

Museum and Memory – International Museum Day 2011

International Museum Day, created in 1977 by the International Council of Museums (ICOM) is held on or around 18 May every year. Museums around the world celebrate the day with activities. The theme for next International Museum Day (IMD) is 'Museum and Memory'.

To prepare for IMD 2011, a workshop was held in September in Berlin in which representatives of ICOM and other 'memory-keeping' organisations – the International Council on Archives (ICA), the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA), the Coordinating Council of Audiovisual Archives Associations (CCAAA) and UNESCO's *Memory of the World* programme for safeguarding documentary heritage – discussed collaborating to celebrate IMD and its theme.

I was invited to Berlin to represent the UNESCO *Memory of the World* programme. The workshop was organised by the International Committee of Literary and Composer Museums (ICLM) of ICOM, and the Association of Museums of the Greater Region (AMGR, comprising Saarland, Rhineland-Palatinate, Lorraine, Wallonia and Luxembourg).

The workshop venue was appropriate for a discussion of memory, as it is close to sites where Germany confronts the tragic memories of its twentieth-century history. It was held in the State House of Saarland, overlooking the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, a stark and compelling area of 1900 square metres filled with over 2700 stelae, one for each page of the Talmud, the Jewish scriptures. Underneath the Memorial is an information centre with the names of all known Jewish Holocaust victims, made available by the Yad Vashem Memorial in Israel.

Within walking distance are fragments of the Berlin Wall that divided the city from 1961 to 1990, and Checkpoint Charlie, the US Army post on the Friedrichstrasse that marked the border crossing between East and West Berlin. It also has a museum telling the stories of its role as a focal point of the Cold War in German, English, French and Russian.

An outdoor exhibition, *Topography of Terror*, relates the rise and fall of the Third Reich; then the division of Germany into the communist East and democratic West and the events that led to the demolition of the Berlin Wall 20 years ago. It employs both graphic panels and audio recordings that pull no punches in telling the story of one of the great cataclysms of world history. It is chilling to pick up an audio wand and hear the voice of Hitler, the man whose words and deeds wrought such destruction, with consequences that can still be seen in the modern city of Berlin.

Next to the *Topography of Terror* exhibition is the Martin-Gropius-Bau, established originally in the nineteenth century as a museum of applied art and more recently a venue for art and cultural exhibitions. Its magnificent façade has been carefully restored, with the exception of the statue at the entrance. Grimy and dismembered, it is a stark reminder of the devastation of war.

As Chair of the International Advisory Committee of *Memory of the World*, my task at the workshop was to outline the role of museums in this programme, beginning with their representation in *Memory of the World* registers that list documentary heritage of world significance at international, regional and national levels.

The goal of the registers is to raise awareness of the importance of documentary heritage in preserving the world's memory, and guard against its destruction by acts of violence or nature, or through neglect or improper care. Increasing access to documentary heritage worldwide is also a key goal of *Memory of the World*.

Museums are not as well represented in *Memory of the World* registers as libraries and archives – of the 193 inscriptions currently in the International *Memory of the World* Register, only 23 are from museums or housed in museum institutions. Yet museums play a significant part in collecting and preserving memories and making them accessible. Museums collect documents as well as three-dimensional objects, including oral histories. And they provide access to these documents through exhibitions, and increasingly through websites.

I took the opportunity to bring to the notice of colleagues from overseas museums and non-government organisations some examples of the work of the National Museum of

Australia, and other collecting institutions, that highlights documentary heritage, and the memories it contains.

The National Museum and the National Library of Australia are collaborating to record the stories of the Forgotten Australians, the over half a million Australians who experienced institutional or other out-of-home care as child migrants or as wards of the state in the twentieth century, often leaving them with damaged lives and painful memories.

To acknowledge and remember the experiences of these people when they were children, the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs is funding the National Museum of Australia exhibition, *Inside: Life in Children's Homes*, curated by Dr Jay Arthur and Dr Adele Chynoweth and set to open in November 2011. Exhibition development on *Inside* is at the halfway mark, but information is available on the National Museum's website at www.nma.gov.au/blogs/inside.

Dr Joanna Sassoon is conducting the oral history project on the Forgotten Australians at the National Library. Photos and other documents, oral histories and other testimonies by the Forgotten Australians can be accessed through a website, *Forgotten Australians: Our History*, at <http://forgottenaustralianshistory.gov.au/index.html>.

Wilma Robb, one of the Forgotten Australians, has recorded an oral history interview with the National Library's project, and her story will also be featured in the Museum's *Inside* exhibition. She spoke of her experiences at a seminar at the Museum on 7 October, and of her determination to tell her story, although the memories it brought back were 'horrific'. Wilma believes that 'it's important to actually hear the voice behind the story, and see the photos of the little girl that went into institutions as a five-year-old.'¹

The National Museum also collaborates with institutions overseas to bring documentary heritage to Australia, and make it accessible to a worldwide audience. The current exhibition in the Museum's Studio Gallery, *Exploration & Endeavour: the Royal Society*

of London and the South Seas, is displaying key documents in the story of the Royal Society's role in the exploration of the Pacific and the scientific study of the Australian continent in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

The documents in the exhibition testify to advances in knowledge of navigation, hygiene and diet, meteorology, astronomy and zoology by voyages of exploration in the Pacific in which the Royal Society and its members played vital parts.

They also illuminate the characters of some of the leading players in the story of early European contact with the Pacific, notably James Cook and Sir Joseph Banks. For those who want to see more than what is on display in the Studio Gallery or who cannot come to the exhibition – or both – the Museum's website provides a view of each page of every document, and even allows a reader to zoom in on specific areas of a page. The exhibition is on line at

http://www.nma.gov.au/exhibitions/exploration_and_endeavour/

What can museums do to bring attention to the important part they play in collecting, preserving and making accessible the memories embodied in documents of all kinds? ICOM has suggested a number of focus topics for IMD 2011, including:

- Care of and access to collections (including documents)
- Museum history: What is your museum's subject?
- Forgotten memory
- Memory, community and identity (including family identity).

From now until May next year ICOM will be promoting the 'Museum and Memory' theme for IMD 2011, with posters in 36 languages, and an IMD 2011 website. This will contain content on the topic areas listed above; as well as examples of best practice and joint projects proposed for IMD 2011 as a result of the Berlin workshop.

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Images



A small part of the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, or Holocaust Memorial, located just a block from the Brandenburg Gate in central Berlin.



A shattered statue at the entrance of the Martin-Gropius-Bau is a mute testimony to the devastation of war.



A fragment of the Berlin Wall is left as a reminder of a divided city and country.



Topography of Terror exhibition, flanked by the largest extant portion of the Berlin Wall.

Photos: Roslyn Russell



Drawing of a platypus, from *Exploration & Endeavour*.

Courtesy of the Royal Society of London.

¹ Natasha Rudra, 'Painful stories of a country's shame', *Canberra Times*, 8 October 2010