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Wed 2 Mar 2022

# Fears Lismore art gallery's entire collection lost in NSW floods

**Gallery director braces for loss of building and exhibits including Afghan war rugs and stunning Hannah Cabinet**

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‘It would be just a bloody dreadful loss’: Geoff Hannah in front of the stunningly intricate Hannah Cabinet, which was on display at the flood-damaged Lismore Regional Gallery

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Wed 2 Mar 2022 16.42 AEDT

There are fears the entire collection at the Lismore Regional Gallery may have been lost during the catastrophic floods in northern [New South Wales](#).

The gallery director, Ashleigh Ralph, said that while no one had been able to get access to the building to confirm the situation, flood waters had risen 2.5 metres higher than expected, which meant the top floor of the gallery had been inundated.

“The collection we stored up there, it’s got all our major exhibitions on the second floor in case of flooding. Most of them would have been flooded,” Ralph said.

“That includes hundreds and hundreds of works from the collection.”  
The gallery houses several collections from local artists and the Afghan war rugs collection being toured by the Australian National University Drill Hall Gallery.

Ralph said all her staff were “safe and accounted for” but she was bracing herself for the collection to be lost along with the building.

“It’s a huge blow to the community,” Ralph said. “There’s so much history in our collection. Historical works, from artists in the region, that tell our story. And also the gallery is a place where everyone comes together and shares cultural experiences.”

Ralph said she was grateful for offers from people willing to help with the recovery and said the gallery would organise a response in the coming days when the situation could be properly assessed.

“It will be our job after this to help share stories and recover and be that place where everyone comes together,” she said.



Unknown weaver, Political Map of Europe, I weave what I have seen, from the Afghan war rugs exhibition held in Lismore. Photograph: Rob Little/Australian National University Drill Hall Gallery

The Afghan war rugs are a collection of textiles produced by weavers that began with the invasion of the Soviet Union in 1979 where they were originally produced as souvenirs.

They often include images of maps, tanks, guns, helicopters and messages in broken English and Cyrillic.

Conditions imposed under the gallery’s insurance contract meant they could not be removed from the building.

The gallery also houses the Hannah Cabinet, a stunningly intricate cabinet built by master craftsman Geoff Hannah over six years.

It is the product of 5,000 hours of work, contains 34 types of timber and veneers, 17 types of stone, four species of shell and 23-carat gold leaf.

Hannah, whose home, workshop and woodworking machines were flooded, said he was braced to learn the fate of the cabinet.

“I’m just waiting for the art gallery director to ring me so we can go down and take a look when the building’s made safe,” Hannah said.

“You build these things that might take six years or seven years, and you take it out on display to show the public and you see the joy the public get.”

The cabinet has 18 doors and 140 drawers, many of them layered so there are cabinets within cabinets, and draws within draws, often with finely detailed animal designs that have been hidden away.

“It would be just devastating. It would be just a bloody dreadful loss at the moment, but then, all the rest of the people in Lismore have got loss too.”



A woodshed from an adjoining property was swept into Geoff Hannah’s backyard by flood waters, concrete slab and all. Photograph: Geoff Hannah

His family had been caught off guard with the water rising at a rate of two metres an hour, and flood waters sweeping a timber shed from an adjoining property onto his.

They managed to escape on a boat before Hannah’s son and grandson set about rescuing 25 other people “until we ran out of fuel”.

“No one’s ever witnessed anything like it here,” Hannah said. “Not in our lifetime. Not in our lifetime.”