

## **Submission to the Senate Select Committee on COVID-19**

ICOM Australia is pleased to make this submission to the Senate Select Committee inquiring into the Australian Government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The International Council of Museums (ICOM) is committed to the research, preservation and communication to society of the world's natural and cultural heritage, present and future, tangible and intangible. Internationally we have more than 44,500 members.

The ICOM Australia Committee is one of 119 national committees and represents the interests of over 850 local members. 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. ICOM Australia makes this submission drawing from ICOM's Code of Ethics, which establishes internationally accepted benchmarks and standards of excellence in museums.

ICOM Australia regards the development, documentation, preservation and representation of heritage collections as being a common good at the heart of civil society. We proceed from a fundamental view that the people own museum collections and the knowledge of those collections. While Governments at Federal, State and Local level have formal responsibilities to protect culture in the common interest, all who work in the museum and gallery sector share a commitment to provide for the safety of heritage collections, and maximise their public value and future use.

## **The impact of the crisis on museums and galleries**

The COVID-19 crisis has demanded very great changes and alterations in the way we live, some with short term impact but many others which will have lasting effects on Australian society. In the first instance, the pandemic has required Australian Federal, State and Territory governments to take drastic measures to limit the spread of the virus, and in particular to enforce restrictions on movement and association of peoples. For this, they are to be congratulated, as Australia has largely escaped the widespread contagion that has caused thousands of deaths in other countries. But the necessary consequences of these measures, of social distancing, of work from home and the closure of places where people naturally gather, including museums, has been far-reaching. Australians have isolated themselves from one another and community activities have reduced to a bare minimum as the emphasis turned to working and schooling at home.

ICOM Australia believes that museums and galleries have responded to the challenges of COVID-19 in ways that have helped to preserve public health and safety, while continuing to find ways of connecting and engaging with audiences across the country and overseas. In the period when restrictions were put in place, museums and galleries thoughtfully and deliberately closed their doors to communicate the importance of social distancing and protecting individuals from the virus. They immediately turned their attention to enhancing their digital and online services in ways that allowed them to maintain their obligations to serve the public.

Museums' digital 'pivot' in service delivery proved invaluable for parents schooling their children at home, for adults who wanted to find arts and cultural experiences online and for those who wanted

to express their own views about the impact of COVID-19 on their lives. It is also worth noting the increased value of on-line collections databases for tertiary teaching and research. The restrictions put in place to manage COVID-19 have meant that on-line content has become far more searched and considered as primary source material, and also enabled the identification of new opportunities for research and collaborative partnerships.

The impact of the COVID-19 measures on the arts and cultural sector has been profound, with many practitioners, companies and organisations in the visual and performing arts suffering well-documented, significant losses that threaten the ongoing sustainability of these practices. Similarly, all museums and galleries throughout the country have been forced to close their doors to protect the community from the virus, and have consequently lost major sources of own-source income, notwithstanding continued funding from Federal, State and Territory governments.

ICOM Australia is concerned that the impact of these financial losses may be felt disproportionately by early career professionals in the museum and gallery sector. Younger and early career staff are over-represented in the numbers of casual and contract workers engaged by museums, and so their conditions of employment leave them more vulnerable to the inevitable cost-cutting that will come from revenue losses. We note, therefore, that there is especial need for revenue shortfalls to be made good to ensure a generation of young museum workers are not lost to the industry.

Moreover, it is also the case that Australia's major museums and galleries are fundamental to arts ecologies that incorporate significant privately-run businesses which depend upon these institutions' operations. For instance, all major museums and galleries have catering and retail services for the public that are generally fulfilled by lessees that employ their own staff and operate effectively as independent entities.

Museums and galleries are also major buyers of works of art and artefacts, and many arts organisations, particularly in rural and remote Indigenous communities, depend upon this market. The closure of museums and galleries, and the reduction of budgets due to loss of income, has therefore had an immediate and mordant effect on the capacity of these businesses and arts centres to sustain their operations.

### **Change and opportunity**

The impact of the crisis has had some unexpected consequences. Many major museums and galleries have moved to digital delivery of programs and experiences as they were forced to close their doors, and in some respects the sector has seen the adoption of digital communications technologies in a relatively short period of time, that might otherwise have taken much longer. This is a manifest opportunity for museums and galleries that are keepers of a vast cultural heritage estate comprising art, artefacts and archives which are otherwise generally available to the public via exhibitions and other programming onsite.

ICOM Australia believes that as the nation emerges from the restrictions that were put in place to protect us collectively, museums and galleries have a special role to play in helping inspire public confidence and encourage a return to normal activities. Museums and galleries are fundamental institutions in our society, and are deeply enmeshed in the social, political and economic spheres of human endeavour. Museums and their collections have intrinsic values which sustain our civic culture and reinforce social cohesion, they communicate important information and experiences to their publics, and they underpin cultural endeavour and creative industries with clear economic value. Moreover, they enjoy a very high level of public trust and confidence.

The position of museums and galleries as trusted organisations makes them especially useful as their return to normal operations can help people overcome their own uncertainties about the residual or latent threat of the virus in Australia as the recovery begins. These organisations are well-run and highly managed and can proceed carefully and deliberately to welcome visitors to their public galleries and related services, in ways that allow for the gradual lifting of restrictions and the effective monitoring of the impacts of those changes. It is especially important, we think, that the return to operation of such institutions, which are seen as fundamental to the operation of civil society, proceeds with the support and encouragement of governments everywhere.

ICOM Australia is of the strong view that governments in all jurisdictions should support the return to normal operations at all museums and galleries as a way of re-investing in the public realm and building confidence in our society. Financial assistance and support for these organisations is an effective way of rebuilding community life and enhancing a return to principles of public exchange and value, in ways that can be highly managed and controlled over time.

### **Support needed**

ICOM Australia considers that public sector support for museums and galleries is needed as part of a comprehensive industry wide package, or packages, which can assist arts and cultural organisations' survival. Without such emergency support, it is likely that museums and galleries will need to reduce staff and programs to meet budget. Ultimately, this will impact upon these institutions' public value and result in audiences being left with a lesser service – at the precise time that access to cultural experiences and information could do much to assist the community's recovery from the crisis.

The move to digital delivery has made even more apparent the need for a comprehensive national plan to provide digital discovery and access to the cultural heritage collections of Australia. Whereas the natural heritage collections of the nation are now discoverable and knowable through the national 'Atlas of Living Australia' database, no analogous or similar digital access is enabled for our cultural heritage collections. Given the very great investment the nation is making in the NBN, consideration should now be given to the creation of a suitable digital platform for these collections of Australian experience and society.

### **Recommendations**

ICOM Australia recommends that Australian governments at all levels develop comprehensive plans to assist museums and galleries that are suffering significant financial losses due to the COVID-19 pandemic, as part of wider arts and cultural industry packages to maintain employment and viability of our vital arts and cultural sector.

Moreover, we recommend that governments actively support the nation's museums and galleries in fulfilling their social role as centres of our civic life and society at this time. Museums and galleries can assist directly in the national recovery from the pandemic lockdown, and build social confidence and cohesion when it is most needed.

We also recommend the development of a comprehensive national plan to provide digital discovery and access to the vast cultural heritage collections of Australia. The crisis has made clear that museums and galleries can use digital technologies effectively to deliver enhanced services to the

public, and to enable creativity and cultural development in the community more generally, if they are properly resourced to do so.

ICOM Australia stands ready to assist in helping our museums and galleries, and the national community more generally, to recover from the pandemic and develop the value of these organisations' work in the years ahead.

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