



# **Contexts for Conservation**

## **2013 National Conference - Adelaide 23- 25 October**

### **Exposure and Collaboration in the Museum Workshop**

**Anne-Marie Conde and Vicki Humphrey**

#### **Abstract**

From October 2012 to the end of January 2013, the National Museum of Australia's conservation section was on display in the Museum Workshop Exhibition. This exhibition and the period of its development, presented the Conservation section and the Museum as a whole with a number of new challenges as well as providing a wonderful opportunity to showcase work that normally takes place off site away from our Museum colleagues and the public.

At all stages, the project was a collaboration between the many sections of the museum that work together to prepare for exhibitions, strengthening the relationship between the Conservation section and the rest of the Museum. For the two curators, Vicki Humphrey and Anne-Marie Conde, a conservator and a curator respectively, working on the exhibition together exposed new ways of seeing the "conservator-curator" relationship, the different ways we approach our work and the way we view and interpret objects.

There is no doubt that the exhibition was at times difficult for the conservators, but they rose to the occasion. They gave generously of their time and their knowledge to a public hungry for information and delighted to have a sense of connection with the workings of the Museum.

**Key Words:** collaboration, lessons learnt, participation, conservation, audience engagement

#### **Germination**

A 'behind the scenes' exhibition featuring conservation work was proposed for the National Museum of Australia's temporary gallery at a 'Big Ideas' forum in December 2010. At the time of its conception, one of the Museum Workshop's curators did not work at the Museum and the other had little idea that she would be taking a lead on this exhibition.

It was almost a year later that the two curators came together with representatives from across the Museum to start developing the exhibition in earnest. Due to pressing issues requiring attention from one of the curators, it was not until 23 January 2012 that the draft concept plan was presented to the project team. For an exhibition to open in October of that same year, this was very late. It would be fair to say that a number of people were nervous about the timeframes involved, not least because this exhibition was something of an unknown quantity. The two curators – one a conservator, the other one of the NMA's curatorial staff – were about to embark on an exciting journey, that felt like a roller coaster ride at times.

## **Collaboration is the key**

As with all exhibitions, there are challenges that the project team has to face, and it is collaborative working that produces the end result. In this sense the Museum Workshop exhibition was not so different. So what did make this exhibition different? It would have to be the types of collaboration involved around placing people in an exhibition and the lessons that were learnt during the process.

### *The Quality of Collaboration*

For the curators and the conservation staff, one of the key challenges was around the quality of the collaboration within the timeframe. There is no doubt that the delay setting the groundwork for the project affected the quality of the collaboration – the impacts were both negative and positive.

Once work commenced it had to proceed at a cracking pace – a pace to which, Vicki Humphrey, the conservator on the curatorial team was accustomed but which left little time for good quality communication with those that worked at a different pace. It also meant that there was no time for her to learn the accepted methods of exhibition development at the NMA. Added together, these issues left others in the team – including the conservators who were both contributors and exhibits – uncertain at times of the direction things were developing and somewhat nervous that so much was reliant on one person not being run over by the proverbial bus.

On the plus side, despite the lack of deep thinking time there was a reasonably quick process of sorting, firming up and gaining agreement on the main messages to be communicated. In addition, there was very wide communication via briefing sessions, presentations and small meetings between curators and other Museum business units that both informed and developed enthusiasm across the entire Museum.

The fact that both curators had other duties cannot be ignored. With a tight timeframe, there can be no doubt that there were risks in having one curator heading up Conservation and the other taking a temporary placement heading up the Museum's Research Centre.

### *Ways of Seeing*

The different ways that people perceive and interpret objects was one of the messages we hoped to communicate, albeit subtly, through the exhibition. We wanted to draw out the different things conservators and curators, exhibition visitors and others see when they examine an object. How many times do conservators look at the mounting technique or zero-in immediately on a discoloured bevel – evidence that the board used was acidic? Whereas the curator is far more likely to see each object in the setting of their area of specialism – in the case of the NMA, as a reflection of aspects of the histories and cultures of Australia.

In working on this exhibition, the Museum Workshop curators experienced these different ways of seeing in many new ways. Vicki Humphrey, coming from a profession that is so often focussed on objects, found that her focus on this project was largely on ideas and conveying messages about the philosophy and practice of conservation. In bringing conservation out of the back room, this conservator wanted to make sure that people were

able to see conservation in a larger context – as part of the broader discipline of cultural heritage management and as a point where the work of a number of disciplines intersect. This was effectively summarised in the Conservation Decision-Making Venn diagram that was featured at the entrance to the exhibition (see Figure 1).

While the “conservator-curator” did not abandon objects completely, a lot of the work of maintaining objects and their stories as a core feature of the exhibition fell to the other curator, Anne-Marie Conde. If the history and significance of objects was not presented in the exhibition, visitors may rightly wonder why all this time and money was being spent on conserving them. This, of course, fitted exactly with the decision-making diagram and was delightfully illustrated by the inclusion of the Bush Mechanics Car in the exhibition (See Figure 2). In this case, the significance of the object would be seriously diminished if extensive conservation work was carried out.

### *Telling the Story*

Unsurprisingly writing the labels for the exhibition was a huge challenge. A single voice and a complex blend of information had to be achieved in every piece of text – with tight word limits. As a curator with a traditional training as an historian, Anne-Marie found collaboration over the drafting of text very hard. Both curators agreed it was a juggling act. With object labels we started with Anne-Marie drafting a few sentences about the history of the object, and Vicki adding text about the treatments required. Working the themes of ways of seeing and decision-making into this mix was an added challenge.

Of course, each label was then worked over and over by writers and an editor to get this blend just right in each case. On top of that was the challenge of making technical information comprehensible to the public. Anne-Marie Conde, in addition to her role as a writer, became the visitor advocate by asking questions such as ‘what do you *mean* by that?’; ‘do you really think you can get that idea across fully in 30 words?’ and so on. We both learnt a great deal about each other’s professions and ways of seeing, and that of the Publishing team that takes on the editing and production of the labels for exhibitions as one aspect of their work.

In drafting text about the history and significance of an object Anne-Marie, working with information from the Conservation team, drew out whatever it was about the history of an object that had led to the need for its treatment. For example, a graduation certificate was a critical piece of identification for a Polish migrant to Australia, so he had folded and unfolded it many times, and later repaired it with sticky tape. The materials in a piece of embroidery were selected to reflect the wealth that the piece symbolises, but they also hold the source of their own destruction. A billboard poster advertising Holden cars has survived in fine condition because, by chance it was never put up. And so on. It was very satisfying to be able show how the history of an object can be read in part from its physical condition

### *Introducing the Conservators*

A significant challenge for Vicki Humphrey, as Head of Conservation and co-curator of this exhibition, was to bring the conservation staff along on the roller coaster ride. The input from each and every conservator was vital to the success of the exhibition. It is a credit to the conservation team that they really embraced this exhibition, despite the pressure it placed them under and that so many aspects of the exhibition exposed them to public scrutiny.

During the planning stages of the exhibition, it became apparent that there were no extra resources for Conservation for the period of the Museum workshop. This meant that the conservators would need to be present in the exhibition 7 days a week, over the Christmas/New Year period when they were normally not at work and that they would have to meet all normal work deadlines, including preparation for the next exhibition in the temporary gallery, exhibition changeovers, processing loans, gallery maintenance to name but a few.

In order to achieve this, some of the work had to be done in the exhibition space, but it was also necessary to roster staff so that they could have rest periods – in place of normal weekends – and so that they could return to the conservation labs. The rostering system ensured that of the three labs – Paper and Textiles, Objects and Large Technology – there would always be two operating in the exhibition between the hours of 11am and 3pm. The third lab would be left as a display, with a multimedia presentation featuring conservators discussing their work.

The multimedia presentations were a great success. They were invaluable for the periods when there were no conservators present. Even when conservators were present, people watched them from start to finish. What made them so successful? We believe it was because they were about people. All of the conservators were put through the experience (some of them might describe it as an ordeal) of being interviewed with a camera recording their every word. They were asked not just about conservation treatments, but about themselves and the diverse paths they followed to get where they are. For a number of the staff, this took them well out of their comfort zone.

The interviews were produced in-house and form an impressive body of work. The editing took a great deal of time and extreme fine tuning. They are yet another example of a collaboration and mutual learning experience between different sections of the Museum. A number of them are on the NMA website and others will be added as we upgrade the Conservation web presence. The interviews remain a lasting legacy of the exhibition.

## **Exposed**

Placing people and their work on display is obviously the critical difference between this exhibition and traditional exhibitions. The active, dynamic and changing nature of the exhibition was difficult to conceptualise and predict within the Museum's traditional project management and curatorial processes. The exhibition demanded a lot from the conservators and challenged them to take on new roles while continuing to meet the requirements of their everyday work.

During the planning stages, conservation staff were asked to suggest objects that would illustrate some of the key themes. This was nowhere near as difficult as the request for them to identify objects they would work on while in the exhibition space – objects that had to be selected from a 150% object list for the next exhibition. The usual issues regarding the balance between deadlines and unfinished object lists were exacerbated and placed into a completely new context. How many objects could be treated during the exhibition? How would they be stored when not being worked on? How would we predict, manage and track the conservation materials and equipment required? These issues had to be resolved as early as possible so that the exhibition designer had a brief to work with. Then all objects and

larger pieces of equipment had to be tracked, transported and arranged according to the exhibition design.

### *On Show*

Apart from all the considerations about objects and the work that needed to be done during the exhibition, perhaps the most important question was 'How would conservators feel about being 'on show'?

Simple answer: the conservators had mixed feelings. The conservation staff at the National Museum are rarely public-facing people. They are not located at the main Museum site at Acton but 16.5 km away in a factory-style building at Mitchell. During previous Open Days there was no doubt they relished the opportunity to talk about their work, but they had not been the instigators of these programs. This last fact was important and its implications perhaps not fully understood until feedback was given after the exhibition.

During the planning phases of the exhibition we all grew rather weary of wisecracks such as 'do not feed the conservator' and 'do not tap the glass', but there was almost no sense of a zoo or goldfish bowl once the exhibition opened.

What happened instead was the most dynamic collaboration of the whole exercise – that between the public and the conservation staff in the exhibition space.

### *Participation*

In recent months, the National Museum has been working on its strategic plan and the concept of a "participatory museum" is part of the discussions. The Museum Workshop exhibition has been put forward as a practical model for this idea, and rightly so.

The visitors to the Museum Workshop displayed a hunger for information, interaction and participation that was perhaps not fully understood before this exhibition. Those of us that worked in the exhibition were exchanging information – it was not a one-way flow. This is why the interaction between the conservators and the public has to be seen as a collaboration. One of the many examples of the power of these exchanges was when Vicki Humphrey was discussing the conservation work required on an album of photographs from the flight of the Southern Cross from the United States to Australia. One of the images – that of Kingsford-Smith and Ulm – had been used in the marketing campaign for the exhibition. While describing the album to a woman and her children, the woman mentioned that Ulm was her children's great grandfather. A man, who was unmistakably Ulm's grandson, then joined the conversation and this led to a search for his father, as a young boy, in the images in the album. This was one of many interesting, moving, involved and stimulating exchanges that conservators and public shared.

The exhibition also entered cyberspace, and not just on the website and the Museum's Facebook page. On the 27<sup>th</sup> October 2012, the Museum was involved in a tourism event to promote Canberra. The 'Human Brochure' brought 500 people who are active on social media to Canberra to tweet about their experiences. Those who had nominated Arts and Culture as their interest came along to the Museum Workshop. The exhibition, the conservators and the conversations we were having with the Humans all started streaming out

of our gallery and into a vibrant and fast moving space without walls. It was exciting, with wonderful feedback and contacts that continued after the exhibition.

The opportunity to see the objects in the exhibition and to talk about how they were made, how they deteriorated and their place in history, generated interest in the collection in a whole new way. The audience seemed to have a closer engagement with the collection items on display – almost as if the collection was a third party in the exchanges between conservators and the public.

### *Feedback*

Feedback from the public was for the most part very positive. Vicki Humphrey received the following in an email from a visitor to the Museum:

*I stopped and chatted to (a conservator).....; she was fantastic. I was very impressed, she was kind, enthusiastic, very generous with her time, extremely thoughtful and open and shared so much with me that I left feeling like she had made my day. She told me all about the Holden poster and the work she was doing, she showed such passion for her work, what a wonderful ambassador for the Museum! It really was excellent, please thank her for me.<sup>1</sup>*

This type of response was what we came to expect.

Equally positive, was the fact that many visitors to the exhibition joined the hidden dots and were able to understand that what we see on exhibition is merely the tip of the iceberg – another of the exhibitions themes. It was very gratifying when people noted that they now saw the need for funding for all the aspects of work that take place behind the scenes in a museum.

Feedback from the Conservation staff was positive when they spoke about the opportunity to talk about their work, to promote their team, the Museum and the conservation profession as a whole. Despite some trepidation about being on display, there was little doubt that all of the staff relished this aspect of the exhibition.

However, the experience was exhausting for the conservators and was disruptive of their private lives and work-life balance. Trying to meet normal work deadlines while discussing work with the public added an overlay of effort that was difficult to sustain. In addition, some conservators found dealing with the idiosyncrasies of some members of the public difficult and not something for which they had been trained.

Did the conservation staff meet their deadline? Yes they did. Did they engage the Museum's audiences? Yes they did. And for all of their efforts they are to be congratulated.

### **Conclusion**

The Museum Workshop was so much more than a successful exhibition. It was a serious learning experience, a chance to expose conservation's place in the broader context of museum practice and we hope that it was a beginning of a higher profile for the Museum's Conservation section and conservation generally.

While the exhibition did not draw the numbers of visitors expected, we continue to see benefits that have resulted from the exhibition. The public programs that commenced during the exhibition have continued on a quarterly basis and there is a much greater awareness for the potential for conservation components in exhibitions and public programs. The exhibition has also sparked interest from young people considering a career in the cultural heritage field. A number of our recent work experience students mention that they saw the exhibition.

For the two curators it was an excellent learning experience, which stimulated many ideas and gave us each a far better insight into the other's world – arguably more effectively than any other experience could do. It was hard work, but so worth doing!

## **Biography Authors**

*Anne-Marie Conde* is Senior Curator at the National Museum of Australia and was co-curator of the Museum Workshop exhibition. Prior to joining the Museum she worked as a historian at the Australian War Memorial. Her published work mainly concerns the history of archives, recordkeeping and museums in Australia, and she is a member of the UNESCO Australian Memory of the World Committee. Anne-Marie is the lead curator on the Museum's First World War centenary projects.

*Vicki Humphrey* is the Head of Conservation at the National Museum of Australia and was co-curator of the Museum Workshop exhibition. Prior to joining the Museum, Vicki worked as a consultant to the Alexander Turnbull Library and the National Library of New Zealand. Her conservation career in the UK and Australia has been largely focussed on conservation management and includes leading a significant change agenda as Head of Conservation at the British Library, 13 years as one of the management team at Artlab Australia and establishing a conservation presence at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew.

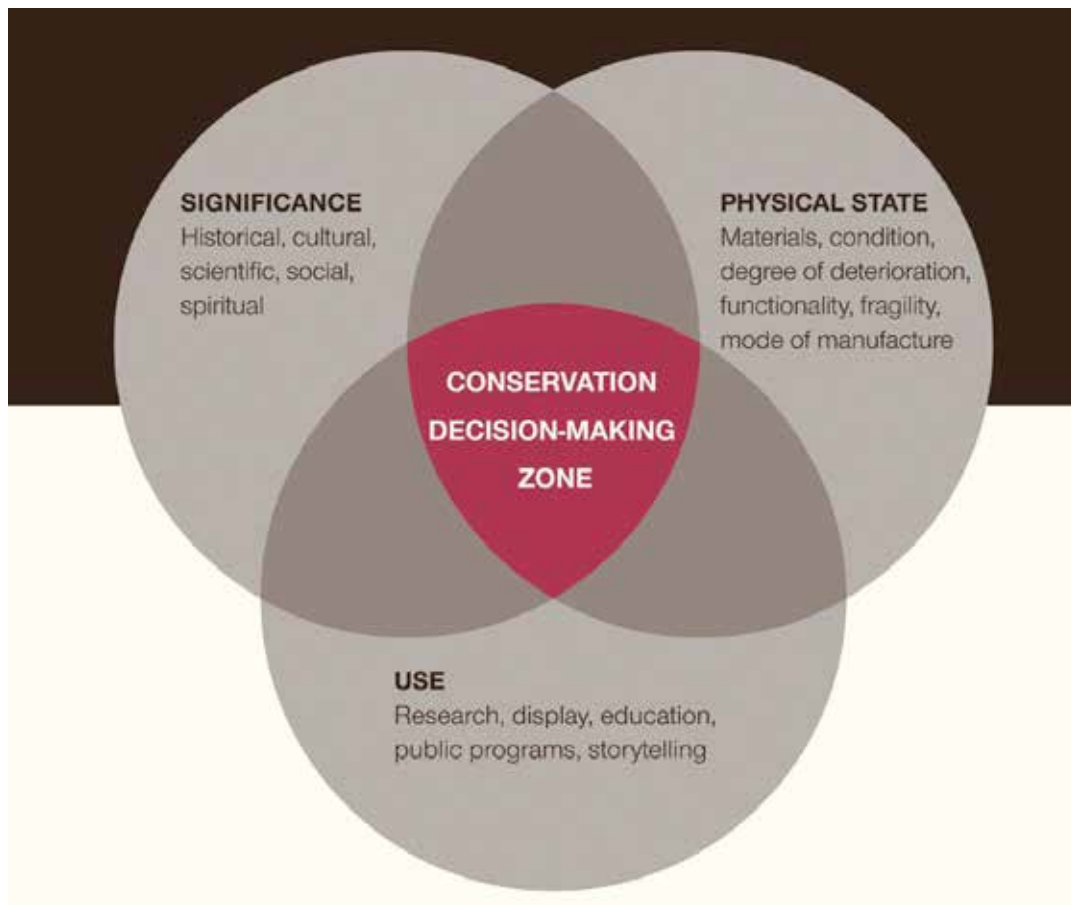
## **Captions**

**Figure 1:** In the Zone – the Conservation Decision-Making diagram was displayed at the entrance to The Museum Workshop exhibition.

**Figure 2:** The label for the Bush Mechanics Car displayed as part of The Museum Workshop exhibition.

---

<sup>1</sup> Personal Communication, Dr Samantha Johnson, 28<sup>th</sup> November 2012



**Figure 1:** In the Zone – the Conservation Decision-Making diagram was displayed at the entrance to The Museum Workshop exhibition.



**To treat or not to treat?**

This EJ Holden is dented, dilapidated and crudely modified and repaired – and that is how it will remain. The car featured in the 2001 television series, the *Bush Mechanics*, about the ingenuity of a group of Warlpiri men in keeping old cars on the road in remote Central Australia. The roof of the car was removed in 2001 to make a trailer for transporting a drum-kit and other gear. Restore the car to pristine condition, and the greater part of its story would be lost. Instead, conservators have stabilised the car in the condition that the bush mechanics had left it.

**Modified EJ Holden Special station wagon, known as the *Bush Mechanics* car 1962**

**Acquired** 2003, purchase

**Condition** Stabilised in its dented, rusty and dilapidated state. The bush mechanics have replaced some of the car's original parts with salvaged parts, and carried out makeshift repairs

**Treatment** Existing rust appears stable, but corrosion inhibitors have been applied to the engine as a precaution. All surfaces have been dusted

**Conservator time** 2 days

**Figure 2:** The label for the Bush Mechanics Car displayed as part of The Museum Workshop exhibition.