What do museum apps, Mannerist drawings, Verdi’s Sicilian Vespers, a 19th century moss collection, crystallography, evolutionary theory, Japanese Beatles memorabilia and a historic osteological collection have in common? Not sure...cannot guess? Well, they were just some of the fascinating territories that cultural collections projects traversed this year! These projects were energetically worked on by students and volunteers who took part in the Cultural Collections Projects Program and much was achieved. Equally diverse were the backgrounds of participants, all of whom brought unique skills to their projects and went away with an enriched knowledge of the University’s collections. Similar to last year, demand for projects was very strong which meant unfortunately that not everyone interested in working on a project could be accommodated. However, those students and volunteers who did secure project work were doubly keen and did so with much enthusiasm and gusto!

This year also saw the staging of the Cultural Treasures Festival, a weekend event in July in which many participants of the Program assisted at information marques. Their in-depth knowledge of the University’s museums and collections and warm smiles provided a great welcome for those visiting the campus. Other highlights this year included the opening of Aftershocks: Experiences of Japan’s Great Earthquake a moving exhibition curated by Arts student Hannah Gould. The impetus for the exhibition grew from a preventative conservation project Hannah had undertaken two years prior with the East Asian Collection. Aftershocks is an outstanding example of how involvement in a project can develop well beyond the initial project brief and yield excellent, unexpected outcomes. At times these outcomes are large scale and public as in the Aftershocks exhibition, at other times they are more individual and personal, such as a friendship formed, or the development of a new interest. As well as the anticipated benefits to the participants and collections, it is these additional, unexpected outcomes that really enhance the experience for all involved.

A closer look at the students, volunteers and the projects

Whether it be a Conservation student wanting to gain collection management experience; a Curatorship student keen to learn preservation strategies; a person trying out a collection area in which they have an interest, or every other reason in between, the different projects across the cultural collections have been able to fulfil this niche. Following, is an introduction to the volunteers and the projects they worked on during the year.

A cornerstone of collection management, cataloguing projects are always popular. The cataloguing process utilises a broad range of skills including methodical thinking, object handling, research, database familiarity and a keen eye! At the Physics Museum, John Lupton (MA Arts Management, RMIT) joined recent CCMC conservation graduate Stephanie Smith and they have made great progress cataloguing a range of objects in this collection. At the Henry Forman Atkinson Dental Museum, two very different cataloguing projects were completed: Katherine Sayers (MA Information Management, RMIT) documented the paper-based records of the Dental Board of Victoria Collection, while Madeleine Price (MA Cultural Materials Conservation) put to good use her undergraduate degree in biological anthropology and catalogued the Historic Osteological Collection. Melinda Barrie (MA Cultural Heritage, Deakin) was hosted by the Grainger Museum and her project involved cataloguing the fascinating Ella Grainger correspondence housed within the Museum. Ellen Bradley (MA Art Curatorship) continued her placement with the Baillieu Library Print Collection, where she added to and updated information on the collection catalogue. Next door in the Medical History Museum, Sophine Chai’s (MA Art Curatorship) project had her adding to and extending information on the Vernon collection database. Library cataloguing also featured in projects this year, with Jayne Cleave (MA Information Management, RMIT) updating catalogue records for a selection of rare books in Special Collections. She described the process as ‘inspiring and satisfying’. Jayne Weatherburn (MA Information Management, RMIT) also enjoyed a short placement with Special Collections on a cataloguing project.

Preventative conservation and rehousing projects are keenly sought by volunteers as they offer the opportunity to gain object handling skills while working closely with a collection. These projects are particularly rewarding as participants can readily see the difference these practices have on the future longevity of a collection. Combine this with the chance to delve deeper into the history of an object and it is not surprising that these projects are popular. Alexander Bars (BA, Latrobe) and Claudia Devos (BA, Hons, Melb.) worked on a rehousing and inventory project with the Bill Mitchell Collection from the Architecture and Planning Library’s Rare Materials Collection. Claudia found the materials from the 1970s and 1980s particularly engaging as they predicted the direction the ‘new’ digital technologies would take. Special Collections also hosted three conservation-based projects, with Rachel Kennedy (MA Information Management, RMIT) working on a rehousing and listing project with the McLaren Collection, while Ainslee Meredith (MA Cultural Material Conservation) re-housed post 1800 books from the Poynton Collection. Lastly, working with the Louise Hanson-Dyer Music Library’s Rare Collections, Alexandra Mathew (PhD Musicology) documented, conservation cleaned, and rehoused a rare music manuscript of Verdi’s Sicilian Vespers performed by Lyster’s company.
Significance assessment and research projects provide the opportunity to delve more deeply into a particular area and pursue multiple lines of inquiry. These projects aid our understanding and appreciation of materials, and also become a vital component. Research projects provide the opportunity to delve more deeply into a particular area and pursue multiple lines of inquiry. These projects aid our understanding and appreciation of materials, and also become a vital component.

Curatorial projects can enable volunteers to participate in the development of an exhibition from its early stages of planning and research through to installation. Rebecca Clifton (BA, Melb.), Mem Capp (Grad Dip. Museum and Heritage Studies, Deakin) and Amy Walsh (MA Cultural Materials Conservation) had this opportunity when they helped curate the recently opened Between artefact and text exhibition in the Potter’s Classics and Archaeology Gallery. Having contributed to all stages of the curatorial process, each will also give a floor talk in the new year. Caroline Tully (PhD Classics and Archaeology) recently commenced a project where she will develop an exhibition focusing on Egyptian artefacts in the University’s collections, that will open late next year. From Classics to Chemistry, students Cassandra Johnston (BA, Melb.) and Emily Were (MA Art Curatorship) enjoyed their involvement with Reflections: Tales from within the Crystal, an exhibition exploring crystallography and currently on display in the School of Chemistry. The Medical History Museum has also offered curatorial projects to students this year – Petra Blagojevic (MA Cultural Management) was an exhibition assistant on Boisterous Beginnings: Doctors in the Port Phillip District, while Caroline Stok who has a background in cultural heritage, recently commenced research on the war related materials in the collection for an upcoming WW1 exhibition. Both have valued the opportunity to delve into their areas of interest and contribute to these fascinating exhibitions. Hannah Gould (BA, Hons, Melb.) curated Aftershocks: Experiences of Japan’s Great Earthquake a poignant exhibition highlighting items from the East Asian Rare Materials Collection and currently on display in the Noel Shaw Gallery.

This year the use of new technologies across the cultural collections has provided some very interesting areas for projects. Cassandra Johnston (Executive MA, Melb.) created and developed an educational and entertaining iBook app which enabled younger visitors to interact with the prints in the Radicals, Slayers and Villains exhibition. Meanwhile in the Medical History Museum, Michelle Bashta (MA Cultural Heritage, Deakin) has been compiling content which will be used in a new app showcasing the collections in the Faculty of Medicine, Dentistry and Health Sciences.

Inventory and archival documentation projects continued to be prized by students seeking ‘classic’ collection and information management experiences, as they offer invaluable insight into the fundamental procedures and practices in these fields. In Special Collections, Kate Hodgetts’ (MA Cultural Materials Conservation), listing and rehousing of the Artists’ Books Collection and its associated archives provided the ideal opportunity to see how a collection of this type was managed. For Information Management students, the projects that engage with the extensive collections at University of Melbourne Archives also prove to be a strong drawcard. Shane Talia (MA Cultural Heritage, Deakin) completed his documentation project with the AMP Ltd Collection, while Nicole McGrath (MA Information Management, RMIT) also worked with the AMP Collection and has been documenting and rehousing the photographic component. Bob Appleyard through his project work has continued to apply his extensive knowledge of the mining industry to related UMA collections. In the Harry Brookes Allen Museum Julia Kuehns’ (MA Information Management, RMIT) documentation project had her working with the Historical Hospital Records Collection. Julia digitised these historic patient case reports and then matched them to corresponding specimens in the Museum.
Lastly, there are the projects that cover several areas of **collection management** and so are not easily categorised! Katarina Klaric (MA Art Curatorship) and Charlotte Scales’ (BA, Melb.) worked on different aspects of the development and application of a tour manual for the *Radical, Slayers and Villains* exhibition. Through their projects, both gained experience across a number of key collection management areas while working closely with this outstanding collection of prints. For her project with the Japanese Rare Materials collection, Sharon Wong (MA Cultural Materials Conservation) has created an inventory, photographed, translated and researched a small collection of miscellaneous paper-based materials. The visually striking collection dates from the 1880s through to the 1960s and includes advertising flyers, posters, games and maps. Natasha Story (PhD English Literature), also worked with visually fascinating materials in the collection of glass slides from the Architecture and Planning Library’s Rare Materials Collection. The slides, originally used as a teaching aid, principally feature the urban landscape of Melbourne and date from the first half of the 20th century. As well as creating an inventory and rehousing the collection, Natasha has also completed research on the slides. Anna Tarasova (Grad. Dip. Information Management, RMIT) completed an audit and documented the objects contained in the Frederic Wood Jones Collection in the HBA Museum. Anna surveyed the collection, which was sourced in the early 1900s, and comprises of preserved marsupials, skulls and images, and also completed research into Wood Jones and the collection’s provenance. Emily Keppel (MA of Cultural Materials Conservation) has worked on an inventory, rehousing and storage project at the Medical History Museum which has seen her assist in the relocation of sections of the Museum’s collections. The completion of the project will aid in the long term access to, and storage of this important collection.

**Museums and Collections Award 2014**

The Museums and Collections Award, now in its fifth year, saw University of Birmingham student Lucy Cooper visit Melbourne in July, and will see Melbourne student Amy Walsh travel to the United Kingdom in the new year. The Award, supported by Universitas 21, offers a unique professional development opportunity to students interested in pursuing careers in the museums sector. The month-long placement at the partner University enables the student recipient to be involved in museum and collection based projects. The experience enables them to develop collection management skills, consider museums and collections within an international context, pursue their own study interests and establish networks with industry professionals.

In the excerpt below Lucy Cooper reflects on her month-long placement with the cultural collections at the University of Melbourne (this is an abridged version of a report Lucy submitted at the conclusion of her stay).

*From July-August 2014 I embarked on a life-changing experience to the University of Melbourne. I am a postgraduate student studying for an MA in Heritage Management at the University of Birmingham. It was a unique opportunity to work with the collections, staff, and students at Melbourne; and to share knowledge, expand skills and use the theory work from my course in a professional heritage environment.*

Firstly, it must be stated that the collections at Melbourne and Birmingham are remarkably similar. Initially a teaching collection, they have diversified to create varied collections which reflect the evolution of knowledge and scholarship. My projects covered aspects of heritage management including documentation and cataloguing, conservation, research, and interpretation. Mondays spent with the Cultural Collections Unit were illuminating, as I was introduced to several new approaches to collections management designed specifically to suit the universities environment. My project was to create an outreach activity for use on community days such as open days or student services events.

My principal duty with the Baillieu Library Print Collection was to conduct research on William Blake. The analytical and research skills from my undergraduate degree in ancient history and the knowledge of how to interpret information from my MA greatly helped this task. I was also given the fantastic opportunity to work with precise, beautifully made facsimiles of some of Blake’s more famous pieces made by the Trianon Press; culminating in a blog about the rare, unique collections held by the University of Melbourne. Furthermore, I gained hands-on experience and skills through making book cradles and exhibition labels.

At the Ian Potter Museum of Art I was shown the large teaching collection of antiquities, among which was a large box of 150 cylinder seal reproductions. Nothing was known about the collection, where they came from, how they were made, what they depicted, or what was important about them. I was tasked to uncover their provenance and establish their significance in the teaching collection. Having specialised in Ancient Near Eastern Studies and learnt Cuneiform, the ancient writing system used on the seals, I managed to identify 50 seals. I was thoroughly trained in the KE Emu database where my findings became immortalised in catalogue entries that I had created. This project was extremely satisfying as it showed that I could utilise my existing skills in a professional setting whilst knowing that my input was appreciated by the staff. It stands as an excellent example of how volunteer programs can be of benefit to both the student and the organisation.
The Centre for Cultural Materials Conservation (CCMC) project was an astounding hands-on experience in a dizzyingly busy environment. I assisted in a wide variety of tasks including brush-vacuuming, corrosion reduction, solubility testing, humidifying, immersion baths, and paper consolidation using Japanese tissues. It shed light on how the profession has different expectations to meet in the UK and Australia. In contrast to my research projects which were wholly concerned with the historicity and interpretation of artefacts, the work with CCMC allowed me to be immersed in the care and treatment of the object. It made me appreciate materials, textures, and lifespans of objects far more and will inform my consideration of cultural heritage in the future.

Throughout the entirety of the scheme I was given a large amount of creative freedom and was allowed to work independently...This independence was even apparent on my special ‘one-off’ days at the University Archives and Herbarium. These were two similar, self-contained projects that were principally concerned with updating the material held in the collections. At both, items in the collection needed finding, rehousing into new archive grade storage, then updating or inserting onto the online catalogue. My time here challenged my conceptions that archives were static store houses where items went and were scarcely moved. They were vibrant, busy, ever-changing environments where there was a constant need to improve the service to aid accessibility for users.

Although the award is primarily about the placement at the university, the wider cultural landscape of Australia is fascinating for any student engaged in museum studies. The award presents a unique opportunity to see and feel how another culture interprets and engages with their cultural heritage - especially given their inextricable connection to English history.

One of the greatest benefits of this scheme is the exchange of knowledge...I was able to transfer my own experiences and interpretations of heritage, whilst also taking on the expertise and resources from an unfamiliar and culturally contrasting surrounding. The award was designed to cater to my existing skills, but also to lift me away from my comfort zone, to boost confidence, to identify my strengths and weaknesses, to expose me to the daily workings of a university collection, and to give me the tools to shape my experience to suit my interests. ...The achievement of being granted the award, and completing the placement is not an end in itself, rather it is the beginning of another partnership that is instrumental to the development and expansion of discourse in the heritage industry. The award has not only enabled me to gather research and contacts for my MA thesis on university collections and expanded my skill set, it has also given me something immeasurable and invaluable - confidence and determination. Working with so many enlightened and experienced heritage professionals has been a privilege, and has consolidated my plans to pursue a career in the heritage sector. As a result of this placement, I have an entire new range of skills that I am able to highlight to future employers, and I have applied for collections assistant roles that I would never have deemed myself suitable for before ...May the award continue to enrich the lives of future participants as it has mine.

Lucy Cooper, 2014 Museums and Collections Award recipient

The University of Birmingham campus

It is wonderful to read of Lucy’s experiences while she was based with the cultural collections of Melbourne and to see the impact that being a recipient of the Award will have on her future chosen career path.

With all of that ahead of her, Masters of Cultural Materials Conservation student Amy Walsh, will leave for the UK in January and similarly enjoy the hospitality of Birmingham University while immersing herself in projects with their excellent collections and museums.

You will be able to follow Amy’s upcoming adventure through her blog, which will be available on the Cultural Collections website early next year.

Amy Walsh will be travelling to the United Kingdom in January

Wrap up

As you can see, it has been a jam-packed year with many excellent results achieved across the Program. While valuing the obvious benefits to students, volunteers and the collections themselves, it is often the more subtle results that I find to be the most rewarding and make each year special – whether it be the friendships formed, new interests nurtured or seeing the connectedness of a participant to a collection as a result of their project assignment – these are all enduring outcomes that add an additional dimension to this already rich exchange. Thank you to all who have participated in and supported projects this year, your input is appreciated and valued.

I wish you a Merry Christmas and all the best for the New Year.

Helen Arnoldi
Cultural Collections Projects Coordinator
December 2014