

TIP SHEET

The Meaning of 'Significance' for Museum Collections

1. Introduction

This tip sheet will help museum staff and volunteers understand the meanings of 'significance' in the context of evaluating and understanding the collections we care for.

This is important because:

- we need to be able to clearly articulate why we exhibit and preserve our collections.
- we need to understand our collections from multiple perspectives, including perspectives that are outside of our own lived experiences.
- funding applications will be strengthened by statements that match our unique collections to broader social narratives.
- part of best practice in collections management is choosing what to preserve for the future.
- we need to be able to justify why we have prioritised, made selections, or decisions about our collections.

All of the above points can only be done holistically and comprehensively when we have developed skills in defining, recognizing, recording, researching and sharing what is significant about our museums, our collections and individual objects / belongings¹, artworks and specimen.

2. Definitions

'Significant' is recorded as being used in 15th and 16th century Europe to indicate that 'something has a meaning'. The origins of the word itself are from the Latin word *significare*, meaning to 'make known, or indicate', similar to the English word, 'signify' that we use today. In the 18th century the meaning sometimes included having a 'special or secret' meaning, which is when the concept of 'importance' became part of the definition².

The internet has some useful definitions of 'significance' that show we still understand that 'importance' is related to what we understand 'significance' or 'significant' to mean:

- Important; having or likely to have influence or effect³.
- Important; and deserving of attention, or consequence⁴.

The definition of significance is very similar to contemporary use of the word 'value', but in a museum context value can also mean terms that can be selected in a database field with pre-defined options (often called 'values'), and / or the market or monetary value assigned to an object for the purpose of insurance, or during the purchase of a new acquisition. To avoid confusion with these two ways of using the word 'value' in museums, we will use the term 'significance' to define *the multiple ways of understanding the importance of an object*.

¹ This Tip Sheet will use 'object' to describe individual items but acknowledges that for collections of material culture, especially collections of Indigenous creations, the word 'belonging' is often used as this embodies the ongoing relationships between people and collections. Object, as used in this Tip Sheet, can also refer to an archival object, a specimen from the natural environment, or artwork.

² <https://www.etymonline.com/word/significant>

³ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/significant>

⁴ <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/significant>

3. Applying 'Significance' to the Museum Context

There are multiple facets, from broad to specific, involved in a comprehensive understanding of significance for museums and collections. When you have considered the significance of your collection as a whole in your overall collections and sub-collection scoping descriptions, and considered the significance of individual objects in detailed cataloguing tasks, you will increase the ways the collection can be used in your museum activities.

For example:

- **Exhibition planning** - Increased range of objects to demonstrate the core ideas and narratives that exhibits explore.
- **Prioritising resources** – A significant object should be considered as a priority for improved storage conditions, for conservation assessments and treatments if necessary.
- **Increasing audiences** – Being able to show how your collections are interesting, relevant and that they matter to different types of visitor groups, and groups composed of many social demographics, means that your audiences can engage on personal levels with your collections.
- **Funding and grant applications** – If you are applying for Cultural Property designation you need to be able to explain the significance of the object or collection to Canada's heritage (which may include heritages related to ongoing sovereign Indigenous Nations, or the heritage that predates what we recognize as the Dominion of Canada in 1867, or that predates when Saskatchewan joined the Confederation in 1905, or heritages related to the land rather than the colonial state).
 - For other grants and funding applications, being able to explain why funding is

needed for your collections should include an overview of what makes your collection significant and therefore deserving of funding.

- Being able to match how your project relates what is significant about your collection to wider social initiatives, occasions, and events will help make your grant applications more effective.

Tip: Request letters of support from community groups for grant applications that include what they find significant about your collection and your project from their perspectives.

- **Collections management** – Your collecting focus and collections scope or area should be clearly defined by your Acquisitions Policy, which usually relates to your Mission⁵.
 - Your collection should consist of objects, artwork or specimen, in varying degrees of significance, that clearly demonstrate the themes and subjects listed in your Acquisitions Policy.
 - Recording the significance of your collections, by collection or individual item, ensures that collections management decisions can be taken that will ensure a high standard of overall care for your collections.
 - If an object does not clearly relate to your Mission, it may have intangible or associated significance that does relate to your Mission. This information needs to be documented as part of the object record.
 - De-accessioning processes can be used to remove collections that do not fit your Mission and/or that do not have significance.
 - Objects that demonstrate your Mission but that are duplicates, undocumented, and / or that have no known significance over others, may be suited for handling collections.

⁵ If you do not have either of these essential documents, or if they need to be updated, please refer to MAS' Standards for Saskatchewan Museums (2016).

- **Justification of decisions taken** – Knowing the significance of your collections, or how they might be more significant to another organisation, means decisions can be taken that ensure collections are used to their full potential, whether within your museum or elsewhere.
 - As museums, we hold collections in trust for the future, and for the future enjoyment of society. Part of this means recognizing when an object might be better cared for somewhere else, and/or when an object or collection has greater significance to another organization.

4. Types of Significance

From individual objects, to collections, to our museum building itself, there are many ways of understanding significance.

- Significance can be personal, institutional, local, cultural, tangible, intangible, historical, disciplinary, regional, provincial, national or international.
- It is important to consider all types of significance when documenting your collections.
- Significance can change over time, and can be subjective based on different perspectives.
- Some collections will have significance relating to their provenance, or history over time. It is important to periodically re-evaluate additional types of significance.

Your museum building may have significance, or the history of why your museum was founded may have local, regional or cultural significance.

There are infinite ways that objects and collections can have significance. The list below provides examples to outline different types of significance – they are non exclusive, meaning an object can have significance of all, a few, or one of these types.

Personal – The significance is unique to an individual's lived experience or personal story. For example, an object that reminds someone of a specific experience in their past. Object example: Any rotary phone reminds me of my childhood in London, Ontario, in the 1970s, because we had a wall mounted rotary phone.

Relational – The significance may be in relation to other objects within the same collection (related by collector, or theme), or related to other objects in your collections. It is important to record this relationship so that the integrity of the related objects is recognized and maintained. Object example: The outfit a local child wore for their baptism into a Christian church – each of the separate items may not be significant, but as a whole, they have a related significance.

Individual or Group Associations – The significance relates to a known, named individual, or group. It is important to record these names so that this association is not lost over time. The significance of the individual or group is what gives the object its significance. For example, if an object was owned by the first Mayor of your town, the ownership is what adds to the significance of the object.

Institutional – The significance relates to the founding or an event in the history of your Museum. For example, the collection that is considered the 'founding' collection in a museum is usually the collection that existed when the museum was created, or that was donated to create the museum. This collection has institutional significance that should be documented in your database and collections records.

Local – The significance relates to the local landscape; to changes in the landscape over time; to people who live in the local area now; their stories of coming here and/ or the local Indigenous Nations. For example, an original copy of the treaty that was created to allow Europeans to settle on Indigenous homelands has local significance because it is the documentary record that shows the on-going obligations of settlers and Indigenous Nations that made it possible for Europeans to live in the area in the first place. These obligations continue today and still have important local relevance.

Cultural – The significance relates to a specific cultural group or Indigenous Nation. Cultural significance could include beliefs associated with objects or collections. For example, a drum made by a local Indigenous Elder has specific cultural significance to the Elder, and his Nation.

Tangible or Physical – The significance is observed, visible, aesthetic and relates to the physical nature of the object. Tangible significance depends the meanings we assign to an object based on what we can see or ‘touch’. For example, a painting that demonstrates visual elements relating to the Impressionist period in Europe has an aesthetic significance related to that era of artistic creation.

Intangible – The significance is assigned by association with a story, or a meaning that is not based on what it looks like or other sensory interactions. For example, a rusty nail might not have anything that looks significant about it, but it could be the only surviving piece of one of the first buildings in your town. This story makes a seemingly insignificant item have significance.

Historical – The significance relates to specific past events or is understood to be part of what we now understand as defining a certain era or way of thinking. For example, models of what dinosaurs were thought to look like by European scientists in the late 1800s that were exhibited at the World’s Fairs. Palaeontologists now have different ways of interpreting how dinosaurs look, so these models have historical significance related to that era of thinking.

Disciplinary – The significance relates to a subject specific discipline, usually defined by broad topics like ‘Art History’ or ‘Natural History’, which can also include narrower sub topics, like ‘French Impressionist Painting’, or ‘Geology’. Please note that ‘Disciplinary’ names and ways of thinking in current use tend to present the European Enlightenment and/or Humanities world view. Disciplinary thinking for Indigenous Nations also exist, and reflect different ways of looking at and understanding the world around us. Any disciplinary significance should include identifying the broad world view that the discipline is part of, in order to leave space for equally valid, alternative ways of seeing the world. For example, names of botanical specimens of Natural History assigned from Linnaean classifications use specific hierarchies that relate to how Europeans structured knowledge from the late 1700s, which is known as the Enlightenment.

Regional – The significance relates to the regional landscape; to changes in the region over time; to people who live in the region now, and / or the local Indigenous Nations. For example, tools used to clear

land for agricultural purposes when settlers arrived in your area have regional significance.

Provincial - The significance relates to the history or contemporary society of the province; the creation of the province as a defined area of Canada; the landscape (features of which likely extend past provincial boundaries); the people living in the province now; the history of provincial settlement (including the on-going relevance of treaties); and / or the Indigenous Nations that have lived in the province since time immemorial (whose original territories and homelands likely span past the imposed provincial boundaries). For example, an early version of the flag made to symbolize your province has provincial significance.

National /Nation-al – The significance relates to the history or contemporary society of the geo-political state of Canada. If the object predates 1905 be sure that any descriptions and cataloguing details use accurate language, if, for example, it’s significance is related to the process of settlement by Europeans who travelled to your area to live, prior to when Saskatchewan became part of ‘Canada’.

- An object may have significance to an Indigenous Nation, that exists independently to Canada and that activates their own sovereignty.
- An object may have significance to another Country or Nation.
- For example, a treaty with local significance can also have significance for the national story of Canada, as well as significance to the Indigenous Nations the treaty was negotiated with because it shows their ongoing sovereignty as Nations.

International / Inter-Nation-al - The significance relates to the history or contemporary situation in multiple geopolitical states or countries, or Nations, as described above. For example, a dinosaur fossil recovered in your area might have international significance if the name of the species assigned was taken from that fossil, and that type of dinosaur appears in other countries.

5. Interpreting Significance

When interpreting significance it is essential to remember that significance is subjective, meaning it depends on your understanding and perspectives. It is important to use qualifying language that is self-reflexive, so that assumptions are not made about the lived experiences of people from other backgrounds. It may be necessary to seek other opinions to describe significance as fully as possible.

For all of the types of significance listed in Section 4, these questions can help you use precise terminology:

- Is this observation related to my own life experience and way of seeing the world?
- How might the significance differ for someone whose family has just immigrated to Canada?
- How might the significance differ for an Indigenous Elder whose ancestors have lived in this area since time immemorial?
- What knowledge is required to understand the significance?
- Are there any assumptions about world views and values that I am making?
- How should the significance be recorded so that it is easily understood by others?
- Is the significance unique to this object, or does it relate to a larger collection?

6. Ethical Considerations

It is difficult to place a monetary value on collections that have significance in the categories included in Section 4, because a replacement item would not necessarily have the same significance. It is important to consult with all stakeholders who share in the recognition of the significance when assigning value, to ensure that the widest possible number of perspectives are taken into account.

Museums have an ethical obligation to interpret their collections from many points of view, and to recognize that the significance of an object to the museum may be outweighed by the significance of the object to another group or institution. It is important to recognize that within the last two hundred years there has been an ongoing imbalance of power and authority that museums have participated in, and actively benefit from, related to colonial governance. Museums need to be open minded and seek ways for redress and restitution for past actions, which may mean placing significant collections with the ancestors of their original owners, for example.

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