## CONTENTS

1. **Caroline Turner**  
   Editorial: Tomorrow’s Museums

5. **Iain McCalman**  
   Museum & Heritage Management in the New Economy

17. **Dawn Casey**  
   Case Study: The National Museum of Australia

25. **Elaine Heumann Gurian**  
   What is the Object of This Exercise?: A Meandering Exploration of the Many Meanings of Objects in Museums

37. **Howard Morphy**  
   Seeing Aboriginal Art in the Gallery

51. **Paul A. Pickering**  
   Conserving the People’s History: Lessons From Manchester and Salford

59. **Dorreen Mellor**  
   Arterfacts of Memory: Oral Histories in Archival Institutions

68. Future Shots: Prominent Australians Share Their Thoughts on Museums of the Future

71. **Ralph Elliot**  
EDITORIAL:
TOMORROW’S MUSEUMS

CAROLINE TURNER

An aerial view of the new National Museum of Australia on Canberra’s Acton Peninsula.
Source: Ashton Raggatt McDougall, Robert Peck von Hartel Trethowan. Architects in Association

At the beginning of the twenty-first century museums worldwide are coming under increasing scrutiny as public institutions. They are taking on new roles and using new means of communication with audiences. Two volumes of Humanities Research — this issue for 2001 and the first volume for 2002 — will be devoted to this subject. The Humanities Research Centre and the Centre for Cross-Cultural Research at the Australian National University are both vitally concerned with the future of museums as cultural heritage institutions and are both involved in research projects and partnerships with museums and cultural institutions, nationally and internationally.

Museums in our contemporary globalised world are far more than repositories of the history of “nations” or single national narratives. They reflect culture in its broadest sense and diverse community concerns as well as transnational ideas. Their mission statements are as much concerned with education as with
preserving objects. The move away from the traditional focus on objects (artefacts, documents, books and art works) of significance to individuals and societies is a theme taken up by Elaine Gurian in her seminal article in this volume. More and more, however, as other contributions in this volume indicate, museums and other heritage institutions such as libraries, have also become forums for public debate, broadly based classrooms, memorials and places of mourning, sites of social interaction and creative encounters, and even zones of spiritual experience and places for healing of community trauma. Old and new technologies are generating new ways of seeing and experiencing. The new inclusiveness in many museums of minorities, especially Indigenous groups, and the presentation of multiple perspectives and issues of controversy offer new directions for the future.

Thus museums today can be seen as critical to a nation’s understanding of itself in the future, of potential enormous significance to subaltern groups within societies and to humanity as a whole. New types of museums and heritage sites have emerged, including those, such as ecomuseums, which emphasise sustainable economic development for local communities, cultural tourism sites to share natural and material heritage with visitors, or “keeping places” for objects sacred to Indigenous cultures which cannot be shared with others. In some museums today the emphasis is on preserving the culture of a particular group, in other cases it is multifocussed inclusiveness and in yet other cases the concept is of environment or heritage belonging to all human beings (i.e. the debate over the destruction of the Afghan Buddhas). A redefinition of the functions of museums to include contributions to cultural survival and revival of subaltern groups as well as dominant ones, poses new and complex questions for those charged with administering these institutions. Some of these critical questions are reserved for our 2002 volume, which also has a special focus on new developments in museums in the Asia-Pacific region.

The modern museum is a by-product of social changes which saw private collections opened to public use and the creation of national museums. The Louvre, one of the first modern museums, is an example of a museum as a national focus for bringing together a nation’s history in times of great social change. Its early collections embraced, not only those of the former Kings, but collections of material from buildings, memorials, churches destroyed in the Revolution and were magnificently, if controversially, augmented by the imperial conquests of Napoleon and colonial expansion. Although ostensibly a museum devoted to all human civilisation, it was ultimately the national museum of France. In the US, the circumstances of the eighteenth-century revolutionary war against Britain necessitated preserving knowledge of the nation’s birth and the communication of “core” values, resulting in almost a national obsession with museums of history. The national parks commemorating nineteenth century Civil War battle sites completed from the 1930s to the 1960s are an example of national mourning and healing by commemorating the bravery of both sides in one of the most bitter of civil war conflicts which sometimes literally pitted brother against brother. What the battlefield parks tended to ignore in this equation was the issue of human slavery and it has been left to more recent US museum developments, including Afro-American museums to fill this gap.

In Australia, science, history and natural history museums, libraries and art galleries developed in each of the nineteenth century colonies as part of initiatives to create a “civilised” society. National museums have been largely a product of the second half of the twentieth century and we lacked a national social history museum until the opening of the new Museum of Australia in March 2001. The Australian War Memorial in Canberra, the national consolidation of a deep need for memorialising the sacrifices of war was, like the “Digger” memorials put in place in every small town after the first World War, a com
CAROLINE TURNER Tomorrow’s Museums

munity response to incredible trauma. Until the opening of the new National Museum of Australia, the War Memorial could indeed be described as the national history museum for Australians. Interestingly this was a concept of nation forged in international conflict, beginning with Gallipoli. It is still one of the most visited museums in Australia. The new National Museum is more focussed on Australia’s domestic history.

In Australia today, museums, art museums, heritage organisations, libraries and archives are facing considerable challenges. They may be valued contributors to society, including through knowledge enhancing research and cultural tourism, but they are also expected to raise varying proportions of their own revenue and to justify what they do in quantitative terms related to the national economy. They are also part of new attitudes to culture in this country and must address new approaches to history. Iain McCalman and Dawn Casey discuss some of the challenges in important contributions to this volume, first delivered at a major summit on Australia’s future convened by the Academies of Humanities and Social Sciences. In this volume also Howard Morphy, Paul Pickering, Doreen Mellor and Ralph Elliott, together with a variety of Australian museum professionals, discuss critical issues for the future of museums as well as new approaches to culture and history and to researching and communicating knowledge.

While museums have always needed to be research based institutions, one controversy emerging today in Australia is whether the economic pressures and programming changes, including an emphasis on new technology, are eroding the research base. Does it matter if “curators” become “content developers” — probably not but if research is not done then obviously the intellectual core of the museum and its educational authority is diminished. Tomorrow’s museums will reflect, one hopes, new partnerships between museums, universities and other educational institutions. Some partnerships, and their scholarly and popular results, are described in this volume, and suggest ways forward.

Museums in Australia today are more and more presenting and examining issues of controversy — two, or more, sides to a story especially that of Indigenous contacts with Europeans. What is going on in Australian museums today may be a redefinition of Australian culture and society. Australian museums reflect what has been occurring in this country for the last fifty years. Many are developing programs which interact with very large numbers of people and many, including the National Museum of Australia, emphasise the personal stories of ordinary people. There is more emphasis on women, on preserving the environment, on Indigenous issues, and on the rich variety of migrant experiences that go into the make-up of our multicultural society. Undoubtedly, this points to a redefinition of Australian culture and society. The widening community involvement in museums today can, as Dawn Casey, Director of the National Museum of Australia puts it, promote participation amongst those sections of the community “… who have typically been excluded or alienated by conventional participation and communication processes.” Nevertheless, as we know, cultural interaction is not always on equal terms. A new conservatism has emerged towards history in some museums overseas and similar pressure may be exerted here. Let us hope that the new inclusiveness in museums in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries does not suffer a reaction with the subsequent return of less nuanced national narratives which, in the process, exclude many from the story.
INTRODUCTION: CULTURAL HERITAGE — PUBLIC GOOD AND ECONOMIC AGENT

There is no disputing that museums, art museums, heritage organisations, and archives are valued highly in Australia. However much lobby groups or governments might disagree about what constitutes worthwhile cultural heritage and about how that heritage should be presented, there is broad consensus about its importance to national psychic health. In a climate of diminishing state provision for public culture, we have just witnessed a major investment by the Commonwealth Government in a new National Museum of Australia.

This kind of investment derives from a bipartisan appreciation of the value of cultural heritage organisations as agents of public good. Major cultural heritage organisations (CHOs) are seen by most governments as necessary to modern democracy. They enable a multi-ethnic population of citizens to participate in evolving new senses of national identity out of a diversity of experiences, values and traditions. There is a realisation across the spectrum of Australian politics — witnessed in the Centenary of Federation celebrations around the country — that our population has differing historical heritages, and that these heritages must be retrieved, cherished, and renegotiated if we are to maintain Australia as a cohesive democracy with an appropriately healthy sense of civility and social responsibility.

Yet the very governments that fund these institutions as agents of public good undervalue them as agents of economic growth. Like cultural institutions more broadly, CHOs are still seen predominantly as part of a worthy but essentially hobbyist and elitist publicly-funded 'welfare' sector, or as a 'natural' by-product of human society that requires no conscious planning or stimulation. Above all, governments and economic planners have failed to appreciate CHOs as dynamic contributors to the new information-based, globally-influenced, knowledge economies of the twenty-first century.

Global knowledge economies are generally defined by their focus on performance in three seminal areas: education, research and development, and information and communications technologies. Collectively, these areas comprise the OECD-defined index for investment in knowledge.
The Commonwealth Government’s recent innovation plan, ‘Backing Australia’s Ability’, seeks to institute comprehensive and long-term policies to stimulate our development as a global knowledge economy capable of competing in the markets of the future. Many of the proposals in the innovation action plan are excellent. It is impossible to underestimate the importance of stimulating new skills, ideas and commercial initiatives through research and development alliances between university, government and private industry. But why has this process been confined to science and technology? By implication CHOs are viewed neither as productive industries in need of research and development nor as sources of intellectual innovation and experiment on which our future competitive knowledge economy will depend.

‘Backing Australia’s Ability’ singles out biotechnology and agribusiness as crucial nodes for research and development investment, but says nothing, for example, about encouraging the growth of cultural and social informatics in the knowledge society of the future. Cultural informatics encompasses the human application of the information revolution. It is defined as the interdisciplinary study of information content, representation, technology and applications, and the methods and strategies by which information is used in organisations, cultures and societies. In the United States, Canada and Europe, cultural informatics is a burgeoning field for government, university and private industry investment. Museum and heritage management has been in the vanguard of developing this new knowledge form. In the United States, Europe and parts of Asia, CHOs are fast integrating with information management systems to generate both theoretical and applied innovations in cultural informatics. This is manifested in new degree programs, expert conferences, and research collaborations with heritage institutions, technology industries and universities. Australia has also achieved a great deal, but without conscious investment we will soon no longer be in a position to participate in building this new knowledge matrix of the future. Our economic competitors are not making the same mistake.

Take the relevant examples of Britain, Singapore and New Zealand, where similar processes of policy-making for innovation are under way. In the British Government’s Green Paper, ‘Culture and Creativity’, stress is laid on ‘the key role that culture and creativity play in the government’s educational and industrial policies’. ‘Culture and Creativity’ acknowledges the importance of the cultural sphere as a sector of the economy that continues to experience vigorous growth in Britain and throughout the globe. But it also recognises that cultural research and development constitutes an essential catalyst of future innovation: ‘creative talent will be crucial to our individual and national economic success in the economy of the future’.

It is a truism that a spirit of innovation and experiment is difficult to inculcate. Otherwise everyone would do it. Recent research in Singapore identifies the neglect of the humanities as the ingredient hampering an otherwise highly sophisticated knowledge society from taking a lead in innovation. Investment in science and technology alone has failed to generate the intuitive, pluralistic and multidimensional modes of thinking necessary to twenty-first-century innovation.

Historians and economists have long debated what it was that gave British society the innovatory psychology to trigger the first industrial revolution in the mid-eighteenth century. Most scholars now agree that, whatever else was involved, the open, critical spirit that sprang out of Nonconformist religious and educational culture played a crucial role in shaping the first industrial generation of entrepreneurs and inventors. In short, culture, science and technology were part of a holistic mix, without which intellectual combustion would not have occurred.

No wonder, then, that Tony Blair asserted in his stunningly successful recent election campaign: “For too long arts and culture...
stood outside the mainstream, their potential unrecognised by government. That has to change, and ... it will ... In the twenty-first century, we are going to see the world increasingly influenced by innovation and creative minds. Our future depends on creativity.”

1. MUSEUMS AND HERITAGE ORGANISATIONS AS CULTURE INDUSTRIES

Recognition that culture is big business, is not new; neither is it new to point out that changing patterns of consumption and rising real incomes are fostering a growth in demand for cultural goods and services through the industrialised world. But it is worth reaffirming this basic economic case in the more specific context of museum, art museums, and heritage organisations.

ATTENDANCES

First we need to note that there are a lot of these cultural heritage institutions: research of three years ago shows that there were then more than 1700 such public institutions across Australia. Moreover, these institutions took an enormous diversity of forms outside the more familiar ones of museums, art museums, and archives, including historical theme parks, science and technology centres, house museums, memorial and commemorative institutions and interpretation centres.

Plenty of people visit them. The Australian Bureau of Statistics survey of attendance at Selected Culture/Leisure Venues in April 1999, indicated that total attendance at museums is in excess of sixteen million people per year and the figure is slightly higher for art museums. Around 20 per cent of the Australian population aged fifteen and over had visited a museum at least once in the previous year, and among these is a very high percentage of school age children — the consumers and innovators of the future.

TOURISM

The figures of Australian museum attendance climb to between 60 and 70 per cent when international tourists are polled, a vitally important economic indicator given that tourism is now the world’s largest industry. Around 700 million people travel the world...
every year and economists predict that at the present rate of growth this figure will reach a staggering 1.6 billion people by 2020. Moreover, it is relevant to note that cities and regions containing world heritage listings are the most popular tourist destinations.

Last year more than 600,000 people visited the Australian War Memorial in Canberra, and the figures are on target to exceed that considerably this year. Similarly, official estimates of likely attendance at the new National Museum of Australia fell far short of actual attendance figures which are over 450,000 already (figures as at 26 July 2001).

Even considered on a more modest local and regional scale, museum and heritage institutions constitute an astonishing source of actual and potential economic vitality for communities, councils, businesses and tourist bodies. Arresting the decline of the bush has to be among our most serious national concerns. Local museum and heritage activity can provide additional sources of community income and employment, diversify vulnerable economies, and strengthen local identity and morale.

Research undertaken in 2000 on three historical mining towns, Maldon in Victoria, Burra in South Australia, and Charters Towers in Queensland, showed that visitors spent $102-164 each day in the towns and surrounding regions, adding $2-4.5 million to the annual gross regional product. Or, to take another relevant example, income generated in Australia last year from the sale of Aboriginal crafts, many of which were channelled through museum and heritage outlets, was in excess of $200 million.

CIVIC INFRASTRUCTURE

Museums and heritage organisations are also a key element of the hidden infrastructure that gives modern cities a competitive edge when seeking to attract international businesses to locate and relocate. This is one reason that Singapore funds them generously and this presumably lay behind the thinking of New South Wales Premier Bob Carr in 1997 when he announced a ten-year plan to position Sydney as a major intellectual and arts centre. Under Premier Kennett Victoria also embarked on an unprecedentedly high level of expenditure on museums, art museums and CHO's. Such cities become places where those with the highest disposable incomes want to live and to raise their children.

EDUCATION INDUSTRIES

Culture industries, particularly the museum and gallery sector, play a vital educative role in establishing the mutual cultural understandings and connective tissues for developing international trade and business markets. Schools in Queensland have for some time fostered the teaching of Asian languages as a core part of the curriculum in order to underpin consumer and business relations of the future. Likewise, the Asia-Pacific Art Triennial at the Queensland Art Gallery has drawn many thousands of Queenslanders into new understandings and connections with modern Asian societies and cultures. Conversely, the international reputation of this Triennial exhibition and festival as the premier global forum of modern Asian art has brought a new respect for and understanding of Australia throughout the Asia-Pacific region.

GLOBAL AND REGIONAL MARKETS

Our economic competitors have shown themselves well aware of cultural heritage activities as agencies of long-term social diplomacy and trade development, which is why countries such as Sweden, France, Holland, Portugal and Belgium are investing heavily in rebuilding heritage in Asia, especially South East Asia, Vietnam and East Timor. Disturbingly, Australia's relative disregard of the importance of cultural heritage diplomacy in favour of engagements motivated by short-term or instant trade benefits, has produced a situation where we are being sidelined from such heritage initiatives. A new Europe-Asia League for cultural heritage has recently been founded that explicitly excludes Australia. It also seems likely that the UNESCO proposal to
build a new national museum of East Timor will be undertaken in cooperation with Portugal rather than Australia. An undervaluing of the role of heritage in rebuilding communities and nations could lead us to squander the good will that has been built up through other forms of aid and diplomacy.

2. CULTURAL HERITAGE ORGANISATIONS: INNOVATION AND THE NEW ECONOMY

The fact that a number of CHOs in Australia have managed to become key sites of innovative research and development in spite of a disadvantaged funding climate highlights the folly of excluding them from the enhanced benefits of government research and development programs such as ‘Backing Australia’s Ability’. Of course, museums and heritage organisations have long possessed some specialised research dimensions, but these have grown and diversified as CHOs have moved beyond their traditional roles as collectors, preservers, and custodians of material culture into interpreters, teachers, and popular disseminators of diverse cultural products.

Mapping the Character and Needs of Heritage Consumers

For a start, CHOs have had to pioneer research into the nature of museum publics. Proposed museum exhibitions are now subjected to intensive preliminary consultation and trial among cross-sections of the public, using a variety of polling techniques and comparative international research data. Publicly-funded heritage organisations have to justify their existence and measure their success through their ability to attract mass audiences within a highly competitive leisure economy. This has forced them to develop sophisticated calibrations of the ethnic, age, class, gender, and religious characteristics of their potential audiences, as well as understandings of the communicative processes needed to reach and retain them. This type of research has become part of the body of disciplinary theory and practice that must be absorbed by modern museum and heritage professionals. It is customarily published by heritage organisations, in collaboration with university researchers, through the medium of scholarly presses, online publications, specialist journals and the like.

Research into Communicative and Learning Processes

As interpreters, as well as preservers, of heritage significance, CHOs have also had to develop theoretical and applied research expertise into how these diverse audiences experience and process heritage information and images. CHOs are in the business of having constantly to discover and tell stories in ways that appeal to consumers already schooled in sophisticated information processes. As a result CHOs have become vital components of the educational infrastructure of modern industrialised countries. By comparison with most educational institutions their remit is also exceptionally wide. They must reach and retain audiences from the very young to the elderly, from those with tertiary qualifications to those with none at all, from those who speak English as their first language to those who do not, from international tourists wanting instant histories to specialist local audiences looking for reflections of their particular experiences.

Social Applications for Information Technologies

CHOs find themselves at the forefront of developing human uses for new information and multimedia technologies, particularly in the customising of software applications and the development of useful content for these technologies. Today, the collections of museum, libraries and heritage organisations are likely to be digital as well as material, and their audiences may live thousands of miles from the physical space where the institution is located. Web portals, narrow and broadband broadcast facilities, and video, film and print productions have become as important as the display cabinets of old. Partnerships with
The South Seas Project is funded by a Strategic Partnership with Industry Research and Training grant (SPIRT) and is a collaboration of scholars, curators and technicians from the ARC Special Research Centre for Cross-Cultural Research at the ANU, the Australian Centre for Science, Technology and Heritage in Melbourne, and the National Library of Australia. These researchers are developing a networked hypermedia encyclopaedia of ocean voyaging and cross-cultural encounter in the age of Enlightenment that at the same time disseminates via the internet the library’s unique manuscripts, maps and visual materials on the Pacific voyages of Captain Cook. In the process, researchers have had to pioneer new forms of software application capable of generating stable and reliable standards of documentation and of absorbing future data increases without damaging the overall coherence and integrity of the project. The result will be both a highly innovatory educational product and a set of information tools that can be applied to a wide variety of other hypermedia uses.

A few examples:

The Discovery Centre of the CSIRO, the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney and the National Museum of Australia have collaborated with advanced computing specialists from the Australian National University’s Super Computer facility to develop new museum applications for the virtual reality immersion system known as ‘The Wedge’, designed and built at the ANU. The National Museum collaboration, for example, has produced the brilliantly creative ‘kSpace’, where children from six to fourteen are encouraged to create cities or motor vehicles of the future. After designing their prototypes on a series of touch screens, children can see their inventions projected in a dazzlingly colourful 3D virtual reality theatre. This innovative project has also been linked into national and state educational curricula in a way that demonstrates the dynamic integration of the cultural heritage and educational sectors.

industries and university researchers to generate new methods of communicating their stories have become commonplace.

The Discovery Centre of the CSIRO, the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney and the National Museum of Australia have collaborated with advanced computing specialists from the Australian National University’s Super Computer facility to develop new museum applications for the virtual reality immersion system known as ‘The Wedge’, designed and built at the ANU. The National Museum collaboration, for example, has produced the brilliantly creative ‘kSpace’, where children from six to fourteen are encouraged to create cities or motor vehicles of the future. After designing their prototypes on a series of touch screens, children can see their inventions projected in a dazzlingly colourful 3D virtual reality theatre. This innovative project has also been linked into national and state educational curricula in a way that demonstrates the dynamic integration of the cultural heritage and educational sectors.
A systematic series of information and multimedia research and development projects are also under way in a new Consortium for Research and Information Outreach (CRIIO), which brings together a complementary synergy of museum curators, information experts and researchers from the National Museum of Australia, the Australian National University, and the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies. One of the first fruits of this collaboration, an innovative CD Rom application called People of the Rivermouth, will be displayed at this summit. It presents complex anthropological research into kinship patterns and customary life of an aboriginal community at Maningrida in Arnhem Land, in ways that impart vivid, multi-sensual viewer understandings. Its unique multimedia template will be used to develop a further range of 'virtual exhibitions' centred on the origins and development of spectacle, multimedia and special effects in Europe, Australia and Asia.

A different type of applied research project is being pioneered by the Institute of Cultural Research (ICR) in Sydney. Combining researchers and experts from the University of Western Sydney, the University of Technology, Sydney, and the Migration Heritage Centre of New South Wales, the ICR has developed collaborations with a variety of cultural heritage institutions and local government agencies to enrich the social life and stimulate the civic infrastructures of Sydney's newer migrant communities and precincts.

One of these, undertaken with the Art Gallery of New South Wales (AGNSW), is developing an exhibition of Asian religious art and culture in close consultation with local migrant communities in the inner West of Sydney. Innovative in its combination of community and scholarly expertise, the exhibition also works to attract visitors from outside conventional museum constituencies.

A similar series of research and development heritage collaborations at the University of South Australia aim to reinvigorate economic and civic infrastructure in rural South Australian towns and communities. The University's Australian Architecture Archive and History Research Group are involved in a series of projects with local museums and heritage organisations to develop visitors centres and architectural innovations for Broken Hill and for Aboriginal communities at Warburton. They are also undertaking heritage surveys for the towns of Woomera, Eden Park and Mitcham.

One aim of such projects is to build, in areas where cultural and civic infrastructure is relatively thin, a new type of blended cultural research precinct. This seeks to link universities, CHOs, and tourist and other businesses so as to create research and entertainment consortia. Out of these institutional clusters, new economic and culturally dynamic synergies are being generated. Research experiments and productive economic and social outcomes are treated as mutually interactive. Tourism becomes a magnet to other activities.

Decades ago, the social wastelands of London's Financial City area in the East End and Docklands were revitalised by building a series of cultural and heritage institutions as nodes of new economic and cultural activity. Goldsmiths University, the Maritime Museum at Greenwich, the Museum of London and the Barbican cultural complex now routinely join together in a series of economically and culturally productive relationships. Tourism and its penumbra of service industries now flourish in the district.
Screens from the CD-Rom application ‘People of the Rivermouth’.
Most Australian cities have evolved such cultural research precincts quite unconsciously in areas where CHOs and Universities happen to be physically contiguous, particularly when these locations are also attractive to tourists. Networks of cultural institutions, businesses and university research bodies cluster together around Circular Quay in Sydney, along the south riverbank of Brisbane and Melbourne, along the Torrens River near the University of Adelaide and in the Freemantle docklands of Western Australia.

Most recent of such precincts is the Acton Peninsula in the ACT, where this summit is taking place and a national research cluster is being consciously developed. Here we find colocated such institutions as the National Museum of Australia, the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, ScreenSound Australia, the Learned Academies of Science, the Social Sciences and the Humanities, and the ANU’s Humanities Research Centre, Centre for Cross-Cultural Research, Asia Pacific School of Economics and Management and new National Europe Centre. This dynamic cluster of heritage, teaching and research bodies is beginning to work together, on the pattern of the Smithsonian on the Mall in Washington DC, to develop a series of intermeshed research and development initiatives that will generate innovatory research, mount joint educational and training programs, and attract a variety of tourist constituencies. One aim will be to disseminate this research to national publics through electronic and broadcasting portals, and to attract private investment capital into the area so as to stimulate further innovation.

INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVES

CHOs have also shown themselves acutely aware of the need to look outwards beyond Australian national horizons to engage in intellectual collaborations, exchanges and dialogues of an international and transnational kind. It is a truism that the building of new knowledge economies in the future must be done in concert with the explosive forces of globalisation.

Museums, art museums and CHOs have long cultivated international relationships through their need to negotiate international loans and exchanges, to repatriate or share key cultural heritage items, and to collect items of national heritage that have been dispersed abroad.

In the past decade, however, an awareness of the need to develop international linkages for the pursuit of research has led to a much more systematic and integrated process of international dialogue and cooperation between universities and CHOs. The linchpin of this process has been the international Consortium of Humanities Centres and Institutes (CHCI), administered from Harvard University under the directorship of Professor Marjorie Garber. This US-based but internationally focused organisation gathers together a huge network of university humanities centres, private funding foundations and CHOs. Membership includes the Getty, Smithsonian, Field, and Huntington Museums, and the Ford, Getty and Rockefeller Foundations. The CHCI coordinates information exchanges, develops joint policy initiatives, brokers national and international collaborations, and lobbies government and funding bodies.

In 1999, on the initiative of the ANU’s Humanities Research Centre, assisted by Griffith University and the Queensland Art Gallery, the CHCI convened its annual conference in Brisbane, the first time it has gathered outside the USA. Building on the success of this meeting, an Australian Consortium of Humanities Centres and Institutes, has been founded to develop international and national research, funding and teaching collaborations between university and public CHOs.

Already this has produced several collaborative global R&D projects. One of the most ambitious will link the Humanities Research Institute for all ten campuses of the University of California in the USA, with James Cook University, the Humanities Research Centre,
ANU, and the National Museum of Australia. The project 'Peoples and Places' proposes to focus on urgent common problems of environmental heritage in rainforests and deserts of Latin America, the United States and Australia. Such global collaborations and relationships not only gather new sources of expertise and funding for Australia's nascent knowledge economy, but enable us to keep in the forefront of the breathtaking pace of change within global information environments.

INTEGRATION OF SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY AND CULTURAL HERITAGE RESEARCH

It is typical of such collaborations also, whether national or international, that no sharp distinction is drawn between cultural, scientific and technological research. The above initiative, for example, has already engendered linkages with the Rainforest and Reef Cooperative Research Centre in Cairns and Townsville, as well as a variety of ANU faculty involved in arts, computing, forestry, geology and resource management research, and, of course, with the full spectrum of scientific, cultural and environmental curatorial staff of the National Museum of Australia.

The report of November 2000, 'Knowledge, Innovation and Creativity', commissioned by the Ministry of Research Science and Technology in New Zealand, stressed that innovation and creativity are complex social and cultural processes that cannot be achieved without close arts-science linkages and convergences. The idea that innovation and creativity can be fostered in a society by cordonning off the cultural from the technological and scientific spheres was seen as both unrealistic and myopic. The report states, "One sign of this convergence is the increasing use of 'creativity' in scientific and technological contexts; another is the use of 'industry' and 'product' in arts contexts."

CONCLUSION

In the new global, information-based, knowledge economies of the future, the ability to be innovative both in generating research and applying it for social use is more important than at any other time since the onset of the first industrial revolution in the second half of the eighteenth century. Yet the psychic and intellectual properties that generate a creative, innovative, and critical culture during times of bewildering social and technological change remain elusive.

The governments of Britain, Singapore and New Zealand, to take examples of clear relevance to Australia, have recently stressed a precious pioneering spirit of innovation. Australia needs it.

IAIN McCALMAN

Acknowledgements

My thanks to Lindy Shultz, Christine Clark and Caroline Turner for their help in researching and preparing this paper.

References

Agenda for the Knowledge Nation: Report of the Knowledge Nation Taskforce (Canberra: Chifley Research Centre, 2001).


Mark Considine, et al., The Comparative Performance of Australia as a Knowledge Nation: Report to the Chifley Research Centre (Canberra: Chifley Research Centre, 2001).

The Hon. Dr D.A. Kemp, Knowledge and Innovation: A Policy Statement on Research and Research Training (Canberra: AusInfo, 1999).


CASE STUDY: THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AUSTRALIA

KEYNOTE ADDRESS FROM
THE HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES SUMMIT
26-27 JULY 2001, CANBERRA

DAWN CASEY

Today’s case study is provided by the new National Museum of Australia, a museum which is not only a showcase for Australian cultural and environmental history, but also a research base and centre of excellence. About 450,000 visitors have passed through the exhibitions since March, but while they may spend hours exploring the subject matter of Tangled Destinies or Nation or Horizons, they only see the surface. There is very much more going on behind the scenes, including collection care, professional consultancies, future planning and research, which the general public never see. And yet it is research in particular which underpins the content and the quality of the visitor experience as well as the broad range of the Museum’s work.

Why do we have museums? The traditional definition describes a permanent institution in the service of society which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits material evidence of people and their environment. However a more realistic question might be: why do we have a National Museum of Australia — most especially now, in an era of restricted Commonwealth expenditure on cultural institutions of all kinds?

The answers are quite interesting. The obvious one, of course, is to commemorate the Centenary of Federation with an appropriate and lasting expression of national history and identity. But in addition to the chance to exploit that very fortunate anniversary, there was the realisation that funding of national cultural institutions is a sound investment.

The outcome is not just job creation and tourist income — though they do provide a significant and measurable economic return on investment — but also a profound contribution to the evolving discussion of national history and identity, the place of Indigenous peoples in a pluralistic settler society and the aspirations of present day Australians for the future.

National museums are always, in part, a nation building exercise and national governments are mindful of their potential impact on public discourse. Today I also hope to show you that the government’s investment in the National Museum of Australia has given us a number of other assets, many of them planned in advance but some arising incidentally from the development process, which we intend to exploit for our own and the national good.

But let me return to the Museum’s official role as anticipated by the National Museum of Australia Act 1980.

The functions of the Museum are:
* To develop and maintain a national collection of historical material;
* To exhibit historical material from the national historical collection;
* To exhibit material in written form or in any other form relating to Australia or to a foreign country;
* To conduct, arrange for or assist in research into matters pertaining to Australian history; and
* To disseminate information relating to Australian history and information relating to the Museum and its functions.
Dawn Casey walks through the Main Hall of the National Museum of Australia during its construction. Photo: Fairfax.
The Museum shall use every endeavour to make the most advantageous use of the national collection in the national interest.2

So — we must collect, care for and display heritage material, create exhibitions, research Australian history and disseminate the results. While based in Canberra, we must also remain mindful of our national obligations. And in the real world of 2001, we must do all of the above with a strictly finite set of resources: human, financial and technological.

Fortunately the Museum’s brief but intense development phase left us in March 2001 with a number of valuable assets.

First and foremost is the building itself, which I suspect has added its own chapter of daring innovation to the history of Australian architecture. Our choice of the Alliancing method for its construction was also a world first for a building project of this size. I believe that Alliancing has now so successfully demonstrated the value of an integrated team in achieving cost, time and quality targets and a ‘no dispute’ culture, that it is likely to become a trend in Australia’s construction and other industries.

Other assets or resources which we now enjoy and intend to use as we plan our future development are as follows: people, technology, and partnerships. Let me tell you something of our aspirations in the fields of research, innovation and outreach and how we intend to put those resources to good use in the future.

One of the very great pleasures of the Museum development process was the chance to work with a number of wonderful people, expert advisers prominent in many academic fields — and I am pleased to recognise some of them in the audience today. Their contribution to our great re-telling of the national story not only ensured that the Museum’s approach was detailed, balanced, richly diverse and based on sound scholarship, but also left us with a group of good friends and respected colleagues whose advice we certainly hope to use in the future.

The diversity of specialist contributions was far greater than any of us expected at the start and encompassed a number from the sciences as well as the humanities. My head of Research and Development, Dr Mike Smith, has observed that to develop just one exhibition, Tangled Destinies, we commissioned at various stages the work of an economic historian, an archaeologist, a lexical cartographer, a bio-geographer, a geo-morphologist and cultural geographer, as well as specialists in the history of natural history, the history of science, and the history of ethnography. Truly an outstanding example of cross-cultural research.

Among the Museum’s human resources I therefore include the many external advisers who helped create the Museum’s content and who in many cases have a continuing relationship with us, and also of course the Museum’s staff. It takes an enormous range of skills to run a museum, and I am pleased to say that we have acquired a correspondingly diverse and talented staff with expertise in everything from visitor service and children’s programs to multimedia technology and commerce.

I mentioned technological resources as another major asset which we intend to build on in the future. Based on the infrastructure we already have and that which we intend to acquire, in this field the sky is definitely the limit.

The National Museum’s recent Strategic Review of Communications Technologies and Information Management recognises that new information and communication technologies offer the Museum important opportunities as an educator, a research institution and a leisure venue for the general public. The use of new communications media on-site, and the off-site distribution of museum content through broadcasting, narrowcasting and the Internet, can strengthen our role not just as a repository of artefacts but as a source of knowledge and information for many audiences, including those who may never visit Acton Peninsula at all.
Our challenge in the next years will therefore be to use information communication technologies effectively to create and maintain a position in the very competitive information market. We will use these technologies to extend our professional practice across the spectrum: research of all kinds, collections acquisition and management; the interpretation of objects and historic events for different audiences, the presentation of knowledge in interesting and user-friendly ways, and the capacity to support and illustrate debates about contemporary issues.

We are already well placed to meet these challenges. If you have seen the rest of the museum you will know that we have a rotating audio-visual theatre called 'Circa', a three-dimensional animation sequence downstairs in 'kSpace', a programmable Optiwave screen in the Main Hall, and a number of interactive multimedia exhibits and databases throughout the public spaces. When it is not being used for conferences, this Visions Theatre also runs a digital video program based on historic film footage. The Museum’s web site provides another medium through which virtual visitors can explore our collections, exhibitions and multimedia resources and more is being added as the web site evolves and expands.

In the next few years we intend to maintain a leading position in information and communication technology by continuing to invest in technology infrastructure on Acton Peninsula and dramatically increasing our outreach potential. These are some of the outcomes we hope to see:

* Targeted technology — that is, services intended specifically for some of our priority audiences. These would include school students up to Year 12, who frequently have good classroom access to information technologies and are keen to exploit any interesting sources which can deliver curriculum needs. Then there are adult Internet users who like to browse for information or entertainment options and on-line shopping, and subject specialists who want access to our collections or databases.
* Broadcasting — we aim to carry out web-casting immediately, and after further development explore other broadcast media to create innovative, specialist programming, perhaps in co-production with suitable partners.
* Collections management — we intend to acquire an industry standard digital collections management system which can combine acquisition, treatment, storage and exhibition records, images and intellectual property information for all items in the National Historical Collection.
* Digitisation — the continuing large scale creation of digital copies of collection items or exhibition support material, particularly those in which the museum has intellectual property.
* Central media repository — an integrated central repository to include all digital images, audio and video sequences which will have many uses, including off-site delivery of Museum programs.

* e-Business — the capacity to deliver online retail facilities in order to enjoy the benefits of efficiency, public profile and income generation.

* Collection support strategies — the acquisition of digital images, audio and video to support or complement the interpretation and historical significance of key collection items. The historic video footage associated with the ABC broadcast van is an obvious example.

In addition to acquiring and managing its own technology applications, the Museum has already been involved in a number of creative business partnerships whose work can be seen throughout the exhibition areas.

The amazing welcome space leading into the Gallery of First Australians in which life-size dancers appear on the walls, and the program reacts to the footprints of visitors passing through the space, was created in collaboration with the CSIRO and of course the performers, Bangarra Dance Theatre.

‘kSpace’, an installation which encourages young people to design a city and transport system of the future in which their own faces appear, was devised in collaboration with ANU computer specialists.

The electronic ‘big map’ of Australia on which visitors can call up a variety of interactive programs was developed in collaboration with CDP Media and Massive Interactive of Sydney.

We call these ‘muscle media’ — powerful media — and their impact on visitors can be seen on any day of the week. They are immensely attractive, and crowds usually gather to see the programs run through their paces or to take their turn in ‘driving’ the interactive controls. And of course they have also become showpieces for our business partners, who are now able to point to them as examples of what is possible in a museum context when you merge the power of technology with the power of the human imagination.

Another partnership about to be exploited for a variety of useful outcomes is a three-way relationship between the Museum, the Murray-Darling Basin Commission and Charles Sturt University.

Picture this: an innovative collaboration between a major natural resource management organisation, the Museum, and the Centre for Rural Social Research at Charles Sturt University, in which each of the partners maintains parallel goals, while involving rural communities in a number of associated programs and voluntary initiatives.

Among many other outcomes, this project intends to consider a number of essential questions:
* How can community participation in natural and cultural resource initiatives be activated and maintained?
* How can such participation be made meaningful to the participants themselves?
* How can the diversity of the communities within the Murray-Darling Basin be recognised, valued and reflected in such participation?
* How can participation be promoted amongst those sections of the community who have typically been excluded or alienated by conventional participation and communication processes?
* How can the power imbalances and the limitations of articulation and social skills be overcome?

The National Museum and the Murray-Darling Basin Commission share an agenda for increasing public participation in their respective programs — natural resource management and the preservation and communication of Australian history. The research expertise of the Centre for Rural Social Research in social research, rural communities and participation will then be required to answer the key questions. Most importantly, this project recognises that the goal of activating communities and individuals to support natural resource management involves an engagement with local cultural heritage — it cannot be imposed from outside. That is where the notion of a partnership becomes so particularly appealing — the need for organisations to draw on expertise and experience across very different fields.

I find the potential of this project particularly exciting — and once again, I would like to point out that it is only possible now that a cultural institution with the very wide ranging interests of the National Museum exists to provide an essential link in such partnerships. Government investment in a museum has given rise to the potential for a variety of research and development projects of enduring value.

So — what now lies ahead for the Museum? What are our aspirations for the future?

In brief:
* To continue to delight and inform our on-site visitors;
* To build and exploit our influence as a major interpreter of Australian history;
* To maximise the use of information technologies for the use of specialist off-site audiences;
* To become an acknowledged lead player in the knowledge economy;
* To better manage heritage collections; and
* To continue developing our skills base both internally and through strategic alliances.

I have already mentioned our commitment to work with evolving new technologies, to develop the potential of assets such as our Broadcast Studio and our web site. The Museum development process included the installation and testing of a sophisticated technical infrastructure based on multimedia. That infrastructure now supports interactive multimedia programs throughout the Museum, but it is only a beginning.

Although we have developed highly successful schools programs here on Acton Peninsula, we now hope to reach out with our webcasts to all classrooms with Internet access, or children working at home with their parents. We want any Internet user to feel encouraged to explore our online resources and take away whatever they need in terms of information, research materials or perhaps just entertainment. Our ambition is to be known as a reliable and authoritative source for any enquirer, whether their need is images to accompany a school project or in-depth information contributing to a research paper or thesis.

We are also a member of the Consortium for Research and Information Outreach set up by the ANU. The Consortium involves the humanities, social science and environmental science sectors of the ANU and brings together in a formal relationship leading multimedia
researchers to enhance the use of digital communication technologies by cultural institutions. Our physical proximity to the ANU and its Centre for Cross-Cultural Research makes the proposed sharing of facilities, infrastructure and even staff particularly easy.

Our chief ambition for the future is to make the National Museum a familiar and valued part of Australia’s cultural landscape. I believe that the Museum’s influence will grow, in the sense that our innovative way of presenting history will be considered worthy of imitation. We have positioned ourselves a little differently from other museums and are already recognised for a popular and unusual approach to social and natural history, based on sound scholarship. This means challenges ahead as we try to stay competitive in a market already well supplied with leisure choices in general, and quality museums in particular. However we have started out with gratifyingly large visitor numbers and very high visitor satisfaction levels, and I am confident that we can sustain this very positive trend.

As many of you know, it took successive Australian governments a very long time to proceed from the Pigott Report of 1975 to the establishing Act of 1980 and finally the built Museum of 2001. It will now be our duty as well as our pleasure to prove that such a major investment of public resources was well made, and will lead on to public benefits both foreseeable and not yet guessed at, well into the future.

DAWN CASEY

Endnotes
1 Paraphrased from the International Council of Museums definition (see http://www.icom.org)
2 Paraphrased from Section 6 (see http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/legis/cth/consol_act/nmosa1980297/)
“Why did the Serbs and Croats shell each other's historic sites when they had so little ammunition and these were not military targets?” I routinely ask my museum-studies graduate students this question when I lecture. “To break their spirit,” is always the instantaneous answer. Museums, historic sites, and other institutions of memory, I would contend, are the tangible evidence of the spirit of a civilised society. And while the proponents of museums have long asserted that museums add to the quality of life, they have not understood (as the graduate students did when confronted by the example of war) how profound and even central that ‘quality’ was.

Similar examples reveal the relationship between museums and ‘spirit’ in sharp detail. Why did the Russians proclaim, one day after the Russian revolution had succeeded, that all historic monuments were to be protected even though they most often represented the hated czar and the church? Why did Hitler and Stalin establish lists of acceptable and unacceptable art and then install shows in museums to proclaim them while sending the formerly acclaimed, now forbidden, art to storage? Why did the Nazis stockpile Jewish material and force interned curators to catalogue and accession it, intending to create a museum to the eradicated Jews? Why, when I was in the rural mountains of the Philippines, was I taken to hidden closets that served as museums, curated by tribal members, holding the material of the tribe’s immediate past, secreted from the dealers who were offering great sums for the same material?

In adversity it is understood, by antagonists and protagonists alike, that the evidence of history has something central to do with the spirit, will, pride, identity, and civility of people, and that destroying such material may lead to forgetting, broken spirits, and docility. This same understanding is what motivates cultural and ethnic communities to create their own museums in order to tell their stories, in their own way, to themselves and to others.

Yet neither the museum profession nor its sibling workers in the other storehouses of collective memory (archives, libraries, concert halls, and so forth), makes (nor, I would contend, understands) the case clearly about its institution’s connectedness to the soul of civic life. In cities under duress you can hear the case being made better by mayors and governors. Dennis Archer, the mayor of Detroit, said recently while being interviewed on the radio, ‘Detroit, in order to be a great city, needs to protect its great art museum, the Detroit Institute of Art.’ It was Archer and his predecessor, Coleman Young, who championed and underwrote the latest incarnation of Detroit’s Museum of African American History. And it was Teddy Kolik, the fabled former mayor of Jerusalem, who was the chief proponent of the creation of the Israel Museum (and who placed one of his two offices within the building). Mayors know why museums are important. Citizens, implicitly, do too. A recent survey in Detroit asked people to rate the importance of institutions to their city and then tell which they had visited. The Museum of African American History was listed very high on the important list and much lower on the “I have visited” list. People do not have to use the Museum in order to...
assert its importance or feel that their tax dollars are being well spent in its support.

The people who work in museums have collectively struggled over the proper definition and role of their institutions. Their struggle has been, in part, to differentiate museums from other near relatives — the other storehouses of collective memory. The resulting definitions have often centered on things — on objects and their permissible uses. I believe the debate has missed the essential meaning (the soul, if you will) of the institution that is the museum.

OBJECTS ARE NOT THE HEART OF THE MUSEUM

The following discussion will attempt to capture that soul by throwing light on the shifting role of museum objects over time. It will show how elusive objects are, even as they remain the central element embedded within all definitions of museums. This essay will also postulate that the definition of a ‘museum object’ and the associated practices of acquisition, preservation, care, display, study, and interpretation have always been fluid and have become more so recently. Objects did not provide the definitional bedrock in the past, although museum staff thought they did. I will show that museums may not need them any longer to justify their work.

But if the essence of a museum is not to be found in its objects, then where? I propose that the answer is in being a place that stores memories and presents and organizes meaning in some sensory form. It is both the physicality of a place and the memories and stories told therein that are important. Further, I propose that these two essential ingredients — place and remembrances are not exclusive to museums. And, finally, I contend that the blurring of the distinctions between these institutions of memory and other seemingly separate institutions (like shopping malls and attractions) is a positive, rather than negative, development.

Not meaning to denigrate the immense importance of museum objects and their care, I am postulating that they, like props in a brilliant play, are necessary but alone are not sufficient. This essay points out something that we have always known intuitively: that the larger issues revolve around the stories museums tell and the way they tell them. When parsed carefully, the objects, in their tangibility, provide a variety of stakeholders with an opportunity to debate the meaning and control of their memories. It is the ownership of the story, rather than the object itself, that the dispute has been all about.

This essay suggests what museums are not (or not exactly) and, therefore, continues the dialogue about what museums are and what makes them important, so important that people in extremis fight over them.

WHAT IS AN OBJECT?

"Ah, but we have the real thing", museum professionals used to say when touting the uniqueness of their occupation. When I began in museum work, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the definition of museums always contained reference to the object as the pivot around which we justified our other activities. Although there were always other parts of the definition, our security nonetheless lay in owning objects. With it came our privileged responsibility for the attendant acquisition, its preservation, safety, display, study, and interpretation. We were like priests and the museums our reliquaries.

The definition of objects was easy. They were the real stuff. Words were used like ‘unique’, ‘authentic’, ‘original’, ‘genuine’, ‘actual’. The things that were collected had significance and were within the natural, cultural, or aesthetic history of the known world. Yet some assert its importance or feel that their tax dollars are being well spent in its support.

The people who work in museums have collectively struggled over the proper definition and role of their institutions. Their struggle has been, in part, to differentiate museums from other near relatives — the other storehouses of collective memory. The resulting definitions have often centered on things — on objects and their permissible uses. I believe the debate has missed the essential meaning (the soul, if you will) of the institution that is the museum.

OBJECTS ARE NOT THE HEART OF THE MUSEUM

The following discussion will attempt to capture that soul by throwing light on the shifting role of museum objects over time. It will show how elusive objects are, even as they remain the central element embedded within all definitions of museums. This essay will also postulate that the definition of a ‘museum object’ and the associated practices of acquisition, preservation, care, display, study, and interpretation have always been fluid and have become more so recently. Objects did not provide the definitional bedrock in the past, although museum staff thought they did. I will show that museums may not need them any longer to justify their work.

But if the essence of a museum is not to be found in its objects, then where? I propose that the answer is in being a place that stores memories and presents and organizes meaning in some sensory form. It is both the physicality of a place and the memories and stories told therein that are important. Further, I propose that these two essential ingredients — place and remembrances are not exclusive to museums. And, finally, I contend that the blurring of the distinctions between these institutions of memory and other seemingly separate institutions (like shopping malls and attractions) is a positive, rather than negative, development.

Not meaning to denigrate the immense importance of museum objects and their care, I am postulating that they, like props in a brilliant play, are necessary but alone are not sufficient. This essay points out something that we have always known intuitively: that the larger issues revolve around the stories museums tell and the way they tell them. When parsed carefully, the objects, in their tangibility, provide a variety of stakeholders with an opportunity to debate the meaning and control of their memories. It is the ownership of the story, rather than the object itself, that the dispute has been all about.

This essay suggests what museums are not (or not exactly) and, therefore, continues the dialogue about what museums are and what makes them important, so important that people in extremis fight over them.

WHAT IS AN OBJECT?

"Ah, but we have the real thing", museum professionals used to say when touting the uniqueness of their occupation. When I began in museum work, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the definition of museums always contained reference to the object as the pivot around which we justified our other activities. Although there were always other parts of the definition, our security nonetheless lay in owning objects. With it came our privileged responsibility for the attendant acquisition, its preservation, safety, display, study, and interpretation. We were like priests and the museums our reliquaries.

The definition of objects was easy. They were the real stuff. Words were used like ‘unique’, ‘authentic’, ‘original’, ‘genuine’, ‘actual’. The things that were collected had significance and were within the natural, cultural, or aesthetic history of the known world. Yet some
could also be unique — the last passenger pigeon or the last dodo bird. Objects from both categories, unique and example, were accessioned into the collections. Museums owned the objects and took on the responsibility of preserving, studying, and displaying them.

Yet even within these seemingly easy categories there were variations. In asserting uniqueness (as in made-by-hand), specific authorship was associated with some objects, such as paintings, but not with others, most especially utilitarian works whose makers were often unknown. Some unique works were thought of as ‘art’ and some as ‘craft’; with some notable exceptions, art was individualized as to maker but craft was not. This practice, which is now changing, made it possible to do research and mount shows of the work of particular artists in some, but not all, cultures.

WHAT ARE COLLECTIONS?

In the early 1970s the American Association of Museums (AAM) established an Accreditation Commission. As its members deliberated, they discussed whether groups of living things could be called collections and whether institutions that so ‘collected’ should be classified as museums. Heretofore, ‘museums’ were conserving things that had never been, or now were no longer, alive. The field debated if the living things in botanical gardens, fish in aquaria, or animals in zoos were ‘collections’; if so, were those institutions, de facto, museums? It was decided that, yes, at least for funding and accreditation purposes, they were museums, and the living things they cared for were likewise to be regarded as collections, and hence objects.¹

Yet there were other institutional repositories that cared for, protected, preserved, and taught about objects but were not called museums nor necessarily treated by museums as siblings. Archives and libraries, especially rare-book collections, were considered related but not siblings even though some museum collections contain the identical materials. There were also commercial galleries and private and corporate collections that were considered by museum professionals to be different and outside the field, separated supposedly by an underlying purpose. A legal distinction of ‘not-for-profit’ was considered an essential part of the definition of a museum. It was clear that while objects formed the necessary foundation upon which the definition of a museum might rest, they were not sufficient in themselves.

CAN NON-COLLECTING INSTITUTIONS BE MUSEUMS?

The Accreditation Commission of the AAM next sought to determine if places that resembled collections-based museums but did not hold collections (i.e. places like not-for-profit galleries and cultural centres) were, for purposes of accreditation, also museums. In 1978, they decided that, in some instances, galleries could be considered museums because, like museums, they cared for, displayed, and preserved objects even though they did not own them. Ownership, therefore, in some instances, no longer defined museums.

There was also the conundrum brought to the profession by science centres and children’s museums, mostly of the mid-twentieth century. Earlier in the century, these places had collected and displayed objects, but by mid-century children’s museums and science centres were proliferating and creating new public experiences, using exhibition material that was built specifically for the purpose and omitting collections’ objects altogether. How were these ‘purpose-built’ objects to be considered? They were three-dimensional, often unique, many times extremely well made, but they had no cognates in the outside world. Much of this exhibit material was built to demonstrate the activity and function of the ‘real’ (and now inactive) machinery sitting beside it.

The Adler Planetarium, applying to the AAM for accreditation, also caused the AAM to reconsider the definition of a museum. The
The planetarium's object was a machine that projected stars onto a ceiling. If institutions relied on such 'objects', were these places museums? Had the profession inadvertently crafted a definition of objects that was restricted to those things that were created elsewhere and were then transported to museums? That was not the case in art museums that commissioned site-specific work. Certainly the murals of the depression period applied directly to museum walls were accessionable works of art—an easy call! Portability, then, did not define objects.

In 1978, the Accreditation Commission of the AAM, citing these three different types of non-collections-based institutions (art centres, science and technology centres, and planetariums), wrote specific language for each type of museum and, by amending its definition of collections for each group, declared these types of organizations to be ... museums! They elaborated: 'The existence of collections and supporting exhibitions is considered desirable, but their absence is not disabling...'. In response, many museums set about creating more than one set of rules — one for accessioned objects, and another for exhibitions material — and began to understand that the handleable material they used in their classes (their teaching collections) should be governed by a different set of criteria as well.

Nevertheless, there were often no easy distinctions between the handleability of teaching collections' objects and those others deserving preservation. The Boston Children's Museum loan boxes, for example, created in the 1960s, contained easy-to-obtain material about Northeast Native Americans. But by the 1980s, the remaining material was retired from the loan boxes and accessioned into the collections because it was no longer obtainable and had become rare and valuable.

Even purpose-built 'environments' have, in cases such as the synagogue models in the Museum of the Diaspora in Tel Aviv, become so intriguing or are of such craftsmanship that they, decades later, become collections' objects themselves. So, too, have the exhibitions created by distinguished artists, such as parts of Charles and Ray Eames's exhibit Mathematica: A World of Numbers and Beyond.

Dioramas were often built for a museum exhibition hall in order to put objects (mostly animals) in context. These display techniques, which were considered a craft at the time they were created, were occasionally of such beauty, and displayed artistic conventions of realism (and seeming realism) so special, that today the original dioramas themselves have become 'objects', and many are subject to preservation, accession, and special display. The definition of objects suitable for collections has, therefore, expanded to include, in special cases, material built for the museum itself.

**WHAT IS REAL? IS THE EXPERIENCE THE OBJECT?**

In the nineteenth century, some museums had and displayed sculptural plaster castings and studies. The Louvre and other museums had rooms devoted to copies of famous sculptures that the museum did not own. The originals either remained in situ or were held by others. People came to see, study, and paint these reproductions. They were treated with the respect accorded the real thing. For a long time, museums and their publics have felt that though there were differences between the 'original' and reproductions, both had a place within their walls.

Similarly, reconstructed skeletons of dinosaurs have long appeared in museums. They usually are a combination of the bones of the species owned by the museums plus the casting of the missing bones from the same species owned by someone else. Sometimes museums point out which part is real and which is cast, but often they do not. 'Real', therefore, takes on new meaning. Curators recognise that the experience of seeing the whole skeleton is more 'real', and certainly more informative, than seeing only the authentic, unattached bones that do not add up to a complete or understandable image.

Likewise, multiples or limited editions were always considered 'real' as long as the intention of the artist was respected. Thus, the fact that Rodin and many others authorised
the multiple production of some pieces did not seem to make each one any less real or less unique. The creation of additional, though still limited, copies, using the same etching plates, but after the death of the artist, caused more problems. But often, while acknowledging the facts of the edition, such works also hung in museums and, if the quality was good, were accessioned into their collections.

IS THE IMAGE THE OBJECT?

The twentieth century’s invention of new technologies has made multiples the norm and made determining what is real and what that means much more difficult. While original prints of movies, for example, exist, it is the moving image that the public thinks of as the object rather than the master print of film. Questions of authenticity revolve around subsequent manipulation of the image (e.g. colonisation, cutting, or cropping) rather than the contents of any particular canister.

Printed editions with identical multiples are considered originals, and become more valuable, if signed; unsigned editions are considered less ‘real’ and certainly less valuable. In such cases one could say that the signature, rather than the image, becomes the object. Photographs printed by the photographer may be considered more real than those using the same negative but printed by someone else. With the invention of digital technology, many identical images can be reproduced at will without recourse to any negative at all. So the notion of authenticity (meaning singularity or uniqueness) becomes problematic as images indistinguishable from those in museums are easily available outside the museum. It is the artist’s sensibility that produced the image. It is the image itself, therefore, that is the object.

IS THE STORY THE OBJECT?

Of the utilitarian objects of the twentieth century, most are manufactured in huge quantities and therefore could be termed ‘examples’. Which of these objects to collect often then depends not upon the object itself but on an associated story that may render one of them unique or important.

The objects present in the death camps of the Holocaust were, in the main, created for use elsewhere. There is nothing unique in the physicality of a bowl that comes from Auschwitz-Birkenau. These bowls could have been purchased in shops that sold cheap tableware all over Germany at the time. However, when the visitor reads the label that says the bowl comes from Auschwitz, the viewer, knowing something about the Holocaust, transfers meaning to the object. Since there is nothing aside from the label that makes the bowl distinctive, it is not the bowl itself but its associated history that forms importance for the visitor.

DOES THE CULTURAL CONTEXT MAKE THE OBJECT?

As Foucault and many others have written, objects lose their meaning without the viewer’s knowledge and acceptance of underlying aesthetic or cultural values. Without such knowledge, an object’s reification even within its own society cannot be understood. Often the discomfort of novice visitors to art museums has to do with their lack of understanding of the cultural aesthetics that the art on display either challenges or affirms.

By accessioning or displaying objects, the creators of museums exhibitions are creating or enhancing these objects’ value. Further, society’s acceptance of the value of museums themselves likewise transfers value to their objects. When museums receive gifts or bequests from a major donor’s holdings, they are inheriting — and then passing on — a set of value judgments from someone who is essentially hidden from the visitor’s view. A particular aesthetic pervades such museums because of the collections they house and the collectors who gave the objects in the first place.

This issue of values determining choice comes into sharper focus when museums begin acquiring or presenting collections from cultures whose aesthetic might be different.
When installing a show of African material in an American art museum, should the curator show pieces based on the values inherent in the producing culture (i.e., focusing on the objects that attain special aesthetic value within that culture), or should the curator pick objects that appeal more to the aesthetic of his or her own culture? This question, the source of much debate, arises when museums attempt to diversify their holdings to include works created by a foreign (or even an assimilated) culture quite different from that which produced the majority of their holdings. For example, the selection of which African or Latino art to accession or show has to do not with authenticity but with quality. The notion of quality has been sharply debated between the scholar within the museum and the peoples representing the culture of the maker. So the question becomes: who selects the objects and by what criteria?

In material created by Indigenous artists, the native community itself sometimes disagrees internally as to whether the material is native or belongs to a modern tradition that crosses cultural boundary lines. Some within the native population also argue about the birthright of the artist; blood quantum, traditional upbringing, and knowledge of the language sometimes have considerable bearing on whether artists and their creations are considered native. In such cases, the decision about what is quality work that should be housed in a museum may have little to do with the object itself and more to do with the genealogy of the producer.

What if Your Story Has No Objects or Does Not Need Them? Is the Absence of Objects the Object?

Most collections were created by wealthy people who acquired things of interest and value to themselves. The everyday objects of non-valued or subjugated peoples were usually not collected. Often the people in the lowest economic strata could hardly wait to exchange their objects for those that were more valued, giving no thought, at the time, to the preservation of the discarded material. So it goes for most peoples during their most impoverished historical periods. Accordingly, their museums must choose among a narrow band of choices — do not tell that part of their history, recreate the artefacts and environments, or use interpretative techniques that do not rely on material evidence.

The Museum of the Diaspora in Israel, struggling with this issue more than twenty-five years ago, decided to tell the complete story of five thousand years of Jewish migration without using a single authentic artefact. It elected to create tableaux that reproduced physical surroundings in an illustrative manner based on scholarly research into pictorial and written documentation of all kinds. The museum did so because its collection could not accurately or comprehensively tell the story, and a presentation of settings that appeared ‘like new’ honoured the history of Jewish migration more than an assortment of haphazard authentic artefacts showing their age and wear. The experience, wholly fabricated but three-dimensional, became the object. It presented a good public experience, many argued, but still did not qualify as a ‘museum’. Ultimately, this total re-creation was accepted as a highly distinguished museum. The Museum of the Diaspora also presented movies, photos, and recordings in a publicly accessible form, arguing that a comprehensive presentation required material that was non-artefactual.

The U.S. African-American and Native American communities have suggested, in the same vein, that their primary cultural transmission is accomplished through oral language, dance, and song — vehicles that are ephemeral. Their central artefacts, or objects, if you will, are not dimensional at all, and museums that wish to transmit the accuracy of such cultures, or display historical periods for which material evidence is not available, must learn to employ more diverse material. It may be the performance that is the object, for example. And the performance space might need to be indistinguishable from the exhibit.
As museums struggle to do this, one begins to see videos of ceremonies and hear audio chanting. Such techniques, formerly thought of as augmentation rather than core interpretation, have increasingly taken on the role and function previously played by collection objects.

Even in museums like Cleveland’s Rock and Roll Hall of Fame or the soon-to-be-opened Experience Music Project, it is the sound and performance of the artists that is the artefact much more than the stationary guitar that, say, Jimi Hendrix once used. Indeed, musical instrument archives at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts and other places have long struggled with the proper presentation of their ‘artefacts’. ‘Silent musical instruments’ approaches an oxymoron.

**HOW IS THE OBJECT TO BE PRESERVED? IS THE OBJECT TO BE USED?**

The museum, in accepting an object for its collection, takes on the responsibility for its care. In doing so, collections managers follow rules organised for the safety and long-term preservation of the objects. Climate control, access restrictions, and security systems are all issues of concern to those who care for objects. Institutions devoted to music or performance transform the notion of collections and certainly the notion of preservation, because while it is true that most things are preserved better when left alone, some musical instruments are not among them. They are preserved better if played, and so, for example at the Smithsonian’s Museum of American History, they are.

Likewise, many native people have successfully argued that accessioned material should be used in the continuance of ceremony and tradition. Artefacts, rather than being relinquished to isolated preservation (and losing their usefulness), are stored in trust waiting for the time when they must again be used. In the 1980s, when native people from a specific clan or group asked for an object to be loaned for a short-term use, this was a radical notion for most natural history museums. That request now is more common and often accommodated. For example, at the end of the 1980s, the Dog Soldiers of the Northern Cheyenne requested their pipe, which the Smithsonian’s National Museum of Natural History holds, and used it in their ceremonies, after which it was returned to the museum.

Now, native museums and, less commonly, some general museums that hold native material accept objects into their collections with the express understanding that they will be loaned out and used when needed. The notion of a museum as a storehouse in perpetuity has, in these instances, evolved into the museum as a revolving loan warehouse. A long-standing and easily understood example predates this relatively new development. The Crown Jewels of the British monarchy, which are displayed in the Tower of London, are worn by the monarch when he or she is crowned. And so it has been for many centuries.

**WHOSE RULES ARE USED FOR OBJECT CARE?**

There are other fundamental rules of collections that are successfully being challenged worldwide by native people’s involvement. Collections care has been predicated on the basic notion that objects are inanimate. Though some objects were once alive, they now are no longer, and most had never been alive. Thus, collections-care policies proceeded from the assumption that objects should be preserved in the best manner possible, avoiding decay from elements, exposure, and use. Protective coverings and storage cases were designed to do just that. Extremes in the exposure to light and temperature, and all manner of pest infestation, were to be avoided. But when the museum was recognised to be neither the only nor the absolute arbiter of its material holdings, accommodation to the beliefs of the producers of the materials or their descendants became necessary.

These beliefs often included a lack of distinction between animate and inanimate. Thus, spirits, mana, fields of power, and life sources could live within an object regardless of the material from which it was made. And
that being so, the care for these living things, it was argued, is, and should be, quite different from the care of dead or never alive things. So, for example, bubble wrap, while an excellent protector of objects, does not allow for breathing or 'singing and dancing at night'. Those working with native populations in good faith have come to respect native understanding of their own objects and now provide for the appropriate life of the object. Some objects need to be fed, some need to be protected from their enemies, some need to be isolated from menstruating women. Collections are no longer under the absolute province of the professional caregivers. Storage facilities that accommodate the native understanding of their objects require new architectural designs that allow for ceremony for some and isolation from the curious for others.

WHO OWNS THE COLLECTIONS?

This change in collections use and care alters the notion of the museum as owner of its collections and opens the door to multiple definitions of ownership. These new definitions have far-reaching implications. If tribal communities can determine the use, presentation, and care of objects 'owned' by museums, can the descendants of an artist? Can the victims or perpetrators of a war event? In the recent Smithsonian National Museum of Air and Space Enola Gay exhibition controversy, it was the veterans who flew the plane and their World War II associates who ultimately controlled the access to, presentation of, and interpretation of the object. Ownership or legal title to an object does not convey the simple, more absolute meaning it did when I began in the museum field.

The notion that if you buy something from a person who controlled it in the past, then it is yours to do with as you wish is clearly under redefinition in a number of fields. What constitutes clear title? Under what rules does stolen material need to be returned? What is stolen, in any case? Do the Holocaust victims' paintings and the Elgin Marbles have anything in common? The issue is so complex and varied that countries forge treaties to try to determine which items of their patrimony should be returned. Similarly, museums in countries like New Zealand, Canada, and Australia have developed accords that, in some cases, give dual ownership to collections. Museums and the native populations then jointly control the presentation, care, and even return of the objects, or museums give ownership to the native populations, who, in turn, allow the museum to hold the objects in trust. Ownership has developed a complex meaning.

IF I OWN IT CAN I HAVE IT BACK, PLEASE?

Some of this blurring of ownership began with native people maintaining that some items should not be in the hands of museums regardless of their history. That this would be claimed for human remains held in collections was easy to understand. Almost all cultures do something ceremonial and intentional with the remains of their people, which, in almost all instances, does not include leaving bodies for study in boxes on shelves. So when native people started to call for the return of their ancestors' remains, there was an intuitive understanding of the problem in most circles. This, however, did not make it any easier for the paleontologists and forensic curators whose life work had centred on the access to these bones, nor for the museum-goer whose favorite museum memories had to do with shrunken heads, mummies, or prehistoric human remains. The arguments that emanated from both sides were understandable and difficult to reconcile. It was a clear clash of world views and belief systems. To the curators it seemed that removal of human remains within museum collections would result in the unwarranted triumph of cultural tradition and emotionalism over scientific objectivity and the advancement of knowledge.

As it turned out, the Native American Grave Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA)' made clear that Native American tribes had rights to the return of their sacred material and to their ancestors'
remains and associated grave goods, regardless of the method by which museums had acquired the material. However, the emptying of collections into native communities, as predicted by the most fearful, did not happen. Rather, museums and native communities, working together in good faith, moved into an easier and more collegial relationship, as between equals. In most cases, the objects returned are carefully chosen and returned with due solemnity. Some tribes have chosen to allow some forensic samples to be saved, or studied prior to reburial, and some have reinterred their ancestors in ways that could allow for future study should the native community wish it.

NAGPRA struck a new balance between the world view of most museums and their staff (which endorsed a rational and scientific model of discourse and allowed for access to as much information as could be gathered) and the spiritual interests of traditional native peoples. A variety of museum practices were broadened, and visitors began to see the interpretation of exhibitions changed to include multiple side-by-side explanations of the same objects. For example, Wolves, an exhibition created by the Science Museum of Minnesota, presented scientific data, native stories, conservation and hunting controversies, and physiological information together in an evenhanded way. An argument for multiple interpretations began to be heard in natural history museums whose comfort level in the past had not permitted the inclusion of spiritual information in formats other than anthropological myth.

HOW OLD IS AN OBJECT?

The scientific dating of artefacts used in religious practices often holds little relevance to the believers. When an object such as the Shroud of Turin, for example, is carbon dated and shown to be insufficiently old, the problem of writing its museum label becomes complex. An object held in Te Papa, the Museum of New Zealand, was returned to an iwi (tribe) that requested it, with all the solemnity and ceremony appropriate. So too went records of its age and material composition, at variance with beliefs held by the Maori people. But if, as the Maori believe, spirit or mana migrates from one piece to its replacement (rendering the successor indistinguishable from its more ancient equivalent), then what relevance is the fact that dates or materials are at variance? The object’s cultural essence is as old as they say.

Similarly, when restoration of landmarks includes the replacement of their elements (as is routinely the case in Japanese shrines), the landmark is said to be dated from its inception even though no material part of it remains from that time. That does not upset us. So even something so seemingly rational and historical as dating is up for interpretation.

THE OBJECT IS OFF-LIMITS. IT IS NONE OF YOUR BUSINESS

Museums, even in their earliest incarnations as cabinets of curiosities, were available to all interested eyes or at least to those allowed to have access by the owners of the cabinets. In fact, part and parcel of conquest and subjugation was the access to interesting bits of the subjugated. This assumption that everything was fair game held currency for a long time. Though the notion of secret and sacred was also understood (for example, no one but the faithful could enter Mecca), this concept did not attach to museums nor to the holdings thereof. If a museum owned it, the visitors could see it if the curator/staff wished them to.

So it came as a surprise to some curators that contemporary native peoples began to make demands on museums to return not only human remains but material that was sacred and once secret. Accommodations negotiated between the museums and the native people sometimes led to agreements to leave the material in the museum but to limit viewing access. The notion that one people, the museum curators, would voluntarily limit their own and others’ access to material owned by museums came initially as a shock to the museum system. But under the leadership of sympathetic museum and native people and, further, under the force of NAG-
PRA, museums began to understand that all material was not to be made available to all interested parties.

It was the beginning of the 'It is none of your business' concept of museum objects. It held that the people most intimately concerned with and related to the material could determine the access to that material. In many cultures sacred ceremonies are open to all, and the objects in use are available for view in museum settings, but that too may change. For example, in Jewish tradition, Torahs once desecrated are supposed to be disposed of by burial in a prescribed manner. Yet some of these are available for view, most notably at the United State Holocaust Memorial Museum. There may come a time when such artefacts are petitioned to be removed for burial even though the statement they make is powerful.
WHO SAYS ALL OBJECTS NEED TO BE PRESERVED

Ownership is not always an issue; sometimes it is the preservation of the object itself that needs examination. Museums have felt their most fundamental responsibility extended to the preservation of the object, yet in returning human remains to the earth, artifacts are being intentionally destroyed. That was difficult to reconcile for those trained in preservation. Even more difficult was the belief that not all things made by hand were intended to be preserved; perhaps some should be allowed to be destroyed. The Zuni war gods preserved by museums were returned to the Zuni tribe when it was successfully proven that these could only have been stolen from grave sites. But even more difficult was the Zuni’s assertion that these objects were created to accompany the dead, and that preservation of them was therefore anathema. The war gods were returned to the Zuni, who watched over the gradual decay of these objects as they returned to the earth. In effect, the Zuni were entitled to destroy the objects that the museums had so carefully preserved.

The notion of preservation has, therefore, also been blurred. Museum personnel began to wrestle with the notion that all people do not hold preservation of all objects as a universal good. The Tibetan Lamas who create exquisite sand paintings only to destroy them later would certainly understand this.

THE OBJECT SPEAKS

I would be remiss if I did not also acknowledge the power of some objects to speak directly to the visitor, for example, in the sensual pleasure brought about by viewing unique original objects of spectacular beauty. But the notion that objects, per se, can communicate directly and meaningfully is under much scrutiny. The academicians of material culture, anthropology, history, and other fields are engaged in parsing the ways in which humans decode objects in order to figure out what information is intrinsic to the object itself, what requires associated knowledge gleaned from another source, and what is embedded in cultural tradition.

In some ways, it is because of this parallel contemporary inquiry into the ‘vocabulary’ of objects that I can inquire into the object’s changing role in the definition of museums.

WHAT ARE MUSEUMS IF THEY ARE LESS OBJECT-BASED?

Museum staff intuitively understand that museums are important — an understanding that the public shares. However, especially for the public, this understanding does not always revolve around the objects, though objects are, like props, essential to most museums’ purposes: making an implicit thesis visible and tangible. The nature of the thesis can range from explanation of the past to advocacy for a contemporary viewpoint to indication of possible future directions — in each case through a medium that presents a story in sensory form.

Museums will remain responsible for the care of the objects they house and collect, but the notion of responsibility will be, and has already been, broadened to include shared ownership, appropriate use, and, potentially, removal and return.

The foundational definition of museums will, in the long run, I believe, arise not from objects, but from ‘place’ and ‘storytelling in tangible sensory form’, where citizenry can congregate in a spirit of cross-generational inclusivity and inquiry into the memory of our past, a forum for our present, and aspirations for our future.

Coming back to definitions, the current definition of museums used by the Accreditation Program of the AAM encompasses all museums and no longer separates them by categories. Museums, in this definition, “... present regularly scheduled programs and exhibits that use and interpret objects for the public according to accepted standards; have a formal and appropriate program of documentation, care, and use of collections and/or tangible objects ...”

For the visitor, it is the experience of simultaneously being in a social and often celebratory space while focusing on a multi-
sensory experience that makes a museum effective. Virtual experiences in the privacy of one's home may be enlightening but, I think, are not part of the civilising experience that museums provide. It is the very materiality of the building, the importance of the architecture, and the prominence that cities give to museum location that together make for the august place that museums hold. Congregant space will, I believe, remain a necessary ingredient of the museum's work.

The objects that today's museums responsibly care for, protect, and cherish will remain central to their presentations. But the definition of 'objectness' will be broad and allow for every possible method of storymaking. These more broadly defined objects range from hard evidence to mere props and ephemera. I hope I have shown that objects are certainly not exclusively real nor even necessarily 'tangible' (even though the AAM uses that word). For it is the story told, the message given, and the ability of social groups to experience it together that provide the essential ingredients of making a museum important.

Museums are social-service providers (not always by doing direct social-service work, though many do that), because they are spaces belonging to the citizenry at large, expounding on ideas that inform and stir the population to contemplate and occasionally to act.

Museums are not unique in their work. Rather, they share a common purpose with a host of other institutions. We need museums and their siblings because we need collective history set in congregant locations in order to remain civilised. Societies build these institutions because they authenticate the social contract. They are collective evidence that we were here.

ELAINE HEUMANN GURIAN


Endnotes

1 'For the purposes of the accreditation program of the AAM, a museum is defined as an organized and permanent non-profit institution, essentially educational or aesthetic in purpose, with professional staff, which owns and utilizes tangible objects, cares for them, and exhibits them to the public on some regular schedule.' American Association of Museums, Museum Accreditation: Professional Standards (Washington, D.C.: American Association of Museums, 1973), p. 8.

2 ' ... owns and utilizes tangible things animate and inanimate.' Museum Accreditation: Professional Standards, p. 9.

3 An art centre 'utilizes borrowed art objects, cares for them and maintains responsibility to their owners ... [its primary function is to plan and carry out exhibitions.' American Association of Museums, Museum Accreditation: Professional Standards, p. 12. A science and technology centre ' ... maintains and utilizes exhibits and/or objects for the presentation and interpretation of scientific and technological knowledge.... These serve primarily as tools for communicating what is known of the subject matter....' American Association of Museums, Museum Accreditation: Professional Standards, p. 12. A planetarium's ' ... principal function is to provide educational information on astronomy and related sciences through lectures and demonstrations.' American Association of Museums, Museum Accreditation ..., p. 11.


INTRODUCTION

One of the great embarrassments confronting the art world in the post-colonial context is the recent history of the exclusion of much of the world’s ‘artistic’ production from the hallowed walls of the fine art galleries of the West (Sally Price’s ‘civilised places’). One might ask: how was it that it was excluded for so long and who is to blame for keeping all this art out? However, rather than attributing blame, it is much more interesting to analyse the historical process of its inclusion. The excluded objects became different after they were included not because their very inclusion magically changed their status, but because the fact of their inclusion reflects changes in Western conceptions of what art is. The process of inclusion has involved three...
significant factors: the critique of the concept of ‘primitive art’, an associated change in conceptions of what can be called ‘art’, and an increased understanding of art as a commodity. Those factors have operated in conjunction with global political and economic processes which in some contexts have empowered the agency of Indigenous artists. In this paper I will outline my theoretical argument and then apply it briefly to the Australian context, reflecting on the history of the inclusion of Aboriginal art in galleries of fine art and the significance of that change in the discourse over Aboriginal art.

The anthropology of art seems at times to have been squeezed between — and distorted by — two myths: the myth adhered to by the art market, and by some art curators, that somehow an anthropological approach to Indigenous art created its otherness and separated it from Western art works; and the anthropological myth that classifying works as ‘art’ imposed a Western categorisation upon them. These myths have a number of continuing echoes in practice: for example the emphasis in art galleries on displaying works as art, with the minimum of information lest it provide a distraction to the viewer, contrasting with the greater concern with information in ethnographic museums. This opposition has been reinforced at times by disciplinary battles over public spaces, by Indigenous and ethnic politics, and by the desire to be on the right side of the colonial/post-colonial divide. In part it has been maintained by the desire of the disciplines involved to emphasise their distinctiveness in order to maintain their separate identities and sources of funding. This motivation to maintain a structural division provides a clue to the ahistorical nature of the debate and the ever-present desire to lay blame for an unacceptable history on a rival: the art gallery can feel threatened by the ethnographic museum, the anthropologist by the art historian.

The myth concerning the role of the anthropologists in the creation of otherness of primitive art has no historical basis. Indeed in the Australian case anthropologists have played a major role in the process of including Aboriginal art within the same generic category as other people’s art, and there is evidence that anthropologists have played a similar role elsewhere. This is not to argue that all anthropologists were participants in the process. For much of the twentieth century anthropology neglected art. Non-Western art and material culture were associated with ethnographic museums and some museum curators were indeed unsympathetic to the categorisation of objects in their collections as art objects. I would argue, however, that their position was often motivated by a desire to increase the understanding of the significance to the producers of the objects in their collections. Many museum curators and anthropologists viewed the inclusion of non-European objects in the art category as a license for misinterpretation, through the imposition of universalistic aesthetic concepts and in the creation of difference at the level of meaning and significance.

‘Primitive art’ was viewed by modernist critics and connoisseurs as formally dynamic, expressive, challenging and incorporable within the Western canon; as to its meaning it explored the primeval depths of human spirituality and sexuality. It was this demeaning and ill-informed categorisation of objects as ‘primitive art’ that alienated anthropologists from the art connoisseurs and signified the gulf between their discourses. It is ironic, yet inevitable, that for many years anthropologists and connoisseurs of Indigenous art found themselves on opposite sides of the art/artefact divide. The recent challenge mounted to the category of primitive art by anthropologists and art historians, such as Coote, Shelton, Errington, Philips, Marcus and Myers, Price and Vogel has allowed museum anthropologists to reincorporate the concept of art within their theoretical discourse and may foreshadow a bridging of the divide between the anthropological and art worlds.

Part of the process of incorporating art within the theoretical discourse of anthropol-
ogy is the development of definitions that are cross-cultural and that distance the concept from its Western historical baggage. An example of such a definition is one I produced myself: art objects are ‘objects having semantic and/or aesthetic properties that are used for presentational or representational purposes’.1 I am not concerned at this stage to defend this particular definition. Any cross-cultural definition of art, just as in the case of a cross-cultural definition of religion, magic, gender or kinship, is part of a discourse that shifts the term in the direction of broad applicability while still maintaining connections to its previous place in academic discourse. The recent history of the world biases epistemology towards Western definitions, but the challenge of anthropology is in part to separate concepts from a particular past, as for example, in anthropological definitions of religion which have moved away from Christianity without excluding it. Cross-cultural definitions are as much concerned with time as with space: hence a cross-cultural conceptualisation of art must allow the analyst to encompass the fact that conceptions of art have changed in the last 400 years of Western art practice and history as much as they differ cross-culturally. As a consequence the sets of objects that get included under the rubric art change continually over time.

However in relegating Western based definitions of art to their place in a typology of possible definitions, it would clearly be naïve to neglect the impact that Western cultures — and their definitions — have had on global processes in recent centuries. The material culture of Indigenous societies has been changed as they have been incorporated within wider global processes. However those processes of articulation and transformation are highly complex — both the incorporated and the incorporators are changed thereby.2 Changing definitions of art are a microcosm of these larger processes. The increased understanding of the role of the commoditisation and trade of material culture, including art, has been a partner to the critique of the ‘primitive art’ paradigm in bringing art back into anthropology. Graburn puts this succinctly when he writes:

We now realise that practically all the objects in our ethnographic collections were acquired in politically complex multicultural colonial situations. Furthermore we can state unequivocally that unless we include the socio-political context of production and exchange in our analyses we will have failed in our interpretation and understanding.3

To this I would only add a corollary: that material culture — however it enters the discourse of art — is an important source of evidence, for anthropologists, to better understand the social conditions and historical interactions of the time of their production.

ART OR ETHNOGRAPHY A FALSE OPPOSITION

Aboriginal art is included today in the collections of every major art gallery and art museum in Australia, and is one of the world’s most visible art forms. Its inclusion within the category of fine art is no longer challenged in Australia, though elsewhere in the world this can still be the subject of controversy.4 It is easy to forget how recently this process of inclusion happened. Aboriginal art was barely recognised as a significant art form until the 1950s and it was not until the 1980s that it began to enter the collections of most Australian galleries, or gain widespread recognition as a significant dimension of Australian art.5 However it is also important not to overstate the lateness of its arrival on the world stage. In 1964 Ronald Berndt was able to write:

Australian Aboriginal art is becoming better known these days, or at least more widely known, than ever before. Once it was relegated to the ethnological section of a museum, and treated along with the artifacts and material culture of other non-literate peoples. Now it is not unusual to
find such things as Aboriginal bark paintings taking place alongside European and other examples of aesthetic expression. And because they rub shoulders with all forms of art, irrespective of cultural origin, the inference is that they are being evaluated in more general terms: that there is not only wider appreciation of Aboriginal endeavour in this respect, but that it is, almost imperceptibly, taking its place in the world of art. ... Fifteen years ago few of us would have envisaged this meteoric rise in popularity, within Australia and overseas.

It is often said that Aboriginal art first entered an Australian gallery of fine art in 1959, with the acquisition by the Art Gallery of New South Wales (AGNSW) of major works from the Tiwi artists of Melville and Bathurst Islands and the Yolngu artists of Yirrkala in north-east Arnhem Land. While this is an oversimplified account, nevertheless this gift remains a significant and perhaps, in hindsight, even transforming event. The works were acquired by Tony Tuckson, Deputy Director at the AGNSW in association with Stuart Scougall, an orthopaedic surgeon with a passion for Aboriginal art. One of the ways in which this event has been interpreted is as shattering the anthropological paradigm. For example the curator Terence Maloon puts this position clearly when he states of Tony Tuckson: 'In the role of Aboriginal art expert he had to take an opposing position to the anthropologists who to put it crudely, generally argued for the radical dissimilarity of all things traditionally Aboriginal to all things traditionally European'. According to Maloon this enabled Tuckson to lay the foundation ‘for the earliest public collection to be acquired for aesthetic rather than ethnographic reasons’. Maloon here echoes Tuckson who wrote: ‘Appreciation of Aboriginal art has widened immeasurably because the general public and the artist have been given a greater opportunity to see it as art, not as part of an ethnological collection.’ However in phrasing it ‘crudely’, arguing in effect that anthropologists have failed to recognise the cross-cultural nature of art, Maloon oversimplifies the issues involved.

It could indeed of course be argued that certain Western definitions of art themselves are inherently cross-cultural since they posit universals in human aesthetic appreciation. Clearly such a view lies behind Tuckson’s position as summarised by Maloon. He argues that:

[Aboriginal] artists make their paintings with pleasure and imagination and intuition. They put their feeling into what they do. They exercise skill and ingenuity in their use of materials; they are considerate of the ways their works are organised and elaborated and are sensitive to the resulting aesthetic effect. Bark paintings and other Aboriginal artefacts are not ethnographic curiosities, but genuine works of art. Furthermore, when non-Aboriginal people respond to bark paintings as art, they are prone to recognise ‘the underlying spirit of the imagery’ (in Tuckson’s revealing phrase).

In countering Maloon’s/Tuckson’s thesis it is necessary to isolate two strands of argument that are only loosely interconnected. The first is an essentialist view that associates art with individual creativity, technical facility, and aesthetic sensibility. The second is masked by the phrase that bark paintings ‘are not ethnographic curiosities’. I will address these issues by first stepping back in time to the debate between Tuckson and Ronald Berndt that is the initial reference point of Maloon’s argument. The debate occurs in the pages of Berndt’s edited book Australian Aboriginal Art which was published to accompany an exhibition of the same name curated by Tuckson. A ‘reading between the lines’ reveals that the book reflects a heated exchange between the two over how Aboriginal art should be exhibited, appreciated, and understood.
Tuckson certainly believed that there is something universal about the character of art objects that makes it possible to evaluate them in isolation from their cultural and social background. He wrote: [there is] "an underlying unifying quality in art that resides in a visual sense of balance and proportion, but also an underlying spirit of their imagery ... [makes it possible] for us to appreciate visual art without any knowledge of its meaning and original purpose". (emphasis in the original). In a weak sense there is nothing unremarkable about this position. It is undeniably the case that 'Western art appreciators' can make aesthetic judgments about works they know nothing about; the question remains who is included in the 'us', and are there differences in the bases of 'our' evaluations? Berndt writing in the same book acknowledged that Tuckson was at least partially right: that the appreciation of the aesthetics of Aboriginal art did attract the attention of the viewer: "however, we have attempted to go a little further — to cross over the limits of our own cultural frontiers, and to see something of the broader significance of Aboriginal art". But Berndt thought that Tuckson pushed the argument just a little too far:

Tuckson's contention is based on the universality of all art, irrespective of provenance. It is important for us to know here exactly what this means. The cultural background is not, here seriously taken into account; the function or use of the object or painting, even the identity of the artist, may be completely unknown. ... Its decorative qualities, its design, its treatment its overall appeal, are what matters; we like its lines its curves its sense of boldness, its balance and so forth. We are evaluating it in our own idiom, within a climate of our own aesthetic traditions.

While Berndt probably accurately assesses the core of Tuckson's position, Tuckson acknowledged the importance of what he referred to as the 'work of the ethnologist, archaeologist, and anthropologist' and in the examples that he analyses does indeed use ethnographic data.

In essence Berndt is arguing that although it is possible to appreciate works purely on the basis of form, this appreciation is only partial, and is biased towards the values of the viewing culture. Following from this I would argue that while people can thus obviously appreciate any work of art through the lens of their own culture's aesthetics, just as they can appreciate the aesthetic properties of found objects, they must realise that this is precisely what they are doing. They must not be under the illusion that they are experiencing the work as a member of the producing culture would. The failure to provide the background knowledge necessary to interpret the object in relation to the producers culture can then be challenged both on moral grounds and on the grounds that it impoverishes the interpretation.

The counter-argument to this challenge is covered by Maloon's statement that bark paintings 'are not ethnographic curiosities'. While he provides no explanation of what he means, his underlying premise is that, as works of art, they should not be positioned solely or even primarily as sources of information about the way of life of another culture. From this perspective art is a celebration of common humanity, and too much context distracts the viewer. Indeed he suggests that the 'spirituality' that lies behind Aboriginal art is best revealed when it is viewed as art. This second suggestion poses the greatest challenge to an anthropological perspective on art, since it deems irrelevant the particular cultural meanings associated with objects. The anthropological perspective would not deny that the search for human universals and for categories that can be applied cross-culturally is perfectly compatible with a recognition of cultural difference. But the recognition of cultural difference requires that those categories be distanced from particular Western cultural assumptions. Maloon's/Tuckson's universals are in fact not universals at all but the expression of values of a particular (and indeed today
unrepresentative) European art world. The debates that raged over Rubin’s Primitivism exhibition generated similar debates in which it was argued that key assumptions of the ideology underlying European modernism alienated the art from the societies that produced it. Bernhard Lüthi, for example, wrote:

Rubin’s love of modernism is based on the fact that it took Western art beyond the mere level of illustration. When Rubin notes that African, Oceanic or Indian artisans are not illustrating but conceptualising, he evidently feels he is praising them for their modernity. In doing so he altogether undercuts their reality system. By denying that tribal canons of representation actually represent anything, he is in effect denying that their view of the world is real.22

Interestingly if we adopt a universalistic aesthetic perspective it is difficult to understand why the art world was so tardy in recognising the value of Aboriginal art — a value which appears to lie in its formal appearance unmediated by cultural knowledge. It seems unjust to attribute to anthropologists a significant role in the failure to recognise its universal attributes unless of course their attention to meaning was too much of a distraction. It was Australian artists and curators who so singularly failed to draw attention (to paraphrase Maloon) to the ‘[exercise of] skill and ingenuity in their use of materials; [or the fact that] they are considerate of the ways their works are organised and elaborated and are sensitive to the resulting aesthetic effect.’ Indeed Margaret Preston,23 one of the few Euro-Australian artists who showed an interest in Aboriginal art until the 1950s, wrote at times as if the simple asymmetric geometry that she found so vital is almost the accidental product of a simple mind and faulty technique! She later modified her view. By way of contrast praise that issued from the pen of the anthropologist Baldwin Spencer foreshadowed Tuckson’s own (a fact that Tuckson clearly acknowledges):

Today I found a native who, apparently, had nothing better to do than to sit quietly in the camp evidently enjoying himself ... he held [his brush] like a civilised artist ... he did the line work, often very fine and regular, with much the same freedom and precision as a Japanese or Chinese artist doing his most beautiful wash-work with his brush.24

However from Tuckson’s point of view Spencer’s involvement with Aboriginal art may have symbolised the very problem that he was trying to address. While Spencer was able to see the aesthetic dimension of Aboriginal art and responded to it in terms of universal characteristics of form, the paintings in his charge remained in the National Museum, and absent from the walls of the National...
Gallery of Victoria. The paintings were part of a comprehensive ethnographic collection which included material culture objects in general, and thus the art was lost in the ethnography. It was not seen by others as art because of where it was housed and how it was exhibited.

The theory of a universal aesthetic is intertwined with a theory of viewing that opposes the art gallery to the museum. In this theory works of art should be allowed to speak for themselves. Thus they need their own space for contemplation, and though their meaning and impact will be affected by their relationship to adjacent works, and to the hang as a whole, it is desirable that the act of viewing should take place in space as uncluttered as possible by supplementary information. While the density of hangs varies, as does the amount of information provided, these broad principles apply in art galleries around the world. Museums, on the other hand, are often defined in opposition to art galleries as places where objects are contextualised by information, by accompanying interpretative materials, by dioramas, and by being seen in association with other objects. I think that it is desirable to distinguish the Western concept of 'seeing things' as art from the presumption of a universalistic aesthetic and indeed to separate 'seeing things' as isolated or decontextualised objects from 'seeing things' as art.

The real problem with Maloon's/Tuckson's position, apart from its circularity, is that Western viewers come to an art gallery already laden with information and experience that can be applied to already familiar works of European art. This information will have been acquired from seeing works in quite different contexts: not only the gallery walls, but also in publications and films, as reproductions, and so on. It is a conceit of a particularly narrow band of Western art theory and practice that the appreciation and production of art has nothing to do with knowledge of its particular art history. For Indigenous art to be seen on equal terms with Western art it requires more than the right to an isolated space. The viewer must also have some access to its history and significance. Nigel Lendon has shown that, in viewing eastern Arnhem Land bark paintings, knowledge of the social and cultural background of the works enhances the viewer's appreciation of them:

The interpretation of these paintings may be compared to how the viewer might understand Western religious or political art, or the world of allegory. In that case we expect both the viewer and the artist to bring to the exchange a prior knowledge of the social and mythic space of the narrative, or at least a recognition of the wider reality to which the image refers.

Yet it is also undeniable that understanding the form of the paintings can provide deep insights into culture and cognition.

Seeing a work as art is also quite compatible with seeing it as something else, and viewing an object in isolation does not of itself make it into an art object. However placing objects in isolation, as in an art gallery, or in sets, as in ethnographic displays, has at times created the space for discourse over whether something is or is not an art object. And because art has been so inextricably interconnected with the market, the dialogue has been entangled both in an economic and in a cultural value-creation process. The South Australian Museum's exhibition in 1986 'Art and Land', provides an excellent example of the discourse over Aboriginal art as art. It also illustrates just how challenging Tuckson's action was, nearly twenty-five years earlier, when he installed Aboriginal art for the first time in the AGNSW. 'Art and Land' was an exhibition of toas from the Lake Eyre region of Central Australia. Toas were direction signs that marked where people had gone but they were also engaging and diverse minimalist sculptural forms. On this occasion anthropologist Peter Sutton and historian Philip Jones decided to exhibit the objects not as ethnography but as art, by the simple expedient of giving them their own space in a well lit
display with a minimum of accompanying information. The protagonist who took them to task was an art historian, Donald Brooke, who argued that the way they were displayed in itself was a form of appropriation, since it contradicted the intention of the producers.26 Although adopting a different and, on the surface, opposite position from Tuckson, Brooke too appears to have been bound by the categories of his own culture. The acceptance of art works into the Western gallery context is not simply a belated recognition of their universal attributes. It can be a far more radical step that challenges the Western category itself and shifts the definition of art: exhibiting toas as art was part of that process. That is why the inclusion of non-European art continues to generate such opposition: it insists on a different kind of art history that threatens to disrupt pre-existing values. At the same time Jones and Sutton provided, through the accompanying book,27 and in the debates that surrounded the exhibition, more contextual information on toas than had been available until then. As Luke Taylor pointed out in reviewing the debate the error is in the polarisation of views: in seeing works either as art or ethnography.

Our theory of art should not divorce the analysis of aesthetic forms from a consideration of social context; the form of the work is a crystallisation of those values. Rather we should investigate the cultural setting of the artist’s aesthetic experience and how this relates to the form of the works and also address the ways such artistic forms engender aesthetic responses in members of other cultures who view the works.28

A SHORT HISTORY OF INCLUSION

If Aboriginal art had its advocates, such as Baldwin Spencer and Margaret Preston, early on, how was it that it remained neglected by the Western art world for so long? There is no simple explanation. Much Aboriginal art was uncollectable either because it existed in temporary form as body painting, sand sculpture, or ceremonial construction. While museum collections were crowded with Australian weapons, Aboriginal cultures seemed to have produced few figurative carvings or masks, the items that had gripped the imagination of sectors of the European art world. However this perception may have been reinforced by the evolutionist’s eye. Aborigines as hunters and gatherers were seen to represent the lower rungs of the evolutionary ladder. Fine art, thought to be a characteristic of high civilisation, was not anticipated and hence remained unseen. It may also be the case that, in formal terms, much Aboriginal art fell outside the kinds of things included within the nineteenth century inventory of types of art. For example a toa comprising a hunk of pubic hair stuck into a ball of white clay on the top of a pointed stick was unlikely to have been acceptable as a work of art in Victorian-era Australia. Much Aboriginal art could however more easily find its place in the later slots created by conceptual art, minimalism, performance art and even abstract expressionism. While almost by definition ‘primitive art’ provided something of a challenge to existing categories, there were few Aboriginal artworks that did not pose a major challenge. Interestingly, in focusing on bark painting Maloon has chosen works that are most analogous to a fairly standard Western art form — that of pictorial representation.

While anthropologists may have been complicit in the nineteenth century in contributing to the image of hunter-gatherer society as representative of a pre-art, primitive level of social organisation, they were also at the forefront of the challenge to such a view. Indeed it was anthropologists in association with a few artists and curators who, before World War II, pushed for the recognition of Aboriginal art, and who, in the case of Leonard Adam and Ronald and Catherine Berndt were the first to attribute works to known individuals. And according to Maloon29 it was at an exhibition organised by
HOWARD MORPHY Seeing Aboriginal Art in the Gallery

the Berndts in David Jones art gallery in Sydney in 1949 that Tuckson first encountered Aboriginal art, and it was in a book edited by Ronald Berndt that Tuckson wrote his major article on the aesthetics of Aboriginal art. Moreover it was not for nearly another thirty years that other galleries joined the AGNSW in adding Aboriginal art to their collections.

Just as it began to gain limited recognition in the 1950s Aboriginal art had to face another challenge, this time to its authenticity. This was felt to be threatened with contamination by contact and trade. While rejecting the categorisation of Aboriginal works as primitive, many anthropologists were allied with the primitive art market in assigning a primary value to those works made before the influence of European colonisation. In particular there was a tendency to reject art produced for sale. As Ruth Philips writes of Native American art:

...the scholarly apparatus that inscribes the inauthenticity of commoditized wares [is] a central problem in the way that art history has addressed Native art. The authenticity paradigm marginalises not only the objects but the makers, making of them a ghostly presence in the modern world rather than acknowledging their vigorous interventions in it.  

In the 1950s Australia was viewed as a country whose Indigenous inhabitants had been long colonised despite the fact that the frontier had only been extended to much of Arnhem Land and parts of central Australia in the decades either side of World War II. Almost from first contact bark paintings were viewed with suspicion by ethnographic museums and art galleries alike, and relatively few were collected by museums in Australia and overseas during the 1950s and 1960s.  

Collections made by Kupka and Scougal were notable exceptions. Indeed this attitude that authenticity is allied to isolation, that characterised the views of some anthropologists, gives a superficial weight to Maloon’s arguments.

Perhaps because Aboriginal art had never been a major token in the ‘primitive art’ market there was less resistance to the inclusion of art made for sale in the fine art category when, eventually, the breakthrough came. The primitive art market needed to limit its products in order to keep the market price high; also its values rested on the difference between Europeans and the romanticised primitive other who was tamed and, in a sense, devalued through contact with civilisation. Between the 1940s and 1980s Aboriginal art moved from the non-art to the art category almost without passing through the stage of being considered as primitive art. Aboriginal art became art partly through the process of its
Because so many forms of Aboriginal art are the temporary product of performance — body paintings, sand sculptures and ground drawings, string constructions and fragile headdresses — or sacred objects, in making works that could be sold Aboriginal craftspeople clearly produced artefacts whose form was influenced by interaction with the market. The designs on bark paintings were the same as those produced as body paintings, coffin lids, bark huts and containers or hollow log coffins — but in being painted on bark they were being produced for outside consumption. Similar considerations apply to the transfer of central Australian designs to acrylic paintings on canvas, though in this case no-one could imagine that they were a pre-European product. Anthropologists who worked on art such as Berndt and Mountford, in making foundational collections of art in ‘new media’, were often without realising it integral to these processes of incorporating Aboriginal cultural production within the new market economy. However in doing so they were only reflecting the agency of Aboriginal people themselves, who used art as a means of persuading outsiders of the value of their way of life as well as a means of earning a living in the post-colonial context.

Aboriginal art has also been fortunate in that at the time when interest in it was developing, the categorisation of Indigenous art as primitive art was under challenge. The 1970s and 1980s have seen a breakdown of categories within Western art in general as the hegemony of the Western canon has come increasingly under challenge, from non-Western and Indigenous arts. This challenge has led implicitly to a shift in the definition of what art is and in who defines what is art.

‘Contemporary Aboriginal art’ emerged as a category in Australia during the 1970s and 1980s. Initially it included paintings which challenged the ‘primitive art’ category because of the dynamic nature of the art and the contemporaneity of the artists. Previously the only slot allocated to such work was the devalued category of ‘tourist art’. The new category included art from all regions of Australia, with the proviso that the works were in continuity with Aboriginal traditions, and thus part of a trajectory that stretched backwards to the precolonial era. It included the art of Arnhem Land — an art whose genesis was independent of European traditions. The category came
into being partly because Aborigines asserted the contemporary relevance of their art in the Australian context. It was their contemporary art, it influenced white Australian art and in turn was influenced by the post-colonial context of its production. Aboriginal art, too, represented dynamic and diverse traditions, and for those who were prepared to see, it was an avowedly political art. The category also came to include the acrylic art of the Western and Central Desert.

The ‘Aboriginal Australia’ exhibition of 1981 which travelled to the State art galleries of Victoria, Western Australia, and Queensland was a major expression of this new and more inclusive category. In addition to bark paintings, Western Desert acrylic paintings and sculptures from Cape York Peninsula and Melville and Bathurst Islands, it included decorated artefacts from all over Australia. It also found a place for string bags and basketwork which challenged the accepted division between art and craft. Most innovatively, perhaps, it included watercolours by Namatjira, paintings by William Barak, and drawings by Tommy McRae.

The ‘Dreamings’ exhibition that toured the USA in 1988-89 before returning to its home gallery in Adelaide was in direct continuity with ‘Aboriginal Australia’, although its agenda, to show the works as contemporary Aboriginal art, was even more explicitly articulated. ‘Dreamings’ emphasised the commercial context of much of the art and drew attention, especially in the catalogue, to Indigenous perceptions of the art as opposed to Western aesthetics. It also included a far greater proportion of works from the Western Desert than did ‘Aboriginal Australia’, reflecting the degree to which that art was beginning to attract global interest. The exhibition of Western Desert acrylics and bark paintings from Arnhem Land together as equal members of the contemporary Aboriginal art category was potentially very challenging to the conceptualisation of the avant-garde. Western Desert paintings were a newly developed art form employing European materials, and they apparently changed rapidly over time; these paintings thus became unproblematically avant-garde. Bark paintings, which used materials and techniques that were independent of European art, had been accepted into the old category of primitive art. Yet as art objects they and Western Desert acrylics occupied an almost identical position, and both were related directly to Indigenous iconographic traditions. Such Aboriginal art seemed to be simultaneously ‘primitive’ and ‘avant-garde’.

As Jean-Hubert Martin pointed out, “If [contemporary] Aboriginal artists do produce work of recognized value, then the categories reigning in our institutions are in dire need of revision.”

The development of ‘contemporary Aboriginal art’ as a category rescued some Indigenous art from being marginalised or devalued but it sowed the seeds for a different kind of marginalisation. In the 1970s, when the art of the north and the centre was beginning to achieve recognition, the Aboriginal art of south-east Australia was still unrecognised. There the illusion that Aboriginal art belonged to a past that was separated from contemporary life was easy to maintain. It was simply a facet of the continuing invisibility of Aboriginal people from the south in the consciousness of most white Australians until the middle of the twentieth century. Aboriginal art had gone just as Aboriginal people were ‘fading away’. The near-prehistoric art of the early to mid-nineteenth century gained some acceptance, but the art of the twentieth century and contemporary Koori art remained unrecognised, hidden as part of what W. E. H. Stanner called ‘the great Australian silence’.

However, Aborigines in south-east Australia had continued to produce art and craftworks and a few, such as Ronald Bull, gained a limited reputation as artists. But they were in a difficult position, like Namatjira only more so. They found themselves positioned either as producers of tourist art, which was negatively viewed as a contaminated form of primitive art, or if their art was influenced by, or indistinguishable in formal terms from,
contemporary Western art then what they produced was taken as a sign of their assimilation. ‘Aboriginal Australia’ pushed at the boundaries of these categories by including works by William Barak and Tommy McRae. But more significantly the emergence of the category ‘contemporary Aboriginal art’ and the positioning of Arnhem Land bark paintings and Western Desert acrylics within it brought the contradictions of exclusion and Martin’s ‘need for revision’ closer to home. This was implicitly recognised in the ‘Dreamings’ exhibition. Even so, while the catalogue included reference to the contemporary art of southeast Australia the exhibition itself did not.

In the 1970s and 1980s many Aboriginal people in south-east Australia began to develop as artists while simultaneously and confidently asserting their Aboriginality. Most were trained not in the remote bush or desert regions of central Australia but, like many of their white contemporaries, in the art worlds and art schools of urban Australia. What was their relationship to other Aboriginal artists? What was the relationship between Aboriginal art and other contemporary Australian art? The paradoxes multiplied when non-Aboriginal contemporary artists such as Tim Johnson and Imants Tillers borrowed Aboriginal motifs for their own work. Tim Johnson even participated with Aboriginal artists in the co-production of paintings. Was a piece of Western Desert art contemporary Australian art when Tim Johnson painted some of the dots? Was it ‘Australian’ as opposed to ‘Aboriginal’ even if it was formally indistinguishable from other Western Desert pieces? If it was classifiable as avant-garde could it no longer be Aboriginal art? And if it was avant-garde then weren’t Aboriginal artists working in other avant-garde styles equally producers of Aboriginal art?

The apparent paradoxes arise because Western art history creates pigeonholes. It tends to allocate individual works to single art-historical spaces, failing to recognise the fuzzy nature of the boundaries between stylistic categories and the multiplicity of influences on a particular artist’s work. The solution forced by the nature of contemporary Aboriginal art was the recognition both of its plural nature and of the consequences of this plurality for Western art-historical theory.

CONCLUSION

The current moment provides a good opportunity for a rapprochement between art historical and anthropological approaches to art. The challenge to the old presuppositions of the Western art world, including the anthropological critique of the concept of primitive art, has created art worlds that are far more complex and heterogeneous than their predecessors, less subordinate to the developmental sequences of European-American art. Once non-Western arts were only thought to have a history at the moment of their discovery by the West. Such a view is no longer tenable. Art history must, as a result, be reinvented to reflect the diversity of world arts and make sense of the apparent chaos. This is not as radical a proposal as it may seem. Indeed contemporary art curation has long taken for granted the existence of knowledge of the history and significance of objects included in exhibitions, without which it is impossible to make sense of changes in the artistic record. Many of the variations in the Western canon can only be explained when related to the wider context of the objects’ production: why the works of the artists of the voyages of discovery paid such attention to details of geology, environment and climate, what motivated the impressionists to develop a new paradigm, the role of colour theory in Seurat’s pointillism, the cubist rejection of representational art, and so on. The anthropological endeavour of understanding difference as well as similarity is one that gives agency to the artists who made the works and allows their intentions and motivations to be reflected in the histories of their works that are produced. An anthropologically informed art history is needed to provide the historical, art historical, social and cultur-
al information, not only for those artistic traditions where background cannot be taken for granted but, it could be argued, for the Western art tradition as well.

HOWARD MORPHY

This is based on a paper given at the 2000 conference of the American Anthropological Association in San Francisco, at a session convened by Russell Sharman on 'The state of the anthropology of art'. I would like to thank the discussant Nelson Graburn for his comments. I’d like to thank Margaret Tuckson who put me in touch with Richard McMillan, whose UNSW thesis proved invaluable. Nigel Lendon provided stimulating comments on the paper and corrected some of the errors. Christiane Keller provided some useful references and Katie Russell provided some valuable background research. Frances Morphy helped develop the structure of the argument and improved the clarity of expression.

Endnotes


2 James Clifford, The Predicament of Culture (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988). The chapter titled ‘Histories of the Tribal and the Modern’ provides an interesting discussion of these issues though his eventual collapse of the opposition between museum anthropologists and primitive art aesthetes into an ‘anthropological/aesthetic object system’ oversimplifies the dynamics of the discourse and diverts attention away from the issues that divided them.


7 In 1997 for example there was controversy over the exclusion of some categories of Aboriginal art from the art fair in Basel. David Throsby, ‘But is it Art?’, in Art Monthly Australia (Nov. 1997), p. 32, wrote to the chairman of the committee saying that letting in recognisably Indigenous artworks from Australia would open up the floodgates to primitive, tribal, and folk art from around the world. Interestingly Tracey Moffatt’s work was exhibited with great success at the same fair. The following year an even more heated debate broke out over the exclusion of a number of Arnhem Land artists from the Cologne art fair, see John McDonald, ‘Black Ban: All They Want is a Fair Go’, in Sydney Morning Herald, 29 September 1998.


10 Richard McMillan, ‘The Drawings of Tony Tuckson’, (unpublished M. Arts Theory Thesis, UNSW, 1997), documents the process of the acquisition of the collection and shows it as the result of a complex process of negotiation between the Gallery staff, in particular Tuckson and the director Hal Missingham, the Board of Trustees and the donor or sponsor Scougall himself. As Nigel Lendon pointed out to me the Indigenous works were still included under the rubric ‘Primitive art’ at the AGNSW until the 1980s.


I use this formulation Maloon/Tuckson in places where it is difficult to know whether the views represented are ones shared by Maloon and Tuckson or are simply Maloon reporting his understanding of Tuckson’s position. The confusion may be a sign of just how well Maloon represents Tuckson’s arguments.

Indeed Richard McMillan’s 1997 UNSW thesis *The Drawings of Tony Tuckson*, reveals a heated exchange between Tuckson and Ronald and Catherine Berndt over publication of Tuckson’s chapter in the book. Reading further between the lines one can’t help thinking that the somewhat interventionist editorial style adopted by the Berndt’s helped to polarise the debate and make the protagonists’ views seem more opposed than in fact they were.

Anthony Tuckson, ‘Aboriginal Art and the Western World’, p. 63


Berndt, ‘Epilogue’, p. 71; my emphasis.

Tuckson, ‘Aboriginal Art and the Western World’, p. 68.

22 ‘The Marginalisation of (Contemporary) Non-European/Non-American Art (as reflected in the way we view it)’, in Bernhard Lüthi (ed) *Anatjara: The Art of the First Australians, (Dusseldorf: Kunstammlung Norrhein-Westfalen, 1993)* p. 23; In writing a history of this particular period one is conscious of the fact that one is dealing with a coded language in which the use of words like conceptual is far removed from their ordinary language meaning and position the author in a particular way. Tuckson stresses that non-Western art is conceptual rather than representational, and clarifies his view with a quote from Golding, ‘The Negro sculptor tends to depict what he knows about his subject rather than what he sees’. Without agreeing with the presuppositions about Negro art, this perspective should on the surface be compatible with an anthropological investigation. The difference may be that the anthropologist wishes to establish first what the artist knows about the subject of his painting by placing art within a context of cultural knowledge and establish the relationship between knowing and seeing, whereas a particular modernist world view sees that knowledge as being communicated directly through the art itself.


The closest that Margaret Thatcher comes to an admission of failure in her voluminous political memoirs concerns her efforts to promote history as a subject for school children. Ironically, however, one of the acknowledged legacies of the Thatcher years, a by-product of the transformation of the British economy from manufacturing to services under her stewardship, is the proliferation of museums and historical precincts that pepper the countryside from New Lanark to Wigan Pier. Although Mrs Thatcher would be unlikely to approve of the subject matter, for those interested in ‘history from below’ there are many lessons to be learned from recent efforts at the conservation of the people’s history in the heartland of Britain’s nineteenth-century industrial landscape. Manchester and Salford offer a vision of the museum of the future that is worthy of emulation.

During the morning of Monday, 16 August 1819, large numbers of people began to gather in St Peter’s Fields, Manchester, for a public meeting that was advertised to commence later that day. The purpose of the meeting was to demand extensive reform of the British political system, in particular universal manhood suffrage and annual parliaments, and many of the crowd had come to hear these principles expounded by the leading radical reformer of the day, ‘Orator’ Henry Hunt. By noon a crowd estimated at about 60,000 had assembled. As each new group of protesters arrived the cheering was renewed for the sentiments displayed on their many banners and flags: ‘Liberty and Fraternity’, ‘Hunt and Liberty’, ‘Universal Suffrage and Annual Parliaments’, and ‘No Corn Laws’, the latter a reference to the tax that institutionalised high bread prices to buttress the wealth and power of the land-owning aristocracy. For all that the cause was a serious one the numerous colourful banners, bands of music, and the presence of many families gave the occasion in prospect an unmistakably festive air.

Overlooking St Peter’s Fields from the window of a hotel, however, a group of nervous magistrates viewed the scene as anything but festive. Alarmed by reports of secret radical ‘drilling’ in the surrounding hills, and tormented by the largely apocryphal tales of spies and agent provocateurs, the magistrates decided that the scene ‘bore the appearance of insurrection’ and determined to arrest Hunt. In the surrounding streets contingents of Yeomanry Cavalry, Hussars and Special Constables lay in wait to assist in the execution of the warrant.

Hunt arrived to tremendous cheering at about 1.00 pm and began to address the massive crowd from the hustings that had been erected. As he began to speak the Deputy Constable of Manchester was ordered to serve his warrant and he, in turn, requested military support before setting foot among the protesters. The first force to arrive were the Yeomanry Cavalry — part-time soldiers, including many who had no cause to love the radicals — who charged into the peaceful crowd near the hustings with sabres drawn. Hunt was arrested, his famous ‘White Hat’ of Liberty smashed by the truncheon of a Special Constable. In the melee fifteen people lost their lives — the first victims were a woman and her child — and more than four hundred were injured, many seriously.
Instantaneously British public opinion was polarised by the massacre of 'Peterloo' — a term coined by a radical journalist that cleverly combined the location with the fact that the meeting had taken place on the fourth anniversary of the battle of Waterloo. While the Tory-dominated Parliament passed a vote of thanks to the cavalry for their 'patriotic conduct', outraged citizens from all over the nation protested at the arbitrary attack on members of a peaceful crowd. No event in recent or remote history was more important for subsequent generations of radicals and reformers. For supporters of the largest working-class movement of the 1840s, the Chartists, this was evident in innumerable ways, from the monument erected by subscription in Manchester in commemoration of 'Orator' Hunt, to the scores of ballads and poems that celebrated courage and perpetuated a sense of indignation. "How valiantly we met that crew, Of infants, men and women too, Upon the plain of Peter-loo", ran the opening stanzas of a popular satire composed by the fictional Sir Hugo Burlo Furioso in 1819, "And gloriously did hack and hew, The [damne]d reforming gang..." For many years after the inns and pubs of working-class Ancoats reputedly echoed to the strains of "With Henry Hunt We'll Go, We'll Go" on a Saturday night.³ The Peterloo Massacre is better remembered for its association with the movement for manhood suffrage, but leading middle-class reformers saw it differently. The Manchester Free Trade Hall, home of the archetypal middle-class pressure group of the 1840s, the Anti-Corn Law League, was erected, in part, as a "cenotaph raised on the shades of the victims" of Peterloo.⁴

Peterloo did not pass beyond the realm of living memory until late in the century. Even in the 1880s there were a dozen or so 'Peterloo Veterans' in the village of Failsworth, a few miles from central Manchester, who met in their local Liberal Club surrounded by the banners they had carried on that tragic day more than sixty years before.¹ By this time, however, there were already signs that Peterloo's talismanic place in British history was beginning to wane. In 1888 on the site where, in 1842, 30,000 Chartists had witnessed the laying of the foundation stone, a mere handful of protesters watched the Hunt Monument being demolished to be sold-off as scrap building material.⁵ By the end of the twentieth century the transformation was complete. Despite Mrs Thatcher's support for the study of history in schools, albeit a Gradgrind-like preference for 'facts' rather than 'interpretation',¹ the level of historical knowledge and understanding in the general community is low. A recent survey completed during the sixtieth anniversary of the Battle of Britain, for example, showed that 10 per cent of Britons aged eighteen to twenty-four believed that it had occurred in 1815 and a further 11 per cent thought it had occurred in 1066. Not surprisingly 'Peterloo' is now a forgotten episode.⁷

No student of nineteenth-century British politics is surprised that Peterloo occurred in Manchester, a city characterised by abrasive class values and the centre of what many working people regarded as the 'White slavery' of the burgeoning factory system. Manchester was 'the workshop of the world' that amazed or terrified contemporaries with Thomas Carlyle performing the typically Promethean role of upholding both extremes in his famous references to a "Sooty Manchester" which was "every whit as wonderful, as fearful, unimaginable, as the oldest Salem or Prophetic City".⁹ For most of the first half of the nineteenth century at least, the city seethed with discontent against a backdrop of poverty, squalor and environmental spoliation that was the scandal of the age. It is thus appropriate that a sustained attempt to rescue the memory of Peterloo, and the history of working people in general, is taking place in Manchester and Salford.

In August 2000 the Pump House People’s History Museum in Manchester displayed its latest acquisition: a truncheon snatched from the hands of a Special Constable on St Peter’s
Passed down from generation to generation in a shoe box by members of a local family, the truncheon now takes its place alongside other artefacts from the massacre that are displayed in one of more than twenty galleries in the museum. Located on the banks of the river Irwell in the heartland of what was industrial Manchester the museum is funded principally by the Association of Greater Manchester Authorities and Manchester City Council. As the only British museum dedicated exclusively to working class history the Pump House combines exhibitions of seminal episodes in political history — from Peterloo and the campaign for a free press to the General Strike of 1926 and the creation of the welfare state by the first majority Labour Government after 1945 — with ephemera relating to popular leisure from the Beatles to Association Football. A co-op shop is recreated as is the kitchen of leading Manchester suffragette, Hannah Mitchell. The devotion of considerable space to popular culture, in particular football, is appropriate: a reminder that modern Manchester is best known, not as the centre of a global cotton industry (now long since ended) or for its ‘School’ of economists (also in decline) but for its beloved Red-Devils.

As Frank Bongiorno has pointed out, the tone of museum’s galleries is sympathetic but never Manichean. Given that the museum is located in the converted Pumping Station that provided Manchester with hydraulic power until the 1970s, a visitor might expect to find more industrial history (machinery) although this is the principal fare of the near-
by Museum of Science and Industry. The space that is given to Manchester's industrial heritage makes no pretence at any form of that scientific detachment that characterised some contemporary comment on the condition of nineteenth-century Manchester (and still characterises the displays at the museum's more grandiose and conventional neighbour). The Pump House offers engaged history; an evocation of the past that might have meant something to a leading local Chartist, James Leach, who described “the bitterest curse” as the “hissing, whizzing, jumping, thumping, rattling, steaming and stinking factory”. The Pump House also unashamedly pursues an educative mission, the success of which is exemplified by the acquisition of the Peterloo truncheon. The local woman in whose family it had remained knew vaguely from her parents — as they had learned it from theirs — that it was associated with an important event in Manchester history, but it was only during a visit to the Museum that it was identified as a prized relic of Peterloo.

The Pump House is part of a larger institution, the National Museum of Labour History, that was relocated to Manchester from London in the late 1980s. The main Archive Centre is located in Princess Street in a building that, having been, successively, a Mechanics’ Institute and home of the inaugural meeting of the Trades’ Union Congress in 1868, is most appropriate for its present purposes. As the principal national centre for the
study of material relating to the history of working people it boasts an impressive collection: from the papers of the Chartists, Henry Vincent and Bronterre O’Brien and leading Labour figures such as Keir Hardie and Robert Blatchford, to an impressive array of organisational records from the Industrial Women’s Organisations (1913-1971) and the Socialist Sunday School Movement (1907-1971) to the National Union of Railwaymen Reports and Proceedings (1894-1972) and the Central and Political Committee Minutes of the British Communist Party (1930-1991). The collection is growing apace with regular acquisitions of the papers of recently retired or deceased stalwarts of the Labour movement such as Michael Foot, John Smith and the irascible left-wing Liverpool MP, Eric Heffer. The contrast to the recent difficulties faced by the comparable Noel Butlin Archives at the Australian National University is self-evident.

What has put the National Museum of Labour History on the cutting edge in the study of history from below has been the collection, documentation and conservation of political and trade banners (some of its collection are displayed at the Pump House). Few historians have given much attention to the inscriptions and pictorial representations on the banners and flags carried in demonstrations and parades, but their importance in popular politics was evident to radicals and the authorities alike. It was no accident that Peterloo commenced with the command to the Yeomanry Cavalry to ‘have at their banners’, and, as one of the victims, Samuel Bamford, vividly recalled, the contest for them continued throughout that fateful day in 1819. Those Peterloo banners that survived were regarded as sacred relics and often took pride of place among the banners and flags carried by the local Chartists.

Since its move to Manchester the Museum has applied professional conservation standards to banners and has now built a collection of 360, the largest of its kind. In 1997 the Museum applied to the British Heritage Lottery Fund to support these efforts in the conservation of the nation’s banners — estimated at £10,000 for an average banner — and received funding for a major national survey as a preliminary step. During 1998-9 the National Museum’s banner survey identified over 2500 banners extant (not including military insignia) which represents an unparalleled resource for the study of people’s history.

The efforts of the National Museum and the Pump House also have a valuable adjunct across the Irwell in Salford. Located in a late Victorian building, Jubilee House, opposite the Salford Art Gallery and Museum, the Working Class Movement Library had begun in 1961 as a private collection of books, pamphlets and labour movement ephemera by two local labour movement activists, Ruth and Eddie Frow, and was originally housed in their home in Stretford. By the early 1980s the ‘Library’, at that time containing more than 10,000 volumes, had outgrown a private residence and the City of Salford offered to house it in more suitable premises that would better facilitate its use by scholars and the general public. Since its relocation the collection has grown to 25,000 books and 15,000 pamphlets, as well as an impressive range of badges, posters, photographs and archival material under the care of a professional librarian. One of the most prized artefacts in the collection is an un-presented fragment of one of the ‘monster’ petitions demanding the implementation of the People’s Charter during the 1840s.

Taken together these three premises, located within a few short kilometres of each other, possess a critical mass that has made Manchester and Salford a Mecca for the study of the people’s history. Manchester, wrote A.J.P. Taylor in 1957, is “irredeemably ugly”. At the time Taylor’s comment must have seemed like an epitaph: after more than a century of conjecture the story of Manchester had reached an unhappy conclusion, a microcosm of Britain’s decline as an industrial nation and a world power. Nevertheless Manchester survived the ‘British disease’ and emerged
from the harsh reality of Thatcherism with renewed prosperity as a centre of finance and commerce. It would surprise Taylor as much as it would Carlyle that, at least in part, the rebuilding of Manchester’s international standing stems from the study of ‘history from below’. Unfortunately for students of Chartism the nationwide banner survey conducted from Manchester’s National Museum of Labour History failed to identify a single surviving Chartist banner. In the town of Young, on the southern New South Wales southern tablelands, however, the visitor to the Historical Society premises — known as the Lambing Flat Folk Museum — can see a banner painted on a tent-flap in 1861. Bearing a Southern Cross superimposed over a Cross of St Andrew with the inscription, ‘No Chinese, Roll Up’, the banner was an advertisement for a public meeting that presaged the infamous Lambing Flat riots later that year.25 Notwithstanding the unfortunate sentiment, the banner is an example of the Chartist art form at its peak. Painted by a Scottish migrant, it is a testimony to the transfer of cultural practices and values through migration. Lying in a dusty glass case in the premises of a small amateur society, it is essentially hidden from history. It is a reminder that the practice of ‘history from below’ in Australia has produced many works of significant scholarship but fewer landmarks of conservation.26 It too deserves to be rescued.

Paul A. Pickering

Endnotes


3 Manchester Central Reference Library, newspaper cuttings: Notes and Queries, 12 March 1903, pp. 182-3; Northern Star, 2 April 1842, pp. 6-7. The Renowned Achievements of Peter-loo (Manchester, 1819), was reputedly written by James Varley whose


5 P. Percival, Failsworth Folk and Failsworth Memories: Reminiscences Associated With Ben Brierley's Native Place (Manchester: G. Hargreaves, 1903), pp. 5-6, 27.


8 Daily Mirror, 15 September 2000, pp. 1-2. The local museum in Devizes, near Hunt's home town in Wiltshire, has made an effort to keep his memory alive (see: Guardian, 24 January 1996). I am grateful to Alex Tyrrell for this reference.


12 This contrast is noted in Bongiorno's perceptive report.


14 The inspiration derived from a Peterloo relic — in this case a sword — is a plot line in Howard Spring's story of the rise of a labour politician in Fame is the Spar (Collins, London, 1940).

15 The only dark cloud on the Manchester horizon is the threat to funding for the Manchester Central Library. At the time of writing (January 2001) Manchester City Council were considering options to reduce services at the library which has served the local community since 1852. For the early history of this institution which commenced in what had been the Owenite Hall of Science in Manchester see M. Hewitt, ‘Confronting the Modern City: the Manchester Free Public Library, 1850-1880’, in Urban History, 27,1 (2000), pp. 62-88.


19 See Manchester Guardian, 26 September 1838, p. 2; Northern Star, 2 October 1841, pp. 6-7; 19 August 1843, p. 3. According to Peter Percival, ‘as late as 1884’ one of Bamford’s Peterloo Banners was carried in a demonstration against the House of Lords by members of the Failsworth Liberal Club. See Failsworth Folk and Failsworth Memories, pp. 5-6.


22 I am grateful to the librarian at the Working Class Museum, Dr Alan Kahan, for allowing me to examine this document. For the importance of petitioning see P.A Pickering, “And Your Petitioners &c”: Chartist Petitioning and Popular Politics, 1838-1848, in English Historical Review, 466 (April 2001), pp. 368-388.

23 Of note also is the establishment of the North West Film Archive by the Manchester Metropolitan University which now has a collection of over 25,000 reels of film and video tape.

ARCHIVAL INSTITUTIONS AND MEMORY

“Archival institutions and memory” according to Pierre Ryckmans, “is a place where a nation nourishes its memory and exerts its imagination — where it connects with its past and invents its future.” It is the artefacts of memory which provide the means for this connection with the past, in the collections of contemporary archival institutions. Spoken views and recollections held within these institutions as recorded oral histories — more often in libraries, than in archives or museums — have become increasingly important as a research resource, and as a way of understanding the past and its influence on the present and the future. More precisely than other collected items, they have become artefacts of memory.

Some of the most significant memories of recent times are at present being documented through the National Library of Australia’s Bringing Them Home Oral History Project, over a four-year period to conclude in mid-2002. This collection will illuminate and honour the removal experiences of separated Indigenous Australian children and their families, and others directly connected with these events, which occurred over a period of several generations. It is our common task to ensure that these memories become collective memories, and to reflect upon how that is best achieved, within the archival institutions of our times.

These institutions have generally been identified and organised around the artefacts in their care, and the specialised skills required to create access to them, and care for them. Public libraries were initially charged with the custody of books and other print media, and sometimes pictorial material. Museums on the other hand, have historically fewer collection boundaries, but developed over time — as either specialist or generalist institutions — a commitment to the display of three-dimensional objects. Archives collect documents, specifically the records created by governments or other organisations. Unlike libraries, as repositories for bibliographic material already created in its entirety, the documentary material in archives has been given meaning as it is accessioned, through an elimination and arrangement process, and attempts to second-guess which material might be important enough to keep.

It is clear nevertheless, that boundaries between these different types of archival institutions have always been to some extent blurred. In addition to bibliographic collections, libraries have kept manuscripts and other documentary material; museums are repositories for an infinite array of objects, which might include books and documents (and even living objects like plants and fish); and archives contain much material which libraries and museums might collect, including diaries, photographs or even three-dimensional models. All of these institutions, despite their emergence as specialist collecting establishments from the “undifferentiated collections of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century rulers, aristocrats and scholars” retain the imprint epitomised by the Closet of Curiosities from which the Ashmolean Museum at Oxford originated. This collection of John Tradescot towards the end of the seventeenth century included various objects...
related to natural history and antiquities, as well as a library and a chemical laboratory. Curiosity was a favoured impetus of the period, for collecting rare and exotic objects of various kinds, and for expanding knowledge of other cultures and of the past. As collecting institutions developed differentiated collecting roles, so societies developed a dependence on these institutions, for retrieval of information and access to records.

As part of the evolving history of archival institutions themselves, collections have expanded, accumulated and moved into the province of consolidated and collective memory. At the same time, they have undergone various transformations, not only into differentiated and classified bodies of material and information, but into collections which provide references to local and contemporary life and activity. These two aspects of museum function — memory and contemporary activity — are linked. As the accumulated past in archival institutions expanded to become collective memory, the community became increasingly interested, implicated and involved: the presence of the community inevitably brings the community's present to bear, and community activity now readily occurs in conjunction with that of museums and other such institutions. The instructive influence of the museum, as reformists of the mid-nineteenth century conceived it, was to bring an appropriately 'civilising' model into the life of the community. However, its present mandate is much more likely to include the capacity to reflect, and to reflect upon, the life of the community in which it is situated.

All forms of archival institution have taken on display activities, making stored materials accessible through exhibitions and further blurring the boundaries established with such enthusiasm during the mid-nineteenth century as museums became part of the public sphere. Further contributing to the increasing ambiguity of archival institutional function, is the emergence of collections of audio, video and multimedia material, now accessible and retrievable, along with other elements of collections and the research underpinning them, in ways never imagined by former generations of museum or archival workers. Information technology and digitisation have revolutionised the way objects, bibliographic material, audio material or even archival records, can be accessed. Digitisation, as Rayward has observed, “eliminates physical distinctions between types of records and thus, presumably, the need for institutional distinctions in the management of the systems within which these records are handled.” Such questions as “What is to be collected, by whom and under what circumstances of preservation, availability and access”, whilst not being intrinsically new, require fresh approaches in any attempt to find relevant answers.

At the audience/user end of the spectrum, digitisation provides the opportunity to ‘create ever-changing virtual “cabinets of curiosities” at will’. All collecting institutions making use of the opportunities presented by digitisation might then be termed, for practical purposes, museums, as the original mobility and scope of institutional collections is reinstated. It is a mobility which implicitly welcomes the addition of objects, technologies and approaches arising from contemporary frameworks of knowledge, activity and expectation.

The notion of a collection of sound, with its overtones of ephemerality, synthesises well with these new dynamics. The technology which makes such a collection possible is a relatively recent arrival. It has heralded the development of oral history as a discrete discipline and contemporary phenomenon, and has enabled its inclusion in collections — and also in the displays and retrieval mechanisms — of libraries, archives and museums. The analogous evolutions of oral history as a discipline, information technology as a support mechanism, and of the museum as a phenomenon have come to a meeting point, or perhaps a crucible, wherein many cultural elements now have the opportunity to amalgamate.
ORAL HISTORY

Oral history — the recorded memoirs and reflections of people who become during the course of an interview, memoirists, narrators or interviewees — is an increasingly validated discipline. Its development, along with the expansion of oral history collections, has occurred in parallel with the broadening role of museums and other collecting or archival institutions. As with the conservation of expanding collections of three-dimensional objects, the safekeeping of sound archives has developed as a separate discipline, and audio-engineers in archival institutions are likely to be as concerned with sound preservation as they are with sound quality. Memory has been given a technical guise, as collections of spoken sound have accumulated, and the individual and collective memories of various communities have been laid down, first on magnetic, and more recently, on digital tape.

The significance of these collections of spoken memoirs is far-reaching, for paradoxically, memory relates to the past, but is significant only for the present and the future. Our understanding of the past, dependent on written and oral accounts of the time, is used to illuminate the present and the future. Anticipation, hope, desire, vision — all these states of projection into the future are impossible to experience without memory and a sense of the past. Oral history collections play an important role as the keepers of memory, with the increasing diversity, size, mobility and accompanying disjunction of contemporary communities. With a sense of the importance the past as a presence, Ann-Mari Jordens, an interviewer for the Bringing Them Home Oral History Project writes:

As an interviewer I am a conduit, allowing the interviewee to speak to living Australians and those yet to be born. I am an ear for the future.9

In the context of increasingly unwieldy bodies of knowledge, and complex interrelationships within and between communities, the importance of communication (both speaking and listening) is amplified, and Jordens’ ‘ear for the future’ is of particular interest and consequence. Ronald Grele, an historian whose work was significant in shaping the methodology of the recorded interview as it is approached today, highlights two views on oral history — one which sees it as a way to ‘flesh out the record, to get more history for the historian’ and the other, as a way to bypass the historian and hear the real voices of the people and the past — to get beyond history. Grele believed that neither view should prevail, but that the collaborative work of the historian and the interviewee in creating a sound document should be recognised.10

During the early 1960s Allan Nevins established the Oral History Research Office at Columbia University, in the USA, to record participation in the political, cultural and economic affairs of the nation, of Americans who had lived significant lives. The outcome of the tape-recorded interviews conducted was not the same as the oral history record as it is known today — usually an unedited master sound recording, accompanied by verbatim transcript. At Columbia at this time, the tapes were edited and might eventually be erased, after changes to the written material — often worked on by both interviewee and historian — except for a small example retained as an illustration of delivery and style.11

ORAL HISTORY AT THE NATIONAL LIBRARY OF AUSTRALIA

The early development of the oral history collections of the National Library of Australia were influenced by the work carried out at Columbia University under Nevins. From 1970, interviews were commissioned (as distinct from those initiated from enthusiasts external to the Library, such as Hazel de Berg) by the Library, to record the views and histories of Australians prominent in politics, journalism or the public service. The main purpose of these interviews was to augment the manuscript collection, which held the
papers of significant contributors to the community, and to uncover insights into important processes and events. The coordinated establishment of a broader based collection of interviews from a wide cross-section of the community, recommended in the report commissioned during the 1960s by the Library’s then Assistant Librarian, Harold White, was not to occur until the early 1980s. Finally, in 1983, a social history component was officially written into the Library’s collection development strategy, providing a context for numbers of interviews already in the collection, of people who did not fall into the hitherto favoured category of ‘eminent’ Australians who might have been persuaded to deposit their papers with the Library.12

THE BRINGING THEM HOME ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

This new development also provided a springboard for many other initiatives, some of them national in scope, such as the Cultural Context of Unemployment project which recorded the memories and reflection of more than 500 unemployed people across Australia. Such a project is the Bringing Them Home Oral History Project established with an allocation of federal government funding as a response to the report of the Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families. This project is arguably one of the most significant oral history initiatives to be undertaken in Australia, grappling as it does, with issues which affect all Indigenous Australians, and which have become part of an uncomfortable dialogue across all communities in Australia, through media coverage and political action. Its scope is both broad and comprehensive, by virtue of the range of views to be sought, the numbers of interviews it aims to record, the degree to which it aims to resolve the processes inherent in recording and archiving oral histories, and not least, the amount of funding which has been made available in order to carry it through.

Through the recollection and reflections of those involved, government policies and practices which resulted in the separation from their families of many Indigenous Australian children, will be considered. The extent of the dislocation which occurred, the resulting disintegration of that collective memory linked with family and culture and language, and the painful collective loss of a sense of identity, are only now being realised, and the effects only now being reckoned.

The Bringing Them Home Oral History Project is therefore recording the highly personal accounts of those who were directly involved in separation events as children, parents, close family, adoptive or foster parents, as well as the recollections of those who worked with the children professionally. A wide variety of roles were played by non-Indigenous people as school teachers, religious and welfare workers, policemen and patrol officers, hospital matrons, staff in children’s homes, and also as government administrators and policy makers. The range of their experiences is extensive. Many believed they were acting in the best interests of the children involved, and tried to do their work to the best of their ability. It is important that these stories are also heard, so that future generations understand the complexities of this history.

A significant aspect of this project is the role it will play in making previously inaccessible information available to all, on the public record. Interviewees are therefore encouraged to give permission for their interviews to be on open access, although some interviews — or sections of them — are embargoed for particular periods of time, where appropriate.

Some relevant recordings will be held by state or large regional libraries as co-repositories, and in appropriate community keeping places, if the interviewee is agreeable. This distribution of tapes will ensure that the material is accessible to a much wider audience than if the material is held only in the national capital — although it should be emphasised that the National Library’s stated goal is that “all Australians, at their place of choice, have
direct, seamless access to print and electronic sources of information”.13 Also planned as part of making the material accessible, is a major publication which will include interview excerpts. Unlike the Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission Inquiry, which made a commitment to keeping all interviews confidential, this project aims to allow wide community access to the stories of all those who were personally and directly affected by the separation of Indigenous children from their families.

Bringing Them Home interviewers operate individually in their own regions, usually far from the National Library in Canberra, but the project trains and establishes support links between interviewers, creating an inclusive and cooperative network. The collaborative contribution of technical staff, coordinators, researchers, historians and importantly, the memoirists and interviewers who interface directly with them and with their unfolding stories, is inestimable and reflects a multi-disciplinary approach within the project. This can be linked to Grele’s optimism in the 1970s about contemporary trends in oral history, in narrowing “…the gap between history, and folklore and anthropology”.14

Many Indigenous people are able to describe so eloquently how identity and memory are interleaved, and how fractured memories have resulted in lost and fragmented families and the struggle for reclamation of identity. It becomes ever more apparent, as these particular interviews unfold, that identity and history both live in the memory.

IDENTITY AND MEMORY

Shared memory contributes to an understanding of both individual and collective identity. Although it is often to strangers that life-stories are told, the unspoken memories of a family or community group held in common imply a shared identity, which empowers the individual to act effectively within the context of the present or to plan for activity in the future. All action is contextual, and depends to some degree on the past — on heritage.

Lowenthal15 refers to the growing inclusivity of the term ‘heritage’ and its importance in bestowing collective identity and by implication, individual identity. Included in the term ‘heritage’ are such intangibles as legend, language and history, and Lowenthal remarks on the worldwide similarity of concerns with precedence, antiquity, continuity and coherence, despite their being expressed in distinctive ways by different cultures. He also points to the prevailing global interdependence which makes heritage increasingly universal, though reflecting personal or communal self-interest.

The notion of heritage and identity can be linked to the concept of commemoration, or ritualising memory.16 Taking an example used by Rosenzweig and Thelen, the battle described from a colonial Western perspective as Custer’s Last Stand, is known as an equally heroic event by the Oglala Sioux people, and other Native Americans, as the Battle of Little Bighorn. General Custer, Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse are part of a convergent history. The divergent heritage bestowed by their actions however, may be interdependent, but is certainly not shared.

THE POWER OF THE SPOKEN WORD

Some concern may be felt by the findings of Rosenzweig and Thelen, that Americans in general are interested in history, especially that which personally affects them, or their families, but are bored by and do not trust many of the time-honoured methods of imparting historical information which historians have come to rely on. Far more trustworthy than books, the local history teacher or even the professor of history at a tertiary institution, are museum displays and eyewitness accounts.17 This view was even more emphatically held by the groups of Native American peoples canvassed by Rosenzweig and Thelen. Here, a divergent heritage is also at work. Historians trained in the Western scholarly tradition will tend to be mistrustful of oral accounts because they are based on memory and coloured by personal
Margaret Robinson with Rosemary (L) and Rhonda (R), taken in 1959 in Broome.

Below: Margaret’s parents, Regina Maria Roe b. 1902 and Edward Roe b. 1900, taken in the early 1950s outside the family home in Broome WA. Photos courtesy Margaret Robinson.
MARGARET ROBINSON — A 'BRINGING THEM HOME' STORY

Margaret Robinson was born in 1924 in Broome, Western Australia. She was delivered in her family home by a doctor who took payment in chickens or eggs as Indigenous people were not allowed to give birth in the hospital at that time. Margaret remembers the Second World War and the bombing of Broome and can remember being evacuated several times. It was during one of these evacuations that she was picked up by Native Welfare officers and put on a plane to Perth where she was placed in Sister Kate’s home. She was then sent out as a domestic to work at a floristry farm in Kalamunda. While there she wrote to her father in Broome who organised to have her brought back home.

MARGARET REMEMBERS:

Margaret recalls working at the Club Hotel in Derby, her uncle and brother were also there. She was told her mother and father were coming to collect her at 4am, so they wouldn’t get evacuated, but Native Welfare and Police officers came and picked her up along with another girl and put them on a plane (a DC-3) to Perth. She was fifteen years old.

She “stayed the first night with the Salvation Army, then Sister Kate’s, then to Kalamunda to the Davies’”. She was in Sister Kate’s 2-3 months and was told she couldn’t return to Broome.

She wrote to her father while in Sister Kate’s who arranged with Colonel Gibson to get her home. He flew her home to Broome (1944) and locked her in the Hotel room with a guard. “Paddy Torres stayed guard because there were 3000 troops in Broome at the time.”

Biographical material written by Marnie Richardson, Bringing Them Home interviewer.

experience. Native American historians such as Angela Cavender Wilson however, point out that the oral traditions of the Dakota people are the result of skills learnt and passed on in a disciplined way, as a task. Repetition, praise, critique and other devices were used to ensure that training was rigorous, skills were learned and accurate information was delivered and archived. As Wilson says:

...the Dakota definitions of oral tradition is based on the assumption that the ability to remember is an acquired skill — one that is acutely developed or neglected.

These observations may be applied — in their own cultural context — to the oral traditions of other Native American peoples or to the oral traditions of Indigenous Australians. In these cultures, the function of oral traditions is not confined to the transmission of history, but also to the delivery of a wide range of information which might be as important in providing moral guidelines as in passing on practical knowledge about food sources.

To Indigenous Australians, the recording of oral ‘histories’ (or memories, or personal visions and reflections) is a highly significant activity, which provides not only an archive, but a connection with their own definitive ways of articulating heritage. The Bringing Them Home Oral History Project, particularly, provides opportunities for sharing collective memories, and for the heightened sense of identity which follows. It also creates opportunities for communicating with others and for participation in a more democratised version of history.

MUSEUMS OF SOUND AND MEMORY

Those versions of history which might be termed democratised, take account of the input of various people, not least those who have been part of the history. Democratisation might also refer to the input of those who wish to access history — those who appreciate the opportunity to engage actively
with objects and their histories and create their own relationships with them. Bennett points out that unmediated contact with an object is not possible in a museum context, and that the same interpretive layers surround it, as might be produced by a book or a film. The artefact, according to Bennett, becomes a rhetorical object as soon as it is placed in a museum, and when viewed as part of a display or exhibition, takes on the character of a ‘signifier’. This view of the museum and the objects it holds may be accurate, but according to Rosenzweig and Thelen, many members of the public would not agree — books and films and history teachers are regarded by a surprising percentage of the American public as unreliable filters, and objects in a museum and the eyewitness accounts of people who were actually present at an event provide the best means possible for actually getting to the truth of the matter.

This implies that the public does not favour layers of interpretation, although perhaps the general viewing audience is not quite aware of how omnipresent this can be in a museum. In a museum context however, the interpreter/curator/selector/researcher, unlike an author, film-maker or teacher, is not only talking about an object, but placing it in view. The power of the object is that it has a life apart from its museological context, including the life ascribed to it by a viewer, who is an active participant in the exchange, and may select — as the curator has done — which objects to include in their own experience of a display, and what meanings to ascribe to that object, from their own range of experiences. This is a valid activity, insofar as it remains a private activity — since it does not take into account the very real concerns felt by those to whom an object may culturally belong, and who may wish it to be understood in that context.

These observations bring to mind the role of the museum as a custodian of many kinds of memory. Every object is infused with the memory of the person/s to whom it belonged before it made its way to the archive. The memories of those who selected it for exhibition and created interpretive text also become part of its reality, as do the memories brought to bear by the viewer. A displayed object serves as a tangible reminder of the journey travelled from origin to museum display, as well as being a reassurance to the viewer of the reality of that journey as well as its own history. As Morton points out, there are several consequences which arise from an object-centred approach to history, the primary one being that “if there are no objects available, it becomes very difficult to mount a museum display.”

Sound collections of oral history, as non-material phenomena, may provide the same assurance for the museum visitor that he or she is directly in touch with experienced history, as an object does. Reliance on sight as the ‘I saw it with my own eyes’ phenomenon, is analogous to the ‘I heard it with my own ears’ confidence in oral eyewitness accounts. Both utilise senses which are of major importance to individual interpretation of the daily environment. The oral histories archived in various (but usually library) collections are, like collections of objects, tips of the collection iceberg stored out of sight. Oral collections are more accessible however, through bibliographic retrieval systems which have made the information held in libraries so accessible, and their storage facilities so transparent. In many ways, these collections are constantly on display — virtual catalogues have opened the doors and windows, allowing audiences to see inside and make instant selections. Further advances in technology will allow effortless access to online sound.

These developments will emphasise both the similarities and differences between museums and libraries as archival institutions. Collections of sound accommodate easily to the idea of the virtual museum. However museums are constrained by ideologies of selection which do not apply to libraries. Libraries work under obligations and charters to facilitate access to information held within their collections, and from this perspective
may continue to be more appropriate reposito-
ries for sound collections. Until further
blurring and coalescing of boundaries between
archival institutions occurs, the virtual
museum of sound and memory sits comfort-
ably within its present bibliographic confines.
Artefacts of memory, such as those within the
Bringing Them Home collection, await this
further diffusion of boundaries before their
status as virtual objects is formally conferred.

DOREEN MELLOR Artefacts of Memory

Endnotes
1 P. Ryckmans, cited in Directions for 2000-2002,
National Library of Australia.
2 W. Boyd Rayward, ‘Information and Functional
Integration of Libraries’, in E. Higgs, (ed), History
and Electronic Artefacts (New York: Oxford
3 W. Boyd Rayward, ‘Information and Functional
Integration of Libraries’, p. 212.
4 W. Boyd Rayward, ‘Information and Functional
Integration of Libraries’, p. 212.
5 T. Bennett, The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory,
Politics (London: Routledge) p. 28.
6 T. Bennett, The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory,
7 W. Boyd Rayward, ‘Information and Functional
Integration of Libraries’, p. 214.
8 W. Boyd Rayward, ‘Information and Functional
Integration of Libraries’, p. 215.
no. 47, October 2000, p. 21.
10 R. J. Grele, (ed), Envelopes of Sound: The Art of
p. viii.
11 R. J. Grele, (ed), Envelopes of Sound: Six
Practitioners Discuss the Method, Theory and Practice of
Oral History and Oral Testimony (Chicago: Precedent
12 B. York, ‘Impossible on Less Terms’, in P. Cochrane,
ed., Remarkable Occurrences: The National Library’s
First 100 Years, 1901-2001 (Canberra: National
13 National Library of Australia, Directions for 2000-
2002.
14 R. J. Grele, (ed), Envelopes of Sound, Six
Practitioners Discuss the Method, Theory and Practice of
Oral History and Oral Testimony (Chicago: Precedent
15 David Lowenthal, ‘Identity, Heritage and History’,
in John R. Gillis, Commemorations, The Politics of
National Identity (New Jersey: Princeton University
16 Roy Rosenzweig & David Thelen, The Presence of
the Past, Popular Uses of History in America (New
17 Roy Rosenzweig & David Thelen, The Presence of
the Past, Popular Uses of History in America, p. 21.
18 Angela Cavender Wilson, ‘Power of the Spoken
Word’, in D. Fixico (ed), Rethinking American History
(Albuquerque : University of New Mexico Press,
1997) p. 113.
20 T. Bennett, The Birth of the Museum, p. 146.
21 T. Bennett, The Birth of the Museum, p. 146.
22 A. Morton, ‘Tomorrow’s Yesterdays’, in R. Lumley,
The Museum Time-Machine: Putting Cultures on
131.
FUTURE SHOTS

PRO predominant AUSTRALIANS SHARE THEIR THOUGHTS ON MUSEUMS OF THE FUTURE

BETTY CHURCHER, AO
FORMER DIRECTOR, ART GALLERY OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA, FORMER DIRECTOR, NATIONAL GALLERY OF AUSTRALIA

“I’m not sure what the art museum of the future will become, but I do know that I hope it never ceases to be a place of private discovery and contemplation. I believe that the more transitory and electronic our world becomes, the greater will be our need for objects of lasting value. Palpable objects that are prepared to sit quietly on a wall or on a floor and speak to us with their own voice across time and space.”

SIR ROBERT MAY
PRESIDENT, THE ROYAL SOCIETY
CHAIRMAN EMERITUS, NATURAL HISTORY MUSEUM, LONDON

“Yesterday’s museums tended to be — marvelously but simply — treasurehouses or cabinets of curiosities. Whether art galleries, or museums of science or natural history, the interpretive material was usually minimal. Today’s museums (with a few exceptions) aim to educate, using the objects on display to tell a story about our past, or about how the natural world works. Unfortunately, these stories are too often presented as wisdom to be received, and sometimes even preached as sermons which force-fit today’s values onto the different realities of yesterday. I hope that tomorrow’s museums will go beyond the best of today, using the objects to provoke questions, with guidance that is open-ended rather than a closed answer. Increasingly, this will be helped by moving beyond the Gutenberg style — text on a panel — to add information and questions in the style of computer games, and in other imaginative ways, which will engage contemporary audiences of younger people.

I end on a paradoxical note, based on discussions and experience in the Natural History Museum in London. Despite what I have just said, I have great personal affection for the Victorian clutter of the cabinets of curiosities. So the real challenge for tomorrow’s museums may be to blend a demotic idiom suited to the realities of the TV/computer/internet age, with nooks and crannies which preserve some of the crowded displays that have so much appeal to a certain kind of scholarly mind. No easy trick.”

ANDREW SAYERS,
DIRECTOR, NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY.
CHAIRMAN, ADVISORY BOARD FOR THE HUMANITIES RESEARCH CENTRE

“The greatest challenge for museums in the medium to long term future is sustainability. Around the world, museums are undertaking larger and more complex building projects; virtually every major gallery and museum has recently seen major additions, or these are planned. Yet these buildings create their own demands. At the same time, running costs are dramatically increasing, yet money is not being spent on running costs at a rate commensurate with capital expansion. Museums are about collections and ideas — buildings are important, too, but it is essential that the right balance is maintained and the core values which sustain museums are not put under impossible pressures by over-investment in bricks and mortar.”
CAROL SCOTT, PRESIDENT OF MUSEUMS AUSTRALIA AND EVALUATIONS MANAGER, POWERHOUSE MUSEUM, SYDNEY

"Museums in the future will be facing significant challenges. Firstly, they will be examining the impacts of technology on interpretation and the place of the object. Will ‘bytes’ of information and networked paradigms become substitutes for linear narratives and stories? What will be the significance of the object in a world where less distinction is made between the simulated and the authentic? Secondly, the museum of the future has work ahead of it with regard to maintaining audiences. In a post modern world, the increasing pace of life is favouring fun and entertainment over leisure that requires intellectual commitment. And museums, accustomed to being patronised by the numerous and affluent generation of baby-boomers, will be encountering an emergent generation that is less numerous and less willing to accept the transcendent authority of the museum. Finally, the issue of the repatriation of cultural material to communities and individuals will be a compelling concern. All of this points to a re-negotiation of relationships with communities and stakeholders and a re-positioning of the place of the museum in society.

MARGO NEALE, DIRECTOR, GALLERY OF FIRST AUSTRALIANS, NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AUSTRALIA

"The museum is an eighteenth-century concept and this is the twenty-first century. This apparent dichotomy will have to be addressed by museums of the future. Do we still need museums? If so, why and what sort?

Regardless of how futuristic, virtual and conceptual the museum of the future may look and feel, and how many bells and whistles it has, it would be a mistake to confuse these new modes of delivery with content and disregard the traditional visitors’ changing expectations and the basic human need for contemplation, reflection and enlightenment. Instead I see the tools of new technologies, not as ends in themselves but tools to be exploited, to enhance and expand the museums’ pluralistic roles, the imaginative dimension and the multi-sensorial.

Museums will be compelled, by an increasingly sophisticated, insatiable and educated audience to expand their functions and deepen and broaden the knowledge base. Just as shops lining one street in linear progression have been replaced by shopping malls that offer a total, more immersive experience, from beauty and health to retail and entertainment, the museum of the future, I believe, will combine many of the functions of the traditional museum, art gallery and university with contemporary needs. That is, alongside a sense of worship by a congregation of people in cathedral-like spaces and the leisure of the park or garden as before, there will also be a sense of the cultural keeping place of ancient and living traditions, the engagement of penny arcades, theme parks and festivals. A kind of one-stop shop. I see the beginnings of all this at the NMA where joint scholarly projects with universities are underway and where museum spaces are being used for critical contemporary debates broadcast to the nation alongside ‘yowie’ picnics.

Accountability on all fronts, in particular content and delivery, will be high. And only those who can address the popular with the scholarly, the object with the experience, the fun and fantasy with the profound, the sacred with the secular and a sense of the spiritual, will survive in the highly competitive market ahead. The idea of ‘either - or’ and that things have to one way or the other is outmoded and bound for the dustbins of history.

From an Indigenous perspective and a minority position, I hope the museums of the future increasingly become sites of negotiation. Places where multiple histories are told by diverse voices and stories have no end. A place where contradictions are allowed to exist, hard questions are posed without qualification, answers are debated and conclusions are forever rubbery. And most of all where these practices are considered normal and
expected and not resisted by a reactionary mainstream as sacrilege. A time when one does not even have to talk about these ideas in the same sentence as the word 'future'.

'Encounters' and 'people' will hopefully remain the keystone of all future museums, value-added over time. The museum must always be a place of encounters. Encounters between cultures, between disciplines and between technologies. Encounters with and between objects. Encounters between people from all walks of life and as the new National Museum's logo states, encounters between yesterday and tomorrow.”

GEORGE MACDONALD
CEO MELBOURNE MUSEUM
(AN EXTRACT OF AN INTERVIEW WITH DR AMARESWAR GALLA)

“I think in many ways we are dealing with a new form of culture that has not been given full recognition, which I call the ‘distributed metropolis’. It is just not the global village, that village model does not fit. We are in a metropolitan society that has a manifestation around the globe and that's the part of society that is growing most rapidly. These cities are made up of elements from every part of the globe, every population is represented. I think of Toronto and Melbourne as being the same city only positioned in different parts of the globe but having the same overall population profile. Toronto has more Italians, Melbourne has more Greeks but they all have the whole world represented in their population and therefore their institutions tend to be going in the same direction.

People are always asking why museums are being built at the rate they are and why is the public investing hundreds of millions and sometimes billions of dollars in these new museums. In that sense I think they represent culturally neutral space in an environment where the renegotiation of identity is an ongoing process. We look at social models such as the American ‘melting pot’ and all those processes are still at play. The whole requirement is for every individual to identify who they are in the world and to what group they belong and what is the positioning of that group in the social, economic world and political world.

So museums of social history or historical museums even natural history museums, come into play and in this they are there as a forum, as a market place of ideas. But as a place of renegotiation of individual and group identities they form an appropriate kind of place for that to happen.”
Etymologically, a 'library' is a bookseller's shop; for Chaucer it was a place "in which I put bookes"; today it is a building or room containing collections of books, periodicals, and sometimes films and recorded music. But for Joan Kerr in her chapter on 'Strange Objects' in this elegant book, the National Library of Australia contains "a rich treasure trove of three-dimensional objects", including a nineteenth-century copper kettle, Sir Robert Menzies' uniform as Lord Warden of the Cinque Ports, 'boring' inkstands used 100 years ago by the Department of Foreign Affairs, and a death mask of Vance Palmer with a chipped nose.

Such objects occasionally formed part of collections sold or given to the National Library, and several chapters are devoted to these. Nicholas Thomas gives an admirable account of the remarkable literary and pictorial archive of the New Zealand-born art dealer and collector Rex Nan Kivell, which is one of the Library's most prized possessions. John Ferguson and Edward Augustus Petherick, very different characters, as Graeme Powell aver, collected invaluable Australiana, including the first printed book on 'Terra Australis'. But it is James Cook's 'Endeavour Journal', the Library's MS 1, which, "in number and in sentiment, is the foundation document of the National Library of Australia", as Greg Dening proclaims in his lively opening chapter.

Starting life in 1901 as the Commonwealth Parliamentary Library with one Remington typewriter, the National Library became an independent statutory authority in 1968, but already in 1902 books relating 'in
any way’ to Australia were being acquired. It was the start of a century of diligent pursuit of manuscripts, papers, letters, books, maps, pictures, on behalf of the steadily maturing institution we cherish today.

Peter Cochrane, editor of this book, tells of the Library ‘Becoming National’. By 1928 it possessed two typewriters and one of its renowned founding fathers, Kenneth Binns, called it the ‘National Library’ and managed to obtain special grants from Parliament to purchase not only Cook’s ‘Endeavour Journal’ but the Ellis Rowan paintings of flowers and birds and the Hardy Wilson collection of Old Colonial architectural drawings — all for £13,000. Tim Bonyhady devotes his chapter to these collections, accompanied, as indeed is the whole book, with some superb illustrations, although the aureate captions are rather hard to read.

There is one name that crops up irrefragibly throughout this fascinating history, that of Harold White, one of the famed Seven Dwarfs of Canberra, whom John Thompson aptly describes as “when roused, this diminutive man was unstoppable”. I can myself testify to being cornered on quite a few occasions at his hospitable Red Hill home, while Harold expounded on his vision for his Library and his insistent methods of achieving it.

White’s pertinacious pursuit of the Vance and Nettie Palmer papers is a typical example, as well as what remained of Katharine Susannah Prichard’s papers after the tantalising burning of so many others, reminding Thompson of that other ritual burning of his papers by the aged Thomas Hardy in his garden at Max Gate in 1919. John Thompson, himself for twenty years a senior member of the Library staff, also mentions Harold White’s wife Elizabeth, his staunch supporter in all his tireless endeavours on behalf of the National Library. She, too, deserves to be affectionately remembered.

White succeeded Kenneth Binns in 1947 as National Librarian, as he styled himself, although this fitting title was regretfully changed to Director-General. He took a particular interest in politicians and, as Stuart McIntyre writes in his excellent chapter ‘The Library and the Political Life of the Nation’, White’s “epistolary courtship” of politicians, active or retired, “was constant and insistent”. There were of course other claimants, like the National Archives, just as other items coveted by the Library found their way to other institutions in Canberra. Thus ScreenSound Australia, the former National Film and Sound Archive, now houses the classic 1919 film ‘The Sentimental Bloke’, whose rescue by the Library’s Film Division is traced by Peter Cochrane with appropriate photographs.

For too long the Library’s accumulating treasures were stored haphazardly in most unlikely places: boxes in a grain store at the railway station, films in the nurses’ quarters at the old hospital premises on the site of the Australian National University, with serials stored in the morgue, and other items in the old laundry. Eventually the splendid building by Lake Burley Griffin, strikingly photographed by Damian McDonald, was built and ceremoniously opened.

Along with his contemporaries Cliff Burmester and Courtenay Key, Harold White busily promoted the development of stronger Asian collections in the Library, as David Walker narrates. White himself visited librarians and scholars in various Asian centres and persuaded Sydney Wang at Taipei to join the National Library, which he did in 1964. While some scholars regretted the Library’s move from the traditional European and American cultural heritage towards Asia, the opportunity to build a world-class Asian Collection proved irresistible, not least with such acquisitions as the Yetts Chinese collection and the Luce collection dealing largely with Burma.

One of the Library’s major undertakings is ‘The Oral History Collection’, another of Harold White’s brainchildren, established in 1970, which, as Barry York writes, is now a 34,000-hour sound collection, including the pioneering recordings made by the intrepid Hazel de Berg on her ancient metal and bakelite tape recorder, one of Joan Kerr’s ‘Strange
Objects'. The Collection includes music, folklore recordings, as well as interviews with Australians from all walks of life, conducted by a select group of interviewers like Terry Colhoun, formerly of the ABC, of whose interlocutory skills I was made personally aware. The Library’s ‘Bringing Them Home’ oral history project, designed to collect and preserve a range of stories from Indigenous Australians and others involved in the process of child removal, has so far recorded interviews with more than 200 individuals. It is scheduled to be completed in 2002.

It remains to mention other aspects of White’s design to systematically collect and preserve ‘material of all kinds illustrating the life and development of the Australian people’, as described in this book. Hence the well-researched and illustrated chapters by Helen Ennis on the Photographic Collection and by Robyn Holmes on ‘Musical Dialogues’, with its tributes to the well-known music critic and antiquarian bookseller Kenneth Hince and the distinguished musicologist Andrew McCredie. Suzanne Rickard writes on the Map Collection, which includes a 1535 edition of Ptolemy’s Geographia, with its suggested existence of Australia as ‘Terra Incognita’, as well as a lively account of the legendary Daisy Bates mapping Aboriginal places in situ from the Nullarbor Plain to the Kimberley, maps now being used in connection with Aboriginal land claims. By the end of the twentieth century the National Library of Australia possessed over 600,000 maps, 2500 atlases, and over 800,000 aerial photographs.

In the final chapter, ‘The Network and the Nation’, Paul Turnbull looks at the National Library’s increasing reliance on new technology. This development, closely watched by interested and sometimes highly critical observers, has not been without hiccups. But the fine achievement of the Library’s many distinguished and devoted directors and staff, and its active body of Friends, live on, and the reader closes this book confident that under its present Director-General, Jan Fullerton, the vision of that young cadet cataloguer of 1923, Harold White, will remain alive and fruitful as the National Library of Australia enters upon its Second Century.

RALPH ELLIOTT

Edited by Peter Cochrane.
ISBN 0 642 10730 0. $59.95.