

CREATING VISIBILITY: ARCHIVES, EPHEMERA AND ORAL HISTORY AT THE NGA RESEARCH LIBRARY

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ABSTRACT

The National Gallery of Australia Research Library holds a wealth of printed ephemera, archives and audio interviews relating to Australian art and artists. In the late 1970s James Gleeson conducted nearly one hundred interviews with Australian artists whose works had been acquired by the National Gallery of Australia. The project was initiated by the Gallery's first Director, James Mollison before the Gallery was even opened. In the early 1990s, James Mollison donated his personal papers to the Research Library, including records documenting a significant role in the development of the Australian visual arts. The Research Library's ANZ Art & Artists files contain ephemera relating to over 30,000 Australian and New Zealand artists. It holds invitations, small exhibition catalogues, posters, pamphlets, leaflets, handbills, cards, menus and photographs.

In our paper we discuss creating visibility of ephemera and archives and the extension to creating new digital resources for preservation and access. Partnerships for digitising materials will be explored along with impediments of copyright and current technology. The cataloguing of important and extensive ephemeral artist files will be complemented with an overview of the databases: *Prints and Printmaking: Australia, Asia, Pacific* and the *Dictionary of Australian Artists Online*.

The role of oral history and its significance is illustrated by the James Gleeson Oral History Collection, recently inscribed into the UNESCO *Australian Memory of the World* register. Oral histories are compared with artist personal papers in archives.

Introduction

The Research Library of the National Gallery of Australia, formally established under the powers vested in the National Gallery of Australia by the National Gallery Act 1975, houses the most extensive collection of visual arts literature in Australia. It documents the history and development of art and culture in Australia and provides the National Gallery of Australia with a collection of worldwide breadth appropriate to the research needs of the National Gallery's professional staff and visiting scholars. Notable and existing strengths in both breadth and depth as a national resource include:

- Australian art, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art
- contemporary art internationally with emphasis on catalogue raisonnées and exhibition catalogues
- Asian art with growing emphasis on South East Asian art and Indian art
- Pacific art
- photography
- visual arts relating to the National Gallery of Australia's Ballets Russes collection

- French salons publications
- Museum practice and curatorship
- art conservation

The Library's mandate extends as well to the national and international scholarly communities, and to a varied clientele of museum professionals, students, artists, journalists, collectors, dealers and the general public. The collections emphasise advanced research, but user needs are supported at the general inquiry level as well. The Research Library's holdings are recorded on Libraries Australia to provide the widest access to the collections.

In depth collections of materials mirror the acquisitions policy of the art collection. The collection strategy is based on the Director, Ron Radford's *Vision Statement*, 2005¹ and the National Gallery of Australia's *Acquisition Policy*, 2006² It is also mindful of the 1966 *Lindsay Report*³ which placed emphasis on modern art worldwide, the whole of Australian art and works of art in southern and eastern Asia and the Pacific Islands. The collection strategy addresses building on existing strengths, filling gaps in these areas, and extending the collections to include the vast number of electronic publications now available for scholarly research. All languages are collected with a preference for English, if available.

Core collections are supplemented by an excellent Reference Collection of broad, international scope, with particular emphasis on the history of art. This has been enhanced to include on-line collections for databases, encyclopaedias, and full-text serial publications.

With new strategic directions for the Research Library supported by the Director in 2006, the Research Library now not only holds the largest collections in the visual arts in Australia with over 125,000 monographs and exhibition catalogues, 2000 current serials and a comprehensive collection of auction catalogues, but also has evolved into the provision of information available as digital resources. The web publication in 2007, *E-Resources Gateway: Databases for the Research Library*, provided online access for all NGA staff for resource discovery and access to the electronic resources available. For example, the four auction catalogue online databases provide the curators with the most current information for acquisition of artworks, and location and provenance of artworks when planning exhibitions..

The National Gallery of Australia Research Library holds a wealth of printed ephemera, archives and audio interviews relating to Australian art and artists. There are many ways of creating visibility of information, ephemera and archives about artist's lives. Many pictures can be drawn which inform of us of the totality of an artists life. Three examples of approaches to biography / autobiography include a dictionary of artists with a focus on the printed word and the artist; a research database with emphasis on the images of the artworks; and a collection of oral history interviews as a conversation between two artists.

The first, the *Dictionary of Australian Artists Online*, is a national collaborative project with entries written by scholars and experts on Australian art and artists; the second, *Prints and Printmaking: Australia Asia Pacific*, is the creation and work of the NGA's Senior Curator for Australian Prints and Drawings, and was recently awarded 2008

“Best of the Web’ in the research category; and the third, the *James Gleeson Oral History Collection*, is an oral history collection from the 1970’s digitised in partnership with the National Library of Australia Oral History Section. This oral history collection was accepted for inscription into the UNESCO Australian Memory of the World for 2008.

Dictionary of Australian Artists Online

<http://www.daa0.org.au/>

The National Gallery of Australia is a participant in the development of the *Dictionary of Australian Artists Online*, an open access and dynamic scholarly reference work. This database has a strong scholarly focus with an emphasis on collaborative knowledge. You can search over 7000 biographies by over 400 biographers with 530 new biographies currently in progress. There are themes and patterns from 45 years of art scholarship. You can create new biographies, comment or revise those previously written and write alternative interpretation on artists already covered. The online dictionary aims to reflect the entire landscape and history of artistic production in Australia. It began as an Australia council funded project and has now emerged as a service.

The foundation data focuses predominantly on Colonial artists; women artists to 1950; black and white artists and Aboriginal artists of the western Desert and the Sydney region. It is constantly being added to.

The foundation biographies are taken from

- *The Dictionary of Australian Artists: painters, sketchers, photographers and engravers to 1870*, edited by Joan Kerr
- *Heritage: The National Women’s Art Book*, edited by Joan Kerr
- *Aboriginal Artists of the Western Desert: A Biographical Dictionary*, by Vivien Johnson
- Batches of biographies from collecting institutions and art academics

Born digital biographies have been added by partner organizations including the National Gallery of Australia, Commercial galleries, academics and postgraduate researchers and artists.

DAAO was launched publicly in 2007, supporting collaborative editorial management, online submissions and rights management, as well as double-blind peer review of new research. The service has been well received, with around 11,000 hits per day on the site, although there is a great deal of work that needs to be done to provide more comprehensive coverage of Australian art history, particularly 20th century artists..

To illustrate the Dictionary, the entry for Lloyd Rees is written by Dr Anne Gray, Head of Australian Art at the National Gallery of Australia. There is a significant material about his artworks and an extensive bibliography. There are also many links to images of his artworks including the Lloyd Rees Sketchbook Project at the Art Gallery of New South Wales. At the end of the biography you can link directly through to Pictures

Australia and to Google Images. It also references the James Gleeson Oral History Collection where you hear an audio excerpt of Lloyd Rees interview in 1979.

The entry for Elaine Haxton was submitted by Andrew Sayers, Director of the National Portrait Gallery. Painter, printmaker and designer, Haxton worked through the 1930's as a commercial artist in both Sydney and London. In 1943 she won the Sulman Prize, awarded for the best subject painting, genre painting or mural project by an Australian artist and in 1986 was awarded an AM for printmaking.

A new feature that has recently been added is the slideshow with 3D using PicLens. This site won Best of the Web 2008 in the Research Category. In the citation they called the database an impressive gateway reference site. 'This is what a reference site should be. It has a clearly defined focus, covering many aspects of Australian printmaking.. It includes biographical and institutional information, exhibitions and bibliographies, as well as 45,000 works. The information is simply and clearly presented.'⁴ With such a large database, it is unlikely that all records will ever be complete. It intersects with the DAAO and complements the artists' information with images of their artworks.

Special Collections & Archives

The appointment of a Special Collections Archivist in September 2006 created new opportunities for the development of the important artist and art archives and to target new archives for acquisition. These Archives are a key national resource for Australian Artists' papers and collections. The archives have been recorded on the Research Library's catalogue to provide integrated access to the breadth of the collections. Work has begun on listing all of the Australian & New Zealand artist's files which comprise 38,000 artists.

Art libraries are generally still obsessed with the published and the printed resources. Serials, rare books, catalogues raisins are very much part of the art library's most treasured and valuable resources. In addition to bibliographic collections, the Library has also kept manuscripts and documentary material such as diaries, photographs and ephemera. It also holds a collection of ninety-eight interviews and transcripts with Australian artists created in the late 1970s, before the building was even opened.

Artists Archives

Personal archives are a challenge to collect, acquire and document. By their very nature they tend to be messy and idiosyncratic. They contain the intimate and personal view of life's experiences and lack the collective formality and organisation found in other types of records.

No matter how detailed the series arrangement and listing for these papers, understanding and access is best gained by physical contact and familiarity with the collection, something that is almost impossible to duplicate in an online environment. A collection level catalogue entry is often limited in its ability to convey the complexity, breadth and scope of the material that can include diaries, correspondence, photographs, scrapbooks, albums – and in the case of artist papers – a lot of visual media such as slides, sketchbooks, drafts of architectural plans and designs and

photographs (often in the hundreds). Some of the Research Library's better known personal archives include Helene Kirsova, Loudon Sainthill and Bernard Hall, all of which contain a significant number of illustrated letters, sketches and uncaptioned photographs. The collections provide a source of commentary on their personal life and relationships, and their views on life's experiences. There is an intimacy in some of the exchanges with friends and family that is lacking in the corporate, formalised recordkeeping systems that document their professional role. In the records there are the facts of their professional activities but also their views, opinions and reactions concerning art openings, exhibitions, publishing, reviews, teaching, developing and acquiring art, impressions of local and overseas artists, opinions about works of art. And the lives they experienced and envisaged were immersed in building collections of Australian art from the turn of the century through to the present.

The challenge for us is how to create more visibility for these collections. Certainly a catalogue entry is a start and all the collection I have just mentioned have one on the Library's catalogue now. However they deserve more. The next step will be to create detailed finding aids that are searchable and available from the Gallery's website. In the Gallery's vision statement, the Director said that the core functions of an art museum 'are to preserve, research and interpret works of art, and their accompanying information, for the public benefit'. Our aim in the Research Library is to increase awareness and access to these alternative – and very rich – research resources.

Ephemera

Ephemera has also always been widely collected by art libraries all over the world, including the Research Library at the National Gallery of Australia which has nearly 1000 Type A Archival boxes of exhibition invitations and announcements, press releases, newspaper cuttings, price lists, photographs and dinner menus all relating to individual artists, commercial and public galleries and all documenting the business of making and exhibiting art. The Research Library at the National Gallery of Australia has collected ephemera relating to Australian and international visual arts for over twenty-five years. One of the most fascinating things about these collections is while individually the items might seem unimportant; cumulatively they can throw a particular light on art history, offering not only factual detail but an evocative link with the past.

The sheer numbers of this type of record have made them difficult to properly document and deal with and traditionally been referred to as 'grey' or 'guerrilla' or 'documentation' files. Most institutions collecting and acquiring ephemera don't tend to make it widely available through their catalogue or even via other forms of promotion. The material tends to be self-indexed, alphabetically organised under an artist or organisation name and known about through word of mouth by the staff and regular researchers.

The Research Library has slowly been cataloguing these files and a small percentage is available on the catalogue available on the Gallery's website at www.nga.gov.au and through Libraries Australia. We currently have 1000 records which while only a very small percentage of the total at least allow some visibility for this rich and underused resource. For this first wave of visibility we have created a generic template on the

Library's MARC-based ALEPH catalogue and created a basic format description of the contents. The cataloguer simply has to add the name of the organisation or individual and the size, which generally varies from one file to 20 folders or 3 to 4 boxes for some of the larger organisations. We have focussed on cataloguing the Australian and New Zealand Art Files as they are the most highly used by staff and external researchers. They also have many connections to the Library's monographs and the Gallery's Australian art collection. For example, we have several commercial gallery ephemera collection such as Macquarie Galleries, South Yarra Gallery and David Jones Gallery from whom we purchased art and who exhibited artists whom have significant holdings in our own collection.

The International ephemera collection is truly an extraordinary one, enhanced by the purchase of two collections of ephemera made by the Research Library in the 1980s. They were bought from Lord Alistair McAlpine, patron of the arts, collector and author and Jasia Reichardt, then a curator at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London. The McAlpine collection comprised over 15,000 exhibition catalogues – many of these were monographs. The Jasia Reichardt research collection contained over 150,000 exhibition catalogues, periodicals and ephemeral records that she had put together in London. Combined with the Gallery's own holdings of invitations received from major overseas galleries, they have made the International Artist Files particularly strong in twentieth century post-war British and American art.

The next stage of the project is to add more detailed information to these catalogue entries. For example with the commercial galleries, we plan to add the names of the artists who exhibited there to provide more information to our researchers.

National Gallery of Australia Ephemera

We also collect the ephemera created by the National Gallery, including exhibitions held before the building was opened. This gives us snapshots of history; artifacts recording particular moments in time and presenting a historical narrative of the National Gallery itself. The earliest record invites the public to a 'summer exhibition' in 1963 with the Arts Council of Australia and the Commonwealth Advisory Board presenting 'Recent additions to the National Collection' at the Auditorium in Garema Place. The plain black and white pamphlet lists recently acquired works by 17 artists, including Rupert Bunny, Tom Roberts, Ivor Hele and Charles Blackman. This collection has been recently completely re-housed and as part of this process a detailed finding aid created of all the exhibitions held by the Gallery since 1963. The finding aid is available on the Gallery's website at <http://www.nga.gov.au>

Put together, all these 'ephemeral' records capture the development and content of the National Gallery's collection and exhibitions as well as reflecting the changes design, format and production over the last three decades. So while the original intent may be 'fleeting' and transitory, there is much value in preserving ephemera for the future. They are a very detailed research resource and with the finding aid finally created and available online have a much more visible presence than ever before.

James Gleeson Oral History Collection

In 2006 the Research Library with the assistance of the National Library of Australia digitized 98 interviews done by James Gleeson with Australian artists in the late 1970s. Prior to this the interviews were held in the Research Library and could be listed to on cassettes. They were not catalogued and again known about through word of mouth among Gallery staff and some researchers.

The interviews were conducted by the well-know surrealist artist James Gleeson (b. 1915), who served as chairman of the Acquisitions Committee at the Gallery from 1974 to 1975. At the time of the interviews, he was a member of the Australian National Gallery council and the visiting curator of Australian art. The Gallery's director, James Mollison, commissioned the interviews to collect more information for the Gallery's Research Library and the curatorial staff. They were not formal interviews intended for a wider public audience but rather conversations between artists. The resulting recordings are powerful on multiple levels. As well as the artist's personal recollections about how a work was made, the recordings also link to the Gallery's corporate and official memories – the history of its acquisitions, the choice of artists who works were acquired and the histories of the works themselves.

In 2006 the Research Library with the assistance of the National Library of Australia digitized the interviews, creating more visibility for this collection of interviews by cataloguing them. Sixty-five of the ninety-eight are now available on the Library's online catalogue and a growing number of audio excerpts and transcriptions are on the National Gallery's website.

For the webpage we chose four artists for whom we had digital images of their works and selected a part of the interview where they discussed the creation of those works with James Gleeson. As we gain permission from other artists or their estates, more audio excerpts will be added to the site. We have been contacting the artists or their descendents to gain permission to have these interviews available online. So far, the responses have been positive ones. However, there have been some questions raised about making essentially 'conversations between two artists' available to all of cyberspace in this way. One letter written by a family member to the Chief Librarian of the Research Library, rather wittily and clearly, articulates these concerns:

‘ Our concern over the tapes... has been to do with the difference between what an artist says he does – his rhetoric– and what the actual content of the picture is.. People often think that the contents of the picture are the same as the artist's account... Also what an artist says at the age of 30 about his life and work is usually very different to what he says at the age of 40, 50, 60 etc... but these dimensions of passing time and maturity is not given credit... because the words came from the artist himself.’

While these concerns are valid I think the argument can be made if the artist had written a letter or kept a diary at a particular point in his or her life, expressing views and opinions that probably change over time. These interviews do capture a particular moment in time in the late 1970s– in the artist's personal life and in their professional life. And they capture a moment in the history of the National Gallery of Australia. They were made before the completion of the Gallery building in 1982. The art collection was still in its early stages of development. Gleeson not only interviewed artists, but National Gallery staff and commercial gallery directors such as Frank Watters, Violet Dulieu, Rudy Komon and Treania Smith. He interviewed Mervyn

Horton, the editor of *Art in Australia*. They provide an historical snapshot of the Australian art scene for future research. And they also provide a verbal testimony to whom the Gallery was collecting and why. The interviews provide an interesting counterpoint to official artist acquisition files held by the institution documenting the reasons for acquiring a work

In the Gallery's vision statement, Director Ron Radford said that the core functions of an art museum 'are to preserve research and interpret works of art, and their accompanying information, for the public benefit'.⁵

For research and interpretation the interviews can offer a profound and personal insight into how they created their works. Artists often do not enjoy talking about their art. The artists interviewed by Gleeson, however all have ideas and a sense of purpose about what they do. Gleeson, in intimate conversation with them, draws out their stories and evocative descriptions. They express themselves eloquently and articulately about the technical process and emotional involvement in their work.

Lloyd Rees had made many trips to Europe and was particularly inspired by the French and Italian countryside. In the 1930s he depicted landscapes showing light radiating from behind the hills and through the trees; and in the 1940s he moved to depict large open vistas, painted with free, spontaneous brush strokes on a high-key palette. In 1976 Rees began his first portfolio of prints. The following year he made a series of Australian Landscape prints depicting the mountains, cliff faces, rocks and valleys of Tasmania, New South Wales and Central Australia. His interview with James Gleeson reveals his sense of humor and love of painting the landscape. Discussing how he interprets the landscape of the Australian south coast he says:

That's right. With a lot of my painting, when I began to get a sufficient grip on things down the South Coast, I realised that I might be out the whole morning but I hadn't looked at the subject once. I had been looking at the picture all the time, the canvas. The sense of environment—to be working on a headland and to get the ozone off the ocean, with the waves pounding—was to me what made it so important working out of doors.

Costume designer Elaine Haxton was interviewed by Gleeson in 1979. She had worked on sets and costumes for theatre, ballet and opera, including *Journey to the moon* in 1960 for the Borovansky Ballet and *Parades* in 1962. Musing on why she stopped designing for the theatre, Haxton confides in Gleeson:

It was never a very well paid job doing the theatre. One did it for love and the smell of the grease paint, all that sort of thing. It was... you were always keyed very high and you know the actors and the dancers. It was a terribly interesting life and it was thrilling. But Australian designers have never been given their...any real credit...

In contrast to the delicacy and lightness of touch in her ballet designs, Haxton's frank interview with Gleeson reveals some of the tensions and uncertainties of theatre life, the punishing deadlines and strong personalities.

The James Gleeson Oral History collection has been inscribed into UNESCO's Australian Memory of the World register 2008 as being of significant Australian cultural heritage. The UNESCO Memory of the World program announced the inscription at its conference *Communities and memories: a global perspective* in

Canberra, 19–22 February 2008. The Gleeson interviews join other culturally significant material on the register, including the *Endeavour* journal of James Cook, the Mabo Case manuscripts, the sorry books and the 1906 film *the Story of the Kelly Gang*.

These items are all national treasures. It is suitable recognition of the significance and value of an artist's words that the interviews have been entered on the register. The recordings allow the voices of these Australian artists to be heard by future generations. Their spoken words add another dimension to the understanding and appreciation of the body of work they created during their life

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Between 2006 and 2008 work has gone into creating more visibility for this collection of interviews through cataloguing the interviews (sixty-five of the ninety-eight are now available on the Library's online catalogue) and giving them a small on-line presence on the Gallery's website at <http://www.nga.gov.au/Research/Gleeson/Default.cfm>. This webpage includes a listing of all the artists interviewed as well as sound excerpts of interviews with Judy Cassab, Rosalie Gascoigne, Lloyd Rees and Rosemary Madigan.

For the webpage we chose four artists whose works we held a digital image of and selected a part of the interview where they discussed with James Gleeson how they created them. As we gain permission from other interviewees more sound bites of interviews will be added to the site.

Now that the digitisation project has been completed the Research Library is planning to eventually have the interviews available through its catalogue as downloadable MP3 files for researchers to access. Transcripts are currently being completed. We plan to have these attached as an electronic document to the catalogue entry so that we can share the experience of hearing these artists in their own words and voices – to create further visibility. They deserve to be heard and – with all these collections discussed today - to be used.

Brief Biography of Presenter

Jennifer Coombes has a Bachelor of Arts degree from the Australian National University and a Graduate Diploma in Information Management from the University of Canberra. For the past eight years she has worked in cultural institutions as a manuscript librarian, curator and archivist (National Library of Australia, Australian War Memorial and National Gallery of Australia). Jennifer held the position of Curator of Private Records for five years at the Australian War Memorial where she managed the Memorial's collection of private papers such as letters, diaries and scrapbooks. Her interest in oral history began when she worked for three months in the Memorial's Film

and Sound section. Since she took up the position at the National Gallery in late 2006 she has been working with the James Gleeson oral history interviews and has become very interested in the use of the interview as a primary source document in collaboration with the more traditional documents valued by archivists and record managers.

Jennifer has worked as the Special Collections Archivist at the Research Library, National Gallery of Australia since September 2006. She manages the Library's manuscript, ephemera and audio-visual collections.

Joye Volker has a Bachelor of Science and a Master of Library Science degree from the University of British Columbia. She has worked as a Senior Librarian and the Australian National University and as Institute Librarian of the National Institute of the Arts. She manages the Arts Libraries Society of Australia and New Zealand (ARLIS/ANZ) discussion List, is past Chair of the ACT Chapter, and a past National President. She has been elected to the Standing Committee of the Art Library Section of the International Federation of Library Associations from 2007 to 2010. On a broader professional scale, she has been President of the ACT Branch of the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA), a General Counsellor on the ALIA Council and is currently on the Copyright and Intellectual Property Committee. She was appointed in 2006 to the Standards Australia Committee, *Computer Applications – Information and Documentation*. She moderated and presented a panel session at the ARLIS/NA Annual Conference in New York in April 2004 and presented a paper at the ARLIS/Norden conference in Oslo in August 2005. Ms Volker is a member of the international board for the journal *Visual Resources*.

Joye Volker has worked as the Chief Librarian at the National Gallery of Australia since June 2005.

¹ Radford, Ron. *A Vision for the National Gallery of Australia*. 2005. Canberra: NGA

² National Gallery of Australia. *Acquisitions Policy*. 2006. Canberra. The Gallery

³ Australia. National Art Gallery Committee of Inquiry. *Report of National Art Gallery Committee of Inquiry*. March. 1966. Canberra.

⁵ Radford, Ron. *A Vision for the National Gallery of Australia*. 2005. Canberra: NGA. p.2