

COUNCIL OF AUSTRALASIAN MUSEUM DIRECTORS

Submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Inquiry into AUSTRALIA'S RELATIONSHIP WITH ASEAN

Introduction

The Council of Australasian Museum Directors (CAMD) is making this submission to the Inquiry in order to highlight the importance of cultural links in forging greater understanding and enduring relationships between Australia and its neighbours in the ASEAN region. Culture and cultural heritage are critical components of all societies and nations; they underpin and inform social exchanges, economics, politics and international relations. Poised as we are on the edge of an age which will undoubtedly see an unprecedented rise in the influence of the Asia-Pacific region, it is incumbent on Australia to ensure that it holds the keys to understanding the culture of the region and the tools with which to establish mutual understanding and respect between regional partners.

Australia's major museums are in a unique position to assist in this process. Museums have the knowledge, contacts and professional skills to foster the cross-cultural understanding which is necessary for the development of long-term, productive relationships between Australia and its regional neighbours. Museums can do this by:

- projecting Australia's distinctive stories, heritage and character to its neighbours and the world;
- opening Australian eyes to different cultures and promoting understanding with our neighbours; and
- promoting partnerships within the region which build mutual trust, understanding and capacity.

CAMD

The Council of Australasian Museum Directors (CAMD) brings together the leaders of the major national, state and regional museums in Australia and New Zealand (see appendix 1 for a list of members). Established in 1967, CAMD is an independent, non-governmental organisation which:

- considers national strategic directions for major museums;
- encourages the development of national standards;
- facilitates collaboration in research, exhibitions and education;
- represents the interests of major museums to Government and other stakeholders

- provides a forum for the sharing of information and ideas amongst members; and
- works to promote the social, educational, scientific, cultural and economic benefits of the museum domain to the community.

CAMD's 21 museums operate in over 67 locations across Australia and New Zealand and include natural science and social history museums, industry and technology collections, science centres, combined museum/art galleries, heritage houses and outdoor museum sites. They work across disciplines in the arts, sciences and humanities and engage in formal partnerships and collaborations with a wide variety of Government and non-Government agencies and academies.

MUSEUMS AND CULTURAL DIPLOMACY

Over the past decade or more, the work of Australia's major museums with their Asia-Pacific counterparts has gathered momentum. From events such as the 'Sunken Treasures of Brunei Darussalam' exhibition, organised in conjunction with the Brunei Museum and Government to tell the story of South East Asia's 14th and 15th century sea trade, to the Australian Museum's involvement in the ARC research project 'Understanding Balinese paintings: Collections, narrative, aesthetics and society' and to Questacon's successful piloting of science training in East Timor and provision of training programs for science centres in Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia, Australia's museums have made a significant contribution to the process of building relationships with other countries in the South East Asian region.

A number of CAMD members, including the Australian Museum, Australian National Maritime Museum, Museum and Art Gallery of Northern Territory, Museum Victoria, National Maritime Museum and Powerhouse Museum are active members of AusHeritage, the network of Australian cultural heritage management organisations, established by the Australian Government in 1996 to facilitate the engagement of practitioners and organisations for the Australian heritage industry in the overseas arena.

CAMD is aware that AusHeritage has made a separate submission to the enquiry and wishes to record its strong support for the recommendations therein. Like AusHeritage, CAMD believes that Australia can perform an important leadership role in the Asia Pacific Region through the development of partnerships in all areas of museum and heritage work.

Telling our Stories

One obvious way in which Australia's major museums can contribute to building regional relationships is in characterising and promoting Australia and its culture to the region. Museums collect and hold the objects that bring Australia's past and its unique biodiversity to life and help us to make sense of our social identity and explore the environment we inhabit. Australia's major museums draw on their immense collections to present and interpret Australia's diverse heritage and natural character to the world through exhibitions, public programs and on-line resources. At a time when some still view Australia as a cultural satellite of Europe or America, museums capture and tell our national stories and,

in doing so, promote understanding of distinctly Australian goals, values and ideas. One telling demonstration of the unique role played by major museums in this respect is the extent to which they are called on to play host to visits from politicians, leaders, diplomats and other key figures from various ASEAN countries.

Bridging Cultures

This type of cultural diplomacy, however, is not only about projecting an image but, more significantly, about engagement and relationship building. Museums not only engender understanding of Australia's heritage but also work to strengthen a sense of social harmony and confidence across our diverse cultural communities, many of which are drawn from the Asia-Pacific region. Museums play an important role in acknowledging and telling the different individual and communal stories of migrant cultures which have come to our shores and in exploring the different histories, cultural traditions and natural environments of the Asia-Pacific region. Museums interpret communities to each other and extend the identity of cultural groups by revealing unknown aspects of their culture. In doing this they build mutual respect and understanding between the richly diverse range of cultures which make up Australian society and heighten awareness of our place in the Asia-Pacific region and the wider global context.

In 2007-08 CAMD museums launched over 180 public programs and exhibitions which fostered cultural diversity and understanding by exploring Indigenous, South East Asian and other cultures from around the world. Many of these events grew from the formal affiliation of museums with overseas museums and other cultural organisations in the region. In many instances Australia's major museums are keepers of national stories and custodians of important aspects of other countries' cultural heritage and, as such, play a key role in maintaining and strengthening cultural identity in the region.

The impact of these programs is heightened by the incontestable reach of CAMD's museums into the Australian community. In 2007-08 they recorded over 9.7 million visits in Australia including over 1.2 million students in formal groups. Museum curators and scientists held talks, workshops and presentations which reached over three quarters of a million more people. The major museums also travelled their exhibitions across Australia and, where they were able, sent them to other sites within the Asia-Pacific region.

Australia's museums have also opened virtual gateways to its neighbours. There has been a massive rise in virtual visits to museum websites. In 2007-08 alone the number of 'virtual' visits to 68 CAMD museum websites was more than 50 million. These figures represent an impressive engagement with a public, here and overseas, actively pursuing ideas and information about Australia and its region.

Promoting Partnerships

While the public face of exhibitions and on-line resources contributes to building regional ties, as important, are the behind-the-scene relationships forged through professional exchange. CAMD's major museums have actively promoted two-way staff exchanges,

capability building exercises, research collaborations, training workshops, conferences and seminars which centre on engagement and relationship building. Dialogues are established at the professional level and with leadership from all areas of society which helps maintain links and communication even when relations between countries have broken down at a diplomatic level.

4. Recommendations

While CAMD's museums have made significant contributions in the areas outlined above, there is potential for a far wider and more strategic input from this sector in the ASEAN region. Despite their interest and involvement in this form of cultural diplomacy, many CAMD museums are state-based and not funded specifically to exhibit overseas. Moreover, their funding has not kept pace with an increasing range of functions and Government and public expectations in recent years. They are also limited by the fact that both capacity building exercises and exhibitions cannot be prepared quickly but require long-term preparation and funding to succeed.

For these reasons, CAMD recommends that:

- the Government foster a greater coordination of cultural diplomacy activities and, in particular, undertakes long-term strategic planning in this area in close collaboration with major cultural institutions;
- expanded financial resources be made available to support initiatives for cultural presentations and to enhance cultural and heritage capacity building initiatives;
- further work be undertaken by a coordinated program to identify potential partnerships and provide relevant diplomatic introductions; and
- enhanced funding be provided to exchange and scholarships programs.

CAMD members would welcome the opportunity to collaborate with the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade in developing these recommendations further. We would also be happy to provide further information or clarification in regard to the points made above. Please feel free to contact Dr Meredith Foley, Executive Officer, CAMD, 02 9967-3237 or by email mfolwil@bigpond.net.au.

Dr Meredith Foley
Executive Officer, CAMD

28 November 2008

Appendix 1

Council of Australasian Museum Directors

MEMBERSHIP

Ms Margaret Anderson

Chair, CAMD
Director
HISTORY TRUST OF SA

Dr Seddon Bennington

Executive Member, CAMD
Director,
MUSEUM OF NEW ZEALAND TE PAPA TONGAREWA

Dr J Patrick Greene OBE

CEO
MUSEUM VICTORIA

Mr Frank Howarth

Executive Member, CAMD
Director
AUSTRALIAN MUSEUM

Mr Bill Bleathman

Director
TASMANIAN MUSEUM & ART GALLERY

Mr Jeremy Johnson

Hon Treasurer, CAMD
Chief Executive Officer,
SOVEREIGN HILL

Mr Alan Brien

Chief Executive Officer
SCITECH DISCOVERY CENTRE

Ms Diana Jones

Acting Executive Director
WESTERN AUSTRALIAN MUSEUM

Professor Graham Durant

Director
NATIONAL SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY CENTRE

Dr Dawn Casey

Director,
POWERHOUSE MUSEUM

Dr Suzanne Miller

Director

SOUTH AUSTRALIAN MUSEUM

Dr Ian Galloway

Executive Member, CAMD
Director
QUEENSLAND MUSEUM

Major General Steve Gower AO, AO Mil

Director
AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

Ms Anna Malgorzewicz

Director,
MUSEUM & ART GALLERY OF THE
NORTHERN TERRITORY

Mr Craddock Morton

Director
NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AUSTRALIA

Mr Shimrath Paul

Chief Executive
OTAGO MUSEUM AND DISCOVERY WORLD

Mr Patrick Filmer-Sankey

Director
QUEEN VICTORIA MUSEUM & ART GALLERY

Ms Kate Clark

Director
HISTORIC HOUSES TRUST OF NSW

Dr Vanda Vitali

Director
AUCKLAND WAR MEMORIAL MUSEUM

Ms Mary-Louise Williams

Director
AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL MARITIME MUSEUM

Mr Anthony Wright

Director
CANTERBURY MUSEUM