

Museum Metadata Exchange Update

August 2011

The landmark Museum Metadata Exchange (MME) digital program is reaching the end of its initial phase with over 1,000 collection descriptions ready for upload to Research Data Australia. The result of a close collaboration between the Council of Australasian Museum Directors (CAMD) and Museums Australia (MA), the project has been hosted by the Powerhouse Museum and funded by the Australian National Data Service (ANDS) under the National Research Infrastructure Strategy Program and the Super Science Initiative.

The MME project grew from a desire on the part of CAMD and MA to increase online access to the humanities collections held in Australia's museums, in much the same way as has been achieved for biodiversity collections via the Atlas of Living Australia.¹ This interest coincided with the desire of ANDS to add information from cultural collections to Research Data Australia, its online discovery service for research academics. The ANDS investment has allowed a modest, but potentially far-reaching, start to the work of releasing the enormous, and to date relatively untapped, humanities resources held in museums across Australia.

The need to make this information more accessible to researchers in the humanities, arts and social science fields has presented participating museums with an interesting challenge. Museums have been used to cataloguing and organising their collections object by object; academics, on the other hand, want to be able to identify the relationships between these objects and their field of research. The solution was to rethink collections by identifying groups of objects unified through people, places, events, technologies and other relational criteria.

In the process of conceptualising these collections, donated collections and collections already assembled for exhibitions were identified and written up fairly quickly. Far more creativity was needed by museum staff in identifying other notional collections within their institutions' larger catalogue. With the assistance of the MME's Data Analysts, Lynne McNairn and Julie-Anne Carbon and Project Coordinator, Dan Collins, over 950 collection level descriptions have now been assembled. Although up and running for a relatively short period and relatively unpublicised, the MME website, at <http://museumex.org/> has already had several thousand hits with a large number of visits emanating from universities here and overseas.

¹ The Atlas of Living Australia, which was initiated by CAMD in 2005, is supported by the CSIRO and a wide range of biodiversity collections in museums, universities and Government agencies. See www.ala.org.au/. It has received substantial funding as a capability area under the Federal Government's Strategic Research Infrastructure program.

A browse through the Museum Metadata Exchange website reveals collections which touch on every aspect of Australian life from fashion to sport, from war to life on the home front and from pipes to computers. Congratulations are due to the staff of the following museums for their efforts in preparing high quality collection descriptions which far exceeded the quota required by ANDS:

- Australian Centre for the Moving Image
- Australian Museum
- Australian National Maritime Museum
- Australian War Memorial
- Historic Houses Trust NSW
- History SA
- Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory
- Museum Victoria
- National Film and Sound Archive
- National Museum of Australia
- Powerhouse Museum
- Queensland Museum
- South Australian Museum
- Sovereign Hill Museums
- Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery
- Western Australian Museum

Some museums have begun to include images and further details of significant objects within the described collections. In addition, a promising start has been made in broadening the base of participants in the MME by harvesting readily available descriptions of collections in regional museums from the Collections Australia Network (CAN).

Early testing of the MME collection level descriptions with university partners at Monash and RMIT has elicited positive responses from academic researchers.² Those who had not used museum collections before were impressed with the potential research data which could be brought into the academic domain. Most saw the concept of accessing information about museum collections online, alongside other academic resources, as 'potentially powerful' and 'a useful tool at the beginning of a project, to help establish what's available in a particular field or class of material' outside the usual sources. The workshops also elicited useful advice about how the collection descriptions and associated search engines might be enhanced to meet academic needs. Further workshops are planned for Flinders University, Adelaide and the University of Sydney.

With the current funding for the MME project coming to an end, discussions have already begun on sustaining and extending this start. One of the main aims of the project was to encourage museums to become self-sufficient in developing and uploading further collection descriptions and enhancements directly to the MME and RDA sites. This need is being met through the development of a module to manage collection level descriptions as an integrated part of collection management software. Due to ANDS ownership requirements, this work has been undertaken with Australian-

² Academics participating in the MME workshops were from a range of fields including History, Australian Studies, Indigenous Studies, Art, Design, Architecture and Medical Anthropology.

based KE-EMu only; it is anticipated that the open-source nature of the module will see it picked up progressively by other collection software producers.

A group with representatives from MA, CAMD, ANDS, the project technical advisory team, the Universities and the Academy of Humanities has been set up to explore the future of the MME concept. It will meet in September to discuss opportunities to broaden the scope of project participants and the development of additional tools including a collective thesaurus.

As the first humanities project funded by ANDS, the MME project has proven to be a successful and timely initiative. The effectiveness of its approach drew favourable mention in the recent exposure draft of the *2011 Strategic Roadmap for Australian Research Infrastructure*.³ For the first time, the Roadmap included a 'capability' area aimed at supporting the digitisation of cultural collections 'by assembling state-of-the-art digitisation technology and expertise'. This was linked to a 'Cultures and Communities' capability which aims to make a range of humanities-based data, including material for cultural collections, discoverable and reusable. CAMD and MA will push for funding for these interconnected aims over the coming months.

The success of the MME project has allowed the museum sector to make a number of important points about:

- the depth and breadth of research resources in Australia's collections;
- the distributed nature of these collections and the critical need to enhance access using digital tools;
- the value of these research resources to academics from a variety of disciplines;
- the potential for collections to inspire new and innovative approaches to humanities topics;
- the willingness of museums and their peak organisations to work together to make these collections accessible; and
- the opportunities for museums and academic researchers to work more closely in the future.

Over time, it is anticipated that the potential shown by the MME project will further illustrate the need to resource the development of a national program to make Australia's cultural collections systematically discoverable and accessible online.

³ 'Digitisation Infrastructure', Department of Innovation, Industry, Science and Research, *2011 Strategic Roadmap for Australian Research Infrastructure*, June 2011, p.37 at http://www.innovation.gov.au/Science/ResearchInfrastructure/Documents/2011_Roadmap_Exposure_Draft.pdf

Meredith Foley
CAMD Executive Officer
August 2011