

ICOM Submission to Standing Committee on Communications and the Arts

22 October 2020

Committee Secretariat
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Re: Inquiry into Australia's Creative and Cultural Industries and Institutions

Dear Committee members

The International Council of Museums (ICOM) Australia is pleased to make a submission to the inquiry into Australia's creative and cultural industries and institutions.

ICOM is the largest international network of museum and heritage professionals, with more than 44,500 members around the world. The ICOM Australia Committee represents the interests of over 850 individual and institutional members, located in every state and territory of the country. We are committed to the research, preservation and communication to society of the world's natural and cultural heritage, present and future, tangible and intangible. ICOM Australia effectively provides an international voice for museum professionals in this country, complementing the work of the domestic professional association, the Australian Museums and Galleries Association (AMaGA), with whom we have a close relationship.

Museums and galleries are where **Australia's stories are collected, preserved, interpreted and shared**. In some cases, their collections are of national significance; in others they represent the interests of a specific place, community, or ethnic group. The arts, scientific and cultural heritage collections collectively held by our museums are a vital resource through which communities can celebrate, challenge, and reimagine their identities. A significant proportion of Australians engage with museums: according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), in 2017-18, 30% of Australian adults and 45% of Australian children had visited a museum at least once in the previous 12 months. However, while visitation is an oft-cited metric for assessing the impact of museums, quantitative measures alone are not sufficient for measuring the full breadth and depth of impact that our cultural organisations have on individuals and communities.

Museums and galleries are an important component of the broader arts landscape in this country. These institutions have an economic value in their own right, but are also crucial in driving creative endeavour more broadly in our country. Museums and galleries comprise one of the 12 industry groupings defined by the Australian and New Zealand Standard Industrial Classification (ANZSIC) codes as part of the Cultural and Creative Activity Satellite Accounts that are worth in total \$85.7 billion annually to the Australian economy.¹ Extending that, the wider creative industries economy was worth \$111.7 billion in 2016-17 and relies

¹ A New Approach, *Australia's Cultural and Creative Economy: a 21st Century Guide*, September 2020, p.13.

heavily on the interdependencies that exist between the creative industries domains.² It is this variegation and mutuality in the Australian arts economy which is so potentially valuable and presents an opportunity to grow jobs and affluence in coming decades. The UK writer and researcher, Professor John Holden, has described the importance of publicly funded institutions, such as museums and galleries to growing commercial opportunities in the wider creative industries sector, and specifically outlined the reciprocity that exists between public and private investments in the arts and cultural economies.

ICOM Australia notes both the challenges and the opportunities that the COVID-19 pandemic has brought to museums and other collecting organisations across Australia and the world. Many museums have looked to new ways of engaging with audiences, and have moved to digital delivery of programs and experiences. This has highlighted the need for, and value of, **sustained resources to enable opportunities in our digital futures**. It has also highlighted the critical need for **digitization of our collections** to facilitate online access and better support the preservation of our heritage. Behind this lies a myriad of stand-alone collection databases, which we now recognize **need to be more effectively connected** across communities and across Australia. This will require adequate resourcing for digital engagement and supporting infrastructure, reversing the impacts of successive funding cuts and efficiency dividends on the sector – for instance, leading to the de-funding of previous national digital initiatives such as Australian Museums Online (AMOL) and its successor the Collections Australia Network (CAN). While the cultural sector has diversified its revenue sources in the past two decades, the worldwide impact of COVID-19 on visitor generated revenue to cultural institutions has revealed the vulnerabilities of relying on such business models to support core operational needs.

The cultural sector is a **critical employer** in Australia. In 2016, Australia's cultural and creative economy was the main source of employment for 868,098 people, or more than 8 per cent of the national workforce.³ Our publicly funded cultural institutions attract local, national and international visitors (in pre-COVID times), encouraging them to stay longer and spend more in our economies. The sector provides employment in communities large and small, in every corner of Australia, both as direct employers and indirectly through the broader visitor economy. Through providing opportunities for volunteering, museums are also an important source of community connection and wellbeing for many people, particularly older Australians. Museums are the life-blood of many small and remote communities, sustaining connections to culture, and building social meaning at a collective and individual level.

Museums are also deeply trusted as sources of information and authenticity. **Investment in local and regional museums** has immediate community benefit, whether for recent graduates looking for early career opportunities or for experienced professionals looking to contribute to their own communities. This investment is also of particular benefit to First Peoples, engaging, interpreting and preserving culture within their own communities. Strengthening the cultural lives of these communities is crucial to building their resilience and promoting self-belief and worth, and in driving sustainable local economies. ICOM Australia believes that

² *Ibid*, p.12.

³ Data calculated using the 6-digit ANZSCO codes, in the ABS 2016 Census TableBuilder, based on the definition of cultural and creative economy used by BCAR to produce the Cultural and Creative Activity Satellite Accounts. It includes 43 industry classes and 132 cultural and creative occupations. (ABS 2016)

investment in local museums and galleries is vital to meeting the needs of rural and regional communities, and has important intrinsic and economic benefits.

ICOM Australia supports calls for a National Arts, Culture and Creativity Plan that can establish a strategic approach to building the creative industries economy for Australia. The example of other nations in our region and beyond, which have made long-term investments in arts and cultural domains, such as New Zealand, South Korea, Singapore and China, demonstrates the opportunities that are enabled by well-considered and thought out approaches to building creative industries economies. We believe that the signal opportunities presented by this age suggest that our national affluence will increasingly depend on the quality of our ideas and creative thinking, and that this must be addressed by coherent and whole of Government action to drive and exploit opportunities in this sector. Only a comprehensive and strategic national plan can achieve this.

More specifically, **ICOM Australia proposes the creation of a Federal peak agency to represent the interests of, and develop policy and programs in support of, the nation's cultural heritage activity**, and more specifically to address the concerns of the museum and gallery sector in this country. Such a body would need to be consistently resourced, rather than relying on additional voluntary efforts of individuals. This could also be responsible for the distribution of resources in turn, to ensure the sector is ready to meet the new challenges and opportunities of the digital age, while at the same time preserving our heritage and supporting deep and effective community engagement. Unlike other spheres of arts and cultural endeavour that lie within the interest of the Australia Council, there is no similar national body that deals with the needs of our great collecting institutions and allied local and regional institutions that promote creativity and knowledge of our environment and society. Such a body would ensure that the needs of the sector were well-understood at a national level, and would promote policy and objectives to exploit the social and economic opportunities that museums and galleries present. It would address a significant gap that exists in the arts and cultural sector in this country, and bring Australian into line with other comparative economies in our region and beyond.

Productively, such a body might also draw together the interests of built heritage and moveable cultural heritage which have been separated at a Federal level for some time. The divide between the Department of Arts responsibilities for moveable cultural heritage and the Environment Department's responsibilities for built heritage is arbitrary and does not take account of the natural connections between these two fields, especially in relation to scientific and cultural heritage collections in museums. A new national body might usefully draw stronger connection between these heritage fields, which are usefully connected in other jurisdictions around the world.

Museums and galleries have never been more needed by our communities than they have been in this year of crisis. In the summer of bushfires and more recently through COVID-19, our nation's museums and galleries – great and small – have worked to sustain communities through their work, reminding them of essential human values and demonstrating an unstinting commitment to fortifying and sustaining our civic life. In many cases, they have preserved the idea of our common interests and values, and in being quick to re-open after the COVID-19 national lockdown they encouraged people to recover their lives and move forward. It is critical that in considering our future needs in the creative and cultural industries sector we understand the importance of our museums and galleries in pump-priming activity in allied arts and cultural fields. They are the foundations upon which much

of the strength of Australia's arts and cultural life depends, but they need support after years of relative funding decline to ensure their vitality and sustainability into the future.

For its part, **ICOM Australia is ready to play its part in helping to develop and extend the practice and capability of museums and galleries in this country.** It is committed to enhancing the professional lives of its membership and ensuring that the nation has the talent and skill in this sector to equal any in the world. We are ready to provide advice and support for action to address the proposals made above, and will continue to work on behalf of our members and the sector more broadly, in the service of the national interest.

ICOM Australia National Committee