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A very personal commentary: the Visual Arts Craft & Design SIG

As much as I enjoy the company and the achievements of the museum community at large, I can't say I can ever get terribly excited about those collections and programmes generally based on science, technology, stamps, or cars. Sorry it just had to be said. Now art, that's a different thing altogether. And that's where the Visual Arts Craft and Design Special Interest Group takes my fancy. And it seems that I am probably not alone since there is a whole gang of us now.

In comparison with many Johnny come lately SIGs, this SIG has a long history based as it is on the Art Museums Association of Australia, which was a separate body with its own secretariat before the amalgamation in 1993 that formed Museums Australia. Before this, it was the Art Galleries Association. These groups have had a long and very active tradition of bringing together those concerned for the future of professional practice in art museums in this country.

Ongoing funding of these bodies by the Visual Arts / Crafts Fund of the Australia Council from 1973 to 1976, and then again from 1986 to 1999 also acknowledged the contribution that such a professional sector-constituted group could make to the arts in Australia. It was with a great feeling of loss that members of the VACDSIG learned in September 2000 that Museums Australia lost its funding from this source. The disappointment that many individual members felt towards Museums Australia for not avoiding this cessation of funding continues quietly to this day. The repercussions for Museums Australia too, have been significant. The funding of \$152,969 for the year 1999, for example, provided more than half of the National Office's operating revenue for that year.

Despite these changes, the group is still reasonably strong. Where once publications were funded and produced, independent conferences were run and the Professional Development Grant Program administered, without an active secretariat directly supporting the sector's interests we still achieve a lot, albeit in a more economical fashion.

Our membership is truly national, and since there are quite a number of professionally managed art museums around Australia many museums have contact with the SIG and its activities. One mechanism, which has provided an effective channel of communication, is the SIG's electronic noticeboard. It has many advantages: it is cheap, fast, current, geographically unbiased and democratic. It services research queries, position notices, funding opportunities, exhibition openings and events, articles of interest, discussions and – quite to the heart of the art museum world – gossip and

things to laugh about. It has proven particularly popular with those of our sector who either work alone or in very small and isolated institutions.

Another recent major achievement was the SIG's response to the Contemporary Visual Arts and Craft Inquiry. Sadly, the absence of a paid secretariat for the SIG limits its ability to respond to such major questions relevant to the sector without drawing extensively on members whose employment responsibilities lie elsewhere. Such projects also echo a commitment to supporting the general museum sector's effective, ethical and embracing work relationships with visual artists, craftworkers and designers.

Our conference sessions continue to stir up great emotions and enthusiasm. In recent years there has been a strong commitment to providing discussion topics of special interest to our SIG members as well as contributing sessions for the main sessions. Boots Herrera's keynote paper, sponsored by the VACDSIG, was a highlight for all in Adelaide recently. Recent issues that have been considered by the SIG have included: an analysis of the contributions that artists can make to museums across the sector; the benefits and burdens of VISCOPY and reproduction copyright; and the future role of the curator in museums. The one question over the years that we as a group never seem to agree on though is should we call our institutions art galleries or art museums? Me, I think it's the latter, but honestly, this is hardly an important question in the big scheme of things now is it?

*Annette Welkamp, Director, Cultural Connotations
In 1986 Annette was Secretary of the National Council of the Art Museums Association of Australia and since then has been a long-standing member of the Art gang in museums.*

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