

**Submission
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INQUIRY INTO MUSEUMS AND GALLERIES

Organisation: Australian Institute for the Conservation of Cultural Materials

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Response to the Inquiry into Museums and Galleries from the Australian Institute for the Conservation of Cultural Materials (AICCM)

About the Australian Institute for the Conservation of Cultural Materials (AICCM)

AICCM is the representative body for professional conservators in Australia. We provide professional development opportunities for conservators throughout their professional lives as well as advocating the needs of the profession and promoting the value of conserving Australia's cultural heritage.

We work collaboratively with like-minded bodies both nationally and internationally, in particular the International Institute for the Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works, the International Council of Museums Conservation Committee and locally with the Council of Australian Museum Directors (CAMD), Museums Galleries Australia, the Australian Library and Information Association and the Australian Society of Archivists.

Our members work to conserve Australia's cultural heritage in museums, galleries, libraries, archives and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Keeping Places and Cultural Centres. Our members in private practice work with individuals and organisation of all sizes to care for Australia's Distributed National Collection wherever is housed. We provide advice and assistance to community groups about the care of cultural material in response to natural disasters such as bushfires and floods.

AICCM's current strategic plan has identified regional outreach, disaster preparedness and sustainable collection management as key areas of need alongside the growing urgency of planning around the rapid shift to a digital framework and the conservation of magnetic media that is predicted to be lost if not digitised by 2025.

For further information about AICCM and the work of conservators please visit our website aiccm.org.au

Response to the Inquiry

a) NSW government policy, funding and support for museums and galleries, museum and gallery buildings and heritage collections, including volunteer managed museums and museums managed by councils

In NSW museums and galleries are funded by a range of federal, state and local government direct funding and grants with further support through sponsorship,

ticketed events, foundations and external philanthropic organisations. The competition for the scarce funds is high and in some ways encourages like minded organisations to compete against each other where there may be greater advantage in working collaboratively to more sustainable outcomes.

With the growth of digital engagement within cultural institutions there has been a refocusing of resources to this area. This has led to greater engagement with communities but with little growth in funds to cover these new activities there has been a reduction of resources to other areas of activity, including collection conservation.

Large collections including material of state and national significance are held across regional NSW. The majority of conservation expertise is concentrated in Sydney and Canberra (given its geographic location, some areas of NSW are able to tap into the significant conservation expertise concentrated in the ACT) with very few professional conservators being based in regional areas.

In the *Study into the Key Needs of Collecting Institutions in the Heritage Sector* undertaken in 2002 respondents identified collection conservation and documentation as the top 2 areas of need in heritage based organisations. Respondents in NSW identified Specialist advice (44%) and more personnel (26%) as the two key areas that would assist them in this area (over more equipment, training and information).

Whilst there is a great deal of good will within conservation departments in state funded institutions in NSW, there is no coordinated mechanism to enable conservation expertise to be shared with regional organisations. Shrinking resources within state funded cultural organisations has meant that conservation expertise is only available when the overheads including travel, staff time and materials are able to be reimbursed through grants, local government support or sponsorship.

The Museum and Gallery Building Improvement Program managed by Museums and Galleries NSW through funding from the Office of Environment and Heritage is an example of an innovative funding arrangement that connects specialist expertise in state funded institutes and the private sectors with regional museums and galleries for sustainable outcomes. The program is designed to enable energy efficiency/feasibility studies and repair works to buildings in NSW, being considered or utilized as museums or galleries, to ensure they can offer appropriate access and egress, sustainability, environmental and/or collection care controls.

Drawing on expertise from the Australian Museum and OCP Architects the program is progressive with initial funds to undertake a building assessment fund which may then lead to funds to develop a costed schedule of works and finally funds to undertake building repair and maintenance.

AICCM suggests that this inquiry explores opportunities to strengthen access to conservation expertise in regional areas through grants and the resourcing of coordinated outreach programs to tap into the expertise of state funded institutions and private conservation entities. The model outlined above is an example of how such a program could work.

b) Potential funding impacts on museums and galleries affected by council amalgamations

There is an opportunity with council amalgamations for the development of collection hubs with improved facilities and specialist staff to support collection care in regional areas. Examples of collaborative regional collection support can be seen locally with the work of the Museum of the Riverina, Orange Regional Council, Bathurst Regional Council, Western Plains Cultural Centre and Albury Library Museum along with its sister organisation MAMA. An international example can be found in the Highland Council of Scotland's High Life Archive Service with conservation facilities based in the Highland Archive Centre, Inverness.

c) Opportunities to revitalise the structure, reach and impact of museums and galleries and their research and collecting priorities

Internal restructuring of several of the state's major cultural organisations has been disruptive to general operations and it is felt that further restructuring has the potential to be highly demoralising and a distraction to core business. Over the past ten years the state's cultural organisations have been dispersed into a range of government departments including the Justice Cluster, the Office of Environment and Heritage and Finance, Services and Innovation. At times this proves a challenge for collaborative operations.

Collaboration provides mature organisations with opportunities to reflect on and revitalise their operations. Conservators from state funded collecting organisations have been working collaboratively on disaster preparedness through DIS-NSW. This entity enables conservators from these organisations to meet regularly to raise awareness, share resources and undertake training related to preparing and responding to collection related emergencies.

The Museums Discovery Centre based at the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences (MAAS) site in Castle Hill has provided the MAAS, Australian Museum and Sydney Living Museums with an opportunity to work in an innovative manner towards a more sustainable and collaborative model for collection storage and access that could, perhaps be emulated on a smaller scale in regional areas.

This collaboration could also be tapped into as a guiding entity for further collection research and development.

As mentioned previously, there is great competition for funding within the museum and gallery sector. There is great pressure on conservation specialists in state institutions to support large exhibition programs. This means there is limited scope and resource to undertake research to support the conservation of cultural material. It is suggested that the inquiry explores opportunities to develop collaborative research programs between cultural institutions, tertiary institutions and national and international partners (such as the Getty Conservation Institute). Areas that have been identified for further research include

- the development of sustainable climate control for collection storage and display
- Conservation and preservation of modern materials
- Management of digitisation of magnetic media for future preservation before 2025
- Mould remediation for cultural collections
- Long term preservation of wet specimens
- The impact of climate change on collection care

d) Access to the collections of the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, the Australian Museum and any other state collections held in trust for the people of NSW, and programs that promote physical and online access.

State funded cultural institutions provide access to collections through exhibitions at each museum and gallery, regional and interstate touring exhibitions, loans to regionally based museums and galleries and via online exhibitions and collection databases.

Touring exhibitions and collection loans to regional museums, galleries and keeping places provide cost effective opportunities for conservators to “piggy-back” regional visits which could be used to undertake regional training sessions, consultations about the conservation needs of key collection items or assessments of museum environments/storage needs etc. These are all “value adding” opportunities that could be developed into touring exhibition and loan programs if funding and resources were made available.

As mentioned above, the Australian Museum, MAAS and Sydney Living Museums are currently finalising the development of a new storage facility and collection access facility at the MAAS Castle Hill site that will both improve the storage facilities for each of the organisations and increase public access to collections.

e) The sale of the Powerhouse Museum site in Ultimo and its proposed move to Parramatta, and whether there are alternative strategies to support museum development

Any large-scale movement of heritage collections will put them at risk, through handling, vibration, risk of theft, for example. A relocation of this size increases the risk of damage and loss. Ongoing core preservation activities will likely be suspended, or scaled back during the move, as resources are diverted from the daily routine maintenance of collections. This could increase the risks to the Powerhouse Museum collection materials not involved in the move as there are less resources available to them.

The unique industrial heritage objects built-in to the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences Powerhouse Museum site are large, complex and in the case of one, the Boulton and Watt engine, the only remaining one operating in the world. To risk the historical integrity of some of these objects by moving them only 30 years after installation in a historic building risks criticism from the worldwide museum community and loss of status for the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences.

e) The development and transparency of advice to the government on priorities for NSW museums and galleries

AICCM would be delighted to be engaged in any future consultations regarding the identification of priorities for museums and galleries

g) The impact of the efficiency dividend on the budgets of museums and galleries over the last 10 years, and funding levels compared to other states

The efficiency dividend appears to have eroded staffing levels within the large cultural institutions. This has resulted in a reduction of services that Conservation staff can provide to both their institutions and others. Core collection care tasks have been reduced due to reductions in resources, and internal pressures to deliver public programs. High value state collections are receiving less care than they require, affecting the long-term stability of these collections/assets.

It should be pointed out that museums and gallery collections are one of the few state assets that appreciate over time. Especially when compared to other government assets – technology, infrastructure, etc. Allowing state collections to deteriorate could impact the AAA credit rating of the government.

Conservation departments have had to reduce the amount of outreach services they provide to regional NSW. Regional collections often contact Sydney institutions for advice on collection care, but institutional conservators are unable to follow through with practical assistance due to a lack of resources.

Less job opportunities or less stable jobs make gaining and developing the necessary skills in conservation difficult. Conservation requires a range of highly specialised skills spanning scientific and craft skills. Acquiring this specialist knowledge takes time and stability. A reduction in funding leading to less positions means fewer people can gain these specialised skills and work on our collections into the future. There is the potential for an under skilled workforce, who are unable to care for state and national collections to the highest world standards. This also leads to a dwindling pool of job ready conservators. As institutions and private firms are relying more on grants or capital (project) money to complete collection care projects, they need conservators at hand ready to work on short projects. It is becoming more difficult to find job ready conservators waiting for this type of work.

h) The economic impact of museums and galleries on cultural tourism and their role in supporting the visitor economy in Sydney and regional NSW

Museums and galleries have a strong part to play in both cultural tourism and the development of liveable cities. A Destination NSW report on Cultural and Heritage Tourism to NSW for the year ended December 2015 reported that there were over 11.4 million international and domestic cultural and heritage visitors to NSW in 2015 which was up by 8.1% on 2014. These visitors spent an estimated \$11.2 billion in NSW which was up by 15.4% on the previous year. Of these visitors 57.7% visited museums or art galleries. It was also noted that international cultural and heritage visitors stayed an average of 26.3 nights (the average for all visitors is 25.1 nights).

To date there does not appear to be a NSW strategic plan for cultural tourism, unlike both Victoria and Queensland. It is suggested that such a plan would encourage the state's cultural institutions to work in a more collaborative manner towards a shared goal.

In Sydney places such as the Museum of Sydney, Hyde Park Barracks and the Australian Museum are strong drawcards for tourists seeking a cultural experience. Similarly regional centres such as the Tweed Regional Art Gallery with its Margaret Olley Rooms, the Bradman Centre in Bowral, and the Western Plains Cultural Centre, Dubbo all provide a significant cultural experience for tourists. In many smaller locations the local museum is listed as a key site to visit by guides such as *Lonely Planet* and *TripAdvisor*.

Limited funding and geographical distance has restricted access to conservation expertise has limited the capacity of smaller museums, galleries and keeping places to undertake extensive conservation work on their collections. This in turn limits the capacity to develop engaging, sustainable exhibitions that would enhance cultural tourist experiences across the state. The development of a cultural tourism plan could be used to identify significant locations and collections that could be developed to enhance the experiences of cultural tourists beyond major centres.

i) Any other related matter

There is great concern about the ongoing reduction of the size and depth of the conservation workforce within state cultural institutions in NSW. Over the past ten years not only has the number of Full time Equivalent staff in conservation departments reduced but areas of specialisation such as large technology and musical instruments have all but disappeared.

Like many professions, expertise and knowledge builds over time. In recent years NSW government has been encouraging public servants to have a broader outlook on work place opportunities and have rightly been encouraging staff to cross fertilise and move between government agencies. This is to be commended as it reduces the development of silos and encourages public servants to have a broader perspective on their work. However, in a small field such as conservation, moving staff out of their field runs the risk that there is no opportunity for succession planning and valuable expertise is lost.

We would encourage this enquiry to explore opportunities to value to the expertise of conservation specialists and work with AICCM to develop a program of paid conservation internships for recent graduates to strengthen conservation expertise in NSW. Alongside this program, we advocate for a program of Aboriginal internships for NSW Aboriginal cultural knowledge holders to work with state based organisations in a program of two way learning.