

**Understanding Museums:
Australian museums and museology**

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Art museums

During the last three decades Australia has witnessed an unprecedented development in the visual arts. Art museums have both responded to and been agents of change in this period through their collections, exhibitions and public programs. Their role in contemporary art, including Indigenous art, has been especially significant. Australian art museums have also contributed to Australian artists being represented in exhibitions and collections throughout the world. The papers in this section provide an overview of Australian art museums and the role of 'blockbuster' exhibitions from overseas.

Contents

- Introduction, Leon Paroissien
- Art museums in Australia: a personal account, Daniel Thomas
- International exhibitions, Caroline Turner
- Collecting works on paper: specialisation at risk?, Anne Kirker

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Understanding Museums: Australian Museums and Museology

Art museums: introduction

by Leon Paroissien

During recent decades Australia has witnessed an unprecedented development in the visual arts. Art museums have both responded to and been agents of change in this period through their collections, exhibitions and public programs. Their role in contemporary art, including Indigenous art, has been especially significant, and Australian art museums have contributed to Australian artists being represented in exhibitions and collections throughout the world.

In 1968, when the relocated National Gallery of Victoria opened its doors, it was Australia's first purpose-built art museum to house an established collection. It also included a dedicated space for temporary exhibitions. The 1975 Pigott Report observed, 'in the last quarter century art museums in Australia have been more favoured by governments; and the two great building programs for museums both centre on art museums – Melbourne and Canberra'. The Report does not mention the Art Gallery of New South Wales's major extensions of the Captain Cook Wing completed in 1972. Before the long-planned National Gallery eventually opened in Canberra in 1982, the state gallery in Perth had opened a new building in 1979, and Brisbane saw the opening of a new state gallery building shortly after the National Gallery itself opened. In subsequent decades other state gallery buildings, and composite museums that included art collections, were restored or extended – in some cases a number of times.

Improving a museum in stages – as funding becomes available – became the most typical model of development for Australian museums, enabling them to respond through revision as well as improvement to changing needs. Such incremental growth has the great advantage not only of conserving heritage buildings that might otherwise have been torn down as fashionable standards changed, but also of displaying art of earlier periods in the architectural contexts to which they originally related. The National Gallery of Victoria and the Queensland Art Gallery, both having built new buildings in the earlier phases of their museum development, subsequently established second campuses for aspects of their collections and related exhibitions. In Australia there are now approximately 200 public art museums and exhibition galleries in addition to the six state galleries, the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory, the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, and the National Gallery of Australia.

Australia's art museums had long sought to complement their collections by organising exhibitions of Australian and foreign art – becoming in the 1970s a participant in a worldwide movement in the initiation of major exhibitions, and at the very time that such programs were being developed in Europe and the United States. Australia's Government Indemnity Scheme – unique in the generosity of its application – facilitated an ambitious program of exhibitions in Australian museums.

The great increase in temporary exhibitions and the expansion of building programs were closely interrelated, as states and cities sought to match facilities and programs elsewhere, and museums interspersed their own exhibitions with those initiated in other museums. Gradually an increased number of exhibitions were researched in-house, and museums appointed people with diverse skills in exhibition organisation, installation, marketing, merchandising and sponsorship management.

In 1950 there were only some seven regional art museums in the whole of Australia, most of these in Victoria. Stimulated by later population growth, as well as by civic pride and the rise of tourism, the development of further art museums spread gradually north along east-coast states: first to New South Wales in the 1970s, and subsequently to Queensland in the 1980s and 1990s.

Some of the many smaller museums have commissioned entirely new buildings; others are accommodated in recycled buildings such as former town halls or council chambers; meanwhile others have added new wings to nineteenth-century or early twentieth-century buildings.

Regional, city and university art museums often remain substantially under-funded and under-staffed. New initiatives generally depend on special project grants from government or private

sources. Nevertheless this may not be evident behind the museums' high aspirations, professional standards, and dynamic programs.

Substantial private collections have been rare in Australia's history. However, in recent years this situation has begun to change markedly and there are now important private collections that museums would greatly value – some having already found their way into public museums. In 2003 Tarrawarra, Australia's first small art museum initiated and endowed wholly by private funding, opened in the heart of the vineyards of the Yarra Valley, some 60 kilometres from Melbourne.

During some four decades of critical transformation, the whole Australian art museum profession has established a richer museology and has nurtured multiple publics that better appreciate the incremental and productive nature of heritage itself. A more thoughtful and discriminating population now has a sense of collective ownership of cultural heritage and places complex expectations on Australia's art museums.

Essays in this volume address a selection of themes in the burgeoning of art museums in Australia. The collecting of prints and drawings, and the appointment of specialist curators in the field, lay close to the foundations of the country's major art museums. Anne Kirker looks at recent changes in the organisation of museums that have challenged the well-established roles of specialist curators. Temporary exhibitions have played a major role in art museums, introducing works and themes not represented in local collections. Caroline Turner traces the exceptional development of major art exhibitions since the 1970s.

During the period spanned by essays in this book, every major art museum in Australia has collected and exhibited work by Indigenous artists. Bernice Murphy outlines the context in which this uniquely Australia phenomenon has occurred. Meanwhile, Daniel Thomas provides a rich personal account of the development of Australia's art museums during his outstanding 30-year career as a curator and director.

Understanding Museums - Art museums

Art museums in Australia: a personal account

by Daniel Thomas

From 1958 to 1990 I worked in art museums – first as a multi-purpose curator at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in Sydney, then at the fledgling National Gallery in Canberra as head of Australian art, and finally at the Art Gallery of South Australia in Adelaide as director. The art museum world that I entered was very British, and rather unaware that it was run largely by artist directors and artist trustees for a small world of artists and collectors. Only the National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne produced a good quantity of scholarly art historical research; only the University of Melbourne then had a department of art history, and thus harboured colleagues for museum-based scholarship.

I was the first-ever curator at the National Gallery of New South Wales (which dropped the anachronistic pre-Federation 'National' the year I arrived). Apart from nomenclature we were very backward: the roof leaked and the collections were mediocre compared with the wealthier state galleries in Adelaide and Melbourne, where curators existed and where there were huge private endowments for acquisitions – the 1897 Elder Bequest and the 1904 Felton Bequest. The state galleries in Perth and Brisbane were even more primitive than that in Sydney. In Hobart the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery was, and still is, a multi-disciplinary museum for natural sciences, local history and art. In the second half of the nineteenth century a three-part structure of science museum plus 'national' gallery plus library had been the format for the major institutions in most Australian colonies except New South Wales.

There were small late nineteenth-century institutions in mining boom cities such as Launceston, Bendigo or Ballarat, and also at Warrnambool and Geelong. After a stagnant early twentieth century for art museums throughout Australia, a professional regional gallery opened in Newcastle in 1957, the first in New South Wales. The University of Melbourne and the Teachers College at Armidale in New South Wales had been given significant art collections, precursors of the art museums now to be found within the present day swarm of universities. Almost all metropolitan local governments and regional cities throughout Australia now boast art collecting or art exhibition spaces. By 2008 there were almost 200.

Fifty years ago not even the state galleries had cafés, bookshops, lecture theatres or purpose-built spaces for receptions and entertainments. Above all, none then had purpose-built spaces to handle and display special exhibitions.

Membership organisations – 'Art Gallery Societies' – were founded in the 1950s; they improvised lectures, films, concerts and parties in the collection-display spaces. The six state gallery directors – the Australian Gallery Directors Conference – had been conferring regularly since 1948 to plan the touring exhibitions that similarly disrupted their collection displays. The art museums were becoming livelier for visitors, but in the process had become rather unsafe places for works of art. A great change occurred in the 1970s.

Melbourne started the big shift. The National Gallery of Victoria had been a rabbit warren concealed behind a great public library; galleries for paintings by Rembrandt and Cézanne also led to a science museum's galleries for skeletons and taxidermy. In 1968 a conspicuous new National Gallery of Victoria on St Kilda Road triggered a nationwide upgrade of art museum buildings. The new buildings, especially Sydney's in 1972, in turn caused unexpected changes to funding and to governance as well as to collecting capabilities and public programs. Economic prosperity and cultural globalisation had created the momentum.

The prior conditions were state and civic pride – and healthy competitiveness. The term 'global village' was coined in the 1960s, not only in regard to media and communications, but also to international transport. Australians were able to travel across the world far more easily and quickly than by ocean liner. Jet aircraft allowed local powerbrokers, taking breaks from business or politics in Europe or America, to appreciate more often the stimulus and glamour of overseas art museums and to compare them with the drab art museums at home in Australia.

The run-down Art Gallery of New South Wales in sub-tropical Sydney was a conservation hazard to its collections and, crucially, a discouragement to high-value exhibitions from overseas. Even so, it was interstate competition with Victoria and South Australia that caused the New South Wales government to embark in 1969 on upgrading its state gallery. The new National Gallery of Victoria building had opened in 1968, but ahead of the palatial state-of-the-art building in Melbourne the National Gallery of South Australia in Adelaide had opened a small extension in 1962 – Australia's first climate-controlled art exhibition space.

Both Adelaide and Melbourne have seasons that are kinder to art collections than Sydney's summertime steaminess; conservation needs were not the whole story. South Australia's lead in the climate-control stakes was instead a matter of synergy with the Adelaide Festival, the nation's first large multi-arts event, first held in 1960 and modelled on the Edinburgh Festival. Ultimately, arts festivals and special-event exhibitions are what changed Australia's art museums and art audiences.

When the upgraded and extended Art Gallery of New South Wales opened in 1972 it meant that, at last, the two largest cities, Melbourne and Sydney, could be entrusted with the kind of big budget overseas exhibitions that had to rely on box-office income and hence on large but essentially occasional audiences for art. There had been no shortage of overseas exhibitions previously, but they were fairly routine government-to-government cultural exchange displays that were easily borrowed for long absences from their owners; they interested the local art world well enough, but did not have much attraction for larger audiences.

Britain had sent 16 marvellous paintings by JMW Turner to the first Adelaide Festival in 1960, and then toured them on to Melbourne and Sydney. It was the only exhibition by a great artist to reach Australia before climate control was introduced. In 1962 a locally generated 'scholarly blockbuster' of Pre-Raphaelite art, for the Adelaide Festival and a subsequent extensive tour, secured loans of masterpieces from Britain. A decade later at the Art Gallery of New South Wales a similar formula, of scholarship based on the past century's steady accumulation in Australia – and New Zealand – of contemporary art from the British motherland, produced *Victorian Olympians* and *Victorian Social Conscience*. In 2004 at the National Gallery of Australia *The Edwardians*, with many key works borrowed from overseas, broke newer ground than scholarship within Britain itself. In 2007, at the National Gallery of Victoria, *Modern Britain: masterworks from Australian and New Zealand collections* continued this process of creating a strength out of what had begun as colonial British parochialism. And in 2008 the National Gallery of Australia internationalised our Britishness with *Turner to Monet: the triumph of landscape painting*. An art museum at last had sufficient curatorial imagination to conceive an exhibition theme never previously attempted anywhere in the world; sufficient curatorial clout to negotiate international loans of masterpieces by artists such as Caspar David Friedrich from Germany, as well as Turners from London; and sufficient confidence to include Australian paintings by John Glover, Eugene von Guérard and Tom Roberts alongside the great nineteenth-century Americans and Europeans. *Turner to Monet* was not only a major art historical event; it was also a popular success. It made money and covered its huge costs.

In 1975 Australia's first 'populist blockbuster', *Modern Masters: Manet to Matisse*, provided by the philanthropic International Program of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), came to Melbourne and Sydney from New York. MoMA had already sent exhibitions to Australia, and had been early to exploit globalised airfreight for exhibition itineraries that moved works through Japan, India, New Zealand and Australia. Ardent art-world New Yorkers in the 1960s had also been the first foreigners to start re-routing their private visits to Asia through Australia, in order to check progress at the Sydney Opera House, then under construction. A city giving birth to a wonder of the modern world clearly deserved attention. The upgraded Art Gallery of New South Wales of 1972 had perfect synergy with the Sydney Opera House that opened in 1973.

MoMA's *Modern Masters* attracted huge attendances of 350,000 visitors – long queues had to wait outdoors – and produced hefty box-office income. Hare-brained ideas from businessmen suddenly cropped up for revenue-sharing productions with the art museums. Governments, more soberly, saw an opportunity to reduce their funding of the state galleries. Their investments in safe, attractive and high-prestige buildings had turned out well. Besides programs of immense high-cultural popularity there was also unexpected revenue, and the possibility of cost savings. Immense savings would indeed be achieved: 30 years later state government was contributing less than 50 per cent of total expenditure at the Art Gallery of New South Wales.

At the federal level, the culturally activist Whitlam government had recently established a new

agency, the Australia Council for the Arts, which supported *Modern Masters* in 1975. Federal government therefore best understood what was needed next, and in 1977 set up an independent company, the Australian Art Exhibitions Corporation, to produce and manage blockbuster exhibitions. The Art Exhibitions Corporation began with *The Chinese Exhibition: recent archaeological finds of the People's Republic of China*, which was not really an art exhibition. Further archaeological exhibitions lost money. Inexperience at 'shoehorning' quasi-art exhibitions into art museums bankrupted the Corporation. For art museum audiences cultural edification was not enough; they also expected aesthetic delight or fright.

Outsourced management of major exhibitions, with the huge advantage of federal government indemnification in lieu of otherwise prohibitive insurance costs, passed to other structures and now resides in Art Exhibitions Australia (AEA). In 2003 AEA, by then entirely self-supporting and able to cross-subsidise its exhibitions, toured the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery's *John Glover and the Colonial Picturesque*. Though the scholarly exhibition of Australian art found a large audience and its box-office results were satisfactory, it's an example of what would never have been undertaken without reserves earned from dependable crowd-pleasing 'treasures' exhibitions from overseas such as the National Gallery of Victoria's recent *The Impressionists: masterpieces from the Musée d'Orsay* and the sightings of Rembrandt and Vermeer in its *Dutch Masters from the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam*. The most spectacularly successful exhibition of this kind was the National Gallery of Australia's 2009–10 *Masterpieces from Paris: Van Gogh, Gauguin, Cezanne and beyond* which – most unusually in the small population city of Canberra – broke Australia's record for exhibition visitation with a figure of 476,843.

Australian government indemnification of prohibitively expensive exhibitions was made available to the National Gallery of Australia as well as to AEA. State galleries, now with management skills and international curatorial clout of their own for obtaining loans, sometimes preferred not to share income with AEA and soon persuaded their various state governments occasionally to underwrite insurance for blockbuster exhibitions. All quickly found that high-end box-office populism could cross-subsidise smaller, riskier, free-admission exhibitions of local art and contemporary art. They also subsidise numerous scholarly exhibitions of Asian art, especially at the Art Gallery of New South Wales.

Major art museums began to make money, not only from major exhibitions but also from their cafés and restaurants, from their specialist art bookshops and designer trinkets, from their publishing, and from public lectures and receptions. Following the membership organisations that had been started in the 1950s, high-powered foundations, at first seeded with matching funds from government, began to accumulate non-government capital in the 1970s. Governments for a while demanded the introduction of general admission charges, by way of compensation for the cost of the new buildings, but such charges were resisted and did not last long. Exhibitions, and shops and cafés and publishing, were more effective ways of making money. Admission charges to collections are uncommon in art museums in Australia; they occur most often in smaller museums at tourist destinations.

Teams of keen volunteer guides and in-house education officers helped make the art accessible to a much broader public than previously, a political plus with governments nervous about assisting art consumption by 'elitist' minorities. Governments accepted the argument that upgraded buildings needed upgraded staff: young art history graduate curators came on stream, and registrars to handle art logistics.

The building-led revolution continued on from Melbourne and Sydney. A new Art Gallery of Western Australia opened in Perth in 1979, and then Australia's art-museum revolution climaxed in 1982. That year a new building for the Queensland Art Gallery opened in Brisbane and the Australian National Gallery opened in Canberra.

The advent of a real National Gallery in the national capital brings us to a problem bequeathed from colonial British times. Other colonial 'National' galleries in New South Wales and South Australia had already adjusted their names, in belated recognition that federation of the once separate colonies had taken place in 1901, but in the twenty-first century the 'National' Gallery of Victoria remains recalcitrant. It claims that its uniquely encyclopaedic collections, ranging from Mediterranean antiquities to international contemporary art, are a service to the entire federated nation, and it continues to use the nineteenth-century colonial name. However, in 2002 when it opened its separate building for Australian art, it quietly started using corporate-style abbreviations: 'NGV Australia' and 'NGV International'.

Naming demonstrates another unfortunate British colonial legacy. The peculiarly British terminology of (public) 'gallery' – not 'art museum' – causes trouble; art museums become muddled with dealers' galleries. Redneck Australian parliamentarians have sometimes started by assuming that government 'galleries' are commercial businesses in need of occasional subsidy, not cultural, educational and research institutions in need of permanent sustenance; foreigners have approached the state or regional 'galleries' hoping to buy works of art.

Universities, always more worldly than state or local governments, were early to adopt more appropriate naming conventions, for example the Ian Potter Museum of Art at the University of Melbourne. Contemporary art is similarly a global field, and when the Power Bequest to the University of Sydney eventually generated an off-campus museum it was named the Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA), Sydney. The MCA receives assistance from the New South Wales government and the Australia Council for the Arts but is essentially a non-government museum, and so far the only one invited to supply an additional voice to the heavyweight gathering of state and national gallery directors that calls itself the Council of Australian Art Museum Directors. It was a lost opportunity in 1993 when the Australian National Gallery changed its name to the National Gallery of Australia. (Innocent first-timers, including parliamentarians, had been puzzled by its enthusiasm for non-Australian art.) Something like 'National Museum of Art, Canberra' might have better defined its role, and set an example.

The National Gallery's visionary founding director, James Mollison, wanted to show Australians a sampling of all kinds of art worldwide – African and Pre-Columbian American as well Asian and Western art – alongside a concentration of highest-quality international modernism and contemporary art and an extremely comprehensive collection of Australian art. In 1967 Prime Minister Harold Holt had committed the Australian government to a national gallery; Prime Minister Gough Whitlam (1972–1975) escalated cultural funding to hitherto astonishing levels, including acquisition funds for the future National Gallery. The 1973 purchase, at a world record price, of Jackson Pollock's *Blue Poles*, a masterpiece of Abstract Expressionist painting, caused Americans to say they now understood how the ancient Greeks must have felt when their great works of art disappeared to newly rich Rome. Mollison's National Gallery was startlingly different from the overly British collections formed previously in Australia. It was also different from the highly parochial state-based collections of Australian art elsewhere.

New South Wales and Victoria had neglected each other's art; only South Australia had previously been collecting the full range of interstate Australian art. There were also prejudices and demarcations about mediums and categories and periods. Victoria and South Australia collected European and Asian decorative arts as art, but New South Wales left them for its technology museum, the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, which later metamorphosed into the Powerhouse Museum. At the Powerhouse 'applied arts' became 'craft' or 'design'. The decorative arts collections at state galleries have taken a greater interest in 'contemporary craft' since practitioners began to receive assistance from the Australia Council. Modern design, too, now has a stronger presence in the decorative arts collections at state galleries. Decorative arts collections had seldom incorporated Australian folk art objects, a neglected area usually left to the very numerous volunteer-run rural museums of local history, but a conspicuous and unexpected delight at the new National Gallery.

Another inconsistency was early colonial Australian art. The state galleries in New South Wales and Victoria saw it as history rather than art, and left it to the pictorial and memorabilia collections of the state libraries. Until the 1960s there was little or no expert knowledge of Australia's own art history, so outside their own states there was negligible awareness of the best nineteenth-century painters, John Glover who worked in Tasmania and Eugene von Guérard who worked in Victoria. On the other hand, in South Australia, Western Australia and Queensland the state galleries, not the state libraries, collected early colonial history. Photographs as history had resided in libraries and archives; photographs as art began to enter art museum collections only in the mid-1970s.

These inconsistencies and overlaps between art museums, natural science and anthropology museums, history and technology museums, libraries and archives, led the intergovernmental Cultural Ministers Council to create a Heritage Collections Committee. From that committee there emerged, in 2004, a company called the Collections Council of Australia, with an ex-officio board member coming from the Council of Australian Art Museum Directors, but it was defunded in 2009. The Collections Council established 'cultural significance' as an alternative criterion to aesthetic excellence for assessing the value of art objects and quasi-art.

The most important of the in-between categories is Australian Aboriginal art. One or two Hermannsburg School watercolours and Arnhem Land bark paintings had entered the art collections in Adelaide, Melbourne and Sydney in the 1940s. However, the liberation of Aboriginal art into the world of high art – a liberation from what some Indigenous Australians saw as the demeaning company of plants and animals in science museums – was chiefly due to the activities of the Adelaide anthropologist Charles Mountford. In the 1950s he engineered significant gifts of Aboriginal bark paintings to the state galleries throughout Australia and Tony Tuckson, deputy director at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, was the most eager of those who took up the challenge. From 1958 Tuckson carried out an extensive campaign of acquisitions for his art museum, which thenceforth always conspicuously displayed Aboriginal art. In 1960 the Directors Conference commissioned from New South Wales a large exhibition of *Australian Aboriginal Art*, mostly bark paintings, for an Australia-wide tour.

A very strong presence of Australian Aboriginal art, most of it contemporary, is now found in all art museums. In Melbourne at NGV Australia it has the ground level entirely to itself, but Aboriginal art has also been seen alongside Andy Warhol at NGV International. In Canberra a new ground-level entrance to the National Gallery, opened in 2010, continues the focus on the 200 burial poles commissioned in 1988 as an *Aboriginal Memorial*. As well as filling its own separate spaces, Aboriginal art continues to be intermingled with international and other Australian collection-displays at the National Gallery. Social empowerment of Indigenous Australians would have been Mountford's intention when he first inserted their work into art museums, but Tuckson's and Mollison's triumphantly realised initiatives were based largely on modernist aesthetics. They knew that the best Indigenous works were as powerful and beautiful as – although different from – the best Western works of art. Australian and foreign audiences now share that understanding. No other country in the world has done anything similar through its art museums.

New Zealand art also requires complicated curatorial handling. Specialists in international Western art will have little knowledge of New Zealand, so at least at the National Gallery, where it is more serious a political issue than elsewhere, New Zealand art is cared for by a department of *Australasian* art but displayed with European and American art as well as with Australian art. The National Gallery's privately endowed Gordon Darling Australasian Print Fund mutated in 2008 into an Australia Pacific Print Fund, a further acceptance that the whole Pacific Lake is best overseen by Australia-based expertise.

When the Museum of Contemporary Art opened in Sydney in 1991 it promptly staged important exhibitions from New Zealand, Japan and China, a conscious departure from Eurocentric attitudes. Later, in 1993, the Queensland Art Gallery began its *Asia-Pacific Triennials* as major contemporary art events that would be very different from the *Biennale of Sydney* instigated in 1973 by Franco Belgiorno-Nettis, an Italian immigrant tycoon who, like other wealthy patrons in the twentieth century, wanted to bring isolated Australians into contact with the most recent art from the rest of the world.

In the 1970s the National Gallery of Australia, acknowledging the NGV's great collections of Chinese art, began by focusing instead on South-east Asian art, especially Cambodian and Thai Buddhist sculptures and Indonesian batik cloths, and soon became probably the world's leading centre for South-east Asian textiles. In 1978 Edmund Capon, a sinologist from the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, became director of the Art Gallery of New South Wales, and promptly created a department of Asian art, programmed wonderful exhibitions, extended the meagre collections, and created purpose-built display spaces for Asian art. In Adelaide, the Art Gallery of South Australia developed special expertise in South-east Asian ceramics, but also now possesses the finest Japanese sculptures and screen paintings in Australia; in 2006 it installed the nation's only collection space dedicated to Islamic art, still a neglected field. In 2005, when Ron Radford arrived from the Art Gallery of South Australia to direct the National Gallery, he further strengthened all the Asian collections in Canberra and created a new focus on Indian sculptures and paintings. He also shifted Asian art from basement spaces to the main entrance level, where Australia's most spectacular displays of highest quality South-east and South Asian art displaced a scrappy display of European art.

The National Gallery's 30 or so European paintings and sculptures, from the early Renaissance to Neoclassicism, were pronounced unlikely ever to develop into a coherent display worthy of a national gallery. In a bold but not too controversial move they have been transferred on indefinite loan to better contexts in the state galleries in Adelaide, Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne.

Art museum deaccessioning is a related issue. In the 1940s and 1950s the state galleries in Victoria and New South Wales deaccessioned a good number of British Victorian paintings and sculptures – not to raise money, but because they occupied too much storage space and were out of fashion. The process was ill-advised, both artistically and politically. In the late twentieth century better deaccessioning policies were drafted in most state galleries, especially in relation to works originally received as gifts, or to works suitable for transfer to other institutions, or that clearly duplicated others of lesser quality. Even so, in 1996, further deaccessioning of a number of Victorian and Edwardian British paintings from the Art Gallery of New South Wales was not done well; a few paintings of superior quality slipped away, while others of low quality certainly met the criterion of cultural significance.

A converse matter to deaccessioning is the acceptance of gifts restricted by conditions such as permanent display. In 2006 NGV Australia accepted a selection from the celebrated Joseph Brown Collection, originally formed to illustrate the full timespan and geographical range of Australian art. It did much to correct Melbourne's neglect of Sydney art, and it must have pleased many that the collection was saved for Dr Brown's home state, but his condensed history of Australian art within a much more extensive history is an awkward interruption and an oddity for visitors. There was a better interstate offer from the Australian National University in Canberra, to house the complete Joseph Brown Collection in a building that would bear his name, but localism unfortunately prevailed.

Australia's art museums have always taken contemporary art seriously. Those deaccessioned Victorian and Edwardian British paintings and sculptures were contemporary art when they first entered the colonial and state collections. Contemporary art is best presented extensively in special exhibitions and best collected more judiciously than in the past; the upgraded special exhibition spaces of the 1970s allowed hugely increased and more appropriate attention to contemporary art.

The upgraded art museum buildings arrived just in time to cope with post-modernism, whose messy installation art, performance art, film and video could not otherwise have been accommodated. The international *Biennales of Sydney*, the national *Australian Perspectives* (1981–1999), also in Sydney, the *Adelaide Biennials of Australian Art* and, as mentioned, the *Asia-Pacific Triennials* in Brisbane became typical special-event showcases for newest art, local and foreign, designed for the large audiences that reach the state galleries.

Work by women painters and sculptors was never discriminated against in collections of Australian art. If they had assertive personalities like the modernist Margaret Preston, their excellence had been recognised from the start. If they had retiring personalities, like Grace Cossington Smith or Grace Crowley, or were out of fashion like Clarice Beckett, recognition took time, just as it did for retiring males such as Ralph Balson. A prime task for collection curators is recognition of neglected excellence, especially out-of-fashion excellence. The art museum upsurge of retrospective collecting and exhibitions of Australian art in the 1970s was part of that normal museological process, not a consequence of post-modernist feminism.

On the other hand, neglect of art mediums favoured by women artists was corrected by the newly changed mindsets. Prints, especially the mediums of woodcut and linocut, were one example; craft arts of all kinds, especially needlework, were another. Needlework quilts in the National Gallery's collections gave Australian nineteenth-century colonial women artists, including convicts, a voice.

As mentioned, the colonial multi-disciplinary format survives in Hobart at the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery. In 2008 a commitment eventually came from government to upgrade a building that is very inconvenient for visitors. The Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory, which opened in improvised premises in Darwin in 1964, was the one new multi-disciplinary institution established by a government in the twentieth century. A new post-Cyclone Tracy building opened in 1981. The combination of science, history and art still suits a small capital city.

By 2008 the Art Gallery of New South Wales had been extended twice since 1972 and in 2010 it converted its entire art storage floor to display its collections of international contemporary art, greatly strengthened by the John W Kaldor Family Gift of classic minimalism and conceptual art. In Melbourne, Jeff Kennett, a monument-building former premier of Victoria desperate to find functions for the 'iconic' Federation Square that he hoped would rival Sydney's Opera House, bullied the NGV into taking on the key tenancy as a museum of Australian art; in 2002 a museum of international contemporary art might have been more suitable for the site.

In 2006 the Queensland Art Gallery doubled in size, its beautiful Gallery of Modern Art (GoMA)

conveniently situated only 200 metres from its parent building, whereas NGV Australia and NGV International are on opposite sides of a river. GoMA is Australia's first art museum to include a cinémathèque. As well as showing the *Asia-Pacific Triennials* it also showcases Queensland's now extensive collections of contemporary Asian art. Acquisition funds from state governments were once substantial, but have dwindled and sometimes entirely disappeared; only in Queensland have governments continued since the 1970s with very generous funding for acquisitions as well as buildings and operations.

A National Portrait Gallery, opened in 2008 in Canberra, was almost entirely due to inspired lobbying from a private citizen. A former chairman of the National Gallery, Gordon Darling, and his wife Marilyn, had become addicted to philanthropy, persuaded prime ministers that a National Portrait Gallery was an essential asset for a national capital, and ensured its successful start by contributing financial support. Although the National Portrait Gallery is really a history museum, its director has been added to the elite Council of Australian Art Museum Directors, perhaps on the assumption that the Portrait Gallery will continue to use the not-so-secret weapon of aesthetic excellence in its campaign to make Australians interesting.

Ambitious private museums are a very recent development. Marc Besen's TarraWarra Museum of Art opened in 2003 in beautiful Yarra Valley wine country outside Melbourne. David Walsh's Museum of Old and New Art, known as Mona, opened in 2011 at the Moorilla vineyard on the Derwent estuary near Hobart. There is nothing like it in the world. A self-proclaimed vehicle for the owner's missionary Atheism and Darwinism – marketed somewhat misleadingly as being about 'sex and death' – it displays major Egyptian and Greek antiquities alongside international late 20th century and 21st century art. It has free admission and in its first few months attracted an extremely high visitation, not only from an Australia-wide and international artworld but also, more significantly, from a non-artworld local demographic. Mona offers a paradigm shift in art museums; it's the result of altruistic self-gratification by an extremely free-thinking mind.

Before Mona it seemed the most significant new development was ACMI, the Australian Centre for the Moving Image. One of the world's first such museums, it opened in 2002 in Melbourne, next door to NGV Australia at Federation Square. It is always crowded with young people, at home in the present-day age of disembodied digital images.

Older generations worry about one of the ways in which the Internet is changing the world; minds are narrowing as people graze on self-centred information, constantly reinforcing what they already know and believe. Bracing otherness in unfamiliar ways is seldom encountered by post-newspaper reading generations. Art museums should therefore treat complete Internet accessibility of their extraordinarily powerful images as a high priority.

However, their materiality gives the ideas and emotions embodied in art museum objects a much greater charge than their disembodied images can transmit from a laptop screen. At NGV Australia, a less crowded place than ACMI next door, video installations and other kinds of screen-based art are now taken for granted in temporary exhibitions of contemporary art, but they are not available all the time. To help capture present-day audiences for art they should always be available for serendipitous encounters by those who might wander through an art collection. In Hobart, the inaugural collection display at David Walsh's Mona included much more moving-image and installation art as paintings or photomedia, and thereby made its unusually eager young visitors feel at home.

Special exhibitions are wonderful temporary stimulants, and good marketing tools for art museums, but the collection is the more wondrous final product. Revisiting, rethinking and re-scrutinising the thoughts and feelings that have been worked into clear and graspable form is the best way to use an art museum. A universal and unedited ocean of Internet information has vast lucky-dip potential, but browsing a good library or a large museum collection is a better way to encounter the high-energy artefacts that we call works of art. Works of art exist to suddenly provide understanding of self or, equally important, to take viewers out of themselves.

Australia's art museums, more perhaps than any others, have become unusually well-suited to a post-European or post-North Atlantic age. For over 30 years they have been defining and hence creating the Asia-Pacific age whose time is upon us. Perhaps that is why, while he was still director of the Art Gallery of South Australia, Ron Radford was invited to join the world's peak international Directors Council, the first from a museum outside Europe or North America to network formally with the directors of the Louvre in Paris, the British Museum in London, and the J Paul Getty

Museum in Los Angeles. And perhaps that is why in 2006 Michael Brand, a Canberra-born one-time curator of Asian art at the National Gallery of Australia became the director of the Getty, the world's wealthiest art museum. Australia is leading the world.

Note

A longer version of this paper is published in *Journal of Art Historiography*, No 4 June 2011. Daniel Thomas, 'Art Museums in Australia: A Personal Retrospect', <http://arthistoriography.files.wordpress.com/2011/05/dthistoriogartmus-reedit29may11ref.pdf> [PDF, opens in a new window]

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Cite as: Daniel Thomas, 2011, 'Art museums in Australia: a personal account', in Des Griffin and Leon Paroissien (eds), *Understanding Museums: Australian Museums and Museology*, National Museum of Australia, published online at nma.gov.au/research/understanding-museums/DThomas_2011.html ISBN 978-1-876944-92-6

Understanding Museums - Art museums

International exhibitions

by Caroline Turner

Overview

More than the entire current population of Australia has visited major international exhibitions at Australian museums in the last 30 years. [1] Australian museums, and in particular art museums, have been transformed by the advent of these international exhibitions. International 'blockbuster' exhibitions have created sophisticated and appreciative audiences. They have increased professionalism at every level in Australian museums, and created a paradigm shift in the way museums operate within their communities and public programming.

While it is problematic to identify exhibitions as highly significant only from attendances, inevitably a study of international exhibitions becomes a study of the so-called 'blockbuster' exhibitions; overwhelmingly in the twentieth century these were shown in state and national art museums, even when the subject matter could equally suggest a science, history or ethnography museum. It goes without saying that exhibitions about Australian subjects, particularly of Indigenous culture in this country, and exhibitions sent by Australia abroad are equally significant in the history of this nation. What follows is inevitably a compression of a complex subject. [2]

Australian art museums [3] borrowed from overseas to supplement their collections and to show new developments in international art. They could never hope to achieve sufficient depth through collecting alone, although the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV) with its Felton Bequest and wealth derived from the goldfields very early built a most distinguished collection of international art. Nevertheless, some very significant exhibitions have been shown in non-art museums, especially at the Australian Museum in Sydney. In the twenty-first century the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney with exhibitions such as *The Great Wall of China* (2006–2007), the National Library of Australia with its hugely successful *Treasures of the World's Great Libraries* (2001–2002), the National Museum of Australia (NMA) since opening in 2001, the National Portrait Gallery and the Australian National Maritime Museum have all developed international programs.

Conventional wisdom records the age of the blockbuster as beginning in Australia with the series of international exhibitions inaugurated at the National Gallery of Australia (NGA) from the early 1990s; but it is much more accurately dated to the 1970s, especially to *Modern Masters: Manet to Matisse* organised by the International Council of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York, in 1975 and to the Chinese exhibition of 1977, *The Chinese Exhibition: a selection of recent archaeological finds of the People's Republic of China*. The history of international exhibitions in Australia, however, spans more than a century. It is a fascinating history: attendances at many nineteenth-century exhibitions (which included artworks) numbered in the hundreds of thousands; in 1906 William Holman Hunt's religious painting, the *Light of the World*, was seen by an estimated four million people in Australia and New Zealand. Audiences have frequently been more adventurous than those who ran cultural institutions – an example being the enthusiastic public reception for the *Herald* exhibition of contemporary art in 1939 which had been rejected by the NGV. [4] The history of this engagement with international exhibitions suggests a people who felt a 'tyranny of distance' and were interested in the new – not simply clinging to the familiar past of the places they had left as emigrants or to the cultures of Europe, in which the great majority of the population had their roots.

From very early on the Australian populace has shown a great interest in culture and art from outside this country and from very diverse sources, including our near neighbours. Australia has been very successful in attracting loans. This reveals much about the image Australia projected to the world – of a new frontier and of enthusiastic audiences and of professional knowledge. The quality of international exhibitions since the 1970s has been extremely high, driven by curators and scholars within Australia and by sophisticated audiences, often well educated and much travelled, and, from the 1940s onwards, increasingly multicultural.

As might be expected, a history of international exhibitions in Australia reveals a predominant early interest in British, North American and European culture (especially French art) but also a

surprising number of exhibitions from other parts of the world, including Latin America and the Middle East. [5]

Apart from exhibitions on eighteenth-century voyages of discovery at the Australian Museum in 1970 during the Bicentenary year of 1988, *Cook's Pacific Encounters* at the National Museum of Australia (NMA) in 2006, and *Headlands* in 1992 (Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA)), there have been surprisingly few exhibitions on the Pacific and few trans-Tasman exchanges. There has been an early interest in the arts of Asia: as many as 20 per cent of the exhibitions shown in Australia since 1975 have been Asian in content and have held their own in popularity with European exhibitions. Australians have understood the importance of cultural diplomacy with our Asian neighbours, including sending Australian exhibitions to China. [6] A distinction should be made also between those exhibitions developed and curated in Australia and exhibitions developed overseas.

The story of international exhibitions in Australia has largely been a story of Canberra and the state capitals; blockbusters have predominantly followed larger east coast populations. While a majority of exhibitions have been organised by the NGV, the Art Gallery of New South Wales (AGNSW) and NGA, the Art Galleries of South Australia (AGSA), Queensland (QAG), Western Australia (AGWA) and MCA have all organised major international exhibitions and outstanding exhibitions have been initiated by all states: for example, *John Glover and the Colonial Picturesque* by the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery (TMAG); and *Speaking with Cloths* by the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory (MAGNT). Many exhibitions have been developed for Australian audiences, curated by Australians, and have catalogues written by Australian scholars. There has been considerable collaboration between institutions, in part because high costs have dictated the need for multiple venues. A major development was the national and international coordination undertaken by the Australian Gallery Directors' Council (AGDC) and the Visual Arts Board of the Australia Council in the 1970s, and the International Cultural Corporation of Australia (ICCA), later Art Exhibitions Australia (AEA), from the 1980s. Both federal and state governments have been significant: the 'age of the blockbuster' would not have been possible without government support through indemnification provided by the Australian government from the 1970s and later by individual states, meaning that huge insurance premiums did not have to be paid. The Australian government's Indemnity Scheme had the result of encouraging a geographical spread of venues. Other important external players in facilitating exhibitions have included the British and French governments and MoMA's International Council.

If one were to attempt to name the most important international exhibitions in Australia's history there would inevitably be different contenders, but the list would include the earlier exhibition of *French and British Contemporary Art* in 1939 and *Modern Masters: Manet to Matisse* in 1975 because of their impact on Australian art developments. The most significant portent for the future of art exhibitions in Australia was the reception accorded the display of *The Chinese Exhibition* in 1977, when 595,000 visitors marvelled at these works of Chinese genius.

In the years following the Second World War new immigrants, especially from Europe, including talented refugees from Hitler's regime, played a role in changing Australian tastes. In 1953 more than 200,000 people in Sydney and Melbourne alone – the exhibition also went to Perth, Brisbane, Hobart and Adelaide – came to see *French Painting Today*, [7] and exhibitions of Indian, Japanese, Mexican, Italian, Canadian, German, Scandinavian, American, Malaysian and Pakistani art and culture, as well as of works by Turner, Bonnard, Picasso and Surrealist artists in the next two decades, augured a major and exciting change for Australian museums. The 1960s saw several important British/European/American exhibitions. In 1974 came the national tour of the NGA's newly purchased painting by Jackson Pollock, *Blue Poles*, which aroused great interest and much controversy.

The Chinese Exhibition in 1977, *The Entombed Warriors* in 1982–1983 and the *Chinese Dinosaurs* of 1984 also had considerable impact. The Sydney Biennales which began in 1973 were vital in developing knowledge of international contemporary art, as were the Asia-Pacific Triennials at QAG from 1993. There have been a host of other exhibitions, including smaller non-blockbuster exhibitions, which have been significant. Two examples are the exhibitions of Scandinavian contemporary design which came to Australia from the 1960s and which, as Robert Bell has shown, had an enduring impact on design consciousness and craft in Australia, [8] and the vibrant series of exchanges with Asian countries organised by Asialink from 1991.

In the early years of the exhibitions, including blockbusters, fees were generally not paid to institutions sending loan exhibitions – the exhibitions were based on scholarly exchange. While

cultural diplomacy was a significant motivator, a web of individual relationships and networks built by museums and individuals underpinned each exhibition. Australian scholarship was vital in negotiating loans, and Australian professionalism in handling and displaying works earned the respect of lending museums. The contributions of a host of highly talented Australian museum directors, curators and scholars cannot be overstated in achieving the high quality of exhibitions.

There were many reasons why museums moved so enthusiastically to take international exhibitions. These include the potential to attract new audiences, connecting with international scholarship, researching existing collections and enhancing those collections through admission charges, merchandise, donations and sponsorships, and perhaps above all raising the profile of the institution with government and the public. While there were commercial and diplomatic pressures to have international exhibitions, there were equally overwhelming scholarly and artistic reasons. As well, the popular success of such exhibitions has assisted art museums to argue to government for new buildings – or at least for new facilities. Australian museums at first were not prepared for the public response to blockbuster exhibitions in the 1970s and 1980s. In 1975 at AGNSW the sewerage became blocked during the *Modern Masters* exhibition, and visitors to QAG in 1983 wore paths in new parquet floors for the *Entombed Warriors*. [9] The NGA, when it opened in 1982, had no large-scale temporary exhibition space in which to show major exhibitions. The intention of the first Director, James Mollison, was that the Gallery would focus on its own collection, but public demand soon necessitated a change in policy and a new temporary exhibitions wing. The advent of the blockbusters resulted in better facilities and new staff. Public demand also transformed the nature of education services: new types of public programs had to be developed, aimed at servicing new types of visitors.

The most dramatic result of the blockbuster phenomenon has been the increased professionalism of museums and the changed power relationships between professional staff and boards of trustees, resulting in a professional 'takeover' of the art museums which had been dominated until the 1970s by their powerful boards of trustees appointed by state governments. [10] It soon became apparent that overseas museums needed to deal with their professional colleagues, and that directors and curatorial staff needed to travel and to have control of decision making in critical operational areas. [11] The networks established with museums and lenders overseas were forged through scholarship and shared with others, including art practitioners in Australia. Increased professionalism led some staff to question the expenditure of time and resources on collections from 'other peoples' museums', rather than from permanent collections. [12] The insatiable appetite of the public for blockbusters was the deciding factor.

Audiences were no longer desperate for novelty, but they were impressively prepared to broaden their horizons of acceptance of artworks from other than Europe. A paradigm shift had occurred. The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York had already sent an exhibition, *Modern Masters: Manet to Matisse* in 1975, comprising 115 works by 58 artists. The Trustees of the AGNSW suggested tentatively that this was 'perhaps the largest group of major paintings ever to have been seen in Australia'. [13] It was undoubtedly the largest group of artworks seen in the country since the European Art Exhibition for Australia in 1923, and the standard of the works was far superior. As Leon Paroissien has pointed out, it set an artistic benchmark from which other international exhibitions would be judged.

The age of the blockbuster had arrived, and with it the need for more professional organisation of international exhibitions. The *Modern Masters* exhibition had been organised with MoMA through its International Council. Since the 1960s this had been important as a source of exhibitions for Australia. [14] The Australian Gallery Directors' Council (AGDC) in conjunction with the newly formed Visual Arts Board (VAB) of the Australia Council also emerged as an extremely important partnership in the 1970s. The AGDC cooperated with the VAB in a number of exhibitions, including Australian art exhibitions, but the AGDC disbanded in 1981. The VAB under founding Director Leon Paroissien played an impressive and critical role in organising international exhibitions and promoting the concept of government indemnity until a new agency was created to manage exhibitions – the International Cultural Corporation of Australia (later AEA).

The first few years of the blockbuster era had been inspiring. In the 1980s there were more Chinese exhibitions attracting large audiences, including *The Entombed Warriors* in 1982–83. It was the first international exhibition to be shown at the new NGA, where it attracted 50,000 people in nine days.

These exhibitions were the product of the new Australian Government Indemnity Scheme [15] and

the successor to the ADGC set up by the Australian government to coordinate exhibitions in 1980 – the ICCA headed by Robert Edwards who created its vision and purpose. Its role was to manage significant exhibitions of ‘cultural and historical interest relating to art, science and antiquities, working in close co-operation with Australian and overseas museums.’ [16] The ICCA received a total of \$1 million in funding from the Australian government between 1980 and 1983, but after that its programs became self-supporting through sponsorship, admission fees and merchandising. Over the next 25 years it staged an impressive 57 exhibitions, attracting more than 10 million visitors; raised \$42 million in sponsorships; and started a million-dollar foundation. [17] It changed its name to Art Exhibitions Australia (AEA) in 1991, reflecting the predominance of art museums in the arena of international exhibitions.

In the 1980s the AGNSW took a major lead in presenting Asian exhibitions. The NGV at the time had the more important collection of Asian art, but it was the AGNSW that began to present an array of exciting Asian historical exhibitions, including from China, Japan and India, and to build a highly significant Asian collection. The new QAG opened in 1982 as part of the striking new Queensland Cultural Centre. Excellent audiences in Brisbane quickly established QAG as a venue for AEA exhibitions, but QAG had from the early 1980s also begun to negotiate its own exhibitions including from Japan, China and France. From the early 1980s Asia – and particularly contemporary Asia – became a focus, culminating in 1993 in the establishment of the Asia-Pacific Triennials of Contemporary Art. [18] These exhibitions developed a specific strategy to educate audiences about the dynamic changes taking place in the region, and to demonstrate that Australia in its world view is no longer solely a Euro-American country.

Although the NGA held some very important international exhibitions in the 1980s, when Betty Churcher became Director in 1990 she inaugurated a major policy shift of curating major international exhibitions. This became a hallmark of the NGA in Churcher’s time. Her aim was to present exhibitions which led to research into works held in the NGA and other Australian collections – *Rubens and the Italian Renaissance* (1992) was a prime example, as well as *Surrealism: revolution by night* (1993). The NGA also assisted the devastated Cambodian National Museum, receiving in return the exhibition *The Age of Angkor* in 1992, and mounted several very successful exhibitions in the 1990s, including the challenging *Don’t leave me this way: art in the age of AIDS* (1994).

Another new player had emerged: the Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA), Sydney, opened in 1991 through the extraordinary efforts of an idealistic few who were convinced that Australia needed a museum of contemporary art. [19] With initial capital funding and a percentage of operating costs from the University of Sydney and the University’s Power Bequest, and under Founding Director Leon Paroissien and Chief Curator Bernice Murphy it initiated a new type of Australian museum, one without major government funding and thus pursuing an entrepreneurial model for funding, as well as a dynamic new style of international contemporary exhibitions with a focus on critical writing about contemporary issues – including social and political issues – and extensive public programming. The MCA showed works and exhibitions that were experimental, often edgy, such as the 1995 *Robert Mapplethorpe* retrospective, and major exhibitions of Australian Indigenous and contemporary international art from New Zealand, Europe, Latin America and Asia.

The established state institutions continued to curate important and scholarly exhibitions. One of the most popular was *Classic Cezanne* (1998) which attracted 188,000 visitors. AGNSW Director Edmund Capon hailed it as a demonstration of the will of the Gallery to initiate and produce major exhibitions of sustained quality, its capacity to do so now being sustained by the NSW Treasury Managed Indemnification Scheme. [20] Similar schemes emerged in Victoria and Queensland, reflecting renewed competition – the new 2003 Victorian scheme provides a staggering two billion dollars in indemnity but requires exclusivity for Victoria. [21] AEA, which had been vital in assisting the state museums to develop their professionalism and enabled many of the smaller institutions to receive important international exhibitions, continues to be of great significance as a national exhibitions management agency, including for the opening of the new National Museum of Australia in 2001. Some directors of art institutions have suggested they did not need AEA. Edmund Capon pointed to his success with *Darkness and Light: Caravaggio and his world*, shown at the AGNSW and the NGV in 2003–04, which drew 212,000 visitors. [22]

The dawn of the twenty-first century saw some exciting exhibitions, particularly the series of Asian exhibitions at the AGNSW on Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam which attracted new audiences, among them many young people, and were aimed at a greater understanding of Asian religions

and immigrant groups in Australia. [23]

NGA Director Ron Radford has observed that Australia has had more blockbuster exhibitions than it can justify as a lender. Why has Australia been able to show so many exhibitions and to obtain so many loans? There has undoubtedly been a belief among the world's great museums that Australia is a new frontier, and that the population has fewer opportunities than those in Europe or North America – clearly the appetite for, and appreciation of, loans from foreign collections has been enormous. Close links with Britain, Europe, North America and Asia have helped. Trade and diplomatic reasons existed for many exhibitions. Curators have wanted to come to Australia and, as Bernice Murphy has noted, Australia has not been merely 'a cultural receiver'. It is also important to note that, to borrow exceptional works the rationale and scholarship of the exhibitions for which the loans are sought has to be very high. But increasing effort is now required for loans, and costs are becoming almost prohibitive. The more prosperous East Asian and Middle Eastern countries can now afford to pay large fees. NGV Director Gerard Vaughan has concluded that the golden age of the blockbuster in its classical form – the all-encompassing format – is passing, and it may be necessary in the future for galleries to concentrate more on their own collections. [24] Yet the NGV also announced in 2007 its hopes for a whole new building for Indigenous, Oceanic and Asian art (and to include temporary exhibition space) having opened its \$100 million new site at Federation Square only five years before. [25] As Paroissien has noted, the demise of the blockbuster has long been wrongly predicted, and AEA Chief Executive Carol Henry remains optimistic about the future of international exhibitions.

While it could be argued that many international exhibitions contribute to scholarship and are greatly appreciated by audiences, not all actually contribute to expanding popular taste or knowledge about the world or Australian society. Most exhibitions continue to be drawn predominantly from a narrow period of Western European art history, but exhibitions such as the AGNSW's *Buddha: Radiant Awakening* have reached beyond this traditional focus. New players are emerging, especially in the non-art museums. Australian curators and scholars continue to put together ideas for exhibitions that are exciting, new and contribute to knowledge. As Jackie Menzies has pointed out, the skills and knowledge in the Australian community – from academics to immigrant artists – can be harnessed in developing exhibitions. [26] And Australians undoubtedly still want to see international exhibitions.

The author thanks Leon Paroissien, Des Griffin, Bernice Murphy, Jackie Menzies, Anne Kirker, Robert Edwards and Carol Henry, curators and librarians at all named institutions, and Harry Wise and Glen St John Barclay for invaluable assistance with research. Key statistical information was prepared by Harry Wise.

Footnotes

¹ Art Indemnity Australia states that 20 million Australians have seen indemnified exhibitions since 1979, Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts, 'Art Indemnity Australia', <www.dcita.gov.au/arts_culture/arts/art_indemnity_australia> (accessed 3/10/07). Director of the NGA, Ron Radford, suggested at the 2007 Museums Australia conference (18 May) that 25 million Australians had seen 'blockbuster' exhibitions since the 1970s. Research for this essay suggests Radford's figure is realistic.

² Between five and 10 per cent of the exhibitions which have achieved high attendances, such as *Golden Summers* (1985–86) were Australian in content, but most did not achieve the attendances of the major international exhibitions. Many fine international exhibitions have also been shown at regional and university galleries and museums.

³ I apply the term 'art museum' in this chapter.

⁴ See Eileen Chanin and Steven Miller, *Degenerates and Perverts: the 1939 Herald exhibition of French and British contemporary art*, The Miegunyah Press, Melbourne, 2005; Jeremy Maas, *Holman Hunt and the Light of the World*, Scolar Press, London and Berkeley, 1984; and Kate Darian-Smith, Richard Gillespie, Caroline Jordan and Elizabeth Willis (eds), *Seize the Day: exhibitions, Australia and the world*, Monash University ePress, Melbourne, 2008.

⁵ Based on figures in museum annual reports, about 35 per cent of very popular exhibitions dealt with European and American art after the late eighteenth century, slightly under 10 per cent dealt with European art from before the late eighteenth century, and about 10 per cent included European and American art from both before and after the late eighteenth century. Overall, major exhibitions from other cultures seem to have been roughly comparable in popularity with European/American exhibitions in terms of attendances. Attendances did reflect whether these were paid exhibitions – most international exhibitions have had a

charge to cover costs. These statistics are based on listings of attendances from annual reports of the major state and national museums in Australia and do not take regional museums into account. Attendance figures are not given for all exhibitions, and these statistics are an estimate only and cannot be regarded as definitive.

⁶ There were occasional exhibitions of Asian contemporary art prior to the 1980s, including *The Hiroshima Panels*, 1958.

⁷ *Report of the Trustees of the Art Gallery of New South Wales Together with Statement of Accounts for 1953*, Alfred Henry Pettifer, Government Printer, Sydney, 1955, p. 1; *Report of the Trustees of the National Gallery of Victoria with statement of income and expenditure for the year ended 30th June, 1953*, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, 1953, p. 2.

⁸ Robert Bell, 'Nordic Wave: A Study of the Reception and Influence of Scandinavian Design in Australia', unpublished dissertation, 2007.

⁹ Sources for these anecdotes are Leon Paroissien for *Modern Masters* and the author's personal experience for *Entombed Warriors*.

¹⁰ Paroissien, Bernice Murphy and Des Griffin in discussions with the author.

¹¹ One major impact, as Paroissien notes, was the expertise they brought with them: the English scholar Edmund Capon came to Australia with the first Chinese exhibition and returned as Director of the AGNSW in 1978.

¹² The Art Museums Association invited leading scholar Albert Elsen to debate the subject. Albert Elsen, 'The Pros and Cons of the 'Blockbuster' Art Exhibition: a paper delivered at the CAMA Conference, Adelaide, October 1984', Art Museums Association of Australia occasional papers.

¹³ *Report of the Trustees of the Art Gallery of New South Wales for 1975*. D. West, Government Printer, Sydney, 1977, p. 20.

¹⁴ Such MoMA exhibitions include *Two Decades of American Painting* (1967), *Surrealism* (1972), and *Picasso, Master Printmaker* (1973).

¹⁵ See Leon Paroissien, 'Art Museum Patronage through Government Indemnity: the Australia scheme, its context and application', unpublished, n.d.

¹⁶ *Art Exhibitions Australia Limited Annual Report 1999*, Art Exhibitions Australia Limited, Sydney, p. 3.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Caroline Turner, 'Cultural Transformations in the Asia-Pacific', in John Clark, Maurizio Peleggi and TK Sabapathy (eds), *Eye of the Beholder*, University of Sydney East Asia Series, Sydney, No. 15, Wild Peony Press, 2006, pp. 221–243.

¹⁹ See Bernice Murphy, *Museum of Contemporary Art: Vision and Context*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, 1993; and Leon Paroissien, 'Contemporary Art in an Antipodean Context', paper presented at IV Foro Internacional de Teoria Sobre Arte Contemporaneo, Guadalajara, Mexico, 1–3 June 1995.

²⁰ *Art Gallery of NSW Annual Report 1998*, Art Gallery of NSW, Sydney, p. 5.

²¹ Gerard Vaughan, Museums Australia Conference, 2007.

²² Lauren Martin, 'A case for passing on the buck', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 8 November 2005, accessed 3 October 2007, <www.smh.com.au/news/arts/a-case-for-passing-on-the-buck/2005/11/07/1131212004078.html> .

²³ Head of Asian Art, AGNSW, Jackie Menzies has noted that 'Museums are a space of connection with the community'. Many visitors come through public programs, e.g. the Durga Puja ritual for *Goddesses*, Menzies, Museums Australia Conference, 2007.

²⁴ Gerard Vaughan, Museums Australia Conference, 2007. Radford in the same forum pointed to the excellent collections in Australia including those of British art, small but important collections of Old and Modern European Masters, the American Collections and Asian textiles of the NGA, and Indian miniatures at the NGV.

²⁵ Paroissien, Radford, Vaughan, Menzies, Museums Australia Conference, 2007. For NGV see *The Age*, 22 September 2007.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

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Cite as: Caroline Turner, 2011, 'International exhibitions', in Des Griffin and Leon Paroissien (eds), *Understanding Museums: Australian Museums and Museology*, National Museum of Australia, 2011, published online at nma.gov.au/research/understanding-museums/CTurner_2011.html ISBN 978-1-876944-92-6

Understanding Museums - Art museums

Collecting works on paper in Australia: specialisation at risk?

by Anne Kirker

Numerically, works on paper form the major part of permanent collections in Australian art museums. [1] They have traditionally been considered the linchpin for educating audiences in the histories of art. In the 1960s and 1970s there was a push to establish specific departments dedicated to them and a drive for curatorial expertise in such media-specific areas. This produced finely honed connoisseurship and notable acquisitions, leading to exhibitions of discernment and depth. This practice of connoisseurship was a key ingredient in safeguarding the integrity of an art museum's collection. However, the past decade has witnessed, especially in smaller institutions, the eradication of barriers between media. This partly reflects the impact of postmodernism in the approach to interpreting collections, where the production of meaning is paramount rather than an emphasis on contextualising art works within known frameworks of aesthetic excellence, chronological ordering and links with art history. [2]

There have been notable gains as custodians with overarching collection responsibilities bring fresh insights into the realm of works on paper. Often more heterogeneous explorations – combining paintings, three-dimensional works, film and works on paper – inspire connections that may not readily be made if the objects were isolated from each other. The expansion in understanding of how art can be articulated for contemporary audiences means also that medium-specific exhibitions from permanent collections now freely traverse an identified subject, placing prints from the 1990s, for instance, with their thematic counterparts from earlier periods.

A number of conundrums remain. One is that curators, unless they are employed in large institutions where it is impractical to disband or disperse comprehensive holdings formed under media classifications, are unlikely to be specifically trained in all fields under their care. [3] This can result in errors of judgement associated with appraisal of artworks and collection acquisitions. Another potential loss is the particular passion that specialists bring to a field – say, printmaking, – that, if denied recognition, can leave it on the sidelines.

A further development has been the corralling of modernist or small-scale works of photography, prints and drawings into a medium-specific department, while progressive post-1980s works are relegated to the general area of contemporary art. While we may rejoice in viewing displays of commanding series and installation-scale works on paper, this process is fraught with discrimination as more discrete statements are once more relegated to less frequented display spaces, or to the darkness of a Solander box.

With the rapid growth and popularity of art museums in the 1990s, visible through building programs and increased budgets for marketing, development and public programs, what tends to be hidden is the diminution of the traditional role of curator and the bond that person had with the collection.

Curators in the 1980s were confident of their brief: to have sole leadership in the care, acquisition, selection, research, display, publication and promotion of works on paper under their custodianship. These print curators were prized authorities in their field, and persons to be consulted for accurate and unquestionably sound appraisals and advice.

In the 1970s and 1980s specialist curators were understood to be, along with their fellow curators, *the* linchpins for defining exhibitions and education according to a clearly defined mission statement.

In opening up to fairer representation and widening of geographical bases for acknowledgement, the study of visual arts today has downplayed the fundamental imperative of curators to appreciate how a work is executed, when it is likely to have been made, and the circumstances surrounding its creation. [4] This disruption to tradition has provocatively 'opened up' art history. Yet at the same time it has tended to undermine the science of tracing provenance, of identifying date according to type of signature, paper and other materials used, the importance of language skills for research, knowledge of key reference texts, and of personnel equipped to assist in a work's

authentication. In short, connoisseurship has been dismissed as a preoccupation best suited to auction houses. The word 'connoisseur', in fact, is hardly used in the early 2000s.

While few would not welcome the stretching of art history as it has unfolded since the 1980s, what has inevitably been lost is the fact that most works of art have a genealogy and infrastructure of their own. Prints, for example have their own highly specific history, as does photography. [5] This in no way diminishes their valuable usage in mixed-media exhibitions and discursively driven projects.



Installation view of an aspect of the cross-media exhibition Masters of Emotion: Exploring the Emotions from the Old Masters to the Present curated by Irena Zdanowicz for the Mornington Peninsula Regional Gallery 20 April – 24 June 2007. The photograph shows the juxtaposition of an etching ('Seven' 1974) by Bea Maddock with a painting ('Sorry' 1982) by Linda Marrinon. Photo: courtesy of Morning Peninsula Regional Gallery.

By the early 2000s, the very term 'curator' has shifted in emphasis from being a noun to being a verb, an active and engaging force. An individual 'curates' an exhibition, for example, rather than being 'a curator' of a collection. The curator of an exhibition no longer has the luxury of sole responsibility for the initiation, development and presentation of the show, but is usually surrounded by a team of people with an equal stake in the event. These 'stakeholders' are also highly trained within their particular spheres, whether it be exhibition design, promotion or education.

In this environment, the curator may be hired as a freelance employee rather than one located within the institution who, over a period of time, has built up a substantial knowledge of the institution and *all* its collections. The contemporary focus in art museums tends to be on the production of highly visible, entertaining events that are nevertheless educational and which may demonstrate in-depth research. Inevitably they attract the largest resources. They are intended for a broadly based constituency, but with specific programs tailored for groups such as children or senior citizens.

However, in larger art museums with in-depth collections, traditional curatorial standards are most likely to be maintained as a desirable aspect of the institution's corporate identity. The National Gallery of Australia (NGA) in Canberra is an obvious case in point. Specialist curators have largely been maintained there to ensure the care and maintain the scope of the collection, including acquisition, preservation and access, interpretation and exhibition, research and publication. The

sheer quantity of objects owned by the institution, and the desire of most NGA directors to focus on maintaining high levels of scholarship, are the reasons why within culturally determined departments there are curators who are trained in appreciating prints, and/or drawings and photographs. Furthermore, the NGA funds research internships and regular symposia to ensure print practice and scholarship is acknowledged and maintained in Australia.



'The Print Room (dedicated to Ursula Hoff) at the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne 2004', Photo: courtesy of Alisa Bunbury and the National Gallery of Victoria.

As a result of the munificence of the 1904 Felton Bequest, the Print Room holdings at the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV) boast one of Australia's most distinguished International (mainly European) works on paper collections. At the same time it has assiduously collected Australian material. The distinguished European émigré, Dr Ursula Hoff, steered the Print Room into its pre-eminent position in Australia at the St Kilda Road site. This model of a discrete department with viewing and research facilities was subsequently adopted throughout Australia. In Adelaide this model continues into the twenty-first century. At the Art Gallery of South Australia, there is one department responsible for 23,000 prints, drawings and photographs covering all schools, with trained staff – at least one formerly from the NGV – following the high standards of scholarship set by Hoff and the staff she mentored in Melbourne.

In contrast, while works on paper continue to be a significant area of collecting for the Queensland Art Gallery (QAG), the approximately 6250 works on paper are currently spread throughout the curatorial departments of Australian Art, Asian and Pacific Art, and International Art and Cinema. An expertise in photography and printmaking as discrete areas of specialisation may still be present, yet overarching briefs subsume it. Sometimes the art works themselves dictate this. For instance, in 1995–97 a large collection of Fluxus works entered the collection, courtesy of Francesco Conz in Verona. Practically all of these items defied the usual taxonomies of classification.

The collecting of works on paper for art museums in Australasia is an evolving phenomenon. This is subject to a number of contexts, including the physical, economic, ethical, and aesthetic as well as dramatic shifts in ideology, especially as they pertain to the function of art museums and the way in which art history has been rearticulated. Accordingly, the role of collection curators has changed significantly since the 1980s as their former autonomy within the institution has been diminished (especially in smaller institutions), and their specialist expertise has often been less valued.

A challenge for art museums in the coming years is to recognise the value of the integrity of their collections, and of congruent curatorial advice regarding exhibitions and publications. Core curatorial duties remain just as essential when changing priorities are facilitating the demonstration of the joy in collecting works on paper to larger audiences than ever. Through stimulating exhibitions and allied events, and all manner of publications (paper and online), their power and relevancy within the scope of the past *and* of art's expanded role can be emphasised.

Footnotes

¹ If this essay tends to use the print as prime example of the area of 'works on paper', it is because such collections began in the early development of collections and have become the mainstay of the print room in major public galleries in Australia. Perceived from the 1960s and 1970s as a democratic art form, being relatively inexpensive, the print was also an educational means to promote an appetite for and understanding of art in general.

² Konrad Oberhuber, former director of the Albertina in Vienna, one of the world's premier museums for prints and drawings, wrote that in the late twentieth century there were two kinds of art museums: the museum of 'information' and the museum of 'experience'; the J Paul Getty Museum being an example of the former and Guggenheim Museum Bilbao of the latter. See Oberhuber, 'Thoughts Regarding the Millennium', *Apollo*, January 2000), pp. 19–23.

³ In fact, in some cases where medium-specific curators are no longer at hand, as in the case of the Queensland Art Gallery, it is more likely that paper conservators would be consulting such texts and providing the relevant cataloguer with their opinions. Unlike curators, conservators tend to have job descriptions that are more contained, with functions that are more readily identified.

⁴ See, for instance the provocative article by Charles Green, 'Art as Printmaking: the deterritorialised print', *Art Monthly Australia*, No. 58, April 1993.

⁵ It is important to note the numbers of works involved. For instance, the AGNSW's Australian works on paper collections, prints and drawings number 9798 Australian works, of which 4309 are prints. When including those administered by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and Contemporary Australian art departments, these figures go up to 10,308 works on paper, incorporating 4653 prints.

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Cite as: Anne Kirker, 2011, 'Collecting works on paper in Australia: specialisation at risk?', in *Understanding Museums: Australian Museums and Museology*, Des Griffin and Leon Paroissien (eds), National Museum of Australia, published online at nma.gov.au/research/understanding-museums/AKirker_2011.html ISBN 978-1-876944-92-6

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