

2022 NSW Flood Inquiry

Submitted 11 May 2022

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I am writing as Chief Executive Officer of Museums & Galleries of NSW (M&G NSW), and previously as Director of Lismore Regional Gallery for 11 years.

M&G NSW is service organisation supported by the NSW Government through Create NSW. Our role is to assist small-medium museums, galleries and Aboriginal cultural centres create exciting experiences for visitors and, through this, thriving local NSW communities. We develop these organisations skills, connect them with others in the industry, provide funding, point visitors their way, and give them access to ground-breaking exhibitions.

The context of this submission is to ensure there is consideration for the long-term preservation of moveable cultural heritage material in future decisions to be made about the recovery and the rebuilding of the city; alongside the broader role the arts play in ensuring community well-being and connectivity. While this submission obviously is most pertinent to the situation in Lismore, it is an issue worthy of considering across New South Wales in the context of increased frequency, and greater scale of environmental disasters.

This submission mainly refers to the impacts on the collections of Lismore Regional Museum and Lismore Regional Gallery.

The museum is an award-winning facility and has one of the best historical collections in regional Australia. It is 100% volunteer managed by the Richmond River Historical Society, which since 1936 has collected, preserved, displayed and disseminated the history of the region.

It has a total collection of more than 20,000 items, divided between museum objects and research archive items. Major objects are on display at all times; the remainder kept in storage areas. Most of the more significant items fall within the categories of river navigation and/or timber cutting, and social history connected to the farming industry. One of the most significant items is a large collection of both hardwood and rainforest samples, representing all types of hardwood and rainforest timber that were cut and milled in the region during the 19th Century.

There are also many Bundjalung objects ranging from weapons and tools to domestic items, such as finely made dilly bags that have great technical and aesthetic significance. The collection also has early military items, including a c1899 Boer War troopers tunic.

Lismore Regional Gallery is one of the longest-running regional galleries in NSW, first established in 1953. Its collection pre-dates the establishment of the gallery, with the first works acquired by the Council in 1948. Prior to the 2022 flood, there were over 1400 artworks in the permanent collection. A highlight is *The Hannah Cabinet*, constructed by Lismore-based master craftsmen Geoff Hannah in 2020 after an extensive community driven fundraising campaign.

In writing this submission, I am fully aware where these issues sit within the broader impacts of the February/March 2022 floods on the community. Housing, education, employment, business retention, health, and mental health needs are vital and urgent issues to be considered. In writing of the needs to support the cultural sector and cultural heritage, I would like to stress I am not advocating for these needs to be prioritised above the more urgent ones – but ones that do need considering in ensuring the longer-term wellbeing and vitality of the city.

Preparation and planning

Lismore Regional Gallery had a robust Disaster Plan, which covered the protection of all artworks above the 1 in 100-year flood level. Lismore Regional Museum also has a Disaster Plan, that adequately protected their collections in all previous floods. In 2022 objects stored in the lower level of the museum were located above the 1 in 100-year flood level.

The gallery's main exhibition spaces, and permanent collection store are all located on the second level. Office furniture, gallery library, and all technical equipment were located to the second floor of the gallery on Sunday 27th February when the warnings issued were for a flood height in the vicinity of 11.5m.

The total value of art located within the gallery at the time had a combined value of approximately \$4.2m (\$3.8m permanent collection + \$430,000 in borrowed works on display – mainly the Afghani War Rugs on loan from a private collection).

Response to floods

By the early hours of Monday 28th February 2022, it was known that the regional gallery would be severely impacted, with extensive damage to artworks on loan and to the permanent collection – including the renowned *Hannah Cabinet*.

It was unknown for a number of days what the impact was going to be on the Lismore Regional Museum. It was later established that their second floor (the main display areas, and the vast majority of the collection) were thankfully spared. A 15m flood would enter the second floor, and the museum has since established that nothing of value be stored or displayed below 15.5m. However, it should be noted, that mould is a major problem on heritage items and cultural material, and so even if material has not been submerged, there can still be risks to items not touched by flood water.

In the week of 28th February, M&G NSW staff reached out to museums and galleries across the Northern Rivers region to assess any damage. Given the widespread nature of the disaster, it was fortunate that the main damage to art and heritage collections was limited to Lismore. Mullumbimby Museum had water through some outdoor collections of farm machinery, while Ballina Naval and Maritime Museum narrowly escaped flooding. New Italy Museum sustained building damage and some damaged collection items in the second rain event on 28th/29th March.

Once our organisation had a better sense on the conservation needs of our sector, we worked alongside Create NSW and International Conservation Services, as well as with the Lismore collecting facilities, to ensure there was a team of conservators on the ground to support the recovery efforts of the collection.

It was vital that we had external people onsite to assist with decision making as local people were experiencing their own trauma and would find it difficult to know how to approach such a disastrous situation.

Conservators arrived onsite in Lismore on Friday 4th March, and by Wednesday 9th March all damaged items were removed from the museum and the gallery and relocated to cold storage in Brisbane to alleviate any future damage, including mould growth. *The Hannah Cabinet* and Afghani War Rugs were taken directly to Canberra for conservation assessment.

Transition from incident response to recovery

While damaged objects were located in a storage facility in Brisbane, gallery staff commenced a triage process alongside International Conservation Services. From there, objects for conservation treatment were relocated to Sydney. The state cultural institutions (Art Gallery of NSW; Powerhouse Museum; Australian Museum; Sydney Living Museums and State Library of NSW have also been providing assistance).

Initial assessments of the collection indicate that 50% of Lismore Regional Gallery's will be able to be salvaged. Emphasis is being placed on saving higher value, and more significant objects. It is anticipated that perhaps there will be a loss of \$780,000 in works from the gallery collection, or 20% of its overall value. Conservators remain positive on the recovery of The Hannah Cabinet.

The museum had a collection of maps, plans and architectural drawings damaged, as well as some historic audio-visual material. Conservators are currently undertaking further assessment to determine what is able to be salvaged from this material.

Recovery from floods

Given the museum had its second floor, and main exhibition areas spared, it is looking to reopen in the near future. The gallery has a long journey ahead before it will be ready to reopen, with extensive building works needing to take place. However, the question to be considered is 'should this cultural heritage material be returned to a site known for such catastrophic flooding'?

In regard to some immediate recovery activity, it should be noted the work the gallery, and the attached Lismore Quadrangle, are doing to ensure the wellbeing of the community is supported. External programs have commenced including music performances; collage workshops; hosting an event for young people living with Autism; activities for young people and many more.

The gallery is planning a program of external visual arts projects to take place while the building is out of action, including partnering with our organisation to present the work of First Nations artists and an associated educational symposium.

These events all illustrate the need for ongoing cultural provision in Lismore to assist with the rebuilding of the city – both physically and emotionally, and in the immediate and long-term timeframes.

These kinds of art projects (inclusive the activities of the museum) have been demonstrated to provide benefits far beyond just distraction and entertainment to communities in the months subsequent to disaster by:

- Providing a way for people to reflect and commemorate on how their community has changed and how it may be redefined;

- Helping people within communities reconnect and break down barriers of social isolation;
- Encouraging people to share stories and capture important moments in history for generations to come;
- Helping people express their feelings of loss, grief and hope; and
- Giving people a sense of normality when things around them seem out of their control.

(NSF Consulting: <http://nsfconsulting.com.au/arts-disaster-recovery-myth/>)

Lismore is a city known for its creative spirit, backed by a number of arts companies including those discussed above, as well as the Northern Rivers Conservatorium, LightnUp (Lismore Lantern Parade) and NORPA among others. Our organisation calls for inclusion of a representative from the Lismore cultural sector to any community-based advisory group to ensure this aspect of Lismore's identity is carried through to future decision about the city.

Any other matters

A major issue that needs to be considered is how safely can the gallery and the museum store and display cultural material.

It goes without saying that these items of cultural heritage can never be replaced, and so great thought needs to be had as to how to safely care for this material into the future.

A key issue for the whole cultural sector in Lismore is where will these permanent collection items be stored (including *The Hannah Cabinet*) if there is a similar flood in the future. Or a 15.5m flood. The untold damage to the museum and gallery collections should never happen again.

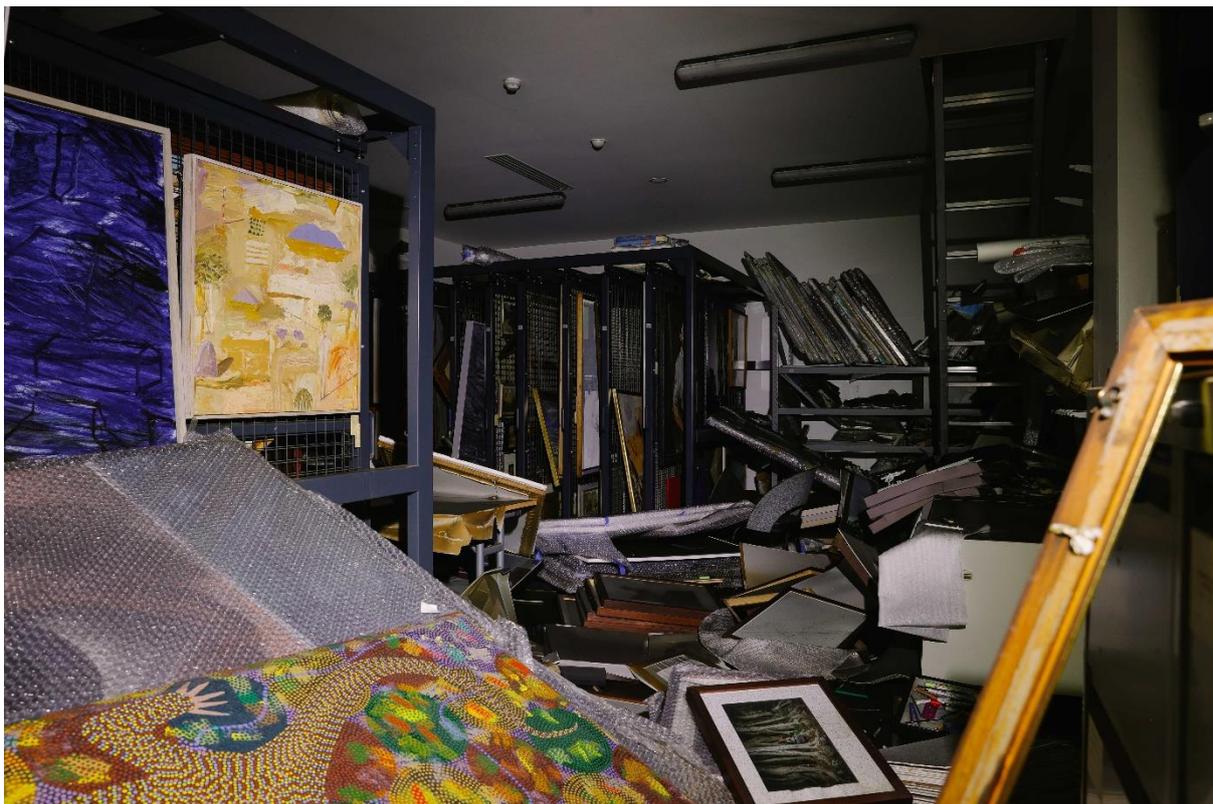
One answer to this could be an offsite collections facility, located in flood free land.

Bathurst Regional Council is in the process of building the Central Tablelands Collections Facility, which will house collections items managed by the Council. The facility will also provide industry standard storage and services for significant items from smaller regional museums, historical societies, education facilities and private collectors across the region.

However, an offsite storage facility, on its own, does not address the issue of the museum and the gallery having confidence that their public display areas, and thus collection items and borrowed artworks on display, are safe from floods. To relocate all these display items from both institutions in the case of major flood is not practical, and risks damage from being handled incorrectly in a rushed environment. If these facilities do remain at risk of flood, there will be difficulties in securing loans from touring bodies and other major collecting institutions.

Any future decisions on flood proofing the CBD, including relocating essential services, must take in to consideration the ongoing preservation of the city's important moveable cultural heritage.

Supporting documents or images





Objects from Lismore Regional Museum, at great risk with any flood above 15m. Left to right: Bundjalung dilly bag c1880 and Boer War troopers tunic c1899.



