

# Significance and libraries

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The main libraries in Australia which hold significant heritage collections are the state and national libraries, public libraries with local studies collections, university libraries with special collections, and libraries in organisations such as schools or societies where historical and archival collections relating to the organisation have been entrusted to the care of the library.

In general these heritage collections exist as a small part within a larger collection of library materials.

With the exception of what in libraries are usually called special collections, library collections are generally of published materials, rather than of unique materials, with the same books, journals and increasingly e-resources being held in any number of libraries.

Brian Fletcher's recently published book on the history of the Mitchell Library, for example, is held in 59 Australian libraries including the national, state and territory libraries, university libraries, public libraries in NSW, Victoria and Tasmania; and the libraries of the National Museum, the Australian Museum, the Australia Council, the Historic Houses Trust of NSW and the Royal Australian Historical Society. In choosing to acquire a copy of this book for its collection, no librarian is going to undertake a significance assessment. Especially not for something that costs \$59.95.

Our acquisition decisions are made in regard to a broad collection development policy that is framed to meet the anticipated needs of the particular library's users. And at the national and state libraries we're also interested in insignificance: our obligations under legal deposit arrangements to comprehensively collect the nation's publishing output mean that we want at least some examples of a Kmart catalogue which might be pushed through the letter box as junk mail (or should I say an Aldi catalogue), and we privilege these documents to some extent as much as we would something like a hand printed broadsheet from Wayzgoose Press.

Significance changes over time, as we know. The ephemeral playbill advertising the performance of the melodrama *Jane Shore* - produced in Sydney in 1796, hand printed in a small edition, perhaps intended to survive just a couple of weeks - thanks to its generous repatriation by the Canadian government as an official APEC gift to the Australian Prime Minister, now enjoys exalted status as the earliest surviving document of Australia's print heritage.

I feel, in the limited time available, as if I can only talk in generalisations to an audience in which library professionals are in the minority. So let me give you a ‘take away’ about library philosophy, which I think provides an instructive contrast with those of other heritage collecting domains.

In 1931 the Indian librarian S R Ranganathan posited five laws of librarianship which I think are enduring, despite their old fashioned, sexist expression. As a library professional of more than 30 years standing, I often find myself reflecting on these apparently simple maxims.

1. Books are for use.
2. Every man his book.
3. Every book its man.
4. Save the time of the user.
5. The library is a growing organism.

A formally documented significance assessment process resulting in a written statement like the examples in *Significance* (2001) is not something which is routinely or regularly carried out in libraries. Our main priority is to make our growing collections available for use by our particular patrons. We save the time of the user by having our collections described and able to be discovered in our online catalogues, as well as services like Google. Generally speaking we’re not interested in interpreting collection material. We leave this up to users

And because of the history of libraries cataloguing into a searchable centralised database we do know how our collection holdings compare with those of other libraries, how rare or representative something may be.

Libraries Australia, the national bibliographic database, which records the holdings of more than a thousand Australian libraries, currently lists holdings for 42 million items in Australian library collections. The size of our collections is one of the things that inhibits the widespread take up of significance assessment, as outlined in *Significance* (2001), by libraries.

In the case of the National Library our collection exceeds 6 million items. In my area of responsibility alone this includes 760,000 photographs, 73,000 other pictures, 860,000 aerial photographs; 670,000 maps; 64,000 hours of oral history recordings, 195, 000 music scores and 13,481 linear shelf metres of archives and manuscripts – this latter perhaps amounting to as much as two million individual diaries, ledgers, files, letters etc.

Not in my area of collection responsibility, but worth noting, is that the most recent harvest of the entire .au domain for our PANDORA archive of Australian websites crawled 516m unique documents which amounted to more than 18 terabytes of data being taken into the archive at the conclusion of the harvest.

Like other heritage professionals in different domains, those of us working in libraries with heritage collections make judgements about significance every day, but these are

done at a much higher level than the approach outlined in *Significance* (2001) and focus on whole collections, rather than individual items within them.

Many of these judgements about significance are made at the point of acquisition. Taking archival collections as an example, at the National Library, we decline to accept about half of what we are offered. Our Manuscripts section, which has a staff of 9.5 FTE, acts on about 40 offers of collection material each month; last month they took in more than 44 metres of new material. Among the material not accepted: a typescript of a translation into German of Patrick White's *The Ham Funeral* – a copy was already held in White's own papers; a land grant for Howlong – a nice object, but with no real research significance; an 1821 journal kept by a servant who worked for the Scott family, referred to the Mitchell Library, which is rich with other Scott holdings.

In making these decisions, we're assessing significance and making judgements, taking into account at least some of the formal criteria outlined in *Significance* (2001), however, the time to formally document these 'curatorial' judgements cannot be justified in terms of cost benefit analysis in the library domain context.

Significance decisions in libraries are not generally made at the level of an individual item as expressed in the original *Significance* publication, but more likely at the level of a whole collection. In making *Significance 2.0* more generic, and less focused on museums, the two things which most need to be changed to make it relevant for libraries are:

- (1) not to focus exclusively on thoughtful, time consuming detailed formal assessment of a single item; and
- (2) to reduce the emphasis on the criterion of interpretive potential, which is largely irrelevant to libraries.

We are interested in the potential of collection material to support research and study by users, rather than to be interpreted for visitors.

Apart from some fundamental philosophical differences between libraries and museums, I wonder about the implications of the Web 2.0 world for our convergent professional practice. To my ears, the cyber universe of folksonomies contrasts sharply with the voice of curatorial authority. Again, I feel the need to qualify my opinion. The Powerhouse Museum and the National Library, I believe, share similar philosophical approaches to what in the library domain we could call something like resource discovery and access.

But to conclude: in instances when a library did feel the need to more formally assess and record significance, the primary criteria and comparative criteria set out in *Significance* (2001) are quite valid for libraries which want to assess the significance of items or collections. Not surprisingly, given the intended audience of museum professionals for *Significance* (2001), there's a bit too much emphasis on exhibitions, which are not so relevant for most libraries. To put it in perspective, at the National Library, we do regard ourselves as a major exhibiting institution, but we would exhibit only 600 items a year drawn from our collection of more than 6 million items.

Possibly one area that could be given a stronger emphasis in *Significance 2.0*, and which is very relevant to libraries, is consideration of the collection strength and

interest of other institutions. This is not just about representation and rarity. Most of our decisions not to acquire material are taken in this broader context of collection activity by a range of institutions.

However when there is a need for libraries to make a significance assessment, whether this is to nominate an item or collection for the Memory of the World register, to apply for a Community Heritage Grant, to decide whether to acquire a valuable archival collection, to prioritise material which is sufficiently important to receive preservation treatment, to list material on internal registers (such as the NLA's register of nationally significant material), the approach that is outlined in the *Significance* manual is relevant to libraries and provides useful practical guidance on how to go about it.