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## Powerhouse Museum bounces back from COVID-19 with exhibitions celebrating Buddhist sculpture, eucalyptus

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By arts editor [Dee Jefferson](#)



The exhibition Five Hundred Arhats of Changnyeongsa Temple Site will coincide with the 60th anniversary of diplomatic relations between Korea and Australia. (Supplied: Chuncheon National Museum)

A landmark exhibition of 16th century stone statuettes will touch down in Australia later this year — the first time the stone figures have left South Korea since they were discovered in the ruins of a Buddhist temple in 2001.



The arhats were so popular with visitors that a follow-up exhibit was installed at Chuncheon National Museum. *(Supplied: Chuncheon National Museum)*

The human-shaped figures, named 'arhats' after the human disciples of Buddha who achieved enlightenment, are part of the exhibition Five Hundred Arhats of Changnyeongsa Temple Site: Reflections of our Hearts, opening at Sydney's Powerhouse Museum in December.

It is the first summer blockbuster exhibition under Powerhouse Chief Executive Lisa Havilah, and one of 12 exhibitions slated in her first full annual program since [commencing in January 2019](#).

The schedule announcement, made on Tuesday, kicks off what Havilah hopes will be a year unmarred by COVID-19 setbacks, following the hits to programming and visitation when the museum was forced to close from mid-March to June last year. (In July, it opened an [exhibition celebrating Australian guitar-maker Maton](#)).



Powerhouse CEO Lisa Havilah wants the museum to focus on exhibitions that tell the story of its collection. (*ABC Arts: Ken Leanfore*)

It follows the surprise announcement in July that the NSW Government would retain the Ultimo museum, scuppering long-held but fiercely contested plans to sell the site and relocate to Parramatta.

## **Everyday enlightenment**

Contrary to the title, which is a reference to the figurative "500 arhats" within Buddhist mythology, the exhibition will present 50-60 of the sculptures — part of a larger group of more than 300 that were unearthed in Gangwon Province between 2001-2002.



In Buddhist mythology, the arhats are portrayed as a group of 16 specific, individual disciples, as well as a more generalised group of "500".(Supplied: *Chuncheon National Museum*)

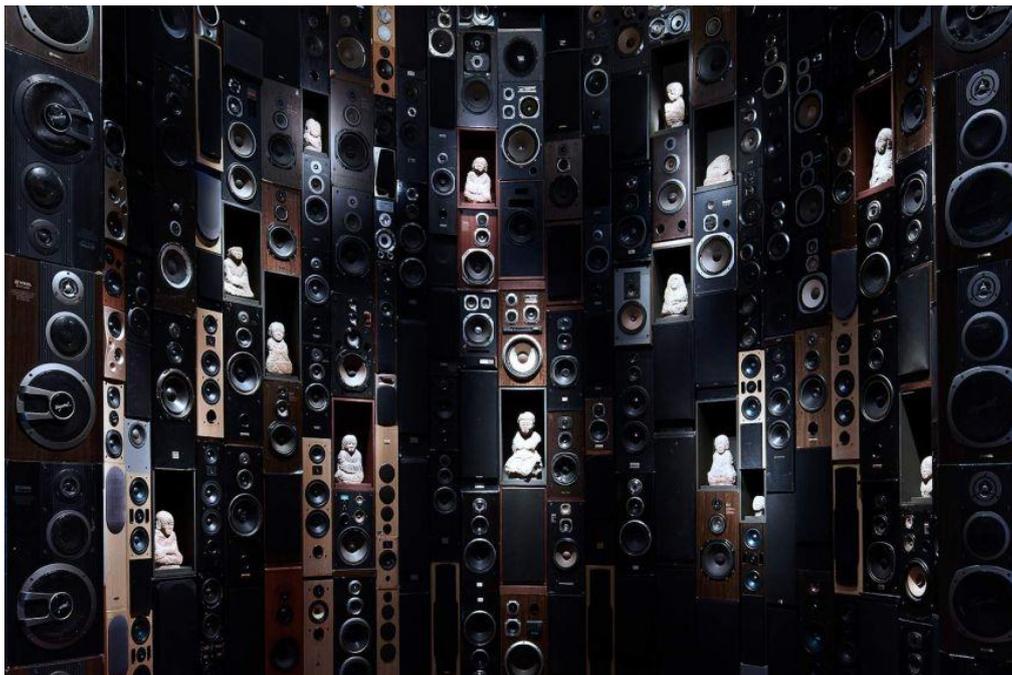
The figures, carved from granite, range from around 30-40cm height, and no two are alike; across the group, expressions range from contented to amused and sad.

Min-Jung Kim, Powerhouse's curator of Asian Collections, says the Buddhist sculptors who made them would have drawn on real people around them for inspiration.

"What really appeals about these objects is that they're like one of us — not like Buddha, or god-like," says Kim.

The exhibition, which premiered at Chuncheon National Museum in 2018 and subsequently toured to Seoul and Busan, situates the figures in a design by Korean artist Seung-young Kim.

Half the figures will sit in a room with a moss-covered brick flooring that conjures up their original setting; the rest will be embedded in a 'wall' of 700 speakers, from which a soundscape of dripping water and bells emanates.



"These Arhat statuettes are from the past, but their expressions are universal, in fact quite modern as well," Korean artist Seung-young Kim told the Korea Times.(Supplied: *Chuncheon National Museum*)

The exhibition is designed to bring visitors into a naturally meditative frame of mind.

## Powerhouse Museum 2021

Under Havilah, the Powerhouse has shifted away from touring 'blockbusters' from overseas — including Lego, Star Wars and Harry Potter, in recent years — to exhibitions produced in-house.

"One of the things I wanted to do was focus on the creation of exhibitions by the Powerhouse that centre its history of collecting but also bring forth objects and stories that have never been seen or told before," Havilah told ABC.

In 2021, the Powerhouse's major in-house exhibition will celebrate the eucalyptus tree and the museum's historical connection with that species, which dates back to its role in the research and production of eucalyptus oil in the early 20th century.

Artist Agatha Gothe-Snape, embedded within the umbrella organisation of Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences (MAAS) as part of their 'renewal' project, has led development of the exhibition, which will feature items from the collection (ranging from wood samples to glass-plate negatives and botanical illustrations) as well as new commissions from artists including Dean Cross, Julie Gough, Nicholas Mangan and Yasmin Smith.

The 2021 exhibition slate also features showcases of Australian ceramics and graphic design, and a survey of portraits and party snaps by Sydney social photographer [Robert Rosen](#), including the RAT (Recreational Arts Team) dance parties of the 80s.

But the first cab off the rank is an exhibition of photographs by Bayram Ali, who migrated from Cyprus in 1949 and worked for the Snowy Mountains Authority, and documented the construction of the Snowy Mountains Hydro-Electric Scheme and its surrounding community from the mid-50s to around 1970.



Bayram Ali documented the work, community and leisure activities at key Snowy Mountains scheme sites, including Canberra, Cooma, Eaglehawk and Jindabyne. (*Supplied: MAAS*)

## Renewal

MAAS used its forced closure in 2020 to ramp up its renewal project, including the digitisation of its vast collection of more than 500,000 objects, so the public can access them online.

It also continued the community consultation and design process for the new Parramatta museum, which is conceived as a space for temporary exhibitions rather than permanent exhibits, and will also house residential spaces for researchers and scientists, and a dormitory for school groups from regional and rural NSW.

Construction on Powerhouse Parramatta will commence in mid-2021, with the opening scheduled for 2024.



The architectural partnership of Moreau Kusunoki and Genton was selected to design Powerhouse Parramatta following a global design competition. *(Supplied)*

The other major plank in the MAAS's renewal project is a proposal to refresh the Ultimo site, which opened in 1988 and has for some time revolved around a series of permanent exhibits — some of which have not been refreshed in decades.

Havilah's agenda includes utilising the space to accommodate and support artists and creatives, reducing the carbon imprint of the institution to net zero, and connecting the museum to its surrounding community.

"We need to address how this precinct engages with its public and all the changes that are happening around it — including the Goods Line and the [tech precinct](#)," says Havilah.

The proposal for the Ultimo site's re-design will be decided by the State Government mid-2021.