

Part 5 The statement of significance

Recapping the steps in the significance assessment process for items and collections

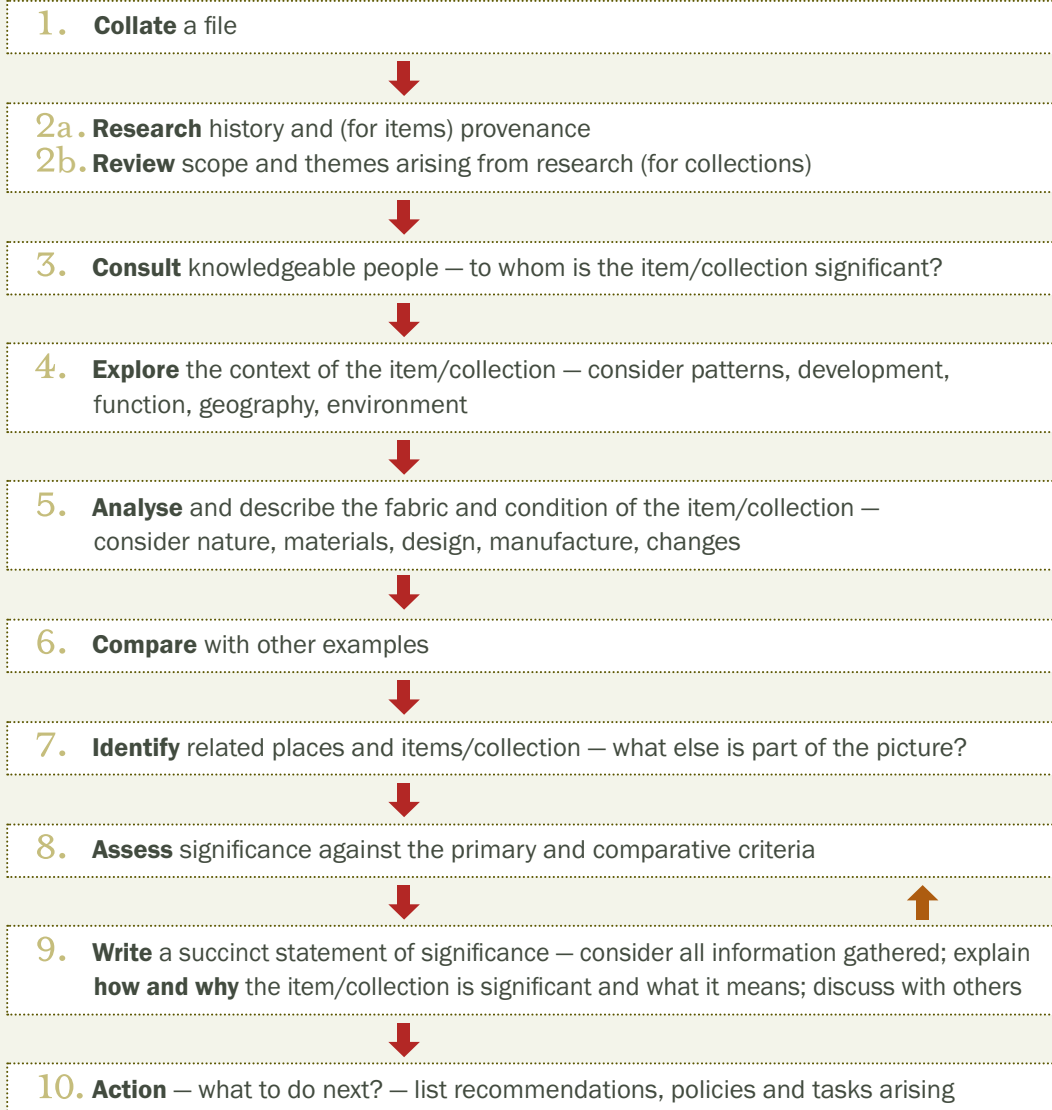


Figure 3. This diagram shows how the statement of significance is shaped by reference to the criteria and the preceding steps in the assessment process.
Note: Step 2b is specific to the assessment of whole collections.

How to use the criteria

In Figure 3, Step 8 is about using the criteria. A consistent set of criteria for assessing items and collections creates comparable assessments across all kinds of collections. The criteria seen on the following page are simply a framework to elucidate and describe **how and why** the item is important. Use the criteria to draw out the precise qualities of the item or collection's significance, rather than simply assert that it is, for example, historically significant.

The prompt questions that follow help to explore the special qualities and attributes of an item or collection's significance. They can be adapted or reframed to suit particular items and collections. Look back at the information gathered through the step-by-step process to consider how the criteria apply.

Assessment against the criteria feeds into the statement of significance, helping to synthesise the meanings and values of the item or collection.³⁶

There are four primary criteria and four comparative criteria for assessing significance.

Note that one or more criteria may apply and be interrelated. It is not necessary to find evidence of all criteria to justify significance. An item or collection may be highly significant even if it is relevant to one primary criterion only. The comparative criteria interact with the primary criteria to modify or clarify the degree of significance. Items or collections may be more or less significant depending on the answers to the following questions.

Primary criteria

Historic significance

- Is it associated with a particular person, group, event, place or activity and how is this important?
- What does it say about an historic theme, process, or pattern of life?
- How does it contribute to understanding a period, place, activity, industry, person or event?

Artistic or aesthetic significance

- Is it well designed, crafted or made?
- Is it a good example of a style, design, artistic movement or an artist's work?
- Is it original or innovative in its design?
- Is it beautiful, pleasing, or well-proportioned?
- Does it show a high degree of creative or technical accomplishment?
- Does it depict a subject, person, place, activity or event of interest or importance?

This criterion is most relevant to works of art, craft, design and decorative arts, but may also apply to items of technology, or mineral specimens or folk art. Items do not have to be art works to have artistic value. Some pictures may have little artistic significance but have historic value instead.

Scientific or research significance

- Do researchers have an active interest in studying the item or collection today, or will they want to in the future?
- How is it of interest or value for science or research today or in the future?
- Is it of research potential and in what way?
- What things in particular constitute its scientific or research interest and research value?

This criterion only applies to items or collections of **current** scientific value, or with **research potential** such as archives, natural history or archaeological collections. Items such as historic scientific instruments are generally of historic significance.

Social or spiritual significance

- Is it of particular value to a community or group today? Why is it important to them?
- How is this demonstrated? How is the item kept in the public eye, or its meaning kept alive for a group? For example, by use in an annual parade or ceremonies, or by maintaining traditional practices surrounding the item.
- Has the community been consulted about its importance for them?
- Is it of spiritual significance for a particular group?
- Is this spiritual significance found in the present?
- Does it embody beliefs, ideas, customs, traditions, practices or stories that are important for a particular group?

Social or spiritual significance is always specific to a particular, identified group of people. This type of significance only applies to items and collections where there is a **demonstrated contemporary attachment** between the item or collection and a group or community. Items or collections of social history interest are of historic significance. Religious items that are no longer used are more likely to be of historic or artistic significance. If the item or collection has spiritual or social significance, this should be demonstrated through consultation with the community or group.

Comparative criteria

Four comparative criteria are used to evaluate the **degree** of significance. They interact with the primary criteria and may increase or decrease significance. For example, if the item is well provenanced it will generally be more significant; if it is in poor or incomplete condition, it will generally be of lower significance. Items or collections must be significant under one or more of the primary criteria. They cannot be significant if only the comparative criteria apply.

Provenance

- Is it well documented or recorded for its class or type?
- Who created, made, owned or used the item or collection?
- Is its place of origin well documented?
- Is there a chain of ownership?
- Is the provenance reliable?
- How does the provenance shape the significance of the item or collection?

Provenance is part of the research in the assessment process as well as a comparative criterion.

Rarity or representativeness

- Does it have unusual qualities that distinguish it from other items in the class or category?
- Is it unusual or a particularly fine example of its type?
- Is it singular, unique or endangered?
- Is it a good example of its type or class?
- Is it typical or characteristic?
- Is it particularly well documented for its class or group?

In some cases items may be both rare and representative, such as examples of nineteenth-century working dress. An item that is merely representative is unlikely to be significant. It has to be significant under one of the primary criteria.

Condition or completeness

- Is it in good condition for its type?
- Is it intact or complete?
- Does it show repairs, alterations or evidence of the way it was used?
- Is it still working?
- Is it in original, unrestored condition?

In general, an item in original condition is more significant than one that has been restored.

Interpretive capacity

- How is it relevant to the organisation's mission, purpose, collection policy and programs?
- Does it have a special place in the collection in relation to other items or a collection theme?
- Does it help to interpret aspects of its place or context?

The statement of significance

A statement of significance is a reasoned, readable summary of the values, meaning and importance of an item or collection. It is more than a description of what the item or collection looks like. A statement of significance summarises **how** and **why** the item or collection is important. It is supported by research and evidence assembled through the assessment process.

The statement of significance incorporates all of the elements that contribute to the meaning of items and collections including appearance, fabric, design, context, environment, history, provenance, uses, function, social values and intangible associations.

Drawing all these values and attributes together into a statement of significance is an effective way of communicating and sharing knowledge about why an item or collection is important, and why it has a place in a public collection.

A statement of significance can be prepared for a single item, for a particular collection theme or subject, or for a whole collection. Significance is not set in stone and may change over time. From time to time it should be reviewed as circumstances change and knowledge develops.

Why prepare a statement of significance?

- To summarise the meaning and importance of an item or collection
- To communicate these meanings to users and audiences
- To enhance access to and use of collections e.g. online
- To facilitate debate, discussion and understanding of the item or collection
- To synthesise knowledge and ideas about the item or collection
- To ensure that the provenance and associations of items and collections are fully recorded
- As a reference point when considering how best to conserve and manage the item, so that its important values and attributes are preserved
- As a resource for developing policies or actions towards further research, interpretation or collection management

How to write a statement of significance

Collate all the information about the item or collection into a folder, including images, references to similar items and material from references of the period. Visual references are useful. These include historic photos, paintings, and advertising material from the period. Looking at images of similar items in use gives insights into its history, context and patterns of use.

Follow the step-by-step assessment process and develop notes under each heading or step. It is important to work through each step in the assessment process before starting on the statement of significance. That way the material functions as a reference point for crafting the statement of significance. It also means that the conclusions in the statement of significance can be substantiated by referring back to information assembled under each step in the assessment process.

While the statement of significance is best written as a readable paragraph or page, it doesn't have to be in perfect prose. Dot points are acceptable, e.g. *this item is significant because ...* It may be easier to start with dot points as a way of capturing the key elements of significance. The statement of significance may be as short as a few succinct sentences or several paragraphs, or it may be a page or more long. 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.

Use the assessment criteria as a framework for refining ideas about the values, meaning and importance of the item or collection. Focus on explaining how and why the item or collection is important.

Some heritage registers structure the statement of significance by reference to each criterion. However, the statement of significance is more useful if it synthesises the whole story of the item or collection into a readable summary. That way it can be used in many different ways from in-house management to online access.

An interim statement of significance can be prepared pending further research.

If time is short, make sure the essential information about the item or collection's provenance and context is documented so that the statement of significance can be prepared later.

Assessing significance is a collaborative process. Confer with knowledgeable people to seek their ideas. Consider forming a small working group with each member drafting a statement of significance, then come together to discuss the work in progress and refine the drafts. This can be a very rewarding process that draws on the knowledge and insight of many people who share a passion for collections.

The statement of significance can encompass different points of view. It is rewarding to share ideas about what makes items and collections important. Skills and speed improve with practice.

How the criteria shape the statement of significance for John Marsden's dress

This example shows how the criteria act as reference points in drafting the statement of significance, ensuring that the important attributes of the item are reflected there.

Other examples in Part 4 also show how the assessment criteria inform the statement of significance.

Primary criteria

Historic significance: for its associations with a prominent colonial family; as a poignant keepsake of a domestic tragedy; as an example of an everyday child's dress worn in Australia; for its early date, just sixteen years after the beginning of European settlement in Australia.

Comparative criteria

Provenance: reliably provenanced to John Marsden, and by descent through the Marsden family to Anne Hassall née Marsden, daughter of Samuel and Elizabeth Marsden, then to her daughter Eliza Hassall (1834–1917), and from her executors to the Royal Australian Historical Society which gave its collection to the Powerhouse Museum in 1981. The provenance is documented in a note written by Eliza Hassall and is verified in other sources. This is the earliest provenanced item of Australian dress.

Rarity: a very rare early example of an everyday child's dress

Condition: darned, stained and faded in places, showing the wear and tear of daily life.

Statement of significance

A pink and white cotton child's dress worn in 1803 by John Marsden, the fourth child of Elizabeth and the Reverend Samuel Marsden. A note from the donor, Eliza Hassall, Elizabeth's granddaughter, accompanied the dress when it was given to the Royal Australian Historical Society. The note reads 'the dress Grandmother's little son had on when he fell into a pot of boiling water and died at the parsonage'. This little dress is a poignant keepsake of John Marsden's death. Its survival suggests the enduring grief of Elizabeth Marsden, who must have kept the dress until her death in 1835. A year after this terrible accident Elizabeth Marsden wrote 'the loss of those that I have parted from weighs so much on my mind that at times I am as miserable as it is possible to be'. The dress is a reminder of the dangers and risks that children faced in the home, and the tragedies that beset even the most powerful families in colonial society.

Everyday children's clothes rarely survive. This humble garment, with the darns and stains that evoke the hard wear of an active child, is a rare example of the ordinary clothes worn by children in the colony. In addition to its associations with the Marsden family, the dress is significant as the earliest provenanced item of Australian dress, dating from just sixteen years after the beginning of European settlement. As a well-provenanced garment, this is an important comparative piece for undated children's clothes.



A small child's pink and white printed cotton dress worn by John Marsden (1801–1803) when he died after falling into a pot of boiling water at the Parsonage in Parramatta in 1803
Photo: Sotha Bourn
Collection: Powerhouse Museum, Sydney