

What is significance?

Part one transcript

We are going to have a discussion in two parts. This is part one. I want you to imagine that you are in a training session. You would discuss with your group the concepts and ideas as they arise. I will be discussing them by myself but hoping that you may discuss these matters further with your colleagues.

We are going to start by engaging in what is a global conversation. The following headings and text/image boxes were used in a presentation at an international conference in Maastricht in 2007 by Ian Cook, the Director of the heritage consultancy 3CS AsiaPacific. The presentation was called Subject Matters. The headings are his and illustrate the big questions which are being explored worldwide on the meanings and values of objects. I do not know what he said to these headings but the questions are the key. Let's look at them together.

All objects are not created equal



Photo: Ken Taylor

All objects are not created equal

We know that. In the local Corryong 'art' show (entries include paintings, photos, musical instruments, textiles, furniture) prizes are awarded. Determinations are made to give first, second and third prizes. Criteria are undoubtedly used. If you were asked to judge this competition you would need to be able to articulate why and how you made these decisions. It is the same with awarding levels of significance to objects in your museum.

Objects acquire value for a variety of reasons. It could be from scarcity or a form of cultural prestige.

From a museum perspective notional economic value does not necessarily make the object valuable.

Value might be derived from association with an historical event, for example, Robert O'Hara Burke's revolver. It may be derived from scarcity (and representativeness), for example, an item of colonial furniture.

It may be the rarity of the item. Rarity is the consequence of reduced reproduction of an item, such as the penny black or the rarest Australian coin

<http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2003/03/25/1048354595518.html>

It may be to do with the quality of the item. Quality is found in finish, craftsmanship and materials used in the manufacture of an item.

It may be because of prestige and association. Prestige and association is the value derived from association with a famous person; a glove, mop cap, pin, brooch or sock belonging to Jane Austen would achieve these.

Some have outstanding universal value

Some items have universal value – (once again for a variety of reasons) such as the Taj Mahal or the Sydney Opera House (see images next page). These buildings transcend most ideas of value based on their representation of phases of architectural development – they are iconic. They are seen to have a value which is embedded in themselves. People go to see them because of what they are.

The Taj Mahal – constructed 1631 – 1653 WHL: 1983



Photo: Ken Taylor

The Sydney Opera House – constructed 1959 – 1973, WHL: June 2007



Photo: 'barryspics' on Flickr

Some have great symbolic meaning

The Sydney Harbour Bridge

Below those of iconic status there are things which have value because of what they represent and what they can do to us. We like to look at items in our cultural stock because they give pleasure. This might be aesthetic. They might be a device to stimulate us by association, for example, Shackleton's boat, the James Caird, acts as a device to allow us to gain understanding of the precarious and heroic journey from Elephant Island to South Georgia.



Photo: 'lemoncat1' on Flickr: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/lemoncat1/2171373604>

Selecting items which inspire provoke and inform

Other items can:

provoke a sense of injustice – such as devices like leg irons used on convicts, chains around Indigenous people's necks or a visit to Kenmore Hospital and Museum where visitors can step back into a 19th century psychiatric asylum.

inform us – about the way people lived in the 19th and 20th centuries such as Calthorpe's house in the ACT or the Swan Hill Pioneer settlement.

reassure us – such as sporting memorabilia – Bradman's bat. Both Bradman's Adelaide house and the original family home in Bowral have been heritage listed.

challenge us – slavery museums, piles of shoes in a concentration camp, skulls in Cambodia. In terms of the body we can be challenged by corsetry, birthing chairs, strait jackets and gags.

confirm – such as the Dig tree. This proves the event occurred.

uplift --such as artefacts from POW's diaries and letters, Simpson and his donkey.

- can give pleasure
- inspire
- provoke
- inform
- challenge
- reassure
- uplift
- confirm



*Shikumen Open House Museum,
French Concession, Shanghai*

The trick when collecting items for museum collections is to select items which can best inspire, provoke and inform.

This is done by selecting things which are the best or the only examples. Robert O'Hara Burke had a Tranter revolver. Tranter revolvers are not unique. Thousands were manufactured but only two belonged to him and were taken on the expedition to the Gulf.

As you know any farming district will possibly have hundreds of horse collars, bits, bridles, saddles and horse shoes. It would make no sense to collect and display them all. Duplication in a museum collection can diminish the significance of the items. Before a piece of equine equipment should be collected it would be important to know if:

- It is particularly intricately or beautifully made (gives pleasure)
- It has a story which is inspirational, for example, a rescue

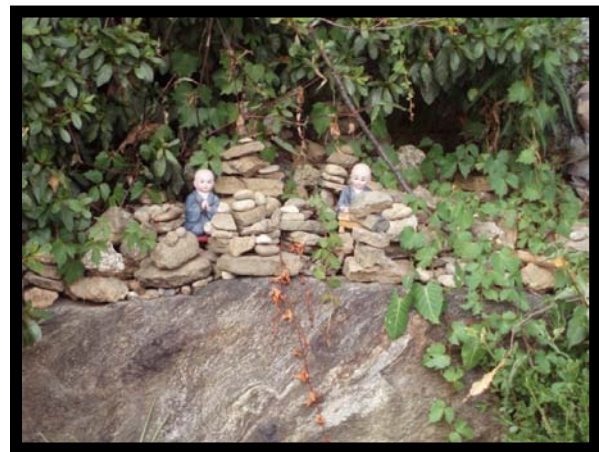
- It is provocative; used in a context that challenges our current ideas, for example, a pit pony
- It can let us know about how things were done, for example, horse teams
- It can reassure us by reminding us of the heritage way of doing things
- It can uplift; Phar Lap. (Parts of the film Phar Lap were filmed near Corryong at Towong race course. Items commemorate this in the museum!)
- It can challenge. In the Man from Snowy River Museum there is a small gaol. 'Wild' Wright, who had been an associate of the Kelly gang, spent a night in this lock-up for cruelty to a horse.

These considerations sit behind the process of significance assessment. In the end the calculation of the significance of an object will be determined by the particular historic, aesthetic, scientific and social values that an object has for past, present and future generations. An Australian slouch hat, ammunition belt or puttees would be of limited significance in Dodge City, Kansas. If these things belonged to a celebrated local soldier such as Albert Jacka VC then in his local museum they would have high significance. (National as well). To do this we need to know a lot about the item, its provenance (its history), our collection policy and the social and cultural interests of our district.

Piles of stones or objects with meaning?

Not all objects are immediately clear as artifacts which have a utilitarian purpose, yet they may have cultural value. Arrangement of rocks for example (see images, next page) can be found in many places in the world. Here in Australia we have ceremonial rock arrangements in many parts of the country, aboriginal quarries, and middens. We have many informal structures which the European settlers have created, such as cairns, rock spits and other items which have been created by surveyors and land holders. There are other more informal structures which people create which have cultural or votive value.

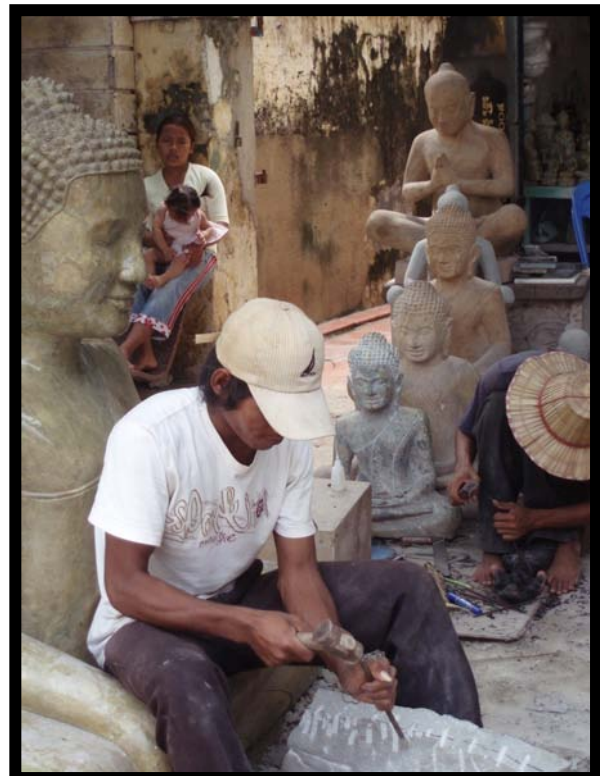
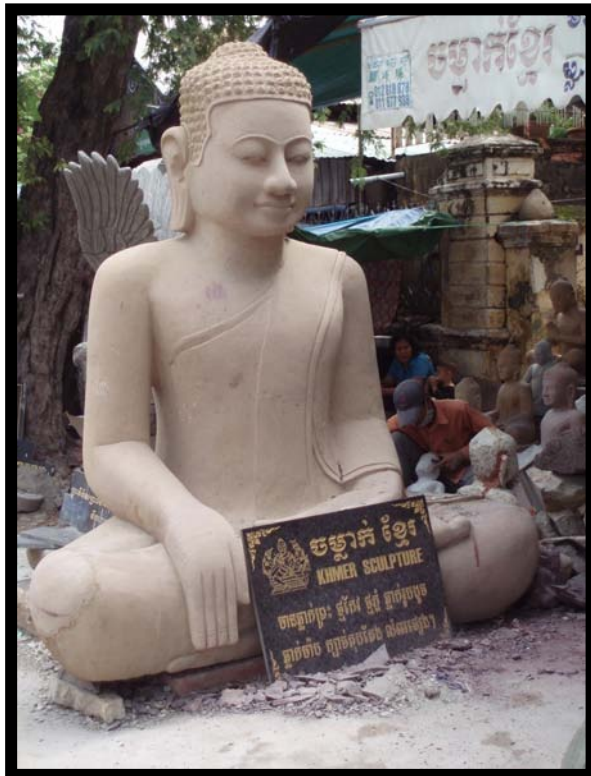
On the stairs to Yeongsanjeon, Bonguensa, Seoul:



Material fabric and method of manufacture influence how we think about the authentic

In a world in which most of our items are mass produced there is an apparent anonymity of products, although some mass produced items can acquire significance as a consequence of their association with an individual. In the National Museum of Australia there is a life jacket worn by Bob Brown during his campaigning to save the Franklin River and the matinee jacket worn by Azaria Chamberlain.

Handmade items can have significance as a result of the marks of the maker, and the unique qualities that the maker has invested in the item. The use of tools or the idiosyncratic method of construction can accentuate the uniqueness of an item. A quilt or a piece of embroidery can have unique qualities in design, which may directly relate to the place and time of its making.



Preah Ang Makhak Vann Street. Phnom Penh

Context powerfully shapes our ideas and our views

Context adds to the value of an object.



Phra That Phanom Temple, Nakorn Province, Thailand

Mawson's hut in Antarctica has greater conservation value in its location than it would have if it were removed to another location. The Dig tree has much of its value because it is located in the situation in which the dramatic moments of the Burke and Wills expedition took place. Some, not all, objects gain significance from the context in which they are located. We can see them around the world when we travel to places where iconic objects are located.

What is authentic? Does it come from use?

In an age of mass production and mass tourism we can have appropriation of cultural objects and a stripping of value through relocation. Religious statuary can be mass produced yet has a powerful significance in the original culture, whereas the same item moved into another cultural context can strip the object of its significance. We have seen this with representations of the Buddha which are treated with great reverence in their home culture, yet might be used as decoration in a new cultural context.



Buddha shop, Saphan Chang Rongsi, Bangkok, Thailand



At the temple, Phra That Phanom, Nakorn Province, Thailand

Size and age on our perceptions



Bahnar communal house, built 2003 by 42 villagers from Kon Rbang village, Kontum town, Central Highlands, open-air exhibition, Vietnam Museum of Ethnology, Hanoi. 3CS Asia Pacific – Maastricht 2007



That Dam the black stupa 16th century, Vientiane, Lao. 3CS Asia Pacific – Maastricht 2007

Inevitably there is a tendency to see the monumental as more significant than smaller items. Great cathedrals, sporting venues and ruins attract people from all over the world. Think of places you would like to visit on a European trip, your destinations might include the Parthenon, St Paul's cathedral, the Acropolis, Stonehenge or Notre Dame. These are structures which tend to get world heritage listing; and given the spiritual, cultural and monumental value of these structures it makes sense. However smaller less dominant structures can have great significance and value, Beatrix Potter's cottage, Dove Cottage in the Lakes district, or a house in which Keats lived all have deep cultural significance. Monumental structures were built for monumental purposes and culturally we are going to be entranced by them, that is part of the reason why they were built as they were.

However smaller structures can have just as profound and enduring associations, it is a matter of knowing the culture, the stories that are embedded in them and being able to assess them in an objective way. Over the centuries the Christian tradition has been centred on relics of saints; a scapula, a ring, chalice, a lock of hair or some other remains, that can be the central point of a pilgrimage.

This discussion on 'significance issues' such as context, association, authenticity, size and age, method of manufacture and meaning sit behind our decisions to acquire, assess significance and to determine which items are significant to our collections and which are not.

Part two will be looking at processes and further considerations that we adopt when determining significance.