

CULTURE & THE ARTS

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Introduction

Out of Australia's multicultural society has emerged a rich, diverse culture based on the country's Indigenous, British, European and Asian heritages.

The cultural debate goes back to the foundations of European settlement in 1788. Colonial Australians generally equated cultural goals with the successful transplantation of British civilisation to Australia, with the creation of a new Britannia in another world.

For years Australia suffered from 'cultural cringe' - the belief that nothing Australian should be considered of cultural value until it had been approved in London, or perhaps New York. At other times, public opinion was the opposite, the 'cultural strut' was prevalent - the belief that little of cultural value was produced outside Australia, and even less was relevant.

But today many Australians believe the 'cringe' and the 'strut' are over for good. Multicultural Australia, a society which encourages diversity, is one of the country's great achievements.

One Australian in five was born overseas and 40 per cent of the population has at least one parent who was not born in Australia. Australia's artists draw on their Aboriginal, European, Asian or British experiences, mixing the old with the new to produce some unique and remarkable work.

Aboriginal culture the oldest in the world

When Picasso saw the paintings on bark by Yirawala, a ceremonial leader of

the Gunwingu clan group of Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory, he commented: "That is what I have been trying to achieve all my life."

As never before, Australians now recognise the magnificent heritage of the oldest civilisation on earth - that of Aboriginal people. These people practiced their culture in Australia for at least 50 millenia before the British arrived in the country two hundred years ago. And, although historically Australia has not always appreciated the immense value of indigenous art, the country now embraces it.

Art is central to indigenous life, as it is inherently connected to the religious domain, Mr Wally Caruana, Curator of Aboriginal Art at the National Gallery of Australia, said in his book *Aboriginal Art*.

"Art is a means by which the present is connected with the past and human beings with the supernatural world," Mr Caruana said. "Art expresses individual and group identity and the relationships between people and the land."

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander visual arts take many forms, from enduring rock engravings and paintings to the more ephemeral arts of body decoration, bark and ground paintings and ceremonial sculpture in wood.

Ritual and utilitarian objects are made from stone, wood, paint, woven fibre and feathers, and jewellery is also made from bone, shell and seeds.

Among the leading painters from the desert region of Central Australia are Clifford Possum Tjapaljarri, Turkey Tolsen Jupurrurla, Michael Nelson Tjakamarra and Emily Kame Kngwarreye. Fiona Foley, Gordon Bennett, Trevor Nickolls, Zane Saunders and Dennis Nona are well known Aboriginal and

Torres Strait Islander painters of urban life.

Indigenous art also encompasses dance and music. Innovative companies like Bangarra, which was formed in 1989 by graduate dancers and staff of the Aboriginal and Islander Dance Theatre, combine a distinctive combination of dance drawn from traditional influences, and contemporary dance and music.

The Tjapukai Dance Theatre combines dance based on Aboriginal traditions, ancient didgeridoo music, and body decoration to tell the story of the Tjapukai, or rain forest people.

Other groups, such as the rock band Yothu Yindi, which features Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal musicians, are combining traditional and modern Australian musical styles, producing a unique, commercially successful sound.

Band member Mandawuy Yunupingu said he feared that Aboriginal culture would disappear. "I had that fear when I was growing up," he said. "Then I said 'No, I won't let that happen', and we formed Yothu Yindi to show how cultural balance and unity can be achieved without selling out."

The national and international success of these groups have put an indelible stamp on Australia's cultural identity.

The success of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation series Heartland, which won several Australian Film Institute awards, has further demonstrated the talents of Aboriginal actors such as Ernie Dingo, Bob Maza, Justine Saunders and Bradley Byquar.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander writers include Sally Morgan, Jack Davis,

the late Kevin Gilbert, the late Oodgeroo Nunuccal and Ephraim Barri.

The Australian Government has recognised the importance of assisting indigenous cultural groups. One of its cultural policy objectives is ‘to ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture is sustained through the preservation of cultural traditions and the development of contemporary cultural expression by Australia’s indigenous people.’

Australia is also promoting its indigenous art abroad. Surveys have found that nearly half of all international visitors to Australia are interested in seeing and learning about Australia’s indigenous culture. This has resulted in a policy to include it in overseas tours.

Both Yothu Yindi and Tjapukai Dance Theatre performed at another Australian Government cultural production, Festival Australia, held in Washington DC in 1994.

The Australian ballet a world class company

The Australian Ballet is forging a place for itself internationally, creating an image of Australia abroad as a nation full of cultural talent. At Festival Australia, the ballet’s performances of Don Quixote and an all-Australian repertory program were greeted by rave reviews and enthusiastic audiences.

The *Washington Post* said the company had “progressed into the front ranks of the global ballet scene...this company has graduated to a higher level of excellence”. The *Washington Times* said the Australian Ballet showed it had developed into “a major world-class company” and described the programs

as “entertaining, interesting and impressively staged”. The New York Times praised the “energy and sleekness of the company ...a company with young dancers of this quality is a company with a future,” the review said.

The government is a strong supporter of the Australian Ballet, ‘a national flagship company.’ It also supports the Australian Ballet School, which has contributed substantially to Australia’s fine international reputation in dance.

Its graduates can be found as principals, soloists and artists in major companies throughout the world. The school works in close liaison with the Australian Ballet and, since its inception, has produced, on average, 95 per cent of the dancers for the Australian Ballet.

Australian film industry achieves international success

The Piano, supported by the Australian Film Commission, won Director Jane Campion the coveted Palm d’Or at the 1993 Cannes Film Festival.

The Australian film industry has enjoyed enormous success recently. In 1992-93, total expenditure on Australian film and video production was more than \$1.2 billion. A number of Australian films have achieved local box office revenues equal to foreign movies made on vastly bigger budgets.

Crocodile Dundee took the world by storm in 1986. This box office blockbuster opened the door on a flood of high quality, award-winning Australian films such as *Strictly Ballroom*, *The Piano*, *Priscilla Queen of the Desert*, *Muriel’s Wedding* and *Shine*.

These movies have provided Australia with an international image at once

humorous, intense, quirky and diverse - an editorial in *The Canberra Times* said recently. "It (the image) is not one which might have been expected - or even welcomed - a decade ago, but it is curiously in tune with a new and developing Australian identity prepared to break from the confinement of tradition."

The energy and expertise of independent producers have created a film industry with a diversity of voices, which promotes efficiency and is cost-effective.

Classical to contemporary music

Australia is now the third largest supplier of new English repertoire to the international contemporary music market, with some estimates putting export earnings at about \$206 million a year.

Music has always formed an important part of Australian's lives, whether it be modern, classical or indigenous. In the classical sphere, the Sydney Symphony Orchestra, the Australian Youth Orchestra and the Australian Chamber Orchestra have achieved international success.

Australia's orchestras grew out of early radio broadcasting in the 1940s. Their creation early in that decade was an enlightened act at a time when there was virtually no performing arts infrastructure or funding. They have carved out a central role in Australia's cultural history.

Works by contemporary classical Australian composers are being heard more and more in the world's concert halls. Reflecting growing cultural contact with

Australia's region, Peter Sculthorpe, a leading contemporary composer, incorporates influences from Indonesia and Japan in his music.

One of the fastest rising Australian conductors in Europe is Simone Young, formerly of the Australian Opera. She became assistant to famous pianist and conductor, Daniel Barenboim after working with the Cologne Opera, Germany, for seven years. She made a successful debut in 1992 conducting *Tales of Hoffman* at one of Vienna's great opera houses, the Volksoper. She has also conducted at La Bastille, Paris.

The Australian Opera is the national opera company. It performs principally in the Sydney Opera House, and tours regularly. It also reaches wide television and radio audiences. Some states have smaller professional opera companies. The Australian Opera's best-known singer for many years was Dame Joan Sutherland.

During the 1980s, Australia built up a strong international presence in contemporary music, despite its relatively small domestic market. Australia is now the third largest supplier of new English repertoire to the international market, with some estimates putting export earnings at about \$206 million a year.

It is estimated that, in 1991, contemporary music in all its forms was the most popular and accessible form of cultural activity, with 28 per cent of the Australian population and 54 per cent of 18-24 year olds attending popular music performances in that year.

It is a significant contributor to the Australian economy with a turnover of about \$1.5 billion annually. The government provides \$1.5 million per annum

in support to the industry.

Highly successful bands like INXS have achieved international as well as domestic success. This music medium also promotes Australia's multicultural background, with bands like Yothu Yindi successfully blending the old with the new to produce a distinctive, modern Australian sound.

Other well-known groups in recent times have included Crowded House, Midnight Oil and the Hoodoo Gurus.

The government is currently reviewing its music industry assistance schemes and plans to convene a contemporary music summit.

Prize-winning literature

ADuring the last 20 years, there has been an increase in critical recognition of Australian writers and their work. As a result, sales have increased substantially.

More than 200 Australian novels were published in 1992 compared with 19 in 1972. The total value of the Australian book industry in 1993 was estimated at \$2 billion retail value.

Patrick White won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1973. In the 1980s, Australian authors Thomas Kenneally and Peter Carey each won the prestigious Booker Prize. Helen Garner, David Malouf, Elizabeth Jolley, Mudrooroo Narogin and Tim Winton are among the many other Australian prize-winning novelists.

Leading poets include Les Murray, A.D. Hope, Judith Wright, Gwen Harwood, Oodgeroo (who originally wrote as Kath Walker), John Tranter and the expatriate Peter Porter.

The emergence of Australian dramatists has been exceptional. Australian plays generally account now for about half of Australian theatre companies' programming, and events such as the annual Australian National Playwrights Conference bring works by emerging playwrights to the attention of professional companies and directors.

Drama by local playwrights gives audiences insights into Australian society. David Williamson's plays, in particular, have been successful in the United Kingdom and the United States. Hannie Rayson, Michael Gow and Daniel Keene are also gaining international reputations.

A new dimension is being added to Australian literature by writers with a migrant background such as Brian Castro, Fotini Epanomitis, Beth Yahp, Timoshenko Aslanides, Angelo Loukakis and Andrew Riemer.

Australian fiction and non-fiction works increasingly reflect a growing awareness of Asia-Pacific cultures and of the mutuality of the interests shared by the countries of the region. Some recent examples include the work of Nick Jose, Alex Miller and Bernard Smith.

Australia's publishing industry has always worked at exporting Australian works. It has recently targeted Asian markets as possible destinations for Australian books, particularly in the educational field.

Visual arts and crafts

There are more than 40,000 professional visual artists in Australia, including painters, sculptors, drawing artists, print makers, photographers, video producers, performers, and makers of crafts working with ceramics, fibre, textiles, leather, glass, wood, metal and gems.

Australians have long had a fascination and connection with the natural landscape, an interest that has developed a robust visual arts tradition which encompasses all major arts/crafts genres.

The works of leading artists such as Sidney Nolan, Arthur Boyd, Albert Tucker and Brett Whiteley reflect both an Australian character and style and an international flavour.

Since painters late last century captured the distinctive qualities of Australian light and saw with local eyes the unique shapes of animals, trees and land forms, artists in Australia have been sensitive to both local and overseas influences.

The National Gallery of Australia in Canberra is responsible for developing and maintaining a collection of art works from Australia and the rest of the world. It also conducts programs to educate and inform the public about the collection and the visual arts in general.

The largest component of the National Gallery's collection relates to Australian art. Aboriginal art underpins the projection of Australian art, as is demonstrated by the permanent housing of the Aboriginal Memorial.

The Gallery's collection of Aboriginal art, international art, international prints and illustrated books, Oceanic, pre-Columbian, African and Asian art are of international importance.

The gallery is also committed to the collection and display of cultures of non-European societies, particularly those of indigenous Australia and South-East Asia. In doing so, it strengthens the pluralist nature of Australia's culture.

Australian TV and radio

The Australian Broadcasting Corporation, Australia's national broadcaster, and the Special Broadcasting Service, Australia's government-funded multicultural station, play a vital role in encouraging and developing an Australian culture.

The editorial and programming independence of the ABC and SBS is guaranteed through legislation.

ABC television reaches 98 per cent of Australians through terrestrial broadcasts to capital cities and regional areas, and through the Homestead and Community Broadcasting Satellite Service to remote areas. It operates 24-hour broadcasting, seven days a week.

In 1993, ABC Television broadcast over 100 hours of first-run Australian drama to reach its highest level in Australian content. On average, more than 75 per cent of ABC TV's evening programming is Australian.

Much of the drama broadcast on ABC TV has received Australian and inter-

national accolades. Programs such as *Brides of Christ*, *Police Rescue*, *Phoenix* and *Janus* have set new standards in productions, and children's programs such as *Playschool* and *Bananas in Pyjamas* have also achieved unprecedented success.

ABC radio is a world class radio service offering high quality news, current affairs, entertainment, music, drama and arts programming. It broadcasts more than 120 plays each year, over half of which are Australian.

ABC Radio networks also ensure that a minimum of at least 20 per cent of all music broadcast is performed by Australians, and five per cent of the music is of Australian composition.

The ABC provides five domestic radio services: Radio Metropolitan, which has stations in all capital cities and Newcastle; ABC Regional, with stations and outposts in 48 regional centres throughout Australia; Radio National, which is a specialist network with studios and production units in every state; ABC classic FM: a national network devoted to music (particularly classical music), performance audio arts and features; and Triple J, an FM youth network which reaches all capital cities and Newcastle.

SBS delivers quality radio and television to a multicultural Australian audience. The network is available to around 14.5 million Australians (75 per cent of the population), and SBS's multilingual radio service is available in most capital cities.

The SBS is funded primarily by the government (\$75.7 million was allocated in the 1994-95 Budget), but is permitted to supplement this through sponsor-

ship and other activities. Current SBS policy is that neither commercial sponsorship nor advertising is permitted on SBS Radio.

SBS TV is available in all capital cities, most large regional centres and some smaller centres. It is viewed by more than three million Australians each week. SBS policy ensures that half the SBS TV program schedule will be in languages other than English, reflecting Australia's multicultural society.

Australia's SBS Radio is the world's only multilingual, multicultural national radio network. It broadcasts more hours per week in more languages, and reaches more non-English speaking and Aboriginal audiences than any other radio network in Australia.

Australia also has Imparja Television, an indigenous broadcasting group operating in Central Australia, and three major commercial networks. Australians will soon be able to access more television programs with the introduction of pay TV with services being delivered by satellite, microwave or cable, or a combination of these technologies.

Australian television is world competitive. The Australian television industry has, like the film industry, achieved growing success in exporting Australian programs. In 1993, overseas sales of Australian programs raised over \$65 million in revenue.

The Australian Government's cultural role

Australia's national governments have long taken the view that they have a responsibility to preserve the country's national heritage and cultivate the

arts. At the same time, they recognise that governments cannot or should not create cultures or national identities: Australian culture and identity is the work of Australians themselves.

The catalytic role of the Australian Government has expanded dramatically in the past 25 years. In 1994-95, through the Department of Communication and the Arts, direct expenditure is estimated to be more than \$1 billion.

Additional funding for Australian cultural development is provided through other portfolios, including Foreign Affairs and Trade; Employment, Education and Training; Prime Minister and Cabinet; and Environment, Sport and Territories. The cultural portfolio also includes a dozen agencies and statutory authorities.

The government fulfils its responsibilities through various means: direct federal expenditure; indirect support through the taxation system; partnerships with other levels of government, communities and the private sector; and legislative and regulatory provisions, such as protection of intellectual property through copyright, and local content requirements for radio and television.

Over the years, the government has established national cultural institutions and provided varying degrees of support for creative artists and organisations. In 1968, the government created the Australian Council for the Arts which in 1973 became the Australia Council.

The Australia Council is one of Australia's most important cultural resources: the country now has three times as many practicing artists and four times as

many arts organisations as there were 20 years ago, and most rely substantially on the council for their continued existence.

The council has operated on a peer assessment process, whereby artists apply for funding and are assessed by the council. The government will assist the council in providing additional assistance to individual artists by increasing the council's base funding level.

The government believes, however, that the council should turn its attention away from the 'supply' side of the arts equation to the creation of a higher level of demand from arts consumers. It will also provide additional funding to develop alternative mechanisms of funding for the arts and stimulate increased private sector support.

The future in multi-media

The current revolution in information technology has the potential to significantly affect Australia's cultural industries.

The new services which will emerge from the revolution will enable people to send almost any communication, information or entertainment from anywhere to anywhere.

A home or work computer could also be a television set and video, a telephone, and a connection to every on-line databank. A wide range of information and entertainment services will be more readily available and easier and cheaper to find and access. Multi-media products will be the drivers of these vast new services.

The Australian Government sees major opportunities within the revolution, by turning the power of the new technology to a democratic and creative cultural purpose, generating new realms of creative opportunity.

Content is critical: it is what is put on the information highway that really matters. Australia's current strengths in creating for film, literature, music and art audiences provide a platform from which to build. The country's cultural institutions have begun to head down this path, but much more can be achieved.

It's an investment in the future. Australian interactive multi-media exports could be worth more than \$200 million by 1997-98, and the domestic market could be worth \$2 billion to \$3 billion by the end of the decade.

Source: DFAT