A GUIDE TO ASSESSING THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CULTURAL HERITAGE OBJECTS AND COLLECTIONS
Significance assessment check list

**You can photocopy this page and use it as you assess the significance of your objects.**

- Have you compiled a folder with details of the object?
- Have you properly researched the history and provenance of the object?
- Have you talked with donors, owners, users and community associations about their knowledge of, and feelings about, the object?
- Do you understand the historical context of the object?
- Have you analysed how the object works? What is it made of, and what are its patterns of wear, repairs and adaptations? Have you recorded these?
- Have you compared the object with similar objects?
- Have you assessed the object’s significance against the criteria?
- Finally, have you written a succinct statement of significance for the object?
A GUIDE TO ASSESSING THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CULTURAL HERITAGE OBJECTS AND COLLECTIONS

HERITAGE COLLECTIONS COUNCIL

A Heritage Collections Council project undertaken by Roslyn Russell of Australian Heritage Projects and Kylie Winkworth.
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Foreword

Our inherited culture is a rich resource through which we can reach a deeper understanding of our past and the environment in which we live.

There are an estimated 41 million objects held in Australian museums, art galleries and historical collections. Collectively, these objects tell the story of our history and the seminal events which contribute to our sense of identity and national pride.

Important objects do not reside solely in our major museums and collecting institutions. Every community, small regional museum, art gallery or historical collection are custodians of much of our cultural heritage—significant items that are held in trust for all Australians.

Significance — a guide to assessing the significance of cultural heritage objects and collections has been developed to assist all those who care for collections to identify and preserve our cultural heritage.

By using this guide, organisations can assess the significance of objects in their collection — providing a sound basis on which to make collection management decisions relating to conservation, preservation and access.

The Heritage Collections Council (HCC), a partnership of the Commonwealth Government, State and Territory Governments and the museums sector, seeks to protect the nation’s significant cultural heritage and make it accessible to all Australians.

Significance is an important component of the HCC’s National Conservation and Preservation Strategy for Australia’s Heritage Collections.

This guide will assist in ensuring that Australia’s cultural heritage is a legacy for coming generations.

Alan Stretton
CHAIR
HERITAGE COLLECTIONS COUNCIL
Significance is a guide to help you assess the significance of the heritage objects and collections in your care.

Significance means the historic, aesthetic, scientific and social values that an object or collection has for past, present and future generations. Significance refers not just to the physical fabric or appearance of an object. Rather, it incorporates all the elements that contribute to an object's meaning. It includes the context, history, uses and its social and spiritual values. When you consider this information you can draw informed conclusions about why an object is significant. Significance is not fixed—it may increase or diminish over time.
What is *Significance*?

*Significance* is a guide to help you assess the significance of the heritage objects and collections in your care.

It takes you through a simple significance assessment process that equips you to make sound judgements and good decisions about conserving, interpreting and managing objects and collections, now and into the future.

The guide supports a coordinated national approach to assessing the significance of the estimated 41 million objects in Australia’s museums, galleries and historical collections—our movable cultural heritage.

*Significance* was compiled after extensive consultation with Australia’s museum community, and also draws on international expertise. It includes explanatory notes and case studies to illustrate the process, and explains the criteria and application of significance assessment across a wide range of museum contexts and collection types.

It can assist your organisation to incorporate and adopt a standard set of criteria and a standard methodology for assessing significance. The aim is to eventually have all museums in Australia use a common system and language to describe and assess the significance of this country’s collections.

*Significance—a guide to assessing the significance of cultural heritage objects and collections* was produced by the Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts through the Heritage Collections Council (HCC)—a partnership between the Commonwealth, State and Territory Governments and the museum sector, which coordinates national approaches to caring for Australia’s heritage collections.

Who is *Significance* for?

*Significance* is for collecting institutions of all kinds and interests—historical museums, natural history museums, place museums, and public art galleries (referred to in this guide collectively as ‘museums’).

It is for everyone working with collections—including registrars, curators, conservators, educators, exhibition and public program designers—and is equally relevant for museums of all sizes, from small, volunteer-run historical societies to large State and national institutions.
How can *Significance* help you?

When contributing to decisions about collecting, conserving, researching and exhibiting objects, you normally consider factors such as your exhibition programs and available funding, space, skills and resources.

This guide focuses on the fundamental concept of significance, which is now recognised as a key concept that can help you make sound decisions about objects and collections.

*Significance* steps you through a rigorous process which helps you make good decisions and focus your resources.

You can use the simple process in this guide to set priorities and make informed and broadly consistent decisions on collecting, storing and interpreting objects, by assessing their significance against a standard set of criteria.

This will guide all your decisions about the life of an object—from initial acquisition, to cataloguing, conservation, storage, access, interpretation and, if necessary, deaccessioning.

These decisions are increasingly pressing due to the growth in the size of collections and number of museums in Australia over the past 50 years, the pressure on storage and display space, and the backlog of objects needing conservation work and further research.

Why should you use *Significance*?

Just like many other public and private sector organisations, museums are affected by an increasing emphasis on accountability, benchmarking and evaluation.

Australia’s heritage collections are an important national asset and a legacy for coming generations. But we risk our collections becoming a liability for governments and communities if we fail to collect, conserve and document with long-term obligations and liabilities in mind.

It is important to ask how effectively museums interpret Australia’s history and cultural diversity. With the creation of new museums in every region, and with the cost of keeping collections on the rise, the museum community must be able to answer this critical question.

The meaning of objects often resides in their stories, context and associations with people and places. However, limited resources, especially in volunteer museums, mean that history and provenance (a documented history of an object’s existence, ownership and use) of many objects is not always fully recorded. In addition, many people who helped build our heritage collections during the 1960s and 1970s have or are now retiring. As a result, information central to the significance of historical collections is in danger of being lost.

Documenting the context and stories of significant objects before they disappear or are forgotten must be given priority. The processes described in this guide can help you identify these objects and focus your resources on recording their vulnerable histories.

How was *Significance* developed?

When the HCC was established in 1996, it recognised that there had been little detailed assessment of the value and significance of the huge collections assembled over the last century and distributed across the country, and that coordinated policies and strategies are required to conserve and provide widespread access to the collections.

As part of its program, the HCC sponsored the development of the Australian Museums On-Line (AMOL) database and website, to promote access to collections held in museums throughout Australia.

During the initial development of the AMOL database, museums were asked to identify for listing their most significant objects. The nation-wide response elicited a fascinating range of objects, many linked to important events, activities and people in Australia’s history. However, the AMOL listings tend to tell us what the objects look like rather than why they are in a museum, or why they are nominated as a significant object. Museums need to go beyond catalogue descriptions to explain the meaning and significance of objects and collections to everyone accessing AMOL.

Although many museums already incorporate significance into their collection policies and cataloguing procedures, there is still a need for a simple set of standardised criteria for assessing significance, and an assessment process that can be used by museums and collections of all descriptions.
AMOL helps you share information and compare your research and collections with other museums around Australia. It offers unprecedented opportunities for museums to work together.

But realising those opportunities will depend in part on the museum community adopting common and compatible assessment criteria and standard processes. This will ensure that all museums can focus resources on their most significant objects, and help you make more effective arguments to governments to fund further conservation and interpretation activities.

In its National Conservation and Preservation Policy and Strategy the HCC recognises, as a key goal, the need for museums to assess the significance of their collections.1

Over the past three years the HCC sponsored the development of the most appropriate significance assessment criteria for Australia’s movable heritage collections. 2

Heritage consultants Roslyn Russell and Kylie Winkworth investigated assessment criteria and methodologies used in Australia and overseas, for museums, libraries, archives and the built environment. They developed draft criteria, largely adapted from those used by the Australian Heritage Commission and Australia International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) for the assessment of the built environment.3 These existing criteria were brief, simple and flexible enough to use with diverse collections. As well, many museums, especially those in heritage buildings, were already familiar with them.

The HCC’s significance criteria recognise that all the interwoven elements of museum collections, places, buildings and archaeological material—that together document and interpret Australia’s history and culture—will be better managed if the museum community adopts a broadly consistent terminology, assessment criteria, and methods of practice.

The assessment criteria were extensively tested in workshops with museums around Australia. Museum workers responded with outstanding examples and case studies drawn from their collections.

Using the simple step-by-step process of assessment, many participants in the workshops unearthed new information, even about well-documented objects.

This changed the way they understood the object’s meaning and significance.

The case studies demonstrated that significance assessment effectively analyses and articulates the meanings of objects. In the process it restores the object to the centre of museum practice and discourse, both within the profession and in the Australian community.

Case studies and comments from the workshops have been used to develop this guide, and the authors gratefully acknowledge the contributions from large and small museums around Australia.

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2 ‘Museums and other parties involved in management of the Distributed National Collection should be seen as forming a dynamic and cooperative network to…increase cooperation to help meet national objectives for collecting, recording, presenting and preserving material of significance.’ Heritage Collections in Australia: a plan for a new partnership, Heritage Collections Working Group, 1993, p.20.


4 Australian Heritage Commission, Assessment Criteria and Sub-criteria for the Register of the National Estate (Australian Heritage Commission N.D.).
SIGNIFICANCE MEANS THE HISTORIC, AESTHETIC, SCIENTIFIC AND SOCIAL VALUES THAT AN OBJECT OR COLLECTION HAS FOR PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE GENERATIONS.

SIGNIFICANCE REFERS NOT JUST TO THE PHYSICAL FABRIC OR APPEARANCE OF AN OBJECT. RATHER, IT INCORPORATES ALL THE ELEMENTS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO AN OBJECT’S MEANING, INCLUDING ITS CONTEXT, HISTORY, USES AND ITS SOCIAL AND SPIRITUAL VALUES. WHEN YOU CONSIDER THIS INFORMATION YOU CAN DRAW INFORMED CONCLUSIONS ABOUT WHY AN OBJECT IS SIGNIFICANT. SIGNIFICANCE IS NOT FIXED — IT MAY INCREASE OR DIMINISH OVER TIME.
Significance means the historic, aesthetic, scientific and social values that an object or collection has for past, present and future generations. Significance refers not just to the physical fabric or appearance of an object. Rather, it incorporates all the elements that contribute to an object’s meaning, including its context, history, uses and its social and spiritual values. When you consider this information you can draw informed conclusions about why an object is significant. Significance is not fixed—it may increase or diminish over time.

What is significance assessment?
Significance assessment is the process of studying and understanding the meanings and values of objects and collections. Significance assessment is a practical and effective process that helps you clearly articulate the value and meaning of objects and collections, and make sound judgements and good decisions about conserving, interpreting and managing them, now and into the future.

The process can be applied to a single object, specific or whole collections within a museum, collections across a region, or even across the country.

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

The criteria
Four primary criteria apply when assessing significance:
- historic;
- aesthetic;
- scientific, research or technical; and
- social or spiritual.

Five comparative criteria evaluate the degree of significance. These are modifiers of the main criteria:
- provenance;
- representativeness;
- rarity;
- condition, completeness or intactness and integrity; and
- interpretive potential.

You should consider all criteria when assessing significance. However, it is not necessary to find evidence of all criteria to justify an object’s significance. Indeed, an object may still be highly significant if only one or two criteria apply.

A more detailed explanation of both primary and comparative criteria is at part 4.
What is a statement of significance?

When you have completed the significance assessment process, you summarise the information you have gathered in a statement of significance.

This statement should be a reasoned, clear summary of the values, meaning and importance of an object or collection. It may be as short as a few succinct sentences or run to several paragraphs. The level of detail will depend on the object being assessed, the circumstances in which the assessment is carried out, and the available time, skills and resources.

Statements of significance draw on the history and analysis of an object compiled using the step-by-step process and assessment criteria outlined in this guide. Your statement should only include criteria that are relevant. A statement of significance is more than an assertion that an object meets standard criteria. It is effectively an argument about the meaning of an object and how and why it is significant. It is a reference point for all policies and future decisions about how that object is managed. A clear and succinct statement of significance enables you to consider more carefully whether proposed policies or actions are in synch with the ongoing conservation and understanding of an object’s significance.

Cast iron mangle, POWERHOUSE MUSEUM, SYDNEY, NEW SOUTH WALES

This upright cast iron laundry mangle, with original paintwork and complete with draining and mangling boards, was manufactured for Anthony Hordern’s department store, in Sydney, around 1900. The upright mangle was invented in the mid-1800s and was commonly found in domestic laundries, hotels and boarding houses by the turn of the century. The mangle’s design, with a main spring, tooth gears and wheel, illustrates how industrial design was applied to household technology. The decorative cast iron panels are typical of Victorian taste. The mangle was used to wring out washed household linen and clothes, and to press, smooth and add gloss to linen. These mass produced and affordable upright mangles allowed middle class homes to enjoy glossy, pressed linen, even with limited domestic help. Mangled linen did not need to be ironed, and its glossy surface meant it did not soil as readily.

Although mangles are not rare in museum collections, this one is particularly significant for its good condition, completeness and provenance, as it was documented in its original laundry context in an inner Sydney terrace house, along with information about the family’s domestic life.
Why assess significance?

Good decisions about the conservation and management of objects depend on understanding their meaning and importance. Identifying the significant attributes of an object allows you to manage it in a way that best conserves and interprets its values. Significance assessment can help you to focus resources on the most significant objects, and give them priority in curatorial, conservation, exhibition and education programs.

The practice of assessing the relative importance of objects and collections is already embedded in a range of museum tasks, from acquisitions to exhibition preparation. You can use significance assessment in tandem with your existing policies and assessment procedures, such as cataloguing, taxonomic collecting, or assessment based on connoisseurship.

Significance assessment provides a framework within which museums and communities can debate the meanings of objects, work collaboratively on collection themes and documentation, and communicate the value of Australia's heritage collections to a wider audience.

Significance may change over time. The assessment process enables you to re-evaluate the meaning of objects and collections according to current circumstances and knowledge.

Who assesses significance?

Both volunteer and paid museum staff can assess significance. One person might research an object or collection, but the significance assessment process is most effective when it involves a range of people, skills and consultation.

The significance assessment process is an opportunity to involve people in discussion about the meaning of a collection and its significant objects. For example:

- donors and former owners often provide vital information about the use, context and history of an object. This is a crucial part of the significance assessment process;
- people who have worked in an industry or occupation associated with an object may contribute details on its working life, use and role in that industry;
- communities can be consulted to uncover evidence of social or spiritual meanings and attachments. They may also provide information about the context, culture or working use of an object;
- curators and collection managers record context and history when researching and assembling information about an object;
- scientists and conservators help evaluate scientific significance by analysing the materials, techniques, construction and condition of an object;
- historians provide broader contextual and thematic information;
- museum colleagues, drawing on their knowledge of similar objects and collections, may provide comparative information and advice, helping to build a clearer assessment; and
- AMOL and illustrated reference books can also provide comparative information and examples.

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

Wherever possible, you should provide the donor or community with the opportunity to describe, in their own words, why an object is important to them.

The question of who defines significance is more complex, and will vary from object-to-object, and from museum-to-museum. Individuals, donors and cultural or community groups may have different views about an object’s significance. Sometimes there are strongly contested ideas about an object’s meaning.

The significance assessment process should record differences in emphasis, which should be reflected in the statement of significance. Increasingly, museums respect the ties and links between people and objects—recognising these relationships in the way meanings are described in statements of significance, and in how objects are managed and interpreted.
When to assess significance

Significance assessment can be included in a range of museum tasks and undertaken at any point in a museum’s collection work.

- You can assess significance when deciding whether or not to acquire an object or accept a donation.
- You can include significance assessment as part of your registration, cataloguing and collection documentation—to ensure that the most significant objects are fully documented. If you have limited time for cataloguing, you can focus on collecting information about the donor, history and context of an object, as this may be more difficult to recover later on.
- Significance assessment should be undertaken before conservation begins so that the object’s values are thoroughly understood and carefully preserved in the treatment process.
- It may be used as part of disaster planning, to identify the most significant objects for priority rescue action.
- Significance assessment can guide exhibition preparation, so that the most significant objects are displayed, and to help develop clearly articulated exhibition texts and labels, to ensure visitors understand the significance and meaning.
- Significance assessment provides an explicit framework and process for making and justifying deaccessioning decisions.
- Reviewing a museum’s whole collection using significance assessment provides an overview that can in turn serve as a preamble to a collection policy and inform planning collecting strategies.
- Significance assessment of specific categories of objects or themes can also be undertaken in collaboration with other museums, to review certain types of collections or themes on a regional, State or national basis.
- It can also be used when listing objects on AMOL, so that people using the website understand why your object is significant and can access its meaning.
The benefits of significance assessment

There are many benefits to significance assessment, for both individual museums and the industry as a whole, including:

- A statement of significance gives a concise description of an object’s value and meaning. It says more about an object and why it is in a museum collection than is possible through a description of physical appearance. A statement of significance outlines the reasons why an object is acquired, conserved and exhibited, or why a donation is declined or an object deaccessioned;

- Significance assessment provides a framework for museums and the wider community to explore and appreciate the meanings of collections. It can promote awareness and discussion of the value of Australia’s distributed collections;

- Significance assessment can help museums and collection managers focus resources on the most significant objects, and identify priorities in collection management, conservation programs and exhibitions;

- The significance assessment process systematises assessment of the values of objects and collections across museums and different collection types, transcending individual collection and acquisition policies. By introducing a standard process and criteria, significance assessment can improve public and professional communication about objects, creating for the first time an agreed framework of practice for working with collections;

- A broadly-adopted process for significance assessment will help identify the most significant objects and collections for grant funding and enhanced government support;

- Listing significant objects and collections can enhance awareness of the value of these collections to government, particularly with lesser-known collections in regional Australia;

- Describing objects by significance on AMOL, especially in thematic groups, will increase the usefulness of the database as a research tool for museums and the Australian community;

- Assessment of significance encourages museums to fully record the history and provenance of objects. Much of this history can be difficult to recover after an object has been given to a museum;

- Significance assessment is useful in disaster planning since it can help identify items requiring urgent attention;

- An understanding of significance guides conservation policy and treatment, so that key features of an object are conserved appropriately. For example, working clothes, vehicles and tools should retain evidence of wear and tear;

- Significance assessment can help with overall collection assessment, particularly when reviewing collection patterns, and considering strengths, scope and omissions. This can then help you develop a more strategic approach to your collecting activities;

- A statement of significance may form the basis for interpretation and exhibition of an object. Significance guides decisions on the design and content of exhibition text to ensure that visitors understand the meaning of an object; and

- Significance assessment helps you make careful decisions when collecting from heritage sites. A consideration of the relationship between an object (or collection) and a place may indicate that it should be left in situ. Alternatively, the whole group of objects might be collected and the place recorded so the context of use can be understood in future exhibitions and research, or reinstated if circumstances change.
Man’s shirt,
POWERHOUSE MUSEUM, SYDNEY, NEW SOUTH WALES

Abbreviated catalogue description: A man’s square cut work shirt, c. 1800–1850, of thin, cream plain woven cotton, with stand collar, slit opening and tie at neck, the body of the shirt sewn selvedge to selvedge, the sleeves straight set into the body, with underarm gussets and simple cuffs lacking buttons or button holes. All hand sewn. Acquired from a donor with a family collection in Toongabbie, Sydney, but lacking a specific provenance.

Statement of significance: A man’s work shirt, pre-1850, the square cut pattern and construction is typical of 18th and early 19th century shirts, but this example is simplified to its most basic elements. Although unprovenanced, this shirt is a very rare survivor of one the most common garments of the 19th century. Through the late 18th and early 19th century the shirt was in transition from undergarment to more visible outer wear, with the front becoming more detailed and the cut more tailored. Working men might also wear a shirt to bed. The simple cut, poor quality fabric and tie fastening at the neck points up this transition and possible multiple use. If the shirt was a defining statement of class and occupation in the 19th century, this example ranks at the bottom of the scale. The rarity and simplicity of this shirt makes it a significant example and comparative piece for other shirts, including the better quality convict’s shirt recovered from the Hyde Park Barracks in Sydney, and more elaborate gentlemen’s dress shirts.
Is significance assessment the same as cataloguing?
No. Cataloguing traditionally only describes the history, fabric and appearance of an object. Significance assessment goes a step further—it complements a catalogue description, but goes on to establish the meaning and values of the object and draw conclusions about its importance. The resulting statement of significance then forms a judgement or argument about why an object is important and what it means.

Significance assessment can be easily incorporated into a museum’s acquisition and cataloguing procedures. It is simply an extra step in the process and another section in a catalogue form.

Contrast the catalogue description for this shirt with the catalogue history and statement of significance.

How long does significance assessment take?
This depends on the object and how much you already know about its historical context and use. You can make a preliminary assessment in your accession register or catalogue. You may then prepare a longer, more thoroughly researched assessment as needs arise, such as before conservation or during exhibition research and preparation.

What if there is no time to assess the significance of every object?
There are several options for you to consider if time is limited. You can, for example:

- focus on the most important objects in the collection, such as those entered in your museum’s AMOL listing or highlighted in publicity about your museum; or
- quickly scan the collection and identify significant objects whose history and context has not been fully documented.

Perhaps you know that the donor of a particular object has more information about its use that you have not yet recorded. This information could be lost if collecting it is not made a priority. Consider setting a goal to assess the significance of a certain number of objects per year, focussing on the most important ones.

Alternatively, you can assess the significance of a group of related or similar objects in the collection that can share background research, for example, steam engines, carts, portraits, typewriters or telephones.

In addition, you should incorporate significance assessment in your museum’s registration and cataloguing procedures for new acquisitions.

Does significance explain why a museum is collecting a particular object?
Yes. You can explain, through your statement of significance and by referencing your museum’s collection policy, why your museum is acquiring a particular object. The assessment process will also reveal if the object is of limited significance and can help you explain the reasons for declining a donation.

The high cost of collecting and storing objects in perpetuity means that museums must carefully evaluate the merits of accepting donations or making particular acquisitions. Significance assessment helps you consider potential acquisitions more rigorously.

Is significance just a value judgement?
No. The purpose of following a consistent assessment process and criteria is to standardise significance assessment across museums and make it as impartial as possible. Significance assessment will vary to some extent depending on who does the work. For example, an object may have different meanings to different groups or people. The emphasis on consultation in the assessment process is designed to take this into account, and any variations in meaning that arise should be summarised in the statement of significance.

While there will always be an element of personal judgement in the assessment, using a consistent process and criteria helps to develop assessments that are rigorous and well substantiated by evidence, research and logical argument.

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 objects. You do not have to resolve conflicting viewpoints, or determine which is right or wrong, especially where the parties have cultural or spiritual attachments to an object. The statement of significance should 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 can be adapted by museums facing similar issues with objects or collections.

Is significance only useful for historical collections?

No. Although the concept of managing according to significance was originally developed for heritage places, these criteria and processes have been designed for all kinds of collections, including visual arts, natural history and scientific collections.

The significance assessment process can help you investigate and articulate the importance of objects—their meanings and values. The process is designed to complement other collection philosophies, including those based on principles of connoisseurship or taxonomic collecting. Not all the steps in the assessment process apply to every object. For example, contemporary objects may only need minor contextual or historical research, but these should of course be recorded when these objects come into collections.

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 object may be significant and worthy of inclusion in a museum collection, but still be of limited monetary value. Similarly, valuable objects can be of limited significance and of little interest to museums.

How does significance relate to levels of national, State, regional or local significance?

Assessment processes for the built environment usually consider national, State or local significance. This is often tied to local, state and national heritage registers, and to the legislative or planning regimes for managing these places. These assessments are informed by decades of research into comparative and thematic studies of various types of places or industries.

However, little comparative work has been carried out on objects or themes across museum collections. This makes it difficult to substantiate assessments of national, State or local significance. Some objects and collections are associated with themes, events and people significant in Australia’s history, and are more easily identified as being of national or State significance—for example certain objects associated with the story of Federation or the early European settlement of Australia. But many objects of everyday life and local significance are also integral to telling the nation’s story. Detailed comparative and thematic studies are needed to develop a better understanding of the significance of such collections.

Further debate is needed on the relevance of national, State or local significance to movable heritage collections. Just because a collection is owned and maintained by the Commonwealth Government or State Government, for example, does not mean that everything in it is necessarily of national or State significance.

On the contrary, many nationally significant objects are held in regional and community museums, and family and private collections all over Australia. The local context in which such objects exist is often an integral part of their significance.
**How to Assess Significance: Step-by-Step Significance Assessment.**

**Follow these simple steps to assess the significance of an object or collection in your museum.**

1. **Compile a folder containing all available details about an object and its history.** This may include:
   - Acquisition date
   - Donor details
   - Notes made when the object was acquired
   - Photos
   - Copies of reference material and notes on related objects in the collection

2. **Research the history and provenance of an object, including photos of it in use, notes about the owner or place where it was used, and general history.**
How to assess significance:
step-by-step significance assessment

Follow these simple steps to assess the significance of an object or collection in your museum. The following case study is an example of how this process is applied.

1. Compile a folder containing all available details about an object and its history. This may include the acquisition date, donor details, notes made when the object was acquired, photos, copies of reference material and notes on related objects in the collection.

2. Research the history and provenance of an object, including photos of it in use, notes about the owner or place where it was used, when it was made or purchased, and general history.

3. Talk with donors, owners, users and relevant community associations to ensure the context, provenance and potential social values of the object are fully understood. Encourage the donor to write notes and describe the history and meaning of the object and when it was in use. Consult other people in the community who may have information about the object or expert knowledge of similar items, and of the associated industry or trade.

4. Understand the context of the object. Consider its relationship to other objects, where it was used, the locality and how it relates to the history and geography of the area. Wherever possible, record the object or collection in its context of use and original location.

5. Analyse and record the fabric of the object. Document how an object works, what it is made of, its manufacture, patterns of wear, repairs and adaptations. Record the object’s condition. (This step may be part of your cataloguing procedures.)

6. Consider comparative examples of similar objects. Check to see if AMOL lists other similar or related objects. Check reference books and talk with colleagues and other museums with related collections. Judge whether the item is common or rare, in good condition or intact, and if it is well-provenanced and documented by comparison to similar items in other museums.

7. Assess significance against the main criteria—historic, aesthetic, scientific and social values. Determine the degree of significance by assessing against the comparative criteria—provenance, rarity, representativeness, condition and integrity, and interpretive potential. The criteria will help you analyse and define the object’s significance.

8. Write a succinct statement of significance encapsulating the object’s values and meaning. Do not just say the object is significant—explain why it is significant and what it means.
Case study:
Step-by-step example:

Assessing the significance of a cabbage tree hat,
Illawarra Historical Society, New South Wales

1. Compile a file containing all available details about the object

   The exact acquisition date is not known, but the Historical Society has detailed notes about the hat’s history and provenance. It was a gift on behalf of the late Mrs A R Hurry, daughter of the hat’s maker, around 1969. The society’s collection contains many objects related to the Denniss and Hurry family homes. Also associated with the hat are three rolls of cabbage tree plait, possibly left over from when the hat was made.

2. Research the history and provenance of the object

   Notes associated with the hat record that it was made by Mrs Lionel Hurry, nee Sarah Denniss, for her nephew Albert Denniss, son of her brother George, when he was a small boy holidaying with her at Vine Cottage, Flinders Street, Albion Park. It was probably made in the late 19th or early 20th century.

   Cabbage tree hats were characteristic of male dress in the Australia bush in the 19th century. First recorded in 1799, they were worn by convicts, shepherds, poets, explorers and the well-to-do. They are described in the works of writers such as Henry Lawson and Mary Gilmore, and seen in many paintings and photographs of daily life on the goldfields and in the bush. Later in the century, the larrikins of Sydney’s Rocks area were also distinguished by their cabbage tree hats and dubbed the ‘Cabbage Tree Mob’.

   Straw plaiting was a rural craft in Britain. It was taught to convicts awaiting transportation, and was a prison craft in Australia in the 19th century. Shepherds in the bush, who were often freed convicts, also carried out straw plaiting. It was suited to occupations and circumstances where there was plenty of time and limited resources. By the second half of the
19th century the hats were made by men and women in many circumstances—from factory workers in Sydney and regional towns, to housewives and rural workers supplementing farm incomes—and sold to drovers and other travellers along the main roads of New South Wales. Plaits were also sold separately to be made into hats later. Very fine cabbage tree hats were also exhibited in many international exhibitions. These hats are significant as the only distinctive item of Australian dress entirely made from Australian materials.

5 Talk with donors, owners, users and relevant community associations

The Society’s notes associated with the hat were presumably written from information supplied by the donor when it was donated. Notes include information about the family’s arrival in Australia, their home and work. They also record Mr W A Denniss making a small tool to strip the cabbage palm leaves into narrow widths before plaiting.

The Society collected additional information from local sources, which builds a picture of the pattern of manufacture of cabbage tree hats by people in the Illawarra. Of particular note is the reference that members of the Denniss family paid Aboriginal people to climb the cabbage trees and collect palm ‘hands’ for plaiting in exchange for a ‘halfmoon’ of damper. There is also a record of the Tibbles family making quantities of hats to sell twice a year at their stand at the Sydney markets; and Mrs Brooks of Kangaroo Valley putting palm hands on her laundry roof to be bleached by the sun and frost.

4 Understand the context of the object.

The cabbage tree palm, Livistona australis, is a distinctive feature of the Illawarra landscape. The palm tree figures in many 19th century illustrations and travellers’ descriptions of the region, and stands of cabbage palms are still prominent landmarks in the Illawarra. Every part of the cabbage tree palm was exploited by early settlers for housing, food, furniture and hats. The reference to Aboriginal people gathering palm ‘hands’ for plaiting gives an important insight into the co-existence and cooperation of Aboriginal people and European settlers in the Illawarra. The notes kept by the Society highlight some ways in which family income was supplemented by women making and selling hats. They point to trade routes and cultural relationships not documented in other sources.

5 Analyse and record the fabric of the item

In common with other cabbage tree hats, this example was made by first boiling and bleaching the palm leaves. The leaves were then stripped into narrow widths using a variety of tools and blades—the width of the strip affecting the fineness of the plait. The strips were plaited together, this one with five strands. To make the hat, the plait was wound from the crown out, overlapping the plait beneath, and then sewn down to make the high crown and wide brim of this example. Additional blocking and steaming might refine the shape. This example has a worked band of plait around the crown. It is lined and has the owner’s name inside the crown, and a leather thong for fastening under the chin.
Consider comparative examples

There are about ten cabbage tree hats in museum and library collections in Australia. Perhaps half are linked to specific owners, but this example is the best-provenanced known at present, with specific and contextual history from the region. Comparison also highlights the quality of the straw plaiting in this example. Other examples show the same type of band around the crown and various shapes, from this style to boater types.

Assess significance against the main criteria

The hat is primarily of historic significance. It is both rare and representative of vernacular bush dress, in excellent condition, and well-provenanced. Its provenance could be argued as providing research significance as a reference point for unprovenanced cabbage tree hats. It may also have some aesthetic value related to the quality of craftsmanship and as a fine example of straw plaiting.

Write a succinct statement of significance

This cabbage tree hat is a fine, well-provenanced example of a characteristic item of bush dress in 19th century Australia. As a group they are significant as the only distinctive item of Australian dress entirely made from Australian materials. The hats have a special place in the developing egalitarian mythology of bush life, described by authors such as Henry Lawson. Writers noted that the wealth and status of wearers could not be determined under their battered and sun-darkened cabbage tree hats. They were worn by convicts, shepherds, squatters, settlers, miners on the goldfields, explorers in the outback and larrikins in the inner city.

This cabbage tree hat and its history helps tease out the relationship between people and the environment in the Illawarra, linking the landscape with the settler’s skills, their exploitation of local materials, and informal ways of supplementing incomes. Cabbage tree hats clearly demonstrate the adaptation of traditional British skills to the raw materials available in the environment, driven by climatic needs. This example is significant for being provenanced to a particular locality, with the capacity to interpret the distinctive history and character of the region.
An object or collection may be historically significant for its association with people, events, places and themes. This is the most common category of significance in historical collections. Historically significant objects range from those associated with famous people in their careers and lives to examples of daily life used by ordinary people. They include objects that are typical of particular activities, industries or ways of living. Historically significant items may be mass-produced, unique, precious or handmade.
Primary criteria  1. Historic significance

An object or collection may be historically significant for its association with people, events, places and themes. This is the most common category of significance in historical collections. Historically significant objects range from those associated with famous people and important events, to objects of daily life used by ordinary people. They include objects that are typical of particular activities, industries or ways of living. Historically significant items may be mass produced, unique, precious or handmade.
The Eureka Flag
BALLARAT FINE ART GALLERY, VICTORIA

Statement of significance: This is the original Southern Cross flag raised at the rebellion of gold diggers at Ballarat in Victoria on 3 December 1854, during the short but bloody incident known as the Eureka Stockade. Designed by a Canadian digger and sewn by three miners’ wives—Anastasia Withers, Anne Duke and Anastasia Hayes—the flag was flown from the stockade. Fuelled by digger resistance to a gold mining license fee, the rebellion came to symbolise Australian egalitarian values, mateship and resistance to authority. The tattered and fragile condition of the flag reflects its history since the fall of the Stockade, when it was captured by the military and police. Small pieces were cut from the flag and distributed as souvenirs. Its survival embodies the victory of the ideas and values of the Eureka Stockade and it has since become a powerful symbol for both left and right wing causes. The flag has historic significance as a direct relic of the events of the Eureka Stockade in December 1854, and as the symbol adopted by diggers in their struggle for rights. By extension it has become the symbol of many subsequent protest movements. It has social significance to the descendants of the miners and the people of Ballarat, whose history and identity is embodied in the flag. This social significance is echoed on a national scale by widespread recognition for the values attributed to the flag.

Fong Lee and Ling Collection, 1935
OXLEY MUSEUM, WELLINGTON, NEW SOUTH WALES

Statement of significance: The collection consists of goods left over when Fong Lee & Company’s store in Wellington closed in 1935. Alice Ling, wife of the store’s owner, William Suey Ling, packed a selection of goods to take with her on a trip to China, which did not eventuate. All the goods were then stored in a warehouse, which remained in Ling family ownership. In 1993, Alice Ling’s grandniece, Carole Gass, opened the packages. The collection includes shoes, clothing, calendars, mail order catalogues, medicine, groceries, kitchenware and ledger books. The Fong Lee and Ling Collection has historic significance as a rare selection of mixed Chinese and European shop goods, representing the nature of consumption in rural Australia in the 1930s and the role of Chinese families in early 20th century retailing.
Mobile cook’s galley
MUSEUM OF THE RIVERINA/WAGGA WAGGA AND DISTRICT HISTORICAL SOCIETY, NEW SOUTH WALES

Statement of significance: The mobile cook’s galley functioned as part of a Riverina district chaff-cutting plant operated by the Fife brothers from 1934 to the 1952–53 harvest. In original as-used condition, the galley’s complete contents include a rectangular frypan specially made by a local blacksmith, for cooking large quantities of chops and sausages. The galley’s former owner has described its history in detail, providing photographs of it in use. Itinerant work was a feature of Australia’s rural economy throughout the 19th and into the first half of the 20th century. The galley provides evidence of the hard work associated with life on the road, a topic not otherwise well recorded in formal written historical sources. The cook’s galley is of historic significance as an object demonstrating the lifestyle of itinerant workers in broad scale wheat agriculture. Its high integrity, expressed in its original as-used condition and complete contents, with associated documentation, makes it very rare, and adds to its significance.

Convict iron-gang trousers, c. 1868
WESTERN AUSTRALIAN MUSEUM, PERTH, WESTERN AUSTRALIA

Statement of significance: Although convicts were no longer transported to the eastern Australian colonies by the time they were sent to Western Australia (between 1850–68), a similar system of convict management was still used. This included issuing convicts who had been sentenced to wear leg irons with specific uniforms, including conspicuous pieces of clothing in black and yellow. A sentence to the iron gang was the most extreme level of secondary punishment, inflicted for up to seven years for offences committed while already under sentence.

To accommodate the fetters, the outside seams of these trousers can unbutton entirely from waistband to hem. This is the only pair of trousers among just five surviving pieces of Western Australian convict uniform, and is one of only two pairs of particoloured trousers, and less than 30 other pieces of convict clothing in Australia. These trousers were probably never issued, but have been on display for many years, causing the yellow colour to fade, in dramatic distinction to the bright mustard colour inside. The broad arrow stamps signify government property. The bizarre particolouring visually separated chain gang members from other convicts. This reinforced the humiliation associated with this form of servitude, and symbolised a convict’s exile from the wider society. The particoloured convict trousers have historic significance as an expression of the convict experience in Western Australia, and as a demonstration of the policies associated with secondary punishment. As one of only a few similar items to have survived from this period, their rarity enhances their significance.
An object may be aesthetically significant for its craftsmanship, style, technical excellence, beauty, demonstration of skill and quality of design and execution. It might include innovative or traditional objects from Indigenous or folk cultures or high art. Aesthetically significant objects may be unique or mass produced.
Embroidered bedcover, 1900–03
NATIONAL GALLERY OF AUSTRALIA, CANBERRA, AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

Statement of significance: This bedcover, worked by sisters Mary and Jane Hampson of Fernbank farm, Westbury, Tasmania, is densely embroidered with symbols of faith, loyalty and luck, including representations of familiar objects, farmyard and household pets, and embellished with popular sayings and patriotic motifs. It is dated between 1900–03. The bedcover has aesthetic significance as a fine example of Australian vernacular design and craft, employing a high standard of needlework. It demonstrates a lively appreciation of domestic life and traditional wisdom, and reflects current events as well as enduring values. Its colouring is strong and simple and the design, though naive, has coherence and charm.

Mask, Erub (Darnley) Island, Torres Strait, c. 1875
MACLEAY MUSEUM, UNIVERSITY OF SYDNEY, NEW SOUTH WALES

Statement of significance: Masks made of engraved and applied turtle-shell are unique to the Torres Strait Islands, where they were worn during ceremonies. Their specific use varies between groups. This mask was collected from Erub Island in the Torres Strait in 1875 by the Chevert Expedition, led and financed by William John Macleay, a wealthy Sydney pastoralist, naturalist and ethnographer. It was probably made between c. 1850–75. The plates of turtle-shell show that they had been used before for previous masks. The mask was made and collected at a time when the lifestyles and traditional cultures of Torres Strait Islanders were undergoing tremendous change. Europeans had begun visiting the Strait more frequently; a pearling industry had been established in the 1860s; and the London Missionary Society had established a mission on Darnley Island in 1871. The mask is therefore evidence of the survival of aspects of traditional culture, despite colonial occupation.

The mask is of aesthetic significance as a vibrant composition of characteristic Torres Strait style, vigorously worked in available materials and by traditional techniques. It is also of historic significance as a specimen of a unique Torres Strait Island ceremonial decoration, one of only a small number remaining in the world. It is evidence of the survival of aspects of traditional culture despite colonial occupation.

Margaret Dodd (born 1941), F X Holden, 1977, earthenware
ART GALLERY OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA, ADELAIDE

Statement of significance: Margaret Dodd’s wry and ambiguous sculptural ceramics introduced the 1960s ‘California Funk’ movement to Australia. Here it acquired the name ‘Skangaroovian Funk’, and was seen as a radical alternative to the modernist tradition in Australian pottery. Dodd adopted the Holden car as a typically Australian subject, and depicted it over several years in a series of diverse Australian identities, from shy native animal to sleazy car freak, and in a parody of male/female relationships. F X Holden has aesthetic significance as an Australian interpretation of the late 20th century ‘California Funk’ movement, and for its wry comment on Holden culture as a star of Australian industry, an ideal of suburban comfort, the dream of car fanciers and the role of women in the 1970s in Australia.
The significance of archives

It is important that archival collections maintain the series order in which they were created and used. The original placement of documents next to, inside of or underneath other documents can be meaningful in itself, and such relationships must be maintained. If an archival collection has already been disturbed by re-boxing, or if it has been rescued from the dump in a disordered condition, its significance is impaired, if not necessarily lost.

Primary criteria 3. Scientific or research significance

An object or collection may have research significance if it has major potential for further scientific examination or study. An object may be of scientific value if it demonstrates the documented distribution, range, variation or habitat of a taxon or taxonomic category, such as species or genus. Archaeological artefacts and collections may have research significance if they are provenanced, and were recovered from a documented context, and if they represent aspects of history that are not well reflected in other sources. This criterion tends to apply chiefly to biological, geological and archaeological material, but may also apply to documentary collections. All biological collections of wild plants or animals, providing they have some data about their provenance, are of some real or potential scientific value, since they contribute to an overall picture of the species, an ecological community, or area biota of a particular locality. Note that objects significant to the history of science or technology should be assessed under the criterion of historical significance, not scientific significance.
Two water-stones or enhydros
BURKE MUSEUM, BEECHWORTH, VICTORIA

Statement of significance: Water-stones are defined as ‘nodules of chalcedony containing water, sometimes in large amount’. (Dana, Descriptive Mineralogy, New York, 1904) While found in locations all over the world, they not common. The origin of water-stones is not precisely understood. (Boutakoff and Whitehead, ‘Enhydros or Water-Stones’, Mining and Geological Journal, 4/5, 1952) These specimens are two of only three known in Australia still to contain water. They were uncovered by Edward Dunn (1844–1937, later Head of Victoria’s Geological Survey) in 1862–64 at Spring Creek near Beechworth, in Victoria, in a dyke composed of fragments of granite and sandstone cemented together by large masses of chalcedony and crystallised quartz, and in a vein of chalcedony and clay, comprising gold workings now buried under debris.

The water-stones have scientific significance for their potential in mineralogical study, and as evidence of the variety of minerals and gemstones found around the gold-mining district of Beechworth in Victoria. They also have historic significance for their association with eminent Victorian geologist Edward Dunn, who discovered them in the early 1860s.

Brennan & Geraghty’s Store Archive, 1872–1972
NATIONAL TRUST, MARYBOROUGH, QUEENSLAND

Statement of significance: Brennan & Geraghty’s Store traded in Maryborough in Queensland for 101 years, from 1871–1972. Its records date back to 1872, and include accounts and ledgers, catalogues, correspondence and shopping lists. The store’s archive tell us a lot about the daily life and standard of living of local people, and demonstrate that Maryborough was a culturally diverse community from its early years as a settlement and port of entry to Australia. They also recall the hard times of flood, fire and depression. The range of records, existing in their original context in the store museum, enable research into a wide variety of subjects, from the history of the store complex to shopping habits, employment patterns, local manufactures, product histories, packaging and advertising trends and design, and recycling.

The research potential of the store’s archive gives it a high degree of scientific/research significance. It is also of historic significance as an intact collection of commercial records over a century in a country town.

Isotype specimen, Rhodamnia novoguineensis
AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL HERBARIUM, CANBERRA, AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

Statement of significance: This is a specimen from a collection made in Papua by R Pullen in the 1960s and 1970s (his collection number: 7481). The collection was designated by A J Scott of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, as the type collection for Rhodamnia novoguineensis, the name coined by Scott for the new species he delineated and published in the Kew Bulletin 33(3): 444 (1979). The holotype is held at the Herbarium of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, United Kingdom. This specimen has scientific significance as an isotype (duplicate of the holotype original specimen) on which the identification of Rhodamnia novoguineensis is based.
Primary criteria 4. Social or spiritual significance

Objects have social significance if they are held in community esteem. This may be demonstrated by social, spiritual, or cultural expressions that provide evidence of a community's strong affection for an object or collection, and of how it contributes to that community's identity and social cohesion. This evidence can usually be found by consulting people and communities, but it sometimes becomes apparent only when the object is threatened in some way. For example, the social significance of an object is often demonstrated through public debate about its location, conservation or interpretation.

Objects may acquire social value with the passage of time and through particular events or activities that demonstrate present-day community esteem. The case study below on two portraits of the See Poy children from Innisfail shows how contemporary activity can revalue objects to demonstrate social significance and new shades of meaning for groups or communities today. The social significance of an object is often demonstrated through public debate about its location, conservation and interpretation. Some objects have intrinsic spiritual qualities for particular groups of people and belief systems, and are referred to as sacred objects. Indigenous collections in museums and keeping places often contain secret/sacred objects, which must only be accessed by appropriate people. Social significance is only for living, contemporary value; if the value has ceased to exist, it becomes historical significance. For further discussion of social significance see What is Social Value, Chris Johnston, Australian Heritage Commission, 1992.
Australia II
WESTERN AUSTRALIAN MARITIME MUSEUM, FREMANTLE, WESTERN AUSTRALIA

Statement of significance: In 1983, Australia II became the first non-United States challenger to win the 132-year-old America’s Cup race off Rhode Island. Australia II's victory was greeted with public euphoria at home, and the yacht became an object of national pride. National attention focused on the yacht’s owner, entrepreneur Alan Bond, who headed the challenge for the Fremantle Yacht Club. Fremantle hosted the next America’s Cup race in 1996, when an American yacht took the Cup back to the United States. During these years, Fremantle (and Western Australia) was the focus of much national and international attention. The success of Australia II, with its innovative winged keel designed by Ben Lexcen, has not faded in the Australian memory.

The Commonwealth purchased Australia II after the race, and for nearly ten years it was on loan to the Australian National Maritime Museum at Darling Harbour in Sydney, a highlight attraction at the museum. Western Australia argued that the yacht should be returned for display in Fremantle. In 1994, the Commonwealth Government offered to return Australia II to Fremantle. This decision provoked considerable debate in Sydney and Perth, highlighting the high social significance both maritime communities attached to the yacht. Australia II has now been moved and takes pride of place in the Western Australian Maritime Museum in Fremantle.

Australia II has historic significance as the winner of a famous yachting victory, representing the sporting triumph of Australia over the United States in 1983. It was also the first time that the Cup had left the United States. Its significance for the Australian community was demonstrated by public support for its purchase by the Australian Government. While on display in Sydney, there were demands for its repatriation to its home State, and equally strong demands that it remain in the Australian National Maritime Museum in Sydney. The yacht’s relocation to Fremantle affirms the continuing affection Western Australians feel for this symbol of the time when their State attracted world attention. The yacht also has historic significance as a specimen of the most advanced design of its time.

See Poy family child portraits
INNISFAIL AND DISTRICT HISTORICAL SOCIETY, QUEENSLAND

Prominent merchants in Innisfail in far north Queensland, the See Poy family arrived from China in 1877 for the Palmer River gold rush. In 1994, descendants of the family donated a collection of clothing and family items to the Innisfail and District Historical Society, including two portraits of the See Poy children from around 1907–10. They were probably painted in Hong Kong or Southern China, using photos for reference. In one painting the children are dressed in European clothes, perhaps pointing to their future in Australia, and in the other their traditional Chinese dress underlines their Chinese heritage.

The portraits, in poor condition after nearly a century in the tropics, were removed from display in the Historical Society’s museum.
A Queensland Art Gallery conservator saw the paintings and, impressed by their significance, persuaded the Gallery to fund half the estimated conservation cost of $10,800. Innisfail and District Historical Society raised matching funds with donations from the community, family descendants, Johnstone Shire Council, and other fundraising activities.

After conservation, the paintings were displayed at the Queensland Art Gallery as the centerpiece of Chinese New Year celebrations, along with contemporary Asian and Chinese Australian works. See Poy family descendants, historians, and other community members gathered to celebrate the launch. At a time of considerable debate about immigration and multiculturalism, the portraits honour the hard work and contribution of the See Poy family, and more generally the contribution of Chinese immigrants to far north Queensland.

### Statement of Significance

The dual portraits of the See Poy children in Chinese and Australian dress represent both the Chinese heritage of the See Poy family and their new life and prosperity in Australia. These portraits are particularly significant for their provenance and history, and their association with a respected Chinese-Australian family in the Innisfail district, whose struggles and success in Australia are well documented. Since their conservation and higher public profile, the portraits have acquired social significance, symbolising the contribution and achievements of Chinese migrants in far north Queensland.

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**Yolngu people, Yirrkala, Collection of drawings, 1946**

The Yolngu people of north-east Arnhem Land drew these images with wax crayons on brown paper to complement a collection of keys to traditional bark paintings in ochre. They were made for anthropologist Professor Ronald M. Berndt, who pencilled numbers on each work (up to 94 on one example) referencing the artist's explanation of the meanings of each element. The comparative stability, convenience, and colour of the crayons and paper enabled a bolder character than permitted by traditional media and helped to produce a new form of artistic expression, the myth-map, combining sacred and historical events. Professor Berndt finally transcribed the works from his original field notebooks in 1988.

In 1995–98 an exhibition of the barks and crayon drawings, **Djalkiri Wänga: the land is our foundation**, travelled around Australia, and was shown in Yirrkala, where a new flowering of traditional art had occurred in the 1980s. While the exhibition was being arranged, the children and grandchildren of the 1946 artists saw for the first time works they had previously been unaware of, but which demonstrated the intergenerational links of traditional story and imagery: ‘their spirits are still in the land and their words still hold’. (G. Hutcherson, *Djalkiri Wanga: The Land is My Foundation*, Berndt Museum of Anthropology, University of Western Australia, 1995, p.7)

The collection has powerful spiritual significance, depicting sacred stories of the land’s mythic formation, and it has social significance to the Yirrkala community, as it demonstrates the continuity of traditional forms and stories in Yolngu culture.
**Statement of significance:** The collection has scientific significance as a research source into the anthropology of aesthetics. It also has historic and aesthetic significance as the first explanatory material to document traditional Yolŋu imagery and story of their land for balanda (foreign) understanding. It has further aesthetic significance as one of the first examples of the transfer of traditional Indigenous art onto European media. This aesthetic character is evident in the bold colours of the chosen crayons, the detailed scope possible thanks to the size of the paper and a new form of myth-map.

Policy guidelines and protocols for dealing with Indigenous cultural heritage are outlined in *Previous Possessions, New Obligations: A Plain English Summary of Policies for Museums in Australia and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples* (Museums Australia Inc. 1996); *Taking the Time: museums and galleries, cultural protocols and communities* (Museums Australia Inc. (QLD) 1998); and Karen Coote, *Care of Collections for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Keeping Places and Cultural Centres* (Australian Museum, Sydney, 1998).

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**String rosary, 1944**

*MIGRATION MUSEUM, ADELAIDE, SOUTH AUSTRALIA*

**Statement of significance:** Marian Szczepanowski, a Polish Catholic political prisoner, made this simple rosary in Sachsenhausen concentration camp during World War II. He made it with a religious medal and a piece of string, into which he knotted the decades of the rosary. His family later explained how the rosary served as the vehicle of the spiritual strength that enabled him to survive war and imprisonment, saying:

‘His strong religious faith was one of the things that kept him going and helped him survive. He made himself a rosary out of string, just by knotting it, to say his prayers at night. Even that was illegal. If prisoners were caught with a rosary they were severely beaten for it. It was confiscated. People disappeared for having such simple possessions. At night lying in his bunk, he prayed even for the SS man who beat him.’

(*Migration Museum interview with Marian’s son, Stan Szczepanowski, 1985*)

The rosary is of powerful spiritual significance to its maker, his family and his community of faith. It is also an inspiration to others, representing the spiritual strength that enables people to survive in the worst of circumstances.

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Reproduced courtesy of the Migration Museum, Adelaide, South Australia
Phar Lap
MUSEUM VICTORIA, NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AUSTRALIA

New Zealand-born Phar Lap is the best known and loved racehorse in Australian history, and is remembered for winning by huge margins while carrying great weights, including in the 1930 Melbourne Cup. In 1932, Phar Lap was sent to race in America. After winning one race, he died in mysterious circumstances—giving rise to the belief by some that he was poisoned. Conspiracy theories surrounding Phar Lap’s death have added to his legendary status.

Phar Lap was seen as a horse with a great heart, and the autopsy proved the public’s belief. His massive heart was displayed at the former Institute of Anatomy in Canberra for many years, and is now in the National Museum of Australia’s collection. Museum Victoria claimed the horse’s skin, which has been taxidermied and mounted as its most popular exhibit, cementing Phar Lap’s association with Melbourne and the Melbourne Cup. In his autobiography, Barry Humphries captures the public feeling towards the exhibit.

‘At the Museum [my father] would hurry me past the paintings and the stuffed bandicoots and the mineral samples, and stop only before one exhibit—Phar Lap, the famous racehorse, who stood, impeccably stuffed, in a large glass case. There was always a group of awe-struck spectators around this mysterious effigy. People would pop into the Museum in their lunch hour to pay their respects to the most celebrated dead horse in Australia.’


Phar Lap’s skeleton was returned to New Zealand, where it can be seen in Te Papa Tongarewa, the National Museum of New Zealand.

Statement of significance: Phar Lap’s physical remains are of social significance for many Australians and New Zealanders, because of the associations with a legendary champion of a favourite sport, and the long history as popular displays in Australian museums.
Provenance means the chain of ownership and context of use of an object. Knowing this history enables a more precise assessment. Provenance is central to establishing historic and scientific significance. An object may be significant because its provenance—a documented history of its existence, ownership and use—gives it a context in society at large or in the natural world, or in the more personal world of a known individual. Provenance has very particular meanings in some collection areas. For example art museums and collectors prefer a complete line of ownership of a work of art, from the time it leaves the artist’s studio to its latest appearance in the saleroom. Artworks of doubtful or incomplete provenance have less value than those with a clear sequence of owners. Archaeological material should desirably be provenanced to a particular site, and to an exact stratum and location within that site. Archaeological material removed from a site without having had its provenance recorded has little value, unless it has other significance, such as aesthetic. Even then, an object whose archaeological provenance is unknown is diminished in value in the same way as an artwork of doubtful provenance. Archival collections take the provenance of a record as a basic organising principle. A record forms part of a series created by a specific agency or individual, and must remain in its original place within the series to maintain its specific integrity, and the integrity of the series and archive as a whole.
**Statement of significance:** Eugene von Guérard (1811–1901) arrived in Victoria as a gold seeker in 1854 but soon resumed his painting career, specialising in two basic landscape subjects, the wilderness and the homestead. His extensive series of homestead portraits, including this example, depict the peaceful possession and prosperity enjoyed by settlers in the Western District of Victoria.

The painting *From the verandah of Purrumbete* remained with the owners of Purrumbete— the Manifold family—for 120 years. Its ownership by one family for so many years enhances its value and its significance. This work also has historic significance as a demonstration of the ‘Europeanisation’ of the Australian countryside via the garden plantings and fence, the small boat on the lake and the fur blanket hung on the verandah rail.

**Steam hammer, 1912**
Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery, Launceston, Tasmania

**Statement of significance:** This large Nasmyth steam hammer was imported from Manchester, in Great Britain, in 1912. It was used in the blacksmiths’ shop at the Launceston Railway Workshops, where Tasmania’s rolling stock was manufactured and maintained between 1868 and 1993. The steam hammer was sold for scrap in 1982 and subsequently purchased by Launceston’s Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery as example of Tasmania’s industrial heritage. The museum has since moved its history and art collections into the workshop buildings, and manages the entire precinct as a heritage site.

The steam hammer is of historic significance as the largest of four in the Launceston Railway Workshops, the centre of Tasmanian heavy industry for 70 years. It is a rare Australian example of an arched steam hammer, and the only Tasmanian example. Although sold for scrap at the end of its working life, the steam hammer’s significance is enhanced by its return to its original context in the Blacksmith Shop.

**Goat cart, 1915**
Queensland Museum, Brisbane, Queensland

**Statement of significance:** Goats were a once indispensable but now largely forgotten part of Queensland rural life. Costing little or nothing to feed, they thrived where other domestic animals failed. They provided meat, butter, milk and cheese; pelts for floor rugs; and they carted firewood and water. The Queensland Museum acquired this goat cart—a professionally made smaller version of a horse-drawn coach. Further research into goats and goat carts identified this cart as belonging to the Wallace family of Rockhampton—a provenance that enlarges the history of Queenslanders’ use of goats in domestic life.

The detailed family provenance of this goat cart enhances understanding of how goats were used in bush life in the early 20th century. It is historically significant as a fine example of its type.
An object may be significant because it represents a particular category of object, or activity, way of life or historical theme.
Campaign or travelling chest, 1850s
WOMEN'S HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION, BRISBANE, QUEENSLAND

Statement of significance: Campaign chests—also known as military chests—were made in two parts that could be carried separately. The drawer handles fitted flush for easy transport, and the corners were reinforced with brass. Such chests were typical of furniture owned by men whose careers required them to travel, such as the Army or the Colonial Office. This particular mahogany chest was owned by Sir George Bowen, the first Governor of Queensland (1859–68), a professional civil servant who later governed New Zealand, Victoria, Mauritius and Hong Kong.

The chest is historically significant for its association with Queensland’s first governor. It is representative of a type of travelling furniture often owned by people who came to Australia in the 19th century. Its provenance makes it a reference point for assessing the numerous undocumented campaign chests in public and family collections.

Ruston Hornsby gas engine and gas producer, 1922
GATTON AND DISTRICT HISTORICAL SOCIETY, GATTON, QUEENSLAND

Statement of significance: From 1922 to 1937 this 19hp suction gas engine powered a complete irrigation system consisting of the engine itself, its gas plant, irrigation pump, and main and spray lines. It was one of the first successful irrigation systems to be installed in the Lockyer district in Queensland, enabling diversification of local agriculture.

The engine’s efficient gas producer eliminated the need for a boiler, signalling the demise of steam power in most agricultural applications.

The engine is of historic significance, having powered one of the first successful irrigation systems in the Lockyer district. Irrigation transformed the landscape and economy of the Gatton area, enabling the diversification of local agriculture. It is a representative example of the survival of slow-running internal combustion engines well into the early years of the 20th century.

Centenary plate, 1888
KATANNING AND DISTRICT HISTORICAL SOCIETY, WESTERN AUSTRALIA

Statement of significance: This plate has historic significance as a representative example of the souvenir ware produced for mass consumption at a time of community celebration—the 1888 Centenary of British settlement in Australia. The use of the Coat of Arms with a kangaroo and emu shows that this form of the crest we know today was used for many years before Australia became a federated nation.
Comparative criteria: 3. Rarity

An object may be significant as a rare, unusual or particularly fine example of its type. It is possible for an object’s significance to be rated as both rare and representative.
Possum skin cloak, Lake Condah, Victoria, 1872
MUSEUM VICTORIA, MELBOURNE

Statement of significance: A possum skin cloak collected around 1872 from an Aboriginal person at the Lake Condah mission. The cloak is made of 49 skins sewn together with sinews from the tail of a kangaroo. It is beautifully decorated with a variety of incised markings that were made with sharp implements such as shells or pieces of bone. Possum skin cloaks were commonly worn by Aboriginal people in south eastern Australia for warmth and weather protection. In addition to their practical functions, they embodied a language of affiliations with places, totems and groups. Designs from possum skin cloaks might also be cut into trees around a burial site.

Although possum skin cloaks were often described by early settlers and explorers, and appear in many 19th century photographs of Aboriginal people, less than ten cloaks survive in museum collections in Australia and overseas. Of these the Lake Condah example is perhaps the finest, for its intact condition and elaborately incised patterns. Possum skin cloaks are significant for the skills, culture and way of life represented in their design, manufacture and use. Cloaks were traded between Aborigines and Europeans, and were prized for their warmth and waterproof qualities. Aboriginal people continued to make cloaks through the 19th century, and they were exhibited and admired at various international exhibitions.

Long case clock, 1897
REDLAND MUSEUM, BRISBANE, QUEENSLAND

Statement of significance: This long case clock was entirely made in Brisbane in 1897—the mechanism by Nils Clauson and his son George, and the cedar case by a Danish friend. It is one of only two clocks by this maker remaining in Brisbane. It has a movement with a remontoire escapement and an elaborate compensated pendulum for high performance time keeping. The clock was loaned for some time to the Brisbane Observatory.

The Clauson clock is rare and significant as one of only a few clocks fully made in Queensland in the 19th century. It is also significant for its strong provenance to the maker’s family. The clock has aesthetic significance as a fine example of craftsmanship, for the quality of its design and its technical excellence.
Comparative criteria: 4. Condition, intactness and integrity

An object may be significant because it is unusually complete, or in sound, original condition. Objects with these characteristics are said to have integrity. Changes and adaptations made in the working life of an object do not necessarily diminish significance, and in fact are also recognised as an integral part of the object and its history.
First world war uniform, 1918
AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL, CANBERRA, AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

**Statement of significance:** This uniform was collected from Private George Giles, 29th Battalion, 5th Division Australian Imperial Force, at Heilly, France, on 30 July 1918, just as he came out of the trenches. Charles Bean of the War Records Section was guided in his collecting by his vision of a war museum that would depict not only great battles, but also the character of the ordinary Australian digger. Giles’ entire uniform, full kit and rifle, were swapped for new ones, and the uniform was packed up still impregnated with dirt and sweat, which Bean regarded as integral to preserving the experience of warfare. The uniform has been preserved in this condition by the Australian War Memorial ever since.

Private Giles’ uniform is of special historic significance, not only for its precise provenance but also for its particular integrity, as it comprises every item of uniform and equipment worn by an Australian soldier on the Western Front in 1918, and also includes the all-pervasive mud. In this way it represents a most direct experience of the war.

Riley Family collection of toys, 1890s–1900s
MUSEUM OF CHILDHOOD, EDITH COWAN UNIVERSITY, PERTH, WESTERN AUSTRALIA

**Statement of significance:** This collection of 150 toys belonged to Bishop C O L Riley’s six children (b. 1887–97). The toys are in excellent condition and include many rare items. The collection is supported by extensive archival and published material about the family, particularly the oldest child, Pauline. The museum also holds photographs of the children, some with their toys, an oral history with Pauline at 98, and other items belonging to the family. The collection is among the most complete in Australia to have come from one family.

The Riley collection of toys has historic significance in representing the toys belonging to a privileged middle-class Australian family in the late 19th to early 20th century. They demonstrate social class, gender roles, religious observance and the acculturation of Australian children into the British Empire. The collection is rare in its excellent provenance, integrity and completeness. Many of the toys have aesthetic value because of their beautiful style and craftsmanship. The collection also has social significance for the community of people who still remember Bishop Riley.
Comparative criteria: 5. Interpretive potential

Objects and collections may be significant for their capacity to interpret and demonstrate aspects of experience, historical themes, people and activities. In the hands of a skilled museum worker, most objects have potential to tell their story, and their significance is best described by reference to one or more of the primary criteria. However, there are some circumstances where interpretive potential is a major attribute of an object or collection, or may indeed be the only criterion for which the object is significant. To some extent, interpretive potential represents the value or utility the object has for a museum as a focus for interpretive and educational programs. It may also be significant for its links to particular collection themes, histories, or ways of seeing the collection. Some objects may have very limited significance under the primary criteria, but they may still have some degree of significance for museums for their ability to interpret and illustrate particular themes, people or ideas. This is the case for many humble, unprovenanced social history objects, where the object stands for, or is used as a link to, wider themes or issues. Interpretive potential can be particularly important where certain aspects of history and experience are not well represented in museum collections. Some people's lives are not materially rich or well expressed in the material culture record. In museums their lives or experience may be interpreted through generic objects that have interpretive potential but are otherwise of limited significance.
Soy sauce jars
INVERELL PIONEER VILLAGE, NEW SOUTH WALES

Statement of significance: These brown-glazed stoneware spouted jars were probably imported from China and used for storing soy sauce and other liquids. The jars are believed to have come from an area near Inverell in New South Wales, used for Chinese market gardens around 1900. Their style and material are representative of the domestic ceramics used by the Chinese in Australia. Unlike many similar jars recovered from archaeological excavations, these examples lack a firm provenance and have limited historical significance. However, the jars can interpret the diet and tastes of the Chinese and their distinctive way of life, and are a reminder of the diverse culinary traditions and tools in Australia’s history.

Despite their limited significance their interpretive potential makes them useful museum objects, particularly for museums where there are few objects left to illustrate Chinese presence in a locality.

Balmain Swimming Club archives and memorabilia
BALMAIN, NEW SOUTH WALES

Statement of significance: This is a collection of historic photographs, trophies, archives and swimming memorabilia reflecting the people, activities and social life of the Balmain Swimming Club, operating from the Dawn Fraser Pool at Balmain, Sydney. Built in 1883, it is the only remaining saltwater enclosed timber pool. The club was formed when the pool opened. Its collection documents the oldest swimming club in Australia, the club that nurtured Dawn Fraser, one of Australia’s finest swimmers and Olympians. The collection represents and interprets the people, social life and sporting activities of the club. It shows how the pool has been used over a hundred years and demonstrates the continuing social significance of the club and the pool for the people of Balmain. The collection is an integral part of the significance of the pool, and its values are enhanced for still being held in situ, in rooms above the pool’s timber deck.

In situ movable items or collections may be significant for their capacity to interpret and demonstrate aspects of the significance of the place, as well as for their associations with people. For example, portraits of mayors and aldermen hung in town halls are significant for their interpretive potential to help bring to life the names and faces of the people who used the place. Such portraits may also have significance as an integral part of the decoration of interior hallways, although their aesthetic value is sometimes debatable. Removed from their context, the portraits are usually of limited interest and reduced significance.

Places with in situ collections generally have greater interpretive potential to demonstrate their significance, than comparable sites without movable collections. Decisions to remove or in any way alter the relationship between the place and its collections must be carefully evaluated through assessing and understanding significance.
In the past, few museums paid attention to recording the history and provenance of objects. If the object was properly accessioned (and many collections were not), information about it was recorded in a register and/or on a simple catalogue card. There was often no space to record the history of the object beyond a few lines. Letters from donors, which perhaps had valuable information about the object, were filed separately. The traditional catalogue card thus often limited the amount of information a museum recorded about an object.
Significance and documenting objects

In the past, few museums paid attention to recording the history and provenance of objects. If the object was properly accessioned (and many collections were not), information about it was recorded in a register and/or on a simple catalogue card. There was often no space to record the provenance and history of the object beyond a few lines. Letters from donors, which perhaps had valuable information about the object, were filed separately. The traditional catalogue card thus often limited the amount of information a museum recorded about an object.

Most museums now use object files to collate information about their most significant items. These allow references and research material to be assembled together, including letters from donors, notes about their family history, photocopies from reference books, photographs, auction records and copies of labels. Conservation reports also go into object files, although a separate, more detailed conservation file may be maintained. This range of information is vital to investigating and understanding the significance of an object.

The first step in significance assessment is to collate and assemble information and research about the object into a file or folder.

Context and cataloguing

The context of objects, and their stories and associations, is central to the idea of significance and to the process of investigating the meaning and values of objects.

Where possible, document objects in their context before removal to a museum.

Consider the kinds of questions that future historians might ask about an object, its context, meaning and pattern of use. The way an object is documented at the time of acquisition will, to a large extent, determine how future generations understand it. If you don’t have time to catalogue an object properly, at least record its provenance, context and donor details. It is preferable to acquire fewer well documented objects than lots of objects with no history. Some collection policies state that the acquisitions rate should not exceed a museum’s capacity to properly catalogue and document objects.

Many museums with historical collections no longer accept unprovenanced objects lacking clear associations to a locality.

It is sometimes possible to track down more information about unprovenanced objects in a collection. This is well worth trying for the most significant items. Many museums have discovered exciting new information and photos of an object in use by recontacting donors. Family descendants, neighbours and the phone book are all useful tools in this process.
Making acquisitions—collecting according to significance

Significance is an integral part of collection development, and it is useful to consider significance when thinking about making an acquisition. Often museums accept objects from well-meaning donors, with little regard for an object’s significance. Asking yourself these types of questions can help you avoid this: What is the significance of this object? What is the significance of the object in relation to our collection? Does it meet the purposes of our museum?

Hypothetical case study

An assortment of bottles, syringes, bedpans and the like is now referred to as a ‘heritage collection’ in a medical teaching institution. Someone with a sense of history gathered this material together when a local hospital closed, and the objects were about to be discarded. A retired nurse was hired to create a display from the material, with the assistance of some museum studies students. They could not identify all the objects, and so could only produce a basic register. Without knowing what everything was or how the objects connected to one another, they had trouble displaying the material. But the display was wanted urgently and so the objects were placed in cases with no interpretation—there were no stories associated with them, so there was little to tell.

This case study shows that it is impossible to assess the significance of objects without knowing—outside the broadest descriptions—what they are, how and when they were used and by whom and for what.

In this hypothetical case study, the collection was established without considering significance. The original collector was under the mistaken impression that old objects would make a museum collection. However, without supporting information to assess significance they remain just that—old objects. If the institution established a collection policy and assessed the significance of the material on display, some of the objects would have become meaningful and relevant. Without this, the collection can only be described as insignificant.

Deaccessioning—letting go of objects without significance

Significance—or the lack of it—is often the central reason for a museum deciding to deaccession and dispose of objects. The most common reasons for deaccessioning an object are duplication, deteriorated condition, and irrelevance to a collection. The last two reasons can be tested using significance assessment by asking: Does its condition affect the object’s significance? What is its significance? Is it significant to our collection? Answering these questions will provide a strong and reasoned case for your final decision.
Use of significance assessment in deaccessioning decisions

A pair of gothic corner cabinets were considered for deaccessioning because they did not meet the primary aim of the Canberra and District Historical Society collection policy: to represent the history of Canberra and its district. There is simply not enough information to connect these objects with Canberra, though it remains a possibility that, if someone had the time and resources to research the cabinets, more information might emerge. Assessing the significance of the cabinets did not produce any strong reasons why the Historical Society should retain them, so the decision was made to deaccession them.

No place in the cottage—Gothic corner cabinets, c. 1880s
CANBERRA AND DISTRICT HISTORICAL SOCIETY, AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

This pair of Gothic Revival corner cabinets was displayed in the Canberra and District Historical Society’s cottage museum for many years, with the doors open wide to hide the carved religious image of the Holy Spirit, represented as a descending dove. Though they were obviously made as church or convent furnishings, the objects found their way into the collection when a member of the Society purchased them in an antique shop in Yass, New South Wales and donated them to the society. No information about the cabinets’ origins or use was available. A review of the cottage’s interpretation over the past few years resulted in a decision to remove the cabinets, and others items that were considered inappropriate to a domestic setting.

Careful physical examination showed that the cabinets are bush woodwork of packing case timber carved by an amateur rather than a professional artist. One cabinet is intact—only the central box-portion of the other is original. Both had been painted in modern oil paints before they were displayed in the cottage. Conservators recently treated the intact cabinet, removing the paint to show its dark-stained original finish.

Statement of significance: The cabinets have historic significance as evidence of the desire of bush people to furnish their religious buildings in ‘proper’ Gothic style—even if they had to make it themselves. The design and carving of the cabinets have aesthetic significance as strong, vernacular renderings of a Christian symbol in the 19th century Gothic Revival style. The integrity of one cabinet gives it a higher degree of significance than the other, whose condition lessens its significance. The two cabinets together have more meaning than if they were separated.
Significance of intact and *in situ* collections—keeping objects in their place

Many objects derive their meaning from their relationships with other objects in the places they were originally used, for example, a fully-equipped kitchen or workshop. Most objects in such settings are part of a larger purpose, with each complementing the others. Such complete, sometimes intact collections are therefore most meaningful in the places where they were assembled and used, that is, *in situ*.

The significance of intact and *in situ* collections lies in keeping objects together and in their original place, an idea that can run contrary to conventional museum collecting. Nevertheless, we need to be aware of the special significance of intact and *in situ* collections. Some collections are so significant for their integrity, condition, rarity and provenance that we should make every effort to maintain them, not just in an intact condition but also *in situ*, and pay extra attention to assessing their significance.

Keeping it in the shed—Tom Shaw’s shed contents, 1928–1991

Tom Shaw and his family moved into their newly-built bungalow in the Sydney suburb of Longueville in 1927. Tom created a work shed in the low space under the back of the house. Over the next 60 years he filled it with precisely arranged tools, equipment and materials he used to make and mend household items, furniture, clothes and toys, and to maintain the garden. His motto hung on the wall: ‘The best way to kill time is to work it to death’.

Tom Shaw died in 1991, and Mrs Shaw died four years later, bequeathing the shed to the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney. The workshop could not be kept *in situ*, but the Powerhouse collected a substantial section of the shed, including the workbench, and shelves with all their contents. Before removal to the museum the workshop was photographed overall and in detail, and every item numbered and mapped. Using this data, Tom Shaw’s shed can be recreated in an exhibition of his own characteristic ordered clutter.

*Statement of significance:* The contents of Tom Shaw’s shed have historic significance as representative examples of tools and equipment in a suburban shed setting from 1928 to 1991. The material has even greater significance as a substantially intact assemblage of more than 360 items in sound condition, demonstrating an ordinary man’s extraordinary energy, thrifty values and highly organised mind. It also demonstrates men’s domestic labour and the specialised use of domestic spaces over a large part of the 20th century in Australia.
The significance of intact collections
Very few deceased estates can be preserved intact or in situ.
Assessing the significance of each case, especially using comparative criteria, helps you to decide the best course of action. Many museums now have programs to record and photograph significant in situ collections, as a valid alternative to collecting.

Tom Shaw’s shed contents are representative, and rare in their survival. They have a high degree of integrity in their relative completeness and in their well-used but sound condition. Collections such as Tom Shaw’s shed are archives of material culture. As with documentary archives, much of their significance lies in the relationship of all of the parts to the whole. It is therefore critical to document and preserve substantial parts in their original arrangement. A museum would probably only collect an intact example such as this if it owned no other, knew of no others, if it could be safely stored and managed, and if it met the museum’s collection objectives very precisely.

Significance of in situ objects
The Calthorpes’ furnishings, equipment and house have meaning because they are intact. If items were extracted from the house, or new items introduced, their meaning would be diminished. So would the room settings, if taken down and recreated in a museum. It is not always possible—and it is a huge financial outlay—to conserve an entire house in situ, but it can be done. When it is, we have a time capsule of human life conserved for the future.

Keeping them in the home—Calthorpes’ House and contents, 1927–1979
ACT HISTORIC PLACES, CANBERRA, AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

Statement of significance: The house at 24 Mugga Way, Canberra, was built and furnished in 1927 for the Calthorpe family. Mrs Dell Calthorpe (1892–1979) made a special shopping expedition to Beard Watson & Co in Sydney, where she bought nearly all the furnishings in one visit. For £705 and 19 shillings and sixpence she acquired furniture, curtains, carpets and china and glassware for the hall, sitting room, dining room and main bedroom. The other rooms were furnished with goods from the Calthorpes’ previous house in Queanbeyan. Outside the house there was a garage, a cubby house, ornamental and kitchen gardens, and a 1942 addition—an air-raid shelter.

Mrs Calthorpe was house-proud and thrifty. She was a careful housekeeper and little was added to the main furnishings and equipment of the house throughout her life. When she died the furnishings amounted to a lifetime’s assemblage representing suburban domestic life in the mid-20th century. The rarity of such an intact collection in its original setting was recognised, and the Australian Capital Territory’s Government purchased the house as a heritage site and museum. The house is now a closed collection; no additional material has been added (except for some items for interactive use by visitors). It is one of about 15 intact house collections in public ownership throughout Australia, although one of only two 20th century examples.

The Calthorpes’ house collection is of unique historical significance as the total contents of a middle class suburban household from 1927 to 1979. It contains both highly individualised items and standard representative household goods, which are documented by original paperwork and oral histories. Contained in its original setting of house and garden, Calthorpes’ House maintains the unity and meaning with which it was regarded by two generations of one family. It is rare in this degree of unity.
Bringing objects together in a place—Convict collection
OWNED BY THE AUSTRALIAN MUSEUM, SYDNEY; ON LOAN TO PORT ARTHUR HISTORIC SITE, TASMANIA

Statement of significance: In 1972, collector Melbourne Ward bequeathed a large collection of cultural material from around the world to the Australian Museum. Among the collection are 43 items of convict-related material with a Tasmanian provenance, including clothing, punishment equipment such as leg irons, and memorabilia such as Port Arthur pottery and bricks. These appear to have come from W L Williamson’s Old Curiosity Shop in Kingston, Tasmania, Dr Frederick Watson of Canberra, and J W Beattie’s Port Arthur Museum in Hobart—all well-known sources. In 1988–90 the curator of Port Arthur Historic Site negotiated with the Australian Museum to have the convict material transferred from Sydney on long-term loan. Now on display at Port Arthur, the significance of this part of the collection is better understood for being seen in its original context.

Melbourne Ward’s collection of convict-related items illustrates aspects of the experiences of convict life in Tasmania. It has a fair provenance to three well-known sources of this type of material, and represents a tradition of relic collecting popular among antiquarians and gentlemen collectors. Individual items are significant as representative of their types—rakes, pick head, an axe—while others are rare, for example, three coats, a vest and a pair of trousers.

Return of objects to a place of significance

The significance of some objects is closely connected to their place of use and context. Their significance is largely related to where they come from, usually because they are associated with a particular person or event at this place. The significance of such objects may be best expressed and illustrated by the object being returned to the place with which it is strongly associated.

Significance prompting repatriation of objects to places

Not all objects should—or can—be returned to their point of origin or place with which they are strongly associated, but you can use significance when making decisions about whether an object would be better managed, and its significance more thoroughly expressed, in one place over another.

Some cases are easy to determine: if a local museum receives material that relates to another town in another State, it could have advantages to both sides to transfer the items to the place with the strongest connections. Many museums are building new relationships with communities by returning objects to the people or context where they were most significant. Answers to questions such as these may not be clear, but considering the significance of objects in relation to places can help you resolve competing interests. In museums, it is usually preferable to transfer ownership legally and absolutely. Where this is not possible, owing to donor stipulations or other conditions, long-term loan is a viable option.
Significance as a guide to conservation

Significance guides the conservation of an object by identifying the important elements of its fabric, history and meaning. Once these features are clearly expressed in a statement of significance, proposed treatments can be checked to ensure that all these aspects of the object are conserved.

Most museums now emphasise conservation and preservation over restoration, which usually entails irreversible changes to the fabric and appearance of an object. With a few exceptions, restoration is only used (or indicated) when an object needs to be made operational.

It is easy to lose vital historical information as a result of poorly planned and thought-out treatments. Seek the advice of a trained conservator before restoring objects in a collection.

Restoration versus conservation

Ideas about restoration versus conservation have changed over time.

The coach was heavily used, repaired and modified from a coach to a wagon throughout its working life, evidence of which was obliterated by its restoration in 1948. This often happens with historic machinery and transport (and other) items, which are sometimes believed to be more significant in their original form (that is, how they looked when they left the factory), than in their ‘as-found’ condition. Most museums now recognise that changes and adaptations made over an object’s working life are an integral part of its story and significance.

Restoration of the coach has made it more difficult to interpret the life history and changing fortunes of this object.

Significance assessment can guide museum decisions about restoration versus conservation. If you have duplicate examples and want to undertake a restoration, use significance assessment to choose the least significant item for restoration, keeping the most significant objects in unrestored, intact condition.

Conflicting assessments of significance are part and parcel of managing heritage objects. Collection managers should ensure that objects regarded as suitable candidates for extensive restoration are thoroughly documented by photography, oral history and any other available means.
Passenger coach Cobb & Co. coach no. 100, c. 1890

COBB & CO. MUSEUM, TOOWOOMBA, QUEENSLAND

Four Americans who had joined the rush to the Victorian goldfields established the Cobb & Co. transport company in 1853. Though on-sold several times, the company provided passenger and mail transport throughout Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland for nearly 70 years. Its name became synonymous with bush travel:

“Through stringybark and blue gum, and box and pines we go A hundred miles shall see tonight the lights of Cobb and Co!”

(Henry Lawson, The Lights of Cobb and Co.)

The Queensland branch of the company became a separate entity in 1881. This coach was probably built at its coachworks in Charleville about 1890. When Cobb & Co. closed down in 1924 the coach was purchased by Dugald Cameron and converted as a drover’s wagon by removing the roof and rear passenger compartment. In 1936, it was bequeathed to Billy Hart, who ran an all-Aboriginal droving team between the Northern Territory and Walgett. In the course of such work the wagon received many repairs, but it was finally abandoned in 1940. It was rescued in 1948 and restored to a passenger coach configuration by Ferguson’s Coachworks, Toowoomba; thereafter it became the centrepiece of W R F Bolton’s Australian Museum. The Bolton family eventually donated it to the Queensland Museum, and it is now displayed in the museum’s Toowoomba branch.

**Statement of significance:** The coach has historic significance as an example of a passenger and mail coach serving south-west Queensland between about 1890–1924, as operated by Cobb & Co., famous for bush transport throughout the eastern Australian colonies since 1853. As one of only about five Cobb & Co. coaches in public collections it is rare, though it might be regarded as a ‘grandfather’s axe’ (more replacements than original material), representing one use of the vehicle rather than the survival of its authentic fabric.
Decisions in managing collections

The significance of objects and collections is central to establishing priorities for management decisions, such as conservation treatment or disaster preparedness. Knowing the relative significance of objects allows rational decisions to be made about which object or objects come first in, for instance, emergency rescue, expensive conservation treatment, storing in archival-quality containers or housing in environmentally-controlled and secure storage.

Decisions based on the significance of the Endeavour journal

Items and collections classified as National Treasures, Priority 1 are conserved as appropriate, and in line with the National Library’s preservation policy. They are reformatted for preservation and access; given appropriate primary protective housing in tailor-made boxes; and stocked in locked water-resistant cabinets, drawers and shelving in an environmentally-controlled secure store.

The Endeavour journal has been copied to secure its information, and is available as a CD-ROM for wider public access. The journal itself is displayed in highly controlled environmental conditions, and is available for loan only in accordance with the library’s stringent exhibition and loan policy. As part of disaster preparedness planning at the Library, the journal is housed and stored to ensure appropriate environmental protection and to facilitate salvage in the case of an emergency.

Using significance to determine priorities for collections management

It is difficult to rank significant material in priority order, but responsible management—including safeguarding significant material in the event of a disaster—is the first responsibility of heritage collection managers. It is common sense to allocate resources for storage, conservation and research to the most significant objects in a collection first.

Further advice and guidelines on preparing for a disaster can be found in Be Prepared: Guidelines for small museums for writing a disaster preparedness plan, Heritage Collections Council, 2000.

Significance guiding exhibition policies

Assessing the significance of a whole collection, as described in part 6, may inform exhibition policies, to ensure that the significance and history of the collection is accessible to visitors. This can be particularly important when the museum incorporates significant discrete collections, or its history is shaped by a particular view of collecting. Collections and some exhibits may over time become artefacts of museum history, and should be conserved.

Survey and assessment of a whole collection helps to develop policies to ensure that the collection is displayed in a way consistent with its significance.

The statement of significance for the James Cook Museum collection in Cooktown argues...

The inclusion of historical artefacts, Indigenous material and natural history specimens in the one collection demonstrates a wide-ranging interest in the material world. It harks back to an older and more eclectic approach to collecting which characterised 19th century museums. The collection demonstrates curiosity and enthusiasm for all aspects of the material culture and the environment of Cooktown. Although the collection is overwhelmingly historical in character, new displays should endeavour to preserve this intertwined interest in the cultural and natural history of the region.
The journal of the 1768–1771 voyage of the Endeavour records the first European sighting and exploration of the east coast of Australia. It is a key object in Australian history. The National Library has assessed it for collections management planning as a National Treasure, Priority 1 (out of 4), a category for materials of exceptionally high significance, with both artefactual and information value. Other examples in this category at the Library are Captain Bligh’s longboat journal and the Alfred Deakin manuscript collection.
THE SIGNIFICANCE ASSESSMENT PROCESS FOR A WHOLE COLLECTION

From time-to-time every museum needs to take stock of its collection and review its significance as a whole. The process is a scan of the collection, with a history, analysis and overview assessment, of the collection’s significance. This is particularly important when revising your collection policy or writing a new one.
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The assessment represents an introduction to a collection policy. It helps you understand the pattern and context of your museum’s collecting, allows you to reflect on its strengths and weaknesses, identify significant objects and themes significant for the museum’s history and records, and set collecting directions for the future.

In addition, significance assessment of a whole collection helps to identify priority objects for conservation, further research and individual assessment, and as outlined in Part 5, for disaster preparedness planning. The resulting statement of significance for the collection can also be drawn on as an introduction to the museum’s exhibitions, in display texts, publications, brochures and grant applications.

Assessing the significance of a collection as a whole is essentially the same process you use for assessing the significance of individual objects. It can be summarised from existing knowledge, but you will learn more about a collection through further research.

Consider holding a seminar to talk about the collection’s significance, or invite comments by advertising the process in your local paper. Many people value certain objects and collections as part of the identity and heritage of their community. The summary of a collection’s significance should take account of how the collection is valued and used by its audiences, past and present. The information obtained through consultation helps to identify objects of social value to the community.

Part 5 gives examples of using significance to manage collections.
The eight key steps to assess a whole collection are outlined below.

**Step 1:** Collate the collection’s records and the museum’s archives.

**Step 2:** Research the history of the collection and the museum.

Many established museums and historical societies already have published histories, but they may not be well related to the development of their collections. If this is the case, there are several things you can do to address steps 1 and 2 outlined above, including:

- identify the main themes shaping the evolution of the collection, and key objects related to major themes;
- identify the original purpose of the collection and how it was used or displayed;
- list the range and scope of the collection;
- summarise the acquisition of important objects or collections;
- consider the role of significant benefactors, collectors and curators in shaping the collection; and
- determine events in the museum’s history that have impacted on the collection and its display, such as new buildings or extensions;

Many collections will demonstrate aspects of the changing history of museums. At times whole displays may become artefacts of museum history, and have social value to generations of visitors. You may be surprised at what your examination of the collection reveals about your museum.

**Step 3:** Consult the community and record its ideas and comments about the collection.

You can work through the following actions to carry out step 3, including:

- talk with previous committee members, volunteers or staff about the collection’s development and significant acquisitions;
- discuss the collection with donors, visitors, researchers, affiliated societies and community interest groups—this will contribute to your understanding of the significance of the collection. Don’t assume you know which objects have particular social value to the community. Public events and activities to test the opinions of the community will raise awareness of the importance of the collection and strengthen the bonds between the museum and its audience;
- consider the community’s relationship with the museum and its sense of attachment to the collection. Are there significant objects or themes in the museum that the community feels strongly about?
- identify what role the museum has in your community or town. Have there been times when the community has rallied to support the museum? This may be important in demonstrating the social value of the collection;
- determine which objects are the best loved, most remembered and talked about by visitors; and

- consider holding events and activities to engage the community and explore ideas and aspirations for the collection. Ensure there are mechanisms in place, such as questionnaires and comment books, to properly record opinions and comments in the contributors’ own words.

**Step 4: Assess the relationship between the museum buildings and the collection.**

Consider the collection in the context of its building, site and precinct, especially if there are collections associated with the place, such as original furniture or equipment. For example:

- are there objects associated with the museum’s history, or the building and its design, that should be accessioned and recognised as part of the collection?;

- was the building purpose-built to show the collection?; and

- consider how or if the collection reflects the history and identity of the people and the region, the history and organisational context, and the various interest groups associated with the museum’s operations.

**Step 5: Analyse the condition of the collection.**

Review the overall condition of the collection, especially the most significant objects and collections. This can help to set conservation policies, strategies and priorities.

**Step 6: Compare your collection with collections of equivalent or similar scope or purpose.**

Consider how your collection compares with other museum collections, or collections, of similar size, theme or purpose.

**Step 7: Assess the collection’s significance by referring to the main assessment criteria and comparative criteria in this guide.**

Main assessment criteria—historic, aesthetic, scientific/research and social or spiritual values. Comparative criteria—provenance, rarity, representativeness, condition and interpretive potential.

**Step 8: Write a statement of significance that summarises the history, themes, importance and meaning of the collection.**

This may be a few paragraphs for a whole collection or run to a page or two. Dot points are fine.
Case study

Significance assessment of a whole collection at James Cook Museum, Cooktown, Queensland

THE MUSEUM FOLLOWED THIS PROCESS IN DEVELOPING ITS COLLECTION POLICY.

Step 1: Collate the collection’s records and the museum’s archives.

For the James Cook Museum this included correspondence about the museum’s establishment, and copies of the first registers and object lists.

Step 2: Research the history of the collection and the museum.

Identify the main themes shaping the evolution of the collection and key objects representing those themes.

The core of the museum collection was formed by the Cooktown Historical Museum in the 1960s.

What was the original purpose of the collection? How was it used or displayed?

Its genesis reflects the collecting interests of committee members and other individuals, and pioneer families.

List the range and scope of the collection.

The scope of the collection includes historical artefacts, personal and family memorabilia, minerals, shells, fossils and natural history specimens, coins, bottles and domestic objects, unprovenanced archaeological items, mining relics, and traditional and post-contact Indigenous artefacts from far north Queensland and New Guinea.

- Summarise the acquisition of important objects or collections.

There is a separate category for royal photographs.

- Consider the role of significant benefactors, collectors and curators in shaping the collection.

In 1970 the collections were amalgamated in the James Cook Museum, which was opened by Queen Elizabeth. The museum is in the former Sisters of Mercy Convent building, restored by the Queensland Branch of the National Trust.

What events in the museum’s history have impacted on the collection and its display, such as new buildings and extensions?

Many collections will demonstrate aspects of the changing history of museums. At times whole displays may become artefacts of museum history and have social value to generations of visitors. You may be surprised at what your examination of its collection reveals about your museum.

Many collections will demonstrate aspects of the changing history of museums. At times whole displays may become artefacts of museum history and have social value to generations of visitors. You may be surprised at what your examination of its collection reveals about your museum.

Step 3: Consult the community and record ideas and comments about the collection.

Talk with previous committee members, volunteers or staff about the collection’s development and significant acquisitions.

A community meeting was held to discuss the collection policy and gauge opinion about future directions for the collection and exhibition program. Comments affirmed that the community wanted a collection and exhibition program that maintained the scope of the existing themes, while responding to the interests of new museums opening in Cooktown and north Queensland.

- Discussing the collection with donors, visitors, researchers, affiliated societies and community interest groups will also contribute to your understanding of the significance of the collection. Don’t assume that you know which objects have particular social value to the community. It is important to provide opportunities for people to comment and contribute to an understanding of the collection’s significance. Public events and activities to test community opinion will raise awareness of the collection’s importance and strengthen the relationship between the museum and its audience.

Among the most significant objects identified by the community is an anchor from the Endeavour, recovered from the reef off Cooktown on which Cook’s ship was nearly wrecked in 1770.

- Consider the community’s relationship with the museum and sense of attachment to its collection. Are there specific objects or themes in the museum about which the community has strong feelings?

The James Cook Museum has an important role in the tourism economy of Cooktown in presenting the authentic heritage of the region, and giving visitors an understanding of its identity and heritage.

- What role does the museum have in your community or town? Have there been times when the community has rallied to the museum’s support? This may be important in demonstrating the collection’s social value.

- Which objects are the best loved, most remembered and talked about by visitors?

- Consider holding events and activities to engage the community and explore ideas and aspirations for the collection. Make sure there are mechanisms, such as questionnaires and comment books, for visitors to record their opinions and comments.

The displays in the revamped museum should orient visitors more strongly to the region, and encourage them to visit the places profiled in the exhibition.
Step 4: Assess the relationship between the museum building(s) and the collection.

Consider the collection in the context of its building, site and precinct, especially if collections such as original furniture and equipment are associated with the place.

- Are there objects associated with the museum’s history or the building and its design that should be recognised as part of the collection and accessioned?
- Was the building purpose-built to show the collection?
- Consider how or if the collection reflects the history or identity of the people and the region, the history and organisational context of the museum, and the various interest groups associated with the museum.

Step 5: Analyse the condition of the collection.

Review the overall condition of the collection, especially the most significant objects and collections. This can help to set conservation policies, strategies and priorities.

Conservation assessment at the James Cook Museum highlighted specific objects and collections as priorities for conservation. Specific strategies were identified for improving climate control through natural ventilation and good housekeeping.

Step 6: Compare your collection with equivalent or similar museums in scope or purpose.

Consider how your collection compares with other museum collections in the region, or collections of similar size, theme or purpose.

See statement of significance in Step 8.

Step 7: Assess the collection’s significance by reference to the primary and comparative assessment criteria.

Primary criteria: historic, aesthetic, scientific/research, and social or spiritual values.
Comparative criteria: provenance, rarity, representativeness, condition, and interpretive potential.

See statement of significance in Step 8.

Step 8: Write a statement of significance that summarises the history, themes, importance and meaning of the collection.

This may be a few paragraphs, or run to a page or two. Dot points are fine if there’s no time for perfect prose.

Statement of significance

The James Cook Museum is a significant historical collection in regional Australia. It interprets major themes in Australia’s history and represents the diverse people and cultures that have shaped the history of Cooktown and far north Queensland. The collection is strongly related to the settlement and development of the north, with many objects linked to towns, sites and places in the region. The Chinese collection is significant for its association with known families, places of worship and business, indicating the size of the Chinese population and the crucial role they played in the settlement and commercial development of towns in the region.
HOW TO INCLUDE SIGNIFICANCE ASSESSMENT IN YOUR MUSEUM

As outlined in the introduction, the HCC’s National Conservation and Preservation Policy and Strategy recognises the need for widespread adoption of standardised significance assessment into museum policies and practice. Apart from providing a common language and method of understanding national heritage collections, this will improve the way museums manage and conserve collections, and make their significance more accessible.
As outlined in the introduction, the HCC's National Conservation and Preservation Policy and Strategy recognises the need for widespread adoption of standardised significance assessment into museum policies and practice. Apart from providing a common language and methodology for understanding Australia’s heritage collections, this will improve the way museums manage and conserve collections, and make their significance more accessible.

Four options are described below to help you investigate significance and include it in your museum’s policies and procedures.

1. Trial significance assessment.
2. Incorporate significance assessment in the collection policy and procedures.
3. Assess the significance of the most important objects.
4. Assess significance before starting conservation or restoration work.

**Option 1** Trial significance assessment

You can decide to try significance assessment to see how it works with your collection and test its effectiveness in a variety of contexts.

**Step 1: Find out about significance assessment**

Meet with museum colleagues to discuss the benefits of significance assessment. Circulate this guide and consider holding a workshop or training session. If you work in a regional museum, your State museum advisory service may provide specific training and workshops in significance assessment.

**Step 2: Decide where you will use significance assessment**

Discuss how you want to use significance assessment in your museum: in collection policy and cataloguing, conservation work, reviewing the collection as a whole, or all the above. The case studies in part 4 show the range of museum tasks where significance assessment is useful.

**Step 3: Determine how you will trial significance assessment**

You could try the assessment process, including the criteria and statement of significance in the following ways:

- add the assessment criteria to your acquisition policy and use them to evaluate a number of potential acquisitions. Develop a short draft statement of significance to include on the collection documentation form;
- undertake significance assessment on some of your most important objects, such as the ones you may have nominated for AMOL. Develop a statement of significance using the step-by-step process outlined in this guide. Compare the statement of significance with the way you originally described the object;
- assess the significance of an object before conservation work. Analyse the object following the step-by-step guide and write a statement of significance. Identify which features and characteristics of the object need to be conserved. For example, if the object has had repairs or alterations and these reflect its history and use, identify these as a conservation policy, (for example: conserve the evidence of use and wear and tear). Write a treatment plan that describes how you will preserve these significant features. Record the progress of the work and materials used.
Step 4: Evaluate how significance assessment enhances understanding of the object.

Here are six ways you can try significance assessment in your museum.

1. Review a potential acquisition or donation by assessing its significance, and use this to help you decide if the object should be accepted.

2. Identify an object for potential deaccessioning and assess its significance. Use the assessment to guide your decision on whether it should be deaccessioned and how it should be disposed of.

3. Use a statement of significance as an object label. Do not worry if it is long. Put it beside the existing text or label and ask visitors which one they prefer.

4. You could ask a range of museum workers, volunteers or paid, to be involved in using and trialing the assessment process. After preparing statements of significance for a number of objects, call a meeting to consider if the process helped to better analyse and understand the objects.

5. Plan the conservation of an object based on a significance assessment and the preparation of a conservation policy. After the work is completed, review how useful the assessment was in the preparation of a treatment plan and appropriate conservation work.

6. Include significance assessment in your collection policy.

**Option 2. Incorporate significance assessment in your museum’s collection policy and procedures**

**Step 1:** Call a meeting of your museum’s committee to discuss including significance assessment in the policy. Agree on what steps you will follow to do this. Circulate the information about significance assessment and consider holding a workshop or seminar to explain it to your members or participants.

**Step 2:** Review your collection policy and see where you can incorporate the significance assessment criteria. They can replace or be added to your existing assessment criteria, such as duplication and condition. The assessment criteria complement the collection policy’s list of thematic or subject interests. You may want to include the explanation of the assessment criteria and step-by-step process in this guide as an appendix to your collection policy.

Significance assessment does not tell you what to collect, but it can improve the way you consider acquisitions, and the quality of documentation. If your museum has trouble saying ‘no’ to donations then significance assessment can help you reach an informed decision, and better explain that decision to donors. It also means you have to take some time to properly consider and review the object, and discuss it with other people in the museum.
**Step 3:** Include a space on your accession form for a simple two or three sentence statement of significance for the object. This may be interim or preliminary until the object is more fully researched and catalogued. Incorporate the step-by-step process into your cataloguing manual or procedures and include a section in your catalogue sheets for the statement of significance. Consider using object files that will allow you to collate all the information and research about the item, including letters and photographs from donors.

**Step 4:** Include an assessment and statement of significance for the museum’s whole collection as a preamble to the collection policy. This review, history and assessment of the collection, outlined in part 3 or 6, which is about analysing a whole collection, analyses the pattern of collecting and helps identify significant objects and collecting directions for the future. The process is one of taking stock of the collecting record and using the analysis to plan and enhance collecting themes and strategies. It can be used in other contexts, from marketing to disaster planning.

Assessing the significance of your collection as a whole is the same process used for assessing the significance of individual objects. It involves researching the history of the collection and museum, identifying its main themes, the acquisition of important collections, and events in the museum’s history that have impacted on the collection and its display.

Many collections will demonstrate aspects of the changing history of museums, and sometimes this is the case for displays as well.

Consider the overall condition and scope of the collection and also how it compares with other museum collections of similar size or interest. You should also consider the relationship between the building and your collection, particularly if it is a heritage building, a building of architectural significance, or if you have collections or thematic interests in common with the site.

**Option 3. Assess the significance of the most important objects**

You might choose to focus on assessing the significance only of the most important objects, including those you use to promote the museum or highlight to visitors. Or you might revise the statement of significance for any objects the museum has listed on AMOL.

In addition, you may identify one or two objects to represent each of the main themes of the museum’s collection, and assess the significance of these. The resulting statements of significance could be included in the collection policy as an illustrated guide to the scope and themes of the collection.

Consider setting a goal to do, for example, five detailed significance assessments a year, to improve the way the objects are recorded.

Volunteers could be sought to help. Objects could be assigned to a member of your museum society, a local historian, teacher, or someone expert or familiar with that class of objects or industry. Form a small committee to help carry on the work, and meet regularly to make suggestions and discuss the draft significance assessments. Significance assessment is always improved by collaboration and sharing knowledge.
Option 4. Assess significance before starting conservation or restoration work

Incorporate significance assessment in your procedures for conservation work. Ensure that the significance of an object is understood and recorded before starting conservation work.

Significance is the starting point for considering how best to conserve an object.

No conservation action or treatment should diminish the significance of an object, or its capacity to demonstrate its history and use. In cases where the history of an object and its use is evident in the fabric, and recognised as part of its significance, then preservation is generally preferable to restoration.

A written conservation policy is a useful way to draw together the statement of significance and the proposed course of action to conserve the object. Proposed treatments can be set out and reviewed against the statement of significance.

It may be desirable to consult other interested people about proposed conservation work. A written conservation policy is a helpful way to present the case. In the future, people may wish to know how an object came to look the way it does, and in this instance the conservation policy, together with notes and photos of the conservation work, will explain why certain treatment decisions were made.

A conservation policy can be as simple as a few sentences. For example, an apron may be significant as a rare item of working dress. The conservation policy could read: the purpose of conservation treatment is to conserve the evidence of the apron’s use and hard-working life. The proposed treatment may include washing the apron but not removing all the stains or repair of the torn pocket.

In another case, an archaeological artefact recovered from a shipwreck may be significant as an object of trade and as part of a cargo of goods that shows the perils of trade and maritime life. The conservation policy would be to stabilise the object against further corrosion, but ensure that it can still be understood and recognised as an archaeological artefact recovered after a century or more under water.
APPENDIX

Significance assessment check list

You can photocopy this page and use it as you assess the significance of your objects.

☐ Have you compiled a folder with details of the object?
☐ Have you properly researched the history and provenance of the object?
☐ Have you talked with donors, owners, users and community associations about their knowledge of, and feelings about, the object?
☐ Do you understand the historical context of the object?
☐ Have you analysed how the object works? What is it made of, and what are its patterns of wear, repairs and adaptations? Have you recorded these?
☐ Have you compared the object with similar objects?
☐ Have you assessed the object’s significance against the criteria?
☐ Finally, have you written a succinct statement of significance for the object?
Glossary

Accessioning  The process of registering an object into a collection.

Acquisition  Acquiring or gaining possession of an object.

Aesthetic  An object with visual or sensory appeal, landmark design qualities, or displaying creative or technical excellence.

AMOL  Australian Museums On-Line www.amol.org.au

Burra Charter  Charter developed and adopted by Australia ICOMOS which establishes nationally accepted principles for the conservation of places of cultural significance.

Cataloguing  Creating a record according to specific principles of construction. Museum cataloguing usually includes details of any numbers assigned to the object; the object name; details of manufacture; history and use; storage location; physical condition; and often some form of classification. Cataloguing is the more advanced stage of museum documentation, after registration.

Collection  A body of acquired objects held by a collecting organisation, or the accumulated items held by a collector.

Connoisseurship  The ability and competence to pass critical judgements on items of cultural heritage, based on knowledge of history, style, technology and comparative examples.

Conservation  All the processes involved in looking after an item to retain its cultural significance.

Conservator  One who conserves or preserves heritage objects.

Documentation  The process of record keeping for each object in a collection. Documentation includes registration, cataloguing and research notes.

Fabric  Physical material of an object.

Heritage collections  Cultural heritage collections and objects in the custody of a wide range of organisations and individuals, including governments and the private, community and non-government sector. Include historic, artistic and ethnographic objects, documents, images, natural history and geological specimens, and archaeological collections.

Heritage Collections Council (HCC)  Established in 1996 by the national Cultural Ministers Council, and responsible for this publication, for the coordination of a national conservation strategy for preventive conservation, and the development of Australian Museums On-Line (AMOL).

ICOM  International Council of Museums.

ICOMOS  International Council on Monuments and Sites.

In situ  Latin for ‘in place’. Refers to objects which remain in their original context of use or discovery.

Interpretation  The presentation of an object or collection that brings out its meanings and values.

Movable cultural heritage  Any reasonably portable item of historic, aesthetic, scientific or social significance.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Museum</td>
<td>A non-profit making, permanent institution in the service of society and of its development, and open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits, for purposes of study, education and enjoyment, material evidence of people and their environment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preservation</td>
<td>All actions taken to retard deterioration of or prevent damage to cultural material. Preservation involves controlling the environment and conditions of use, and may include treatment to maintain an object, as nearly as possible, in an unchanging state. Preservation also includes activities taken to prevent or delay material becoming damaged—preventive conservation.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Provenance</td>
<td>The life history of an object, supported by documentation of its context, accounts of its use, and its sequence of ownership.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reconstruction</td>
<td>Actions taken to recreate, in whole or part, objects or other cultural material by the introduction of new or old materials into the fabric.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Registration</td>
<td>The process of entering an object into the recording systems of a museum by assigning a unique number, physically numbering the object, recording that number in a register and noting brief details of the object and its acquisition. Registration is the first step in museum documentation, preceding cataloguing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restoration</td>
<td>Actions taken to modify the existing material and structure of an object to represent a known earlier state.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significance</td>
<td>The historic, aesthetic, scientific and social values that an object or collection has for past, present and future generations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significance assessment</td>
<td>The process of studying and understanding the meanings and values of an object or collection, enabling sound and reasoned statements and judgements about the importance of objects and collections, and their meanings for communities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statement of significance</td>
<td>A reasoned, readable summary of the meaning, values and importance of an object or collection.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taxon</td>
<td>Taxonomic group of any rank, such as a species, family, class etc.; an organism contained in such a group.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taxonomy</td>
<td>Classification by tightly defined categories, especially in science and ethnography.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vernacular</td>
<td>Traditional cultural expression, unschooled.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Select bibliography


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(Significance) is a guide to help you assess the significance of the heritage objects and collections in your care.