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Simplicity in Complexity: Trends and Future Directions in Caring for Collections in Australia and Southeast Asia

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ABSTRACT

Southeast Asia and Australia are characterised by diversity in culture and custom, language, history, climate, religion and belief, methods of government, and economic capacity. Such diversity poses particular challenges for universal approaches to museum development and management, and in particular for practices, policies, and procedures relating to the care of collections. Conversely, diversity provides fertile ground for regional approaches, provided that decisions result from targeted research, the sharing of knowledge and resources, and the development of protocols and procedures that reflect the diversity and acknowledge the various capacities, including in economics, in literacy and language, and in law across the region. In this lecture, Professor Robyn Sloggett examines some of the pressing issues in collections care that need to be addressed across Australia and Southeast Asia, and explores current trends, initiatives and future directions for the care of the rich, diverse, and very important collections that exist in the region.

Introduction

The theme of the Heritage Conservation Centre's Conference *Collection Care: Staying Relevant in Changing Times, ASEAN & Beyond* encapsulates two critical issues that collection managers, conservators, curators, librarians, and archivists face in the 21st century – relevance and change. Over the past century the world has witnessed extraordinary social and political change, significant technological advancement, and unprecedented challenges. The human population has risen from 1.8 billion people in 1919 to 7.7 billion in 2019. We have watched, or been part of, the largest displacement of people in the history of our planet. We struggle with impacts of climate warming at all levels of decision-making. At no other time in the history of homo sapiens has it been so critical for us to be able to understand our past, and to be in a position to examine decisions that have impact on the future.

Two hundred years ago, the world was a very different place. Singapore, with a population of about 1,000 people, was just beginning to make its way in the world, attempting to understand its newfound status as a British settlement. In the opening chapter of his wonderful historical account of Singapore, *Singapore 1819: A Living Legacy*, Kennie Ting describes Singapore's founding document, the Treaty of Singapore, and the haste with which it was negotiated.¹ Signed on “6 February in the Year of Our Lord 1819 answering to the 11th day of the Month Rubbelakhir and the year of the Hujira 1234”², the 1819

Treaty of Singapore is a relatively simple document written in English and Jawi Malay, and embellished only with the seals of Tengku Hussein Mua'zzam Shah ibni Mahmud Shah Alam, resident Temenggong Abdul Rahman of Johor-Riau, and the East India Company. But through this simple object, it is possible to identify the play of colonial power that, tsunami-like, washed over Asia in the 19th century, destabilising dynastic allegiances, toppling governments, disrupting millennia-old cultural practices, and beginning the reorientation of the Western history of ideas.

In 1819, Britain was eager to thwart the dominance of Dutch trade in Southeast Asia. Colonel William Farquhar, representing the East India Company, and the then Lieutenant Governor of Bencoolen, Sir Stamford Raffles, representing the British government, were commissioned to obtain a treaty for strategic access to regional trade. By 28 January 1819, their two ships, along with six other vessels, were anchored near “a spot where a town and a strong fort could be built for the defence of the inhabitants and its trade.”³ Ting draws attention to how “Raffles’ signature – a hasty scrawl in a not-so-elegant hand – evokes the tense circumstances surrounding the signing of the treaty”. Raffles’ signature stands in contrast to the beautifully calligraphic script of his Malay counterpart Tengku Hussein Shah, the elder brother of the Sultan of Johore, who arrived from Bulang on 1 February for the signing ceremony.

For Hussein Shah, the signing of the Treaty meant more than confirming a new trade relationship. It was validation of his claim to dynastic legitimacy. As the eldest son of Sultan Mahmud Shah III, Hussein Shah had expected to succeed to the Sultanate of Johore when his father died, but he was absent in Pahang and his younger half-brother Sultan Abdul Rahman, supported by political factions sympathetic to the Dutch, claimed the Sultanate.⁴ The Sultanate had been fortified by the treaty with the Dutch East India Company that Sultan Mahmud Shah III had signed in 1784. The 1819 Treaty countered this, validating the claims of both Hussein Shah and the British Empire to the region. This relatively fragile document helps to better understand the British attempts to undermine Dutch trade dominance in Southeast Asia, and the individuals whose personal ambitions intersected with these global plays of power.

Objects like the Treaty of Singapore are, however, more than simply windows into the past. The objects held in public collecting institutions, in family collections, in small communities, and by individuals, help validate or contest received histories. They threaten comfortable assumptions by presenting unpalatable truths, taunt scholars with half-told stories, and provide the mechanisms that locate much broader issues that will impact the future. Access to objects enables stories to be told in ways that would not otherwise be possible, examine topics that would otherwise lack context, explore visual and material reference points with new insights, and test and validate theories and conjecture in new ways.

Materials and technology

The paper, wax seals, and ink of which the various copies of the Treaty of Singapore are comprised are part of a material tradition that stretches back centuries and which, by 1819, had crossed the globe. If the Treaty of Singapore had been signed in 1919, rather than 1819, it would have been part of a world where new manufacturing techniques were creating new materials and new products at a relentlessly rapid pace. By 1919, an event as significant as the signing of the Treaty of Singapore would be captured on film or in photographs. Such film would have been made from an unstable cellulose-derived material known as celluloid, comprised of nitrocellulose, camphor, ethyl alcohol, and a range of dyes, stabilisers, and other constituents. In 1919, this first modern plastic, cheap and highly ductile, was everywhere. Today it is a ubiquitous material in collections, found as audio recordings, moving image film, and simulated replacements for bone, ivory, tortoiseshell, and more. But celluloid is, literally, a time bomb. As camphor molecules shift their alignment, celluloid becomes brittle. Nitrates, accumulating in the presence of moisture, form nitric acid, resulting in sticky surface and a darkened, brittle mass. Celluloid is the undead of the collection, ready at any time to manufacture its own life force. Aged cellulose nitrate film is highly flammable and alarmingly unstable, with the capacity to spontaneously ignite. It burns at very high heat and produces large amounts of highly toxic nitrogen monoxide and dioxide, as well as oxygen, which makes nitrate fires impossible to extinguish. The “improved” version of celluloid, cellulose acetate, is

only marginally better. It distorts, shrinks, and becomes brittle as it leaches acetic acid in a continuous chemical reaction known as “vinegar syndrome”.

Many modern materials such as these have created both practical and philosophical problems in collection care. Challenging ideas of material longevity, they have the potential to demand expensive solutions, create points of conflict between creators, curators, conservators and collection managers, and require vast amounts of time and ingenuity to solve the problems they pose. But there is no choice. If they are to properly represent human history, creativity, and endeavour, then institutions must collect modern materials. By the end of the 20th century, research into modern materials and modern technologies had become a significant priority in conservation and collections care, with large international collaborative research platforms examining the practical and philosophical issues raised by the collection of modern materials.⁵ In 1996, the International Council of Museums – Committee for Conservation (ICOM-CC) established a working group dedicated to “Modern Materials”. In 1999, the International Network for the Conservation of Contemporary Art (INCCA) was established.⁶ The beginning of the 21st century saw a raft of research initiatives in this area. Preservation of Plastics ARTEfacts (POPART) developed a coordinated European-scale strategy that focused on identification and collection surveys, degradation studies, and active conservation.⁷ Tate implemented its Modern Paints Project⁸; and the Getty Conservation Institute (GCI) began its Modern and Contemporary Art Initiative.⁹ In Southeast Asia and Australia, two projects examined the behaviour of Western artists’ materials in tropical climates, and the 20th century in paint, bringing together partners across Singapore, Malaysia, The Philippines, Thailand, Australia, USA, and the UK.¹⁰

The digital age

If the Treaty of Singapore had been signed in 2019, the treaty document would probably still be paper-based, and photographs and a film would still be made of the ceremony, but digital versions of all these records would have been uploaded to a file sharing system and then downloaded into a digital archive. A digital version of the Treaty and images and the film of the signing ceremony would be posted on social media, and commentary shared on platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, QZone, WeChat, YouTube, Pinterest, WhatsApp, Tumblr, Instagram, or a myriad of others. Publicly accessible, these images and commentary would attract additional comments. In turn, some of this social media content would be uploaded into a digital archive, some downloaded into a range of devices, edited, and re-shared with new comments. With each new media platform, new content could be added. Each step requires a series of manufacturing, production, technological, planning, and decision-making ecosystems that are much more complicated than those involved in the production, use, and storage of the 1819 manuscript, or the 1919 version with its celluloid film and sound recordings. The democratisation of content production and distribution has created digital records that are more ubiquitous, and more difficult to manage than plastic. In 2003, to address the issues raised by digital records, The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), in partnership with the National Library of Australia, produced *Guidelines for the preservation of digital heritage*.¹¹ By 2016, UNESCO saw the threat posed by digital technology as nothing less than a threat to the continuing function of national heritage institutions.

Heritage institutions – libraries, archives, and museums – traditionally bear the responsibility of preserving the intellectual and cultural resources produced by all of society. This important mission is now in jeopardy around the world due to the sheer volume of information which is created and shared every day in digital form.¹²

UNESCO also noted:

The long-term preservation of digital heritage is perhaps the most daunting challenge faced by heritage institutions today.¹³

By the beginning of the 21st century, and faced with a “digital dark age”, most collecting institutions had established protocols and procedures in place for interoperability, emulation, simulation, archiving, and preservation. Much has been lost, however, for many individuals, communities, and organisations with less capacity to develop responses to this threat, and particularly those with limited financial and infrastructure resources. The age of the democratisation of information has also led to significant inequity. On the one hand, almost anyone can own the means of production to create and to share digital content, and vast tracts of social, historical, cultural, and scientific records currently exist only in digital format. On the other, the ability to properly maintain and preserve this content sits with relatively few well-resourced and heavily invested organisations. For those who cannot afford to manage the technological obsolescence, and the maintenance of the ecosystems that support the continued access to the records, their history will, with the passage of time, slip from their grasp and from a wider shared heritage.

The sustainable museum

The internet access that the National Library Board (NLB) in Singapore provides to digitised copies of newspapers from 1831 made it possible to uncover an article in *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser* dated 6 February 1914 about the 1819 Treaty. Headed “Founding of Singapore”, the article opens:

Today, Feb 6th, is the anniversary of the signing of the Treaty of Singapore, and we may briefly recapitulate some of the circumstances of that memorable day which have all been carefully collected and gone into by the late Mr C. B. Buckley, in his admirable “Anecdotal History of Singapore.”¹⁴

C. B. Buckley had been the owner of *The Singapore Free Press* as well as honorary adviser to the Shah of Johore, and an avid amateur historian. The article describes how the original 1819 Treaty disappeared immediately after the signing ceremony, and copies of the 1824 Treaty were appended with the note that “no copy of these preliminary articles is to be found.” C. B. Buckley, having searched Singapore for the original 1819 Treaty without success, assumed that the Treaty had been lost to “white ants, insects, and a damp climate ... and mistakes or carelessness.”¹⁵

Then Mr Buckley went to Johore on the August Bank holiday of 1901. “The Dato Bintara Dalam ... asked why so much trouble need be taken about it; why not look at the original?”... So a large safe was opened and the papers laid out on a big office table ... Near the bottom ... the treaty of 1819 itself was found among a bundle of old papers.¹⁶

The article noted Buckley mused that:

The one copy, in the hands of English clerks, with secure safes, had not been forthcoming for many years, and the copies of it were incorrect, while the copy that had been handed to the Malay chief who had not a table, chair, envelope or safe, had been kept carefully wrapped up and preserved through four generations and nearly a century to the hands of his great grandson, now styled the Sultan of Johore.

A year after Buckley found the Treaty of Singapore in Johore, 25-year-old engineer Willis Carrier developed the first modern air-conditioning unit in New York. Two years later, air-conditioning was used for the St Louis World Fair, Missouri, USA. Gradually, the belief that air-conditioning was a valuable tool in collections management permeated collections care. In 1978, Garry Thomson, then Head of

the Scientific Department at the National Gallery (London), in his book *The Museum Environment*, consolidated existing research and practices on and explored the “principles and techniques” for managing the museum environment. With collecting institutions invested in the idea of universal standards, Thomson’s publication led an industry that was hungry for information and guidelines to endorse requirements for universal environmental standards. These were set at the generally accepted parameters of around 50 +/-5% relative humidity RH and 20 +/- 2 degrees Celsius.¹⁷

In the decades that followed, travelling international blockbuster exhibitions became a focus for institutions that were keen to demonstrate their commitment to accessibility and to showcase the relevance of their work in a global environment. Adherence to these universal environmental standards became a requirement for such programmes. Across non-temperate zones in Southeast Asia, India, Equatorial Africa, the Pacific Nations, South America, and Australia, institutions grappled with the costs of trying to create environments of 50 +/-5% RH and 20 +/- 2 degrees Celsius. Loan objects coming from local Indigenous, small rural, or regional communities were relocated from relatively high humidity and temperature into institutions which aimed at, but rarely achieved, a flatline of 50% RH and 20 degrees Celsius. For collections held in these communities, the cost of air-conditioning was not only prohibitive but the technology proved to be far from fail-safe. Research began to identify significant risks posed to objects from the failures and limitations of air-conditioning, and questions were raised as to whether the economic cost and impacts to the environment were justified.¹⁸

At the International Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works IIC 2014 Congress in Hong Kong, a joint IIC and ICOM-CC *Declaration on Environmental Guidelines* was announced. This Declaration sought to address a number of issues including: increased flexibility in guidelines for environmental conditions for collections and in the provision of environmental conditions for loans; better environmentally sustainable approaches to the management of museum environments; environmental conditions for permanent display and storage that were achievable for the local climate; and identification of different requirements for objects for loan and those held in permanent collections.

The Declaration also recommended that “existing interim guidelines” agreed by the American Institute for Conservation (AIC), the Australian Institute for the Conservation of Cultural Material (AICCM), and the Bizot Group, which proscribed acceptable tolerances of 40 – 60% RH and 15-25 degrees Celsius as standards for international loan exhibitions, should be confirmed as guidelines. Despite changes, these guidelines still reflect the concerns of institutions in temperate zones, the reliance on air-conditioning remains unchanged, and there is a failure to effect impact in the face of significant climate change. The recommendations in the guidelines remain as an adjustment of numbers, not as a change in practice.

A shifting global identity

The European protagonists engaged in the signing of the Treaty of Singapore – Sir Stamford Raffles and Major General William Farquhar – were quintessential early 19th century colonial military administrators. Both were avid collectors who built collections that record the natural history, and social customs, practices, and beliefs of the local population in the areas they administered. Collections such as these were assembled to support research and education programmes that were located “at home”, thousands of miles away in the centres of colonial politics and ideas. In these metropolises, public institutions relied on cultural commodities from the colonies. In turn, these institutions valorised the great voyages of discovery, as well as the social, economic, and political theories that supported colonial conquest, trade, and government. In 1819, collections served to demonstrate the role and significance of emerging disciplines in contemporary European society. Collections were a record of the activities (and successes) of the colonial administrators, and served to entice the next generation of workers and entrepreneurs to serve in the colonies. Above all, the collections served as propaganda to justify Europe’s colonial expansion. Collections of cultural material and human remains from Indigenous societies were the basis for self-serving theories about culture, society, and human development. Collections were also valuable assets, sold to raise money to support new colonial endeavours. For communities of origin, the result was often devastating, as cultural, religious, ceremonial, and educative objects were no longer available for cultural practice, study, or intergenerational knowledge development.

In 1812, seven years prior to signing the Treaty of Singapore, Sir Stamford Raffles, in a monumental act of aggression, ordered the sacking of the Keraton of Yogyakarta. Javanese manuscripts dating between 1772 and 1813 were looted, and ended up in the private collections of Raffles, Chief Engineer Colin Mackenzie, and Resident John Crawford. Only three manuscripts remained in the Keraton's Royal Library after the sacking: a Qur'an (copied in 1797), the *Serat Suryaraja* (1774), and a copy of the *Arjuna Wiwaha* (1778). In 1842, the British Museum purchased John Crawford's collection, known as the Archive of Yogyakarta, which is comprised of some 400 manuscripts and records. Bound in two volumes, this archive consisted of official reports, letters, accounts, and other documents, as well as the private papers of Sultan Hamengkubuwana II and his successor Sultan Hamengkubuwana III. The British Library describes these archives as a "highly important source for the political, economic, social, administrative and legal history of central Java in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries". In 2016, in recognition of this significance, the library digitised the entire contents of the Archive of Yogyakarta and presented these records to His Excellency the Governor of Yogyakarta, H. M. Sri Sultan Hamengkubuwana.

Unfortunately, however, many items thus acquired were lost forever. During his service in Penang, Melaka, Java, and Sumatra, Raffles built an extensive personal collection of natural history, languages, literatures, and cultures of the region. Unfortunately, most of the Sumatran collections were lost when his ship the *Fame* caught fire in 1824. Raffles' secretary wrote:

When I heard this news I was breathless ... remembering all the Malay books of ancient date collected from various countries...The books could not be recovered for none of them were printed but in manuscript ...²¹

The Javanese collections have survived with the Malay and Javanese manuscripts held in the Royal Asiatic Society of London; books and paintings in the British Library; and Javanese antiquities, archaeological drawings, textiles, weapons, shadow puppets, masks, and gamelan instruments held in the British Museum. While he served as British Resident and Commandant of Melaka between 1803 and 1818, William Farquhar commissioned local artists to produce 477 natural history drawings of local flora and fauna. Held by the Royal Asiatic Society from 1827, these drawings were purchased by Mr Goh Keok Khim in 1993, repatriated, and donated to Singapore's National Museum, where they are one of the most recognised components of the collection.

Repatriation, access, and the authentic cultural record

During the 20th century, as the colonial grip weakened and new nation states emerged with new needs for education and new remits for public institutions, moves to contest universal approaches to collection development and management strengthened. Emerging nation states reframed the purpose of their collecting institutions, defining these institutions as caretakers of new and very different national stories. These new and reimagined collecting institutions supported their constituent populations to find new voices for the new nations. For those keen to tell their own stories, it was obvious that, in many cases, overseas institutions were much better placed to tell these stories. They were aware that their country's objects and archives remained more easily accessible to scholars in Europe or North America, and that their country's history remained focused through the prism of colonisation. Across the globe, communities became increasingly aware that objects and archives held overseas could help fill significant gaps in their own history. By the end of the 20th century, repatriation had become a political lightning rod that periodically engaged Heads of State in awkward political manoeuvres that forced them to tiptoe between being seen as supportive of the needs of their local constituencies, and being seen as players on the international stage. For Indigenous communities in Australia and New Zealand, the refusal of institutions to return tens of thousands of human remains to families and communities provoked particularly intense responses. As recently as 1988, it was still necessary to mount a public campaign in order to halt a proposed auction in London of a *mokomokai*, which had been valued between £5,000 and £7,000. The campaign resulted in the head being withdrawn from the

sale, and repatriated to New Zealand for reburial, but many communities and families are still engaged in this unequal battle. In 2000, having identified repatriation as a significant threat, the directors of 18 of the world's major museums in Great Britain, Europe, Russia, and USA signed the *Declaration of the Universal Museum*, claiming, with a certain amount of hyperbole, that of all the threats to museums in the 21st century:

One of the most pressing of these is the threat to the integrity of universal collections posed by the demands for restitution of objects to their countries of origin.

New philosophies, however, were challenging the systems that had built these “universal” museums. In 1982, UNESCO established its Working Group on Indigenous Populations, and in 1985, work on the draft *Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* began. The Declaration was formally adopted on 13 September 2007, and the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues asserted that:

Many of the rights in the Declaration require new approaches to global issues, such as development, decentralization and multicultural democracy. In order to achieve full respect for diversity, countries will need to adopt participatory approaches to Indigenous issues, which will require effective consultations and the building of partnerships with Indigenous peoples.

Around the same time, The Nara Document on Authenticity Conference (1994) focused the global heritage sector's interest on what constituted authenticity in conservation by arguing that:

11. All judgements about values attributed to cultural properties as well as the credibility of related information sources may differ from culture to culture, and even within the same culture. It is thus not possible to base judgements of values and authenticity within fixed criteria. On the contrary, the respect due to all cultures requires that heritage properties must be considered and judged within the cultural contexts to which they belong.²⁶

Other statements followed. The African Cultural Heritage and The World Heritage Convention (1995) expressed concern that the under-representation of African sites on the World Heritage List demonstrated a Eurocentric “monumentalist” conception of cultural heritage.²⁷ In 1996, the Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) in the US prepared The Declaration of San Antonio that asked “whether the American point of view is fully represented in the [Nara] document”, noting the plurality of community interests, and that “the identification of ‘fundamental cultural values’ is not possible or desirable in this context.”²⁸

Rethinking the museum

Two decades into the 21st century, philosophies and practices relating to decision-making and documentation now form a considerable part of collections care, and informed advocacy is central to any objectives aimed at the preservation of cultural material. Unsurprisingly, the increased interest in pluralist approaches to conservation and collection management opens up new challenges. In Australia, for centuries prior to colonisation, Indigenous communities were part of the great north-south trade route that stretched from northern Australia, past Timor, to Macassar and on to Macau. This trade was based on treaties, but unlike the Treaty of Singapore, these were performative and not textual; enacted through cultural practice and protocols. The crews of the Macassan *praus* that traded along the coastline of northern Australia raised flags in order to seek permission to access landing sites and were, similarly, granted permission. Today, documentation of these treaties is preserved in contemporary performance, though the trade was banned in 1907. For institutions holding ceremonial

material that relates to these treaties, the question of how to preserve the performance that is the treaty is a significant one. Similar questions are being asked about the preservation of conceptual performance art as institutions grapple with questions of how best to collect performance, rather than just a record of the performance. The bringing together of senior cultural knowledge holders, practitioners with collection managers, and conservators, in dialogue, to examine these difficult questions of preservation and access, provides a much broader and more effective constituency to guide consultation and decision-making.

Collection managers and conservators worked hard in the 20th century to build professional frameworks for the care of cultural collections. But challenges remain, and the political and economic realities that are part of the history of the region impact on the care of collections across Australia and Southeast Asia. In Australia, many regional and remote Indigenous communities have amassed highly significant collections of audio-visual materials that are housed in conditions with poor environmental control, and that lack staff dedicated to, or trained in, collections care.²⁹ In the Tiwi Islands off the coast of northern Australia, community art centres experienced annual mean fluctuations between 66 and 73% RH from 1979 to 2009, rising from between 74.5 to 80.5% RH in the Wet Season, and falling to between 57 and 67% RH in the Dry Season. Objects coming from such communities will be under stress in environments between 40 and 60% RH.³⁰ So, despite significant work done to date, much evidence-based research is still needed in order to understand the impacts of climate change and museum environmental standards for collections in tropical environments, or in small, less well-resourced communities. In many centres in Southeast Asia, the aftermaths of war, regime change, and environmental disasters have left governments without the resources to properly manage and conserve large parts of their country's significant cultural audio-visual heritage. For the Asia-Pacific region, the issue of how to best provide fit-for-purpose conservation and collection management responses in depleted economic environments is a pressing one.

Conclusion

Eric Thompson, who examines the historical narratives developed in museums across Southeast Asia, discusses the shift that had occurred by 2012 from colonial museums to museums that simultaneously demonstrate national narratives and perspectives, with “extra-national narratives ... with particular thoughts to an emergent international and regional ASEAN consciousness”.³¹

Towards the end of second decade of the 21st century, rethinking the definition of what it meant to be a museum as:

... a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment³²

has become a focus for the International Council of Museums (ICOM). In September 2019, at ICOM's Extraordinary General Assembly in Kyoto, the ICOM membership were asked to vote on a proposed new definition of a museum that acknowledges that:

Museums are democratising, inclusive and polyphonic spaces for critical dialogue about the pasts and the futures. Acknowledging and addressing the conflicts and challenges of the present, they hold artefacts and specimens in trust for society, safeguard diverse memories for future generations and guarantee equal rights and equal access to heritage for all people.

Museums are not for profit. They are participatory and transparent, and work in active partnership with and for diverse communities to collect, preserve, research, interpret, exhibit, and enhance understandings of the world, aiming to contribute to human dignity and social justice, global equality and planetary wellbeing.³³

After much discussion the Extraordinary General Assembly of ICOM decided to postpone the vote, and the debate will, no doubt, continue to be active for some time into the future.

As objects were brought together to build collections, and as collections were brought together to form museums, guiding models of best practice and effective decision-making were crafted to suit the requirements at the time. But times change. New challenges propel new enquiries. New enquiries effect new solutions. Some of these are technological, some are philosophical, some are sociological, but all need to be practical.

This story of the Treaty of Singapore started 200 years ago when the materials on which the treaty was written were purchased and prepared. As each milestone is reached in its history – 50 years, 100 years, and now, 200 years – a document with the social and historical weight of the Treaty of Singapore attracts additional content in different contexts. Along the way, new materials and new technologies challenge accepted methodologies for collections care, while new sociologies reframe the aims of public institutions, and rebalances occur as history is examined and its impacts recalibrated. There is no doubt that the 21st century will present new major challenges for the care of collections.

For collecting institutions across the globe, staying relevant in changing times means being engaged with, and contributing to the big issues they face in the 21st century, including the challenges posed by new technologies, social inequity, climate change, changing needs in education, and the displacement of people across the globe. Times change, but the commitment of people with passion for and understanding of the value of collections has been a constant over time. It is this simple belief, more than anything else, that will drive the care of collections into the future.

Author's biography

Professor Robyn Sloggett is the Cripps Foundation Chair and Director of the Grimwade Centre for Cultural Materials Conservation at the University of Melbourne. Her research interests include: the investigation of the materials and techniques of artists, attribution and authentication of paintings, the development of the art market in the twentieth century, collection development and history, and the preservation of cultural materials held in Australian Indigenous communities. She holds qualifications in art history, philosophy, and cultural materials conservation. Robyn has been honoured to receive the Bathurst Macquarie Heritage Medal (2016), the International Council of Museums Australia Award for International Relations (2013), the AICCM Award for Outstanding Research in the Field of Material Conservation (2012), and the AICCM Conservator of the Year Award (2004). In 2015, she was made a Member of the Order of Australia. She is passionate about conservation and its importance for the future of our region.

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