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

from

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Our National Museum is on a spectacular site, in an interesting building. Its present exhibitions make it a marvellous place for children under ten and for dumbed-down Australians who don't mind being dumbed-down further. The problem is largely in the name. If it had been called the National Funfair it would have been all right, but calling something a Museum sets up certain expectations.

The functions of a museum are generally regarded as

- the conservation of items of worth, worth being defined in terms of public interest, rarity, historical value or association
- providing a resource for those intent on increasing their knowledge in a particular field
- being educational, which does not exclude being entertaining, but must be more than entertainment

The first of these functions is acknowledged in the *National Museum of Australia Act 1980 Section 6 (1) (a)*. A mere member of the public can only hope that the National Museum honours the intention.

As a resource the national collection, in accord with the *Act Section 6 (1) (c)*, is no doubt available to the scholar who makes an official request to access particular material, but it dramatically fails the informed amateur or independent scholar who might wish to spend a few hours studying a collection of items that reflect an aspect of significance in our short history, or one that illustrates any of the unique experiences that constitute Australia. Where are the artifacts, the treasures that have been collected for us over the many decades of accession? Very few are on public display. Of course they cannot all be displayed simultaneously, but the people who own the museum and have paid over the years for the collection must be allowed to see a greater percentage on exhibition at any one time and, moreover and most importantly, be permitted to form their own opinions about them. The present exhibitions are not a collection of objects to be examined and personally assessed, but are largely a set of simplistic and unsubstantiated opinions on issues, supported by an occasional artefact.

(When this point was raised with the Director in 2001, a very patronising reply was received to the effect that the displays were in line with current international museum practice. As this writer is grateful to have had the opportunity to visit many of the world's great museums, and in all continents, she knows that answer is not only condescending but incorrect.)

The *National Museum of Australia Act 1980 Section 6* addresses only 'exhibiting'. It does not define the quality or the intent of such 'exhibiting'. Perhaps these aspects should be considered if the Act is to be revised. Granted that it is difficult to be specific in such things, yet some indication of worth should be given.

As to an educational function, the Act does not address this at all, perhaps taking for granted that a visit to a museum will be an educating and enriching experience. However, that cannot be said of a visit to the National Museum of Australia. It is largely the style of the displays

that delimits the educational possibilities. Apart from the terminals around which children cluster to the exclusion of all else, since there are so few material objects, understanding the displays depends on reading the reams of text, which are printed on patterned or textured card and always badly lit, so that they are very difficult to decipher.

Now, who is going to persist in trying to read that text? Immediately excluded are large numbers of those whom one would wish to have access to such a public collection, aggregated and housed at great public expense

- the very same schoolchildren scampering from one button-pressing experience to the next who so often have inadequate or as yet undeveloped reading ability
- marginally illiterate adults who might gain much from a display of objects which speak for themselves
- those whose first language is not English – our new citizens and a large proportion of tourists
- the elderly who have trouble getting their bifocals positioned at just the right reading distance

This is a huge audience to be neglected.

Even for the fully literate, English-reading, normally-sighted visitor a good well-illustrated book to be read in comfort in one's own home must seem an attractive alternative to that overwhelming text. In the minds of those not enchanted by playing with interactive-video terminals the thought must arise that a take-home video would provide greater educational opportunity.

Which leads to the question, why bother to visit the museum at all? It fails to satisfy the two parameters which this writer feels confident to address: as a resource and in an educative and informing role.

As it stands, the displays in this museum are an inaccessible and huge condescension to the visitor and almost certainly provide a misleading experience (Although I have read and agree with much of the criticism of the **text's content** in certain displays, that aspect is more appropriately addressed by people more specifically informed than I).

In conclusion, speaking on the two areas where my experience is relevant, I suggest that the educational challenge has been disregarded by those responsible for the material-object content, the method of display is madness, and as a resource for a reasonably intelligent visitor the museum is currently worthless.

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About the writer of this submission:

Heather Rossiter's life has been episodic, a constantly changing mixture of continents and careers, husbands and death, children and travel.

A science graduate, she has worked in research and teaching, always with a big serve of the arts on the side. Her interests lie primarily in painting; the architecture and decorative arts of Islam; Russia and Russian history; and opera.

She has published book reviews, articles, travel pieces in major newspapers and magazines and is the author of *Lady Spy, Gentleman Explorer, The Life of Herbert Dyce Murphy*, Random House 2001.

Once, long ago, she wrote a script and shot the film in Death Valley, California, USA.