

# The Preservation of the Aboriginal Cultural Heritage

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Nineteenth century archaeologists would hardly qualify for I.C.C.M. membership, if Sir Henry Layard's *Nineveh and Its Remains* (2 vols, 1849), is taken as a typical example of archaeological practice. His report is spattered with such comments as: "... entire when first exposed to view, it crumbled into dust as soon as touched" A comparable fate was meted out four times within ten pages (Vol 1: 341-51) to a range of materials including wood, basketry, ivory, painted plaster, iron and copper.

In many Australian museums today, the same remarks are applicable to accessions, particularly to ethnographic objects. It is even more inexcusable now than it was a century ago, but few curators would share Layard's blandness.

The tragic state of decay was documented by the Committee of Inquiry on Museums and National Collections, and by the Planning Committee on the Gallery of Aboriginal Australia. Comparable findings concerning the built environment, Aboriginal art and other prehistoric sites resulted from the National Estate Inquiry.

Presumably, this audience has read those reports, and a summary of major relevant conclusions suffices. Highest priority was given to the formation of an Australian Museums Commission, which would fund a major up-grading of present museum storage and laboratory facilities. The urgency of a marked increase in trained specialist conservators was recognised and a training programme for conservators was recommended for establishment at the Canberra College of Advanced Education. A Central Cultural Materials Conservation Institute was advocated, in order to undertake advanced research and training into problems of Australian museum and field conservation. This research was nowhere more urgent than into the conservation of the wide range of organic ethnographic materials and Aboriginal rock art sites.

The Gallery of Aboriginal Australia was envisaged as an integral component of a triad which would constitute The Museum of Australia. Low profile buildings, set in a broad-acres landscape and with exterior exhibitions could set a model of storage and display. Its prime function would be to portray the great cultural and ecological diversity within traditional Aboriginal society. The National Capital provides a symbolic setting in which to portray the interaction between all Australians and their environment. The educational medium of a comprehensive depiction of Aboriginal *ways* (rather than the caricature of a unitary Aboriginal *way*), would inform all visitors, Aboriginal as well as non-Aboriginal. An emphasis on conservation facilities was written into recommendations, as was the close collaboration with the Aboriginal Arts Board and the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies.

It is essential that Aboriginal people should be involved in the Gallery of Aboriginal Australia at all levels of planning and staffing. But it prompts the question, how many Aboriginal visitors today tour ethnographic galleries of existing museums, and what message would their displays convey to them? It is not simply a question of removing sacred objects or photographs of secret ceremonies. Museums of the future must become meaningful to Aboriginal visitors in a positive sense. Today, possibly only the Western Australian Museum display attempts within its limited area to achieve this result.

It might be achieved through Aboriginal participation on the staff, or through a community being commissioned to prepare display material. A programme of curatorial training for Aborigines is essential; but this need applies equally to the production of Aboriginal conservators at both professional and semi-skilled levels.

There are some serious problems requiring resolution before Aboriginal participation in conservation can be successful. Current sympathetic

attitudes towards Aboriginal involvement are frequently unduly simplistic, for they treat Aboriginal culture as unitary. In reality, intra-group and inter-group differences are marked.

It is also necessary to recognise and to endorse the desire of communities to retain (or to have returned) certain organic items of extreme ritual significance. Such communities need to comprehend the true nature of museums, in their various educational, research and preservation roles, and to understand that they are not simply treasure houses of sacred objects (as many do currently believe). The provision of suitably designed tribal storehouses for items of local importance might allay disquiet. Yet it would be necessary to provide separate, lockable sections in such structures, because each clan possesses distinctive secret rights and artefacts.

This means that no single 'curator' could possess rights to look upon, let alone curate items belonging to another clan within his community. Consequently, several men in such a centre should receive elementary conservation training. To train a single conservator would be to impose an unworkable and unacceptable system. Similarly, any prospective trainees must be nominated by the relevant elders and not chosen by others using outside considerations.

Obviously, even to provide elementary training for a number of persons from various centres would prove costly, and the removal of trainees from their own environment could prove detrimental to the success of the scheme. One solution is to provide training on the spot through visits by Regional Conservators based upon major museums. In this way, instruction could be adapted directly to local needs and facilities without disrupting traditional routine.

If Aboriginal confidence in the role of museums were assured through measures such as those outlined, the co-operation of traditionally oriented

informants could be sought. Visits to museums by such persons could assist better documentation of many acquisitions and provide advice on display arrangement. There are some items which could be restored by traditional craftsmen, although restoration should be resorted to only after serious consideration of the rarity or scientific value of the item.

The problem is that Aboriginal people resent the past museological philosophy which virtually assigned them a place amongst the flora and fauna, and which 'regarded (them) as a relic of the early childhood of mankind.' (Baldwin Spencer, *Guide to the Australian Ethnographical Collection in the National Museum of Victoria*, 1922, p.12.

Most of the small band of Australian conservators are located in a few major institutions, while public attention is also focussed upon them. It is important to remember that because of the prevalence of ethnographic collecting as a nineteenth century interest, many major items of Aboriginal material culture remain in private or municipal hands. In many cases their conditions of storage and conservation are even worse than those in the major institutions. Some system of regional inventories and conservation advice is an urgent need, and it would be tragic if this important segment of ethnography was neglected. Yet its maintenance depends upon a sense of responsibility and outward looking policies within major state institutions.

It is timely to reflect that museums do not live by the skills of conservators or curators alone. Unless museologists obtain the meaningful involvement of the Aboriginal people in their institutions, and put the comprehension of Aboriginal culture rather than a catalogue of its artefacts in the forefront of priorities, Australia's cultural heritage will be much the poorer.