

International Museums and Collections Award 2019

Erin Holder

As a recipient of the 2019 Universitas 21 International Museums and Collections Award (IMAC), I was privileged to undertake a four-week placement in the cultural collections of the University of Melbourne. I have always been enthusiastic about communicating history to the public; having worked in visitor services at heritage and museum sites in the UK, I was aware that every collection is managed differently and comes with its own particular difficulties. During my placement I was given the opportunity to work on projects at the Baillieu Library Print Collection, University of Melbourne Archives, Grimwade Centre for Cultural Materials Conservation, and Grainger Museum.

I am interested in the methodological aspects of managing museum collections. As part of the selection process for the award, I was asked to make a presentation on an area of current museum practice. I chose to discuss spoliation and restitution. Spoliation is the act of taking cultural goods or property by violent means, the most notorious example being the Nazi looting of art during World War II. Restitution is the process of returning spoliated objects to their original owners, or to their heirs. Today, spoliation and restitution are questions of increasing importance in museums internationally. One successful restitution claim was made in 2004 by Maria Altmann against the Österreichische Galerie Belvedere over the painting *Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer* by Gustav Klimt (now in the Neue Galerie, New York, its restitution being the subject of the 2015 movie *Woman in gold*). The importance of researching and publishing the provenance of museum collections has been widely acknowledged since the Washington Conference on Holocaust-Era Assets, held in December 1998, where 44 governments set down and signed the Washington Conference Principles on Nazi-Confiscated Art. These provide for:

- the identification of spoliated art and objects
- the opening up of records and archives for investigation and research
- making resources and personnel available to investigate the provenance of artworks
- publicising potentially spoliated art to increase the likelihood of reuniting it with the rightful owners
- establishing a central registry of information on spoliated art.¹

Britain has its own registry, managed by the National Museum Directors' Council and the Collections Trust, to which all museums are required to report gaps in the provenance of their collections.² As well as this, the *Holocaust (Return of Cultural Items) Act 2009* allows British institutions to return spoliated objects without the explicit permission of government.

Restitution efforts have widened to include objects taken as part of the process of colonisation. The director of the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, Tristram Hunt, stated that 'the V&A is committed to exploring our own colonial history with rigour and transparency, and to building platforms for partnership and collaboration around the world'.³

In 2018, the exhibition *Oceania* at the Royal Academy of Art (RA) represented a turning point and a new approach for museums dealing with colonial spoliation and restitution.⁴ For an exhibition displaying objects from many cultures across the Pacific, the project's organisers sought explicit permission to exhibit items from each community to whom the objects had originally belonged. Special arrangements were made for objects in the exhibition that are considered 'living treasures' by Pacific Islanders. Twelve years in the planning, the exhibition allowed for offerings to be made and for people to pay their respects to objects of spiritual significance to them.

Erin Holder cataloguing works of art in the Baillieu Library Print Collection (showing a drawing of Germaine Greer by Louis Kahan). Photograph by Kerriane Stone.



It is important that museums manage, interpret and display their collections in ways that reflect the diversity of stories that they embody. Restitution cases should be dealt with sensitively, and collections should be made as accessible as possible to those communities who were originally their owners. As Christopher Le Brun, president of the RA, noted of the *Oceania* exhibition, it ‘deliberately avoids showing Oceania through European eyes’.⁵

While I was in Melbourne, I sought to investigate the ways in which museums and collections (in universities and national institutions) are decolonising collections, especially in balancing Aboriginal and colonial histories that can be seen throughout their collections. I observed the ways in which museums attempt to connect the First Peoples of Australia with objects relating to their culture that are held in collections across the country. The *Awaken* exhibition currently in the Arts West building on the Parkville campus aims to forge connections between Indigenous communities, university students and the public.⁶ The exhibition succeeds in demonstrating how these objects, with the input of descendants of their makers or original owners, can reveal meanings beyond the anthropological. It raises questions as to the ethics of collecting, and acknowledges the colonial histories of the objects. These objects, when reconnected with their communities of origin and traditional lands, can be better appreciated in their emotional and spiritual contexts. In this way we can deepen our understanding of collections and of the people who created them.



Another important concern that was highlighted during my placement was the varying degrees to which different collecting organisations can adopt best practice. Despite the best of intentions, it is not always possible to carry out a collections management task to perfect or ideal levels.

An example of this arose in the Baillieu Library, where compromise was needed in setting the lighting levels for an exhibition of prints. Staff had to balance the ideal conservation standard (to prevent damage from exposure to light over the duration of the exhibition) with visitors' need to see the prints clearly. Another example: when cataloguing papers at University of Melbourne Archives it was necessary to record only enough information to serve as a signpost to researchers, pointing them to items that might be relevant to them, however tempting and interesting it might be to document the contents of boxes of papers with a detailed description of each item. Few archives have the necessary staff to do this. Similar considerations apply to conservation: treating an individual object to the highest degree can take many hours and the expertise of many staff members; unfortunately, resourcing and budgetary constraints mean that this is not always possible.

The IMAC award placement gave me an invaluable opportunity to learn about the complexities of managing museum collections, beyond making them accessible to the public and conserving them for the future. All of the collection managers and staff were generous with their time and knowledge, and gave me vital insights into the sector. I'm sure that my time in Melbourne will continue to influence my perspective for years to come, and I hope to be able to build a lasting relationship and links between the cultural collections of the University of Melbourne and the research and cultural collections of the University of Birmingham.

Erin Holder is studying for an honours degree in history at the University of Birmingham. She has worked at the National Archives (UK) and Kensington Palace, and has volunteered at Kew Palace and Aston Hall (a Civil War-era mansion in Birmingham). You can read Erin's blog posts from her four weeks working with the University of Melbourne's collections at <https://behindthedisplaycase.wordpress.com/>.

- 1 Looted Art Commission, 'Washington Conference Principles on Nazi-Confiscated Art', 3 December 1998, www.lootedart.com/MG7QA043892 (viewed 3 October 2019).
- 2 Collections Trust, 'Spoliation reports from UK museums', London: Collections Trust, <http://records.collectionstrust.org.uk/> (viewed 29 September 2019).
- 3 Caroline Parry, 'Restitution back in spotlight', *Museums Association: News Analysis*, issue 119/01 (1 January 2018), www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/news-analysis/01012019-restitution-back-in-spotlight.
- 4 Royal Academy of Arts, *Oceania*, 2018, www.royalacademy.org.uk/exhibition/oceania (viewed 29 September 2019).
- 5 Christopher Le Brun, quoted in Hannah Furness, 'Royal Academy asks tribal leaders to bless "stolen" treasures in culturally sensitive exhibition', *Telegraph*, 21 September 2018.
- 6 'Awaken exhibition opens in Arts West Gallery', Faculty of Arts *Past News*, 26 October 2018, University of Melbourne, <https://arts.unimelb.edu.au/news/past-news/awaken-exhibition-opens-in-arts-west-gallery> (viewed 28 September 2019).