

# A new definition of 'Museum'

At the national AGM of Museums Australia held on 22 March 2002, our association adopted a new definition of 'museum'. This article aims to provide members and other readers with an understanding of the background to the change, and the potential offered to our sector by the new definition.

## What was the old definition?

Museums Australia previously used the same definition as the one developed by the International Council Of Museums (ICOM):

A museum is a non-profit making, permanent institution in the service of society and of its development, and open to the public which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits, for purposes of study, education and enjoyment, material evidence of people and their environment.

This was a convenient definition to use at the time when Museums Australia was formed in 1994 through the amalgamation of several earlier associations. The ICOM definition offered an acceptable unity for members of each amalgamating body.

## What needed changing?

As I argued in an article published in Museum National (February 2001), the ICOM definition has several limitations in the Australian context. The term 'non-profit making' requires a specialised understanding of the meaning of 'profit'. The phrase 'in the service of society and of its development' carries ambiguities, and implies that museums are reactive rather than pro-active. The focus on 'study, education and enjoyment' suggests that museums that are the custodians of distressing material (such as prison or Holocaust museums) must nevertheless create an enjoyable experience for their visitors. The ICOM definition was written in the days before the internet had given us the possibility of virtual museums, and before the importance of intangible heritage had been recognised.

In addition, the ICOM definition is rather dreary. If, as museum practitioner, you are asked to define 'museum' for the benefit of a local politician, or for friends at a dinner party, I am sure you know precisely how fast the eyes of your audience will glaze over as you labour through the first half of the ICOM definition. A 'non-profit making, permanent institution in the service of society and of its development, and open to the public' could be a hospital, a patents office or a police station. It has been a real concern of mine for several years that the ICOM definition was actually a hindrance to our advocacy of museums to politicians, sponsors and community partners.

## What was the process for bringing in the new definition?

The 1999 AGM of Museums Australia unanimously supported a motion for the national Council to review the current definition, and to assess whether or not it was an appropriate tool for representing the sector in Australia. The Council considered the matter in August 2000, and authorised an article in Museum National that would alert members to the issues involved, plus an open session to be held at the April 2001 national conference. The abstract for the conference session read: Can we define 'museum' in a way that represents the Australian museum sector more effectively than the current ICOM definition that we use? This workshop session explores the purpose of museums, the capacity of a definition to represent virtual museums and intangible heritage, and the centrality of collections. Ideas from the session will contribute to Museums Australia's consideration of its current definition. Speakers were Dr Don McMichael (Public Officer of Museums Australia), Dr Linda Young (University of Canberra), Simon Elliott (National Portrait Gallery, Canberra), Mark O'Neill, (Glasgow Museums and Galleries) and myself. The large audi-

ence gave general support for a creative move away from the ICOM definition.

Consequently, the Council drafted a new definition that was eventually circulated as a motion for change to the Constitution of Museums Australia.

## What is the new definition?

A new clause (5.3) of the Constitution now reads:

Museums Australia defines museum as an institution with the following characteristics:

A museum helps people understand the world by using objects and ideas to interpret the past and present and explore the future. A museum preserves and researches collections, and makes objects and information accessible in actual and virtual environments. Museums are established in the public interest as permanent, not-for-profit organisations that contribute long-term value to communities.

Museums Australia recognises that museums of science, history and art may be designated by many other names (including gallery and Keeping Place). In addition, the following may qualify as museums for the purposes of this definition:

- (a) natural, archaeological and ethnographic monuments and sites and historical monuments and sites of a museum nature that acquire, conserve and communicate material evidence of people and their environment;
- (b) institutions holding collections of and displaying specimens of plants and animals, such as botanical and zoological gardens, herbaria, aquaria and vivaria;
- (c) science centres;
- (d) cultural centres and other entities that facilitate the preservation, continuation and management of tangible or intangible heritage resources (living heritage and digital creative activity);
- (e) such other institutions as the

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Council considers as having some or all of the characteristics of a museum.

Are we now cut off from the rest of the museum world? No. The professional associations in the UK, Canada and the USA each have their own definitions of 'museum', and yet are still active participants in the wider museum community. A museum can comply with a local definition and also subscribe to the ICOM definition (which is still important for accessing the new .museum internet domain name, and for ICOM membership).

What does the new definition achieve? It brings audiences, objects, collections and associated information to the foreground. It reminds the reader that art museums (often called 'galleries') are part of the museum sector despite variations in nomenclature. It gives museums a more pro-active role (helping people understand the world) and is inclusive of the virtual realm that many museums now occupy.

Margaret Birtley  
Vice-President, Museums Australia

# Congratulations Lifetime Achievers!



Barbara Lindner, Mornington Peninsula Regional Gallery, (left) shared the MIRA for Most Outstanding Volunteer Achievement in the Victorian Museum Sector with John Kennedy of the Victoria Jazz Archive.

Peter Swinkels, Museum Victoria, (right) and Margaret Birtley, Deakin University, shared the MIRA for Lifetime Achievement.



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