

# EDITORIAL: TOMORROW'S MUSEUMS

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**An aerial view of the new National Museum of Australia on Canberra's Acton Peninsula.**

Source: Ashton Raggatt McDougall, Robert Peck von Hartel Trethrowan. 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-

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.