Heritage Victoria

Victoria’s Heritage Grants: Community Collections

Guidance for significance assessments of cultural heritage objects

Introduction

This information has been collated for recipients of a Victoria’s Heritage Grants: Community Collections grant for a Significance Assessment of a heritage object or heritage collection. It provides owners and custodians of heritage objects and collections with explanations about:

- what a significance assessment is and why it is important;
- the benefits of cultural heritage management reports such as significance assessments.
- who assesses significance;
- the criteria used in assessing significance; and
- the process of assessing significance.

Victoria’s significant objects and collections

The Heritage Act 1995 enables significant heritage objects to be included in the Victorian Heritage Register and given the State’s highest level of heritage protection. The ‘registration’ of an important object(s) can be as part of the registration of a heritage place, or in its own right. Places and objects included in the Victorian Heritage Register are considered to have ‘state-wide’ cultural heritage significance and be important to all Victorians. Further information about places and objects in the Register - including their statements of cultural heritage significance - can be obtained from the Victorian Heritage Database which can be found on the Heritage Victoria website http://vhd.heritage.vic.gov.au/vhd/heritagevic

Objects listed in the Victorian Heritage Register that are not associated with a place must be of state-wide significance in their own right. Objects included in the Register in their own right include the Eureka Flag, Loong Chinese Dragon and the Women’s Suffrage Petition. Objects registered in association with a heritage place may not always be of state-wide significance on their own, but must contribute to the importance of the place at a state level.

What is a significance assessment for objects and collections?

A significance assessment involves the investigation and documentation of the meanings and values of heritage objects and collections. The aim is to
identify and describe how and why an object or collection is important, and to whom. The result is a well-researched, succinct statement, which describes the object or collection and summarises the significant heritage values. Significance assessments might identify or recommend a ‘level’ or threshold of importance, eg. local significance. The category of local significance indicates that a place or object is characteristic of a community’s local history. State-wide significance means that the place or object contributes to a broader understanding of Victoria and its history.

**Why is significance assessment important?**
Professionally produced statements of significance help owners and custodians to:

- broaden their understanding of the heritage values associated with an object or collection
- prioritise collection management and conservation activities
- interpret the heritage values of objects and collections to a variety of audiences
- seek funding opportunities for conservation and interpretation projects

**Benefits**
A statement of significance becomes the basis for policy and management decisions that affect the long term research, conservation and interpretation of the object or collection by residents, visitors, authorities and institutions.

**Who undertakes significance assessments?**
A professional historian or heritage researcher can undertake a significance assessment. For specific collection types or objects, a specialist in that field may need to be sub-contracted to assist with the investigation and assessment. The Victorian heritage website contains guidance on this.

Heritage Victoria also maintains a heritage consultants and contractors directory on the website.

Relevant professional membership associations can also assist in contracting the services of members.

The Cultural Gifts Program, administered by the Federal Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts, maintains a list of approved valuers who have expertise in areas that may be of relevance to heritage objects and collections.

**How is ‘significance’ assessed?**
Various organisations have adopted criteria to assess significance. Criteria help us to understand whether an object is representative of a particular object type, an activity, a way of life or a theme. Using assessment criteria can reveal whether or not the object is rare, whether it is intact, complete or in exceptionally good or original condition; or whether it has associations or attributes that distinguish this particular item from others similar to it.
Three key documents should be used by professional historians or heritage researchers to guide the assessment of post-contact cultural heritage objects and collections in Victoria:

- the Heritage Council of Victoria’s *Criteria for Assessment of Cultural Heritage Significance*, adopted by the Council on 7th August 2008, pursuant to Section s 8(c) and 8(2) of the *Heritage Act 1995*. The Council determines significance and decides whether a place, object or collection is of aesthetic, archaeological, architectural, cultural, historical, technical/scientific and/or social significance.


  Developed as a framework specific to objects and collections, *Significance*... can be accessed online: [http://www.collectionaustralia.net/sector_info_item/5](http://www.collectionaustralia.net/sector_info_item/5).


**The Process of Assessing Significance**

Assessing the significance of heritage objects and collections includes researching the object’s history, analysing its material and condition, investigating its rarity, comparing it against any other known examples and recording its provenance and associations with people and places. An integral part of the process is consultation with the owner or custodian.

Before a heritage consultant applies assessment criteria, there are a series of documentation and research tasks which are undertaken, that include:

- Reviewing the inventory of the collection or object, the photographic records and written descriptions of the object or collection
- Drawing up a list of the objects within the collection which are considered significant by the community, custodians or owners
- Researching the history of the collecting organization and its community
- Noting the condition of the collection or object in photographs, written descriptions and other media
- Understanding and analysing the fabric of the object(s), its form and materials
Looking for evidence of the manufacturer – label, maker’s mark, or nameplate

Examining the items to see how they were used, and noting evidence of repair, adaptation and patterns of wear and tear

Researching the history of the object, including oral histories and pictorial records

Considering the collection’s or object’s relationship with its place of use

Comparing the collection/object with examples of similar types of objects and collections elsewhere in the region or the nation.

Note: The information collected from the documentation and research tasks could form part of a nomination of an object or collection to the Victorian Heritage Register.

How to contract a consultant to undertake a heritage assessment?
Recipients of Victoria’s Heritage Grants: Community Collections funding should prepare a project brief to engage a heritage consultant to undertake a significance assessment. A well written brief will assist the heritage consultant in establishing a time frame and budget for the project. An outline of a sample consultant’s brief is included as Appendix 1.

An object/collection survey form has been included as Appendix 2. Completing this form prior to contracting a consultant may assist in obtaining a quotation for a significance assessment. It will also assist the consultant when they are undertaking the work.

What will I need to do once I’ve contracted a consultant?

• Be available to assist the consultant
• Arrange for access to the collection and a suitable work space for the consultant
• Collate information and material that will be useful for the consultant in researching the collection
• Contact persons who may provide information about the collection and ensure that they are able to be contacted by the consultant if the need arises.

Feedback
For further information or to make comments on this document, please contact Susie Collis at susanna.collis@dpcd.vic.gov.au or telephone (03) 9637 9340
Appendix 1
Sample Brief to engage a consultant to conduct a significance assessment

The Project Brief
The headings below can be adapted for most projects; remember that the quality of the information provided to the consultant at the outset, the better the consultant will be able to apply his or her skills and expertise.

Cover letter –Here, the project will be introduced and the consultant may be invited to assist in reviewing the final project brief if the organisation is unsure of the scope of the project at the outset.

Title of Project (“Significance Assessment of the … Collection”)
- Full name of the organisation
- Name and contact details of the person who will liaise with consultant.

Aims & Objectives
- Identify the purpose of the project and what you hope to achieve

Background
Information about:
- The site
- The object or collection
- The type of collection, types of materials represented, size of collection, uses of the collection, the documentation about the collection/object (e.g. does a catalogue or inventory exist)
- Management of the organisation.

Scope of Work
- Does the assessment include all of the collection, or just aspects of the collection?
- Define what the project should cover. Clearly outline the boundaries of the project physically (how much of the collection is to be assessed) and intellectually (what are the themes that are to be explored in the assessment).
- An outline of the project steps should be included; this can be refined by the consultant and the owners/custodians at a later stage.

Project Management Information
This part of the brief includes consultation, timeline, budget, and deliverables.
- List names of important contacts and other stakeholders in the community that can be consulted.
- Identify any linkages between existing projects being carried out by the organisation, such as a concurrent cataloguing or conservation project, or a collection inventory project
- Include a clearly stated start and finish date.
- List names of important contacts and other stakeholders in the community that can be consulted.
• Note any constraints – eg, availability of personnel within the organisation, the requirement to use specific references or criteria.
• Invite a quotation from the consultant and list the costs that could be covered by the contract (eg travel, report production).
• Final report - specify the format (an electronic copy to be provided as well as printed and bound copies) and how many copies are required.
Electronic Copies

If you would like an electronic copy of this survey, so you can type directly into it and return it to me by email, please contact:

Susie Collis
Project officer, Heritage Collections
Department of Planning and Community Development
Level 7, 8 Nicholson Street, East Melbourne, Victoria 3002
Ph: 03 9637 9340

Please return completed surveys with your grant application.

Please note: Heritage Victoria is collecting this information for the Community Collections Museums Grant Program. Personal information may be supplied to other government departments and agencies and tertiary bodies (including universities and TAFEs) for the purpose of assisting in carrying out research. Personal information will otherwise not be supplied to any other organisation.

This information is to assist us in determining how your organisation’s collection may be better managed and used by local communities.
Heritage Victoria
Collections Conservation Survey

Date: / / ………….. Person completing form: ……………………

1. Organization

1.1 Name of Organisation:
………………………………………………………………………………...
Street address:
………………………………………………………………………………
Phone on site:
………………………………………………………………………………
Postal address:
………………………………………………………………………………
Web address: …………………………… Email:
……………………………………
Organisation is located within: ………………………local government
authority
Days open to the public:
………………………………………………………………………………
□ School holidays: ………………………… □ Other:
……………………………………

1.2 Contact person: ……………………… Position:
…………………………………………
Phone: ……………………… Email:
……………………………………
Address:
………………………………………………………………………………

1.3 Legal status of organisation
□ Incorporated association □ Deductible gift recipient
□ Other (eg Trustees, Committee of Council):
………………………………………………………………………………
Date of establishment:
………………………………………………………………………………
Name/s of committees:
………………………………………………………………………………

1.4 Governance
□ Mission Statement □ Business Plan
Insurance/s type: □ Other:
……………………………………

1.5 Type of organisation (choose major type):
□ Museum □ Family History
□ Historical society □ Keeping Place
□ Library/Archive □ Garden/park
□ Historic house □ Historic site
□ Mechanics Institute □ Gallery
□ Archaeological site □ Other:
……………………………………

1.6 Recognition of organisation
□ MAP (Museums Assessment Program) □ Keeping place name:
……………………………………
□ POD (Places of Deposit – PROV) □ Other:
……………………………………

1.7 Membership
Number of members:
…………………………………………………………………………………………
Active members: ............................................Inactive members:
……………………………………

1.8 Staff # volunteer staff? .................. # paid staff?
……………………………………

2. Buildings
2.1 General: number, size, ownership, maintenance
How many buildings does the organisation occupy?
……………………………………
Are they all on the same site? □ Yes □ No If not, please
comment:
…………………………………………………………………………………………
…..
Size of building/s: ...... Number of rooms: ...... Age of
building(s)…………………………
Are the buildings that the organisation occupies listed on the Vic. Heritage Register,
Heritage Inventory or Heritage Overlay? □ Yes*, VHR No……………… □ No
* If yes, has a Conservation Management Plan been carried out for the building(s)?
□ Yes (Include title and author, if possible)…………………………………… □ No
Does the organisation own the building(s) in which its collections are housed?

□ Yes □ No If not, who owns the building(s) or site(s)?

Who is responsible for maintenance?

External: .................................................. Internal:

2.2 Structure (Specify materials)
External Walls:

Roof:

Floors:

Ceiling insulation:

Wall insulation:

Any environmental controls?

2.3 Storage
Are the organisation’s collections stored in specially-designed storage facilities?.............

□ Yes □ No □ Partial: ….% □ Other:

2.4 Display
What portion of the total space is devoted to exhibitions?

What type of exhibits does the organisation have?

3. Collections
3.1 Objects
How many objects (approximately) does the organisation own?

□ 1-100 □ 100 - 5,000

□ 5,000 - 20,000 □ 20,000 - 50,000

□ 50,000+ Number of boxes/linear metres?

Items on long-term loan to the organisation?
3.2 Significance
List any particularly significant objects or collections identified by the custodians, surveyor or a significance assessment.

If a significance assessment has been produced, note author/date & obtain a copy.

3.3 Kinds of collections
Tick as many as are applicable and indicate approximate percentages.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>%</th>
<th>Types of collection objects</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>□</td>
<td>Archaeology, land</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□</td>
<td>Archaeology, maritime</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□</td>
<td>Arms &amp; armour/weapons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□</td>
<td>Art: Watercolour, drawing, print, painting, sculpture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□</td>
<td>Building materials</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□</td>
<td>Costume</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□</td>
<td>Crafts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□</td>
<td>Domestic objects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□</td>
<td>Farming/agriculture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□</td>
<td>Furniture/wooden artefacts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□</td>
<td>Historic objects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□</td>
<td>Indigenous: pre and post-contact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□</td>
<td>Industrial items</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□</td>
<td>Library/archival material (books)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□</td>
<td>Maps</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□</td>
<td>Musical instruments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□</td>
<td>Natural history: geology, botany, palaeontology, zoology, taxidermy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□</td>
<td>Newspapers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□</td>
<td>Photographs and film/sound recordings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□</td>
<td>Records (eg council, cemetery)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□</td>
<td>Science/technology/medicine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□</td>
<td>Transportation vehicles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□</td>
<td>Other:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.4 Condition
Written assessment report available? □ Yes  Author: …………………… □
No.....

3.5 Issues
What are the conservation issues/needs concerning this collection?
3.6 Catalogue
Type: □ Database.
□ Hard copy (eg. worksheets and collection register)……………………………….
Please provide a sample copy of entry/sheet/page.
Percentage of collection catalogued: …% 

3.7 Marketing
□ Web presence
□ Advertising
□ Other

4. Equipment
5. Management

5.1 Collections
- Collections Policy
- Accession Policy (and Procedures)
- De-accession Policy/Procedures
- Loans Policy (and Procedures)
- Environmental assessment
- Risk Assessment
- Disaster Recovery Plan
- Condition Assessment
- Other:

5.2 Financial Resources
How is the organisation funded?

Do you receive any on-going financial or in-kind support?

Source/s:

Grants received in last 5 years:

6. Operations
At what times is the organisation open to members/staff?
- Weekdays: ..............................................
- Weekends: ..............................................
7. Training

7.1 Courses
List the training courses that volunteers/staff have undertaken to date:
- Museums Australia (Victoria) courses
- Archival support program courses
- RHSV training
- CHG training
- SLV training
- Other:

7.2 What training would the volunteers/staff like to do?

8. Proposed CVA Heritage Care Projects

9. Notes

10. Summary
1. Highest priority need:

Other Collections in the Area