



Material Culture and the Cultural Environment: Objects and Places

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Preface

Australia: State of the Environment 1996 (the first ever independent and comprehensive assessment of the state of Australia's environment) was presented to the Commonwealth Environment Minister in 1996. This landmark report, which draws upon the expertise of a broad section of the Australian scientific and technical community, was prepared by seven expert reference groups working under the broad direction of an independent State of the Environment Advisory Council. While preparing the report, the Department of the Environment, Sport and Territories, on behalf of the reference groups, commissioned a number of specialist technical papers. These have been refereed and are now being published as the State of the Environment Technical Paper Series. Reflecting the theme chapters of the report, the papers relate to human settlements, biodiversity, the atmosphere, land resources, inland waters, estuaries and the sea, and natural and cultural heritage. The topics covered range from air and water quality to sea grasses and historic shipwrecks.

Abstract

This paper provides an initial argument about the inter-connectedness of places and objects and about the place of objects in our culture. It points to the importance of preserving objects along with historic places, but goes further to consider objects—material (or portable) heritage—as another source of historical or cultural evidence, together with the built environment, documentary and pictorial evidence and ‘intangible heritage’, or folklore.

Alongside the objects associated with places in the historic environment, museums also house large collections of scientific, historical and ethnographic objects. Together these constitute a highly significant source for the interpretation of Australia’s environment, history and culture, both past and present. The paper explores the representativeness of these collections, pointing to recent developments in this area. It also highlights the conditions under which collections are held, arguing the need for urgent strategies to ensure their preservation into the future. Despite recent inter-governmental initiatives in this area, much remains to be done to preserve Australia’s material heritage and, with it, our sense of ourselves.

1 Objects and culture

We live in a material world. The way we see ourselves, or others in relation to ourselves, and the way we view our world is conditioned by the things which surround us. However we conceptualise culture, in contemporary society or in the past, it is entangled with the objects which give it tangible expression. At an obvious level we use objects to define status: the houses we live in, the cars we drive and the clothes we wear are all understood in relation to those of others, in a complex web of knowledge and assumption which is widely shared. However the significance of objects is much greater than this, for the things which constitute our world, which direct its functions, in turn influence our most basic cultural assumptions. A society which has access to jet aeroplanes, fast cars, and an international mass media based on television, fax machines and the information super-highway views the world entirely differently from a society dependent on the bullock dray and sea mail. It is not simply a matter of restricted horizons, or a time lag in information. Nineteenth century Australians *imagined* the world differently. Similarly a culture which accepts birth control and low infant mortality as routine, constructs its notions of women and men, families and children accordingly. These notions differ markedly from those of the past, or those current in societies which cannot access the same technologies. They are differences which are profound. It is too simplistic to suggest baldly that we are what we have, but it would be equally false to

suggest that without what we have, we would be as we are. Objects exist in a symbiotic relationship with culture, in a relationship which is dynamic, not passive. It is impossible to consider one in isolation from the other. A strategy which excludes objects from its consideration of the cultural environment is at best a partial strategy. At worst it risks the viability of the whole.

1.1 Objects and the National Estate

In seeking to preserve the cultural environment so far, energy has been directed almost exclusively towards safeguarding nominated aspects of Australia’s built heritage and natural environment.¹ In the evolving dialogue assessing significance in terms of place, portable heritage—what scholars increasingly call material culture—has scarcely featured. Yet leaving aside the totality of objects in a culture for one moment, many sites actually include objects as the contents of places, or as archaeological material. Of course the principal meaning of an archaeological site is often revealed through the objects recovered from it. Similarly, without their contents places are empty shells, stripped of the primary evidence for their function and use.

Sometimes this is unavoidable. Original contents have often been dispersed long before the state’s heritage process enters the scene. The sale of factory machinery for continuing use elsewhere, or a family’s desire to retain the contents of a house otherwise offered to the National Estate, may see the place

separated from its contents. But in other cases, especially in early heritage acquisitions, the fabric of the place was everything: there was little interest in preserving the contents. While the architectural significance of a place may survive this asset-stripping intact, the historical and therefore overall heritage significance is seriously diminished. Similarly the objects themselves, separated from the place which gave them context and from each other, risk losing coherence, becoming isolated examples of a type, their original associations lost.²

1.2 Objects and the myths of ‘heritage’

Unfortunately there are also examples of places, acquired for their architectural and historical significance, whose contents were specifically rejected at the time of acquisition. Ripponlea in Melbourne is a case in point. Ripponlea’s contents were rejected not because they lacked authenticity, but because those overseeing the process of acquisition judged them inconsistent with the quality of furniture and fittings which should grace a heritage property. In place of the actual contents, the property of the most recent owner, the house was furnished for the public with a mish-mash of ‘antique’ furniture from the National Trust’s collection, in a mistaken attempt to return the house to its ‘original’ period. This process of heritage myth-making entirely distorts any historical interpretation of the house, even in the context of the original owners, who were, as it happens, furniture manufacturers. According to a contemporary inventory their tastes ran not to antiques, but to modern furniture. It also imposes an entirely false twentieth century preoccupation with the ‘antique’ on a forward-looking, later nineteenth century consciousness, which was far more inclined to value the new. Moreover the process of ‘restoration’ removed most of the 1930s Hollywood-style makeover, which had been the pride and joy of the most recent owner. What then does the Ripponlea house mean in its present form? Unfortunately the answer must be ‘very little’. It does not reflect the interior of the house at any period of its occupation. It gives a false impression of the values of its original owners. If anything, it stands as a monument to the distortions resulting from the victory of mythical notions of ‘heritage’ over history at a particular point in the history of the National Trust.³

1.3 Preserving objects in places

The alternative approach to that described above is to preserve the contents of places in situ., respecting both built and portable heritage equally, treating both as important historical evidence. At once the interpretive possibilities of the place increase dramatically.

Perhaps the best known example of this approach is Calthorpes’ House in Canberra, a place preserved more for its intact interior and contents, than for its architectural merit. Calthorpes’ House is a fairly typical home of the 1920s. Although rather larger and grander than most at this time, it is not a mansion on the scale of Ripponlea or Elizabeth Bay House in Sydney and as such is more immediately accessible to most Australians. The house was decorated and furnished at the time of building. The fittings were chosen and ordered by mail, and the house remains substantially intact. In her meticulous record-keeping, Dell Calthorpe even retained the original receipts for most purchases. Few technological innovations were introduced and in most cases original implements were retained in store rooms, even if obsolete, so that the layers of domestic technology are there for the visitor to read. In Calthorpes’ House it is possible to experience the house almost as the Calthorpes knew it. Oral histories conducted with the Calthorpes’ long-serving maid and family members have clarified much of the routine of the house, allowing the place to be interpreted as both home and worksite. This is rare. Although invariably sites of work for women in the past, few heritage properties are interpreted in this way and the evidence of work routines is rarely preserved. As a result most heritage properties, even homes, reflect little of the lives of the women who lived and worked in them. In Calthorpes’ House, the National Estate provides a unique opportunity for Australians to glimpse their past in a form which is immediately accessible and relevant. This would not have been possible had the house been stripped of its contents.

Other examples of the powerful combination of places and objects can be found at Meroogal in New South Wales, or Samson House in Fremantle. In each case the contents of the house reveal more about the owners and the society they inhabited than the house alone could ever hope to suggest. At Samson House for example, the rather gracious late nineteenth

century style of the architecture contrasts with the clutter of contemporary furniture and decoration favoured by the family. The Samson House garden is also interesting. It is not a fine garden and the heritage assessments which exist are rather condescending. However, it is one of very few surviving examples of a suburban garden, laid out and maintained not by a recognised horticulturist or landscape architect, but by an owner, in the tradition of most Australian suburban gardens. Gardening was and still is, a favoured pastime for many Australians. For significant periods of this century concepts of an 'Australian way of life' drew heavily on images of suburban homes and gardens. It is important that examples of relatively ordinary gardens are retained, with all their amateur compromises, to complement the grander examples to be found at Ripponlea or Como in Melbourne.

1.4 Culture, objects and the limitations of place

The last decade has seen a concerted effort within the heritage movement to broaden the categories of places nominated to the Register of the National Estate. Although the legacy of earlier preoccupations with the oldest or the most imposing property in a region continues to dominate public perceptions, the Australian Heritage Commission and State heritage agencies have consciously sought alternative nominations, responding to the calls of historians, amongst others, for the built environment to be regarded as evidence of aspects of life in the past. Conceptualising places as historical evidence transforms the way in which 'heritage' is constructed. To the imposing public buildings and stately mansions have been added workers' cottages and factories, while a developing interest in industrial heritage suggests further alternatives.

Most recently the Commission has revisited earlier attempts to establish a range of historical themes, which might both assist in identifying gaps in the Register of the National Estate and prompt the provision of contextual information on places. Consultants in the Centre for Western Australian History at the University of Western Australia have devised a draft list of broad themes. However they warn against the simple assumption that the adoption

of a thematic approach to nominations will make the process more 'democratic', concluding:

we doubt that the pursuit of 'democracy' and equal representation of groups and chapters in Australia's history is achievable through the use of themes in the nomination and registration of heritage places.⁴

There are, they acknowledge, many aspects of cultural experience which cannot be interpreted successfully through sites or structures at all. A careful reading of the generally admirable list of themes they suggest confirms these difficulties. There is in particular a distinct emphasis on public activity over private or domestic concerns, which has the effect ultimately of privileging certain kinds of cultural activity over others. The private, family rituals, such as those surrounding important milestones in the life-cycle, are difficult to interpret through places, and yet they are essential aspects of our cultural heritage, intrinsic to an understanding of cultures, both historic and contemporary. Women's culture also tends to be swamped in the plethora of public sites suggested for inclusion, although this is more a reflection of the historical reality of women's lives, than an intention of the consultants. Ironically an otherwise admirable tendency to 'democratisation' has the potential to further marginalise women's heritage, unless an accompanying commitment to principles of gender equity can be pursued.⁵ Recent attempts to advance the cause of 'industrial heritage' suggest this all too clearly.

1.5 An inclusive heritage

A more inclusive approach to heritage, including both portable heritage (objects), pictorial heritage (paintings, photographs etc.) and intangible heritage (sometimes called folklore) can address these gaps to a degree. To build on the example given in the preceding paragraph, bridal clothing or christening gowns can speak powerfully of family ceremonies, of life-cycle rituals, or even of women's skill with a needle, but other important gaps will still remain. Often neither places nor objects exist which can reflect the experience of the poor, or of, for example, Aboriginal Australians, even at these important life-time events. No policies, however well intentioned, can preserve evidence which no longer exists.

1.6 Objects as evidence

While some objects are intrinsic to place, for others place is merely incidental. The very portability of objects underscores their independence of specific location. Certainly since the nineteenth century and probably long before this in non-indigenous societies, most objects were made to be traded: a tiny minority only were made in the place of use. Museum collections are premised on the assumption that such objects retain their meaning, providing their provenance is recorded adequately.⁶

Historians are only just beginning to appreciate the possibilities of research in material culture. Such research does not claim to replace a more traditional reliance on written sources, but there are instances in which material evidence can suggest intriguing alternative interpretations of even long-established historical assumptions. One small example must suffice. Much has been written about Australia's female convicts, some of it emotive,⁷ almost all of it based on the written record of middle-class observers. Women convicts often emerge from this narrative as sexually promiscuous, disreputable women, with little to offer in terms of skill.⁸ The Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery contains a fragile christening gown which suggests the need to enquire more closely into such dismissive interpretations. The gown is made of fine cotton, meticulously hand-sewn, with tiny, even stitching. Its bodice is exquisitely embroidered in Ayreshire work, a highly skilled form of white work embroidery which made extensive use of hand-made lace fillings. In all, this christening gown is undoubtedly one of the finest examples of an early nineteenth century gown in any museum collection in Australia. It was sewn by female convicts on board the hulk *Ance*, and presented to their matron in the 1830s. There can be no doubt from this gown that the women who made and embroidered it were very skilled needleworkers indeed. The fineness of the work attests to their meticulous attention to detail. Yet with all their skill, their earnings were probably insufficient to support them and they found themselves on a convict ship in Tasmania. This single item has the capacity both to highlight the acute problems for nineteenth century women of a gendered employment environment, which consistently under-valued women's skill, and also to question the assumption that all female

convicts were 'abandoned' women with little to offer Australia.

Of course even very large collections cannot contain what some scholars have termed the 'totality of objects in a culture',⁹ but their sampling of the cultural environment has a capacity for representativeness which must always elude any register of built heritage. It becomes very important to understand both the current scope of museum collections in Australia and the state of their preservation and interpretation.

2 Heritage collections in Australia

At last count museums in Australia between them held in excess of 41 million objects and specimens, a considerable number when considered in the abstract. However many of these are mass research collections, mostly unaccessioned. The number of actual accessions is probably closer to 10 million—still an imposing figure.¹⁰ The vast majority of these items are scientific specimens, collected by museums over the last century or more of research. As such they represent an irreplaceable record of Australia's biota both past and present, providing an essential basis for modern ecological studies.

The material culture of Australia's human occupation is more sparsely represented, reflecting the relative dominance of natural science in museums until very recently. Although there are over 4 million objects recorded in either archaeology or anthropological collections in total, three-quarters of these are, once again, mass archaeological specimens. Anthropological collections alone comprise slightly more than 500 000 artefacts, of which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ethnographic collections constitute about half (some 250 783 artefacts). This is a surprisingly slight basis from which to document the history of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

In stark contrast to their interest in natural science, anthropology and archaeology, museums in Australia have only very recently developed an interest in documenting non-indigenous history, with the inevitable result that historical collections are small. While ostensibly some 1.4 million historical artefacts are held by museums throughout Australia, in practice nearly 1 million of these are held by the Australian War Memorial in Canberra—still Australia's largest history museum. Of the remaining 'historical' items,

nearly half comprise the numerous philatelic or numismatic collections which tend to be included with historical collections, leaving only about 200 000 artefacts to reflect 200 years of post-colonial peace-time material culture.¹¹ There are, perhaps, another 150 000 works of Australian art, but this is a very rough estimate since art museums have been reluctant to provide details of their holdings in recent surveys.

2.1 Collections of national significance

In 1974 the Hope Inquiry into the National Estate argued that those components of the natural and cultural environment which were of international or national significance might encompass places or objects:

of such aesthetic, historical, scientific, social, cultural, ecological or other special value to the nation or any part of it, including a region or locality, that they should be conserved, managed and presented for the benefit of the whole community.¹²

One year later the Pigott Inquiry into Museums and National Collections adopted substantially the same approach, without probing the nature of significance or ‘value’ any further. It was left to those charged with drafting legislation to prevent the export of important items of Australia’s portable heritage to attempt to concretise such concepts. The *Protection of Moveable Cultural Heritage Act 1986* lists various classes of material, from those which are prohibited from export altogether (class A objects, like Aboriginal secret/sacred objects, or scientific type specimens), to those whose export requires a permit (class B objects), to material which can be traded freely.

The categories of material listed as either class A or class B have changed over time, but in general inclusion reflects assumptions about age, rarity or monetary value—relevant indicators of significance perhaps, but by no means all of the story. In the case of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander secret/sacred material, the definitive issue is one of cultural value, but this is seldom the only consideration for non-indigenous material. This is a common concern voiced about the operation of the *Protection of Moveable Cultural Heritage Act*. In fact only one item had been refused an export permit to 1994. In 1989 the Committee refused a permit for the export of the

painting ‘The Bath of Diana’, painted in 1837 by John Glover.¹³ The failure of the Australian Government to endow the fund intended to accompany the operation of the Act—to allow the emergency purchase of contested items—until recently weakened the capacity of the Act to intervene to prevent export.

Since the 1970s and 1980s notions of ‘significance’ have changed substantially for both built and portable heritage. The apparent ‘democratisation’ of built heritage was discussed earlier. Within museums the burgeoning study of material culture¹⁴ focussed attention on the interaction between objects and culture and on the notion of objects as social and cultural evidence. Responding to these debates, the Heritage Collections Working Group, a committee established by the Cultural Ministers’ Council in 1990, suggested that Australia’s heritage collections might be described as:

those objects or specimens which together constitute the material evidence of Australia’s environment and of its historical and cultural life. Objects of ‘significance’ therefore will include not only those judged in some way ‘unique’, but those which provide evidence of a style, trend or movement, or of a political, social, cultural or economic process of significance to Australia.¹⁵

In its three-year survey of museum collections throughout the country, the Working Group concluded that collections of national significance were widely dispersed between collecting institutions. The term the ‘distributed national collection’ was borrowed from the library world to describe the location of important collections.

2.2 How representative is the distributed national collection?

Reference has already been made to the relative paucity of collections documenting the history of Australia’s human occupation. Despite a concerted effort in the last decade, most of these collections still reflect the legacy of past collecting priorities. Within anthropological collections, the dominance of artefacts reflecting ‘traditional’ cultures over historical or contemporary material continues, although contemporary concerns are gradually assuming more significance, especially as museums pursue more active partnerships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Similarly ethnographic collections almost all overwhelmingly

comprise men's cultural artefacts, to the exclusion of women's culture, probably because so many of the early anthropologists were men. This bias has continuing implications for the management and interpretation of collections, even where it is acknowledged as a problem. A current collaborative project between Museums Australia, the museum professional association and various Aboriginal Land Councils to compile a list of secret/sacred material held in museum collections will concentrate on male secret material in the first instance and has appointed a male researcher accordingly. In fact the extent of women's secret material held in museum collections is not known and its identification is not a current priority.

Within post-colonial history collections there is similar imbalance. Older collections often show the continuing legacy of an early technological bias in collecting, and despite the substantial impact of new initiatives, like the Migration Museum in South Australia, museum collections are still dominated by the cultural artefacts of wealthy, Anglo-Saxon Australian men. There are strong parallels with the Register of the National Estate.

2.3 Collecting trends in the past decade

The previous comments notwithstanding, the past decade has seen substantial change in the direction of museum collecting. From the early 1980s¹⁶ State museums progressively established sections with a brief to collect historical material. Most of these departments reflected a strong interest in the 'new social history' then dominating the academics, with its interest in documenting the less privileged in society alongside history's winners. Perhaps the most recent significant response has seen museums become increasingly open to community participation in all aspects of museum work, from collecting to exhibiting. Cooperative collecting ventures at the Migration Museum in Adelaide, the Museum of Victoria and the Western Australian Museum, have resulted in the development of collections of specific relevance to the cultural traditions and contemporary practice of a range of communities. At the Western Australian Museum a project in collaboration with the Ethnic Communities Council led to the establishment of a Multicultural Heritage Task Force to encourage individuals and

groups to care for their own cultural heritage, in their homes, cultural centres, or in the Museum if desired. Projects like this also vastly increase the capacity of the museum to expand its range of interpretive programs. These programs represent important beginnings in the process of making museum collections more representative of the majority of Australians.

2.4 Contextualising collections

Many museums also conduct extensive research, including oral histories, in the course of their collecting and exhibiting activities. Recent programs which have contributed important insights to aspects of the Australian cultural environment might include the Sydney Powerhouse Museum's exhibition 'The Australian dream: Design of the fifties', which for the first time explored the phenomenon of the owner-built house in Australia after the Second World War.¹⁷

At the Western Australian Museum the imminent closure of one of Fremantle's most significant factories, the Mills and Ware biscuit factory, also prompted a concerted collecting and research program, documenting the work practices and culture of the factory workers. The sale of the factory premises for other purposes meant that there was no prospect of preserving these objects on site, but at least their cultural context has been carefully recorded. An exhibition on the factory and the life of the factory workers opened in 1996.

Nevertheless it is still true to say that there are many objects in museum historical and anthropological collections for which minimal information exists. Sometimes this is because the material has come to collections long after its useful life—perhaps via the auction house but also through private donation—and has long since been parted from its provenance. Unfortunately, however, past (and no doubt some present) collecting practices were also sometimes at fault.

The Western Australian Museum holds a concentration camp uniform worn by a Polish political prisoner in several camps during the Second World War. The uniform was first accepted into the collection in the 1970s, but the officer who collected it did not record the donor's quite amazing story with the uniform at the time. It is impossible after twenty years to say why this was so. Perhaps the uniform's context was simply too distressing for the officer

concerned. However the donor interpreted the action as lack of interest and deeply regretted having parted with the uniform. Luckily for the Museum he could be located again just recently and his full story was recorded. The uniform and the story is now exhibited in the context of an exhibition on post-war migration to Western Australia. It is an incredibly powerful object and its inclusion in the exhibition has been a very important process for both the donor and his family.

2.5 Gender equity and museums

Within the international museum movement there is also increasing acceptance of the need for museums to pursue policies of gender equity in their collecting and exhibiting practice. The Australian museum movement has participated vigorously in this debate and a lively women's group has been active within Museums Australia for some five years or more. Its impact varies. Museums like the Migration Museum in Adelaide or the National Portrait Gallery in Canberra place gender awareness at the centre of their activities: other museums are more constrained by their focus and their collections. It is more difficult for the Australian War Memorial to pursue gender equity, although it has tried to accord women some presence in its galleries.

Part of the problem for women's culture is the continuing enthusiasm of male decision-makers for the technological museums of their dreams. As a consequence maritime museums abound in Australia, while the national stable now includes the Australian National Maritime Museum and a National Aviation Museum alongside the Australian War Memorial. There is only one women's museum in Australia—a small, community-managed museum, the Pioneer Women's Hut in Tumberumba. It receives no regular State funding.¹⁸

2.6 Preservation of the distributed national collection

Material culture is often fragile. It requires special storage and exhibition conditions to ensure its survival for future generations of Australians. Unfortunately while the nation's portable heritage is widely distributed around the country, the resources to care for it do not always match areas of need. The Heritage Collections Working Group found that, in

general, federal institutions (with the notable exception of the National Museum of Australia), State and federal art museums and all museums in New South Wales were better funded (and therefore able to command better storage and exhibition facilities) than other State museums. Regional and small community museums had even fewer facilities. As a result highly significant material is deteriorating daily. An example might be the priceless ethnographic collection at the South Australian Museum. In 1975 the Pigott Report argued strongly for vastly improved conservation facilities in Australian museums, which it argued faced a 'crisis on a massive scale',¹⁹ citing the threatened survival of this collection as an example. Pigott cited an earlier report of Bob Edwards, former curator of the collection, who wrote in 1968:

They are under the best storage conditions we can provide at present—crowded into a basement storeroom equipped with a ventilation system to control periodic circulation of air. These conditions are inadequate. Their safety is imperative as it is the largest collection of its kind anywhere in the world.²⁰

In 1981 the significance of this collection prompted yet another report by Edwards, this time recommending the redevelopment of the South Australian Museum.²¹ His report received bi-partisan support in the South Australian Parliament and the redevelopment began in 1982 with the construction of a large new building to house the natural science collection.

The restoration of a suite of historic buildings, one of which now houses the Migration Museum, followed. The ethnographic collection was to have been rehoused in stage II of the project. Stage II was never funded. There have been other projects since—the South Australian Art Gallery has a new wing, a maritime museum was funded in Port Adelaide—but the priceless ethnographic collection, one of the two most important collections of Aboriginal material culture in the world, is little better off than it was in 1968. Its condition is a national disgrace. The other large and significant collection at the Museum of Victoria was in a similar position, with a museum redevelopment half built, then abandoned. However that museum is now in the process of a very significant re-development, which includes a state-of-the-art storage area. Thankfully this collection's survival should now be assured.

2.7 Responses to preservation needs

In the two decades since the Pigott Report much has changed in museums overall. All State and federal museums now employ conservators for their collections and a conservation course in Canberra trains graduates for this specialist work. However the number of conservators is still small compared to the need. In 1991 the Heritage Collections Working Group estimated that only a minority of artefacts in the major museums had even been surveyed by conservators, while overall less than 10 per cent had ever been treated.²² Regional and community museums face even greater difficulties: few can command the funds required to buy the specialist treatment their collections require. Almost all collections in small museums are displayed for far too long and in unregulated areas, but even some major State museums still exhibit and store collections in areas which lack even basic climate control.

3 A national approach to material heritage

One year after the Hope Report recommended the establishment of the Australian Heritage Commission, the Pigott Report recommended what the then Australian Government had envisaged as its twin organisation—an Australian Museums Commission. Tabled in Parliament on 11 November 1975, the day of the dismissal of the Whitlam Government, the Pigott Report was never implemented. While the Australian Heritage Commission steadily consolidated the position of Australia's built and natural heritage in collaboration with State heritage agencies, material heritage languished, dependent on the fortunes, or interest, of successive State governments. Repeated attempts by the museum movement to interest the Australian Government in a parallel strategy for material heritage bore little fruit until recently.

Ironically the only class of objects to command Australian Government resources related in the first instance to the material culture of a foreign country. Since the 1970s the Commonwealth Government has accepted responsibility for the management of shipwrecks and shipwreck material, sparked off by the spectacular Dutch shipwrecks discovered off the coast of northern Western Australia. In stark contrast to Australian material culture, these objects command

significant federal resources for their conservation and study, a privileged position confirmed recently in the *Creative Nation* policy. As it stands at present, material recovered from shipwrecks, whatever its condition or value as evidence, commanded access to federal resources, while the same material, collected elsewhere, could not.

Within the constraints of 1990s funding limitations however, museums and governments have been attempting to redress this balance somewhat. The Heritage Collections Working Group and now the Heritage Collections Council, a committee of the Cultural Ministers' Council, jointly funded by the Federal Government, State Government and major museums, is attempting to devise strategies for the improved conservation and documentation of collections. A National Conservation Policy was launched in 1996 and a Strategy will be launched later in 1997.²³ The Committee/Council has been a very successful example of the progress which can be achieved through cooperative strategies between the tiers of government and a specific sector. Commonwealth/State tensions have been overcome and a comfortable, committed working relationship has been achieved. The needs of smaller, community museums have not been forgotten. By the time of the next national state of the environment report, it should be possible to document improvements in the preservation and conservation of museum collections in Australia.

3.1 Trends in museums—competing demands

In the years since the publication of the Pigott Report in 1975 much has changed for the better in museums. Pigott's castigation of museums for their neglect of Australian history is far less relevant now. Although most history departments are small, with limited resources, they generate active exhibiting programs and the representativeness of their collections is improving. Similarly all major museums are now well aware of the preservation needs of their holdings and implement them as best they can. There is also a strong awareness of other heritage areas, particularly archaeological sites and the built environment, and a general acceptance of the desirability of preserving objects in situ if at all feasible. That having been said, there are still occasional instances of inappropriate collecting at the local level by enthusiasts who are unaware of accepted heritage guidelines. The mining

museum in the northern Tasmanian town of Zeehan was noted, until recently, for its appropriation of mining equipment from sites in the area. Practices like this suggest the continuing need for explanatory programs about preservation at the community level.

Within all museums there is still a continuing tension between the public demand for access to collections and the preservation requirements of objects. In major museums this tension is lessened by an acute awareness of conservation requirements—low lighting levels, treatment prior to display, appropriate lighting, limited periods of exhibition for fragile materials and so on—but these standards are observed less consistently in small museums, where the entire collection will often be displayed permanently. Museums Australia does its best to emphasise conservation issues in local seminars and training programs, but it has limited resources. State government assistance, although well established in New South Wales and Victoria, is only very recently acquired in Western Australia and Queensland. It is not provided in Tasmania, South Australia, the ACT or the Northern Territory, although South Australia funds an alternative program of assistance through the History Trust of South Australia.

The increasing desire of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to assume control of their own cultural material and to locate it where it has primary meaning is widely supported by the museum movement, but invokes similar tensions. One of the principal concerns of communities is with the on-going preservation of their collections. Communities which wish to establish keeping places to house fragile material must have access to the resources to house it appropriately on an on-going basis. Alternatively museums might be resourced to facilitate better access, especially by remote communities.

These and other issues ensure that the age-old problem of competing demands for scant resources continues to be a dilemma for museums. In the past five years in particular many museums have received substantial budget cuts, at the same time as they face mounting demands for increased services. Community groups demand increased access to

collections, exhibitions on an expanded range of themes and assistance with projects of their own. All governments demand similarly enhanced public programs, but suggest that museums should seek the wherewithal to fund them from the private sector. The performance indicators they establish to test effectiveness invariably reflect public considerations, rather than traditional collection management and conservation issues. This is an area which museums themselves need to address more clearly with government at all levels.

In an attempt to address issues of access to collections, especially the voluminous study collections, while preserving the object from more or less permanent display, major museums are now pursuing computer interactive programs. Again the main barrier to success in this area is adequate resources. Nevertheless it is hoped that by the end of this century the major museums in Australia will be linked electronically, so that effective searching of data bases is possible from all major cities and hopefully larger regional centres. A working group established under the auspices of the Heritage Collections Council has made exceptional progress in this area in the past few years. The rapid expansion of CD-ROM technology in recent years also has positive implications for accessing museum collections in schools and even homes.

3.2 A national approach to heritage preservation

Despite the very significant achievements of State governments over the years, Australia's material heritage is still at risk. Resources are uneven, with extremely significant material in smaller states like South Australia, Tasmania and Western Australia in urgent need of assistance. Unless the Australian Government can be persuaded to adopt a balanced approach to heritage preservation, including portable heritage alongside the built and natural environment, considerable segments of Australia's cultural heritage environment will continue to be lost. Tragically, amongst the material most immediately at risk is the fragile material record of Australia's indigenous peoples.

4 Museums and a sense of self— a creative nation?

In the final analysis, preservation of the cultural environment depends on a broad community commitment to a sense of pride in place—Australia. How self-confident are we as Australians? For all the recent rhetoric it might be suggested that Australia as a nation has yet to come to terms with its past and therefore with its present. In its 1994 cultural policy, *Creative Nation*, the then Australian Government effectively scrapped its long-awaited, inclusive National Museum of Australia, choosing instead to pursue a Gallery of Aboriginal Australia alone. It is impossible to imagine this decision being made in the United States, or indeed in Europe, where museums of history are now seen as key strategies in preserving and interpreting regional cultures, in the wake of the development of the European Economic Community.²⁴ In these countries cultural heritage and national pride are seen as inseparable.²⁵ The cultural environment, in all its forms, will be safer in Australia when we can say the same. Thankfully the in-coming Liberal Government has reversed the National Museum decision and a major new museum will soon be built on the Acton Peninsula in Canberra. As we approach the centenary of our federation as a nation, this is an important statement.

5 Possible indicators for future State of the Environment Reports

1. The degree to which Commonwealth, State, Territory and local governments build upon current initiatives to establish on-going support for material heritage, rather than partial initiatives.
2. The degree to which protection of material heritage is included in State and federal heritage and related legislation.
3. The extent to which State, Territory and federal cultural policies include specific programs to preserve and interpret material heritage.
4. The extent to which material heritage is considered in the work of heritage agencies—in statements of significance, assessments of significance and conservation plans.
5. The proportion of collections surveyed for conservation needs and subsequently treated. The object would be for an increasing proportion of collections to be treated over time.
6. The proportion of museum collections held and exhibited in climate-controlled areas.
7. The progress of museums in identifying categories of material currently under-represented in collections. This presupposes a systematic analysis of material culture holdings.
8. The adoption of national policies in a range of collecting areas—Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander material, ethnicity, gender etc.
9. Progress on increasing access to information about collections, particularly increased electronic access.

Endnotes

1. The exception is the material recovered from shipwrecks.
2. One referee reading a draft of this paper commented that there are other factors involved in the loss of context, not least being the passage of time. This is, of course, unarguable. However the main point here is the need to safeguard as much as possible, while recognising that, unlike Dr Who, we still cannot experience the culture of a place in its entirety. Detailed recording as soon as possible can help to minimise loss.
3. There are now several papers debating the interface of heritage and history. One of the earliest was Chris McConville's 1984 paper "In trust": Heritage and history', *Melbourne Historical Journal*, no. 16, pp. 60–73. See also Graeme Davison, 'The meanings of "heritage"' and 'A brief history of the Australian heritage movement', in *A heritage handbook* (1991), eds Graeme Davison & Chris McConville, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, pp. 1–3 & 14–27. There is also an extensive international literature. See e.g. Robert Hewison, *The heritage industry*, Methuen, London, 1987; David Lowenthal, *The past is a foreign country*, Cambridge University Press, 1985; Patrick Wright, *On living in an old country: The national past in contemporary Britain*, Verso, London, 1985.
4. N. Etherington, P. Brock, T. Stannage & J. Gregory, Uses and identification of principal historic themes, Draft report, vol. 1, 1994, p. 20.
5. See Margaret Anderson, 'In search of women's public history: Heritage and gender', *Public History Review*, 2, 1994, pp. 1–18
6. There is an argument about the extent to which the inclusion of objects in museum collections preserves or changes meaning. Certainly acquisition by the museum adds a further layer of meaning to the cultural significance of the object.
7. Most recently the work of Robert Hughes *The fatal shore: A history of the transportation of convicts to Australia 1788–1868*, London, 1987.
8. Although there are also alternative feminist interpretations. See Marian Aveling 'Bending the bars: Convict women and the state', in *Gender relations in Australia: Domination and negotiation*, eds K. Saunders & R. Evans, Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, Sydney, 1992, pp. 144–157.
9. R.B. St George, *Material life in America, 1600–1860*, North Eastern University Press, Boston, 1988.
10. M. Anderson, Heritage Collections in Australia: Report to the Heritage Collections Working Group, no. 1, May 1991, p. 26. (Hereafter HCWG, Report 1)
11. HCWG Report 1, p. 27.
12. *Hope Report*, p. 341, para. 43.
13. Cited by M. Walker & K. Winkworth, Places, objects and people: Retaining significant relationships, Extracts from a workshop about moveable heritage, 21 April 1994, p. 3.
14. See for example, R.B. St George, *Material life in America*, or T. Schlereth *Artifacts and the American past*, Nashville, 1980, and others including Schlereth & Anes, *Material culture: A research guide*, American Association for State and Local History, Nashville, Tennessee, 1985.
15. HCWG Report 1, p. 24.
16. Both the Western Australian Museum and the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery established history departments in the early 1970s (WA in 1970) but others were very slow to follow.
17. See the exhibition catalogue Judith O'Callaghan (ed.) *The Australian dream: Design of the fifties*, Powerhouse Museum, Sydney, 1993.
18. For a survey of museum activity in this area and an extended debate see M. Anderson, 'Engendering public culture: Women and museums in Australia', *National Museum of Australia images of women*, Conference papers, Canberra, 1994, pp. 116–133.
19. Pigott Report, p. 9, para 4.7.
20. Quoted in the Pigott Report, p. 9, para. 4.6.
21. R. Edwards, *Museum policy and development in South Australia*, Adelaide, 1981.
22. It is impossible to provide a definitive estimate overall. Estimates based on differing collections were summarised in HCWG Report 1, Table III.

23. Heritage Collections Committee, *National conservation and preservation policy for movable cultural heritage*, Department of Communications and the Arts, Canberra, 1996; Heritage Collections Council, *National conservation and preservation strategy for movable cultural heritage*, Department of Communications and the

Arts, Canberra, 1997.

24. The most recent and ambitious project is the National History Museum of Germany, a new museum currently being constructed in Berlin.

25. Of course there can be problems in this nexus also, especially in the context of post-Cold War Europe.

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