

TOURING EXHIBITIONS – WHAT MUSEUMS WANT

Touring exhibitions are crucial to community based museums and galleries, providing significant benefits for audience development and exposure to inspiration, issues and ideas.

The publicly funded regional galleries and art museums have long had access to incoming touring shows. In New South Wales, they can present popular exhibitions such as the Archibald Prize and Art Express, which enhance their credibility and encourage local audience growth, as well as more specialised or edgy shows. Funding through Visions of Australia; the Australia Council and Arts NSW supports galleries to develop and tour their own exhibitions.

However, for publicly funded community and volunteer-managed museums – of which around 500 are located in NSW – opportunities are more limited.

Recent research, carried out by MGNSW with the assistance of Peta Landman, identified the needs of museums as potential developers or presenters of touring exhibitions and the challenges they face. The barriers to developing or even presenting touring exhibitions include skills, experience and a lack of resources.

It's more likely that museums will be *presenters* of touring exhibitions, well before they begin to develop tours.

Many smaller museums concentrate on the basics of collections and operations and are unable to extend themselves to develop regular in-house programs, let alone tour potentially suitable exhibitions. While skills-development programs are required to educate and assist staff to develop touring product many museums are not up to this stage and are just seeking the incoming show.

Even then, there are barriers.

Not all museum infrastructure and space is suitable. Exhibition areas are often small. Loading facilities and handling equipment are limited or non-existent and sometimes a crew or specialised assistance is needed, particularly if crates are involved. The handling and ongoing management and maintenance of the exhibitions can also be a disincentive for smaller organisations with slim resources.

In the short term, alternatives such as the use of libraries and other spaces can be considered for museum tours. There could be regional solutions enabling the development of appropriate exhibition spaces within reach of a group of towns or suburbs, although there are strong counter arguments for developing the accessibility of local venues.

Requirements for touring product have been established through our research. Relevance is most important. Audiences will be more interested if the exhibition has a theme that resonates with local issues or collections and encourages the presentation of complementary local content.

“Relevance to local community is important for maintaining and improving our profile within the community”. Local content is “very important for return visitation, local promotion and to support festivals and events.”

Museums have identified four main themes of interest:

- Indigenous and colonial histories and first contact stories
- Natural sciences, environment, natural history and of sustainability issues, and broader science themes.
- Social history topics, such as milestones in life, worse, marriage, death etc. Multiculturalism and immigration, gender, politics, socially contentious issues such as drugs and gaming.
- Leisure and sport – especially their social aspects.

Museums also want exhibitions that are family and education oriented, and that appeal to youth – particularly with interactive material. A cross-disciplinary focus, with a strong community cultural development basis is also desired. Museums are also interested in the visual and decorative arts, for

instance photography and craft. Their communities would like to see and

experience important and significant cultural items.

Many perceive touring exhibitions as a means to target new audiences through public programs “useful, especially in relation to school curricula ... providing access and depth that extends our service ... integral to promoting the exhibition to a wider audience”.



Milkshakes, Sundaes and Café Culture exhibition detail, Museum of the Riverina, Wagga Wagga

It is also important to stimulate investigation and interpretation of the museum’s own collection or building and increase opportunities to tell regional stories, involve community groups and build networks and partnerships.

More information on available touring exhibitions is required. A national exhibition register – perhaps on CAN—could assist in identifying potential exhibitions for the smaller sector. Media kits with images and press releases are also a useful tool for presenters.

Leaving a legacy is favoured, through a program encouraging skills’ development for staff on different aspects of touring and

presenting exhibitions.

However, the lack of suitable touring exhibitions is an issue. Large institutions such as the Australian War Memorial provide excellent touring shows, although community museums feel that small scale touring exhibitions are not a priority for state or national institutions, as development and touring costs to regional areas are often disproportionately higher than touring to sister venues in capital cities.

There have been a number of successful models providing a big impact for community museums. These included MGNSW's *Café* exhibition and the Powerhouse's *Births of a Nation*.



Milkshakes, Sundaes and Café Culture exhibition, Museum of the Riverina, Wagga Wagga

When it comes to developing their own touring product, access to external funding and skills support is crucial as individual museums may not have the capacity to develop touring exhibitions. Regional museum strategies, partnerships and co-operative networks may be a viable solution. Collaboration with other cultural institutions, such as libraries and galleries, could also assist.

The regional gallery scenario shows us that strong networks will encourage touring and other interactions. When this works

effectively, touring exhibitions will be developed and exchanged between different institutions. At worst, it leads to a lack of diversity and well-trodden touring circuits, as familiar networks will exchange only within a certain group. The nurturing of networks across the collection sectors of museums, galleries and libraries will certainly diversify the touring agenda however, this is only the beginning.

Collaborative exhibitions with larger organisations also have been successful, but consume greater resources than less interactive models and are not sustainable on an ongoing basis.

Resources are required to ensure external expertise is available to both develop the product and/or to provide relevant training to the organisation. External curators, project managers and touring organisations need to be included in the funding equation. Grants that sustain a mentoring or supportive relationship with separate resourcing streams for both the mentor and mentored, will encourage and formalise more effective support for small organisations.

When a small organisation wishes to develop an exhibition to tour, they should be encouraged to work with a professional curator to assist the concept development, oversee grant applications and assist in the realisation of the exhibition in the host location, as well as for touring.

The Australia-wide network of touring agencies (NETS) could assist in touring and developing museum exhibitions but they are currently established to tour visual arts and crafts exhibitions. A wider brief, additional support and new

performance criteria would be required to expand their roles to support smaller groups as well as to develop innovative exhibitions which might push the boundaries through content, innovation of delivery and best practice.

A performance agreement specifying that at a minimum, touring agencies would work with a small network of small organisation to develop and to tour an exhibition would achieve this.

We need to recognise that there is immense diversity in the sector and a range of solutions from the do-it-yourself exhibitions to the professional tour is possible.

We would advocate that the development of touring exhibitions should be seen as a continuum. The small museum sector will continually evolve, with many organisations requiring ongoing training, resourcing and support while others embrace touring with gusto. The ideal would be funding models which move the whole sector gradually forward, recognising that there will be leadership and innovation, as well as organisations requiring more developmental work.

While resources are always an issue it would be important not to expect everything to be directed through government arts departments and agencies. However, such bodies can play a role in advocating to their colleagues in government the benefits of touring exhibitions as a valid and important means of communicating and conveying information to the community.

There are many themes that relate and respond to issues that different

departments believe are important. These include:

- Health promotion/community issues
- Tourism – telling the story of a region/exhibiting aspects of Australia or promoting Australian product is attractive to visitors
- Education
- The environment
- Trade and industry

Seeking resources through a greater range of government bodies will confirm museums as central to information provision, knowledge and learning.

There are lasting benefits for both museums that develop touring exhibitions and for those that present them.

What museums want is sustainable touring, that does not overburden their resources but will enhance their capacity to provide an important source of learning, inspiration, entertainment and enjoyment to their communities.

This article was taken from a presentation made by MGNSW Chief Executive Officer Maisy Stapleton to a Visions of Australia Forum held in Canberra in February.

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