Multi-culturalism is a lot like the weather: we talk about it a lot, but what are we really doing about it? At the recent AAM convention in Philadelphia, a dialogue on What Does It Mean To Be American focused almost exclusively on issues that divide us rather than those that define us, leaving the title question unanswered. In the national debate, every conceivable constituency (except for straight white males, who apparently are not allowed to have a culture) clamors for inclusion, creating the unmistakable impression that a pluralistic society is, by definition, a little bit of everything but nothing in particular.

But we are not alone in this. On the other side of the planet another immigrant nation, Australia, struggles with many of these same issues. As American museums try to find their place in our multi-cultural society, it may be instructive to see what they've come up with Down Under.

The Nature of Australian Multi-Culturalism

Australian culture is dominated by an unmistakable English flavor, the legacy of colonialism and the White Australia Policy. Until the mid-1960s, law and official policy encouraged only English emigration. All others, including other Europeans, were not welcome. As a result more than 95% of Aussies are "white," as opposed to just under 75% of Americans.

For immigration, however, the situation is reversed: some 91% of Americans (of all colors) were born here, while only 77% of Australians are native. This led Robert Baker, Director of Exhibition Coordination at the Powerhouse Museum, Sydney, to claim, "Australia is the world's most multi-cultural society, even more so than the US." While most Americans have roots going back many generations -- long enough to assimilate into a single "mainstream" culture -- many Australians are first-or second-generation citizens.

Many Australians view this depiction of their country as a myth, fostered by the liberal socialist government courting votes from the large immigrant population. One Melbourne cabbie insisted the Greek and Italian immigrants from the '50s and '60s are plenty assimilated. Of course, "promoting tolerance is good. Australians are as racist as anyone... Australians hate Asians the way Americans hate Mexicans."
Multi-culturalism in Australian Museums

Given that multi-culturalism is a social reality, how do museums help visitors create a national identity out of the patchwork quilt that is Australia? During a recent visit I saw a number of exhibits addressing this issue, and four main themes emerged:

The Land

Australians are justly proud of their natural heritage, the unique flora, fauna and geology of their homeland. Furthermore, the outback plays as large a role in their mythic self-perception as "The West" does for Americans. Thus the land and its economic importance are featured prominently, in numerous geology exhibits and museums such as The Earth Exchange in Sydney. Similarly, The National Wool Museum outside Melbourne is one of many tributes to the ranchers who turned the "barren" land into a prosperous enterprise.

Maritime museums are quite common, as might be expected on an island nation. Every major city has at least one, sometimes two. Museums of history and natural history (which are usually combined into a single, state-run institution) also feature large exhibits on whaling, shipping, and/or sea exploration. Even science museums get into the act -- The Investigator in Adelaide offers several interactive displays on waves, wave motion, wave power, etc.

The negative effects of geography are also acknowledged. The semi-arid bush suffers frequent wildfires; thus, fire fighting is an important occupation, and Museums of Fire are everywhere. Rabbits, introduced for sport, have denuded large areas of range land. This eco-tragedy is told in a large display at the Museum of Western Australia, featuring as its centerpiece that uniquely Australian vision of the apocalypse: two humping bunnies.

The English gardening tradition is evident in the many spectacular botanic gardens. Each city has one, and not on the edge of town or out in the 'burbs but usually right downtown. (Sir Arthur Conan Doyle declared the Melbourne Royal Botanic Gardens "the most beautiful spot on Earth," though personally I would give the nod to Adelaide).

Of course, when one thinks of Australia, one thinks of the unique wildlife. The tourist industry has latched onto this in a big way: you cannot swing a dead wallaby without hitting a koala photo-op. These range from serious conservation facilities to blatant petting zoos. As a result, pride of place in Australian zoos generally goes to the African megafauna (after all, when you've seen one sleeping kangaroo you've seen them all). On the other hand, most zoos offer prominent displays of species unique to their region.
Australia parallels the United States in that both countries are a nation of immigrants, recent or otherwise, with a European civilization superimposed over the original cultures. However, Australians seem much more aware of their aboriginal history than Americans are of ours. There are a number of reasons for this. For one, the colonization is much more recent. As one Aborigine woman told me, "We learn a lot from your Indians. After all, they've had 500 years' experience dealing with whites; we've only had 200."

Another reason is that vast stretches of the outback are still in Aborigine hands. And it doesn't hurt that, as a percentage of the total population, Australian Aboriginies are twice as prominent as American (1.5% of the population vs. 0.7% here).

As a result, Aboriginal art is everywhere: in Aborigine-owned and –run galleries, in natural history museums, in corporate offices, in lobbies of performing arts centers, and most strikingly in art museums. Brochures on "where to find Aboriginal art in the (name of city) area" are readily available.

Aborigine-related programming is also abundant. My favorite program was at the Adelaide Zoo where, after an hour's dance performance, trained docents from local tribes gave tours of the collection, describing myths, legends, hunting techniques, etc. associated with each native animal.

The cultural background of other Australians is also amply presented. Virtually every museum -- history, natural history, art -- has a "community access gallery." The Powerhouse, Australia's largest museum, is roughly equivalent to an American museum of science, technology, and industry. But even it has an Australian Communities Gallery, with sections on Aboriginal culture, the original English settlers, and the waves of immigration in the 1850s, 1950s, and 1990s. It also features an adjacent rotating gallery where individual ethnic groups are highlighted.

Adelaide's Migration Museum traces the immigrant experience, from packing up and leaving home, to the problems encountered and overcome in settling in a new land. The museum ends with a gallery on multi-culturalism today: a bulletin board for visitor comments, a history of migration, a computer data-base with information provided by each ethnic group. The final display describes the national "stew," showing disparate groups brought together by the one thing that unites all Australians -- the love of sport, symbolized by a Chicago Bulls jersey.

The Australian Museum, Sydney, concludes it's exhibit on human evolution with an anti-prejudice display reminding us we are All One Species. At the same institution, the exhibit Our Place asks "who is an Australian?" and answers "all of us." Sections explore themes all Australians have in
common -- the land, national symbols, community (in yet another rotating gallery), heritage, etc. -- despite their diversity.

Another section of presents about half a dozen Australians of various ages, races, sexes, etc., answering the question "What are the five most important dates in Australian history?" As you might expect, the answers are quite varied, not only for the dates chosen but also for the way they are described -- Captain Cook is called as an explorer in one, a colonist in another, an invader in a third. Though this diversity leads to some spirited discussions, visitors are forced to consider the history they all share.

**Self-Perception**

Australians are keenly aware that they are regarded as poor relations by England, and barely even acknowledged by America, the 800-pound gorilla of world culture. Therefore, much emphasis is placed on national identity. Exhibits explore the ways certain universal themes are given a uniquely Australian expression.

The Powerhouse, for instance, has developed several such exhibits. *Real Wild Child* tells the story of Australian rock music, presenting youth as a separate culture. (It was like stepping into an alternate universe -- the music, the styles, the fashion, everything was the same, but it was all by a bunch of bands you'd never heard of.) There have been exhibits about Australian design, Australian movies, Australia and the monarchy, Australian mothers in the 1950s, Australians in space -- all striving to build a common culture. The Performing Arts Museum in Melbourne has examined Australian comedy, jazz, and circuses. The Australian Museum of Sport has a permanent exhibit on the nation's unique contribution to world testosterone levels, Australian Rules Football.

Unlike America, which is leveling out to a monoculture, Australia retains many regional distinctions, most of which stem from the colonial era (which ended less than a century ago). Sydney and Hobart have exhibits on their history as penal colonies; Melbourne still remembers its days as capital, the largest and wealthiest city on the continent.

Perth, on the other side of the country, is the most isolated large city on Earth. It views itself as quite distinct from the rest of the country (a favorite post card featured a map of the continent with Western Australia filled with detail and the rest of the country shown in mere outline, with the stencil "Largely Unexplored"), and makes for a particular study in regionalism.

For example, the history of life exhibit at The Museum of Western Australia rarely strays outside the borders of the state. It presents a full 3.5 billion years of life -- in Western Australia:
stromatilites, Edicarian fauna, Ordovician sea floor, fossil marsupials, etc. Outside of a couple of
dinosaur casts from the US, everything is local.

The Perth Zoo emphasizes local wildlife -- the nimbat, quokka, and black swan. Scitech, its
science and technology center, focuses on the local mining industry. Even the Art Gallery of
Western Australia was just that: works by Western Australia artists, with a scant handful of others.

Unlike the great eastern cities, which try to affect a certain cosmopolitan refinement, the South
Australia capital of Adelaide has a degree of brashness that one might associate with the American
West. The Old Parliament Building, the official state history museum, makes no attempt to gloss
over the failures, controversies and scandals of the past.

Australian brashness is also apparent at The Migration Museum, a decidedly left-leaning
institution. "All of the staff are feminists, and most of us are socialists, so we do have that bias"
explained my docent, and exhibit labels are clearly written from this point-of-view. But regardless
of how you feel about their politics, you've got to admire a museum (and a state-run institution, at
that) which has the courage of its convictions. Hell, in the mealy-mouthed US simply having
convictions is a feat in itself.

Art

Despite the efforts of community galleries, immigration exhibits, etc., art galleries are leading the
way in defining the Australian identity. And they do so because they seemingly have no other
choice.

Your standard American art institute tells the chronological story of Western art from the
Renaissance forward. All schools and styles that do not fit into the standard sequence -- Asian art,
African art, even American art prior to 1945 -- are ghettoized in side galleries, stuck off in some
unobtrusive corner.

However, Australian collectors, isolated from the Western mainstream, were unable to amass much
European art. Australian museums focus on English and Australian art because that's pretty much
all they have. The Art Gallery of Western Australia, for example, displays exactly four works by
non-British 20th century Europeans. Space which might otherwise go to the Baroque or Rococo is
instead given to contemporary Australian and Aboriginal art.

The National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, has probably the best collection of European art from
the Renaissance through the Romantic periods (ah, the spoils of empire). But these works are
ghettoized on the top floor. To get to them, one must first walk through several galleries of
Australian, Aboriginal, and international Modern and Post-Modern art, before one finally reaches "Art Through the Ages."

The Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, does follow a strict chronological sequence, but in reverse. Starting with the very latest Australian works (by artists of both European and Aboriginal descent), the visitor proceeds backwards through the history of Australian art -- the post-war explosion, the pre-war imitation of various Modernist schools, the pre-independence imitation of English landscape and portraiture -- until finally you reach the International Room, under the stairs, where Picasso rubs elbows with Rembrandt (they have one of each).

Yet the lack of expected "masterpieces" in no way diminishes the power of these installations. Post-war Australian art is as big and colorful as the land itself, as bold and brassy as the people who make it. It has one foot in the Western world and one in its own, looking like a fusion of ancient Aboriginal design and 1960s pop. This, more than any community gallery or P. C. exhibit, told me what it means to be an Australian. And it receives this prominence basically this is all they've got -- which also says a lot about what it means to be Australian.

**Final thoughts and radical editorializing**

To stretch a metaphor, if Australian and American society are "stews," then museums can play an important role in exploring and explaining the recipe. But a recipe is more than just a list of ingredients. I have long felt that the American approach to diversity is divisive: focusing on each individual piece, while ignoring the whole, alienates those visitors who do not identify with the group on exhibit. Australian museums take the opposite approach: they start by describing the nation as a whole, then place each group within that framework. This seems to me a logical approach to exhibiting and interpreting our multi-facted cultures.