A snapshot of the year

Projects offered through the Cultural Collections Projects Program this year were sought by an enthusiastic cohort of students, graduates and interested individuals. All were keen for the opportunity the projects provided: a chance for close engagement with the University’s cultural collections while contributing in meaningful ways to their preservation, accessibility, and long term management. Considerable attention has recently been paid to the benefits of vocational work experiences for students. More degrees now include a formal internship requirement within their structure, and with good reason. In a competitive labour market students and graduates need to be able to demonstrate they have bridged the gap between theory and practice. This concept is not new to the CCPP - it is something that we have always done. For over a decade this Program, through offering well thought out collection management projects, has given participants the opportunity to develop and apply skills in and beyond their study discipline areas, gain confidence in these skills and establish professional networks. A central tenet of the Program has been to offer interesting professional development experiences that have real value to the volunteers and the collections. If we get this balance right (which I believe we do!), a successful partnership follows – one that has ongoing benefits for the participants, the collections and those who work with them. Students and volunteers commence their career paths with enriched learning experiences and the cultural collections remain a relevant and dynamic resource for the University and broader community.

Projects, projects and more projects

This year 53 students and volunteers have enthusiastically catalogued, relocated, rehoused, curated, digitised, assessed, archived, researched, installed, and inventoried their way across the collections. The variety of collections and projects offered was matched by the diversity represented in the motivations and backgrounds of the Program’s participants. Many students and volunteers were keen to be involved so that they could experience firsthand the University’s unique cultural collections. Project types were varied across a full range of collection management and curatorial areas: from preventive conservation, relocation projects, cataloguing and inventories through to researched-focused roles linked to exhibitions, displays, website content and significance assessment. Indeed, many of the projects involved the application and development of skills across several areas of collection management and defy categorisation! Outlined below is an introduction to the students and volunteers who participated this year and the projects on which they worked.

Archival documentation, digitisation and inventory projects featured prominently with participants eager to gain practical experience in these areas. At the Victorian College of the Arts, a team of volunteers worked on a digitisation project with the VCA Digital Film and Television Archive. This impressive group included Claire O’Meara (History and Aust. Indigenous Studies, UoM), Geraldine Brault (Library Information Management, Victoria University), Cassandra Gorton (Graduate of Information Studies, Charles Sturt University), Jessica O’Brien (graduate MA Art Curatorship, UoM), Bronte Laffin-Vines (Archives graduate, Charles Sturt University), Simone Rule (Cultural Heritage Studies, Deakin), Madeleine Thorburn (Arts and Cultural Management, UoM) and Matthew Waters (Communications, Deakin). Over the year, they catalogued and researched this fascinating archive of student film prints, tapes and materials. This project has helped make the collection more accessible to students, academics, filmmakers, researchers and the wider community. Over at the University of Melbourne Archives, volunteers assisted on several archival documentation projects. Tanyia Harrison (Library and Information Management, Curtin University) completed a processing project with the MCAE Collection, while Lucas Manuell (Information and Library Studies, Box Hill Institute), listed and described archives from the Blake and Rigall Collection, a law firm established in the 1850s. Also at Archives, Adrian Maginn catalogued materials from MU Boat Club, a collection recently transferred to UMA. Over at the Harry Brookes Allen Museum of Anatomy and Pathology, Olivia Baenziger (Doctor of Medicine, UoM), worked on an audit and museum storage project that was part of major rearrangement of the museum’s storage area.
Cataloguing projects are the mainstay of collection management, and there were several opportunities for participants to hone their skills in this key area. Simone Eywenson (Masters of Cultural Heritage Studies, Deakin), Liza Martin (Masters Cultural Heritage, Deakin) and Susan Laidlaw (BA University of Western Australia and UoM) worked on a cataloguing and rehousing project with the Royal Women’s Hospital Collection which had recently been transferred to the Medical History Museum (MHM). In a separate cataloguing project at the MHM, Patrice Holstock (Graduate Diploma Arts, UoM) documented items from the Frank Morgan and AMA Collections. At the Henry Forman Atkinson Dental Museum, Rebecca King (Master of Arts and Cultural Management, UoM) and Natasha Haysom (Grad. Dip. Museum Studies, Deakin) had the opportunity to familiarise with different aspects of the collection by adding to and expanding records in the collection catalogue. Lili Birchall (BA Ancient World Studies and Linguistics, UoM) were placed at the Harry Brooks Allen Museum. There, they catalogued and created database records for a collection of early 20th century zoology specimens and comparative anatomy models. Cataloguing projects continued over at the Ian Potter Museum of Art, where Grace McKenzie-McHarg (MA Cultural Materials Conservation, UoM) assisted in the registration of recent acquisitions to the University’s art collection. Stephanie Smith (graduate Masters in Cultural Materials Conservation, UoM) continued to catalogue the objects in the Physics Museum and assisted in the design of a collection brochure.

Students and volunteers also contributed to several of the thought-provoking exhibitions that featured the cultural collections this year. Lili Birchall (MA Arts and Cultural Management, UoM) and Eden Christian (Grad. Cert. Cultural Materials Conservation, UoM) delved into the Medical History Museum’s collections to research content for an exhibition at the Victorian Comprehensive Cancer Centre. The exhibition explores the development of radiology equipment in cancer treatment during the 20th century. Projects with the Baillieu Library Print Collection included work on the upcoming exhibition Plotting the Island: Dreams, Discovery and Disaster. Boe-in Bastian (MA Arts and Cultural Management, UoM) also worked on the Shakespeare exhibition where she researched and wrote labels for a series of prints and a volume on the bard’s plays. Anna Linardi (graduate History, UoM) provided research support for It’s a Gas, an exhibition presented by the Henry Forman Atkinson Dental Museum tracing the history of dentistry through illustrations and cartoons from the 17th century to the present. From dentistry to music, Melinda Barrie (MA Cultural Heritage, Deakin) is developing an exhibition for the ERC that will utilise the rare materials in the Louise Hanson-Dyer Music Library. Jessica Aubert (MA Cultural Heritage, Deakin) continued her interpretation and display project at the Physics Museum which involves label creation and the reinvigoration of the display spaces.

There were several preventative conservation projects this year that were actively sought by volunteers wishing to make a difference to the longevity of the collections. Adele Barbara (MA Cultural Materials Conservation, UoM) continued her rehousing project with the Bill Mitchell Collection which forms part of the Architecture and Planning Library’s Rare Materials Collection. Adele subsequently handed the baton over to Cancy Chu (MA Cultural Materials Conservation, UoM) and Emma Hayles (MA Cultural Materials Conservation, UoM) who completed the project which has aided the longevity and accessibility of this important collection. Also at the Library, Jesse Clarke (MA Cultural Materials Conservation, UoM) and Jennifer Todd (MA Cultural Materials Conservation, UoM) worked on a preservation assessment and rehousing project with the Theses Collection which will aid in its stability, preservation, storage and future access. The Property and Campus Services Photographic Collection provided a range of projects. Camielle Fitzmaurice (MA Cultural Materials Conservation, UoM) completed a preservation assessment and treatment plan for the magnetic albums in the collection. Michael Slater (graduate MA Information Studies, Charles Sturt University), Owen Martin (MA Liberal Arts, ANU) and Amelia O’Donnell (MA Cultural Materials Conservation, UoM) contributed to an inventory and rehousing project for the slides, assorted photographs, albums and binders of photographic materials that make up the Collection. In addition to the professional skills developed they also learned much about the built environment of the University over the past fifty years! Over at the Physics Museum, Helen Merritt (MA Cultural Materials Conservation, UoM), recently commenced a condition survey project on the Cooke Refractor Telescope c.1874, the outcomes of which will help inform recommendations on its future management.
Research and interpretation of the collections is an important part of their management as it contributes to them remaining a relevant and dynamic resource. These projects provided participants with the opportunity to explore in greater depth aspects of the collections with some fascinating results. Shilpa Rath (BA Bio Medicine, UoM) researched the Comparative Anatomy Collection at the HBA Museum and was very pleased to be able to explore anatomy from a different perspective to her medical studies! At the Ian Potter Museum of Art, Rose Dryzek (BA History, UoM) completed in depth research on a selection of items from the Grimwade Collection. The Rare Book Collection had five volunteers working on research and interpretation projects with Maria Halkias (MA Cultural Materials Conservation, UoM), Helen Vines (alumni UoM) and Kim Hitchcock (MA Art Curatorship, UoM) working on the ‘10 Great Books’ discovery project. The project, linked to the lecture series of the same name, will support an on-line gallery on the Rare Books’ website, and increase awareness and appreciation of this significant collection. Similarly, Alexandra McLennan (BA Ancient World Studies/History, UoM) and Ellen Muller (MA Publishing and Communications, UoM) researched and wrote content for a selection of books to feature on the Rare Books Collection website. Also within the Baillieu Library, Fleur McArthur (MA Art Curatorship, UoM) researched drawings in the Print Collection and uncovered some surprising discoveries relating to the attribution of a pencil and watercolour drawing, the Conversion of St Paul. At the Tiegs Museum, Karla Way (MA Art Curatorship, UoM) completed her research project that investigated the contribution made by Associate Professor of Zoology, Georgina Sweet (1875-1946) on the collections within the Museum.

In keeping with the research theme, two significance assessments have been worked on this year. Claire Liersch (grad. Museum Studies, Deakin) completed her report for the Physics Museum while Natasha Ressia (BA Ancient World Studies and Classics, UoM) contributed to an assessment on the International House Collection. Once completed the significance assessments will be utilised to help inform future collection management decisions in areas such as conservation, acquisition/de-accession, valuation and access.

‘Incomings and Outgoings’: the International Museums and Collections Award

In January, UoM student Kim Goldsmith (MA Cultural Materials Conservation) and 2015 recipient of the IMaC Award, travelled to the UK and spent one month working with the University of Birmingham’s museums and collections. In August, the reciprocal part of the exchange saw the Cultural Collections team welcome Birmingham student Emily Robins, who worked on a selection of projects across this University’s collections. In the extracts that follow, Kim and Emily reflect on their respective Award experiences.

‘Outgoings’

The IMAC award was an opportunity for me to consider my future career trajectory. I hoped to explore how my skills as an artist, educator and conservator would fit within the context of University museums and collections. In addition, I considered it a chance for me to reconnect with my English heritage, and explore the possibility of future employment in the UK.

I met and worked with conservators, curators, collections managers, artists-in-residence, volunteers, students, geologists, museum workers and academics, and I now have a bigger picture of the structure and operation of University and Museum collections.

The content and projects I was assigned were varied and either utilised my existing skills, or extended my knowledge base. For example, it was the first time during this award that I have participated in curating an exhibition that was not of my own artwork. I enjoyed working both autonomously, and collaboratively, to research and present a collection of Tuareg artefacts for the Empires of Emptiness exhibition hosted by the Research and Cultural Collections. It was very satisfying to know that the project had real world outcomes…. I gained new skills in conservation during this award, as well as confidence in my own judgement and expertise. I liked the fact that all of the professionals I worked with during the award had trust in my judgement, as this in turn made me feel that I do have valuable skills and knowledge that are applicable to work within archives, galleries or museums.

The breadth of the award also enabled me to discover new areas of research and interests I had not expected. I was fortunate enough to participate in the Engaging the senses: Object-based learning in Higher Education conference at The University College, London, where I could compare their approaches to using collections for education. I am now very interested to explore object based learning within museums and university collections as a future thesis project.

With the encouragement of the staff at RCC, I also produced a mini art installation of my own small objects that I made in the evenings from found materials during my last week of the award. The title was ‘There’s no place like home...’ and the objects or artefacts were small cocoons that symbolised temporary homes and a sense of the connection I felt through the artefacts I encountered, and the rapport I built with people at the University. It was also a reflection of my experience reconnecting with my heritage, as a UK citizen who was raised in Australia.
Overall, I had an extremely rewarding experience and it exceeded my expectations. Although I enjoyed all of the projects I worked on, and gained valuable skills such as networking, research, conservation and project management, I feel that it was the people I met that made the experience so enriching. I now have an extended network of friends and colleagues in the UK who I hope to continue to connect with on a personal and professional level. The IMAC award placement was a fantastic opportunity, because I was situated within a supportive environment where staff encouraged me to work autonomously and gain confidence in my skills and knowledge. After observing and engaging with a variety of activities within the University collections, and alongside experienced curators, collections managers, archivists and conservators, I now feel that I would love to work in a museum or University collection in the future. The award has been an invaluable and enjoyable growth experience for me as an individual, and I am certain it will improve and influence my career choices in the future.

Kim Goldsmith, March 2016

‘Incomings’

As a recent Art History Graduate with an interest in museum education, collections access and the intersections between art and science, I was thrilled to be awarded this position. Whilst at [my home] University, I undertook a module which involved the usage of science and medical history collections across campus. My exposure to this has prompted me to develop an interest in the intersection between art and science and how medical collections are displayed, curated and can be used as tools for learning. Therefore, I was particularly excited to undertake a project in the Harry Brookes Allen Museum of Anatomy and Pathology. In light of my own career ambitions, I found this experience one of the most professionally rewarding. I was keen to gain experience working with a collection of a scientific nature but was concerned that my arts background and lack of specialist knowledge may put me at a disadvantage. However, I found I was able to approach and engage with the specimens from a different perspective, using my existing experience to create labels which balanced interest with fact and were accessible to diverse audience. Through the label writing and display/curation process I felt I was able to contribute professionally to the museum, offering a boost to my own existing experience and offering me tangible evidence that I can use for future job applications. I found my time spent at the Harry Brookes Allen was extremely satisfying, allowing me to prove the value of my existing skills within a new setting with its own unique challenges.

I was distinctly impressed by the University of Melbourne’s commitment to integrate the collections within university teaching and offer an interdisciplinary approach to learning. The award catered to not only my existing skills and experience but pushed me to step outside my comfort zone. I have been able to explore new possibilities of where my arts degree could take me and it has certainly provided me with the confidence to apply for paid museum and gallery positions due to my strengthened experience with different types of collection. Furthermore, so often with work experience it is easy to feel that the tasks you are completing are not particularly worthwhile, that you’re not making a valid contribution to the institution or organisation. This could not be further from the case here, I felt as if all my projects had mutually beneficial outcomes. Each of my projects allowed me to develop my skills whilst contributing to the collections in a relevant and valuable way. I left Melbourne with an increased confidence in my own ability which could be backed up with tangible evidence - be it through the hands on experience or written material that I crafted. I hope the award continues to permit such engaging experiences for students in the future.

Emily Robins, October 2016

‘Birmingham bound’

In September Irene Finkelde was selected from an exemplary field of applicants as Melbourne’s 2016 IMaC Award recipient. Studying for her Masters in Cultural Materials Conservation, Irene will travel to the UK early next year and spend a month working with the collections and museums of the University of Birmingham. You can follow Irene’s Birmingham adventures via her blog, accessible from the Cultural Collections website from mid-January.

Year’s end...

Thank you to all who have supported the Cultural Collections Projects Program this year – whether directly as participants and collections staff, or indirectly as interested observers with passion for the collections. It has been an enriching and inspiring year for all involved. I wish you all the best for the festive season and year ahead.

Helen Arnoldi
Cultural Collections Projects Coordinator
December 2016