

# University Collections

by Belinda Nemeč



The University of Melbourne, established in the 1850s, owns 26 museum, library and archive collections relating to disciplines including sciences, music, visual arts, medicine, dentistry, law, engineering and architecture. The collections range in size from 80 scientific instruments in the Geomatics 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.

Over the past few years the collection managers have been working co-operatively to improve the standard of care and raise the profile of all the collections. ('Collection manager' here refers to registrars, librarians, archivists and curators; departmental staff such as technical officers whose role includes collection management; and retired staff working in a voluntary capacity.) This work has been informed by the 2 *Cinderella* collection reports.<sup>1 & 2</sup>

After initial identification and brief documentation of the collections, the great need for preventive and interventive conservation measures soon became apparent. Condition surveys of some of the larger collections estimated the cost of such work in the millions and it became clear that priorities needed to be set, based on significance. In 2002-2003 therefore the University appointed a Significance Assessment Officer (Stephanie Jaehrling) to work with the collection managers to undertake an assessment of each collection using the methodology developed by the Heritage Collections Council.<sup>3</sup> Many collections and individual items were found to be highly significant, some at the national and international level. Stephanie also undertook a detailed survey of the nature and needs of each collection. Results were presented to the University with a recommendation to establish a Cultural Collections Committee, create a new position of Cultural Collections Officer, and provide additional funds for cataloguing.

This brings us to 2004. We have established the Committee and 3 Subcommittees are a valuable source of practical initiatives as well as information sharing among collection managers. One subcommittee deals with conservation and storage issues, another with cataloguing, and a third with public profile and development. We have funded cataloguing projects in the Dental Museum, Medical History Museum and Herbarium and we undertook a survey of all the catalogue systems in use at the University. Numerous articles publicising the collections have appeared in University and external publications, and a

number of interviews, talks and seminars have focussed on the collections overall or various aspects of them. We have improved internet access to the collections and are developing sites for individual collections.<sup>4</sup> We are looking at ways of enhancing alumni and friends groups' involvement with and support for collections. Undergraduate and postgraduate students from various disciplines including art curatorship, history, museum studies, conservation and information technology have undertaken projects which include research activities, cataloguing, conservation, exhibition development and website design. We are also developing a strategy for the valuation of the collections for insurance and asset management purposes, and are working with the University's property and buildings staff on the need for adequate storage and display facilities.

We plan to build on this work in 2005, with a particular focus on disaster planning; training in preventive conservation; development of policies and procedures in key areas such as acquisitions, deaccessions and loans; and encouraging further student involvement, research and publications. Our aim is to maintain the historic link between each collection and its academic community, while encouraging a University-wide approach to management philosophy and standards.

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1. Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee and University Museums Review Committee, *Cinderella collections: University museums and collections in Australia*, Canberra, 1996;
2. Department of Communications and the Arts, Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee and University Museums Review Committee, *Transforming Cinderella collections: the management and conservation of Australian university museums, collections & herbaria*, Canberra, 1998.
3. Roslyn Russell and Kylie Winkworth for the Heritage Collections Council, *Significance: a guide to assessing the significance of cultural heritage objects and collections*, Canberra, 2001.
4. See [www.unimelb.edu.au/community/museums.html](http://www.unimelb.edu.au/community/museums.html); [www.unimelb.edu.au/community/libraries.html](http://www.unimelb.edu.au/community/libraries.html); and [www.unimelb.edu.au/community/collections.html](http://www.unimelb.edu.au/community/collections.html).

*Photo of an Anatomical model made by Franz Josef Steger, Leipzig, early 20th century. Collection of the Harry Brookes Allen Museum of Anatomy and Pathology, University of Melbourne.*