## My Favourite Museum

We invite our readers to submit a short (300-400 words) article about a favourite museum in Asia, Australia or New Zealand or to write about an Asian collection elsewhere in the world. Please send submissions to Susan Hunter, Features Editor, at susanfhunter@mindspring.com

## The National Gallery of Australia, Canberra

By Stephanie Burridge

Canberra, the capital of Australia, is not known as the most exciting destination for a holiday in Australia. People usually think of the sun-drenched beaches of the Gold Coast, Sydney's Harbour Bridge and the Opera House, and Melbourne's eateries and international shopping. The National Gallery in Canberra, however, has a few secrets that are worth investigating and some real buried treasure in its archival vaults.

Begin your visit in the Aboriginal galleries where you will spot the indigenous equivalents of a Picasso or a Rothko. Aboriginal art is complex, beautiful and powerful contemporary art. It draws on the ancestral past and ancient 'dream time' stories (the Aboriginal view of the cosmos) yet explodes with a creative aesthetic that is very much about the present. Aboriginal art has understandably taken the international art world by storm. I vividly recall the ceremony that marked the installation of the Aboriginal Memorial at the NGA in 1998. Two hundred ceremonial hollow log coffins commemorated the 200 years that Aboriginal people died defending their lands against colonisation. The artwork is painted by the artists of Ramingining in North East Arnhem Land. Each tree trunk is a *dupun* or log coffin, which is used in ritual burials to mark the safe transition of the soul of the deceased from this world to the next. They are painted in each clan's design. Some are narrative stories based on animal totems, others come from body painting designs that are used in ceremonies. The imagery is as profound today as it has been

The gallery also has important collections of Asian art and in particular, Indonesian textiles. These have actually been displayed at our museum in Singapore. Despite a sizable collection of contemporary art masterpieces in the permanent collection and a couple of marvelous Brancusi sculptures, for me, the best thing that the gallery owns is the collection of costumes and designs from the Russian Ballet.



A pair of shoes and the costumes for Le Dieu Bleu (The Blue God) worn by Vaslav Nijinsky, the extraordinary dancer from the Ballet Russe, are truly wondrous for dance lovers. There are scenery and costume designs by Pablo Picasso, Léon Bakst, Giorgio de Chirico and Henri Matisse. The NGA has had some outstanding public exhibitions of this material complete with music and footage of the old ballets; for instance, From Studio to Stage: Costumes and Designs from the Russian Ballet in the Australian National Gallery in 1990 and From Russia with Love: Costumes for the Ballet Russe 1909-1933 in 1998. The swirling colours and bold designs not only exemplify the adventurous spirit of the early 20th century avant-garde art movements, but also their willingness to collaborate across art forms, take risks, be passionate and creative.

I think the NGA has an outstanding and diverse collection. Situated next to Lake Burley Griffin, it has an interesting sculpture garden, an excellent bookshop, cafes and restaurants. In short, a great art museum to visit.

National Gallery of Australia, Canberra Parkes Place Parkes, Canberra ACT 2600 AUSTRALIA Open daily 10:00am-5:00pm (Closed Christmas Day) General information +61 2 6240 6411 General email enquiries information@nga.gov.au



RAMINGINING ARTISTS The Aboriginal Memorial 1987-88, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra Purchased with the assistance of funds from National Gallery admission charges and commissioned in 1987.



Léon BAKST Costume for the Blue God c. 1912 National Gallery of Australia, Canberra. Purchased 1987

Stephanie Burridge grew up in Tasmania, an island as famous for convicts and Aboriginal history as for its spectacular scenery, ghosts, excellent wine and food. Before moving to Singapore in 2001, she lived in Canberra, where she developed a great appreciation for Aboriginal art and culture. She is a dancer, choreographer, teacher, critic and writer.