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Museums and the Stuff of History

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At their most aspirational, museums prompt and facilitate historical consciousness — that uniquely human capacity to think temporally and imagine ourselves in time. ‘It is our human condition to make histories,’ the ethnographic historian Greg Dening insisted.<sup>1</sup> Understanding that powerful relationship between institution and audience has become an important focus of research into historical consciousness and the place of history in society.

One influential study, published in 1998 by American historians Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, explored the role and function of history in everyday life. *The Presence of the Past*<sup>2</sup> used a qualitative and quantitative survey of around 1500 people to demonstrate that Americans were devouring the past and constantly making histories, in the form of scrapbooks, family histories and photo albums. Their project spawned several other national studies around the world, including Australia and Canada.

While many respondents felt least connected studying history in school and were sceptical of certain national narratives presented by politicians and the media, museums were considered the most ‘trustworthy’ historical authority.

Such research importantly challenges who’s making history, revealing a proliferation of everyday acts of history-making beyond official narratives, education systems and public institutions. It also lays out community attitudes about history — especially the arbiters of historical authority and reliability. In these settler-colonies, each with heated and publicly contested ‘history wars’, historical artefacts in the museum felt most stable.

Historical authority isn’t simply an intellectual exercise: objects don’t lie.

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<sup>1</sup> Greg Dening, *Performances* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1996), 35.

<sup>2</sup> Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998)

The institutional commitment to *objectivity* also has an important history in its own right. ‘The Museum’ as an idea has its origins in the Enlightenment — that broad movement of reason and rationality, which believed in the power of knowledge, and sensed that the world could be understood and improved with scientific and philosophical reasoning. The 1700s and 1800s saw the consolidation of fields of knowledge like natural history and earth sciences. Carl Linnaeus’ 1735 classification of the natural world and Charles Darwin’s 1859 *On the Origin of Species*, honed along his fateful voyage on HMS *Beagle*, proposed that biology and human evolution could be understood through logic and scientific observation.

The British Museum, established in 1753, The Australian Museum, established in 1827 and opened to the public in 1857, and The Technological, Industrial and Sanitary Museum of New South Wales first designated in 1880 (the precursor to today’s Powerhouse Museum), all drew on that imperial tradition. In an age of colonial ‘discovery’ and ‘exploration’, the natural world needed classification and observation. Naturally, this meant the acquisition of artefacts and specimens for science. Museums needed *stuff*.

Despite the apparent concreteness of its objects, such schematisation isn’t neutral. As Laura McBride and Dr Mariko Smith, the curators of the 2021 Australian Museum exhibition *Unsettled* wrote, the museum ‘has been at once both a production of and a producer of history — albeit, for a time, a very *selective* history.’<sup>3</sup>

In recent years, the role and apparent objectivity of museums have been increasingly challenged. Historians have interrogated the power of museums to define ‘historical truth’ by virtue of the objects they collected and the systems of classification and sequencing they have employed. Public and popular critiques of museums have also highlighted the power of imperial institutions to take those objects (usually from their own empires) in the name of ‘science’ and ‘knowledge’.

Also, and perhaps most powerfully, new readings of museums and their collections have come from within institutions themselves—especially from First Nations curators. The important work of repatriation, such as the return of human remains to communities and Country, is at the core of the ethically reimagined museum. This movement includes the recent commitment from Cambridge

**Commented [SR1]:** Hi Anna - hope you don't mind - I've just added our museum into this list

**Commented [AC2R1]:** Do you think it just tweaks the comment about natural history collecting? Anyway, I like its inclusion.

**Commented [SR3R1]:** Interestingly enough it still fits as our museum's earliest collections were mostly focused on collecting samples from the natural world - but with reference to their economic potential. So heaps of economic botany, economic geology, forestry, agricultural samples etc

<sup>3</sup> Laura McBride and Mariko Smith, ‘Unsettling Darlinghurst at the Australian Museum’, in Anna Clark, Gabrielle Kemmis and Tamson Pietsch (eds), *My Darlinghurst* (Sydney: NewSouth, 2023), 180.

University's Trinity College to return Dharawal fishing spears taken by Captain James Cook in 1770 to the La Perouse Aboriginal Land Council.

At the same time, understanding the vital role of museums as repositories and keeping places for cultural objects is also important, given the immense devastation experienced by First Nations communities since colonisation. Acts of recognition, large and small, can powerfully shift our relationship to the objects themselves as well as the institutions that collect them.

All this leaves museums in a curious place: they hold vast collections that have been acquired over time but are now increasingly revised and critiqued; they maintain considerable social capital and historical authority as mediators of our collective past; and they continue to act as vital, imaginative storytellers of that past.

Is there a better starting point from which to contemplate the major exhibition *1001 Remarkable Objects*, which opened at Powerhouse Ultimo on 25 August 2023, and is captured in this companion publication *1001*.

This immense project rallies a chorus of objects, voices and perspectives. In a nod to the great Arabian collection of 1001 tales, it eschews chronology and distillation for cacophony. In it, we come face-to-face with the narratives of objects in riotous conversation. If exhibitions are highly selective, barely scratching the surface of the vast catalogues of *stuff* that for the most part sits in museum drawers, shelves and storage units, *1001* offers audiences an insight into the immensity of institutional collections. In doing so, giving a sense of the museum's uneven story as memory-keeper, truth-teller, hoarder, and curator.

Among the 1001 objects are curiosities ranging from currency to discarded rubbish —including brooches, paintings, chairs, fashion, sheet music, walking sticks, instruments, shoes, fans, and fine lacework. There's a New South Wales fireman's helmet and early poker machine, dolls, prams, needlework, commemorative medallions and convict love tokens. There's a model Sydney Opera House, a toy Hills Hoist, costumes from the film *Strictly Ballroom*, an emu egg teapot, a suit of armour, mousetrap making machine from 1920s Sydney, enamelware, pots, kitchenware, colonial clothing, a convict cap, Egyptian jewellery from 2500 years ago, and a Fijian necklace made from whale teeth. All this is presented without strict chronology or the sense of singular narrative.

In that plethora, *1001* presents not simply an assemblage of objects, but a series of conversations about the complex nature of museum collecting, storytelling and time travel.

A gold brooch from 1855 (Object No. A4478) marks the moment that a Bathurst shopkeeper arrived in Sydney with a nugget weighing about 225 grams. He had found it only a year after the discovery of gold by Edward Hammond Hargraves, which started the 1850s goldrushes in Australia and became a watershed for radical social and economic change. While the object stands as an example of craftsmanship, it also represents much more: its owner, Edward Austin (Elias Arnstein), was a Bavarian Jew sentenced to transportation in 1831, who later made his fortune selling credit to miners on the Bathurst goldfields. Austin's individual human story of changing fortunes is also emblematic of this period: the discovery of gold prompted mass migration (and race riots), rapid capital expansion, and demands for political representation.

Or we might take a look at the belt buckle with wattle flower design by Deakin & Francis (Object No. A1244). Made in 1909, the piece reflects a burgeoning national identity — evidenced by growing interest in Australianism and the uniqueness of its natural world — in the decades around Federation. Yet it also shows how that national imaginary, at least aesthetically, is crafted in a global context. This item was manufactured overseas (in Birmingham) and, with its distinctive art nouveau design, drew on global trends.

There is also a well-worn homemade 'swaggie' doll (Object No. 85/2320). Crafted in 1933 by Rita Williams as a Christmas gift for her four-year-old daughter Barbara, it's a case of ingenuity and thrift during times of hardship. Swagmen camping by the canal in front of their Merrylands home, hoping for a meal or tobacco in exchange for odd-jobs, were the inspiration for this little toy. But the context of hardship extended to the doll's crafting, cobbled together from material scraps and a doll's head found in a rubbish bin.

There is irreverence and kitsch along with joy and play, here, but also serious provocations.

A series of three eel traps of blown glass by Arrente artist Jennifer Kemarre Martiniello, (Object No. 202281/1-3), tells us about contemporary culture and technology, as well as referencing those cultural artefacts which were frequently collected by museums historically. The glass is both beautiful and fragile, a powerful reimagination of ancient technology and form.

The objects collected in *1001* don't simply represent changing technologies and textures of Australia's past, but also changing understandings of what's worth keeping.

Take the stoneware ginger beer bottle (Object A9336) made in Sydney by Jonathan Leak at his Brickfield Hill pottery in the 1820s. Sure, it's an example of the earliest surviving marked pottery made in Australia, but the story of this object is also about use and refuse. Leak was transported to Sydney in 1819 for burglary then worked as a potter in the growing colony, where his skills were in high demand. Local ceramic industries were set up wherever there were good deposits of clay. Stoneware bottles were ubiquitous, and remnants can still be found under floorboards and buried among building foundations all over Sydney. Once the contents were drunk or poured out, they were frequently discarded like this one was — into Parramatta River. Only now, this object isn't mere garbage, but a precious window into Australia's early colonial history.

Fifty photographic portraits of World War I soldiers stationed in Marrickville, Sydney, before their deployment shows young men permanently frozen in 1916 (50 parts of Object No. 85/1286). Yet that window into the past is now freighted with all that we know about the war and what the soldiers would endure, as well as its memorialisation over the next 100 years. These images might be fixed in time, but their meanings change with every generation of reinterpretation.

There are too many objects to make sense of here, but that's precisely the point. Meaning comes from the plethora of *1001*, because its multitude of objects, voices and stories also tells us something about the diversity of Australian history, in all its multifaceted, multi-vocal, multifarious glory. Stories have been shared, knowledge has been learnt and connections have been forged in Australia for thousands of generations. In this multitude it's clear that there isn't one nationally representative story or mood, and that chronology and distillation aren't the only ways of telling our history and transporting us back in time (or times).

Critically, *1001* also tells us something about the changing role and function of museums as national storytellers. It's clear from this exhibition that there's no sole authority for storying the past, and no single arbiter of the national story. (Yes, we are hoarders, but look what this tells us about ourselves!)

Instead, we're led into an open-ended conversation, or a series of them — between past and present, curator and audience, and among the objects themselves. And in that plethora, a whole new set of narratives emerges, as well as the complication of older ones.