

Museum Workshop: The Art, Science and Craft of the Conservator

By Vicki Humphrey, Head of Conservation, National Museum of Australia

An exhibition is really just the tip of an iceberg – a visible product presented to audiences to explore themes and tell stories about the objects on display. However, as with any iceberg, there is a great deal below the surface that visitors don't see. The *Museum Workshop* provides a glimpse of the underside of the exhibition iceberg and the opportunity to see what takes place behind the scenes.

The *Museum Workshop* highlights the work of conservators in preparing collection items for exhibition and maintaining the Museum's collection as a whole. The exhibition space mirrors the three main conservation labs in the Museum – paper and textiles, large technology and objects – as well as showing some preventive measures used to reduce the risk of damage to collections.

This is a very different experience for Museum visitors, who will enter a space equipped for conservation work, where conservators are actively working on collection items. Some pieces of equipment provide spectacular set dressing – with the largest and most noticeable in use in the large technology lab. Visitors will be able to witness major conservation milestones in the preservation of important objects, such as when conservators lift the body of Queen Elizabeth II's Royal Daimler off its chassis.

With a collection as diverse as the Museum's, it is rare that any two treatments are identical. It may surprise some people to discover that the conservation decision-making process is not just about repairing damage. It is often very complex, with the need to take into account the significance of the object in question, its physical state and its intended use.

Significance refers to the historic, aesthetic, scientific, cultural and social values that make objects meaningful to people. These are important considerations in terms of conservation treatments as some processes might obliterate or minimise specific features that make objects significant. In this exhibition, a good example of this is the EJ Holden. It is dilapidated and in pieces and has had many

makeshift repairs, but – as one of the cars featured in the ABC television program *Bush Mechanics* – its poor condition is an integral part of its significance as an example of ingenuity and use of available resources. If this vehicle were taken back to its original condition, the greater part of its significance would be lost.

In the majority of cases conservators aim to slow deterioration or return objects to agreed previous states of significance. In the *Museum Workshop* you will see conservators treat two photograph albums. Although they can't reverse the chemically induced deterioration of the pages, they can stabilise and repair damaged pages. They can also repair the album structures, making the albums much easier to access and use.

Another aspect that influences decision-making is the preservation of functional objects in their working order. For example, a pianola needs to be able to play music, so conservators maintain and exercise it regularly to ensure that it continues to work. Preserving function requires more ongoing treatment than if function was not considered.

Whatever the purpose of objects in a museum setting, they will be handled, moved and stored and will require different levels of protection depending on their exposure to risk. This will influence decisions about treatment, packing and support. Such decisions cannot be made without cooperation between curators, conservators and other areas across the Museum. The involvement of different experts enriches the process and results in more imaginative solutions. It can also increase the complexity of decision-making because we all see the objects differently. Typically, curators see history and context, conservators see history, deterioration and problems to solve, and registrars see items to be documented, transported and stored appropriately. Visitors to the *Museum Workshop* have opportunities to explore different approaches to objects by talking to Museum staff or by participating in the variety of programs designed to accompany the exhibition.



The range of objects on display reflects the diversity of the Museum's collection and makes it apparent that conservators need both a broad knowledge of materials and very specific skills in order to treat and care for the collection.

***Museum Workshop: The Art, Science and Craft of the Conservator* is on display at the National Museum of Australia in Canberra from 25 October 2012 to 28 January 2013. Admission is free. For more information about the exhibition, including details of when to see conservators in action and hear related talks, visit www.nma.gov.au/exhibitions/museum_workshop/home**