



WESTPAC LONG GALLERY



THE WESTPAC LONG GALLERY AND *200 TREASURES*: ORIGIN AND DESIGN

In December 2015, the Australian Museum (AM) announced an historic partnership with Westpac, the NSW Government and the AM Foundation to restore the nation's first museum gallery and to showcase 200 of the nation's most significant treasures, including two artefacts from Westpac's and the NSW Government's collections.

The \$9 million, two-year project opens in 2017 in celebration of the AM's 190th and Westpac's 200th anniversaries. The restoration of the Westpac Long Gallery and the *200 Treasures* exhibition were also conceived to bring the AM's collections into the spotlight and to provide a new experience for visitors – an insight into the collections and the museum's scientific and cultural research.

Less than one per cent of the AM's research collection of more than 18 million cultural objects and scientific specimens is currently on public display, due to a lack of public exhibition space. The restoration of the Westpac Long Gallery and the new *200 Treasures* permanent exhibition were conceived to liberate some of the most intriguing and important objects in the AM's care.

The restoration of the Westpac Long Gallery and *200 Treasures* form part of the AM's transformation. The AM's renewal program has also included the opening of the Crystal Hall entrance on William Street and the new permanent exhibition Wild Planet, along with four other new galleries and a collections storage area in Castle Hill.

The Westpac Long Gallery is itself a treasure: a stunningly proportioned neo-classical gallery over three levels. The first museum gallery in the nation has been restored so visitors can enjoy its classical architecture, as well as the treasures housed within its walls.

The AM was established in 1827 by Lord Bathurst, Secretary of State for the Colonies, and celebrates its 190th anniversary in 2017. In 1845, funds were approved for construction of a two-story building with a north and a west wing on the corner of William and College Streets, designed by Colonial Architect Mortimer Lewis. The foundations for

the AM were laid in January 1846 and the Long Gallery was completed in 1850 when the roof was finally finished. It opened to the public in May 1857.

AM exhibition designer **Aaron Maestri** said the restoration of what is now the Westpac Long Gallery responds to the original architecture and the requirements of the exhibition. The exhibition was designed to work in harmony with the grand Victorian architecture – but for the two to remain visually independent.

To achieve this goal, the custom-made display cases are seamless modern glass enclosures that sit behind the gallery's columns on the ground floor. Similarly, the cases on the first floor – which reflect the different “ologies” or scientific disciplines and cultures studied at the AM – are transparent to connect visitors with the whole space.

Maestri described the Westpac Long Gallery as a “jewel box” of the AM's collections. “The gallery is built on a grand scale to actually inspire people about the natural world that is being exhibited within it,” he said. “We are lucky that we have retained it and are able to restore it as a showcase of all of our treasures.”

Heritage architect Alan Croker and his team at **Design 5 - Architects** oversaw the restoration of the Westpac Long Gallery.

The restoration of the gallery involved the removal of several layers of old exhibition infrastructure installed over many years, including old display cases and lighting systems. The restoration has stripped back generations of change. The original floors have been uncovered. The columns, with their marble paintwork, have been revealed and restored. The original wire fretwork has been reinstalled on all levels and a cast-iron balustrade reinstalled on level one.

The gallery has also been re-energized to appeal to a 21 st century audience. A modern LED lighting system has been installed to allow for lighting that is more flexible and visually unobtrusive. A contemporary interactive display on the ground floor provides information about the AM's collection of type specimens – the display is housed in a cabinet that is based on the original cabinetry constructed for the gallery.

Interactive touch screens on level one also offer visitors an opportunity to learn more about each of the objects and people in the exhibition, along with exploring the many “entangled” ways in which they relate to each other. The exhibition also comes with a custom-made smartphone app, to enhance visitors' experience and understanding of the gallery.

The glass display cases on the first two levels of the gallery were custom-designed, built and installed by Italian company Goppion, which is among the world's foremost designers and installers of museum exhibition showcases.

The Milan-based company previously designed and installed showcases for the AM's Wild Planet gallery of more than 400 animals, which opened in 2015. Goppion's showcases are also found in many of the world's major museums and galleries. The company's cases exhibit the Crown Jewels of the United Kingdom, the Mona Lisa in Paris and objects in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London.