

Museums & Galleries of NSW Submission:

Refresh of *Significance 2.0: a guide to assessing the significance of collections*

1 October 2024

Museums & Galleries of NSW (M&G NSW) welcomes the opportunity to provide comment on the Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications and the Arts update of *Significance 2.0*.

We are a peak body and service organisation supported by the NSW Government through Create NSW. Our Purpose is to ‘*support the capacity building of small to medium museums, galleries and Aboriginal cultural centres so they can realise and maximise their impact on their communities*’. We develop these organisations’ skills, connect them with others in the industry, provide funding, point visitors their way, and give them access to ground-breaking exhibitions.

Significance 2.0 details best practice to ensure a considered process behind determining the significance of objects in cultural collections. It provides a benchmark for organisations to achieve within the *National Standards for Australian Museums and Galleries*.

FIRST NATIONS CULTURAL MATERIAL:

It has been 15 years since *Significance 2.0* launched, and much has changed within the collecting landscape. As the National Cultural Policy, *REVIVE*, rightfully announces itself with First Nations First – so too should the next iteration of *Significance*.

We believe that the framework for determining significance should start with the question: ‘*Significance to who?*’.

While the existing criteria provides scope for an object or collection to be viewed through the lens of a particular group, we see that a key problem is that *Significance 2.0* does not provide detailed examples of how non-settler cultures in particular may apply the criteria.

Significance 2.0 does seek to encourage conversations with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, although it is primarily within the context of these communities providing cultural knowledge to (predominantly) non-First Nations organisations to validate their collections. Within *Significance 2.0*, questions of custodianship are not clearly addressed, nor the concept of ‘relevance’ to a particular collection. Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property determine First Peoples’ rights to their cultural heritage based on the fundamental right to self-determination. This needs to be reflected in any update to *Significance*. We propose that updates to *Significance* needs to be fully endorsed by First Nations people.

If the next iteration of *Significance* does not provide strong guidance on determining the relevance of objects/collections to the host institution, we fear the continuation of colonial style collecting practices. *Our Culture: Our Future – Report on Australian Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property Rights* (Michael Frankel & Company and Terri Janke, 1998) identifies many recommendations relevant to the collecting of First Nations cultural material that should be considered within the context of an update to *Significance*.

Other existing reference guides include the Australian Museum and Galleries Association's [First Peoples: A Roadmap for Enhancing Indigenous Engagement in Museums and Galleries](#); which has been embedded in to the [National Standards for Australian Museums and Galleries](#) (National Standards Taskforce, 2023).

We acknowledge that conversations around custodianship presents potentially challenging situations for institutions and will require additional resources. Nonetheless, it is essential that contemporary collections practice grapples with this issue, particularly if the sector is to uphold the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, 2007 Article 31:

'Indigenous peoples have the right to maintain, control, protect and develop their cultural heritage, traditional knowledge and traditional cultural expressions, as well as the manifestations of their sciences, technologies and cultures, including human and genetic resources, seeds, medicines, knowledge of the properties of fauna and flora, oral traditions, literatures, designs, sports and traditional games and visual and performing arts. They also have the right to maintain, control, protect and develop their intellectual property over such cultural heritage, traditional knowledge, and traditional cultural expressions.'

We also acknowledge that questioning 'Significance to who' can extend beyond First Nations communities and custodians – to any community of people with lived experience and/or relevance to an organisation's collections and/or objects. We encourage the updated version to revise the context information to reflect this.

PROVENANCE:

We recommend expanding the provenance research section in the updated document, with particular emphasis on looking for, and understanding problematic provenance. The only reference to 'bad' provenance in *Significance 2.0* refers to Jewish-owned art collections looted during the Nazi era. The issue of problematic provenance is much broader than this one specific topic, given the sometimes coercive or illegal nature that cultural material has been collected.

Institutions need assistance in understanding what to do when provenance research turns up materials imported into the country under questionable circumstances. This includes identifying fake provenance details which are becoming increasingly problematic for institutions of all sizes, with dealers operating inside and outside of Australia selling unprovenanced cultural materials.

We also assert that an updated *Significance* document needs to speak to regional contexts – so 'problematic provenance' should include examples that relate to the regional setting. Examples of this can include First Nations cultural material gifted to regional museums with little known background.

DESIGN AND FORMAT OF THE GUIDE:

Significance 2.0, a very dense document, which can be a daunting, even alienating process for smaller organisations. Currently, delineation between ideas, methods, and hierarchies of processes can be confusing, and includes elements of repetition. This is also an accessibility issue: easy English is preferred by many.

We advocate for simpler visual guides to step users through the process and strongly recommend the sixth edition of the [Code of Practice for Visual Arts, Craft and Design](#) format, launched by the National Association for the Visual Arts (NAVA) in 2022. The Code's online platform breaks down a range of multifaceted considerations into easily digestible and accessible pages. It should be noted that this platform was co-designed with the sector through many consultation sessions over an extended period.

We also recommend much greater array of working examples, including from diverse regional collections; and relating to diverse communities and cultures. This would enhance the application of the significance methodology.

TYPES OF COLLECTIONS FEATURED IN CASE STUDIES:

While we note the inclusion of examples from smaller collecting institutions in *Significance 2.0*, we recommend a more visibly robust focus on the small to medium sector generally. A focus on collections held by First Nations-led organisations would support a deeper understanding of First Nations cultural custodianship. This would ensure these organisations are evidently represented within the document. We also suggest reference to determining significance for digital heritage (and 'born again' objects), including [TROVE](#) and M&G NSW's [Storyplace](#) as guiding platforms for this.

SECTOR FINANCIAL SUPPORT:

Since *Significance 2.0* first launched, numerous collection-related initiatives have ceased, including Collections Australia Network and its predecessor Australian Museums Online (AMOL), as well as the Collections Council of Australia, publisher of *Significance 2.0*.

The preface to *Significance 2.0* outlines that the objectives for the Collections Council of Australia were to:

- advance the stability and sustainability of the collections sector, through communication, consultation and resolution of common issues;
- sponsor such programs deemed necessary and desirable to further industry development;
- promote benchmarks and standards for the care and management of collections;
- promote access to and participation in Australian cultural heritage collections.

Minimal federal government funding initiatives currently exist to support the museums and heritage sectors. M&G NSW outlined this issue in our submission to the National Cultural Policy Inquiry (22 February 2023):

'In 2022, of the 886 funded applications through the Australia Council for the Arts, 1.2% were awarded to regional and university galleries (though we note that organisations such as ours, and individual artists had received funding to support programs in these institutions); while there were no successful applications to identified heritage museums or heritage related projects. The pathways for funding for small to medium museums is restricted, with a perception that Federal Government support is non-existent. This perception has been emphasised on the release of Revive. Small museums play a vital role in preserving Australia's cultural heritage, indeed, they underpin the very notion of the Cultural Policy's by-line: 'a place for every story, a story for every place.'

Our organisation calls for further investment in the collections sector more broadly, with a specific focus on small to medium collecting institutions. While this is possibly outside the scope of the consultation for *Significance 2.0*, linkages between this process, and the current state of the sector cannot be overlooked. The 2022 M&G NSW Sector Census found that 95% of respondents cited current risks to their collections. These included urgent and/or long-term building maintenance issues; inadequate/unsafe storage; lack of trained staff or volunteers in collection care and general lack of funding. Consideration should also be made for specific investment in digitisation for items of significance. The M&G NSW platform [Storyplace](#) is an example to consider here, along with the digitisation guide, [Crystal Clear: standards and guidance for digitising regional collections](#).

ENVIRONMENTAL DISASTER:

Within our submission to *Significance 2.0*, we would also like to highlight the pressing need for protection of movable cultural heritage within the context of increasing environmental disasters. The March 2022 NSW flood event greatly impacted the collections of Lismore Regional Museum and Lismore Regional Gallery (with an estimated loss of 50% of collection objects, representing a value of \$780,000, or 20% of its overall value). Later in the year Eugowra Historical Museum & Bushranger Centre suffered extensive damage to the majority of its collections.

Our recommendations in our submission to the [Senate Select Committee on Australia's Disaster Resilience](#) (February 2023) covered 4 key points, that we believe should be considered within the context of significance given it pertains to protecting movable cultural heritage in Australia. These included: The establishment of a National Cultural Recovery Fund; A National Insurance Scheme for cultural collections; A National Cultural Infrastructure Fund to support the protection of cultural heritage items; and Establishment of Offsite Regional Collections Facilities.

FUTURE OF COLLECTIONS:

One of the tougher conversations M&G NSW believes has to be had, is what is the future of our collections? This is broached in *Significance 2.0*, but we believe an updated *Significance* needs to dedicate a section on what shouldn't be kept – even if an object meets the significance criteria. Applying significance can't just be about keeping everything that has value. Ultimately it can be argued that everything that is provenanced meets the criteria and has value. We believe that deciding what should be kept in collections needs to be considered within a sustainability framework, as well as a significance framework. It is not sustainable (environmentally and/or financially) or physically possible to continue to grow collections without taking in to account the ability to house these objects. Many collections are already strained in caring for the collections they have, leading to the situation that they are unable to care for anything effectively. While we advocate for the role of regional collections facilities (such as the [Central Tablelands Collections Facility](#)) these facilities should not be considered in isolation from the issue of ever increasing collections.

A sustainability framework is linked to the deaccessioning process, which is referenced in *Significance 2.0*, however we believe that a stronger conversation needs to be had around collecting of objects than the deaccessioning process allows for.

An update should also talk to the benefits of keeping a focused, place-based collection. This is especially pertinent to museums that are focused on local and regional hi/story telling.

An updated *Significance* document should be asking:

- What are the financial implications to keeping the object?
- Does the institution have adequate storage facilities for the object?
- What environmental sustainability issues arise from collecting the object?
- What does the collecting of this object add to our broader collection?
- Does the institution have adequate knowledge and human resource to care for the object?

Digitisation has a role to play here, as it can assist us to record items that meet significance criteria but which we can't keep because they do not meet conditions such as those above. These digitised (or 'born again' objects) can still have a role to play in storytelling and understanding our varied cultures, without being an unnecessary burden to the institutions housing them.

SUMMARY OF MUSEUMS & GALLERIES OF NSW RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. Framing significance around the question: Significance to who?
2. Reference existing protocols for working with First Nations cultural material and communities;
3. Update and expand section on dealing with problematic provenance;
4. Simplify design and format using NAVAs *Code of Practice for Visual Arts, Craft and Design* as a guide and/or consider using a codesign process;
5. Ensure a focus on accessibility is built in to the design and format;
6. Highlight diverse collections from small to medium and First Nations-led organisations in the revised document;
7. Increase investment for collections related needs, particularly at the small to medium level;
8. Consider collection needs to protect against disaster and environmental threats;
9. Include tools to assist in decision making around items unable to be kept in the long term.