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Why do we have it? A Significance Process and Template

CyMAL

Museums Archives and Libraries Wales

Acknowledgements

There have been considerable developments both nationally and internationally in developing models for determining the significance of collections and objects. We have specifically considered the Collections Council of Australia (CCA) Model: Significance 2.0 and referred to the work carried out by Caroline Reed for Renaissance East Midlands (REM) and the Collections Trust on their Reviewing Significance Framework. The work of Amgueddfa Cymru – National Museum of Wales, on a Levels of Accessioning Matrix, provided information towards this approach.

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Part 1. Background

1. Introduction

How can we decide what to collect and what not to collect unless we understand the significance of the items offered?

How can we make decisions about the care and development of our collections if we do not understand the significance of what we hold?

If we do not understand the significance of our collections, how can we communicate their meaning to others?

This document has been designed to help organisations address the questions raised above and provides two straightforward approaches to assessing significance. The first is the significance matrix, which is designed to be applied to all types of objects and collections. The second is the full significance assessment, which requires more in depth research to support the classification of significance.

The significance of an object or collection is defined by considering four key values:

- Historic
- Artistic / Aesthetic
- Social
- Scientific / Technological

Against four comparative criteria:

- Provenance
- Rarity or Representativeness
- Condition or Completeness
- Interpretive capacity

The process of assigning significance will be described in more detail in part two of this document.

Significance assessments recognise the wider context of an object or collection and reflect the values assigned to them. They collate relevant information and bring it together in one place. This creates a body of information that has many uses in supporting collection management decisions and can aid in effective collecting over the long-term.

In particular, significance can help decision making in:

- Accessioning;
- De-accessioning;
- Resource management;
- Collection reviews;
- Developing exhibitions;
- Prioritising work;
- Conservation project planning;
- Salvage priorities, and
- Making funding bids.

The process of assigning significance should complement and expand on existing documentation activity. Assessments should inform an institution's development of their collections, which should in turn feed into the wider strategic planning framework.

There is an increased expectation from governing bodies and funders that collecting institutions understand and are able to articulate the significance of their collections. This toolkit is offered as an aid to help collecting institutions meet those expectations.

2. Definition of significance

Significance establishes, defines and communicates all the cultural values and meaning that people and communities assign to objects and collections.

Work carried out in Australia led to the development of a model that defines the concept of significance in the context of a collecting organisation:

Significance refers to the values and meanings that items and collections have for people and communities. Significance helps unlock the potential of collections, creating opportunities for communities to access and enjoy collections, and to understand the history, cultures and environments (Russell, R & Winkworth, K. 2009, 1).

Significance assessment logically analyses, explores and articulates the meaning and values of items and collections (Russell, R & Winkworth, K. 2009, 4).¹

This definition of significance in the context of a collecting organisation is appropriate for our purposes in Wales and it has been adopted as the basis for the development of the significance template.

¹Russell, R. Winkworth, K. 2009. *Significance 2.0: a guide to assessing the significance of collections*. Collections Council of Australia

3. Why significance?

It is crucial that we understand the context of our objects and collections in order to interpret them correctly. Significance assessments consider how an object or collection fits into both the whole collection and the institution. Significance collates all the relevant information about an object or collection, which can then be condensed into a single statement for easy communication to stakeholders, management, trustees and funders.

Statements of significance will reinforce an object or collection's historical or cultural value and contribute to the development of an overview that illustrates the strength of the museum's collection, and its relevance for users.

Significance assessment will help:

- justify collection management decisions;
- inform and support your institution's strategic planning, by aiding with collections management decisions;
- meet the requirements of Accreditation in the creation of a development policy²;
- communicate the range of values related to an object or collection to the stakeholders;
- collate a body of information for long term use, and
- aid understanding of the context of your collections.

It would benefit organisations to apply significance assessments to their collections and demonstrate that they can establish where the strengths in their collections lie.

The statement produced by application of the full significance assessment should

be validated by a professional with understanding of the item or collection in question and of the significance concept. This action will help keep statements objective and relevant.

As resources become stretched within institutions, there is likely to be a greater need for significance assessments. Museum stores are fast filling up and we are under pressure to do more with less. There will always be a need to rationalise and justify collection management decisions. A statement of significance undertaken at the point of accessioning makes it clear the reasons behind accepting an object or collection into an organisation and will support arguments as to why resources need to be assigned to an object / collection to ensure its long-term preservation.

²2011: Accreditation Scheme for Museums and Galleries in the United Kingdom. Arts Council England. Section 2: Collections Guidance

4. Strategic context

Nationally, the concept of assigning significance to collections is gathering momentum. This is reflected in policy and strategic documents produced for the sector in the United Kingdom regarding collections management.

4.1 A Museums Strategy for Wales

In A Museums Strategy for Wales 2010-2015 significance was identified as a method for institutions to better understand the importance and relevance of their collections. This information can then be used to make the best possible use of resources to manage collections effectively

Within the strategy, CyMAL has pledged to:

- Develop tools to help museums assess, understand and articulate the full significance of their collections, using the information to help in collections management.
- Develop a pilot project on defining significance.

A Museums Strategy for Wales p.26.³

This approach to defining significance has been developed to meet the aims and objectives of A Museums Strategy for Wales.

³A Museums Strategy for Wales 2010-2015. Welsh Government.

<http://wales.gov.uk/topics/cultureandsport/museumsarchiveslibraries/cymal/museums/strategy/?skip=1&lang=en>

5. Professional standards

Professional standards documents guide institutions in effective and appropriate collecting and set standards for museums and galleries seeking to achieve and maintain Accreditation. A brief guide to some of the more applicable standards is provided below along with information on how significance assessments can help organisations to meet those requirements.

5.1 The UK Accreditation Scheme

The Accreditation Standard is the national standard for museums in the UK. Museum Accreditation demonstrates a museum's achievements in the areas of museum management, collection care and public service. In order to achieve Accredited status a museum must meet particular requirements for standards of care and provide relevant documents that demonstrate the institution's commitment to museum management.

The provision of a development policy is a requirement of achieving and maintaining Accredited status and this must include an overview of collections.

A significance assessment would aid the creation of a comprehensive collections overview and would enable the museum to '*identify the areas of strength and significance as well as the unique nature of the museum*'. (ACE; *Guidance for Collections*: Pg7).⁴

For further guidance on the requirements of Accreditation see the Arts Council England (ACE) published documents.⁵

5.2 PAS 197: 2009 Code of practice for cultural collections management

Publicly Available Specification (PAS) 197 refers to significance assessments in Section 4: Collections Development. The PAS 197 acknowledges that significance assessments can be useful tools in managing collections growth effectively.

5.3 SPECTRUM 4.0: The Museum Documentation Standard

SPECTRUM 4.0 is the base document for museums undertaking collections management activity. SPECTRUM's primary procedures are a central part of the Accreditation standard. SPECTRUM supports the delivery of the PAS197 by providing users with detailed guidance on how to deliver effective collections management.⁶

The process of assigning significance will help institutions to 'develop the extensive records'⁷ desirable for a significant complex object. SPECTRUM 4.0 recognises that status and significance can change with time and therefore use of an object may have to be re-evaluated to reflect that change.

⁴ 2011: *Accreditation Scheme for Museums and Galleries in the United Kingdom*. Arts Council England. Section 2: *Collections Guidance*. P.7

⁵ www.artscouncil.org.uk/what-we-do/supporting-museums/accreditation-scheme/ 01/06/2012

⁶ British Standards Institute (BSI). 2009. *Publicly Available Specification (PAS) 197:2009 Code of practice for cultural collections management*

⁷ SPECTRUM, 2005: 75

'An object may change its status (may be recognised, for example, as unique), or may be able to be operated carefully for a limited time without suffering. We therefore suggest a more sophisticated approach based on regular assessment of each objects importance. What matters is that each museum should adopt and stick to a clear policy' (SPECTRUM, 2005; 38)⁸.

In dealing with de-accessioning and disposal SPECTRUM 4.0 requires institutions to evaluate the cultural, historic and scientific worth of the object and requires a review of the context of existing collections in making the case for disposal.⁹ A full significance assessment enables institutions to carry out this requirement thoroughly and effectively.

5.4 Museums Association Code of Ethics

All collecting organisations have a responsibility to collect ethically and in line with their acquisitions policy. The collection should be retained in the location that provides the best balance of care, context and access¹⁰.

Museums are expected to develop collections over the long term and regularly review their policies.

Society expects museums to:

- hold collections in trust on behalf of society;
- acquire items honestly and responsibly;
- safeguard the long-term public interest in the collections;

- recognise the interests of people who made, used, owned, collected or gave items in the collections;
- research, share and interpret information related to collections, reflecting diverse views, and;
- review performance to innovate and improve collections¹¹.

Assigning significance to objects and collections can help institutions fulfil the ethical requirements by collating the evidence base which justifies the complex and occasionally challenging decision making regarding collections.

5.5 The definition of significance in European standards

The European Committee for Standardization (CEN) has published a standard on the main general terms and definitions. This document contains definitions on both significance and value. The inclusion of these definitions in the standard represents the importance placed on recognising the significance of objects and collections in the context of the conservation of cultural property.¹²

⁸SPECTRUM, 2005; 38 from *Museums & Galleries Commission Standards in the Museum Care of Larger and Working objects: Social and Industrial History Collections*. 1994

⁹SPECTRUM 4.0, 2010; 90. *De-accessioning and Disposal*.

¹⁰*Museums Association Code of Ethics*. 2007. Pg 10

¹¹*Museums Association Code of Ethics*. 2007. Pg 9

¹²CEN. 2011. *Conservation of cultural property- Main general terms and definitions*

Part 2: The process

This document explains the concept of significance and provides you with a foundation for exploring and defining the significance of your collections further. The process and template has been designed for general use and you may need to adapt it slightly to deal with collections such as natural history and geology.

The questions associated with the template are a **GUIDE ONLY**. They are suggestions about what you may need to consider to help keep your observations as objective as possible. You can only fill the template in as far as your knowledge and experience allows and you are encouraged to draw on the knowledge of others.

Remember, a statement of significance collates a body of information for long term use and enables you to articulate the values assigned to objects and collections. This document is your guide for identifying the type and extent of information you need to gather to provide you with the clearest picture possible of the object's context.

6. The significance assessment criteria

Our culture is ever changing. The different groups that make up our society will assign a wide range of values to objects held in collections. Some values will be shared across groups; however some will be different and specific to particular objects and groups.

There are many different types of cultural values that can be assigned to collections; however the four values listed express how or why a collection or item is significant and are considered the most relevant when assessing the significance of collections and objects.

When carrying out an assessment, all the key values should be considered initially although not all may be relevant. These key values will be cross referenced with four comparative criteria, which support the assignment of the degree of significance.

The four key values and four comparative criteria apply to both the significance matrix and the full significance assessment.

6.1 The four key values

1. **Historic.** Associated with a person, place or event in the past and key in telling a story about a theme, process or pattern of life. It should contribute to an understanding of the past.

2. **Artistic or Aesthetic.** The concept of beauty that the object expresses. The object may be remarkably beautiful or hideously ugly but is important for what it represents; a school of design, artistic movement or innovation and originality. It may show a high level of craftsmanship and skill in its execution. This value can be highly subjective and the concept can change with time and place.

3. **Scientific or Technological.** The object or collection may have scientific or technological value.

4. **Social.** The collection or object may have a demonstrated contemporary attachment to an identified group of people. The group should be consulted about the degree of significance. The object or collection may also represent a belief, idea, custom, tradition or practice that is important for that particular group of people.

As stated at the beginning of section 2, this document deals with collections in general and certain collections will require special consideration.

For example, in natural history collections the biological significance of the specimens is key. Therefore you will need to consider slightly different criteria. The criteria for defining the significance of collections such as natural history and geology should be outlined before you start your significance assessment, to ensure that the same criteria are applied objectively to all specimens or collections.

6.2 The four comparative criteria

The four comparative criteria are:

1. **Provenance.** The purpose of provenance is to source the origin. To be able to assign good provenance to an object there should be an evidence base documenting who created, made, owned or used the item or collection. The provenance needs to be reliable and should automatically form part of the research in the assessment process.

2. **Rarity or Representativeness.** Items can be both rare and representative. The object or collection needs to be considered as being unusual, or a good example of its type, as being singular, unique or endangered.

3. **Condition or Completeness** (Completeness in its natural state i.e. pair of shoes, teapot with lid). An item in original condition will be more significant than one which has been restored. The object or collections condition should be considered, if it is intact or incomplete. Any evidence of repairs and alterations, evidence of the way it was used and if it still has the capacity to work should be documented.

4. **Interpretive capacity.** The object or collection may help provide interpretation for aspects of place or context. It may relate to other collections and items and be relevant in their interpretation.

These comparative criteria should be used to clarify the degree of significance.

6.3 Degree of significance

The degree of significance will be defined based on all the evidence gathered.

The options for defining significance are:

- **International**
- **National** – This applies to Wales and the UK, state if the item is either:
 - **National: Wales**
 - **National: UK**
- **Regional**
- **Local**

It is important to note that a collection that is locally significant does not necessarily hold less value than a collection that is nationally significant, as the collection may be hugely relevant for local users.

The significance assessment criteria guide you in producing your output which is:

A clear definition of the local, regional, national or international significance of an object or collection that is based on an objective assessment of the criteria.

7. Methods of assessing significance

This document outlines two different levels of significance assessment. The levels differ in terms of the depth of research they require and the uses that collated information can be applied to. The same criteria and values identified in section 6 apply to both the matrix and the full assessment.

1. The significance matrix is useful in providing an overview of the status of the collection.
2. The full significance assessment collates an evidence base which fully supports a definition of significance and creates a useable body of information that can be communicated to users.

7.1 Significance matrix

For collections, all institutions should start by undertaking a matrix assessment. Collections and objects that are held in store may not merit a full significance assessment or have the information readily available enabling one to be carried out without a considerable time investment. The matrix assessment enables a relatively quick assessment to be carried out which will provide information for in-house use. Application of the matrix should produce an overview of the collection enabling you to be more objective when making collection management decisions. The matrix is presented in section 8.

A matrix assessment provides an overview of the significance of collections and objects and will help to highlight objects and collections that require a more in depth significance assessment.

7.2 Full significance assessment

The full significance assessment will create an evidence base that expresses clearly and concisely the cultural values associated with an object, enabling you to communicate them effectively in a variety of contexts, for example in preparing funding bids or preparing exhibitions for a particular audience. The process and template is provided in section 11.

8. The significance matrix in detail

8.1 What can I use it for?

The significance matrix should be applied to ALL objects and collections. The results can be used to help identify objects or collections that should be progressed to a full significance assessment.

In particular the matrix assessment would be beneficial for:

- Larger collections and backlogs
- Objects that have limited or no documentation

The matrix can:

- help establish the degree of significance for objects / collections with limited documentation;
- provide an overview of the status of the collection;
- help establish where further research is required, and
- help prioritise future research.

You will need to refer back to the definitions of the main criteria, to help you establish the degree of significance in the matrix.

8.2 Who can carry out a matrix assessment?

A good working knowledge of the collection will be needed to undertake the assessment. Anyone working with collections who holds this knowledge can undertake an assessment of significance.

8.3 Using the matrix

The matrix is presented as a table. Carefully consider the object or the collection with regard to the matrix assessment, referring to the key values and comparative criteria.

If, after the matrix assessment is carried out, you consider any item to be internationally or nationally important, serious consideration must be given to carrying out the full significance assessment as you may need an evidence base to support this claim.

If objects are identified for disposal through the matrix you may also want to consider undertaking a full significance assessment. Even if the research potential and documentation is limited for objects identified for disposal, the process of looking in depth into the object will possibly generate new information and ensure that you have a sound, clear and concise evidence base justifying your decision to dispose.

If you identify any item or collection for disposal after carrying out any level of significance assessment, you should refer to the Museums Association Disposal Toolkit for guidance on procedure.¹³

¹³Museums Association www.museumsassociation.org/collections/disposal-toolkit-and-training

8.4 Significance matrix main steps

The table below provides a framework for identifying the level of significance based on the evidence that has been collated. It ranges from 1A as the highest level of significance to 7D, the lowest.

A blank copy of the matrix grid colour coded with the letter number combinations is provided on pages 34 & 35. This copy can be printed out for reference.

Column 2A-D can refer to a UK or Wales nationally important object. It may be necessary to make this clear on the label or in the documentation.

As an example:

- 2A – Wales
- 2D – UK

8.5 Combinations of significance

To carry out the matrix assessment:

1. Establish if your object / collection is in the core or support group (see the definitions)
2. Consider the significance of your item against the 4 Key values and comparative criteria.
3. Consider the condition of your item (establish how you define the condition: see page 23 / 24 for guidance)
4. Compare the x axis against the y axis in the table to establish a letter / number combination
5. Record this combination on your documentation to refer back to it for future in-house use.

	International	National Wales or UK	Regional	Local	Handling	Replicas	Set dressing
Good	1A	2A	3A	4A	5A	6A	7A
Fair	1B	2B	3B	4B	5B	6B	7B
Poor	1C	2C	3C	4C	5C	6C	7C
Very poor	1D	2D	3D	4D	5D	6D	7D
Core collection				Support collection			

8.6 Definitions

Core collection

The institution's core collection will be defined by the collecting policy. Items will be accessioned and have a minimum standard of care applied to them.

(N.B Replicas: Commissioned pieces over a set value may form part of the core collection)

Support collections

Education / handling collections: Items used in handling collections or for educational purposes. Some objects may be accessioned

Replicas: Objects from a collection that have been reproduced, possibly using traditional materials or methods to aid in the interpretation of a theme or to aid understanding.

Set dressing: Non accessioned items, often modern, used for dressing displays. Low value and easily replaced.

		1	2 UK or Wales	3	4
		Internationally Important: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aesthetically • Artistically • Historically • Scientifically • Socially 	Nationally Important: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aesthetically • Artistically • Historically • Scientifically • Socially 	Regionally Important: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aesthetically • Artistically • Historically • Scientifically • Socially 	Locally Important: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aesthetically • Artistically • Historically • Scientifically • Socially
A	Condition: good	Security: high Access controlled	Security: high Access controlled	Security: high Access controlled	Security: high Access controlled
B	Condition: fair	Security: high Access controlled Conservation priority: high	Security: high Access controlled Conservation priority: high	Security: high Access controlled Conservation priority: high	Security: high Access controlled Conservation priority: high
C	Condition: poor	Security: high Access controlled Conservation priority: high	Security: high Access controlled Conservation priority: high	Stabilise with preventive conservation methods Conservation priority: medium	Stabilise with preventive conservation methods Conservation priority: medium
D	Condition: very poor	Security: high Access controlled Conservation priority: high	Security: high Access controlled Conservation priority: high	Stabilise with preventive conservation methods Conservation priority: medium	Stabilise with preventive conservation methods Conservation priority: medium
		Core collection	Core collection	Core collection	Core collection

5	6	7
Replicas	Education / handling importance	Set dressing
Security: medium Refer to handling guidelines for access Conservation priority: low	Security: medium Refer to handling guidelines for access Conservation priority: low	Security: low
Security: medium Refer to handling guidelines for access Conservation priority: low	Security: medium Refer to handling guidelines for access Conservation priority: low	Security: low
Dispose?	Dispose?	Dispose?
Dispose?	Dispose?	Dispose?
Support	Support	Support

Key	
	Undertake a full significance assessment to support the claim
	Undertake a full significance assessment when there is a need i.e. for funding bid, collection review, disposal etc
	Undertake a full significance assessment to collate evidence for disposal
	No assessment likely to be required unless circumstances change

9. The full significance process and template

The aim of the full significance assessment is to aid institutions with effective collecting and collection management and to help assess, understand and articulate the full significance of collections.

A standard process has been developed for museums, archives and library special collections.

The objectives are:

- to produce a clear, concise and well evidenced statement of significance;
- to support collection management decisions;
- to justify the decision for accession and disposal, and
- to support funding bids.

Case studies

Merthyr Tydfil Museums Service Ceramics Collection

Merthyr Tydfil Museums Service used the significance toolkit with a ceramics conservator primarily to identify the importance of its ceramics collections at Cyfarthfa Castle Museum and Joseph Parry's Cottage set against their conditions to provide priorities for conservation.



This was used to produce a shortlist of the most significant objects requiring work. A secondary use of the survey was to correct the attributions of a number of pieces for research purposes as well as suggesting possible options for future display.



© Cyfarthfa Castle Museum & Art Gallery, Merthyr Tydfil

Carmarthenshire County Museum John Francis Lloyd photograph collection

Carmarthenshire County Museum used the significance tool to assess its collection of over 700 glass negatives by the local photographer John Francis Lloyd. The collection was assessed to evaluate its significance as both a record of Carmarthenshire's past and also its artistic significance.



As a result, following the scanning of all glass negatives, 100 of those assessed of greatest importance were researched and placed on the Peoples Collection Wales website. The process will also assist in the selection of photographs for a future exhibition.



© Carmarthenshire County Museum

9.1 Where should the information be stored?

The statements should be included on accessioning forms so the justification for accessioning is clear. The information should be stored on the electronic documentation system and easily accessible to relevant members of staff.

9.2 What can be assessed?

This model can be applied to both collections and individual objects where there is a need for more extensive research to define the significance.

9.3 Backlogs

A backlog is defined as an accumulation of unprocessed collections.

Backlogs (some objects and larger collections) may not have the documentation or information available to carry out the thorough investigation required to fully support a statement of significance. This does not imply that an object or collection is insignificant to the collecting organisation. It may have significant value in other contexts.

Backlogs will be dealt with and classified in the context of the collecting organisation using the Matrix model. Application of the matrix process will identify where additional research is necessary.

9.4 Who can carry out the assessment?

The assessment should be carried out by the people who have the best understanding of the collection or artefact. Anyone working with collections should be able to undertake an assessment of significance.

It is important that a consistent approach is taken within the institution. This can be encouraged by organising training for all those involved, and by having regular discussions between anyone involved in writing statements of significance. You should consider holding cross sector discussions with the local museums, archives and libraries in your area that you know have carried out this process.

Institutions could consider entering into research partnerships with local interest groups, which could bring new research and information to light. Some aspects of significance assessment; like condition assessing may seem daunting and specialist, but significance is based on the information and knowledge available to you, the process is fluid and if new information comes to light, classifications can be altered. If you do not feel that you have the knowledge to confidently assess a key value or comparative criteria it may be preferable to seek expert advice, for example from either a conservator or specialist curator.

10. Main steps for the full significance assessment

These are the recommended steps that will guide the creation of a clear, concise and detailed statement of significance.

The questions are for guidance and all may not be relevant in the assessment. They are included to ensure that all possible aspects of relevance have been considered and that the assessment is thorough and as objective as possible. You will only be able to answer as far as your knowledge, documentation or research limitations allow. Add all the information you can as this is the evidence base which forms and supports your statement of significance.

10.1 Analyse the object / collection: detailed description

The purpose of the detailed description is to ensure that the assessor is familiar with the tangible aspects of the object or collection. The detailed description provides the foundation for addressing the key values and comparative criteria.

The assessor will be looking at the object / collection in detail. A full description of the item including any important features, design and style needs to be given. A detailed description will ensure that any particular features are noted.

Information about a collection or object may be intrinsic (it forms part of the object), or it may be associated and has to be obtained from other sources (the wider context).

CONSIDER the following questions:¹⁴

- What is it made of?
- What does it look like?

- What is the size of the collection? What are the dimensions of the object; height, weight, width & length?
- How was it made?
- What are the object or collection's key characteristics?

10.2 Condition assessment

A condition assessment should be provided including details of wear, repair, changes and adaptations. This assessment can reveal much about the history of use of an object or collection.

It should be remembered that condition is notoriously subjective; therefore it is important you outline your definitions of good / fair / poor / very poor before starting the assessment process, use them consistently and make them available to any interested party. This will enable others to understand your classification.

The condition assessment is part of the comparative criteria assessment. The condition assessment comes first as it is important that you are familiar with the condition of your object or collection before you propose a use. You may need to make objects a priority for conservation or apply stringent guidelines for access and handling based on the evidence gathered from the assessment.

CONSIDER the following questions:¹⁵

- Do you consider the item's condition to be:
 - Good. Stable and robust. Structurally sound, no evidence of damage or deterioration. Useable for any purpose.
 - Fair. Stable. May be disfigured or damaged. Minor problems, minimal remedial conservation work required. Can be used with care and attention.

^{14&15}Reed, C, 2012: *Reviewing Significance 2.0: Significance Assessment Grid questions*

- Poor. Signs of deterioration and damage are obvious. Use could cause further damage.
- Very poor. Unstable material. It is completely unsuitable for use. Damage is certain if handled.
- Is there damage?
- How did this damage occur?
- Has it been altered? What do the alterations tell us about the history of use?
- Has it previously been conserved / restored (this is not a consideration for some specimen collections such as botanical ones)?
- Is it complete (as in obvious loss, missing lid, handles etc)?

10.3 Research and background

This evidence base should include documentary research. The previous owners (if known) and individuals associated with the item or collection should be consulted if possible. The full context should be explored and links to places, websites, and literature should be included in the evidence base. Provenance and acquisition should be included and consideration should be given as to how the object / collection relates to wider themes, patterns, movements, developments or industry.

For industrial or heavy machinery objects and collections, it is important to state here if the object or collection is a working collection, if it has moving parts and if it is used for demonstrations.

For natural history collections, the biological significance of the specimens is key. Therefore you will need to consider slightly different criteria. Any criteria chosen for defining the significance of collections such

as natural history and geology should be outlined before you start your significance assessment and should be used consistently.

The research and background assessment investigates the key values and some of comparative criteria in more detail.

CONSIDER the following questions:¹⁶

History

- Who previously owned it?
- Where was it made?
- Who made it?
- What was its function?
- When was it acquired by the institution?
- Why was it collected?
- How was it acquired? Donation or purchase?
- Does it have a direct connection to a historical event, person, group etc?
- Does it represent a particular theme or process or pattern of life?
- How does it relate to the history, geography or environment of the place where it was created or used?

Artistic / Aesthetic

- Is / Was the design influential or innovative?
- Is the design / construction of high quality?
- Does it represent a style, type, school or design?

¹⁶Reed, C, 2012: *Reviewing Significance 2.0. Significance Assessment Grid questions*

Social

- Does it represent relationships?
- Does it symbolise beliefs, ideas or cultures?
- Does it have a particular and demonstrable meaning to a specific group in the community, or for the whole community?
- How is this meaning and attachment demonstrated?
- Is it iconic within the collection? An image / object that is presented and has memorial status.

Scientific / Technological Is it in working order (moving parts i.e. machinery, this may not be relevant for everything)?

- Does the object / collection have demonstrated relevance to science or technology?

Provenance

- Is there good documentation for the object / collection?
- Is it a primary source?
- Can you provide the evidence for the links to people, places ect that the object or collection claims to have?

Interpretive capacity

- Is the object or collection currently used for research / learning or outreach?
- Does it have potential for contributing to research, learning or outreach?
- Does it support or raise profiles on local, regional, national or international scales?
- Is the object or collection often requested for loan? Why?

10.4 Compare: related places and items

Related places and items should be identified and colleagues in other organisations should be consulted in an attempt to find similar examples. Use the internet and reference books for comparison and speak with specialist groups and societies.

Comparing related places and items addresses the remaining comparative criteria in more detail.

CONSIDER the following questions:¹⁷

Provenance

- Is it related to a particular place / collection / object?

Rarity / Representativeness

- Does it have meaning to a place / community / individual?
- Are there any other examples in museums locally, regionally or nationally?
- How does it relate to these other examples?
- Is it one of a kind?

10.5 Assign significance against the criteria

Considering all the collated evidence, assess the object or collection against the key values and establish which of the key values are supported by a strong evidence base. Make a note of the strongest evidenced values, more than one can apply.

- Historic
- Artistic or aesthetic
- Scientific or research potential
- Social

¹⁷Reed, C, 2012: *Reviewing Significance 2.0. Significance Assessment Grid questions*

And determine the degree of significance by considering the evidence in support of the comparative criteria:

- Provenance;
- Rarity or Representativeness;
- Condition or Completeness;
- Interpretive capacity.

Your evidence base will make it clear if the significance is of an importance which is:

- Local, relating to a specific area (people and places within it): a town, village or neighbourhood.
 - How does it associate with local values and culture?
- Regional, relating to a region defined by its characteristics or boundaries: a city, county or larger area.
 - How does it associate with regional values and culture?
- National, relating to or be characteristic of the nation. It will have a common appeal.
- Specify if the significance is UK national or Wales national.
 - How does it associate with Welsh national values and culture?
 - How does it associate with UK national values and culture?
- International, relating to the culture of more than one nation (outside of the British Isles).
 - How does it associate with international values and culture?

Part 3: The Template

11. Writing your statement of significance

This is the point where you gather together all your evidence, collate your information and create your clear, concise statement of significance. It summarises your understanding of the object / collection in your care and justifies your collection

management decisions. The statement should be easily communicated to key stakeholders and aid understanding of the relevance of the object / collection.

An Excel spread sheet containing the fields of the template is available to download from the CyMAL website. The spread sheet can be used for both the matrix and full significance assessments.

Museum name:	
Name of the assessor:	
Date of the assessment:	
Object / collection / batch name:	
Object Accession No: Or collection sequence:	
Current location:	
Brief description of object / collection: i.e military costume:	
Materials:	
Size:	

Machinery, science and industry	
Does it have moveable parts?	
Is it still in use?	

Photograph or drawing	
------------------------------	--

Detailed description:

Condition (technical) assessment:

Delete as appropriate: very poor / poor / fair / good

Research and background

Compare: related places and items

After considering all the evidence and looking at the main criteria I have decided that the object has the greatest significance in the following context (more than one can apply):

Historic	Social	Aesthetic or Artistic	Scientific, Research or Technical	Other (Please specify)

Comparative criteria: Use the comparative criteria to SUPPORT AND CLARIFY the degree of significance. This box is a checklist; it helps to ensure that all of the required information has been gathered. You may have expanded on the information gathered in the above section.

If required, replicate the comparative criteria box for the different object types making up a collection.

Is the provenance good or bad?	Good / Bad
Is the object / collection rare?	Yes / No
What is the object / collection representative of? Name an institution that holds a comparable collection / object?	
Is the object / collection complete? As an object or a series i.e pair of shoes, teapot with the lid, complete set of medals. If you are not sure leave this section blank	
Is there potential for interpretive capacity? What does it aid the interpretation of?	
Free text box for additional notes	

Based on the evidence gathered, we think our item or collection is the most significant:

Degree of significance	Tick relevant box
Internationally	
Nationally, Wales or UK	
Regionally	
Locally	

Statement of significance

Using the evidence base as collated above, define how and why the object / collection is significant and what this means for the object / collection? Summarise the key points in the box below. This is the text you will be using to justify your claim that your object / collection is significant in a particular context. This is the text you will be communicating to trustees, funders and stakeholders.

Sign and date the assessment:

List references:

List and acknowledge contributors:

Statement of significance:

12. What next?

The collecting institution needs to consider where the information will be stored in the long-term and the uses that the information will have during the lifetime of the collection.

Storage

Once all the data has been collected the evidence should be stored in a secure database with other records related to the items or collection. The matrix assessment generates a letter and number combination which should be included on store room labels for quick reference.

Use of the information

The information can then be used as required to aid collection management decisions.

The collated evidence will support:

- Accessioning;
- De-accessioning;
- Resource management;
- Collection reviews;
- Developing exhibitions;
- Prioritising work;
- Conservation project planning;
- Salvage priorities, and
- Making funding bids.

The statement of significance should be added to the accessioning form to make clear the justification for accessioning an object to the collection.

Workshops

Holding a significance workshop within your organisation, or with other organisations, could be an opportunity for people to present case studies of their successes in using the significance process. It would be an opportunity to discuss and troubleshoot issues with the process.

Networks

Smaller organisations with limited numbers of professional staff may need access to a professional network of conservators and curators to aid them in their assessments.

Mentors

Developing a relationship with a specialist in a specific area that relates to collections could provide an opportunity to learn about your collection while accessing the information required to complete an assessment.

If you would like to get involved with a network or workshop, please contact CyMAL who can offer further advice.

13. References

Arts Council England (ACE). 2011. Accreditation Scheme for Museums and Galleries in the United Kingdom.

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A Museums Strategy for Wales 2010-2015.

15. Websites

Collections Council of Australia Significance 2.0 (11/2010)

Significance International

www.significanceinternational.com/

Collections Australia Network

www.collectionsaustralia.net/search.php?search=significance

Renaissance East Midlands (11/2010)

Assessing Significance Network (19/01/11)

www.collectionslink.org.uk/programmes/reviewing-significance/671-collections-reviewing-significance-framework

People's Collection Wales

www.peoplescollectionwales.co.uk

Collections Link (14/05/12)

www.collectionslink.org.uk/programmes/reviewing-significance/671-collections-reviewing-significance-framework

Matrix Grid

		1	2 UK or Wales	3	4
		Internationally Important: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aesthetically • Artistically • Historically • Scientifically • Socially 	Nationally Important: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aesthetically • Artistically • Historically • Scientifically • Socially 	Regionally Important: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aesthetically • Artistically • Historically • Scientifically • Socially 	Locally Important: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aesthetically • Artistically • Historically • Scientifically • Socially
A	Condition: good	1A	2A	3A	4A
B	Condition: fair	1B	2B	3B	4B
C	Condition: poor	1C	2C	3C	4C
D	Condition: very poor	1D	2D	3D	4D
		Core collection	Core collection	Core collection	Core collection

5	6	7
Replicas	Education / handling importance	Set dressing
5A	6A	7A
5B	6B	7B
5C	6C	7C
5D	6D	7D
Support	Support	Support

Appendix i

Significance 2.0

In 2001, the Collections Council of Australia published *Significance: a guide to assessing the significance of cultural heritage objects and collections*. A new edition was published in 2009.

Significance 2.0 was written by Roslyn Russell and Kylie Winkworth. The project manager was Veronica Bullock. In July 2010, CyMAL arranged a meeting with Veronica Bullock at Cardiff University. Other interested parties were invited to this event. It opened up interesting debate and helped to form the approach that CyMAL has taken with the toolkit.

Significance International was launched in 2010 to 'provide local, national and international services in the areas of significance and preservation assessments of collections, as well as more general collections and strategic planning guidance'.

Significance International principals are Veronica Bullock and Roslyn Russell – respectively the project manager and co-author of *Significance 2.0* – a guide for assessing the significance of collections (2009), Collections Council of Australia.

For more information see:

www.significanceinternational.com

Appendix ii

Renaissance East Midlands. Reviewing Significance: a framework for assessing museum collections' significance, management and use September 2010

"In November 2009 Renaissance East Midlands (REM) commissioned consultants Caroline Reed, Jayne Dunn, Subhadra Das and Emma Passmore to develop a regional framework to establish criteria and offer a methodology for reviewing the significance of key museum objects and of whole and part museum collections across the region. The project was managed for REM by consultant Stuart Davies and led by Jonathan Wallis, Assistant Head of Derby Museums.

The aim is to enable East Midlands museums to take a lead in tackling the issue of assessing collections' significance in a structured way that can be used to inform their strategic planning for collections management, use and interpretation. A key objective for the project was to develop a regional approach to assessment that highlights the importance of collections to small, specific or local communities as much as to regional, national and international audiences."

(Wording referenced from Reed. C. 2010. Renaissance East Midlands. Reviewing Significance Framework. P. 3).

For more information see:

www.collectionslink.org.uk/programmes/reviewing-significance/671-collections-reviewing-significance-framework

Appendix iii

Amgueddfa Cymru – National Museum Wales (AC-NMW): Significance Assessment Grid and Levels of Accessioning Matrix

AC-NMW levels of accessioning group developed a framework specifically for them to apply to their collections. AC-NMW holds over 5 million objects in trust for Wales.

A considerable number of objects in the collection have been held in a backlog and AC-NMW identified the need to create a clear and easy to use tool to deal with large collections and backlogs.

AC-NMW explored various models including the Hampshire Grading Matrix to develop a process that was suitable for their needs.

AC-NMW has played a big part in helping shape this document and we are extremely grateful for their input.