

# Introduction

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The 'categorical imperative of memory' is a richly suggestive phrase, used by the late German writer W.G. Sebald in an essay on the 20th-century fellow German artist Peter Weiss. In the opinion of Sebald, memory or 'the struggle against forgetting' is difficult but crucial work for the entire human race.

Indeed, the preservation of memory empowers us to become fully human.

Great cultural collections, museums, libraries and monuments are among the tools communities use to support a deeply felt need for remembrance of things past. Preserving memory in this public way is an honourable exercise and one in which the University of Melbourne is proud to participate through careful stewarding of its distinctive cultural collections.

In this edition of *University of Melbourne Collections* the themes of connection, continuity and change are illustrated through reflections on the cultural and scientific acquisitions of a university long engaged with a wider world.

These reflections include Rosemary Wrench's article 'First peoples', which explores the finely crafted artefacts acquired by Donald Thomson in northern Australia

between the 1920s and the 1960s. As Rosemary shows, these important cultural heritage materials now promote interactions between Aboriginal community members and students. Both zoologist and anthropologist, the remarkable Donald Thomson also features in the essay 'Venomous collections' by Kenneth Winkel and Jacqueline Healy. This reveals a fascinating history of curiosity-driven yet deeply practical research around venoms and toxins in Australia.

Teaching and learning are supported by the university's collections, as explained by Amanda Burritt in her article 'See, think, wonder'. Amanda suggests how university collections, museums and archives engage students through the Melbourne Graduate School of Education's breadth subject Knowledge, Learning and Culture.

Institutionally too, the University of Melbourne's story is highlighted through reflection on ceremonial tradition, in Robert La Nauze's discussion of the 19th-century carved timber thrones built by George Thwaites, in the opening article 'Antiquity and strength'. These fine examples of Gothic revival furniture, now resident in Wilson Hall, have long been silent onlookers through

council deliberations and university graduation ceremonies, becoming a shared memory among generations of Melbourne graduates.

In all, this edition of *University of Melbourne Collections* is a fascinating exploration of important themes in the life of a significant institution. It is a pleasure to commend the work of colleagues who work so hard to preserve, catalogue, interpret and here present the collections to a wider community. As an institution, we build upon an extraordinary heritage of memories, uniquely retained in the University of Melbourne collections.



Professor Glyn Davis AC has been vice-chancellor of the University of Melbourne since 2005.