

POTTER MUSEUM OF ART



CARING FOR COLLECTIONS



University of
Melbourne
Museums and
Collections

About this Resource

Caring for Collections is an extensive resource outlining how the University of Melbourne's Museums and Collections department cares for works of art. Students will gain insight into the key departments, staff roles, and procedures that ensure the incredibly varied works of art from the collections in our care, as well as new acquisitions and loans, are safely managed at all stages of exhibition-making. A variety of artworks from recent exhibitions are used as case studies to contextualise processes of museum-grade storage, conservation and display methods.

This resource links to the VCE Art Making and Exhibiting Study Design, particularly:

Unit 2: Understand, develop and resolve, Area of Study 1, Outcome 1

Unit 3: Collect, extend and connect, Area of Study 3, Outcome 3

Unit 4: Consolidate, present and conserve, Area of Study 3, Outcome 3

Contents

Museums and Collections	3
Careers and Pathways	5
Caring for Collections	12
University of Melbourne Collections	12
Potter Museum of Art	16
Exhibition Case Studies	19
<i>65,000 Years: A Short History of Australian Art</i>	19
<i>A velvet ant, a flower and a bird</i>	25
<i>Ngarn Wa'ngal: Art of the gumtree</i>	31
Resources	44
Acknowledgements	44

Museums and Collections

UNIVERSITY CULTURAL COLLECTIONS

The Museums and Collections department is the custodian of the University Art Collection, the Grainger Museum Collection, and the Indigenous Art and Culture Collection. The University of Melbourne is home to over 15 museums and galleries, and over 30 individual collections spanning visual arts, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural heritage, musical instruments, plant specimens, zoology, archives and more. The University cultural collections are cared for by the Museums and Collections department, faculties and schools, and Student and Scholarly Services. Cultural assets are integral to supporting teaching, learning, research, and engagement across the University by providing students and staff with unique opportunities to learn about contemporary and traditional cultures, scientific discoveries and creative practice. The social and cultural impact of our expansive collections is a fundamental part of the University's [Cultural Commons Strategy](#).

THE UNIVERSITY ART COLLECTION

The University of Melbourne Art Collection is one of Australia's most extensive university collections and comprises over 18,000 works. Spanning colonial to contemporary practice, the collection includes significant holdings of paintings, ceramics, sculpture, and works on paper, with a principal focus on Australian art and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural material. The University Art Collection is displayed in curated exhibitions across a variety of cultural venues and buildings on campus, including at Museums and Collections managed sites, the Potter Museum of Art, Science Gallery Museum, and Buxton Contemporary.



A Learning Experience Facilitator engages primary students for *65,000 Years: A Short History of Australian Art* ▲

TEACHING AND LEARNING

The University's art museums offer collection-based learning and art-focused education through customised teaching and learning programs for diverse audiences. The Academic Engagement team develops and delivers transformative learning and research opportunities for tertiary students across many study areas. The Learning Experiences team provides curriculum-aligned exhibition visits, tours, and workshops for secondary students to spark artistic enquiry and foster the development of transferable 21st-century skills. The Potter Museum of Art is an interdisciplinary site that brings together objects and artworks from across the University's collections, newly commissioned works, and loans from contemporary artists and other institutions.

Careers and Pathways

TEAMS AND ROLES

The Museums and Collections Department at the University of Melbourne comprises multiple teams of staff, some of which are responsible for the presentation and conservation of collections and exhibitions at The Potter Museum of Art.

Collections

Collections Managers
Registrars
Conservators

Art Museums

Curators
Assistant Curators
Curatorial Interns

Exhibitions Management

Exhibition Project Managers
Exhibition Designers
Lighting Technicians
Art Installers

Visitor Services

Audience Engagement Coordinators
Gallery Invigilators

Learning Experiences

Learning and Outreach Manager
Learning Experience Facilitators



University of Melbourne Master of Art Curatorship students collaborate with Museums and Collections staff to curate exhibitions ▲ using works from the University Art Collection.

About the Collections team

There are currently 19 staff members in the Collections team that are working across the following broad Collections focus areas:

- Systems and Documentation
- Storage, Logistics and Collection Management
- Exhibitions, Loans and Access
- Indigenous Collections
- Strategic Projects and Collections Governance
- Repatriation and Compliance



Learn about “What it’s like to study a Master of Cultural Materials Conservation at the University of Melbourne” through this video ▲

TERTIARY PATHWAYS

There are many routes to a career working with museums and collections, as it is an industry that gains a lot of value from involving people of all backgrounds and experiences. The following is a list of some formal qualifications that can be useful in gaining knowledge and practical familiarity with many skills that are applicable when caring for cultural collections:

- TAFE courses in Visual Art
- Bachelor of Arts, Fine Art, Science, Archeology, Anthropology, and others
- Post-Graduate research degree: Honours, Masters, and PhD
- Master of Art Curatorship
- Master of Cultural Materials Conservation
- Master of Arts and Cultural Management



Master of Cultural Materials Conservation students at work in the lab ▲

Dr Holly Jones-Amin

Lecturer in Art History and Art Curatorship



What is your role?

Lecturer in Art History and Art Curatorship where I currently teach Collection Management, Issues in Art Conservation and Art Markets and Methods.

Prior to this role I was the Team Leader/ Senior Conservator for the Objects, Textiles and Archaeology laboratory at Grimwade Conservation Services, University of Melbourne.

What are your formal qualifications?

- Doctor of Philosophy (PhD), Monash Indigenous Studies Centre / and Australian Research Centre of Excellence for Australian Biodiversity and Heritage (CABAH). Thesis: Caution at Caution Bay — conservation of Western-Pacific low-fired ceramics.
- Bachelor of Applied Science (Conservation of Cultural Materials — Objects), University of Canberra.
- Bachelor of Arts (Archaeology), The University of Sydney.

What has been your career pathway to get to where you are?

During my archaeological studies I heard about how archaeological finds had been conserved. I was very artistic and creative and loved working with my hands and wondered if this was something I might be able to pursue. So, I contacted the Conservator of archaeological objects for the Nicholson Museum at the

University of Sydney (now closed and part of the Chau Chak Wing Museum) and started volunteering with her. I also went and worked on an archaeological site in Italy and ended up working more with the conservators than with the archaeologists. Hence my archaeological studies, volunteer work at the Nicholson Museum and archaeological field work in Italy lead me to pursue specialist training in conservation.

After completing my degree in the Conservation Cultural Materials I worked as a Conservator at Artlab Australia (Adelaide) followed by the Heritage Conservation Centre (HCC), Singapore. These roles gave me hands-on experience in conservation, exhibition mounting and community-facing conservation. At Artlab, I developed my skills in conserving objects and project management for exhibitions. I worked on large conservation projects for the South Australian Museum earthquake mitigation works; managing the deinstallation and conservation and mounting of over 1000 artefacts for the Pacific Gallery, and the Egyptian Room, and conserved Indigenous cultural heritage for the Aboriginal Cultures Gallery. In Singapore I also worked on artefacts in preparation for the opening of the Asian Civilisations Museum, specifically I developed a protocol for a Gamelan (Indonesian ensemble, consisting mainly of struck percussion instruments like bronze gongs, metallophones, and drums) to be played in the museum.

I was appointed to Grimwade Conservation Services, University of Melbourne (UoM) in 2004. I built and managed the Objects, Archaeology and Textiles department.

At the commencement of my work at UoM I also had a parallel academic role as the foundation lecturer and sessional teacher in the Masters of Cultural Materials Conservation (2004-2015), coordinating subjects, supervising practicums and minor theses.

Concurrently with my roles at Artlab, HCC and UoM I undertook archaeological fieldwork leading conservation in Syria, Georgia, and Turkey.

I also managed large public projects; archaeological work for the Metro Tunnel,² and the Loong Conservation Project; team-led, community-centred conservation of Bendigo's Imperial dragon Loong; combined museum-based treatments, public symposium and sustainability considerations.³ The conservation and repatriation of a c.3,000-year-old Lapita pottery vessel.⁴

My PhD research strengthened methodological approaches to low-fired ceramics and led to an international book contract (Cambridge Manuals of Archaeology).

Were you always planning to be in the job that you're in right now? Did you ever have different aspirations?

No, my pathway evolved. I started university with aspirations to be a curator. However, with a strong interest in archaeology and how material culture can tell human stories conservation then opened practical, scientific and ethical ways to work with objects. My field and museum experiences, especially work with living communities and the gamelan protocol in Singapore, shifted my focus from being purely object-centric to valuing intangible cultural values and people-centred approaches. So, I combined archaeology, scientific methods, teaching and community engagement into a conservation career I hadn't planned.

What are some of your favourite things about your profession?

- Collaborating with communities and source-communities to ensure conservation respects intangible values.
- Enabling communities to tell their stories through the object I conserved
- The variety: from delicate lab treatments and condition reporting to field first-aid, large-scale outdoor sculpture condition surveys and conservation for exhibitions

- Practical treatments grounded in research
- Teaching and mentoring students; sharing hand skills, critical thinking and ethical practice.
- Seeing tangible outcomes: a conserved object returned to community, rehoused for future research, or repatriated to its community.

What are some interdisciplinary elements of your job?

Conservation is inherently interdisciplinary. Examples include:

- Working with archaeologists, on excavation, documentation, storage and display strategies.
- Working with and finding conservation solutions with curators and collection managers
- Collaborating with archaeological scientists (materials analysis, organic-residue analysts and ancient-DNA researchers) to understand manufacture, use and deterioration of materials.
- Engaging with Indigenous knowledge holders and community leaders to respect intangible values during treatment and display and even use, such as the University of Melbourne possum skin cloak. 5 6
- Project management, tendering and consultancy skills for public projects (outdoor sculpture surveys, outdoor sculpture treatment, museum redevelopments).
- Communication and education: public outreach, classroom teaching, and training practicums.
- Ethical, legal and logistical domains: permits/quarantine, repatriation/rematriation processes and risk assessment for transportation and exhibition.

Practical advice for VCE Art Making and Exhibiting students (and teachers)

- Useful study/skills: studio practice, fine motor skills, observational drawing, basic

chemistry/physics, documentation and clear note-taking.

- Looking and observing everything: notice imperfections in surfaces, look at and question how things are made, from artworks to your shoes.
- Get hands-on experience: museum volunteer roles, work experience in galleries, or short conservation practicums.
- Learn to write clear reports and to photograph works; these are everyday tools for conservators.
- Think holistically about care: handling museum object techniques, packing, light and humidity control, how chemicals interact with the materials objects are made from, how materials objects are made from deteriorate.
- Value the cultural context: ask who an object matters to and why; conservation makes objects last longer so that we can understand ourselves and others better.



Jane Rhodes

Collections Coordinator, Campus Loans



What is your role title?

Collection Coordinator – Campus Loans (Museums and Collections), University of Melbourne

What are your formal qualifications?

Master of Arts (History and Heritage), University of Melbourne.

What has been your career pathway to get to where you are?

While completing my Arts undergraduate degree at the University of Melbourne there was a subject called “History in the Field.” For this subject, I was placed at the State Library to learn about history in the real world – Public History – in a gallery or museum setting, rather than in an academic university setting. Working with curators, exhibition producers, and coordinators as well conservation staff and collection managers, I learnt about selecting objects from a historical collection to tell stories about social history. I also learned how to best care for objects and artworks in a public display setting. Following this subject, I was offered a role in the Exhibitions team. I stayed at the State Library for 8 years, growing my career from a part time assistant into full time role as Exhibition Coordinator.

During this time, I was also interested in contemporary art and in 2007 I had the opportunity to work at the Venice Art Biennale to be a gallery guide at the Australian gallery spaces. Following this amazing experience, I followed a path away from working with historical collections to working with artists and commissioning new contemporary artworks at the Australian Centre of Contemporary Art (ACCA) from 2010 as Exhibition Manager. Other paths along my way also include managing a design studio and working at a commercial gallery.

Now at the University of Melbourne, I get

to combine all my interests and knowledge in caring for historical collections and modern and contemporary art on display in a public environment.

Were you always planning to be in the job that you're in right now? Did you ever have different aspirations?

I've been very lucky to have had career opportunities in some of Melbourne's most important institutions. I've always loved working with a collection of objects and artworks as well as creative people, and I enjoy the nature of putting an object or artwork on display in a public setting. I've been working in this creative sector for 25 years and don't plan to stop now.

What are some of your favourite things about your profession?

Art can really change a room or an environment, and it's always great seeing the reaction people have when we install artwork around campus. Artworks can be transformational.

I also love the idea that I am caring for a collection, making sure paintings and objects are stored or displayed carefully and correctly, but also that they have excellent record keeping and a good label to tell a story once it is on display and seen as intended.

What are some interdisciplinary elements of your job?

In my role in Campus Loans, we have a broad reach across the University and its many buildings and I have relationships with many of the faculties and departments across the campus. By installing University Collection artworks on campus, we can connect the art collection to lots of different people, who are in lots of different roles.

In one day, I can be choosing and installing artwork for the Chancellery, working out an installation plan for artworks to go into the Indigenous Business Unit with curators and staff, and then installing a painting and writing a label for a painting to go on display in an academic's office in the Mathematics and Statistics department. It's fun!

Ashley Perry

Collection Manager, Indigenous Collections



What is your role title?

Collection Manager, Indigenous Collections

What are your formal qualifications?

- Diploma in Visual Art, Fine Art
- Bachelor in Fine Art, Visual Art (Sculpture and Spatial Practice)
- Honours in Fine Art, Visual Art
- Masters of Fine Art

What has been your career pathway to get to where you are?

I have had quite a meandering career path, from working in the service industry to early in my career helping manage an artist's estate to volunteering in small historical societies on collection and curatorial projects. During this same period, I worked for many years as a workshop and gallery technician at several galleries across Melbourne. I also had my own artist and curatorial practice.

Were you always planning to be in the job that you're in right now? Did you ever have different aspirations?

I've always wanted a job like this; in many ways, it's my dream job. However, I wasn't sure if it was possible. I worked on projects and jobs that developed my skills and knowledge towards collection work. I think there are many barriers to a career in the arts and working in museums. I wasn't sure I'd ever be given the opportunity to

enter the industry in a more professional capacity. I thought about studying to become a pharmacist for many years.

What are some of your favourite things about your profession?

There are many things that I love about my job. I'm a real data nerd; part of the work with collections is figuring out how best to describe objects in the collections, learning what the names of techniques, materials, forms, and colours. These form a shared vocabulary across the collection; they help students, researchers, and curators working with the collections find the objects they are looking for. Building out this data can be really helpful in working out how to care for the objects. For example, certain ochre colours can be more fragile, so knowing exactly which objects in the collection are made with those ochres can help us work out how to handle them, how to display them, and what conservation work they may need. Another part of the role that I love is working with Indigenous communities to access objects from their Ancestors in our collections. Helping them find what the university holds in its collections and what information we have alongside the object. It's a real honour to support Indigenous Communities in locating their cultural heritage within collections.

What are some interdisciplinary elements of your job?

Because different disciplines access and work with our collections, much of my role has interdisciplinary elements. Our collections hold all kinds of objects. We were recently supporting collection work with engineers, looking at some of the fish-trap technologies in our collections. This was an opportunity to think about these tools as designed, tested, perfected over the years, built to handle the specific fluid dynamics of the water systems they were made for.

Caring for Collections

At the University of Melbourne

STORAGE

The University of Melbourne Art Collection comprises over 18,000 works of art. The collection is stored at an offsite museum-grade facility that is designed to house materials according to international best practice standards and guidelines.

The dedicated storage facility is climate-controlled to maintain a temperature of 20°C with a relative humidity of 50%. To maintain stable environmental conditions, air locks are installed between storage spaces and external environments to create an extra protective barrier.

Extensive security measures include ensuring that the knowledge of the exact storage locations is classified, that store access is controlled, and that video surveillance and sensory alarms are monitored.

The University's digital Collection Management System stores detailed information about the location and condition of collection objects, ensuring that each item can be tracked, and the location is always known, including while on temporary loan for exhibition or conservation treatment.

Specific storage requirements depend on the object and include painting racks, bespoke padded and vibration-resistant crates, shelving for medium sized works, and plan drawers or Solander boxes for works on paper. All packing and housing materials that are in contact with works are archival quality or chemically 'inert', meaning they will not cause a chemical reaction or degrade over time.

DATABASES

The Museums and Collections department uses a digital collection management system called EMu (short for Electronic Museum) to manage the data and multimedia files for the collections in its care. This system keeps a record of important information, for example, how an object was made, what materials were used, where it is located, conservation and access notes, and its acquisition and exhibition history. It also manages information about loans, lender details, copyright details, and contracts. Importantly, it is considered a legal records repository by the University and meets the security and protection and controls needed for permanent record keeping. Sophisticated access controls are applied to EMu to limit who can view, access, and edit the records, with permissions controlled by collections staff.

While EMu ensures collection information is protected and only used or shared by authorised persons, selected data and images about some works of art are publicly accessible via the [Museums and Collections website](#). The database is managed by the Collections Manager, Systems and Documentation, whose unique skill set comprises an understanding of computer programming and museum practice.

Photographic documentation is critical to managing collections as it provides an

immediate visual reference and reduces the need to handle objects. Photographs are also an essential component to online collection searches and digital access. Three-dimensional scans enhance and diversify the digital accessibility of collection items, and the University hosts multiple 3D files of works of art from the cultural collections on a platform called [Pedestal3D](#).

The University of Melbourne is currently leading important work in digital access as part of the Cultural Collections Nexus Program, which is aimed at developing a cross-collection search that supports access to all [University cultural collections](#) through a shared interface.

Behind the scenes of a collection
digitisation photoshoot ▼



PREVENTATIVE CONSERVATION

Preventative conservation encompasses all the methods museums implement to prevent damage occurring to artworks while they are being stored, transported, handled, installed, and displayed. Collection Managers are responsible for implementing the most appropriate preventative conservation practices for exhibition displays at The Potter, according to the specificities of the works in question. Sometimes, they will refer to professional art conservators for specialist advice if works have unique requirements.

Inherent Vice

Inherent vice refers to the fundamental instability unique to the materiality of every work of art. Virtually all materials will inevitably decay over time, which is the process that preventative conservation is ultimately attempting to slow down.

To manage this, staff need to be well informed about the physical properties of works proposed for display and their current conditions so that they can apply appropriate measures to that object and know the kinds of changes to expect over time.

Condition Reports

A condition report documents the physical details of an artwork with photographs and a written description of any perceptible deterioration or damage, as well as information about previous repairs. Condition reports and inventories are completed by Collection Managers and Conservators to ensure artworks are fit to be displayed and as evidence of their condition before they are transported and exhibited, particularly by another institution. If damage is found, a Conservator is consulted about treatment options.

Environment

Controlling the environment where artworks are stored and displayed is key to effective preventative conservation. The most important principle when managing environments is maintaining consistent temperature and humidity levels, as severe fluctuations can

affect the physical composition of fragile materials. To protect works from the elements they must be housed in adequate storage containers (e.g. museum-grade frames, solander boxes, crates) and be stored, transported and exhibited in spaces that are regulated by climate control systems.

Pollutants

Pollutants contribute to the decay of collection items on display through the air and via direct contact. Airborne pollutants include gasses from wall paint, dust, and even acids from packing materials, and direct contaminants include oils and salt from skin. Art galleries and museums mitigate the exposure of artworks to pollutants in a variety of ways. If gallery walls are painted between exhibitions, an off-gassing period is observed to allow gaseous fumes to dissipate before installing artworks. The HVAC system filters dust from the air, and precious artworks may be housed in Perspex hoods or displayed in glazed frames. Inert, acid-free packing materials are used to store and transport artworks. Visitors are discouraged from touching artworks on display, while art handlers use nitrate-free gloves.

Transport

Collections Managers and Registrars oversee the freight of artworks that are acquired into the collection or transported for temporary exhibition. While digital artworks can be sent via secure online transfer services, specialised art freight logistic companies are contracted to help collect and move physical works from all over the world to the gallery in an effective manner. Depending on the size and type of work, crates, stillages (structures used for separating artworks), and soft packing methods are typically used to move the works safely and protect them from damage. Large works are often transported in parts by truck, plane or sea, and must be reassembled again in the exhibition space according to specific installation instructions. The Collections team is involved in the entire logistical process of moving works from their original location through to their final placement in the store or gallery.

RESTORATIVE CONSERVATION TREATMENTS

While many Museums and Collections staff have extensive knowledge of conservation principles, if a work has been damaged it will most likely require the services of a professional art conservator to be assessed and treated in a specialised lab. The treatment process will be informed by extensive research on the materiality of the work, its present condition, and consideration of the artist's intent. While highly individualised, conservators follow established guidelines, for example, the principle of reversibility, which ensures that any interventions must use materials and techniques that can be safely removed in the future without damaging the original work. Specialities among conservators commonly include works on paper, paintings, objects, textiles, time-based media, and frames or furniture.

Conservation Services

Grimwade Conservation Services is part of the Grimwade Centre for Cultural Materials Conservation at the University of Melbourne and offers a broad range of conservation and restoration services to institutions and private clients. They have also recently opened the Robert Cripps Institute for Cultural Conservation, which will educate and train the next generation of conservators, deliver research, and work in partnership with Australian Indigenous and Asia-Pacific communities. In addition to Grimwade, the University of Melbourne also engages other conservation studios, including International Conservation Services, Care of Studios, Tiaki Objects Conservation, as well as independent specialised conservators. To further explore conservation research and treatment examples, including medium specific before and after images, visit [Grimwade Conservation Service's online portfolio](#).

Caring for Collections

At the Potter Museum of Art

HVAC

The humidity and temperature at the Potter Museum of Art is managed by a HVAC system. HVAC stands for Heating, Ventilation, and Air Conditioning and is a system designed to regulate indoor temperature, air quality (controlling contaminants), and humidity for comfort and safety. The HVAC is controlled by the Building Automation System, a centralised platform that automates and optimises HVAC operations, improving comfort, efficiency, and energy management. An external company manages this system for the University.

TEMPERATURE

20°C +/- 2°C

Artworks are stored and displayed in climate-controlled spaces which maintain a temperature of approximately 20°C at all times, allowing for fluctuations of two degrees either way to account for the influence of external conditions.

HUMIDITY

50% +/- 5%

Relative humidity is maintained at around 50% in all areas where artworks are stored and displayed, as a dry environment may cause artworks to flake, splinter or crack, and a very humid environment promotes unwanted mould and attracts pests.

LIGHTING

Light levels are measured by the unit, lux. Depending on the physical material of an object, artworks can withstand different lux levels for varying amounts of time. Fragile and organic materials like works on paper (drawings, prints, books) can safely be exposed in a low light level environment of 50 lux and are typically stored in a completely light-free container while not on display. Oil and acrylic paintings can be safely displayed within a range of 200-250 lux and are often framed under UV protected glass or Perspex. Sculptures made of stone, marble, or steel do not generally have a lux limit and are sometimes displayed outdoors for long periods of time. At the Potter, LED lighting is installed in the galleries as they are energy efficient, protect against UV damage, and are easier to control remotely than more traditional lighting options.



The interface of the Potter's Building Automation System that monitors HVAC ▲

ARTWORK HANDLING

The Collections Manager – Storage & Logistics is responsible for coordinating the packing and transport of artworks to different locations. Part of this process is implementing appropriate risk mitigation strategies, which may include planning unobstructed walking routes, confirming all documentation is up to date, and ensuring the correct number of trained staff are always present. A specialised art transport company will use a purpose-built van to safely move artworks, which they will deliver to professional art handlers ready to receive and store or install the works at their destination.

Artworks are physically handled by trained museum staff during the transportation, installation, and deinstallation processes. Guidelines to ensure best practice handling of artworks include:

- Wearing nitrile gloves to protect artworks from oils on human skin.
- Using manual handling devices such as flatbed trolleys, scissor lifts, and pallet jacks.
- Employing multiple people to move artworks that are large or unwieldy.
- Installing works using secure, museum-standard materials (frames, museum wax, plinths, vitrines, and bespoke supports).
- Wrapping works of art in inert materials like Tyvek, Cell-air, and bubble wrap, then packing them within specially made crates to minimise vibration during transportation.



Loaned artworks arrive in custom crates which are moved from the loading bay into the gallery spaces manual pallet jack and dolly trolleys via the goods lift ▲

GREEN MUSEUM PRACTICES

Contemporary museums are increasingly conscious of reducing their carbon footprint and use less environmentally destructive materials and practices. To do this, institutional conservation protocols encourage tailoring environmental controls to the requirements of specific objects rather than applying blanket conditions, using sustainable controls rather than high energy solutions, and choosing greener transport practices whenever possible.

ARTWORK DOCUMENTATION

Correct and current documentation is essential to maintain adequate care of an artwork over its lifetime. This includes preparing condition reports each time the work is included in an exhibition or loaned out. Following its display, the artwork is inspected for any changes before it is returned to its owner. In addition to maintaining a record of its condition and assessing any treatments the work may need, this process also serves as a legal document for insurance purposes.



Collections staff using nitrile gloves to work with the Donald Thompson Collection during its relocation to the University of Melbourne ▲

CLEANLINESS

A clean and well-maintained environment is essential to keeping visitors, staff and artworks safe. Risks are mitigated by banning food and drink in gallery spaces, ensuring adequate space around displays for mobility and access, and preventing pests.

PESTS

Many insects and vermin are attracted to natural materials and can cause significant damage to artworks that contain organic matter, including paper, wood, textiles, silk, feathers, and plant matter. To prevent pests from entering the building, museums aim to keep facilities clean by keeping rubbish and food sources away from art storage and display areas. Works of art entering the Potter that may have come into contact with pests (for example, if they were kept in outdoor storage spaces or made from foraged natural materials) may undergo quarantine to ensure that pests aren't being introduced into the building and potentially infect other works. Pest traps are also placed around gallery spaces for monitoring and control.

SECURITY

Gallery attendants or invigilators are museum staff who are physically stationed inside gallery spaces to ensure that visitors are behaving appropriately and not making contact with works of art. Security cameras are also installed for surveillance purposes, which the Front of House staff can view from their desks as a live feed. Sometimes, artworks are fitted with alarms or locks that prevent them from being physically removed. Small and portable objects, like sculptures, are often displayed under acrylic hoods to protect them from theft or damage.

TIME-BASED MEDIA

Contemporary artworks that include video, film, slide, audio, performance, or computer technologies are referred to as time-based media because they have duration as a dimension and unfold to the viewer over time. Collecting, preserving, and exhibiting these artworks poses complex technical and ethical challenges for conservators. Instability and change are inherent to these artworks, since the original artist-selected equipment and technologies may fail and become obsolete. Digital works may be stored in multiple different formats and locations to protect them from digital file corruption. Certain technologies important to the functioning of an artwork, such as specific screens or projectors, are often sourced in multiples as backups. Artists may also leave instructions for alternative equipment that can be used to show the work (for example, screen size, output resolution, aesthetic characteristics).

Exhibition Case Studies

65,000 Years: A Short History of Australian Art

This landmark exhibition celebrated the brilliance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art while confronting the dark heart of Australia's colonial and postcolonial history. The exhibition featured more than 400 works, including rarely seen works of art and cultural objects from the University of Melbourne's collections, 194 important loans from 78 private and public lenders and six new commissions.

EXHIBITION DESIGN

The curators adopted a 'maximalist approach' for *65,000 Years*, so they could fit in as many artworks and cultural objects as possible in the spaces that were available. In six months, over 54,000 visitors came to view the exhibition.

Exhibition design plays an important role in ensuring that both the works and visitors are safe and protected. An important element to consider is that there is adequate space for movement between works of art, walkways, museum furniture, and display equipment like plinths or vitrines. Adequate space reduces the risk of visitors bumping or knocking into artworks on open display. Some gallery spaces feature temporary walls built especially for this exhibition, while others did not. For the Western and Central Desert gallery space, the curators chose not to build temporary walls to ensure that the audience had the best sightlines of the works on display and to mirror the spaciousness of the Australian deserts. To accomplish this, central display cabinets were chosen to display 2D and 3D works behind glass to ensure that fragile works were not touched. The exhibition designers worked with the curators to ensure the space surrounding works measured at least 1.2 metres to adhere to accessibility guidelines for wheelchair users, and for large groups of visitors.



Installation view of *65,000 Years: A Short History of Australian Art*, Potter Museum of Art, the University of Melbourne, 2025. Photography by Christian Capurro.

CULTURAL CONSULTATION

For *65,000 Years: A Short History of Australian Art*, University curators and collections staff worked together to consult with various artists, arts centres, Indigenous corporations, and communities of origin to obtain cultural permission to display the 400 objects and works of art.

Cultural consultation encompasses complex and often delicate negotiations with artists, their descendants, custodians and stakeholders and is conducted over extended periods of time. When dealing with works of art by unidentified or deceased artists, locating a descendant or custodian who is authorised to speak for the work can be fiendishly difficult. Consultation is easier if longstanding authentic relationships have been established. It is essential to provide all relevant information and generous time allocations. Consultation correspondence for this exhibition included information about the concept and development of the exhibition, the nature of the request, and the specific context of display (design, display methods, and other works in the specific exhibition section).

Existing policies, frameworks and guidelines inform the cultural consultation that was undertaken for this exhibition:

- [The University of Melbourne's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultural Heritage Policy](#)
- [The National Association for the Visual Arts \(NAVA\): Principles, Ethic and Rights, "First Nations Recommended Processes"](#)
- [Creative Australia: Protocols for using First Nations cultural and intellectual property in the arts](#)

CONSERVATION AND PRESENTATION OF CULTURAL MATERIALS

Bark Paintings

65,000 Years included a selection of important bark paintings from two of the University's uniquely important collections of Indigenous art and culture: The Donald Thompson Collection and Leonhard Adam Collection. Most of these 1930s and 1940s barks were from East Arnhem Land or Groote Eylandt and their display required direct cultural consultation with custodians from the artists' communities of origin. Other cultural considerations included determining where to place certain works in relation to others, for example, in language, clan, moiety or gender groupings.

Grimwade Conservation Services were engaged to assess and prepare the bark paintings so that they could be displayed safely and effectively. This process included cleaning the works and consolidating earth pigments on the painting's surface. Early bark paintings are composed of earth pigments bound with orchid bulb and other vegetal fixatives rather than synthetic binders, making them prone to surface exfoliation (lifting from the surface). Conservators employ materials that are as close as possible to what would have originally been used and ensure that their conservation treatments are reversible.

An example of preventative conservation is the mounting method used on bark paintings. As they are composed of organic materials, bark paintings are very responsive to changes in temperature and humidity and are prone to move and flex. Constricting barks using improper mounting methods can lead to splitting or cracking as their curved shape naturally contracts or expands in certain environments.

Yolngu bark paintings from the Donald Thompson Collection were installed with custom mounts formed a 'spine' structure along the verso of the work and were designed to allow for some flexibility in movement. The Anindilyakwa bark paintings from the Leonhard Adam Collection sat on two metal clips that form a ledge and are secured with one upper clip, making them appear like they are floating on the wall. Some barks were not included in the exhibition as they were deemed too fragile for display without casing. The care of artworks in a public institution must carefully balance the dual need to preserve cultural objects for as long as possible, as well as provide access to them for communities of origin, visitors, students and researchers.



Learn more about caring for the Donald Thompson Collection at the University of Melbourne Museums and Collections in this [video](#).



Installation view of *65,000 Years: A Short History of Australian Art*, Potter Museum of Art, the University of Melbourne, 2025. Photograph by Christian Capurro. ▲



Installation view of *65,000 Years: A Short History of Australian Art*, Potter Museum of Art, the University of Melbourne, 2025. Including items from the Donald Thomson Collection, part of the Indigenous Art and Culture Collection, the University of Melbourne. Gift of Mrs Dorita Thomson, 1973. Photograph by Christian Capurro. ▲

Mandy Nicholson's *Possum skin cloak* 2012

Possum skin cloaks are profoundly significant cultural objects in South East Australia that symbolise connectedness to Country. Wurundjeri Wilam artist Mandy Nicholson was commissioned to create a cloak for the University of Melbourne in 2012 to be used in official ceremonies. In recognition of the cloak's importance and the need to think about its longevity, a protocol for use was developed by conservators and the artist outlining the requirements for storage, display, and repair.

The protocol provides an ongoing record of the cloak's use and changes to its condition and identifies the artist and her daughters as the future repairers of the cloak. As this cloak is both a work of art and a cultural object that serves an important function, instructions on how to handle the cloak are imperative to ensure that it lasts as a usable ceremonial garment for as long as possible. Cultural protocols are essential in determining the ethical care and conservation of works of art. The protocol was presented as an academic paper at the International Council for Museums (ICOM) Committee for Conservation Conference in 2017 and is free to access via ICOM(CC)'s online publication website.

Recommendations for wearers of the possum skin cloak include:

- Handle the cloak with washed hands free of moisturiser.
- Wear a scarf or shirt collar around the neck to prevent body soil, hairspray, perfume and makeup from soiling the fur.
- Avoid eating and drinking in the cloak to prevent stains and food residues, and not consuming alcohol while the cloak is being worn.
- Wear the cloak with the fur on the outside if the weather is inclement, as advised by the artist.

Protocol for storing the possum skin cloak include:

- Folding the cloak three times over a flat roller in an archival plastic costume box.
- Maintaining a pest-free environment.
- Conservation treatment of the cloak: repair of the cloak, for example restitching the designs, is confined to the artist and her descendants.

Read more about Mandy Nicholson's *Possum Skin Cloak* 2012 [here](#).



◀ Installation view of *65,000 Years: A Short History of Australian Art*, Potter Museum of Art, the University of Melbourne, 2025. Featuring Brett Leavy, *Virtual Narrm* 1834 commissioned by the University of Melbourne, 2023 with support from Creative Australia; Mandy Nicholson, *Possum skin cloak* 2012, commissioned by Melbourne Medical School, the University of Melbourne. Photography by Christian Capurro.

PRESENTING LARGE FORMAT PAINTINGS

Ngangkari Ngura (Healing Country) 2022 was an acquisitive commission for 65,000 Years and is now part of the University of Melbourne Art Collection. The collaborative painting was made by Betty Muffler and her niece Maringka Burton, both of whom are ngangkari, respected traditional healers in their communities. The artists created the work on Country and painted the canvas while it was on the ground. Due to its very large size, the work had to be rolled for transportation to the

Potter Museum of Art. Since the stretched work would not have fitted into the arts lift, the work had to be unrolled, striplined and stretched by professional framers in the gallery space before being installed. At the conclusion of the exhibition, the work had to be unstretched and rolled again for removal from the building.



Installation view of *65,000 Years: A Short History of Australian Art*, Potter Museum of Art, the University of Melbourne, 2025. Featuring Betty Muffler and Maringka Burton, *Ngangkari Ngura (Healing Country)* 2022. Commissioned by the University of Melbourne with support from Peter and Ruth McMullin. The University of Melbourne Art Collection. Photography by Christian Capurro.

Exhibition Case Studies

A velvet ant, a flower, and a bird

A velvet ant, a flower and a bird was an exhibition inviting visitors to rethink intelligence from a non-human viewpoint. The show centred on three familiar natural figures—ants, flowers, and birds—each rich with symbolism that invites discussions across philosophy, ethics, cognition, literature, history, science, and politics. This was an expansive exhibition and open to interpretation.

Every museum floor was dedicated to one entity, creating a garden of knowledge where historic and contemporary art in multiple mediums demonstrated that intelligence is living, evolving, interconnected, and interdependent.

The exhibition featured works from University of Melbourne collections, including Classics, Biology, and Art, alongside loans from private and public collections, plus new commissions and performances by Australian and international artists. This historic and contemporary art mingled in a non-linear, non-hierarchical arrangement, encouraging visitors to form their own connections.

Curated by Professor Dr Chus Martínez, Head of the Institute of Art Gender Nature, FHNW Academy of Arts and Design, Basel, Switzerland, the show reflected her passions for pedagogy, literature, philosophy, and art.

EXHIBITION DESIGN

Guest curator, Dr Chuz Martínez and the exhibition team at the Potter worked with architect and exhibition designer Nyugen Le to unify the three levels of the exhibition to communicate curiosity and play. The design aesthetic was inspired by the Italian Memphis Design movement of the late 1980s. This movement rejected modernism and minimalist design principles in favour of unusual forms in bold colours. Leaving the gallery walls completely white, Le designed a series of plinths and shelves using vibrant colours and intersecting geometrical forms that showcased a vast array of artworks in various mediums and materials. These designs enabled groups of visitors to get close to the objects at various, accessible heights. Custom mounts and armatures were created to secure many small sculptures, allowing them to be on open display without Perspex hoods or bulky display cases. Where artworks did require additional protective measures, Perspex covers and domes were seamlessly integrated into the design of the display tables.

The exhibition also incorporated a large number of moving image works. Each video work was integrated into the flow of the exhibition. This meant that there were no projectors, and no darkened film spaces. Rather, the digital and analogue works within the exhibition were seen at the same time. This acknowledges the idea that the digital is part of our world now and cannot be separated from it.



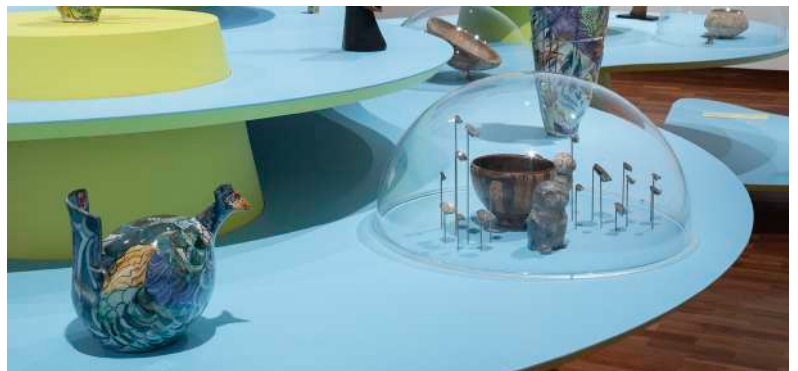
Multiple 3D renders were created to show the final designs of the exhibition display benches. ▲



Custom mounts were created in the form of rubber coated metal armature to secure small objects on open display. ▲



Custom acrylic sheets were mounted to the display tables to protect works on paper. ▲

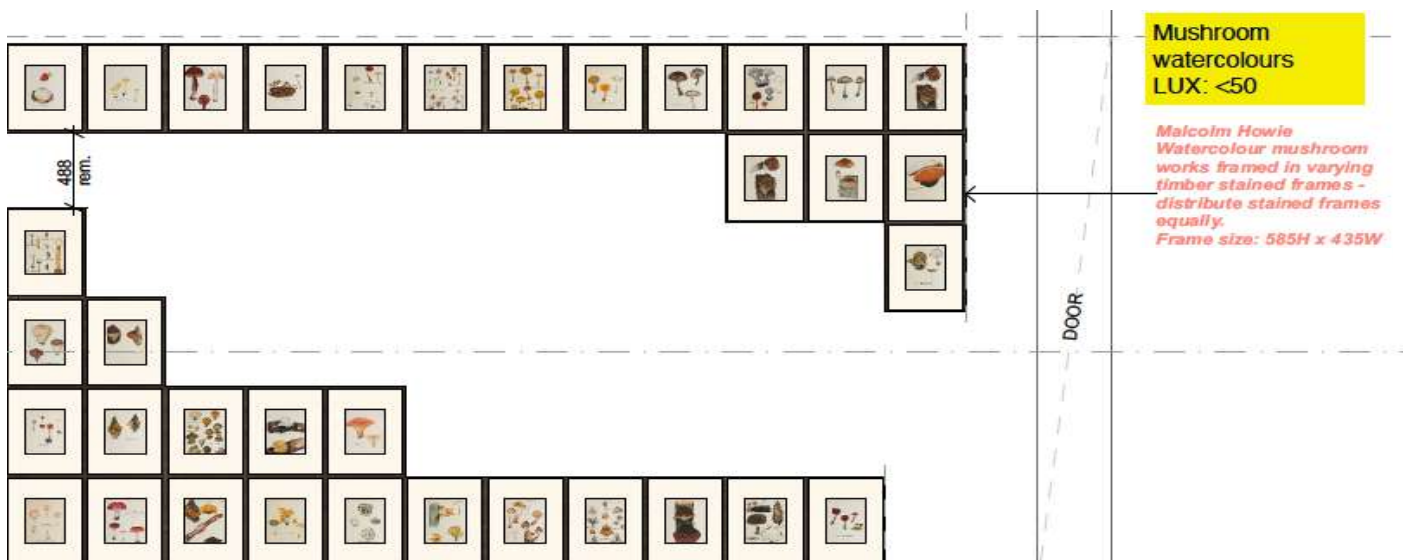


Acrylic domes were secured to the display tables to protect rare and valuable works from the University of Melbourne's Classics collection. ▲

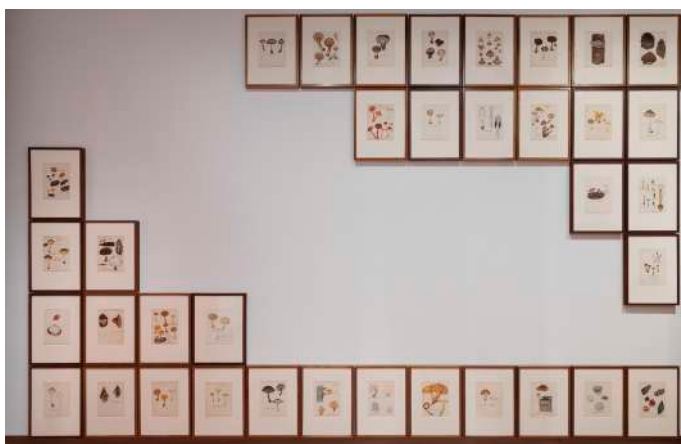
GALLERY LIGHTING

Lighting is an important part of exhibition design and preservative conservation that that collections managers, curators, and artists consider when planning exhibitions. The artwork's medium and the artist's wishes are important factors when deciding what LUX levels are appropriate for each work. For all exhibitions at the Potter, the exhibition designer will create a document showing the wall elevation plan for each artwork with notes from the exhibition team about the required LUX levels for each work, and any spot lighting or coloured gels required. The Lighting Technician uses the guiding document to arrange LED lights and spot lights on the lighting track, and sets the brightness of each individual light. They use a LUX level meter to measure the amount of light that falls on the surface of each artwork. Once the gallery lights are set, they can be turned on and off by gallery staff using a single switch at the front desk.

This show included 77 watercolours by Malcom Howie depicting Victorian fungi. These required <50 LUX. The works belong to the University of Melbourne Herbarium and are stored on campus in solander boxes that hold roughly 10 mounted prints. Solander boxes are cases that protect works on paper from light, dust, and other contaminants. They are lined with ph-neutral materials making them inert. The Collections team organised for the works to be transported via a van and trolley in their solander boxes to the Potter for the exhibition installation.



Wall elevation design for Malcom Howie's watercolours, including a note with the required Lux <50 level for works on paper. ▲



Installation view of Malcom Howie's watercolour works to compare with the wall elevation design and final lighting outcome. ▲



This image shows the solander boxes used to store and conserve Malcom Howie's watercolour works and their mounts. ▲

NATURAL LIGHTING

For *A velvet ant, a flower and a bird*, the curators decided to allow as much natural light to enter the gallery as possible. This meant removing temporary walls covering the Level 1 and Level 2 windows to open up the gallery. Exposing windows meant taking careful consideration of light exposure to artworks situated nearby. One of the benefits of curating and commissioning contemporary art is that exhibition teams can consult artists, who can make informed decisions about the conservation risks to their works over the four-month duration of the show.

Miles Howard-Wilks and Lauren Burrows were commissioned to create new sculptural works, both of which were displayed beside gallery windows. Howard-Wilks' ceramic animals are glazed, making the underglaze pigments less susceptible to fading caused by sunlight. Burrow's sculpture, *Minimum exposure 2026*, is made from smashed car windows, glitter nail polish, and brass, and its support is made from sub-water native timber and beeswax. These materials are also less susceptible to damage caused by UV.



Installation view of Lauren Burrow's *Minimum exposure 2026*, displayed on the Level 2 landing, exposed to natural light through the large windows.



Installation view of Miles Howard-Wilks' ceramic sculptures and Liss Fenwick's photographs from the *Humpty Doom* (2023) series, which are exhibition copies. These works are exposed to natural light through the large window.

Liss Fenwick's photographs were also displayed near a window. This was possible because the curators requested to use 'exhibition prints', meaning the artist supplied digital copies of the images, which the exhibition team had printed and framed. It is a condition that exhibition prints are either destroyed or returned to the artist at the end of the exhibition.

COMMUNICATING CARE REQUIREMENTS

Exhibition Manual and Front of House Team

For each exhibition at the Potter, the Collections team puts together an Exhibition Manual to outline daily tasks and invigilation requirements for the Front of House team.

Daily tasks for this exhibition included:

- Turning the exhibition on and off using the integrated electrical system and panel at the front desk. The system panel allows staff to turn the lights, exhibition sound and digital works on and off.
- Turn on one additional video work in the foyer using the buttons on the television
- Counting Michael Howard-Wilks' many small ceramic sculptures
- Inspecting and reporting: all artworks for change, movement or other issues; the walls for scuff marks; and for dust or dirt around plinths.



Detail of Miles Howard-Wilks' many ceramic ants, a series of works that Visitor Services staff counted each day to confirm all objects were still in place. ▲



Invigilation requirements

As many artworks were on open display and in direct contact with the floor, it was necessary for gallery invigilators to actively remind visitors to step back from and not touch artworks, and to encourage large groups to separate into smaller groups to safely move through the exhibition. Once the exhibition is opened to the public, gallery invigilators can report feedback to the exhibition team, and in some cases adjustments are made to the exhibition to further communicate care requirements to the public. For this exhibition, a distance line was installed on the ground surrounding the fragile glass lamps by Tamara Henderson.

◀ Installation view of a distance line surrounding Tamara Henderson's *Floral Lamps* 2025, exhibited in *A velvet ant, a flower and a bird* 2026.

CONSERVING DIGITAL WORKS

Joan Jonas' video work, *Merlo* 1974, was played on an older generation television and installed on a trolley in the gallery foyer. This was the only digital work that could not be integrated into the electrical system panel, and staff needed to turn the video on using the physical buttons on the device.

Merlo 1974 was originally produced by recording engineers Raffaele (Lello) Corazziari and Alberto Pirelli at Art/Tapes/22, a video studio established in the early 1970s based in Florence, Italy, that supported European artists with emerging video, technical, and sound equipment and production. The artwork is one of 6000 videos and records available from The Kitchen Archive, a special project of The Getty Research Institute.

The original file made by the artist was digitised by [The Kitchen Archive](#), and the Potter received this by digital transfer. The exhibition team then stored this on a server and transferred it to a storage system that could be played through the CRT monitor.

When seeking the loan from the artist's archive, the curators specified the mode of display. This was an official process of filling in forms, quite different from other artist / curator relationships that require direct communication with the artist.



Installation view of Joan Jonas' single-channel video work, *Merlo* 1974, displayed in the gallery foyer on a CRT monitor. ▲

Exhibition Case Studies

Ngarn Wa'ngal: Art of the gum tree

A defining feature of the Australian landscape, the gum tree breathes through our collective imagination, connecting us to this land and shaping our personal and cultural identities.

Ngarn Wa'ngal: Art of the gum tree invites audiences to explore this iconic tree as a source of creative inspiration branching across centuries of artistic practice.

Translating as 'breathing for us' in Woi Wurrung, *Ngarn Wa'ngal* celebrates the deep cultural and ecological significance of the eucalypt. Over three floors, this expansive exhibition brings together colonial, twentieth century and contemporary works, sparking broader conversations about identity, sovereignty, climate and continuity.

Drawing from the University of Melbourne's collections alongside significant local and interstate loans, *Ngarn Wa'ngal* features over 160 works including commissions by Jane E. Brown, Dean Cross, Megan Evans, Janet Laurence and Jazz Money.

Curated by Alisa Bunbury, Senior Curator of the Grimwade Collection at the University of Melbourne, and Guest Curator Sophie Gerhard.

EXHIBITION DESIGN

Ngarn Wa'ngal features 176 works including 23 items from the University of Melbourne Art Collection, Rare Books Collection, Special Collections and Archives, and Herbarium Collection. While visitors may take any route around the Potter, the curators designed the exhibition with a certain pathway in mind that follows a roughly chronological timeline and ties together different themes in a considered narrative. The seven themes have been organised in the following order:

Ground Floor: 'Always': a space dedicated to contemporary First Nations art; 'Classification' and 'Witness': 18th and 19th century works from the colonial period, and the perspective of trees as witnesses to history's atrocities.

Level 1: 'A Sense of Place': 20th century into the 21st century – looking at the development of the gum as an emblem of national identity, as well as the gum tree; 'Of the gum': focus on tree details rather than the whole landscape.

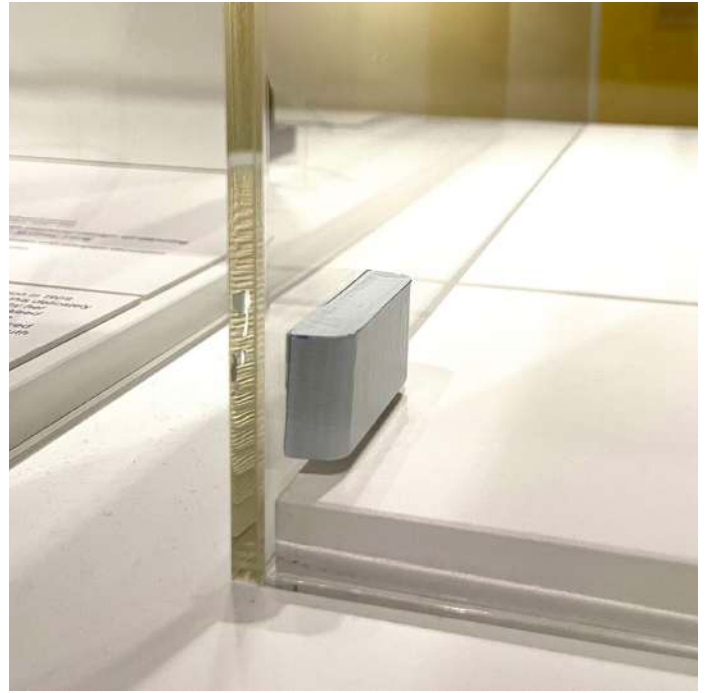
Level 2: 'Sick Country': environmental changes and our current relationship with gums; 'Regeneration': finishing on a positive note – where can we go from here.

While there are countless works that could have fit into the broad theme of gum trees, the curators wanted to ensure their exhibition contained a lot of diversity and surprising inclusions, as well as the anticipated classic works that are associated with the gum. It was also important for the curators to have a good flow of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous voices throughout the exhibition, while highlighting the enduring knowledges and connection First Nations people have always had and continue to have with eucalypts.

Aside from the placement of artworks, the design of the exhibition has to also consider how people experience the spaces. Every work is accompanied by an extended text, a 100 word didactic label containing contextual information. Seating and rest areas have been positioned around the Potter to allow people to pause and contemplate what they have seen, and browse through some related books about eucalypts and the gum tree.

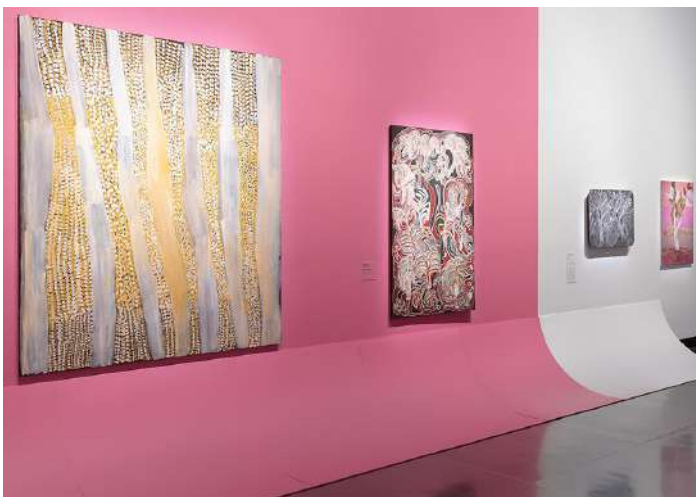
CONSERVATION

Conservation requirements can potentially have a significant influence on exhibition design. As many of the works in *Ngarn Wa'ngal* have been borrowed from other institutions, artists, or private collections, there are lots of different lender requirements that the University of Melbourne has to implement to meet the conditions of the loan. For example, this could include works being fitted with alarms, secured with acrylic hoods on display cabinets, being monitored by special camera placements, or have touch barriers that create a certain length of space between the art and visitors. One clever design strategy to meet the requirement of the touch barrier is a kick plinth that buttresses out from the coloured wall to meet the ground. Inspired by tree roots, these kick plinths act as an aesthetically pleasing method of preventing audiences getting too close, protecting unglazed and valuable works.



Tiara, Lefebure and Sons, c.1900, was borrowed from the Powerhouse collection. ▲
This object requires a sensed alarm to be fitted to its display case.

One clever design strategy to meet the requirement of the touch barrier is a kick plinth that buttresses out from the coloured wall to meet the ground. Inspired by tree roots, these kick plinths act as an aesthetically pleasing method of preventing audiences getting too close, protecting unglazed and valuable works.



Installation view of *Ngarn Wa'ngal: Art of the gum tree*, Potter Museum of Art, the University of Melbourne, 2026. Featuring Tali Tali Pompey, *Para* 2009, National Gallery of Victoria; Tjilpi Kunmanara Robin Kankapankatja, *Para – Ghost Gum Trees* 2012, National Gallery of Australia, Purchased 2012 ; Wendy Hubert, *Wirlumarra (Ghost gum)* 2024, Private collection; Gaypalani Wanambi, *Dawurr* 2022, Powerhouse collection, Purchased, 2023. Photography by Christian Capurro.

▲ In the *Always* gallery, a purpose built case displays and protects *Barmah nurrtja biganga (Barmah Forest Possum Skin Cloak)* 2005, by Treahna Hamm (Yorta Yorta). The case was originally created for a past exhibition titled *65,000 Years: A short history of Australian Art*, in which it displayed Mandy Nicholson's Possum skin cloak 2012. ▲

In the Classification gallery, a variety of works including prints, rare books and eucalypt specimens are displayed using methods specific to the medium or type of object. Rare books are displayed atop custom mounts that hold open the pages at an accessible viewing angle that also prevents stress from stretching open their spines. Acrylic hoods are screwed into place to prevent theft. The specimens on display to the left of this image have been collected by well known botanist, Daniel Solander, who invented the Solander Box, which is commonly used to protect and store works on paper.



These images show an empty solander box with inert lining material, kept at the Potter's temporary collection store. ▲



Installation view of *Ngarn Wa'ngal: Art of the gumtree 2026*, featuring a section of ▲ the Classification gallery displaying rare books, prints and specimens from various collections. Photography by Christian Capurro

CONSERVING AND DISPLAYING ORGANIC MATERIALS

Works made with organic materials require strict assessment and a quarantine process to ensure no unwanted pests are introduced into the gallery spaces. A common way to make works containing gum leaves, dead trees, seeds, and new timber safe is by freezing them. When creating her commission for this exhibition, Megan Evans was required to freeze multiple bags of gum leaves in her home freezer for at least two weeks prior to using them as a material in her work, *Gust 2026*. In the following text, Megan Evans shares insights into the significance and material qualities of the leaves in her work. She also outlines the techniques and processes she used to conserve the leaves over a long period of time, including during the making and installation process.

megan evans

Gust is made of hundreds of multicoloured eucalyptus leaves gathered over a 30-year period.

It follows the design of the wind as it moves up the stairs, beginning with green leaves, moving through brown, yellow, pink, red, gold, and black. I have always loved gum trees and this work is a culmination of several bodies of work I have done over many years inspired by the gum tree and its leaves.



Installation view of *Ngarn Waŋgal: Art of the gumtree* 2026, featuring megan evans, ▲
Gust 2026. Photography by Christian Capurro.

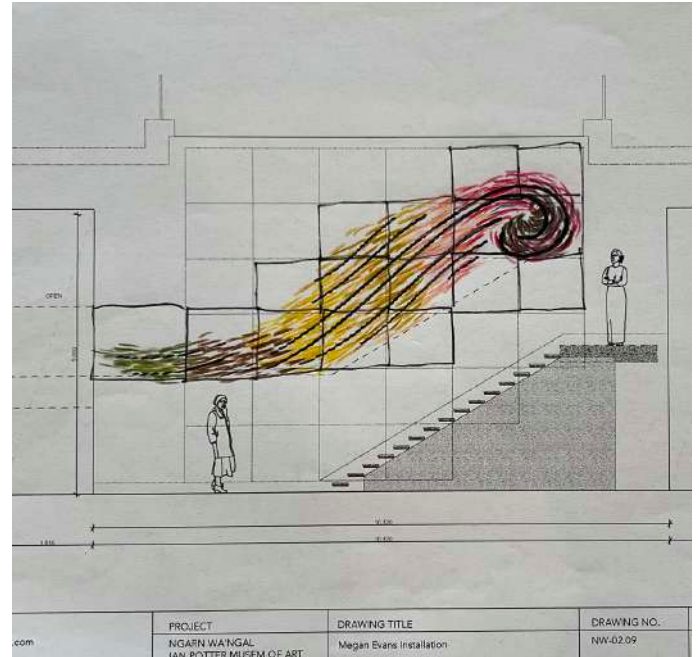
Some of the bigger leaves I have kept for 30 years. I can't believe that I have managed to keep them for so long. The black leaves at the climax of the gust are from burnt trees around my mother's house in Chum Creek, which was in the centre of the 2009 Black Saturday bushfires. That they have survived for 20 years is a credit to the structural integrity of the leaf, not my care for them as they were just kept in a box without much special attention. They are charcoal. They were part of my first iteration of this work in 2015 called *Swarm* as a part of an exhibition titled 'The Fall'. It was my reaction to the fires which tore through Wurundjeri country where I had grown up. Many people died.

I use silicon glue to attach push pins to the back of the leaves. Initially I used museum wax but it wasn't stable enough, so eventually on the advice of a conservator I shifted to silicon which seems to have held the leaves more securely over a long time.



This image shows the artist's use of push pins adhered to collected gum leaves with silicon. ▲

This work has been constructed in my studio which has a 6 x 3.5 metre wall. It therefore had to be done in two parts. The first part involved five panels of eco soundproofing material with a MDF backing which were attached to the wall using battens. The second part involved four new panels with one of the joining panels. Each panel had leaves that crossed from one panel to the next so there had to be a system that meant I could take the crossover leaves off and then replace them when the work is installed in the gallery. Some leaves will inevitably come off during transport despite the care of the installers so they will have to be replaced in situ.



Top left and right: Two diagrams show the artist's diagrams that communicate an intricate installation process and the final form of the work illustrated onto gallery wall elevations.



Bottom left and right: These two images show the two sections of the artwork in development on multiple eco panels in the artist's studio.

I have to be very careful when pinning the leaves into the panels as it is easy to break them, especially the fragile charcoal ones. It takes a lot of concentration while holding my fingers at just the right angle. Sometimes I had to pre-pin the holes. Many of the leaves have been kept, with the pins already attached from the previous work, in dry boxes. The leaves are all dry before they are attached. If you collect a leaf from the ground, when it has colour but also dry, it will stay close to that colour. For example, I have noticed that if the red leaves are left on the ground, they go brown.

I collected the leaves during the eucalyptus 'autumn' when they fall, which is the Boonwurrung season of Bullarto nye-wiiny. The red leaves mostly come from Lemon Scented Gums. I have collected most of the leaves this time from Boonwurrung country, which is where I live.

Some other leaves have been contributed by people from University of Melbourne campuses across Victoria, with some collected at Parkville from precolonial gums that have survived.

- *megan evans*



megan evans meticulously planned the layout of the gum leaves for each panel. She photographed the panels and stored the remaining leaves in the box that would cover the gaps between the panels. The lettered and numbered codes correspond to the above diagrams. ▲

CONSERVING EXPERIMENTAL PHOTOGRAPHS



Installation view of *Ngarn Wa'ngal: Art of the gum tree*, Potter Museum of Art, the University of Melbourne, 2026. Jane E. Brown, *Violet Street*, *Corymbia ficifolia*, *Silver princess (Eucalyptus caesia)* and *Photosynthetic* from the series *1,8-Cineole* 2026. Courtesy of Jane E. Brown. Miegunyah Creative Fellowship commission, 2026. Photography by Christian Capurro.

Corymbia ficifolia and *Silver princess (Eucalyptus caesia)* are two of the four works from the commissioned series *1,8-Cineole*, 2026. These gelatin silver photographs were made in response to the photography of Russell Grimwade (1879–1955), who was a scientist, businessman and philanthropist with wide ranging interests embracing industry, botany and art. In particular, Brown researched his glass-plate negatives and carbon prints made for *An Anthography of the Eucalypts* (1920/30) and in response created a series of experimental photographs of gum blossoms and gumnuts. Remarkably, Brown found a way to print her photographs using eucalyptus oil as the developing agent, inspiring the title of the series *1,8-Cineole*, which is the chemical name for eucalyptol, the primary compound found in eucalyptus oil.

"I consider the 'magic' of the darkroom integral to the way I work. The darkroom and photographic processes augment my interest in photography's materiality and presence." Jane E. Brown.

INTERVIEW WITH JANE E. BROWN

Could you describe the process you undertook to create your new series, 1,8-Cineole?

JB: Flowering gums were sourced from various locations around Melbourne; they were then brought back to the studio to be photographed using a large format camera and 4x5 sheet film. Due to the bellows extension on the camera, lengthy exposures were required when photographing the flowers close-up. The film was processed in the usual manner in my darkroom. Following a good deal of experimentation, the negatives were then printed using a novel developing agent – eucalyptus oil.

How are the images composed and why?

JB: Each work is a composite of four prints made from the same negative (the negative inverted for two of the four prints). The final assemblage creates a mirror image that can also be read as a commentary on photography's reproducibility and representation.

What inspired your innovative idea to experiment with eucalyptus oil to develop your images?

JB: In 2026, the bicentenary of photography's invention is being celebrated, it seemed apposite to draw attention to the mediums' rich history. I was particularly inspired by botanical extracts and their historical associations with photography, for instance photography's pioneer William Henry Fox Talbot (1800-1877) used gallic acid found in witch-hazel, tea leaves and oak bark to make his developer.

What are your thoughts about responding to Russell Grimwade's photographs?

JB: I was drawn to Russell's interest in photography, his business connection to eucalyptus oil distilling, his love of the eucalypt and attitudes towards their conservation. It was a privilege to examine Russell's original glass negatives alongside his carbon prints. The historic ephemera that surrounded the collection also gave clues to the photographic processes of the day which was fascinating to see.

Images of Jane E. Brown's darkroom, note the wet area and use of a red light known as a safelight. Black and white papers are blue light sensitive; the safelight prevents paper fogging whilst giving minimal visibility to comfortably work in the darkroom. ►



How does the care for your photographs differ from that of regular photographs?

JB: Preservation guidelines for a typical silver gelatin print suggest a low sensitivity for display. That is, total exposure per year of 30,000+ ft-c hours (300,000 Lux hours); e.g. 10 ft-c for 9 months at 10 hours per day. Because I was using a novel developing process for silver gelatin prints, I needed to make sure the prints were stable for museum display. Alongside archival fixing and washing I created a test print that was placed in direct sunlight (equivalent to 32,000 – 100,000 lux) over 72 hours. The test showed no evident fading or change to the tonal values of the print. To increase archival stability the prints were also toned in selenium and/or gold toner.

Why is analogue photography important in a world of digital and AI image making?

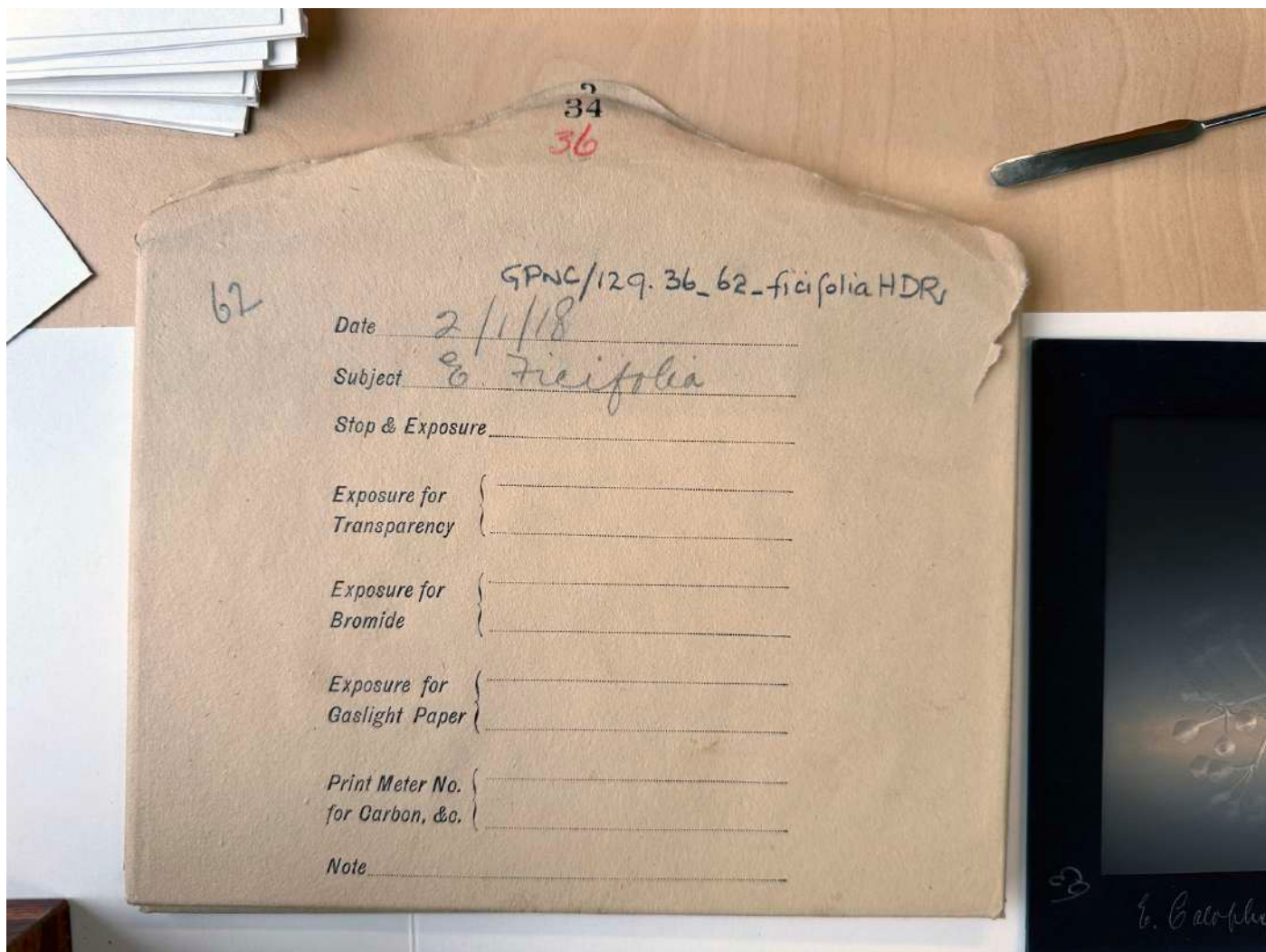
JB: Analogue is the stuff of light-sensitive emulsions, celluloid, paper, glass and chemistry. There is an authenticity to analogue in that it requires human dexterity and skill that is somewhat lost in digital or artificial applications. The refined tonal range of an analogue print are closer to what the human eye sees, and I believe it produces a more beautiful result. When you are in control of the actual production of the work it can lead to unexpected creative outcomes and greater experimentation. I fear with artificial applications there is a 'sameness' driven by the limits of software. Besides, it is far more fun to produce work in a darkroom than on a laptop.



Russel Grimwade, *Eucalypt specimen photographic studies*, c. 1920, carbon photographs. University of Melbourne Archives, Archives and Special Collections ▲



Installation view, *Ngarn Wa'ngal: Art of the gum tree 2026*, featuring Russel Grimwade's *Eucalyptus specimen photograph studies*, c.1920, carbon photographs, and Jane E. Brown's new comission ▲



The negative enclosures for Russell Grimwade's glass negatives showed a variety of photographic historic processes such as gaslight, bromide and carbon. ▲



Russell Grimwade's glass-plate negatives on a lightbox for viewing at the University Archives. Photographs by Russell Grimwade to illustrate his *An Anthography of the Eucalypts* (1920). ▲

Resources

UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE

Potter Museum of Art

- [Collection Highlights](#)
- Exhibition Pages
- [*65,000 Years: A short history of Australian art*](#)
- [*A velvet ant, a flower and a bird*](#)
- [*Ngarn Wa'ngal: Art of the gum tree*](#)

Buxton Contemporary

- [Caring for Contemporary Art – VCE AME Resource](#)

Museums and Collections

- [Explore our museums, galleries and performance spaces](#)
- [Explore our Collections](#)
- [Donald Thompson Collection – Indigenous Collections](#)

Robert Cripps Institute for Cultural Conservation

- [Conservation research](#)

OTHER RESOURCES:

- [Audiovisual and digital – Australian Institute for the Conservation of Cultural Material](#)
- [Preventative Conservation – Australian Institute for the Conservation of Cultural Material](#)
- [Time-Based Media – The Guggenheim Museums and Foundation](#)

Acknowledgements

Caring for Collections has been authored by Eloise Breskvar and Katarina Kotsimbos from the Learning Experiences Team. This resource would not have been possible without the generous support of exhibited artists and the Collections and Curatorial teams of the Museums and Collections Department.

The Learning Experiences team thanks:

Collections staff: Julie Banks, Kathryn Keily, James Needham, Ash Perry, Michelle Eskola, Carly Richardson and Meg Taylor.

Curatorial staff: Alisa Bunbury, Pippa Milne, Jane Rhodes and Judith Ryan.

University of Melbourne academic staff: Dr Holly Jones-Amin

Ngagn Wa'ngal artists: Jane E. Brown and Megan Evans

Graphic design by Sally Hull

POTTER
MUSEUM
OF ART



University of
Melbourne
Museums and
Collections