



Environmetrics



Fuzzy PMs: Martin Wilson



New Millennium Family: Kate Dunn

Reflections in the Social Mirror

Museums reflecting national identity

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I have two teenage daughters. The Australia they are growing up in and their views of themselves as Australians are radically different from the Australia I grew up in, in the 1950s in a Queensland country town. The country of my childhood called England the Mother Country and did not acknowledge non-Anglo citizens. Like most country towns we had a Paragon Cafe run by a Greek family, but it served milkshakes, hamburgers, steak and chips, or steak and egg and chips. And we children simply ignored the shadow people who lived in a camp somewhere outside town. We reserved our rejection for the daily taunts thrown at the kids from the Catholic school.

In contrast, I find that my daughters are not only aware of many strands of difference in Australian society, but they actively support these differences. They are products of a multi-cultural society.

How did this happen? What factors influence the development of national identity and how have museums contributed to this process?

We need, first, to acknowledge that national identity evolves through the interactions of complex social structures. Within these complex structures, each element influences all others. Some influences are direct, others indirect, some are reactive while others may be 'knock-on' effects. Reciprocal influences and feedback loops are part of the complexity. Some influences may be deliberate or intentional, such as government policies like multi-culturalism, while others are unintended or circumstantial.

So complex is the social system that it may appear that national identity emerges by chance through a continual morphing of the zeitgeist. However, identity formation and development is not a random process, it is a psychological action with distinct characteristics.

Psychologists have studied identity formation intensively and in detail. Today, I will outline some key concepts from these studies and point at the roles Australian museums have played in the social system of Australian culture.

Here, we can note that a kind of Australian identity has been in process for as long as there have been human societies on the continent. Museums have been around since the 1800s, but it is only in recent years that they have addressed issues of social history and identity more directly. The national identity I am referring to in this paper is the identity connected with the nation state established in 1901.

The question of identity is the question *who am I?* or *what is me and what is not?* *What is Australian, what is not?* How is it that we discover what we are and delineate the boundaries of self?

Psychologists Cooley and Mead draw on the evidence from numerous studies to bring the idea of the looking glass self. They note that identity is formed by the



reflection of how others react to us. We know ourselves by our reflections in the social mirror.

This mirror uses all the forms of rhetoric: description, illustration, evidence, contrast, comparison, debate, argument, persuasion, proclamation, suppression, definition, elaboration and so forth.

To be seen more readily in the social mirror, we wear clear identifiers—clothing such as akubras and dryazabones, accessories such as cars and mobile phones, language, accent, eye contact and posture can all be signifiers of identity.

Psychologists note that people identify themselves in terms of their

- traits (e.g. cooperative / competitive)
- competencies (e.g. efficient / creative)
- values (e.g. egalitarian / fair play).

In constructing identity, we generalise and take averages to reach conclusions about trends and tendencies. This means that we don't have to prove something is so in every single instance for the generalisation to be true. For example, we can say that men are taller than women and hold that this is true as a useful generalisation. In terms of identity, we are not restricted to only those characteristics which are true in every single instance. If we were, then we would find we had very little to talk about.

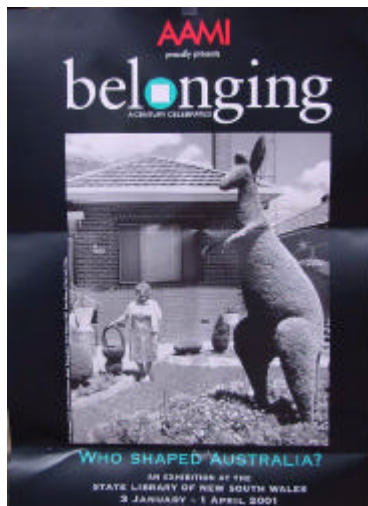
Taking these concepts of identity formation and maintenance:

- the systemic process of a complex social context,
- the social mirror,
- identity is comprised of traits, competencies and values,
- social markers of identity,

we can look to see how Australian museums are active in the systemic production of an emergent national identity.

An exhibition currently at the Library of NSW, called *Belonging*, examines some issues about identity in twentieth century Australia. Among other things, it aims to illustrate:

- how Australians have used clothing codes to define identity,
- how home decoration reflects identity,
- how migrants adjusted their sense of identity,
- how government policy shaped identity by excluding non-English speakers,
- how indigenous Australians sense of belonging may be expressed as 'We belong to the land'.



Audience evaluation at the concept development stage indicated that the concept of belonging and not-belonging was an emotional one and suggested that the exhibition would need to present individual stories in personal voices.

Evaluation also indicated strong interest in recent events and contemporary issues and suggested that to be most meaningful, the exhibition would need to include a weight of material from the past 20 years along with material from earlier decades.

We find this recency effect is strong for many museum audiences, especially those under the age of 40. However, it appears to be particularly relevant to the topic of national identity because

Australian identity is in a state of flux—something is reshaping and it is happening right now.

Apart from *Belonging*, two other museum exhibitions come to mind as making a fairly deliberate attempt to shape perceptions of national identity. One was *Tolerance*, an exhibition mounted by the National Museum which opened at Old Parliament House and then travelled. It was a somewhat predictable expression of Government multi-cultural policy and it went its way without causing many waves.

The second exhibition was the National Archive of Australia exhibition *Between Two Worlds* which set out to tell the stories of Aboriginal children who were removed from their parents. This exhibition opened in 1993 and has been touring since then. It is currently in Darwin. *Between Two Worlds* has been life changing for the curators, the people who worked with them and for many visitors. The visitor books which have accompanied the exhibition have become notable documents themselves and will be preserved for the future in the National Archive. With this exhibition, we see an example of an exhibition which is acting in the present and creating history.

For Australians, other countries are important social mirrors because we can see similarities and contrasts. In the lead up to Federation, we contrasted ourselves with the United States and questions were raised about our knowledge of political history and valuation of it. Most Australians admitted to knowing more about US presidents than Australian Prime Ministers. Few of us knew the name of our first Prime Minister.

Within this context, there should be no surprise to discover that a Newcastle artist, Martin Wilson, received a Federation Fund grant to make portraits of all Australian Prime Ministers. These went on display in January in the Object



Gallery in Sydney in an exhibition called *Fuzzy PMs*. This august group of public notables were on presented as brightly coloured latch hook rugs.

What do these artworks reflect about Australian identity? In some ways, they reflect that quintessentially Australian trait of honouring something while simultaneously

destabilising it. They reflect an ironic, tongue in cheek larrikinsim to the subject. As might be expected, the exhibition attracted a considerable amount of media discussion. It was a very contemporary comment on Australians' attitudes towards politics and, as such, it had a fresh impact.

I wonder what it says about us, though, that the National Portrait Gallery declined to add the *Fuzzy PMs* to their collection.

Public museums and cultural collections present exhibitions which are authoritative, institutional and formal whereas gallery spaces seem more able to provide forums for individual voices to contribute to perceptions of national identity.

For example, we may wonder what to make of this —



Fuzzy PMs: Martin Wilson



Millennium Family: Kate Dunn



The object label reveals that we are looking at *New Millennium Family* by Kate Dunn. In this family, there are “Lobsterman, Calamari, Vera (who always suspected there was something fishy going on) and Mullet”.

What a delightful comment on identity at a time when national identity is in flux. This exhibition has allowed this quirky and personal contribution to the range of rhetoric that constitutes the social mirror. The large collecting institutions operate within different parameters from display galleries, however they strive to enliven their contribution to national debate in creative ways.

We know who we are by hearing important stories told and retold so they are passed on from generation to generation. Each new generation adds their quota to the collection of important stories. The telling and retelling, the addition of new threads and the revision of old ones, maintains a balance between the forces of cohesion and differentiation.

The National Museum of Australia has a mandate to tell the stories of Australian people. The Eternity Gallery, curated by Marion Stell, does this in a fresh way by using the organising principle of key emotions to frame the examples it uses.



Eternity Gallery in National Museum of Australia

One of the stories in the Eternity Gallery is that of Azaria Chamberlain. This event in 1980 was hugely important at the time and is now 20 years old, meaning that 30% of Australians have no living memory of it or its implications for Australian society. Among other things, the death of Azaria Chamberlain challenged our notions of ourselves as a good-natured and friendly people who valued mateship, fair play and inclusiveness. While the exhibition does not deal with these issues, it



preserves the core story as a signpost to the full account. In a sense, it is the story that has been added to the Museum's collection as much as it is the artefacts.

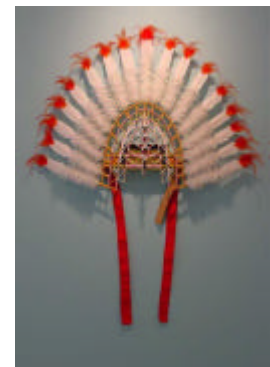
In my view, the most outstanding contribution by museums and galleries in the past 20 years to understanding of national identity is the visibility provided for indigenous Australians. If identity is constructed and maintained to a large extent by visibility in the social mirror, as described by Cooley and Mead, then invisibility can be recognised as a destructive force.

While the major museums have long had displays of indigenous artefacts, these were usually presented as material from a past culture. The strong implication was that the material and the culture were irrelevant to contemporary Australian society and identity.

The exhibition, *inland/island* at the Object Gallery in January 2001, presented things made by contemporary indigenous craftspeople. Pieces such as the headdress illustrated here were displayed as examples of contemporary competence using skills valued by the community of origin and by national institutions with an interest in fine craftsmanship. Competence is one of the planks of identity formation. This headdress is not relegated to the past or to the domain of anthropologists, but is part of contemporary expression of Australian range and capability. In fact, it could be said that it has been rescued from the past and shown as an exemplar of living excellence.



inland/island at Object Gallery



Headdress in inland/island

In the past year, five major Australian museums have opened large new indigenous galleries: the South Australian Museum, the Melbourne Museum, the West Australian Museum, the Powerhouse Museum and the National Museum of Australia.

What do these exhibitions contribute to the evolving notions of Australian identity? The *Bayagul* exhibition in the Powerhouse Museum aims to reveal aspects of Indigenous Australian identities as they are expressed through today's technologies and industries and does not take an historic approach as the other four exhibitions do.

The South Australian Museum's *Australian Aboriginal Cultures Gallery* starts with a wall of faces near the entrance as shown in the following image. Historic images are layered in sepia diversity, punctuated by A4 screens of contemporary 'talking heads'. On these high quality screens the present speaks from within the context



of many pasts conveying the immediacy of the rich and dense diversity of a living culture.



South Australian Museum: Australian Aboriginal Cultures Gallery

In this wall of faces, people are seen individually and collectively. This past is here with us now. With minimal mediating interpretation, it asks to speak for itself.

Looking through the Indigenous Gallery at the Melbourne Museum, I was struck by the large space given over to a free standing display of individual faces – old and young, fat and thin. The open space encouraged visitors to walk up close and thread between the stands of faces – each individual with their own identity and place in the world.

Coming to the new National Museum of Australia, I was curious to see the *First Australians Gallery*. I strolled through the Welcome Corridor and looked at displays of artefacts. Baskets and a beautiful display of fine arrow heads caught my interest. Then I came to the following display on the wall of a mezzanine section.



National Museum of Australia: First Australians Gallery

I was thunderstruck to see, once again, these orderly rows of faces in sepia or black and white.

The artefact rich, designer elegance of the *Australian Aboriginal Cultures Gallery* in the South Australian Museum contrasts with the “show and tell” social history approach of the Melbourne Museum, the Australian Museum and the West Australian Museum Indigenous galleries, but all of these galleries feature a Portrait Panel of individual faces. It must mean something. It must mean something powerful.

These faces are lined up to be seen. Just seen. Seen for what they are. Not recognised for their traits, competencies or values. Not interpreted, simply reflected in the social mirror of the museum wall.

From the past of my childhood where contemporary Indigenous culture was invisible in society and cultural institutions, perhaps one of the tasks for the social mirror at this point in time is to make the people visible in simple ways as well as in more subtle ways.

Indigenous culture is finding a place in contemporary museums as they engage with issues of identity and culture. The imprint of grand scale, formal and authoritative institutions adds weight to the images and messages they convey.



Who are we? What do museums tell us about this? Australian museums are sophisticated and professional. And they are recognisably Australian. There is no need to legislate minimum levels of Australian content here.

However, in the context of Australian social life where identity is shaped and re-shaped, museums are a niche industry.

Our research indicates that for about one-third of Australians, museums and galleries are outside the horizon of interest. For the two-thirds who do pay some attention, visitation is very intermittent. Given this, museums tend to make their contribution by holding up the mirror and creating ripple effects through the complex social system where identity emerges.

This mirror has the power to include or exclude. In it, we recognise our traits, competencies and values, or simply recognise each other's faces. However, museums can only polish the mirror with their scholarship and hold it up for us via their exhibitions and programs. Somebody has to look into the mirror.

Are we looking? Can we see?



National Museum of Australia: First Australians Gallery



We come sit-down

That ole woman died
she knew the songs.
We come sit-down this water
no more singin' now
we listenin' t' frogs.

Frankie drunk all-time now
cryin' an' hittin' out.
We sit-down now
keepin' quiet
listen to paperbarks.

Children all-gone now
laughin' some other place.
We sittin' by this water
long-long time
listen to wind.

Fella on horse, he come by
but he see nothin'.
We sittin' by this water
breathin' out an' in
but he see nothin'.

We come sit-down here
we stay here by this waterhole
listen to frogs
listen to paperbarks.
Fella see nothin'.

