

# Context

Context is an important step in assessing significance. It builds on research in the step-by-step method to place the item or collection in a wider historical, geographic, artistic or environmental context. This means exploring how the item or collection relates to broader themes or patterns. Like provenance, context will have different shades of meaning or interpretation depending on the type of item or collection. This section explores the important role of context in different domains and with different types of material.

Understanding context is vital to assessing significance. In significance practice, context places an item or collection within wider historical patterns or themes, or within an environment or physical locality. Context can include relationships with other items or with the place where an item was used, made or created. Contextual studies can also reveal how an item was used or how it functioned.

Context builds on information explored in earlier steps in the significance method, including provenance, history, community associations, and for natural history, environment. For items without such information, looking at the wider context of that class of items helps build a picture of their general development, use, function and historical context. This feeds into the statement of significance, and helps to give a fuller understanding of an item's meaning and importance.

Exploring the context of an item or collection taps into information, knowledge and ideas that are not always part of formal collection documentation practice, although experts inside collecting organisations understand contextual knowledge well. The significance assessment process recommends documenting this knowledge.

Recording provenance and context can be related processes. How an item is documented when it is collected can be vital to understanding its context. An item's significance and its future research potential may depend on a well-documented context. Collecting organisations are placing more emphasis on the contextual documentation of items in a variety of media, such as photography, photogrammetry, written reports and oral history recordings.

As with the concept of provenance, context has different shades of meaning and interpretation depending on item or collection type, or on collecting domain or professional discipline.

For example, **context for natural history specimens** may include detailed recording of the environment in which the specimens were collected. The absence of a provenance or a recorded context may render items and collections insignificant. Confiscated bird egg collections, for example, are occasionally offered to science museums by Customs or the Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service, but if no contextual or provenance information is available, notably when and where the eggs were collected and by whom, they will not be accepted into the collections of state museums or universities.

Following are illustrated examples of 'context in action' across some collection types.



'Airzone' wireless radio belonging to Prime Minister Chifley and his wife is displayed *in situ*, thereby retaining its full context and meaning. Reproduced courtesy of the Chifley Home, Bathurst Regional Council.

The High Court of Australia decides constitutional matters and cases of special federal significance. It is the highest court of appeal for federal, state and territory cases. Although the High Court of Australia was established in 1901 by Section 71 of the Constitution, the appointment of the first Bench awaited the passage of the *Judiciary Act 1903*.

The vast collection of the High Court of Australia, held at the National Archives of Australia and by the High Court, includes judges' notebooks, correspondence between members, reports, and records of judgments. It illustrates the development of Australia's common law practices and principles and includes images and film of the opening of the original Court and of the new High Court of Australia building in Canberra. The records provide an insight into landmark judicial decisions affecting Australian society, democracy and government. Issues covered include Commonwealth versus State powers (the *Engineers Case* of 1920 and the Tasmanian *Franklin Dam Case*, 1983), economic regulation (the *Bank Nationalisation Case*, 1948), freedom of speech and subversion (the *Communist Party Case*, 1951), the separation of powers doctrine (the *Boilermakers Case*, 1956), Native title (the *Mabo Case*, 1992), and anti-homosexuality laws and human rights (the *Toonen Case*, 1994).



The High Court of Australia, Canberra  
Photo: Roslyn Russell

## Context and archives

Archivists look first at context when deciding to take records into an archive. They examine the significance of the creating entity itself, the events and phenomena associated with it, and the quality of the records themselves. Once these are identified, the question becomes one of how useful the records can be for researching these events.

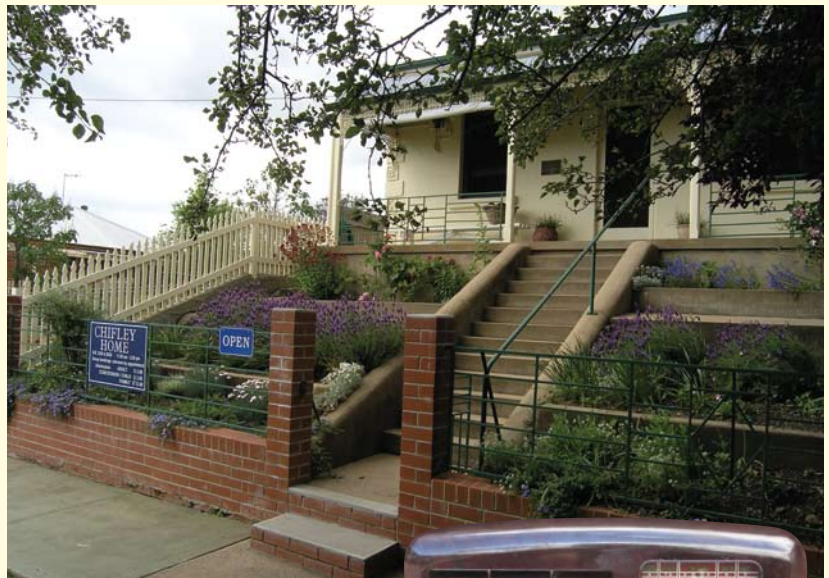
The historical context of the place of the High Court in the development of Australian common law and the interpretation of the Constitution is crucial to understanding the significance of the records it has created.

## Context and *in situ* collections

Context is central to the meaning and significance of *in situ* collections. Keeping items in their place of use, and understanding their context within it, and also in relation to wider social and historical movements and events, broadens understanding of their significance. Collections that survive intact in their place of use and context are of particular significance. Individual items that are still *in situ* may be a reference point for the research and assessment of similar unprovenanced items.

The radio in the Chifley Home, while interesting for its association with Ben and Elizabeth Chifley, would lose much of its significance as part of the *in situ* collection on display in their former home if it were to be removed from its physical and historical context.

Joseph Benedict ('Ben') Chifley, Labor Prime Minister of Australia from 1945 to 1949, and his wife Elizabeth lived in a modest home in Bathurst, NSW, for all their married life. Ben Chifley was often absent for long periods in Canberra, so Mrs Chifley had wirelasses set up in several rooms so that she could hear her husband speaking in Canberra during parliamentary sessions or when he addressed the nation. This wireless, along with the other contents of the house, has a strong provenance to one of Australia's best loved prime ministers and his wife. The wirelasses in the Chifley Home demonstrate the importance of radio for keeping in touch with the outside world. They attest to the increasing use of wireless by prime ministers to communicate directly with Australians in their homes during the Second World War and its immediate aftermath. Both the physical context in which the radio is to be found and the broader historical context are key elements in its significance.



The Chifley Home, Busby Street, Bathurst, NSW  
 Photo: Roslyn Russell  
 Reproduced courtesy of Bathurst Regional Council



This 'Airzone' wireless radio is kept *in situ* in the sitting room of the Chifley Home in Bathurst, NSW  
 Reproduced courtesy of the Chifley Home,  
 Bathurst Regional Council

Excerpt from the discussion of context in the significance assessment about this gown

In the 1870s and 1880s, the formal gowns of wealthy and upper-class women became increasingly elaborate. Complex arrangements of drapery and trimmings, the use of contrasting and toning fabrics and pattern on pattern were underpinned by a highly engineered arrangement of undergarments to support a dress's architecture.

The increasing availability of textiles and new technologies, such as the sewing machine, were just two of the factors driving the increasing elaboration and complexity of women's dress in the 1870s and 1880s. The jacquard looms and textile factories in Britain and France were producing beautiful brocades in styles reminiscent of the eighteenth century. In this costume, contrasting fabrics and elaborate drapery show off the expensive material and the wealth of the wearer. The development of the sewing machine facilitated an increasingly complex arrangement of frills, pleats and detail, with the labour saved from hand sewing displaced to create more detail and complexity in the trimming and arrangement of the skirt and bodice.

The social structures and etiquette were as elaborate as the physical arrangements for wearing the gown. Gowns such as this were worn to formal events in the afternoon and early evening. The tightly fitted bodice and heavy skirt and train meant that the wearer was always conscious of her form and bulk. Moving around while keeping the drapery in line took care. Sitting down was a complex manoeuvre that required a kind of three-point-turn to move beyond then reverse into the chair. This is not a costume made for walking in the street, though the train has a deep gauze frill that could be sacrificed and removed once it was soiled. A lady's maid and ownership of a carriage were integral parts of the infrastructure to support such a costume. This gown is a mobile canvas expressing the skill of the dressmaker and the wealth, taste, status and grace of the wearer.



Afternoon gown, c. 1878,  
Grossman House, Maitland  
Photo: Kylie Winkworth  
Reproduced courtesy of National  
Trust of Australia (NSW)

## Context and historic significance

For historical items, context may include the historical processes or themes that shaped an item, as well as related places, settings, functions and issues such as social and technological change.

For items of technology, context may include the way that the design of an item fits within the evolution and design of that class of items and the work that they performed.

Many items in history collections lack a recorded provenance or specific context. Exploring the broader historical context of that class of items can draw out the wider meanings and significance of the object.

Australian collections contain many items of historic costume that have no specific provenance or history. Exploring the historical context of the type of garment places it within the evolution of fashion, design and the social history of the period. This can tell us much about the social conditions in which it was worn, even if we lack detailed knowledge about the wearer.

## Context and works of art

For works of art, context may include the place of a particular work within an artist's *oeuvre*, or within an art movement.

In the case of public art, the physical context is often an integral part of the conception and design of the work, and is an important element of its significance.

*Kangaroos* was created for a specific poolside context. Both design and production combine to make the art work important in Jan Brown's *oeuvre*.

Jan Brown is a Canberra sculptor who has achieved national recognition, but whose work is best known within the Australian Capital Territory. She was trained in Sydney, and at London's Chelsea Polytechnic School where internationally famed British sculptor Henry Moore was one of her teachers. Brown is a masterly interpreter of animals through sculpture and has managed to convey a sense of their poignant vulnerability, even in this work where she has exaggerated the kangaroos' bodies to emphasise their muscularity and strength. Brown's larger-than-life bronze sculptures of a mother kangaroo and her joey poised to drink at the Mirror Pool in Canberra's Commonwealth Park are perfectly crafted to suit their physical context. *Kangaroos* is also significant as the first major bronze cast by Peter Morley in Australia. Morley worked with another celebrated British sculptor, Barbara Hepworth, at a London foundry before emigrating to Australia, where he established the Meridian Foundry in Melbourne and began a long-term collaboration with Jan Brown.



Jan Brown  
*Kangaroos* (detail)  
 1979–1980  
 Photo: Roslyn Russell

### Excerpt from the statement of significance about this shirt

The shirt is significant for understanding aspects of convict history. It is historically significant as the only known example of what was the most common garment issued to convicts and assigned servants. It is one of the few items of convicts' clothing reliably provenanced to a particular site and is significant in the context of the whole archaeological collection from the Hyde Park Barracks in Sydney.

The shirt and the Barracks reflect developments in penal policy in the colony, aimed at containing and controlling the behaviour of convicts by confining them at night and clothing them in regulation marked garments. Research in archives and written records shows how this system was open to subversion.

While this shirt is seen as a distinctly convict garment, we also know that blue and white striped shirts were issued to assigned servants, and were worn by shepherds, who were often emancipated convicts. The shirts are also widely depicted in images of the goldfields, and were listed in emigrants' guides as standard provisions for the colony. Indeed, this garment counters the popular image of convicts, with their clothes and countenance marked all over with the prominent stamp of convict infamy.



Convict striped cotton shirt  
Hyde Park Barracks Museum  
Collection, Historic Houses  
Trust of New South Wales  
Photo: Roger Deckker  
Reproduced courtesy of the  
Powerhouse Museum, Sydney

### Context in archaeological collections

'Context' in archaeological collections refers to the precise location where an artefact is found on a site and its relationship with other artefacts, such as its position in the stratigraphy or layers of an excavation. It is a crucial aspect of artefact analysis and is an important dimension of the significance of archaeological collections. The loss of provenance and context in archaeological artefacts seriously diminishes their significance.

In the case of the convict's shirt, excavated beneath the floorboards of the Hyde Park Barracks, context also relates the item to developments in the administration of the convict system as well as relationships with the site. This information and analysis contributes to a richer understanding of its significance.