

## Collection policy

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### What is a collection policy?

A 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 a museum collects, and how and why items may be deaccessioned from the collection.

The collection policy includes a range of reference points 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.

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 museums still need a collection policy to manage the collection.

Preparing a collection policy is an opportunity to take stock of the collection, understand its scope and needs and consider opportunities for future development. Developing or reviewing the collection policy is an opportunity to put the collection back into focus and to plan for its future.

### How did we end up with all this stuff?

Collections are shaped by the history of the organisation that creates them. Understanding and documenting this history sheds light on the evolution and development of the collection and its significance.

Documenting the history of the museum is particularly important as those who built the museum age and retire from service. This history can be used in many ways and forms the basis of key documents such as the strategic plan, interpretative strategies and grant applications. It gives supporters and funding organisations a snapshot of how and why the museum has developed.



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#### **Collection Policy: guidelines to writing**

Amanda Jones, Community History SA  
[www.community.history.sa.gov.au](http://www.community.history.sa.gov.au)

#### **MAP Collection Policy Template**

Museums Australia Victoria  
[www.mavic.asn.au](http://www.mavic.asn.au)

#### **Assessing Heritage Significance**

NSW Heritage Office  
[www.environment.nsw.gov.au](http://www.environment.nsw.gov.au)

#### **Significance 2.0**

Roslyn Russell and Kylie Winkworth  
[www.arts.gov.au](http://www.arts.gov.au)

#### **The Illustrated Burra Charter: good practice for heritage places**

Meredith Walker and Peter Marquis-Kyle,  
ICOMOS  
[www.icomos.org](http://www.icomos.org)

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## Key components of a history of your museum and its collection

Document the following points into a short 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 notes about their memories of the early days of the museum.
- Outline the development of major exhibitions, exhibits and museum activities including 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.

## Reviewing the significance of the collection

### Assessing significance

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Significance is used to understand the meaning and value of single objects, of particular themes or sections of the collection, or of the whole collection. The assessment helps the museum to understand the strengths and weaknesses in the collection, and refine collecting directions and priorities.

Objects can be significant for many reasons. They may be:

- Connected to local people, events, places and history.
- Demonstrate workmanship, beauty and ingenuity.
- Be representative examples of skills and technology.

The steps used to develop a statement of significance for the collection as a whole or for assessing the significance of individual objects are basically the same, and involve the following activities:

- Collate the collection's records and the museum's archives.
- Research the history of the collection and museum.
- Identify the main themes and collection interests, the acquisition of important objects or collections, and events in the museum's history.
- 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.
- Analyse the overall condition of the collection. This can help to set future conservation priorities.

- Consider how your collection compares with other museum collections in the region, or collections of similar size or interest.
- Assess significance with reference to the main criteria and comparative criteria: historic, aesthetic, research and social significance; and provenance, representativeness, rarity, condition, and interpretive potential.
- Write a statement of significance that summarises the importance and meaning of the collection. This may be a paragraph or several pages.

### **Significance of the museum building or site**

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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 heritage values and meaning.

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 the collection policy should recognise the significance of the building and any associated collections.

Prepare a statement of significance for the building 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. A good rule of thumb is that the collection and the museum functions should fit the building, rather than compromising the building to accommodate the collection and museum.

Use one or more of the following statements:

- 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.
- 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. 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.

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## Creating Object Files

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

Object files are the starting point for significance assessment; they shape decisions on conservation and guide interpretation. Object files are an effective way to collate and organise information about your most significant objects. Generally each object should have its own file, but similar groups of items may share a single file.

The file should be labelled with the object name and number, and along the edge that will be visible when the file is shelved or in a filing cabinet. Add a photo of the object on the front of the folder.

Object files should be kept in a secure, designated place. The object file should never leave the museum. If you are working on object research at home, make a duplicate file and keep both the original and copy up to date by transferring information as it is developed. Mark the duplicate file so it isn't confused with the museum's original records.

An object file is a work in progress, adding information over time, including new research and notes about when the object is conserved, loaned or or displayed.

### 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. Include photos of the object on display in the museum. Where relevant include details or different views or angles.
- Notes from the donor, 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 be archival films that could be noted on the file. These images help 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. Keep samples of what has been removed or replaced, and samples of the new material added to the object. 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. Collections Australia Network (CAN) is a useful source of information.

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- If the object has been published or referred to in a newspaper or magazine article, include a copy for reference.

## 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. Many collections have accumulated without the guidance of a collection policy or a clear sense of the purpose of 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. Most mistakes occur through a lack of clear policies and inadequate discussion and consultation.

It is common to allow a space of 12 months between the deaccessioning decision and disposal is a 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.

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.

### **The following questions will guide decision-making.**

- Is the item relevant to the mission and purpose of the museum?
- Does it tell a story about life in the district? Is it provenanced to the area? Provenance is the life history of an object, especially the origin, history, associations, previous owners and context of use.

- 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?

## Linking your collection – regional collaboration

Over the last 50 years museums have experienced a growth period and many regions have multiple heritage collections. This can lead to overlap of collecting interests and duplication of types of items. Collection policies should recognise museums and collecting organisations with related interests, and seek to complement other collections.

Collaborating with other collecting organisations in the region provides mutual benefits including improved chances of attracting grant funding.

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Examples of 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.

Shared collection policies can then be developed which identify strategic priorities and ways of developing each collection with a distinctive and complementary focus. See 'Timber Stories of the Hastings', Heritage NSW, Autumn 2004, pp16-17.

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## 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 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.

The museum's strategic plan should incorporate key recommendations and tasks identified through the collection policy.

The strategic plan should contain one key goal focused on collection development. For example, '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:

- Researching and documenting significant objects
- Developing object files
- Preparing statements of significance for important objects
- Collection management training for volunteers and staff
- Deaccessioning

- Enhancing on-line access to the collection
- Identifying strategies to redress weaknesses and omissions in the collection and planning ways to make collecting less passive.

The strategic plan details the specific tasks required to implement each strategy and identifies a timeframe. The museum can then develop an action work on the collection. Some tasks will be 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.