The year in review

At the start of the year, each new project listed on the Cultural Collections Projects Program website represents a unique learning opportunity waiting for the ‘right’ person to come along. Then, once a project is assigned it is interesting to see how this collaboration develops over the ensuing months. From the initial meeting with the collection manager, where timelines are mapped, expectations discussed and logistics considered, there is much energy and enthusiasm. Over the duration of the project I usually meet with the student while they are working in situ to find out how their project is progressing. I am often impressed as they expertly explain the processes involved, or outline their exciting research discoveries. A sense of pride and ownership in the project is apparent. Fast forward to the project end, when goals have been met - maybe exhibition labels have been written and installed in a gallery space; a collection has been rehoused to archival standards; collection items have been catalogued; or perhaps the research has evolved into an article for an upcoming edition of Collections magazine – all are very tangible and significant outcomes. And all of this before taking into account the benefits of the experience for the volunteer!

This year interest in projects with the University’s collections continued to grow, with an increasing number of students and volunteers seeking the opportunity to work on a project through the Program. As a result, many well qualified and enthusiastic individuals have participated, their contribution demonstrating the cultural collections are a dynamic and central part of an enriched campus experience. Students and volunteers gain much from this partnership including the development of professional skills; the enhancement of their study program with valuable vocational experiences; the exploration of new areas and career paths; the nurturing of networks with collections staff and other students all while connecting with the collections in a meaningful way.

Students, volunteers and projects

While the projects are generally classified under the categories of preventative conservation, exhibitions, research, significance assessment, archiving and cataloguing, in reality many do not fit neatly in to any one category and may span a couple of collection management areas. For example, an exhibition assistant project role may expose the student to other collection management procedures and practices including cataloguing and conservation, and this connection to other areas provides a broader learning experience. Further, it enables the student/volunteer to see how their task fits in to the bigger picture which is always beneficial.

This year has seen 46 participants in the Cultural Collections Projects Program experience first-hand how the collections are managed, interpreted, conserved and utilised. Following is an introduction to this year’s Program participants and their projects:

There were numerous exhibitions focused projects across the campus and Jeremy Teow (BA History and French, UoM) used his language and investigative skills as a research assistant on the upcoming WWI exhibition Somewhere in France opening early next year in the Noel Shaw Gallery. Meanwhile, Natalie Tizzi (MA Arts and Cultural Management, UoM) enjoyed her role as exhibition assistant on Reading Adventures also held in the Baillieu Library, where she was especially excited to be involved with the education and outreach program associated with the exhibition. The Medical History Museum had two volunteers working on exhibition projects this year. Caroline Stok who has a cultural heritage background, completed her project which involved researching war related materials in the collection for inclusion in the Compassion and Courage exhibition. Lili Birchall (MA Arts and Cultural Management, UoM) commenced a curatorial assistant role on an upcoming cancer research themed exhibition that will be on display at the Museum early next year. Livia Kenney's (MA Art Curatorship, UoM) project has her researching content for an upcoming exhibition at the Henry Forman Atkinson Dental Museum focusing on the history of dentistry. Other exhibition related projects were at the Classics and Archaeology Gallery at the Potter, where Caroline Tully (PhD Classics and Archaeology, UoM) co-curated Mummymania, an exhibition that explores changing perceptions of the Egyptian mummy over time. Lisa Cipollone (BA Art History and Ancient World Studies, UoM) assisted in the installation of Mummymania and worked closely with Dr Andrew Jamieson and Caroline to gain hands on experience in exhibition installation and museum practices more broadly. Music student Alexandra Mathew (PhD Musicology, UoM) curated an exhibition in the ERC utilising the Rare Collections in the Louise Hanson-Dyer Music Library. Her display centres around 20th century Australian composer Margaret Sutherland and features instruments, photographs and manuscripts from the collection.
Cataloguing projects are a popular choice with volunteers as they provide the opportunity to develop practical skills in a key area of collection management. Asta Cameron (MA Art Curatorship, UoM), Simone Rule (MA Cultural Heritage, Deakin) and Sophine Chai (MA Art Curatorship, UoM), worked on cataloguing projects at the Medical History Museum. Of her experience documenting recent acquisitions, Anna commented she enjoyed seeing how cataloguing works in practice, and as an added bonus learnt much about the history of medicine at the University. Other collections that have benefited from cataloguing projects are the Henry Forman Atkinson Dental Museum, where History graduate Stephanie Smith continued cataloguing artefacts from the Physics Museum where she processed a recent gift and also assisted in the design of a brochure for the museum. For the first time this year projects were available with the VCA’s School of Film and Television Digital Archive. Cassandra Gorton, a Master of Information Studies graduate, Jessica O’Brien an Art Curatorship graduate and Claire O’Meara (BA History and Australian Indigenous Studies, UoM) recently commenced a cataloguing and research project. Through the project they are preparing the archive of student film prints, tapes and materials for digitisation to help make this unique collection accessible to students, academics, filmmakers and the wider community. Lara Dykun’s (Adv. PG Dip. Arts and Cultural Management UoM) project at the Ian Potter Museum of Art involved cataloguing a collection of British Museum casts of cylinder seals from the Classics and Archaeology Collection. The catalogue information Lara generated will subsequently be added to the EMu database.

Many fascinating research projects were completed this year with outstanding results. The Baillieu Library Print Collection had three students placed on projects and all contributed to enhancing our understanding and appreciation of works in the collection. James Dear (BA Arts, UoM) continued his project investigating the provenance of a Mannerist drawing and hopes to publish his findings in an upcoming edition of Collections. Art history graduate Jessica Cole completed in depth research on a 17th century Italian drawing of an angel about which little was previously known. Jessica has been able to provide an art historical context for understanding the drawing, and is also planning to publish her findings. Lastly, Art Curatorship graduate Alexandra Shapley, researched La Carita, an oil on paper drawing by 18th century Italian artist Francesco Zuccarelli. Alex enjoyed her time studying this beautiful drawing and has published a piece on her discoveries in the current edition of Collections. At the Herbarium, Donna Fearne (MA Cultural Heritage, Deakin) completed her research on the Burnley Herbarium Collection and has also made some excellent discoveries. Two research projects at the Harry Brookes Allen Museum of Anatomy and Pathology, have explored three historic skeletons in the collection with some fascinating results. Post-doctoral scientist Sarah Creed was interested in broadening her skills in the museum sector in an area that related to her science background. For her project, she researched two historic skeletons with ‘Fibrodyplasia ossificans progressiva’. In addition to her research, Sarah has created a text panel on the skeletons to accompany the museum display. Exploring the history of a different skeleton in the Museum was History graduate Eugenia Pacitti. Using the University’s archives as a starting point, Eugenia investigated the origins of the historic ‘Hydrocephalus’ skeleton to better understand its context within the collection. The project afforded her the opportunity to hone research and communication skills and become more familiar with museum practices. Eugenia will create a text panel to accompany the display and is also planning to publish her findings. At the Tegs Museum, Karla Way (MA Art Curatorship, UoM) is researching Associate Professor Georgina Sweet’s contribution to the collections of the Zoology Museum during the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

This year two significance assessment projects (which are research intensive and also require consideration of collection management issues), provided excellent learning opportunities for two participants in the Program. Annabelle Weight (MA Cultural Heritage, Deakin) recently completed an assessment on the Burnley Rare Book Collection. The collection comprises horticultural books, documents, journals and handwritten ledgers that relate to the history of Burnley Campus since its establishment as a horticultural teaching college in 1891. Annabelle found the application of the methodology to be an excellent opportunity to broaden her collection management skills. Claire Liersch (MA Cultural Heritage, Deakin) continued her significance assessment of collections in the Physics Museum and similarly has found it to be an engaging experience that produces a very useful collection management resource at its completion.

Archival documentation and inventory projects were popular this year with many students seeking vocational experiences that complement coursework. At the University of Melbourne Archives, Esther Crocker (Master of Information Studies, CSU) assisted in the listing and appraisal of the legacy records created by the Labour Archivist. Also at UMA were Master of Arts graduates Emma Adams and Chloe Pagaduan (Graduate Diploma of Cultural Heritage, Deakin). Their project involved cataloguing and researching the digitised resources in the Germaine Greer Archive and will aid in its future access and appreciation. Another project with the Greer Archive has Tanya Harrison (Librarianship and Information Management, Curtin University), Madeline Smith (BA, Honours History, UoM) and Emily Spiller (PhD Social and Political Science, UoM) creating file level metadata for the correspondence files in the collection. The metadata will be published in the online catalogue. Completing her archive placement Nicole McGrath (MA Information Management, RMIT) has documented and rehoused the photographs in the AMP Collection.
There have been many preventative conservation and rehousing projects across the collections all achieving noticeable results. Adele Barbara’s (MA Cultural Materials Conservation, UoM) project saw her working with the Bill Mitchell Collection from the Architecture and Planning Library’s Rare Materials. Adele has been rehousing and compiling an inventory of the collection from this preeminent urban theorist. Also at Architecture, Yanisa Nienattrakul’s (MA Architecture, UoM) project involved the Dr Ernest Fookes Collection. Fookes was a prominent Viennese architect who came to Melbourne in 1939 where he made a significant contribution to architecture, town planning, and design education in Australia. Yanisa’s rehousing project will pave the way for future digitisation of the collection. At the Medical History Museum, recent Conservation graduate Emily Keppel continued her assignment on a rehousing, storage and inventory project and was joined by Simone Ewenson (MA Cultural Heritage Studies, Deakin) and Sita McAlpine (MA Arts and Cultural Management, UoM). In addition to assisting with the relocation project they had the bonus opportunity to acquire some cataloguing skills. Over at the HBA Museum, Kim Goldsmith’s (MA Cultural Materials Conservation, UoM) project involved rehousing and cataloguing the Comparative Anatomy Collection – which includes more than 100 zoological specimens and models used for teaching in the early 20th century. Working with the University Library’s Rare Books, Celeste Kuypers (MA Cultural Materials Conservation, UoM) enjoyed the opportunity to apply her skills and assist with the implementation of a stabilising preservation program.

Lastly, there were projects that were more general collection management in nature. Sharon Wong’s (MA Cultural Materials Conservation, UoM) project with the East Asian Collection involved rehousing, researching and completing an inventory on a small collection of paper-based materials from the Japanese Rare Materials collection. Comprising primarily of advertising flyers, posters, games and maps, the uncatalogued materials date from the late 19th century through to the mid 20th century. A conservator in training, Sharon saw the project as an invaluable way to gain practical experience in the documentation of collections. Over at the HBA Museum, Masters of Cultural Heritage graduate Rebecca Bolden’s collection management project had her involved with an assortment of tasks from cataloguing and barcoding through to rehousing and relocation of objects within the collection. Lastly, back at the Print Collection, Amelia Saward (BA Arts – Art History and History, UoM) was able to improve access to the collection by working on an exhibition and narratives compilation project. Through the role she gained experience in the research, writing and compilation of interpretive material for the on-line catalogue. Further, she was also exposed to other facets of collection management work including creation of exhibition object cradles and curating her own display. Amelia has written an article on her research in the latest edition of Collections and was very pleased with the way her placement enabled her to connect her classes to a practical learning experience.

‘Incomings and Outgoings’ the International Museums and Collections Award

Early this year, 2014 IMaC Award recipient Amy Walsh travelled to the University of Birmingham to commence her month-long placement with their museums and collections. In the extract below, Amy reflects on some of the highlights of her month in the United Kingdom. Following on from Amy’s musings, Award recipient Katherine Grayson, from the University of Birmingham, recollects the time she spent based with Melbourne’s museums and collections over September-October.

When I first heard about the Award I knew it would be a wonderful opportunity to broaden my knowledge, gain practical experience and extend my skill set. I also saw it as an invaluable chance to build meaningful connections within the international museum profession and strengthen the relationship between the Universities of Melbourne and Birmingham. An element of the Award that I particularly appreciate is the fact that the host university endeavours to incorporate the recipient’s interests into the placement program but also encourages them to extend beyond their comfort zone and learn new skills. I feel that my own program of projects perfectly reflected this aim, with all my tasks either building on prior experience and knowledge or introducing me to a new element of collection management or interpretation. I am studying conservation so I was naturally very keen to gain some experience in the Wilson Conservation Studio…. As a student of object conservation, paper is not a material I have had much experience with, so while my learning curve was steep it was an immensely enjoyable one. Gaining knowledge and experiencing the practical treatment of paper will be an invaluable skill for my career.

Another project that was particularly rewarding was a collection survey I carried out for the Research and Cultural Collections’ Heritage store, which holds objects relating to the history of the University of Birmingham. I was lucky enough to spend some time at the Barber Institute of Fine Arts with the Learning and Access team, observing all the work that they do to create engaging and diverse public programs. They asked me to produce a fact sheet on a recently conserved panel painting by Mannerist artist Jan de Beer to facilitate the delivery of future gallery talks on the piece. At Winterbourne House and Garden (an Edwardian house with period Arts and Crafts features) I prepared a children’s pamphlet for an upcoming World War I exhibition. Being so used to writing in an academic style it was initially difficult to write for a young audience but I thoroughly enjoyed the task. During my time in Birmingham, the Lapworth Museum of Geology was undergoing a full redevelopment. I was able to learn about and observe the fascinating process of relocating the collection and redesigning the museum space, something I may not ever have the chance to experience again.
The Award helped me gain hands-on experience but it also allowed me to fully immerse myself in the visual and historical culture of two foreign countries. I was able to spend some time in Paris and London prior to my placement, during which I visited some of the cities’ iconic museums, galleries and historical sites. While I was based in Birmingham I explored the city’s vibrant cultural scene and took trips to nearby Stratford-Upon-Avon, Manchester and Stoke-on-Trent. Visiting other cultural institutions complemented my learning at the University of Birmingham and helped me to develop greater understanding of museum practices outside of Australia.

While I learnt beneficial practical skills and gained invaluable insight into the museum profession, the Award placement has also benefited me in many personal ways—testing my prior knowledge, drawing on new skills and working alongside industry professionals has helped me to feel more confident in my own abilities and opinions. I believe I contributed in a professional capacity to the museums and collections at the University of Birmingham and I am very proud of this achievement. The Award has truly enriched my life, both professionally and personally, and I know it will continue to benefit me for years to come. It has inspired an even greater passion for conservation and collection management and has strengthened my desire to work within the museum sector. I’m looking forward to applying my new knowledge and skills here in Australia and I wish the best of luck to all the future recipients of this wonderful Award!

Amy Walsh, March 2015

Nearing the end of my final year of studying English Literature at the University of Birmingham earlier this year, I experienced a panic probably not unfamiliar to many in that position – what do I do next? And, perhaps more importantly, how am I going to be able to do it? Receiving the International Museums and Collections Award to the University of Melbourne, therefore, gave me an invaluable opportunity to gain a broad range of skills and understanding and to decide which area of the sector is for me.

It was this breadth to the Award that really appealed to me. During my month placement, I worked with the Curation, Collections Management and Academic Services teams at the Ian Potter Museum of Art; the Conservation department at the Centre for Cultural Materials Conservation; the Cultural Collections in the Baillieu Library; and the Chemistry Cultural Collection, as well as spending time in the Print Collection, Herbarium and University Archives. This variety was excellent, as I began to understand the requirements of each role on a daily basis, and accordingly what suited my interests and skills the most. In addition to developing this range of skills, the diversity of the Collections is incredible, and I therefore gained experience working with a variety of content. Having previously associated museums and collections with the Arts, this really opened my eyes to the wide breadth of museum work. Moreover, this really helped to build my confidence in my abilities: I found that, even when working with content as unfamiliar to my Arts-based background as the Chemistry Collection, my existing skills in research and writing were actually very beneficial. When writing exhibition labels, reports and archival Collection Appraisal forms, my English Literature background was very valuable, and realising this will help me to demonstrate in future application forms and interviews why I would be a good candidate for museum employment. Furthermore, producing this writing, as well as the article I wrote for Collections magazine, gave me useful additions to my portfolio, and provided me with the opportunity to show I’ve been published. Working at a University in Australia for a month also makes you grow in a more personal way…exploring a city so far away from home was so exciting, and to live and work here for four weeks allowed me to see another culture in a very different way from the fleeting stops of holidays or travelling.

I certainly wasn’t left to fend for myself outside the working day. Even people who I didn’t come into direct contact with during my placement were kind enough to invite me for coffee and a chat. Particularly lovely was the little Award alumni network: previous recipients of the Award from Melbourne were all really eager to meet and look after me, including an amazing goodie bag complete with factor 50 sun-cream for my English skin! It’s brilliant to think that I now have friendships in another hemisphere, and have exchanged details to stay in touch. My internship has helped me to decide that the Education and Interpretation side of museums is what particularly interests me, and has presented me with lots of ideas and advice as to how to attain this. I am very excited for my next steps and can safely say that this placement will help me, both professionally and personally, in whatever the future holds.

Katherine Grayson, October 2015

Kim Goldsmith, a Masters in Cultural Materials Conservation student, is the 2015 Melbourne recipient of the International Museums and Collections Award and will be travelling to the United Kingdom in January. In addition to conservation, Kim’s background is in visual arts and teaching, and no doubt this will enable her to get much out of her Birmingham trip. Kim is very much looking forward to seeing how she might apply these skills in a new environment. You will be able to follow Kim’s UK adventure through her blog via the Cultural Collections website from January.

Wrap up

It has been a rewarding and productive year for the CCPP and much has been achieved. As you will have seen from this brief insight into the Program, the collaboration between students, volunteers and collections staff on cultural collection projects has enduring benefits that continue to resonate. To those that have contributed to the Program this year, I thank you for your invaluable input, it has been integral to its success. I wish you a Merry Christmas and all the best for the New Year,

Helen Arnoldi
Cultural Collections Projects Coordinator
December 2015