

# National Cultural Policy Submission

## National Portrait Gallery

**Submitted:** On behalf of a not for profit arts organisation; On behalf of an arts peak body; on behalf of government or a government body

### **What challenges and opportunities do you see in the pillar or pillars most relevant to you?**

#### **First Nations**

Cultural institutions must have a commitment to growing the presence of First Nations participation and professional presence within the sector. The National Portrait Gallery actively takes steps in broad engagement, particularly through collection development, exhibition programming, the establishment of its first identified role, and is formally committed to the reconciliation journey. The Gallery's journey will include the forthcoming establishment of a First Nations advisory entity, and further, recognises the critical need for First Nations representation at Board level as a priority.

However, there is much more that can and should be done, and institutions will progress further with dedicated support from the Australian Government; to create more positions within the cultural sector, and in order to ensure the weight of responsibility that sits with First Nations staff is not burdensome.

A National Cultural Policy should recognise this responsibility, and put forward means of support for the growth of the First Nations professional presence within Australia's cultural institutions.

The Policy should ask First Nations cultural workers what initiatives are needed to sustain the transformation of our cultural sector to reflect a First Nations First priority, one based on true and transparent partnerships, engagements, and collaboration.

#### **Place for Every Story**

The National Portrait Gallery is the youngest national cultural institution, and since 1998 has grown a collection of more than 3000 portraits; many of which have been donated. The Gallery must have the capacity to continue to proactively grow and evolve the collection, in order to comprehensively reflect the rich and diverse nature of the Australians whose achievements ought to be celebrated in our collection; and to redress the disparity between those currently represented in the collection, and the breadth of the historical and modern face of Australia. Portraiture is unique, in its role of capturing the story of its subject through the creative vision of its artist; and it is this potential for extraordinary collaboration that must be fostered by the Gallery.

While the Gallery is enormously grateful for the ongoing support of the Australian Government, we acknowledge the clear benefits of further support that would enable robust, proactive collection development, through an appropriately resourced acquisitions and commissioning program. Growing the nation's collection of portraits to truly reflect Australia's diversity will better reflect the breadth of Australian experience and contribution, and assist in engaging a nation-wide audience. This is fundamental to the Gallery's role in inspiring the next generation of Australian achievers through the stories we tell.

#### **The Centrality of the Artist**

As Creative Australia notes, artists are at the heart of a cultural economy, and many of the nation's cultural institutions, including the National Portrait Gallery, are dependent on the extraordinary talent and vibrancy of individual artists to continue to fulfil their missions.

Portraiture can be regarded as a narrow genre within the visual and fine arts. The challenge – and opportunity – embraced by the National Portrait Gallery is to lead Australia's exploration of what portraiture is and can be, as an accessible avenue for Australians to simultaneously learn about and explore history and contemporary life, through the creative arts. The Gallery actively encourages the nation's wealth of talented artists (many of whom might not necessarily regard themselves as

portraitists) to engage with the genre, explore its capacity to combine biography and social history with creativity, and in doing so ultimately reflect on important notions of identity in Australia.

All cultural institutions have the opportunity to position themselves as creative hubs, welcoming and supporting individual artists and giving them a platform and the means to contribute their work to Australia's cultural ecosystem. The Gallery would support opportunities to further its capacity to expand pathways for artists, with ambitious, well-funded exhibitions, engagement, and commissioning programs.

### **Strong Institutions**

The National Portrait Gallery is a national resource, and requires ongoing investment in order to meet its Purpose: to develop, maintain and promote a national collection of portraits; and to develop and engage a national audience for our collection, exhibitions, education, research, publications, and public and online programs. These core activities offer all Australians a dynamic and ambitious program that tell real stories relevant to the nation; reflecting the face of Australia to our contemporary audience.

The Gallery is proud of its consistent and steadily improving track record in delivering its purpose, commendably holding its own among the dynamic environment of its national peers and the state cultural institutions of Australia, despite its notably smaller operational scale. The Gallery continues to build on its successful foundations, extend its reach, and increase its audiences.

It is recognised that in order to safeguard the ongoing sustainability of the Gallery, and its important contribution to Australia's cultural landscape as a national institution, it would greatly benefit from an approach to funding support that would see resourcing be considered in the context of the Gallery's position as a peak organisation, and commensurate with its proven capacity to deliver at a level equal to its historically better-resourced peers.

Cultural institutions have an important role to play in 'soft' diplomacy on behalf of the nation. Through strong international engagement via cross-institutional collaborations and partnerships, and via Australia's diplomatic networks, our institutions have great capacity to contribute to a healthy and dynamic cultural ecosystem, both domestically and overseas.

### **Reaching the Audience**

Located in Canberra, the National Portrait Gallery attracts more than 400,000 visitors on-site per year. Entry to the Gallery itself must continue to be free, encouraging the widest possible visitation from the myriad communities of Australia. Perceived and actual barriers to accessibility must be removed, whether these barriers are physical, or evident in the nature in which the Gallery presents itself and its activities. The Gallery must also maintain its activity far beyond the building itself, presenting the collection, its exhibitions and public programs via its travelling exhibitions program, and online activity.

Communities Australia-wide are immeasurably enriched by touring exhibitions, and our national cultural institutions must be funded sufficiently to take art to communities who would not otherwise have access to them. Currently, the National Portrait Gallery tours several exhibitions annually with the support of the National Collecting Institutions Touring and Outreach Program (NCITO), to great appreciation from regional galleries. Travelling exhibitions are most often accompanied by Gallery staff who assist in bringing the exhibition to life for local visitors, and can also collaborate with the venues to facilitate meaningful skills exchange. There is an opportunity to expand this capacity-building element by including it in the funded activities under the existing NCITO program.

99% of the Gallery's collection has been digitised, making access to it much more easily within the reach of a broad audience across the country, and internationally. The Gallery will continue to use the treasures in its collection, and those featured in its exhibitions, to reach this broad and diverse audience; one eager to explore what it means to be Australian. Online access to the Gallery's digital educational and public programs is predominantly free of charge, and the cost of providing these programs is the same whether 50 people or 50,000 people participate.

We believe that cultural institutions should and will continue to engage with bigger audiences, as communities throughout Australia are made aware of the content we have on offer. Our national cultural institutions must actively capture the attention and earn the respect of these broader audiences,

and not just the traditional in-person audience that is able to visit our buildings. Cultural institutions would welcome government support to promote access via various means such as digital programs, that benefit Australian communities across the board, regardless of socio-economic or geographic constraints.

**Please tell us how each of the 5 pillars are important to you and your practice and why.**

### **First Nations**

The National Portrait Gallery aims to establish an environment for bringing First Nations Peoples forward, by promoting understanding and appreciation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, histories and ongoing cultures as central to our shared national identity.

We aspire to cultural excellence in how we employ, engage and collaborate with First Nations Peoples, and an organisational culture that includes, involves, considers and respects First Nations knowledge and perspectives, and embeds principles of self-determination and cultural autonomy.

### **A Place for Every Story**

The National Portrait Gallery's mission is to reflect the face of Australia and to tell the national story with clarity and without complacency. The Gallery uses portraiture to tell Australia's stories, and to increase understanding and appreciation of all Australians, focussing on their identity, history, culture, creativity and diversity.

It is therefore imperative that visitors to the Gallery – either onsite or online – are able to find themselves in our collection and in our exhibitions. We are committed to developing the collection to reflect the diverse face of Australia.

### **The Centrality of the Artist**

Portraits, being an artistic interpretation of a living subject, are the creative result of a collaboration between an artist and their sitter.

The National Portrait Gallery is committed to elevating the presence of the artist within this tradition, for the benefit of Australians' understanding of and appreciation for the best examples of the genre: where an inspired connection between talented artist and interesting subject ensures excellence in portraiture.

In undertaking its purpose, the Gallery consistently seeks to ensure that artists, and by extension their creative vision of their subjects, are given all due consideration in the establishment, growth, interpretation, study, and elucidation of the Gallery's collection, in its program of exhibitions, and in engagement with creatives from all arts disciplines in its programming and outreach.

### **Strong Institutions**

Strong national institutions are the bedrock of a vibrant cultural ecosystem. They provide leadership within their respective collecting and programming remits, are recognised as centres of excellence and best practice within the sector, and are peak interpretive and creative hubs for Australia's communities, to invigorate and inspire audiences, researchers, and artists alike.

Individually, cultural institutions articulate their respective, nuanced visions, and this imperative mission is of great benefit to Australia and its place in the international cultural environment.

When considered holistically, and when given the opportunity to work collaboratively, institutions are able to even further promote and deepen the understanding of what Australia is, its place in the world, and importantly, what it could be.

The National Portrait Gallery is a proud and ambitious contributor to, and documenter of, Australia's living and ever-evolving artistic and social history, and is committed to furthering the nation's presence in its own and in the global cultural landscape.

## **Reaching the Audience**

The National Portrait Gallery is committed to working with the Australian Government, governments at all levels, artists, industry, collegiate cultural institutions, donors, partners, the myriad remarkable Australians whose stories are to be captured, and the broader community, to undertake its purpose, and bring its vision to Australians across the country.

Cultural institutions around the world responded quickly and innovatively to the challenges of the pandemic and, in fact, expanded their audiences by providing relevant, entertaining and illuminating digital content. The National Portrait Gallery embraced that challenge as it happened, and its engaged audience tuned in to online exhibitions, masterclasses, in-conversations and more; with national and international colleagues and virtual tours. More importantly, audiences who had never come to Canberra were able to involve themselves in the life of the Gallery, as the geographical and socio-economic barriers to participation were removed.

Looking forward, the National Portrait Gallery continues to embed and evolve these innovations in the digital spaces in its commitment to offer a comprehensive approach to audience engagement and interaction; whether in person or via virtual channels.

## **Are there any other things that you would like to see in a National Cultural Policy?**

A new National Cultural Policy has the great potential to positively shift Australians' perception of the status of the arts in society, by encouraging the understanding that arts and culture are very much part of everyday life; importantly through institutions, but equally through myriad activity undertaken throughout our communities in all places and at all levels. The cultural life of Australia is constantly experienced, enjoyed, and created by friends and family, colleagues and schoolmates. It is a diverse, evolving ecosystem that speaks to who we are as a nation.