

# **Collections development policy**

POL-C-005

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

More than 230,000 items are contained in the collections outlined in this policy.

### 3.2 Purpose

This policy describes the rationale, definitions, collecting principles and structure of the Museum's collections. It establishes the intellectual and administrative principles that support the collection of historical material by the Museum. The Library collection is developed according to the Library collection development policy.

### 3.3 Rationale

The Museum documents and celebrates the distinctive character and history of the nation. Collections are central to this role. One of the functions of the Museum, as set out in the *National Museum of Australia Act 1980* (NMA Act) is to develop and maintain a national collection of historical material. The NMA Act also requires the Museum to have a dedicated gallery, and collection of historical material, relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

The NMA Act empowers the Museum to do all things necessary to undertake this task, including the purchase, 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 builds collections that are nationally significant, in line with its legislative responsibilities. It seeks objects, documents, images and other materials that have rich historical associations and communicative power and that represent the thematic and geographic breadth of Australia's 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 Core collecting areas and priorities

The Museum balances its collecting activities between long-term obligations to document and represent the nation's history and society and the shorter-term needs associated with exhibitions and public programs.

The following three interrelated thematic areas guide the Museum's range of operations, including collection development, exhibitions, public programs and publications:

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

These entwined thematic areas assist in explaining the broader history of human interaction with the Australian continent, of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. Objects considered for inclusion in the Museum's collections are often significant in more than one thematic area, and represent a range of historical experiences.

A separate Collections development framework describes these core collecting areas and the related collecting priorities in greater detail. The scope and orientation of the collecting areas and priorities is periodically reviewed.

### 4.2 Ethics and collecting practices

Museum staff abide by the International Council of Museums (ICOM) and Museums Australia codes of ethics with regard to collecting practices and procedures.

The Museum is committed to making information about its collections, and the process by which it acquires material for its collections, available to the public.

The Museum only acquires material for its collections in accordance with relevant Australian legislation, such as the *Historic Shipwrecks Act 1976* (Cth) and the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Heritage Protection Act 1984* (Cth) as well as Australia's international obligations, such as those under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES Convention) and the UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property 1970 (1970 UNESCO Convention). The obligations set out in these international instruments have been given effect in Australian law through the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (Cth), and the *Protection of Movable Cultural Heritage Act 1986* (Cth), respectively.

When acquiring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander objects for the Museum's collections Museum staff are guided by the principles set out in the Museum's Indigenous cultural rights and engagement policy, the Indigenous Roadmap Project, the Australian Best Practice Guide to Collecting Cultural Material and will consult and collaborate with relevant traditional owners or authorised representatives, as appropriate.

The Museum also recognises the principles of the Museums Australia document, *Continuous Cultures, Ongoing Responsibilities: Principles and Guidelines for Australian Museums Working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultural Heritage*, and follows, where appropriate, the principles and philosophy of the Indigenous Australian Art Charter of Principles for Publicly Funded Collecting Institutions and the Australia Council's Protocols for producing Indigenous Australian visual arts.

As outlined in the Museum's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander human remains policy and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander secret/sacred and private material policy, the Museum does not actively collect and retain Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander human remains nor secret/sacred Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander material.

The Museum does not generally acquire material for its collections on a conditional basis, such as the condition that the material be displayed in perpetuity. The Museum does not usually accept material on long-term loan without considering the immediate and future implications.

The Museum collects and interprets material that may be represented in the collections of other institutions where such material has historical value relevant to the Museum's legislative functions and responsibilities.

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

For donated material, the Museum ensures that donors understand which collection their material is being placed in, and the associated implications for storage and preservation. Where appropriate, the Museum commits to informing and acknowledging donors when their material is used in Museum programs, such as exhibitions and publications. This may include individual acknowledgements, such as acknowledgement on object labels where appropriate, and where appropriate, community or family acknowledgement. The Museum will address any claims on material in its collections in a professional, sensitive and timely manner, guided by the Museum's Collections — return of cultural objects policy, the Museum's complaints handling procedures and the *Australian Best Practice Guide to Collecting Cultural Material*.

### 4.3 Due diligence

The Museum has robust procedures to ensure the veracity of previous ownership before acquiring material for its collections. It exercises due diligence before acquiring material, including undertaking extensive research of the item's provenance, as set out in the *Australian Best Practice Guide to Collecting Cultural Material*. Due diligence also extends to thoroughly evaluating and acting upon any new information that raises questions about the provenance or authenticity of previously acquired objects. The Museum pays particular attention to provenance information associated with periods of conflict (for example 1933–1945).

The Museum does not seek to acquire for its collections, whether by purchase, gift, bequest or exchange, any material unless satisfied that it can acquire valid title to the material in question and understands the history and provenance of that material.

The Museum does not acquire any material unless it is satisfied that it has not been acquired in, or exported from, its country of origin (or any intermediate country in which it may have been legally owned) in violation of that country's law.

The Museum does not acquire archaeological antiquities where there is any suspicion that the circumstances of the recovery of the item involved a failure to follow appropriate legal procedures, such as reporting finds to the appropriate authorities.

The Museum does not acquire biological material or geological material that has been collected, sold or otherwise transferred in contravention of applicable national or international laws, regulations or treaties.

#### 4.4 The Museum's collections

This policy concerns the Museum's holdings of historical material in the following three collections, the contents of which all represent the Museum's three themes:

- National Historical Collection
- Archive Collection
- Museum Collection.

##### 4.4.1 National Historical Collection

The National Historical Collection is the Museum's core heritage collection representing Australian history and experience. It is a selective and representative collection that seeks to document the diversity and breadth of life in Australia.

Material is accepted into the National Historical Collection if it is shown to be nationally significant. This includes objects and other materials related to national institutions and organisations as well as exemplars of national, state, regional and local themes, events and interests that have national visibility and salience.

The National Historical Collection may include material of any medium, including objects, images, and audiovisual materials. It can include digital materials.

The physical and intellectual integrity of material in the National Historical Collection is managed according to the highest standards set out in the Museum's Collection care and preservation policy and the Museum's Digital preservation and digitisation policy.

In accordance with the NMA Act, the Museum will use every endeavour to make the most advantageous use of the National Collection in the national/public interest.

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

##### Criteria for acceptance into the National Historical Collection

- **Significance**

The material has high historic, aesthetic, scientific, research, and/or social or spiritual significance that:

- relates to themes, issues or people of national scope or importance
- relates to subjects identified in the Collections development framework and/or related Priority Collections Projects
- will make a lasting contribution to understanding and interpreting Australian history.

- **Provenance**

The origin and/or history of the material can be thoroughly documented and authenticated to the highest standards, including documenting its chain of ownership.

- **Originality or rarity**

The material is unique or relatively rare, or it is a fine example of its type.

- **Research value**

The material has high research value through its potential to contribute to research and scholarship.

- **Display value**  
The material has high display value through its potential communicative power within an exhibition.
- **Conservation qualities**  
The material is suitable for long-term storage and preservation. Material in digital format should meet the Museum's digital preservation and access standards.

Material is approved for inclusion in the National Historical Collection by the Museum's Council, on the recommendation of the Assistant Director, Discovery and Collections.

#### 4.4.2 Archive Collection

The Archive Collection comprises historically important documents, audio and/or visual records that support material held in the National Historical Collection, and assists with its interpretation. It may also include similar material containing pertinent information relevant to the Museum's areas of research activity or other program interest. The origin and/or history and prior ownership of archival material is documented and authenticated before its acquisition.

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

The intellectual and physical integrity of material in the Archive Collection is managed according to the standards set out in the Museum's Collection care and preservation policy and the Museum's Digital preservation and digitisation policy. However, Archive Collection material may not receive specialised conservation treatment unless it is selected for exhibition, program purposes or loan.

Material is recommended for acceptance into the Archive Collection if it can be shown to have high value against the following criteria.

##### Criteria for acceptance into the Archive Collection

- **Relevance**  
The material has a direct association with material in the National Historical Collection or Museum Collection, or supports the Museum's research or other program interests.
- **Research value**  
The object has research value through its potential to contribute to research and scholarship.
- **Conservation qualities**  
There are no hazards or problems involved in stabilising, storing or handling the material. Material in digital format should meet the Museum's digital preservation and access standards.

Material is approved for inclusion in the Archive Collection by the Assistant Director, Discovery and Collections, as a delegate of the Museum's Council.

#### 4.4.3 Museum Collection

The Museum Collection contains material of historical importance, but which does not meet the higher-level criteria required for inclusion in the National Historical Collection. It encompasses the range of types of material represented in the National Historical Collection and the Archive Collection.



The Museum Collection can also include material acquired for, or related to, an exhibition program at the Museum, if it has value in representing significant aspects of the institution's exhibition history.

The physical and intellectual integrity of material in the Museum Collection is managed according to the standards set out in the Museum's Collection care and preservation policy and the Museum's Digital preservation and digitisation policy. Material may not receive specialised conservation treatment unless it is selected for exhibition, program purposes or loan.

Material in the Museum Collection is periodically reviewed for retention in the Museum Collection or for inclusion in the National Historical Collection, or for disposal.

Material is recommended for acceptance into the Museum Collection against the following criteria.

#### **Criteria for acceptance into the Museum Collection**

- **Significance**  
The material has historic, aesthetic, scientific or research, and/or social or spiritual significance that:
  - relates to themes, issues or people of national scope or importance
  - relates to subjects identified in the Collections Development Framework and/or related Priority Collections Projects
  - will make a lasting contribution to understanding and interpreting Australian history.
- **Provenance**  
The origin and/or subsequent history of the material can be thoroughly documented and authenticated. Assessment of Museum Collection material includes documentation of its known chain of ownership.
- **Originality or rarity**  
The material may be relatively rare; it may also include useful exemplars of a particular form or type of object, which do not have the specific provenance details necessary for inclusion in the National Historical Collection.
- **Research value**  
The material has research value through its potential to contribute to research and scholarship.
- **Display value**  
The material has display value through its potential communicative power within an exhibition.
- **Conservation qualities**  
There are no hazards or problems involved in stabilising, storing or handling the material. Material in digital format should meet the Museum's digital preservation and access standards.

Material is approved for inclusion in the Museum Collection by the Assistant Director, Discovery and Collections as the delegate of the Council of the Museum.

#### **4.5 Ownership of material**

The Museum seeks to obtain clear legal title for all objects acquired for its collections.

The Museum acquisition process includes reaching a clear agreement with the owners of material or the transferring party about the nature of the acquisition, including the status of any associated intellectual property rights. Where appropriate, the Museum seeks to acquire limited intellectual property rights in the material for Museum purposes. For example, the Museum may wish to photograph an object in its collection and reproduce the image in various formats for a range of purposes, including collection management, education, publicity, making it available on the website under a creative commons licence, limited commercial use and display.

With regard to the material culture of Indigenous communities, the Museum may in appropriate circumstances hold material 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 from any of the Museum's collections, the Museum follows the procedures set out in the Museum's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander secret/sacred and private material policy.

In the event that non-Indigenous communities or their representatives seek the return or repatriation of non-Indigenous material from any of the Museum's collections, the Museum follows the procedures set out in the Museum's Collections — return of cultural objects policy.

#### **4.6 Deaccessioning and disposal of collections material**

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

## **5. Definition of terms**

### **Archive Collection**

The Archive Collection comprises historically important documents, audio and/or visual records that are associated with material held in the National Historical Collection. It may also include similar material containing pertinent information relevant to the Museum's areas of research activity or other program interest. Material in the Archive Collection is not part of the National Historical Collection.

### **Acquisition**

Acquisition refers to the rigorous process by which collection material is obtained by the Museum. Acquisition may be by donation (including under the Cultural Gifts Program), bequest, purchase, or transfer of assets from other Commonwealth agencies. The process by which material is acquired is documented in the Museum's acquisition procedures.

### **Australian history**

Australian history encompasses the political, economic, social and environmental history of Australia. Material documenting Australia's history includes contemporary material.

### **Museum Collection**

Material entering the Museum Collection does not meet the high-level criteria for inclusion in the National Historical Collection. It might contain useful exemplars of particular forms or types of object, but without strong use association. Material in the Museum Collection will be regularly reviewed either for disposal, retention in the Museum Collection or for inclusion in 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 material held in the Archive Collection, Museum Collection or Education Collection.

## **6. Definition of responsibilities**

### **Council**

The Council of the National Museum of Australia approves material for inclusion in the National Historical Collection. The Council also delegates its powers to acquire historical material (including expending funds on acquiring such material, in accordance with the Museum's financial delegations) to designated Museum staff including the Director and the Assistant Director (Discovery and Collections).

### **Director**

The Director (or other official tasked with the responsibility under this policy) approves material for inclusion in the Archive and Museum Collections.

## **7. References**

*Australian Best Practice Guide to Collecting Cultural Material*, Commonwealth of Australia, 2015

*Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (giving effect to provisions of the 1975 CITES Convention under Australian law)

*Historic Shipwrecks Act 1976* (Cth)

*ICOM Code of Ethics for Museums*, ICOM (International Council of Museums), 2013

Indigenous Australian Art Charter of Principles for Publicly Funded Collecting Institutions, Indigenous Art Code

Museums Australia Incorporated Code of Ethics, 1999

*National Museum of Australia Act 1980* (Cth)

*Protection of Movable Cultural Heritage Act 1986* (giving effect to the 1970 UNESCO Convention under Australian law)

Protocols for producing Indigenous Australian visual arts, Australia Council, 2006

Roslyn Russell, Kylie Winkworth and Collections Council of Australia, *Significance 2.0: A Guide to Assessing the Significance of Collections*, Collections Council of Australia, Rundle Mall, South Australia, 2009

Terri Janke, *First Peoples: A Roadmap for Enhancing Indigenous Engagement in Museums and Galleries*, Australian Museums and Galleries Association, 2018

## 8. Implementation

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

### 8.1 Coverage

This policy applies to all collections development activities and processes of the Museum in relation to the National Historical Collection, Archive Collection and Museum Collection.

### 8.2 Other related policies

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander human remains policy (POL-C-011)

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander secret/sacred and private material policy (POL-C-034)

Collection care and preservation policy (POL-C-042)

Collections — deaccessioning and disposal policy (POL-C-035)

Collections — outward loan of historical material policy (POL-C-036)

Collections — return of cultural objects policy (POL-C-037)

Digital preservation and digitisation policy (POL-C-028)

Indigenous cultural rights and engagement policy (POL-C-054)

Interpretation policy (POL-C-007)

Research and scholarship policy (POL-C-008)

### 8.3 Exclusions

Issues related to the conservation, storage and interpretation of the Museum's collections and loans into or out of the Museum are dealt with separately. Library acquisitions are dealt with in the Library collection development policy.

### 8.4 Superseded policies

This policy supersedes:

Former policy/ies title	Version number	Version date	Council approval date
Antarctic collections policy		1984	
Special collections policy		1987	
Policy documents on Aboriginal collecting		1992	
Acquisition guidelines		1992	
Education collections policy			6 Sep 1996
Collections policy	1.0	1982	
Collections policy	2.0	1984	
Collections policy	3.0		1992
Collections policy	4.0		1995
Collections development policy	5.0		1 Nov 2002
Collections development framework			1 Nov 2002
Collections development policy	6.0		25 Nov 2004
Collections development policy	6.1 minor update	31 Jan 2005	
Collections development policy	6.2 minor update	30 Jun 2005	
Collections development policy	7.0	24 May 2006	
Collections development policy	8.0	25 Nov 2014	25 Aug 2014

### **8.5 Monitoring**

The Museum reports to Council and the Ministry of the Arts on its collections development activities.

The Collections development policy is scheduled for review in June 2021.