

National Cultural Policy Submission

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Individual

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Short submission (text box 500 words or less)

The Audiences for Australian Collections within Australia and Abroad

How are Australian collections known, in Australia and abroad? There are books, exhibition catalogues, and most importantly databases with information about the collections. We live in a digital age and expectations are high. In 2021 the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, launched a new database. It has proved disappointing. Previously everybody could find an account of all the objects in the NGA's collection in the nation's capital. The new one installed, as recorded in the annual report <https://interaction.net.au/articles/we-have-launched-the-new-national-gallery-of-australia-website/#:~:text=and%20very%20intuitive.-,2022%20MAPDA%20Awards,cannot%20discuss%20these%20just%20> has not replaced the earlier one, although an update is promised. Even though the NGA has received an award the stuff online only presents dumbed down casual references to select objects. The historical memory of the collection has disappeared. Visitation to the NGA database was the highest in the country. It halved dramatically after 2021. The Australian public is discriminating. Most galleries have an inadequate representation online of what they own as a collecting institution, with the exception of the Art Gallery of New South Wales, the result of a collaboration between a scholar librarian, Steven Miller, and a director who is an expert in art history, Michael Brandis. Ideally a database should contain accounts of all objects in the collection, their provenance, interpretative literature, and conservation data. The gold standard is the catalogue online of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, where curators update the data, so that they have a constantly improving catalogue, without need to add to the ever-growing bureaucracy. See the Oceanic part of their website:

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search?department=Oceanic+Art+in+The+Michael+C.+Rockefeller+Wing>

There are no guidelines for Australian museums to follow when constructing a database and no consensus about what is necessary. There have been no surveys as to what is needed. Some Australian museums have done little to make their libraries and archives user friendly. It is said that the National

Gallery of Victoria has dispensed with their library. It is an extremely slow business to consult the library and archive of the National Gallery of Australia. There are multiple ways in which databases may be used in the teaching of art history, curatorship and many subjects. You could construct online exhibitions in the classroom from data; museum curators abroad can research Australian collections online for exhibitions they are curating. Few museums create exhibitions that travel abroad, one exception being the Medical Museum in the University of Melbourne, whose exhibition on indigenous Healing, travelled to Germany. Admittedly this is a small museum with an excellent database and a scholar director.

The invention of TROVE has transformed the way Australian history is written. If we could do the same for the databases of Australian Museums, we may revolutionize the way Australian (art) history is written and known about here and abroad. Much conservation data fails to go beyond the laboratory but would make a permanent impact through databases.

In the hope that the collections of Australian Museums will receive the global diffusion they deserve.

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