

ARLIS/ANZ CONFERENCE PAPER

UNCLOGGING THE BACKLOG

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'Backlogs', 'arrears', 'unprocessed material', whatever you call it, we all have them! Large or small, this material is useless until it is listed and described in some fashion—its existence restricts Collection Managers' knowledge of the full extent of their collections, obstructs acquisition research and planned collection-building, and most importantly the public has no knowledge of the material let alone the ability to access it.

During 2015 and 2016 the Pictures team at the National Library of Australia has managed to 'control' the backlog photographic collection. The material comprises photographs donated to the Library over an 80 year period, some with little or no provenance or descriptive information. It includes all photographic formats, and ranges from known and unknown photographers, with subject matter covering the documentary (landscapes and portraits), artistic and sometimes the macabre and bizarre, the task has remained a daunting prospect for Pictures staff for over forty years.

Through a combination of archival and traditional Pictures collection management approaches, some 600,000 extra photographic items are now accessioned and will be made available to the public for research.

The project was undertaken in two stages, January to June 2015, and November 2015 to June 2016, using contractors employed through an agency overseen by Library staff. Contractor staffing levels rose and fell over the life of the project to deal with the differences in collection material and workflows imposed by the variations in media, arrangement and storage. For most of the project, contractor levels were around 10 full-time positions, engaging at times up to 24 part-time contract staff.

The first stage of the project was completed on 30 June 2015. The contractors accessioned all of the photographic material in the Library's Cold Store, around 230,000 negatives, transparencies and colour prints, and the bulk of the 143,000 unaccessioned items in the Hurley Stack, named after the eminent Australian photographer Frank Hurley. Accessioning the uncontrolled material held in the Hurley, Cazneaux, and Valerie stacks, and the Nitrate Store was completed at the end of June 2016. During the seven months of stage 2 of the project 232,088 accession records were created for Pictures collection materials, which when added to the previous stage, results in a total of 605,088 accession records created.

The project included the full range of pictorial materials: colour and b&w prints; negatives; transparencies of various dimensions; glass lantern slides; antique photographic formats, such as ambrotypes and daguerreotypes; and rolled panoramas. Rehousing this material into archival housings was one of the outcomes, and challenges, of the project.

The project workflow commenced with a shelf check at the physical location of the backlog material, as there are few lists or finding aids available. The material was then inspected for notes, accessioning, or catalogue records that may have been created previously. Where a Registry file number was found, the acquisition files were searched for information on the provenance. Information found with the material was recorded and the final location was assigned, giving consideration to special housing requirements, such as archival enclosures, relocation to cold storage or nitrate storage. The preliminary searching was undertaken by experienced staff as it was at times complex, unearthed unresolved legacy issues, and required an understanding of the Library's processes and knowledge of the collection.



The Hurley Stack with backlog material flagged prior to processing

The information from the shelf check was recorded on an Excel spreadsheet. The master list included any existing numbering or accession numbers (if the material was unaccessioned a new accession number would be assigned, and recorded in a separate column); collection name; bibliographic identification number; the precise location within the stack; format; total number of items; finding aids or lists; notes were recorded for any follow-up work required, such as preservation work, or restrictions on digitisation and display of the images, which may arise with images of Indigenous topics.

The control of collection materials through accession numbers, based on archival principles, rather than imposed subject access, is a more modern and efficient way to organise large pictorial collections. It will also assist the impending stack move during the installation of compactus housing in the Hurley Stack, and facilitate retrieval through E-callslip, the Library's electronic call-slip system.

Although the preliminary research was at times complex, the emphasis was on speed and brevity. Pragmatic decisions were made throughout the project. Some of these may not adhere to best archival practice; for example, different accession numbers were at times assigned to dispersed components of the same collection to allow several contractors to work on the sub-collections at the same time. Reaccessioning collecting material was avoided where possible, in case the existing accession number had been published or cited. Where a new accession number was assigned, the original numbering was retained in searchable notes in the catalogue record.

The opportunity to accession previously uncontrolled material, allowed formed collections, which had been dispersed throughout Pictures' stacks, to be collated through the finding aid, restoring the integrity of these collections.



A subject drawer, showing badly-housed, unaccessioned and uncatalogued material in with catalogued and accessioned material

The second stage involved the creation of formatted datasheets to allow ingest of the data into ArchivesSpace, an open-source archives information management system used to manage the Library's manuscripts collections. Materials were described at collection or item level depending on the significance of the material and size of the collection.

The datasheets include the accession number, item numbering, description level (set or individual item); newly-assigned location (stack, row, drawer, bay and shelf) as well as the location within the arrearage; basic description; creator, if known; date range; format; size; preservation work required; digitisation notes; collection hierarchy and quantity of material.



Contractors creating datasheet records

The focus was on 'light' descriptive data – providing sufficient description to allow ingest and recall through ArchivesSpace. Minimal research was undertaken to create the basic description; contractors were encouraged to use the information on the item. It is anticipated that additional information will be supplied by the research community when the images are made available online.

Materials were rehoused in archival enclosures, as required, and the contents of overcrowded drawers reorganised, reducing the potential damage to collection material. The listing of materials held in the Library's Cold Store will allow the better management of the pictures material in that space and reduce the number of unnecessary retrievals requiring lengthy acclimatisation. A preservation listing produced from the data sheets identifies materials which should be examined to determine treatment required. This document will assist in allocating conservation resources where they are most required.



Contractors rehousing material into archival enclosures.

The accessioning team finished on the 30th June 2016. One existing staff member has been tasked with the third stage of the project - ingesting the accession data into ArchivesSpace. In this process, the data sheets for a collection are amalgamated into a single data sheet, collating dispersed collections prior to ingest into ArchivesSpace. A program developed by IT consultants, Hudson Molonglo, is used to ingest the formatted data. The project outcome will be to create a collection management system for Pictures within ArchivesSpace, and to subsequently publicly expose the data through TROVE.

Conclusion

Compilation of 'light' descriptive data into Excel spreadsheets and subsequent ingest of that data into the collection management system ArchivesSpace, has proven extremely effective in creating collection level catalogue records. At present, finding aids are delivered on request, a note in the catalogue indicating that a finding aid is available. In future, the catalogue record will link to online finding aids detailing subjects, individual items and any digital images available. More information about the use and benefits will follow when significant quantities of data are ingested into collection management systems and integrated with the Library's access and discovery layers.

Outcomes

The Pictures Arrearage project has delivered the following benefits:

- 605,088 items are accessioned, when they previously had no accession record, or were recorded in paper-based lists.
- 605,088 items will be discoverable by collection name and/or item subject, when they were previously only available through local knowledge or browsing the shelves.

- Each item has location information attached to the record, and so retrieval becomes less arcane and more systems enabled.
- The housing of the collection has been improved, especially overcrowded drawers which can easily cause damage to collection material.
- A preservation listing has been created which identifies materials which should be examined to determine treatment required
- The creation of a nitrate list, which sets the benchmark for condition, housing and level of deterioration (allowing us to determine the ongoing condition of material in that collection)
- A listing of materials held in the Cold Store, which will allow the better management of the pictures material in that space.
- Consolidation of stack location controls facilitates access through the Library's e-call slip system
- Consolidation of pictorial material previously dispersed in three separate stack areas.