

SIGNIFICANCE IN A NUTSHELL

Significance is a way of investigating, defining and communicating the meaning and importance of individual collection items and entire collections. An item's significance is made up of its history, uses, and the aesthetic, scientific social and spiritual values it holds for past, present and future generations.

To communicate significance, we use standardised criteria and procedures to assess and describe such values. This communication is often called a Statement of Significance. A Statement of Significance uses the objective descriptive data contained in the item record and the tangible knowledge about the item obtained through the acquisition process to make an argument for the item's cultural value and importance to the collection.

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO DOCUMENT SIGNIFICANCE?

Assessing and describing the significance of a collection item or an entire collection:

- provides a framework to make informed and consistent decisions about your collection
- assists your organisation to prioritise resources
- assists in identifying key messages to communicate to your audience
- substantiates funding applications

Including significance information in the catalogue ensures that it is documented and stored in a centralised fashion and is accessible to inform collection management decision making.

THE BUILDING BLOCKS OF SIGNIFICANCE

The publications *Significance* and *Significance 2.0* are national frameworks for galleries, libraries, archives and museums to assess and articulate an item's significance. You can use the information documented in your catalogue records to assess your items against the Significance criteria.

The four Primary Criteria serve to articulate the item's inherent cultural value:

HISTORIC SIGNIFICANCE

Historic significance can be determined using the information in the **Contextual or Historic Information** fields of Victorian Collections. Ask yourself:

- Is the item associated with a particular person, group, event or activity?
- Does it tell us something about a historic theme?
- Does it contribute to our understanding of a period or place?

AESTHETIC SIGNIFICANCE

Aesthetic significance can be determined using the information in the **Physical Description** fields of Victorian Collections. Ask yourself:

- Is the item well designed, crafted or made?
- Is it original or innovative?

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SCIENTIFIC OR RESEARCH SIGNIFICANCE

Scientific, research or technical significance can be determined using the using the information in the **Contextual or Historic Information** fields of Victorian Collections. Ask yourself:

- Do researchers have a current or potential interest in this item?
- Which particular things about this item constitute scientific interest or research value?

SOCIAL OR SPIRITUAL SIGNIFICANCE

Social or spiritual significance can be determined using the using the information in the **Contextual or Historic Information** fields of Victorian Collections. Ask yourself:

- Is this item presently of special value to a community group?
- How is this demonstrated?
- Has your organisation consulted the community about the importance of the item for them?

The five **Comparative Criteria** serve to evaluate the degree of significance, and can also modify or support the **Primary Criteria**:

PROVENANCE

Provenance can be determined using the information in the **Provenance** section. Ask yourself:

- Is this item's ownership, origin and production well documented?
- Do you have information documenting who owned or made it, or when and how it was used?

RARITY

Rarity can be determined using the information in **Contextual or Historic Information**. Ask yourself:

- Is this item singular or unique?
- Does it have special qualities that distinguish it from other examples of this item?

REPRESENTATIVENESS

Representativeness can be determined using the information in **Contextual or Historic Information**. Ask yourself:

- Is this item a typical or characteristic example of its type or class?

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CONDITION OR COMPLETENESS

Condition or Completeness can be determined using the information in **Physical Description** and the **Condition** section. Ask yourself:

- Is this item in unusually good condition for its type?
- Is it unusually intact or complete?
- Does it show evidence of use or repairs?
- Is it still operational?
- Is it in an original and unrestored condition?

INTERPRETIVE CAPACITY

Interpretive Capacity is determined by the item's relevance to your organisation's purpose and interpretive priorities, and to other items in the collection. This could be identified using **Subjects** to identify like themes throughout your collection or through the **Relationships** tab which will reveal that connections between objects and stories they tell as part of a collective.

Based on the answers to these questions, you can start to write a **Statement of Significance**. There is no set length or format for **Statements of Significance**; this will depend on the item itself, including how significant it is, and how much information you have available about it. You can find example **Statements of Significance** on pages 26-27 of *Significance* and pages 25 and 41 of *Significance 2.0*.

FURTHER RESOURCES

Significance: A Guide to Assessing the Significance of Cultural Heritage Objects and Collections, Heritage Collections Council - [https://www.significanceinternational.com/Portals/0/Documents/\(significance\)2001.pdf](https://www.significanceinternational.com/Portals/0/Documents/(significance)2001.pdf)

Significance 2.0: A Guide to Assessing the Significance of Cultural Heritage Collections, Collections Council of Australia - https://www.arts.gov.au/sites/default/files/significance-2.0.pdf?acsf_files_redirect

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