

The Australiana Society

Researching, collecting and preserving Australia's heritage.



16/11/22

Australiana Society address to the Select Committee report on the Government's Management of the Museum Applied Arts and Sciences (MAAS) - Powerhouse Museum.

Forum held by the Powerhouse Museum Alliance, hosted by Committee Chair, The Honourable Robert Borsak MLC, to mark the completion of the Select Committee Report.

Wednesday 16th November 9am, Jubilee Room, Parliament House, Macquarie St.

On behalf of the NSW Branch of the *Australiana Society* I would like to thank The Honourable Robert Borsak MLC, Chair, and the Select Committee and the Powerhouse Museum Alliance for being given the opportunity to address this forum.

The *Australiana Society* was formed in 1978 at the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences (MAAS), "Powerhouse Museum" by curatorial staff and by specialist antique dealers, researchers and collectors from across Australia. Australiana is an incorporated association devoted to researching, preserving and collecting Australia's heritage: art, Decorative arts, antiques, historic items, collectables, buildings and sites, and portable heritage made in, or relating to, Australia. We have approximately 490 members and we publish a 60-page colour magazine every quarter. We hold regular tours and lectures across Australia. We hold an annual Kevin Fahy lecture and we co-host an annual Peter Walker Fine Art Writing Award.

On the 23rd November 2021 the NSW Branch reached out to MAAS to arrange a tour and a viewing of specific items within the collection which was to be backed up with a discussion of the items on display by curators and knowledgeable members.

Over several months we were able to negotiate a date for the event set down for the 22nd October 2022, 10am – 2pm. Weeks went by in not receiving replies to emails and phone calls / messages regarding the format and item content. When we did receive a reply to our emails our questions would not be answered directly or clearly, leaving us frustrated and concerned for the success of the event. In mid-May we became so concerned that we drove out to the Discovery Centre at Castle Hill on a Sunday to try to get a better understanding of why our emails and phone calls had not been adequately answered. We were provided with assurances that the arrangement for the event was on track but within a very short period of time we found again our questions going unanswered for weeks at a time.

On the 9th October, thirteen days prior to the event, we wrote directly to CEO Lisa Havilah because we were still not receiving satisfactory response to our questions in arranging this event. We received an almost immediate response from her and then a phone call from management and at that point the “curtains parted” and we had the cooperation we had been seeking.

In the end the visit by 38 members and friends of the Australiana Society was a huge success and we were able to draw out important knowledge from our members regarding several of the items in regards to techniques, materials, provenance or to help in dating some of the items.

Many of our guests and members had never been to the Castle Hill Discovery Centre but were certainly aware of this site and the importance it plays as an integral part of MAAS but they were surprised and made the following observations;

- First time visitors were astounded by the lack of public transport;
- No other tourist destinations in the vicinity to link up for a day out;
- Access off the corner of Windsor and Showground Road is extremely dangerous;
- The gate off Showground Rd was still closed on arrival and the driveway could only accommodate 6 cars. More cars were queuing onto Showground Road, causing a traffic hazard and we were waving cars on and we were phoning guests to drive around the block to wait for further instructions. We contacted the security number on the gate and that transferred us to security at the Powerhouse Ultimo whereby security told us they could not help.
We managed to open the gate ourselves;
- Prior to the day we were told by management to car-pool because of the limited onsite parking; and
- Our guests who are historians, antique dealers, researchers, curators and authors were saddened to see the MAAS reduced to a series of tin sheds in an industrial park with no aesthetic appeal and being 35km's from Ultimo.

Once inside

- We went to Shed J, the door into the shed was almost too narrow to accommodate one of our members who was in a wheel chair and it took three people including the occupant of the chair to manoeuvre it through the door. The issue of access into a museum was a surprise and furthermore was humiliating for our member and embarrassing for us.
- The lighting in the shed was poor and with some items we had our mobile phones out with torches on, so we could see detail of the item being viewed.
- The furniture we requested was brought down from the pallet racking but the space in the aisles was limited so we could not walk around each item. Some items were still on their pallet so we could not climb under to view timbers, screws, nails, markings or construction methods.

The staff and volunteers were wonderful and very attentive on the day but we received unsolicited comments that morale was low. We were told of a lack of resources, training, curators not being replaced with qualified staff but with staff who have qualifications for working in galleries and not in museums. There is uncertainty over Ultimo, Castle Hill and Parramatta, we were told that when they are moved to Castle Hill many staff are not sure how they will get to and from work because the public transport is inadequate. We were told that MAAS were considering putting on a staff bus

between the nearest railway station and Castle Hill Discovery Centre. When staff are transferred to Castle Hill there will be a further loss of qualified staff. Resources were stretched further with the top secret Leo Schofield exhibition currently being arranged for next year and there was also resentment due to this exhibition.

Beyond this visit *Australiana* has experienced problems in other areas. The production of our quarterly magazine was delayed due to a lack of cooperation with management at MAAS.

March 2022, we arranged a four-day tour for 40 of our *Australiana* members to museums and private collections in the Sydney region. We made arrangements to visit *Eucalyptusdom* and *Clay Dynasty* at the Powerhouse Museum. For this event we also experienced a break-down in communication.

It was during this time that we became aware that there had been a series of focus group sessions between various societies and the Powerhouse Management. The *Australiana* Society was not invited to this discussion or focus group sessions. The last session we believe was on the 19th March and many of the other affiliated societies and trusts were invited. In response to our letter to Lisa Havilah on the on the 9th October I met with a senior member of MAAS and we were told that the affiliation between *Australiana* and MAAS had been put on hold and this was the same for all other societies. We questioned the statement, we were reassured that all affiliations had been put on hold until further notice and I had two other witnesses at this meeting.

In the past these organisations had provided free of charge expert advice, collaborated on exhibitions, donated important items to MAAS and for these organisations to be informed of the affiliation being placed on hold through a third person was a further blow to the long term working relationship. The question of why these affiliations had been put on hold, for how long and why went unanswered.

I have spoken to several like-minded organisations and as much as they are extremely disappointed by what appears to be happening to MAAS and the working relationship. Many of these organisations are dependent on government assistance so are unwilling to comment due to any repercussions.

The Powerhouse Museum Ultimo must be kept in its present form, it must be enhanced with a far more comprehensive permanent collection with a strong element of Australian decorative arts which includes first nations work. There must be an increase in staffing with the appropriate qualifications in museum standards and excellence.

The 1980's award winning Wran building and the historically important Harwood building must not be demolished or built over.

Robert Hannan
Chair NSW Branch
Australiana Society

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The Macquarie Chair

C.1821

Australian Red Cedar, Rose Mahogany, Casuarina and replacement Eastern Grey Kangaroo fur cover.



This is how one of Australia's most important colonial items of furniture is presented, strapped To a pallet sitting on top of what appears to be a plastic storage bin behind an upright piano.



Work box and inner tray (2) marquetry, Australian Cedar, Huon Pine, Musk and Blackwood, maker unknown, possibly Tasmania, c1840.

The lighting in the SHED was so poor we had to use our mobile phones.