



Submission to the Australian Government – New National Cultural Policy

Robert Cripps Institute for Cultural Conservation, University of Melbourne

The Robert Cripps Institute for Cultural Conservation: Faculty of Arts, University of Melbourne, welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the development of Australia's new National Cultural Policy.

Context:

The Cripps Institute educates the next generation of leading conservators, delivers innovative conservation research, works in partnership with Australian Indigenous peoples and Asia-Pacific communities to protect and preserve their heritage, and provides expert conservation services to the public. The Institute's work is grounded in the principle that access to cultural, historical and scientific heritage is fundamental to human capability, community cohesion and democratic participation. Our submission emphasises the need to recognise **cultural conservation as core national infrastructure**, alongside the importance of **strengthening the evidence base that informs investment and policy development** across the cultural sector.

Issues:

A critical issue identified is the **absence of up-to-date, comprehensive national data**. Current datasets, such as the Australian Bureau of Statistics' *Arts and Culture in Australia* series, have not been updated since 2014, with limited comparable national datasets available. This lack of data significantly constrains effective advocacy for investment from government, philanthropy and the private sector. The **development of a coordinated national cultural data framework is essential to enable evidence-based decision-making and to better understand the cultural ecosystem**.

The Cripps Institute is actively examining this ecosystem to identify structural gaps in areas including education, documentation, statistics, philanthropy and storage. These interdependent systems underpin both cultural production and long-term preservation but remain insufficiently integrated within current policy settings.

The Institute also notes a broader shift in policy emphasis towards "creative industries" and market-facing activity. While this focus is important, **it neglects the cultural infrastructure that enables cultures to be created and re-energised, particularly conservation systems, collections care and archival preservation**. It is notable that conservation is not substantively articulated within the current *Revive* policy framework. Australia has not yet ratified UNESCO's *2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage*, nor does the current *Revive* policy take any steps to endorse it. A rebalancing is required to ensure that investment in creative production is supported by sustainable systems for preservation and access.

Furthermore, this focus on the creative industries neglects intangible cultural practices in which knowledge is embedded -that don't necessarily have public outcomes- such as efforts to improve the

vitality of local, Indigenous cultural traditions. In their introduction to *Revive, A Place for Every Story, a Story for Every Place*, Christos Tsiolkas and Clare Wright discuss creative works such as Alexis Wright's novel, *Carpentaria* and Warwick Thornton's film, *Samson and Delilah*. The development of these productions **required access to well-preserved cultural collections for such research to maintain authenticity and respectful representation**. If practitioners don't have the ability to research the cultural context within which they are working, especially when engaging with First Nations discourses, they are not able to conduct the in-depth field research needed to produce authentic and respectful work. Insufficient support for cultural heritage undermines cultural continuity and the equitable transmission of knowledge across generations.

Under Pillar 3, *The Centrality of the Artist*, the policy currently emphasises artists as economic actors within market systems. **The Institute recommends broadening this framing to include the role of conservation in supporting living practitioners**. Artists rely on access to maintained collections to locate, interpret and develop their practice. Without such access, opportunities for critical engagement with, and creative interpretation of, cultural history are diminished.

Furthermore, to ensure a holistic and sustainable approach to the lifecycle of artists' work, there is a **need for investment in collaboration and discourse between artists and conservators** when commissioning artworks by collecting institutions.

These issues are evident in the circulation of collections across Australia. While recent lending activity to regional galleries is significant, this has not been matched by consistent investment in conservation support. **Inadequate conservation infrastructure and the dangers of climate change and disasters pose risks to the long-term condition of cultural materials and impede the ability to share artworks and cultural objects across a range of institutions**. Increased access must be accompanied by appropriate infrastructure for care and preservation. Increased disasters means that cultural infrastructure, funding and conservation are needed to rebuild and revive at-risk cultural assets that belong to the many communities in Australia. At present, our national cultural collections predominantly reside in urban centres and funding models for regional and smaller not-for-profit organisations are inconsistent and unclear; **regular and equitable access to funding to re-energise material of cultural and community significance is a key indicator for cultural health**. We call for stronger funding for conservation work undertaken by small to medium-scale arts and cultural organisations, particularly in remote and regional areas.

Revive's A Place for Every Story, a Story for Every Place, suggests there is no separation between cultural assets and heritage. However, policies and infrastructure to protect heritage are governed by the State of the Environment (*Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*), whilst cultural assets are governed by Australia's National Cultural Policy, when the two are intrinsically linked. The practicalities of identifying what is important with Significance 2.0 are challenged when protection policies are separately governed.

As such, we call on the government to **avoid the gradual weakening of the cultural sector through inconsistent long-term support for the cultural knowledge ecosystem** within which creative practices and industries are nurtured. Just as the creative industries are re-energised, fit-for-



purpose cultural infrastructure and at-risk/depreciated cultural assets need to be creatively revived through conservation dialogues and practices, inclusive of Australia's communities.

Accordingly, the Cripps Institute makes the following recommendations:

- Establish **a national cultural data framework** to support evidence-based policy and investment.
- **Recognise conservation as core cultural infrastructure** within policy frameworks.
- **Rebalance investment** between creative industries and **long-term cultural systems**.
- **Strengthen conservation support** for distributed and regional collections as well as not-for-profit organisations, particularly those at risk and cultural infrastructure no longer fit for purpose, under-funded and not meeting the expectations of contemporary audiences.
- Develop **strategies for the preservation of contemporary and intangible cultural practices**.
- Recognise the **role of conservation in supporting artists' practice** and cultural participation.

A forward-looking National Cultural Policy must recognise that cultural production and cultural preservation are interdependent. Investment in conservation is fundamental not only to safe heritage and supporting the cultural health and wellbeing of communities, but also to enable artistic practice and ensure equitable access to Australia's cultural life.