

UNESCO and cultural heritage practice in Australia in the 1950s: The international touring exhibition *Australian Aboriginal Culture, 1948-55*

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Abstract This article investigates aspects of the production, dissemination and consumption of UNESCO's first international touring exhibition, *Australian Aboriginal Culture*, in order to explore the relationship between UNESCO and Australia in the development of a key cultural heritage program. It argues that the exhibition indicates a national and international spirit of universalism that attempted to address cross-cultural ignorance in a period of post-war optimism.

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Introduction

In the 1940s the Commonwealth of Australia was an enthusiastic supporter of the establishment of the United Nations and a keen participant in its fledgling committees. In 1946 and 1947 Australia served on the Security Council and the following year was elected to the Economic and Social Council (until 1951), which oversaw the work of UNESCO. A perception prevailed in the Australian government that membership of the United Nations would enhance international contact (Jones & Symon 1987: 2–3). However, in an atmosphere of post-war reconstruction, the left-leaning Labor Government advocated a socially progressive role for the organisation. Its principal Australian spokesman, Dr Evatt, was also the Minister for External Affairs and President of the 1948 UN General Assembly. Evatt stressed that the organisation ought to be more than just a diplomatic forum; he believed it should be focused on 'bringing about social and economic well-being' (Jones & Symon 1987: 3). The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) upheld the UN's idealistic spirit, as did members of its Australian committees.

This article investigates aspects of the production, dissemination and consumption of UNESCO's first international touring exhibition, *Australian Aboriginal Culture*, in order to explore the relationship between UNESCO and Australia in the development of a key cultural heritage program. It focuses on the context in which the representation of Aboriginal people occurred in this period, seeking to unearth what it was that the Australian government wanted to project about Australian identity through its support of this exhibition.

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The examination here highlights a juxtaposition of conservative local tradition with UNESCO's universalistic ideals. The notion that the representation of Indigenous people in museums was a legacy of colonial policy that commonly belittled Aboriginal people and excluded them from the prevailing conception of Australian national identity is now a widely accepted understanding of museological history. In the 1950s this tradition sat quite uncomfortably alongside the agenda of UNESCO, which included the promotion of programs that aimed to break down cultural ignorance and racial intolerance in an emerging post-colonial world.

A surprising aspect of the exhibition *Australian Aboriginal Culture* is that although these two trajectories – global concerns and local heritage practice – may potentially have been in conflict, the exhibition nevertheless took place, albeit with a lengthy period of gestation. Significantly, a study of the historical context in which this exhibition was developed provides an opportunity to examine the relationship between UNESCO and Australia in this period and to gain some sense of how this exhibition reflected both universal ideals and ideas about local cultural identity.

The *Australian Aboriginal Culture* exhibition

Conceived in 1948, *Australian Aboriginal Culture* was the first exhibition prepared by a Member State and offered through UNESCO for circulation to other Member States (McCann Morley 1953: 283). Its origins lay in the Australian UNESCO Museum Committee's response to a resolution from the Second UNESCO General Conference in 1948:

4.4.2 To stimulate and promote and to develop a plan for organized exchanges of exhibitions and collections, including in particular, the international circulation of UNESCO exhibitions of contemporary works of art accompanied by appropriate catalogues, such exhibitions to be prepared if possible by Member States, National Commissions or Co-operating Bodies, and appropriate professional organizations (McCann Morley 1949b: 11).

At the second committee meeting, members politely began by considering 'if there were any exhibitions already resulting from UNESCO's activities which might possibly be brought to Australia'. But this in turn inspired a moment of national pride. George Mack, the Director of the Queensland Museum, interjected, and 'said that we could hardly expect the exchange of exhibitions to be one-sided; we should try to do something ourselves in our own country and send exhibitions abroad.' Herbert Hale, Director of the South Australian Museum, quickly added that 'we could probably make quite a good exhibit out of available ethnological material' (Australian UNESCO Museum Committee 1948). This was the moment of conception of the first tangible project undertaken through the Australian UNESCO Museum Committee.

Although it was conceived in 1948, there was a significant time lag before the exhibition commenced a tour of the United States in 1953. This was a year before the Soviet Bloc joined UNESCO. Given the growing alliance between Australia and the United States, the choice of destination was not surprising. The tour began at the Buffalo Museum of Science where the opening coincided with the annual general meeting of the American Association of Museums, attended by approximately 300 museum workers (McCann Morley 1953: 83). This opening was a strategic success and there were over twenty-five requests from museums to host the exhibition (McCann Morley 1953: 84). At the end of the US tour in 1955 an official report estimated that over 250 000 people had visited the exhibition at fourteen venues, including university, public, natural history and art museums (San Francisco Museum of Art, n.d.). The tour continued to Canada and upon returning to Australia, the exhibition commenced touring Australian museums.

While the attendance figure may seem modest by the standards of today's blockbuster exhibitions, the exhibition is pertinent to the discussion of Australian cultural heritage

programming in the immediate post-war period, in particular to museum practice. The exhibition can be situated at the intersection of two major museological discourses. On one trajectory, the exhibition is the product of the nexus between the mission of UNESCO and local heritage practice. It embodies shared ideas concerning the role and function of museums and galleries and the mission of the United Nations. On another trajectory, the local heritage practice that initiated and developed this exhibition can be situated within a tradition of the representation of Aboriginal people in Australian museum and gallery programs and the historical context that has shaped that process.

UNESCO and the role of museums

By interpreting local Indigenous cultural artifacts and information to the citizens of another Member State, *Australian Aboriginal Culture* reflected a philosophical position, shared by Australian and international members of UNESCO, that bestowed significant importance on both museums and the international exchange of exhibitions. Two of the pivotal figures asserting this position were Grace McCann Morley and Arthur de Ramon Penfold. McCann Morley was the first head of the Museum Division of UNESCO. She had been seconded from her position as Director of the San Francisco Museum of Art, and was tenured in Paris between 1946 and 1949 (Dwivedi 1980: iv). McCann Morley oversaw the foundation of the magazine *Museum*, a key publication that focused on museum principles and practices for both developed and developing nations, which became a key conduit in the UNESCO museology network for the next fifty years. When her UNESCO tenure concluded, McCann Morley returned to the San Francisco Museum of Art where between 1953 and 1955 she managed the tour of the exhibition *Australian Aboriginal Culture*. Arthur de Ramon Penfold was the President of the Art Galleries and Museums Association of Australia and New Zealand and a member of the international advisory board of *Museum*. Penfold took part in the official Australian delegation to the Second UNESCO General Conference in Mexico City. He was also an influential figure in the professional Australian museum scene in this period and had the ear of local governments.

The position McCann Morley and Penfold took asserted the educational role of museums and their ability and social obligation to engage a wide range of people. In 1947 Penfold advanced the case for a greater educational role for museums in the process of post-war reconstruction. In a magazine published by the New South Wales Premier's Department he wrote:

Museums are now entering a golden age, if they grasp the opportunity presented to them to-day through workers' demands for reduced hours and increased time for leisure. They must eventually become the foremost instruments for both adult and visual education (Penfold 1947: 53).

McCann Morley may have applauded the ambitious role that Penfold had advocated. In 1949 she optimistically suggested that museum development involved 'an active movement to become part of the general system of education and to bring the majority in a democratic world, a heaven of culture and knowledge' (McCann Morley 1949b: 20). This democratising sentiment was most emphatically articulated in UNESCO's optimistic public campaign, titled the 'Crusade for Museums', and the accompanying clarion call: 'museums in the service of all' (Leveille 1949: 197–198). Museums were seen to be of value to the work of UNESCO primarily as instruments of education, and touring exhibitions were identified as a key means of ensuring museums achieved UNESCO's mission.

It is clear that Australian museum practitioners shared a similar set of ideas about the role of museum exhibitions as a means for the dissemination of knowledge and the enhancement of cross-cultural awareness. A central practitioner with a similar belief in the ability of exhibitions to communicate effectively was the Australian Museum-based anthropologist Frederick McCarthy, who became the principal curator of the exhibition *Australian Aboriginal Culture*. He wrote in 1946:

There can be no doubt that museum exhibits, properly displayed, promote an understanding of the philosophy of life and of the social and economic problems of foreign peoples. Moreover, they prompt study of such subjects among the general public. The knowledge thus gained helps to eradicate ignorance and prejudice, and contributes to mutual understanding and co-operation. This is one of the ways in which museums of anthropology can justify their existence on more than purely academic or cultural grounds (McCarthy 1946: 30).

In line with the idealistic goals of UNESCO and the United Nations, one of the committee's stated underlying purposes was to 'advance the mutual understanding of peoples' (Australian National Committee for UNESCO 1953). Another was:

...to pay tribute to the ancient culture of this minority group, to express the hope that it will receive the recognition it deserves, and to emphasise the importance of preserving a permanent record of a culture which is inevitably being modified through contact with Western civilisation (Australian National Committee for UNESCO 1953).

Furthermore, McCann Morley presented the exhibition as a model of what could be achieved by other countries (McCann Morley 1953: 283–4).

There was thus a shared tradition underpinning the confidence McCann Morley and McCarthy had in the potential of exhibitions to 'eradicate ignorance and prejudice'. Seemingly too, they were both committed to the ideal. But the Australian UNESCO Museum Committee and its touring exhibition were both also shaped by the local conditions in which they existed.

Universal values and local policy

Given its stature as the first exhibition developed by a Member State for circulation through UNESCO, *Australian Aboriginal Culture* has received surprisingly scant scholarly attention. For example, in a biographical 'appreciation' of Frederick D. McCarthy, its principal curator, the exhibition is not mentioned at all, even though during a long and influential career as a museum anthropologist McCarthy seems not to have worked on any other international touring exhibitions (Khan 1993: 1–5). It is likely that recent scholars of museology have underplayed this exhibition because it is seen to owe too much to a tradition of colonial anthropology and its perceived racist tendencies.

Recently an historian has focused on an aspect of this exhibition for precisely this reason. Lynette Russell appreciated the role of the 1953 exhibition catalogue in presenting a view of Aboriginal people and has investigated the sustained interest in it. Remarkably, a second edition was published in 1973 and a third edition appeared as late as 1989. Russell's analysis of these publications looks at the transformation of the text from one to the next over a thirty-year period. In discussing the changes she demonstrates shifts in perspective in anthropological practice in Australia (Russell 2001: 75–9). Nevertheless, despite the value of her literary analysis, the exhibition itself disappeared from view. It was dislocated from the second edition of the booklet in 1973. Whilst the first publication in 1953 was a true catalogue that comprehensively documented each display panel of the exhibition, the second edition made little mention of the exhibition but adopted a similar thematic structure. Generic photographs were substituted for the exhibition display panels, which had featured not just text but objects, illustrations and photographs (Australian National Commission for UNESCO 1973).

The neglect of this exhibition from a museological perspective is therefore worth exploring further, particularly where there has been an investigation of the relationship between anthropology and the representation of Aboriginal people in museums in

Australia. In 1996 Donna McAlear wrote a groundbreaking article for the publication *Museums and Citizenship: A Resource Book* (Bennett, Trotter & McAlear 1996), about the challenge to public museums by contemporary Indigenous interests. In summarising the tradition of the representation of Indigenous people in museums McAlear discussed the legacy of 'the museum age of anthropology 1880–1920'. She argued that 'the savage paradigm' established during that period survived virtually unchanged until the 1960s. In her view any change of attitude towards Aboriginal heritage during this period was modest and in the most part driven by a new-found Australian nationalism, which responded to the unchecked exportation of heritage material. This led to some early protectionist legislation (Customs Act 1901 and the Crown Lands Consolidation Act of 1913) (McAlear 1996: 98–100) but overall, she argued, that change was negligible.

From the perspective of late twentieth-century reconciliation in which McAlear writes, *Australian Aboriginal Culture* can indeed hardly be considered a model of best practice, largely because the project completely lacked consultation with Indigenous people – an omission that has become deeply unfashionable in contemporary museological practice. Furthermore, systemic conservatism may well be evident in Australian museum practice in the 1950s, in so far as the members of the Australian UNESCO Museum Committee were *metropolitan* museum directors who had come to prominence in the inter-war years. These men belonged to an earlier generation. For example, Penfold had been appointed to his directorship in 1927 with no museological training (McKern 1981: 329). Added to this were systemic structural and resource problems within Australian museums that gave the impression of inertia (Mulvaney 1993: 7; McCarthy 1982: 34–7).

Even so, close examination of changes in Australian museology in the 1940s and 1950s, including the exhibition *Australian Aboriginal Culture*, suggests the possibility that the unification of contemporary museological and anthropological practice was slowly unfolding from the 1920s to the 1960s. The Australian Museum, for example, had appointed the first trained anthropology staff in Australia in the 1930s, an important recognition that the narrow museum interpretation of Aboriginal cultures solely within a natural history paradigm was not satisfactory (McCarthy 1982: 23–4). Frustratingly, McAlear sites just one example from the period, a passage from the *Australian Museum Magazine* from 1957 that she suggests 'indicates the biased state of knowledge available to Sydney museum goers just forty years ago' (McAlear 1996: 80). *Australian Aboriginal Culture* was probably the largest and most significant project concerning the representation of Australian Indigenous people in the 1950s, and it can be situated within a process of the reappraisal of Aboriginal material culture in museums that had been happening for some time.

In this exhibition Aboriginal life and culture were presented in a more complex way than purely within a natural history paradigm. The exhibition made use of a nomenclature which included 'art'. For example, McCarthy wrote in the catalogue of Indigenous Australians that 'art expresses their social and religious beliefs' (Australian National Committee for UNESCO 1953). This shift in perspective had grown from the 1920s when alongside anthropological museum interpretation (epitomised by the diorama), scholars and curators began to graft on western art historical concepts and terminology. Within this new paradigm some artefacts that might have been collected for scientific reasons were re-categorised as Aboriginal *art*.

To differentiate the exhibition from previous museum practice, it is necessary to look at this evolving representational trajectory. In 1929 the National Museum of Victoria held an exhibition entitled *Australian Aboriginal Art*. The post-war museum Director, R. T. M. Prescott (a member of the Australian UNESCO Museum Committee), subsequently described the exhibits included in this exhibition. He wrote that the exhibition included 'a great variety of decorated implements, ceremonial objects, personal ornaments and bark paintings, together with rock-shelter drawings and paintings and casts of rock engravings from various parts of Australia' (Prescott 1947: 3). This was quite an

extensive mixture of decorated objects displayed under a broad umbrella. After the war the museum again wrestled with an appropriate scheme for the ethnographic collection and it was reorganised for the new *Baldwin Spencer Hall of Australian Ethnology*. Whilst elements of the dioramas survived, art was still an important theme, as according to Prescott, when the Hall opened in 1947 'a great amount of Australian Aboriginal Art is to be seen on display' (Prescott 1947: 3).

Another term, developed at the Australian Museum in Sydney, was *Australian Aboriginal Decorative Art*. This was the title of F. D. McCarthy's 1938 Australian Museum publication. A. B. Walkom, Director of the Australian Museum and another key member of the Australian UNESCO Museum Committee, wrote in the preface to second edition of this book, published after the war in 1948:

During the interval since the last publication of the first edition, interest in the art of the aborigines has spread, and the subject has been incorporated in art courses of the Technical Colleges and Teachers' College, students of these colleges visiting the Museum galleries regularly. Designs based on Australian aboriginal art motifs have been widely used by architects, interior decorators and commercial artists, and the Museum display of collections illustrating this primitive art is of service in this direction (Walkom 1948).

Walkom recognised that the decorative motifs used in Aboriginal art and designs were in vogue, and were being used by mainstream designers as a source. He also identified both educational institutions and museums as key agents in the dissemination of information about Aboriginal culture. Museums particularly were at least an important source of inspiration.

In the post-war period there was also a great deal of interest in Aboriginal wall paintings and archaeological sites. The Australian UNESCO Museum Committee discussed the need for the protection of Aboriginal archaeological sites in 1949. They expressed concern 'over the failure of authorities in Australia to take adequate steps to protect Aboriginal carving, burial grounds and other places which might fall under the heading of archaeological sites' (Australian UNESCO Museum Committee 1949). In Melbourne, Charles Mountford promoted the significance of Aboriginal sites in the Arnhem Land plateau, which he had surveyed and later described as 'remarkable art galleries' (Mountford 1950: 4). With Mountford's encouragement the painter, James Cant, used sketches and photographs to interpret the cave paintings for a series of his own paintings and these were exhibited in London in 1950. With a growing interest in 'Primitive Art' and abstraction in Europe, the interest in wall paintings reached a summit in 1954 with the publication of the book, *Australia: Aboriginal Paintings – Arnhem Land*, which was published as volume number 2 in the monumental UNESCO World Art Series.

By 1964, as McAlear suggested, the natural history paradigm had clearly broken down in some quarters, as R. M. Berndt observed:

Australian Aboriginal art is becoming better known these days, or at least more widely known, than ever before. Once it was relegated to the ethnological section of a museum, and treated along with artifacts and material objects of other non-literate peoples. Now it is not unusual to find such things as Aboriginal bark paintings taking their place alongside European and other examples of aesthetic expression (Berndt 1964: 1).

It can be argued that all official cultural production is to some extent biased. Nevertheless, a closer examination of this exhibition is desirable, not least because it illustrates both the idealistic atmosphere in which it was conceived and organised, and developments in museological practice that it embodied.

As we have seen it is likely that an international museological discourse was shared

across national boundaries through professional networks like the advisory board of *Museum*, but this does not account for the objectives, contents or interpretation of subject matter, which were in the main shaped locally. While the United Nations promoted universal values, including key principles such as the recognition of human rights and a concern for standards of living, these values may have been variously interpreted in local cultural heritage programs, especially where there was a high concern with national identity. For example, according to the cultural historian Richard White, the Australian way of life in the 1950s was associated with 'racial exclusiveness and intolerance' (White 1981: 61), a powerful spine that provided a bulwark against social change from without and distinction from the other within. This way of life was exactly the sort of cultural behaviour discouraged by UNESCO.

McAlear and White have pointed to examples of social realities that appear inconsistent with the rhetoric of universalistic idealism. Certainly in 1949 a political change occurred that might have muddied the enthusiasm expressed by members of the Australian UNESCO Museum Committee the year before. The Labor Party-led Federal Government of Australia, which had been proactive at the United Nations, was replaced by Robert Menzies' newly constituted Liberal Party. The change of Government offered an opportunity for reappraisal. However even while this occurred on the brink of the Korean War, there is no evidence so far to suggest that the Liberal Government directly questioned the purpose of the exhibition or retarded its development. In fact, although work proceeded slowly, during 1951 the Australian UNESCO Museum Committee received notification that the Treasury had approved their request for additional £2 850 in funds to meet the projected cost of the production (Australian UNESCO Museum Committee 1952). The exhibition transcended party politics to be deemed by both parties as of national significance.

While there might have been no clear political reason for the government to distance itself from UNESCO during this period, perhaps because the Organization was an almost exclusively western alliance, there may have been concerns about the relationships between cultural heritage programs, national identity, and Aboriginal affairs. In this respect however political change may have worked in favor of the exhibition's survival as it brought new blood into a position of relevant political influence. Paul Hasluck (later Governor-General) was the new Liberal member for the West Australian seat of Curtin, and he was surprisingly well-equipped to negotiate the relationship between universal values and local cultural policy. He was the Australian representative to the United Nations between 1946 and 1947 and, when a journalist in the 1930s, he had written sympathetically on Aboriginal affairs. In 1942 he had published his university masters thesis *Black Australians: a history of opinion and policy in Western Australia*. According to his own recollections, his 'dream' was to go on to study anthropology at Sydney University with Professor A. Elkin, but the war intervened (Hasluck 1994: 62).

We can therefore assume a degree of sympathy for both the fledgling United Nations and the urgent state of Aboriginal affairs from Hasluck, who after 1949 was a member of the Federal Government. In the late 1940s, he had presented a general rationale for involvement with the United Nations, here reprinted in the *1949 Herald Yearbook*:

The justification for what Australia has done is surely in the sense of the opening words of the Charter, the test whether it will help to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war, to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, to establish conditions under which justice and law will prevail, and to promote better standards of life. That is why the nations joined together in a world organisation, and everything we do as a member must stand the test of serving those ends (Hasluck 1949: 11).

This was an ambitious set of principles. So how were these broad idealistic goals interpreted in local policy? As far as the Aboriginal people were concerned the emerging philosophical thrust of Government policy in the forties and fifties was the

concept of assimilation. At best this could be said to have had ambiguous relationship with cultural heritage preservation. Nevertheless, the influential anthropologist Professor A. Elkin championed of the idea of 'assimilation' (Commonwealth of Australia 1967: 44) and he also emphasised aesthetics and the central role of personal expression in the production of Aboriginal art (Elkin 1964: 11). Elkin argued that Aboriginal creativity was not restricted by tradition, Aboriginal culture was more fluid than had been acknowledged and it changed, in part through leadership. As Federal Minister for Territories in 1951, Hasluck promoted the idea of assimilation at the first inter-governmental meeting of Aboriginal affairs Ministers, echoing his hero:

We know that culture is not static but that it either changes or dies. We know that the idea of progress, once so easily derided, has the germ of truth about it. Assimilation does not mean the suppression of the Aboriginal culture but rather that, for generation after generation, cultural adjustment will take place. The native people will grow into the society in which, by force of history, they are bound to live (Commonwealth of Australia 1967: 44).

Whilst there is no evidence of a direct link between Hasluck and the Australian UNESCO Museum Committee, this speech resonates with the final paragraph of the catalogue to the exhibition *Australian Aboriginal Culture*, published two years later. Under the heading, 'The Aborigines' New World' the catalogue states:

Government policies have changed from the old attitude of protection of the aborigines to one of consideration for their welfare in an attempt to raise their social status. Special attention is being given to their diet, health, housing and the sanitation of their camps; to their education and vocational training; and to all other matters which help them to become assimilated into the Australian community as a whole (Australian Aboriginal Culture 1953).

Conclusion

Although the development of this exhibition was inspired by the ideals of UNESCO, it occurred in the midst of a transition in the policies concerned with the management of Aboriginal people from one of protection to one of assimilation. This suggests that the exhibition *Australian Aboriginal Culture* is very pertinent to a broader discussion of the role of cultural heritage programs. Although it was born of universalistic ideals, it was developed in the face of a complex homogenising nationalism, which now recognised that the Aborigines were not likely to just die out. Political change around 1950 may potentially have placed the members of the Australian UNESCO Museum Committee in a very invidious position, but it did not halt the development of the exhibition; if anything it may have given it a more overt and clear purpose.

It could be hypothesised that the international spirit of universalism underpinned an attempt to address cross-cultural ignorance through an official cultural heritage program in a period of post-war optimism.

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