

National Cultural Policy Submission

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Submitted: On behalf of a not-for-profit arts organisation; On behalf of an arts peak body

What challenges and opportunities do you see in the pillar or pillars most relevant to you? Feel free to respond to any or all pillars:

First Nations

Historical societies initially collected European documents & told stories about colonisation. The RHSV (1909+) now publishes Indigenous history in its *Victorian Historical Journal (VHJ)*; has created a privately funded annual Indigenous Lecture (2022+); provides cultural training for staff and councillors; and is decolonising our collection. Our 350 affiliated societies need help to do the same. First Nations cultural officers are needed to offer help & advice.

A Place for Every Story

The RHSV, established in 1909, initially collected stories of European settlement. It now seeks more First Nations and multicultural holdings, to tell more diverse stories. It aspires for a new exhibition to tell tourists of Melbourne's story: from First Nations' history to British and multicultural immigration. Historical societies seek to tell the diversity of stories they hold about the contributions of all Australians as creators of culture. These societies need greater skills in exhibition design and digital story-telling to do so.

The Centrality of the Artist

The act of narrating and writing history is both a truth-telling and a creative act. Each historian views the past differently according to their own values and methods of research and inquiry, which influence the way they interpret and write about the past. The stories they tell are both factual and creative. History is contestable, and historians are in this sense both truth tellers and cultural artists, helping to define our identity. History is not one voice but a plurality of voices. History is part of the national cultural policy. Indeed, historical storytelling and writing is the foundation for many who use history to shape and inform their art, to articulate ideas, images and stories about our nation. Historical knowledge underpins much of Australia's cultural endeavour. The RHSV collects, protects and publishes knowledge about Victoria. The *VHJ* (1911+), the 2nd oldest journal of Australian history, is now of high quality led by an eminent Editorial Board. Local historians need assistance to create their own stories.

Strong Institutions

Local historical societies are part of the diverse spectrum of keepers of Australian culture. All but a few are staffed by volunteers, except for State umbrella bodies such as the RHSV, with a small (4FTE) staff across administration, collections management and marketing. The much-admired *VHJ* is produced by volunteers. Passionate volunteers in all societies collect, protect, and display their community's identity by exhibitions, signage and books. This volunteering underpins community well-being and personal self-fulfilment. The RHSV with little government assistance provides constant advice and training to enhance our 350 affiliates. All makers of cultural knowledge deserve assistance, but federal and state governments only sparsely fund community history and heritage.

Reaching the Audience

The RHSV annually, with 4FTE and 80 volunteers, stages 2 exhibitions, 14 lectures, 6 annual special lectures; 2 festivals - Women's History Month (March) and History Month (October), 30 seminars for

affiliates; monthly history writer's club, rich social media profile (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and LinkedIn), 26 ebulletin *OldNews*, 6 *History News* newsletters and 2, 220-page *VHJs* - in hard copy and digital form. All historical societies engage their communities by exhibitions, lectures, signage, events, newsletters, publications, local research services and by hosting visiting groups. All have websites and social media platforms. Mortlake HS hosts an active Facebook site of images of the town, beamed into local aged care homes, stimulating discussion among residents. Societies have images to contribute to wellbeing programs. With a template created by a digital content producer they could create saleable community wellbeing packages.

Please tell us how each of the 5 pillars are important to you and your practice and why. Feel free to respond to any or all that are applicable to you:

First Nations

Our organisation should engage with all histories to tell the story of our state and nation, otherwise our view of the past is both limited and partial. First Nations stories in our lectures, exhibitions and publications are vital to ensure this.

A Place for Every Story

All historical societies must represent the people and histories of their region, moving beyond stories that simply reflect their current membership. Only then will they be dynamic and relevant organisations. This is why the RHSV co-hosts, since 1998, the Annual Victorian Community History Awards

The Centrality of the Artist

Historians are artists too. To deny this is to stifle a creative part of our national culture making. Historical story telling is at the heart of all historical societies' activities, events and publications.

Strong Institutions

The RHSV is an umbrella body. We strive to sustain both our society and our 350 affiliated societies, through providing leadership, resources and training via the History of Victoria Support Group. Without such support, many societies cannot thrive.

Reaching the Audience

All artists and arts bodies exist to engage and challenge audiences, in our case by stories of past cultural worlds that are so different to today.

Are there any other things that you would like to see in a National Cultural Policy?

Yes, History is foundational to our National Cultural Policy. This policy should always use the three words 'history, arts and culture' to describe its brief. Human historical knowledge of the past builds identity, culture and social bonds. First Nations peoples have told stories for 60,000+ years, added to in 1788+ by other Australians, through the Western tradition of writing history. History conveys knowledge of the past, understanding of the present and offers signposts to the future. It enriches individuals and communities and as a medium of critical thought, is fundamental to the nation's democracy and wellbeing. To exclude History from cultural policy would impoverish our nation's quest to create the knowledge, skills and resources necessary to build cultural capital. Much creative endeavour, whether in novels, film, television, theatre, visual art, music, and other media, is based on historical knowledge and subjects drawn from our people, all Australians, in the past.

Much of the cultural work of History at the community level is performed by historical societies, almost entirely volunteer-run. The RHSV with 1,250 members and just 4FTE staff, assists 350 affiliated societies, their 20,000+ active members and surrounding communities. The Federation of Australian Historical Societies, of which the RHSV is a member, represents 1,000 historical societies with

100,000+ active volunteer members across Australia, who collect, protect and display millions of items of local history which form a significant part of our Distributed National Collection through TROVE. Many receive only modest financial and office-space support from local government. Covid has increased pressures, as their survival demanded digital content skills and new delivery methods, that required more time and financial resources. The RHSV has managed this transition years ahead of our planning, but at great cost. Most other societies, without paid staff, have struggled.