

Significance assessment: How important is the material in your collection?

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Assessing cultural heritage significance

- Significance assessment is a qualitative technique to **evaluate the relative importance** of cultural heritage items for certain management purposes.
- We know some items are more important than others - but how do we **justify the judgement**?
- The process of significance assessment uses **systematic criteria to establish what is important** about each item.
- It deliberately does not consider the commercial value (or absence of it) of items; it looks for heritage value, ie significance.*
- The end product is a **statement of cultural significance** to summarise the meanings and values of an item in relation to other items.



Japanese map of WA coast, 1942: SLWA: historically significant for its implications for Australian security during WW2.

* Commercial value may be of critical importance in other contexts, but not in the context of significance assessment.

“Significance”

- Significance is judged in 4 fields of value: **historic, aesthetic, scientific [research] and/or social value** which a document, object, site, building or collection has for past, present and future generations.
- These are qualified by 4 more comparative conditions: **provenance, representativeness, rarity and integrity.**
- It is not necessary to find significance in all fields – **one is sufficient.**
- Significance refers not only to the carrier (fabric) of a document. It also incorporates the content: **context, history, uses and its social and spiritual values.**
- Significance assessment **requires knowledge about the item, its provenance, context and comparative examples.** It may be necessary to undertake research to establish enough knowledge to assess significance.
- Significance can apply to individual objects or collections, and to heritage places.
- Significance can grow or fade over time – it requires revision



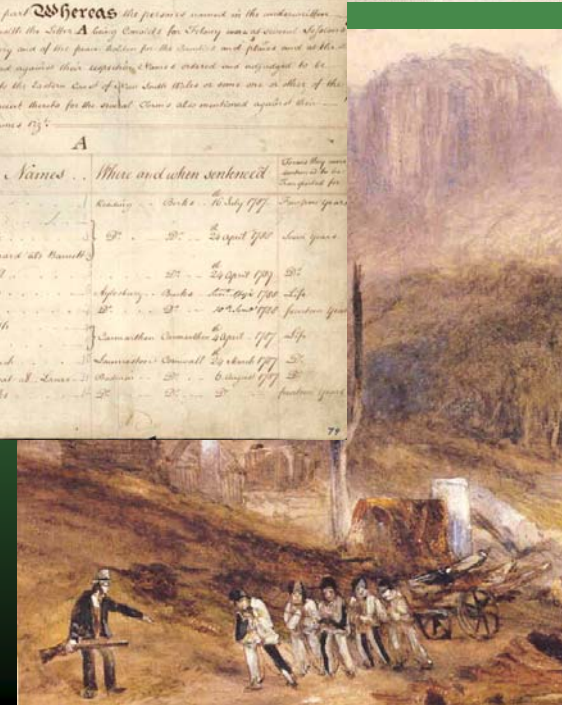
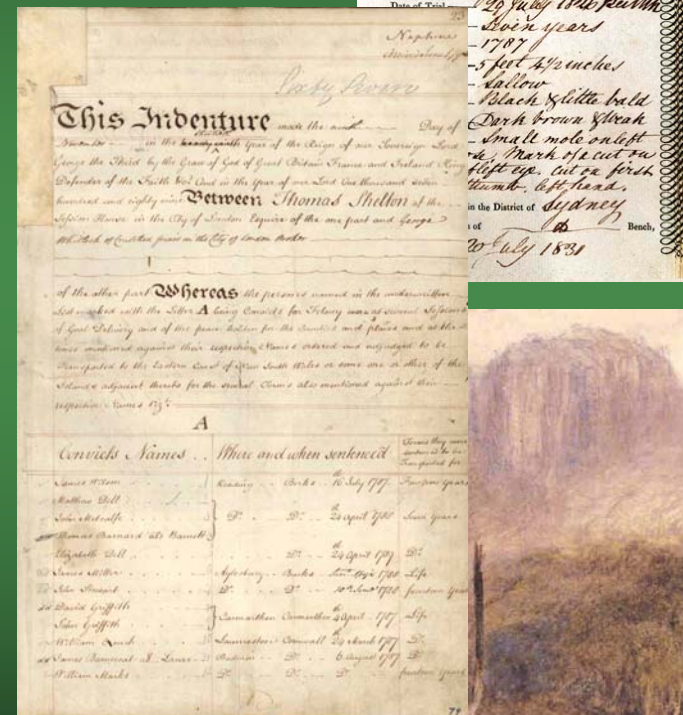
For example: Statement of Significance

Convict Records of Australia: NSW, VDL, WA

- The Australian convict records are of world significance in documenting a period of trans-global forced migration, initiated and managed by the state apparatus of British imperialism.
- They constitute a unique body of documentation of a mass of 18th-19thC working class people at a level of detail rarely undertaken.
- They comprise the most detailed records extant of the legal, philosophical, strategic and operational aspects of an 18th-19thC penal system and its consequences for human rights.
- They open up universally relevant questions of inequality and justice, crime and punishment, individual and social development, in colonial and post-colonial societies.
- In that the convicts became the ancestors of perhaps one third of modern Australia's population, their records are of irreplaceable social significance

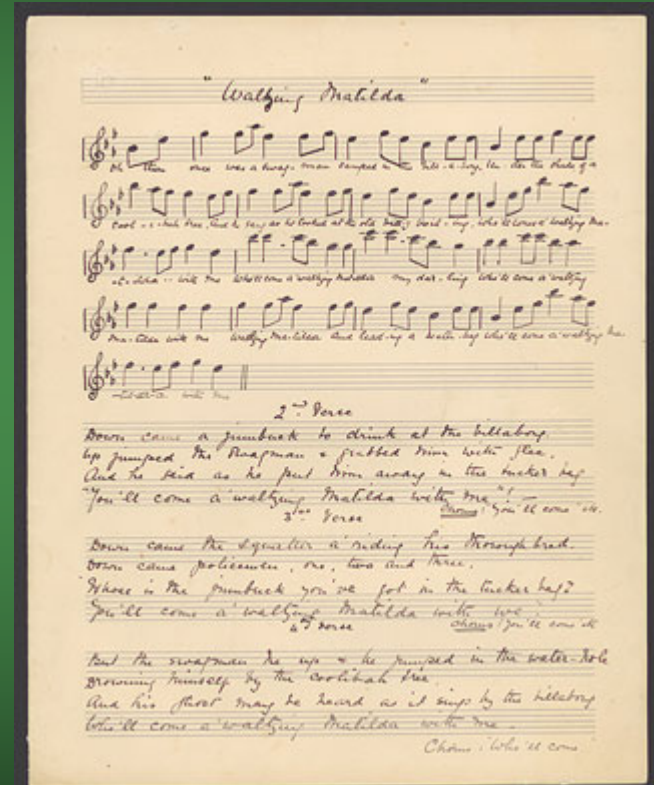
TICKET OF LEAVE.
No. *3778* *29 September 1838*

Prisoner's No. _____
Name, _____ *James Broderick*
Ship, _____ *Maurice*
Master, _____ *Northway*
Year, _____ *1827*
Native Place, _____ *Galway City*
Trade or Calling, _____ *Workman*
Office, _____ *Galway Town*
Place of Trial, _____ *29th July 1827*
Term of Trial, _____ *Seven years*



What are the purposes of assessing the significance of documents?

- Fully understand and articulate the meaning and value of an item/coll.
- Make informed acquisition and deaccession decisions.
- Guide conservation decisions and priorities.
- Demonstrate the quality of the library/archive to funders and stakeholders... eg, via prestige of inscription on the National or International Register of the Memory of the World.



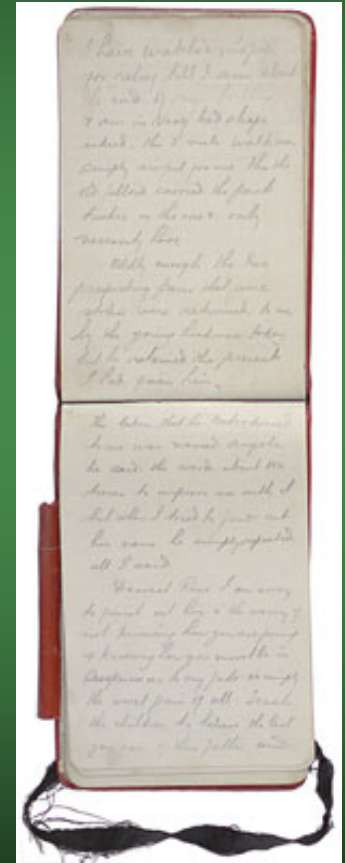
'Waltzing Matilda' score, 1895: SLQ:

The manuscript of Australia's national folk song has high historic and social significance for the growth of Australian national identity in the 1890s.

If it's in a library/archive, isn't it already judged significant?

- Archives/libraries select and acquire material on the basis of it having historical significance and relevance to the institutional mission – therefore worthy of preservation.
- And furthermore, elevating some material to national or world heritage status implies that everything else is insignificant, or of lesser significance.
- Entire libraries/archives should be evaluated, therefore, as having cultural significance automatically.
- Why should we further assess the significance of individual items, or of formed collections?
- Yes! These are real criticisms.

Harold Lassetter's diary has historic and community significance as evidence of one of Australia's most famous gold searches of the 20thC. Both Lassetter and his 'lost reef' have become mythic references for unattainable treasure.

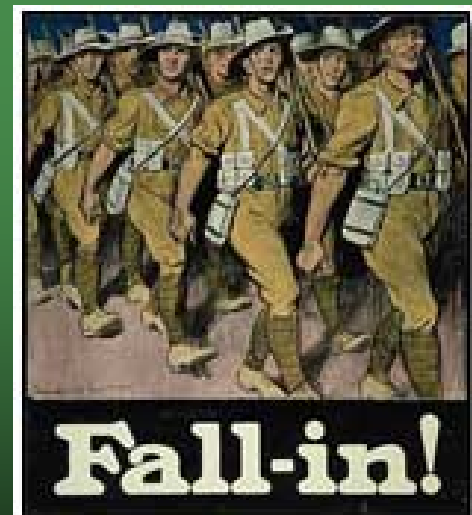


Lassetter's diary, 1931:
SLNSW

But it might still be worth assessing significance...

For collections management purposes, eg:

- Prioritisation of expensive treatments – which item merits treatment first?
- Justification of deaccession – how do we know it's not worth keeping?
- Articulation of what is important and valuable in the collection.
- Make a claim for national or international status on a Memory of the World *Register*.

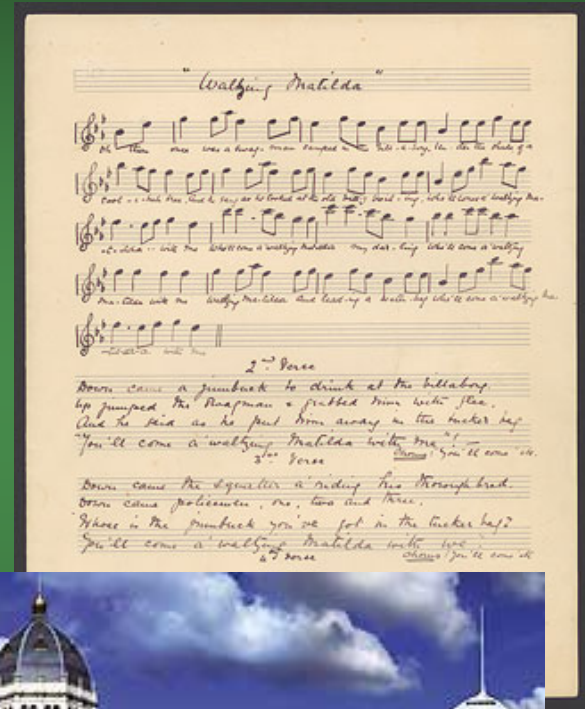


Recruiting posters, WW1, Australia, AWM: They have some historic significance as part of the War effort, despite the anti-conscription vote in 1916.

There is a strategic purpose in assessing significance for listing on MOW registers

- The Memory of the World program of listing documentary heritage on national, regional and international Registers is a **strategic marketing tool**.
- MOW follows the model of the World Heritage Register for places because it has been a phenomenally successful concept.
- National governments love the **fame**; tourists make it a **focus**; sites themselves bask in **recognition**.
- MOW registration is mark of status and esteem – not of exclusive moral quality or truth.

'Waltzing Matilda'
score, 1895: SLQ



Royal Exhibition
Building, Melbourne;
Australia's 1st built
World Heritage site

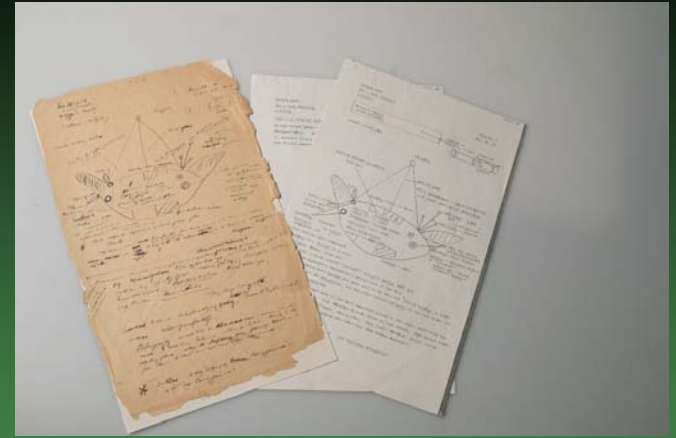


How to assess significance

1. Analyse the object.



Donald Thompson Collection: NT ethnography, 1940s-60s
Museum Victoria



2. Understand its history and context.



3. Compare it with similar objects.

4. Assess significance against criteria.

5. Summarise values and meanings in a Statement of Significance.

Step-by-Step significance assessment



1. Research the document's material / technical / contextual history.
2. Analyse and record fabric: what made of, patterns of wear, repairs, condition.
3. Establish provenance.
4. Identify comparative examples to check your findings against further examples.
5. In the light of this knowledge, assess significance against the criteria.
6. Sign and date your work.

NB: it is impossible to assess significance without deep understanding of the item or collection and comparative material.

The criteria of significance

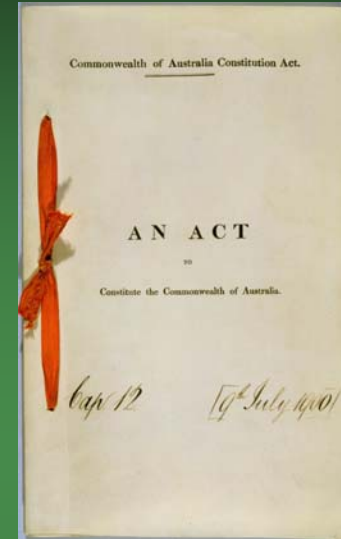
Primary Fields of Significance (Criteria):

- Historic
- Aesthetic
- Scientific or research
- Social or spiritual or community

Comparative Conditions (Criteria):

- Provenance
- Representativeness
- Rarity
- Condition, intactness or integrity

It is not necessary to fulfill all the criteria: just one, at sufficient level, is sufficient to assert significance.



An Act for the Constitution of the Commonwealth of Australia, 1901: NAA

This is a representative specimen of numerous copies of an Act of the UK Parliament, constituting the Australian colonies as the Commonwealth of Australia.



The photo collection has high historic significance as evidence of the lives of children of part-descent removed from their families to 'The Bungalow' in Alice Springs, 1913-47

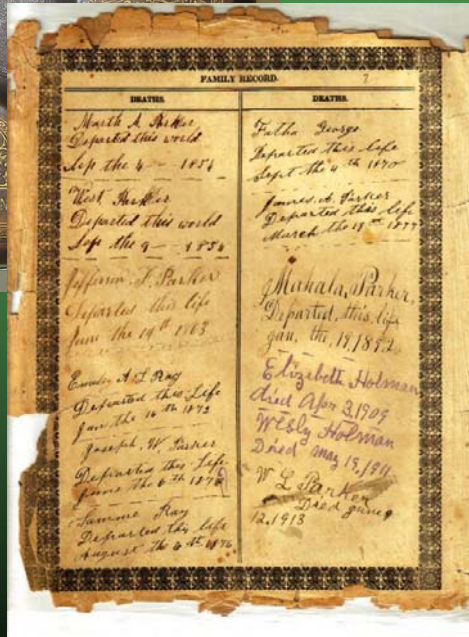


Photos evidencing the 'Stolen Generations': NAA

Historic Significance



Parker Family Bible,
1878: Doyle'sford
Historical Society



- Is the object associated with a particular person, group, event or activity?
- What does it tell us about a historic theme, process or pattern of life?
- How does it contribute to our understanding of a period or place, activity, person, group or event?

The Parker Family Bible is a family record of births, deaths and marriages, 1878-1955. As such it is of considerable social value to branches of the family today. As a representative specimen of a mass-produced fancy Bible, it has historic significance as a specimen of popular family piety in the 19thC.

Aesthetic Significance

- Is the object well designed, crafted or made?
- Is it a good example of a style, design, artistic movement, or an artist's / craftsman's work?
- Is it original or innovative in its design?
- Is it beautiful (by common standards, not personal view)?



15thC
illuminated
mss: SLV



Aesthetic significance tends to be assigned mainly to artworks on account of artistic quality. This doesn't preclude the object also having historic significance. Nor does it preclude good design being judged as aesthetic significance.

Schedule No. 1—Population.

Enumeration of the inhabitants in the Village of Mazonami in the county of Dane State of Wisconsin, on the 1st day of June, A. D. 1905.

998

H. R. Leonard Village Clerk.

NAME	RELATIONSHIP TO HEAD OF FAMILY	SEX	AGE	MARRIAGE	NATIVITY	OCCUPATION				OCCUPATION OF PARENTS
						Year	Trade	Profession	Other	
Huggins	Head	M	38	1867	Wis	Farmer				
Blanchard	Wife	F	35	1870	Wis					
Morris	Head	M	34	1871	England	Farmer				
Robert	Wife	F	32	1873	England					
Morris	Head	M	31	1874	Wis	Farmer				
Morris	Wife	F	28	1877	Wis					
Morris	Head	M	27	1878	Wis	Farmer				
Morris	Wife	F	25	1880	Wis					
Morris	Head	M	24	1881	Wis	Farmer				
Morris	Wife	F	22	1883	Wis					
Morris	Head	M	21	1884	Wis	Farmer				
Morris	Wife	F	19	1886	Wis					
Morris	Head	M	18	1887	Wis	Farmer				
Morris	Wife	F	16	1889	Wis					
Morris	Head	M	15	1890	Wis	Farmer				
Morris	Wife	F	13	1892	Wis					
Morris	Head	M	12	1893	Wis	Farmer				
Morris	Wife	F	10	1895	Wis					
Morris	Head	M	9	1896	Wis	Farmer				
Morris	Wife	F	7	1898	Wis					
Morris	Head	M	6	1899	Wis	Farmer				
Morris	Wife	F	4	1901	Wis					
Morris	Head	M	3	1902	Wis	Farmer				
Morris	Wife	F	2	1903	Wis					
Morris	Head	M	1	1904	Wis	Farmer				
Morris	Wife	F	0	1905	Wis					

Research Significance

also called "scientific" significance, but referring to future scientific research, not to "science"

- Do researchers have an active or potential interest in studying this kind of object?
- How is it possible to predict future research today?
- What aspects make it of research interest?

This criterion derives from the concept of an unexcavated archaeological deposit, which we can be fairly certain will reveal new research data if/when it is further investigated. Consider this idea when you contemplate the scientific / research significance of an item or collection!

Schedule No. 1—Population.

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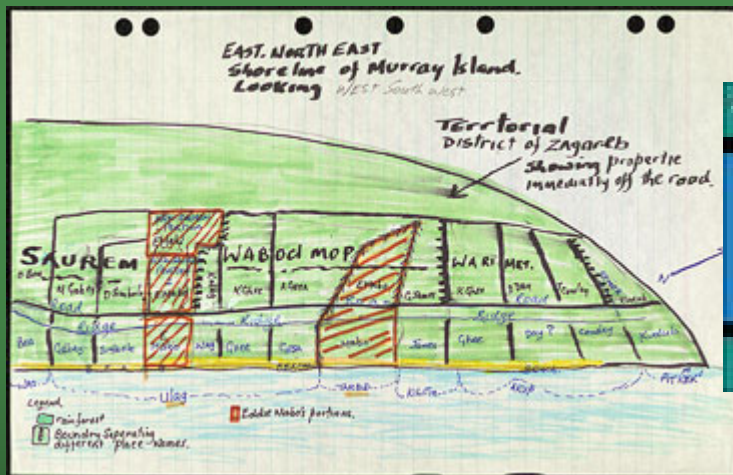
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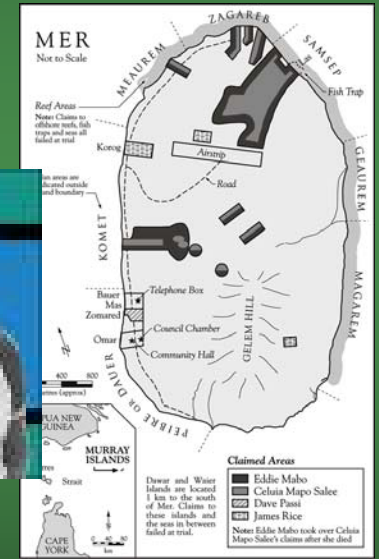
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Social or Spiritual Significance

- Is the object of particular value to a cultural, ethnic or other community today?
- How is this importance demonstrated?
- Has the Museum consulted the relevant community about its importance to them?



Mabo Papers, 1981-92, NLA

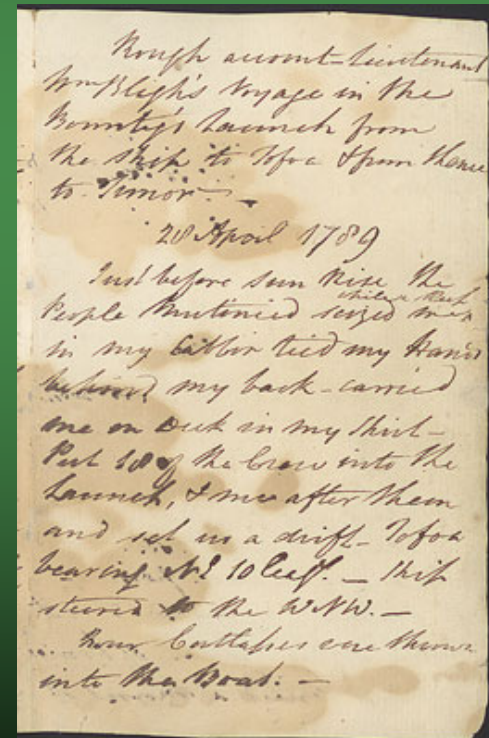


In June 1992 the High Court of Australia, in its judgement in the Mabo Case, overturned the doctrine of 'terra nullius', that Australia was an empty land owned by no one at the time of European colonisation. The judgment unleashed profound change in Australia's legal landscape, and influenced the status and land rights of its indigenous peoples generally. It is an extremely rare instance in world history of pre-existing customary law being recognised as superior to the law of the invading culture, regardless of the economic and political implications. The Mabo papers, 1959-92, are significant for their documentation of a crucial period in the history of race relations in Australia, featuring a series of battles and legal cases over the ownership and use of land, and growing awareness of racial discrimination. The papers are also significant as documenting much of the life, of Edward Koiki Mabo, not widely known in his lifetime but whose name is now a household word around Australia. Inscribed on the *International Memory of the World Register* in 2001.

The comparative criteria: Provenance

- Who owned, used or made the document?
- Where, when and how was it used?
- Is its source well documented?

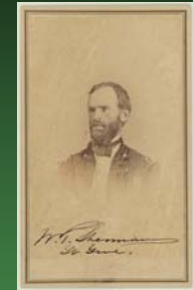
A reliable provenance often provides key evidence of an item or collection's significance. This group of ms and pictorial material documents the Royal Navy life of Captain William Bligh, and was owned by his descendents for many years. Where multiple material is available, a personal association between the subject and the items adds historic and perhaps community significance.



Capt Wm Bligh's Bounty cutter notebook, 1789; portrait miniature by A Huey, 1814: NLA

Representativeness

- Is it a good example of its type or class?
- Is it typical or characteristic?

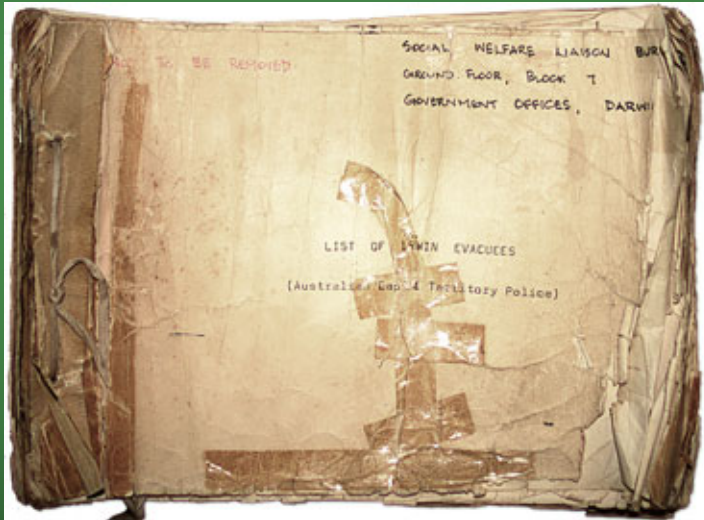


This photo album of the 1860s-70s has historic significance as a good representative specimen in good condition, with a full complement of *carte de visite* photographs. Many are identified.

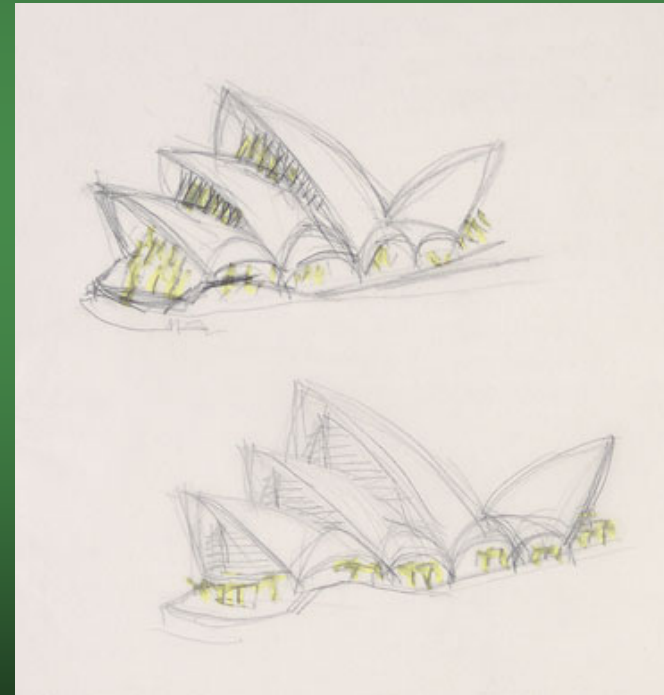
Rarity

- Is it an unusual or specially fine example of its type?
- Is it singular or unique?
- Is it particularly well-documented for its type or group?
- Does it have special qualities that distinguish it from others of its type or group?

List of
Darwin
cyclone
evacuees,
1974-75:
NTL



The List of Evacuees is the single, original document compiled by an official as people were flown out of Darwin after the cyclone. The drawing is one of hundreds of concept sketches for the Sydney Opera House – more significant as a group than as individual items.



Joern
Utzorn,
Sketches
for
Sydney
Opera
House,
1960:
SLNSW

Writing a Statement of Significance

- SoS: a summary of why an item is important.
- Usually introduced by a brief historic statement.
- Record and bring together knowledge and ideas about it.
- Ensure provenance and association details are recorded and considered.
- Reference point in making further decisions about object, eg conservation treatment, display, deaccession.
- Review from time to time: significance may change.

Governor Arthur's 'Proclamation to the Aborigines' in Van Diemen's Land is of great historic significance because it indicates the standards of equitable justice and relationships between settlers and Aboriginal people that were expected (if not practiced) in the Arthur's years in the colony of VDL.



A brief, cogent statement: Gov. Arthur's proclamation, 1830: SLNSW