

Showcasing our collections – the Distributed National Collection Project

Phillipa Tocker describes a key strategic initiative for Museums Aotearoa which will raise the profile of collections as heritage assets of national value both individually and cumulatively

Our national arts, culture and heritage collections are distributed among a wide range of organisations throughout NZ. Museums Aotearoa and major museums and art galleries are collaborating to identify and present the 'best' of these in a touring exhibition, book and website.

THE ORIGINS OF THE PROJECT

In 2003 and 2004 Museums Aotearoa undertook nationwide consultation on a strategic vision for the museum sector. This was a museum and art gallery initiative towards the sector "working to a united vision and ready to provide museum services that are relevant, inspiring and accessible" (Museums Aotearoa, 2005 p.9).

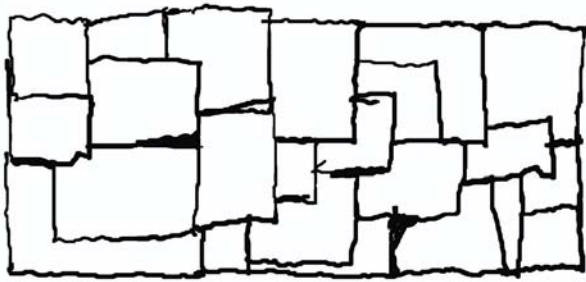
The resulting document, *A Strategy for the Museum Sector in New Zealand*, was published in 2005, and was described in *Te Ara* (Tanner, 2005) and is downloadable

from the Museums Aotearoa website. It is a strategy for us as a sector to, among other things,

- promote our collections
- work collaboratively across the sector
- improve access both within the collecting community and for the public
- fulfil our changing role as an active part of our communities.

The *Strategy* addressed the controversial question of the recognition of nationally significant collections that are held in diverse museum institutions. This issue had been debated by our museums, galleries and other collecting institutions for decades. The *Strategy* acknowledged that the issue of significance has the potential to be divisive, but was concerned that: "there is no coordinated strategy to ensure the preservation of the nation's cultural material or to facilitate broader physical and intellectual access to it" (Museums Aotearoa, 2005 p.12). It is noted also that in a climate of continuing resource constraints, and greater emphasis on public programmes in museums, the work of "developing and sharing our collections has not been at the top of museums' agenda in recent years" (Museums Aotearoa, 2005 p.12).

This problem was further investigated and defined in a 2006 report by the Auditor-General's office on the care of heritage collections in local museums and galleries, which highlighted collection facilities, documentation and access to collection information and archives, as areas which are under-funded and difficult to prioritise (Office of the Auditor-General, 2006).



museums aotearoa 2006

Figure 1. More than the sum of their parts: artist's image created for MA06 conference, Museums as a central focus of community life

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT: MARTIN POPPLEWELL.

The *Strategy* proposed a fundamental shift in attitudes that would transform museum users' experience:

"if they were seen as a single common resource, New Zealand's museum collections would add up to much more than the sum of their parts" (Museums Aotearoa, 2005 p.12) (figure 1).

This was not to suggest changes of location or ownership, but envisioned much improved access to basic collection information for museum users and professionals.

THE DIGITAL DIMENSION

The museum sector *Strategy* also looked at digital technology in museums – or more especially the relative lack of it. The *New Zealand Digital Strategy* was out in draft form at the time, and foreshadowing the later *Digital Content Strategy*, the museum *Strategy* saw an opportunity

"where, by promoting and improving the digital content relating to its heritage collections, the museum sector could work towards the goal of increasing its visibility and relevance" (Museums Aotearoa, 2005 p.13).

REALITY CHECK

Of course the museum sector *Strategy* also identified a number of challenges to these lofty aims, including:

- resources
- uneven skills and capacity
- rights and permissions, and the need for consultation, for instance with iwi
- integrity of information
- on-going upkeep of online information, that is sustainability beyond initial digitisation.

Many of these challenges resonate throughout the 'GLAM' sector (as galleries, libraries, archives, museums are sometimes collectively referred to, along with terms such as cultural heritage, heritage information etc) and beyond...

Notwithstanding these acknowledged issues and challenges, the *Strategy* proposed that "the sector adopts the notion of a 'distributed national collection'", and at the 2005 Museums Aotearoa conference, the *Strategy* was strongly endorsed by the sector.

"The aim in creating the new concept for New Zealand of there being a 'distributed national collection' is to increase the community's knowledge, enjoyment and appreciation of New Zealand's heritage through its collections." (Museums Aotearoa, 2005, p.21)

The challenge we now face is putting this concept into practice. The *Strategy* asserts:

"Museums and their curatorial staff will need to work together across organisational boundaries to ensure that [the nation's heritage objects] are properly conserved and readily accessible to New Zealanders, by the innovative use of displays and exhibitions as well as using new access methods such as virtual technology." (Museums Aotearoa, 2005, p.22)

In mid-2006, Museums Aotearoa convened a meeting of museum and art gallery directors, and representatives of the wider 'GLAM' sector, including Alexander Turnbull Library, Archives New Zealand, and the Ministry for Culture and Heritage. It was agreed that a 'treasures' exhibition, a major touring showcase for our wonderful collections, would be a powerful way of bringing them into greater prominence – of offering the public a chance to engage directly with at least some of our 'distributed national collection'. Such an exhibition would be accompanied by a book, a website, perhaps a TV series or documentary. It could be followed by satellite exhibitions in smaller centres, to temporarily 'distribute' some of the collections more widely.

FROM NOTIONAL TO NATIONAL...

Such a broad and ambitious proposal has wide ramifications, some of which are still being worked through. While the project has a primary focus on public museums and art galleries, the concept of the 'distributed national collection' means that all holders of public heritage collections are potential participants. Noting the permeability of the 'museum' sector – where many museums are also archives, there are combined libraries and museums, art galleries collect documentary material relating to their collections – the inclusion of material from a range of public institutions is essential. However, for mainly



Figure 2. **Things great** Lockheed Hudson on display at the Air Force Museum. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT: AIR FORCE MUSEUM, CHRISTCHURCH, COPYRIGHT 2006

practical reasons, we have excluded 'private' collections, except for those which are on long-term loan to public institutions.

As a sector we have wider information-sharing and access goals. Advances in technology invite us to use digital means to further these aims, especially in the context of the Government's *Digital Content Strategy* – the creation of digital content from museum/gallery collections will be boosted.

The manifold challenges ahead have already been noted. For example, selecting 'the best'. What is 'best' or most 'significant' depends on the context – is it selected as a vital part of a story or narrative, as the most well-known, or as an 'icon' of identity? What place do practical considerations have in selecting 'the best'? How do we make curatorial choices to achieve a cohesive exhibition, complete with engaging narratives and themes, while ensuring that the most comprehensive sampling of 'the best' is included?

There are 'unexhibitable' items – too fragile, too large, too sensitive. We know we cannot tour the original Tiriti o Waitangi, and touring a bomber plane or a whale skeleton poses practical and financial challenges (*figure 2*). And while some objects may be difficult or disappointing to show in 'the flesh', they can be ideal candidates for 'virtual exhibition' such as specimens of flora or fauna (*figure 3*).

Then there are the inevitable resource challenges – money, people and time.

COLLECTIVE ENDEAVOUR – THE NATIONAL COLLABORATIVE EXHIBITION

Notwithstanding the scale and complexity, leaders in the museum sector have agreed that the strategic goals are worth pursuing. The project will have three main elements: an exhibition, book and website, with associated information-sharing and perhaps other components developed alongside these.

The exhibition is expected to include from 200 to 400 objects from collections around the country. It will tour to the four main centres, and is planned to open in 2011. Although the eventual shape of the exhibition is yet to be developed, it is intended to excite New Zealanders and visitors alike, offering an insight into the breadth and depth of our museum and gallery collections – the intriguing, the curious, the unexpected.

To complement the exhibition, a major publication will be not just a catalogue. It will include additional collection material, allowing an exploration of narrative and context, and major themes in our collections. The book is intended as a contribution to the ongoing story of our shared culture and heritage.

The website will be a public access point to the project, as well as being a promotion for the exhibition, publication, and any other 'products'. It will be a way for people, wherever they are, to 'dip into' our distributed national collection.

Underlying the various strands of the project is collaboration and the sharing of information. A digital information sharing framework is to be developed, initially to manage information about the collection material selected for the exhibition, book and website. It is hoped that in the longer term, more and more information can be included and linked, forming a framework for ongoing collaboration among museums, galleries and other collecting institutions. This is part of the wider move towards 'joined-up' content, which is essential to provide both public and professional access to primary collection information.

In 2007, Museums Aotearoa coordinated an initial collaboration, funded by major museums and art galleries, during which over 60 experts met to make initial selections of material. That information is currently being brought together for the project to use as a 'pool'. It is not exhaustive, and further research and information will be added as the project progresses.

Museums Aotearoa is now developing a management arrangement to lead the project forward. We are getting ready to plan the major project elements, which will be followed by working to flesh out the information already gathered.

We have a commitment from the museum sector to develop the project. We have some seed funding from the major institutions who will lead the project. We also have secured funding from Lotteries Environment and Heritage to engage a project manager in 2008 to oversee the next steps.

ENSURING A STRATEGIC FUTURE FOR THE NATION'S COLLECTIONS

As we go into the future, there are some questions to keep in mind. There is the digital challenge, noting the rapid advancement of 'Digital New Zealand' and the Digital Content Strategy. While museums and art galleries are part of the GLAM sector, not all the parts are equal: museums tend to be content rich, and resource



Figure 3. ... and small: *Megadromus crassalis*, 35mm-long beetle know only from a few South Canterbury sites.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT: SOUTH CANTERBURY MUSEUM

and skills poor. We have not yet been at the forefront in things digital, having tended to prioritise the immediate aspects of museum work, such as exhibitions and collection care. In the wider context, there is a huge challenge to integrate all the content initiatives across the culture, heritage and information areas.

So far we have some broad strategic goals, a core of information, enthusiasm, and the outline of a project. The next phase is to flesh these out into the interrelated exhibition, publication and website projects. In the process we will all gain knowledge and information. We will foster public understanding, and education, and a sense of ownership of our national cultural collections. In order to achieve all this, we, as museum and art gallery people, need to collaborate and to learn from each other and from our colleagues in related fields. Most importantly, we need to embrace a spirit of *whakakōtahitanga*. This concept, as explained by Huhana Smith, Senior Curator Maori at Te Papa, October 2007, embodies the excitement and the rewards of collaboration that are already being felt in the early stages: "...in coming together with one accord, the project draws together like-minded representatives, experts and committed others to organise, compile and present the cultural uniqueness and diversity within Aotearoa New Zealand."

Phillipa Tocker has been Executive Director of Museums Aotearoa since late 2005. Previous employment at Victoria University of Wellington included a variety of management, administration and art collection management roles. Phillipa has postgraduate qualifications in art history and anthropology, reflecting a life-long engagement with the arts and culture.

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