

Part 3 Significance: concept and process

Significance defines the meanings and values of an item or collection through research and analysis, and by assessment against a standard set of criteria.

What does 'significance' mean?

'Significance' refers to the values and meanings that items and collections have for people and communities.

At a simple level, significance is a way of telling compelling stories about items and collections, explaining why they are important.

Significance may also be defined as the historic, artistic, scientific and social or spiritual values that items and collections have for past, present and future generations. These are the **criteria** or key **values** that help to express how and why an item or collection is significant.

What is significance assessment?

Significance assessment is the process of researching and understanding the meanings and values of items and collections.

The assessment process explores all the elements that contribute to meaning, including history, context, provenance, related places, memories, and comparative knowledge of similar items. It goes beyond a conventional catalogue description to explain **why and how** the item is important and what it means. The results of the analysis are synthesised in a **statement of significance**. This is a readable summary of the values, meaning and importance of the item.

The assessment process helps collection managers to make reasoned judgements about the importance of items and collections and their meaning for communities. This in turn enables collecting organisations to manage collections to conserve their significance,

and make their meanings accessible to users and the community in many different circumstances.

The assessment process

Significance assessment involves five **main** steps:

- analysing an item or collection
- researching its history, provenance and context
- comparison with similar items
- understanding its values by reference to the criteria
- summarising its meanings and values in a statement of significance

These steps are explained in the step-by-step method in Part 4.

Significance assessment is a transparent and collaborative process that brings all kinds of research and knowledge together to shape and inform the statement of significance.

The assessment process builds knowledge about an item from a wide range of sources. Based on this research and knowledge, the process defines the meaning and values of an item or collection by reference to comparable items, and a standard set of criteria or values.

Significance assessment can be used in tandem with an organisation's existing policies and assessment criteria, depending on the circumstances. For example, it can be built into collection policies to aid consideration of new acquisitions. Significance assessment can complement or enhance domain or discipline-specific methodologies and practice, such as archival appraisal, taxonomic research, or art museum assessments based on connoisseurship.²⁷

Items and collections may hold different meanings and values for different groups and individuals. The significance assessment process requires consultation so that multiple meanings and values, where they exist, are documented and recognised in the assessment.

The purpose of significance assessment is to understand and describe how and why an item is significant.

The assessment criteria

The assessment criteria are a broad framework of cultural and natural values relevant to the whole spectrum of collections in Australia. The criteria help tease out how and why the item is significant.

Four primary criteria apply when assessing significance:

- historic
- artistic or aesthetic
- scientific or research potential
- social or spiritual

Four comparative criteria evaluate the degree of significance. These are modifiers of the main criteria:

- provenance
- rarity or representativeness
- condition or completeness
- interpretive capacity

Using a consistent set of criteria facilitates more accurate analysis and helps elucidate the unique characteristics and meanings of each item or collection.

All criteria are considered when making an assessment, but not all will be relevant to the item or collection. One or more criteria may apply and be interrelated. It is not necessary to find evidence of all criteria to justify that an item is significant. Indeed, an item may be highly significant under only one primary criterion, with clarification added by considering the comparative criteria.

The criteria are a prompt for describing how and why the item or collection is significant. They will have different shades of meaning depending on the type of item or collection under consideration.

A more detailed explanation of the primary and comparative criteria is at Part 5.

What is a statement of significance?

A statement of significance is a reasoned, readable summary of the values, meaning and importance of an item or collection.

It may be as short as a few succinct sentences, several paragraphs, or a page. The length and level of detail will depend on the item or collection, the circumstances in which the assessment is carried out, and the available time, skills and resources.

A statement of significance summarises the information and research assembled by following the step-by-step assessment method, looking at how the item compares with similar items, and considering the relevant criteria.

It is effectively an argument about the meaning of an item or collection and **how and why it is significant**. The case made in the statement of significance can be justified by referring back to the research and analysis laid out in the step-by-step process.

A statement of significance is a reference point for all the policies, actions and decisions about how the item is managed. It is a means of sharing knowledge about why an item is important, and why it has a place in a public collection.

The statement of significance should be reviewed from time to time, as circumstances change and in the light of new research and knowledge.

A statement of significance is a concise summary of the values, meaning and importance of an item or collection.

It is an argument about how and why an item or collection is of value.

Part 5 explains how to write a statement of significance.

Contrasting a catalogue description with a statement of significance

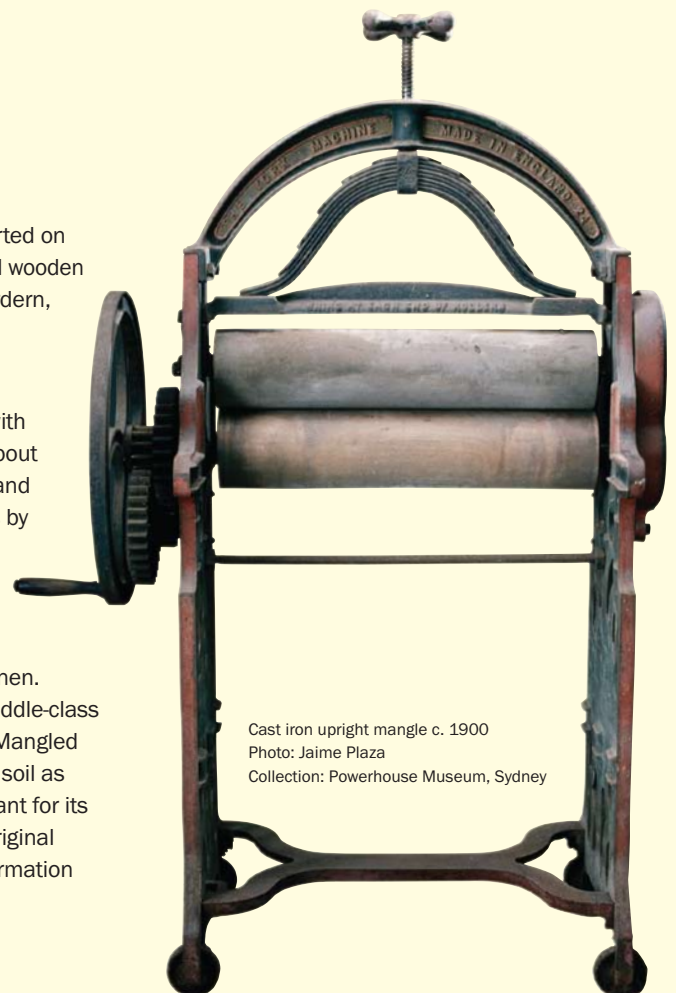
Catalogue description

Cast iron mangle, K1372, Powerhouse Museum

Mangle, laundry, upright, ornate, cast-iron, red and green frame, supported on 4 casters, arched roof, 2 wooden rollers, operated by wheel with rounded wooden handle, patent no. 120847, 'The York Machine', retailed by Anthony Hordern, England, from the laundry of 18 Watkin St Newtown (OF). c. 1900 (AF).

Statement of significance

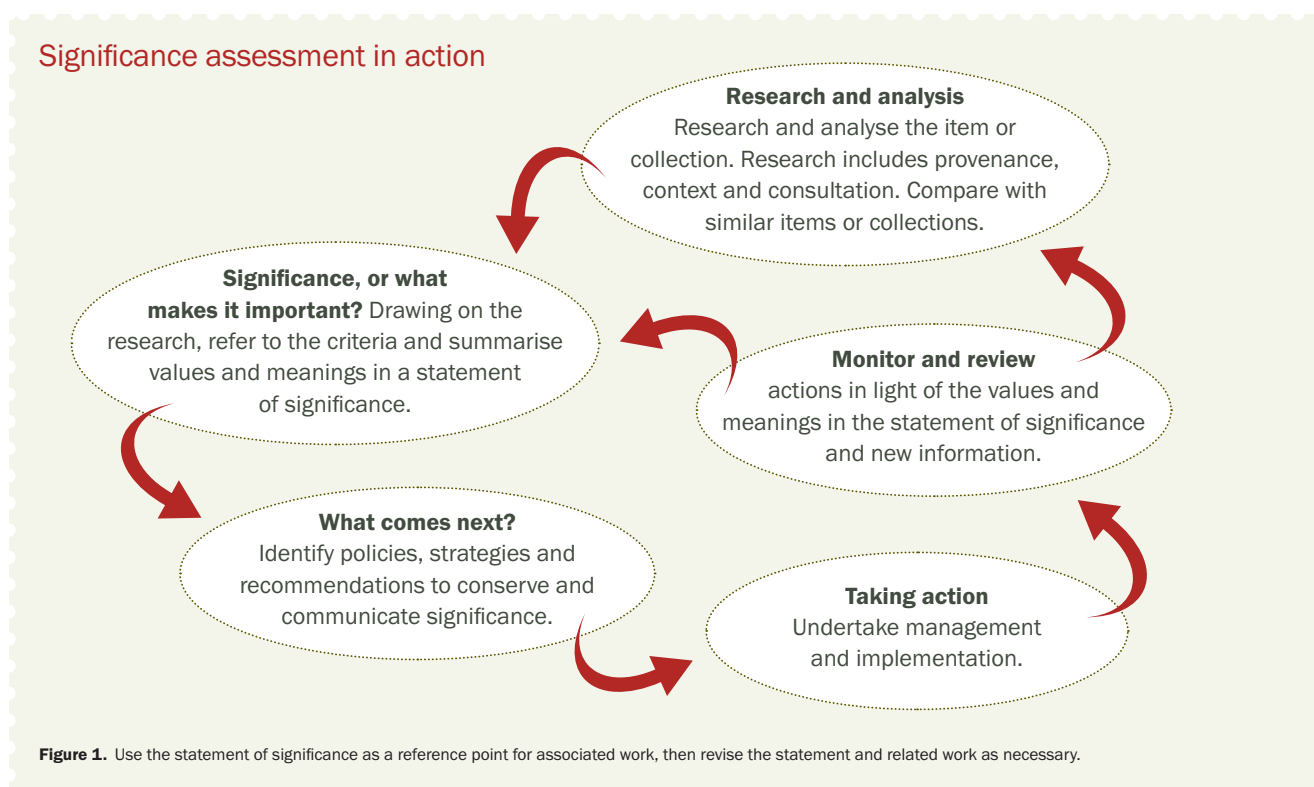
An upright cast iron laundry mangle with original paintwork, complete with draining and mangling boards, retailed by Anthony Hordern's Sydney, about 1900. The upright mangle was invented in the mid-nineteenth century and was a common item in domestic laundries, hotels and boarding houses by the turn of the century. The design of the mangle, with its main spring, tooth gears and wheel, shows the application of industrial design to household technology, while the decorative cast iron panels are typical of Victorian taste. The mangle was used to wring out washed linen and clothes, and to press, smooth and add gloss to dampened household linen. The mass production and affordability of the upright mangle allowed middle-class homes to enjoy glossy, pressed linen, even with limited domestic help. Mangled linen did not need to be ironed, and the glossy surface meant it did not soil as readily. Although not rare in museum collections, this mangle is significant for its good condition, completeness, and provenance, being recorded in its original laundry context in a terrace house in inner Sydney, with associated information about the family's domestic life.



Cast iron upright mangle c. 1900
Photo: Jaime Plaza
Collection: Powerhouse Museum, Sydney

What comes next?

Significance assessment is not an end in itself but a process to aid good management of items and collections. After drafting the statement of significance, consider policies, actions and recommendations to improve the care, management and access to the item or collection. This might include clauses for the collection policy, recommendations on storage or access, a conservation policy, identification of issues or special attributes to be considered in conservation treatment, further research, and strategies or actions that might be built into the organisation's strategic plan or management plan. Monitor and review work arising from the assessment of significance by referring back to the statement of significance.



Why assess significance?

Significance is a vital tool in the sustainable management of collections. Good decisions about the conservation and management of items and collections depend on understanding their meaning and importance. Identifying the significant attributes of an item helps to ensure that it is managed in a way that best conserves its values for the present and the future.

Significance assessment helps focus resources on the most significant items and collections, giving them priority in curatorial, conservation, exhibition, research and access programs. The practice of assessing the relative importance of items and collections is already embedded in a range of decisions and tasks made every day by

collecting organisations. Significance assessment simply provides an explicit framework for debate and decision making about items and collections.

Significance is the key to unlocking the meaning of collections, sharing collections with a wide range of users across Australia and the world. It takes the deep knowledge of collections held inside institutions and by their expert staff, and it makes this accessible in a way that can be easily understood. Significance enables communities to use, enjoy and engage with collections in all kinds of ways.

Significance is also proving to be an effective tool to foster collaboration across collections, sharing knowledge, coordinating collecting and using scarce resources more effectively.

Who assesses significance?

Significance assessment is a collaborative process that draws on the knowledge, skills, and experience of many people.

One person may be primarily responsible for researching an item or collection, but the assessment process is most effective when it involves a range of people who have knowledge of and an interest in the item or collection. Involving people in significance assessment may occur at any time in the organisation's care of the collection, such as at the point of acquisition, during a research project, preparing for an exhibition, for online access, or for conservation.

Consultation is an essential part of the process of significance assessment.

The significance assessment process is an opportunity to involve people in discussion about the meaning of items and collections. There are large areas of Australia's collections where information and knowledge about the item will not be found in books and printed references. Tapping knowledge and skills in the community and other collecting organisations is good practice for many reasons. Seeking community input into significance can strengthen an organisation's relationships with communities and interest groups, leading to new partnerships and enhanced support. This includes scholars and expert people working with and using collections.

Where items have social or spiritual significance to specific communities, these communities must be consulted and their points of view documented and reflected in the statement of significance.

Wherever possible, give the donor or community the opportunity to describe, in their own words, why an item or collection is important to them. This might be recorded or expressed in a variety of media.

The question of who defines significance is complex, and will vary from item to item, collection to collection, and from organisation to organisation. Individuals, donors and cultural or community groups may have different views about an item or collection's significance. Sometimes there are strongly contested ideas about an item or collection's meaning.

The significance assessment process should record differences in emphasis, and reflect this in the statement of significance. Increasingly, collecting organisations respect the ties and links between people and collections, recognising these relationships in statements of significance, and in how items and collections are managed and accessed.

Always ask and consider to whom the item or collection is significant.

When to assess significance

Significance assessment may be undertaken at any stage of an item or collection's life in a collecting organisation.

Significance assessment may be included in all kinds of collection management tasks, depending on the type of collection and the organisation's needs:

- to accept or refuse an acquisition, or support an acquisition proposal to a board or governing council;
- as part of the cataloguing and collection documentation process, ensuring that crucial information is recorded at the time the item comes into the collection;
- to guide conservation priorities and decisions on treatment, so that the item's values are thoroughly understood and preserved;
- in disaster planning, to identify the most significant items or collections as a priority for rescue or recovery action;
- in exhibition development, informing the selection of items and ensuring that meanings are communicated in exhibition design and interpretation;
- to justify and document deaccessioning decisions, and guide disposal of an item or collection;
- to review the strengths and weaknesses of a collection and set strategic priorities for future acquisitions;
- to make collections accessible online, sharing the meaning of items in a way that aids their use and promotes access and enjoyment;
- in strategic planning, to ensure the needs of the collection are embedded in the organisation's strategic plan and funded through the budget and work program that flows from the plan;
- to nominate items and collections for registers, such as state heritage registers that include movable items, or UNESCO's *Memory of the World* Register for documentary heritage, and thereby to build wider appreciation of their significance and support subsequent funding applications; or

- in collaborative and cross-collection projects like thematic studies, building a broader understanding of the theme and laying the foundation for strategic collecting and promotion.

These uses and applications are detailed through case studies in Part 6.

Some common questions about significance

Is significance a value judgement?

No. The purpose of using a standard assessment process and criteria is to substantiate and justify assessments as factually as possible. The judgements and assertions in the statement of significance are explained and supported by research, evidence, analysis and comparison with similar items. While there will always be an element of personal judgement and enthusiasm in the statement of significance, using a consistent process and criteria ensures that assessments are rigorous and well substantiated. At their best, statements of significance combine logic, passion and insight.

What happens when there are conflicting opinions about significance?

At times individuals, families or cultural groups may be at odds over the meaning and significance of particular items or collections. It is not necessary to resolve conflicting viewpoints, or determine which is right or wrong, especially where the parties have cultural or spiritual attachments to an item or collection. The statement of significance can reflect the nature and substance of multiple points of view.

Australia ICOMOS has acknowledged the special circumstances surrounding these conflicts and has produced a *Code on the ethics of co-existence in conserving significant places* (1998), which could be adapted by collecting organisations facing similar issues with items or collections.

Can significance be used for all types of collections?

Yes. Although the concept of managing according to significance was originally developed for heritage places, the assessment process and criteria are designed for use with all kinds of cultural and natural collections, including visual arts, natural history and scientific collections.

Is significance assessment the same as cataloguing?

No. Cataloguing traditionally describes the fabric, appearance and history of an item. Significance assessment goes further, building on the catalogue description with additional steps that establish the meaning and values of the item, drawing conclusions about its importance. The resulting statement of significance then forms a judgement, or argument about why an item is important and what it means. Significance assessment is readily incorporated into documentation procedures. The illustrated example in this section demonstrates the difference between a catalogue description and a statement of significance.

How long does significance assessment take?

This depends on the item or collection and how much is already known about it. A preliminary assessment may be made at the time of acquisition. A more thoroughly researched assessment may be done later, such as before conservation. If time is short, ensure that the item's provenance and history are recorded, as this information may be difficult to obtain in the future.

What if there is no time to assess the significance of every item?

Collecting organisations have several options and may use the single item assessment method, assess particular themes or a section of a collection, or assess the whole collection.

One option is to focus on the most important items in the collection. Scan the collection and identify significant items whose history and context has not been fully documented. Perhaps the donor or user of a particular item has more information about its use and context that has not yet been recorded, so this might be a priority. This information could be lost as those who remember it age and die.

Consider setting a goal to assess the significance of a certain number of items per year, focusing on the most important ones or those related to a forthcoming exhibition. Alternatively, assess the significance of a group of related or similar items that share a common theme, association or history.

Where relevant, incorporate significance assessment into acquisition, registration and cataloguing procedures so that all new acquisitions have a statement of significance. Or seek funding to undertake a whole of collection assessment.

Why can't we just tick a box or give items a significance ranking?

Significance assessment is an **argument** about how and why an item or collection is important. The argument is justified by referring back to each step in the assessment process. Merely asserting that an item or collection is significant fails to properly explain or communicate why it is important. Ticking a box or giving a ranking misses the point of the process, which is to make a reasoned argument about **how and why** the item or collection is significant.

Does significance explain why an item or collection is acquired?

Yes, in part. With new acquisitions, significance assessment works in tandem with the organisation's acquisition policies, with collection development priorities, and in light of the mission and purpose of the organisation.

The assessment process will reveal if the item is of limited significance, helping to explain the reasons for declining a donation. The high cost of collecting and storing items in perpetuity means that collecting organisations must carefully evaluate the merits of particular acquisitions, however generous an offer of donation may be. Significance assessment helps organisations to consider potential acquisitions more rigorously.

How does significance relate to the financial value of an object?

The monetary value of an object often reflects significance, and significance assessment is an essential tool in any valuation process. However, financial value is not a significance assessment criterion. An item may be significant and worthy of inclusion in a public collection, but still be of limited monetary value. Similarly, many valuable items are of limited significance for public collections.

How can families and private owners use significance?

Very easily. Families and collectors may find significance particularly useful in documenting their items and collections. Provenance is an important dimension of the value and meaning of items owned by families and collectors and it is a crucial part of significance. This information is easily lost when those who know about the item die. Make sure the story of the item is written down and kept with the item, so that the next generation understands its history and associations. This includes family memorabilia, photographs, furniture or any item cherished as part of a family's history. Collectors should keep receipts and records of how and when an item was acquired. It is a good idea to keep a photograph of the item with these records so the two are easily matched.

Research and assess the significance of privately owned items and collections by following the significance assessment step-by-step method in Part 4.