

# Travelling Treasures

## END OF THE ROAD

Justine van Mourik looks back on the hugely successful *National Treasures from Australia's Great Libraries* exhibition

When *National Treasures from Australia's Great Libraries* concluded its unprecedented and successful nationwide tour in Perth on 26 August 2007, it had been visited by 417 746 people on its 13 000 kilometre journey to every capital city in the country. Australia's only federally indemnified exhibition touring to all state and territory capitals had drawn to a close, but the influence it had over its visitors and on the venues it visited lives on.

The tour was no mean feat for an exhibition containing almost 200 objects—many of them fragile, light-sensitive, and largely irreplaceable. The logistics of touring an exhibition of this size are complex. In addition to the 179 items on display there were a further 66 items that were changed over during the tour, and for conservation reasons more than 150 different pages of exhibited books and manuscripts were turned for display. This changing over of items meant that 385 individual captions were written, including 127 captions just for the pages turned.

Before transporting the exhibition, each object was scrutinised by conservators to determine if any changes or damage had occurred before packing them into their purpose-built crates. These crates, weighing a total of 2.8 tonnes, were then transported in air-ride suspension-equipped, climate-



controlled vehicles to the airport, where they were strapped onto huge pallets and loaded onto Qantas aircraft for transit.

The idea of being an art courier perhaps conjures up visions of people travelling first class with a briefcase handcuffed to their wrist, however the reality is not glamorous at all. Airport freight sheds open at 3.00 am, and frequently *National Treasures* was the first freight to be loaded. This meant a lot of late nights and early mornings for couriers waiting around in a draughty hangar next to a security guard with a gun. Flight schedules, and the bulk of the crates, also meant that only wide-

above:  
Greg Power (b.1974)  
*National Treasures* exhibition at the National Library of Australia

below, from left:  
David Ashman, Senior Conservator, State Library of Western Australia, reports on condition of the exhibits  
Courtesy State Library of Western Australia

Exhibition staff seal transportation crates bound for the Northern Territory  
Photo courtesy Rowena Jameson

Australian Air Express staff strap crates onto pallets at Adelaide Airport  
Photo courtesy Justine van Mourik





above top:  
Promotional banner on the newly built State Library of Queensland  
Courtesy State Library of Queensland

above:  
Front entrance, State Library of Victoria, promoting the *Treasures* exhibition  
Photo courtesy Justine van Mourik

bodied Qantas aircraft could accommodate the exhibition. Sometimes this meant transferring planes mid-trip, making for journeys lasting 24 hours or more, with couriers constantly monitoring the shipment in transit.

In addition to the exhibition content, a further three tonnes of showcases, audiovisual equipment, labels, wall panels, banners, supports and display materials were sent by road in a fully laden 45-foot (13.5 m) pantechnicon or semi trailer truck. On average, the truck containing the showcases took up to five hours to pack and about three hours to unpack at each venue.

Installation and conservation staff from the National Library spent two to three weeks away from home moving the exhibition from one venue to the next, pulling apart and then putting together and cleaning showcases, installing audiovisual displays, hanging works of art, condition-checking objects, strapping books to supports, meticulously arranging the items inside their showcases, and training venue staff in the maintenance of the exhibition.

Although the task of moving the exhibition from city to city was extremely complex, once the exhibition had been installed at the venue, it was then up to the local staff and volunteers to care for the exhibition for the eight weeks. Ultimately it was their effort and commitment that guaranteed the extraordinary success of the exhibition: not just cloaking bags, handing out information and answering questions but also sharing visitors' experiences and listening to their stories.

It is sometimes easy for those working in cultural institutions to be blasé about the very significant objects they encounter every day. When one reads through the thousands of visitor comments resulting from the *National Treasures* exhibition tour, one realises the effect that these objects have on visitors. In some cases the reactions are profound, moving visitors to tears, changing their opinions, opening their eyes and touching their nerves.

It was not just visitors that fell under this spell either. Every time Ned Kelly's helmet was unpacked at a new venue, the installation staff and conservators would cluster to watch in reverential silence as it was transferred to the display stand, to be

united with pages from Kelly's manifesto, 'The Jerilderie Letter'.

During the transit of the exhibition from Melbourne to Hobart aboard a freighter plane, the pilots—who had seen the exhibition at the State Library of Victoria—saluted prior to takeoff, as the captain said 'Better fly straight boys, we've got Smithy on board', a reference to the Kingsford Smith and Charles Ulm items in the exhibition. For acclaimed singer and songwriter Paul Kelly, who sang 'Waltzing Matilda' at the exhibition launch in Victoria, the opportunity to see the manuscript version of the song—which actually begins 'Oh there once was a swagman' instead of the more recent 'Once a jolly swagman'—provided the answer to a question that had always troubled him: 'I always wondered why, if he was so jolly, he went and drowned himself at the first sign of trouble.'

At each venue, visitors' comments would reveal the personal and emotional connections they made with the exhibition. In Hobart, one young boy visited the exhibition with his class, and subsequently asked his 'Pa', who happened to be Professor Graeme Clark, to come to school and talk about inventing the bionic ear which was included in the exhibition. In Perth there were descendants of the policeman who had arrested serial killer Frederick Deeming; a visitor in Canberra claimed her great-great grandmother had knitted the balaclava that Ned Kelly had worn underneath his helmet; and at many of the venues there were tearful survivors of Cyclone Tracy, some of whom had never returned to Darwin after being evacuated in 1974. One visitor in Brisbane, a particularly excited Ned Kelly fan, turned up at the entrance to the exhibition wearing a full set of homemade steel armour and, after posing for photos with other visitors queuing outside, happily agreed to take the armour off before entering the exhibition.

More formal visitor surveys and evaluations throughout the tour showed that for 48 per cent of visitors it was their first visit to the Library or Museum, and that 77 per cent of those visitors had come specifically to see *National Treasures*. Overall, nearly 90 per cent of visitors surveyed rated the exhibition 'Very Good' or 'Excellent'.

Many of the visitors had no idea of the scope of library collecting in Australia,

and were amazed to see the diversity and richness. In Adelaide, the donor of the Crowder Diary visited the exhibition to see the diary on display. He was unaware that libraries collected objects as well as documents and books, and as a result of his visit donated two further items referred to in the diary to the State Library of South Australia's collection. Similarly, a number of visitors who had no idea that their photographs, letters and documents were worth keeping, were encouraged to preserve them for the future, or to consider donating them to a public collection.

It became apparent over the course of the tour that interested visitors wanted transcriptions of displayed manuscript items, to be able to read more than just the one or two pages on view at the venue. Staff at the National Library were kept busy compiling books of transcripts, and in preparing large print copies of the exhibition captions for the visually impaired and for visitors in wheelchairs. As the tour progressed, the exhibition subtly evolved, with many captions being amended as visitors offered new information on displays which required checking and updating. Events such as the recent death of artist John Coburn, or the National Library's acquisition of the Patrick White manuscripts archive, meant that exhibition information had to be revised. Our close-reading visitors would be sure to point out omissions.

Some visitors subsequently wrote to the National Library asking for points to be clarified or for further information to be provided. Margaret Dent and Nat Williams, as co-curators, patiently researched and responded to each letter or query. They also contributed many exhibition talks and tours at each venue, spoke to ABC Radio or to News Limited prize winners, or to government or sponsorship officials at each opening. Many additional staff were involved in the day-to-day running of the exhibition: liaising with the numerous generous sponsors, with federal government, helping design artwork or write media releases, compiling reports, organising freight and travel, monitoring environmental conditions, and providing advice to staff at exhibition venues.

It was a poignant occasion as the doors of the Western Australian Museum closed on 26 August 2007. The exhibition objects

were checked for the final time, then packed back into their crates for return to each of the national, state or territory libraries. Some objects were immediately placed back on display—like Ned Kelly's helmet in Melbourne; visitors who had seen it on tour elsewhere in Australia wanted to look it up again back home. Most of the items however were returned to storage, for a 'rest', and won't be displayed again for some time.

The National Library looks forward to the day when it can display many of its own treasures again in the proposed Treasures Gallery, now under design and scheduled for opening in a couple of years time. The success of the *National Treasures* tour is testament to the capacity of Australian libraries to cooperate and collaborate, to generate dynamic and engaging public programs, and to achieve complex and challenging nationally significant projects. It is safe to say that an exhibition of the scale and significance of *National Treasures* will not be toured again in a hurry, but the lessons learned from this experience will make our libraries even stronger in their quest to be as accessible as possible to our enthusiastic audiences.

JUSTINE VAN MOURIK was Assistant Project Manager and then Acting Project Manager for *National Treasures from Australia's Great Libraries*. She is currently Acting Registrar, Exhibitions & Loans at the National Library. She was also the one who in the early morning hours stood in the freezing freight shed next to the guard with a gun

The 176-page catalogue for the *National Treasures from Australia's Great Libraries* exhibition is available at the Library Shop or from the Library's Sales and Distribution section



above top:  
(left to right): Dianne Jones (Western Australian Museum), lucky 400 000th visitor Allan Adams with sons Mathew and Eden, and Margaret Allen (CEO, State Library of Western Australia)  
Courtesy State Library of Western Australia and Western Australian Museum

above:  
Tasmanian living treasure, artist Max Angus and wife Theda, at opening of *National Treasures*, Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery  
Courtesy Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery