australians: Gallery of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples* for two reasons; the limited time for submissions meant an in depth analysis of the whole Museum was not possible in the time frame set, and secondly, due to concern by members following the public debate over the Gallery in the last twelve months. Members were concerned that changes might be mooted to this Gallery. Interpretation Australia therefore wanted to provide members of the Review Panel some background to interpretation principles and techniques, and in doing so explain why, from an interpretation perspective, Interpretation Australia considers this Gallery to be an outstanding success.

Freeman Tilden is considered the doyen of interpreters. His six principles of interpretation are set out in his classic text *Interpreting our heritage*. The next section of this submission assesses the effectiveness of *the First Australians: Gallery of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples* against these principles.

Part II: The principles of Tilden and the First Australians: Gallery of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples

Principle 1: Any interpretation that does not somehow relate what is being displayed or described to something within the personality or experience of the visitor will be sterile.

This principle draws on the basic educational principle that learning only begins with what people already know. In considering what visitors to the NMA know about Aboriginal culture, the curators have had to develop exhibitions and public programs for the broadest range of visitors, from those who know very little about the Aboriginal community and culture to those with an in depth knowledge, including Indigenous community members.

The solution employed by the NMA in the *First Australians Gallery* is to offer a broad variety of topics, objects and media. Visitors drawn to music and dance are captivated by the entrance corridor with its magical life-sized videos. Those whose knowledge is framed by an Australian primary school education recognise the ingeniously split lump of stone transformed into flaked tools and begin to make connections with the beautiful back-lit display of flaked points. Those who know little of the culture of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, including overseas visitors, may wander along to the videos of contemporary life, where, with the familiar surrounds of a television screen, they may start to recognise the traditional and modern artefacts that surround each monitor.

This variety is a skilful and effective interpretive technique. It is based on an informed educational philosophy and incorporates excellent design, and an extensive collection of meaningful material. From an interpretation perspective it is highly successful

Principle 2: Information, as such, is not interpretation. Interpretation is revelation based on information. They are entirely different things; however, all interpretation includes information.

This principle relates to the recent discussions over the ‘factualness’ of some NMA exhibits. It reminds us that information/facts are inevitably enmeshed in the presentation of information. This implies that those who interpret information must have a clearly articulated framework or perspective, so that when they present information they understand that they are also communicating ideas.

It is evident to professional interpreters that the developers of the *First Australians Gallery* framed their presentation of information based on certain premises. One important premise is that Indigenous people and culture are not dead and past but very much alive and vigorous. Therefore the objects that constitute the exhibits might be called ‘facts’, but the ways they are displayed—in conjunctions such as traditional with modern, or contextualised by being set in sand rather than mounted on display frames—indicate that these objects have a living purpose today. There are no explicit statistics anywhere in the *First Australians Gallery*, nor encyclopedia-style presentations of data, yet there are powerful interpretive messages indisputably grounded in the objects and display techniques used.

If it might be argued that such interpretive consciousness amounts to ‘bias’, experienced interpreters would respond that visitors are not innocent, empty-headed beings who believe everything they are offered. On the contrary, both learning theory and visitor research confirm that visitors arrive at museums with the battery of their own knowledge, experience and values which do not alter through occasional interpretive encounters. What effective heritage interpretation can achieve is to present new or perhaps different frameworks for understanding what one already knows. From this intellectual springboard, visitors can, if they choose, extend their ideas. But equally, they can maintain or defend them.

Principle 3: Interpretation is an art which combines many arts, whether the materials presented are scientific, historical or architectural. Any art is in some degree teachable.

This principle asserts that heritage interpretation is not a mysterious, intuitive gift but a way of presenting ideas which can be achieved via considered planning. The exhibits of the *First Australians Gallery* demonstrate that there were skilled, gifted people at work on its presentation.

This is the place to reflect on the aesthetic dimension of interpretation. It is not important to everyone, but in shaping the conventional modes of visual

communication, it affects every visitor's comprehension of interpretive products such as exhibitions and public programs.

It might be said of the *First Australians Gallery* that there is little overall aesthetic unity, but that its individual elements (the exhibits) are well crafted and sensitively balanced. The audio-visual elements are highly professional—bright, vital, engaging. Even the taxonomic exhibitions in the open access gallery, which are at some risk of the popular perception of being endless boring specimens, contain internal beauty thanks to inspired arrangement of the basic elements of form, colour and texture.

Principle 4: The chief aim of interpretation is not instruction but provocation.

Tilden's famous dictum is itself deliberately provocative. It is clearly a reaction to the dire experience of so many people that education is a turn-off, and that 'educational' programs in museums and parks must be boring. Tilden here advocates that heritage interpretation should startle and surprise visitors such that they are removed from the suspicion of didactic torture. In this he connects to the contemporary psychology of 'mindfulness', where successful interpretation jogs the visitor out of the mundane state of 'mindless' automatism and into a state of receptivity.

The *First Australians Gallery* employs this principle in presenting novel intellectual approaches to Aboriginal culture and vivid new technologies to illustrate them. It deliberately avoids the 19th century museum technique of displaying multiple objects arranged in rows. It deliberately introduces a quantity of zippy audio-visuals on both large and small scales. Are these diversions effective in startling visitor perception into mindfulness? The evidence could be measured through interviews with visitors, but the simpler style of evaluation through visitor observation suggests some conclusions.

Unusual interpretive approaches might be said to 'provoke' visitor attention. In the *First Australians Gallery*, the ones which have attracted special criticism focus on the history of relations between colonial settlers and Indigenous people. Professional interpreters would argue that they are sound examples of drawing on new scholarship to suggest alternative views from the conventional stories learned in non-specialist Australian educations.

Principle 5: Interpretation should aim to present a whole rather than a part, and must address itself to the whole person rather than any single phase.

This principle is an alert to the expert staff of heritage institutions that they should not focus on just one or a few aspects of a topic, but should aim to offer a holistic picture. It is also a reminder that good interpretation communicates in multiple formats, aiming to touch participants in more than the merely academic ways suggested by the central focus on learning. Visitors are not usually specialists and are likely to be interested in overview presentations, within which they can choose for themselves to pay attention to

particular elements. At the same time, the most effective interpretation is not envisaged as 'a book on the wall', trying to tell all about everything.

New multimedia technologies enable a tremendous ambit of additional information to be presented in small spaces and fairly short times (though admittedly at large cost). The *First Australians Gallery* use of audiovisuals to expand and set in context individual exhibits is exemplary. They make it possible instantly to take visitors, for instance, to the actual site of production of objects, to see and hear a traditional maker, or to listen to someone recount the oral history told them by a parent. The opportunity to see both traditional and modern people, speaking both language and English, makes apparent the diversity of Aboriginal cultures and of contemporary Australia.

Effective interpretation employs a variety of media and techniques to touch the many ways humans have of perceiving the world. The use of multimedia provides an opportunity for all the senses of the visitor to be provoked, visual, aural, rhythmic, intellectual and aesthetic. Again, the *First Australians Gallery* carries it off beautifully, in filling the museum environment with music (appealing to musical and kinaesthetic intelligences), intricate masses of items on display in a variety of internal spaces (spatial and aesthetic intelligences), and stories of people in both highly personal and straightforward narrative styles (inter-personal and intra-personal intelligences).

Effective interpretation might therefore be called a smorgasbord, offering a huge variety of substances in a huge variety of media. Individuals and groups browse among the abundance to consume what appeals to them. Each morsel they pick up is sound information, and because it is to the individual's taste, it is absorbed with relish to join the bundle of understandings that comprises each person's stock of knowledge.

Principle 6: Interpretation addressed to children should not be a dilution of the presentation to adults, but should follow a fundamentally different approach. To be at its best it will require a separate program.

Parents, educators and advertisers appreciate that children develop through stages of mental and physical growth and know therefore that children of different ages need different modes of communication for effective understanding. Interpretation Australia members are pleased to observe that the *First Australians Gallery* is studded with child-oriented interpretive devices and that specific activities for children and families are regularly offered.

The critical precept in interpreting to children is to make topics relevant to small people whose only frame of reference is themselves and their families. Meeting this need in the *First Australians Gallery* is the regular presence of children's objects among items on display and images of and references to children in the multimedia productions. The pre-teen's response is a recognition that children like her/himself live another kind of life, the beginning of the appreciation of difference. The big audiovisual viewed from above the stairs is specially powerful in this context, full of children, unconstrained by

narrative, accompanied by sensuous music. It is a shame that it's only minimally accessible to smaller children, given there are only two sets of child-sized steps to help small people see over the edge to enjoy the show.

An adjunct principle which could be added to this principle of Tilden's concerns the way in which parents show and explain exhibitions to their children. Because children rarely visit museums alone, attention should be given to this mediation in interpretive planning. This idea captures the focussing role of parents in showing and explaining things to their children. It is often met with a specialised brochure mapping out a family or children's trail through a museum or site. But the larger truth is that providing the smorgasbord of content and media, visitors of all developmental stages can be satisfied and fulfilled.

Conclusion:

Interpretation Australia considers the review of the NMA activities and Act an important component in the development of the NMA as the most outstanding Museum in Australia that showcases innovative and involving exhibitions and public programs. The key issues the Association believes need to be considered to ensure the Museum builds on the exhibitions and programs already developed are:

- Provision of adequate funding and staff to provide a high standard of exhibitions and public programs;
- Continuing development of outreach programs, to extend the access of the Museums exhibitions and collections to the community outside the National Capital;
- Closer involvement, and perhaps specified in the Act, of the Indigenous community in the operation and management of the Indigenous programs and collections;
- Recognition of the importance in any review of the Museum's activities of the importance of peer review by professional associations including Interpretation Australia and Museums Australia.