

# **Making the Most out of Travelling Exhibitions: Developing New Audiences at the Museum of the Riverina**

## **Muse(um)s**

In preparing this paper about engaging new audiences - bringing the outside in - I wondered if there was any obvious beacon to guide us through the process. There is such a beacon. In fact there are nine. The nine Muses, the Greek goddesses of learning, arts, culture and inspiration who were worshipped and venerated in *mouseion* from which we derive the word museum. There was a Muse for history, tragedy, comedy, music, astronomy and various forms of poetry. To bring the *outside in*, and just as importantly to take the *inside out*, regional museums need to reconnect with the nine Muses. This is our story of doing so.

The *Museum of the Riverina*, situated in Wagga Wagga, initiated and developed a travelling exhibition program at its city-based site almost four years ago. This program has had a major effect on the profile, image and performance of the Museum. During this period we have hosted 28 exhibitions, which include two shows of our own. The exhibitions are presented in our Historic Council Chambers site which offers 134sqm of gallery space. On average we present six shows per year. The program has been funded jointly by the Wagga Wagga City Council and NSW Ministry for the Arts. Until recently there were no designated staff for this program. It is planned and implemented by myself, the curator, casuals and volunteers who do so in addition to our core managerial or curatorial duties.

## **Hosting exhibitions**

The program has two principle components: hosting travelling exhibitions of quality and diversity AND developing a range of public programs to accompany these exhibitions. It's a formula that produces the following benefits:

- Increases visitation levels
- Provides incentives for REPEAT visitation
- Attracts new audiences
- Provides opportunities for innovative and exciting public programs
- Encourages community participation
- Offers opportunities for staff training and development
- Develops networking and partnerships
- Fosters a positive profile and performance
- Offers quality and diversity
- Contributes to regional renewal
- Provides tangible bonuses
- Offers a regional window for national, state, regional or private institutions to promote their exhibitions, programs and themselves

In the course of this discussion I will give examples of what we have done to produce these benefits particularly, in line with the theme of this symposium, how to attract and engage new audiences. You will notice that I'm using present tense in this discussion as the program is very much alive and we continually host new shows with different themes and organise new public programs to instil a dynamic and fresh quality to the program.

### **Travelling exhibitions**

For us travelling exhibitions are more than crates that we unpack, install and then forget about until we reverse the process a month or two later. These crates provide opportunities for activity and engagement. Think of them as gifts. We all like to receive and unwrap presents and share the experience of others. Travelling exhibitions provide wonderful opportunities for this type of experience. They offer something new, get others to participate and fun is had in the process. Think of travelling exhibitions as multi-vitamins that improve your complexion and boost your energy levels. So what are some of our experiences since we reintroduced the Muses back into our Museum?

It helps if you can link an exhibition to a commemoration, anniversary, special occasion or annual event. This idea is not new but it is a formula that works. And if you cannot link the exhibition to a specific event, create one! Be bold and imaginative. Have a spirit of adventure. Use your creativity – there is a special opportunity lurking in every exhibition. Awareness is the key.

Some examples we have used:

The Sydney Olympic Games. Here was an international and national event, the largest global sporting event on the calendar, which we at the *Museum of the Riverina* embraced by developing an exhibition for the occasion. *They Came from the Bush: Our National Olympic Heroes*, which featured rural athletes who had represented Australia in previous Olympics, was created with the assistance of a Visions of Australia grant. We rode the wave of Olympic euphoria and opened the exhibition the night before the spectacular opening ceremony in Sydney. Those present included the parents of two Wagga athletes represented in the Australian Olympic team and a Paralympian who four weeks later went on to win a silver medal. Through this exercise we attracted a new audience of sports buffs, Olympians and Paralympians, their families and friends, volunteers who participated in the Olympic Games or torch relay, and those men and women who were caught up in Olympic fever. Sport I acknowledge is not everyone's preferred cultural activity but in our city, renowned as a nursery for producing quality athletes in many different codes, it was an appropriate choice. And providing choice is a key part of our strategy.

Most of you will remember 2001 as Federation year. During that year we hosted a series of exhibitions that were directly or indirectly linked to this commemorative theme. They included *Births of a Nation: Women, Childbirth & Federation*, from the Powerhouse Museum, and *Unity and Nationhood*, from

the NSW Archives. In addition to its emphasis on women *Births of a Nation* was particularly valuable to us because it came with training, workshops and encouraged local museums to include their own material within the display. Two lasting tangible benefits from this exhibition are, for example, the display panel created for Wagga as part of our permanent exhibition at our Botanic Gardens site and secondly, the walking tour with its brochure developed for the exhibition offers an additional outdoor activity for our Museum visitors. These two items are proof travelling exhibitions can leave a lasting footprint long after the freight truck has driven out of town. Not to forget a new lineage of interested visitors: throughout *Births* we had a procession of mothers pushing prams through our Museum which was wonderful to see.

In 2001 we also hosted two Aboriginal exhibitions *Indigenous Australia: Standing Strong* from the New England Regional Art Museum and *Indigenous Australians: Australia's First Peoples* from the Australian Museum. These two exhibitions were highly significant for us in the Federation year as they gave us an opportunity to engage with our local Aboriginal community. For the first time in the history of the Museum, as well as our century old venue - which previously was the city's Town Hall and former Council Chamber - there were two events aimed exclusively at celebrating Aboriginal people and culture. I can still remember the wonderful opening night when the Museum was teeming with local Aboriginal people, their family, supporters and friends in celebration of their own culture - many of which had stepped into our building for the first time. And because of the quality of the education kits, we attracted many school groups from around the region.

### **Public programmes**

A significant and lasting consequence of hosting these exhibitions, particularly *Standing Strong*, was the comment from a local elder, "A great exhibition but no one from the Riverina is represented!" That prompted us to work with local elders to create an exhibition *Talking About Ourselves: Our Local Aboriginal Community* which is now a permanent feature at our Botanic Gardens site. As the name suggests this exhibition profiles nine local Aboriginal people who talk about their life in their own words. It has proven to be a popular drawcard at our Museum and is now part of an Aboriginal tour of our city. It was inspired by a travelling exhibition and is yet another example of a show producing lasting benefits and attracting new audiences.

Last year we programmed *Science on the Move* from the Questacon to coincide with Science Week and this proved a stunning success. During the week we organised a number of public programs which included:

- Inviting student teachers from the School of Education at Charles Sturt University to act as guides to explain the scientific principles behind the interactive exhibits to school groups;
- The delivery of bush ecology workshops by two Aboriginal Site Officers from the National Parks and Wildlife Service;
- A professor from CSU delivering two fun environmental workshops;

- And three star gazing nights making use of the services of a local astronomer (remember one of the Muses was dedicated to astronomy).

Science Week enabled us to break through the academic curtain and tap into the pool of talent at our local university for the first time. More than 40 students participated in this program and we followed a similar exercise for a couple of weeks again during Science Week 2003 when students from CSU conducted experiments about water at the Museum. Networks developed the previous year were therefore reignited to keep the program alive to the benefit of students, scholars, the university and the Museum.

The three star gazing nights were well attended and arranged in conjunction with Wagga Wagga Observatory, a group established to develop a permanent Observatory in our city. Working with this group opened more opportunities as they launched their Observatory project at the Museum on a later occasion and recently when Mars was the closest it had been to earth in 7500 years we held another star gazing evening that included a presentation by a prominent British astronomer. The fact that it poured with rain and not a star was seen did not detract from a good turn out! When bad weather intervenes it helps to have a good speaker and a PowerPoint presentation in reserve! These star gazing evenings are now been presented at other museums in the Riverina. So once again we have this flow on effect of travelling exhibitions spawning ongoing activities which by implication attract new audiences or sustain existing ones.

I mentioned earlier if it is not possible to link an exhibition to a special anniversary or an event - create one. Here are some examples from our experience:

At the beginning of this year we hosted *Wine! An Australian Social History* from the National Archives. It was our biggest and most complex show to date and we wanted to attract good numbers. We also wanted to showcase the emerging wine industry in our area and *Wine* gave us the perfect introduction to do so. Our small team got to work and produced a wonderful program of activities under the slogan *Start Your Year With Grape Expectations* – which was as much an internal motivator for our team as it was a hook to pull new audiences in.

We started with a fantastic outdoor opening event on a perfect Saturday evening. Six local wineries offered tastings of their vintages in mini marquees erected on the plaza in front of the museum. Two musicians provided background music. It was one of those magical events where everything slotted into place – the theme, the venue, the weather and an excellent crowd fuelled by fine wines, good music and warm fellowship.

Over the next two months other events included:

- a motivational talk, aimed primarily at women in business, by an owner and operator of a winery in the Tumbarumba district;

- a series of wine tastings by different wineries at the Museum on Sunday afternoons. These events increased our Sunday visitation levels;
- a light lunch and wine tasting to coincide with Seniors Week;
- three cocktail functions, two to welcome Newcomers to Wagga Wagga and one a Business Breakfast Reunion. The latter three functions were organised and arranged with the help of the Commercial Response Unit at the Wagga Wagga City Council and is a wonderful illustration of developing internal partnerships with benefits for those involved. The Museum offered the venue and the attraction of a good exhibition; CRU did all the mail outs using their extensive database AND paid for all the catering, wine and refreshments. They were delighted at the result and so we were we. Imagine if you're are a newcomer to Wagga what a great way to be introduced to the city by being invited to an informal social gathering within a friendly setting to meet new people and be introduced to Council officers. What a great way of promoting the Museum. This is yet another creative example of attracting new audiences and making new friends – both internally within your own organisation and externally with new residents in town.
- Finally with *Wine* we organised a wine appreciation course which was presented over four weeks, ending a very successful two months of public programming.

Our following exhibition *My Vietnam* and *Touched by Fire* overlapped with ANZAC day which is another annual event worthy of linking into as all communities commemorate this day. The photographic exhibition and a twelve-panel mural came from a private source. For Vietnam we decided to do some different – a live open-air concert in the amphitheatre alongside the Civic Centre. The idea came from listening to a radio broadcast that mentioned Denise Drysdale's singer performances to Vietnam troops in the 60s. The seed was sown and two months later Denise Drysdale and Patti Newtown were on stage presenting a live concert to 500 Vietnam Veterans and their families as part of the opening function. For this occasion we rallied the support of the local Vietnam Veterans Association who sent out invitations, promoted the exhibition, encouraged members to bring in material for display and collected a gold coin donation on the night of the concert. *My Vietnam* opened a door to work with this Association for the first time and as a result we made new friends and developed a new audience.

And sometimes the gods are with you! When we hosted the MGF's *Milkshakes, Sundaes and Café Culture* we were under organisational pressures. Our budget had run dry as it was the last show of the year. Time was running out and we wondered what we could do to create a memorable occasion with little at our disposal. Once again we heard on the radio that the Cancer Council of Australia were holding their annual Biggest Morning Tea during the week we planned to open the exhibition and invited organisations from all over the country to participate. We decided to link our opening to this national event and working within the extended family of Wagga Wagga City Council, held a giant morning tea for Council workers inside the Museum as part opening function, part fund raiser for the Cancer Council. It was a great success. It raised the most money ever for this event within Council, gave the

Council Officer who usually organised this event a refreshing break and drew many new internal patrons to our Museum. Morning tea is sacrosanct within Council and no one is prepared to miss out – even if it meant walking downstairs and into the Museum! Eureka! We used the insatiable desire for morning tea to our advantage attracting a new audience and gathering funds for the Cancer Council in the process. Well done Heather for a brilliant piece of opportunism.

Two further examples. Last year we hosted *Women with Wings* from the Powerhouse Museum. In thinking about what we could do for the opening and public programs I happened to be watching *Australian Story* on Monday ABC TV. The story featured Allana Arnott who had survived a horrific plane crash in north Sydney while part of a search mission looking for another plane that had crashed earlier in the day. As a result of the accident Allana was left a paraplegic and told she would never walk again and would never fly again. She proved everyone wrong. Today she walks with the aid of two sticks and owns and flies her own helicopter. When I learnt she was one of the 33 aviators featured in *Women with Wings* she became our obvious choice to open the exhibition. It took a couple of phone calls and Allana flew herself from Hobart in Tasmania to Wagga Wagga to open the exhibition and present a motivational talk for 350 High School students in our Civic Theatre the following day. In financial terms it cost the Museum nothing – so don't be afraid to think big. Many times when you reach out and embrace opportunity positive forces rally behind you and things fall into place. Pick up the phone and make the call.

To *Women with Wings* we added some other dimensions. We invited the local RAAF base to exhibit material about their history and the local Aeronautical Association to do the same. Both groups agreed and adorned our entrance foyer and second galley space with an array of colourful aviation memorabilia. We also decided to create our own mini version of *Women with Wings*. In phoning around the district we secured the interest and participation of eleven women from within the Riverina who had some association with aviation. They included a couple of pilots, a balloonist, a paraglider, an aircraft technician, even someone who had built her own plane. *Women with Altitude*, the title we gave to this exhibition, was assembled in a two week period and formed the local component to the larger *Women with Wings*. The women involved were so impressed that we travelled *Women with Altitude* to Griffith, Temora and Tumut for public display. And here we have an example of attracting new audiences for other Riverina museums as well as ourselves. Developing local content for travelling exhibitions, which is another paper in itself, is a great way of getting community groups involved, and by extension gets the outside in.

As a postscript to the Allana Arnott story. Allana returned to Wagga six months later to launch her second book *Prisoners of the East*, which details the story of her grandmother and mother in a Japanese Prisoner of War camp during the Second World War. Allana's grandmother was living in Wagga Wagga so once again we reaped an ongoing benefit from hosting a travelling

exhibition by being presented with an additional opportunity to do a different public function drawing in another group of people.

I will give you one more example before summing up. Last year we hosted *Vanishing Queensland* a photographic exhibition. Richard Stringer whose work was represented in the exhibition, was funded by the National Trust of Queensland to deliver a photographic workshop in Wagga. The one-day workshop, which attracted 35 participants, included a walk down our main street to the Hampden Bridge that spans the Murrumbidgee River, photographing buildings and features along the way. An outdoor lunch was held beside the bridge during which time over 700 images were speedily developed by two photographic studios in town. In the afternoon session Richard provided a critique of five images from each participant and from these a selection was made for display in the Museum. Empty exhibition frames for the purpose had come with the exhibition. For the participants: instant recognition! Instant fame! The activity was a great success.

In addition to this workshop we cooperated with other sections within the Council and our local library to include the following as part of our public programming:

- The presentation in the Museum of the Wagga Wagga City Council Heritage Awards for 2002.
- A local historian giving a talk about the *Bridges in and around Wagga Wagga* to coincide with the Heritage Festival at the time.
- A workshop about *How to Store your Photographic & Print Material* delivered by a conservator from Canberra which blended in perfectly with the theme of the exhibition.

We have other examples from our stable but now is the time to sum up. At the beginning of this paper I highlighted the multiple benefits the *Museum of the Riverina* has derived from developing a program of travelling exhibitions and coupling this with innovative public programs. These benefits are multi-dimensional and broad in their scope and intensity. They provide a web of positive and useful outcomes that filter through all areas of our museological work. Collectively they combine to improve our capacity, performance and service in a way to make the Muses proud.

## **Benefits**

A very quick summary shows:

- The program has increased our visitation levels by 400% and our attendance figures have increased for each and every year of the program. 2003 is no different and if we maintain our momentum for the remainder of the year another record number will be achieved.
- The program fosters repeat visitation that is important in our city. Wagga is not a typical tourist destination so catering for our own community

becomes a key strategy. If you want people to visit you again and again you need to offer quality and diversity - elements that are inherent within this program.

- In reaching out we have widened our networks considerably and worked with many different groups both within Council, for example with our local library, theatre, art gallery and Commercial Response Unit, and outside of Council linking up with community groups across a broad range of themes. These include Aboriginal groups, sporting bodies, military associations, women in business, in aviation, in domestic situations, different ethnic groups, crafts and hobbies, architects, astronomers, scientists, the police, customs officials, university lecturers and students, teachers and youth. The list is open-ended. A major benefit of hosting travelling exhibitions is the unlimited number of community groups you can invite to participate at the appropriate time.
- The program has also been a wonderful training tool for developing the skills and abilities of staff. The success of our program over the past year was largely due to the enthusiasm and commitment of someone who came to us two years before eager to learn and wanted something better than cleaning motel rooms. Heather started as a volunteer in front of house, moved to weekend casual work, then to four days a week, then to permanent part time and finally, earlier this year, was in a position to accept a full time position as a Special Projects Officer at a Regional Arts Development Program. Heather's rise in skill levels would not have been possible without the intensity of the travelling exhibition program. And her success was not a one off: her replacement started as a volunteer and put off a semester of overseas study to join our team for intensive on-the-job training, kick-starting her career.
- There have been lasting tangible benefits too. Through our association with national or state institutions we received old exhibitions cases which were recycled for our Sporting Hall of Fame saving us tens of thousands of dollars. In addition, we acquired themed exhibition panels which now form part of our permanent exhibitions, guided tour publications applicable to our city and numerous contacts that have helped to promote and assist in the development of our rural museums.
- And then there are those uniquely human benefits of the program that resonate with a powerful intensity that is difficult to quantify or qualify. They go way beyond simply keeping a tally of numbers through the door. These aspects unfold into transformational qualities of magic, meaning and purpose. Some of these include:
  - ✓ listening to survivors of the Holocaust tell their stories of childhood survival in the face of genocide which was part of the *Courage to Care* exhibitions public programs;
  - ✓ following the cathartic experience of David Walsh a Vietnam veteran who as a twenty-year-old had to search for personal belongings on the dead bodies of fallen soldiers. So traumatic was



his experience he exiled himself to a darkened, single roomed flat for many years. His reprieve - painting a twelve panel mural *Touched by Fire* which he uses to tell his story and those of his comrades. An exercise that has eased the terror of the demons within.

- ✓ Paraplegic Allana Arnott, who was told she would never walk again, striding confidently and purposefully across the Civic Theatre stage telling 350 students they can do anything if they put their minds to it.

And then some lighter moments when, for example, Charlie our live carp who was part of the *Bush Lives: Bush Futures* exhibition decided to leap from his fish tank and thud into the chest of a startled visitor before gasping for air on the gallery floor! Kids strutting their stuff in an air guitar competition as part of *Li'l Elvis* exhibition and humorous poetry readings which were a feature at the opening of our very first exhibition, *Aprons*.

## **Reconnections**

Through all these experiences we have reconnected with the Muses and brought life into our Museum – tragedy, comedy, music, poetry, astronomy – all linked through the common thread of history.

To all our exhibition providers whether they come from National, State, Regional or independent institutions; to my small team of staff and volunteers who bi-monthly dig deep to present a new program; to the Wagga Wagga City Council and Ministry for the Arts for the financial support: I thank you all for giving us the opportunity to revitalise our institution and provide quality cultural programs for our Riverina community. If I have one request it is to the larger institutions: We need more good quality MUSEUM orientated travelling exhibitions. Please keep this in mind when you think about the nature of your service obligations to regional Australia.

And a final thank you to Madeleine for reading this paper to you today in my absence.

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