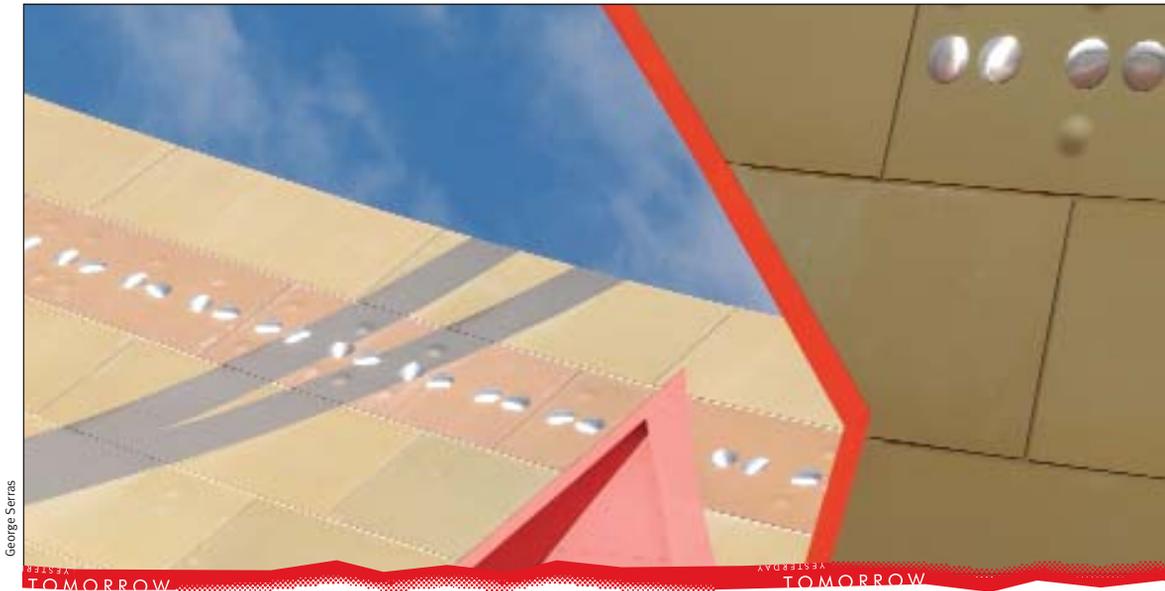


## Director's review of operations



George Serrins

## THE YEAR UNDER REVIEW

In its first full reporting year since opening in March 2001, the National Museum of Australia has established itself as a lively and accessible visitor experience, welcoming to all age groups and with the capacity and vision to play a major role in the political and social debate about modern Australia.

The Museum's transition from 'just opened' to a fully operational organisation took place in a seamless manner. The Museum had set itself a number of key performance targets for its first full year of operation which would demonstrate that it is a successful, dynamic and high performing cultural organisation. These targets were:

- ▶ achieving a visitor number in excess of 500 000 in the first full year of operation which had been adopted in the planning and development phase
- ▶ achieving an enviable reputation for the quality of the services and programs provided to visitors and reflected in visitor satisfaction ratings
- ▶ achieving an enviable reputation for the quality of the research and scholarship underpinning its exhibitions and for the diversity of its programs
- ▶ strengthening the Museum's research and collecting capabilities and relationships with research institutions
- ▶ enhancing the development, care and management of the National Historical Collection
- ▶ creating an assured, predictable funding base.

The Museum has met all these targets. Its performance against them is assessed in both this review and in more detail in the reports of the relevant business units.

The targets also informed the commencement of a review of the Museum's strategic plan as part of its corporate governance framework. The existing strategic plan had been developed and implemented some years prior to the opening of the new Acton facility. The new strategic plan, covering the period 2002–2007, will be completed during 2002. Council and executive management also improved the corporate governance framework during the year. The Council's Audit and Finance Committee's mandate was strengthened in relation to the consideration of both budget and off-budget operational and business strategies. Both Council and executive and senior management participated in training sessions about governance obligations and accountabilities under Commonwealth legislation.

One of the Museum's strengths has been its project management framework. The Museum has an integrated business planning approach for the development and management of both annual business and business unit plans. Business units prepare their project and business plans based on the strategic directions approved by Council, the planned major events and exhibitions for the financial year, and identified risks and contingency plans. Each business plan has financial and non-financial performance targets and are accompanied by project budgets consistent with the business plan. The Museum has an integrated project management reporting framework that requires managers to monitor and report against both financial and activity indicators.

## Serving the public

The Museum's architecture and content which were first perceived as startling or even controversial have now become familiar favourites with the visiting public. By the time of our first anniversary in March 2002, over one million visitors had attended Acton Peninsula in person and millions more had accessed the Museum's web site. Visitors consistently express delight in learning things that were never taught at school, or gaining fresh insights into the character and diversity of Australian life.

The Museum attracted 643 543 visitors to its permanent exhibitions during the 12 months July 2001–June 2002, and 116 192 in total to the temporary exhibitions *Australia's Lost Kingdoms* and *To Mars and Beyond: Search for the Origins of Life*. Many more attended open air events such as Tracking Kultja:

The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultural Festival and Sky Lounge: Cinema Under the Stars or visited the Museum after hours for special events ranging from conferences and lectures to dinners or concerts. The number and variety of visitors have confirmed the National Museum as a people's museum — popular, accessible, entertaining, thought-provoking and contemporary. In this sense, the Museum has been entirely true to the vision of the original Pigott Report in 1975.

A major factor of this success was brought about by the Commonwealth Government's decision that the Museum should not charge admission. Many visitors have expressed their appreciation that this is the case, and told us that free admission encourages multiple visits, especially for families.



George Serras

Council Chairman, the Hon. Tony Staley, Director Dawn Casey and Senator the Hon. Rod Kemp cut 'the loop' on the first anniversary of the Museum



Brendan Bell

The launch of the Museum's third temporary exhibition, To Mars and Beyond

During the year, the Museum put in place a number of activities to encourage and assist visitation from people with hearing and vision impairment. These included storytelling sessions with Auslan interpretation and hearing induction loops being placed at various sites within the Museum. Touch trolleys were also placed in various exhibition areas for visitors with vision impairment. Services for visitors with physical and intellectual disabilities will be expanded during the coming year.

Evaluation and visitor research carried out during the year included exit interviews with 4000 visitors, 93 per cent of whom said they were satisfied or very satisfied with their visit, and rated exhibition quality very highly. Most admired features were the spectacular architecture with its bold colours, large open spaces and lake views, the variety and quality of the exhibitions, the First Australians gallery, the computer interactives and the multimedia components. When asked what they did not like about the Museum, 31 per cent said 'Nothing — it's all wonderful'. Others nominated problems with wayfinding (14 per cent) and the darkness of the galleries (9 per cent).

The overwhelmingly positive visitor reaction contrasts sharply with early media stories suggesting that the new Museum was controversial or problematic. While the bold architecture, innovative displays and inclusion of sometimes difficult subjects surprised some commentators, it is precisely those aspects which subsequent visitors have praised. The strong reaction of some media commentators certainly proved that the subjects displayed and debated in this Museum are both historical and living issues, and worthy of continuing public debate.

The Museum demonstrated continuing public relations and marketing success during the year with overwhelmingly positive media coverage, and a number of special interest stories on Museum exhibitions and events which helped to attract additional visitors.

## Exhibitions

After opening at the National Museum, *Gold and Civilisation* toured to the Melbourne Museum and was replaced by *Australia's Lost Kingdoms*, mounted in collaboration with the Australian Museum. *To Mars and Beyond: Search for the Origins of Life*, our second exhibition with Art Exhibitions Australia Ltd, opened in December. The Museum will continue to monitor the price structure of temporary exhibitions, as evidence shows that they are disadvantaged by the Museum's free general admission and must also compete with other Canberra attractions.

The initial Focus Gallery exhibition on the Museum's construction was replaced with *Homemade Treasures* from the Museum of Childhood in Perth and then *I am Woman Hear me Draw*, the works of leading feminist cartoonist Judy Horacek. In the Torres Strait section of the First Australians gallery the Alfred Haddon Collection, on loan from Cambridge University, was replaced by the *Paipa* exhibition which opened in July 2002. There were also three story changes within the Eternity gallery. As part of the Museum's commitment to keeping exhibition content in the permanent galleries fresh and relevant, the Museum was able to become a showcase for objects from nearly 100 collections held by other organisations and private individuals.

The Museum's annual exhibition of political cartoons, *Bringing the House Down: 12 Months of Australian Political Cartoons*, opened at Old Parliament House in December and then toured to Melbourne, Albury and Perth. Touring exhibitions and similar outreach activity will be a priority commitment in the year ahead.

## Public programs and events

During the year, the Museum also set a benchmark with its imaginative approaches to public programming, targeting of new audiences and interpretation of social history. Among other memorable events, children were asked to be curators for a day to show off their treasures, adults sought Museum expertise on conserving their own treasures, and as well as continuing its own extensive program of in-house performers, the Museum hosted the inaugural national conference on performance in cultural institutions in February.

This year also saw Tracking Kultja: The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultural Festival which brought remote Indigenous communities to Canberra for a week of music, performance and craft, the launch of the Writers in the Museum program for children, and the first In Sight on Site artists-in-residence program with Elaine Russell and Ann Ferran. Thousands of young people were drawn to the Museum for the Sky Lounge: Cinema Under the Stars evenings in the Garden of Australian Dreams featuring bands, entertainment and cult 1950s space movies related to the exhibition *To Mars and Beyond: Search for the Origins of Life*.

Speakers and special forums hosted during the year included the Australians in Antarctica forum with a live cross to Casey Station, the Museum Directors' debate on the extinction of Australia's megafauna; and the Frontier Conflict: The Australian Experience forum which brought experts, including the Museum's critics, from around the country. Some forums dealt with issues of immediacy such as the impact of the devastating bushfires in New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory in December–January.

A large number of public lectures and gallery talks, many reflecting the latest research findings in a diverse number of subjects, were delivered during the course of the year. Some of these lectures were in support of the permanent and major temporary exhibitions, such as *To Mars and Beyond: Search for the Origins of Life*, and others were associated with major commemorative and celebratory events.

During the year, I accepted a number of requests to speak at conferences or forums on subjects ranging from education to alliancing. These public forums extended awareness of the Museum and its role into a number of different public arenas and the Museum's broad subject matter, unusual architecture and development history continue to make it interesting to a wide range of conference organisers and special interest groups. Further details of these presentations are in Appendix 4. I also responded to issues in the public arena by contributing articles or letters to newspapers including the *Australian*, the *Age* and the *Sydney Morning Herald*.

## Schools Programs

A success in which the Museum takes particular pride is the achievement of the Schools Programs in attracting nearly 83 000 student visits during the year. The spirit of inquiry within the Museum, and its blend of scholarship and engagement has been strengthened by the collaboration with Reed Education Australia (Rigby division) in which the Museum has provided the content of 27 books and other materials for primary school children across Australia. Other achievements have included a collaboration with Ryebuck Media and ScreenSound Australia to produce video material for secondary students, and the series Talkback Classroom which in 2001–2002 gave selected students the opportunity to interview seven prominent politicians or opinion makers. The forums were staged in the Museum's Studio, broadcast on Triple J and webcast to schools.

## Research

Thanks to the support of the Australian Research Council, five important research initiatives are now underway, involving collaborations between the Museum and universities and other institutions across the country. The Museum has also forged its own collaborations to research a range of specific conservation challenges, including DNA testing and the conservation of both bark paintings and photographic images. Another research collaboration, a CD-ROM and book, *People of the Rivermouth: The Jobarr Texts of Frank Gurrmanamana*, was produced with the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies.

## Finance

The funding review undertaken at the Prime Minister's request provided an excellent indicator of the Museum's performance. The outcome was accepted by the Ministers and coordinating agencies, and was used as the basis for Expenditure Review Committee deliberations for the 2002–2003 budget.

Commercial revenue at the Museum was below expectation this year, despite demonstrated visitor approval of the quality of the Museum's shop and catering outlets. This result needs to be seen against the context of a difficult operating and fiscal environment and a downturn in the world economy with its inevitable impact on Australia. The Museum is now assessing alternate commercial opportunities to provide additional revenue sources in the years ahead. These include potential opportunities in consultancy-based activities, partnerships or joint venture arrangements for exhibition development and revised retail delivery arrangements, including e-commerce facilities.

The Museum's financial statements have again received an unqualified report by the Auditor-General. The Statement of Financial Performance reports an operating surplus of \$25 591 596 for the year ended 30 June 2002 (compared to \$140.224 million in 2000–2001). However, if the revenues relating to the Capital Use Charge funding are removed, the Museum's underlying result is an operating deficit of \$3.721 million. This deficit is within pre-approved budget expectations and in accordance with the agreement with the Minister for Finance for the first full year of operations at Acton. It is my expectation that following the outcomes of the 2002–2003 Budget deliberations delivered in May 2002, and with the impact of enhancements to commercial operations, the Museum will move out of the underlying deficit situation in the coming 2002–2003 financial year.

## Information and communication technologies

During the year, the Museum completed a major strategic review of its information and communication technologies systems. As a result, a new organisational structure was introduced to provide for the future development of information technology systems, exhibition multimedia and online content and service delivery. A new web architecture is also expected to be implemented during 2002–2003.

## THE YEAR AHEAD

The National Museum has made a major impact with its Acton Peninsula operations, and will continue to generate positive comment and visitor enthusiasm for its spectacular building and innovative exhibitions. The time has now come to expand operations beyond the Canberra site.

A substantial proportion of Australians have never been to Canberra, or cannot hope to visit more than once or twice in their lifetime. To serve those people, a greater emphasis on outreach programs is called for. These may range from million dollar travelling exhibitions to small installations which travel to schools or shopping centres, and will include the major upgrade of the website and online programs. Broadcasting will also be an important means of keeping schools, subject specialists and communities in touch with events at the Museum.

The Museum will stage its first overseas exhibition when a survey of Australia's Indigenous culture and communities opens at the Guangzhou Museum of Art in December 2002 to mark the thirtieth year of diplomatic relations between China and Australia. Cultural exchanges have also been explored with other Chinese museums in areas of National Museum expertise such as conservation, multimedia and storytelling.

On Acton Peninsula, the cartoon exhibition *Bringing the House Down: 12 Months of Australian Political Cartoons*, will open in December 2002, replacing *To Mars and Beyond: Search for the Origins of Life* which travels to the Melbourne Museum. *Paipa*, about the culture and migration of the Torres Strait Islanders, opened at the Museum in July 2002, as did *Hickory Dickory Dock*, a tribute to the long running ABC children's television show, *Play School*.

*Rare Trades*, the Museum's exhibition on skilled manual work and ancient trades, opens in Melbourne at the Scienceworks Museum in February 2003, and after appearing at the National Museum it moves to the South Australian Maritime Museum in December 2003. Development of the international exhibition *Outlawed: Bushrangers, Rebels and Revolutionaries* is well advanced and it is scheduled to open later in 2003.

We expect to have a new strategic plan in place next year which will take the Museum forward for the next five years. A review of current exhibitions and programs will also be implemented. The Museum must also complete the conversion of the Hospice building on Acton Peninsula into community consultation and conservation spaces, library use, volunteer accommodation and other facilities. In addition, we are committed to the vision of the Friends of the National Museum to retain and build membership and increase the national ownership of this exciting Museum. Improving the energy efficiency of the building, making the Garden of Australian Dreams more useable for public programs during winter and improving the acoustics in the Hall are also priorities for the year ahead.

## FUTURE CHALLENGES

Many programs and customer services are of necessity labour-intensive. Human resources issues will remain important in the future. Further to this is the need for the Museum to expand, to win capital investment to construct a new wing to allow further exploration of the huge themes of land, nation and people. Of all the criticism directed at the Museum, most has been about not what it included, but rather what it left out.

## A TEAM EFFORT

Just as the National Museum of Australia was constructed under a unique alliancing contractual system, so it runs now as a team effort. The Museum is grateful for the speed and eagerness with which many other institutions have collaborated with us — including museums and galleries, universities and research centres, hundreds of community groups and many other agencies of government.

The Museum particularly wishes to acknowledge the considerable support of the Minister for the Arts, the Hon. Rod Kemp and the former Minister, the Hon. Peter McGauran, and the work of the Chairman of Council, the Hon. Tony Staley and other Council members. Many thanks also to Senator Richard Alston and officers of the Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts for their support during the budget process. Bob Edwards and Art Exhibitions Australia Ltd also deserve thanks for their hard work and support in the development of the *Gold and Civilisation* and the *To Mars and Beyond: Search for the Origins of Life* exhibitions.

Finally, thanks must go to all those who work at the Museum as staff, volunteers or contractors. They have demonstrated in this most busy year that they are committed to delivering the highest quality of service to the customer and making the Museum a special and ever improving place. They have continued to provide the professionalism, skills, knowledge and creativity that has enabled the Museum this year to fully translate the Government's vision into reality.



Dawn Casey  
Director

16 August 2002