

National Cultural Policy Submission

from Craft Australia

Craft connects us to our world and to each other. Making by hand, with materials drawn from the environment around us, is one of humanity's oldest acts of meaning.

In an era of digital disembodiment, geopolitical fracture and fraying community bonds craft offers something uniquely powerful: a shared language that crosses borders, cultures and political divides. Now is an opportunity to place craft firmly within a renewed National Cultural Policy – not as a niche art form, but as a strategic asset for social cohesion, international diplomacy, health, economic productivity and as an essential partner of technology to drive innovation.

Craft Australia¹ is the national body that connects, and advocates for, Australian craftspeople. We represent the full spectrum of contemporary making practice, from Indigenous cultural traditions to contemporary fine art, from community health programmes to international cultural exchange. We submit these recommendations in that context and thank the Minister for the Arts for the opportunity to put forward this submission.

Summary of Major Recommendations

Structural Recognition

- Establish a Council for Visual Arts within Creative Australia.

First Nations

- Develop cultural treaties with each First Nation to protect and recognise distinct craft traditions.
- Establish Indigenous-led craft mentorship programmes to preserve intangible cultural heritage.
- Instigate the use of Aboriginal language names and terminologies for cultural practises, skills and knowledge.

Education

- Conduct an urgent national audit of practical arts education decline at all levels and develop a funded recovery plan.
- Reduce fees for arts degrees to pre-Job Ready Graduate levels.
- Embed practical making skills in national curriculum frameworks from primary school.

Craft as Diplomacy

- Establish a Craft Diplomacy Fund within the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.
- Commission craft-based cultural exchange programmes targeting strategic relationships.
- Provide sustained funding to the Indian Ocean Craft Triennial and similar Indo-Pacific programmes.

¹ Craft Australia was defunded in 2011 but has continued with a volunteer board as the World Craft Council, Australia. The organisation is in the process of changing its name back to Craft Australia.

Infrastructure and Funding

- Reinststate a champion of Australian craft and design to fill the void left by the closing of the Australian Design Centre.
- Recognise the vital role of volunteer-run craft organisations.
- Restore ABS data collection for the arts.
- Introduce dedicated operational funding for Not For Profit (NFP) craft organisations.
- Introduce a rolling, responsive small-grant mechanism for time-sensitive opportunities.

Craft and the Five Enduring Pillars

Pillar 1: First Nations First

“Aboriginal Culture is ancient and it is embedded within traditions and craft that are integral elements of connection to the living being that is Country, to Kin, to our ancestors, to the songlines that connect the many across Country, and to the stories that weave them together that stretch before time back as far as the creation stories.”

Dean Greeno, Board Member and craft practitioner, Craft Australia

Craft Australia’s views on the first pillar have been informed by the Indigenous voice on our board, Mr [REDACTED], in consultation with his community.

Country is a living being with rights and Aboriginal people are its custodians and stewards. Aboriginal people and communities are diverse and made up of some 250 individual nations across the country with their own languages, independent traditions, cultural processes and protocols, and unique ways of Knowing, Being and Doing.

“First Nations First” means recognising the diversity of Aboriginal nations within Australia. Each of these has a deeply connected unique culture that can be protected through the creation of Aboriginal Advisory Groups to safeguard Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property (ICIP) and cultural authority.

Pillar 1 Recommendations

- 1. Develop cultural treaties specific to each Aboriginal nation and its lands.*
- 2. Establish Aboriginal led mentorship programmes to uphold culture and intangible cultural heritage and to strengthen pathways for First Nations leadership across the cultural landscape.*
- 3. Adopt appropriate and authorised Aboriginal language names and terminologies when referring to cultural practises, skills and knowledge.*

Pillar 2: A Place for Every Story

The craft sector is a thriving, creative and essential part of Australia’s creative ecosystem, and in every craft object there is the story of its maker. The place of craft - making by hand - everywhere infuses the Australian cultural landscape. It is present in the prototyping studios of engineers and designers and in the practices of contemporary fine artists. It underpins the work of art therapists in the health sector and helps teenagers cope with anxiety. It thrives in and drives maker spaces and Men’s Sheds and thousands of community art centres. These contemporary manifestations of craft in Australia build on 60,000 plus years of craft knowledge held preciously by Indigenous communities and individuals.

This submission presents four domains where craft’s contribution to Australian society is direct, evidence based and undervalued in current policy: community building and integration, health and well-being, cultural diplomacy and sustainability.

1. Community Building and Integration

When politics, media and economic forces create division, making together builds bridges. The shared act of creation, working towards something tangible, learning from one another and producing something beautiful achieves what neither dialogue nor legislation can do alone. Three recent examples demonstrate this in practice:

The Tapestry Couch (Auburn, NSW): Over twelve months at the Auburn Community Centre in Sydney, hundreds of community members and asylum seekers of all ages and nationalities came together to make a timber couch upholstered with a tufted tapestry, learning the skill from Afghani refugee [REDACTED]. The slow, repetitive nature of the work created space for friendship, story-sharing and the dissolution of fear. The couch now stands in the foyer of the centre as a permanent witness to what making together achieves.²

Textiles Sydney (Cremorne, NSW): Founded in 2020 with 10 members, this not-for-profit has grown to 83 members, eight monthly sessions and 500 newsletter subscribers. Its growth trajectory is not unusual – it reflects a widespread, unmet community need for hands-on making and genuine human connection.

The Meeras Pavilion (Sydney) is an immersive installation of bamboo, coloured steel and woven ropework created over three years by Australian and Rohingya artists in Sydney, Kuala Lumpur and the Kutupalong refugee camp in Bangladesh. Installed in front of Customs House in October 2025, it invited audiences into the Rohingya story of statelessness through light, sounds and participatory embroidery. This is craft as advocacy, witness and bridge building at its most powerful.³

2. Health

“More than half of Australians think funding should ensure art and creative experiences are available to support our health and wellbeing (55% ranked this in their top three priorities for public or private investment).”⁴

Craft supports health and wellbeing. Repetitive skills such as crochet, carving and weaving can reduce cortisol levels and focus attention to help people who suffer from anxiety. Mastering a craft also builds confidence and generates pride and agency in ways that talk-based therapies cannot. It is widely used in art therapy to speed the rehabilitation of fine motor skills after injury and stroke, and in the treatment of

² <https://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/books/tapestry-couch-tells-stories-of-sydneys-refugees-20170612-gwpgkk.html>

³ <https://creativeadvocacypartnership.org/meeras-pavillion/>

⁴ Creating Our Future. Results of the National Arts Participation Survey, 2020

cognitive decline⁵, an important benefit in a society with an ageing population. The role of craft in health should be explicitly recognised in both arts and health policy frameworks.

3. Cultural Diplomacy

Craft objects carry story, culture and identity in a form that is tactile, human and lasting. In an era when conventional diplomacy is strained by competing ideologies and eroding multilateral institutions, craft offers a different kind of engagement. Australian craft provides a material point of connection between ours and other cultures. The art we make shapes our sense of ourselves, and when it leaves our shores, it reflects that self-image to the world.

Recent examples demonstrate what is already occurring and what investment could amplify:

- the tapestries of Indigenous designs created at the Australian Tapestry Workshop have been installed in ten Australian Embassies and High Commissions around the world;
- the Indian Ocean Craft Triennial actively builds relationships in Southeast Asia, South Asia and Africa through the medium of craft. In a time when Australia's regional relationships require careful, sustained cultivation, this model of people-to-people contact is invaluable;
- two Australian glass artists, [REDACTED] and [REDACTED], are among the 30 finalists in the prestigious 2026 Loewe Award. In the context of 5,100 entries from 133 countries this is a remarkable result that demonstrates the global standing of Australian craft at the highest level.

Craft Australia is uniquely positioned to advance this agenda. Our board includes the former Vice President of the World Craft Council, the President of the Asia Pacific Craft Alliance and Chair of the Indian Ocean Craft Triennial, the President of Craft New Zealand Aotearoa and the Coordinator of UNESCO Creative City Ballarat, and our organisation is the representative of Homo Faber in Australia.

4. Sustainability

When people participate bodily in life rather than being passive observers they engage more with their environment. Physical making affords a knowledge of and respect for materials and for the environment from which they come.

Engagement with various crafts allows people to develop the skills and the desire to repair objects rather than throw them away, and this creates a community that wants to create rather than consume. Repair, which is facilitated by the acquisition of practical making skills, is an important component of a sustainable economy.

The benefits of craft are pervasive and firmly embedded in the cultural landscape and we would like this to be recognised through the raising of the profile of visual arts and craft within Creative Australia. (Nowhere in the current Creative Australia Organisational Chart is 'visual arts' mentioned.)

⁵ <https://www.snapdragonlife.com/news/blog/the-neuroscience-of-making-why-your-hands-matter-more-than-you-think/#:~:text=Research%20from%20the%20Mayo%20Clinic,helps%20regulate%20your%20emotional%20state.>

Pillar 2 Recommendations

1. Establish a Council for Visual Arts alongside the Council for Music and the Council for Writing within Creative Australia with resources directly dedicated to craft and design.
2. Establish a Craft Diplomacy Programme within the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade to support participation of craftspeople in international fairs, residencies and exchange programmes, targeted to strengthen strategically significant bilateral relationships.
3. Provide sustained, multi-year funding to the Indian Ocean Craft Triennial and similar regional craft exchange programmes as instruments of Australian foreign policy.

Pillar 3: Centrality of the Artist

Education

Australia is in the early stages of an arts education crisis whose full consequences will not be visible for a decade.

The progressive removal of practical making from high school curricula has reduced the pipeline of students equipped to pursue higher level craft, art and design education. The closure of making facilities in universities – foundries, jewellery studios, woodworking and ceramics workshops – has eliminated pathways that cannot be easily rebuilt. The introduction of the Job Ready Graduate Scheme in 2021 and the consequent increase in fees for arts degrees has depressed enrolments with long term consequences for the entire creative economy. While some investment in education has been made through *Revive*, our lived experience as artists, artisans, art educators and art administrators is of arts education in decline at all levels – primary, secondary and tertiary⁶. According to NAVA, as of 2025 forty university arts courses had been cut since 2018⁷.

An example of the knock-on effects of this trajectory for the economy can be seen in the area of jewellery design and fabrication. For several years stand-alone jewellery courses have been closed and folded into more general design degrees leading to a decline in the number of Australian jewellers. The result: in 2025 Jeweller was added to the *Australian Occupation Shortage List*, Jewellery Designer was added to the *Skilled Migration List* and in 2026 Jeweller was further added to the *Australian Apprenticeships Priority List*. Contraction of practical education, which may produce short-term economic gains for teaching institutions, has long-term consequences.

The acquisition of craft skills has wide-ranging impacts on childhood development. Learning how to make at an early age wires the brain to be resourceful and solve problems. It increases manual dexterity and the fine motor skills which have markedly declined since the proliferation of electronic devices⁸. One of the top three priorities identified by Australians in the National Arts Participation Survey was to ensure arts are present in the lives of young people – this issue of arts education is important to the general population.

The decline of arts education will have long term consequences for the national cultural landscape, and for the economy. Art, craft and design are interdependent: skilled designers require craft knowledge;

⁶ *The Polycrisis for Arts and Creative Education in Australia*, Sandra Gattenhof and John Nicholas Saunders, Australian Journal of Education 2026, Vol. 0(0) 1-20

⁷ <https://www.facebook.com/NAVA.VisualArt/posts/australias-arts-education-system-is-in-crisis-with-40-university-arts-courses-cu/1062087899288663/>

⁸ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2667009725000399>

innovative manufacturers depend on designers; the Future Made in Australia agenda requires people who can conceive and make things. Craft education is not a cultural luxury, it is an economic necessity.

We believe practical arts education in Australia deserves urgent attention.

Pillar 3 Recommendations:

- 1. Conduct an urgent national audit of the decline in practical arts education at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels with specific attention to making skills. Report findings within 12 months and develop a funded recovery plan.*
- 2. Immediately reduce fees for arts degrees to pre-Job Ready Graduate levels.*
- 3. Require all national curriculum frameworks to include practical making skills from primary school.*
- 4. Recognise making as foundational literacy alongside reading, writing and numeracy.*
- 5. For the education of practical skills no longer taught in Australia, provide funds to facilitate access to international learning opportunities.*

Pillar 4: Strong Cultural Infrastructure

Not-for-Profit Art and Craft Organisations

While cultural heritage is recognised as a vital part of the national story, with the decline in arts education the responsibility for its survival is falling elsewhere to not-for-profit community organisations. The unrecognised backbone of this sector is the volunteer workforce. Australia's craft ecosystem is largely held together by volunteers. Guilds, community art centres and organisations like the Lost Trades Fair (Victoria) are keeping making cultures alive, preserving skills, training emerging practitioners and providing community infrastructure with no government funding and an ageing volunteer base.

These organisations are also a training ground for arts professionals. They play a role in arts staff development disproportionate to their size and financial resources. Many arts workers gain their initial experience in these entities and when their skills become valuable, they move on to better paying, more prestigious jobs in government-funded institutions and commercial galleries. This paradigm places great stress on NFPs and is unsustainable.

Organisational and Facility Closures

The loss of the Australian Design Centre, which supported a large ecosystem of artists, craftspeople and designers, was a blow for craft and design in Australia. The recent losses of funding to regional galleries and organisations in NSW and Victoria, and the closure of making facilities in universities have a cumulative effect on Australia's craft knowledge and practice. These losses and others in the arts sector are poorly documented because the data to track them does not exist. The Australian Bureau of Statistics no longer collects data on arts practice, arts education or arts funding patterns. This leaves policy makers working from anecdote rather than evidence. It is not possible to defend what cannot be measured.

Funding Responsiveness

Current Creative Australia and state arts funding operates within fixed windows that frequently do not respond to real world opportunities. Artists regularly miss significant international exhibiting opportunities because the timelines do not align with grant cycles.

Pillar 4 Recommendations

- 1. Recognise the vital role of volunteer-run craft organisations in skill transfer and as training grounds for arts workers.*
- 2. Accordingly, introduce a dedicated grants programme for NFP craft and making organisations, with simplified application processes and multi-year operational funding. Recognise that operational costs, not just project costs, are essential to sustaining these organisations.*
- 3. Reinststate a national, appropriately funded organisation with a mandate to exhibit, promote and advocate for Australian craft and design, filling the gap left by the Australian Design Centre.*
- 4. Introduce a responsive, rolling small grant mechanism for makers within Creative Australia for time-sensitive opportunities, international exhibitions, craft fairs, residencies and exchange programmes. This fund should operate year-round with short decision cycles (maximum four weeks).*
- 5. Initiate the ongoing collection and collation of data by the ABS pertaining to arts practise, arts education and arts funding patterns to draw an accurate picture from which policy can be shaped.*
- 6. Create formal alliances between NFP craft organisations and the formal education sector to preserve at-risk making skills and sustain intangible cultural heritage.*

Pillar 5: Engaging the Audience

Since losing its funding in 2011, Craft Australia, as a volunteer-run organisation, has continued informing Australian makers of the opportunities that exist within Australia and globally to expand their audiences.

For nearly 10 years Craft Australia's publication *Garland*⁹ has been bringing to the attention of Australian artists national and international opportunities to exhibit and market their work, to teach and to attend residencies and festivals. It publishes articles on contemporary and traditional crafts, individual makers, materials and issues facing the craft sector. Each issue of the magazine reaches more than 54,000 readers and to date *Garland* has published the writing of over a thousand contributors from 88 countries.

Craft Australia also engages audiences through its online Cooee programme. These events highlight individual makers, provide information on the craft sector and connect Australian makers with international audiences in real time.

Pillar 5 Recommendation

That a national strategy be developed to put the work of Australia craftspeople on the international stage.

⁹ <https://garlandmag.com/>