

COLLECTORS AND COLLECTIONS



The National Museum's Indigenous collections are wide ranging in their scope: they exhibit considerable historical depth, there is a broad range of objects and there are items from all over the country. As a consequence, the National Historical Collection (NHC), as the Museum's total collection is called, is continually being developed.

How have collections of Indigenous material been assembled, and how does the Museum acquire them? Collections are acquired by donation or purchase or, occasionally, through transfer. There is a very active market for Indigenous material and it is common for people to offer items for sale to the Museum. The Museum also buys items directly from Indigenous people, as well as other sources such as auction houses. Acquisitions are purchased directly from Indigenous people when staff are on fieldwork, or consulting over special projects. Occasionally an artist or craftsperson approaches the Museum directly.

Sometimes a very generous collector offers their collection as a gift. The two collectors most recently featured in this series, Edmund Milne and Deaconess Winifred Hilliard, are particularly notable here. People can also donate collections through the Cultural Gifts Program (previously called the Taxation Incentives for the Arts Scheme) where, once the collection is approved (the donation has to satisfy defined criteria) the owner effectively receives a reduction in their tax. Transfers, usually from another institution or a government department, are less common but there have been significant acquisitions made in this way, such as the University of Sydney collection which includes several collections assembled by some of the earliest professional anthropologists to work in Australia.

All new collection offers made to the Museum are managed by a Duty Curator. These then go fortnightly to a Collections Committee. This committee makes an initial judgment on the suitability of the offer for inclusion in the NHC and determines which offers should progress to the assessment stage. Decisions are guided by the Museum's Collections Development Framework. Assessments are carried out by a curator who determines the significance of the offer and its relevance to the NHC.

To do this as much information, or documentation, about items comprising the offer is recorded. This documentation is obtained from the person making the offer. Sometimes further information

is located through researching other sources. If acquisition is recommended by the curator and the assessment completed, it is forwarded to the Program Director to be signed off and to the General Manager for approval. The Collections Committee of the Museum's Council has final approval for collections to be accessioned into the National Historical Collection.

Collections that progress to assessment stage clearly fit within the Framework and progress to acquisition. That is not to say that rigorous questions are not asked. Museums today see their role in presenting Indigenous histories as being broader than in the past. Over the last twenty or thirty years museums have gone from showing just 'traditional' cultures to incorporating a much higher percentage of more recent historical or contemporary issues. Collecting practices have changed to accommodate this. In recent years the National Museum has been actively collecting in areas including land rights and protest, missions, the art and craft industry and other cross-cultural areas. As a result, curators might propose the acquisition of new items not currently present in the collection that require justification before acquisition can proceed.

One reason for taking this rigorous approach when acquiring new collections is to ensure that the Museum acquires legal title to these collections. This is necessary if the Museum is to properly manage and use the collections to their full potential. While ensuring legal title to collections is obtained, the Museum does, however, acknowledge the moral rights of Indigenous people and ensures that they are consulted over the use of items in the various programs.

This is all very well for new collections, but the Museum holds over 200 collections comprising thousands of items that were made before the Museum even came into being in 1980. Requirements when acquiring collections in the past were less stringent than they are now. So the older collections rarely have any record of how they were acquired, and in some cases do not even have an acquisition date. For example, the only way we know that the Melbourne-based surgeon Dr George Horne donated his collection in 1926 is from a newspaper article!

Some of these collections were put together by anthropologists, while many were made by amateur collectors, like Horne. Generally speaking the former are more cohesive in that they were collected from only one, or at most a few, cultural groups,

whereas amateur collectors tended to acquire unrelated artefacts from many locations. This reflects the fact that anthropologists work directly with Indigenous people, while amateur collectors tend to have little or even no contact at all with Indigenous people. Again speaking generally, anthropologists' collections are better documented, but rarely are those in the NHC as well documented as we would like them to be. When Museum staff make collections, they are careful to record as much information about each item as they can.

This sparse level of information relates to most items in early collections. For the majority of older items the only thing we know about them might be a place name (for many items even this was not recorded). Sometimes there might be a language name or a date. For Indigenous material in the NHC this does not improve greatly until collections made in the 1960s and later, again with one or two significant exceptions. The reasons for this are many and complex and not well understood. Possible reasons could include the collector not writing down the information before they died, and not comprehending the intricacies of Indigenous cultures. It is likely that many artefacts acquired by amateur collectors passed through several sets of hands before coming to the Museum and in the process information was simply lost.

Documentation takes two forms. There is the information that is specific to each component, to the collection itself, or to individual items in that collection. This in turn helps to inform the broader picture, for example how collections are assembled or the use of particular artefact types.

Few of the collectors are still alive and in some cases the nearest living relatives are elderly grandchildren. Without a direct link to the collector there is rarely much new information that can be obtained. But this is not always the case. Max Gedde, now in his late seventies, is the grandson of Frederick Goddard. The Museum holds a small collection made by Goddard (see *Friends* 14(2) 2003). The only documentation that came with the collection was place names for most items. Mr Gedde holds some of his grandfather's papers which he kindly allowed the Museum to copy. This material includes autobiographical notes that, while not providing primary documentation for individual objects, do give contextual information about Goddard's life. From this we can build up a picture of when Goddard would have collected particular artefacts and what he was doing at the time.

This level of information is often more than we can expect to obtain. Other relatives of deceased collectors I have contacted did not even know their relative had a collection, or only had a vague recollection of it. They sometimes do provide biographical information which helps us to learn a bit more about the collector. Sometimes this leads us to new information.

In order to better understand the historical collections it is worthwhile to research them to find out how they were assembled. By doing this we can learn more about issues such as cross-cultural relations, and how the market for Indigenous material culture has developed over time. And, sometimes, new information is uncovered about particular items.

Dedicated research can be a productive way of improving the documentation of historical collections. But most frequently this reveals more about the non-Indigenous side of a collection's history, rather than revealing more about the cultures behind the items. Thus, when I was researching the Milne Collection I found a lot of new information about Milne and how he collected, but only a small amount of extra information about items in his collection.

Specific information about individual objects has only been discovered during the course of research. For example Herbert Basedow, an early twentieth century anthropologist, recorded how an Aboriginal man had given him a bullroarer in appreciation of the interest he took in the man's culture. Some sacred objects are individually owned, and in this case it is quite possible it was culturally acceptable for the man to give this particular item to Basedow. In other cases the information is more ambiguous. Several items in Edmund Milne's collection have his initials on them as part of the way he labelled artefacts. What this may mean is that Milne collected them directly from Aboriginal people. Milne certainly knew many Aboriginal people personally, including the people whose names are associated with these items, but there is no clear statement that he actually collected the items.

Research should not be confined to older collection items. Talking to the collectors themselves is the best way to obtain specific details about both individual items and the collectors themselves. In April this year the Museum brought Winifred Hilliard to Canberra to spend four days further documenting her important collection relating to Ernabella. As a result much new information was added to the existing documentation.

What the limited object documentation available, as well as other information from publications, does tell us is that there is a range of ways in which non-Indigenous people collected artefacts. Every conceivable method has been recorded, from gifts through purchases through to straight-out theft. For items in the NHC, the reality is that we will never know how most of them were collected from Indigenous people.

To conclude: Margaret Rolfe, quilt maker and author, said in her book *Patchwork and Quilting in the National Museum of Australia*, published by the National Museum in 2003, page 1:

Any object in a museum collection represents many things: the person or people who made it, the particular time and place in which it was made, the technology of the times and the prevailing social situation. This in turn is influenced by the sweep of historical, national and international events. The object is like the tip of an iceberg – what we see is only a part of the story. Hidden from our sight are the factors, small and large, that made the object what it is.

This quote reflects why museums contextualise their collections. To this we could add how items were originally collected. Armed with this information, museums can utilise objects in their collections to illustrate those stories in their programs, whether they be exhibitions, education programs or publications. If they are comprehensively documented, objects can be used to tell any or all of these stories. 🗨️

David Kaus, Curator, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and Repatriation programs