

Museum People – the Human Collection

A museum's most important collection is its staff. It was fitting, therefore, that the focus of the 2008 Museums Aotearoa conference was Museum People - The Human Collection. The conference sought to illuminate the challenges and opportunities that confront heritage staff and volunteers. An ambitious and wide-ranging topic, but one that made a good companion to the 2007 conference on the architecture that houses heritage institutions and their 'human collection'.

The conference was hosted predominantly in the Dunedin Public Art Gallery which, with its central location and facilities, proved an excellent venue. Apart from the occasional overrunning of time, the event was very well organised and thanks go to the staff of both Museums Aotearoa and the Gallery.

STARTING ON A GOOD NOTE

From the outset the conference made a memorable impact – largely due to Dunedin's singing mayor Peter Chin, who serenaded the delegates with a tune extolling his city's virtues. The mayor at the next conference has a lot to live up to. The musical opening was followed by key note speaker Dr David Fleming, the director of National Museums Liverpool, whose talk was titled, 'The Evolving Museum Profession'. Fleming explored challenges facing museums and ways to drive and manage change in the heritage environment, citing examples from the UK. He said change in the museum environment was a long and wearing process, and pro-change directors should themselves be the 'embodiment' of change. But he added that directors need to develop the staff to assist the process and 'neutralise' staff opposition where necessary. Fleming delivered a provocative talk, but he addressed institutional transformation and making staff serve that end, rather than the wider issues facing the human collection. It would have been enlightening to hear his strategies for developing staff to excel in the changing environment.

PUTTING PEOPLE IN THE PICTURE

The next session, entitled 'Changing Environment', turned the spotlight onto the external influences on internal structures, presenting the findings of the latest

Himself a feature of the human collection, **Chris Rapley** reports on the 2008 Museums Aotearoa annual conference held in Dunedin.

Museums Aotearoa survey and giving interesting insights into the nature of the industry's labour force. The importance of volunteers was very evident, with 42% of museums surveyed having no paid fulltime staff. The conference next received presentations from Puke Ariki's Bill Macnaught and Gore District Council's Steve Parry, who both stressed the importance of creating productive relationships with councils. Then Tourism New Zealand's Kiri Goulter reinforced museums' importance to the tourism sector. The link of this session to the human collection was thin, but considering recent events in the museum sector the emphasis on building positive relationships with local councils was certainly relevant.

From this point on the conference focussed more clearly on the theme of the human collection and there were many thought-provoking speakers. After lunch the delegates broke into streams, including one on education and training, before rejoining for the final session, which examined professionalism in museums and art galleries. The day was rounded off by Brad Jackson's lively presentation on leadership, which stressed the importance not only of leadership, but also of good 'following'.

CAREERING ALONG

Day two began with a session on career planning and professional development. Projects International's Chris Knoll outlined the development of a museum career pathways resource, which will provide guidance

for those looking to enter the sector. He was followed by Mark Lindsay from Creative New Zealand, who spoke about the growing diversity of jobs in the cultural heritage sector, noting that people in our sector have highly specialised skills that cannot be found in other environments. The next presentation looked at internships that are being piloted and developed for the sector. The session ended with Claire Regnault's presentation on her experiences in the United Kingdom as part of the 2007 Clark Collection Scholarship. For the rest of the day the conference broke into two streams; firstly, qualifications and career case studies, and then local tours and an internet-focused session hosted by National Services Te Paerangi. This second day kept more closely to the theme and offered many good insights and also an overview of interesting developments in the sector – both for new entrants and those who have already made museums their profession.

YOUTH AND EXPERIENCE

That evening delegates were treated to an entertaining night at the conference dinner. As well as a fine meal, the delegates were able to enjoy seeing the presentation of awards and the popular presentation of a Fellowship of Museums Aotearoa to Dr Rodney Wilson. In his heartfelt speech, Wilson commented on the importance of his mentors, especially Canterbury Museum's Roger Duff, which served to further highlight the importance of the conference's theme.

Volunteers and interns were on the agenda for the first session on the Friday morning. The impressive redevelopment at the volunteer-driven Riverton Heritage Museum was showcased and there were two presentations from people who worked as volunteers. The session closed with Jessica Tocker's presentation on her time as a graduate intern at North Otago Museum. As a person new to the industry, Tocker gave 'old hands' a reminder of what it was like starting out in our complex heritage sector. The volunteer and intern session was engaging, but it would have benefited by directly confronting some of the big issues, such as how museums can successfully manage volunteers and how to empower those 42% of museums with no paid staff.

Overall the Museums Aotearoa Conference 2008 was a success, and provided food for thought and inspiration for the delegates. In addition the conference still provides one of the best networking opportunities to build relationships throughout the sector. The presentations were at their best when they dealt directly with the issues that confront 'The Human Collection', and some would

have been of more benefit if they had more clearly focused on the theme of the conference.

This was **Chris Rapley's** fifth annual conference. He started his career as Collections Technician at Canterbury Museum. He has worked as Assistant Curator of Accoutrements and Social History at the National Army Museum in Waiouru since 2004 where he completed his Postgraduate Diploma in Museum Studies through Massey University's distance learning programme.



Figure 1: MA08 Opening at the Dunedin Public Art Gallery
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT: MUSEUMS AOTEAROA