

NATIONAL CULTURAL POLICY SUBMISSION

Individual Submission: Carola Akindele-Obe

Over 30 years working across the craft and visual arts sector in Australia and internationally, including through organisations such as the Indian Ocean Craft Triennial (IOTA), Maker & Smith, the Sydney Art on Paper Fair and the Biennale of Sydney, I have observed both the extraordinary potential of Australia's creative sector and the structural challenges limiting its growth. My experience spans artist development, cultural exchange, regional engagement, audience participation and cross-cultural collaboration across metropolitan, regional and international contexts.

Australia has the talent and opportunity to become a leader in craft, design and material-led cultural practice. However, this opportunity is being constrained by fragmented policy, declining skills pathways and underinvestment in long-term cultural infrastructure.

Australia's cultural policy should recognise culture as the shared patterns of meaning, creativity and human connection that build belonging, strengthen communities and shape a **confident multicultural identity** enriched by the many cultures, histories and experiences that make up contemporary Australia.

• First Nations First

First Nations knowledge systems, material practices and cultural traditions are foundational to Australia's cultural identity and should be recognised as central – not supplementary – within national cultural policy. Craft practice provides important opportunities for intergenerational knowledge transfer, cultural continuity and community connection.

The maintenance, practice and transfer of First Nations cultural knowledge are also deeply connected to community wellbeing, identity, healing and cultural strength, supporting the social, emotional and cultural health of First Nations peoples and communities.

First Nations cultural policy must be First Nations led and be embedded across government portfolios including health, education, community services, regional development and justice, recognising the vital role that cultural practice plays in strengthening identity, resilience, connection and long-term community health and wellbeing.

Greater investment is needed in First Nations-led cultural programs, exchanges, making spaces and long-term partnerships that support cultural authority, cultural care and self-determination.

Western Australia also has a unique opportunity to strengthen cultural relationships across the Indian Ocean region through contemporary craft, shared material knowledge and intercultural exchange, particularly through engagement with multicultural and diaspora communities.

• A Place for Every Story

Australia's multicultural identity is strengthened through cultural participation, storytelling and shared creative experiences. Craft and material-led practice play a powerful role in building relationships across communities and cultures, supporting social cohesion, wellbeing and intercultural understanding.

Arts and culture policy should not sit solely within arts departments. Creative practice contributes directly to:

- education and lifelong learning
- tourism and destination identity
- multicultural engagement and social inclusion
- regional development
- health and wellbeing
- innovation and manufacturing
- international engagement and cultural diplomacy

The National Cultural Policy should encourage integrated policy and investment frameworks across Arts & Culture, Education, Tourism, Trade, Multicultural Affairs, Regional Development, Health and Small Business portfolios.

As governments and corporations increasingly focus on wellbeing, social impact and community resilience, arts and culture should be recognised as essential contributors to these outcomes rather than discretionary activities.

• The Centrality of the Artist

Artists, makers and creative practitioners are skilled workers, cultural contributors and small business operators. However, Australia is experiencing strong public participation and audience interest in craft and making while the professional craft sector itself is weakening.

The highly skilled, professional craft sector is now in clear danger of long-term decline due to the loss of specialist education pathways, affordable infrastructure, advanced training opportunities and sustainable career support. At the same time, hobby participation and low-level commercial production continue to grow without equivalent investment in excellence, mastery and professional development.

This is creating a widening quality gap between Australia and countries across Asia and Europe where governments continue to invest strategically in craft skills, design excellence, manufacturing capability and cultural infrastructure. Without intervention, Australia risks losing critical making knowledge, international competitiveness and the next generation of highly skilled practitioners.

Greater investment is needed in:

- professional training and advanced skills pathways
- affordable making spaces and creative hubs
- market development and export readiness
- international exchange and cultural diplomacy
- business skills and economic development support for creative micro-businesses

Government should also strengthen incentives for philanthropy, corporate giving and ESG investment into arts and culture, recognising the sector's contribution to inclusion, sustainability, community resilience and wellbeing.

• Strong Cultural Infrastructure & Engaging the Audience

The craft and design sector remains fragmented and under-recognised despite its significant cultural and economic potential.

Many craft-specific organisations continue to operate through ageing volunteer-run membership models that are becoming increasingly unsustainable due to volunteer burnout, limited succession planning, lack of affordable spaces and insufficient access to professional development, workshops and shared infrastructure.

The sector also lacks a sufficiently resourced national cross-craft advocacy and development body to coordinate policy, research, market development and strategic sector growth across Australia.

Small and medium arts organisations are increasingly overburdened by short-term funding cycles, complex compliance requirements and unsustainable delivery expectations that limit long-term planning and collaboration.

Australia needs stronger investment in shared creative infrastructure, affordable making spaces, cooperative production facilities and collaborative development models that support both excellence and access. Incentives for collaboration, shared resources and cross-sector partnerships would strengthen sector sustainability and national impact.

Australia has strong creative talent but weak pathways for translating cultural value into sustainable economic opportunity. Dedicated economic development initiatives for the craft and design sector could support market development, export opportunities, digital commerce, mentoring and international profile-building.

Arts and culture should be understood not as a discretionary add-on, but as essential social, cultural and economic infrastructure that contributes across multiple areas of public life.

With coordinated policy, long-term investment and cross-sector collaboration, Australia can become a national and international leader in contemporary craft, cultural exchange and material-led creative practice.

Summary Recommendations

• Cultural Recognition & National Identity

- Reinststate 'craft' explicitly within national cultural policy.
- Recognise arts and culture as essential social, cultural and economic infrastructure.
- Support First Nations-led cultural practice, knowledge transfer and wellbeing.
- Recognise Western Australia as a gateway to craft & cultural exchange with the Indian Ocean region.

• Skills, Workforce & Creative Careers

- Invest in professional craft skills, education and advanced training pathways.
- Address the growing gap between hobby participation and professional craft excellence.
- Strengthen economic development pathways for craft through exports, tourism and market development.

• Infrastructure, Capacity & Sector Sustainability

- Invest in affordable making spaces, shared infrastructure and creative hubs.
- Support centres of excellence for craft and designer-makers.
- Reduce compliance burdens and support longer-term funding models for small organisations.
- Support stronger national advocacy and coordination across the craft sector.

• Cross-Sector Collaboration & Investment

- Embed arts and culture across government portfolios, not only arts departments.
- Incentivise philanthropy, corporate partnerships and ESG investment into arts and culture.

Carola Akindele-Obe is a Scottish-born arts manager and curator who has worked in the visual arts and craft sector in Australia since 1997. She is Co-founder and Executive Director of the [Indian Ocean Craft Triennial \(IOTA\)](#) and founder of the voluntary initiative [Maker & Smith](#). Carola holds qualifications in Design (Embroidered & Woven Textiles), City & Guilds (Basketry and Woven Furniture), and Arts Administration. She is a passionate advocate for craft and its important role in cultural identity, creative innovation, learning and the future of contemporary society.