

SUBMISSION TO THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AUSTRALIA REVIEW OF EXHIBITIONS AND PUBLIC PROGRAMS: MARCH 2003

TERM OF REFERENCE NO.1: THE AIMS AND CONTENT OF THE MUSEUM'S EXHIBITIONS AND PUBLIC PROGRAMS

The Prime Minister, Mr Howard, said with surprise at the Museum's opening in March 2001 that it was 'quite un-museumlike'. The comment suggests that he has another idea of what a museum *is* like; it's likely he meant a Greek temple-style building filled with dinosaur bones, insect specimens and the odd rusty relic of an explorer. I suspect this clichéd vision is very common (witness media reports on exhibitions/museums, observing with repetitive astonishment that each new example is *not* a musty-dusty cavern). But whoever holds such a view, it suggests he/she hasn't been inside a (professionally-funded) Australian museum for ten years or more. The temple stuffed with specimens is a stereotype that hardly exists in this country today, yet it dominates the popular imagination as the essence of a museum. It derives from a conflation of the historic roots of museums, which haunts the modern example with contradictory ambitions. I think it continues to confuse many of the critics of NMA exhibits.

Modern museums contain elements from the ancient and medieval treasure houses of kings and bishops; the Renaissance cabinets of curiosity belonging to philosophers and aristocrats; the taxonomic collections gathered by Enlightenment scientists and connoisseurs; the mid-19thC mechanics' institute intended to improve the working class; and the 20thC theme parks built to provide experience for a populace sated with sensation. All of them inform today's museum with sometimes oppositional ideas about value, uniqueness, representativeness, education, fun and profit. Such diversity enables commentators to seize upon just one character to make their polemical claims—an ancient rhetorical technique, which must be recognised for its self-chosen blinkers. One person's vision of the museum as the grandeur of the state is challenged by another person's ideal of scholarly collections, which is at odds with another's demand for family-friendly educational activity, all of which may seem acceptable to yet another as long as the users who benefit from museum experiences pay for them. Who is to say that only one perspective is the right one?

The NMA Act indicates that the Museum should collect, exhibit and disseminate historical material relevant to Australia, while making money (with no specified object, but evidently to fund its operations). The Act is enlarged by the Government's vision of the Museum employing new media technologies to offer a range of experiences of wide appeal. This summary of a museum's purposes is typical in drawing on the mixed parentage of the modern institution. Interpreting these specifications in the genealogical vein of many antecedents suggests the following paraphrase. *The NMA collections should be significant and comprehensive in the tradition of valuable and scholarly collecting. Its exhibitions should communicate important ideas via new media, enlarged with outreach programs, in order to promote learning for recreation. Its products should be so attractive that philanthropists will subsidise it and visitors will willingly pay for it.* How does the NMA measure up?

Exhibitions

In my opinion, the Museum is strongest in the communication function; in fact, it is excellent. The exhibitions and public programs are substantial, original and attractive (even though constrained by awkward, claustrophobic gallery spaces). My top assessments go to 'First Australians' and 'Eternity'.

- I applaud the ways in which 'First Australians' grapples with highly sensitive and politicised issues. Museums carry the historic burden of having appropriated the material evidence of Indigenous cultures, and therefore symbolise dispossession to modern Indigenous people, making it fraught to construct positive museum-community relationships. Yet thanks to consultative exhibition development processes, I understand that there is wide approval of the exhibits among Aboriginal communities. They are not the only audience, but they are central to the success of the Museum; an institution that alienated the subjects of its largest single gallery would be a shameful case. At the same time, exhibits must engage with non-Indigenous and non-Australian audiences. For white Australians, the contemporary issue of land rights has to be addressed, defining as it does today's Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal relations. By displaying primary documents, such as Governor Phillip's 1787 instructions and John Batman's 'land deed' of 1835, the Museum presents the legitimacy of modern land rights claims. The subsequent history of dispossession and death hardly needs explicit labels to comprehend. Foreign visitors come to national museums seeking a comprehensive cultural overview of what is unique to the place, and this too is realised in 'First Australians', with its emphasis on the living continuity and adaptations of Indigenous people. Given that many white Australians have never met an Aboriginal person, the lively presence of audiovisuals among the object displays is equally relevant to locals.
- I admire 'Eternity' because the concept of displaying individual objects in the context of their owners' emotional lives is unmatched in any museum I know. The result is peculiar, even weird, but absolutely engrossing. The object hang is crowded, suggesting the back spaces of the mind; the thematic labels are unusually pungent and poetic; the record-your-own-contribution video is demonstrably enticing to visitors. I would dearly like to see an analysis of these videos; they must be unique evidence of how modern people use objects in their lives. That kind of research is not implied in the Museum's Act, but then, no one was thinking along such lines in 1980. 'Eternity' pushes the envelope of what collections might mean to the public, and merits resources to investigate further.

Having admired the originality of two galleries, I want also to make the case for some traditional styles of exhibition presentation. Visitor studies show that people respond best to exhibitions where they feel a sense of familiarity with both topic and style (you need to start learning from the point of what you already know, and it's usually counterproductive to destabilise positive expectations just for effect). The innovative takes on national history and imagery in the 'Horizons' and 'Nation' galleries amount to valuable new perspectives on a familiar history, but I think the largest segment of visitors would almost certainly appreciate a thread of traditional narrative laced with some iconic objects, as the scaffolding framework onto which they can extend their ideas.

Collections and research

The comment on the research potential of 'Eternity' elides nicely into my judgement that the Museum's collecting and research functions, as per the Act, are less effectively realised than the collecting function. Admittedly, both functions have changed drastically in professional

priority since 1980. The pressure on museums to earn income has shifted the balance of museum work from collections and research toward public programs, which it is believed demonstrate effective use of public funds and contain the potential to generate admission or participation fees. Nonetheless, collections and the knowledge they contain constitute the capital of museums (and I don't mean as potentially saleable assets); they are the intellectual and social capital which guarantees museum authority and credibility. Like economic capital, collection capital needs reinvestment in the form of collection development and research. Both require the resource of curatorial expertise, and that has been a victim of first, the shift in museum management direction and second, the haste with which the NMA was opened.

In saying this, I don't mean to cast aspersions on the up-to-date and enthusiastic people whose work is traditionally called curatorial (though the Museum uses a managerialist vocabulary to describe their functions). They are well-informed and make judicious use of external, mainly academic, experts. This would seem to amount to a flourishing partnership between museum and academe, but I argue it is a shallow deal. The recent publication of the conference papers, *Frontier Conflict*, demonstrates that authority (indeed, debate) is entirely in the hands of academe. Since the resignation of Dr Ann McGrath to return to a university job, the curatorial staff contains no PhD in social history. By comparison with the great national museums of the UK and USA, this is a pitiful situation. But with or without higher degrees, NMA staff have relatively little expertise in material culture, for they have been pressed for years to produce exhibitions, in and out of the new Museum building. Expertise comes with experience, from contact with lots of objects, via dedicated time to catalogue and research. Time is money, but expertise is credibility, and that is surely the primary currency of the National Museum.

The NMA collection is remarkable for having been formed entirely in the later 20thC and largely informed by deliberate policies. This makes it a different creature from the state museums, which have been collecting in the light of the times for over a hundred years. It could seem that there is little left for a new institution to acquire, and little need to present anything more than a national gloss on the same range of topics as shown in each of the state capitals. There is some truth in this, but it ignores the role of contemporary ideas in using collections. The significant difference is that the NMA was framed from its inception as a history museum rather than a collection of economic resources or curious native animals. In this, the nation makes a claim to share the ideals of modern civilisation by claiming distinctive national character through valuing its cultural heritage. For decades, the claim was shaped by the Australian War Memorial's presentation of the nation at war. Latterly, the claim has been expressed through the art collections in the National Gallery and the paraphernalia of sea-going activity in the National Maritime Museum. Making a show of the material evidence of history and culture is obviously seen by national authorities as a worthy act. In establishing a collection to justify the national character of Australia, the Museum rises above the state museums with its national take on histories. Although each state has a special story to tell, each story shares a prehistory, often a joint history, and usually a subsequent history of the same events, all precluded by the state-funded local focus. It is thus a relief to see the NMA collect the large themes of Australia's past, from convictism to immigration, beyond the mere boundaries of the states. The collecting themes and efforts to be nationally representative are sometimes strained, but the objective is brave and deserves more support.

When I speak above of *histories*, I speak in the language of contemporary historiography, which has provoked violent and self-righteous criticism from such as Keith Windschuttle. My own opinion as a professional historian is that his objections have been soundly rebutted by

the Museum's academic advisers such as Graeme Davison. But from the perspective of museology I think it's appropriate to point out that Windschuttle's views are predicated on a concept of the museum as a certain kind of institution. In other words, he frames his critique of the Museum's reference to, for instance, oral sources on the Bell's Creek massacre, in the expectation that a museum should be authoritative beyond argument. This suggests the idea of the museum as the mouthpiece of absolutism, as practised in Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia. I don't think this abuse of the museum as a public voice made any mark on the current mixed genealogy of Australian museums, but like the traditions of the majesty of the royal treasury or the correctness of the didactic improver of the populace, the one-true-word museum is not the model of professional museum practice today. The NMA is entirely within the sphere of standard practice among international museums in its approach to presenting ideas from many sources, even if they challenge orthodoxy.

Making money

Museums were once seen as public goods, whose intangible social benefits justified governments spending taxpayers' funds to maintain them. This view was challenged by the Commonwealth in another Review, resulting in the 1989 report 'What Price Heritage'? Although this document was itself challenged by a response paper in 1990, 'What Value Heritage?', the conceptual shift towards the user-pays principle has stuck in public policy. It has had dramatic consequences in museum management, as directors attempt to keep up the idea of the museum as an organisation that generates knowledge from collections, while introducing money-making schemes such as admission fees, venue hire, shop sales, fee-for-service visitor programs and charges to access knowledge and collections as commodities. The labour to make money by these means has changed the nature of the museum workforce, shifting from knowledge and collection development to services and marketing. Museum outputs have changed too, but there is little evidence that the profound shift in emphasis has moved much of the costs of museum operations from government. Few Australian museums make even 30% of their operating costs, and some (Melbourne Museum right now, potentially the NMA) are in dire straits because management has attempted to deliver on unrealistic government expectations.

There are two ways of responding to this situation. The first would be an acknowledgment that the benefits of museums (much as they exist now) are society-wide and socially-supported, in which case it is appropriate to tax society in order to pay adequately for museums. There is some British evidence that even tax-payers who don't particularly want to visit museums don't mind the continued public support of museums. (Merriman, 1986) A citizen jury approach to prioritising government expenditure could well reveal that Australians feel similarly positive about continuing to pay for museums.

The second response is to endorse government policy directions via the evolution of museums, through economic starvation, into something new and more or less self-supporting. There are optimistic ways to look at this: that the growth of the information economy will put new, commodity values on museum collections, that life-long learning will bring the informal education sector closer into mainstream life, and that both will bring new income streams to museum operations. Unfortunately there is little evidence that these directions are yet having an appreciable effect. Meanwhile, there are pessimistic perspectives: that the commodification of culture via user-charges is unsustainable, or alternatively, that efforts to make museums more of a market-league entertainment choice undermine the fundamental purposes of museums. The general judgement that museum visitation needs to be subsidised

in order to keep people using them is supported by the British experience of visitor surges over the past two years of admission-charge-abolition. It is pretty clear that the public needs major spectacle to attract them to admission-charging museums. In this environment, the big question is, to what degree do the older functions of museums survive? I've already noted that collections and research have declined at the expense of public programs in the struggle for financial survival, and argued that research based on collections continues to constitute the credibility of museums. If the present regime of making museums pay is to be pursued, there may be nothing of the museum (of any ancestry) left at the end of a century of user-pays, and what has been achieved?

Sponsorship is pushed hard by DCITA as the solution to many cultural organisations' economic woes. While there are successes to show, countless dead ends have been explored in the quest for sponsorship in Australia. The philanthropy sphere is best understood in marketing terms, as private investment in public good will, but it has pretty discrete limits. Sponsorship is not a viable alternative to reliable public funding.

TERM OF REFERENCE NO.2: FUTURE PRIORITIES OF THE MUSEUM IN EXHIBITIONS AND PUBLIC PROGRAMS, AND AS CONCERNS ITS ACT.

Thematic framework

I see the NMA as a medium between ideas about Australia and the public, presented in the peculiar but impressive mode of interpretive object displays. I don't believe it's the role of the Museum to advocate perspectives, but to communicate them; the use of the plural in referring to ideas/perspectives is here critical. The source of ideas that are worth presenting should be broad and they might represent extremes as well as the middle range. To filter the universe for museum-potential topics, I suggest themes that are widely commented on, written about, and discussed in public forums. This instantly suggests topics of the contemporary world, set in historic contexts, presented as ways of understanding—not as absolute truths. It is difficult for museums to respond to issues quickly; like a book, the exhibition medium just isn't a rush production. So the large themes need to be framed in the scale of permanent exhibition lifespan, ie about ten years. The concept of a thematic framework has served the NMA well since the initial three fields were identified by the Piggott Report; I endorse the approach. That said, I regularly do a lecture about the future of museums, in which I review predictions about museum futures since about 1975. It reveals some laughable irrelevancies, but there are some large frameworks which have proved to contain even the unimaginable changes to the world in that period. Good examples for the NMA might be the following:

- The best enduring theme is the inter-relationship of humanity and the environment. It is already the structure for one of the NMA major galleries, and it was specified in the original Piggott Report recommendations. It's tried and tested and likely to remain so.
- Relationships between Australia's Indigenous people and its subsequent immigrants (including investigations of their distinctive cultures) strikes me as a more contemporary and important wholism for future exhibitions than the existing gallery focussing on First Australians exclusively. The larger take would incorporate the gallery, but would locate it in the human context of modern Australia. It would open up opportunities to make comparative surveys of Australia's people, in the style of Adelaide's Migration Museum, the one I admire most in this country.

- Globalisation is one of the issues that few people foresaw as shaping modern life in 1990, let alone in 1975. For NMA use, it might be called ‘Australia in the world’, which would open up transnational perspectives on our history as well as situating the modern nation in the world.

Celebrationism

It would be very disturbing if this Review were to respond to current criticism by prescribing an approach to the broad themes of national history which the NMA undertakes. In particular, conclusions should avoid imposing the concept of the Museum celebrating the nation—an error into which the Review already strays in the description of the Government’s vision for the Museum, though otherwise not stated in the Museum’s defining documents.

Celebrationism precludes the thoughtful review of many perspectives, which I believe is essential to an institution that responds to the variety of Australian lives, values and beliefs. The shortcomings of celebrationism were thoroughly exposed in subsequent analyses of the 1988 Bicentenary and suspicion of celebratory approaches informed the Centenary of Federation program, producing sensible awareness rather than worship of the 1901 event. ‘Celebration’ is the wrong style of approach for national issues about which we should always acknowledge there may be different perceptions.

Folklife

A field that deserves resurrection from a history of neglect in Australia’s cultural policy development is a folklore/life function within the Museum. Folklife is the great missing element of Australia’s formal heritage apparatus; we have agencies that administer place heritage, museums that manage object heritage, libraries and archives which gather printed and oral records, but only in scattered and inconsistent situations do we have some documentation of the expressive cultures of ordinary life in all its variety. A comprehensive program on the ethnography of Australia’s cultural diversity would be a great way of recognising the heritage and hybridity of our daily cultures. And the NMA would be an appropriate organisational umbrella. Indeed, insofar as folklife ethnography involves objects, the NMA already does it, as does the National Library in regard to some elements of traditional song and verse. But objects, song and verse are just three of many expressions which merit recording; others include traditional beliefs and spirituality, even superstitions; rites of passage and cycles of personal and family celebration; the rituals and habits of foodways; and so forth. These dimensions of folklife acknowledge the ongoing practice of what is called social history in the domain of the past, but the fact is, they surround us—they *are* us—right now. Folklife is a methodological avenue into contemporary culture, meaningful to every person. It would be productive, helpful and fill in a gap in cultural awareness to introduce folklife as part of the conceptual structure of the NMA.

SUMMARY

I don’t have the expertise to review the NMA Act, but I am glad to have this opportunity to comment on the NMA’s operations since it opened two years ago.

- The content and style of the NMA’s exhibitions and public programs is, overall, admirable. They contain many contemporary and original perspectives, making the NMA

refreshingly unlike its state cousins. At the same time, the said cousins have shaped public expectations of what a museum is for more than a century, and at times, the difference confuses visitors rather than delights them.

- To guarantee the on-going credibility of the NMA, it is vital that its collecting and research functions should not be restricted by the need to devote resources to raising income. I cannot see what the nation gains from contorting the strengths of this unique type of public medium by making it raise its own costs through user charges.
- The NMA should beware of celebrationism as a mode of presenting Australian history and culture. It should recognise and present a multiplicity of views, including those of its critics, but never constrained by them.
- The NMA would be strengthened by adding a folklife ethnography component to its history mandate.
- The performance of the NMA merits continuing government support to carry out the kind of work it has demonstrated it does so well.

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