

Australian Museum Cultural Collections Acquisition Policy 2014 – 2017

1. Introduction

The purpose of this document is to set out principles and priorities guiding the selection of new acquisitions for the Australian Museum cultural collections (including ethnographic, archaeological and archival collections). It provides guidance on the range and type of items that will be sought for the collection, the topics, research questions, and communities which will be prioritised over the life of the strategy and guidance on the process the Museum will follow in making decisions about whether to proceed with particular acquisitions.

The current document replaces the *Australian Museum Ethnographic Collection Development Strategy 2008-2012*, with significant changes including:

- A new focus on collecting contemporary forms of artistic and cultural expression by Indigenous and Pacific peoples, and in particular a much greater emphasis on the Pacific diaspora in Australia and NSW,
- Incorporation of Australian Museum archival collections within the scope of the cultural collections, and
- A new emphasis on collaboration, shared decision making and partnerships during the collecting process with creator communities and artists.

2. Background and scope

Under the *Australian Museum Trust Act (1975)* the Australian Museum's objective is to propagate and increase knowledge in the disciplines of biology, anthropology and geology. To achieve this goal it may acquire and hold specimens and scientific data relating to the natural sciences and anthropology. As such, the Australian Museum cultural collections provide an avenue through which the Museum can provide a unique range of services to the community, including;

- Public access – collections are accessible to the public through displays and visitor activities, via digital technologies such as the web and via loans to institutions and community organisations across Australia and the world.
- Support for creator communities – our cultural collections provide an avenue for creator communities to explore issues of identity and cultural expression, to develop artistic practice and to assist the transmission of inter-generational knowledge.
- Research – the cultural collections support a broad range of research activities by staff and external researchers and Indigenous community members.

The Museum will continue to acquire new items into its cultural collections to enhance the services it provides the community, and to respond to changing demands from new and existing users of its collections.

Note that this strategy specifically excludes archaeological materials collected in New South Wales under the auspices of the *National Parks and Wildlife Act (1974)*¹. It also does not fully encompass the scope of the Museum's archival collection, which includes elements relating to the history of biological and geological sciences at the Museum, and institutional records

¹ See the *Australian Museum Archaeological Collection Deposition Policy 2012*

managed under the *State Records Act (1988)*. Issues relating to the ongoing management of collections, including accessioning, loan and de-accessioning procedures are also dealt with under a separate policy².

3. Collection development themes

Over the life of this policy the Museum expects to prioritise the acquisition of tangible and intangible cultural heritage where it falls within the following themes: ‘Contemporary Pacific’, ‘Contemporary Indigenous Australia’ and ‘Aboriginal NSW’. Note that the Museum may collect items for the collection which fall outside of the three themes. However, this will only be done where it can be established that the new acquisitions holds a particularly significant service potential for the Museum (whether in terms of public engagement, community engagement or research potential).

3.1 Contemporary Pacific

New acquisitions will explore a seemingly universal theme for Melanesian, Micronesian and Polynesian peoples: the impact of globalisation, urbanisation and the fault lines that can open up between traditional cultural identity and contemporary popular culture and modernity, including:

- Issues pertinent to the urban diaspora that are articulated by contemporary Pacific artists and practitioners,
- Changes in ideology and ritual practice and the incorporation of global religions into the life of Pacific communities,
- How communities are responding to and interpreting changes in their marine and terrestrial environments associated with human industry and development, such as pest species, overfishing, forestry, mining, and sea level change,
- How communities are responding to the processes of technological modernisation and globalisation, and in particular how they are taking up new technologies and adapting them to local requirements as expressed through their material culture and artistic traditions, and
- Issues related to political instability, contested cultural identity and cultural dislocation (especially migration to urban areas).

‘Contemporary Pacific’ includes the Pacific diaspora in New South Wales and across Australia, where this community actively maintains a collective sense of identity through community groups and through distinctive performing and visual arts.

3.2 Contemporary Indigenous Australia

Collecting ‘Contemporary Indigenous Australia’ provides the Museum with an opportunity to celebrate and reflect the ongoing dynamism of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture. From Tasmania to Torres Strait, collecting will reflect local cultural traditions, how cultural expression is continually refreshed to make a powerful commentary on issues relating to identity, politics and social injustice, and pertinent issues within popular culture expressed by contemporary Indigenous artists and practitioners. Topics of particular interest include:

² *Australian Museum Collection Management Policy 2012*

- The relationship between Indigenous peoples and the nation state, including topics such as youth incarceration, deaths in custody, native title and land rights, and the intervention.
- Community responses to environmental change and threats to terrestrial and marine environments,
- How young people in particular grapple with the impact of unemployment and substance abuse, while also having to resolve the contradictions around cultural identity, modernity, and traditional family values, and
- Popular culture and urban arts practice by contemporary Indigenous artists and practitioners.

Indigenous languages will be an important element of the collecting strategy, particularly where intangible heritage can enhance the capacity of the Museum to use Indigenous language in its public programming activities.

3.3 Aboriginal NSW

NSW has the largest Aboriginal population in Australia and a unique contemporary Aboriginal arts and cultural sector. The sector plays an important role in maintaining, enhancing and transmitting culture as Aboriginal artists and community members seek to develop their own practice and find inspiration through their culture. The NSW Aboriginal community are key stakeholders for the Australian Museum, and their continued collaboration in our research, collection development and public program activities will be critical.

Despite its role as a NSW cultural institution, for a range of historical reasons the cultural collections from NSW are smaller, and considerably less diverse than the Museum's Indigenous collections from northern Australia. As a consequence, the Australian Museum will continue to prioritise the acquisition of both contemporary and historical Indigenous art, material culture and archival material from NSW. Continued development of the NSW Aboriginal collection provides an opportunity to deliver on key NSW Government Aboriginal arts objectives such as promoting the recognition and appreciation of NSW Aboriginal arts and cultural practice and increased participation of NSW Aboriginal people in arts and cultural activity³.

4. Collection acquisition process

Given that the resources we have for collection care are finite, the Museum must prioritise any future cultural acquisitions to ensure they can most effectively enhance its capacity to deliver services to the community. Responsibility for the decision over whether or not to make an individual acquisition under this policy rests with the Cultural Collections Acquisition Committee:

- Assistant Director, Public Engagement and Culture
- Head of Culture Conservation and Consulting
- Manager of Archives and Records
- Coordinator International Collections

³ See *NSW Aboriginal Arts and Cultural Strategy 2010* and *Two Ways Together – the NSW Aboriginal Affairs Plan*

- Manager Aboriginal Heritage
- Manager Materials Conservation Unit

No assets will be purchased or acquired, with the intention of incorporating them into the cultural collections of the Australian Museum, without first seeking approval through the committee. The committee makes decisions on the acquisition of cultural material and then submits a recommendation to the Director. In making a decision on whether or not to incorporate an item into the cultural collections, the following considerations will be relevant (in addition to the collection development themes).

- *Service potential.* This reflects the potential for new material to enhance the Museum's services to stakeholders, whether through community and public engagement and/or research.
- *Contextual data.* Priority will be given to collecting materials where the origin, history and other contextual data can be thoroughly documented and authenticated.
- *Legal and ethical title.* In cases where it is not clear that the vendor or donor holds valid legal title, or where the Museum cannot be satisfied that an object was originally collected both legally and ethically, the Museum will not proceed with acquisition of the item.
- *Conservation capacity.* The Museum will not acquire items for the cultural collections where it has no reasonable expectation of providing the curatorial resources necessary to provide for their long term care and preservation such as appropriately secure and environmentally controlled storage space and materials conservation treatments. As a general principle, preference will be given to collecting items which are relatively complete and in good condition, and which therefore do not require significant materials conservation resources.
- *Originality or rarity.* Preference will generally be given to objects or collections that are unique or relatively rare, unusual or particularly fine example of their type. Physical objects will only be collected where the object itself (as opposed to for example a digital image of the object), holds value in terms of enhancing the service capacity of the cultural collections.
- *Duplication.* Where it falls outside the scope of its identified priorities, the Museum will generally not seek to collect material well represented or targeted by other public collecting institutions across Australia.
- *Community engagement.* Where relevant, the Museum will ensure that any collecting be done in collaboration with the relevant community, allowing them to be fully engaged with the acquisition process. The Museum will give particular consideration to the way in which creator communities wish to be represented in cultural collections, consulting over the selection of material for the permanent collections with the relevant community wherever possible.