Cultural collections at the University of Melbourne

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This paper reports on the Cultural Collections Project undertaken at the University of Melbourne in 2004, the way this project built on collection identification and assessment work undertaken cooperatively by staff in preceding years, and plans for future work. The aim has been to increase awareness – both within the university and in the broader community – of the existence and significance of the university’s cultural collections; to encourage their use by students, staff, researchers and the public; to improve the standard of collections management and preservation across the university; and to help ensure the collections’ longterm viability through appropriate resourcing and use.

The work we have been undertaking has involved library, archival, museum and scientific collections. Because most of the issues facing them were similar, it was not thought useful to deal differently with different object types. This paper therefore deals with all these types of material, not just specifically designated ‘museum’ or ‘gallery’ holdings.

The University of Melbourne, which was established in the 1850s, today owns 27 identified ‘cultural collections’, which link the history, scholarship and identity of the university with research, teaching and public programs. Our definition of a ‘cultural collection’ is as follows:

- An assemblage of physical (not digital or virtual) items which has historic, aesthetic, scientific, research, technical, social or spiritual significance. This significance goes beyond the role of the material as an intellectual resource or carrier of information or evidence.

- The items in a collection may be naturally occurring or created by humans and can include living organisms. Although each individual item may not be rare or unique, each collection as a totality is unique and irreplaceable; if lost or destroyed, the collection could not be re-created, regardless of available funding. Some of the collections were originally accumulated by private individuals, families or organisations, and later acquired by the university; this provenance contributes to the significance of such collections and cannot be replicated.

- As assets, the cultural collections usually appreciate rather than depreciate in monetary value.

- Each collection is usually located in one place or is managed by one organisational unit of the university.
Following is a list of the collections. This list keeps growing as we come across material of which we were previously unaware. As can be seen, the collections relate to a wide range of academic disciplines taught at the university, including medicine, dentistry, engineering, life and applied sciences, architecture, music, anthropology, the visual arts and history.

- Bionic Ear Archive, Department of Otolaryngology
- Dental Museum
- Electrical Engineering Education Museum
- F.A. Singleton Earth Sciences Collection
- Grainger Museum
- Harry Brookes Allen Museum of Anatomy and Pathology
- Medical History Museum
- Michell Crankless Engine Co. Mechanical Engineering Collection
- Physics Museum
- Surveying and Geomatic Engineering Collection
- Tiegs Zoology Museum
- University of Melbourne Archives
- University of Melbourne Art Collection (includes public art and Classics & Archaeology Collection) – all managed by the Ian Potter Museum of Art
- University of Melbourne Herbarium
- Veterinary Science Anatomy and Pathology Collection

**University of Melbourne Library Branches, rare and special materials:**

- Architecture and Planning Library: Rare Materials Collection
- Brownless Biomedical Library: Rare Books
- Earth Sciences Library: Rare Books
- Faculty of Land and Food Resources, Burnley, Rare Books
- Legal Resource Centre Rare Books Collection
- Maps Library: Historic Maps Collection
- Music Library: Rare Music Collection
- Prints Collection, Baillieu Library
- Special Collections, Baillieu Library

In addition to these are three collections owned by the university but managed by other organisations, which are therefore not discussed in this paper.

The age, purpose, size, quality and level of active use for teaching, research and general enjoyment vary widely between the university’s collections.

Some of these collections were accumulated initially as teaching resources, others resulted from research activity, some include works commissioned by the university specifically for commemorative or display purposes while others are the result of generous gifts and bequests. The exact date of establishment of a
collection is often difficult to verify, but in many cases it relates to the history of a particular academic discipline within the university, or to the gift or bequest of an individual benefactor, or to an evolving awareness that a class of material that had accumulated in a random fashion should henceforth be more formally managed as a ‘collection’.

The most recently formed museum at the University of Melbourne is the Harry Brookes Allen Museum of Anatomy and Pathology. This was launched in April 2004, when two much older collections (the Anatomy Museum and the Pathology Museum), both established in the 19th century, were merged into one facility under one curator. This merger responded both to practical issues such as space requirements and to changing methods of teaching medical students.

One of the more recently established collections is the Bionic Ear Archive in the Department of Otolaryngology in the Faculty of Medicine, Dentistry and Health Sciences. This collection of material, generated by Professor Emeritus Graeme Clark and his colleagues, documents the development since the 1970s of the cochlear implant, or ‘bionic ear’.

The Medical History Museum was established in 1967 with a grant from the Wellcome Trust in England.

The university commissioned and collected artworks from its early days. Although works such as portraits of professors were located in various departments since at least the 1880s, it was not until the 1960s that the university began to appreciate the need to engage professional curatorial and collection management staff and create a museum to properly manage this aspect of the university’s heritage. The University Art Gallery was set up in 1975 and, in its present incarnation as the Ian Potter Museum of Art, moved to a new building in 1998.

The University of Melbourne Archives was established in 1960 to collect both business and university records. From the 1970s it added trade union and labour history material to its collecting scope as well as the records of professional, community, women’s, peace and political organisations.

The Prints Collection in the Baillieu Library (the university’s main humanities and social sciences library) is based on a significant gift in the 1950s from a private collector of prints and books, Dr John Orde Poynton, and has been enhanced by other gifts and purchases since that time.

The Grainger Museum was established in the 1930s by the Australian-born, American-resident composer, folklorist, pianist and educator Percy Grainger (1882–1961) to house his remarkably comprehensive and detailed collection of music manuscripts and printed editions (of works by himself and other
composers), ethnographic material, folksong recordings, archives, artworks, furniture, clothing, personal effects and ephemera.

The University of Melbourne Herbarium was established in the School of Botany in 1926 when a donation of plant specimens was given to the School by the Rev. Herman Montague Rucker Rupp, a former student of Trinity College at the university. The Herbarium developed from that date under the leadership of the university’s first Professor of Botany, Alfred James Ewart (1872–1937).

The history of the Dental Museum goes back to 1884, to the formation of the Odontological Society of Victoria, which at an early meeting decided to develop a library and museum, which is now part of the School of Dental Science in the Faculty of Medicine, Dentistry and Health Sciences.

These are just some examples of the diverse circumstances that led to the establishment of the various collections now owned by the University of Melbourne. This historical variety is reflected today in the uses to which the various collections are put and the level of resourcing they receive from the university and elsewhere.

The collections range in size from 80 instruments in the Surveying and Geomatic Engineering Collection to millions of documents in the University of Melbourne Archives. Historically, there has been a similar level of variation in resourcing and use across the collections. A few are open to the general public, others by appointment or with supervised access only. The buildings in which the collections are housed range in size and quality from purpose-built facilities with museum-standard environmental control, security and display space, to corridor showcases and basement storerooms in various academic departments. Some of the collections are managed by teams of professional collection managers, curators, librarians and archivists. Custodianship of others is included in the many responsibilities of employees such as departmental managers or technical officers, while a few are cared for by retired staff and other volunteers.

The type and level of use to which different collections are put also varies. Some collections are an integral part of undergraduate and postgraduate teaching, learning and research. The herbarium, for example, is used by numerous students and staff every day for identifying specimens collected during field trips and other research, including DNA analysis. Access to the Harry Brookes Allen Museum of Anatomy and Pathology is restricted to specified staff and students, with public access only on annual open days, due to the nature of its collection, being mostly specimens of human tissue: skeletons, organs, entire limbs and the like. This museum is an essential resource for students of medicine, physiotherapy, nursing, dentistry and some sciences. Its usefulness is reflected in the recent investment of a million dollars of university and faculty money to upgrade the display space and facilities, and the appointment of a full-time curator. The University of Melbourne Archives, being the largest non-government
archives in Australia, is well-known as the location of essential primary sources for historians and other researchers working on topics as wide ranging as labour history, biography, university history and the history of companies such as WMC Resources Ltd and many law firms. Exhibitions at the Ian Potter Museum of Art attract thousands of visitors each year and its collections management staff are also responsible for approximately 2,500 artworks from the collection that are displayed across the university’s various campuses, including more than 60 public sculptures, murals, memorials and architectural features. Some of the smaller collections include modest corridor displays of historic artefacts, such as the Electrical and Electronic Engineering collection and historic apparatus in the School of Physics Museum.

These variations in the level of resources available to each collection are the result of a range of factors including historical circumstances such as decreasing relevance to their traditional curriculum, the increasing public profile and monetary value of art collections, and the ‘inheritance’ of collections by departments which played no part in their creation and which can see little use for them at present.

All of this has been by way of background. More recently, managers of the university’s cultural collections have been working together to improve the standard of care, increase the use and raise the profile of all the collections. The principal mechanism for this cooperative approach was the establishment in 2001 of the university-wide Heritage Collections Management Strategy Working Group, made up of conservation staff and collection managers (‘collection managers’ in this context includes registrars, librarians, archivists and curators; departmental staff such as technical officers whose roles include collection management; and volunteers undertaking cataloguing and other collection management type tasks). The working group’s role was to investigate the major issues affecting the longterm management and preservation of the collections, and its deliberations were informed by the two Cinderella collections reports. After initial identification and brief documentation of the university’s collections, the great need for preventive and interventive conservation measures soon became apparent. Condition surveys of some of the larger collections, undertaken by staff of the University of Melbourne Art Conservation Service (now the Centre for Cultural Materials Conservation) estimated the cost of such work at tens of millions of dollars and it became clear that priorities needed to be set, based on cultural significance. In August 2001 the working group presented a report that set out in detail those processes necessary for establishing standardised procedures for managing the distributed cultural heritage assets of the university.

As a result of that 2001 report – with financial support provided by the Information Division, the Ian Potter Museum of Art and Corporate Services – the university employed in 2002–2003 a Cultural Significance Officer (Stephanie Jaehrling) to produce the following outcomes:
• identify all cultural collections on campus
• identify issues affecting each collection including cataloguing, valuations, condition reporting, infrastructure and housing
• coordinate the cultural significance assessment of the collections
• identify items of key cultural significance to the University (particularly for its 150th Anniversary celebrations in 2003)
• develop a budget for the implementation of future phases of this program

The Cultural Significance Officer worked with the collection managers individually and as a committee to undertake an assessment of each collection using the methodology *Significance* developed by the Heritage Collections Council (Russell & Winkworth 2001). With some of the larger collections, such as the Art Collection and Baillieu Library Special Collections, this included significance assessments of the collection as a whole as well as individual assessments of some of the sub-collections within them.

As a result of this process, many collections and individual items were found to be highly significant, some at the national and international level. Ms Jaehrling also undertook a detailed questionnaire survey of the nature and needs of each collection, such as their size, scope, history, condition, staffing level, budget, storage and display facilities, and catalogue system. All these results were compiled into a report (Arthur, Jaehrling & Sloggett 2003) and presented to the university with a recommendation to establish a high-level central committee with responsibility for overseeing the management of the university’s cultural collections and deal in a coordinated way with issues relating to collections. The report also recommended the creation of a new position of Cultural Collections Officer, and the provision of additional funds for cataloguing. These recommendations were accepted by the university in late 2003 and funded for implementation in 2004.

In 2004 the Cultural Collections Committee was established, chaired by the university’s Vice-Principal and Chief Financial Officer with membership drawn from three of the university’s collections and the Director of the university’s Centre for Cultural Materials Conservation. The role of the committee is:

• to serve as a forum where university-wide issues relating to the management of collections can be examined and recommendations developed
• to oversee strategic planning for the cultural collections of the university and make recommendations to the university on policy, resources and priorities for the future
• to receive and where appropriate act upon recommendations from the three subcommittees (see below)
• to oversee delivery of outcomes from funding provided

The committee had three subcommittees: Conservation and Storage; Cataloguing; and Public Profile and Development. These forums proved to be a
valuable source of practical initiatives as well as information-sharing among collection managers. Working together in this way resulted in a cooperative and supportive approach to dealing with common issues, rather than competitiveness or rivalry. In 2004 my three-days-a-week role as Cultural Collections Officer involved servicing these committees, liaising with the collection managers, providing advice where needed, acting as a conduit for information, raising awareness of the collections within the university and in the broader community, and recruiting and helping to supervise students for internship-type placements. We are also still discovering more collections owned by the university. Each of these, which I have included in the list above, will require a significance assessment to determine whether it can be considered a ‘cultural collection’ rather than simply, for example, an accumulation of teaching resource material.

In 2004 the Cataloguing Subcommittee managed the distribution of the $20,000 cataloguing budget for three projects in the Dental Museum, Medical History Museum and Herbarium (naturally this funding is additional to cataloguing work funded by some of the departments through their normal annual budgets). In the case of the Dental and Medical History Museums the funding was used to complete cataloguing work that began in 2003 with a grant from the University’s 150th Anniversary celebratory grants program. The Herbarium on the other hand had only recently established a database, with the aim of transferring the card catalogue records for its approximately 80,000 plant specimens. The small grant we provided funded a pilot project to enter the data relating to just one group of plants: the Acacia family. All these databases can be accessed online.

The Cataloguing Subcommittee also undertook a survey of all the catalogue systems in use at the university, which showed that there are seven different software systems being used currently. This lack of uniformity reflects both the differing needs of different types of collections and, unfortunately, the previous lack of coordination and cooperation between collections in different departments. In future it is intended that adopting a new database will involve consultation and comparison between collections across campus. The University of Melbourne is also developing a common user interface for all of its library resources, whether hard copy or electronic. We hope to benefit from the experience gained through that project by developing a common user interface for the cultural collections in the future.

Promoting the collections has been an important part of the project. We have aimed to raise awareness, especially within the university, but also in the broader community, of the existence of the collections, their history, their significance, and their potential for research, teaching and enjoyment. In 2004 a series of articles publicising the collections appeared in university and external publications, and some interviews, talks and seminars focused on the collections overall or various aspects of them. We plan to continue this work in 2005.
Another aspect of this awareness-raising was improving internet access to the collections. At the start of the project some of the collections had excellent websites, many of which included a link to an online searchable catalogue. Some had an inadequate website and others had none. More to the point, however, some of the collection websites were difficult, if not impossible, to find. As is the case with most universities, the University of Melbourne’s web presence is huge and inconsistently structured. We therefore worked with the university’s Web Centre to create a series of three webpages (see references below for URLs) only two mouse-clicks from the university’s homepage, with information on the collections grouped into three categories: museums and galleries; libraries; collections. These pages include a brief description and one image for each collection and, where applicable, a link to that collection’s own homepage. They also have a list of links to other relevant parts of the university’s website, such as the History of the University Unit and the Centre for Cultural Materials Conservation. In future we would like to expand the cultural collections web content to include lists of publications; a register of current research; online exhibitions; image banks; more detail on the history of each collection; a news alert to announce new acquisitions, exhibitions and other events; and information for students interested in undertaking projects with the collections.

We developed websites for some individual collections where they did not exist before, and encouraged departments to upgrade out-of-date sites, including, where possible, a link to a searchable catalogue. Because our funds were limited we were keen to take advantage of the available resources and expertise of the wider university, including the knowledge and skills of students, so in 2004 we successfully submitted a proposal for an ‘Industry Project’ to be undertaken by final-year students in the Bachelor of Information Systems degree. A team of six students took up the challenge to create websites for three of the collections and undertake a usability analysis of the existing website of a fourth collection.

We also approached the course coordinators of the Master of Art Curatorship Degree and the History in the Field subject of the Bachelor of Arts degree to offer students the opportunity to undertake projects with some of the collections. These students must undertake professional placements as part of their course requirements and it makes sense for some of them to take advantage of the university’s collections when doing this. Projects completed by students included cataloguing the Surveying and Geomatic Engineering collection; producing an inventory and condition survey of the paintings in the Baillieu Library collection; researching the history of a set of early 20th century wax models (‘moulages’) of skin diseases in the Anatomy and Pathology Museum; curating an exhibition from the rare books collection of the Legal Resource Centre and the law collections of the University of Melbourne Archives, to mark the launch of a national ‘Law Archives Online’ project; cataloguing, re-mounting and researching historic plant specimens in the herbarium; and research on a significant set of Piranesi engravings in the print collection of the Baillieu Library. Students enrolled in the new Master of Arts (Cultural Materials Conservation) program
worked on documents, objects and paintings from the Archives, the Anatomy and Pathology Museum, and the Art Collection for their practical conservation treatment projects. Individual items from several collections were also used for workshops in teaching the Significance Assessment method to students enrolled in both the Masters program and Post-Graduate Diploma in Cultural Materials Conservation.

Ongoing tasks include working with the university’s central finance staff to develop a strategy for the periodic valuation of the collections for insurance and asset management purposes, as, due largely to lack of university-wide awareness of the existence of some of the collections, not all have been valued in the past. We have also begun liaising with the university’s property and buildings staff to address the need for adequate storage and display facilities for the collections. A survey undertaken in mid-2004 by the Conservation and Storage Subcommittee of policies and procedures currently in place for key management activities, such as acquisitions, de-accessions and loans, revealed gaps and inconsistencies between collections, which we have begun to address as a group through developing templates and other standardised documentation that still allow for the unique characteristics and history of each collection. As with the significance assessment project in 2002–2003, there is a strong consensus among the collection managers that working together as a team on such projects, sharing ideas, avoiding duplication and encouraging each other, is more productive and enjoyable than toiling in isolation.

There is huge scope for research on many aspects of the university’s cultural collections. Although some of the collections, such as the University of Melbourne Archives, the Grainger Museum and the Baillieu Library’s Special Collections, have for many years been recognised as indispensable primary sources for scholars in their respective fields, some of the smaller or less well-known collections have attracted relatively little academic interest, despite their inherent significance, uniqueness and potential as sources of information. There is also great scope for research across collections; many key scholars, administrators and donors have helped shape several collections, while thematic links between collections such as the rare maps in the Maps Library and the examples of historic instruments in the Surveying and Geomatic Engineering Collection are yet to be fully explored.

Other priorities for 2005 include implementing a disaster plan for every collection, including setting up disaster bins and undertaking training; providing practical and theoretical training in preventive conservation, including handling of objects, storage and environmental requirements; seeking funding and other forms of support from philanthropic trusts and other external sources, including alumni and friends groups; and facilitating further research and publications.

We are currently seeking to establish a position of Student Projects Coordinator to manage a larger number and greater variety of placements with collections for
both undergraduate and postgraduate students. We will continue to offer set-term, specifically designed projects with a clear and tangible outcome for both parties, rather than an ongoing volunteer support program. Our experience in 2004 has shown us that project placements of this kind meet a real need, both of the collections and the students, and also demonstrate the relevance of the collections to the university’s core activities.

At the end of 2004 we were successful in obtaining funds from the central administration of the university to continue our work in 2005. A current restructure of the university’s Information Division, which manages the university’s libraries, information technology, and teaching and learning technology services, as well as being directly responsible for twelve of the university’s cultural collections, has incorporated into its mandate a leadership role for all the cultural collections across the university. This is a welcome step, as it has given a permanent administrative ‘home’ to this centralised function. Our aim is to facilitate a university-wide approach to cultural collections management, philosophy and standards, while respecting the unique characteristics of each collection and preserving its historic link with its academic community. Our experience to date suggests that this cooperative approach is more likely to result in museum, library, archive and research collections that continue to be viable into the future, because they will support the core functions of the university: scholarship, research, teaching and learning.
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Webpages with information on the University of Melbourne’s Cultural Collections:

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