

Objects in their Place



NSW
Heritage Office





Movable heritage is any natural or manufactured object of heritage significance.

COVER:

Built in 1913, Tulkiyan in the northern Sydney suburb of Gordon was home to the Donaldson family for eighty years. Its original furniture and contents illustrate their tastes and domestic routines.

Photograph by Jason Busch, courtesy of News Ltd.

ABOVE:

1950s Leyland double-decker bus, Sydney.
Photograph by David Wilson.

OPPOSITE PAGE:

Top left: This carved tree at Eugowra was used in the death ritual for people of the Wiradjuri tribe and has been returned to its traditional owners. *Photograph courtesy of NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service.*

Top right: Bush quilts and rugs at the Pioneer Women's Hut, Tumburumba, tell stories about the women who made them and family and domestic life. *Photograph by Kylie Winkworth.*

Middle right: The Cook's Galley and utensils, Wagga Wagga, was part of a chaff cutting plant operating from 1932 to the harvest of 1952/53. It was pulled by a Foden traction engine. Up to 16 men were fed by the cook. *Photograph courtesy of Museum of the Riverina.*

Bottom right: The Yiu Ming Temple, Alexandria, has been central to maintaining religious practices and Chinese social life for some 90 years. *Photograph by Karl Zhao.*

Bottom left: The scissors were used in the Sydney Harbour Bridge opening on 19 March 1932. The Honourable J. T. Lang, Premier and former Colonial Treasurer, cut the ribbon. They are still used in official ceremonies. *Photograph courtesy of NSW Parliament House.*

What is movable heritage and why is it important?

Our heritage consists of the places and things we want to keep and pass on to future generations. "Movable heritage" is a term used to define any natural or manufactured object of heritage significance. It does not include archaeological relics found underwater or underground.

Movable heritage may be an integral part of the significance of heritage places. It can also belong to cultural groups, communities or regions of New South Wales.

Like other types of heritage, it provides historical information about people's experiences, ways of life and relationships with the environment. It also helps us to learn about people who may have been left out of written historical accounts, including women and migrant communities.

Movable heritage can prompt memories and reflect family and community histories.

Movable heritage can be as important for indigenous people as land and cultural sites. It assists them to keep their culture alive and maintain traditions and practices.

Because movable heritage is portable, it is easily sold, relocated or thrown away during changes of ownership, fashion and use. For this reason, movable heritage is vulnerable to loss, damage, theft and dispersal, often before its heritage significance is appreciated.

Movable heritage is more than trains and vintage cars!

Movable heritage ranges from significant everyday objects to antiques and may be a single item, a group of items or a whole collection. It includes:

- machinery from industry, such as tractors, ploughs and the contents of sheds;
- furniture, domestic collections, letters and accounts books and other items in heritage places;
- transport items, such as trams and ferries;
- collections and archives relating to sporting and community organisations;
- religious or ceremonial objects which are important to indigenous people or other cultural groups;
- natural items such as fossils and botanical specimens; and
- museum objects and collections.





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Documenting movable heritage

Documenting movable heritage helps us to understand an item's importance, including its relationship to people and places. Documentation creates a record of the item's location, its arrangement and details of manufacture, ownership and use. When items are moved from their context, documentation helps us to recover their history, trace their use and reinstate them when circumstances change. Keep copies of documentation with the site and building records and with the items themselves. These are some of the things you can do:

- photograph the place in detail, inside and out, showing the arrangement of movable items in their context;
- make an inventory of the items and record their relationships to places and people;
- talk to people who used the items or who remember their history. Record how the items were used, who owned them and where they came from;
- research the local history of the region, place and community. This provides a context to understand the items and the reasons they are important in local history;
- research historical changes and uses that have influenced the design or current condition of the items;
- carefully examine the items to see how they were used, looking for evidence of wear and tear, repairs and adaptation;
- assess the significance of the items;
- prepare a conservation management plan and follow its recommendations before making decisions on moving, disposing, or restoring items and places.

Caring for movable heritage

A movable heritage item can usually survive for long periods in the place where it belongs, as long as there is basic security, protection from pests and shelter from the elements.

Items can be easily damaged through hasty and poorly informed actions. Any maintenance and restoration work or proposal for removal should be based on an understanding of the item's significance. Follow the recommendations in the conservation management plan.

If a heritage place is being reused, there may be opportunities to keep the items in use or to carefully store them in a room, roof space or shed on the site, or somewhere adjacent.

The following measures can help conserve movable heritage:

- minimise direct physical access which can put items at risk of wear, damage, disturbance and theft;
 - consider storing important archival records elsewhere for future research;
 - secure and store items during conservation works to a building or site;
 - remove small and valuable items to protect them during conservation works;
 - record any conservation work in notes and take before and after photographs. Add these records to the documentation file;
 - seek advice from a museum conservator before applying treatments to items.
- Painting can damage or destroy original materials, as can repairs, reconstruction and adding new parts to make an item operational.

ABOVE:

The Eveleigh Locomotive Workshops demonstrate aspects of railway technology and trades from the 1880s to the 1980s. The remaining machinery, including the Davy Press, is being conserved on site. *Photograph courtesy of Australian Technology Park.*

OPPOSITE PAGE:

Top left: Hillview, Sutton Forest, was the former Vice Regal country residence. Many items are being reused. Others are secured on site. *1991 photograph by Matt Whitehurst, courtesy of NSW Department of Urban Affairs and Planning.*

Top right: The stockbooks at Bickmore's Store, Kurri Kurri, show how the store operated from 1907 to 1944. Stockbooks document both prosperous and lean times in a region's history. *Photograph by Joy McCann.*

Bottom right: This drawer of butterflies from the Macleay Museum is part of a vast insect collection brought to Sydney in 1826. The collection is strongly associated with the Macleay family and has a history of research and display at both Elizabeth Bay House and the Macleay Museum. *Photograph by Penelope Clay.*

Bottom left: Rouse Hill estate is a record of the endeavours, tastes and fortunes of a pastoral family over 180 years. The Humber Super Snipes will deteriorate slowly and do not need to be restored or moved. *Photograph by Scott Cameron, courtesy of Historic Houses Trust of NSW.*





Moving an item may diminish its significance and create new storage and conservation problems in another place.

What if an item has to be moved?

Moving an item may diminish its significance and create new storage and conservation problems in another place. It is important to explore all possible options for retaining movable heritage in its heritage place, cultural group, community or region.

It may be necessary to relocate movable heritage when it is under direct and immediate threat. The conservation management plan and the wishes of cultural groups and communities should guide decisions about moving items. Even if it is necessary to relocate movable heritage from a heritage place, there may be options to retain some of the item's significance by keeping it in its cultural group, community or region. Remember to keep copies of documentation with the item.

Finding a good home

When there is no alternative to moving items, it may be best for a local group, museum or historical society to acquire them. A good home allows community access and interprets the items' links to places, people and regional history. A well organised museum will have a policy identifying what it is collecting and interpreting, in co-operation with other people in the region.

Museums have to be very selective about what they acquire because caring for movable heritage is a major on-going commitment. Sometimes museums will decline to acquire items. This decision will be based on the museum's collection policy and its capacity to safely store and care for the items. The NSW Museums and Galleries Foundation can give advice on display, storage, care and interpretation.

ABOVE:

Made by convicts for Major-General Lachlan Macquarie, Governor of New South Wales, and his wife Elizabeth in 1821, the armchair is built from rose mahogany, red cedar, casuarina and modern replacement wallaby fur. *Photograph courtesy collection, Powerhouse Museum, Sydney.*

OPPOSITE PAGE:

Top left: This icon of St Athanasios was painted by Greek Orthodox priest, Serafim Fokas, in 1901 for the Holy Trinity Church, Surry Hills. The icon has been removed but is still held by a community organisation. *Photograph courtesy of Hellenic Historical and Cultural Centre, Lakemba.*

Top right: D.S. Murray Bookbinders was located at the Gowings Building from 1941 to 1999, when the lease expired. The workroom was documented and the business and equipment relocated to The Block, George Street. *Photograph by M. Kojdanovski, courtesy of the Powerhouse Museum, Sydney.*

Middle right: Recycled from a 44-gallon drum, this food pantry was probably inspired by a 'Rotary Kitchen Canister' advertised in a 1925 Anthony Horden mail order catalogue. *Photograph courtesy collection, Powerhouse Museum, Sydney.*

Bottom: The Quarantine Station Hospital, Sydney Harbour National Park, was used to treat migrants from the 1880s until the 1960s. The beds have been rearranged to match historic photographs. *Photograph courtesy of NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service.*

Government legislation

The *Environmental Planning and Assessment Act 1979* enables local government to list significant heritage places and their fixtures, but it does not cover movable heritage items. Many councils are identifying movable heritage, particularly items in significant town halls, community buildings and parks. Heritage advisors are encouraging private owners to care for heritage places with significant items.

The *NSW Heritage Amendment Act 1998* lists movable items of State significance in the State Heritage Register. In many cases, the items are important elements of places listed in the Register. The NSW Heritage Office is emphasising advice and funding as positive ways to assist private owners.

Movable heritage items and collections owned by State Government organisations illustrate stories of social policy and working practices and show how people experienced facilities and services. Under Section 170 of the Heritage Amendment Act, State Government organisations must maintain a register of heritage items and care for them with due diligence. The organisations are recording the most significant and vulnerable movable items on their registers.

The NSW Ministry for the Arts supports the programs of museums and galleries in NSW and the NSW Museums and Galleries Foundation, the principal service provider for this sector.

The Commonwealth Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts administers the *Protection of Movable Cultural Heritage Act 1986*. Permits are required for the permanent or temporary export of movable items important to Australia. The Act does not affect the right to own or sell items in Australia.



Apply for a grant

Phone (02) 9873 8500 for details of the NSW Heritage Office's funding programs or refer to the home page at www.heritage.nsw.gov.au. The Ministry for the Arts can also assist museums and historical societies with funding for collections and conservation activities. Phone (02) 9228 5533 or refer to www.arts.nsw.gov.au. The National Library of Australia has a community heritage grants program for museums and other organisations. Phone (02) 6262 1111 or refer to www.nla.gov.au.

Further information

Movable Heritage Principles, NSW Heritage Office and Ministry for the Arts Movable Heritage Project, Sydney 1999

Marquis-Kyle, P. and Walker, M., *The Illustrated Burra Charter*, Australia ICOMOS, Canberra 1994

Townley, P. and Parris, R. *Caring For Heritage Objects: Guidelines on Establishing Significance, Object Care and Management*, Powerhouse Museum Research Series: No 3, Sydney 1994



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