

Craft: What we make of where we are

World Crafts Council - Australia's submission to the National Cultural Policy

Summary

Crafts play a critical role in support for the culture of First Nations, Australia's regional relations and the flourishing of diverse communities across the nation. Crafts are a unique expression of our creativity based on our material relationship to the land on which we live. The National Cultural Policy should include support tailored to the needs of crafts. This includes support for international craft exchange, skills transfer through programs such as mentorships and a national platform that can nurture and promote our crafts.

Background

[The World Crafts Council – Australia \(WoCCA\)](#) is part of the global network of World Crafts Councils (WCC) internationally. This volunteer-run organisation contributes to and is a member of the [WCC Asia Pacific Region](#) which comprises the Asian countries from the furthest West and includes Australia and the South Pacific. As representatives of the Asia Pacific sub-region, Australia and New Zealand have two board representative positions as well as an advisory position. [The World Crafts Council International](#) is the over-arching body that supports the activities and provides a network for the five regions worldwide.

WoCCA is the principal partner of [Garland magazine](#), an online publication dedicated to developing, discovering and sharing stories and expertise of craft artists and artisans around the world. There has been a strong focus on stories from the Pacific and Indian Ocean regions and this has contributed to growing understanding and valuing of the traditions and skills in our region. Each issue of Garland magazine reaches more than 35,000 readers. So far, it has published 1370 articles by 653 writers from 72 countries.

WoCCA supports craft in all its forms and from a multitude of sources, cultures and countries. According to the Australia Council's *Visual Arts and Crafts Factsheet*, in 2019 4.7 million Australians were actively involved in making craft. This is likely to have increased during the pandemic. It is useful to view craft in two defined and linked aspects defined below:

- A. Traditional and heritage crafts encompass the skilled making of objects utilising materials including clay, fibre, metal, glass and wood and calling on traditions and histories handed down through generations
- B. Contemporary craft is the skilled making of objects. It is an intellectual and physical activity whereby the maker explores the infinite possibilities of materials and processes to produce unique and expressive forms.

Through these broad principles WoCCA:

- Promotes a community of practice and knowledge transfer both societal and generational
- Promotes high-level practical skills across manual and digital forms and deep material knowledge including advanced manufacturing
- Engages with a creative process that fosters innovation

- Facilitates a network of individuals and organisations across Australia, New Zealand and the world by providing regular information and networking events

It is from this position that the WoCCA group responds to the National Cultural Plan Framework.

1. First Nations First

The craft of Australian First Nations people is intrinsic to culture – to maintaining, nurturing and continuing traditional practices. In Australia, these are typically found in fibre and wood; with clay, metal and glass attracting interest over the past decade. These traditional practices typically are highly sustainable, using naturally found materials.

WoCCA recognises and endeavours to support wherever possible the maintenance of tradition and continuation of skills through knowledge transfer and other learning methodologies.

The capacity for acquiring new and continuing old skills has been put at risk in Australia through very limited support. There has been reduced access to studios, equipment and skilled teaching. We believe this needs to be addressed within the National Cultural Policy.

PRACTICAL MEASURES CAN INCLUDE:

- Reinstating support for mentorships across a wide range of disciplines enabling mentees to acquire critical experience and knowledge and mentors to continue to provide models for their culture.

2. Participation and inclusion

Cultural diversity is one of the great strengths of Australian society. As well as diversity within Australia, there is much potential for exchange with other cultures in our region. Craft diplomacy is an effective way of building stronger ties, based on mutual respect. This is especially important in the Indo-Pacific context.

WoCCA, through our own networks and through the WCC Asia Pacific Region, is uniquely placed to encourage learning, knowledge transfer, development of new markets and presentation of works from artists and artisans throughout our region. These include bi-monthly 'craft coee' sessions inviting and listening to contributions by artists, artisans, organisations and institutions across all states and territories, discussing a broad range of issues including practice lead development, curatorial collection policies, education in institutions etc.

We understand that the economies of many of our neighbours are highly dependent on the creation and marketing of craft-based objects principally for the tourist market, but also for mass marketing to wealthier neighbours. Through WoCCA we encourage learning in our own country about the skills, knowledge and stories embedded in these objects with a view that the humble objects we have in our homes are important links to our neighbors. This has been evident recently with the outstanding success of the [Indian Ocean Craft Triennial](#) held in Western Australia in 2021.

PRACTICAL MEASURES CAN INCLUDE

- Greater investment in cultural diplomacy initiatives with a focus on the Pacific and Indian Ocean region
- Opportunities to develop increased artist exchanges and residencies

- Opportunities to develop exhibitions including touring and exchange between artists in our region

3. Thriving arts and cultural sector

Over the past two decades, opportunities for extended learning in the skills of craft have almost disappeared from tertiary institutions. Whether university systems are the optimum location for jewellery, ceramics, textiles and furniture design is a separate question.

What is without doubt is that there is an appetite and interest in the acquisition of skills, design and concept development that contribute to the richness of a full cultural life and that places of learning are scarce. Craft methodologies are important for the future. An Australian Government working paper was released in 2019 titled *Creative Skills for the Future Economy*. It clearly states:

There is a growing expectation that workers will need more '21st Century Skills', including creative skills, higher-order cognitive skills, system-thinking skills, as well as interpersonal, emotional intelligence, and collaborative skills (Australian Government 2018, 5).

Australian Government, Department of Communications and the Arts. 2019. "Creative skills for the future economy". Last modified January 23, 2019.

<https://www.communications.gov.au/departmental-news/creative-skills-future-economy>

People who are serious about learning a specific craft to a high degree of skill need to travel to the few institutions that continue to teach or to European universities where craft is seen as a valuable part of creative endeavour.

Craft is also a place of innovation but is seriously neglected in Australia. See Terry Cutler (2008); Cutler, Terry. 2008. "Creativity, the arts and innovation." In A Currency House Conversation, Sydney, 2008. Sydney: Opera House.

https://www.cutlerco.com.au/activities/speeches/08_speeches/The_creative_arts_and_innovation.pdf

National platform

Australia lacks a national craft platform. Founded in 1964, Craft Australia represented Australia nationally and internationally until it was defunded in 2011. This was done with the understanding that the funding towards Craft Australia would be retained by the crafts, but re-directed towards more strategic ends. The following year, a National Craft Initiative was conducted to review the sector. This was completed and acknowledged that new working models needed to be established to support the health of the sector. However, none of the promised money was returned. The funding disappeared, despite promises.

Rather than see a national body completely disappear, a group of volunteers established the World Crafts Council - Australia, based on the origins of Craft Australia as a representative body for the World Crafts Council. The board has been successful in maintaining a national and international presence, but lacks the resources to realise its potential.

A parallel history occurred in Canada. Established in 1974, Canadian Crafts Council (CCC) was defunded in 1996, however, it was kept alive by a band of dedicated volunteers. After a similar review to that in Australia, in 1999 the Canadian government decided to continue the organisation as the Canadian Crafts Federation.

Some Australian states continue to be represented by craft organisations. These form their own network: Australian Craft and Design Centres. A national platform needs to represent the broad range of the crafts, in both metropolitan and regional areas with specific, focused inclusion on the contemporary craft created by Indigenous artists and the capacity to provide programs that deliver benefits for all makers. Examples include the Australian Craft Map, international and national exchanges and representation in World Crafts Council events.

PRACTICAL MEASURES CAN INCLUDE

- Restoration of support for a national craft platform that includes
 - A flexible and nimble network to address the fractured systems currently in place
 - Capacity to represent Australia nationally and internationally
 - Provides confidence that craft is a viable career pathway

4. Public value

Australia is endowed with numerous small to medium **not-for-profit** organisations that fulfil any number of functions for our society. While typically under-resourced and under-funded for the need and ambitions of the groups, they also serve as a learning ground for budding arts administrators, curators, artists and performers across every discipline. The **burnout** rate is high, with most people working at least 35% more hours than they are remunerated for.

These positions are not paid as well as administrative positions in any level of government, and typically people move on to more secure, **higher-paid** work with better conditions.

There is little to no recognition of the valuable service **not-for-profit** organisations perform in training excellent arts workers who tend to move on just after they have become truly valuable to their organisation leaving yet another gap and more exhausted workers in their wake.

The Chamber of Arts and Culture WA estimated in 2019 that an enhanced investment of \$25m annually into the sector would produce a return to the state far in excess of the dollar value of the investment. Matching incentives from the Federal Government to *increase* State Government base investment would have a material effect.

PRACTICAL MEASURES CAN INCLUDE

- Recognition of the contribution the arts and culture NFP sector make to society through financial recompense for organisations employing emerging arts administrators, curators, artists and performers as those individuals seek to create a viable career
- Improvement in Federal and State funding base for NFP organisations.

5. Creative economy

WoCCA through Garland magazine and the efforts of its state-based members has created a network of individuals and organisations through a Craft Map that describes teaching and training organisations, galleries, outlets and individual practitioners.

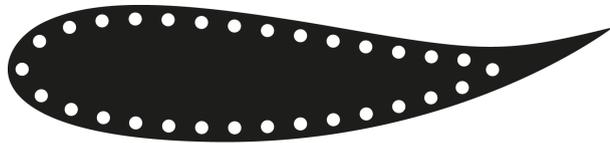
The contribution to GDP via all elements of the visual arts is significant, not well understood and often misrepresented. Australia lacks the means to accurately measure that contribution in financial terms, something clearly described in the [NAVA response to pandemic measures](#)

Australia has experienced an unprecedented generation of practitioners who have gained post-graduate degrees. Though most will not go on to academic positions, they have skills in writing and ideas that can make a significant contribution to our culture. These “thinker-makers” can be nurtured with support for writing and publishing, which has languished in recent years.

While well-being can come across as an emotive term, our shared experiences over the past three years and the revival of interest in the hand-made including in the creation, sharing and purchasing of craft was significant, indicating a human need rather than simply a human want.

PRACTICAL MEASURES CAN INCLUDE

- Financial support to create a dedicated online, readily updatable platform for information and guidance both for craft practitioners, those wishing to find a course, tourists and regional visitors



World Crafts Council
Australia

Thursday, 18 August 2022
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www.wccaaustralia.org.au