

# Hands-on Customs exhibition a success

In this centenary year of Australian Federation and of Customs, the National Maritime Museum puts Customs in the spotlight in the *Smugglers—Customs and Contraband 1901-2001* exhibition.

*The Sydney Morning Herald* has listed the exhibition as a must-see on two occasions since its opening in December. The museum reports that 7000 children saw the *Smugglers in Space* show during the summer school holidays.

The exhibition is open at the Australian National Maritime Museum until July 2001. A smaller show will tour the nation over the next two years.

The curators who researched and assembled *Smugglers—Customs and Contraband 1901-2001* at the National Maritime Museum agree it was quite different from most exhibitions they had worked on previously.

They have rarely worked as closely with one organisation as they did with Customs, and it was a rewarding experience.

"One thing that made it very interesting was the great wealth of material we could draw from Customs' educational and historical collections," says Patricia Miles, one of the curators.

"Graeme Austin and his colleagues have fortunately done an excellent job maintaining and documenting them.

"Customs clearly values its heritage and its own special culture. There's an evident awareness that a knowledge of corporate history helps an organisation to see its

present work and its future directions more clearly."

It's always hard to say exactly where the idea for a new exhibition originated, but certainly the possibility developed from a discussion several years ago between Graeme Austin, Customs Director of Compliance, and Mary-Louise Williams, then the Museum's Assistant Director, Exhibitions and Collections.

As Ms Williams, now the Museum's Director, said in her remarks at a special celebration of the Customs Centenary on 24 January this year: "We take a broad view of maritime history... and we readily accepted that the activities of the people who guard our shores against illegal imports to be well within our brief."

The decision was taken to proceed, and 18 months ago the curators and other museum specialists (conservators, designers, registrars, marketing staff) on the exhibition team set out to develop a presentation to spotlight Australian Customs in a way that it would appeal to the wide multitude of museum visitors.

During the exhibition's development, there were a few changes of personnel, another unusual aspect. The original concept and initial development were the work of curators Kevin Jones and Helen Tropa. In March 2000 Helen left (somewhat earlier than anticipated) to have a baby and Patricia Miles took over her work. In July Kevin Jones, the exhibition's co-ordinator, left to take up the post of Director of the South Australian Maritime Museum. Stephen Thompson took up his curator's role, while the



Part of the exhibition; entry into the Customs store, and exit from the container display.



Entry corridor depicting passengers attempting to import prohibited items.

exhibition's chief designer, Wendy Osmond, took over the co-ordination.

The exhibition team dreamed up some intriguing "props" like the suspicious characters that lurk in niches along the hallway leading in to the exhibition. These characters just beg to be searched, and visitors have the opportunity to do just that. And then the team put themselves in the show. When models were needed for a large-scale photo mural of people at a customs barrier, the team and many museum colleagues lined up.

"We've had a lot of fun," says the exhibition's second curator, Stephen Thompson. "But I agree with Patricia. On the more serious side of putting the exhibition together, there was an enormous wealth of historical material available. The Australian Customs Service would have to have one of the largest historical collections in the country. The diversity of the collection is amazing, there are objects that date from early colonial days to the most recent people-smuggling events."

Patricia says her research for the exhibition took her behind the scenes, and gave her glimpses of the Customs service in operation that other people rarely see.

"When I next return from overseas I will be asking myself how I measure up for risk assessment," she added.

She found it fascinating to talk to specialist officers at the ship search establishment, Neutral Bay, about the dangers and other practical issues in searching vessels. On another occasion she got information straight from "the horse's mouth" when she spoke to the Customs Officer in Perth who detained the Aum Supreme Sect

members at Perth Airport in 1993 and the Federal Police officer who later investigated their activities in Australia.

And she recorded first-hand descriptions of the way heroin seized from the ship Uniana had been formed into blocks, wrapped and packed—and used this information to replicate a display for the Museum.

"I've told quite a few people about the day an officer was showing us how ionscan equipment detects illegal substances," she said.

"He found cocaine on my handbag! I have no idea how it got there. The officer quickly settled me down when he said I could have put the bag down on a surface where there was a small trace of it."

The curators also drew on the education collections of Environment Australia and the Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service and the Australian Federal Police Museum. Immigration authorities helped with material on illegal immigration. The National Archives of Australia, the State Libraries of New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland, the Australian National Library and the National Gallery of Australia all lent objects and documents for display. The curators also drew on the National Maritime Museum's own collections, particularly for the Federation and Human Cargo sections of the exhibition.

In all, the curators selected some hundreds of items for the exhibition, ranging from old gauging equipment to a whole month's wildlife seizures from Sydney airport and International Mail Centre. The result is an exhibition with appeal for all museum visitors.



Some of the items on display in the history of Centenary of Federation area.



Interactive ship search module.



Shelves displaying the wide variety of seized items.