

# Management of the State Art Collection

## Executive Summary

Report 9: May 2018

### Introduction

This report provides an assessment of the management of the State Art Collection (the Collection) and efforts to increase access by the public.

We focused on the Art Gallery of Western Australia (AGWA), and its approaches to building and maintaining the Collection. We looked at how art is stored and conserved, as well as AGWA's display programs.

### Background

AGWA is responsible for building, maintaining and displaying the Collection for the people of Western Australia. It was formed under the *Art Gallery Act 1959*, and is part of the Department of Local Government, Sport and Cultural Industries.

The broad direction for arts in Western Australia is outlined in the Strategic Directions Framework 2015-2030. This includes a focus on increasing the access to high quality arts and cultural experiences for all Western Australians. Delivering programs that connect with, educate and entertain the public is a strategic objective for AGWA.

The Collection is kept almost entirely at the AGWA building in the Perth Cultural Centre and consists of almost 18,000 works from Western Australian, Australian and international artists. It includes works such as paintings, sculptures and audio-visual pieces, with a focus on Western Australian art, as well as 20th century paintings and sculpture. In June 2016, the total Collection was valued at almost \$300 million.

Like many galleries, the lack of artwork storage space is an ongoing issue for AGWA. Similar issues have been identified in other Australian galleries<sup>1</sup>. Nonetheless, the Collection has continued to grow, with 473 pieces<sup>2</sup> added from July 2014 to June 2017. AGWA follows international<sup>3</sup> guidelines in storing and caring for its artwork.

Artworks can need conservation treatments ranging from minor dusting and cleaning to major restoration projects. Not all of these conservation issues pose an immediate threat to the artwork under the controlled environmental conditions of the gallery (for example, cleaning). However, works that are unstable are at a higher risk of deteriorating. AGWA's conservation team is responsible for assessing the condition of artworks, identifying any maintenance issues, and administering treatments.

Detailed records on artworks are kept in a database, and paper records for each artwork are stored by artist, in artist files. Together the database and artist files provide AGWA with knowledge of the Collection as well as capturing historic information that may be useful in valuations and future research.

AGWA engages with the public and visitors to Western Australia in a number of ways. It is open to the public 6 days a week, and provides a range of free displays as well as a number of short term (loaned) exhibitions, talks, guided tours, special events for members, and educational programs.

---

<sup>1</sup> Queensland Audit Office. 2013 *Follow up – Acquisition and public access to the Museum, Art Gallery and Library collections*; Report to Parliament 3. Victorian Auditor General. 2012 *Collections Management in Cultural Agencies*.

<sup>2</sup> This included \$4.3 million in purchases, and donated artworks valued at \$1.5 million.

<sup>3</sup> International Council of Museums. 2014 *Environmental Guidelines*.

AGWA aims to display 5% of the Collection each year. To reflect the focus on Western Australia, AGWA tries to include at least 20% works from Western Australian artists in displays.

## **Audit conclusion**

AGWA struggles to balance its responsibilities to grow and also preserve the State's \$300 million art collection. A significant shortage of appropriate storage space places artworks at risk of damage from not being stored in line with industry standards, and limits access to the Collection for conservation work and public engagement.

A large number of artworks in storage do not receive the conservation attention they need to preserve their value. AGWA does not have a plan to ensure all artworks are conserved, with conservation almost entirely focused on the small part of the Collection going on display each year. Establishing a plan is particularly important given the limited resources AGWA has available to carry out this work.

AGWA needs to improve its records about the State assets for which it is accountable. It cannot be certain of the location or condition of all works in the Collection, as its database is poorly documented, key records are incomplete and inconsistently maintained, and it has not done a stocktake since 2010.

AGWA has taken steps to attract visitors to the gallery through its exhibitions, education programs and social media campaigns. But, these efforts focus on attracting visitors to the Perth gallery, with little opportunity for regional Western Australians to view artworks in person or online.

## **Key findings**

### **Artworks are at risk of damage or loss due to insufficient storage and conservation, and incomplete records**

- AGWA does not have sufficient space to store all its artworks to industry standards. This increases the risk of damage to the works.
- Although works receive conservation treatment before being displayed, AGWA does not have a plan in place to ensure the artworks in storage get the maintenance they need. It may take years before artwork at significant risk of deterioration is maintained. Ninety-nine unstable artworks were identified as being in need of treatment more than 7 years ago. Treating artworks is important to maintain their value, particularly if they are unstable.
- AGWA has not completed a full stocktake since 2010 and has not established good processes to ensure its Collection records are complete and accurate. AGWA risks items being lost or misplaced if the records are incomplete.

### **AGWA needs to broaden access to the Collection, particularly in the regions**

- Visitor numbers are still 20% short of the 2012-13 peak, despite success in 2016-17 from implementing a range of exhibitions, activities, and initiatives.
- AGWA does market research, monitors exhibit numbers and occasionally evaluates exhibits. However, this information could be better used to increase AGWA's understanding of what interests the public, and increase engagement with the Collection.
- Only a small part of the Collection is available online, and AGWA has not developed a strategic approach to increasing access to the Collection for people living outside the Perth metropolitan area. Better use of avenues such as regional loans, and online display, may help increase access to the Collection for all Western Australians.

---

## Recommendations

1. By the end of December 2018, AGWA should explore options to resolve the ongoing lack of storage space, including:
  - a. documenting its consideration of storage solutions for all new acquisitions
  - b. considering if storage should be added as a criterion for removing artworks from the Collection.
2. By the end of June 2019, to further its objective of making artworks accessible, AGWA should:
  - a. develop and start implementing a plan to display artworks in alternative locations and online
  - b. assess the success of all programs and exhibits
  - c. use the results of market research, assessments and post project reviews in planning future programs.
3. By the end of June 2019, to manage and monitor the location and condition of the Collection, AGWA should:
  - a. develop and implement standardised processes for its recordkeeping systems
  - b. implement regular stocktakes of the entire Collection
  - c. develop and deliver a conservation treatment plan for all of the Collection.

## Response from the Art Gallery of Western Australia

The Art Gallery of Western Australia (AGWA) holds the State's premier collection of historic and contemporary art and is an important heritage asset. The State Art Collection has been developed, cared for, and shared with the community for over 120 years. Continuing this work at the highest level remains core to AGWA's mission. AGWA considers that its management of the Collection has been effective given the complexity of the task and the resources available.

AGWA accepts the findings on improving the care and management of the Collection and broadening access, including through displaying art works at other suitable locations and online.

AGWA's original storage capacity was intended to be sufficient for about twenty years from the completion of the Main Building in 1979. More capacity was created in existing storage areas by improved organisation in 1997 and additional storage was created in the upper level of the Centenary Galleries in 2006 and in the Main Building in 2014. While these measures have helped deal with storage demands, AGWA recognises the critical need for additional storage. AGWA welcomes the support for a definite date for the resolution of the ongoing storage problem. AGWA is continuing to work with the Department of Local Government, Sport and Cultural Industries (DLGSC), including portfolio cultural agencies, and the State Government on achieving a speedy offsite storage solution. AGWA agrees that storage considerations should be considered as part of any acquisition or de-accessioning but storage should only be a secondary and never the primary consideration in de-accessioning an art work.

AGWA is committed to providing the broadest possible access to the Collection and accepts as recommended that regular research on community needs and program assessments will support more effective programs.

Currently AGWA is working with DLGSC and Art of the Move on a three-year pilot program to make Western Australian culture more widely accessible within Western Australia and attract visitors, by touring more high quality visual arts exhibitions. This includes providing advice, professional development, expertise and meaningful life-long learning opportunities to regional communities.

AGWA, as part of an ongoing project to improve website access, has created a new portal to explore the Collection. The first phase, launched in February 2018, featured a group of Indigenous works from the Collection. The catalogue record text for each art work in the Collection will be available online by June 2019 and works will be digitised and loaded as part of the ongoing program to digitise the Collection.

AGWA acknowledges there is scope to improve and standardise Collection recordkeeping. AGWA will formally document the standards for Collection records and the mandatory core dataset required for each art work record.

The first complete stocktake of the Collection was completed over a five-year period using considerable staff resources. AGWA accepts that stocktakes are an important mechanism for proper collection management and control and will work to develop a process by June 2019 to ensure improved control of art works. AGWA also will develop a multi-year project as part of its conservation program to implement a safe tagging and external tracking system for art works.

AGWA will develop a formal conservation plan with priorities based on the information about individual works currently identified in the Collection database. This plan will incorporate conservation display needs to ensure that conservation needs for works in storage are balanced with the conservation requirements for display and access. The plan will include strategies to assess the Collection as part of any valuation or stocktake activities and assessment of Collection categories.