

## Cinderella Awaits the Wedding: Managing University Collections

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As a music PhD student in New York in 1976, each week I used to go to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, where I was studying Musical Organology. Equipped with an honorary staff pass, we students swept down to the storerooms, where the Curator of the Crosby Brown Collection of Musical Instruments Prof Emanuel Winternitz held court. With his thick Viennese accent, delighting us with a cornucopia of references to Ancient Greek mythology, and choking us with endless fumes from his thick Cuban cigars, Winternitz would march us through exhibits both stored and on display, demanding we date a Stradivarius violin here, or interpret musical symbolism in a Bellini altarpiece there. First-class teaching combined with first-hand immersion in one of the great instrument collections of the world made an indelible mark on me: it was one of the highlights of my university education.

The year before I went to New York, I had been a Masters musicology student at the University of Melbourne, working on a music manuscript collection at the Percy Grainger Museum. This autobiographical museum, established on the Parkville campus in the 1930s by the Melbourne-born composer-pianist Percy Grainger, is of international significance in musical scholarship. Yet no music lecturer of the University taught in the Grainger when I started work there: the collection was dusty, damp, the Museum dark and mostly deserted. The Vice Director of the Conservatorium had told me that “most of it is old junk that should be thrown in the tip.” This for a collection containing letters of Beethoven, Grieg, Tchaikovsky and Delius, not to mention the manuscripts of Australia’s most internationally famous composer. The University was host to the most important musical site in Australia, one of the last great unexplored musical collections of the

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world, yet seemed to regard it as no more than an idiosyncratic nuisance.

In the museum adventure, Universities generally are ‘fellow travellers’—organisations that own collections, but not as their core business. They are not insignificant travellers in the journey of course: the two *Cinderella Collections* reports commissioned by the Australian Vice-Chancellors’ Committee in 1996<sup>2</sup> and 1998<sup>3</sup> identified over 250 university museums and collections in Australia, concluding that a substantial portion of Australia’s distributed cultural collection is located in universities. If Melbourne’s case is anything to go by, however, this number of 250 collections was a significant underestimation – *Cinderella Collections* identified 16 collections at the University of Melbourne in 1996 but we now know that we have more than 30. The *Cinderella* reports from the mid-1990s also highlighted how university collections across Australia have, in many cases, fallen between two stools in terms of funding and resources. University collections tend to miss out on arts and other museum funding because it is assumed their university masters will provide for them, but inside universities they are not seen as sufficiently critical to teaching for the universities themselves to prioritise. Thus the 1998 report’s metaphor from fairy tale, expressed the hope that, like Cinderella, when properly dressed and presented, university collections would reveal their beauty to the academic community and win their Vice Chancellors’ hearts.

Sadly, nearly 15 years later, little true love has been in evidence. At the University of Melbourne, in a recent three-year review of our *Cultural Strategic Plan* we found that, while many of the non-cost strategies for cultural collections were now achieved, the strategies requiring funds were

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<sup>2</sup> *Cinderella Collections: University Museums & Collections in Australia: The report of the University Museums Review Committee*. Canberra: Australian Vice-Chancellor's Committee, 1996.

<sup>3</sup> *Transforming Cinderella Collections: The Management and Conservation of Australian University Museums, Collections & Herbaria: The Report of the DCA / AV-CC University Museums Project Committee*. Canberra: Australian Vice-Chancellors’ Committee, 1998.

not. We lacked an ongoing slice of the university's central budget for our collections portfolio if we are to truly consummate our ambitions. In Melbourne's Cinderella story, the Prince has found that the glass slipper fits his hidden beauty; but their wedding has yet to take place. This paper seeks to set out some issues important in the way forward for universities like this one managing cultural collections in our difficult economic climate.

University collections were not always seen as fellow travellers in the museum world. In fact, the earliest universities in Europe and then the United States, and even many of those established well into the 19<sup>th</sup> century, used collections as central to their teaching and research work. Some of the best-known museums in the world, such as the Ashmolean Museum at the University of Oxford, established in 1683, are university museums. This tradition was continued by the British colonisers of Australia. Here at Melbourne, for example, our first professor in the natural sciences, Frederick McCoy, believed that a museum was essential for his teaching and research. In the late 1850s he caused public consternation by moving the predecessor of Museum Victoria, the museum of the Philosophical Institute of Victoria from the Assay Office in the city to the campus, which was at the time a remote and swampy paddock with only one substantial building. At first the collection was located in the north wing of the quadrangle, then in the 1860s a larger and elaborate new museum was purpose-built (today virtually unrecognisable as the Student Union building, where conference delegates have been enjoying their morning teas). Although technically owned by the Victorian government and not the university, the museum collection grew under McCoy's supervision and also became popular with the general public. Only upon McCoy's death in 1899 could the community reclaim its museum, relocating to the Swanston Street site now occupied by the State Library of Victoria, and later to the present Museum Victoria site.<sup>4</sup>

#### EXAMPLE 1

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<sup>4</sup> R.J.W. Selleck, *The Shop: The University of Melbourne, 1850–1939*, Melbourne University Press, 2003, pp. 85–93.

**Whale skeleton behind National Museum,** University of Melbourne, 1862-1899.  
*University of Melbourne Archives, UMA/II/1332.*

It would be naive to expect every university to have its Frederick McCoy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. McCoy espoused natural sciences, and as the twentieth century progressed, natural science collections largely lost their central place in universities.<sup>5</sup> Some museums remain central to the university's core teaching: our Harry Brookes Allen Museum of Anatomy and Pathology, for example, is used every day by students of medicine, also of dentistry, nursing, physiotherapy and other health disciplines. The University still maintains a small zoology museum and a herbarium, collections also actively used in undergraduate teaching. But even in those disciplines, the means of presenting objects of study to students have greatly changed.

#### EXAMPLE 2

**Death mask of Edward 'Ned' Kelly, attributed to Maximillian Ludwig Kreitmayer, Melbourne, November 1880.** Collection of the Harry Brookes Allen Museum of Anatomy and Pathology, University of Melbourne. Currently on loan to the Victorian Institute of Forensic Medicine.

Importantly, McCoy brought a museum collection to the University. Our recent experience here is that cultural collections sometimes tend to arrive by themselves, and when this happens without a McCoy, things can be more complicated. An example is the case of the Bright Family Collection in our Archives. The Brights were an ancient British mercantile family operating originally from Bristol; they owned sugar plantations in Jamaica, and from 1835 established extensive enterprises in Melbourne, such as Bright Brothers & Co. (later Gibbs Bright & Co). Their family had acquired a collection of mercantile history over a very long period, including items dating from the period of Christopher Columbus' voyages of the 1490s and

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<sup>5</sup> Jay Gabler and David John Frank, 'The natural sciences in the university: Change and variation over the 20th century', *Sociology of Education*, vol. 78, no. 3 (July 2005), pp. 183–206.

their collection is of international significance for the study of international trade, steam-shipping and Victorian colonial history. The collection was donated to the University by Bright family members in several stages between 1980 and 2010, under the Commonwealth Government's Cultural Gifts Scheme.

Unfortunately, a fire in the Bright family home had resulted in scorching and extensive water damage, with subsequent mould attack, to many of the documents before their delivery to the University.

### **EXAMPLE 3**

**An example of some of the most serious water staining and mould damage in the Bright Family Papers collection, before treatment.**

### **EXAMPLE 4**

**An indenture of 1784, before treatment – recto and verso. Bright Family Papers, University of Melbourne Archives.**

### **EXAMPLE 5**

**The same document after treatment, in a mounting method that allows both sides to be read easily.**

Our curators were thus faced with urgent conservation issues when the collection arrived, on which university funds had to be quickly brought to bear. Suddenly the University needed more than \$100,000 for conservation of a new gift. How can a university set aside such funds, when no-one is calling on the collection for current teaching? This is not to underestimate the Bright collection's importance—many books and scholarly articles have been written from the collection since it arrived, on subjects as diverse as the history of the slave trade to pewter manufacture. But these were largely the work external researchers, not our own staff. To fund the urgent conservation work needed, the University attempted to attract funding from outside bodies, including from businesses with connections to the latter-day Gibbs Bright entity, all without success. Thus all conservation work

had to be funded from the university's internal sources. Sorting, processing, rehousing and listing have been undertaken by archivists, while more than a hundred pre-1800 items had to be urgently treated to remove mould, flatten and rehouse, by staff of our Centre for Cultural Materials Conservation (which is run on a commercial basis, even for the University collections). No funds came to the University to process, house or conserve the gift. Senior university officials could be forgiven for complaining that, in some ways, the donor's gift to us was a huge bill.

The Bright collection is just one of about 4,000 sub-collections comprising the 18 kilometres of holdings in the University of Melbourne Archives, the largest non-Government archive in Australia, which includes records of businesses, trade unions, political organisations, and thousands of individuals. These papers are used constantly by historians and other researchers in a vast field of subject matter. By international convention, access is provided free of charge by the University as a service to all bona fide scholars, not just its own staff and students. Should a university develop an approach to such gifts in advance of agreeing to receive them, realistically appraising the cost of cataloguing and conservation, and planning ahead for their provision? Where a collection has no evident teaching use, given the significant tax advantages to the donors, are they prepared to add cash to such a gift to help provide for its care? Or is there a philanthropist willing to facilitate it? The trouble with approaches of this kind, of course, is the assumption by donors and philanthropies alike that such expenses are incidentals which should be covered by the University itself, which should be glad of simply receiving the gift. In the absence of an academic champion, it can be hard for a university to feel such gratitude.

Other problems arise when a collection is assembled by a key academic, who works intensively over many years in the University, but then retires and departs the scene, leaving no successor. Such was our experience with the collection of the renowned anthropologist and advocate for Aboriginal people, Donald Thomson, one of the most comprehensive and significant collections of Aboriginal cultural heritage material in the world. The Donald Thomson Collection

contains ethnographic, archive, image and sound material, primarily from Arnhem Land, Cape York Peninsula in Queensland, the Great Sandy and Tanami deserts; as well as from Victoria, Solomon Islands and West Papua (formerly Irian Jaya). It also comprises biological specimens and material relating to Thomson's academic career as an anthropologist and biologist, and his social justice work.<sup>6</sup> The artefacts owned by the University are complemented by field notes, diaries, drawings, photographs, film and recordings owned after Thomson's death in the 1970s by his widow. Our solution to our inability to properly provide leadership for the collection after Thomson's death was to loan it to Museum Victoria. To be sure, Museum Victoria does an excellent job in managing the collection and facilitating research and publication, and the University is represented on the management committee of the collection and provides some funds towards its upkeep. But without the founding academic champion as guide, there are recurring problems and tensions. In loaning the collection to the Museum, the University entered an agreement with the Thomson family, which grants the family a significant ongoing role in managing the collection, and the Museum and the University are regularly locked in tense correspondence with the family, sometimes through lawyers, about access to, use of, and even published studies arising from, this important collection. Such an arrangement is far from optimal, probably for the family as much as the university, and another example of the puzzles a university faces, confronted with managing a collection in the absence of leadership from current expert staff in the area.

#### EXAMPLE 6

##### **Bathi mindirr (basket), Mildjingi clan, Yirritja moiety**

Collected by Donald Thomson October 1936  
Bark painting, Wonggu Mununggurr, painted with sons Maama Mununggurr, Mawunpuy Mununggurr and Natjijalma Mununggurr, 1942  
Donald Thomson Collection

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<sup>6</sup> Website of Donald Thomson Collection, Museum Victoria, <http://museumvictoria.com.au/collections-research/our-collections/indigenous-cultures/donald-thomson/> accessed 7 July 2010.

While some collections have no clear purpose in the current curriculum, many of them stand as historical records of their changing discipline. The School of Physics Museum, School of Chemistry Collection, Medical History Museum and Henry Forman Atkinson Dental Museum are examples, the last named containing a unique collection of dental tools and appliances covering more than a century of dental treatment. They are fascinating collections of artefacts but are often overlooked as resources for teaching and research, and it can be difficult for academic departments and faculties to justify expenditure on them.

In some cases, even the international research use of a collection can be constrained by University circumstances. In our Special Collections, the Walter Scott Collection comprises about 2,500 volumes, the gift of the late John Orde Poynton, and aims to contain anything published by Sir Walter Scott, about Scott, or anything with a Scott association up to his death in 1832. The collection also contains significant later Scott editions and works. This collection is of international significance amongst the tight circle of Scott scholars, who regard it as one of the best collections in the world devoted to the author.<sup>7</sup> But wider international awareness of it is relatively limited, since the collection is not yet fully catalogued or searchable online, it is still on physical index cards. In an ideal world, such a collection would not only be publically available via online catalogue, but would be fully accessible via digitization. The benefits that flow when universities extend their digitisation and related online cataloguing programs beyond library materials to their significant cultural collections as well are significant. The University of Pennsylvania Museum comes to mind, now renown amongst classicists and archeologists as one of the great centres for research in ancient Sumer and Babylon, not because of its geographical location—Philadelphia hardly looms large as an obvious destination for sightseers interested in Mesopotamia—but because its priceless antiquities collection is available to scholars worldwide through digitisation. The

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<sup>7</sup> B.J. McMullin, 'Sir Walter Scott at Melbourne University', *University of Melbourne Library Journal*, vol. 5, no. 2, December 1999, pp. 14–16.

University of Melbourne has every right to be regarded as a front rank research destination for Scott literature, or for its Medical History collection, one containing a finer library of early medical and anatomy atlases and texts than that at Oxford, but it will not achieve such recognition or standing until it can make its collections discoverable via online catalogues or available via digitisation.

#### EXAMPLE 7

**Parian-ware portrait bust of Sir Walter Scott, (after the marble bust by Sir Francis Chantrey, 1820), in front of some books from the Walter Scott Collection, Baillieu Library Special Collections, University of Melbourne Library.** Photography by Brian Allison.

Financial provisions for cultural collections in universities remain fragile. Government funding for universities continues to shrink; but in any case the majority of the University of Melbourne's annual income is in fact *not* derived from recurrent government sources, but from student fees, including international fees, research grants and commercial sources. In such an environment, cultural collections can indeed be seen as 'orphaned'. But while a particular academic school may have no purpose for a collection, the University as a whole is still responsible for its preservation. Here Philanthropy can assist. We are fortunate at the University of Melbourne in benefiting from the Russell and Mab Grimwade Miegunyah Fund, which grandly supports the care of our collections every year. Sir Russell Grimwade was a leading Melbourne industrialist and a discerning collector who also bequeathed his art collection, personal papers and rare books to the University. In 2007 a \$0.5 million windfall allocation from that fund (just prior to the Global Financial Crisis) enabled us to address the cataloguing backlogs of several of the collections, including Earth Sciences Rare Books, East Asian Rare Books, and all the Rare Maps collection. But others, such as Baillieu rare books, the more than 100,000 specimens in the Herbarium, and the Archives, would at the current rate take decades to catalogue or list. The University Herbarium, for instance, holds specimens collected on Captain Cook's voyage on the Endeavour by Sir Joseph

Banks and Solander. These remain perilously housed in cellophane envelopes, held in a room whose 19<sup>th</sup>-century roof has leaked notoriously for years, and defied all attempts to fix it.

#### EXAMPLE 8

**Specimens collected by Sir Joseph Banks and Solander (1776), University Herbarium**

In the search for new academic champions for cultural collections, proactive steps to lock a collection into the current curriculum are amongst the most important a university can take. At the Ian Potter Museum of Art this year, with a grant from the Potter Foundation, we have introduced a Curator of Academic Programs, who is working to relate the collection to specific teaching needs in the University. The aim is to collaborate with the Faculties in building breadth subjects whose lectures and tutorials would be in the Museum. In a year we will open a teaching annex at the Potter, in which lecturers and their classes can be brought together with Potter Museum exhibits in an interactive way, to refresh the contact between collection and curriculum. This will be an interesting experiment to watch.

#### Conclusion

I would not wish to belittle our achievements at the University of Melbourne in managing cultural collections. In the past five years, we have made some real headway. In 2006 our Council adopted and published a *Cultural Policy Statement* setting out the seven principles by which we would like to be measured as a cultural custodian. We adopted Cultural Collection Standards, and formed a Cultural Collections Committee to monitor how our Faculties acquire, manage, and conserve cultural collections.

#### EXAMPLE 9

**University of Melbourne Cultural Policy Statement (2006)**

In 2007, we adopted a *Cultural Strategic Plan*, setting out strategies like a Percentage for Art policy in all our capital works projects. In 2008 we started a two-yearly Cultural Treasures Day to

try and raise public awareness of our cultural riches, an open day throwing open our museums, galleries and collections to the public, with special tours, lectures and events. In a 2009 major audit of the collections, we codified our cataloguing and conservation needs, and we are about to engage a consultant to help each of our collections develop a specific development plan

I mentioned the sad state of the Grainger Museum when I was research student 30 years ago. Happily, things have now changed. The University has recently invested significant funds into the conservation and re-interpretation of the Grainger Museum. The building is now on the Victorian Heritage Register and the collection regularly attracts scholars from around the world. The structure, which has had problems ever since it was constructed and for the past seven years it has been closed to the public, is to be reopened next month after being comprehensively refurbished and its displays modernised, at a cost of \$2.7 million. Much of the stored parts of the collection have been removed from the building and are now available for use by researchers, and improved storage was created for it on the Parkville campus and in an offsite repository. Indeed, delegates at this conference are the very first visitors to the re-opened, re-interpreted Grainger Museum. In keeping with Grainger's and the architect's original vision, all the gallery spaces are accessible to visitors, whereas over the years storage space had gradually overtaken many of the galleries as the collection grew.

## EXAMPLE 10

### **Grainger Museum, 2010**

Now the Cinderella story is not just about the discovery and recognition of beauty. The moral is that beauty is a great gift but graciousness is priceless: Cinderella thanks her fairy godmother and forgives her stepsisters despite their treatment of her. A hard message for collection staff in universities, feeling years of neglect; but an important one. But another question in the fairytale is, who is Prince Charming? There has been an assumption in universities that it is the Vice Chancellor who must pluck Cinderella from obscurity, who is in any case held responsible for

just about everything else. Perhaps this is the wrong assumption. I began with an anecdote of my time studying Musical Organology in New York. The pivotal actor there was not just the Metropolitan Museum, it was Winternitz, the legendary professor. The real Princes of in the university story, are the missing Frederick McCoys, those passionate academics who become excited at the museum object, and can see the unique value of teaching their speciality through its artefacts, whether physically handled by their students or examined in digital form on their PC screens. Perhaps my paper should have been called "In search of the Real McCoy": these academics exist on every campus, and the curator's task is to find them, and stimulate them to provide the championship they can uniquely bring to a university collection.

Overwhelmingly, I am convinced that finding academic champions is the key to healthy collection management in a university: from their advocacy funding for managing collections they see as essential to teaching will follow, their vision of research directions will focus acquisitions policy into seeking out and properly planning for collections a university should have, while possibly also urging caution about those it should not. No-one is better positioned than them to argue that digitisation is a critical priority for university cultural collections, or to explain the long-term benefits to a university's reputation that accrue from making its treasures available on line. Going forward, we would recommend to other universities the development of a Cultural Policy Statement and Cultural Strategic Plan as we have done here, or the development of an interface between the teaching program and collections. Our great challenge though is to engage with the university's academic community, those who are best able to draw the university leadership towards prioritising collection management in the budget.

### **About the Author**

Professor Warren Bebbington is Deputy Vice-Chancellor (University Affairs) at The University of Melbourne, responsible for the University's Engagement mission—relations with key external stakeholders and a range of specific strategic issues which bear on the external presence of the

University, including oversight of its cultural policy and programs. He is Chair of the University's Cultural Collections Committee.

He was Dean of the Faculty of Music, 1991-2005.

Winner of the 2005 University of Melbourne Award for Excellence in Teaching the Humanities and a 2008 Australian Council of Teaching & Learning Citation for Outstanding Teaching, he has had a distinguished career at the Universities of Melbourne and Queensland and at the Australian National University School of Music. His publications include the *Oxford Companion to Australian Music* and he was for a decade music member of the International Board of Advisers for *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.

He has served on the Australia Council (chair of music committees for 7 years), Youth Music Australia (deputy chair), and the Australian Music Examinations Board (chair).