

INFORMATION SHEET



museum
VICTORIA

A history of Museum Victoria

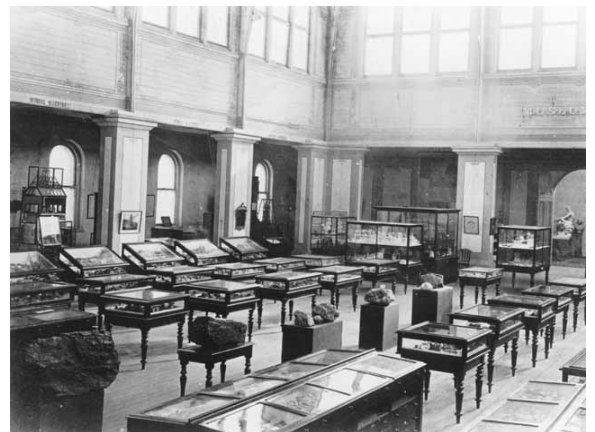
The first displays of what was to become Museum Victoria opened in the Government Assay Office in Latrobe Street on 9 March 1854. A few months later, Museum officials displayed minerals, geological specimens, fossils, and examples of native mammals, fish and birds at the Melbourne Exhibition. Their display also included some 'Aboriginal skulls,' and some 'anatomical preparations'. Much of the exhibited material was sent to the Paris Universelle Exposition of 1855; it did not return to Victoria.

Frederick McCoy, Professor of Natural History at the new Melbourne University, was formally appointed Director of the National Museum in 1858. The museum's collections were displayed in a hall at the University. As the 'new world' was explored, described and classified, the museum's research collections grew with species and specimens new to science. McCoy corresponded and exchanged specimens with curators and collectors throughout the world. Many of Museum Victoria's natural history treasures date from this time.



The National Museum at Melbourne University, c.1873, showing mining and agricultural models, a case of gorillas, and other zoological displays.
Photographer: Charles Nettleton / Source: Museum Victoria

McCoy's interests included ornithology, entomology and mineralogy. Artists including Ludwig Becker and Arthur Bartholomew were employed to illustrate museum specimens for a planned large work on Victoria's palaeontology and zoology. In 1870 most of the models of agricultural and mining machinery were moved to the city, to join collections of economic botany and the mineral collections gathered by the Geological Survey. They were displayed in a timber hall at the back of the Library in Swanston Street that had been used for exhibitions in 1861 and 1866. The newly housed collection had a new name: The Industrial and Technological Museum. Laboratories were established to train students in chemistry, mineralogy, practical mechanics and telegraphy.



Interior of the Industrial and Technological Museum, 1872.
Photographer: Charles Nettleton / Source: State Library of Victoria

McCoy died in 1899, and soon the National Museum collections were moved to Swanston Street, displacing the Industrial and Technological Museum displays. A new brick hall, built in 1893, was re-named McCoy Hall, and filled with zoological displays, including several pyramids of mammals.

The Museum is indebted to many amateur naturalists and collectors for the development of



museum
VICTORIA

some of our most extensive collections. Museum staff members including biologist James Kershaw, palaeontologist Frederick Chapman and engineer James Cosmo Newbery developed extensive networks within the scientific community of Victoria.

Collections of ethnographic material were transferred to the National Museum from the Industrial Museum and the State Library after Professor Baldwin Spencer became the Honorary Director in 1899. His ethnographic work in Central and Northern Australia resulted in new displays on Aboriginal arts and material culture. The first displays compared technologies from different parts of the country, and Spencer regretted that more detailed records had not been kept about the provenance of the earliest Victorian Indigenous collection.



Scene illustrating Aboriginal Life, 1909. These figures had been originally exhibited in the Colonial and Indian Exhibition in London in 1886. Source: Museum Victoria

A new Children's Room was opened in 1917; it included cases placed at children's height, live exhibits like 'The life cycle of the insect', and a Samoyed sled complete with two fur-clad wax figures, reindeer and artificial snow. Primary school children were regular and excited visitors.

During the 1930s Depression, the Museum's most popular exhibit was a dead racehorse, Phar Lap, who arrived freshly taxidermied into McCoy Hall just after Christmas in 1932. The newspapers reported that 'crowds three deep' surrounded the horse in his wooden and glass case. Even now, many people visit Phar Lap, especially during the week before the Spring Racing Carnival; some still touch his case, 'just for luck'.

The National Museum's ethnographic and anthropological collections were newly displayed in 1939. Some of the 200 bark paintings collected by Baldwin Spencer were on display. This was the only place in Melbourne where a comprehensive display of indigenous material culture could be seen.

Naturalists like A.J. Campbell and broadcaster Crosbie Morrison worked with Museum staff and Trustees to increase knowledge of Victoria's natural environment. A 1951 lecture program included Morrison speaking on 'Treasures of the Museum': 'an account of the rarities in the national collection and a plea for conservation'. Museum scientists conducted surveys of a variety of Australian environments.



Crosbie Morrison lecturing in McCoy Hall, surrounded by animals in glass cases. Source: Museum Victoria



Spurred on by a desire 'to convey modern applied science to people so that they may understand it and learn to live with it', the Technological Museum became the Museum of Applied Science in 1945. Over time popular displays explained DNA, antibiotics, principles of flight, and the workings of the human body. There was a shortage of space, and some important nineteenth century technological collections, thought to have no practical use, were discarded.

Successive Directors of both institutions hoped for a new Museum building, and much time and energy was spent on planning for new developments that never eventuated. In 1983 the two Museums were amalgamated, with a new name: Museum of Victoria. The first joint project was an exhibition for the sesquicentenary of European settlement of Victoria. 'Story of Victoria' marked a new display sophistication and the conscious introduction of social history as a discipline in the Museum.

In 1992, the first of a series of new developments, Scienceworks, was opened for the science and technology collections. The Museum moved into the western suburbs and its interactive displays attract large and youthful audiences.

To showcase Victoria's cultural diversity, the Immigration Museum opened in the former Customs House in 1988. 'Spotlights' feature the stories of particular immigrants, the Access Gallery hosts a range of rapidly-changing displays developed by community groups, and the award-winning 'Getting In' exhibition considers changes in Australia's immigration policy.

In 2000, after many years of planning, Melbourne Museum opened on its new site near the Royal Exhibition Building. Museum Victoria is better-resourced and better-housed than at any time in its history. Through expanding research, developing collections, dynamic public programs and exhibitions on a wide range of topics, the Museum aims to continue to serve the community of Victoria, and to be still relevant in another 150 years.

Further Reading

Rasmussen, Carolyn. 2001 *A Museum for the People: a history of Museum Victoria and its predecessors, 1854 – 2000*. Melbourne, Scribe Publications

Pescott, R.T.M. 1954 *Collections of a Century: the history of the first hundred years of the National Museum of Victoria*. Melbourne, National Museum of Victoria

Perry, W. 1972 *The Science Museum of Victoria: a history of its first one hundred years*. Melbourne, Science Museum of Victoria

Museum Victoria, 2004. *Treasures of the Museum, Victoria, Australia*. Melbourne, Museum Victoria

Internet Resources

A History of Museum Victoria webpage:
<http://www.museum.vic.gov.au/history/>

Museum Victoria's website:
<http://www.museum.vic.gov.au>

© Museum Victoria