

The Hon. Tony Burke MP
Minister for the Arts
Parliament of Australia

Proposals to strengthen Australia's museums and galleries in the next term of government

Dear Minister Burke,

On behalf of the International Council of Museums (ICOM) Australian Committee, I appreciate the opportunity to present these proposals aimed at strengthening Australia's museum and galleries and welcome your consideration of these important issues.

Who we are

The International Council of Museums (ICOM) Australia is the largest international network of museum and heritage professionals, with more than 57,000 members around the world. ICOM Australia represents our nation's museums and galleries in this forum, providing the international voice of Australian museum and gallery professionals, and upholds international standards, benchmarks and ethics.

Revive – Australia's current national cultural policy

ICOM Australia warmly welcomed the first national cultural policy for a decade, *Revive: a place for every story, a story for every place*. We believe that it was the first crucial step for the museum and gallery sector to enable the development of a comprehensive policy and strategic framework for sustained investment.

The announced initiatives such as the commitments to First Nations artists and culture, re-instating cultural data collection, and significant support for the performing arts, literature, and workers' rights were commended. The vision statement by author, Christos Tsiolkas, and historian, Clare Wright, was outstanding in its aspirations.

We appreciate that much work has been done in the last two years to implement these and other initiatives. The allocation of sorely needed additional funds to the national collecting institutions in the 2023 Budget was understood as a first response to their significant underfunding of the previous decade.

However, the policy framework itself had some troubling gaps, such as overlooking the issues of climate change and sustainability, minimising the roles of heritage and the humanities, and understating Australia's international cultural responsibilities and potential impacts.

ICOM Australia continues to identify the lack of a national body to deal with the needs of our great collecting institutions and local and regional institutions that preserve, present

and promote creativity and knowledge of our history, heritage, environment and society. Such a body would address a significant gap and bring Australia into line with other comparative economies.

Our proposals

1. The policy gaps need to be addressed

Key Gaps

- National Body to address a significant gap in the arts and cultural sector and bring Australia into line with other comparative economies. (One model is the USA's National Endowment for the Humanities, which is a grant-making companion to their national arts body). Alternatively, the remit and resourcing of Creative Australia (the former Australia Council for the Arts) should be expanded to include strategic and funding support for cultural heritage. Another option would be to establish a new strategic investment program for collections and cultural heritage in the department, perhaps in a renamed Office for Culture and the Arts.
- The cultural policy should include priorities or goals for:
 - **Sustainability** – both for cultural infrastructure and the cultural industries, and in our contributions to national and global environmental sustainability. This would include disaster preparedness for cultural collections and mitigation strategies and funding.
 - **Re-imagined definitions** of work, culture, inclusion, public value, and recompense. This is particularly important for artists and community heritage workers.
 - **Removing the “Hunger Games” attributes** of inadequate grants funding that emphasise economic outcomes over the intrinsic value and community benefits of the arts. Eligibility-based, demand-driven grants programs should be considered, as is the case with other industry support programs such as the Australian Government's Export Market Development Grants Program (EMDG).
 - **Strengthened interactions and co-funding** with key national priorities in infrastructure and regional development, health, education, and community well-being. This would include contributing to *Measuring What Matters*, the Treasurer's Wellbeing Indicators.
 - **International impact** – strongly promoting international and intercultural exchange, export and co-operation in the cultural sphere. Well-resourced cultural institutions and creators carrying out cultural diplomacy in these times of global insecurity and misunderstanding are more vital than ever.

2. Ongoing increased funding for the national collecting institutions

- *Revive* made several small-scale specific funding recommendations for some national collecting institutions, which were later allocated funds in the 2023 Budget. ICOM Australia strongly supports the continuation of this funding especially set within the wider cultural policy priorities.
- The national collecting institutions have much ground to make up due to sustained underfunding and government disinterest over many years. This has been clearly stated in the many public and industry submissions to Parliamentary Inquiries over the last decade. For them to fulfil their national and international responsibilities, they need to be able to rely on a sustained increase in operational funding.

3. Current initiatives need more support and focus

- We welcomed the commitment in *Revive* to update *Significance: a guide to assessing the significance of collections* which is an important methodology for the museums and galleries sector in particular, and the broader Galleries, Libraries Archives and Museums (GLAM) sector, both in Australia and overseas. This was much overdue. However, we are concerned that a proposed light touch 'refresh' will not achieve an outcome that will meet the needs of the sector, especially the many smaller, volunteer community-run organisations, for the next decade.

To update *Significance 2.0* ICOM Australia strongly recommends that the Office for the Arts funds a systematic process of research and consultation over 12 -18 months. This will enable comparative research, including a literature review and impact studies, user surveys, and a range of consultation processes, including engagement with Indigenous communities, remote and regional collecting organisations, and local government, to be carried out, as well as time for feedback on drafts. If First Nations and diaspora communities are well represented, Australia could set the international museum collections gold standard for working with Indigenous and diasporic First Nations collections – including Pasifika collections which are vast in Australia.

- The Australian Cultural Gifts Program is an excellent program that supports collecting institutions to receive donations of important cultural collections. The scheme is, however, slow and cumbersome and become weighed down by layers of bureaucracy between Creative Australia and the Taxation Office. Furthermore, the upfront costs of valuations required by the scheme have rendered it prohibitive for smaller institutions and donors. The scheme should be reviewed to make it more accessible for both donors and institutions and the department should consider professional museum staff and their role as subject matter experts and potential valuers.

ICOM Australia, drawing on the principles, models, experience and perspectives of the national and international museums and galleries sector, continues to be ready to provide expert advice to better enable our institutions and cultural workers (both paid and volunteer) to thrive and deliver their invaluable contributions to our nation and the global community.

We welcome the opportunity to discuss these proposals further and look forward to working collaboratively to support and enhance Australian's cultural heritage sector.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jessica Bridgfoot', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Jessica Bridgfoot
Chair
ICOM Australia