

Australian criteria for assessment of significance of items and collections

A summary overview compiled by Margaret Birtley Consulting, with input from Significance International Pty Ltd.

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Significance assessment is the process of researching and understanding the meanings and values that items and collections have for people and communities.

Australia has a well-recognised system for assessing the significance of movable cultural heritage. The system is set out in two books:

Significance: a guide to assessing the significance of cultural heritage objects and collections, (Heritage Collections Council, Canberra, 2001) ([PDF version](#))

Significance 2.0: a guide to assessing the significance of collections, by Roslyn Russell and Kylie Winkworth, (Collections Council of Australia, Adelaide, 2009) ([PDF version](#))

The Australian approach uses eight criteria (or key values) to help reveal and describe how and why the item is significant. There are four Primary criteria and four Comparative criteria:

Primary criteria

- **Historic.** An item or collection may be historically significant for its association with people, events, places and themes. Historically significant items range from those associated with notable people and important events, to objects of daily life used by ordinary people. They include items that are typical of particular activities, industries or ways of living. Historically significant items may be mass produced, unique, precious or handmade.
- **Artistic or aesthetic.** An item may be artistically or aesthetically significant for its craftsmanship, style, technical excellence, beauty, demonstration of skill, and quality of design and execution. Artistically or aesthetically significant items may be unique or mass produced.
- **Scientific or research.** An item or collection may have research significance if it has a major potential for further scientific examination or study. This criterion tends to apply chiefly to biological, geological and archaeological material, but may also apply to documentary collections (e.g. archives and photographic material).
- **Social or spiritual.** Items have social significance if they are held in community esteem. This may be demonstrated by social spiritual or cultural expressions that provide evidence of a community's strong affection for an item or collection, and of how it contributes to that community's identity and social cohesion. Items may acquire social significance with the passage of time and through particular events or activities that demonstrate present-day community esteem. Some items have intrinsic spiritual qualities for particular groups of people and belief systems, and are referred to as sacred objects. Social or spiritual significance is only for living, contemporary value, and is always specific to a particular identified group of people; if the social value has ceased to exist, the item may nevertheless hold historical significance.

Comparative criteria

- **Provenance.** Provenance means the chain of ownership and context of use of an item. Knowing this history enables a more precise assessment. Provenance is central to establishing historic and social significance. An item may be significant because its provenance – a documented history of its existence, ownership and use – gives it a context in society at large, or in the more personal world of a known individual.
- **Rarity or representativeness.** An item may be significant either as a rare, unusual or particularly fine example of its type, or because it represents a particular category of objects, or activity, way of life or historical theme. It is possible for an object's significance to be rated as both rare and representative.
- **Condition or completeness.** An item may be significant because it is unusually complete, or in sound, original condition (that is, possesses intactness or integrity). Changes or adaptations made in the working life of an item do not necessarily diminish significance, and in fact are also recognised as an integral part of the item and its history.
- **Interpretative capacity.** Items and collections may be significant for their capacity to interpret and demonstrate aspects of experience, historical themes, people and activities. Some items may have very limited significance under the primary criteria but are significant for their potential to enable the owner to interpret and illustrate particular themes, people or ideas.

The Statement of Significance

After a ten-step process of research that includes consultation with knowledgeable people, the assessor records which criteria (or values) apply to the item or collection. The resulting significance is the sum of all applicable values and is expressed in a lucidly written 'Statement of Significance' (SOS), which is signed and dated.

It is important to note that perceptions and information change such that an item assessed as insignificant may be found to be of significance in the future, and vice versa.

Depending on the audience, the SOS may identify:

- The relative *degree* of significance (High / Medium / Low).
Note: An item lacks significance if no Primary Criteria are met. In this scenario an SOS is still prepared. (It may be thought of as a Statement of Insignificance, until such time that circumstances change and the item / collection is found to have acquired significance.)
- The *level* of significance (local / regional / state / national / international).
Note: This is a bureaucratic threshold often required in conjunction with applications for public funds.