INQUIRY INTO MUSEUMS AND GALLERIES

Name: Ms Kylie Winkworth

Date received: 22 August 2016

Legislative Council Inquiry into Museums and Galleries in NSW

General Purpose Standing Committee No. 4

Submission from Kylie Winkworth, independent museum and heritage consultant

d) Access to the collections of NSW government museums

This submission comments on issues around access to the collections of NSW government museums, with recommendations to improve access to collections and outcomes for communities.

NSW museums have collection assets worth $4.6b. Their visitors contribute $8.3b to the NSW economy. The vast majority of these collections are hidden in storage and most are not accessible online. NSW taxpayers are getting a low return on the value of their collections because there are not enough people employed to make collections accessible, and because there is no policy or plan for museums in NSW. This situation is akin to having an object library for the people of NSW, without a catalogue to allow readers to discover and learn from the collections held in their name, and funded year on year by NSW taxpayers.

NSW is paying for the storage of extensive government-owned collections without a strategy to make these collections accessible on the ground or online in a way that will unlock the value of these collections. Some of these collections could well be housed in new or upgraded museums and collections facilities in regional NSW where they would have most significance. For example the state mining and mineral collections could be displayed in the new Orange Regional Museum and housed in accessible storage, making Orange a centre for mining and geology education. The NSW wool collections could be housed in a new regional wool museum in a city like Goulburn. Such opportunities to share important collections and stories could be explored in the context of a NSW Museums Plan.

In the past, cross agency collection research partnerships have been effective in fostering research, discovery and mapping of significant collections. Most of these initiatives have lapsed, been abolished or abandoned. These collection research initiatives include collaborative thematic studies or surveys of heritage collection themes, such as Golden Threads, about the Chinese in regional NSW, and many thematic studies of regional migration heritage collection themes initiated by the NSW Migration Heritage Centre. The now abolished NSW Migration Heritage Centre also led outstanding collaborative research projects with community, museum and academic partners all over NSW. Some collection research was supported through a movable heritage partnership between Arts NSW and the NSW Heritage Office in the late 1990s. This partnership recognised that heritage collections are found in heritage places, museums and all kinds of heritage community organisations.

Digital access to NSW government collections is poor, unco-ordinated, and inconsistent. In the 21st century digital access to collections is an important part of the soft architecture of effective museums. It is just as important as investment in buildings and ever larger temporary exhibition spaces.

And of course it is vital in making collections accessible to people in regional NSW. There are many concerns about the quality, consistency and usability of digital collection records for the NSW

government's museums. Our museums are behind their international peers in creating high quality content rich collections online.

- ➢ Online access to the AGNSW 's relatively small collection is inferior to its gallery peers in Australia and overseas, and is generally not content rich. While the site has the expected collection highlights, most of the works on the gallery's website have just a basic identification. A third of the collection has no photograph. About half the small Indigenous collection of 2,000 works has a photograph. Other art museums such as the NGV routinely turn their exhibitions into online exhibitions; complete with labels and high quality images, but this is not the practice at the AGNSW. This is one simple strategy for sharing exhibitions with people in regional areas who may not be able to visit the museum. In my view it is hard to justify a $400m extension when digital content-rich access to the gallery's collection is so poor.
- ➢ The Powerhouse Museum led the way in the development of online access to museum collections in Australia and internationally. All new acquisitions had a statement of significance that reveals the meaning and importance of the item. And the museum pioneered other richly documented collection projects. Unfortunately this edge has now been lost to Victoria, where the Victorian Collections website is attracting international attention. http://victoriancollections.net.au/
- ➢ Digital innovation and online access to the PHM's collection has diminished in recent years. There is no list of acquisitions for 2015 on the PHM/ MAAS website, nor was one published in the last annual report. This is inexplicable. All acquisitions are digital records so it should be a simple matter to publish them regularly on the museum's website. http://www.powerhousemuseum.com/collection/database/new_acquisitions.php?yr=2015
- ➢ Other PHM cutting edge initiatives have also gone. MAAS has archived the MHC website with its extensive community histories. A note on the homepage says the site is no longer maintained, but there has been no consultation with contributing museums and families who have shared their stories through the MHC. http://www.migrationheritage.nsw.gov.au/homepage/index.html
- ➢ The first online collection survey and register was the landmark National Quilt Register which initiated by the Pioneer Women's Hut, a volunteer managed museums at Tumbarumba. The stories of quilts and their makers were recorded by a network of volunteers, and funded by Arts NSW grants. Its website was developed in partnership with the PHM and hosted by them. The PHM decided it could no longer maintain the website and it has now been transferred to the National Wool Museum in Geelong. http://pandora.nla.gov.au/pan/22046/20021203-0000/amol.org.au/nqr/index.html
- ➢ Although the Australian Museum is working to put some of its collections online, access is still poor. The search engine is unreliable and item listings have scant information. Search for Aboriginal paintings turns up works without information identifying the artist. http://australianmuseum.net.au/australian-museum-collection-search
- ➢ Some volunteer managed museums in regional NSW, such as Port Macquarie Historical Society are creating richer collection records than the NSW government funded museums.

In the 21st century digital access to NSW collections held in the state museums and gallery is vital. It must be a core obligation, not a low priority, optional extra. Collection databases and websites are

used by all kinds of people for research, enjoyment, education, acquisitions, exhibition planning, loans, and in assessing export permits for significant items going overseas.

Recommendations

1. The government must fund and staff the NSW cultural institutions to improve and upgrade online access to their collections. It is a vital equity and access measure for communities in regional NSW.

2. Digital catalogues for the state's museum collections must be content rich, not a bare item identifier, so that the expertise and knowledge of museum staff is shared with the community.

3. NSW cultural institutions should use common assessment standards for new cultural acquisitions, with all new acquisitions documented in a statement of significance.[i]

4. Where possible exhibitions should be recycled into online exhibitions with high quality photographs and content rich information.

5. The government should establish an interdisciplinary **NSW Collections Council**, convened by Arts NSW, to guide the development of high quality, content rich digital collections. The NSW Collections Council should build digital skills, capacity and creativity in online access to collections, and identify and advise on strategic priorities for digitisation, education and storytelling. It should bring the best collection expertise together to foster collection research and access to collections across NSW, and advise on collection policies, deaccessioning and documentation. The council would include representatives from the cultural institutions, digital experts, community museums, regional museums and galleries and collection experts. A NSW Collections Council would make up for the deficit in collection expertise on museum boards, that routinely approve policies, acquisitions and deaccessions without sufficient expertise to properly scrutinise such proposals.

6. NSW should create a single collections portal for NSW museums and galleries to showcase and interpret important themes and stories of significance for NSW. It should encourage discovery of collections, places, museums and stories of importance to NSW.

7. Digital access to NSW collections, themes, places and stories is a high priority. A single NSW collections portal would enhance interpretation of the stories of NSW people, places and cultures. It would create new education and cultural tourism opportunities and encourage creative uses of otherwise hidden cultural assets.

---

[i] Significance is widely used by museums in Australia and the Commonwealth in distributing grant funds and other collection initiatives. The writer was the co-author of *Significance 2.0,* with Roslyn Russell.