

A Potted History

The genesis of a South Australian Museum originated in London with the foundation of the South Australian Literary Association on 29 August 1834. Its purpose was ‘the cultivation and diffusion of useful knowledge throughout the colony by all means which may lie in its power’. The object of the society was to satisfy intellectual pursuits such as literature, arts, history and natural science, as the physical and religious necessities had already been accounted for.

In June of 1856, 20 years after Governor Hindmarsh proclaimed South Australia a province and in the same year South Australia established its constitution, an Act to provide for an institution that would incorporate a public library and museum was assented to.

Its purpose was to ‘improve and elevate the mental and moral condition of such persons as may come within the influence of such societies respectively’. The Act promoted ‘the general study and cultivation of all or any of the branches or departments of art, science, literature, and philosophy’ through lectures and classes and also unite cultural societies under one Institution. A Board of Governors was appointed to the South Australian Institute and was made a body corporate.

The South Australian Institute initially rented space from the Library and Mechanics Institute, situated in Neales Exchange on King William Street, while waiting for its building on the corner of Kintore Avenue and North Terrace to be officially completed. The Institute building was officially opened on 29 January 1861.

On Frederick George Waterhouse’s arrival to the colony he worked as a surveyor before offering his services as Curator of the South Australian Institute Museum in June 1859.

Waterhouse brought experience with him from working at the British Museum. The Board appointed him as the first Curator when the building of the South Australian Institute building was completed. In the meantime, Waterhouse worked in an honorary capacity and commenced immediately to build up the South Australian Institute Museum’s collections by soliciting exchanges and donations and securing small government grants for purchases.

Wilhelm Haacke succeeded Waterhouse after his retirement in February 1882. On 17 January 1883 Haacke submitted a special report to the Board of Governors. He recommended that the position of Curator be changed to Director, and that the South Australian Institute Museum be renamed South Australian Museum, as the name was too long, impracticable and not ‘particularly handsome’. Only the first recommendation was approved. Wilhelm was appointed the first Director of the South Australian Museum.

On 18 December 1884 the new Jervois Wing (west wing) was formally opened to house the Library, Art Gallery and Museum. The Museum was situated in the northern half of the building.

In May 1892 construction of the 'temporary' northern red brick building – the first purpose-built construction for the Museum – commenced and was completed by early 1893. In 1912 the Museum occupied some rooms of the eastern wing, freeing space in the Jervois Wing.

The East Wing officially opened on 8 December 1915 containing a Natural History and Art Museum. Seventy years later the Natural Science Building behind the State Library of South Australia was commissioned.

Today, with ever expanding natural science and anthropological collections, the Museum also has a skeletal preparation facility at Bolivar and storage and curatorial space at Netley and Hindmarsh.

In 1939, Haacke's second recommendation was finally realised. Legislation was passed that gave the South Australian Museum autonomy from the Art Gallery and Library. The South Australian Institute Museum was officially renamed the South Australian Museum. This Act was made operational in 1940.

The Museum has fewer than 100 fulltime equivalent staff members, compared to about 40 in 1956. This reflects greater specialisation rather than embarkation on new fields of study. Due to the nature and significance of the Museum's activities, fulltime staff are outmatched in number by volunteers. Eight Board members provide a valuable resource in terms of marketing, planning and accounting.

The South Australian Museum is a custodian for the State's cultural and natural heritage.

The specialised data generated by collection managers, curators and scientists since 1834 and its interpretation are made available to the international community through publication, promotion, education and exhibitions.

This specialised knowledge contributes to the protection of endangered species, protection of fossils, meteorites and minerals, environmental impact statements, native title and Indigenous family history.

Today the South Australian Museum boasts the largest Australian Aboriginal Cultures collection in the world making Adelaide the gateway to and from the Outback.