

**Submission
No 115**

INQUIRY INTO MUSEUMS AND GALLERIES

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NSW Legislative Council Inquiry into Museums and Galleries.

Submission from

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OVERVIEW

This submission draws on our experience as (Wilton) an academic based in regional New South Wales whose teaching and research practice has entailed working with and for museums and galleries, especially those in regional areas, and (Eisenberg) as a gallery director with forty years experience in NSW visual arts and craft and with two significant periods as a regional gallery director (of the New England Regional Art Museum in Armidale and then the Maitland Regional Art Gallery). This experience includes, for example:

- teaching and supervising students who work and study in the area of history and museums;
- liaising with Sydney based cultural institutions to ensure ongoing assistance to and relationships with regional galleries and museums;
- Trustee of Historic Houses Trust 1999 to 2007 (Wilton);
- Member of Visual Arts and Craft Committee, NSW Ministry for the Arts (1993-2005 passim); National Cultural Heritage Committee, Federal Ministry for the Arts (current) (Eisenberg);
- coordinating, researching and curating the award winning Golden Threads project which worked with museums in regional NSW to document, interpret and exhibit the history of the Chinese in NSW; and
- collaborating on a project to document and creatively interpret the Maitland Jewish Cemetery, a site which was subsequently placed on the NSW State Heritage Register.

Our key concerns are that the Inquiry should take into consideration:

- the central place of history as a base for understanding the present, promoting unique aspects of a locality, engaging diverse audiences, and creating community;
- the important role that volunteer and council managed museums and galleries play in regional areas as tourism and cultural assets especially through their ability to work closely with their communities in order to document and share their histories, cultural diversity and creative activities;
- the significance of the connections between museums and galleries and their localities and communities;

- the need for regional galleries and museums to have sufficient and effective financial and in kind support to achieve their aims;
- the role that the Powerhouse Museum (including the NSW Migration Heritage Centre) has played as a central museum that had the responsibility for collecting, researching and interpreting NSW history;
- the support provided by the Powerhouse Museum to regional galleries and museums;
- the significant historical, cultural, social, collection and network factors that underpin the Powerhouse Museum's current Ultimo location; and
- the need to provide western Sydney with its own, western Sydney focused museum.

SUPPORTING MATERIAL

As support for the key concerns raised in this submission, we provide the following details about a couple of specific projects with which we've been involved. Our particular emphasis is on the important role that the Powerhouse Museum has played in supporting regional activities. There are many other examples that could (and we hope are being) shared by other individuals, and by regional museums and galleries.

Golden Threads Project

Purpose and partners:

This project was initiated in 1996 by the NSW Ministry for the Arts. The concern was to identify, document, conserve, interpret and exhibit items that were held in museums in regional NSW and that told the history of the Chinese in those localities and across NSW. Importantly, the project was based in regional NSW (in Armidale) as a collaboration between the University of New England and the New England Regional Art Museum. As well, apart from the solid financial support provided by the Ministry, the project also received financial and in-kind support from the Powerhouse Museum and the NSW Migration Heritage Centre.

Outcomes:

The project heightened awareness of the significance and impact of the Chinese history of regional NSW and of Chinese communities, families and individuals as integral to the cultural diversity and contemporary heritage of NSW. It also highlighted the important role played by local and regional museums in looking after this heritage. This was achieved through:

- a travelling exhibition that was on the road for four years (2001-2005) and exhibited in over 20 venues (in regional NSW, Sydney (at the Powerhouse Museum), Adelaide, Melbourne and Brisbane and regional Queensland), and that attracted funding from Visions Australia;
- a book : *Golden Threads: The Chinese in regional NSW 1850-1950*, New England Regional Art Museum and Powerhouse Publishing, 2004 (the then Premier of NSW, the Hon. Bob Carr, used this book as a gift for visiting Chinese dignitaries);

- a website that published and shared local collections and their stories (now archived at <http://pandora.nla.gov.au/pan/47223/20070731-0650/archive.amol.org.au/goldenthreads/index-2.html>);
- conservation workshops and other assistance provided by Powerhouse Museum staff to a number of local museums in regional NSW to look after their collections of Chinese items;
- numerous papers, talks and other activities that engaged local communities with their Chinese history and heritage; and
- research and assistance to the Wing Hing Long store in Tingha in northern NSW in order for it to pass from private to Council (Guyra) ownership and be managed as a community museum. The store was subsequently listed on the NSW Heritage Register (Item 01307).

The project also provided a model for other projects on the history and heritage of the Chinese and other ethnic communities, especially in regional NSW.

Award:

The project received the 2005 Energy Australia National Trust Heritage Award for Cultural Heritage (Individuals).

Key points for the Inquiry:

The project's success was dependent on:

- recognition of, and support for, the important role local museums play in collecting and caring for community history and heritage in regional NSW;
- ongoing, and substantial, financial support from the NSW Ministry for the Arts; and
- in kind support from the Powerhouse Museum in the form of curatorial assistance and visits to local museums and galleries, seminar and exhibition venues, support of the website (through Australian Museums Online which was housed at the Powerhouse at the time), and further funding and support provided by the NSW Migration Heritage Centre.

It is our understanding that, in the current climate, the level of financial and in kind support provided through the Ministry and the Powerhouse Museum for the Golden Threads Project is no longer available. Indeed, quite tragically, the stripping of resources from the Powerhouse Museum has seen the shattering of its regional outreach activities and the falling off of its important contribution to collecting, interpreting, conserving and presenting the social history of NSW.

NSW needs a central museum that provides a focus and support for the network of museums that spread across the state. It is not a role that has ever been taken on by the Art Gallery of NSW or the Australian Museum. By contrast, the State Library does this effectively for public libraries across NSW. The Powerhouse Museum should again be funded to do the same for local museums and galleries across the state. To do so, it needs to remain where it is, have its funding revived, reinstate its social history programs, and network out and with museums across the state.

A museum for western Sydney should be just that: a museum for western Sydney in the same way that, for example, Newcastle and Wagga Wagga Regional Museums serve their surrounding communities.

Maitland Jewish Cemetery

Purpose and partners:

This project aimed to revitalise interest in the historically significant Maitland Jewish Cemetery, and in the history of the Jewish community in Maitland. The project was initiated and coordinated by Maitland Regional Art Gallery (as part of Maitland City Council), in partnership with and involving contributions from the NSW Migration Heritage Centre based at the Powerhouse Museum and the University of New England Heritage Futures Centre.

Outcomes:

The project resulted in:

- Hanna Kay, *Undertow*. A travelling exhibition of paintings by artist Hanna Kay that emerged from her visits and reactions to the Maitland Jewish Cemetery. The exhibition toured seven regional galleries in NSW and Queensland and the Jewish Museum in Melbourne;
- an education kit to accompany the travelling exhibition;
- a book: *Maitland Jewish Cemetery: A Monument to Dreams and Deeds*, MRAG, 2010;
- an installation by Maitland graphic designer David Guy at Maitland Regional Art Gallery;
- entries in the *Views of Maitland* online database hosted by the UNE Heritage Futures Research Centre (visit <http://hfrc.une.edu.au/heritagefutures/maitland/>);
- various talks, public events and other activities drawing attention to the site and the histories that flow around it; and
- revitalised interest in the Cemetery as a significant heritage site that has resulted in Maitland City Council commissioning and implementing a heritage conservation plan, and in the listing of the Cemetery on the NSW State Heritage Register (Item 01921) in 2014.

For further information visit <http://mrag.org.au/about/maitland-stories/2010-maitland-jewish-cemetery/>

Awards:

The project won the 2011 National Trust Heritage Award for Interpretation and Presentation (Corporate/Government).

Key points for the Inquiry:

The project's success was dependent on:

- Maitland Regional Art Gallery taking the initiative to commission research on the cemetery and an artist to create an exhibition inspired by the site and its history;
- financial and in-kind support from the NSW Migration Heritage Centre based at the Powerhouse Museum; and
- attracting ongoing support and recognition from Maitland City Council of the heritage and tourism significance of the site.

Importantly, the research component of the project was funded and assisted by the NSW Migration Heritage Centre. Tragically and embarrassingly, the Centre is no longer funded and its ability to support projects across NSW and especially in regional areas has disappeared. We urge the Inquiry to consider reinstating and adequately funding the Centre. It functioned well from its base in the Powerhouse Museum, and should remain an important component of a central museum that includes in its brief the social history of NSW.