Museums and Collections Projects Program 2021

University of Melbourne

School of Chemistry Collection

Project Description

Cataloguing and Rehousing project, School of Chemistry Collection

The Project

This project offers students the opportunity to become involved in the cataloguing and rehousing of items from the School of Chemistry Collection. The project contributes to and helps facilitate the digitisation of these collection materials onto the electronic catalogue and will aid in the accessibility, long-term preservation, storage and appreciation of the collection.

Background

The School of Chemistry Collection comprises over 600 items used for chemistry teaching and research at the University of Melbourne from the 1850s to 1960s. It includes glassware, measuring and experimental apparatus, burners, chemical samples, balances, catalogues and lecture notes. Many items are of historical significance due to their association with key figures in the history of Australian science such as Frederick McCoy, Ernst Johannes Hartung, David Orme Masson and John MacAdam. A small selection of items is on display at any given time, while most of the collection, which is in storage, may be viewed by appointment or via the online catalogue.

The School of Chemistry has always maintained historical objects and equipment as valuable teaching resources for students. In a recent appraisal of approximately 100 historical pieces of equipment (some of which were still being used in some capacity for research and teaching), it was decided that due to their historical and scientific value they should be included in the existing School of Chemistry Collection. The teaching resources include hazardous chemicals in hand-written labelled bottles, synthesised at the University and equipment such as early pH meters, spectroscopy instruments, standard cells and balances made by the most prominent scientific companies of the late 1800s and early 1900s. The collection also includes the original sales catalogues in which some of this equipment appeared. This project will catalogue and rehouse these items so they can be included in the on-line catalogue of the Collection.

Details

Working in consultation with the Manager, Teaching Laboratories and Conservation Programs Coordinator this project will focus on documenting objects in the School of Chemistry Collection that have not previously been catalogued. Some of the items include hazardous chemicals and these will require appropriate labelling and packaging. The items are currently stored in the school's main building and it is required that the student/s work alongside and seek guidance on chemical handling from highly trained staff. As part of the cataloguing process, it will also be necessary to document and record details of the original sales catalogues that form part of the collection. In addition to cataloguing the objects and completing related tasks eg. digitally imaging, numbering etc., where appropriate the student/s will be required to rehouse the objects to meet museum standards. This will involve assessing the condition of the collection materials and then rehousing in archival boxes, folders, jackets and other appropriate enclosures. Once rehoused, labels will be generated that identify the contents of each box. After the electronic cataloguing of the new items has been completed these records will become part of the Collection's database.

A basic understanding of collection management principles specific to the documentation of museum objects (progress towards the completion of a degree in Art Curatorship/Conservation or previous volunteer experience with an Archive, Museum or Historical Society is desirable). Background knowledge in science or chemistry would be ideal due to the nature of some of the materials in the collection. Knowledge of the correct procedures for the safe handling of objects

is required as this position requires the handling and close inspection of object and archival materials. Good communication and writing skills are needed.

Benefits

The opportunity to work closely with a University of Melbourne cultural collection which includes a diverse range of items. Satisfaction in working closely with the School of Chemistry's collection and seeing the collection fully catalogued. The application of collection management principles to the University's cultural collections is necessary to enhance our long-term understanding, management, accessibility and appreciation of the collections.

Supervisors

Rob Ennis-Thomas, Manager Teaching Laboratories, School of Chemistry
Jason Benjamin, Conservation Programs Coordinator, Museums and Collections
Helen Arnoldi, Museums and Collections Projects Coordinator