

# Museums and Gender: an Australian Critique

by Margaret Anderson and Kylie Winkworth

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Museums everywhere interact at a number of levels with the cultures that sustain them. These levels frequently overlap and may be more or less conscious from project to project. Most obviously, museums reflect at least some aspects of their national cultures. It is also increasingly recognized that museums participate in the construction of culture, a process which again may be more conscious in some institutions than in others, or even in different exhibitions within a single institution. Occasionally museums set out to analyse the culture which has produced them, but it is still more common to find cultures other than our own analysed in Australian museums. The same institution which feels quite comfortable with exhibition texts highlighting the hierarchical structure of a Papuan village, or the

gender divisions within hunter-gatherer societies, will view with caution and suspicion an exhibition proposing to examine class or gender questions in contemporary society. Australian museums remain largely culture-affirming institutions, presenting a view of the past and present which rarely challenges that public vision termed the majority view.

But who constitutes this 'majority'? More significantly for this article, who does not? One result of this preoccupation with a 'common', 'national' or 'majority' history has been the virtual exclusion of entire cultural groups who, while they might share some aspects of a national culture, either diverge from it, or are excluded from it in significant ways. Until recently, those

excluded—or at best marginalized—in Australian museums, included: Aboriginal Australians, who rarely found their own version of history presented in exhibitions; most non-Anglo-Saxon Australians (estimated to include about 25 per cent of the population); most working-class men; and almost all women. There have been few attempts to interpret womens' lives, while gender as a specific category of analysis has rarely informed exhibitions. With few exceptions the culture reflected in Australian museums is overwhelmingly the public culture of Anglo-Saxon middle-class men—their work, their technology, their politics, their recreation.

### Haphazard collection

The seeds of this emphasis can be found in the early history of museums and exhibitions. Australians in the late nineteenth century established two kinds of museums: natural history museums (which also collected Aboriginal material culture), and science and technology museums. Like the international exhibitions which spawned them, these institutions reflected the technological optimism of the day, with its unquestioning faith in scientific progress and the attendant glorification of masculine achievement. None of these museums made any systematic attempt to preserve material evidence of European colonization. Instead, isolated 'historical' objects usually associated with early pioneers, explorers and other heroes of Australian history, filtered haphazardly into the collections of public museums, art galleries and libraries. Local historical societies also preserved relics of early settlers, mostly of prominent families, but it was not until the First World War that Australia's public men first saw the need to construct a specific Australian identity through a collecting institution. In a singular exercise in national myth-making, they created the

Australian War Memorial in Canberra,<sup>1</sup> the only historical museum to be established by the Central Australian Government until the last decade. It was to be both war historical museum and war memorial, a combination which has limited the scope of its exhibitions ever since. Sadly, the Museum of Australia, with a more general historical scope, has yet to materialize.

When other Australian museums first developed an interest in establishing historical exhibitions, they naturally turned to the amorphous collections which had accumulated in their basements. These collections, with their obvious biases, established the parameters of exhibition content. Not surprisingly women's presence in these exhibitions was often limited to costume displays or to images of home life, almost always genteel and generally grouped with children. The larger interpretive 'survey' exhibitions, which often began with European settlement (itself a comment) and worked relentlessly through to sometime after the Second World War, continued to reflect the traditional landmarks of male history. By the early 1980s, it had become important to acknowledge the persistent claims of women's history, Aboriginal history, and the history of Australia's migrant communities, and so these were added to the mix. Women's suffrage was useful here: it could be accommodated fairly easily within a male political framework, provided the whole issue of citizenship and participatory democracy was not examined too closely.<sup>2</sup> No attempt was made, however, to reassess overall exhibition strategies.

### A museum of the home?

What exhibitions in Australia have rarely attempted to capture, despite the wealth of appropriate material scattered through collections, is the fundamental importance of the home and

family life within Australian national consciousness. Changing concepts of home and family have been central to Australian social and political consciousness and to the experience of ordinary Australians. In 19<sup>th</sup> century Australia, as in the United Kingdom and the United States, concepts of political citizenship revolved around the householder and family man. The organized labour movement was inspired by a vision of the independent working man supporting 'his' family by his labour alone, the same idea enshrined today in the family wage decisions of industrial arbitration courts. Nineteenth-century Australian rhetoric portrayed women and the family as inseparable bases of social order, an image which has proved remarkably resilient. In post Second World War Australia, the vague but pervasive concept of the 'Australian way of life' revolved around powerful images of suburban life and home ownership.

This widespread domestic experience and even more widespread aspiration might have inspired a totally different way of looking at society in exhibitions—society from the inside out as it were, rather than from the outside in—but it has not. Yet this discarded model readily accommodated both women's and men's experience; it sees the domestic sphere as central to the functioning of society, rather than as peripheral to the main stage.

In other countries, museums play a vital role in cultivating a sense of national identity through the preservation and display of folk culture. Australia's nearest equivalent to folk museums of vernacular culture is the network of around 1,000 local and historical museums. These, however, do not convey any sense of national culture founded and expressed through the home. In these museums women, represented through miscellaneous domestic collections, attain at best a marginal place. The artefacts on display fail to convey the

complexity and value of women's labour. Many of these small museums view the past through a focus on pioneers. It is an idea that has strong masculine resonances: it neither acknowledges women's active contribution nor the cooperative working relationship between men and women in the bush.

### On the fringes

For all the progress that women have made in other spheres of public life they still remain on the fringes of Australian museum culture. Policy-making for our museums does not address fundamental questions of balance, equity or access to resources. The 1975 Piggot Report on Australian Museums,<sup>3</sup> which guided national museum policy in the decade following its publication, worked from the basis of already entrenched collecting interests. The Report covered in some detail questions about national maritime, aviation and railway museums, but it made no mention of women, or the home, or domestic life. Ironically, the Report was delivered during International Women's Year. The Piggot Report is sadly dated, yet it continues to inform Australian policy-making. The collecting values and patterns of the past inexorably influence work in the present, exerting tremendous pressure on display priorities, particularly the bulky transport and technology collections. Furthermore, both visible and invisible power structures in the museum and heritage industry support the continued funding of what we've come to call 'the boy's toys'. Moreover, while most major museums claim to be 'equal opportunity employers', there is little sign that hiring policies influence practice: senior museum management in Australia is overwhelmingly male.

Lacking a critique of the fundamental balance of our museums, it is difficult to fit women's culture into the traditional museum forms, such as the

technological and applied arts museums. Their animating concept of material progress is not compatible with the continuities of women's lives. Similarly, the ruling principles of connoisseurship and the conventional structures for compiling craft and applied art histories pose particular problems for locating and interpreting women's craft.<sup>4</sup>

Australia has many sophisticated historic-house museums, but they too fail to conjure up the women who lived there and the work that kept the home in operation. There are many reasons for the peculiar absence of women's domestic work in most historic-house presentations. It is difficult to make unassuming objects communicate the complexity of women's labour in the home. How can we convey the overlapping tasks and competing demands of women's time? How do we represent the home as a productive unit to a modern audience for whom the home is mainly a place of consumption? Another clue to the invisibility of women's work lies in the nature of repetitive tasks and in the production of goods with a brief 'shelf life'. A lifetime's washing and cooking leaves no monuments. Nor will working women necessarily find a place in exhibitions dealing with the labour movement. In Australia, as elsewhere, many of the industrial concessions awarded men in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were gained at the expense of women. Male trade unions actively engineered the widespread suppression of women's wages.<sup>5</sup> Unless exhibitions deal specifically with gender, women's labour history will not find a place in these displays.

### Women's labour?

But to return to an earlier point, a more fundamental reason for the invisibility of women's labour is the have yet to put women and women work at the centre of our research an

interpretive programmes. Many historic houses have become showpieces of professional expertise; interpreting the house as a home or exploring women's work and family and domestic culture have not been priorities. Perhaps this decision also reflects some of the deeper contradictions inherent in public exhibitions of private space.

Although our official government-funded museum culture has yet to recognize women and their domestic skills, other forums and structures do preserve this culture, presenting it to the public and passing it to new generations. Australia has an active network of craft guilds, some of which maintain their own collections, hold regular exhibitions, run classes and publish newsletters. Yet despite the vitality of these alternatives for maintaining and sharing women's domestic culture, there is no substitute for an equitable share of government-funded museum resources, with the status and legitimacy they bestow, and the considerable expertise in conservation and storage which they can entail.

But to finish on a brighter note, museums in Australia are beginning to reassess their priorities. There is no sign yet that the radical transformation implied in feminist criticism is about to take place, but the avenues of inquiry which might lead to this reassessment have been opened up. Museum curators and social historians are beginning to view their collections with a more critical eye and the next decade will see the expansion of material culture studies in the broadest cultural context—'things as emissaries' as Asa Briggs has put it.<sup>6</sup> There is every indication that gender as a category of analysis will be a primary focus of these studies and that the image our museums present of Australian society and of women will alter profoundly.

Notes

1. Kimberley Webber, 'Constructing Australia's Past', in P. Summerfield (ed.), *Conference of Australian Museums Associations Papers*, Perth, Western Australian Museum, 1986.
2. Carole Pateman, *The Sexual Contract*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1988.
3. Committee of Inquiry on Museums and National Collections, *Report*, Canberra, Government Printer, 1975.
4. Kylie Winkworth, 'Ways of Seeing Women's Domestic Crafts', *Hearth and Home: Women's Decorative Arts and Craft 1800–1930*, Sydney, Historic Houses Trust, 1988.
5. Raelene Frances, 'Never Done but Always Done Down', in V. Burgmann and J. Lee (eds.), *Making a Life: A People's History of Australia*, Ringwood, Penguin, 1988.
6. Asa Briggs, *Victorian Things*, London, Banford, 1988.