

THE FRIENDS OF THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AUSTRALIA INC.

SUBMISSION TO THE NMA REVIEW

**Presented by the Executive Committee,
Friends of the National Museum of Australia, Inc
March 6, 2003**

SUBMISSION BY THE FRIENDS OF THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AUSTRALIA INC TO THE REVIEW of THE NATIONAL MUSEUM

The Friends of the National Museum of Australia Inc is a passionate and committed group of Australians (and overseas members, including a considerable number of Australia-based foreign diplomats) devoted to the National Museum of Australia.

In 2003, the Friends turn fourteen; for twelve of those years the Friends lobbied for a National Museum, based in Canberra but for all Australians (See Appendix 1).

The Friends of the NMA is unique in Australian museum circles in that it is a separate and independent legal body, an incorporated organisation representing the community.

The Friends has two major roles: it is both the membership organisation for the Museum, and because of its independence, it also takes on the role of advocate and lobby group for the Museum. The Friends of the NMA is at all times willing to adopt a robust stance in its assessment of the policies of the Museum. That said, the Friends has a healthy and positive relationship with the director and staff of the museum.

We have a great sense of pride in the part that we played in gaining the resources and in the building of the Museum. We have a strong stake in decisions about the future directions of the Museum.

The Friends represent 2900 financial memberships, and due to family memberships, equates to approximately 6000 people. Family memberships are the main area of growth in the membership since the opening of the Museum. Our membership has tripled since the Museum opened in March, 2001. Half of the membership live outside Canberra, reflecting a truly national membership. The Friends also has international members, including a large cross-section of the diplomatic community in Australia. A core group of "Foundation Members" includes approximately 1000 people who have been members since the early 1990s – and who contributed to the campaign to build the National Museum of Australia.

Since the opening of the Museum, the Friends of the NMA has worked to complement, and develop partnerships with, all areas of the Museum. The Friends run an events program, produce a high-quality quarterly magazine, and operate the Friends Lounge for the benefit of members and as a function venue. We offer extensive benefits to members, including discounts in the Museum shop, cafes and restaurants.

The Friends has reciprocal relationships with supporters of many other cultural institutions across Australia. The Friends is also a long-term member of the Australian Federation of Friends of Museums (AFFM), the peak body for organisations supporting cultural institutions in Australia.

The AFFM is in turn part of the World Federation of Friends of Museums (WFFM), an organisation with UNESCO affiliation. At the eleventh Congress of the WFFM in

Buenos Aires, Argentina in October 2002, the Friends was significantly applauded by organisations in the international community for its partnerships and linkages with community organisations in Australia and overseas.

It is in this context we make our submission to the NMA Review committee. The Friends of the NMA has broken this submission into three parts.

Parts 1 and 2 look at the Museum's exhibitions and programs, relating to the first term of reference, parts (i) and (ii). Part 3 is directed towards future priorities for the Museum and refers to the review's second term of reference.

In Parts 1 and 2, we have not attempted an in-depth consideration of the Museum's exhibitions, public and schools programs within the terms of The National Museum of Australia Act 1980, its Charter and "other relevant documents", nor have we discussed in depth our perceptions of "the Government's vision".

In our view the Museum has complied with the Act and the Charter, both of which continue to be relevant and should not be substantially changed.

We have chosen to address the terms of reference in layman's terms from the point of view of the membership of the Friends of the Museum.

Behind our observations and suggestions is an understanding of the official documentation and government intentions around the Museum, informed by our participation in the creation of the National Museum of Australia.

This is justified by the participation by the Friends in the Pigott report of 1975, the drafting of the legislation of 1980, the development of the Museum's Charter by the inaugural Council, through to the Prime Minister's speech at the opening of the Museum, and up to the present review.

PART 1. EXHIBITIONS AT THE NATIONAL MUSEUM

(i) Permanent exhibitions

The members of the Friends are, not unexpectedly, supportive of the Museum's exhibitions.

Within the space constraints of the building, which is only one-third the space of the War Memorial and one-third the space of the Melbourne Museum, we believe that the exhibitions represent the broad Australian community, and a wide spectrum of stories from all parts of the country.

The Museum has been successful in realising the vision of the Pigott Report, the National Museum of Australia Act, and the Charter.

Australians have "voted with their feet" – their first visits to the Museum presumably motivated by curiosity, but they keep coming. Visitor numbers in the first two years have exceeded projections – 1.5 million before its second anniversary.

We support the Museum as a place where diverse outlooks are encouraged. There is much to celebrate among the objects displayed and the stories they represent. We believe it is the Museum's duty to explore contentious issues.

We are particularly proud of the Gallery of First Australians. Having played a strong role in getting the Museum up and running – the result of the untiring campaign – we know intimately that the Gallery has been an integral part of the Museum plan for more than a quarter of a century.

Like Te Papa in New Zealand, the Museum of Civilization in Canada, and the National Museum of the American Indian (part of the Smithsonian Institution), the National Museum of Australia must tell the stories of our indigenous people, and from their point of view.

The exhibitions are the result of scholarly applied research, wide academic and community consultation, and continuing peer review.

We applaud the professionalism of curatorial staff, who have created displays which give voice to differing views of our national past.

We also congratulate the Museum on its cutting-edge use of technology, and we look forward to future developments in this area.

Limited space is a challenge.

We recognise that other Australian institutions cover some subjects in-depth, which necessarily are almost footnotes in the Museum. We do not think the Museum should duplicate what is done well elsewhere in Australia. Given time, we believe that changing exhibitions will introduce more attention to such subjects as sport in Australian life and our country's economic underpinnings.

We congratulate the Museum on providing exhibitions which appeal across the age spectrum and which use the latest in museum technology. This is no stuffy collection in glass cases, but a true centre for community interest and participation.

Some Friends disagree with certain details in the presentations in permanent exhibitions, and not surprisingly. We recognise that they contain challenging material. Social history is not, in a democracy, dictated by a few, and we hope that visitors will, as part of their experience, debate what they have viewed in the Museum.

The Museum has a responsibility to address issues that are controversial – to be a place where people of differing views can come together, observe, discuss and form their own decisions about Australia's social history.

(ii) Temporary exhibitions

Temporary exhibitions in both the Museum's dedicated space and those located in the permanent galleries provide an opportunity for added value and further balance for Museum visitors.

They attract wide audiences, and travelling exhibitions allow for outreach beyond the Canberra location, continuing an important policy for the Museum since it was established in 1980.

The Museum's recent exhibition of Aboriginal cultures in China, commemorating 30 years of relations between our two countries, was an exciting initiative for a busy, new national museum, but one appropriate to its national standing.

The coming *23 Degrees South* temporary exhibition is allowing the Museum to take its place among other national museums in the southern hemisphere, as it prepares to tell the story of deserts of the south across three continents.

The temporary exhibition which opened with the new Museum, *Gold and Civilisation*, set the standard for international and national loans of objects and demonstrated the good will with which institutions from a number of countries lent assets to a museum not yet even completed.

Within 12 months, the Museum had staged three major temporary exhibitions. *Gold and Civilisation* was followed by *Australia's Lost Kingdoms* and *To Mars and Beyond*. The latter has since travelled to Melbourne while the fourth, *Rare Trades*, has since opened in that city before travelling to Canberra.

Homemade Treasures, among the Museum's temporary exhibitions, was one of the first of many which it plans to "borrow" from other Australian institutions (in this case, from the Museum of Childhood in Western Australia).

The Friends of the NMA believes that the Museum is off to an admirable start. It engaged in a great deal of research in its planning stages, and it is developing quickly and efficiently.

The Friends note and welcome criticism of the Museum, and this has strengthened the institution and encouraged visitors and observers to debate the questions of our history.

Those who have joined the Friends are keen that Australia has a strong, independent national museum.

We are proud of our role in creating a "people's museum" which welcomes Australians and overseas visitors who are keen to learn about our land, people and environment.

PART 2 THE MUSEUM'S PROGRAMS

(i) Schools programs

Friends of the NMA congratulates the education unit of the Museum, which has welcomed more than 165,000 students since March 2001. It should be noted that in addition there are countless school groups visiting the Museum which have not been counted as "official school visitors", making the real number of school groups visiting significantly higher than that above.

Many Friends are enthusiastic volunteers in the schools program; their feedback is that it is a vibrant program, which assists schoolchildren in their understanding of, and enthusiasm for, Australian social history, our unique environment, and studies of civics and civilisation. We note the strong basis of all activities in the Australian curriculum.

Many Friends are also schoolteachers. They have only high praise for the program, which also has a strong outreach component, including the provision of professional development for teachers in many centres around Australia.

Talkback Classroom, in which school children from across Australia interview notable people such as the Prime Minister, Mr Howard, and much Cabinet Ministers - and their interviews are broadcast across Australia on ABC's Triple J - is an example of the unique opportunities provided by the Museum's school program. We note that this year, the Prime Minister will again be interviewed in the Talkback Classroom project, with American students joining in by satellite. A number of other federal Cabinet ministers will also participate by subjecting themselves to interview.

The National Museum of Australia schools program provides active learning experiences for students that introduce Australia's social history in a manner not possible elsewhere.

(ii) Public Programs

Friends of the NMA note a wide diversity of public programs, which we observe are consistently well attended.

From activities linked to *Play School* for the very young, to films and musical groups in the *Sky Lounge* program for the younger "demographic", to activities during Seniors Week, all ages are considered.

While many activities are necessarily located in Canberra, we note recent attempts to push the programs beyond the Acton site to regional centres.

The Friends has always considered that the Museum should represent the hub of a wheel, whose spokes reach out across Australia.

Vital in this outreach is the unique role of the Museum's broadcast Studio and its ability to broadcast high-profile debates in collaboration with the media and other stakeholders.

(iii) The Friends of the NMA's programs

Friends of the NMA creates a calendar of events both for Friends and for the wider community.

These include, for example, lectures, concerts, tours of the Museum and its repositories, and other social events.

The aim of Friends programs is to provide a level of access to the Museum not normally open to the general public, to enhance the Museum's exhibitions and public programs, and to provide educational opportunities for people interested in a more in-depth look at the Museum.

To enhance the Museum experience for Friends outside Canberra, they have been included by being invited to a Museum update for Perth members and Melbourne Friends were invited to the recent opening of the Rare Trades exhibition.

The events are planned in consultation with the Museum's public programs staff, to avoid duplication, and with an awareness of the demographic of Friends membership and the community at large.

The Friends run a number of programs in conjunction with other community organisations. Examples of these participating groups include: The Australiana Fund, Australia's Open Garden Scheme, ACT Storyteller's Guild, University of the Third Age and National Foundation for Australian Women, as well as other community initiatives such as Youth Week celebrations.

These programs further strengthen the Museum's links with the wider community. They are designed to convert a larger audience into fans of the National Museum of Australia.

PART 3 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE PRIORITIES

By any standard, the National Museum of Australia is a successful modern museum.

Visitors expect their national museum to be a repository of stories about past Australians – both the original owners of the land and those who have arrived from all corners of the world.

Whatever their age, they expect to learn about the distinguished, the notable, and ordinary Australians.

Educated in the 20th century, they realise that many voices make up a nation's history, and that there is no single text which dictates the story line.

They understand that a national museum should encourage debate. In fact, they realise that in presenting the stories of Australians – about how we have worked together to create a nation and how we interact with our unique environment – there will inevitably be disagreements.

Wise in the ways of multimedia, they expect exhibitions to be engaging and interactive. We have noted that some of the more interactive parts of the Museum are the most popular with visitors.

Visitors from Australia and overseas have overwhelmingly welcomed this modern museum which has not shied away from controversy, but which has managed to be balanced, when all its permanent and temporary exhibitions and public programs are taken into account.

The Friends of the National Museum of Australia recommends:

(i) The present Museum building should be extended.

Because of the lack of space in the current building, some chapters in the national story have not had the attention they deserve. We also understand the constraints of space and of budget.

We recognise that it would be wasteful and not the role for the National Museum to replicate exhibitions already well established in specialised museums and galleries elsewhere in Australia, and in Canberra itself.

The Friends believe, however, that some subjects are not given the space they deserve.

Even allowing for regular changes in exhibitions, it is regrettable that sport is touched on so briefly, in a country accepted as "sports-mad".

We would also like to see more attention given to – among other things – industry, business and Australian achievements in science.

While the opening temporary exhibition, *Gold and Civilisation*, focused successfully on the role of gold in expanding Australia – and contributing to democracy in our country – little exhibition space has been able to be devoted to mining.

Some of the Museum's functions continue to be located off-site from the central Acton Peninsula.

The Friends are particularly concerned that the Museum's reference library, originally planned to be in the main Museum building, could not – because of space limitations – be included. We hope it will soon be made more accessible.

In addition to expanding the site at Acton Peninsula, other valuable additions would be a purpose-built structure to house large exhibits, and the establishment of a permanent travelling exhibition that could reach remote parts of Australia.

(ii) The space given to the Gallery of First Australians should not in any way be curtailed.

As described in the Pigott Report and outlined in the National Museum of Australia Act, the intention of the Museum was always that it should provide a sizeable gallery dedicated to, and created by, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. There is no reason to change this.

The Friends believe that the Gallery of First Australians is central to telling the story of Australia. As in national museums in countries with a colonial past – such as New Zealand's Te Papa and Canada's Museum of Civilization - where the story of the indigenous people is fundamental, we believe the National Museum of Australia must give prominence to the stories of our indigenous people.

The Gallery, the result of wide consultation in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community, is the only dedicated permanent space of such size in Australia. As such, it contributes to community understanding as does no other institution in Australia. It has been enthusiastically embraced by overseas visitors who wish to learn about our indigenous people.

The material displayed in the Museum as a whole may appear at times controversial, and inevitably this will be so in the Gallery of First Australians. But the subject of its exhibitions is complex and emotional. Indigenous Australia has no Domesday Book or other documentary records of a kind familiar to Australians with a European inheritance.

The stories of indigenous people should be conveyed to all Australians in a manner that evokes their indigenous heritage, handed down from generation to generation. The Gallery's role is to enable other Australians to understand the achievements of indigenous Australians in nurturing this land for thousands of years, and in creating an artistic culture that continues to astonish the world with its deep spiritual significance and its ability to reach out for change and development.

In all this there can be no hard and fast truths. Still less can there even be hard and fast agreement about events which occurred in the interaction between the first Australians and those who came later.

What we need is a national museum which will display the issues and inspire debate about them in the general public. The Friends believes that the National Museum is doing this with extraordinary success, and submits that it should receive every encouragement to continue on its present course.

(iii) The Museum's budget should be increased to better fund acquisitions.

The Friends recognise that the Museum, in spite of early acquisition of objects from the Institute of Anatomy and ownership of the largest collection of bark paintings in the world, has, in total, a small collection.

It is currently in a weak position to bid at auction or private sale for precious objects that support the Australian story.

We are concerned that the current review of the financial operations of the Museum and other federal cultural institutions must not erode the already slim resources for the Museum to improve the National Historical Collection.

We believe that without stability of funding, it is difficult for the Museum to plan for acquisitions.

We believe also that recurring reviews and media coverage speculating on the Museum being "out of favour" have endangered the Museum's attempts to gain sponsorship and funding from the public.

In spite of this, the Friends have tripled their membership since the Museum opened, demonstrating community support.

The Friends of the National Museum intends to launch an acquisitions fund shortly to support the Museum.

We believe that government funding for acquisitions should be increased.

(iv) Membership of the Museum's Council should reflect the nature of the Museum.

The Friends of the Museum are concerned that there is no historian and no Aboriginal person or Torres Strait Islander on the current Council.

Given that the business of this Museum is social history, we regret the absence of a historian.

Given also that the Act sets out that one of the major roles of the Museum is "to pursue a policy directed towards security, under the Council of the Museum, the development and maintenance of the Gallery [of Aboriginal Australia], and the exhibition of specifically identified historical material by persons who are Aboriginals, Torres Strait Islanders, or descendants of Aboriginals or Torres Strait Islanders", we believe that the Council should include an Aboriginal person or a Torres Strait Islander.

We are concerned that appointments to the Council could be perceived as being politically motivated, thus eroding the independence and integrity of this new Museum.

(v) The National Museum should continue its efforts to act as the peak museum body in Australia.

The Friends applaud the efforts of the National Museum to link with other museums across Australia and internationally.

We note that there are many specialised museums in Australia and that the National Museum cannot, given its space, present a comprehensive picture of all of Australia's stories.

Over time, we expect that the Museum will tackle many further Australian stories with the assistance of, and in co-ordination with, other institutions, and in a balanced way.

We congratulate the Museum on its significant borrowings from the collections of other museums and from private collectors for its permanent and temporary exhibitions, and its efforts to share its expertise in areas such as conservation and collections displays with other museums and galleries across the country. We encourage the Museum to continue such exchanges of both objects and expertise.

We note with pride that Museum officers have taken a leadership role in conservation issues in Australia, have been invited to advise other national museums outside Australia, and have contributed to discussion in international forums on museology.

(vi) The powers and functions of the Museum should not be restricted through changes to the National Museum of Australia Act.

The most relevant parts of the National Museum of Australia Act are the powers and functions of the National Museum of Australia.

They remain as valid today as in 1980, allowing the Museum to focus strategically on what has been most important to achieve in the life cycle of the Museum at any particular time.

The focus of the Museum up to 2001 was on the planning and building of the site on Acton Peninsula.

From the opening in 2001 to 2003, there has been a period of settling and consolidation, and learning how to operate the new National Museum of Australia.

It is now appropriate for the Museum to focus on such issues such as the National Historical Collection, the development of its research and commercial activities and expanding its stories to an ever-increasing audience.

The present legislation complements the Museum's strategic goals. The Friends see no reason to change this.

(vii) New technologies should continue to be refreshed.

The Museum was built as an example of the possibilities created by modern technologies.

Its broadcast studio and its online capabilities allow a much broader audience to be reached than those who can visit the site on Acton Peninsula. These technologies should be continually refreshed.

The aim of the Museum is that, by 2004, 80 per cent of visitors to the Museum will reach it through use of new technologies.

This will particularly change the way schools around Australia interact with the Museum.

We believe that our national museum should have a national, and not simply a Canberra, focus. Outreach should increasingly be a policy of the Museum. The development of creative new technologies will help achieve this. We anticipate a continual improvement in web-based technologies, taking the Museum further afield in Australia and overseas.

(viii) Signage should be improved in the Museum.

Australians value freedom of speech. This should include the right of curators to present their interpretations of aspects of social history. It is part of the Museum's role to present controversial issues. The presentation of some displays (in particular those that are controversial) could be improved by curators presenting a succinct plain English public statement to accompany exhibitions. This should be in both exhibition catalogues and on the wall next to displays.

Statements should be displayed prominently and perhaps could include some web sites and other references for those who are interested. This would make the exhibitions more akin to articles in an academic journal, where viewpoints are owned by the authors and references enable readers to check on the authors' opinions. This seems realistic for a museum serving a public that is increasingly well educated and would continue the Museum's aim of allowing people to make up their own minds about the subject matter and interpretation of exhibitions.

Some Friends have noted that lighting on signage is weak in some areas of the Museum, and suggest that the size of text is increased so that it is easily readable.

List of Appendices

Appendix 1 – History of The Friends of the NMA

Appendix 2 - Names of committee members

Appendix 3 – Friends of the NMA constitution or parts thereof

Appendix 4 - Friends of the NMA Magazines

Appendix 5 – Letters to Prime Minister Howard, Senator Richard Alston and Senator Rod Kemp from Friends of the NMA regarding the current review

Appendix 6 – Friends of the NMA media release regarding the current review

Appendix 7 – Letter to all Friends regarding the NMA review