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In a first, the city's biggest cultural institutions are run by women

The six leaders of the state's major galleries and museums discuss budgets, changing audiences and what they would give for 10 minutes alone with a billionaire.

By Linda Morris

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Top row from left: Maud Page (Art Gallery of NSW); Louise Herron AM (Sydney Opera House); Kim McKay AO (Australian Museum); Bottom row from left: Dr Caroline Butler-Bowdon (State Library of NSW), Lisa Havilah (Powerhouse Museum) and Annette Pitman (Museums of History NSW).

The appointment of Maud Page as the Art Gallery of NSW's [first female director](#) in 154 years marks a historic moment for the state's six major cultural institutions.

All are now headed by women: Annette Pitman leads Museums of History of NSW; Dr Caroline Butler-Bowdon, the State Library of NSW; Kim McKay, the Australian Museum; Louise Herron, the Sydney Opera House; and Lisa Havilah, the Powerhouse Museum.

Last year, their cultural institutions welcomed more than eight million visitors, commanded operational budgets of more than \$600 million and employed 2200 full-time staff.

They lead in the [tricky aftermath of COVID](#), which temporarily shut their doors, reshaped public buying habits globally and played havoc with the costs of doing business. Audiences are changing, at once more informed, and increasingly sophisticated but also weaned on novelty; time poor and distracted.



From left Kim McKay (Australian Museum); Maud Page (Art Gallery of NSW); Dr Caroline Butler-Bowdon (State Library of NSW); Louise Herron (Sydney Opera House); Lisa Havilah, (Powerhouse Museum); Annette Pitman (Museums of History NSW).

CREDIT: WOLTER PEETERS

Their museums and galleries are under pressure to leverage technology and enhance visitor experience, without turning their halls into places of entertainment, or quasi-wedding venues.

Many occupy heritage sites built at the so-called high watermark of the British Empire, their collections over-represented when it comes to the works, perspectives and deeds of white men, and all the while their [budgets are under pressure](#), as they seek new funding streams that can bring ethical dilemmas.

Spectrum sat down with the leaders in the boardroom of the Australian Museum to talk budgets, philanthropy and future directions.

Annette Pitman, you lead Museums of History of NSW, but before that, you were chief executive of Create NSW, and you have had the benefit of sitting in on countless budget meetings. Can you set the scene: What is the reality of the financial climate that the state's major galleries and museums currently find themselves in?

Annette Pitman: I think we are in a period of unprecedented demand for what we do. The pandemic really made people appreciate what cultural institutions provide and appreciate the gathering that happens around culture in these spaces. We are incredibly nimble at doing really cutting-edge and meaningful things with small budgets. So we are in a period where we'll have to be at our most creative.



Kim McKay with a favourite object from the Australian Museum collection: a Pormpuraaw Ghost Net sculpture, made from discarded plastic commercial fishing nets, lines and traps. Ghost nets drift in the ocean and create a deadly hazard for marine life before washing up on beaches. In the late 1980s, McKay co-founded Clean Up Australia and saw first-hand the devastation ghost nets cause. *CREDIT: WOLTER PEETERS*

Are cultural institutions out of the woods post-pandemic, Louise Herron?

Louise Herron: Our audience statistics suggest many of the worst of the COVID impacts are behind us. Even in the current cost-of-living crisis, people will still save up and go to see the performers they love. Since COVID, we have become more intentional and analytical about what we do. People got out of the habit of going out, so we need to be even more conscious of who we are trying to attract – be that children, Pasifika people, contemporary music fans. We keep working to let people know we do a lot more than opera, though opera still accounts for a bit more than 10 per cent of tickets sold.

Kim McKay: The fact that we are free for all to come into and enjoy the museum (yes, you pay for special exhibitions and programming) is especially important in a cost-of-living crisis and tight budgets. It's a way to level the playing field. I see migrant families, three generations in the one family coming in together because all people want their kids to be exposed to knowledge and learning. The Australian Museum brings in one and a half million people a year but imagine if we could reach 10 million people.

The Holy Grail for cultural institutions is the 18 to 30-year-olds. How does the Art Gallery of NSW engage with these young adults?

Maud Page: Our youth engagement strategy begins in early childhood. [We] do that through artist-led children's programming, like Hive Festival, which attracted more than 28,000 visitors over one weekend in January. If you bring in children, you bring in their aunties, their cousins, their grandparents and their parents and you provide an experience that resonates with all ages. The magic has to come from education, but people don't want to be dictated to any more. They want to be enthralled. So in our case, it is all about [stepping into experimental music](#) like Grammy Award-winning artist Solange in 2023 and ARIA award-winning Northern Territory rock band King Stingray, who last month attracted more than 6000 visitors to the Art Gallery in one night.



Maud Page holds an Aurukun fire stick gifted to her from artist. “It took me a long time to fall pregnant. The fabulous artist Tony Albert had begun at Queensland Art Gallery in the same week as me. After three years working together, in 2005, my daughter Alia was born. Sharing in my exultation, Tony gave me a rare Aurukun fire stick made by Joe Ngallametta. Joe passed away not long after and this beautiful object represented birth and death but also the beginning of a learning journey into the extraordinary world of First Nations art. *CREDIT: WOLTER PEETERS*

And yet, your gallery has been accused in the Murdoch press of being too woke.

Maud Page: It is a very reductive description of what we do, and I would say every single institution around this table is open and generous and welcoming to everyone. The art gallery showcases such a broad spectrum of artistic voices and contemporary and historical art that offers an enriching experience for all visitors.

Writing and reading are somewhat old-fashioned ideas in the internet age, Caroline Butler-Bowdon. How does the state’s oldest library survive?

Caroline Butler-Bowdon: Books and stories are just as relevant today and remain at the heart of libraries. But libraries have always evolved, and today they’re also places for creativity, lifelong learning and social connection. People used to go to cathedrals and other sorts of places for a sense of connection but these days they are coming to our institutions for the same experience. We work with the Sydney Writers’ Festival, Sydney Film Festival, Mardi Gras and it’s through partnerships and collaboration that we build

audiences, we diversify our audiences. We've had a 25 per cent growth in visitation in one year. The core ingredients are essential services, magical experiences and everything in between using social media to share stories, to share our research and depth and drive audiences.

Louise Herron: You definitely need to have a clear ambition and ours is to be Everyone's House. Last night, one of Australia's heaviest metal bands, Parkway Drive, played to a sold-out Concert Hall of 2500 people, backed by a full symphony orchestra. Almost 80 per cent of the audience was new to the Opera House. Some people were so disappointed to miss out on tickets that they came anyway and stood on the Forecourt during the concert, many in black tie. We're looking for artists or genres that will bring new audiences to the Opera House. And if one of our organisations connects with a new community, it helps all of us.



Annette Pitman holds Laminex samples circa 1956. "This post-war period marked a series of shifts in Australian society; housing boom, Australian Dream, kitchen becoming the heart of the home. Laminex was produced in hundreds of colours and patterns; something for every home, and as a result this durable, practical and affordable Australian made product became ubiquitous in our homes." *CREDIT: WOLTER PEETERS*

Lisa Havilah, you are building a cultural institution from scratch on the banks of the Parramatta River. If you build it, will the crowds come?

Lisa Havilah: One of the reasons the museum at Parramatta is designed to be so vertical is to give as much green space as is possible back to the community and wrapping around each of the exhibition spaces with public space that will lead to an open rooftop. It's in the mix of public space, exhibition space, amenity and experience that we hope to make the museum a part of somebody's everyday life. We are creating exhibitions that people can immerse themselves in in new ways, like working with architects, presenting the collection in new ways that engage young audiences. Because you might come to an exhibition, you might come to have dinner, you might come to just sit in the garden or you might come with your family to sit on the riverbank.

So, why do you say the traditional show-and-tell model of programming is on the way out?

Lisa Havilah: Museums need to change and move more than they used to. Exhibitions need to change. Stories need to shift and become more relevant. Historically, museum exhibitions have been very didactic, presenting one position on an object or one story. So it's about giving space for people's perspectives, their own histories and memories.

Kim McKay: In our early years, our institutions didn't engage with First Nations people. It's very different now. Why should we speak for First Nations people when they can speak for themselves?

Museums of History of NSW cares for 12 house museums, and a written archive that dates to 1788, the arrival of the First Fleet. Annette Pitman, how do you avoid romanticising the past, and how do you represent an Australia that has changed since the foundational times of those house museums?

Annette Pitman: History is messy, right? It's a multidimensional thing and no matter what topic we might be talking about, with the hindsight of time, we come to understand it differently. I think the public understands this, especially today when we see so much manipulation of the truth. There is value to be found in the information we hold about our past. We're partnering with the Aboriginal Languages Trust on a wonderful program that supports First Nations teams to go through our archives and identify references to culture and language that aren't known. So there are ways we can engage without sugar-coating what's happened and that's our duty as a public

Museums and galleries pitch themselves as places of public trust at a time of misinformation, but do you run the danger of turning culture into a commodity?

Annette Pitman: “I don’t think there is anything wrong with making quality content entertaining. We just had a kids program called *Beautiful waterways, Stinky Sewers* that drew 7000 kids from all over NSW who came to the Tank Stream and learn the history of public sanitation. I think we’re clever enough to navigate that line.



Caroline Butler-Bowdon with Dorothea Mackellar’s 1907-1908 poetry notebook from the library’s collection, the only known manuscript of her iconic poem *Core of My Heart*, later renamed *My Country*. “The poem is still loved today for its enduring themes, and shows just how powerfully words can spark creativity, stir emotion, and stay meaningful across generations. The same can be said for libraries. What I love is that it was first written when Dorothea was just 19 years old. Our reading rooms are full of young people, studying and creating and it’s nice to think that a future Dorothea indeed could be one of them.” CREDIT: WOLTER PEETERS

How is your upcoming Lego Relics show relevant to the world of natural science, Kim McKay?

Kim McKay: Lego is an accessible brand and learning toy, and it is not just for children, it’s for adults too, and it puts science in a different context. While

people are here, they will go into our other galleries and see *Wild Planet*, or *Surviving Australia*, or see the First Nations gallery.

Is it effectively a switch and bait tactic then? I wouldn't call it that. I would call it understanding our audiences in such a way as we can deliver different things at different times.

But does concentrating on immersive experiences come at the expense of heft and depth, Lisa Havilah?

No, it's in addition to. It's a new lens. That whole definition of learning or engaging with an idea, or having empathy and connection comes from storytelling and entertainment. That's the institutions' Janus-faced nature, having to always look forward and always having to look back, and finding new ways to connect people with ideas.

Annette Pitman: I think the decisions we make about our own staffing has a lot to do with what audiences we engage. We can tap into communities that are more diverse if our organisations are more diverse.

I don't think we should see ourselves in competition with each other. Sydney is an international city and we can help each other. **Lisa Havilah**

Isn't the other danger in your attempts to diversify and reach new demographics that you risk cannibalising each other's audiences?

Lisa Havilah: I don't think we should see ourselves in competition with each other. Sydney is an international city and we can help each other.

Kim McKay: We have 11.5 million people visit our website each year, and I am happy to point them to other institutions as well. The collaboration between us is illustrated by the Sydney Cultural Walk map where we're promoting each other. Our city is extraordinary because most of the key cultural institutions are found along Macquarie Street, the Domain and Hyde Park, forming a cultural connection link on the eastern side of the city. You could compare it to Museum Island in Berlin.

So, Maud Page, is the era of the Impressionist blockbuster dead or behind us? [This interview took place before the gallery [announced a restructure](#) to save the institution \$7.5 million annually].

Maud Page: The era of the Impressionist blockbuster is not over, but it has certainly evolved. While Impressionism remains beloved, our audiences also have a growing appetite for new work that engages with contemporary issues

and ideas. We want to fulfil both desires and are striking that balance in a range of ways, like showing the work of underrepresented women artists in *Dangerously Modern: Australian Women Artists in Europe 1890-1940*, alongside bold and immersive new work from artists like Mike Hewson, which will draw younger audiences and families in unexpected settings.



Louise Herron holds Jørn Utzon's 1962 Yellow Book. Part of the State Library collection, it is profoundly significant. "Its philosophical approach and breathtaking illustrations set the standard for everything we do. Our challenge as the current custodians of the Opera House is to strive for the same level of excellence in everything we do, and to keep exploring the 'edge of the possible', as Utzon so eloquently and tantalisingly put it." *CREDIT: WOLTER PEETERS*

You are accused of having too many works by dead white men in your collection. Do you? And if so, how do you correct that?

Like most collecting institutions around the world, the Art Gallery's 154-year-old art collection includes significantly more works by men than women. Today, we are diversifying the collection through new acquisitions and commissions and re-examining and reframing our existing collection to highlight underrepresented women artists and achieve greater representation of contemporary and historical art by women artists in our exhibition displays. Crucial when you have 98,000 school kids visiting a year – they demand it.

And that's why you have to respect everyone. You never know whose heart you're touching and what that might lead to. Louise Herron

The State Library of NSW was the recipient of a bequest from a man named Neville Halse, who gave away his fortune of \$2.8 million. As competition intensifies for government funding, does the library and other museums need more Neville Halses?

Caroline Butler-Bowdon: Philanthropy is key. The library has been built on a long-standing tradition of philanthropy. Think David Scott Mitchell, Sir William Dixon, Jean Garling. But it's also those people where the library makes a difference in their daily lives. Neville Halse was one of those. It's important to us to attract all different types of donors. And that was one we didn't expect.

Louise Herron: And that's why you have to respect everyone. You never know whose heart you're touching and what that might lead to. And the government wants to know the community cares not only about coming to the show, but also about the institution. When people put their own money in, it shows they really care.

Is the downside of philanthropy that it comes with strings attached? And that it tends to fund bricks and mortar, not the magic that happens inside the building? How does the library balance questions of donor influence?

"The library's mission has always been clear: to serve our diverse public. Philanthropy is helping us create the kind of library our readers and visitors need, not just for today, but for the next 200 years. Yes, funding sometimes supports building projects, but for us, it's more than that. It's about funding research fellowships. It's about funding access to our collections through digitisation and public programming. It's also about providing spaces for people to study, work and be together.



Lisa Havilah with a prototype of the cochlear implant, or bionic ear. "Western Sydney born Dr Graeme Clark invented the cochlear ear implant, inspired by his dad, who was a chemist who struggled with hearing loss. This invention is considered globally as one of the most important advancements in managing profound deafness." *CREDIT: WOLTER PEETERS*

Kim McKay, you're given 10 minutes with [Mike Cannon-Brookes](#), a prominent tech billionaire and [co-founder of Atlassian](#). What would you say?

Well, first, before meeting any philanthropist you have to do your research and a number of big tech entrepreneurs are interested in science and the application of technology. The Australian Museum has been around for a long time, and we'll be here for a long time into the future. We could talk about a legacy gift to engage young people in science for the next 200 years.

Louise Herron: Can I come in here? He absolutely loves renewable energy. The Opera House is already carbon-neutral. We want to be climate positive by 2030, and we have a brilliant plan to do so. We just need to fund it. Mike Cannon-Brookes, give me a call.