About the exhibition

Nations use symbols to represent and celebrate their distinctive qualities to define and express national identity. To be effective abroad, a nation's symbols must be embraced at home. Australia only became a nation in 1901, but over time has accrued many symbols to represent itself ranging from natural symbols such as our distinctive flora, fauna, and landscapes to official symbols of state such as the flag and coat of arms, to the everyday, such as Vegemite, thongs and the Holden car.

A number of popular symbols emerged well before the Australian nation formally came into being; the Southern Cross was arguably the earliest. In the 19th century, an increasing range of other fauna and flora appeared on trademarks and packaging and as motifs in the decorative arts. This early representation of Australia through symbols of nature rather than culture had significant implications for popular understandings of the nation and its people, both at home and abroad.

Symbols are invariably inscribed with multiple meanings - different people will interpret them in different and sometime contradictory ways. These meanings are not fixed but can change over time. Symbols go in and out of fashion. Some endure, others fade away, and new symbols emerge.

The *Symbols of Australia* exhibition highlights 10 distinctive Australian symbols, exploring how national symbols are used to define and represent national identity and the multiple meanings that are attached to them:

kangaroo	Southern Cross
wattle	Uluru
flag	Boomerang
Sydney Harbour Bridge	billy
Holden car	vegemite

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Facts about the 10 symbols

Kangaroo

- Together with the emu, the kangaroo is one of the standard bearers on the Australian coat of arms.
- Australia's national airline, Qantas, was founded in 1920 and introduced the kangaroo as its logo in 1944.
- The kangaroo was featured on the Australian pre-decimal penny and half-penny coins and is currently featured on the one dollar coin.
- The boxing kangaroo was the mascot for the Australia II team in the 1983 America's Cup and has become a sporting icon, usually displayed in yellow on a green background, and commonly seen at sporting events in Australia and overseas.
- *Matilda the kangaroo* was the official mascot of the 1982 Commonwealth Games in Brisbane, Queensland.
- The Australian national rugby league team is named the *Kangaroos*.
- There are an estimated 40 million kangaroos in Australia.

Wattle

- The Golden Wattle (*Acacia pycnantha*) was declared the national floral symbol in 1988 but had been promoted as a national emblem by various groups and prominent individuals since before Federation.
- The first time wattle was formally recognised in a national context was on the Commonwealth of Australia coat of arms in 1912.
- National Wattle Day is now celebrated every year on 1 September.
- Unlike the kangaroo, the wattle was a very contentious choice for a national symbol because the *Acacia* genus is not native to Australia, being found also in Africa, the Americas and on some islands in both the Pacific and the Atlantic oceans.

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Australian flag

- The Australian flag, formerly known as the blue *ensign*, was selected following a public competition held in 1901 following Federation.
- Although selected in 1901 and gazetted in 1903, it was not given Royal assent and flown as the official Australian flag until 1954.
- The flag is divided into four quadrants and uses three symbolic elements: the British Union Jack, the Southern Cross and the seven pointed Commonwealth or Federation star.
- Australian National Flag Day is celebrated on 3 September which is the anniversary of the first flying of the flag in 1901.
- Several other flags have also been proclaimed as flags of Australia. They include the Royal Australian Navy, Air Force and Australian Defence Force ensigns, the Aboriginal flag and the Torres Strait Islander flag, both proclaimed in 1995.
- The Australian flag which is flown over the Commonwealth parliament is 12.8 x 6.4 metres or slightly larger than the side of a double decker bus.

Sydney Harbour Bridge

- Construction of the Sydney Harbour Bridge began in 1923 and was completed in January 1932. The bridge was officially opened on 19 March 1932.
- Hailed as a great engineering feat, the Sydney Harbour Bridge it became an emblem of industrialisation and modernity for Australians.
- The construction of the bridge played a major role in providing employment for hundreds of workers during the Great Depression.
- Sixteen workers died during the construction of the bridge.
- The local nickname for the Sydney Harbour Bridge is 'the coathanger' because of its arched shape.
- The arch span is 503 metres long.
- At the apex of the arch a person stands 134 metres above mean sea level.
- The official opening of the Sydney Harbour Bridge was the scene of a dramatic protest again the New South Wales Premier Jack Lang and his left-wing government. Francis de Groot, a member of the 'New Guard', a right-wing paramilitary group, rode up on horseback and slashed the ribbon with a sword just before the official ceremony began.

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Southern Cross

- The constellation that is commonly called the Southern Cross is officially known as *Crux Australis* and is the smallest of the 88 constellations recognised by the International Astronomical Union.
- The Southern Cross is the most recognisable and well known constellation seen in the night sky of the Southern Hemisphere.
- The Southern Cross is arguably the earliest symbol used to represent Australia, used in a variety of flags and other contexts from the earliest times of British colonial settlement.
- The Southern Cross features on the national flags of Australia, New Guinea, New Zealand and Samoa and a stylised version was used on the Eureka flag hoisted at the Eureka stockade during a gold miners' revolt in 1854 near Ballarat in Victoria.
- The first European to record the Southern Cross was Andrea Corsali, an Italian explorer from the city state of Florence. He sketched and described the cross in a letter to Guilano de Medici in 1515.

Uluru

- Uluru is Australia's most recognised natural landmark.
- It is an inselberg, an isolated mountain of rock left behind after the erosion of a mountain range.
- In 1873 it was named Ayers Rock by surveyor William Gosse. Since 1993 however, it has officially been known as both Ayers Rock and Uluru, which was the original Pitjantjatjara name. Uluru is currently more commonly used.
- Uluru is sacred to the Pitjantjatjara and Anangu Indigenous peoples of Central Australia.
- On 26 October 1985, Uluru and the surrounding land of Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park was returned to the traditional Anangu owners by the then Governor-General of Australia, Sir Ninian Stephen and the land was leased back to the Australian Government to be reserved as a National Park for 99 years. The hand back (as it was then called) of Uluru in 1985 was a symbolic highpoint in the campaign for land rights.
- The prominence of Uluru as an Australian symbol signifies a valuing of 'outback' landscape and its place in the national psyche, a fascination with the national wonder and recognition of its capacity to attract tourists, and more recently, a growing sense of recognition and connection with ancient Indigenous occupation and culture in Australia.

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Boomerang

- The word 'boomerang' is thought to come from the Dharug language used in New South Wales.
- Boomerangs were traditionally used for hunting, battle and sport, and for fire-making, in ceremonies and as percussion musical instruments. Not all Australian Aboriginal groups used boomerangs.
- Boomerangs vary widely in form, depending on the purpose and local food sources, and have different names across a range of Aboriginal groups.
- Both returning and non-returning boomerangs are produced using the principles of complex aerodynamic engineering incorporating the shaping of the 'wings' (aerofoils) and the use of carved longitudinal grooves to enhance performance, providing greater lift and longer sustained flight.
- Hunting sticks similar to boomerangs are known to have been used in many ancient societies around the world. However, Australian Aboriginal people are the only group known to use a returning boomerang.
- A uniquely cross-shaped returning boomerang was used by Aboriginal people in the rainforest region of northern Queensland.

Billy

- Despite Australia being one of the most highly urbanised societies in the world where more than 90 per cent of the population live in urban centres, the bush and bush culture, embodied in the practical, laconic, egalitarian bushman, are widely seen as symbols of Australia.
- The billy, a lightweight and often makeshift tin used for cooking, is emblematic of the bush culture.
- The expression 'boiling the billy' is commonly used for making a cup of tea, in any setting.
- Billy Tea is an Australian brand of black tea.
- Perhaps the most famous reference to a billy is in the first verse and chorus of 'Waltzing Matilda' written by poet and author, AB (Banjo) Patterson in 1887 and this has given rise to the billy as a symbol of a democratic, independent and somewhat rebellious Australian spirit.

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Vegemite

- Vegemite was invented in 1922 by Dr Cyril P Callister when the Australian company Fred Walker & Co. gave him the task of developing a spread from the used yeast being dumped by Australian breweries.
- It was first sold in 1923.
- Vegemite is very high in B vitamins and despite a high salt content has been promoted by various health professionals including the British Medical Association as a healthy food.
- A 'happy little Vegemite' is slang for a happy person and is derived from a 1950s advertising campaign.
- 22 million jars of Vegemite are produced every year and the one billionth jar was sold in 2008.
- Though considered an Australian national icon, Vegemite is now owned and produced by an overseas company.

Holden car

- The Holden, Australia's first mass-produced car, rolled off the assembly line at Fishermen's Bend, Victoria on 29 November 1948.
- The manufacturer of the first Holden was General Motors Holden, an American company, and yet the Holden was marketed as 'Australia's Own Car'.
- In the postwar era, Australians hailed this as proof that Australia had escaped its pastoral beginnings and embraced the modern industrial age and Holden became a symbol of Australia's modern suburban lifestyle and ingenuity.
- Eighteen thousand people signed up for a Holden without knowing a single detail about the car.
- The FJ Holden was released in 1953 and quickly became an Australian icon. It sold in large numbers and was the first car that many average Australians had ever owned.
- By 1958 Holden had more than a 40 per cent share in car sales in Australia.
- Car ownership gave mobility to those who lived in the rapidly expanding suburbs of cities and contributed significantly to changing patterns of settlement, work and leisure emerging in the 1950s and 60s.

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