



All the comforts of home? Visitors to the exhibition queued for hours to get tickets...

Centenary exhibition, century's success!

Treasures from the World's Great Libraries

Was it a football final, was it a rock concert? Anyone looking at the crowds and the queue for entry might have thought so, but in fact it was the free exhibition that the National Library of Australia staged to celebrate its centenary — and the role of all libraries, in collecting, preserving, and giving access to, the material that demonstrates and documents human endeavour and achievement. Without libraries, many of the exhibits would not have survived, or would not be publicly available. Many visitors were amazed by the range of material libraries hold, and delighted to find great Australian collections as well as overseas ones represented in the exhibition.

Treasures from the World's Great Libraries was a success from the day it opened to the public on 7 December, and by Christmas, visitors were queuing for several hours to enter. The library introduced a system giving visitors a number and an estimated entry time, so that they could if they liked have a meal or visit other attractions until their number was near the head of the queue — which they could check on computer screens in the library, by phone or on the library's website.

In no time at all, people were queuing for the numbers! All told, there were 115 081 visitors to the exhibition.

The exhibition was based on a seemingly simple idea: to borrow from libraries around the world some of their most precious items to show to Australians in the Library's — and the nation's — centenary year. Borrowing from thirty-seven institutions in twenty-four countries, however, was a complex process, involving delicate negotiations — it is no light matter to agree to lend one's 'top treasures' to a country on the other side of the world, and to hold to the agreement

despite the catastrophic events of 11 September 2001. It is a tribute to the goodwill of all the lenders that not a single one dropped out of the exhibition.

In fact, the overriding characteristic of the exhibition was goodwill at all levels: between National Library staff and that of participating institutions, among the library staff who volunteered to work around the clock, and among the exhibition visitors, who coped magnificently with the extraordinary queues they found themselves in. They brought chairs, sleeping bags, thermos flasks, their dogs, books to read and board games to play. With a busker and a portable coffee and pastry service, the queue even became a cult event — there were joking suggestions that the library should produce a T-shirt saying 'I queued for Treasures'. Visitors went home and told their friends to come, and even Canberra taxi-drivers were telling their passengers that it was a 'must-see'. Travel agents, airlines and hotels were doing the same.

So why was there this extraordinary level of interest? From what visitors told staff and volunteer guides, and from their comments in the visitors' book, the exhibition truly seemed to offer something for everyone, whatever their background or interests — the Gutenberg Bible, Albert Einstein, Alexander Graham Bell, Asian manuscripts, Ned Kelly, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Mozart, Beethoven: beauty and intellect, history and creativity, effort and achievement. Above all, every item was real, and in a society which is increasingly dependent on electronic surrogates, this was a powerful drawcard. Visitors could stand in front of the exhibits and know that they actually came from the hands of their creators, starting with 4000-year-old clay tablets and 3000-year-old Chinese oracle bones, all the way up to the hand-drawn

maps of Eddie Mabo. Many commented on how profoundly moving they found it to discover that these extraordinary items were produced by people like us all, and that ordinary items of daily life, like the 1939 Warsaw telephone directory, can become extraordinary. They also said that the exhibition had changed the way they looked at the world; some even said that it had changed their lives — which certainly validates ALIA's 2002 Library and Information Week slogan *Libraries change lives*.

And what does the popularity of the exhibition mean for the Library, and in fact for all libraries? According to one visitor, it offered 'Proof if any was needed, of the integral role institutions such as libraries and museums play in preserving the soul of humanity as it is expressed in word, thought, art and music'. In practical terms, the National Library has deepened the good relations previously established with the participating institutions and there are now networks between staff at many levels. Partnerships have also been established between the library and sponsors, and the library and the media, which will be of mutual benefit. There is no question that the exhibition has made libraries and their work more visible both nationally and internationally to many thousands of people, many of whom were not regular library users. As one visitor put it: 'This exhibition was just exhilarating — I don't know what other word to use. The history, the diversity, the richness and depth from other cultures all over the planet. Trying to imagine, looking at Mozart's manuscript or the cuneiform cylinder — those same marks just as they were being made by the hands of the writers, the sense of distance between then and now but also the commonality of experiences. Like a lot of other people who have written here I won't forget what I've seen.'



The queue stretched around the building. More than 115 000 visitors enjoyed the exhibition...

The library is grateful to the participating libraries for their generous loans, to Art Exhibitions Australia for managing the loan agreements and travel arrangements, to Art Indemnity Australia for indemnity, to sponsors and to all the visitors who came to see it and told us how much it meant to them. All told, it was an outstanding success, drawing a national and international audience, many of whom spoke of being awed and humbled by the exhibits. One said: 'It renews my faith in the people of this country that some of them are prepared to queue for hours before dawn, to see an exhibition after dark, that has absolutely nothing to do with sport — but knowledge, literature and enlightenment.'

Margaret Dent, curator, *Treasures from the World's Great Libraries* exhibition, National Library of Australia

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Age 6: She'll make autumn leaf collages in the children's room of her local library.

Age 15: She'll write a report on herbal remedies based on interviews with Native American healers collected by the Smithsonian Institution.

Age 26: She'll study 3-D models of the molecular structure of rare plant species using her medical school's database resources.

Age 32: Her daughter will make autumn leaf collages in the children's room of her local library.

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