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
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 of students, peace and political organisations. The Archives’ enormous holdings now extend to over 14 kilometres of shelf space.

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of the teachers in training. Law aimed ‘to raise student standards of appreciation of art, literature and music. I felt that lectures were not sufficient. In art, students should have daily contact with original works.’ Renowned for his old-fashioned, strict style of governance, Law imposed a five-shilling annual levy on students to help fund these acquisitions. When the College amalgamated with the University in 1990 the collection became part of the larger University of Melbourne Art Collection but is still displayed primarily in the College’s original 1888 Building on Grattan Street.

Other collections served the purpose of educating students about different cultures and ways of life. The distinguished German-born ethnologist, jurist, Sinologist and author Dr Leonhard Adam (1891–1960), who in 1942 was appointed Reader in Anthropology in the Department of History, assembled a substantial collection of international indigenous cultural artefacts on behalf of the University. Adam aimed to build a collection for use in teaching and researching cultural anthropology and ethnology. Through field collecting, purchase, donation and exchange he modelled his collection on museums such as the Pitt Rivers at Oxford and the Peabody Museums at Harvard and Yale, attempting to assemble a ‘universal’ representation of ethnographic material. Today this collection has a further potential function very different from that envisaged by its creator: research by indigenous people seeking to reconnect with their cultural traditions which have been disrupted or destroyed by colonisation.

Many university collections were created for teaching complex scientific and technical disciplines to professionals-in-training, such as doctors, dentists, surveyors, botanists, zoologists and geologists. Frequently these collections serve as reference examples of known types—whether of plants, minerals or animal skeletons—against which students learn to identify material they find in the field or in the course of their studies. The University of Melbourne Herbarium, for example, contains some 80,000 specimens, the earliest dating back to 1770, and covers all the major plant groups, although focussing on the flora of Victoria. Documentation and orderly storage are therefore of prime importance if such collections are to serve this reference purpose. Each herbarium sample must be carefully dried, mounted, labelled and catalogued. Examples of dried fungi, pressed flowers and algae in the exhibition demonstrate the meticulous nature of caring for such collections.

Large taxonomic collections may no longer hold the central research role in some of the sciences which they held in earlier centuries, when classification was based principally on morphology. More recent techniques such as DNA analysis have changed our uses and understanding of such collections, as well as the techniques used for preservation, but many of the artefacts are still used for teaching and some have acquired new significances. One of the most spectacular objects in Curiosity: 150 years of collecting at the University of Melbourne is the three-metre tall skeleton of the Moa, an extinct, flightless bird from New Zealand. Moa were the tallest birds ever known but had disappeared by the time Europeans colonised New Zealand. This skeleton, probably preserved by being embedded in a peat bog, was donated 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 visitor, 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
1 University Museums Review Committee, Cinderella collections: university museums and collections in Australia, Australian Vice-Chancellors’ Committee, Canberra, 1996.
5 Susan Reidy et al., What a place for an education! 1853 to 2003 – the University of Melbourne (exh. cat.), Baillieu Library, University of Melbourne, 2003, p. 8.
7 University Museums Review Committee, p. 53.
8 The University of Melbourne Archives (brochure), The University of Melbourne Archives, (n.d.), (n.p.).
13 Ann Brothers, Significance assessment (The Medical History Museum, the University of Melbourne), unpublished report, October 2002, p. 11.
14 Russell Grimwade, notes for public lecture ‘A nation’s treasures’, delivered on 13 September 1949, now held in the University of Melbourne Archives, quoted in Rachel Kent et al., Art, industry and science: the Grimwade legacy (exh. cat.), the University of Melbourne Museum of Art, (1997), p. 5.
Dental Museum
21 Amalgamated Dental Co. [London]
Foot engine to operate dental drill, with Doriot-type hand piece (c. 1920s)
cast iron, steel: 160.0 x 45.0 x 30.0 cm. Reg. no. 516
22 Myer, and Wood & Sons [London]
Dental extraction key (c. 1800–1850)
made, iron, 3.0 x 9.5 x 15.5 cm. Reg. no. 653
23 Crescent Dental Manufacturing Co. [New York]
Amalgam balance with adjustable beam suspension (c. 1935)
bakelite, brass, 4.0 x 16.0 x 6.0 cm
Gift of a Collins Street dentist. Reg. no. 695
24 Claudius Ash Sons and Co. [London]
Pestle and mortar (1930)
stone: 7.0 x 9.0 cm. Reg. no. 687
25 Unknown
Timer (c. 1890)
glass, brass, wood, 8.0 x 4.0 cm. Reg. no. 675
26 Dr C.N. Johnson [Chicago]
Teaching model, set of five teeth with prepared cavities to receive gold inlays 1912
human teeth, wood, blue inlay wax 5.5 x 9.0 x 23.0 cm.
Gift of Dr John Little. Reg. no. 600
27 Prisma, agents for Amalgamated Dental Co.
[London and Holland]
Porcelain outfit (c. 1915)
wood, velvet, glass, porcelain: 6.0 x 6.0 x 26.0 cm
Reg. no. 277
28 Dental ceramics part III: porcelain jacket crowns
Reg. no. 12778
29 Unknown
Single point rose head drill (c. 1790)
made, iron, 12.0 x 0.8 cm. Reg. no. 297
30 Unknown [London]
Single-handed ratchet operated drill with spring return arm (c. 1850)
steel, ebonite: 23.0 x 7.0 cm. Reg. no. 306
31 Dental Manufacturing Co. [London]
Right or contra angle hand piece (c. 1900)
steel, ebonite, 15.5 x 1.5 x 1.0 cm. Reg. no. 303
32 Amalgamated Dental Co. [London]
Straight hand piece for use with foot and electric dental engines (1940s)
nickel plated steel: 14.0 x 1.0 cm
From the teaching clinics of the Dental School. Reg. no. 334
33 Morita (Japan)
Air bearing contra angle hand piece (1990)
steel alloy: 11.0 x 1.0 x 1.0 cm
From the teaching clinics of the Dental School Reg. no. 343
34 Unknown [Melbourne]
Two early artificial dentures (not a set) (189th century)
hand-carved ivory bases, human or porcelain front teeth 5.0 x 5.5 x 2.0 cm and 5.5 x 6.5 x 2.0 cm
Reg. nos 260 and 237
35 Unknown [England]
Dentures (c. 1780)
gold alloy plate base, human front teeth, carved bone back teeth: 5.0 x 6.0 x 4.5 cm. Reg. no. 266
Department of Anatomy and Cell Biology
36 Tramond [Paris]
Educational model of human head and shoulders showing the heart and blood vessels (19th century)
wax, bone, mixed media; approx. 50.0 x 40.0 x 20.0 cm
37 Tramond [Paris]
Educational model of human head and torso showing internal organs (19th century)
wax, bone, calico, mixed media; length approx. 80.0 cm
38 Maximilian Kreitmayer [Melbourne]
Death mask of Edward 'Ned' Kelly (1880)
plaster of Paris, paint; height approx. 30.0 cm
Department of Geomatics
39 Chesterman [Sheffield]
Gunter's chain (late 19th century)
brass, iron; length approx. 201.0 metres
40 Artificial horizon with bottle to hold mercury (late 19th century)
metal, glass, bone, wood, bottle height 10.5 cm, cover height 10.8 cm
41 Ulysse Nardin (Switzerland)
Sidereal time chronometer 1955
wood, metal, leather, glass: 24.0 x 32.0 x 26.0 cm

Electricity Engineering Education Museum, Department of Electrical and Electronic Engineering
42 Elliot Bros [London]
Kelvin galvanometer (1896)
brass, metal, glass: 510.0 x 21.0 x 21.0 cm
Reg. no. 44

Ernst Matthaei Memorial Collection of Early Glass
43 Unknown (England)
Large rummer or punch bowl (c. 1830)
glass, height 17.2 cm
Purchased with funds from the Ernst Matthaei Memorial Bequest 1984. 1984.0236 (no. 180)
44 William Belby (engraver, 1740–1819)
Wine glass (c. 1765)
glass, height 14.7 cm
Purchased with funds from the Ernst Matthaei Memorial Bequest 1985. 1985.0011 (no. 183)
45 Unknown (England)
Goblet (c. 1700)
glass, height 22.7 cm
Purchased with funds from the Ernst Matthaei Memorial Bequest 1989. 1989.0071 (no. 46)
46 Unknown (England)
Toasting glass (c. 1750)
glass, height 18.7 cm
Gift of Mrs Joyce Meldrum 1996. 1996.0023 (no. 240)

Grainger Museum
47 Rupert Bunny (1864–1947)
Percy Grainger (c. 1902–04)
 oil on canvas: 99.2 x 83.6 cm
48 Tom Roberts (1856–1931)
Professor G.W.L. Marshall Hall 1900
oil on canvas: 53.5 x 43.8 cm
Purchased by Percy Grainger from Hubert Marshall Hall 1937
49 Elia Grainger nee Ström (1889–1979)
Towelling costume: shorts, leggings, waistcoat, shirt and shoes (c. 1934)
Dri-Glo cotton bath towels, bath mat, leather
Gift of Percy Grainger
50 Percy Grainger (1881–1962)
The warriors: music for an imaginary ballet 1916
full orchestral score manuscript
Lodged by Percy Grainger in the Grainger Museum
51 Edward Greg (1843–1907)
Letter to Percy Grainger 30 June 1906
52 Pytor Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840–1893)
Letter to Maurice Ernst 15 June 1893
53 Thomas Hardy (1840–1928)
Letter to Henry Balfour Gardiner 21 January 1904
54 Lange & Sohne (Glashütte, Saxony).
Pocket watch (c. 1893)
gold, unidentified metal, glass, velvet, leather, diameter 5.5 cm
55 Kilpatrick & Co. (London and Melbourne)
Conducting baton 1880
ivory or bone, silver, gold, leather, velvet, length: 57.3 cm

Law Rare Books Collection, Legal Resource Centre
56 Statutes at large vol. 6. 3 Geo. 2–20 Geo. 2, printed for Mark Basket by Robert Basket, Henry Woodfall and William Strahan, London, 1769

Leonard Adam Collection of International Indigenous Culture
57 Kwakwaka’Wakw (Canada)
Bird mask (c. 1900–1960)
cast iron, red cedar bark, paint; 25.0 x 121.0 x 28.0 cm
Acquired by exchange with the University of British Columbia Museum of Anthropology, 1957. 1960.0158
58 Yirritja (Arnhem Land)
Canoe model (n.d.)
wood, pigments (ochres and clay); 11.4 x 48.4 cm. 1960.1236
59 Marind-Anim (Digul River region, West Papua)
Drum with stylized crocodile and animal motifs
wood, cassowary feathers, textile, pigment, 75.5 x 18.0 cm
Gift of Mr C.E. Howlett 1952. 1952.1460