

# Suitcases and stories: objects of migration in museum exhibitions

Contesting the 'multicultural migration exhibition'

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## The 'suitcase moment'



Image from *Home is Where the Heart Is*, recent exhibition at the Migration Museum, Adelaide.

“We are all familiar, perhaps overly familiar with the suitcase as a design gesture in migration exhibitions. The journey is a favoured trope in migration literature... if the journey is given sole emphasis, migrants remain stubbornly migrants.”

Ian McShane, 'Challenging or conventional? Migration history in Australian museums' in *National Museums, Negotiating Histories*, 2001, p.129

[The group] collectively felt that an effort should be made to break down cultural stereotypes, such as what they called the 'suitcase moment' – a term they coined to describe that 'quintessential image of migration of the 1950s'. It represented a romanticised, sanitised image that they felt was no longer relevant.

Katherine Danylak, *Immigration Museum Audience Development Research Project*, Melbourne: Museum Victoria, 2001, p.37

## Critiques of migration exhibitions – drawing on Hage



Ghassan Hage 1998

*White Nation: Fantasies of White supremacy in a multicultural society*

### **McShane 2001**

“...the policy of multiculturalism strongly influenced the entry of migration history into museums, and even though multiculturalism changed its modulations over 20 years, a standard set of conceptual and practical approaches to migration history exhibitions emerged.”

### **Hutchison 2009**

“The typical multicultural migration exhibition is often presented in a way that renders ‘experience’ as undifferentiated within ‘community’ (ethnic) groups. There are no dissenting voices and there are no other aspects of the complex, experiencing self represented beyond that of migrant – and perhaps woman. This is supported by framing experience within stock narratives of migration and by looking at it through the lens of culture as represented by ethnic organisations.”

### **Witcomb 2009**

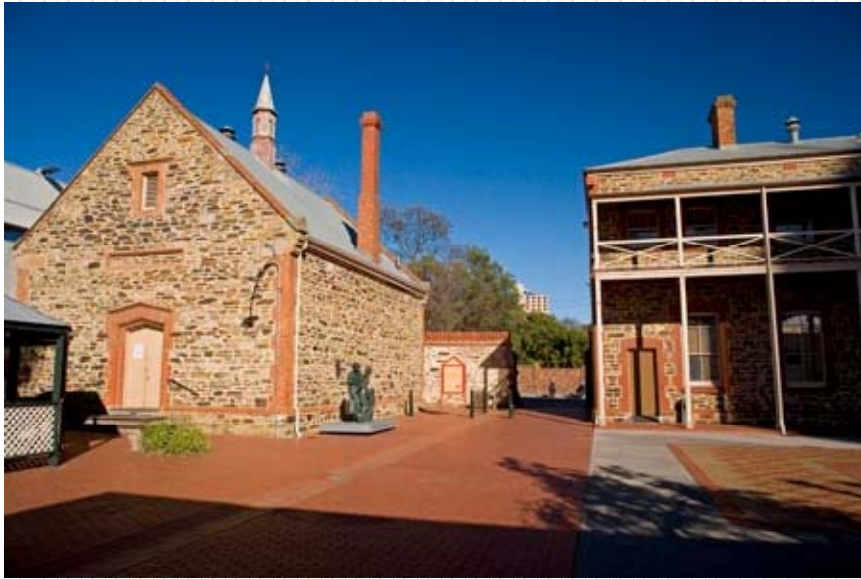
“... the initial suite of [migration] exhibitions was largely celebratory in nature and advanced an understanding of multiculturalism as a melting pot... Exhibitions in this tradition did this by largely focusing on the external markers of ethnicity... many of the early exhibitions were also propaganda agencies for government”

## What's lacking – *a history of the exhibitions themselves*

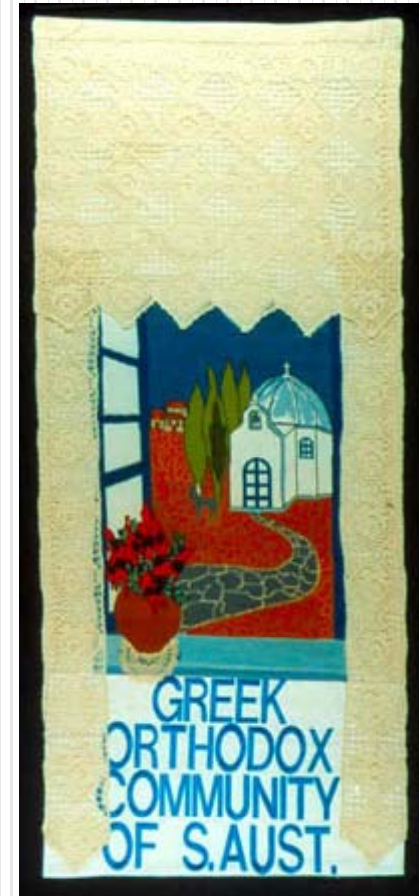
“Museums as institutions, and the collections which they hold, are one of the characteristic modern meta-narratives through which society, in its ideas about knowledge and reality, has been constituted since roughly the middle of the fifteenth century. The notion of exhibition is a significant part of this meta-narrative since the physical organisation of pieces in relation to each other is an important way in which knowledge and understanding is generated. Curatorial theory and practice underpins this whole narrative structure, but is itself contained by it”

Susan Pearce - *Museums, Objects and Collections: A Cultural Study*, 1992, p.118

# The first museum of migration



The Migration Museum in Adelaide, part of The History Trust of South Australia. Established 1983, opened to the public in 1986 (originally called The Migration and Settlement Museum).



English Banner (made by Members of the Embroiderers' Guild of South Australia) and Greek Orthodox Community Banner.  
Images: Migration Museum SA

# International context

Home The Initiative Partners Web Community Objectives Contacts

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**The Migration Museums Map**

*Image credits - Migration Museums Web Community - [network@migrationmuseums.org](mailto:network@migrationmuseums.org) - UNESCO-IOM Migration Museums Initiative*

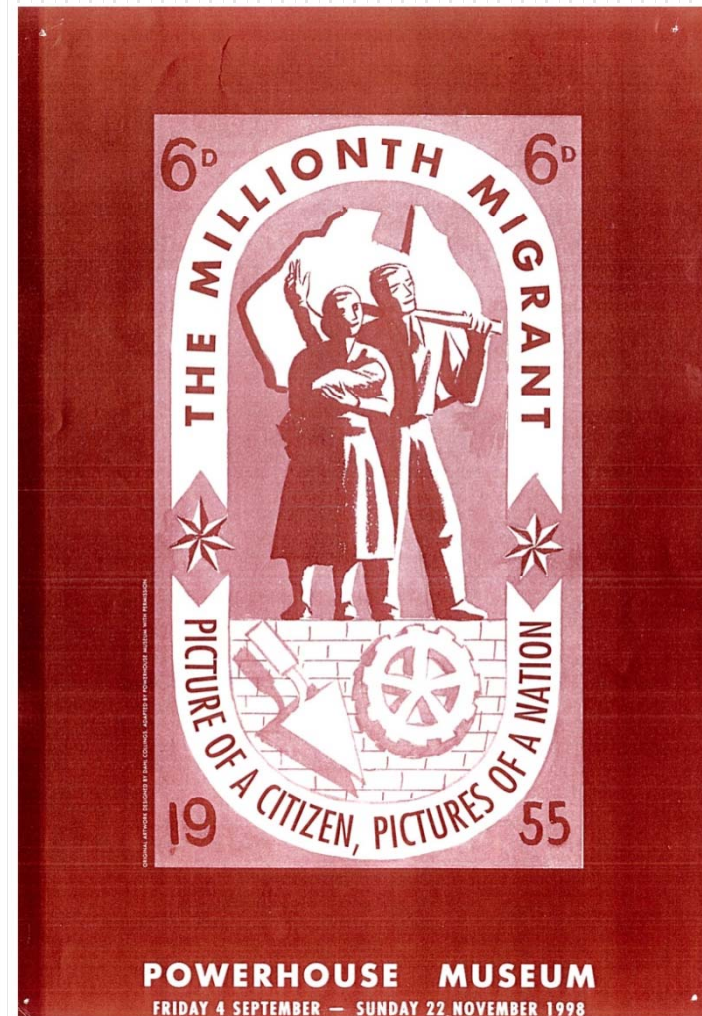
Katherine Goodnow et.al. *Museums, the media and refugees: stories of crisis, control and compassion*, 2008.

The first internationally comparative work on migration exhibitions - highlighted stories that are still missing including those who did not make it or were left behind; global refugees and the internally displaced; those who were forced to return.

## Migration exhibitions – changing museum practice

- The role of oral history
- Community access galleries
- Creating new objects/  
art as object
- Recreations/props  
– an absence of objects

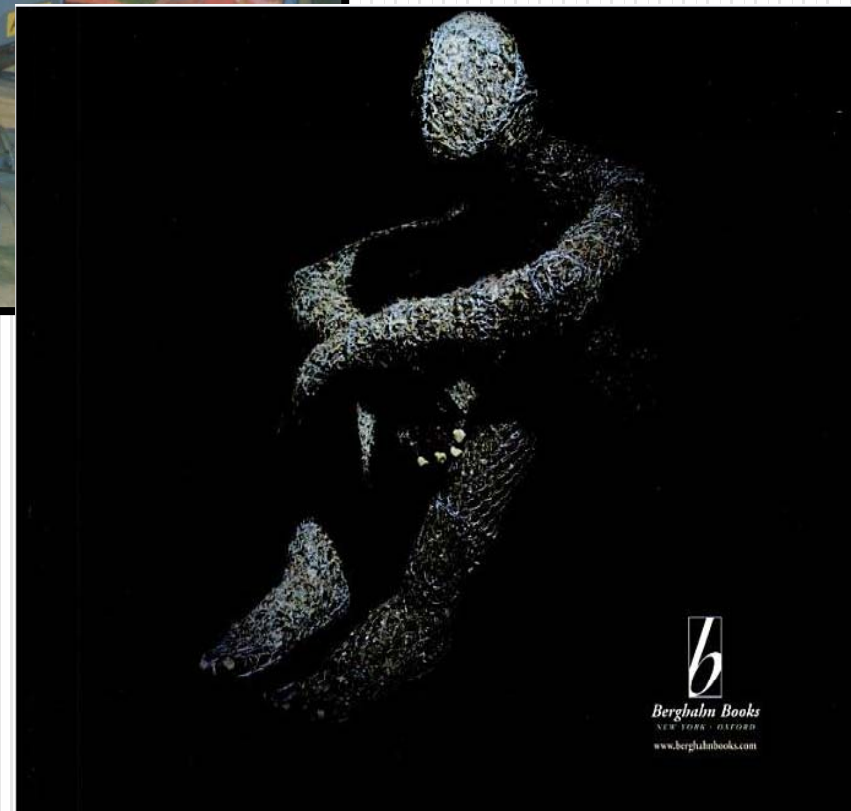
Poster for 'The Millionth Migrant' exhibition at the Powerhouse Museum, adapted from an original artwork by Dahl Collings, 1954





'Work it Out' Exhibition at the Migration Museum, 1995  
Silk paintings by artist Lynn Elzinga

Wire figure from 'A Twist of fate, and experience of war, pain, torture and survival: refugees in Australia' 1998



## Conclusions – it's time to unpack the suitcase



- Exhibitions are the public face of museums
- A history of migration exhibitions across institutions can give us new insights into the way museums transform historical narratives
- More than just food, costume and folk dance
- The stereotype of the 'multicultural migration exhibition' obscures the ways these exhibitions have challenged and changed museum practice over the past three decades

Anna Fiddelaers and her baby sister Martina, new arrivals to Australia on the Zuiderkruis, 1954  
NAA:A12111, 1/1954/4/33. From the National Archives project 'Making Australia Home' website.

Thank you! Questions and comments welcomed.

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