

PictureAustralia – the big picture

<http://www.pictureaustralia.org>

PictureAustralia is a free, collaborative internet-based service that allows users to search the online pictorial collections of multiple cultural agencies from the one website.

Eighteen agencies currently participate in PictureAustralia, with more to follow. They include libraries, galleries, museums, archives, universities, local history societies and other cultural organisations. Individually and collectively, they are working to increase knowledge of, and access to, their collections.

How does it work?

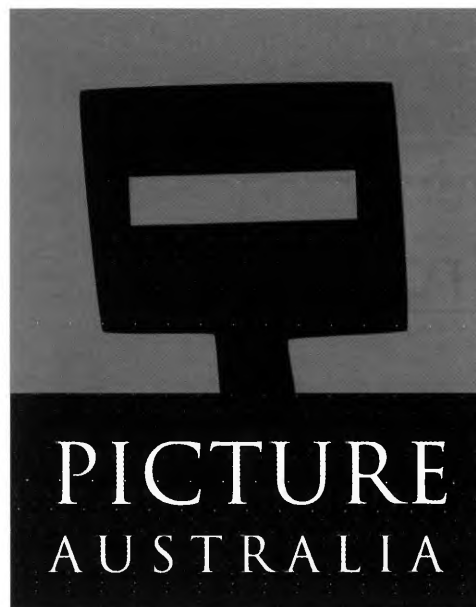
PictureAustralia has been successful because it addresses the fact that in a web environment, users do not make distinctions between which agency may hold the image they require. Many pictorial collections have traditionally been the province of serious researchers and more casual browsers may not know if the image they require exists, let alone where it might be found. By collaborating to provide a way to search without having to address these issues, PictureAustralia helps put users in touch with our national pictorial collection.

PictureAustralia does not actually host any of the images that users can find through a search. They are all located on the websites of the participating agencies. PictureAustralia directs users to the relevant agency websites, which means all aspects of image management remain in the hands of the owner institutions.

Descriptive information for each image (including the URL of the image) is regularly copied into a central database hosted by the National Library of Australia. Users search this database



Mary Edwards of Cardiff in Lake Macquarie, 1915
Lake Macquarie City Library



when they search PictureAustralia and are directed to relevant participating agency websites from their results sets. More information is available at <http://www.pictureaustralia.org/join.html>.

The benefits for users ...

The most obvious benefit of using PictureAustralia is that it gives users the ability to search across the collections of a range of cultural agencies very easily.

In addition, it gives users the chance to pull together increasingly definitive sets of images on any particular topic. For example, a user searching for images relating to Tom Roberts will find a set of results integrating paintings and prints by the artist, images of the artist himself and important places connected with the artist, from a range of galleries, libraries and archives.

Less obvious perhaps, but of considerable importance, is the emphasis on consistent image description. As agencies become more standard in their descriptive practices, users will less and less need to consider using variants such as *World War II*, *Second World War*, *WW2*, *1939–1945* and so on, to find images on this single topic. The promotion of the Australian Pictorial Thesaurus (<http://www.picturethesaurus.gov.au>) as the preferred thesaurus for the service assists in this endeavour.

Finally, PictureAustralia acts as the centre of a network directing users out to significant collections of Australian pictorial material around the nation and overseas. This helps to introduce users to the component parts of the national collection and increases their familiarisation with the part that many agencies play in preserving and making accessible our pictorial heritage.

... and the benefits for participating agencies

Agencies that join PictureAustralia and make their online image collections available through this additional avenue, maximise the return on their significant investment in digitising material and making it available online. They reach a larger, far more diverse user group than their loyal, local clients.

Anyone using a general search engine to search for 'pictures of Australia' or 'Australian pictures' will be directed to PictureAustralia. They may end by burrowing down to view a picture of the dingo fence from the Northern Territory Library, a Chinese celebration complete with dragon from the Camp-

belltown City Library, nude RAAF men diving into a Darwin waterhole from the Australian War Memorial, or Rosella soup labels from the National Library of New Zealand.

Participating in a national service that promotes cross-sectoral collaboration and a standards-based approach to image management can be a useful leveraging tool for agencies seeking funding to begin or extend their digitisation activities. Further, the information sharing between participating agencies with respect to web design and image and description standards, provides a valuable body of knowledge for new participants to access.

Where to next?

PictureAustralia is continuously increasing the geographic coverage and scope of the collections it facilitates access to. The inclusion of the Northern Territory Library in March was a step towards increased participation from the north. PictureAustralia is also focused on enhancing access to rich local collections as well as to the larger state collections with which the service began.

New features to help users navigate the increasing collection size are planned. With the move to a new software platform, TeraText by InQuirion, scheduled for October, the eagerly awaited search-within-search and shopping cart facilities should not be far away.

PictureAustralia has also provided a springboard for the National Library of Australia, in conjunction with ScreenSound Australia, to begin exploring issues related to the delivery of digitised sheet music and audio files over the internet. Check out the MusicAustralia pilot project at <http://www.musicaustralia.org> for an introduction to the next set of challenges.

Now is the time to take part in the excitement of creating and accessing our national pictorial collection. Start searching



*A horse throwing its rider at a rodeo, Tennant Creek, NT, 1980s
Gottaas Collection, Northern Territory Library*

PictureAustralia for images illustrating our national endeavour. At the same time, consider whether your own image collection should be there too, playing its part in telling the full story and painting the big picture.

For more information, please contact PictureAustralia, National Library of Australia, Parkes Place, Canberra, ACT 2600, phone 02 6262 1641, e-mail: pictaust@nla.gov.au. ■

How will you shape the future?

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 species 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.

For details on Sirsi software and services for libraries and their users, visit www.sirsi.com

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