

Australian University Art Museums: the big picture

Even in the best of times and economies, bridging the arts and university sectors is a unique challenge. In our COVID-19 world, this challenge is now greater than ever, as our universities cut budgets and public funds are diverted away from cultural activity.

However, Australia's university art museums are successfully connecting campuses and communities through the visual arts in ways that build professional capacity, encourage well-being, widen participation and make major contributions to the nation's cultural and intellectual life.

Data released today in the [University Art Museums Australia Survey Report \(2017-2019\)](#) – the first ever of its kind – depicts a vibrant group that is driving new scholarship, enriching education, engaging diverse audiences and nourishing Australia's cultural ecology.

UAMs are major investors in Australian visual art and culture. According to the published findings representing 22 members, university art museums presented 492 exhibitions during the reporting period. They facilitated 57 public art projects on their campuses and 53 artist residencies.

In total, university art museums exhibited 5180 artists and oversaw the commissioning of 488 new works of art. Of the total number of artists represented across these activities, the vast majority were contemporary Australian artists, with 42% of this group identifying as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander.

As part of their remit to serve the immediate communities of their campuses as well as wider audiences, university art museums delivered 4894 public and education programs, and produced 141 publications distributed through bookshops and online, nationally and internationally. More than 1.6 million visited university art museums in person, with many more engaging with collections, programs and resources virtually.

“On these insights alone, university art museums can be seen as cultural powerhouses generating significant opportunities for artists, writers and curators, championing their practices and bringing their work to new audiences,” UAMA Chair and Flinders University Museum of Art Director, Fiona Salmon said.

“But more than this, the data indicate that university art museums are innovative, ambitious and adventurous sites of cultural production enabling widespread participation in arts and cultural activity,” she said.

Part of the national network of small-to-medium public art galleries and museums, University Art Museums Australia is a membership organisation driving advocacy and research on behalf of its constituents, each of which is responsible for a university art collection and public program of changing exhibitions that is presented in a dedicated and professionally run gallery space. These spaces vary in scale from intimate to multi-story sites that host on average seven exhibitions per annum.

Today university art museums manage combined collections comprising more than 100,000 original works of art. Seen in the context of the recently released [Australian Public Galleries Snapshot](#), this number represents an estimated 30% of art collections held in the small-to-medium public art galleries and museums sector, constituting a significant part of the nation's moveable heritage and distributed cultural collections.

University art museums typically sit within the Advancement / Engagement portfolios of their host institutions although many have their roots in Humanities or Fine Arts departments with their collections established for education and research purposes.

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The release of this report coincides with the end of Fiona Salmon's four-year appointment as UAMA Chair which will be taken up by Angela Goddard, Director, Griffith University Art Museum.

For more information about UAMA visit <https://www.uama.edu.au/>

Additional background follows

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Australian UAMs in the national cultural landscape

- UAMs are uniquely placed in the national cultural landscape bridging public and academic spheres. They are laboratories for new research, teaching, learning and professional development distinguished by the academic responsibility to take risks in their programming, to push boundaries and tackle controversial and unsettling themes and issues.
- Through exhibitions, partnerships and collaboration with external organisations, and through their involvement in local, national and international cultural activities, such as exhibition exchanges and festivals, UAMs generate opportunities that foster contemporary visual arts practice, develop audiences and connect people through art and ideas.
- Art collections in the care of universities make a substantial contribution to the nation's cultural wealth. As a result of being shaped by education and research agendas, they are distinct from state and regional gallery collections in their emphases and scope offering alternate insights and banks of knowledge in the field of Australian art.
- UAM's financial investment represents a significant portion of the arts economy. They acquire and commission artworks, run artist-in-residency programs and employ artists in public and education programs.
- UAMs invest in scholarship and publishing, driving research on their collections and exhibitions. They provide collections access, share and partner in research, and create avenues for critical and creative writing.
- UAMs also provide employment for a great number of casuals, small businesses, sole traders and the like including graphic designers, installers, freight companies, printers, sign writers, fabricators and caterers.

Australian UAMs and their host institutions

- UAMs are agile sites of teaching and learning positioned within university structures to initiate, co-design and deliver interdisciplinary programs, and support experimental activity and curriculum innovation.
- Access to exhibitions and collections through structured pedagogical engagement provides students across disciplines with access to new ways of seeing and thinking about the world, and opportunities to develop transferable skills including visual literacy, critical and creative thinking, communication skills, cultural competency, empathy/compassion, tolerance of uncertainty/ambiguity, reflective practice and teamwork.
- For many university students, participation in programs presented by UAMs represents their first museum experience and engagement with visual art. By providing welcoming and inclusive spaces and opportunities to connect with others through art, UAMs help to break down social and cultural barriers, and build community.
- Through their collections, exhibitions and programs UAMs provide opportunities for university students and staff to engage respectfully with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders knowledges and perspectives, promoting steps toward reconciliation.
- As training institutions and centres for professional development and mentorship, UAMs offer internships and supervised volunteer programs to university students and aspiring arts professionals, who build industry-specific knowledge and skills through hands-on experience and work integrated learning.
- Research led by UAMs resulting in exhibitions and other public outcomes can contribute to research rankings as assessed by the Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) scheme under the non-traditional research outputs designation.
- UAMs are experienced in communicating complex ideas with diverse audiences providing an interdisciplinary platform to disseminate and promote wider university research.

- Operating fluently at various levels from the local to the global UAMs are catalysts for collaboration and conduits between the university and wider world. They partner within the university, and with external bodies and cultural institutions at regional, national and international levels.
- As public facing entities UAMs are gateways to their host institutions. Outreach and engagement activities are accessible and free of charge, welcoming diverse audiences to university campuses including alumni and prospective students.
- UAMs steward relationships with donors and benefactors, they build circles of support and work closely with philanthropic organisations. These activities extend university networks of patronage and channels of investment.
- UAMs activate their campuses providing formal and informal opportunities for participation in the visual arts. They curate university spaces and lead public art initiatives on their campuses to enhance the built environment and enrich the cultural milieu.
- UAMs promote their host institutions through their far-reaching social media presence; through media coverage of activities and events; through art loans to other galleries and museums; and through the publication of artworks in books and journals, and on merchandise.
- UAMs embody and reflect the values, ethos and spirit of their host institutions, bolstering and reinforcing the unique identities, narratives and 'brands' developed by universities in a competitive education market.

Australian UAMs and their responses to Covid-19

During lockdown, like most of us, Australia's university art museums moved online, which has created unprecedented insights into their collections and communities. In recalibrating their projects and reimagining how to provide their audiences with meaningful and authentic experiences, university art museums have found new ways of bridging their host institutions and wider world. Some great examples include:

- Associate Professor Alison Inglis explores the modernist reimagining of an ancient myth in Australian artist Rupert Bunny's painting 'Oedipus and the Sphinx' from the collection vaults of Melbourne University's Potter Museum of Art <https://art-museum.unimelb.edu.au/events/video-up-from-the-vault-with-associate-professor-alison-inglis/>
- Monash University Museum of Art turned to the world of sound, co-presenting Out Of Our Head (OOOH): Mini Festival of Personalised Listening <http://createsend.com/t/d-9BB24337986E53402540EF23F30FEDED>
- Flinders University Museum of Art's online interview between body art pioneer Stelarc, who once grew a human ear on his forearm, and world-renowned palaeontologist Professor John Long <https://www.flinders.edu.au/museum-of-art/programs/past-programs/2020/stelarc-lecture>
- Griffith University Art Museum's Lockdown Studio tours featuring Lindy Lee demonstrating her wax splatters and ink spills that recall the ancient Chinese practice of 'flung ink painting', as performed by Ch'an (Zen) Buddhists: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yUkc-ItHV7o>
- UNSW Galleries' online exhibition *Friendship as a Way of Life* and expansive digital companion program, Forms of Being Together: <https://artdesign.unsw.edu.au/unsw-galleries/friendship>
- Virtual tours of spaces using cutting-edge technology including The John Curtin Gallery's exhibitions of work by Western Australian artists Ian Strange and Sandra Hill: <https://jcg.curtin.edu.au/>, QUT's group exhibition exploring responses to the anniversary of 250 years since James Cook first arrived on our shores: <http://www.artmuseum.qut.edu.au/riteofpassagevirtualtour/> and Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery's *The Long Kiss Goodbye* <https://www.lwgallery.uwa.edu.au/exhibitions/past/2020-exhibitions-archive/thelongkissgoodbye>
- The University of Queensland Art Museum's Zoom symposia *We Need To Talk About ...* that interrogates notions of common purpose and collective action in times of self-isolation. <https://art-museum.uq.edu.au/event/1509/we-need-talk-about>

Australian university art museums represented in the survey data

Academy Gallery, University of Tasmania, TAS
Anne & Gordon Samstag Museum of Art, University of South Australia, SA
Charles Darwin University Art Collection and Art Gallery, Charles Darwin University, NT
Deakin University Art Collection and Galleries, Deakin University, VIC
Edith Cowan University Art Collection, Edith Cowan University, WA
Flinders University Museum of Art, Flinders University, SA
Griffith University Art Museum, Griffith University, QLD
John Curtin Gallery, Curtin University, WA
La Trobe Art Institute, La Trobe University, VIC
Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery, University of Western Australia, WA
Macquarie University Art Gallery, Macquarie University, NSW
Monash University Museum of Art, Monash University, VIC
National Art School Gallery, National Art School, NSW
QUT Art Museum & William Robinson Gallery, Queensland University of Technology, QLD
RMIT Gallery, Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, VIC
The Ian Potter Museum of Art, University of Melbourne, VIC
University of the Sunshine Coast Art Gallery, University of the Sunshine Coast, QLD
University of Sydney Art Gallery, University of Sydney, NSW
University of Queensland Art Museum, University of Queensland, QLD
University of Wollongong Art Collection and Gallery, University of Wollongong, NSW
UNSW Galleries, University of New South Wales, NSW
UTS Gallery, University of Technology Sydney, NSW