

# Assessing the Significance of a Museum Object

## 1. Background

Significance is a concept that has been widely used in heritage work for the last 30 years. It is now being adopted by museums in Australia as a way of investigating, defining and communicating the meaning and importance of objects and collections. The statement of significance is used as a reference point and tool in all the main museum tasks and activities, including acquisitions and deaccessioning, conservation, cataloguing, exhibitions and marketing.

To determine the significance of an object follow the step-by-step assessment process described below. This is simply a way of investigating and analysing the meaning and importance of objects, using a standard method and criteria. The process and criteria helps to ensure consistent object assessments across museums, enabling comparisons and sounder judgments about the values and needs of heritage collections.

With the development of AMOL as an access point and national database of Australian collections, museums need to use a standard framework for describing the meaning and importance of objects and collections.

## 2. Significance Assessment

Significance assessment is the process of studying and understanding the meanings and values of objects and collections.

Significance assessment is a process and framework for analysing objects that can be used with all kinds of collections. It draws on all the elements that contribute to meaning, including context, provenance, related places, the donor's memories, and comparative knowledge of similar objects. It goes one step further than a conventional catalogue description to explain **why and how** the object is important and what it means. The results of the analysis are synthesised in a **statement of significance**. This is a readable summary of the values, meaning and importance of the object.

Significance assessment can apply to a single object, a group of related objects either within or across museums, or to the whole collection.

## 3. Why Assess Significance?

- To help the museum fully document the provenance and context of the object when it comes into the museum. This information, which is central to the significance of objects and collections, can be difficult to recover later.
- To fully understand and articulate the meaning and values of the object or collection
- To make more careful acquisition and deaccession decisions

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- To guide conservation decisions so that the special qualities of the object are preserved
- To guide management of the object so that its special values and meanings are accessible and conserved, now and in the future
- To communicate the importance of the museum's objects and collections with the public, and stakeholders such as councils
- To argue the case for grant funding for the object, collection and museum

Significance assessment may occur at any stage of the object's use by the museum. The resulting statement of significance then informs and guides decisions about how best to manage and interpret the object.

#### 4. Who Assesses Significance?

Significance assessment is a collaborative process that draws on the knowledge, skills and experience of a range of people including donors and people in the community knowledgeable about the subject or object. Consultation is an essential part of the process of significance assessment.

#### 5. How to Assess Significance

The simple step-by-step process below helps you arrive at the meaning and value of an object. In summary it involves

- .Analysing the object
- Understanding its history and context
- Comparison with similar objects
- Assessment against a set of criteria, explained in 7.
- And summarising its values and meaning in a statement of significance.

Not every step in the assessment process will be relevant to every object. For example, *Step 3. Talking with donors, owners and users*, may not apply to a newly made craft object or a contemporary painting.

## 6. Step-by-Step Significance Assessment

1. **Compile a file containing all details about the object and its history.** This may include the acquisition date, donor details, notes made when the object was acquired, photos, copies of reference material and notes on related objects in the collection
2. **Research the history and provenance of the object,** including photos of it in use, notes about the owner or the place where it was used, when it was made or purchased, and the general history of this type of item.
3. **Talk with donors, owners, users and relevant community** associations to ensure the context, provenance and potential social values are fully understood. Encourage the donor to write notes and describe the history and meaning of the object and when it was in use. Consult other people in the community who may have information about the object or expert knowledge of similar items, and of the associated industry or trade.
4. **Understand the context of the object.** Consider its relationship with other objects, where it was used, the locality and how it relates to the history and geography of the area. Wherever possible, record the object or collection in its context of use and original location.
5. **Analyse and record the fabric of the object.** Document how the object works, what it is made of, its manufacture, patterns of wear, repairs and adaptations. Record the object's condition.
6. **Consider comparative examples** of similar objects. Check to see if AMOL<sup>1</sup> lists other similar objects. Check reference books and consult with colleagues and other museums with related collections.
7. **Assess significance against the main criteria:** historic, aesthetic, scientific and social values. Determine the degree of significance by assessment against the comparative criteria: provenance, rarity, representativeness, condition and integrity, and interpretive potential. Reference to the criteria helps analyse and define the object's significance. See below for more information about the criteria.
8. **Write a succinct statement of significance** encapsulating the object's values and meaning. Do not just say the object is significant - explain **why** it is significant and what it means. Discuss this with others in the museum.

Significance can change over time so it is a good idea to sign and date the assessment of significance.

## 7. Using the Criteria

There are four main criteria and five comparative criteria for assessing significance. Use the criteria to help draw out the precise qualities of the object's significance. The criteria

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<sup>1</sup> See Australian Museums On Line at: <http://amol.org.au>

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are detailed in the *Guide* with illustrated case studies on pp. 24-47. They are summarised in question form below.

One or more criteria may apply and be interrelated. An object may be highly significant even if only one or two criteria apply. Think of the criteria as a framework to assist you to consider and describe **how and why** the object is important. They are not a set of boxes to be ticked. Use these questions to help define the special qualities and attributes of an object's significance.

**Primary Criteria:** There are four primary criteria:

### **Historic significance**

- Is it associated with a particular person, group, event or activity?
- What does it tell us about an historic theme, process, or pattern of life?
- How does it contribute to our understanding of a period or place, activity, person or event?

### **Aesthetic significance**

- Is it well designed, crafted or made?
- Is it a good example of a style, design, artistic movement or the artist's work?
- Is it original or innovative in its design?
- Is it beautiful?

### **Scientific or Research significance**

- Do researchers have an active interest in studying the object or collection today, or will they want to in the future?
- How is it of interest or value for science or research today or in the future?
- Is it of research potential and in what way?
- What things in particular constitute its scientific or research interest and research value?

NB This criterion only applies to objects of **current** scientific value, or with research potential such as archaeological collections. Objects such as old scientific instruments are generally of historic significance.

### **Social or Spiritual significance**

- Is the object or collection of particular value to a community or group today? Why is it important to them?
- How is this demonstrated? How is the object kept in the public eye, or its meaning kept alive for the group? E.g. by being used in an annual a parade or ceremonies, or by maintaining traditional practices surrounding the object
- Has the Museum consulted the community about its importance for them?
- Is the object or collection of spiritual significance for a particular group?
- Is this spiritual significance found in the present?

NB Social or spiritual significance only applies to objects and collections where there is a **demonstrated contemporary** attachment between the object and community. Items of social history interest are of historic significance. Social or spiritual significance is always specific to a particular, identified group of people. If the object has spiritual or social significance, this needs to be demonstrated through consultation with the community or group.

### **Comparative Criteria**

Five comparative criteria are used to evaluate the degree of significance. They are modifiers of the main criteria.

### **Provenance**

- Who owned, used or made the object?
- Where and how was it used?
- Is its place, or origin, well documented?

### **Representativeness**

- Is it a good example of its type or class?
- Is it typical or characteristic?

### **Rarity**

- Is it unusual or a particularly fine example of its type?
- Is it singular, or unique?
- Is it particularly well documented for its class or group?
- Does it have special qualities that distinguish it from other objects in the class or category?

## **Condition, intactness or integrity**

- Is it in unusually good condition for its type?
- Is it unusually intact or complete?
- Does it show repairs, alterations or evidence of the way it was used?
- Is it still working?
- Is it in original, unrestored condition?

In general, an object in original condition is generally more significant than one that has been restored.

## **Interpretive potential**

- How is it relevant to the museum's purpose, collection policy and exhibition program?
- Does it help the museum tell a story, or explore a theme that is important to the museum?
- How does the object demonstrate aspects of its significance? Can you learn something about the object's wider context and associations, or about its materials, design and function?
- In considering new acquisitions is there anything else in the collection that can tell the same story?

## **8. Writing the Statement of Significance**

A statement of significance is a reasoned, readable assessment of the values, meaning and importance of an object or collection. It is more than a description of what the object looks like. A statement of significance summarises how and why the object is important.

A statement of significance can be prepared for a single object, a particular class or category of objects either within the museum or across museums, or for the whole of the museum's collection. It is not set in stone and may change over time. From time to time it should be reviewed as circumstances change and knowledge develops.

### **Why prepare a statement of significance?**

- To record and synthesise knowledge and ideas about the object.
- To ensure that the crucial provenance details and associations of objects and collections are fully recorded.

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- To facilitate debate and discussion about the object or collection.
- To summarise the meaning and importance of an object or collection.
- To enable those values to be communicated to visitors, in interpretive programs such as exhibitions, education activities and online.
- As a reference point for checking future uses or work on the object to ensure the preservation and conservation of its important values.

## **Key Headings**

Make notes under the headings below to record the information for the statement of significance. These follow the stages in the step-by-step method detailed above in section 6. It is important to work through each step in the process before starting on the statement of significance. Notes can be in point form.

Brief description of the object and accession number

History and provenance

Donor's, owner's and community recollections

Context of use

Fabric, manufacture and condition

Comparative examples

Criteria

Statement of Significance

## **Putting Pen to paper: these tips might help**

Collate all the information about the object or collection into a folder, including images, references to similar items and material from references of the period.

Visual references are useful. These include historic photos, paintings, and advertising material from the period. Looking at images of similar objects in use helps in providing an understanding of its context and patterns of use.

While the statement of significance is best written as a readable paragraph, it doesn't have to be in perfect prose. Dot points are acceptable, e.g. *this object is significant because...*

You can do an interim statement of significance pending further research.

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If you don't have time to complete a statement of significance, make sure that you collect and write down the essential information about the object's provenance and context so that it can be prepared later. Where possible ask donors to record **in their own words** who used the item, where and how it was used and how the family or owner valued it.

Assessing significance is a collaborative process that involves talking to donors, museum workers and interested people. Form a small committee with each member drafting their own statement of significance, then come together to discuss the work in progress and refine the draft.

The statement of significance can encompass different points of view about the object.

Use the assessment criteria as a framework for shaping your ideas about the meaning and importance of the object.

You don't have to refer to all the criteria in the statement of significance.

## **Beyond appearance to significance**

Significance is more than a description of what the object looks like. It includes the context, history and meaning of the object. These prompt questions can help you get beyond what the object looks like to summarise its meaning and importance. Consider these questions in the process of assessing significance. They may apply to the specific object or more widely to the general group or class of objects.

- Who used the object? Try to ask the donor and other interested people about their memories of the object, or the class of objects. If working on a collection wide assessment, contact people who have worked with the collection in the past to understand why they built the collection.
- If the actual owner is not known, who generally used or owned such objects?
- How long was it in use? When did it stop being used and why?
- What is important or distinctive about the design of the object? How has it changed or stayed the same?
- Where does this design fit within a class or group of similar items?
- What work did it do?
- Why was it needed? Why was it useful or important?
- What do people connected with the object or similar objects think about it?
- How is it valued?
- What impact did it have on work processes, the environment, and the economy?
- How was the object used?
- What steps are involved in using the object?
- What other tools, objects or equipment was it used with?
- What skills were needed to use the object?
- Where was the object used?
- What space, room or building was it used in?

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