

# Ethnographic Collections

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It is not a common occurrence that a curator is fortunate enough to be involved in the planning and building of a museum during his working life. In my case this happy situation did in fact take place, and after long discussions, arguments and concerns, we moved our collections comprising some 19,000 ethnographic items into the new premises in 1972.<sup>1</sup>

The layout of the Museum is a compromise: It is located on two levels. Stores and the Curator's and secretary's offices are located on the ground floor, display rooms, laboratories and technical staff offices are on the floor above. There is no direct communication between the two levels. Reasons for this layout were imposed by the general purpose of the building in which the Museum is located. Furthermore, certain parts of the Museum have to be easily accessible to students who participate in material culture lectures, as this aspect is a major function of our Museum.<sup>1,2</sup>

Before I address myself to the topic of this essay, I would like to make the following points: The information presented here should strictly be viewed as an example. What I consider to be adequate in our Museum, may of course not be satisfactory to any other ethnographic collection. But I feel, that our storage facilities and storage capacities may provide a practical example which may be useful to others who wish to draw on our experiences for their specific needs.

## Storage Facilities

All storage facilities are located on the ground floor. The total available area comprises 350 square metres (3,886 sq.ft.)\* Excepting Store 1, all other areas are without windows and feature filtered lights against colour damaging ultra-violet rays. All stores are climatically controlled (as is the entire Museum

complex) and a carbon dioxide fire extinguishing service extends through Stores I, II, III, IV and V (as well as through the display rooms). The entire Museum area is protected with an ultrasonic burglar alarm system. Throughout the stores the unpainted concrete floors are now proving to be a source of dust, and investigations are now under way to find the best suited sealing agent that can be applied to reduce this problem. The outer walls of the stores are of poured concrete which is painted in egg-shell tone and they reflect the ceiling lights adequately. Due to design features on the floor above, water pipes extend through a portion of store VI on the ceiling, and these have presented problems by way of forming condensed water according to outside climatic variations.

The major consideration in the actual storage of artifacts was seen in providing sufficient space so that each item could be laid out in a way that it would not touch any other. This concept has of course a number of other advantages such as unimpeded accessibility to each item, it minimises handling of items to gain access to a particular one, and it facilitates an orderly approach to organizing the stores in a meaningful manner.

Since our collections comprise items such as 5 metre long dug-out canoes, very heavy carved tree trunks, long and slender spears, a great number of unwieldy masks, large shields, sacred artifacts, and thousands of small and fragile items, considerable problems posed themselves. To overcome these, areas were designated for low density storage and high density storage.

Store 1 (60 sq. metres: 672 sq.ft.) consequently has become a low density store containing canoe hulls, carved tree trunks, paddles, spears, bows and arrows. Extremely heavy items rest on wooden

\*All conversions from square metres into square feet must be regarded as rough calculations. All measurements were rounded off to the nearest metre.

beams on the floor, paddles and spears lie horizontally on specially constructed shelves which prevent them from sagging under their own weight, and arrows sit vertically in galvanized wire trays, each capable of holding some 1,500 arrows. In all, this store contains approximately 1,845 items.

Stores II, III, IV and V have approximately a floor space of 20 sq. metres (225 sq.ft.), 19 sq. metres (297 sq.ft.), 12 sq. metres (135 sq.ft.) and 27 sq. metres (292 sq.ft.) respectively. These rooms are CO<sub>2</sub> fire protected and used to house specific materials such as: material on loan from elsewhere, highly inflammable items made of grass, feathers, hair, fur and such, and sacred material. As it proved to be far too costly to provide individual CO<sub>2</sub> facilities and climatic controls for each of these stores, it was decided to partition this area with 5 x 5 cm galvanized metal meshing from floor to ceiling. In addition adjustable and movable shelves, covered in white baked enamel and being perforated make up the store furniture for rooms II, III and IV. Store V on the other hand features four bays entirely made of wire mesh stretched tight on metal pipe frames, and has proved extremely useful for hanging light, but odd-shaped items. In summary stores II, III, IV and V contain 650, 200, 191 and 222 artifacts respectively. These stores can be regarded as medium density stores.

The largest store is room VI having an area of approximately 182 sq. metres (2,016 sq.ft.) Its main storage furniture consists of movable compactus shelves. Each movable unit is approximately 2.2 metres high (7'4"), 1.3 metres deep (4'2") and 1.8m (6') wide. The frames and shelves are made of metal, are covered with white baked enamel and are perforated for free air circulation and maximum light access. In all there are 30 such units with a further six under construction. On the average each unit contains ten shelves, and approximately 12,000 items are stored in this room.

For practical reasons the entire stone collection is housed on perforated adjustable metal shelves in store VII, having an area of approximately 30 sq. metres (330 sq.ft.), and contains some 3,800 items.

### Storage Capacities

I shall now turn to the second aspect of this essay and discuss on hand of a few examples the storage capacities of stores III, V and VI.

Store III is a relatively small room with a floor area of 19 sq. metres (207 sq.ft.). It contains the majority of sacred and secret aboriginal items which consist of wood, bark, feather downs, feathers and some bird specimens. All items are relatively fragile, most are painted and utmost care in their storage is called for. The room is furnished with the usual per-

forated metal shelves. These shelves provide a storage area of 42 sq. metres (470 sq.ft.), and thus more than double the original floor space still allowing free movement in the room and easy access to each item. The density of storage in this room equals 0.21 sq. metres (2.35 sq.ft.) per artifact.

Store V has a floor area of 27 sq. metres (302 sq.ft.) and features four bays the walls of which are of meshed galvanized wire. Each side of each bay measures 4.5 metres x 3.9 metres (15' x 13'). The total available hanging space in this store is thus 140 sq. metres (1,507 sq.ft.) a fivefold increase over the original floor space. The artifacts housed in this room are masks, large dancing shields (3 metres long), tapa cloths and grass skirts. In all 222 items occupy the walls of this store. The density of storage equals thus 0.63 sq. metres (7 sq.ft.) per artifact. This figure stands in considerable contrast to the one achieved in Store III (0.21 sq. metres per artifact), and I believe illustrates the usefulness of meshed wire walls to maximum storage capacities without causing damage to artifacts.

The last example I wish to illustrate concerns Store VI. This store features movable compactus shelves and contains the great majority of the Museum's collections, some 12,000 artifacts. The floor area is approximately 182 sq. metres (2,016 sq.ft.). As mentioned previously there are 30 compactus units, each of which on the average contains 10 shelves. Each shelf housing a storage area of 2.34 sq. metres (25 sq.ft.); each compactus unit a storage area of 23.4 sq. metres (250 sq.ft.) and all 30 units thus provide a storage area of 702 sq. metres (7,560 sq.ft.). The compactus units in this store therefore increase the original store VI floor area four times, and in addition leave ample floor space for easy access to each unit, and in turn to each artifact.

Disregarding the great diversity of items stored here, the density of storage in this case equals (0.06 sq. metres (0.7 sq. ft.) per artifact. More often than not this figure would of course rarely be found in reality on any individual shelf, as such items as large bark paintings, wooden clubs, nose sticks and claypots, amongst many others, all occupy individual areas appropriate for their shape, form and condition. Nevertheless this example when viewed in comparison with the two others illustrates sufficiently the varying space requirements which are so important for an ethnographic museum, if its collections are to be stored appropriately.

There remains but one more aspect for your consideration: Again considering Store VI, I wish to quote its storage density figure based on cubic measurements: its total storage capacity as provided by the 30 compactus units is 155 cubic metres (5,471 c.ft.) or in other terms each artifact occupies a space of 0.013 cubic metres (0.45 c.ft.).

## Summary

The examples I have presented here reflect accurately the present storage facilities and storage capacities in our Museum. They are slightly different to those quoted in *The Report of the Planning Committee on the Gallery of Aboriginal Australia*<sup>4</sup> but this is solely due to some considerable rearrangement in the Museum stores. The examples also illustrate the need to assess the most advantageous storage furniture with regard to the artifacts which it is to accommodate as well as to the available floor area. Though all of our stores contain artifacts, the existing layout and design allows for

future expansion. Especially in the compactus shelf area, an additional three shelves on average can be added without interference to artifacts, thus increasing the storage capacity in this area alone by 33%. All other shelving, including the compactus shelving, can in future also be extended by increasing their height from the present 2.1 metres (7 ft.) to at least 3 metres (10 ft.), thus increasing the overall storage capacity by some 30%.

In conclusion I hope that this essay on storage facilities and storage capacities as they exist now in the Museum has served its purpose in providing some factual examples.

## References

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2. Lauer, P. K., 1973, History and Recent Developments of the New Anthropology Museum, University of Queensland, *Occasional Papers* 1: 1-9.
3. Lauer, P. K., 1973, Reflections on Past and Future Functions of Ethnographic Collections, *Occasional Papers*, 2: 1-8.
4. *Museums in Australia, 1975*, A Report of the Committee of Inquiry on Museums and National Collections Including the Report of the Planning Committee on the Gallery of Aboriginal Australia, Aust. Govt. Pub. Serv., Canberra.