



Institute Building, North Tce (corner Kintore Ave), Adelaide
PO Box 263, Rundle Mall SA 5000, Australia

Tel : + 61 (8) 8207 7287 Fax: + 61 (8) 8207 7207

info@collectionscouncil.com.au
www.collectionscouncil.com.au

CONNECTING COLLECTIONS: THEMATIC STUDIES OF HERITAGE COLLECTIONS

1. Introduction

A thematic study is a comparative survey of collections or heritage items related to a particular theme, subject or region. Thematic studies assist collecting organisations and communities to identify, document and interpret their most significant and distinctive objects and collections. The study is a collaborative exercise that identifies the unique strengths of each collection and the contribution each collection can make to the interpretation of a region or theme. It helps to connect collections within a town, a region, or across the state or nation, laying the foundations for joint promotions and linked exhibitions. The knowledge and networks built through the study process underpins planning for regional tourism and coordinated collection and heritage developments. Thematic studies are research projects that explore the wider context and history of the theme or subject. The collaborative work builds skills, and helps reconnect objects with the environment and places outside the museum, gallery, archive or library.

There is an urgent need to take stock of collections by collaborating on thematic studies and collection surveys. The last 50 years has seen tremendous growth in Australia's heritage collections. Many regions in Australia have over twenty historical societies and museums, as well as libraries, galleries and archives. Over time, each has evolved with its own particular mission. Many collections have developed without the guidance of a formal collection policy and without reference to what is in other collections in the region or state. There is now a growing recognition of the importance of these collections and the contribution they make to the nation's history, and to the distinctive and particular history of their region. However there are also question marks about the sustainability of so many collections. Across Australia collections are poorly documented and museums in particular are operating in sub standard buildings. If we are to make a persuasive case for investment in collections and their buildings, we need to demonstrate their significance and show the connections between the collections and the history, identity, people and places of their locality.

• LINKING THE NATION'S MEMORY

The Collections Council of Australia Ltd is supported by the Cultural Ministers Council.
The office is hosted by the Libraries Board of South Australia.

While most collecting organisations in a region know what the others collect, and there is a lot of informal co-operation between them, there have been few comparative studies to analyse the range and significance of heritage collections. One consequence of the uncoordinated nature of collection development is that there are overlaps and duplication in collections, and omissions and silences in the collection record. Most collecting is passive and is the result of offers of donation of unwanted material, rather than strategic acquisitions. This pattern of collecting inevitably results in unrepresentative collections. For example, more recent history since the 1950s is not well reflected in collecting organisations.

Given the enormous costs involved in keeping collections in perpetuity, it is essential that we review the accumulated legacy of the last 50 years of collecting activity. Thematic studies provide a framework for collecting organisations to co-operate, take stock of their collections, assess significance and consider how effectively the collections represent and interpret the region's history, or the theme in question. These studies build knowledge of collections and strengthen collaborative networks. They lay the foundation for fine-tuning collection policies and focusing more strategically on neglected aspects of history.

2. What is a thematic study?

A thematic study is a survey of heritage items and collections related to a particular theme or subject. It is designed to document collections and develop an understanding of the significant objects, collections and heritage items associated with the theme.

A thematic study is based on a contextual history, which identifies the important themes in the history. The themes provide a framework for analysing the objects and assessing their significance. The study helps to document the context and history of significant objects. By mapping the important objects, collections and heritage items associated with a theme, the thematic study highlights omissions and gaps in the historical record and identifies new collecting priorities. The study lays the foundations for a network of museums and collecting organisations to develop linked exhibitions, driving guides, stories on the Collections Australia Network (CAN)¹, education resources, marketing material, and strategies to promote other kinds of physical and virtual access to the collections.

A thematic study enables sound comparative analysis of objects in different collecting organisations, so that the significance of individual items and collections can be better understood. It surveys a range of collections in museums, libraries, galleries, archives and heritage places, and can be based within a region, or look at particular collection themes across the state or around Australia. In the process of the thematic study, the range and significance of movable heritage is analysed, leading to a clear understanding of the issues affecting the conservation and interpretation of the objects, both within collecting organisations and *in situ*. A thematic study helps to establish the

conservation needs of the significant objects, and it feeds into other collection policies and strategies such as cooperative collecting and strategic plans.

A thematic study can be undertaken on a particular subject or category of movable heritage, such as steam engines, quilts, convict objects, colonial furniture or Chinese collections. It may be based around an industry such as wheat, sugar or apples; an activity or aspect of daily life, such as living in outback; or a trade like blacksmithing. Or it can be based on a locality or region, or survey items related to a river, a transport route or other geographical area.

3. Why do Thematic Studies?

- To survey, identify and map the most significant items and collections related to a particular theme, building knowledge of the distributed national collections
- To tell stories through collections, developing a better understanding of the historical context of a subject or theme, and using the research to improve interpretation
- To better record the stories and associations of the significant objects and collections
- To strengthen networks and share resources and skills between museums libraries, archives, galleries and heritage places
- To provide training in collection management and documentation, and implement training lessons in a project context, improving standards of management
- To identify conservation needs and priorities for the most significant items
- To underpin co-ordinated planning for sustainable collections, and their interpretation and promotion
- To identify the unique strengths, distinctive themes and significant objects in each collection
- To coordinate collecting between collecting agencies and across a region, and to revise collection policies and plan strategic and cooperative collecting
- To identify duplications and items for deaccessioning, creating collections of a sustainable size and higher quality
- To identify omissions in the collections and historical record, and improve future collecting in collaboration with collection networks
- To digitise high quality collection information and develop content for exhibitions and online projects, such as thematic and regional stories for CAN
- To improve knowledge and research into the theme and its related

collections

- To substantiate the case for funding for conservation, interpretation and improvements to collection facilities
- To promote awareness of the significance and value of the collections
- To enhance all kinds of access to collections and develop education programs for life long learning

4. Who is Involved in Thematic Studies?

Thematic studies create a framework for collaboration and sharing information. They draw on a wide range of people, skills and interest groups:

- Museums, libraries, galleries and archives sharing common collection interests
- Collection networks and professional associations
- Museum services, advisers and development officers
- Local government, cultural planners, arts workers, artists and photographers
- Community organisations, Indigenous, ethnic and cultural groups
- Historians, heritage practitioners, industry experts, local studies libraries, archivists, universities and technical colleges
- Collectors and private owners
- Heritage organisations, both government and community

5. What is the Scope?

The scope of a thematic study depends on how the brief is developed and available resources. A thematic study may survey objects in many locations and ownership regimes including:

- Collections in museums, galleries, libraries and archives
- Collections held by community groups
- In situ collections, either in place museums, at heritage sites, or those still in working use
- Collections held by government agencies and other authorities such as utilities
- Private owners can be included and encouraged to document their collections, and retain them within the family or in the place where they best demonstrate their significance
- The study may also include other forms of heritage such as places and archaeology.

When setting up a thematic study it is important to define the aims and scope of the survey in a project brief so that everyone understands the purpose, methods and outcomes of the project. A written brief should outline the rationale for the project, the scope of the theme, each step in the study and who will be involved to do the work.

6. How to Do Thematic Studies

Thematic studies usually comprise the following elements:

- A contextual history of the theme, subject or region
- Identification of the main themes or processes shaping the history
- A survey of the movable heritage items relevant to the study
- Research and documentation of the most significant items
- Assessment of the significance of the items using the *Significance* method and criteria²
- Analysis of the collections against the key themes to see how well they represent and interpret the history, and to identify omissions and weaknesses
- Strategic planning, policies and strategies for improved conservation, management, future collecting, interpretation, education and promotion.

A more detailed step-by-step outline follows below in section 11.

7. Contextual History

The starting point for a thematic study is the preparation of a contextual history and the identification of historic themes. This is a commissioned history exploring the events, processes and issues that have shaped the objects and movable heritage. It includes identification of themes to provide a framework for analysing the collections.

The history provides the basis for understanding the significance of the collections and movable heritage relevant to the study. It may explore the development of the region, subject or industry, the key influences on the history, the design and manufacture of the movable heritage, technological innovations, patterns of use and marketing, and its impact on the environment, economy, settlement, places and people of the area.

A contextual history for a movable heritage survey needs to cover the broad general history of the theme, as well as include specific analysis of the patterns and trends in the movable heritage. It should generate research material that can be used on-line, in future interpretation and publications, including sourcing historic photographs and images, and, where relevant, interviews with local experts. Participating collecting agencies need to be deeply involved in the

research work, and an advisory committee can help direct the research and map the main questions to be answered. Identification of the main themes in the subject is part of the contextual history. In general, it is best to commission a trained historian to prepare the history.

The history does not have to be written as a straight narrative. It could be an illustrated history, based on maps, photos, places, paintings, objects and quotes from primary sources with extended captions. A history in this form is easier to adapt to exhibitions, guidebooks, on-line and other interpretations. It may also be useful to prepare a chronology of the key dates, events, people and innovations. However the contextual history is not just about dates and chronologies, but should explore the processes and issues that have shaped the history and geography of the subject. Heritage agencies, the National Trust, and local government may have already researched aspects of the subject of the thematic study. Check with these organisations to see what work has already been done.

8. Hints for the Contextual History

- Discuss the aims for the history with your advisory group,
- Identify how you want to use the history,
- Look at the research and information in museums, galleries, archives and libraries, local government and heritage agencies
- Make sure the history is anchored to the movable heritage and collections
- Look around and do field work, research is not just in libraries and archives
- Identify some key questions that will help to understand the patterns of use and manufacture in the movable heritage
- Talk to local experts and people who have worked in the industry
- Share information and listen to people's questions
- Identify photographs, paintings, maps, stories, places and other historical sources that can be used in future displays and promotional material.

9. Identifying Themes

Historical themes are identified from the contextual history. They are the major processes, activities or subjects that have shaped the history of the industry, subject or region. The themes provide a framework for analysing the collections and movable heritage, and understanding its significance. They are useful for identifying the strengths and weaknesses of the collections, pinpointing omissions in collecting patterns and highlighting new collecting opportunities. Themes also have a role in interpretation, helping to ensure the story is presented in ways that make connections between the collections and the wider history, environment and character of the region.

The starting point for a thematic study is a contextual history. This provides research for the survey of the collections. From the history a list of themes is developed, identifying the major processes and influences shaping the history of the subject. These may be particular to the subject, or be drawn from the state or national thematic frameworks developed by government heritage agencies. The list of themes provides a framework for evaluating the collections. As the collections are surveyed, objects are related to their appropriate themes, and missing objects and collecting omissions are easily identified.

Themes are usually expressed as active ‘doing’ words, but they can also refer to issues, historical processes, events, or places. Using activities rather than functions or types of objects helps to ensure the wider meaning and context of the object is kept in focus.

In addition to the themes you may want to draw up a checklist of the major categories or types of objects in the survey. A checklist helps to ensure a more systematic review of the theme and its relevant objects. This intersects with the themes to ensure that a representative range of objects is surveyed. A checklist helps to make the work more systematic, and, like themes, can identify hidden biases in the collections. Checklists also help define the terminology for the study, ensuring that everyone is using the same names for the objects. Ultimately the themes and checklists are only tools to assist the work of studying collections, understanding their significance and interpreting their values. You can test and adjust the themes in the course of the study.

10. Why Use Thematic Frameworks?

A thematic framework is a tool for analysing the objects and collections. It helps collecting agencies to:

- Develop a more holistic understanding of heritage and history, linking objects and collections to the world outside the museum walls, and to places, people, the environment and the history of the region
- Re-conceptualise the collections and think more broadly about their meaning and associations
- Document the history, context and significance of objects and collections, building skills in significance assessment
- Identify gaps and omissions in the collecting record, and areas where museum collections are duplicating each other
- Develop strategies in conjunction with other collecting agencies to focus on neglected aspects of history in the collecting record
- Develop collaborative and regionally co-ordinated collection policies, which reflect the strengths of each collection
- Connect collections through coordinated planning for new interpretations of the theme, linking collections in serial exhibitions, driving tours of the region and joint management and strategic planning

11. Step-by-Step Outline for Thematic Studies

This is a template not a definitive prescription. The methodology can be adapted to suit the needs and resources of the study.

1. Develop brief with a clearly stated rationale, aims, outcomes, method and who will do the work.
2. Identify a project co-ordinator and work out the way the study will be undertaken: budget, time frame, process etc. Studies can be done in stages. Allow enough time if working with museum volunteers who have other obligations, and consider providing financial incentives for the museums for their research and participation.
3. Hold a meeting with museums, historical societies, libraries, galleries, archives, heritage and history organisations and other interested community groups and individuals to discuss the project, plan the work, share information, and agree on the aims, project outline and further use of the outcomes of the study.
4. Commission a contextual history by a local historian, the history to be strongly linked to movable items and collections, photographs, maps, paintings, places and original source material.
5. Identify key themes in the history as a framework for the assessment of movable items and collections. You may also want to draw up a checklist of the main categories or types of objects likely to be encountered.
6. Promote the project through a variety of means. Use the publicity to raise awareness of your work and identify movable heritage in family and private collections, if this is within the scope of your study.
7. Survey movable items in museums, galleries, libraries and archives, and in situ, to identify the most significant objects and collections. Use the themes and checklist to search out the less obvious objects. Use object files to collect information about the objects and put them on a database.
8. Research and document the most significant objects, where possible undertaking further research on the history and provenance of the items.
9. Assess the significance of individual items and groups of items and collections, using the criteria and method set out in *Significance* (2001).³ Hold a workshop in significance assessment, with participants presenting their research and case studies on significant objects.
10. Assess the objects against the identified themes to consider the scope and representativeness of movable heritage items and collections, analysing the objects against the thematic framework to see what's missing from the collections.
11. Revise the history following the movable heritage survey and significance assessment to incorporate the collection research and significant objects into the contextual history.

12. Analyse the results of the survey. Consider revised collection policies in participating museums, libraries, archives and galleries, greater co-ordination of collection policies and improvements to displays and interpretation. Organise a workshop with participants to discuss the thematic analysis, the information gathered in the study and improved policies and strategies for the theme or subject area.
13. Publish and promote the work as per the brief - in hard copy, on CAN, in newspapers, exhibitions, as a catalogue, postcards and in developing driving tours etc. It's a good idea to have a hard copy publication of the work.
14. Summarise the work and develop policies, strategies and recommendations to aid the conservation and interpretation of movable heritage items and raise awareness of their significance. This might include:
 - A policy framework for the thematic area that can be adopted by participating collections. The policies might include recording collections or objects in situ, co-ordinating collecting with other collecting organisations, joint strategies to address neglected collection themes etc.
 - Conservation funding for significant movable heritage items still in situ or in collections.
 - Conservation plans where relevant.
 - Coordinated strategic planning for collections across a region.
 - Further training of collections staff and volunteers.
 - Community education and awareness campaigns to give advice to families and community organisations holding significant objects and collections.
 - Improved interpretation and upgrades to displays.
 - Linked exhibitions, a web site and driving tours to encourage exploration of the region.
 - Grant applications to fund further work recommended by the study.
 - Work on other areas related to the subject as recommended by the study

12. Benefits and Outcomes from Thematic Studies

A thematic study has many benefits and can be used as the basis for a range of other collections projects, policies and plans.

- Identification, documentation and agreement about the most significant items relating to the theme or subject enables collecting organisations and heritage agencies to prioritise funding for conservation and interpretation
- A thematic study identifies what is most distinctive in the character of the

region and its distributed collections.

- It maps the scope and significance of the distributed national collections.
- It tells regional stories through collections and helps make those stories more accessible to visitors, and for education and other cultural activities.
- It generates high quality content for on-line access to collections and related education projects, enhancing community access and engagement.
- The study analyses the scope and representativeness of collections against the region's contextual history and themes, identifying hidden biases and omissions and thus improving future collecting. This is especially important with local history collections.
- It generates the contextual information to help collection managers understand the significance of their collections and explore new ways of interpreting them. It moves collecting organisations beyond warehousing objects to engaging with their meaning and wider context.
- It encourages collecting organisations to identify their most significant objects and improve their documentation, chasing up further information from previous donors and local sources. It highlights the importance of provenance and the stories, associations, people and places connected to objects.
- It builds skills in collection research and significance assessment. And it applies significance assessment in a collaborative project that makes collection research and documentation a priority.
- It builds knowledge of the subject and collections to underpin improved interpretation, exhibitions, collection management and other ways of promoting the subject and the collections.
- It identifies the strengths of each collection, building knowledge about who has what across the region, and identifies duplications. It helps museums make sound decisions on deaccessioning.
- Thematic studies enhance collaboration between museums, galleries, libraries and archives, strengthening networks, building stronger working relationships, and sharing skills and resources.
- It underpins development of a shared collection policy among collecting organisations within a region, or among those interested in particular themes or subjects. The collection policy recognises the strengths of each collection, develops strategies to improve future collecting and cooperation, identifies priority acquisitions, and explores alternatives to collecting.
- The thematic study identifies the most significant objects and collections, and the conservation needs of the material as a whole. It can improve conservation policies and planning and, by demonstrating the significance of the collections, can help to substantiate a case for investment in the collections and their conservation.
- The thematic study improves the way collecting organisations promote

themselves and their distinctive stories and collections, differentiating one collection from another.

- A thematic study builds a more holistic understanding of the subject that crosses collection boundaries between public collections, privately held material and *in situ* movable heritage. It helps collecting organisations make better decisions when collecting from the field, documenting before collecting, or using their skills to keep objects in their place of context.
- Thematic studies assist with the documentation of private and family collections, so that the history of the objects is written down and passed on to the next generation.
- It provides the basis for co-ordinated strategic planning for collections within a region, highlighting key needs and opportunities, and the relevance of the collections to the history, culture and creative life of communities.
- It helps collecting organisations make difficult decisions about deaccessioning, creating collections of a more sustainable size and greater significance.

About this publication

This paper, ‘Connecting Collections: Thematic Studies of Heritage Collections’, has been summarised by Kylie Winkworth from her book, *Connecting Collections: Thematic Studies of Museum and Heritage Collections, A guide for museums, heritage networks and communities*, Queensland Heritage Trails Network, 2001.

‘Connecting Collections: Thematic Studies of Heritage Collections’ by Kylie Winkworth was published online by the Collections Council of Australia Ltd on 16 October 2008, by kind permission of the author.

Endnotes

¹ The Collections Australian Network is a portal website for the Australian collections sector, and can be found at <http://www.collectionsaustralia.net>. Its predecessor was known as AMOL – Australian Museums and galleries On Line.

² *Significance: a guide to assessing the significance of cultural heritage objects and collections*, Roslyn Russell and Kylie Winkworth, Heritage Collections Council and Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts, 2001. Available online via the Collections Australia Network: http://www.collectionsaustralia.net/sector_info_item/5

³ Please note that a second edition of *Significance* is in preparation during 2008, and is expected to be published during the first half of 2009. Further information is available from: <http://www.collectionscouncil.com.au/significance+second+edition.aspx>.