

Principles for good practice with significance

The principles opposite describe some important aspects of significance and underpin good practice for collections. They relate both to the assessment process and the management of collections. Many of the applications in Part 6 show the principles in action. The example below illustrates a number of principles for good practice with significance.

Thomas Dick collection of photographs, 1910–20

The Thomas Dick photographs were taken around Port Macquarie from about 1910–20. These staged photographs show Aboriginal people in the bush, in traditional activities such as making a canoe and building a shelter, or posed with artefacts in typical arrangements that say more about the photographer and European conceptions of Indigenous people than about the traditional practices of Indigenous people themselves. The photographs are now scattered across collecting organisations in Australia and Britain.

Photographs by Thomas Dick are held in various collections in Australia and Britain, including those of the Birpai Land Council, Port Macquarie, members of the Dick family still living there and the Port Macquarie Historical Society; the Australian Museum and the State Library of NSW in Sydney; the University of Newcastle; the Western Australian Museum; the Queensland Museum; and the Australian Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies in Canberra. Some of Dick's photos of Aboriginal people are held in the University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, in Cambridge, UK.

In Port Macquarie, Council's regional museum curator and the Aboriginal development officer, who is a member of the Birpai Dunghutti group, are tracing the photographs, and researching and documenting the Aboriginal history and culture behind these well-known images. They have identified people and locations in the photographs and worked with families and descendants to understand the complex meanings of the images for them and the Aboriginal community in Port Macquarie. Information gathered through the research and consultations is changing the significance of the photographs and adding new layers of meaning.

The families and descendants are guiding the selection of images for a new exhibition and catalogue in 2009. Their knowledge and advice is shaping interpretation of the photographs. Networks developed through the project will ensure the continuing participation of descendants, and the use of the photographs for education and cultural renewal.



Thomas Dick
 Aboriginal men on a waterway near
 Port Macquarie 1910–20
 Reproduced courtesy of the
 Port Macquarie Historical Society

1. Sustainability

Manage items and collections to conserve their meanings and values

The obligation in managing public collections in trust for communities is to ensure that their meanings and values are conserved for current and future generations. Significance assessment is the key process to assist collection managers to understand and conserve the meanings and values of items and collections.

Relevant case studies: St Saviour Cathedral, page 27; 'Sustainability', online at Part 6.

2. Decision making

Understand significance before making decisions about items and collections

Significance helps guide decisions about all aspects of the management of items and collections, including acquisitions, preservation, risk assessment, access, interpretation, return and repatriation. It makes sense to understand how and why an item is important before making decisions or taking action that could affect its conservation or meaning.

Relevant case studies: Clayton and Shuttleworth steam traction engine, page 51; 'Deaccessioning' and Menzies' Bentley, online at Part 6.

3. Associations

Every item and collection has associations with people and places

These associations can be an important element of their significance. Relationships with people and places are easily ruptured as items are moved into collections. Recognising and documenting the connections between people, places and collections illuminates their meaning and may inform decisions about how items and collections are managed.

Relevant case studies: Chifley wireless, page 34; *View of Geelong*, page 50; Documenting *Springfield*, online at Part 6.

4. Consultation

Always ask 'To whom is the item or collection important?'

Collection managers can learn a lot about the significance of items and collections by consulting people and communities who have knowledge of how an item or collection was made, used or valued. This knowledge may not be available in the future so it is important that people and communities are consulted without delay, as an integral part of the process of assessing significance. Conserving the significance of some items may require the continuing involvement of interested people or communities.

Relevant case study: Documenting *Springfield*, online at Part 6.

5. Collections and Indigenous people

Recognise and respect the relationship between Indigenous people and collections³⁷

Collections may hold special values and meanings for Indigenous people, illuminating culture, country, beliefs, identity, and family and community history. Understanding the significance of items and collection made by or about Indigenous people requires consultation and the involvement of appropriate Indigenous people and groups. This helps to ensure that the significance of the item or collection is properly understood, and that the meaning and values of the item are conserved into the future.

Relevant case studies: Thomas Dick collection, page 42; Margaret Lawrie collection, page 56.

6. Record keeping

Significance assessment is based on good records; they are the key to the meaning of collections, answering questions now and in the future

Preservation, access, research and the security of collections all rely on good records. The records of collections may be an important dimension of their significance, linking items with intangible meanings and enhancing research values.

Relevant case studies:

Aurukun carvings, page 19; Adventist Heritage Centre, page 21; Sydney 2000 Olympic Games, online at Part 6.

7. Research

Research, in all its forms, animates and illuminates the significance of items and collections

It builds relationships between collections, custodians and those who have an interest in and knowledge of the material. Research may change understanding of significance and unlock the potential of collections to contribute to Australian life.

Relevant case studies: Thylacine specimens, page 8; Thomas Dick collection, page 42.

8. Perspective

Communities and collection managers may have different views about what makes an item significant

Significance can encompass a range of ideas about how and why the item is valued. Different points of view about an item or collection can be considered and expressed in the assessment process and statement of significance.

Relevant case study: Thomas Dick collection, page 42.

9. Change

Significance is not fixed in time but may alter with changes in communities, culture, politics, science and the environment

New research may lead to the reappraisal of the significance of items and collections. Statements of significance should be reviewed from time to time to take account of change and new research.

Relevant case studies: Thylacine specimens, page 8; palaeontological collections, page 59.