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History of Government involvement in culture

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Manatū Taonga – the Ministry for Culture and Heritage was established in 2000, by bringing together the Ministry of Cultural Affairs with the history and heritage functions of the Department of Internal Affairs. The involvement of New Zealand governments in culture, however, has a much longer history.

The government's role in protecting and managing the nation's cultural resources can be traced back to at least 1865, when the Colonial Museum was founded in Wellington. In 1901 the Colonial Secretary's Office (later Internal Affairs) took responsibility for Māori antiquities. The Alexander Turnbull Library was established in 1918 and the Dominion Archives (later National Archives, now Archives New Zealand) in 1926.

Other state-funded initiatives in the 1920s included the publishing of a history of the New Zealand Wars in 1922–23, and the establishment of a Board of Māori Ethnological Research (1923), a Māori Purposes Fund Board (1924), which subsidised cultural activities, and a School of Māori Arts and Crafts in Rotorua (1926). The National Art Gallery and Dominion Museum operated under their own board from 1930 until 1992, at which time they were replaced by Te Papa Tongarewa, the Museum of New Zealand.

As the twentieth century progressed, the government broadened its cultural role. It published an eleven-volume series marking New Zealand's centennial in 1940, and a considerable number of other state publications followed, including A H McLintock's three-volume encyclopaedia of New Zealand in 1966. The government also held competitions, formed the State Literary Fund (and, later, the New Zealand Authors' Fund), reformed the broadcasting service, founded a national orchestra, and established the National Film Unit and agencies such as the New Zealand Historic Places Trust and the Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council, later Creative New Zealand.

Such was the government's growing interest in the cultural sector that in 1975 a ministerial portfolio for the arts was established. This was serviced by the Department of Internal Affairs until 1991, when a separate department, the Ministry of Cultural Affairs, was established.

By the end of the 1990s, the Ministry's initially limited scope had broadened to include responsibility for policy relating to historic places and for aspects of broadcasting, along with the oversight of relevant Crown entities.

The creation of the Ministry for Culture and Heritage in 2000 was an important milestone. It formally marked government's recognition of the benefits to be gained from bringing together the various cultural activities that for many years had been scattered among several departments. The structure of government now reflects the significance of culture to New Zealand, and for New Zealanders.

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