

Collections development policy

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Contents

1. Title.....	3
2. Introduction.....	3
3. Scope	3
4. Principles or guidelines	4
5. Definition of terms	7
6. Definition of responsibilities.....	7
7. References	7
8. Implementation.....	8

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1. Title

Collections development policy

2. Introduction

The National Museum of Australia (the Museum) is a major cultural institution charged with researching, collecting, preserving and exhibiting historical material of the Australian nation. The Museum focuses on the three interrelated areas of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history and culture, Australia's history and society since European settlement in 1788 and the interaction of people with the environment.

Established in 1980, the Museum is a publicly funded institution governed as a statutory authority in the Commonwealth Arts portfolio. The Museum's building on Acton Peninsula, Canberra opened in March 2001.

3. Scope

3.1 Description

The collections of the Museum consist of objects and associated materials transferred by the Commonwealth Government to the Museum following its establishment in 1980, and objects and associated materials acquired by the Museum by donation or purchase since 1980.

In 2004, the collections included more than 190,000 items, with associated collections of archival material.

3.2 Purpose

This policy establishes the intellectual and administrative principles that support collection of historical material by the Museum. The policy describes the background, rationale, definitions, collecting principles and structure of the Museum's collections.

3.3 Rationale

The Museum aims to document and celebrate the distinctive characteristics and history of the nation.

Collections are central to the Museum's role. The *National Museum of Australia Act 1980* instructs the Museum to develop and maintain a national collection of historical material that relates to Australia's past, present and future, including a collection of historical material relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

The Act empowers the Museum to do all things necessary to undertake this task, including the purchase, hire or acceptance by gift, deposit or loan of historical material, or acceptance of transfer of assets from other Commonwealth Government agencies. It also empowers the Museum to collect and make available information relating to Australian history.

The Museum strives to build collections that are nationally significant, in line with its legislative responsibilities. It seeks objects, documents, images and other materials that have rich associations and communicative power, while representing the thematic and geographic breadth of Australian history. Collection materials gain emblematic or iconic value through their connection with key figures, events, places, organisations or themes in the national past. Hence, the Museum's collecting is necessarily *selective* and *representative*, rather than comprehensive.

4. Principles or guidelines

4.1 Collecting domains and priorities

The Museum seeks to balance its collecting activities between short and medium-term needs associated with exhibitions and public programs, and long-term obligations to document and represent national life and experience.

Collection development activities are focused on the three interrelated themes that guide the Museum's mission:

- People's interaction with the environment
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and histories
- Australian society and history since 1788.

A separate Collections development framework lists collecting domains, their specific subject areas and collecting priorities for a given period. The scope and orientation of subject areas and priorities is reviewed annually.

4.2 Collecting practices and ethics

Other than those conditions imposed by the *National Museum of Australia Act 1980*, the Museum does not acquire material on a conditional basis, such as the condition that the material be displayed. The Museum does not accept material on long-term loan without taking the immediate and future implications into consideration, except as provided under 4.4.

The Museum collects and interprets objects or material that may be represented in other collections where the object or collection enables it to meet legislative responsibilities and has historical value relevant to its functions. Where material offered to the Museum would be more appropriately located in other national collecting institutions, or in regional or state museums, donors or vendors are referred to those organisations.

The Museum recognises the principles of the Museums Australia document, *Previous Possessions, New Obligations: Policies for Museums and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People*. Museum officers abide by the ICOM and Museums Australia codes of ethics with regard to collecting practices and procedures.

The Museum respects the moral rights of the creators of work acquired for the collections by ensuring the integrity of use and proper attribution of those works.

The Museum does not seek to acquire material where it is reasonably suspected to have been looted, stolen or otherwise improperly gained.

4.3 Structure and use of collections

The historical collections of the Museum comprise the:

- National Historical Collection
- Education Collection
- Archival Collection.

4.3.1 National Historical Collection

The National Historical Collection is the core collection of the Museum, and consists of the most historically and culturally significant objects acquired by the Museum.

Material is recommended for acceptance into the National Historical Collection if it can be shown to have communicative power and high value against the following criteria.

Criteria for acceptance into the National Historical Collection

- **Significance**

The object of collection has historic, aesthetic, scientific or research, and/or social or spiritual significance that¹:

—relates to themes, issues or people of national scope or importance

—relates to subjects nominated by the Collections development framework and related targeted collecting guidelines for collecting activity; and will assist in making a lasting contribution to understanding and interpreting Australian history and culture.

- **Provenance**

The origin and/or subsequent history of the object or collection can be thoroughly documented and authenticated to the highest standards.

- **Originality or rarity**

The object or collection is unique or relatively rare, a fine example of its type, or not well-represented in other museum collections.

- **Research value**

The object or collection has high research value.

- **Display value**

The object or collection has high display value.

- **Conservation qualities**

The object or collection is suitable for long-term storage and preservation with minimal resource outlay.

Material of any medium (object, image, audiovisual material) may be included in the National Historical Collection.

Material in the National Historical Collection is deemed irreplaceable and is displayed or handled according to the highest standards of museum care. Material must be recommended by the General Manager *Collections, Content and Technology*, and approved by Council for inclusion in the National Historical Collection.

4.3.2 Education Collection

The Education Collection refers to materials acquired by the Museum to support specific museum programs and activities.

Not all of the material in this collection is kept for posterity, but may be acquired in the knowledge that it has a finite life as part of the Museum's collections.

Although these objects are not as historically, culturally or commercially significant as those in the National Historical Collection, they may be items of value which must be handled according to accepted museum standards.

Items in the Education Collection may be used in Museum's educational programs or lent to other institutions for use in such programs. Donors of material to the Museum are informed if that material is to be included in the Education Collection, as well as the purpose of the collection.

¹ *Significance: A Guide to Assessing the Significance of Cultural Heritage Objects and Collections*, Canberra, Commonwealth of Australia, 2001, pp.25–36.

Material is recommended for acquisition for the Education Collection if it has a high value against the following criteria.

Criteria for acceptance into the Education Collection

- **Relevance**
The object or collection is relevant to the Museum's themes, areas of subject interest nominated in the Collections development framework, or current or planned program activities.
- **Educational potential**
The object or collection has value for use in Museum educational programs.
- **Display/demonstration value**
The object or collection has display or demonstration value.
- **Donor's agreement**
The donor agrees to the location of the material in the Education Collection, on the understanding that it may be used in educational programs and that it may not be kept permanently in the Museum's collections.
- **Conservation qualities**
There are no hazards or problems involved in stabilising, storing or handling the object or collection.

Material may be assessed for inclusion in the Education Collection by curatorial and education staff (for material that may be used for education programs), but must be approved for inclusion by the General Manager *Collections, Content and Technology*.

4.3.3 Archival Collection

The Archival Collection comprises documents, photographs and images, and sound and vision recordings that are associated with material held in the National Historical Collection or Education Collection, or that contain information relating to the Museum's areas of collecting or research activity, or program interest.

Collections that the Museum seeks to acquire may be split between objects and archival collections according to media. Items such as original documents or photographs which are considered to be highly significant, and which the Museum seeks to handle according to museum standards, are recommended for inclusion in the National Historical Collection.

The Museum does not acquire large individual collections of archival material, but refers the owners of such collections to specialist archival agencies or other collecting institutions.

4.4 Custody and ownership of material

The Museum seeks where appropriate to obtain clear legal title for all objects that are to be acquired for the National Historical Collection.

Where appropriate, the Museum seeks to acquire all intellectual property rights associated with collections material. The Museum concludes a clear agreement with the owners of material, or the transferring party, on the nature of the acquisition including the status of any associated intellectual property rights.

With regard to the material culture of Indigenous communities, the Museum may hold material in custody on behalf of traditional owners rather than seek the transfer of ownership to the Museum.

In the event that Indigenous communities or their representatives seek the return or repatriation of material held in custody by the Museum, the Museum will follow the relevant policies and procedures.

4.5 Deaccessioning and disposal of collections material

The Museum undertakes the deaccessioning and disposal of collections material as part of its collections management strategy. Deaccessioning and disposal of material is governed by the Museum's Deaccessioning and disposal policy.

5. Definition of terms

Archival Collection

Archival Collection refers to collections of documentary, photographic, sound or vision material which are associated with object collections held by the Museum or contain research material in the Museum's areas of collecting interest. Material in the Archival Collection is not part of the National Historical Collection.

Acquisition

Acquisition refers to the process by which collection material is obtained by the Museum. Acquisition may be by outright donation, donation under the Taxation Incentives for the Arts Scheme, bequest, purchase, or transfer of assets. The process by which material is acquired is documented in the Museum's Acquisition guidelines.

Australian history

Australian history means the natural and cultural history of Australia and includes Australia's relationships with the rest of the world. Material documenting Australian history includes contemporary material.

Education Collection

The Education Collection means the collection of historical material acquired by the Museum through the collection assessment and acquisition process for educational or demonstration purposes. Material in the Education Collection is not part of the National Historical Collection.

National Historical Collection

The National Historical Collection is defined by the *National Museum of Australia Act 1980* as comprising historical material owned by, or in the possession of the Museum. The National Historical Collection does not include Archival Collection nor Education Collection material.

6. Definition of responsibilities

Council

The Council of the National Museum of Australia approves material for inclusion in the National Historical Collection.

Collections Committee of Council

The Collections Committee of Council advises the Council and Director generally on the collecting policies of the Museum and on the management of the National Historical Collection.

7. References

Review of the National Museum of Australia: Exhibitions and Programs, Canberra, Commonwealth of Australia, 2003.

Significance: A Guide to Assessing the Significance of Cultural Heritage Objects and Collections, Canberra, Commonwealth of Australia, 2001.

The Burra Charter: The Australia ICOMOS Charter for Places of Cultural Significance 1999, Burwood, Vic, Australia ICOMOS, 2000.

ReCollections: Caring for Collections across Australia, Canberra, Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts, 1999.

Previous Possessions, New Obligations: A Plain English Summary of Policies for Museums in Australia and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, North Fitzroy, Vic, Museums Australia Inc., 1996.

8. Implementation

This policy establishes the conditions and guidelines by which the Museum undertakes its collecting functions as set out in the Act, and gives effect to the goals and objectives of the Museum's Strategic Plan.

A separate Collections development framework and related targeted collecting guidelines set out the operational priorities for the Museum's ongoing collections development activities.

8.1 Coverage

This policy applies to all collections development activities and processes of the Museum.

8.2 Other related policies

Access policy
Deaccessioning and disposal policy
Interpretation policy
Library collection development policy
Policy on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander human remains
Policy on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander secret/sacred and private material
Research and scholarship policy
Return of cultural objects policy

8.3 Exclusions

Issues related to the conservation, storage and interpretation of the Museum's collections are dealt with separately.

8.4 Monitoring

The Museum collects and maintains statistical information on the following collections development activities:

- offers and other inquiries on collections related matters made to Museum officers
- offers and other acquisition proposals considered by the operational collections committee
- Targeted collecting activities of the Museum
- material assessed by curatorial staff for inclusion in the Museum's collections
- material recommended for inclusion in the National Historical Collection
- material accepted and accessioned into the National Historical Collection, Archival Collection and Education Collection.

The Museum reports to Council on its collections development activities every six months.

This policy will be reviewed in November 2006.