

# Displaying chemistry

Katherine Grayson

Having been lucky enough to receive the Universitas 21 International Museums and Collections Award, I embarked on my exchange placement at the University of Melbourne Cultural Collections in September 2015. My month-long internship involved a broad range of projects, working with a variety of collections and developing different skills, and was invaluable in helping me decide where, as a recent graduate, I wish to go from here.

The project seemingly furthest from my comfort zone was with Dr Renée Beale and the Chemistry Cultural Collection. Many of the 300 artefacts in this collection are of historical significance, due to their association with important figures in chemistry at the University of Melbourne, across Australia and, indeed, internationally.<sup>1</sup> Having fully embraced the arts over the sciences at school as soon as was humanly possible, I was sure I would be completely out of my depth. However, it was eye-opening to cross the discipline divide and appreciate the potential of this area of museums and collections.

My task was to update a small display on the ground floor of the School of Chemistry Building. From my first meeting with Dr Beale, I began to understand some of the

factors to be considered when creating an exhibition—both in general, and specifically when exhibiting scientific artefacts. In choosing our exhibits, we had to decide on a theme and consider practical questions such as the size of the cabinet and allowing space for descriptive panels. We followed the maxim ‘less is more’, believing that a relatively spare display is more attractive and informative than a jumbled, potentially confusing one. In the Chemistry Building this is particularly important because of the

location of the display case, situated as it is beside a busy staircase and doorway: a display needing too much concentration and time from passers-by would be counterproductive. Additionally, the nature of the collection means that many potential exhibits can be harmful under certain circumstances. For example, displaying a chemical that reacts with light in a spot-lit cabinet could have disastrous consequences! Solving these more specific problems helped me appreciate that each



**Opposite:** Sample of deuterium oxide ( ${}^2\text{H}_2\text{O}$  or  $\text{D}_2\text{O}$ , also known as heavy water), c. 1940s. CH 160, School of Chemistry Collection, University of Melbourne.

**Right:** Katherine Grayson. Photograph by Brian Allison.



exhibit presents its own challenges, so it is crucial to be flexible in responding to them.

We initially decided on the theme of ‘world wars’, selecting items related in some way to either World War I or II. These were a brass tube from a locomotive boiler, sent to one of the university’s chemistry professors during World War I, with a request for help in solving a corrosion problem, and a sample of heavy water (used in nuclear reactors to create weapons-grade plutonium) from a Norwegian plant that was blown up by the Allies in World War II.<sup>2</sup> However, in beginning my next task—writing labels describing the artefacts and their significance—I could find almost no information about the brass tube. This resulted in a label that was short, dry and disjointed. So we decided that our display would be more effective without it, which showed how things don’t always go as expected and you need to be prepared to alter your plans.

For an English literature graduate, creating the label for the heavy water sample was easier said than done! But I found that I could draw upon my research and writing background, especially for recognising what information is important, and for editing. This impressed on me how transferrable such skills are, and

built my confidence about using my abilities in a wide range of applications. Moreover, approaching the label-writing as (far) less than an expert was beneficial, as I began with the basics and didn’t assume any knowledge on the part of the reader.

Our final task was to design and create a stand to hold the sample, one that would both show it off at its best and safeguard it from falling. This was very hands-on and taught me how important it is to think creatively when you have limited time and resources. We then decided how to arrange the cabinet itself, including whether altering the shelf positions from the previous display would work better for ours.

It was very satisfying to see a project through from beginning to end, and gain practical experience in developing exhibitions. Further, I learnt that I can work effectively in an unfamiliar discipline, and that it’s always good to ask for help when you’re struggling. I’d previously made the mistake of associating museums and collections work with the arts only; this project made me aware of the huge breadth of museum work and the possibilities therein. I feel enormously lucky to have been given this opportunity, and this article shows just a small amount of what I have gained from it.

Katherine Grayson holds a degree in English literature from the University of Birmingham. She plans to work in the education and interpretation area of museums.

The **Universitas 21 International Museums and Collections Award** is a collaboration between the University of Melbourne and the University of Birmingham. Each year a student from each institution spends one month working with the collections and museums of the partner university. Since 2010, ten students working in museums, heritage, collections and conservation have benefited from this opportunity to broaden their horizons.

For more information on the **School of Chemistry Cultural Collection**, visit <http://museum.chemistry.unimelb.edu.au/>.

- 1 On the collection generally, see Petronella Nell, ‘Rediscovered: An introduction to the School of Chemistry Collection’, *University of Melbourne Collections*, issue 4, June 2009, pp. 28–33, [www.unimelb.edu.au/culturalcollections/research/collections4/nel.pdf](http://www.unimelb.edu.au/culturalcollections/research/collections4/nel.pdf); and Michelle Gee, ‘Launch of chemistry virtual museum’, *University of Melbourne Collections*, issue 14, June 2014, pp. 54–5, [www.unimelb.edu.au/culturalcollections/research/collections14/13\\_Collections14-News.pdf](http://www.unimelb.edu.au/culturalcollections/research/collections14/13_Collections14-News.pdf).
- 2 To read more about the heavy water specimen, see Trevor McAllister, ‘Rare gases, heavy water and mutton-bird oil: Three tales from the School of Chemistry Collection’, *University of Melbourne Collections*, issue 10, June 2012, pp. 38–43, [www.unimelb.edu.au/culturalcollections/research/chemistry.html](http://www.unimelb.edu.au/culturalcollections/research/chemistry.html).