

# Reimagining the collections

## New uses for the University of Melbourne's cultural collections in teaching and learning

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The wealth of cultural collections owned by the University of Melbourne provides many opportunities for enriching teaching and learning for students. As custodian of some of the oldest, largest and most significant tertiary-based collections in Australia, the university has the privilege of being able to offer its community a wealth of resources that can involve students in such pedagogical approaches as object-based learning.

Although object-based learning has been practised at the University of Melbourne since its establishment in the 1850s, as evidenced by the origins of many of the collections as teaching aids, more recent international recognition of the pedagogical value of objects has reaffirmed the importance of the university's diverse collections. This in turn has prompted a reimagining of the ways in which they can be used.

The University of Melbourne's cultural collections (of which there are more than 35) can be broadly categorised into two groups.<sup>1</sup> The first consists of collections that were formed for teaching purposes and are still used by students and academics in traditional ways. The Harry Brookes Allen Museum of Anatomy and Pathology, for example, still performs the same role (displaying

and interpreting human tissue specimens to train aspiring doctors and other health professionals) that it played at the time of its formation in the early 1880s. Collections such as the Baillieu Library Rare Book Collection and the University of Melbourne Archives are actively used for teaching and research, as envisaged at the time of their establishment in the late 1950s and the 1960s respectively. Pressed and dried plant specimens in the University of Melbourne Herbarium are still used to teach botany students how to identify and classify plants. As such, the value and relevance of such collections continues to be recognised by the university's wider community, and by the departments responsible for their care and curatorship.

The second group consists of historical legacy collections that, although recognised as significant for their intrinsic value and for their embodiment of the history of particular academic disciplines and the individuals associated with them, today have limited recognised usefulness in the traditional teaching sense. Changes in technologies and pedagogical approaches have seen their relevance diminish over the years. Made up of little-used natural history specimens, or obsolete teaching aids, equipment and

apparatus, today these collections have a less well defined role to play in the teaching programs of the faculties or departments that created them. Examples include scientific instruments now held in the Ed Muirhead Physics Museum, glass laboratory vessels in the School of Chemistry Collection, theodolites and sextants in the Surveying and Geomatic Engineering Collection, mineral specimens in the F.A. Singleton Earth Sciences Collection, and all of the Computing and Information Systems Heritage Collection.

However, at the broader university level, these collections still have a relevance to core teaching and learning activities. By looking beyond the traditional context in which these collections were formed, it is possible to reimagine their potential use—across many disciplines and in new ways. Equally pertinent is the opportunity to develop new uses for those collections that continue to be used in traditional ways. Both categories of collections have the potential to enrich the learning of a much greater number of students from across the university. For this reason, the university has been endeavouring to foster non-traditional approaches to the use of *all* its collections.

Les Fils d'Emile Deyrolle (France, est. 1831),  
*Borage (Borago) Boraginaceae* (Botanical model  
of borage flower), c. 1900, papier mâché, paint,  
wood, metal; 53.5 × 46.5 cm. University of  
Melbourne Herbarium.

The large collection of botanical models  
dating from the late 19th and early 20th centuries  
is now being explored for its value in teaching  
breadth subjects in the Faculty of the  
Victorian College of the Arts and Melbourne  
Conservatorium of Music.



One of the leaders in this area  
has been the Ian Potter Museum of  
Art. The Potter is the university's  
flagship public-facing museum,  
which offers a diverse program of  
contemporary art exhibitions, as well  
as exhibiting the university's own  
sizeable art collection, including the  
Classics and Archaeology Collection.  
In conjunction with this public role,  
the Potter also plays an important  
part in teaching and learning. Its  
Academic Programs Unit connects  
academics and students—from  
across the diversity of disciplines and  
courses offered—with the University  
of Melbourne Art Collection and  
the Potter's temporary exhibitions  
program.

The Academic Programs Unit  
supports approximately 60 distinct  
subjects from 20 faculties and schools  
each semester. Students studying  
engineering, law, information  
technology, environmental science,  
music, education, arts, medicine,  
dentistry and health sciences learn  
by using the collections. In the  
seven years that this program has  
been running, it has broadened  
the Potter's relevance beyond the  
traditional arts-based student and  
academic cohort to a much greater  
cross-disciplinary audience. This has  
been achieved through innovative  
ways of interpreting and connecting

the collections to the objectives of academics for teaching and learning.

One area with which the Potter has made especially strong connections is health sciences. The Visual Arts in Health Education program, developed in collaboration with the Faculty of Medicine, Dentistry and Health Sciences, encourages students to use works of art to explore various conceptual and ethical issues in medicine and health care, and also to improve their clinical skills, such as observing symptoms and communicating with patients.<sup>2</sup>

Other opportunities to open up the collections to non-traditional uses are provided by breadth subjects offered by the university. Now an integral part of the Melbourne Model degree structure (a relatively broad bachelor's degree followed by a more specialised and vocational master's degree), breadth subjects require undergraduate students to follow an academic interest outside their main area of study, thus broadening their knowledge and ways of thinking to embrace curriculum content, conceptual thinking and pedagogical approaches that can greatly differ from those in their main area of study.<sup>3</sup> A biosciences student might learn a musical instrument or foreign language; a law student might study physics. Each faculty offers a range of breadth subjects to the

general undergraduate population. Of these, a number focus on the collections, such as Knowledge, Learning and Culture, offered by the Melbourne Graduate School of Education. Through tutorials based on up to 12 different collections during the course of the semester, this subject gives students the opportunity to experience and work directly with the collections. At the same time, students study theories of learning and teaching, especially those related to the value of object-based learning.<sup>4</sup>

The Faculty of the Victorian College of the Arts and Melbourne Conservatorium of Music (VCA&MCM) offers the breadth subject Drawing with Anatomy as an intensive during summer and winter breaks, which attracts a large number of students from a wide variety of disciplines. Held in collaboration with the Harry Brookes Allen Museum of Anatomy and Pathology, this subject gives students access to that collection, which is normally open to health sciences students only, to draw wet and plasticised specimens, as well as participate in life-drawing classes. Based on this success, the VCA&MCM is investigating broadening the scope of collections used in its breadth teaching, such as offering access to the University of Melbourne Herbarium and the Tieg

Zoology Museum for an additional drawing subject.

For those collections that are now largely redundant as teaching resources in their traditional contexts, these types of collection-based breadth subjects are providing a new relevance. For example, the large and significant collection of 19th- and early 20th-century botanical models that have long been outmoded as aids for teaching botany will, through one of the VCA&MCM breadth drawing subjects, again play a more active role in formal teaching and learning.

Another example of a collection that does maintain a strong pedagogical relevance to its traditional user groups, but is expanding its reach into non-traditional territory, is the Baillieu Library Print Collection. Based around a core of significant Renaissance and Baroque-era prints donated by Dr J. Orde Poynton in 1959, the collection has traditionally been used for teaching art history and art curatorship subjects. Of particular note is the postgraduate advanced art history subject The Print Room, in which students devise a proposed print exhibition based on the collection. But the print collection is increasingly being incorporated into a much wider range of Faculty of Arts subjects. The rich and varied subject matter of the

Unknown artist, *Lucifer's new row-  
barge*, c. 1721, engraving and etching,  
30.6 × 20.1 cm (plate). 1959.4484, gift of  
Dr J. Orde Poynton 1959, Baillieu Library  
Print Collection, University of Melbourne.

This engraving satirising Robert Knight  
(1675–1744) and the South Sea Bubble is  
one of the collection items finding a new  
teaching purpose in the Faculty of Business  
and Commerce.

prints makes them useful in teaching  
courses such as Global Literature  
and Postcolonialism, A History of  
Violence, and Sourcing Emotions:  
Texts, Concepts, Histories, as but a  
few examples.

Beyond the Faculty of Arts, the  
value of the print collection for  
teaching in the Faculty of Business  
and Economics is also being explored.  
The history of printmaking; the ways  
in which prints are viewed, displayed,  
interpreted, bought and sold; and  
the many subjects they depict can  
all be used to investigate various  
financial and economic concepts. For  
example, original 17th- and 18th-  
century prints depicting well-known  
historical financial booms and crashes  
such as the tulip mania of the 1630s  
and the Mississippi and South Sea  
financial bubbles of the 1720s are  
used to illustrate a lecture on financial  
bubbles. These prints offer students  
tangible and vivid evidence and  
genuine context for the economic  
theories they are studying.<sup>5</sup>

One of the most prominent recent  
projects at the university that has  
significantly increased the broader  
use of the collections is the award-  
winning new Arts West building.<sup>6</sup>  
Completed in mid-2016, Arts  
West is now the main teaching and  
learning hub for the Faculty of Arts.  
The philosophy underpinning this



Display on level four of the Arts West building, featuring objects from the Grainger Museum, Ian Potter Museum of Art, F.A. Singleton Earth Sciences Collection, and a reproduction of a detail from *The triumph of time* from the *Triumphs of Petrarch*, c. 1565, by Philips Galle after Maarten van Heemskerck, Baillieu Library Print Collection. Display curated by Fiona Moore and Jenny Long. Photograph by Lee McRae.

building's design was object-based learning, which has increasingly gained currency over recent years at the University of Melbourne. Taking inspiration from similar programs at University College London and other

international universities, the Faculty of Arts in particular has built upon its long history of using objects for teaching and learning by embedding cultural collections in the curriculum. This is being achieved through close

collaboration between Arts Faculty staff, both academic and professional, and collection managers from across the university. The building hosts displays of relevant collection items in numerous exhibition cases spread across the majority of its circulation areas, in specially designed object-based learning labs, and in a dedicated gallery space.<sup>7</sup> These displays are curated to support the faculty's teaching and research programs. The building's curatorial team has created displays of a diverse range of objects drawn from across the university's collections, greatly increasing students' exposure to collection material well outside their areas of study. For instance, fossils from the F.A. Singleton Earth Sciences Collection help illustrate the concept of time in subjects covering history, art history, cultural studies, and the history and philosophy of science. An early 19th-century sewing box from the Grainger Museum is being used to explore the role of women in society as represented in the writings of Jane Austen, for the subjects Reading Western Literature and Gothic Fictions.

An outstanding success story in efforts to promote use of the collections in teaching has been the Museums and Collections Projects Program. With more than



50 participants annually and many more seeking placements, this program offers students, alumni and interested people from the wider community the opportunity to work behind the scenes with the university's collections. Each year the program offers a range of carefully developed collection management projects that are designed to provide an educational, professional experience that is also of real use to the managers of the collections. Projects range from cataloguing and research, to significance assessment and preventive conservation, through to interpretation and exhibition development.<sup>8</sup> The program also ties in directly with teaching and learning more formally through the option for students (from the University of Melbourne and other tertiary institutions) to work on projects to fulfil internship requirements for degrees such as art curatorship, museum studies and librarianship. Informally, however, it presents students with learning opportunities to gain practical experience and new vocational skills that can help increase their future employability in a competitive labour market. In these ways the now little-used specimen collections, obsolete teaching aids, and equipment and apparatus that were once essential to teaching

science, for example, are playing an important new role in educating students in art curatorship, cultural materials conservation and museum studies.

To sum up, through new ways of using the cultural collections in a broad range of cross-disciplinary teaching and learning activities, the University of Melbourne is ensuring that students today are benefiting from the legacy of more than 160 years of collecting. Pedagogical changes have resulted in a shift of relevance away from traditional user groups for some collections. But the many and varied ways in which the collections are increasingly being reimagined for use in object-based learning and the Cultural Collections Projects Program revive their relevance to the greater university community and beyond—both now and into the future.

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1 See University of Melbourne, *Museums and collections*, <http://museumsandcollections.unimelb.edu.au/>.

- 2 Heather Gaunt, 'Narratives of ageing and "the telling of life stories"', *University of Melbourne Collections*, issue 20, June 2017, p. 76. For further information on the use of the collections for teaching and learning in health sciences, see also Heather Gaunt, 'Friday essay: Can looking at art make better doctors?', *Conversation*, 16 December 2016, <http://theconversation.com/friday-essay-can-looking-at-art-make-for-better-doctors-70484>; and Heather Gaunt, 'Medicine and the arts: Using visual art to develop observation skills and empathy in medical and dental students', *University of Melbourne Collections*, issue 11, December 2012, pp. 37–9.
- 3 Amanda Burritt, 'See, think, wonder: Using the cultural collections to bring breadth to education', *University of Melbourne Collections*, issue 15, December 2014, p. 20.
- 4 Burritt, 'See, think, wonder', p. 20.
- 5 Kerriane Stone, *Bursting a bubble: Using prints to teach finance and economics*, Special Collections blog post, 27 September 2017, <http://blogs.unimelb.edu.au/librarycollections/2017/09/27/bursting-a-bubble-using-prints-to-teach-finance-and-economics/>.
- 6 For information on the awards won by the Arts West Building, see *Arts West building design wins award for excellence in educational facilities*, Faculty of Arts, University of Melbourne, 18 July 2017, <http://arts.unimelb.edu.au/news/arts-west-building-design-wins-award-for-excellence-in-educational-facilities>. For a description of the building, see ARM Architecture, 'The Arts West building: A contemporary *Kunst und Wunderkammer*', *University of Melbourne Collections*, issue 20, June 2017, pp. 6–11.
- 7 See Andrew Jamieson, 'Object-based learning: A new way of teaching in Arts West', *University of Melbourne Collections*, issue 20, June 2017, pp. 12–14.
- 8 University of Melbourne, Museums and Collections Projects Program, <http://museumsandcollections.unimelb.edu.au/projects>.