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NMA Review Secretariat *By email:* reviewnmasec@dcita.gov.au
Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts
GPO Box 2154
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Dear Sir/Madam,

SUBMISSION TO:
National Museum of Australia: Review of Exhibitions and Public Programs

I submit to the Review of the National Museum of Australia my belief that:

- i. the Museum has complied with its legislated role and functions; and
- ii. the Government's vision in approving funding for the development of the Museum has been realized.

In addition, I offer some suggestions for the future priorities of the Museum.

I make this submission on the basis of several connections that I have experienced, and continue to enjoy, with the National Museum of Australia (NMA), namely:

- As an Australian citizen who, although based in Melbourne, has made several visits to the NMA – first (in 1987) to its Visitor Centre at Yarramundi, and more recently (several times in 2001 and 2002) to the new building on the Acton Peninsula;
- As a member of the Australian museum sector since 1987;
- As the Senior Lecturer and Course Coordinator of Museum Studies at Deakin University since 1994;
- As a member of the Friends of the National Museum of Australia Inc. since 1997;
- As the Vice-President of Museums Australia since 2001; and
- As a member of the National Collections Advisory Forum (established by the Cultural Ministers Council) since 2002.

I am aware that both the Friends of the National Museum, and also Museums Australia, have made their own submissions to the Review. It is not my intention to duplicate those submissions. Rather, I hope that my comments will complement the other submissions that the Secretariat has received. My comments on the following pages aim to address the terms of reference given to your Review.

1. (i) Has the Museum complied with its role and functions as set out in the National Museum of Australia Act 1980, its Charter and other relevant documents?

In my opinion, the answer is a resounding 'yes'. During the two decades since its mandate commenced with the 1980 Act, the NMA has developed:

- A substantial collection of objects and information that represent significant aspects of the history of Australia's environment and peoples. The growth of this collection is documented in the *Annual Reports* of the NMA. The collection appears to be very well cared for. Collection managers, registrars and conservators employed by the NMA are eminent and acknowledged leaders in their own specialized disciplines.
- Travelling exhibitions that have shared elements of the collection with an Australia-wide audience. I note that the NMA commenced its touring exhibitions program several years prior to commencing the construction of the Acton Peninsula building. This indicates to me a commitment to sharing its collections, information and insights with all Australians, not simply those who can visit Canberra in person. The NMA's commitment in this field extends right up to the present, when the travelling exhibition *Rare Trades* opened (February 2003) in Melbourne (rather than Canberra) as its first, 'premiere' venue.
- A library that assists research into the themes of the Museum's collection.
- An approach to 'outreach' (via use of the internet, webcasts and broadcasts) that has been at the cutting-edge of technology applications in Australian museum practice. The NMA's broadcasting infrastructure has made it possible for remote audiences to communicate on cultural and topical matters. An example that comes to mind from my own experience is the NMA's involvement in the webcasting of sessions of the National Remote and Regional Museums Conference, *Bridging the Boundaries*, held in Kalgoorlie in late October 2001, with video and audio input from Launceston and Townsville, which I was able to watch in Melbourne via the WWW.
- Long-term and short-term exhibitions that represent the ethnic and cultural diversity of Australia, including powerful displays about the culture of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island peoples. *Circa* is an innovative and emotionally charged orientation experience. I was particularly moved to see the Haddon Collection of Torres Strait material (on loan from Cambridge) in a short-term exhibition when the new building was first opened, and also the *Eternity* exhibition which has been curated as a long-term installation by the NMA itself.
- Public programs that address the needs and interests of different age-groups (including the hard-to-reach youth (14-25) sector, which has been attracted by concerts and speakers' forums).
- Support for a Friends group that is able to assist the NMA with audience development as well as public programs delivery.
- Publications that, in content, purpose and appearance, fully match the status of a national institution. Examples include annual reports, CDs, conference proceedings, and exhibition catalogues. I have yet to see a publication from the NMA that fails to communicate effectively to this reader.

The NMA has also developed great standing as a *national* museum, i.e. one that takes an Australia-wide leadership role with respect to museological practice in a wide range of areas. For example, the NMA:

- is the international ‘gateway’ for the repatriation from overseas museums of indigenous human remains and cultural objects;
- is actively working with indigenous communities and representative organisations to arrange the return of human remains and secret/sacred objects;
- hosts a ‘mirror’ site for the website of the International Council of Museums, at <http://www.nma.gov.au/icom/>
- has developed a Service Charter that establishes a benchmark and model for other museums;
- provides opportunities for community involvement in the work of the NMA through its volunteer program;
- assists the involvement of workers in the museum sector (Australia-wide) to attend conferences and forums;
- provides career-path opportunities for professionals in the museum sector;
- undertakes appropriate evaluation of its exhibits and its policies;
- undertakes research into its audiences, and is responsive to feedback from visitors;
- fulfilled an important role in being an early host of the innovative Australian Museums on Line gateway website, at: <http://www.amol.org.au> ; and
- assists in the convening of forums that discuss the development of museum practice.

1. (ii) Has the Government’s vision in approving funding for the development of the Museum has been realized?

The Government’s vision was set out in the documents calling for submissions to this Review:

In deciding to fund construction of the Museum at Acton Peninsula, Canberra, the Government’s intention was that the Museum would be an institution combining the best contemporary techniques with new media technologies, in order to offer a range of experiences of wide appeal. There were to be permanent, changing and travelling exhibitions and blockbusters, and it was intended that audiences beyond Canberra would be reached using information and communication technologies.

http://www.dcita.gov.au/Article/0,0_1-2_2-4_113158,00.html

I believe that the points made in the previous section show that the NMA has comprehensively addressed this aspect of the Government’s vision.

A second statement about the Government’s vision is:

The Museum was also to establish partnerships with state, regional and international cultural institutions, in order to draw from the diversity of heritage collections existing throughout Australia. The opening exhibitions in the social history spaces were to

celebrate the Centenary of Federation and the key themes of Australian society, to reflect on and celebrate our journey as a nation. It was envisaged that research facilities, and the collections, would be accessible to scholars, students and communities, for research and re-interpretation.

http://www.dcita.gov.au/Article/0,,0_1-2_2-4_113158,00.html

Exhibitions as large as *Gold and Civilization*, and as compact as the *Playschool* exhibition, have all drawn on loan items. Museum loans require excellent working relationships between institutions, and the NMA seems to have built many useful partnerships to facilitate this. The organization of exhibitions through the agency of Art Exhibitions Australia seems to have been an efficient way for the NMA to achieve the creation and traveling of larger touring exhibitions.

Reports from colleagues who have been able to use the NMA for research tasks confirm that the NMA fully understands the importance of research, and is a generous provider of access to its collections and information for researchers. The on-line (web-based) catalogue of the NMA Library is a wonderful resource.

In summary, I believe that the creation of the National Museum of Australia has handsomely repaid the Government's vision and investment.

2. What might be the future priorities to be addressed by the Museum, including the continuing relevance of its Act, in the development of permanent and temporary exhibitions and schools and public programs?

What has been achieved on the Acton Peninsula is truly a marvelous achievement in museum terms, and also in terms of project management. The NMA is a great credit to all who made it happen – Government, the Board, the staff, the contractors. Indeed, after my first visit, I wrote to the Director and offered my congratulations. In part, my letter of 10 May 2001 stated:

Unfortunately, my tendency to read every word in the *Gold* exhibition meant that I had too little time left to fully explore the permanent galleries of the new Museum before my plane departed – but I nevertheless gained some solid first impressions during a few hours. *Circa* is a wonderful orientation experience. The *Eternity* exhibition is a triumph – a real innovation in Australian museums. The other galleries each have powerful messages, drawn from a stunning array of objects.

In summary, I was keenly aware that the National Museum is now in its first, purpose-built display environment. It feels fresh, youthful, optimistic. Congratulations on a very fine achievement!

The points I make in the remainder of this submission are intended as constructive suggestions for the future. They respond to the Review Panel's second term of reference, but are not intended to imply any criticism of the new institution.

As the NMA continues to develop its exhibitions and public programs, I wonder if there might be more emphasis placed on principles of universal access, having a greater number of objects to be placed on display, and the continuing development of the website. These matters are expanded upon on the next pages.

PRINCIPLES OF UNIVERSAL ACCESS. I have suggestions to make about both physical and intellectual access.

- *Physical access:* As galleries and other public areas are refreshed and redeveloped, I would like to see the designers give particular attention to readability of text panels (text printed onto clear or translucent surfaces is hard to read), and to address some of the ‘bottlenecks’ where congestion can occur on busy days (thus making viewing of exhibits difficult for visitors with pushers or in wheelchairs).
- *Intellectual access:* The NMA has been a primary case-study in public discussions about the validity of sources of historical information, and about the subjective nature of decision-making processes relating to object selection and exhibition development in museums. The NMA has participated pro-actively and responsibly in these discussions. To continue as a pro-active organisation in the face of some entrenched and media-driven prejudice, the NMA might find it appropriate to:

>>> Involve guest-curators from time to time, so that different curatorial viewpoints can be experienced and assessed.

>>> Create an innovative “access gallery” space such as exists at the Migration Museum (Adelaide) and the Immigration Museum (Melbourne). This would help to empower different and diverse community voices, and would embody the inclusive philosophy that is (I believe) at the heart of the NMA Service Charter.

>>> Conduct overt discussion (through focus groups research, and perhaps through a national competition) as to what issues the next generation of long-term exhibitions might try to present.

GREATER NUMBER OF OBJECTS TO BE PLACED ON DISPLAY. The NMA seems to suffer from a mild anxiety that its collection isn’t as large as those held by the older state institutions. Now that the NMA has become established as an exhibiting venue, the challenge of creating more object-rich exhibitions should be pursued. The existing collections could be ‘trawled’ for new exhibition themes. The collection could continue to be strategically developed so that themed exhibitions can be curated. The NMA should of course also continue to borrow objects from other cultural collecting institutions.

CONTINUING DEVELOPMENT OF THE WEBSITE. I have suggestions to make about both *commercial* and *educational* development.

- *Commercial development of the website:* It is to be hoped that the NMA Shop will soon be able to offer on-line ordering and payment facilities, to assist customers from outside Canberra to patronise the shop and support the NMA’s budget.
- *Educational development of the website:* Only one-third of my Museum Studies students at Deakin University are based in Melbourne; the remaining two-thirds are located in diverse parts of Australia and also overseas. They study by correspondence. I cannot take the distant students on site visits to innovative museums, nor easily set up meetings for them with leading practitioners in the museum sector. Instead, I depend on being able to refer them to websites for information and ‘virtual’ visit experiences. The NMA website is consequently a very useful resource for the students. Having the

Annual Reports on-line is great. The NMA website also provides information that corresponds to the sort of information shared by many museums via the WWW, such as details of print publications, current and past exhibitions, schools programs, media releases, etc. Part of my recommendation, therefore, is 'please continue to keep the web-site rich and informative'.

A further part of my recommendation about the website, however, is to suggest that there are further areas in which development can occur. One example relates to the availability of policy documents via the website. This has declined in the last year or so – from about 20 accessible policy statements to a bare 4 at the time of writing. This is a great loss for my students (as well as for the museum sector more generally) because those NMA policies that were previously available gave a substantial insight into standards for best-practice museum management. Another example is the need for access to an on-line catalogue of the collections.

I offer these thoughts because I have a strong commitment to the concept and practice of continuous improvement.

I wish the Review Panel well in its deliberations, and would be happy to speak with anyone connected with the Review, should further information be required from me.

Yours faithfully,

Margaret Birtley