

Past and Present Tense: Understanding the Visitor Experience in the Indigenous Australians Exhibition at the Australian Museum

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines one Australian museum's commitment to create social awareness of political issues within its community. The paper begins by discussing the challenge of cultural representation of Indigenous peoples in the context of civic engagement. Some of the historical and political issues facing Indigenous Australians and their representation in Museums are discussed. A study of the *Indigenous Australians* exhibition at the Australian Museum in Sydney investigates visitors' perceptions of the exhibition. Recommendations are made as they relate to community partnerships, interpretive materials, and level of engagement with visitors.

INTRODUCTION

Museums have the power and arguably the responsibility to sustain culture, preserve memory, create identity, and reflect contemporary social and political issues. These are not easy tasks, and can be particularly challenging when attempting to exhibit Indigenous or minority cultures. How does the museum ethically and accurately represent the history and views of a minority group while speaking to the broader public? Is there an inherent conflict in attempting to do this?

Racial and cultural exploitation exists as a remnant of colonialism. For many years, this exploitation was justified by scientific theories such as comparative anatomy, physiognomy, ethnology, and eugenics. Early exhibitions in museums and world fairs promulgated these theories and presented them as scientific truths. Because these expositions were democratic and public and were perceived as scientific, they effectively promoted the idea of racial inequality. Today, Natural History

Museums around the globe are trying to debunk these legacies of colonialism. Some museums still struggle to justify the inclusion of exhibitions about minority cultures.

This article emerged from research conducted at the Australian Museum of Sydney in the summer of 2004, when I spent two weeks interviewing staff and visitors about their impressions of the *Indigenous Australians* exhibition. I wanted to understand the museum's process in dealing with the challenges of cultural representation, and I wanted to understand how visitors, staff, and consultants view the museum's role in this process. This article reports on visitors' responses to the exhibition.

THE AUSTRALIAN MUSEUM AND THE INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIANS EXHIBITION

Founded in 1827, and initially referred to as the "Colonial Museum," the Australian Museum garnered Indigenous Australian cultural artifacts and skeletal remains as part of its flora

and fauna collection. Since then respect for Indigenous peoples as part of Australian heritage and contemporary culture has increased, and many of the items from these early collections have been repatriated. Indigenous Australians are active in interpretation, outreach, and public programming for the Museum and were active in planning the current *Indigenous Australians* exhibition. Constructed in 1997, this exhibition has the following objectives:

- To broaden the Museum audience's understanding and awareness of Aboriginal issues;
- To broaden access to the Museum's Aboriginal collections;
- To consult and collaborate with a broad spectrum of Aboriginal communities and people;
- To present the ever changing diversity of issues important to Aboriginal peoples; and
- To use innovative technology that reflects the dynamic nature of Aboriginal peoples.

The exhibition addresses various challenging issues through several

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interpretive strategies. These issues include, but are not limited to, issues of cultural heritage, land rights, the horrifying effects of the Stolen Generations,¹ social justice, and the future of Australian society and Indigenous Australian peoples. Images of contemporary, urban Indigenous Australians are juxtaposed with those of Indigenous Australians in the Outback, wearing loin cloths and performing traditional dances. Visitors are expected to challenge their own notions of Aboriginality when viewing these juxtaposed images.

The traditional curatorial voice of the Museum is absent in this exhibition. Instead, the exhibition employs an “Indigenous Voice.” Quotations from Indigenous Australians are printed on the walls and interactive “talking head” interviews with Indigenous Australians are played on computer monitors. These two elements combine to create the “Indigenous Voice,” an interpretive strategy that replaces the curatorial voice. Visitors cited the “Indigenous Voice” as an effective and compelling component of the exhibition’s design. The success of the “Indigenous Voice” can be attributed to the Museum’s innovative partnership with Indigenous Australians in planning the exhibition. The Aboriginal Heritage Unit (AHU), established by the Museum in 1996, advises the Museum on issues pertaining to Indigenous cultural heritage management and the development of museum policy and procedures. The AHU also helps the Museum plan public programming and outreach (<http://www.austmus.gov.au/ahu/index.htm> 12/7/05).

The visitor exits the *Indigenous Australians* exhibition by walking through a hallway entitled “Future.” In early constructions of the exhibition this section had been entitled “Reconciliation.” Reconciliation is a current hot word in political jargon. It is often referred to in political



The “Future” section of the *Indigenous Australians* exhibition.

Photo by K. Bouman.

speeches and newspaper articles when issues of civil rights and equality are mentioned. Reconciliation generally refers to the process of peacefully uniting or restoring a people and their history. Early evaluation work showed that visitors turned off at this stage in the exhibition. Visitors felt that the “Reconciliation” section was too political and that it fostered a feeling of guilt transference and disunity (Neill, Riley and Associates, 1995). To resolve this problem, the curatorial team dismantled the Reconciliation section. They replaced it with posters and photographic portraits. The posters largely promote tourism. And, the portraits depict modern, professionally successful Indigenous Australians; for example, a judge wearing a wig and a robe and a smiling, middle aged business woman. These photographs and posters are intended to “humanize” the political issues and end on a more positive note (Interview with Phil Gordon, Department of Anthropology,

The Australian Museum of Sydney, 6/7/2004).

Since there have been many changes in Australian politics in the decade since the exhibition first opened, I wanted to investigate how visitors perceive the topics presented. Has the meaning of the topics presented changed in the minds of visitors? Are the topics presented still relevant to the contemporary Australian experience? And, what is the role of visitor and Museum in discussing such topics?

METHOD

I conducted interviews over the course of a week to capture the views of weekday and weekend visitors. As visitors exited the *Indigenous Australians* exhibition, I stopped each visitor and said that the Museum was seeking feedback from its visitors to see what people think about the exhibition to determine whether changes need to

Table 1. Demographics of Sample Compared to Typical Australian Museum Visitors

| | | AM Visitors (n=503) % | Survey (n=50) % |
|---|-------------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------|
| GENDER | Male | 38 | 56 |
| | Female | 58 | 44 |
| AGE | <14 yrs | 10 | 4 |
| | 14-24 yrs | 5 | 30 |
| | 25-34 yrs | 22 | 26 |
| | 35-49 yrs | 28 | 22 |
| | 50-64 yrs | 17 | 16 |
| | 65+ | 8 | 2 |
| LOCATION | Sydney | 53 | 38 |
| | Newcastle/Canberra/Wollongong | 10 | 0 |
| | Other NSW | 13 | 4 |
| | Interstate | 7 | 10 |
| | Overseas | 17 | 48 |
| HIGHEST LEVEL OF EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUND | Primary | 10 | 4 |
| | Secondary | 23 | 16 |
| | TAFE | 17 | 12 |
| | University | 41 | 44 |
| | Post-graduate | 9 | 24 |

Percents are <100 due to some incomplete responses (Kelly, 2004)

be made. I chose this area to conduct interviews because visitors exiting this space would have seen the entire exhibition.

My sample included only fifty visitors. Each interview took approximately ten minutes. Visitors were asked fifteen questions. The questions included both open-ended and Likert scale questions. When necessary, additional questions were posed to clarify visitors' comments or elicit further information. (The interview questions are reported in the Appendix.) I also collected demographic information to ensure that I had selected a broad range of visitors. Indigenous and non-Indigenous

Australians, as well as several international tourists, were surveyed. The two main discrepancies between my sample and the typical Australian Museum's sample is that I had higher representations of individuals who are from overseas, and who have post-graduate degrees.

There are many limitations to my study. Exit interviews capture only what visitors remember immediately after exiting and not necessarily what stays with them after their visit. Because responses were oral, some visitors may not have elaborated as much as they might in a written survey. Visitors may also have felt embarrassed by their

opinions or their English speaking abilities. I decided it would not have been pertinent to weight the words of respondents who spoke English as a second language in this limited sample size. Data collection and interview implementation had some inconsistencies. For example, on one morning several audio components of the exhibition were unplugged in preparation for educational programming.

The data do not support generalizations regarding the larger visiting population's opinions of the exhibition. However, after statistical analysis of the responses to each question, some valuable, "big picture" information emerged. Additionally, there are some wider implications to this study. There are parallels between issues facing Indigenous Australians and those of Indigenous or First peoples of other colonized nations. Through my research I gained a renewed respect for the potential of museums to act as catalysts for community building and cross-cultural understanding.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Six major themes were incorporated in the *Indigenous Australians* exhibition: spirituality; cultural heritage; family; land; social justice; and future/reconciliation. Visitors were asked how relevant they considered each of themes to be to Australian society today. Visitors' responses indicated that issues such as cultural heritage and social justice are considered more relevant to Australian society today than issues pertaining to land, spirituality, or family (see Table 2).

When asked what issues Indigenous Australians face today that were not addressed in the exhibition, visitors suggested recent public policy, reconciliation, and "adapting to modern life." The latter suggests that visitors perceive Indigenous Australians'

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life practices to be outdated. Such stereotypes color how a visitor perceives the information presented in an exhibition.

Visitors were asked to rate their level of interest in eleven topics. These are presented in descending order of interest in Table 3. Although visitors were most interested in pre-contact history, there was also significant interest in post-contact issues such as Indigenous contributions to the broader culture.

When asked about the use of interactive interpretive strategies in exhibitions, visitors had varied previous experiences. Visitors cited having used or participated in museum websites or “webchats,” comment books, and public debates. Not surprisingly, those visitors who had never experienced these interactive approaches were the ones who were least interested in seeing them incorporated in an exhibition. However, many visitors requested gallery interpreters to further personalize their experience and grant them a first-hand understanding of the issues presented in the *Indigenous Australians* exhibition. One visitor spoke candidly about such interactive interpretive strategies: “I think it is very important to engage visitors in a conversation that is based on the values exhibits embody... So exhibits have to embody a way of helping people begin that conversation.”

Visitors rarely agreed on the main idea of the *Indigenous Australians* exhibition; instead, they usually recalled multiple diverse themes. However, it is worth noting that only 8% of visitors mentioned themes of Australia in present day. This compares with a combined 22% of visitors who felt that the main idea addressed history, the past, or effects from a historical event. Many visitors spoke in the past tense when answering this question, suggesting that the exhibition

Table 2. Respondents’ ratings of relevancy of the exhibition’s themes to Australian society, reported in descending order

| Exhibition Themes | Mean level of relevancy to Australian society today* |
|-----------------------|--|
| Cultural Heritage | 4.12 |
| Social Justice | 4.04 |
| Land | 3.70 |
| Future/Reconciliation | 3.66 |
| Family | 3.62 |
| Spirituality | 3.46 |

* On a scale of 1 to 5 - One being completely irrelevant, five being highly relevant.

Table 3. Respondents’ ratings of level of interest in topics, reported in descending order

| Topic | Mean level of interest* |
|---|-------------------------|
| Pre-contact History | 4.26 |
| Indigenous Contributions to Broader Culture | 4.06 |
| Diversity of Aboriginal People | 4.00 |
| Stolen Generations | 3.74 |
| Museum Scientists Working with Indigenous Peoples | 3.72 |
| Integration of Culture within Australian Society | 3.70 |
| Indigenous Languages | 3.56 |
| Native Title | 3.44 |
| Life on a Mission | 3.18 |
| Intellectual Property Rights | 3.10 |
| Repatriation | 3.04 |

* On a scale of 1 to 5 - One being completely irrelevant, five being highly relevant.

reflects on Indigenous Australian history as opposed to Indigenous Australian culture today. Some responses included, "To show how good the Aborigines were to Australia"²; and "The role that the Aborigines played in the founding of Australia." Other visitors cited more ambiguous main ideas such as "education," "spirituality," or "diversity." These responses indicate that many visitors do not think of this exhibition as having a contemporary message. They also indicate that the exhibition fails to communicate a unified, central idea. In many ways this was an intentional decision made by the exhibition development team. A lack of a centralized theme, while occasionally creating confusion for visitors, allows visitors to create personal interpretations of the material presented.

Fewer visitors could agree on a definition of reconciliation, which indicates a lack of shared vocabulary in interpreting this word. And this lack of a shared understanding generates different opinions among visitors about how reconciliation should be realized.

Sample visitor responses included:

- "Redressing some of the injustices of the past."
- "The process of learning to live together and recognize both sides of history and culture, both sides, learning to integrate them, and respect them as well and recognize the darker parts of this history."
- "Reconciliation is a white man's word. You have to have conciliation before you can have reconciliation."

And, as Phil Gordon, a curator of the exhibition explained:

"Reconciliation was a big issue just after the gallery opened... I don't think it is anymore."
(Interview with Phil Gordon, Department of Anthropology, The Australian Museum of Sydney, 6/7/2004).

Moreover, as demonstrated in the responses above, many visitors defined reconciliation by speaking in the past tense. This indicates that visitors view reconciliation as if it were a historical theme, not one of the present or future. However, reconciliation is still an important issue for Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians today. Many Indigenous Australians continue to struggle economically and socially, particularly in the areas of education and health. Both the inability of visitors to define the word "reconciliation" and their tendency to view it as an historical issue are due in part to a feature of the exhibition design. Because the curatorial team omitted the section entitled "Reconciliation" in favor of the "Future" section, they removed nearly all explicit comment about reconciliation and replaced it with vague implications.

As one walks through the exhibition, visiting the celebrated and sometimes tragic moments in Indigenous Australian history, the visitor arrives at the "Future" section of the exhibition feeling a disconnect between what was and will be for Indigenous Australians. When the visitor moves abruptly from historic material to the rosier images presented in the "Future" section, he has crossed a gap where the present should have been addressed. The "Future" section collapses present and future into one, thereby generating the feeling that reconciliation, if not over, is well under way. In an attempt to paint a rosier and "less political" picture, the exhibition historicizes an issue that is still very much at hand.

If an exhibition is to succeed in empowering and inspiring its visitors, a balance must be struck between how much information is presented directly to the visitor and how much information the visitor will extrapolate and interpret on their own. Exhibitions must ensure that visitors have a shared base knowledge of at least some

working definitions while also allowing flexibility in interpretation so that visitors can create their own opinions and understandings. In the example of the *Indigenous Australians* exhibition, visitors should be able to define the word reconciliation in common terms. How and whether or not reconciliation should be accomplished should be uncovered through the visitor's personal interpretation of the information exhibited. Providing visitors with definitions within a framework of an overarching theme can give visitors a point of reference from which greater critical thinking can begin. These definitions do not need to be, nor should they be, value based; but they should be specific, simple, and direct. Providing common definitions does not make the visitor's understanding any less rich. In fact, providing visitors with a common ground allows for deeper thinking about the issues presented within an exhibition. The paradox of the *Indigenous Australians* exhibition is that its successes are also its failures. While the Museum has succeeded in its effort for a people's history to be told by the people themselves, visitors are limited in their role as interpreters as a result.

In the beginning stages of exhibition planning, careful consideration was given to issues pertaining to Indigenous Australian representation. The Museum formed thoughtful and strong partnerships with members of the community, who served as collaborators in the creation of the new exhibition. These representatives worked with the museum to ensure a relationship of equal footing and honored expertise. The resulting internal dialogue ensured cross-fertilization of ideas while simultaneously avoiding components of the intellectual hierarchy that can be imposed on staff within a museum (Hirzy, 1992, p. 21). As a direct result of these collaborations, an innovative and respectful approach to interpretative strategies was created. Instead of the traditional curatorial

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approach to interpretation, the voice of the community represented is heard and read throughout the exhibition.

Unfortunately, the “Indigenous Voice” shares some commonalities with the traditional curatorial approach. Because both strategies lean towards the didactic, they prevent the visitor from engaging with the material presented. The visitor predominantly acts as a consumer of information and recipient in a one-sided dialogue. Thus, he is unable to actively construct his or her personal understanding of the issues presented.

Cultural anthropologist Constance Perin has often written about this dialogue between exhibition makers and viewers or “The Communicative Circle.” Perin argues that museum professionals traditionally instigate an unmediated relationship, sending information to, and often not receiving information from, their audience. She asserts that visitors are “as creative and constructivist in receiving exhibitions’ messages as curators and designers are in composing them” (Perin, 1992, p. 191). As visitors acquire new information, they either assimilate it into their existing framework or gradually replace previous understandings with new ones. Building on the visitors’ learning experience via interreference and synthesis creates a richer experience for visitors.

Interpretive materials are a powerful way to provide for interreference and synthesis that engages visitors and encourages them to think about the Museum’s exhibitions. Whether through wall text, “Talking Heads,” or carefully chosen quotations, interpretive materials guide the visitor through understanding. Without interpretive materials, the visitor can be left feeling lost or can misunderstand the exhibition’s statement or purpose.

Visitors to the *Indigenous Australians* exhibition can choose when to click a button to start a film, but many visitors sought a more personalized interactive



One of the more interactive interpretive strategies present in the gallery - Visitors are encouraged to look through newspaper clippings on Indigenous Australian issues.

Photo by K. Bouman

experience. While the “Talking Heads” and wall text act as the primary speaker, the listener is forbidden a voice. What if the visitor were both active consumer and participant in the dialogue of reconciliation within the exhibition?

Interactive interpretive strategies enable visitors to begin to construct their own understanding of the exhibition. These can take various forms: comment cards, thought-provoking questions in the wall text, the use of multiple voices (such as that of trained interpreter and comments made by visitors). Regardless of format, these strategies require visitors to reflect on their experience in the exhibition and build upon the prior knowledge with which they entered. This is a far more constructivist approach to exhibition design.

An exhibition designed without interactive interpretive strategies leaves visitors with a sense that they have

witnessed a sermon. Professor Amalia Mesa-Bains, an activist in the Chicano artist movement in the U.S., elaborates, “...to repeatedly speak to audiences about things that matter so much, that are tied so much to the politics and economics of this country, as well as to your own institution, with no response, makes me feel as though the discourse is mere entertainment” (Mesa-Bains, 2004, p. 108). If museums wish to create change and inspire critical thinking in their visitors, they must provide for more of a dialogue than they currently do.

Kelly and Gordon (2002, p. 161) explain, “Ultimately, museum learning is about changing a person: how well a visit inspires and stimulates people into wanting to know more, as well as changing how they see themselves and their world both as an individual and as part of a community”. In order to reach the level of engagement that

Kelly and Gordon refer to, museums need to challenge visitors to think about historical and contemporary issues in different ways. In doing this, the visitor may change how they see themselves and their world as well as their role in a changing community.

The museum field and its practitioners have adopted the phrase “civic engagement” to refer to all the ways in which the museum can contribute to its communities. Central to this concept is the notion that museums must strive to become inclusive institutions that honor their visitors and enter into partnerships with their communities. Museums must see themselves as citizens of their wider communities. As institutions for public education, museums need to appeal to diverse audiences by making meaningful connections to the lives of their visitors while accommodating visitors’ different approaches to learning. Exhibitions, when designed to create a shared understanding of a people or culture, can create social awareness about such topics as reconciliation. And, in so doing, they encourage desire for social change and activism. These are not easy tasks. But, if they are undertaken, museums have the potential to become powerful centers of their communities.

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My graduate thesis “On the Way to Reconciliation: Two Australian

Museums” is available through interlibrary loan out of the Bank Street College Library in New York City under my maiden name Katherine S. Howorth.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 By the early 1900s the Commonwealth had begun to round up “half-caste” children growing up in Indigenous homes and institutionalize them in the hopes that they would learn to better integrate into white society. The Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families and its 1997 Report, *Bringing Them Home*, has shown that children continued to be removed through the 1970s (Mellor and Haebich, 2002, p. 71).
- 2 Italics denote my emphasis on the use of past tense.

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APPENDIX

VISITOR SURVEY of *INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIANS*: JUNE 2004

We are seeking feedback from our visitors to see what they think about the exhibition: *Indigenous Australians* and to see what changes we need to make. The survey will take around ten minutes.

1. What were the main reasons for you visiting this exhibition? (prompt – wanted to get specific information, saw ads, someone told me, just wandered in. Note if they say 'no reason')

2. What ONE aspect of the exhibition did you MOST like (e.g. a section/object/story)?

3. What ONE aspect of the exhibition did you LEAST like (e.g. a section/object/story)?

4. How would you rate the exhibition overall on a scale of one to five with 1 being **low** and 5 **high**:

1 2 3 4 5

5. This exhibition was developed by a group of people who work in the Museum. What do you think was the main message or idea they were trying to get across to visitors?

6. Considering the themes we used in the exhibition, and that we began planning on the exhibition 10 years ago, (show card) please rate how relevant you believe them to be to Australian society today. On a scale of 1-5, 5 is very contemporary or relevant, 1 being not at all contemporary or completely irrelevant.

| | | | | | | |
|--------------------------|---|---|---|---|---|-----|
| A. SPIRITUALITY | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | n/a |
| B. CULTURAL HERITAGE | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | n/a |
| C. FAMILY | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | n/a |
| D. LAND | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | n/a |
| E. SOCIAL JUSTICE | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | n/a |
| F. FUTURE/RECONCILIATION | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | n/a |

7. Are there any contemporary issues or topics facing Indigenous Australians that you feel are not addressed in this exhibition?

