

Part 2 Why significance?

Collections and significance

Australian collections are the memory bank of the nation and a key to its future. They embody the people, history, cultures, science and environment of Australia, and they show the creativity of Australians in all dimensions. Collections give a sense of our place in the world, and explain how the land and nation have evolved.

Australians will need knowledge, ideas, creativity and innovation to deal with the challenges of the twenty-first century. This can be discovered and nurtured through engagement with Australia's collections.

But how can we ensure that the nation's distributed collections are able to fulfill their potential?

Many important themes, subjects and histories that are central to Australia's identity and culture can only be fully understood by reaching across collection boundaries and collecting domains. Indigenous cultures, exploration and settlement, the convict system, Australia at war, Australia's engagement with Antarctica and the history of migration are all themes that run across the collecting domains. A proper understanding of these themes means investigating all types of collections.

This is also the case for more specific topics. Specimens of the extinct thylacine are held in many natural history collections in Australia. Each collection holds a particular part of the natural or cultural history of this iconic animal. Our relationship with the thylacine is also documented and interpreted in pictures, books, film and contemporary art. Similarly, papers, objects and works of art related to Patrick White are distributed through collections in Sydney and Canberra. The sum of the man, as a novelist, playwright, benefactor, agitator and Nobel laureate, can only be understood by crossing institutional and domain boundaries.

Australia's collections have evolved through distinct and independent organisations, each with its own mission, purpose, collection policies and priorities. Items acquired new meanings and associations once they entered collections and were constructed into particular histories, taxonomies and assemblages. But who determines what collections mean? Is it the expert curator who identifies and catalogues the item, or the scientist who names and describes a specimen? Or is it the people once associated with the item in its original context? Sometimes the meaning of a collection is highly contested. The Parthenon marbles in the British Museum are presented as artefacts in the universal history of civilisation. They have acquired new meanings since they entered the British Museum. For the people of Greece, the Parthenon marbles are an integral part of a single work of art, a sacred building and place that is central to the culture, history and modern identity of Greece.

With more democratic access to collections, the collecting institution and its staff are no longer the sole authority on meaning. Best practice for collections recognises that many people may have an interest in a collection and contribute to an understanding of its importance. Knowledge and relationships are enhanced by engagement with interested people and communities. Significance assessment recognises the importance of people, places and context in understanding collections. It is a process that investigates and analyses the meanings and values of items and collections, facilitating the sharing of ideas and information. It has not yet been used to solve the contest over the Parthenon marbles, but it could make a positive contribution to this debate.

Today collections exist in every corner of Australia and in a great variety of management and ownership regimes. They are found in community and civic spaces, in scientific and educational institutions, in businesses and government agencies.

Collections are held by the four main collecting domains; archives, art museums, libraries and museums, and by many other organisations, including the National Trust, national parks, historical societies, universities, house museums, Indigenous keeping places and knowledge centres, heritage places, herbaria and families and community organisations.

Australian collections range from the beginnings of life on earth to work made yesterday; from microscopic specimens to planes, trains and automobiles; from inspirational works of art to ephemeral items from daily life; and from official records to rare books and unique manuscripts. Many disciplines and types of knowledge are used to develop and research collections, each with particular ways of looking at items and collections.

The Internet is expanding the audiences and users of collections. It is transcending institutional boundaries and connecting collections across Australia and the world. It is also creating opportunities to communicate more effectively the meanings of items and collections. The growth of collections online highlights the need for a common language to speak about how and why collections are of value. Significance works across institutional, domain and disciplinary boundaries to provide a more complete and rewarding way of sharing the meaning of collections.

Why use significance?

There are three main areas where significance helps collecting organisations: access and community engagement; advocacy; and making good collection management decisions.

Significance is a proven persuader. Whether it's making the case for a new acquisition, substantiating a funding application, or lobbying for education and online resources, significance goes to the heart of why collections are important and why they should be supported.

Significance draws out the knowledge, passion and expertise of collection staff and volunteers, and puts it in the public domain. The assessment process and statement of significance shine a powerful light on the richness, diversity and potential of Australia's collections.

In collection management, significance assessment is finding many applications, not just within collecting organisations, but in cross-collection collaborative projects. It facilitates collection analysis and a more coordinated and strategic approach to collection development.

Significance and sustainable collections

The last fifty years have seen enormous growth in the number and size of collections. Many collecting organisations have run out of storage space, or room to present new exhibitions or resources to reach new audiences and users. There is a backlog of items needing conservation and research, and collecting organisations face difficult decisions about which collections to digitise and make accessible online. Every day, collecting organisations are making judgements about which items and collections will be collected, conserved, researched and made accessible. These are profound decisions that shape what future generations will know and understand about the past and present.

Many factors guide these decisions, including policies, budgets, staffing, volunteers, space and other resources. Collecting organisations are conscious of the need to balance current programs with future obligations. Sustainability is an important principle that underlies effective collections management and significance practice.¹⁰ Significance is a process that helps collecting organisations make good decisions about the sustainable development, care and management of their collections.

Significance is fostering collaboration across collecting organisations, sharing knowledge and prompting conversations about the sustainable future of collections. Collection analysis using significance is raising important questions about duplications and omissions in collections, leading to more cooperative and strategic collecting. There are high costs in keeping collections in perpetuity, so careful decisions about acquisitions are essential.

The Distributed National Collection

The Distributed National Collection (DNC) has been defined as 'the sum of all heritage collections of significance to the nation'.¹¹ These are held by a wide range of organisations and individuals across the country. Nationally significant items and collections are not just found in state and national institutions, but also in rural and regional areas, heritage places, businesses and community organisations. Additionally, some significant items and collections are held by families and individuals. This wide distribution of Australia's important collections underlines the case for national policies and programs to sustain significant collections wherever they are found. *Significance 2.0* is one of the tools to build awareness of the Distributed National Collection.

There are crossovers and common ground for collections. New cultural developments are merging or co-locating art galleries, libraries and museums.¹² However, collections from different domains have always been mixed in collecting organisations. Museums and galleries are often found under the one umbrella, as in the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, and the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory. State and national libraries hold important collections of historic paintings and objects; many historical societies have archives and paintings; and state and national museums include archives and libraries.

Significance assessment is inherently a cross-domain activity, and almost always requires research from more than one domain. The opportunity in collections convergence is perhaps less about co-location or merging collecting organisations, and more about collaborating to share the meanings of collections and learning from the practice and capacities in each domain. Significance has practical applications for each collecting domain, and the capacity to encourage collaboration and communication about the values of collections across domains and within communities, nationwide.

Speaking a common language, sharing a methodology

Significance provides a common framework for analysing all kinds of items and collections and communicating their meanings and values. *Significance 2.0* aims to demonstrate the relevance of the significance method to all types of collections.

It is recognised that each of the four collecting domains—archives, galleries, libraries and museums—has its own policies, procedures and methodologies that have evolved to suit the purpose of the organisation, the nature of the collections, and the needs of their audiences and users. Many terms, such as 'provenance' and 'context', have different shades of meaning in particular domains or with certain types of collections. Collecting organisations have their own criteria for assessing acquisitions, some of which overlap with the significance criteria. Ways of accessing collections vary across collections from users, to visitors and audiences.¹³

Significance 2.0 does not aim to compete with or replace well-established collection practice and procedures.

Rather, it adds value to current collection practices. It can be used and incorporated into collection management practices in ways that best suit the needs of the organisation, the collection, and its audiences or users.

The collecting domains will always have distinctive ways of working with their collections. Nevertheless, in a collections environment that is increasingly connected and intertwined, there are benefits in using a flexible process and a common set of assessment criteria to share the meaning of collections and explain how and why they are of value.

How significance evolved

Significance was first used in Australia for the management of places of cultural significance. The concept of the assessment process and summary statement of significance was developed by Australia ICOMOS (the Australian National Committee of the International Council on Monuments and Sites) in 1979 as the *Burra Charter*.¹⁴ This widely admired technique is the cornerstone of heritage practice in Australia.

The first edition of *Significance* was developed by the Heritage Collections Council (HCC), a forerunner of the Collections Council of Australia.¹⁵ The HCC recognised the need for collecting organisations to assess the significance of their collections, and identified this issue as one of the key goals in the *National Conservation and Preservation Policy and Strategy*.¹⁶ Before publication of *Significance*, three years of investigations and workshops road-tested the best assessment criteria for Australia's movable heritage collections. By trialling the step-by-step process of assessment, and using the draft criteria, participants in the workshops discovered new information about even well-documented items, changing the way they understood their meaning and importance.

The case studies demonstrated that significance assessment logically analyses, explores and articulates the meanings and values of items and collections. While significance was developed for use with original materials, its use has more recently been extended to include 'born digital' items, such as wikis and multimedia objects.

In exploring options for the best assessment process and most flexible criteria, the first edition of *Significance* drew on the work of Australia ICOMOS and the *Burra Charter*. Many collecting organisations, especially those located in heritage buildings, were already familiar with the concept of significance and the assessment process. Australia's collections are part of a cultural continuum, connected with communities and places, tangible and intangible heritage. All the interconnected elements of Australia's culture and heritage are better managed through an integrated assessment process that builds understanding of the layers of meanings found in collections. A particular strength of the significance assessment process is the way it uncovers the connections between collections, communities and places, exploring the wider context and meanings that collections have for people and communities.

When the HCC was recommending significance for collections it was also developing a website with online access to collections across Australia. This has evolved into the Collections Australia Network¹⁷ (CAN), an online portal to hundreds of Australian collections. In the initial development of the collections website, museums were asked to identify their most significant items for listing. The response was a fascinating range of items, many linked to important events, activities, and people in Australia's history. However, in listing their important items, collecting organisations tended to describe their appearance, rather than explain how or why they were significant.

The organisations knew why their items were significant, but this wasn't necessarily obvious to users of the site. To really take advantage of the opportunities to share information about collections on the web, it was apparent that collecting organisations needed to go beyond the standard catalogue description to explain the meaning and importance of items and collections. Since then, the growing availability of significance statements on CAN, and in other collections databases, is enlarging access to collections and opening up new ways of using collections.