

**Speech by Andrew Sayers, AM
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I took up the position as Director of the National Museum of Australia on the 1st of June this year. A week later I was seated on the flower-decked podium of the National Art Museum of China for the opening of the exhibition *Papunya Painting: Out of the Australian Desert*. The exhibition, drawn from our collection, was a part of the cultural program of The Year of Australia in China. It included some of the masterpieces of the Papunya painting movement that began in 1971 and developed over subsequent decades to become Australia's most distinctive and recognisable cultural export.

At a press conference the following day I and other speakers sought to explain the particular and unique characteristics of Western Desert painting and fielded questions from the Chinese media, many of which showed an interest in government policy, especially government policy in the protection of the culture of Indigenous Australia.

Most of my fellow museum directors around the world will have found themselves on similar platforms, no doubt musing between the speeches, on the global ambassadorial roles we now find ourselves playing on a regular basis.

There are several aspects of this ambassadorial role I want to touch on today. Firstly I want to explore globalisation and what it means for national museums. I want to look at the way in which museums see their responsibilities as citizens of the world and I'll introduce some examples of museums as conduits of soft diplomacy. Finally I want focus on some future directions we might take in Australia to find useful and significant roles in the world of museums.

National identity

The exhibition we opened in Beijing earlier this year, *Papunya Painting: Out of the Australian Desert* was, in part, the story of the tentative start and, then, the explosion of art-making in the Western Desert. It is a compelling and on-going episode and it has been shared with the world almost from its inception in the early 1970s through international touring exhibitions organised by the Australia Council's Aboriginal Arts Board.

The Papunya story is one of the great Australian stories – a part of the interwoven fabric of the Australian story. And if you were to ask me: ‘What is the Museum’s story?’ I would answer: ‘the Australian story’.

People expect institutions such as the National Museum of Australia to tell the Australian story. They also expect that a visit to the Museum will inform them in some way about national identity. Which is a much more complex proposition. Even if national museums do not set out to *define* national identity explicitly, there is an expectation that such institutions will have something to say about the things that are central to nationhood - in our case, to the definition of Australia or Australianness.

Clearly there is a responsibility on the part of a National Museum to consider carefully its role in this area. In the past decade much discussion has gone on in the Museum about the markers and symbols of the nation.

Furthermore, the Museum has been part of quite public disagreement about the way in which Australia's history of Indigenous and settler conflict has been presented as a defining dimension of our national ethos.

Increasingly the very idea of national identity seems to lead us into dangerous territory. The risks associated with overt declarations of national identity in the museum context have been highlighted in recent public debates in France. This year President Sarkozy announced the establishment of a museum of French history - the *Maison de l'histoire de France* - to be established in the grand National Archives building in Paris. In announcing the museum Sarkozy declared that its aim is to ‘reinforce national identity’. His special advisor Henri Guaino described the museum as an answer to a French ‘identity crisis’. This rhetoric immediately rang alarm bells; many French historians and museologists have an uneasy feeling that the museum will attempt to entrench an insular idea of what it means to be French. As correspondents in *Le Monde* pointed out, the *Maison de l'histoire de France* is the brainchild of a president whose use of the phrase ‘national identity’ has been closely linked to anti-immigration policies. As one historian correspondent commented ‘One does not build a nation on the rejection of immigrants’.

A fortnight ago however Sarkozy was reported to have said in a television interview that he had given up on the terminology ‘national identity’, taking responsibility for the fact the debate he invited about the idea had ‘sparked misunderstanding’ and created tension. He has now decoupled the term from the immigration portfolio in his cabinet.

There are some important lessons here. On the one hand such politically-led debates are almost always going to be high jacked and create tension. Besides, we have to ask whether this

question about the nature of national identity is worth asking at all. Ideas of national identity are such complex sets of notions that it is impossible to grasp them or pin them down.

On this subject, as on so many subjects, Amartya Sen cuts through the thicket of obscurity in a particularly enlightening way. In Sen's view we have to resist two unfounded but often implicitly invoked assumptions: (1) the presumption that we have a single – or at least a principal and dominant identity; and (2) the supposition that we 'discover' our identity with no room for choice. Sen gives an wonderfully extravagant but convincing example to underscore his first point – 'The same person can be of Indian origin, a Parsee, a French citizen, a US resident, a woman, a poet, a vegetarian, an anthropologist, a university professor, a Christian, a birdwatcher and an avid believer in extraterrestrial life.'

It is the role of museums to investigate and to reveal these specific collectivities whilst leaving the interpretation of national identity as possibilities imagined by our audiences. If there is one unifying idea of national identity it comes down to a geographical idea - admittedly complex in its articulation but a basic fact of our existence - we all inhabit this particular place, Australia. From this point we can move to the idea of citizenship and from there to the interpretive responsibilities of the museum.

World museums

Place and all the other things - people, stories and conditions that derive from place - only get us so far. In defining or touching on *national* identity we operate in a world that is shaped by the *transnational*. This obvious fact has created a lot of soul-searching in the museum community. There have been umpteen museum conferences across the globe exploring the tensions between, on the one hand, the expectation that we will engage with distinctive national stories and, on the other hand, a recognition that fundamental elements of the way we live now are parts of globalised systems.

The digital revolution has exaggerated this phenomenon but we can over-state its newness. The history of museums in Australia has always been linked closely to the rest of the world. If we look at museums in the nineteenth century we can see them behaving as mirrors of the intellectual enthusiasm and cultural imperatives of Britain and (in particular) German-speaking nations. Indeed colonial museums saw themselves as parts of an established world-wide community of scientific and material exchange.

Yet there does now seem to be an urgency about this phenomenon that is compelling museums to redefine their place in the world. It is not just global connectedness that is responsible for this but also increasingly cogent demands whose authority is community and locality-based.

The paradigmatic example is one of the greatest of museums, the British Museum. On the Museum's website you will find a page entitled 'Statements' – and these statements outline the Museum's position on a range of disputed material in its collection.

There you will find the British Museum's position regarding requests by the Greek Government for the repatriation of the Parthenon marbles, a lodestone in the repatriation argument. In defence of its determination not to relinquish the marbles the Museum makes the following statement:

The British Museum exists to tell the story of cultural achievement throughout the world, from the dawn of human history over two million years ago until the present day. The Museum is a unique resource for the world: the breadth and depth of its collection allows the world public to re-examine cultural identities and explore the complex network of interconnected world cultures.

You will not have failed to register here the repetition of the word 'world'. The British Museum is now consciously declaring itself as a *Museum for the world* and it is not alone among UK collecting institutions making this global claim. The Natural History Museum is keen to be seen not as a large historic building in South Kensington with a memorable collection of dinosaur bones, but an active player in assisting with research projects in developing countries, using the resource of its collection to help, for example, in the fight against malaria. And the centrepiece of the UK Pavilion at the Shanghai Expo earlier this year, the Seed Cathedral, was created in conjunction with Kew Gardens and their Millennium Seedbank project – another collection-based project with global reach.

This aspiration of the *world museum* is not confined to Britain. The Louvre is one of the world museums to establish a branch in Abu Dhabi, part of the complex of museums being built there to open in 2012. The relationship between Abu Dhabi and the French government is based on a 30 year agreement signed in 2007. At the time the agreement was made the then President Jacques Chirac commented that '[B]y choosing the Louvre, the emirate of Abu Dhabi not only sealed a partnership with the world's most visited and well-known museum, but selected one which, from its very inception, had a vocation to reach out to the world, to the essence of mankind, through the contemplation of works of art.'

The Smithsonian Institution – Washington's collection of 19 museums, 9 research centres and a zoo - has identified four big goals for the near future. One of them is *Valuing World Cultures*. The goal here is described in Washington's characteristically lofty language: 'As a steward and ambassador of cultural connections, with a presence in some 100 countries and expertise and

collections that encompass the globe, we will build bridges of mutual respect, and present the diversity of world cultures and the joy of creativity with accuracy, insight, and reverence.'

To go back for a moment to the British Museum's argument for retaining the Parthenon marbles, it is interesting to see how the *opposite* view to that of the British Museum – the official Greek line on the Parthenon marbles – can be couched in equally supra-national, even pan-European, terms. Georgios Voulgarakis, the Greek Minister of Culture, said in a speech in 2006 that;

The request for the Parthenon Marbles restoration exceeds our national territories and it has nothing to do with chauvinism, as it is universal ... the Parthenon [is] a universal monument ... our demand [is] ecumenical The reunion of the Marbles is our debt of honour towards history. The museums [and here Voulgarakis refers to all the European museums, not only the BM, that have parts of the Parthenon in their collections] ought to meet their moral obligations towards the cultural and spiritual coherence of the United Europe.

Museums and diplomacy

Another area where the British Museum has taken a particular stand is in the loan, this year, of the important ancient Babylonian cuneiform cylinder – the Cyrus Cylinder - to the National Museum of Iran. On the principles at play here, Karen Armstrong, the author and commentator on religious affairs and a British Museum Trustee is quoted as saying:

This cultural exchange may make a small but timely contribution towards the creation of better relations between the West and Iran.

This is a classic statement of soft diplomacy – culture can build bridges that states cannot. What is reflected here is a wider strategy on the part of the British Government not simply to see its major institutions as parts of a global cultural community, but more specifically to use not only 'small but timely' contributions but also larger gestures in accordance with foreign policy priorities. In 2008 the UK Department of Culture, Media and Sport allocated funding to a group of major UK museums to foster partnerships under a program called the World Collections Programme.

In October this year, writing to the British Museum with the government's expectations of how the Museum was to function following the recent 15% cut to its budget, the UK Secretary of State Jeremy Hunt wrote:

I have not allocated specific funding for the World Collections Programme, but the Foreign Secretary and I would like to see that collaboration and your wider international

work continue to develop over the next four years. The Government's priorities will be the emerging powers of China, India, Brazil, the Gulf States, Russia and Japan, and we would welcome your active engagement in those countries and others with a resonance for your collections and audiences.

'Resonance' is a gloriously vague word covering a range of issues.

Although Australia is not mentioned here there are two planned projects that register the British Museum's resonance with our country. In 2013 a major exhibition drawn from the British Museum's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island collections will be shown at the National Museum of Australia. A crucial aspiration for this project is the forging of real and meaningful connections with Indigenous communities across Australia and their cultural heritage in the British Museum. Such connections are now the work of all world museums

And in May 2011 the Print Room of the British Museum will mount an exhibition of Australian printmaking – the first broad-ranging historical survey exhibition of Australian art for many decades in Britain. In association with the exhibition the British Museum will join with Kew Gardens in planting an Australian landscape garden in the Museum's West Lawn.

Museums and Indigenous cultures

One of the most important issues for British Institutions and indeed for Australia is in the area of the repatriation of culturally sensitive material, in particular the repatriation of human remains. This is a huge issue for any museum aspiring to be a part of the world community. And it is an area in which Australian museums are playing a vital international role.

In a strict sense the obligations that govern the repatriation of human remains could not be described as global obligations because they are driven very much by specific locality associations for Indigenous communities. Australian governments have taken active steps over the past 9 years to assist in the complex processes of negotiation, repatriation and eventual return to custodians. This has been a successful program. Since its inception the National Museum has returned the remains of over 1000 individuals to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and 360 secret/sacred objects. It is a two-way international exchange – the National Museum assists in the repatriation of remains from willing overseas museums (many of which happen quietly, without publicity) and culturally sensitive material has been repatriated from Australian collections, for example, to Maori and Native American communities.

The Museum also has a wider role in helping to present Indigenous culture in an international context and this is very much in line with the way in which the Australian government seeks to

present the face of Australia to the world. I could give many instances stretching back to 1941 when Aboriginal art was included in the Carnegie-sponsored *Art of Australia* exhibition shown in New York, Washington and Ottawa. (Indeed we could go back to the great exhibitions of the 19th century, where Aboriginal artefacts were shown in colonial contexts – the antecedents of the modern Expo). But I will confine myself to two recent examples. I mentioned the National Museum's exhibition of Western Desert paintings in Beijing at the outset. The exhibition was a re-cast version of the exhibition mounted at the National Museum in 2006-7. In Beijing it was seen by over 170,000 people and was accompanied by a Chinese translation of the Museum's 2007 exhibition catalogue.

I want to touch, too, on the display of the National Gallery of Australia's exhibition *Culture Warriors* at the Katzen Arts Center, a university museum in Washington in 2009. *Culture Warriors* was a touring version of the Australian Indigenous Art Triennial and in the words of the *Washington Post*: 'Though the show acts as the most civil of diplomats, it also subverts expectations; more important, its very existence acknowledges a country's history of state-mandated racism.' The exhibition was deemed a success for Australian interests in the United States precisely *because* it was tough, critical and political not *in spite* of these things.

The two exhibitions I have described here are effective examples of Australian cultural institutions working in this area of soft diplomacy. Both exhibitions were real partnerships between cultural institutions and although they were facilitated and assisted by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade they were not conceived as exhibitions to 'sell Australia' overseas. This is an important point. Cultural institutions are proudly independent when it comes to content.

The two exhibitions were initially put together for Australian audiences; yet in an international context both were able to express complex and inflected messages about Australian culture and society. The Federal government was able to play a facilitating rather than a generating role in these cultural exports.

There was a dimension of *Culture Warriors* that was particularly valuable – the integration of a performative element in associated programs. Lectures were given; artists spoke at forums, musicians sang, dancers danced.

This human element, often overlooked if we see museums only as collections of objects, is a vital part of our role into the future and it is where the most lasting impacts will occur.

Australia's role in the world of museums; the future

A further dimension of the human is in the sharing of expertise, an area where Australia has a great deal to offer the world. In this arena the National Museum has many possibilities. Our MoU with China specifically refers to professional staff exchanges; this year National Museum staff assisted the Vatican Ethnographic Museum to successfully mount an exhibition of their Indigenous collections to co-incide with the beatification of Mary MacKillop. Here, again, the National Museum assisted in connecting Indigenous communities with collections held overseas. As a final example, the National Museum supports a joint initiative with ICOM Australia to pursue projects that maintain and strengthen cultural practices in the Pacific. Along with state museums and with grant money provided by AusAID, Australia has over the past five years been able to assist in a number of museum projects - infrastructure, resource and database projects - in the Solomons, Vanuatu and Fiji.

ICOM is one of the international professional organisations through which the museums of Australia connect with those of the wider world, as are such organisations as the International Federation of Friends of Museums.

For the past five years the National Museum of Australia has been working to a strategic plan which included the aspiration that the institution becomes a 'recognised world-class museum'. We now in the process of rethinking this formulation to remove its overtone of cultural cringe and to more accurately describe the Museum's place in the world. Of course we have not given up on the aspiration to be recognised as world-class but our activities into the future will be driven by asking: How can we play a distinctive part in the wider world?

The answer seems to me to have three parts. I have outlined partnerships with the Australian government in the facilitation of our work overseas chiefly through exhibitions. Secondly I have touched on the real potential we have to build human capital with overseas partners and within our own country. Ultimately, however, we will be able to play a distinctive role by *being original*, by getting beyond the international style of museum presentation - the homogenisation that means all museums across the world look the same - and devise a new type of experience altogether.

As we have discussed, the principal way in which our museums have been original in an international context is by showcasing the culture of Indigenous Australia. But originality is also a dimension of the way museums *do* things. The National Museum will become internationally significant by doing worthwhile things in a unique way. In order to do this we will need to use our own intellectual resource, to be self-confident as well as self-reliant but also to be ready to share ideas and expertise with global partners.

In Australia we do have a distinctive place, geographically and geo-politically; we have our own things to say and we have our own ways of doing things. In museums we have a medium through which we can share these distinctive qualities with the world.