

Museums & Galleries NSW

“Rethinking the Collection” – M&G NSW Collection Policy Explanatory Notes

February 2005

- Rethinking the Collection” has been developed by Kylie Winkworth with Museums & Galleries NSW (M&G NSW) to accompany the “M&G NSW Collection Policy Template”
- It is designed to give users of the “M&G NSW Collection Policy Template” background information in developing or updating their Collection Policy, and introduces key issues affecting collection management such as developing statements of significance, deaccessioning, collection policies and strategic planning, and joint collection projects with other local museums
- Please read this document before you adapt the “M&G NSW Collection Policy Template” for your museum

1. Introduction

The collection policy is a public document that guides the development and management of a museum's collection. It specifies why, what, where, how and when the museum collects, and how and why items may be deaccessioned from the collection. The collection policy includes a range of clauses or policy statements that provide a framework for making sound decisions about the development and use of the collection.

Museums hold collections in trust for the community, for their benefit and enjoyment today and in the future. The collection policy establishes an ethical framework for the museum's work with the collection. It is impossible for a museum to responsibly hold or develop collections unless there is a written, formally approved policy that is used in the day-to-day work of the museum.

The contents of a collection policy will vary depending on the type of museum. Some museums, such as those with an *in situ* collection in a heritage building, may have a closed collection with policies that specify no new acquisitions, but these places still need a collection policy to manage the collection.

This Collection Policy Template can be adapted and amended to suit most small historical museums. The policies are intended as a framework to assist small volunteer managed museums to meet minimum standards of operation. The museum may wish to establish a small committee to discuss the policy provisions and add further clauses that reflect the museum's mission and collection themes.

Preparing a collection policy is an opportunity to take stock of the collection, understand its scope and needs and consider opportunities for future development. In some ways the collection is the least demanding aspect of a museum's work. In all the day-to-day imperatives of cleaning, staffing and publicizing the museum, it is easy for the needs of the collection to slip from view. Developing or reviewing the collection policy is an opportunity to put the collection back into focus and to plan for its future. While the collection policy template can be quickly adapted to suit your museum, it can also be used for a wide-ranging strategic review of the shape and needs of the collection. Consider using the review of the collection policy to engage members and the wider community in a conversation about what makes the collection important and what should be collected for the future.

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2. Preparing a History of the Museum and Collection (Or how did we end up with all this stuff?)

Collections are always shaped by the history of the organisation that creates them. Understanding and documenting the history of the museum or collecting organisation sheds light on the evolution and development of the collection and its significance. It is important to document the history of the museum as the generation that built the museum ages and retires from active service. This history can be used in many circumstances and may be included in key documents such as the strategic plans and in grant applications. It gives supporters and funding organisations a picture of how and why the museum has developed.

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It is a good idea to keep a research file documenting the history of the museum to complement what's in the museum's archives, such as records of membership, minutes of meetings and office bearers. This file might include newspaper articles, photos of activities and copies of invitations to special events or exhibitions.

2.1 Key Components of a History of your Museum and Collection

The following points might be documented in a one or two page summary of the history of the museum to include in the collection policy.

- The beginnings of the society or museum, including foundation date, the reason why the museum was established, and quotes from the original aims and mission. Who were the key people involved with the early development of the organisation? List any affiliations and the date of incorporation. Interview former office bearers to seek their recollections or ask older members to write a few pages of notes about their memories of the early days of the museum.
- Outline the development of major exhibitions, exhibits and museum activities. Note changes in focus or changes in the name of the organisation. Outline how the museum's site and building has developed and the dates of extensions or new developments.
- Record the acquisition of significant objects and collections acquired at particular dates; note important donors and supporters and collection strengths and research interests.
- List supporters and major grants, e.g. support from service clubs or industry groups, list assistance from council or government.
- Refer to the museum's participation in local campaigns, if relevant. Also note events in the community's history that involve the museum.
- Note important publications and other milestones in the history and development of the museum.
- Locate photographs of the museum in various stages of development, as well as exhibitions, events and of course the people who helped to develop the museum.

3. Reviewing the Significance of the Collection

Developing or revising the collection policy is an opportunity to step back from the day-to-day work of the museum and review the significance of the collection as a whole. It helps to look afresh as the accumulated results of many decades of collecting activity as the starting point for considering new directions and priorities for the collection. Use this as an opportunity to re-engage members with the collection and its future by asking them to identify what they think are the 10 most significant objects in the collection. Call a special meeting or hold a morning tea. Before the meeting give each person a sheet setting out the purpose of the exercise, adapting the notes below

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3.1 Investigating Significant Objects in the Collection

Please have a look around the museum and tell us what you think are the 10 most significant objects. Bring your list to the meeting on xxxxx [insert actual date] and join a discussion about the collection. We're looking for written lists that we can pin up and use to encourage discussion about the collection. We will also keep the lists in the museum's archives as a record of what we think about the collection in 2005.

Please make a list of what you think are the 10 most significant objects in collection, and briefly say why. Please nominate **individual objects**, not whole exhibits, displays or collections. Make a note under each item on the list explaining why you think the object is important. Bring your list to the meeting and join the discussion. If you can't come you can still drop your list into the museum. You don't have to sign your name to the list if you don't choose to.

NB. Objects can be significant for many reasons: for their connections to local people, events, places and history; for workmanship, beauty and ingenuity, or as representative examples of skills and technology. The purpose of this exercise is to help us understand what you value in the collection, and to help us all take a fresh look at what makes the collection significant. Promoting awareness of the significance of the collection is an important strategy to attract increased funding and support. To keep an element of surprise in store, please do the list on your own.

Ask each person to outline what's on their list and why. Once the lists have been compiled they can be pinned up in the meeting room or in the museum and kept as part of the museum's records. The results from this exercise will contribute to a more thorough review of the significance of the collection (see below). In addition to asking members to look at what they think is significant in the collection, consider inviting the community and local schools to participate in the exercise. Prizes might be offered for the most interesting list.

3.2 Step by Step Process to Assess and Review the Significance of the Museum's Collection

Significance can be used to understand the meaning and value of single objects, of particular themes or sections of the collection, or of the whole collection. When developing a collection policy or strategic plan it is important to take stock of the significance of the collection, and review its history, important themes and its links to the development of the museum. The assessment helps the museum to understand the strengths and weaknesses in the collection, and refine collecting directions and priorities.

Follow the step-by-step outline below to develop a statement of significance for the collection as a whole. The resulting statement of significance, which may be a few paragraphs or a page, can be used in many contexts to promote awareness of the meaning and significance of the collection.

Assessing the significance of your collection as a whole is essentially the same process used for assessing the significance of individual objects.

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- **Step 1**

Collate the collection's records and the museum's archives. Research the history of the collection and museum. Many established museums and historical societies already have a published history but it may not be well related to the development of the collection. Identify the main themes and collection interests, the acquisition of important objects or collections, and events in the museum's history that have impacted on the collection and its display, such as new buildings or extensions. Many collections will reflect aspects of the changing history of museums.

- **Step 2**

Talk with previous office bearers, volunteers or staff about the significant acquisitions and collection development, and also previous donors and community interest groups. Consider the community's relationship with the museum and sense of attachment to the collection. Are there important objects or themes in the museum that the community feel strongly about? What role does the museum have in your town? Have there been times when the community has rallied to support the museum? This is important in considering the social value of the collection.

- **Step 3**

Understand the collection in the context of the museum building, especially if the museum is in a heritage building, or if there are collections associated with the place, such as original furniture or equipment. Are there objects associated with the museum's history, or the building, that should be accessioned? (See below for more advice on this issue) Also consider how the collection reflects the history and identity of the people and the region, or the subject or interest groups associated with the museum.

- **Step 4**

Analyse the overall condition of the collection. This can help to set future conservation priorities.

- **Step 5**

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

- **Step 6**

Assess its significance with reference to the main criteria and comparative criteria: historic, aesthetic, research and social significance; and provenance, representativeness, rarity, condition, and interpretive potential

- **Step 7**

Write a statement of significance that summarises the importance and meaning of the collection. This may be a paragraph or run to a page or two. Dot points are fine if there's no time for perfect prose.

- **Step 8**

Identify strategies to redress weaknesses and omissions in the collection and plan ways to make collecting less passive. Explore opportunities to collaborate with other

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museums to build complementary collections. These points can be incorporated in the final section of the collection policy and in the museum's strategic plan.¹

4. Significance of the Museum Building or Site

Many museums are in heritage buildings or are part of a heritage site or precinct. In most cases, heritage buildings are entrusted to museums on the assumption that the museum will protect its heritage values. Occupying a heritage building imposes special obligations on the museum to recognise its significance and manage the building or site in a way that conserves its special values and meaning. Visiting the historic building or site may be one of the main reasons visitors come to the museum, so visitors want to understand its story and enjoy its unique spaces. Museums in heritage buildings must interpret the building or site so that its history and significance can be understood and appreciated by visitors.

It is easy for collections to overwhelm the spaces of a heritage building and obscure understanding of its history and significance. If the museum is in a heritage building it is important that the collection policy recognises the significance of the building and any associated collections that are part of its history and uses. **These collections are of special significance.**

Prepare a statement of significance for the building² and identify objects, furnishings and fittings that are part of the original fabric, history and patterns of use. Collections associated with the building may be identified as a particular theme in the collection policy and be given special attention in the museum's strategic priorities for the collection; for example collecting further items provenanced to the history of the building or site.

The collection policy should carefully consider and discuss the relationship between the heritage building and the collection, and any conflicts or management issues arising from the needs of the building and the needs of the collections. Identifying potential conflicts will ensure the issues are resolved in a way that respects the needs of both the building and the collection. However a good rule of thumb is that the collection and the museum functions should fit the building, rather than the building be compromised to accommodate the collection and museum.

Particular clauses may need to be added to the collection policy to reflect the museum's obligations to protect the significance of the building. For example, use one or more of the following statements:

¹ Adapted from *Significance, A Guide for Assessing the Significance of Cultural Heritage Objects and Collections*, Roslyn Russell and Kylie Winkworth, Heritage Collections Council and DCITA, 2001, also available on the Collections Australia Network at www.collectionsaustralia.net

² If the building is on a heritage register or has a Conservation Management Plan this will include a statement of significance. See NSW Heritage Office Manual, including *Assessing Heritage Significance*, 1996, Environment Australia, Resources for Protecting Heritage Places, and M. Walker and P. Marquis-Kyle, *The Illustrated Burra Charter: good practice for heritage places*, Australia ICOMOS Inc, Burwood, 2004. The web sites for these organisations provide useful resources and directions for acquiring these publications. Alternatively your local library may have these publications or be willing to buy them.
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- *The collection should fit the building. The collection and its demands should not diminish the heritage values of the building or impede understanding and appreciation of its significance.*
- *The collection will not obscure understanding of the building, but where relevant help to interpret the building, its history, significance and the use of various rooms.*
- *Interpret the history and significance of the museum building, recognising that the place itself is an exhibit. Interpret the functions and uses of the various rooms and spaces. (This does not mean that the space may not house other collections.)*
- *Develop collections that complement the themes and history of the site*
- *Manage the building to conserve and communicate its heritage values for the benefit of current and future generations.*

If the museum does not have a conservation plan for the building this should be a priority task as part of the museum's strategic plan. You can also add a clause to this effect in the collection policy. For example:

- *Prepare a conservation management plan (CMP) for the building/ site and manage in accordance with the CMP.*

5. Creating Object Files

Object files are the essential museum reference for objects in the collection. They hold all the museum's knowledge about the item, its history and significance, information on owners and users, and its history since it came into the collection.

Object files are a reference point for anything to do with the object. They are the starting point for significance assessment; they shape decisions on conservation and guide interpretation. Object files are an effective way to organise information about your most significant objects. They collate information that would otherwise be scattered in various filing cabinets, files and the memories of volunteers. Generally each object has its own file, but a similar group of items may share a single file.

The object file can be any type of folder. Plastic sleeves are useful to keep the information in order. If keeping original material such as historic photos or an instruction book on the file, always put it in a secure pocket or sleeve.

The object name and number should go on the outside of the file, and along the edge that will be visible when the file is shelved or held in a filing cabinet. You can also put a copy of a photo of the object on the front.

Keep the object file in a secure, designated place. **The object file should never leave the museum.** If you are working on object research at home always make a duplicate file. Keep both the original and copy up to date by transferring

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information as it is developed. Mark the duplicate file so it isn't confused with the museum's original records.

An object file is always a work in progress, information is added whenever anything comes to light, or when the object is conserved or displayed in the museum

What goes in an object file?

Anything relevant to understanding the object, its history, significance and what's happened to it in the museum

Object files may include:

- Donor details: name, address, phone number
- Acquisition information: date acquired, copy of receipt, object number, catalogue sheet or a copy of the catalogue entry
- Photos of the object: if possible take photos of the object *in situ*, before it is moved into the museum, and where relevant take or copy photos of the maker or user. Also include photos of the object on display in the museum. Where relevant include details or different views or angles.
- Notes or information from the donor, preferably written by the donor
- Notes from conversations with people who know about the object and remember seeing it or similar items in use
- Copies of all kinds of historical and contemporary references from books, retail trade catalogues, newspapers, letters, local histories, oral histories etc
- Copies of historic photos, paintings, drawings or any pictorial material showing similar objects in use. There may also be archival films that could be noted on the file. These images help you understand the context of use and provide clues for further research and interpretation.
- Information about the maker or manufacturer, photo of the maker or manufacturer or the place where it was used
- Information about the design and process of making the object
- Information about the industry and how it was made or used
- A statement of significance and copies of all the references used to research the statement of significance
- Documentation about conservation or restoration work on the object. Include before and after photos, notes about the process and materials used, notes about new material added to the object, or fabric removed or replaced, the date the work was done and by whom. Save samples of what has been removed or replaced, and samples of the new material added to the object. NB Always assess significance before any conservation or restoration work to the object. The statement of significance helps guide treatment decisions.
- Information about the exhibition history of the object: where shown, duration of exhibition, travelling displays, copy of object label, photo of the object on display.
- Information about similar objects in other museums or in private ownership, including photos if possible. AMOL, now the Collections Australia Network, is a useful source of information, but also check with other museums in the district.
- If the object has been published or referred to in a newspaper or magazine article, include a copy for reference

Consider recruiting new volunteers to work on object files and collection research. Target people who like doing research or know the particular subject or family.

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Focus on the museum's most important objects where the provenance³ and history has not been recorded. Track down donors and don't be embarrassed about asking for more information. Most donors are really pleased the museum is working on their donation.

6. Getting Started on Deaccessioning

Deaccessioning is the process of de-registering an object from the collection for clearly stated reasons, and disposing of it in accordance with approved policies and procedures.

Deaccessioning is an important exercise for museums, particularly those with collections that have grown through donations, and where few offers of donation have been refused. Many collections have accumulated without the guidance of a collection policy or a clear sense of the purpose of the museum. In the past many museums were reluctant to refuse a donation, resulting in collections that now need review, culling and a clearer focus. Just as our houses need to be spring cleaned and de-cluttered from time to time, so museum collections need to be culled to remove things that on reflection have limited significance or relevance to the museum. This process will free up space and resources for more important objects and more strategic acquisitions.

Caution and transparency in the deaccessioning process are essential. There are instances where museums and galleries have deaccessioned items and collections that were subsequently recognised as important and valuable. However most mistakes occur through a lack of clear policies and adequate discussion and consultation. A breathing space of 12 months between the deaccessioning decision and disposal is a wise safeguard, particularly if there is some disagreement among museum members about the significance of the items proposed for deaccessioning. In cases where there is no disagreement, or the item is in poor condition, the 12-month period of review can be waived.

6.1 Deaccessioning Criteria – key questions for your committee

Sound deaccessioning decisions are best made by a committee, using the significance assessment criteria and the collection policy as a framework for careful consideration and assessment.

Consider holding a discussion about deaccessioning by asking museum members to each review the collection and identify 10 objects they think could be removed from the collection. Circulate the deaccessioning policies and ask each person to explain why they have chosen the objects on their list. Pin up each list and compare and contrast items on the list. Consider large items, objects in poor condition and obvious duplicates as a priority.

The following prompt questions may help guide compilation of the list.

- Is the item relevant to the mission and purpose of the museum?

³ Provenance is the life history of an object, especially the origin, history, associations, previous owners and context of use.

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- Does it tell a story about life in the district? Is it provenanced to the area?
- How does the item relate to key themes in the collection? (It is better to have a group of related items that can make a coherent display rather than a scattering of disparate items loosely related to a broad theme.)
- What kind of research or contextual information does the museum have about the item and its use, for example photographs of the item or similar items in use?
- Is it complete and in good condition?
- Is it significant and why?
- Does the museum have other items like it? Is it likely that the museum can acquire a better example such as an item that has a provenance or story?
- Do other museums in the district have similar items of better quality or with a provenance?
- Is it likely to be displayed and in what context? Does it make an interesting object for exhibition?
- Is the item part of a group of things that have the potential to create an interesting display that tells a story about life in the district?
- Can the museum properly store and care for the object?

7. Linking your Collection – Regional Collaborations

Museums have mushroomed over the last 50 years and many regions have 10 or 20 heritage collections. This can lead to overlap of collecting interests and duplication of types of items. Not every museum needs a telephone exchange or a typewriter collection, especially if the objects have little documentation about who used them and how they were used. Collection policies should recognise museums and collecting organisations with related interests, and seek to complement other collections.

Collaborating with collecting organisations in the region is good policy and practice. There are great benefits for museums and collecting organisations that work together on joint collection projects, including improving chances of attracting grant funding. Collaborative projects might include a project to jointly analyse a common collection theme such as farming collections in the region. Working together on thematic studies to review a particular theme, subject or the collections in a region, is an effective way to share resources and knowledge and assess the significance of the distributed collections. Thematic studies develop skills, enhance research, promote awareness of significant objects and collections and lead to improved interpretation and coordinated collecting. From this research and review of what's in the collections, the participating museums can go on to develop a shared collection policy for the theme, identifying strategic priorities and ways of developing each collection with a distinctive and complementary focus. ⁴

8. Collection Policies and the Strategic Plan

A collection policy needs to be actively used and implemented if it is to be effective. There are various ways of translating the collection policy into a program

⁴ See 'Timber Stories of the Hastings', *Heritage NSW*, Autumn 2004 and Kylie Winkworth, *Connecting Collections, Thematic Studies of Museum and Heritage Collections, a guide for museums, heritage networks and communities*, Queensland Heritage Trails Network, 2001
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of ongoing work on the collection. Issues and strategic priorities identified in the process of developing or reviewing the collection policy can be listed as tasks at the end of the policy. In addition, the museum's strategic plan should also incorporate the key recommendations and tasks identified during work on the collection policy.

Every strategic plan for a museum or collecting organisation should have at least one key goal that is focused on collection development. For example the goal may read, "develop a significant and distinctive collection and promote community access and awareness of its values". Under this goal the museum then details a range of strategies and tasks that have been identified in the course of preparing the collection policy. This might include:

- Research and documenting significant objects
- Developing object files and improving collection documentation
- Prepare statements of significance for important objects
- Training museum volunteers in collection management
- Conducting a detailed review of a particular section of the collection
- Deaccessioning
- Enhancing on-line access to the collection
- Reviewing opportunities to strategically collect more recent history
- Actively collecting priority themes
- Collaborate with other collecting organisations to review common collection themes and subjects, such as farming heritage or domestic collections

The plan then details the specific tasks required to implement each strategy and identifies when they will be done. This enables the museum to develop an annual action list of work on the collection. Some tasks are ongoing, such as working on object files and significance assessment; others such as deaccessioning may follow analysis of particular sections of the collection. This is an effective way to translate collection policies into a sustained program of work on the collection. It keeps the collection in focus and renews interest and awareness of its value and purpose.

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