Opening Doors to Humanities Research – the CAMD/MA MME Project

At a symposium on Material Culture at the National Museum of Australia in 2008, Dr Mike Smith noted that "many historians will walk past objects to reach the archival records, photographs and audio recordings which seem to represent a richer vein of information about the past".[1] Dr Smith suggested at the time that this was mainly a matter of training or disciplinary orientation on the part of historians and other humanities researchers. A closer consideration of the reasons for the relative neglect of museum collections by humanities, arts and social science researchers throws up another, even more fundamental, problem.

Museum collections, particularly those of interest to humanities, arts and social science researchers, are highly heterogeneous and are most often organised object by object, in accordance with provenance and historical context, rather than by their relationship to other objects which may highlight events, historical periods, people, communities and places. This approach to registration and classification makes excellent sense from a museum perspective but has proven challenging for academic researchers to penetrate; with many still relying on individual relationships with museum staff and physical access to identify relevant cultural and historical collections.

In the burgeoning digital research environment, researchers need efficient and effective online access to the material culture, associated data, archival and audio-visual collections held by museums. They also need tools for using that information productively, for repurposing it and for sharing and collaborating with their colleagues using that information. The success of CAMD's collaboration with other natural science collecting organisations and institutions, which resulted in the highly successful *Atlas of Living Australia (ALA)* (www.ala.org.au/), has amply demonstrated the value of museum metadata projects.

Museum Sector Collaboration

The pressing need for a humanities version of the *ALA* provided the starting point for the development of the Museum Metadata Exchange (MME) which is a joint project on the part of the Council of Australasian Museum Directors (CAMD) and Museums Australia (MA). The project is funded by the Australian National Data Service (ANDS) which is, in turn, supported by the Australian Government through the National Collaborative Research Infrastructure Strategy Program and the Education Investment Fund (EIF) Super Science Initiative.

---

[1] Transcript, 'Viewpoints on Material Culture', 2008 National Museum Collection Symposium. www.nma.gov.au/audio/detail/viewpoints-on-material-culture/. Accessed 29 November 2010.

The Project's Steering Committee is jointly chaired by CAMD Chair, Margaret Anderson and MA National President, Darryl McIntyre. This CAMD/MA partnership is particularly significant as it is the first step towards building museum collaborative 'muscle' so that a greater sharing of collection data and expertise can be instituted across the nationally distributed collection and peak museum bodies will present a strong coalition to Government. The Steering Committee is also grateful to have active representation from the Australian Academy of the Humanities, partner universities and partner museums.

The project is being hosted by the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney where a Project Team consisting of a Project Manager (formerly Ingrid Mason but, from 1 December, Dan Collins), two Data Analysts, Lynne McNairn (based at the Powerhouse Museum) and Julie-Anne Carbon (Museum Victoria), and Alex Johannesen, Technical Developer, are hard at work under Project Leader, Seb Chan.

Objectives

The basic goal of the CAMD/MA MME Project is to assist partner museums to create collection level descriptions which can then be directly accessed by researchers through the Australian Research Data Commons (ARDC) and explored further via contact with the participating museum.

The practical steps towards this goal include:

- site visits by the Data Analysts to each museum partner to assist in the process of identifying and preparing collection level descriptions in a standardised format ready for harvesting;
- creating a virtual exchange capable of feeding collection level descriptions into the Australian Data Research Commons (ARDC);
- establishing routine capture and publication of museum collection descriptions using methods which integrate with the collection management system in each museum;
- working closely with individual academic researchers, academies and universities to identify research priorities and common search terms; and
- exploring the provision of a common collaborative thesaurus as a two-way service to assist museum data providers and to facilitate effective searching by researchers.

Museum Participants

In seeking museums to participate in this ground-breaking project, CAMD and MA needed to satisfy the ANDS requirement that partners had the resources and capacity to begin preparing and publishing this data without delay and were able to contribute strongly to meeting the ANDS quota of seven hundred collection level descriptions online by the project's completion in mid-2011.

Current project participants are the:

- Australian Centre for the Moving Image
- Australian Museum
- Australian National Maritime Museum
- Australian War Memorial
- Historic Houses Trust NSW
- History SA
- 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

Significantly, this is the first ANDS-funded public data scheme focussed on cultural and historical collections and researcher communities in the humanities. CAMD and MA are grateful that ANDS has invested with confidence in this first step and hopes to use this project to demonstrate the potential for follow on projects with positive implications for the wider museum and research sectors. While the initial project will represent a modest start on releasing the enormous and relatively untapped resources in Australia's collections, it will build infrastructure, tools and services which hold the potential for a sustainable and expanding program. It is anticipated that the model created will lead, over time, to the development of a national program to make Australia's cultural collections systematically discoverable and accessible.

On Site

The site visits by the Project's energetic Data Analysts, Lynne and Julie-Anne, have been in full swing over the past few months. The preparation of collection level descriptions for publication is a new departure for many of the museums involved in this project. Despite this initial challenge, Lynne has noted that "museum peers have enjoyed thinking about describing their collections at this broader level and moved quickly to identify these collections". The project has in fact given staff a good opportunity "to identify commonality and diversity across collections".

So far the types of collections identified are far-ranging covering such diverse groupings as trade unions, surfing, the America's Cup, glass plate negatives, Barrossa German settlers, Australian computing, Lawrence Hargrave, Polish Dance costume, the Weatherley Sisters Circus Archive, Aboriginal paintings, x-ray technology and the Jenny Kee fashion collection.

Following their visits, the Data Analysts are continuing to work closely with each museum team to assist in relation to collection description creation, web publication and harvesting. Support material and model collection level descriptions are being added to continually, along with other guidance material covering automatic harvesting and manual data gathering; all of which can be found on the MME project website: www.powerhousemuseum.com/museumexchange/. The website also provides an interactive forum for sharing and solving problems encountered during the project by all partners.

Outcomes

It is envisaged that the project will have a number of beneficial outcomes for museums and academics:

- the MME will assist **collection managers** to gain further expertise in creating, managing and sharing data in a form which can be directly accessed by Australia's research community and which will encourage collaboration across museums;

- the MME will raise the profile of **museum research** repositories and enhance their value in research, education and policy input;

- the MME will allow **researchers** to discover collections hitherto below the radar of online academic and generic search engines, to gain a sense of the full range of resources available in museum collections and to transform their topics and methodology with hitherto hidden perspectives;

- the data held by ARDC will lead researchers back to the **source museum** and potentially foster new research collaborations between museum and scholarly researchers; and

- the ARDC can also potentially feed data back to institutions about **researcher's use of the collections**; highlighting the value of this data and allowing museums to better align with researchers.

Museums have long known that material culture can provide a unique perspective on history, art and social science disciplines. Dr Mike Smith quotes Delia Falconer who wrote that, focussing on objects is like 'walking though the back door of history, you don't necessarily end up at the front

door of the same house'.[2] A member of one museum MME team recently echoed this observation, noting that the accessibility of collection level descriptions will help direct researchers down new pathways, away from well trodden traditional approaches and potentially open new doors on historical enquiry and methodology and the use of museum collections.

To keep up to date on the progress of the MME project visit the website at:

www.powerhousemuseum.com/museumexchange/

For further information about the CAMD/MA Museum Metada Exchange Project you can contact:

- Dr Meredith Foley, MME Executive Officer, Ph: 02 9412 4256; Mob: 0438 890 902; email: mfolwil@bigpond.net.au
- Ms Lynne McNairn, MME Data Analyst, Ph: 02 9217 0246
- Ms Julie-Anne Carbon, MME Data Analyst, Ph: 03 8341 7607

Project team group email: museumex@phm.gov.au

Meredith Foley

November 2010

---

[2] Ibid.