

Museums & Galleries NSW

Cultural Protocols - Indigenous Welcome to Country

Introduction

This information was compiled by the Museums & Galleries NSW (M&G NSW) through responses from a survey with Indigenous and non-Indigenous respondents to document the current practice of Indigenous cultural protocols in relation to Welcome to Country for public arts events and in particular to gallery and museum openings and activities.

This is a guide to inform the sector of current practice in this area. M&G NSW are aware that there is no prescriptive protocol that is appropriate for all communities, contexts or geographical locations but there are options for the museum and gallery sector to be encouraged to acknowledge and observe Indigenous cultural protocols and the original custodians of the land and country.

From consultation with various Indigenous and non-Indigenous professionals in the arts and cultural sector, the following information was provided.

Some of the key principles which are critical in understanding the function of this cultural protocol and Indigenous arts protocols are:

Key Principles

- Aboriginal Australia is recognised as the oldest living culture in the world. Originally consisting of diverse nations and languages, the Aboriginal people within NSW experienced massive changes to their ways of life as a result of European colonisation.
- Within NSW, Indigenous cultural expression plays a major role in the revitalisation of cultural practices and continued strengthening of Aboriginal identity.
- An acknowledgment that Indigenous culture is informed by the past, and the recognition that Indigenous cultural expression is a vital part of contemporary society.
- Support for the principle of self determination in setting cultural priorities and the adoption of appropriate cultural protocols in the public sector.
- An acknowledgment of the role of the public sector, representing as it does the community as a whole, in supporting, maintaining and nurturing Indigenous cultural heritage and expression.

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- Respect and visibility in public events especially in the arts and cultural community.
- Acknowledging the diversity within Indigenous communities with a range of different cultural bases of histories, geography, languages, political and social contexts.

Cultural Protocols

Welcome to Country is considered an important cultural protocol for museums and galleries.

- Cultural protocols are seen in the context of the current focus on issues such as native title and reconciliation.
- For some Aboriginal people, Welcome to Country is very important and formal. It is important to acknowledge the Local Elders and thank them for allowing you to come to their country. It is also important to recognise Aboriginal Australia as the oldest living culture in the world.
- An Indigenous formality to complement other formalities of an event
- A traditional welcome by the Indigenous community through dance and music
- A welcome by an Indigenous representative from the local area is highly recommended. This can be established by seeking the advice of the Local Aboriginal Lands Council, the Local Council or the Council's Aboriginal Liaison Officer if one is available. Also check to see if the Local Council has an Aboriginal Consultative Committee or Group.
- Welcome to Country should be encouraged not only for Aboriginal related exhibitions but for all exhibitions. It is important for the museum or gallery to consult with local Indigenous community and the Indigenous artists involved.

Personal comments

"A step forward for reconciliation"

An Aboriginal Councillor from a regional local Council

"Welcome to Country is an important cultural practice that has the essence of traditional practices but communities have their own way of practising it. It reminds people that Indigenous people are part of the history and presence of contemporary Australia. It is a part of 'home' and 'true identity' for Indigenous people. It has an important impact in working towards a healthy relationship with the Indigenous and non-Indigenous community".

A young Aboriginal arts worker

Welcome to Country by an Indigenous representative

It is recommended that museums and galleries research and find out about the local community and who are the representatives of the local Indigenous community or communities. It is important to get to know them, invite them to your gallery or museum on a regular basis and be active in attending functions and events in the

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community when invited. Profile, familiarity and trust are key elements in this relationship.

Example 1

For an Indigenous person such as Colleen Wall, Program Manager Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Arts, Arts Office in Queensland:

“Firstly, I must acknowledge the Local Elders and thank them for allowing us to come to their country. This means before I acknowledge my ‘white elders’ such as premiers, ministers etc. in that same gathering. Then I must introduce myself culturally to the local people of the area within which I am travelling.”.

Colleen then also states which Indigenous group she is from and states: *“I must continue in this way until I am recognised and accepted in this area”.*

Example 2

A young Indigenous person who is on a Board of an arts organisation becomes a key person to introduce her ‘Uncle’ as the official Indigenous representative from La Perouse for an official opening for an arts event.

Example 3

A regional gallery in NSW have an Indigenous Community Advisory Committee. This is a Committee that is part of the local Council. The Aboriginal Liaison Officer from the Council also is represented on this Committee. The Gallery is able to seek advice on Indigenous issues through this group and draw upon their advice for recommendations for and liaise with the Indigenous Elders or appropriate representatives for welcome to place for the gallery’s activities.

The Elder from one of the local Aboriginal group start off with a Welcome to Country, welcome to the Indigenous people who are from different groups outside the area and then special guests (Premier, politicians etc). A brief welcome to place is the usual protocol to an exhibition at the Gallery that directly relates to an Indigenous exhibition.

According to the Gallery, as there are two major Aboriginal groups in the local area the decision who should be the most culturally appropriate to open the exhibition seems to resolve itself as sometimes someone is not available from the one of the groups and so then a representative from the other group will then be invited to give the official Welcome to Country.

Verbal approach by phone or in person rather than by letter to invite an Indigenous Elder or representative is usually the most effective way but this is also with the assistance and liaising by a respected Indigenous person in the community or the Council’s Aboriginal Liaison Officer to make the invitation on behalf of the gallery or museum.

Example 4

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A local regional gallery has developed an Aboriginal Services and Community Plan and a have an Aboriginal Community Worker at the local Council. The Gallery Director is able to seek advice and assistance from the Aboriginal Community Worker and the Lake Macquarie Aboriginal Consultative Committee. The Aboriginal Community worker also makes recommendations of appropriate Indigenous elders or representatives when a Welcome to Country needs to be organised for the Gallery.

Example 5

In the opening page of the publication, *Exploring Culture & Community for the 21st century: a new model for museums* published by Global Arts, Ipswich a *Welcome to Country* is printed and reads-

“ In Ipswich we gather on Country for which members and Elders of the local Indigenous community and their forebears have been custodians for many centuries and on which Aboriginal people have performed age-old ceremonies of celebration, initiation and renewal. We acknowledge their living culture and their unique role in the life of the region”.

Example 6

A local Council have signs that inform tourists that they are entering Aboriginal country indicated by signs with Aboriginal names on the different roads leading into the regional town.

Example 7

Whilst payment is not usually requested by an Indigenous Elder or representative for a Welcome to Country it is courteous to make an offer of an honorary payment. This may be necessary in certain circumstances. You should oblige to make the payment if it is requested. It is important to consider that if you require the involvement of a person in a Welcome to Country for only a short period of time it still requires time to travel and participate in the event.

- If you need their availability for 1/2 day -1 day for Aboriginal related issues or consultation, payment should be offered. This also applies for any formal consultation you may require regarding cultural protocols or Indigenous policy issues.

Example 8

Each Indigenous Elder or representative who gives a Welcome to Country may also have their individual way in which they may want to present it. Sometimes it is in the form of their own story about their life as an Indigenous person in Australia and their relationship to their family and the local area. It is also could be in the form of a symbolic gesture of reconciliation eg an Elder offers a large branch of a tree with leaves to guests and asks guests to take a leaf from the branch away with them.

Acknowledgement of Country (Welcome to Country by a non-Indigenous person)

Example 1

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“*I acknowledge the original custodians of this land...*” is the most common form of welcome. A non-Indigenous official spokesperson of an event acknowledges the original custodians of the land but it is important to find out the name of the specific local Indigenous community or communities before the event.

Example 2

Even when an Indigenous representative gives an official Welcome to Country for the event especially at conferences other individual speakers whether Indigenous or non-Indigenous are encouraged to acknowledge the original custodians of the land before they commence their speech.

Example 3

When there is no Indigenous representative available for a Welcome to Country to officially open an exhibition or event it may be appropriate for a Gallery Director, Cultural Services Manager or Mayor or an official person to give a Welcome to Country on behalf of the Indigenous community if the appropriate permission has been sought. However, the original custodians must be acknowledged first before official proceedings of an event commence.

What to do:

- If there is more than one Indigenous language group in the area and you are not sure which group should be approached to do the official Indigenous welcome consult with your Local Aboriginal Lands Council or Local Council.
- If an Indigenous representative or an Elder of the original custodians are not able to do the official Welcome to Country ensure that any other Indigenous language group acknowledges the original custodians first and shows respect to the specific community's name before introducing their own community.

This information has been compiled in consultation with individuals from various Indigenous communities and non-Indigenous representatives working in the museum, gallery, arts and tourism sector. Details of other written references have been provided and credited.

References

- *Taking the Time: A resource guide- museums and galleries, cultural protocols and communities*. Museums Australia Queensland 1998
- ‘Protocols Are They Important?’ by Colleen Wall, 1995. From paper at the Regional Galleries Association, QLD Cultural Linkages Conference published in *Taking the Time*.
- NSW Ministry for the Arts- *Policy for the promotion and support of Indigenous arts and cultural activity in NSW*, March 2000
- *NSW Indigenous Arts Protocols*, March 1998 developed by the Indigenous Arts Reference Group, NSW Ministry for the Arts
- *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Arts Board Policy*, Australia Council for the Arts

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- *Previous Possessions, New Obligations: Plain English Summary of Policies in Australia and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples*, Museums Australia. 1993

Other reference points

- Contact your Local Aboriginal Lands Council
- Contact your Local Council to check if there is an Aboriginal Community Liaison Officer
- Contact your local Aboriginal community organisation
- Contact your local Aboriginal cultural centre or keeping place

Museums & Galleries NSW welcome any additional information and responses to Welcome to Country to contribute to this document