curiosity

150 years of collecting at the University of Melbourne
Curiosity: 150 years of collecting at the University of Melbourne addresses both of these ideals. The exhibition includes a diverse selection of artefacts from a number of the University’s collections, ranging from the library, art collection and archives to medical, dental, engineering and scientific collections. The objects were accumulated across the entire history of the University, demonstrating how collections have been essential to the work of this institution since its very inception. We are fortunate today that staff, students and other interested individuals had the foresight to retain and document these artefacts for posterity.

Many of the University’s collections are the result of remarkable generosity by philanthropic individuals. By donating or bequeathing to the University their often extensive personal holdings of literature, artworks and historical items, such benefactors have greatly enriched the University for future generations of students and staff, opening up new horizons and opportunities for learning and enjoyment. It is the University’s responsibility to fulfil the spirit of these gifts and bequests by caring for its ever richer collection, and by making it accessible to the wider community through various means such as exhibitions, reading rooms, lending programs, publications, online catalogues and educational activities. The present exhibition is an example of this, providing the curious visitor with a glimpse into a number of the University’s holdings, and highlighting their variety, broad scope and richness.

Curiosity: 150 years of collecting at the University of Melbourne is the result of collaboration between staff of the Ian Potter Museum of Art, the University of Melbourne Conservation Service and the custodians of collections in many departments of the University. Acknowledgment is due in particular to the staff and honorary custodians of the collections held by the Information Division; the Faculty of Medicine, Dentistry and Health Sciences; the Faculty of Science; the Faculty of Engineering and the Melbourne Law School.

Professor Alan D. Gilbert  Vice-Chancellor, the University of Melbourne
The collections owned by Australian universities form a significant part of our nation’s movable cultural and scientific heritage. The University of Melbourne, an institution with a 150 year history, is typical of our nation’s older and larger educational institutions in this respect, being a custodian of varied collections that serve a range of purposes to students and staff and to the wider community.

Library collections are at the centre of university life as they are essential for teaching and research at all levels. Raymond Priestley (1886–1974), Vice-Chancellor from 1935 to 1938, saw a university’s library as sacred, ‘a place of pilgrimage’. On a more prosaic note, in the early days of the University, Melbourne’s geographic distance from the older centres of learning in Europe and the eastern United States would have rendered ready access to recent books and journals especially important in maintaining dialogue with other scholars and keeping up with the latest theories and discoveries. The first professors appointed at Melbourne, however, were heavily dependent on their own personal libraries, as the University’s collection had a slow beginning. Indeed, the first full-time Librarian, rather than Assistant Librarian, was not appointed until 1892. By 1871 the University spent more money annually on maintaining its grounds than on its library. The central University Library was originally located in the University’s first building, the old Quadrangle, expanding at various times into different parts of that building until moving to its present home in the new Baillieu Library Building in 1958. In the meanwhile, various branch libraries had been established: by 1915 the medical, chemical engineering, geological, botanical and zoological library collections were each located in the corresponding schools.

The development of the Baillieu Library’s Special Collections, like so many other collections of the University, has benefited significantly from the generosity of private benefactors. Among the most notable gifts and bequests are the collection of George McArthur (1842–1903) which significantly increased the size and quality of the collection, the progressive donation from 1959 by Dr John Orde Poynton (1906–2001) of thousands of rare books and prints, later followed by the generous bequest of Sir Russell Grimwade (1879–1955) and Lady (Mabel) Grimwade (1887–1973). The Grimwades’ contributions to the University included not only their rare books, archival and art collections, but their Toorak home ‘Miegunyah’ and a substantial monetary endowment.

A very different type of donor was Percy Grainger (1882–1961), expatriate Australian composer, virtuoso pianist, conductor and folklorist. His motives in establishing the Grainger Museum in the 1930s were a mixture of deeply-felt concern to preserve and promote the study of the musics of a wide range of cultures including those of Asia and the Pacific, with a desire to memorialise his own life and achievements. Grainger never studied formally at this or any other university but held a lifelong affection for his birth town of Melbourne and established this autobiographical archive and broader music collection at his own expense.

Students, as such, are rarely memorialised through gifts to universities; only when they become notable alumni are they commemorated in this way. One exception however is the Classics and Archaeology Collection, which was assisted substantially in 1926 by a memorial gift of £500 from the parents of John Hugh Sutton (1906–1925), a remarkably talented classics student who died tragically young in a motorcycle accident. This collection enjoyed a second period of development from 1970 under the careful guidance of its curator the late Peter Connor. The general paucity of classical archaeological collections in Australia means that its university collections in this field are of particular significance for researchers and to the community as a whole.

The daily activity of the University generates its own material record, which must be preserved, both for reasons of legal obligation and for the interests of future researchers. The University of Melbourne Archives plays an important role here. Although formally established in 1960, its holdings date back to the inception of the University; they include not only the official documents of the University such as Council minutes and student records, but also the personal papers of many graduates and former staff. From the 1970s the collecting fields expanded to include trade union and labour history, as well as the archives of businesses such as wholesalers and retailers, factories, law firms, architects, pastoral and mining companies, and of community, professional, women’s, peace and political organisations. The Archives’ enormous holdings now extend to over 14 kilometres of shelf space.

In contrast to the formal record-keeping function of the Archives, some other University collections were created or donated for a less tangible benefit—to ‘improve’ students’ taste, morals, refinement or national sentiment—or simply to provide enjoyment and raise the quality of campus life. In donating his collection of mainly Australian art to the student union in 1938, the Melbourne surgeon and University alumnus Dr Samuel Arthur Ewing (1864–1941), hoped ‘that our youth may be inspired with the beauty as well as a deeper love of their country by the works of our artists’. In the mid-1930s Arthur J. Law (1885–1973), Vice-Principal and later Principal of the Melbourne Teachers College, established a collection of Australian art, which now bears his name, for the benefit
to the University by an eminent surgeon and University of Melbourne alumnus, Dr George Armstrong (d. 1954). Because of its great height the skeleton is not usually displayed in its home in the Department of Zoology.

Some academic disciplines require artificial models for teaching. While contemporary pedagogic methods have in some cases moved beyond these tools, the surviving examples are often of historical significance in their own right. The collection of the Department of Anatomy and Cell Biology for example contains some remarkable waxwork models of portions of the human body, the skin absent to reveal the underlying structure of blood vessels, muscles, nerves and tendons. These were made in the nineteenth century by the French firm of Tramond, located not far from the Paris University’s medical school. Beautifully crafted with great attention to detail of structure and colour, they demonstrate a more scholarly side of the famous French waxwork tradition, which also generated sensationally life-like models used for entertainment and spectacle in venues such as Madame Tussaud’s in London.

As an academic or technical discipline evolves over time, the tools of its practitioners can become obsolete as new technology is developed. If preserved these items form a material record of the history of that discipline. The fascinating collection of the Medical History Museum tells us not only about changes in medical understanding and patient care, but also about our attitudes to the body and mind, the role and status of the health practitioner in society, and the history of the medical profession and medical education in Victoria. This tangible record vividly illustrates the ongoing continuum of medical discovery, and helps position the modern medical student or patient in that flow. It can also highlight the misguided faith we sometimes place in untested technologies and theories. An artefact such as a plaster death mask of Ned Kelly (1854–1880), made after the bushranger was hanged at the Melbourne Gaol and now in the collection of the Department of Anatomy and Cell Biology, illustrates fundamental philosophical changes in the fields of anatomy, criminology and psychology. These death masks were used in the now discredited pseudo-science of phrenology, the analysis of character based on the contours of the human head.

Curiosity: 150 years of collecting at the University of Melbourne aims to show the diverse nature and purpose of the collections accumulated throughout the history of the institution. Over time, development and discovery in all the disciplines studied at the University of Melbourne will continue to bring new, possibly unexpected, meanings to its collections. Preserving, documenting and exhibiting these irreplaceable artefacts ensures that future students can continue to learn from them and that they will be relevant to the broader society. Unusual items will always stimulate curiosity in both the dedicated scholar and the casual viewer, and in the words of that most generous benefactor, Sir Russell Grimwade, curiosity is ‘the basis of all knowledge’.

Belinda Nemec
Collections Manager, the Ian Potter Museum of Art
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3 Ernest Scott, A history of the University of Melbourne, Melbourne University Press, 1936, pp. 136–137.
7 University Museums Review Committee, p. 53.
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13 Ann Brothers, Significance assessment (The Medical History Museum, the University of Melbourne), unpublished report, October 2002, p. 11.
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