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Significance: doing what comes naturally

For many years while I was the Collections Registrar at The University of Melbourne Museum of Art (now the Ian Potter Museum of Art) one of my favourite pastimes was amassing information on the collection. We graduated from a few filing cabinets, to a row of compactus once we all really got going on this task. This material came from everywhere – the original, hand written University ledgers, research theses, excavation notes, exhibition ephemera, notes from telephone calls, correspondence and many, many lists and cards.

Nowadays, this is considered step one in any formal assessment of the determination of an object's significance, and not unsurprisingly, the remaining steps are equally logical and many museums have otherwise been undertaking them for years. One of the most accessible guides for this process is the Heritage Collections Council (HCC) publication (Significance)¹. The step-by-step method for assessing significance is identified as:

1. compile a folder containing all available details about an object and its history
2. research the history and provenance of an object
3. talk with donors, owners, users and relevant community associations
4. understand the context of the object
5. analyse and record the fabric of the object
6. consider comparative examples
7. assess significance against the main criteria, and
8. write a succinct statement of significance.

The key difference in terms of how museums have traditionally researched their objects is probably only in steps seven and eight. The main criteria are more specifically defined now, although conceptually they would always have been the motivation for much collecting, be they stated or implied. And extensive reports were rarely prepared on individual objects in this way, unless curators and collection managers were pressed for an acquisition or deaccession rationale.

The processes suggested in the HCC document are ideal since they appear to be applicable to almost any, if not all objects likely to be found in Australian collections. The examples they present are as varied as convict iron-gang trousers, a painting by Eugene von Guérard, a botanical specimen, a possum skin cloak and a goat cart.

The research undertaken in steps one to six above provide information that will enable the object's degree of significance to be evaluated against the four primary criteria of:

- historic
- aesthetic
- scientific, research, or technical, and
- social or spiritual significance.

This evaluation is then considered against further comparative criteria which include: provenance, representativeness, rarity, condition / completeness, intactness / integrity, and interpretive potential of the item. Interestingly, it is important to recognise that there is not necessarily going to be consensus on what is culturally significant. Some objects might also be significant for all or many of the criteria, others for only a few and, over time and with further research, the assessment might change.

The universality of the HCC prescribed process is clearly evident for example, at the City of Yarra which has begun evaluating the particularly varied collection of objects under its care. Those which have been assessed to date, and for which Significance Statements have been drafted, include a cast iron hitching post from the 1880s and a 1992 John Kelly painting, Dobell's Cow on Wheels. The former is considered important for its rarity, representative social context, local provenance and use today as an interpretative device. It has been safely relocated to the Collingwood Children's Farm and is regularly used for hitching horses! Alternatively, the work of art is noteworthy to this collection because its acquisition was through the short-lived Richmond Acquisitive Art Award, its subject matter investigates Australian art history through its reference to William Dobell, and the artist's bold and confident style has ensured his increasing popularity.

In many respects, the task of identifying the significance of objects should rank very highly amongst those working in museums. It provides fascinating and unique opportunities to come to terms with the essence of our collections and with collecting itself. Wonderful stuff.

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¹Significance: A Guide to Assessing the Significance of Cultural Heritage Objects and Collections, 2001, Heritage Collections Council, Commonwealth of Australia. This is a very comprehensive and practical document, and is now also available online at http://sector.amol.org.au/publications_archive/collections_management/significance