

# What is significance?

## Part two transcript

### 1 Defining significance

**Significance means the historic, aesthetic, scientific and social values that an object or collection has for past, present and future generation.**

(significance) A guide to assessing the significance of cultural heritage objects and collections, Heritage Collections Council, Commonwealth of Australia, 2001

So it's not just what the item is made from or its appearance; it is all the elements which contribute to the object's meaning including its context, history, uses, social and spiritual values.

### 2 There is, and can be, no absolute measure of cultural significance

From Selection criteria, Memory of the World guidelines circa 1995

Significance is not fixed it may increase or decrease over time.

Each culture approaches objects in different ways. Reverence, respect and regard will vary. Perceptions of the value of objects necessarily change; it is likely that in fifty years time items belonging to Bradman will evoke a different response than what they have today (and in the past).

The design work of Vivienne Westwood resonates today whereas the designs of the sixties are likely today for many of us to have more of a 'curiosity' value. Think back to the Miniskirts and characters like Twiggy, Jean Shrimpton (how she shocked the Melbourne matrons at the Cup) and Mary Quant!

### 3

Before museums and other keeping places had acquisition policies there was a tendency to collect indiscriminately. This led to the random accumulation of objects and repetition.

### 4

**Now we know that every object in the collection should in some way contribute to the aims of the museum (which will be outlined in a Collection Management policy).**

The process of refusal of objects requires a lot of effort.

You must make the donor **not** feel offended and it should not be done to diminish their feelings for the value of the object. Whatever your choice, it is based on your acquisition policy.

**Remember** An object may have no significance to one museum yet be quite significant to another

The story about the deaccessioning of a marine clock - which did not fit the aims of the Queanbeyan and District Historical Museum - explains how this object found a more suitable home. This is in the Resources section.

## 5

**So how do we go about acquiring objects?**

**The decision about what you will obtain and the policies that drive these considerations are called Collection Management policies and Acquisition policies.**

**Most regional and remote museums concern themselves with their own locality. This is evident in their mission statements.**

Mission: To acquire, preserve and exhibit for future generations, items of significance to the Corryong and Upper Murray district.

Mission Statement

The Redcliffe Museum will celebrate, document and interpret Redcliffe's historic Peninsula and community. The Museum and its Collections will offer an intriguing insight into a unique region, its European history since 1799, its heritage as Queensland's first European Settlement in 1824-25, its much older indigenous culture, its rich maritime history, and the pleasures and surprises of bayside life.

Specialist museums are different and often quite specific  
Heide Museum of Modern Art tells the story of modern art in Australia through the heritage of John and Sunday Reed and the unique environment in which they lived. The Museum maintains their philosophy of support for contemporary art.

## 6

**Acquisition is the process of obtaining legal possession of an item**

**Donation: A donor gives the item to the museum**

**Purchase: Transfer of legal ownership by exchange, usually money**

**Bequest: Transferring title of an item upon death through a will**

**You may have an acquisition policy. There is an example in the Resources section of a checklist for acquisition used by the History Trust of South Australia. Look particularly at numbers 6 and 7.**

**The donor's dilemma: Henry Lawson's desk – who to give it to?** This is not always straightforward. There are many issues and sensitivities around donation. Read this story in the Resources section.

## 7

**When you acquire your object you determine its significance**

**It may have high significance, limited significance or low significance.**

**This is determined by ensuring the item suits your museum's aims (Collection management policy), much research and a set of criteria which you can utilize.**

**See the forms used by the Australian War Memorial when an item is presented for consideration. These are in the Resources section.**

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**The criteria**

**Primary criteria: Historic, Aesthetic, Scientific or research significance, social or spiritual significance**

**Comparative criteria: Provenance, Representativeness, Rarity, Condition, intactness and integrity and interpretive potential**

**Adapted from (significance) A guide to assessing the significance of cultural heritage objects and collections, Heritage Collections Council, Commonwealth of Australia, 2001**

**9**

**The 5-step significance assessment process**

**Analyse the object/collection**

**Understand /document its history and context**

**Compare with similar objects or collections**

**Assess against significance criteria**

**Summarise the values and meanings in a statement of significance**

**From: Assessing the significance of a museum object: an activity for learners, training significance Heritage Collections Council, Commonwealth of Australia and Museums and Galleries NSW, 2002**

This is the process. These steps will be explained in detail in Case study two.

All steps contribute to meaning.

And we will be using the standard set of criteria just previously mentioned. This will help you. Remember collaboration is at the heart of good practice. Assessing significance should be a collaborative effort.

Not all objects are significant and may not merit inclusion in your museum collection. (Think of that marine clock.) This process can provide you with well reasoned arguments for declining or deaccessioning an object. You will be considering a donor's offer in your FIRST case study!

Don't be too concerned with the criteria. It is the method that is so important, it's the research. See Andrew Blundell's research on the Both Iron Lung in **Case Study two**. We need this authenticity, this evidence.

Don't get hung up on the criteria. The criteria are a tool to help you determine value.

## 10

**We will be practicing the significance assessment process. We will do this whilst working through three case studies.**

**The first case study uses your knowledge of the Man from Snowy River museum's Collection Management policy to determine the significance of an object which is to be donated to the museum. You will be asked to give the object a degree of significance (high, limited or low).**

**You will read the two examples of Statements of Significance written by two certificate 1V students at the Canberra Institute of Technology. You will notice that they are not identical. There is no set way that you must write these statements. However there are certain expectations and guidelines will be provided for you.**

**You will notice that the students have not put a degree of significance (high, limited or low) in their statements of significance because that is a job for you to determine. It is a good idea to work with someone else on this task. Sharing other people's ideas and points of view help us develop our understanding**

Significance assessment is a form of being able to write down our reasoning (one aspect of significance over the other)

The Statement of Significance (and process underpinning it) really states why you made the decision you did and includes your reasoning.

## 11

**We use significance assessment as a strategic tool. It helps us to set priorities and to ensure our time and effort is spent in useful interventions; preventive and remedial**

**In that case** significance is really a starting point, not a conclusion.

It elucidates and gives a value for management. Enunciation of interpretive value can then be referred to by management. Many people will use Statements of Significance to support grant applications and use them as guidelines when engaging with professionals.

Management statements are written AFTER you have written your statement of significance.

## 12

**Article 1.2 The Australia ICOMOS Charter for Places of Cultural Significance, 1999**

**1.2 Cultural significance means aesthetic, historic, scientific, social or spiritual value for past, present or future generation.**

**Cultural significance is embodied in the place itself, its fabric, setting, use, associations, meanings, records, related places and related objects.**

**Places may have a range of values for different individuals or groups.**

**You can see that places of cultural significance have a national database. You may wish to view the National Heritage database.**

**We do not at present have a database for significant objects, although it has been discussed.**

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**Significance is the historical value attached to objects, sites, activities or ideas by communities at a local, regional or national level.**

**Australia's Heritage Collections, National Conservation and Preservation Policy and Strategy, Cultural Ministers Council, Heritage Collections Council, 1998**

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**'Assessing the significance of a collection is about placing it in a broader context, and connecting the items in the collection to the stories behind them. A nationally significant collection can enhance understanding of our national stories.'**

**Roslyn Russell**

'Significance, Provenance, Interpretation' workshop, *Working Spaces 2*, Museums Australia Lachlan Chapter, Galong, 1 November 2008.

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**There are excellent resources for you to continue your understanding of significance. You will learn about acquisition, examples of significance & decision making, assessment of significance & setting priorities.**

*Significance: a guide to assessing the significance of cultural heritage objects and collections*, Heritage Collections Council, Canberra, 2001

Museums Australia Inc (NSW), *Museum Methods, A Practical Manual for Managing Small Museums*, Section 3.2 Significance and objects

## **The marine clock and the need for the Queanbeyan and District Historical museum to have a deaccessioning policy.**

The area of policy in which we focused was the need for the QDHMS to have a Deaccession Policy. The Strategic Plan identified the need to develop a deaccession policy and procedure, implementing a way to cull the collection systematically.

Deaccessioning is the formal process of permanently removing an object from a museum's permanent collection.

This includes not only removing the object itself from the collection, but also removing it from any collection register; catalogue or database the museum has the object mentioned.

Deaccessioning, when carried out in an appropriate manner, is an integral part of a modern and open minded museums professional practice.

Deaccessioning has provided the QDHM with the ability to define and refine the scope and quality of collections that has grown over the years. There are also a number of more practical reasons as to why the QDHM looked at the deaccession and disposal of objects. They are:

- a. in the case of the Ships Clock, that a collection policy and deaccession policy have been put in place, where there may not have been one previously
- b. the museums collecting focus has be refined or altered
- c. the object is a duplicate of one already held in the museum
- d. the object is slowly deteriorating or is damaged and the cost of conservation outweighs it value within the collection
- e. the object can no longer be stored (limited or suitable storage)
- f. or someone has proven legal title

Before deaccessioning an object we first needed to look at the QDHM Collection Policy. It stated that "an object will not be considered valuable or useful simply because of its age" and then further another point mentioned "Objects will not be collected because they are old, strange, unusual or have doubtful associations or promote nostalgic or sentimental response".

We identified that the clock was manufactured around 1905, but other than being found in the bottom of a local residence cupboard there is no known connection to the district.

Before removing it from the QDHMS collection, the first thing we had to do is the show clear title. In other words does the QDHMS own the clock (this could be shown either by a bill of sale or a Donation Agreement)?

A deaccession recommendation should also be put together, showing why the object should be removed from the collection with supporting argument. In this case the primary argument was that it no longer fits the Museum's Collection Policy. It should also give recommendation that if deaccessioned what should happen to it.

This recommendation should then be presented to the QDHMS Deaccessioning Committee for them to make a decision.

So the Deaccessioning Committee has agreed that the clock no longer fits the Museum's Collection Policy and agree that it should be deaccessioned. The object should now be removed from any museum records. (Remember to record in the accession register the fate of the object so that this is recorded for future museum workers). It is recommended to retain the object in a separate and clearly marked storage area for a "Cooling off Period" of at least 12 months.

Deaccessioned objects are disposed of by one of the following five preferred methods,

- a. returning the object to the donor
- b. transferring it to another institution
- c. exchanging it with another institution
- d. selling it: or
- e. destruction (this is only ever really considered if the object is in a very poor condition or has irreparable damage)

The method we identified would best fit the Ships Clock was to transfer it to another institution. Noting that it is a Ships Clock, we recommended somewhere like the Australian National Maritime Museum. This is something the QDHMS was recommended to chase up during the 12 months cooling off period.

One thing that can't be stressed enough is the need to keep a paper trail. All decisions and actions regarding deaccessioning are to be fully documented and recorded. This is so that in

the event someone raises a query about an object, it will be possible to respond with an informed perspective.

And that is how we recommended the very old Ships Clock be deaccessioned from the QDHMS collection.

From Collection to Deaccession Six Points to remember

- Identify object for deaccession
- Check records for clear title
- Complete a deaccession recommendation document
- Bring before Institution for consideration
- Check what happens to the item once it has been deaccessioned
- Keep a paper trail



Gerard, Brian and Janet

### **The donor's dilemma: Henry Lawson's desk – who to give it to?**

**By RC 2008**

In 2002 a friend of mine phoned me to ask how much Henry Lawson's writing desk would be worth. My reply was 'You could put any price on it'. He then told me he had just bought it.

Having always had a very strong interest in Henry Lawson, he was compelled to purchase this item when it came up at a local auction. At the time there was a lot of publicity in the local papers regarding the impending demolition of the cottage at Leeton where Henry Lawson lived 1916/17.



(I then mentioned in our next phone call that it would be extremely important to obtain something in writing from the previous owner regarding the items history (provenance), which he then did so in the form of a receipt.)

The table's former owner at the time must have thought he would make the most of the moment by placing the item in a local auction (it failed to meet the reserve and was purchased by the current owner a few days later).

The table has since been used at the book launch of Olive Lawson's book 'Henry Lawson at Leeton'.

The current owner's family have no real interest in the item for what it is, other than that it is a 'handy little work table'.

Early this year I approached my friend to ask if I could borrow the table for the course I am currently doing in Canberra. He quickly said yes, and that he would be happy for me to take custody of it for however long I wish (knowing I have a similar interest and appreciation for the table).

When I collected the table he mentioned to me, as he has, a number of times in the past that he is concerned about the future of the table.

After my talk in Canberra I contacted my friend and suggested that the table be loaned to one of the major museums – preferably the National Library because they also have a number of Henry's possessions including the pen that was used at this desk. As before, he then stated that this seems to be a good idea, but it must only be a loan and nothing else.

The current owner has no interest in the monetary value of this item, but he finds as I do the historical importance is of great significance.

I have as yet not been in contact with the National Library.

I wish to show the table to the local Antique Society in the New Year and repeat the talk I gave at CIT, plus I will talk a bit about the do's and don'ts of furniture restoration and repair (a field I have had some training in having worked in the antique trade and being the third generation in my family having done so).

The former owner had the table stored in pieces in an old tin shed and it became nothing more than a pile of wood. He had it 'restored' by a Leeton local, who even though he did a good job with what he had to work with, it is not entirely repaired in the manner I would have done.

Timber cleats have been fixed to the underside of the top instead of fixing wood screws through the side boards, and into the top as originally done. The original shellac finish has been removed from the legs and the weathered top has been strongly cut back. I also believe the legs have been shortened by ½", but I can't confirm this for sure.

Having not seen the table prior to its renovation, I probably should not be making a comment at all.

RC, 2008