

“ART MUSEUMS IN AUSTRALIA: A PERSONAL RETROSPECT”¹

by DANIEL THOMAS²

From 1958 to 1990 I worked in art museums — first at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in Sydney as a multi-purpose curator, then at the fledgling National Gallery of Australia in Canberra as head of Australian art, and finally at the Art Gallery of South Australia in Adelaide as director. The art-museum world that I entered was very British, and rather unaware that it was run largely by artist directors and artist trustees for a small world of artists and collectors. Only the National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne produced a good quantity of scholarly art-historical research; only the University of Melbourne then had a department of art history, and thus harboured colleagues for museum-based scholarship. All art-museum buildings were then poorly equipped for anything except collection display.

I was the first-ever curator at the National Gallery of New South Wales (which dropped the anachronistic pre-Federation ‘National’ the year I arrived). Apart from the revised nomenclature we were very backward: the roof leaked and the collections were mediocre compared with the wealthier state galleries in Adelaide and Melbourne, where curators existed and where there were huge private endowments for acquisitions — the 1897 Elder Bequest for South Australia and the 1904 Felton Bequest for Victoria. The state galleries of Western Australia in Perth and Queensland in Brisbane were even more primitive than that in Sydney. In Hobart the Tasmanian Museum & Art Gallery was, and still is, a multi-disciplinary museum for natural sciences, local history and art. In the second half of the nineteenth century a three-part structure of natural-science museum plus ‘national’ gallery plus public library had been the format for the major institutions in most Australian colonies except New South Wales.

There were small late-nineteenth-century art collections in mining boom cities such as Launceston, Bendigo or Ballarat, and also at Warrnambool and Geelong. After a stagnant early twentieth century for art museums throughout Australia, a professional regional gallery opened in Newcastle in 1957, the first in New South Wales. The University of Melbourne and the Teachers College at Armidale in New South Wales had been given significant art collections, precursors of the art museums now to be found within the many present-day universities. Almost all metropolitan local governments and regional cities throughout Australia now boast art-collecting or art-exhibition spaces. The university or government art museums have been joined recently by a handful of privately-established museums. In 2011 the total number of art institutions throughout Australia was around two hundred.

Fifty years ago not even the state galleries had cafés, bookshops, lecture theatres or purpose-built spaces for receptions and entertainments. Above all, they had no purpose-built spaces to handle and display special exhibitions.

Membership organisations — then called Art Gallery Societies — had been founded in the nineteen-fifties and they improvised lectures, films, concerts and parties in the collection-

¹ This essay was originally commissioned and written in 2008 for a proposed book on museums in Australia to be published by the National Museum of Australia, Canberra. The National Museum will instead publish the commissioned essays in 2011 in a Web book titled *Understanding Museums*, for which see www.nma.gov.au. In *Understanding Museums* a shortened version of this essay, updated to 2011, is titled “Art museums in Australia: a personal view”.

² Daniel Thomas AM, Emeritus Director Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide, retired in 1990 and now lives in Tasmania. From 1958 he was the curator in charge of Australian art, and later chief curator, at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney. From 1978 to 1984 he was the inaugural head of Australian art at the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra.

display spaces. The six state gallery directors — the Australian Gallery Directors Conference — had been conferring regularly since 1948 to plan the touring exhibitions that similarly disrupted their collection displays. The art museums were becoming livelier for visitors but in the process had become rather unsafe places for works of art. A great change occurred in the nineteen-seventies.

It was a change from near-total control by government to a healthy proportion of self-reliance. Government-supported museums have always been the norm in Australia.

The capital cities of each colony usually sited their public library, museum of natural sciences & anthropology, and a colonial 'National' Gallery together at the city centre, and the three institutions usually shared an overall governing body. Only Victoria and New South Wales established separate museums of technology, then known as "applied arts & sciences". In South Australia the three principal cultural institutions were part of an even more potent urban concentration, further comprising the University of Adelaide, a concert hall, Government House, Parliament House and the main railway station. Today that concentration survives, joined in the late twentieth century by a large performing-arts centre, a casino, five non-collecting contemporary art spaces, a branch of the Flinders University Art Museum inside the State Library, and in 2007 by the University of South Australia's Anne & Gordon Samstag Museum of Art.

Elsewhere government-supported performing arts also eventually arrived in the capital-city culture zones, and casinos, too, are sometimes nearby. In the nineteen-eighties Queensland undertook a large single development for the four principal cultural agencies — science museum, art museum, library, and performing arts — and established a casino just across the Brisbane River.

The state gallery in Adelaide stagnated less than those in the other capitals in the early and mid twentieth century, perhaps because it was the first to have a separate building. The National Gallery of South Australia's own building, close to the Public Library in which it previously resided, opened in 1899 and was paid for by the local wool baron Sir Thomas Elder. Elsewhere governments had paid for the buildings, and still contribute a large part of further building costs (and of course for most of the staffing and other operating costs). The National Gallery of Victoria left the well-attended city-centre building it shared with the Public Library and National Museum of Victoria for its own building only in 1968; the Art Gallery of Western Australia and the Queensland Art Gallery departed their obscure city-fringe locations for stand-alone art-museum buildings later still, in 1979 and 1982.

Large private endowments for buying art, the 1899 Elder Bequest in South Australia and the 1904 Felton Bequest in Victoria, flowed to the two better sited and more powerfully governed art museums in Adelaide and Melbourne. After Elder and Felton other large private endowments for acquisitions continued in South Australia and Victoria but seldom occurred elsewhere until the late twentieth century.

Victoria's shared rabbit warren of a building was a disadvantage for audiences, if not for patriotic private patronage. Concealed behind a great library, galleries for paintings by Rembrandt and Cézanne were also the way to galleries for skeletons and taxidermy. A confused memory of Kenneth Clark's, too often cited from his memoir *Another Part of the Wood* (1974), falsely tells art history that the stuffed carcass of a beloved Australian racehorse, Phar Lap, was exhibited in the same gallery as works of art. It was not; however, it was visible if you looked out from a picture gallery through an arched exit into the galleries for natural science — a placement, halfway along the galleries for works of art, well-calculated to tempt visitors away from the remaining picture galleries.

New South Wales was always different. The Public Library, Museum and National Gallery never shared governance and never shared a site. The Gallery, though close to the centre of Sydney, was situated on a dead-end road in a park. It never had such high-powered boards of trustees as the joint institutions in other colonies/states; perhaps its inconspicuous location and distance from public transport was another disadvantage.

In 1968 Melbourne's new stand-alone building for the National Gallery of Victoria was palatial and highly conspicuous. It triggered a nationwide upgrade of art-museum buildings, which in turn, especially Sydney's in 1972, caused unexpected changes to funding and governance as well as to collecting capabilities and public programmes. Economic prosperity and cultural globalisation had created the momentum.

The prior conditions were state and civic pride — and interstate competitiveness. The term Global Village was coined in the 'sixties not only in regard to media and communications but also to international transport. Australians were now able to travel across the world far more easily and quickly than by ocean liner. Jet aircraft allowed Australia's powerbrokers, taking breaks during business or political trips to Europe or America, more often to appreciate the stimulus and glamour of overseas art museums and compare them with the down-at-heel art museums at home in Australia.

The rundown Art Gallery of New South Wales in sub-tropical Sydney was a conservation hazard to its collections and, crucially, a discouragement to high-value exhibitions from overseas. Even so, it was less conservation than interstate competition with Victoria and South Australia that caused the New South Wales government to embark in 1969 on the upgrade of its state gallery. The new National Gallery of Victoria had opened in 1968 but ahead of that state-of-the-art building in Melbourne the Art Gallery of South Australia in Adelaide had opened a small extension, in 1962, which was Australia's first climate-controlled art exhibition space.

Both Adelaide and Melbourne have seasons that are kinder to art objects than Sydney's summertime steaminess but conservation needs were not the whole story. South Australia's lead in the climate-control stakes was instead a matter of synergy with the Adelaide Festival, the nation's first large multi-arts event, modelled on the Edinburgh Festival, and first held in 1960. Ultimately, arts festivals and special-event exhibitions are what changed Australia's art museums and art audiences.

When the upgraded and extended Art Gallery of New South Wales opened in 1972 it meant that, at last, the two largest cities, Melbourne and Sydney, could be entrusted with the kind of big-budget overseas exhibitions that had to rely on box-office income and hence on large but only occasional audiences for art.

There had been no shortage of overseas exhibitions previously, but they were fairly routine government-to-government cultural-exchange displays of a single nation's contemporary art. Works for exhibitions of contemporary art are easily borrowed for long absences from their owners; they interested the local artworld well enough but did not have much attraction for larger audiences.

Britain had sent sixteen marvellous paintings by J. M. W. Turner to the first Adelaide Festival in 1960, and then toured them on to Melbourne and Sydney. It was the only exhibition by a great artist to reach Australia before climate control. In 1962 a locally-generated 'scholarly blockbuster' of Pre-Raphaelite art, for the Adelaide Festival and subsequent extensive tour, secured loans of masterpieces from Britain. A decade later at the Art Gallery of New South

Wales a similar formula, of scholarship based on the past century's steady accumulation in Australia — and New Zealand — of contemporary art from the British motherland, produced *Victorian Olympians* and *Victorian Social Conscience*. In 2004 at the National Gallery of Australia *The Edwardians*, with many key works borrowed from overseas, broke newer ground than scholarship within Britain itself, and in 2007 at the National Gallery of Victoria *Modern Britain: Masterworks from Australian and New Zealand Collections* continued this process of creating a strength out of what had begun as colonial-British parochialism. The Empire and Commonwealth connection remains significant for art-museum direction and staffing, and for collection development, as well as for exhibitions.

However, in 1975 the first great 'populist blockbuster', *Modern Masters: Manet to Matisse*, was non-British and came to Melbourne and Sydney from a philanthropic non-government source, the International Program of the Museum of Modern Art, New York. MOMA had already sent small exhibitions of contemporary art to Australia, and had been early to exploit globalised airfreight for exhibition itineraries that moved works through Japan, India, New Zealand and Australia — notably, in 1967, for the one contemporary-art exhibition, *Two Decades of American Painting*, that had attracted an extremely large audience. MOMA by 1975 had already poached an exhibition organiser, John Stringer, from the National Gallery of Victoria, and had invited Australian philanthropists to join MOMA's International Council. Ardent art-world New Yorkers in the 'sixties had also been the first foreigners to start re-routing their visits to Asia through Australia, in order to check progress at the Sydney Opera House, then under construction. A city giving birth to a wonder of the modern world deserved attention. The upgraded Art Gallery of New South Wales of 1972 had perfect synergy with the Sydney Opera House that opened in 1973.

MOMA's *Modern Masters* attracted huge attendances of 350,000 — long queues had to wait outdoors — and produced hefty box-office income. Hare-brained ideas suddenly cropped up from businessmen for revenue-sharing productions with the Art Gallery of New South Wales. Governments, more soberly, saw an opportunity to reduce their funding of state gallery operations. Their investments in safe, attractive and high-prestige buildings had turned out well. Besides programmes of immense high-cultural popularity there was also unexpected revenue, and the possibility of cost savings for the state. Immense savings would indeed be achieved: thirty-five years later state government was contributing less than fifty percent of total expenditure at the Art Gallery of New South Wales.

The culturally activist federal government led by prime minister Gough Whitlam had recently established a new agency, the Australia Council for the Arts, which supported *Modern Masters* in 1975. Federal government therefore best understood what was needed next and in 1977 prime minister Malcolm Fraser set up an independent company, the Australian Art Exhibitions Corporation, to produce and manage blockbuster exhibitions. The Art Exhibitions Corporation began with *The Chinese Exhibition: Archaeological finds of the People's Republic of China*, which was not really an art exhibition. Further archaeological exhibitions lost money. Inexperience at shoehorning quasi-art exhibitions into art museums bankrupted the Corporation. For mass audiences cultural edification was not enough; they also expected aesthetic delight or fright.

Independent management of major exhibitions, with the huge advantage of federal government indemnification in lieu of otherwise prohibitive insurance costs, passed to other structures and is now settled in Art Exhibitions Australia (AEA). In 2003 AEA, by then entirely self-supporting and able to cross-subsidise its exhibitions, toured the Tasmanian Museum & Art Gallery's *John Glover and the Colonial Picturesque*. Though the scholarly exhibition of Australian art found a large audience and its box-office results were satisfactory, it's an example of what would never have been undertaken without reserves earned from

dependable crowd-pleasing ‘treasures’ exhibitions from overseas. Examples are the National Gallery of Victoria’s recent *The Impressionists: Masterpieces from the Musée d’Orsay* or the sightings of Rembrandt and Vermeer in its *Dutch Masters from the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam*. The most spectacularly successful exhibition of this kind was the National Gallery of Australia’s 2009–10 *Masterpieces from Paris: Van Gogh, Gauguin, Cézanne and beyond* which broke Australia’s record for exhibition visitation with a figure of 476,843.

Federal government indemnification of exhibitions was made available to the National Gallery of Australia as well as to AEA. But state galleries, which now had management skills and international curatorial clout of their own for obtaining loans, sometimes preferred not to share income with AEA and soon persuaded their own state governments occasionally to underwrite insurance for blockbuster exhibitions. All quickly found that high-end box-office populism could cross-subsidise smaller, riskier, free-admission exhibitions of local art and contemporary art.

State galleries also began to make money from their cafés and restaurants, from their specialist art bookshops and designer trinkets, from their publishing, from public lectures and receptions, as well as from membership subscriptions. Following the membership organisations that had been started in the nineteen-fifties, high-powered foundations, at first seeded with matching funds from government, began to accumulate non-government capital in the seventies. Governments for a while demanded the introduction of general admission charges, by way of compensation for the cost of the new buildings, but such charges were resisted and did not last long. Special exhibitions, and shops and cafés and publishing, were more effective ways of making money. Admission charges to collections are uncommon in art museums in Australia; they occur most often in smaller museums at tourist destinations.

Teams of keen volunteer guides and in-house education officers helped make the art accessible to a much broader public than previously, a political plus with governments nervous about assisting art-consumption by ‘elitist’ minorities. Governments accepted the argument that upgraded buildings needed upgraded staff: young art-history graduate curators came on stream, and registrars to handle art logistics.

Appointments to governing bodies shifted from middle-of-the-road collectors and middle-of-the-road artist-administrators or artist public figures and instead settled on access to big money. High-calibre staff now existed and artistic judgement was left to the director and curators by board members who had highest-level corporate experience. However, if a parliamentary enabling act still required a board containing “persons knowledgeable about art”, government ministers were still inclined to prefer the glamour of artists to the seriousness of art-history professors. In 2008 the two by no means middle-of-the-road artist trustees appointed to the Art Gallery of New South Wales were important conceptual painters Imants Tillers and Lindy Lee. A general air of success and efficiency impressed the one-off private and corporate donors and sponsors who began to proliferate in the nineteen-eighties.

The building-led revolution continued on from Melbourne in 1968 and Sydney in 1972. As mentioned, in Perth in 1979 a new building opened for the Art Gallery of Western Australia. In the same year a café, a bookshop and full climate control were installed at the Art Gallery of South Australia but overdue extensions to accommodate large-scale special exhibitions, education services and receptions arrived in Adelaide almost twenty years later, by which time the Art Gallery of New South Wales had again been doubled in size and the National Gallery of Victoria was planning its present two-campus arrangement. The art-museum revolution had climaxed in 1982, which is when a new building for the Queensland Art Gallery opened in Brisbane and the Australian National Gallery first opened in Canberra.

The advent of a real National Gallery in the national capital brings us to a problem bequeathed from colonial British times. Other colonial ‘National’ galleries in New South Wales and South Australia had already adjusted their names, in belated recognition that federation of the once separate colonies had taken place in 1901, but in the twenty-first century the ‘National’ Gallery of Victoria remains recalcitrant. It claims that its uniquely encyclopedic collections, ranging from Mediterranean antiquities to international contemporary art, are a service to the entire federated nation, and it continues to use the nineteenth-century colonial name. However, in 2002 when it opened its separate building for Australian art, an uncanny name like “National Gallery of Victoria: Australian Art” would have been a handicap. So, although the official name of the building was The Ian Potter Centre: NGV Australia, in honour of a contributor to construction costs, there was also quiet training of the public to favour the corporate-style abbreviations NGV Australia and NGV International.

Naming demonstrates another unfortunate British colonial legacy. The less sophisticated Australian media use the peculiarly British terminology of “public gallery” not “art museum” when they have to distinguish state galleries and other art museums from dealers’ galleries but most often the ambiguous term “gallery” is left standing alone. Consequently, redneck Australian parliamentarians have sometimes started by assuming that government “galleries” are commercial businesses in need of occasional subsidy, not cultural, educational and research institutions in need of permanent sustenance.

Universities, always more worldly than state or local governments, were early to adopt more appropriate naming conventions, for example the Ian Potter Museum of Art at the University of Melbourne. Contemporary art is similarly a global field, and when the Power Bequest to the University of Sydney eventually generated an off-campus museum that had to become independently self-supporting it was named the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney. The MCA receives assistance from the New South Wales government and the Australia Council but is essentially a non-government museum, and so far the only one invited to supply an additional voice to the heavyweight gathering, of state and national gallery directors, that calls itself the Council of Australian Art Museum Directors. Likewise, after encountering assumptions by foreigners that something with a name like “Art Gallery of New South Wales” could be a dealer’s gallery, the professional association originally called the Art Galleries Association of Australia changed its name in the nineteen-seventies to Art Museums Association of Australia (and is now amalgamated with the non-art museums in Museums Australia, an agency based in Old Parliament House, Canberra). So it was a lost opportunity in 1993 when the Australian National Gallery changed its name to the National Gallery of Australia. Something like “National Museum of Art, Canberra” would have better defined its role, and set an example.

Furthermore, for twenty-first-century audiences, museums and modernities apparently sound more interesting than ambiguously commercial-sounding “galleries”. Outside Melbourne the largely self-supporting Heide Park and Art Gallery of 1981 later clarified its identity, and became more tempting to likely excursionist visitors, as Heide Museum of Modern Art. The recent advent of private museums, developed from private collections of contemporary art, affirms the same point. Marc Besen’s TarraWarra Museum of Art opened in 2003 in beautiful Yarra Valley wine country further out of Melbourne than Heide. A “museum” evidently has more cachet than a “gallery” for upmarket lifestyle tourism.

That name change in Canberra from Australian National Gallery to National Gallery of Australia was caused by real-world collisions with patriotic citizens, on pilgrimage-mode visits to the national capital, who had never previously visited an art museum. They were naively, but not stupidly, surprised to see foreign artists’ work, and European landscapes by

Australian artists, in an “Australian National Gallery”. Others had felt the same. The new prime minister Malcolm Fraser in 1975 halted buying foreign art for a while, and Queen Elizabeth, when she opened the building in 1982, was surprised to encounter art from various black African nations of which she was also queen.

At the National Gallery the visionary founding director, James Mollison, wanted to show Australians a sampling of all kinds of art worldwide, alongside a concentration of highest-quality international modernism and contemporary art (Brancusi’s *Birds in space*, Courbet, Monet, Miró, Malevich and much more), and alongside an extremely comprehensive collection of Australian art. In 1967 prime minister Harold Holt had committed the Australian government to a National Gallery; prime minister Gough Whitlam (1972–75) escalated cultural funding to hitherto astonishing levels, including acquisition funds for the future Gallery. The 1973 purchase, at a record price, of Jackson Pollock’s *Blue poles*, a masterpiece of Abstract Expressionist painting, caused Americans to say they now understood how the ancient Greeks must have felt when their great works of art disappeared to newly rich Rome. Mollison’s National Gallery was startlingly different from the overly British collections formed previously in Australia. It was also different from the highly parochial state-based collections of Australian art elsewhere.

New South Wales and Victoria had neglected each other’s art; only South Australia had previously been collecting the full range of intercolonial and interstate Australian art. There were also prejudices and demarcations about mediums and categories and periods. Victoria and South Australia collected European decorative arts as art — oddly, in the nineteen-forties the NGV called its decorative-arts collections ‘the art museum’ — but New South Wales left them for its technology museum, the Museum of Applied Arts & Sciences, which later metamorphosed into the Powerhouse Museum. At the Powerhouse “applied arts” have now become “craft” or “design”. The decorative-arts collections at state galleries have taken a greater interest in contemporary craft since practitioners began to receive assistance from the Australia Council for the Arts. Modern design, too, has a stronger presence in the decorative-arts collections at state galleries, reflecting a broad social trend towards ‘lifestyle’ upgrades of private housing. None of the state galleries had collected Australian folk-art objects, which were a delight at the new National Gallery and, soon after, were added to collecting policies at the Art Gallery of South Australia.

Another inconsistency was early-colonial Australian art. The state galleries in New South Wales and Victoria saw it as history rather than art, and left it to the pictorial and memorabilia collections of the state libraries. Until the nineteen-sixties there was little or no expert knowledge of Australia’s own art history, so outside their own states of Tasmania and Victoria there was negligible awareness of the best early- and mid-nineteenth-century Australian painters, namely John Glover and Eugene von Guérard. On the other hand in South Australia, Western Australia and Queensland the state galleries, not the state libraries, collected pictures to illustrate early-colonial history. Photographs as history resided in public libraries and archives and, notably, in the Australian War Memorial at Canberra. Photographs as art were collected only at the Art Gallery of South Australia. In the mid-seventies the state galleries in New South Wales and Victoria began collecting photographs, but the National Gallery of Australia was then starting out on a much more ambitious level.

These inconsistencies and overlaps between art museums, natural-science and anthropology museums, history and technology museums, libraries and archives, led Australia’s inter-governmental Cultural Ministers Council to create a Heritage Collections Committee. From that committee there emerged, in 2004, a company called the Collections Council of Australia, which receives an ex-officio board member from the Council of Australian Art Museum Directors, but it was defunded in 2009. The Collections Council established

“cultural significance” as an alternative criterion to aesthetic excellence for assessing the value of art objects and quasi-art; it updated an earlier manual on “significance”, a very useful new museological tool.

National standards are not yet fully developed for assessing and documenting collections of art, history and technology, or standards for conservation and ethics. Accessible online catalogues and digital imaging of collections are an obvious priority for all collections, in which the libraries and archives, inevitably, have done more than the art museums. All the larger institutions are making some progress, separately and at varying pace; smaller collecting organisations have greater needs. One hopes continuing advocacy will result in substantial funding from the Commonwealth for backlog cataloguing and conservation projects at collections of great national significance in less wealthy places, such as Tasmania.

The most important of the in-between categories is Australian Aboriginal art. Work by Aborigines had always fascinated colonists and settlers, especially settler artists. As well, pastoralists, farmers and naturalists, and popular-culture journalists, took great interest in rock art. Museums of natural science and anthropology of course collected artefacts, but focused on cultural meanings rather than aesthetic force. However, an exhibition at the National Museum of Victoria in 1929, titled *Australian Aboriginal Art*, and primarily ethnographic, included bark paintings that were already much admired by the art world. In 1911 Baldwin Spencer, a university and museum anthropologist who also fancied luxurious paintings by London-based Australian expatriates Arthur Streeton and George W. Lambert, spent a year in the Northern Territory and commissioned a large number of Aboriginal bark paintings at Oenpelli in Arnhem Land. The Baldwin Spencer barks were widely published and often borrowed for art-museum exhibitions in Australia and overseas, notably for *Art of Australia 1788–1941* shown at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and elsewhere in North America. Similar barks were borrowed in 1982 for inclusion in the inaugural display of Australian art at the Australian National Gallery and placed alongside Edwardian paintings by Rupert Bunny and George W. Lambert; other bark paintings were placed at the entrance to the first introductory display at the National Gallery, and others again, plus Western Desert acrylics, with contemporary Australian art.

The liberation of Aboriginal art into the world of high art — a liberation not only from making tourist-trade souvenirs but also from what some Indigenous Australians saw as the demeaning company of plants and animals in science museums — had begun with the activities of the Adelaide anthropologist Charles Mountford. In 1944 a Melbourne journalists’ philanthropic club commissioned his monograph *The Art of Albert Namatjira*, a tourist-trade watercolourist working at the Hermannsburg Lutheran mission near Alice Springs. In 1946 MOMA New York consulted Mountford for the Aboriginal work in its exhibition *Arts of the South Seas*, and soon after that he organised an exhibition of Aboriginal art in Paris. In 1948 he led an American–Australian anthropological expedition in Arnhem Land, and in 1956 engineered gifts of Aboriginal bark paintings collected then to the state galleries throughout Australia. In the nineteen-forties one or two Hermannsburg School watercolours and Arnhem Land bark paintings had entered the art collections in Adelaide, Melbourne and Sydney, but Mountford’s 1956 distribution of bark paintings to all state galleries was the principal trigger for their own future collecting.

Tony Tuckson, deputy director at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, was the most eager of those who took up the challenge; an outstanding Abstract Expressionist painter, he was inevitably an ardent admirer of what was then still called ‘primitive art’. From 1958 Tuckson carried out an extensive campaign of acquisitions for the Art Gallery of New South Wales, which thenceforth always conspicuously displayed Aboriginal art. In 1960 the Gallery Directors Conference commissioned from Tuckson a large exhibition of *Australian*

Aboriginal Art, mostly bark paintings, for Australia-wide tour of the state galleries. That Art Gallery of New South Wales exhibition was the basis for a book of the same title, edited by the anthropologist Ronald Berndt and issued in 1964 by a publishing house specially geared to art books. It was the first widely accessible book on Aboriginal art as art, and deliberately timed as a companion volume to the first widely accessible history of whitefella art, Bernard Smith's *Australian Painting*, which appeared in 1962.

A very strong presence of Australian Aboriginal art, mostly contemporary, is now found at all state galleries and the National Gallery. At the Art Gallery of New South Wales it moved in 1994 to a new ground-level space, as preferred by Indigenous cultures. In 1996 the Art Gallery of South Australia, already for fifteen years a major collector of Aboriginal art, placed it in the new foyer of its upgraded building. At the 2002 NGV Australia Aboriginal art has the ground level entirely to itself and Aboriginal art has also been seen alongside Andy Warhol at NGV International. In 2010 the National Gallery of Australia opened a new ground-level entrance which focused on the two hundred burial poles commissioned by director James Mollison in 1988 as an *Aboriginal Memorial*, and also in 2010 created nine new separate galleries for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art at the beginning the main level of the Gallery. Aboriginal art continues to be intermingled with international and other Australian collection-displays at the National Gallery. Social empowerment of Indigenous Australians would have been Mountford's intention when he first inserted their work into art museums, but Tuckson's and Mollison's triumphantly realised initiatives were based largely on modernist aesthetics. They knew that the best Indigenous works were as powerful and beautiful as — although different from — the best Western works of art. Australian and foreign audiences now share that understanding. No other country seems to have done anything similar through its major art museums.

New Zealand art also requires complicated curatorial handling. Specialists in international Western art will have little knowledge of New Zealand, so at least at the National Gallery of Australia, where it is more serious a political issue than elsewhere, New Zealand art is cared for by a department of *Australasian* art but displayed with European and American art as well as with Australian art. The National Gallery's privately endowed Gordon Darling Australasian Print Fund mutated in 2008 into an Australia Pacific Print Fund, a further acceptance that the art of the whole Pacific Lake is best overseen by Australia-based expertise.

When the Museum of Contemporary Art opened in Sydney in 1991 it promptly staged important exhibitions from New Zealand, Japan and China, a conscious loosening from Eurocentric attitudes. Later, in 1993, the Queensland Art Gallery began its *Asia-Pacific Triennials* as major contemporary-art events that would be very different from the *Biennales of Sydney* instigated in 1973 by Franco Belgiorno-Nettis, an Italian immigrant tycoon who, like other patrons in the twentieth century, wanted to bring isolated Australians into contact with the most recent art from the rest of the world.

The Asia-Pacific Triennials engendered the Queensland Art Gallery's unique collecting focus on the contemporary art of the region. They also encouraged the Queensland state government to build a second building a couple of hundred metres away, the very beautiful Queensland Gallery of Modern Art that opened in 2006 (and which includes a cinémathèque). Brisbane's Asia-Pacific Triennials helped introduce American and European artworlds to what is now a perhaps overheated contemporary-art scene in China.

Classic Chinese art, greatly appreciated by British taste, had been collected by the NGV throughout the twentieth century, and its spaces for mortuary bronzes and ceramics, and for porcelains and paintings, were one of the most beautiful revelations when NGV International

reopened in Melbourne in 2003 after a campaign of building enlargement. In Sydney, when Edmund Capon, a sinologist from the Victoria & Albert Museum, London, became director of the Art Gallery of New South Wales in 1978 he promptly created a department of Asian art, programmed wonderful exhibitions, extended the meagre collections, created a purpose-built display space in 1988 and then doubled it in 2003 in a key position at the end of the Gallery's entrance foyer. The Art Gallery of New South Wales is now a centre for scholarship in Asian art. In Adelaide, the Art Gallery of South Australia developed special expertise in Southeast Asian ceramics but also now possesses the finest Japanese sculptures and screen paintings in Australia; in 2006 it installed the nation's only collection-space dedicated to Islamic art, still a neglected field.

In the nineteen-seventies the National Gallery of Australia, acknowledging the NGV's great collections of Chinese art, began by focusing on Southeast Asian art, especially Cambodian and Thai Buddhist sculptures and Indonesian batik cloths, and soon became probably the world's leading centre for Southeast Asian textiles. In 2005 when Ron Radford arrived from the Art Gallery of South Australia to direct the National Gallery, he further strengthened all the Asian collections and created a new focus on Indian sculptures and paintings. He also shifted Asian art from basement spaces to the main entrance level, where Australia's most spectacular displays of highest-quality Southeast and South Asian art have now displaced a scrappy display of European art.

The National Gallery's thirty or so European paintings and sculptures, from the early Renaissance to Neoclassicism, were pronounced unlikely ever to become a coherent display worthy of a National Gallery, and in a bold but not too controversial move have been transferred on indefinite loan to better contexts in the state galleries in Adelaide, Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne. The National Gallery's large ceiling canvas by Tiepolo now keeps spectacular company in Melbourne with the NGV's huge Tiepolo, *The Banquet of Cleopatra*, possibly the world's greatest eighteenth-century European painting, sold from Catherine the Great's collection at the Saint Petersburg Hermitage during a bad moment in the nineteen-thirties Soviet economy.

Art-museum deaccessioning is an issue in Australia, too. In the nineteen-forties and -fifties the state galleries in Victoria and New South Wales deaccessioned a number of British Victorian paintings and sculptures not for money but because they occupied too much storage space and were out of fashion. The process was ill-advised both artistically and politically. In the late twentieth century better deaccessioning policies were drafted in most state galleries, especially in relation to works originally received as gifts, or to works suitable for transfer to other state institutions, or that clearly duplicated others of lesser quality. Even so, in 1996 further deaccessioning of a number of Victorian and Edwardian British paintings from the Art Gallery of New South Wales was not done well; a few paintings of superior quality slipped away, and others of low quality certainly met the criterion of cultural significance.

A converse matter to deaccessioning is the acceptance of gifts restricted by conditions such as permanent display. In 2006 NGV Australia accepted a selection from the celebrated Joseph Brown Collection, originally formed to illustrate the full time-span and geographical range of Australian art. It did much to correct Melbourne's neglect of Sydney art, and it must have pleased everybody that the collection was saved for Dr Brown's home state, but his condensed history of Australian art within a much more extensive history is an awkward interruption and oddity for visitors. There was a better interstate offer, from the Australian National University in Canberra, to house the complete Joseph Brown Collection in a building that would bear his name, but localism prevailed.

NGV Australia came into existence in 2002 when Jeff Kennett, a monument-building former premier of Victoria desperate to find functions for the 'iconic' Federation Square that he hoped would rival Sydney's Opera House, bullied the NGV into taking on the key tenancy as a museum of Australian art. A museum of international — Australian and foreign — contemporary art might have been more suitable for the site.

In 2006 the Queensland Art Gallery doubled in size, its beautiful Gallery of Modern Art (GoMA) conveniently situated only 200 metres from its parent building, whereas NGV Australia and NGV International are inconveniently apart on opposite sides of a river. GoMA is Australia's first art museum to include a cinémathèque. As well as showing the *Asia-Pacific Triennials* GoMA also showcases Queensland's now extensive collections of contemporary Asian art. Acquisition funds from state governments in Australia were once substantial, but have dwindled and sometimes entirely disappeared; only in Queensland have governments continued since the nineteen-seventies with very generous funding for acquisitions as well as buildings and operations. The other present-day mining-boom state, Western Australia, followed Queensland's example only in 2007, which is when it began to assign useful millions for state gallery acquisitions.

In Sydney in 2011 the Art Gallery of New South Wales unveiled a large gift — of contemporary works especially notable for classic American minimalism and conceptual art — from the John W. Kaldor Family. The Kaldor collection at the Art Gallery of New South Wales will not remain an intact and separate display like the Joseph Brown collection at NGV Australia; instead it will be absorbed into the existing New South Wales collection. The Kaldor space, privately funded by the Belgiorino-Nettis family, occupies a former art storage floor constructed in 1972, and new off-site storage was funded by the state government.

The existence from 1991 of Sydney's better-sited Museum of Contemporary Art — extensions to which, funded by the Mordant family as well as state and federal governments, will open in 2012 — did not cause the Art Gallery of New South Wales to consider abandoning contemporary art. Apart from specialist university teaching collections of Classical antiquities, Australia's art museums have always taken contemporary art seriously. Those deaccessioned Victorian and Edwardian British paintings and sculptures were contemporary art when they first entered the colonial and state collections. Contemporary art is best presented extensively in special exhibitions and best collected more judiciously than in the past; the new special-exhibition spaces of the nineteen-seventies allowed hugely increased and more appropriate attention to contemporary art.

The upgraded art-museum buildings opened just in time to cope with Post-Modernism. Messy installation art of soil and detritus, or performance art, or film and video could not otherwise have been accommodated, as they were in *Recent Australian Art*, a large exhibition that the Art Gallery of New South Wales contributed to the festivities around the Sydney Opera House opening in 1973. That show included Tim Burns's *A Change of Mind*, the first New Media day-long and day-after-day live performance via closed-circuit TV to be seen in a mainstream Australian art museum. Later, the *Biennales of Sydney*, the *Australian Perspectives* (1981–99) also in Sydney, the *Adelaide Biennials* from 1990 at the Art Gallery of South Australia for the biennial Adelaide Festivals and, as mentioned, the *Asia-Pacific Triennials* in Brisbane from 1993, became typical special-event showcases for newest art, local or foreign, designed for the large audiences that reach the state galleries.

International Post-Modernist changes of mindset, especially regarding race, gender and ethnicity, no doubt contributed to the shifts towards Aboriginal art and Asian and other non-European arts. No doubt there were also specifically Australian political, social and economic imperatives regarding its Indigenous peoples and its Asia-Pacific neighbours. Nevertheless,

the conscious intentions were primarily to provide improved high-level aesthetic stimulus, of as many unfamiliar kinds as possible.

Race and ethnicity have been touched upon, but what about gender? In the museum collections, especially of Australian art, work by women painters and sculptors was never discriminated against. If they had assertive personalities like the modernist Margaret Preston their excellence was recognised from the start. If they had retiring personalities, like Grace Cossington Smith or Grace Crowley, or were out of fashion like Clarice Beckett, recognition took time, just as it did for retiring males such as Ralph Balson. A prime task for collection curators is recognition of neglected excellence, especially out-of-fashion excellence, and the art-museum upsurge of retrospective collecting and exhibitions of women's art in the nineteen-seventies was as much a part of that normal museological process as a consequence of post-modernist feminism.

On the other hand, neglect of entire art mediums favoured by women artists was corrected by the newly changed mindsets. Prints, especially the mediums of woodcut and linocut, were one example; craft arts of all kinds, especially needlework, were another. Needlework quilts in the National Gallery's collections gave Australian nineteenth-century colonial women artists, including convicts, a voice. As to the various survey exhibitions of contemporary art, women artists might not have been properly attended to in the early nineteen-seventies, but by 1979 the Australian component of the international *Biennale of Sydney* tried hard, and thenceforth gender balance was always attempted in museum exhibitions of contemporary art.

As mentioned, the colonial multi-disciplinary format survives in Hobart at the Tasmanian Museum & Art Gallery. In 2008 a commitment eventually came from government to upgrade a building that is very inconvenient for visitors, a fault in a state that has otherwise successfully embraced a late-twentieth-century tourist economy showcasing art and nature; in 2011, realisation of the upgrade had not begun. The Museum & Art Gallery of the Northern Territory, which opened in improvised premises in Darwin in 1964, was the one new multi-disciplinary institution established by a government in the twentieth century; a new post-Cyclone Tracy building opened in 1981. The combination of science, history and art could possibly still suit a small capital city.

A National Portrait Gallery began in 1993 as a programme of the National Library in provisional premises in Old Parliament House, Canberra. Gordon Darling, a former chairman of the National Gallery, had become addicted to philanthropy; with his wife Marilyn Darling he lobbied for a National Portrait Gallery as an essential asset for a national capital and ensured a successful start by contributing financial support. It soon became an independent body under the minister for the arts and eventually a large new building opened in 2008 beside the High Court of Australia and the National Gallery of Australia.

The rising tide of celebrity popular culture made the National Portrait Gallery a safe populist bet for government support. Its director Andrew Sayers, previously a collection curator at the National Gallery, as a matter of course embraced contemporary portrait practice — photographs and DVDs — as well as historical paintings and statues. And being a product of art museums, Sayers also discouraged but could not entirely avoid the aesthetically dead pictures that spoil visits to most portrait collections. A fine example of Sayers's canniness about portraits for today was commissioning a celebrity drug-addict artist, the late Howard Arkley, to portray arty post-punk rock musician Nick Cave. Although the National Portrait Gallery is really a history museum, its director was added to the elite Council of Australian Art Museum Directors. Colleagues on that Council hope the Portrait Gallery will continue to use the not-so-secret weapon of aesthetic excellence in its campaign to make present-day Australians interested in interesting Australians past and present.

There is less good news for portraiture in the present state of the century-old Archibald Prize for portrait painting, held at the Art Gallery of New South Wales. Director Edmund Capon expresses contempt for the annual endowed event, but nevertheless can't help enjoying the income-generating crowds it brings into his building. There, however, they greet bad art, mostly overblown billboard-style images of 'celebrity' sportspersons and presenters already over-familiar on small TV screens. Surprising, unfamiliar or complex faces are seldom encountered. It's a populist event in which low-quality art degrades an art museum, but pulls in an easy \$1 million each year. The Archibald bequest did not require the Art Gallery of New South Wales to hold an exhibition, it requires only that the Gallery's board of trustees judge the paintings and award the prize. The trustees could delegate the judging to their director and curators, and thereby raise the quality of the exhibition. Or they could retain the box-office money but hold the exhibition a short distance away in rented space close to the gallery carpark and its cafés. Either solution would retrieve some lost art-museum honour and credibility.

A related issue is the old perennial of content-free management versus knowledge and experience and love of art. Capon is very much a knowledgeable and experienced art lover, which is ultimately how he or any other director retains credibility with their various constituencies. In 1995 the National Gallery of Australia succumbed, rather after the heyday of managerialism, to a too-young and too-British director from Ireland, who talked the managerialist talk, but had had no curatorial experience, and was therefore untested as a judge of art. The Brian Kennedy years were rocky and saw some degradation of artistic quality in various programmes. (Kennedy has since matured into a fine director in the United States.)

Ambitious private museums are a very recent development. As mentioned, Marc Besen's TarraWarra Museum of Art opened in 2003 in beautiful Yarra Valley wine country outside Melbourne. David Walsh's Museum of Old and New Art, known as Mona, opened in 2011 at the Moorilla vineyard on the Derwent estuary near Hobart. There is nothing like it in the world. A self-proclaimed vehicle for the owner's missionary Atheism and Darwinism — marketed somewhat misleadingly as being about "sex and death" — his *wunderkammer* collection displays Egyptian and Greek antiquities alongside international late-twentieth- and twentyfirst-century art. In its first few months Mona attracted an extremely high visitation, not only from an Australia-wide and international artworld but also, more significantly, from a non-artworld demographic. Mona offers a paradigm shift in art museums; it's the result of altruistic self-gratification by an extremely free-thinking mind. Walsh cheekily called his inaugural exhibition *Monanism*. Not a survey of art history, not a probing of current ideas and issues, but timelessly powerful content — to engage the broadest public — is his sole concern. Gods and afterlives are dangerous delusions: we are mere organisms, like plants and our fellow-animals; all of us have to obey the biological imperatives of birth, growth and breeding, feeding and excreting, enjoying what one may and suffering what one must, ageing, counting the days and seasons, mutating, and dying.

Before Mona it seemed the most significant new development was ACMI, the Australian Centre for the Moving Image. One of the world's first such museums, it opened in 2002 in Melbourne, next door to NGV Australia at Federation Square. It is always crowded with young people, at home in the present-day age of disembodied digital images.

Older generations worry about one of the ways in which the Internet is changing the world; minds are narrowing as people graze on self-centred information, constantly reinforcing what they already know and believe. Bracing otherness in unfamiliar ways is seldom encountered by post-newspaper reading generations. Art museums should therefore treat complete Internet accessibility of their extraordinarily powerful images as a high priority.

However, their materiality gives the ideas and emotions embodied in art-museum objects a much greater charge than their disembodied images can transmit from a computer screen. At NGV Australia, a less crowded place than ACMI next door, video installations and other kinds of screen-based art are now taken for granted in temporary exhibitions of contemporary art, but they are not available all the time. To help capture present-day audiences for art, screen-based works should always be available for serendipitous encounters by those who might wander through an art collection. In Hobart, David Walsh's *Monanism* included as much moving-image and installation art as paintings or photomedia, and thereby made its unusually eager young visitors feel at home.

Special exhibitions are wonderful temporary stimulants, and good marketing tools for art museums, but the collection is the more wondrous final product. Revisiting, rethinking and re-scrutinising the thoughts and feelings that have been worked into clear and graspable form is the best way to use an art museum. A universal and unedited ocean of Internet information has vast lucky-dip potential, but browsing a good library or a large museum collection is a better way to encounter the high-energy artefacts that we call works of art. Works of art exist to suddenly provide understanding of self or, equally important, to take viewers out of themselves.

Australia's art museums, more perhaps than any others, have become unusually well-suited to a post-European or post-North Atlantic age. For over thirty years they have been defining and hence creating the Asia-Pacific age whose time is upon us. Perhaps that is why, while he was still director of the Art Gallery of South Australia, Ron Radford was invited to join the world's peak international Directors Council, the first from a museum outside Europe or North America to network formally with the directors of the Louvre in Paris, the British Museum in London, and the J Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles. (NGV director Gerard Vaughan has since joined that international Bizot Group of art-museum directors.) And perhaps that is why in 2006 Michael Brand, a Canberra-born one-time curator of Asian art at the National Gallery of Australia became the director of the Getty, the world's wealthiest art museum. We sometimes feel that Australia is leading the world.