In preparing this session I began with the aims of ICOMOS, more particularly with the aims of Australia ICOMOS. This document states that Australia ICOMOS is "not usually concerned with moveable objects ... or museum collections," but "more generally with the care of all places of cultural significance including whole groups of buildings or sites having aesthetic, historic, scientific or social value."

This presented me with something of a dilemma. Firstly my work at the Migration Museum is largely concerned with moveable objects, and secondly immigration history as you know, is centrally concerned with people who have been removed from the places they regard as culturally significant.

What I want to do in this paper is to take you through some of the issues that are central to me in thinking about cultural values and what kinds of relics have been conserved from major historical events. But first, I wondered what ICOMOS delegates might regard as a major historical event. In global terms, World War I and II must surely rate, but did the miners' strike of the mid 1980s in Great Britain qualify? The opening of the railway line in 1891 in Oodnadatta, South Australia, was for the people of Oodnadatta undoubtedly a major historical event. But I very much doubt whether it caused much of a stir in, let's say New York. I concluded that the classification of an event as major in historical terms is entirely relative. It depends on the context, and perhaps the scale, and it certainly depends on who is defining significance and why and how much of a story can be made of I became fascinated with the implications of this and decided that it would be interesting to undertake my own small survey to see what kinds of relics (and I include monuments) could be found that had been conserved because someone thought they were of major historical significance.

Naturally I had to restrict my sample to South Australia relics and monuments, which means that the definition for a major historical event is that which is important to South Australians. All South Australians? Well, that remains to be seen.

For a starting point in my investigation I used a neat little leaflet called 'South Australia Memorials 1802 - 1935' produced by my colleague Brain Samuels from the History Trust of South Australia. I discovered that of the 53 listings only two were actual relics which survived and were conserved. The rest were all constructed after the event as plaques, statues and monuments, presumably by people who regarded the event as historically important enough to memorialise. 35 of the 53 listings referred to events that I have categorised as exploration. These included: chance encounters between explorers; their lives or deaths by natural causes or misadventure - quite a few by misadventure. But the exploration category mostly recorded the places that the explorers claimed to have discovered and them promptly named after themselves. Of the remaining listings 4 were memorials to wars in Europe or South Africa, 6 to the businessmen who were Adelaide's founding fathers, and 3 which included statues of Queen Victoria, King Edward VII and poet Robert Burns and I listed these very properly under: Colonisation - British.

I did a quick additional check of my own to bring me up to date, but other than a memorial to a major historical event which was the life and death of Elvis Presley which is memorialised in wrought iron in Adelaide's Botanic Gardens, it was mostly more of the same - wars and businessmen. Two things had become quite clear to me. Firstly, major historical events as defined by those who build memorials to them, or conserve relics from them, have a very narrow vision of history. Secondly, the people who are memorialised in such monuments or whose relics are considered worthy of conserving are exclusively male, white, middle class, and they originally came from Great Britain, with the exception...
of a couple of Frenchmen who don’t really count because they were sailing around before South Australia was officially proclaimed a British colony. For any historian I felt there were a few problems, but for the historian of social history interested in documenting the lives or ordinary people, there were some great gaping holes. So I then turned my attention to buildings.

During South Australia’s Sesquicentenary in 1986 the State Government restored a number of nineteenth century buildings in Adelaide’s cultural precinct, right in the city centre. These, it seemed, had survived quite accidentally and for at least 40 years had been used for storage by various government departments. In 1986 they were restored to their former glory. The Police Barracks which had been built in the 1850s and the Armoury completed in the 1860s looked magnificent. But neither the Police Barracks nor the Armoury could be said to memorialise a major historical event. Rather, they suggested a nervous colonial government preoccupied with law and order.

In searching for monuments or relics from major historical events I decided that the group of buildings presently occupied by the Migration Museum almost qualified. These buildings are all that remain from Adelaide’s Destitute Asylum which gave shelter to the poor and homeless between 1849 and 1927. Restored in the early 1980s the site evokes a time and significant historical and social processes, but more importantly it symbolises 19th century attitudes to the poor. Seen as outcasts, the inmates were well hidden from respectable Adelaide society by a forbidding stone wall capped with tumble brick and broken glass which still partially encloses the site.

When the Migration Museum moved into the Destitute Asylum in 1986, it was seen as rather fitting that buildings which had almost certainly housed many 19th century destitute immigrants should now be used to tell the story of immigration and settlement in South Australia.

Amongst the buildings of the Destitute Asylum that were restored are a Lying-in Hospital and Mothers’ Ward. Hundreds of women gave birth in these buildings having been left deserted and penniless by their men, especially at times during the Victorian gold-rushes. Whilst these buildings are hardly memorials, they do evoke the sad lives and social disgrace experienced by the unmarried mothers who once lived there. Two workboots found during renovations and some broken pieces of pottery from an archaeological excavation are all the material evidence from nearly 80 years of occupation. It is a salutary reminder that the material evidence of the poor has not survived because it was not seen as worth of conserving.

Whilst I can accept that some humans seem to have a psychological need to leave tangible evidence of their existence on this planet by constructing markers which they then endow with all kinds of cultural significance, the examples I found in my survey not only reinforce the values and selective memory of the dominant group, but also highlight the subjective nature of history as a discipline.

For me the question then becomes: Who defines what is culturally significant and how is that expressed or actualised? A particularly poignant example of who defines and whose cultural values count and what does memorialised mean and for whom, is an incident told to me by a friend. As a history teacher he took a group of secondary students on a two-day school excursion. They went to the ancestral home of the Ngarrindjeri of the River Murray, Lakes and Coorong area of South Australia. Known as Camp Coorong, it is run as an education centre by Ngarrindjeri. The students learned about aboriginal culture, and the dreaming and were shown various sites including relatively recent shell middens dating from around 10,000 years ago. Before they returned to Adelaide the Ngarrindjeri guide took them to a hill which overlooks the Coorong. On the hill was a statue of Charles Sturt, a 19th century British explorer. “Here”, said the guide with a smile, “the fella who discovered this land!”.

For me this anecdote is a sad comment on the cultural values that have dominated Australia’s history for the past 200 years which is a history of the mass immigration of predominantly British settlers. It is only in the last 45 years that we have had a significant influx of immigrants from other parts of the world. It was the recognition of this growing cultural diversity in
Australia that prompted the State Government of South Australia to establish a museum of immigration history with a brief to collect, preserve, document and present the history and cultural traditions of South Australia and to recognise the contribution made by immigrants to a multicultural society.

Before I talk about the ways we at the Museum address the issue of whose cultural values are presented, and what we choose to make permanent, memorialise or give meaning to, I would like to give you a very brief introduction to some of the key trends in immigration history as a background to the concept of multiculturalism.

In the 19th century whilst a number of groups and individuals from non-English speaking backgrounds arrived in Australia, the immigrant population as I have said before was predominantly British. As we say in the display in the Museum about South Australian society in the 1880s "It was more British than the British" in social organisation and in attitudes. This legacy not surprisingly underpins much of contemporary Australian values and culture.

With Federation in 1901 came the introduction of what has become known as The White Australia Policy which ensured that the number of non-white settlers and non-British settlers would be minimal. A fifty word dictation test was used as one of the means of controlling the type of immigrant who was eligible for residency or even for entry into Australia. For example in 1934 Egon Kirsch, a Czech Jew and political activist who spoke seven languages was given the test in Scottish Gaelic. Naturally, he failed.

The White Australia Policy continued until the 1970s when it was finally abolished by the Whitlam Government, although some modifications were made to the legislation during its seventy years. For example, in 1947 the economic needs of Australia were such that it was decided to accept non-British European refugees displaced by the Second World War. This was not so much as an altruistic response to the plight of refugees as a way of providing Australia with workers to fill a desperate shortage in the building, construction and service industries.

For the next twenty years, these new immigrants were encouraged to abandon their own customs, loyalties and language and to assimilate with the Anglo-Celtic core culture. This process of assimilation was not only promoted in official government circles, but was strongly reinforced through all popular media. A good migrant was one who would quickly adopt local customs and become indistinguishable from your average Australian—whatever that was.

The next significant trend came with the acknowledgement that assimilation wasn't working. What immediately followed became known as integration. The rhetoric of integration promoted a degree of cultural pluralism and acceptance of cultural difference, but the reality for most new immigrants remained unchanged, in that they felt their cultural backgrounds to be unknown, unrecognised and not regarded as valid as that of mainstream Anglo culture.

In the 1970s we saw the emergence of the concept of multiculturalism. The spirit underpinning the policy formulated in the 1980s was to try to find a way to redress problems of marginalisation and perceived inequalities. Essentially the policy was driven by notions of social justice, access and equity.

For many immigrants multiculturalism was welcomed, for it appeared to accept the existence of non-Anglos in Australia and to give official recognition to the cultural diversity they felt they represented. Multiculturalism appeared to sanction what was felt to be a reality in the workplace, homes, clubs and associations across the country. It was no OK to admit one's immigrant origins, indeed even fashionable. Anglicised names reverted, Bob went back to being Rostyslav, Jenny to Eugenia. In some school yards even salami reappeared in the lunch box. It was in this climate that a museum like the Migration Museum could be established by a state government, in itself an interesting memorial, in that it was an initiative of a particular time and place, not common and indeed still the only one in Australia.

What I'd like to do now is to take you through some examples of the way we think about the issues which are exactly those being raised by this conference. Namely, proper representation that will not only convey...
meanings which are relevant to the communities whose histories we aim to represent in exhibitions, but also have relevance to a wider audience of museum visitors.

Our brief then is to represent a multicultural society, yet there is little agreement about who this includes, or who wishes to be included. Multiculturalism is synonymous with cultural diversity, but many feel in Australia that cultural diversity has largely been translated to mean ethnicity and this denotes minority status. One explanation could be as Gillian Bottomley suggests 'that the concept of culture usually denotes cultivated which is a use defined by class and status'. As she says 'A concert of folk dances can be multicultural but an orchestral concert of Mozart, Vivaldi and Gluck may be considered to be cultural but no multicultural'. The definition of multiculturalism is difficult and complex. For working purposes we have decided to use the concept of cultural diversity because it avoids the problems associated with focusing on ethnicity which can marginalise people. An immigrant's experience is influenced not only by their country or region of origin, but quite centrally by gender, class allegiances and age. For example, when we mounted an exhibition about the South Australian Italian community called Il Cammino Continua: the continuing journey, we discovered dozens of Italian communities, differentiated by language, custom and tradition. The experience let's say, of an Italian woman from Calabria who works at night as a cleaner, as a wife and mother during the day and helps relatives with their market garden at the week end is quite different from an Italian man from Milan who runs a successful legal practice.

One of the Museum's aims is to try to go beyond stereotypic assumptions about cultural identity. Last year we produced an exhibition in the form of a game. Called Work it Out, it challenged primary school children to locate the cultural identity of one of twelve children. With a passbook they followed clues until they discovered the name and cultural origin of a particular child. On the way they discovered some of the complexities that one finds in any notions about culture or cultural diversity. For example, food is recognised as a key element in cultural experience. But when we introduce the experience of a child from a Vietnamese family or a Latvian family, the fact that they may eat Vietnamese or Latvian food at home is probably less relevant than the fact that the most significant cultural eating experience is likely to be meal at McDonalds.

Work it Out was a project devised by the Museum in an effort to contribute to the enterprise of positive education towards informed attitudes and open-mindedness towards difference, in particular cultural difference. But many of our exhibitions are generated by the interests and priorities of different community groups. Who we represent and how we represent them is the ongoing negotiated work of the Museum. What may be of fundamental importance to one group may be regarded as significant by another. This is particularly evident in The Forum, a community access gallery where groups mount their own exhibitions. For example some years ago a Dutch group mounted an exhibition about Dutch history and culture which featured model windmills and clogs. Another Dutch group complained bitterly that this misrepresented Dutch culture and felt that examples of Delft-ware (blue and white pottery for which the Dutch are famous) would have been more appropriate. This would appear to be a trivial example except for the questions of class and taste it raises. To the Dutch group who complained we could suggest they book The Forum and mount their own exhibitions. It is not always quite so easy as can happen when a group wishes to re-draw the map according to their own sense of justice or political aspirations. We only have to look at the present world tensions and conflict to understand that differences of viewpoint about 'historical fact' can be fought to the death.

Another issue is what is represented in exhibitions can depend on what kinds of artifacts survive and these frequently are the valued or exotic which can skew interpretations of history. And how do you represent history where no material evidence exists. As I said before all immigrants are removed from the places they regard as culturally significant. But many, like refugees, have also lost everything that was part of their day-to-day lives. In addition they frequently have traumatic personal histories so scarred by violence and horror that they cannot forget, yet can find no way of unburdening themselves of these memories. It seems to
me that the very people whose experience needs to be publicly acknowledged are in fact disempowered twice over: First by the fact that they are removed from the symbolic markers of their culture which can be profoundly psychologically disorienting; Second by the fact that memories and icons are part of our social and visual environment. Whilst we may not stop each day to acknowledge a statue such as Queen Victoria, what she represents underpins and is ever-present in the backdrop of what constitutes significance and, as we are seeing, is beginning to be questioned by a growing number of Australians.

In terms of constructing meaning it is important to us at the Museum to be in negotiation and dialogue with people on whose experience we focus. Particularly affirming is when we are approached by a group who see our role as being to act on their behalf. It is not just curators and myself deciding what to exhibit next but communities telling us what is important to them.

For example, recently I received a deputation from a group of refugees from the Baltic Communities Council. Since independence of the Baltic States they wished to acknowledge in some official and public way their reasons for emigrating. They said, ‘no-one knows why we had to leave our countries’. On the nights of the 13th and 14th of June, 1941 the Soviet Army arrested and deported to Siberia thousands of Estonians, Latvians and Lithuanians, the majority of whom were never seen again. These arrests prompted thousands more to flee to Germany and after the war they came to Australia as displaced persons.

In response to the Baltic Community’s request the Museum decided to develop a new gallery called Reasons to Remember. A foundation memorial plaque was presented by the Community to mark the historic events which had caused them to leave. The official unveiling was quite overwhelming, revealing the depth of feeling and emotion of those for whom the plaque had real significance. Momentarily the Museum which is usually a busy lively place was transformed by the solemnity of the occasion into the symbolic resting place for the friends and relatives who had died in Siberia. Important to note here that some ground rules have been developed to ensure that the memorial gallery does not become a forum for argument about blame.

For me it is important that the Museum can be a place where groups who previously felt themselves marginalised and unheard can now express publicly what is of significance for them. It is important that they are able to present aspects of their history and experience in a permanent way through the construction of memorials if need be, or in the conserving of relics which have meaning and relevance to them. And that the Museum is one place where cultural identity can be affirmed as part of a mainstream society which is multicultural and in that sense the hope is that ideas and meaning can be negotiated rather then be exhibited as truth.

When I began this paper it was with a strong suspicion that memorials were somewhat questionable. I find I have slightly modified my view, but in pursuing my them the issues which came sharply into focus were these: What do our selected icons and memorials say about our culture? What features of our life and values do they represent and is this really representative? And who decides what will be conserved? It is also well to remember the uses and political ends to which history can be put, for it can be used to celebrate rather then analyse, and mythologise rather than describe. For me then, memorials are significant even when we are not conscious of them. They inform us about what it is that these people at this time and in this place have accorded important. In my view discussion of what memorials are, what they ‘do’ and decisions about what they could become in the future must include debate about realistic representation of our past (warts and all) and must reflect the experience of living in a culturally diverse society.

Reference