New Zealand Conservators of Cultural Materials Pū Manaaki Kahurangi Annual Conference, 2018

Heritage is a living, active part of our communities. Conservation needs to be both responsive to each individual situation and responsible within its own set of wider professional ethics. As conservators, we are aware that our work takes place within a larger cultural context.

Whilst preservation remains at the core of what we do, we are at the intersection of materials-based conservation and values-based approaches.

At the 2018 NZCCM Conference in Auckland, we welcome discussion on current conservation
practices and the challenges we face. This is an opportunity to share and hear about treatment methodologies, advances in the use and research of materials, solutions for display and storage, and ways in which the context of an artwork or object has informed decision making.

A POLITE WAY TO SAY 'NO'
KÊYEELE LAWLER-DORMER AND ROBYN SLOGGETT

As is the case in most countries, much of Australia's cultural record is not housed in large national institutions but in smaller organisations, often located in remote regional or rural areas and with limited resources, and run by few staff, or by volunteers. Most have limited access to conservation expertise. These organisations rely on accessible and practical advice in publications such as reCollections: Caring for Collections Across Australia *(1998). Created as an initiative of the Heritage Collections Council in 1998 and supported by the Australian Federal Government* reCollections *has become an essential resource providing preventative conservation principles for Australian cultural organisations. The current program to update and create* reCollections Online *offers the opportunity to engage current users and the wider community in contributing to a more tailored preventative conservation resource.*
A partnership between Bathurst Regional Council, NSW Australia, and the Grimwade Centre at the University of Melbourne brings together conservators and conservation students with Bathurst museum and heritage professionals and volunteers. A recent study, which interviewed heritage professionals in Bathurst and sought their involvement in the revision of reCollections*, revealed a content gap in the* Acquisitions and Significance *section of* reCollections*. This revision identified the need for practical advice to inform decision making at the initial point of acquisitions through to storage and display. The study also identified the need for professionals and volunteers to understand and assess personnel implications that might arise during or after the acquisition process.*

1. INTRODUCTION AND CONSERVATION INDUSTRY HISTORY IN AUSTRALIA

In 1975 the Australian Government commissioned an *Inquiry into Australian Museums* (Pigott 1975). One of the most significant recommendations was to establish a national postgraduate training program in conservation, and in 1978 the then Canberra College of Advanced Education, enrolled its first students. It was not until 1990, however, that the Inquiry's two main themes, access and preservation, were activated with the establishment of the Heritage Collections Working Group (HCWG), later to become the Heritage Collections Committee and then the Heritage Collections Council. One of its first tasks of the HCWG was to conduct a 3-year survey of Australia's 'distributed national collection' (HCWG cited in Anderson 2007, 9).

In July 1995, the Australian Government endorsed *Australia's National Conservation Policy for the Conservation of Movable Cultural Heritage* followed by the *National Policy and Strategy* in 1998 (HCC 1998a). The policy and strategy were developed from principles that:

> "… were grounded on broad cultural issues, including community well-being, diversity and access, as well as cornerstone activities to improve and sustain the conservation of collections through intergovernmental coordination, the application of significance methodology, community awareness raising, education, and research and development" (Griffin and Pariossien 2011, 4).

The Conservation and Collection Management Working Party commissioned a series of publications aimed at supporting small, often volunteer-run collections across the country. *reCollections: Caring for Collections Across Australia* (Heritage Collections Council 1998b) was

the first of these publications, followed by *Be Prepared* (2000) which provided a disaster planning manual for small museums; *Significance* (2001) which provided guidelines for assessing the significance; and *Guidelines for Environmental Control in Cultural Institutions* (2002).

2. *RECOLLECTIONS*

In 1998 *reCollections* was developed as a practical manual, published in a six-volume ring binder hard copy format, with information located under the headings: Caring for Cultural Material 1 and 2, Damage and Decay, Managing Collections, Managing People and Handling, Transportation, Storage and Display as well as a Glossary. The content was practical, the language was accessible and included information on condition reporting, material science, collection management, risk management, and people management. The core intention of *reCollections* was to provide a conservation resource that included practical advice, supported decision making and informed object care for non-conservators in addition to providing a teaching resource (HCC 1998b). The use of the hard-copy version of *reCollections* is used today in small and regional cultural organisations.

   reCollections 1998 was created by an emerging industry in need of a standardised resource to refer to as national practice when in consultation with historical and cultural organisations. The Ministry for the Arts, Attorney-General's Department is the custodian and copyright holder of *reCollections*. In 2014, working with the Australian Institute for the Conservation of Cultural Materials, the Grimwade Centre received permission to revise and republish an updated and online version of *reCollections* under a Creative Commons CC BY license (Brunoro 2014).

   In 2017 Kêyeele Lawler-Dormer interviewed heritage professionals in Bathurst to provide the opportunity for them to contribute to the revision of *reCollections*. The focus of this study was to explore the current use of the 20-year-old publication to locate a content gap, whilst simultaneously assessing the relevance of the content from a user's perspective. Essentially posing the question, what are the content gaps in *reCollections* 1998 and what information remains relevant to Australian collecting organisations, three managers of cultural collections at Bathurst provided input into the project.

3. CULTURAL HERITAGE IN BATHURST, NSW

The Bathurst regional local government area has 330 listed heritage items and 10 heritage conservation areas, with an additional 994 places throughout the region that have been identified as having some level of heritage significance. These assets include items of natural and cultural heritage and each contributes to the unique history of the region. The variety of the region's cultural landscape illustrates how places have evolved to reflect the values and the needs of its inhabitants. Consequently, levels of significance have also adjusted over time as new meanings and uses have been discovered for places (Bathurst 2017d, 17).

   The community served by Bathurst Regional Council represents the kind of community that the Heritage Collections Council envisaged being served by *reCollections.* Located in rural New South Wales, situated on the land of the most easterly grouping of the Wiradjuri Nation, the Bathurst community takes great pride in its rich cultural heritage.

   The Bathurst Regional Council manages a number of significant sites and collections. The Chifley Home and Education Centre was the marital home of Australia's sixteenth Prime Minister, Joseph Benedict (Ben) Chifley, and his wife Elizabeth. A modest late Victorian semi-detached residence of five rooms built in the 1880s, the house remained the home of the Chifley's until Ben's death in 1951 and Elizabeth's death in 1962. Chifley Home is a site of national significance, not only for its strong and direct connection with Ben Chifley but its intact collection of furniture and chattels consisting of some 680 domestic furnishings, decorative items or personal effects, that represent a modest residence in the early-mid 1900s.

The Bathurst Regional Art Gallery, established in 1955 and co-located with the Bathurst Library, is one of the oldest regional art galleries in New South Wales. Professionally staffed and operated the Gallery has a significant permanent collection of some 2,200 works featuring paintings, sculpture, works on paper, photographs and ceramics from four hundred Australian artists including Jean Bellette, James Gleeson, Lloyd Rees and Grace Cossington Smith. The School of Arts collection of 2000 texts, which is state listed, is housed in the City Library building next to the Gallery.

The National Motor Racing Museum (NMRM), situated at the base of the famous Bathurst Mt Panorama race track, celebrates the history, personalities and achievements of Australian Motor Sports, with history of car and motorbike racing given equal importance. The Museum displays car, bikes and racing memorabilia from all forms of Australian motor sports, and tells the stories of drivers and events. The NMRM collection incorporates some 4700 items with photographs, documents, trophies and textiles being the numerically biggest groups.

Australian Fossil and Mineral Museum featuring the renowned Somerville Collection is housed in the historic 1876 Public School building and currently holds 2446 fossils and 3849 minerals including crystallised gold, raw gemstones and three dinosaurs with a very popular Tyannosaurus rex. The collection was gifted to the Australian Museum by collector Warren Somerville with the provision it remains displayed within the Bathurst community.

Other historical/house museums located in the Bathurst Region include:

The Bathurst Historical Society Museum located in the east wing of the historic Bathurst Courthouse, which was built around 1880. The Museum is run as a volunteer organisation supported by Bathurst Regional Council. Storage of the collection is both at the museum site and in an off-site shed with no climate control.

Old Government Cottage is also owned by Bathurst Regional Council and volunteer run by the Bathurst Historical Society. Rockley Mill and Stables Museum, built in 1864, is operated as a volunteer run community museum with support from Bathurst Regional Council. The privately owned Abercrombie House, built in the 1870s in the Jacobian Scottish Baronial style, is listed on the National Trust and New South Wales Heritage registers. This heritage building is open for public tours, events and event hire. Miss Traill's House, built in 1845 by Reverend Thomas Sharpe is managed by the National Trust and opens to the public on weekends and public holidays. Hill End, which was originally an 1850s gold-mining township, now hosts the Council sponsored Hill End Artists in Residence Program.

4. THE STUDY

Three in-depth interviews were conducted with heritage professionals who manage a range of organisations in Bathurst, NSW. The interviews confirmed the ongoing and wide use of *reCollections* as well as revealing a content gap in the *Acquisitions and Significance* section of *reCollections*.

During the research Tim Pike, Collections Manager Bathurst Regional Council; Samantha Friend, President of Bathurst District Historical Society and Janelle Middleton, Manager Museums Bathurst Regional Council, all discussed the need for more clarity in navigating the tentative landscape of acquisitions. They suggested collecting organisations are experiencing difficulty communicating unwanted donations to the donor and that *reCollections* should include tools to aid this process. Each person gave an example, across each cultural organisation in Bathurst, of a donation that retrospectively would have been better rejected upon initial contact. These new acquisitions had, at times, multiple issues including: dubious provenance; duplication; they were outside the collection aims; they required additional conservation; had problematic storage needs; and/or ambiguous ownership. This major finding draws a sight line between conservation and the acquisitions process. Each new addition to a collection has resource implications. Through understanding the types of resources an acquisition requires, such as space, storage requirements, conservation treatment, staffing, IT infrastructure and processing time to provide access, collection organisations can begin to comprehend the impact

each new acquisition has on already stretched resources (State Library NSW 2015). As each of these steps often involves input from conservation, it is imperative collecting organisations allocate these resources to attaining and preserving significant acquisitions that grow and develop a collection.

5. REVIEWING CURRENT ACQUISITION PROCESSES

The Australian Government's Ministry of Arts defines an acquisition as

> "The collection of material whether by purchase, gift, bequest, exchange, discovery, fieldwork or other method. In the usual understanding of the word, acquisition into an institution's collection results in the transfer of the legal ownership, custody or control of material to the institution" (Australian Government, Ministry for the Arts, Attorney-General's Department 2014, 10).

Collecting organisations (especially regional organisations) rely on community support and donations of cultural material to expand their collections. This method of acquisition and transfer of ownership both requires and ensures strong relationships with donating benefactors and stakeholders. It should also require that the collecting organisation has adequate means to manage the donation, but this is not always the case. Gifts and donations may be accepted into collections regardless of their value and relevance in order to maintain a respectable relationship with the benefactor, and to keep options open for future acquisitions from that benefactor (DeWîtt 1988). However, as Harvard academic Aimée Taberner describes, without adequate procedures, policies and training in place:

> "Museum staff – whether new to the field or working with collections for decades – are often overwhelmed by the complexities of acquiring cultural property, particularly antiquities and archaeological material" (Taberner 2012, 13).

A recent European study conducted a detailed analysis of gift-giving theory, suggesting

> "... reciprocity is the key mechanism that determines voluntary behaviours. The norm of reciprocity explains that when individuals receive benefits, they feel obligated to reciprocate" (Zollo et al. 2017, 516).

For the donor, the impetus to donate can exist on a scale ranging from altruistic to egotistical or financial motivation. The collecting organisation must understand in donating or gifting an object, the motivation guiding the donor may cause them to expect reciprocation (Zollo et al. 2017).

Through determining the donor's motives, collection personnel can judge accordingly and should they choose to decline the donation, alter their response appropriately. Equally important is recognising social constructs that deem rejecting a gift as rude. Collection personnel may feel uncomfortable and likely to accept inappropriate donations so as to appear nicer, open, and knowledgeable. In accepting the donation, however, collection staff transfer the power, aims and direction of their collection to an external entity, simultaneously justifying and reinforcing the donor's original understanding of the collecting organisation aims as true. Through accepting a donation which does not align with collection aims and policies, the collection personnel are altering the trajectory of the collection and allocating resources to items which would otherwise be excluded (DeWîtt 1988).

The Australian Society of Archivists', *Keeping Archives (2008)*, acknowledges that transparent documentation of an acquisition is central to the acquisition process, alongside the relationship between the collecting organisation, staff and donor (Bettington et al. 2008). Building trust in the community and educating internal and external personnel on these frameworks ensures the collecting organisations can acquire and safeguard cultural material (Taberner 2012).

Donations enhance collection growth and social relationships, concurrently, they may be burdensome to process, duplicative, strain limited storage space, and problematic when disposal becomes an issue (O'Hare and Smith 2011). This complexity needs to be reflected in *reCollections*.

It is also important to recognise the community involvement in regional collecting organisations and the role collections play as repositories for community social history. In Australia, donors are encouraged to gift relevant items to organisations by means of a tax deduction. This incentive sees a range of personal and social history collected and preserved. However, it can leave collection staff in an uncomfortable predicament in hard economic times as donors look to relieve personal financial pressures (O'Hare and Smith 2011). Collection staff and councils subsequently can face a compromising social situation resulting in gifts accepted outside of the collection aims and their capacity to preserve and maintain them.

Collecting organisations regularly accept donations which do not align to their collecting aims; are a duplicate; are of marginal value; damaged; or are problematic because of storage or ongoing preservation needs – often because it is difficult to say no (Bettington et al. 2008). DeWîtt notes this conundrum may be because refusing a donation is perceived as poor public relations possibly hurting the reputation of the organisation (DeWîtt 1988; O'Hare and Smith 2011). A proposed gift may be seen as an enduring legacy by the donor or a contribution which they can be proud of (O'Hare and Smith 2011). Saying no can be seen as a personalised rebuttal. *reCollections* already acknowledges the potential to offend a donor (HCC 1998b), but the feedback received from the Bathurst community indicates that this section requires more content and practical solutions for collecting organisations and that collection staff need to find a polite way to say no.

The most recommended solution to resolve acquisition issues is a gifts policy (O'Hare and Smith 2011; DeWîtt 1988; HCC 1998b; Bettington et al. 2008). This policy needs to be understood by both internal and external parties requiring more practical solutions, including advice on training and procedures surrounding acquisitions and donations.

Negotiating potential donations with benefactors is difficult, as it traverses between personal intentions, business decisions and organisational obligations. Shifting from current practices to an integrated approach requires knowledge of acquisitions and donations and each team member needs to fully understand the change in tact for it to be successful. To politely navigate a potential 'no' to a donation, staff and volunteers should manage the donor interaction prior to first initial contact.

By moving *reCollections* to an online platform, the physical limitations of a printed publication are removed but there is the potential risk that *reCollections Online* could become too large. With this in mind, the following recommendations are suggested to continue to utilise *reCollections* as a preventative conservation and collection management platform focusing on creating an integrated approach to negotiating acquisitions.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR *RECOLLECTIONS*:

1. Introduce additional training tools to educate both collection personnel and the local community on the collection aims and donation policies, achieved by including:

    a. A series of online tutorials hosted on *reCollections.* This approach provides consistency and considers the time-poor nature of many collecting organisations.

    b. Produce two one-page handout sheets for the collecting organisation. The first to educate internally, offering a quick synopsis, directing staff to the online tutorials and offer sources for additional information. The second for collection personnel to distribute to potential donors, educating donors on the donation process.

2. Display the collection aim, policy and a donations policy. Displaying a clear and concise acquisition policy helps collection personnel in shepherding the donor through the process. Publicly displaying a copy of the relevant policies supports staff or volunteer's confidence and validity to assert themselves and provide accurate information. This offers collection personnel the tools to ensure a refusal comes from a place of knowledge, empowering them with the confidence to say 'no'.

3. Display a list of exclusions next to the collection policy and aim online and onsite. This will reduce potential duplications and acquisition processing time for collection personnel. It is important to consider the time taken to assess and process new collection items (O'Hare and Smith 2011).

4. Assign the final acquisition decision to a single person or to a working group. This removes the decision and/or pressure from preliminary donor conversations as already mentioned in (HCC 1998b). Coupled with a one-page handout that directs the donor towards the appropriate course of action, any initial pressure on front-of-house staff, volunteers or stakeholders is removed.

5. For the person/working group who is charged with the final decision involving communicating to the donor that the gift is not wanted, it is important to be mindful of their personal strengths. Being self-aware will help collection personnel be assertive and confident in saying no (DeWîtt 1988).

6. *reCollections* already recognises 'that the potential donor may have other objects which are considered both significant and worthy of collection. An insensitive refusal may guarantee that those objects are never offered to your institution, or to any other' (Taberner 2012, 99). In addition the donor may have objects that have curatorial value and it is worth negotiating a loan agreement for a future exhibition. Staff should proactively make the donor feel included in the organisation's wider community.

7. Overall the recommendation was that the section in *Managing Collections* that addresses polite ways of communicating and navigating unwanted donations with potential donors should be expanded to offer more practical solutions for collecting organisations.

7. CONCLUSION:

Acquisitions operate in a difficult and moving landscape, requiring an all-inclusive course of action that takes into account many considerations. To find a polite way to say 'no', organisations need an integrated approach involving planning and infrastructural change, including training staff and educating the local community about their organisation. Moving forward, this research will need to be peer-reviewed and the content simplified into accessible language suitable for *reCollections Online*.

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