

Submission regarding the new Australian Cultural Policy

Collecting institutions are integral to documenting, interpreting and preserving Australia's cultural landscape. Galleries, libraries, archives, museums, and herbaria hold millions of pieces of Australian material culture in their collections, forming an essential part of the Cultural Infrastructure in Pillar 4 of the National Cultural Policy framework.

Yet the existence of these collections is threatened by a lack of investment and resourcing. Behind every collection is the often unobserved and misunderstood work of registrars, collection managers, archivist, and librarians. Their work is different to that of the more widely known curator, though often thrown in the same category. Collection care is ongoing and cyclical, often unglamorous, buried in data and dust, archival boxes, databases, and location codes. It is undervalued and under-represented, as demonstrated by the noticeable lack of collections professionals in the expert and advisory panels for this Policy.

Keeping and caring for collections underpins activities across the Pillars of the Policy. Collection managers are at the forefront of working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to establish management protocols grounded in mutual respect, carefully balancing cultural rights with access and preservation. Collection development places artists, creators, and storytellers at its centre, recording and sharing their narratives, fostering belonging, and enabling visibility for communities and their stories.

A wealth of stories is found in collections across the country, in smaller regional organisations and community museums as well as the major institutions. Registrars and collection managers document, store, and display items so that these histories are not lost, and so future opportunities may be found. Collection work facilitates access, a major driver of audience engagement through digital preservation, loans, and exhibitions. None of these things is possible without the collections and, significantly, the practitioners who care for them.

The great challenge for people working with collections, especially those in regional areas, is shrinking investment in and resourcing for essential projects, including day-to-day management of items, exhibitions, and storage. Members of the profession increasingly report unfinished projects, shelved ambitions, a lack of knowledge about their work (even



from their colleagues), wages lower than equivalent roles in other areas, and high levels of burnout. It is difficult to keep up with the increasing demand for access that we are experiencing through public enquiries and exhibitions when everything else is shrinking.

Registrars, collection managers, archivists, and librarians are creative problem-solvers, but there are limits when they are required to provide more and care for more with less.

If Australia wishes to preserve its material culture in order that artists, students, specialists and the public may continue to create and develop its future culture, the National Cultural Policy must recognise the vital role of collections in recording, shaping and reinterpreting culture through access, whether in private viewings, community visits, exhibitions or online. Equally, the Policy must acknowledge the vital role of registrars, collection managers, archivists, and librarians in maintaining collections and sharing them with the public, recognising and resourcing their work as a specialist profession within the cultural industry.

Australasian Registrars Committee