



(significance)

A GUIDE TO ASSESSING THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CULTURAL HERITAGE OBJECTS AND COLLECTIONS



(significance)

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?

(significance)

A GUIDE TO ASSESSING THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CULTURAL HERITAGE OBJECTS AND COLLECTIONS
HERITAGE COLLECTIONS COUNCIL



Front cover: Clockwise from top left

Isotype specimen, *Rhodamnia novoguineensis*

Reproduced courtesy of the Australian National Herbarium, Centre for Plant Diversity Research, CSIRO Division of Plant Industry

The Fong Lee Collection

*Reproduced courtesy of the Oxley Museum at Wellington, New South Wales
Misses Hampson*

Unknown artist, China

The See Poy children in Qing Dynasty costume

*c. 1907–10, Oil on cotton canvas, 91.2 x 66cm
Collection: Innisfail and District Historical Society*

The Westbury quilt, 1900–1903,

cotton, 223.0 x 191.0cm

*Purchased through the Australian Textiles Fund 1990.
Collection: National Gallery of Australia, Canberra.*

Extract from Captain Cook's Endeavour Journal,

by permission of the National Library of Australia

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on behalf of the Heritage Collections Council

ISBN 0 642 75094 7 (print)
0 642 75100 5 (online)
DOCITA 03/01

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Heritage Collections Council
Collections Development Section
Department of Communications, Information
Technology and the Arts
GPO Box 2154
Canberra ACT 2601
Australia

Telephone: 02 6271 1000
Facsimile: 02 6271 1800
Email: hcc.mail@dcita.gov.au
Website: <http://www.dcita.gov.au>

*Produced by the Commonwealth Department of
Communications, Information Technology and the Arts.
Design by Swell Design Group
With thanks to Clarity Communications*

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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 HISTORICAL, 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, HISTORICAL 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.

(I)

introduction



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 country¹, and that coordinated policies and strategies are required to conserve and provide widespread access to the collections.²

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.³

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

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.⁴ 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.

1 The most recent national sampling of Australia's collections is found in Margaret Anderson's reports for the Heritage Collections Working Group: *Heritage Collections in Australia, Report 1 1991, Report 2 1992, Report 3 1993*, National Centre for Australia Studies, Monash University.

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.

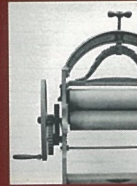
3 'Objective 1: To develop criteria for determining significance and identifying items and collections of significance...' *Australia's Heritage Collections: National Conservation and Preservation Policy and Strategy*, Heritage Collections Council, 1998, p.14.

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 ELEMENTS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO AN OBJECT'S MEANING, RELEVANCE, CULTURAL 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 as a concept





SIGNIFICANCE DEFINES THE MEANING AND VALUES OF AN OBJECT THROUGH RESEARCH, ANALYSIS AND BY ASSESSING AGAINST A STANDARD SET OF CRITERIA.

What does 'significance' mean?

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 process

Significance assessment involves three simple tasks:

- analysing the object;
- understanding its history and context; and
- identifying its value for communities.

These tasks are explained in step-by-step detail on page 20.

The process allows you to define the meaning and value of an object and establish its significance in relation to other objects. It helps you demonstrate why an object is sufficiently important to be in a museum collection.

The process involves considering significance against a standard set of assessment criteria, relevant to the whole spectrum of museum collections in Australia.

Using a consistent and agreed set of criteria facilitates more accurate analysis and helps you tease out the unique characteristics and meanings of each object or collection.

Not all objects are significant, or sufficiently significant to merit inclusion in museum collections. Significance assessment can also provide well-reasoned arguments for declining a donation or deaccessioning an object.

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.



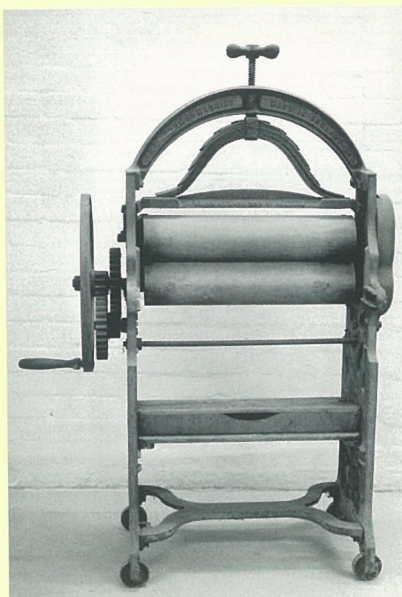
THE PURPOSE OF SIGNIFICANCE ASSESSMENT IS TO UNDERSTAND AND DESCRIBE HOW AND WHY AN OBJECT IS SIGNIFICANT.

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 upright mangle c.1900.

Photo courtesy of the Powerhouse Museum Collection.

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.



A STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE IS A CONCISE SUMMARY OF THE VALUES, MEANING AND IMPORTANCE OF AN OBJECT OR COLLECTION.

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.



YOU CAN ASSESS
SIGNIFICANCE:

- upon acquisition;
- when cataloguing;
- before conservation begins;
- when researching for exhibition;
- when deaccessioning;
- for a collection policy;
- for AMOL listings; or
- in thematic studies.

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 cream cotton work shirt,
late 18th –early 19th C. Photo courtesy of
the Powerhouse Museum Collection

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.

Some common questions about significance

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.

(3)

The significance assessment process

