Introduction

In Australia, state museums and art galleries exist, often side-by-side, with distinct identities. Anthropological (sometimes called ethnographic) divisions are contained within museums of natural history, historically following the British model; this is the case for the Australian Museum, Museum Victoria, the South Australian Museum, the Western Australian Museum and the Queensland Museum. There are no state museums in this country solely dedicated to ethnography, such as the Museum für Völkerkunde in Germany or the Musée de l’Homme in Paris.

In the anthropology collections of Australian natural history museums, material culture objects, including objects of aesthetic merit, are considered to be part of a society’s culture. Aboriginal material culture has therefore generally been part of the range of Australia’s natural history museums’ interests from the time of their foundation, although, as the essays in this book reveal, collecting was often more ad hoc than systematic. The changing nature of the collections and their documentation also clearly shows shifts in the prevailing scientific and social attitudes towards Aboriginal people over time. Anthropologists prefer to regard art objects as a form of creative expression of Aboriginal cultures which may be viewed as manifestations of social systems, each benefiting from local stylistic standards. Exhibitions concerned with Aboriginal culture in Australian museums of natural history generally include detailed annotations which, in the absence of the makers, provide a means of coming to a greater understanding of these works, an appreciation of the cultural context in which they were produced, and the kinds of information they were meant to convey.

The evaluation, selection and purpose of art objects in the context of a western art gallery are based on a set of criteria different from those of ethnographic museums. Since the extension of art galleries into the public arena, which occurred in the late-eighteenth to nineteenth centuries, their aesthetic focus has been on the history of western art from the Renaissance. The conservatism of many art museums established in this period was sometimes rationalised by the argument that the historical depth and diversity of western art provided sufficient justification for their desire to concentrate on exhibiting works from the cannon of western art. In some instances the antecedents of western art, in particular antiquities from the earlier civilisations of Egypt, Greece and Rome, were included in art gallery collections; the most frequent inclusion of non-western art was Chinese and Japanese antiquities, acknowledging the centuries of fine arts traditions in these civilisations.

In contrast to the longevity of collections of Aboriginal material culture in Australia’s museums of natural history, Aboriginal collections in Australia’s State art galleries are a relatively late development. In the 1950s and 1960s several strong advocates for the acceptance of Aboriginal objects as ‘art’ emerged, notably the influential anthropologists Charles Mountford and Ronald Berndt, as well as the deputy director of the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Tony Tudor, and the director of the Art Gallery of Western Australia, Frank...
Norton (both of whom were practising artists). Their sustained efforts and initiatives saw the distribution of Aboriginal works from the American-Australian Scientific Expedition to Arnhem Land to all State art galleries in 1936 (Mountford); the establishment of major Aboriginal collections at the Art Gallery of New South Wales and at the Art Gallery of Western Australia, and the first major national touring exhibition of Aboriginal art organised by Bennett and Tuckson in 1961.

However, the full acceptance of the astonishing diversity and aesthetic values of Aboriginal art into Australian art galleries did not occur until the 1980s, following the rapid emergence of outstanding Aboriginal art movements at Papyunya in the early 1970s and other desert communities a few years later. This was supported by an increasingly effective critique of Eurocentric notions of art and a number of exceptional exhibitions, such as 'Mr Sandman Bring me a Dream' and 'Dreamings: The Art of Aboriginal Australia'. Since this time, Australia's art galleries have given more recognition to the non-material creations which revolve around art objects — dance, oral history, philosophy, religion, ceremony — and which formed part of the object's life in its originating culture. Performance, storytelling and artist-in-residence programs are increasingly becoming part of the interaction within museums; for example, the Yiribana Gallery at the Art Gallery of New South Wales frequently features such activities.

In 1993 the Council of Australian Museums Associations amalgamated the museum and art gallery associations into one central body, now called Museums Australia, in order to streamline museum policies and practices and to provide a more effective group advocating the role of museums to government and the public. The term 'museum' refers to all museums, natural history museums, ethnographic museums, technological museums and so on. 'Museum' is used in this book when referring to museums and art galleries collectively.

One of Australia's newest cultural institutions, Sydney's Museum of Contemporary Art, determined that the name 'museum' encompassed the ideas of interaction and learning, as well as contemplation and aesthetic experience, and preferred to name itself accordingly. The Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory and the Tasmanian Museums and Art Gallery incorporate both the roles of art gallery and ethnographic museum.

A collection needs a framework in which objects may be represented and, for all kinds of museums, exhibitions are the main means of achieving this. The Aboriginal collections of Australian museums, which form the basis for their exhibitions, recognise the fact that Aboriginal art is not one unified entity; there are many different artistic idioms and practices. This is due to the fact that Aboriginal peoples across Australia, while sharing a host of values and ideals, are distinct, with different languages, religious beliefs and social customs, different backgrounds, and, in relation to their contact with Europeans, different histories.

The essays in this book, written by curators with an intimate knowledge of the Aboriginal collections of the respective museums, reveal the historically different roles of art galleries and museums in the Australian context. The policies of art galleries and museums towards collecting and exhibiting Aboriginal material continue to be different, yet are complementary.

The greatest change for Australian museums from the 1970s to the year 2000 was the expansion of their relationships with Indigenous people. Aboriginal groups now actively participate in the formulation of museums' collection and exhibition policies; individuals have been appointed to museums' staff in various full-time capacities and as guest curators; and Aborigines now serve on the councils of major museums. Museums' collections represent one obvious way Aborigines could restructure links with their past, but they wished to do so on their own terms, which included gaining a greater measure of control over the material in collections and a voice within the museum hierarchy as well.

There are a number of challenges facing Australian museums in this new century, with regard to their Aboriginal collections and exhibitions, the challenge is to further encourage the rapprochement between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. Museums are continuing to develop innovative exhibitions, now often in collaboration with Indigenous people who recognise the value of the museums' role.