

**Collecting for New Zealand:**  
**Examining what the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa**  
**Tongarewa should collect**

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## Abstract

*Collecting for New Zealand* explores two interconnected questions: how do history curators at the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa decide what to collect; and what do those curators and members of the public think Te Papa should collect. Te Papa's status as a national museum is important to the context within which decisions are made and opinions formed about collecting. By detailing the actual acquisition process and including the views of museum users, this research makes an important contribution to the literature on museum collecting.

This study draws on multiple sources of data to examine history collecting at Te Papa. Face-to-face interviews were conducted with current curatorial staff and focus group discussions were held with members of the public. Current and previous policy documents that influence collecting at Te Papa were also reviewed. These sources combine to develop a picture of collecting at Te Papa which encompasses both specific details of staff practice and a further understanding of what qualities people seek in museum collection items.

This thesis provides vital details on the practice and implications of collecting using location, in this case New Zealand, as a selection guide. In examining how staff decide what to collect, concerns expressed in the existing literature about the power of individuals to shape what is acquired are also addressed. The extent to which the views of the general public and those of museum staff are shared is revealed. In developing a fuller understanding of what people think Te Papa should collect, this research contributes to the debate about how to collect in ways that are sustainable. *Collecting for New Zealand* concludes by reflecting on the importance of audience to Te Papa's ongoing collecting activity.

# Introduction

Collecting is described as being “at the heart of a museum.” (Pearce 1994, 125) It is seen not only as a central activity but also as a defining one, as it is “the possession of collections ... [that] distinguishes a museum from other kinds of institution. And like the beating of a heart, the collecting activity of museums is often taken for granted, leaving institutional collecting practices relatively unexamined. Collecting involves choice, and in making choices about what to collect “the museum... officially decides what is worthy of preservation and what is not. On the one hand, it constructs what is to be remembered, but on the other hand, it also chooses what is to be forgotten.” (Chen 2007, 174)

Collecting needs to be questioned critically as the selections made have numerous implications. The decision to collect at all as well as the amount and type of material collected has financial and environmental impacts. Museums’ collecting has been described as having “touched the ceiling of growth, both physically and financially.” (Sola 2004, 250) The ongoing sustainability of museum collecting has been queried by a number of scholars (Brophy and Wylie 2008, 4-7; Knell 2004; Gagnon and Fitzgerald 2004, 215; Sola 2004). What is collected also shapes the exhibitions, research and public programmes produced by a museum, both now and into the future. In these ways the choices about what to collect become central to many other aspects of museum activity. Given these ramifications, developing a fuller understanding of institutional collecting is vital.

This dissertation focuses on the collecting activities of the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa (Te Papa), in particular those related to its History collection.<sup>1</sup> The key aim of this research is to present a current account of the issues around deciding what to collect at a national museum, Te Papa, including the perspectives of both its curators and members of the public. The central questions are what should Te Papa collect and how are decisions made about what should be collected currently. This involves examining public and curatorial thoughts on the qualities sought in collection items and on the purposes of collecting at Te Papa. At

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<sup>1</sup> Te Papa currently has five collection areas: Art, History, Pacific Cultures, Taonga Māori and Natural Environment.

present there is little published research on institutional collecting generally and at national museums in particular. My research addresses this gap.

I was drawn to this topic because of the tremendous implications the choice of what to collect can have. Much has been written about these implications, less on how the choices are actually made. As both a private collector and someone who has worked closely with museum collections, I am interested in the selection process when it moves from individual choice, as in the case of private collecting, to the realm of public accountability.

Museum collections exist against a background of limited resources (Kneil 1994, 3). My research has been motivated by a deep concern for the sustainability of current collecting practices, environmentally and in terms of the ongoing relevance of museum collections to people. It is important to understand collecting as it currently occurs in order to manage these issues in meaningful ways. Addressing these issues may include, for example, making decisions about what to collect in future as well as deaccessioning<sup>2</sup> items and deciding how to allocate collection care resources. To make informed choices, it is important to understand what makes an object worthy of retention by a museum.

This dissertation is divided into five parts. In this introduction I establish the aims and discuss the importance of this research. This is followed by an exploration of the key points in the existing literature related to this topic. Finally the research methodology I employed is detailed.

The first chapter looks at Te Papa's collecting policies and draws on my interviews with Te Papa curators to present an account of the collecting process. It addresses the ways policies and staff shape what is collected, reveals who play roles in shaping Te Papa's collections and details the decision making process.

In Chapter Two the question of whether Te Papa should collect at all is addressed. This is followed by an examination of what types of objects Te Papa should

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<sup>2</sup> Deaccessioning refers to the process of formally removing an item or items from a museum's permanent collection. It may be carried out for a number of reasons including removing objects that are duplicated or damaged as well as items collected in the past that now fall outside the established collecting perimeters of the museum. Removing objects that have been selected for collection by museum personnel in the past is viewed by some people as inappropriate and I acknowledge this perspective. I acknowledge that deaccessioning an object requires careful consideration. I am in support of the position that "deaccessioning and disposal are direct consequences of acquisition" given that "museums can neither stop collecting nor continually expand facilities and staff to accommodate new collections." (Ainslie 1999, 241)

collect. Finally this chapter includes debate about what qualities make an item worthy of collection, according to curators and members of the public.

Chapter Three focuses on what should be collected in relation to Te Papa's audiences. As in Chapter Two, information from the focus groups and staff interviews is utilised. In particular, this chapter explores what it means to use New Zealand as a guide for museum collecting.

The final section is a conclusion, where I discuss the broader implications of my research.

## **Literature review**

This literature review shows the need for research into institutional collecting. It begins by establishing that collecting is a process of selection. It then covers details of what museums may currently base their selections upon. This is followed by discussion of the uses and limitations of collection policy and the need to understand collecting in practice. The value of public input into collecting is detailed. The changing roles of the museum are then examined in relation to collecting. The importance of collecting for the present and the future is explained. Then there is an exploration of national museums and the purpose of their collections. The review concludes with a focus on the Te Papa specific context of this research.

Despite the centrality of collecting to the purposes of museums, many questions remain about their collecting activities. This research is a response to calls for more research into institutional collecting activity (Wagstaff 2008, 6). The area of museum collecting has been relatively neglected as a subject of research, with much research into collecting focused on "individual/popular collecting." (Wagstaff 2008, 10) Consequently, there are also a limited number of investigations centred on collecting at national museums in particular. There are, however, larger bodies of literature on collecting and on national museums generally which I have drawn on during this research.

## Collecting

Collecting is not a single, unified practice. Instead items are collected in a variety of ways and for a number of different purposes, including, but not limited to, research and public display. A straightforward definition of 'collecting' is, "to gather objects belonging to a particular category the collector happens to fancy ... and a collection is

what has been gathered.” (Alsop in Pearce 1995, 22) From this definition Pearce (1995, 23) concludes that “[t]he selection process clearly lies at the heart of collecting.” Selection is vital because museums cannot collect examples of everything produced, although this has been suggested (Macdonald 2006, 88).

I have sought to understand how museums make choices about what to collect, in a world where *anything* could be collected. One option, given the questions about the sustainability of collecting objects, is a shift towards “replacing the museum conception of collecting with one centred on recording.” (Knell 2004, 37) An example would be collecting a digital image of an object, instead of the object itself. This would involve adjusting “fundamental beliefs about the required physicality of evidence and the associated characteristics of authenticity.” (Knell 2004, 4) I examine this idea in Chapter Two.

The question of what to collect seems to be particularly challenging when museums attempt to “go about selecting and accumulating material from the twentieth century.” (Pearce 1995, 146) Collecting older material can appear less fraught as the age of objects may seem to justify their retention in museums but “the fact that something is old... is no reason to keep it” (Knell 2004, 32). Museum collections should be “more than a place for redundant things – there must be a bigger historical purpose.” (Knell 2004, 20) As well as dismissing age as a reason to collect something, Knell also claims “if the sole justification for keeping something is that it is unique, without any further qualification, then really it is a candidate for disposal.” (2004, 26-27) There is a need to understand what qualities do justify keeping objects in a museum.

Another option is to focus collecting by a locality (Pearce 1995, 147). This is discussed further below. Knell has questioned whether collecting by locality is always appropriate (2004, 14- 15). I have aimed to further understand what it means to collect using locality as a guide at a national museum, where the nation is both the subject and object of collecting activity. I examine this in Chapter Three.

Another way of focussing collecting, one that was prominent in my research, is ‘significance’. The publication *Significance 2.0* explores the idea of significance in regard to Australian museum collections. Significance refers to “the values and meanings that items ... have for people and communities.” (Russell and Winkworth 2009, 1) The authors contend that “significance is a process that helps collecting organisations make good decisions about the sustainable development, care and



management of their collections.” (Russell and Winkworth 2009, 3) This dissertation utilises Russell and Winkworth’s conception of significance with reference to the information provided by my participants.

The official purposes of collections are articulated in a museum’s policies. Policies act as “gatekeeper documents” to the collection (Knell 2004, 13). Collecting policies also have limitations, including the absence of “deeper intellectual rationale for collecting.” (Knell 2004, 13) This dissertation includes discussion of Te Papa’s collection policies and I go on to examine the perspectives of curators and members of the public in order to get a fuller picture of what should be collected by Te Papa.

The public are included given that collecting is carried out in their stead (Mason 2007, 68; Spalding 2002, 99) and that museums “have a responsibility to be relevant to all those who pay for them.” (Dodd and Sandell in Wagstaff 2008) The inclusion of public perspectives is notably absent from existing accounts of institutional collecting.<sup>3</sup>

Collecting is a political process, every object in a museum collection “has been selected from the large range of possible choices by individuals who acted in the light of their own ideologies, conscious and unconscious”, (Pearce 1989, 9) and museum staff are the individuals usually credited as having the power to make these decisions (Spalding 2002, 7; Vergo 1989, 2-3; Kavanagh 2004, 352-53). Recent research into the collection of contemporary jewellery at New Zealand museums revealed that “[t]he personal enthusiasms of curators ... have a large impact on the direction of collection development.” (Wagstaff 2008, ii) In Chapter One, who shapes the History collection at Te Papa is explored and in Chapter Two the subjective nature of these decisions is discussed.

In addition to these political aspects, collections also develop “as a series of responses to the contingency and accident of different demands, chance donations or specific financial situations ... museums are shaped as much by chance and fortuity as by strategy and design.” (Mason 2007, 29) I have aimed to capture these elements of chance while remaining mindful of collecting’s political dimensions.

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<sup>3</sup> When discussing this research I have encountered some people (not research participants) hostile to the view that public opinions should be sought on museum collecting. The reasons given have included that members of the public are not able to make an informed contribution and that it would be unworkable to consult with the public. I acknowledge that this opinion is held by some, but I reject it. My entire approach to this research is grounded in the belief that the thoughts of members of the public, while they come from a different perspective to those working within museums, are worthy of consideration by museum staff when collecting and that museums should endeavour to develop workable ways of consulting with their communities about collecting.

The “most important” recent change in institutional collecting originates in “the changing nature of the museum itself from a focus on collection to a focus on public service.” (Weil 2004, 289) Attention has shifted to concern about museum purposes, rather than methods (Vergo 1989, 3). As yet, research on institutional collecting has taken little account of this development. My research addresses this by including public thoughts and examining the purposes of collecting at Te Papa. Note that while the terms ‘public’ and ‘audience’ can imply a sense of unity, in practice Te Papa serves a variety of publics, and ‘audience’ encompasses everything from an individual researcher to the entire population.

In examining audience, with reference to collecting, the term is inclusive of both present and future, as typically items are collected with the intention of retaining them indefinitely. Decisions made now impact on the museum far into the future since “the version of the past that appears in this year’s museum display has to be created, very largely, out of objects collected in the past” (Davison in Mason 2007, 29). This raises additional issues around the selections made as, “[n]obody can predict what will be valued in the future, or how posterity will view the achievements of their age” (Spalding 2002, 49). Some items not considered suitable for collection will come to be desired, while other items will “have their position in a collection questioned by succeeding generations” (Wagstaff 2008, 9, see also; Broun 2004, 297; Spalding 2002, 13). This is a serious consideration when collecting, yet it should also be recognised that “we cannot fully preserve... the past or the present, or know the future, [recognising this] actually removes some of the fear we might have about getting it right” (Kneill 2004, 36). Collecting for the present and the future is discussed in Chapter Three.

### National museums

In choosing a national museum as a case study, the history of national museums and their collections must be a consideration in this research. While national museums are often referred to as though they are relatively homogenous, the term refers to “many different types of museums with quite distinct purposes, styles and collections”(Mason 2007, 61). There is a significant body of literature dealing with museums and national identity, but collections are generally not the focus. National museums are situated at both the birth of the modern museum, and the nation state (Kennedy 2004, 303). The national museum enters the stage with the birth of the Louvre, the National Museum of France, nine days after the collapse of the monarchy in 1792 (Spalding 2002, 14). This shift saw museums move from private and personal, to public and national (Newton

1996, 270) and it signals the arrival of the museum as the institution we recognise today (Smith Saumarez 1989, 6). At this time collections were “often established under the aegis of the nation ... [but they] were not expected to be explicitly representative of the nation.” (Mason 2007, 91) Mason’s research into national museums in Wales has been a key source for this dissertation.

This dissertation addresses debates surrounding the purposes of the collections of national museums. Mason (2007, 72) notes the “difficulty of defining and quantifying the link between objects and nations.” There is no single answer, although many have pointed to the museum collecting by locality and providing a sense of national identity (Phillips 1996; Newton 1996; Mason 2007; Mozaffari 2007). The standpoint of a national museum in regard to national identity is complex and “any given museum may hold a plethora of different views.” (Mason 2007, 61)

In recent times a change in the roles of national museums has been noted by Mason (2007, 62-63), as they are called upon to in some way to “deconstruct and critique the national histories they were initially established to promote.” Phillips (1996, 111), regarding planning exhibitions at Te Papa, discusses balancing “exploring and affirming national identity” with “tak[ing] account of the very genuine concerns ... about that notion.” The idea of Te Papa presenting national identity “made the historians and scholars... uncomfortable ... [T]he promotion of national identity was too monocultural an aim, too crippling of diversity, too dangerous in imposing and reinforcing stereotypes.” (Phillips 1996, 110) I explore these issues in regard to collecting in Chapter Three.

It is a mistake to assume that national museums “will always automatically seek to ‘reflect’ a specific locale.” (Mason 2007, 84) A useful distinction is between museums ‘for’ the nation and museums ‘of’ the nation (Mason 2007). Museums ‘for’ the nation are not “meant to be representative [of the nation itself] but are deemed to be national in the sense of being good ‘for’ the nation” (Mason 2007, 84). This is contrasted with museums ‘of’ the nation which “set out to preserve and exhibit the local culture above all, perhaps exclusively.” (Newton 1996, 273) The two approaches are not mutually exclusive and many national museums, including Te Papa, engage in both approaches; presenting the world to the nation and the nation to the world (Mason 2007, 89).

## Te Papa

Te Papa's own history is important to acknowledge as collections are shaped, in part, by what has already been collected (Wagstaff 2008; Townsend 2008). In 1865 the Colonial Museum opened in Wellington, New Zealand's newly designated capital city. From the outset the museum acquired a variety of items, some that form parts of the History collection today. It was renamed the Dominion Museum in 1907 and in 1936 moved, along with the National Art Gallery, to a new building on Buckle Street. The museum again changed name in 1972, when it became the National Museum. In 1992 the National Art Gallery and National Museum were amalgamated to become the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa. The museum's present location on the Wellington waterfront was opened to the public in 1998.

In terms of staff, an Honorary Curator (Cultural History) first appears on the records in 1958 (O'Rourke 2003).<sup>4</sup> It was in 1970 that a Curator of Colonial History was first appointed, and the word Colonial was dropped from this title in 1982 (O'Rourke 2003). There was a single Curator of History until 1989, when an assistant curator was recruited. Currently there is one Senior Curator History and four Curator History positions at Te Papa, all of whom are involved in the collecting process.

While I am discussing Te Papa as New Zealand's national museum, New Zealand has other national museums such as The National Army Museum Te Mata Toa. Nationally significant items are also held by other institutions such as regional museums, as acknowledged by the 'Distributed National Collection Project' (Tocker 2007). The impact other collecting institutions have on Te Papa is discussed in Chapter One.

There is a growing body of research which includes discussion of collecting practices at Te Papa. This has established that the interests of individual staff and the content of existing collections, as well as collecting for exhibitions, are driving forces behind what is selected for collection (Wagstaff 2008; Townsend 2008). This dissertation adds to this field, further expanding knowledge of what shapes Te Papa's collections.

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<sup>4</sup> This individual, Mr S. Northcote Bade, continued in this role until 1969. He had previously held a role titled the Honorary Curator (Ceramics and Furniture) since at least 1953.

## Summary

In reviewing the literature it became clear that further work was required to understand institutional collecting. The significant implications of collecting have been studied, but the processes by which objects are collected have not. I have focused on examining the selection process, understanding the how and the why of institutional collecting and the issues this raises. Recognising that previous research has not included public opinion I have included this in my work. Collecting is about choice, therefore there is a need to understand how these choices are made. This involves examining policy as well as staff and public thoughts. National museums often use locality to guide their collecting, collecting both 'for' and 'of' the nation. My research aims to detail how Te Papa decides what to collect and to develop an understanding of what Te Papa should collect. This required a qualitative approach, as the aim was not, for example, to find out how many items selected for collection are New Zealand made, but rather to look at greater questions surrounding how decisions are made and what Te Papa should collect.

## **Methodology**

This research takes account of Te Papa's collecting by considering policies, staff practice and public and staff perspectives on what should be collected. This involved carrying out documentary research into Te Papa's collecting activities. I also carried out two focus group interviews to gather public opinions. Interviews with curators provided information on Te Papa policies, collecting practice and staff opinions. Gathering data from such a variety of sources enabled me to build a case study that acknowledges the relationships between the public and Te Papa. It has also allowed me to assemble an account which is mindful of both policies and practical restraints on collecting.

My approach has been influenced by that taken by Wagstaff (2008) in her research on the institutional collecting of contemporary New Zealand jewellery. This approach was "multimethod, flexible" and as such attempted to include the various forces that shape collecting activity (Wagstaff 2008, 14). That study included archival research into museum collection policies as well as interviews with staff who were involved in making decisions about collecting. I have utilised a similar approach, though I have also included input from members of the public.

Mason's (2007) research on national museums in Wales also informed the approach I have taken, though again, that research centres on museum staff and policy, without gathering data from the public. Mason's (2007) study also analysed exhibitions and the content of collections, something beyond the scope of this dissertation.

### Documentary research

I undertook documentary research into Te Papa policy, specifically that surrounding collecting. I examined present as well as former collection policies in order to understand the development of the policy currently in place. Documents, including meeting minutes, policies, legislation and annual reports, were sourced from the Te Papa website, library and archives. I was also provided with additional documents by Te Papa staff. This information assisted in the development of interview questions for Te Papa staff as well as in writing about Te Papa's collecting policies.

I also reviewed 1370 letters to the editor regarding Te Papa that were published in newspapers across New Zealand between 1 January 1998 and 1 September 2009. These letters were retrieved following a search for the terms 'Te Papa' and 'letters'. These letters were sourced from the online *Newztext* database. This was intended to provide a snap shot, rather than a representative or complete sample of letters to the editor regarding Te Papa.

In undertaking documentary research it is unlikely that a full record will have survived (McCulloch 2004, 43) and there were gaps in the archival information I was able to source. I went some way to addressing this by talking to staff about policies rather than relying solely on the documents available. Te Papa was unable to provide me with some of the documents I requested, specifically the Annual Collection Plan, due to its confidential nature. Through my discussions with staff I was able to gain some sense of the contents of this document and the role it plays.

### Focus group interviews

I conducted two focus groups with the aim of generating data around public thoughts on what Te Papa should collect. This method appears not to have been previously used as part of a study on collecting at a national museum. I opted for focus groups as I was interested in the thoughts of the general public, and focus groups provide an efficient way of researching the opinions of a group of people and their *collective* responses (Berg 2007, 144, 148). This represented a better choice than interviews or surveys, which tend to privilege individual responses.

As the aim was to present the voices of the public generally, anyone was a potential participant. In reality participants were limited to people residing in the Wellington region, for practical reasons, and to those who had visited Te Papa at least once within the last 12 months, to ensure participants had some awareness of the

museum, as well as assisting in terms of the homogeneity of the group (Morgan 1998, 59-63). Those working in museums and Museum Studies students were excluded as I was not seeking 'expert' opinions. Participants were recruited via friends of friends and colleagues making use of the 'snowballing' method whereby participants provide details of others who may wish to take part (Morgan 1998, 89).

Given the size of my sample, 11 people in total, I did not attempt to recruit a statistically representative segment of the New Zealand public or of Te Papa's present audience. An effort was made to ensure a balance in the number of men and women participating and that participants came from a variety of age groups. I do not intend for the findings presented to be extrapolated beyond the context of this dissertation. I requested that participants record some demographic data so that these characteristics of my sample would be known.<sup>5</sup> Holding two focus groups generated a sizeable amount of data which helped me establish trends in the responses.

Both focus groups were held during weekday evenings at Victoria University in late 2009. Participants were asked a series of open-ended questions, one of which included visual prompts (see Appendix I). These were images of eight items in Te Papa's collection. The objects were selected from a list of recent acquisitions to the History collection in the 2006/07 Te Papa Annual Report. I choose a range of objects in terms of age, country of origin, use and amount of information on the item available (as of 26 November 2009) via Te Papa's Collections Online website. The questions were developed along the guidelines presented by Krueger (1998a, 57 -59) and I sought feedback on them from fellow Museum Studies students as well as from members of the public who were not otherwise involved in this research. While this research focuses on the History collection at Te Papa, I did not make this distinction during the focus group discussions as I believe this division is more relevant to organisational operations than to museum visitors. The first group was used as a pilot, and the questions and approach remained unchanged for the second group. Both focus groups lasted approximately one hour and 20 minutes. The discussion was recorded and a note taker was also present (Berg 2007, 111). I acted as the moderator for both groups. Group members were rewarded for their involvement with food and drinks. A transcript of each focus group was prepared and analysis was guided by the suggestions presented by Krueger (1998b). Participants are referred to via pseudonyms in the text.

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<sup>5</sup> Participants were as follows: 6 males, 5 females. 5 20-29 year olds, 1 30-39 year old, 1 40-49 year old, 1 50-59 year old, 1 60-69 year old, 2 non responses. 2 undergraduates, 8 postgraduates, 1 non response. 10 New Zealand citizens, 1 non-New Zealand citizen. 9 Pakeha/ New Zealand European, 2 non responses.

### Staff interviews

I interviewed five Te Papa curators. The decision to carry out semi-structured, one-on-one interviews was influenced by the importance of capturing these key individuals' thoughts, the ability to respond with follow up questions, as well as reflecting the relatively small number of curators involved in deciding what the History team collects. Individual interviews were also chosen due to the potentially sensitive nature of the comments made and my desire to create an interview environment where staff could express their ideas openly. Interviews of this type have been established as a useful way of exploring institutional collecting (Wagstaff 2008).

My aims in conducting these interviews were to get an understanding of the ways policy shapes collecting, the process by which objects are selected, as well as the curators' thoughts on what should be collected. As suggested by Wengraf (2001, 199) I prepared a brief list of questions that formed the basis of the interview (see Appendix II). The first interview was treated as a pilot for these questions, though I had previously sought feedback on them from academics and Museum Studies students. The questions remained unaltered for the subsequent interviews. Each discussion included follow up questions and there was some flexibility in the order in which questions were asked.

The five curators I interviewed were drawn from the History and Pacific Cultures teams. I selected the History collection as my focus as it is the collection I was most familiar with. I elected to invite input from the Pacific Cultures team as members of this team work closely with History curators on acquisitions, attending the same acquisitions meetings for example. I recruited the curators by attending a staff meeting at Te Papa, discussing my research and my desire to include the perspectives of curatorial staff, and then inviting those present to take part. I elected not to interview collection managers or conservators, though their roles in collecting at Te Papa are acknowledged in Chapter One. I approached six curators in total, one of whom declined as she/he did not have time to be interviewed.

All interviews were carried out face-to-face at Te Papa over the space of one week in late 2009. The interviews varied in length, taking between 40 and 50 minutes each. All interviews were recorded, though staff were able to make comments off the record at the conclusion of the interview. A full transcript of each interview was made. The evaluation of the data was informed by the constant comparative method, which is suitable for analysing qualitative data (Maykut and Morehouse 1994, 126 - 149). This approach involves identifying "units of meaning" (Maykut and Morehouse 1994, 128)



in the transcripts and notes which are then categorised. The categories evolve from the data rather than being predetermined.

All those spoken with are referred to as C1, C2 and so on using the pronouns she/he etcetera. Participants were given the opportunity to check all quotes used, which was recommended by Piper and Simons (2005, 57). While for brevity's sake I employ the term Te Papa, I do not intend my findings to be applied beyond the specific context of this research.

#### Approach to writing up

The qualitative approach taken to gathering material has influenced the presentation of this research. Seeking the opinions of members of the public and Te Papa staff is a key part of this research. In many cases extended quotes, or dialogues in the case of the focus group discussions, are used rather than paraphrased responses. While some participants spoke with greater ease, quotes from all participants are included out of a wish to present the thoughts as they were actually expressed during my research. It reflects my desire to present an account of institutional collecting that retains the voices of those I spoke with. This comes from my undergraduate background in social anthropology and its associated ethnographic approach.

# Chapter One

This chapter begins by outlining collection policies at Te Papa, focussing on those currently in place. Then I discuss the process Te Papa's History Curators go through when deciding what to collect. The level of specificity, regarding policy and practice, in the information presented addresses a key gap in existing accounts of institutional collecting, where policy is typically spoken of in the abstract and staff practice is acknowledged as powerful yet the details remain invisible.

## **The Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa Act**

With the passing of The Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa Act in 1992, Te Papa was formally established. The Act is the legislative foundation of Te Papa, outlining Te Papa's functions and mission. As it currently stands, Te Papa is classified as a Crown entity (The Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa Act 6.2). As such, it receives funding from central government, via the Ministry for Culture and Heritage, in order to carry out the functions designated in the Act.

### Functions

In stipulating the museum's functions, the Act plays a role at a broad level in shaping collecting at Te Papa. The key points are, firstly, that collecting is listed as one of the functions of Te Papa. While there is some debate (see Chapter Two) about whether museums should collect, currently Te Papa has a legal obligation to do so. Secondly, there is a commitment to addressing national identity, as shown below.

Specifically Te Papa is required to "collect works of art and items relating to history and the natural environment" (The Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa Act 7.1b) as well as to "develop... the collections of art and items relating to history and the natural environment in the Board's care." (The Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa Act 7.1d) Beyond the requirement to collect, of the twelve museum functions outlined, a total of eight explicitly mention Te Papa's collections (The Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa Act 7.1b, c, d, e, f, g, h & k, see Appendix III). Te Papa's collections are critical to the museum fulfilling its functions.

The Act also states that when carrying out its functions, such as collecting, the museum is required to

- “[h]ave regard to the ethnic and cultural diversity of the people of New Zealand”
- to “[e]ndeavour to ensure both that the Museum expresses and recognises the mana and significance of Māori, European, and other major traditions and cultural heritages, and that the Museum provides the means for every such culture to contribute effectively to the Museum as a statement of New Zealand's identity”
- to “[e]ndeavour to ensure that the Museum is a source of pride for all New Zealanders.” (The Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa Act 8a, b, c)

What this focus on New Zealand means in regard to collecting practice is discussed in depth in Chapter Three.

### Mission

The Act also lays out Te Papa’s mission. That is, Te Papa “shall provide a forum in which the nation may present, explore, and preserve both the heritage of its cultures and knowledge of the natural environment” (The Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa Act 4) in order

- [t]o understand and treasure the past
- [t]o enrich the present
- [t]o meet the challenges of the future. (The Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa Act 4a, b, c).

Staff and public understandings of how this emphasis on addressing the nation influences collecting are explored in Chapter Three.

Overall the Act - specifically the functions and mission - impact on collecting by making it central to the museum’s activities and setting some broad parameters about the purposes, especially in regard to national identity, this collecting is then to fulfil.

### **Collecting Policies**

Te Papa’s policies provide the boundaries within which collecting activity occurs. In order to understand current collecting practice at Te Papa, it is important to consider policy, while remaining mindful that it is the interplay of chance, people and policy that shapes collecting. Three policies are most closely associated with collecting at Te Papa: the Collection Development Policy, the Acquisitions Strategy and the Acquisitions Plan.

### Background to collecting policies

When asked about the development of collection policies there was a consensus among curators I spoke with that, overall, “the general direction hasn’t changed much.” (C3) Policies around collecting began to be formalised in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Since then the policies have been reviewed several times. From reading previous policies dating back to 1991, a significant policy development has been a decrease in the emphasis placed on iconic items and national identity. Most curators commented that the main change has been “a tightening up of our processes.” (C5) C4 felt that: “the whole process ... is the most rigorous it’s been since I’ve been [here] and that’s an excellent thing... There’s a lot more thought put in to what the strategy should be year to year. Now not everyone agrees and those ambitions are not always fulfilled, but I think just the fact people are thinking through carefully what they might be able to achieve and what they can add to the collections is a really valuable step.” I asked one curator about how policies are developed,

We have an annual meeting where ... we have the opportunity to ... have input into what the strategy should be or what the policy should be ... So we, as a team, get together, and there might be individuals with particular interests in things, but as a group we tend to agree what our collecting areas should be ... and from year to year it might not change that much, but it probably gets more and more refined as we develop our interests or find gaps in the collection that we need to fill. (C3)

### Collection Development Policy

The current Collection Development Policy is a broad document that covers all five areas of collecting at Te Papa.<sup>6</sup> It explains the purposes for the museums collections, the roles of other policies and documents in relation to acquisition and covers some of the legal requirements around collecting. This policy was approved by the Board in 2007 and is the result of a major review of the previous policy, which was first approved in 1999.

It refers to Te Papa’s mission “to document, illustrate and explore the natural and cultural heritage of New Zealand, and those parts of the world that have contributed to New Zealand’s heritage.” (Collection Development Policy 2007, 1.1) The policy also states that the collections “are a resource for the people of New Zealand.” (Collection Development Policy 2007, 7) In terms of deciding what objects to consider for acquisition, “concepts of representativeness and significance” are the guides (Collection

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<sup>6</sup> While the Collection Development Policy is shared I acknowledge that each of Te Papa’s five collection areas will involve diverse approaches to collecting, specific to the different disciplines involved.

Development Policy 2007, 4). More specifically, other guides include “securing the full range of items from the mundane to the iconic” and “illustrating exceptional events, phenomena, and people.” (Collection Development Policy 2007, 4) The policy affirms Te Papa’s commitment to recognising the collection strengths of other New Zealand museums and working co-operatively with other museums in regard to collecting activity (Collection Development Policy 2007, 8).

### Acquisitions Strategy

The current Acquisitions Strategy, 2008/09, is the operational policy in relation to collecting. It covers a three-year period and is reviewed annually. This document lists the outcomes that are desired from Te Papa’s collection development programme, which includes that “Te Papa builds collections of national significance and focus that reflect the past and present state of New Zealand’s culture and natural heritage” (Acquisitions Strategy 2008/09) and that “Te Papa is recognised for its collection strengths in particular areas, as well as the breadth of the collections in their totality.” (Acquisitions Strategy 2008/09) The results sought also include collections that “substantially support exhibitions, on-line products, and research and scholarship, including mātauranga Māori.” (Acquisitions Strategy 2008/09)

The strategy covers strategic approaches for achieving the specified outcomes. These approaches include “[c]ollecting items that are representative of the cultures, environment and biodiversity of New Zealand, including items from other parts of the world that illustrate the development of New Zealand’s heritage.” (Acquisitions Strategy 2008/09) Priority is to be given to “items that have identified exhibition and/or research potential.” (Acquisitions Strategy 2008/09) These points are discussed in Chapters Two and Three.

The strategy then lists acquisition priorities for each of Te Papa’s collection areas. For “New Zealand History and Heritage” the current acquisition priorities are to acquire objects

- that illustrate the diverse cultural heritage of New Zealand, including material which illustrates the cultures of origins of our peoples
- that illustrate the diversity of Māori/Pākehā inter-relationships
- that relate to significant events in New Zealand’s history and to the development of concepts and symbols of national identity
- that reflect aspects of everyday life in New Zealand

- of high artistic merit by nationally recognised historical and contemporary New Zealand designers, craftspeople and commercial manufacturers as well as selected contextualising works
- [h]istorical and contemporary work by international designers, craftspeople and commercial manufacturers that relates to New Zealand or that builds on existing collection strengths
- [a]rchival material that provides contexts for any of Te Papa's collections, and/or complements, strengthens or supports the collections. (Acquisitions Strategy 2008/09)

More generally, "[a]cquisitions will reflect the social, economic, political, and cultural contexts of New Zealand's historical development." (Acquisitions Strategy 2008/09) This list shows the variety of areas the staff are expected to collect within and illustrates the notable extent to which 'New Zealand' is present in current policy, though, as mentioned, there is less emphasis on national identity and 'icons' than previously.

#### Acquisitions Plan

The annual Acquisitions Plan covers all collection areas and is reviewed each year (Collection Development Policy 2007, 3.4). Due to the confidential nature of this document, I was unable to view a copy of either a current or past plan. Instead, I asked one of the curators to provide some details about the current acquisitions plan, "it's a couple sentences about specific collecting priorities but it's largely more a specific narrative around some of our collecting strategies." (C1) It was also described as being "forward looking and it's often to do with gaps in the collection and often things that are fairly rare, so it's often stuff we know we won't be offered... our plan is quite distinct from the type of things offered by the public." (C1)

#### **Collecting in action**

The terms 'acquire', 'collect' and 'accession' may be used interchangeably when describing the process of items entering museum collections. The term 'accession', however, is the most specific. It refers to transferring the legal ownership of the item to the museum and then assigning that item an accession number, which is how it will be identified in future.

Written accounts of museum collections often start after objects are accessioned, but to understand the process of museum collecting it is important to be aware of what

comes before, as this is the part of the process where the decisions around collecting are made. I asked the curators a number of questions about their current collecting practice at Te Papa and their answers are drawn from during this discussion.

If a museum collection is “the heaven for things, the place where they spend their afterlife” as Fisher (1991, 452) puts it, then accessioning is the object’s ‘death’, the point at which it moves from one state to another. The steps immediately prior to this ‘death’ are not typically written about. How it is that some objects get considered, and then received into this ‘afterlife’ in the first place?

The question of where collection items come from has not attracted much attention from those writing about museum collecting, unless the circumstances of the acquisition are in some way exceptional. A piece of the story is missing. To extend the above metaphor, it is the scene from the deathbed through to Saint Peter making his decision at the pearly gates. It is this part of the process I aim to illuminate.

Donations from members of the public were identified by curators as the main source of items for the History collection currently. It has not generally been acknowledged that, in this way, the public play a crucial role in shaping collections.

People may be prompted to make contact with an offer after seeing an article in the media mentioning Te Papa’s collections, by viewing similar items on Te Papa’s Collections Online or when sorting out a relative’s estate. Members of the public approach Te Papa with their offers in a variety of ways. “We get people calling up or dropping in, in some cases people just turn up with a box of objects ... Sometimes it can be a phone call from someone saying, ‘I’m off to the dump, I’ve got these things, are you interested?’ and you’ve got to quickly run round and have a look at them.” (C3)

These offers vary in scale, “from one stamp to an entire warehouse full of theatre costumes. It’s really diverse” (C5), and are shared out between the curatorial staff. Typically each week sees several offers being made, forming a “steady stream” as one curator (C2) put it.

The other main source of collection items mentioned was “the major auction houses.” (C1) C5 described auctions as “a big part of our work” and curators “keep up to date with what’s up for auction around the country and make the selections based on the catalogues” (C3). In some instances staff are “tipped off by the auctioneer that the things are coming [up].” (C2) In terms of the History collection, items are purchased at

auction overseas “very occasionally, but we pretty much don’t have time to look at international houses.” (C1)

Several curators described acquiring items through auction as “stressful”, and contrasted it with other means of acquiring items. “[It] tends to be a fairly stressful method because invariably the time is short, the catalogue appears not much more than a week before if you’re lucky... [And] given the process we have to go through ... it’s essentially a very pressured process. Whereas with somebody ... offering us something for gift or sale, that can be a slightly more leisurely process because ... there’s not that direct auction deadline to jump to it.” (C2) It was also noted that online auctions are another source of items. “People might ring up because something’s on Trade Me<sup>7</sup>, that’s a sort of newer development, so sometimes we might check out some things that come up there.” (C3)

The final source discussed in detail by staff I spoke with was purchasing items from vendors, dealers and private individuals. Compared with buying at auction, C5 considered that, “in a way it’s easier to deal with a known vendor... who doesn’t mind waiting a couple of months and you can just slow the process down a wee bit.” She/he also added that, “if you don’t know the vendor it can be very stressful because most vendors can’t tolerate waiting a couple of months... they’ve got bills to pay.”

Another curator mentioned that “we have a network of contacts among the dealers ... and they often have interesting things in their stock that we need to go and have a look at and check out.” (C2)

Collecting can be divided into active and passive, with active collecting typified by purposely seeking items. In contrast, passive collecting involves responding to what is presented, be it offers of donations or objects from auctions and vendors.

Active collecting involves acquiring items with the intention of using them in a specific exhibition, adding to a research area, or filling gaps in the collection. It is more likely to involve purchasing items than passive collecting. It was noted that the extent to which exhibitions drive collecting has diminished compared to the period before Te Papa opened in 1998 (C1). With active collecting there is the ability to specify the items being sought and these details may be listed in the Acquisitions Plan.

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<sup>7</sup> A popular, New Zealand-based online auction service.



Curators felt that presently the majority of history collecting at Te Papa is *not* active. While I am using the term passive, this term was not used by the staff I interviewed. Instead this type of collecting was described as “opportunistic” or “ad-hoc” and tended to refer to offers from the public. I asked curators about the types of objects offered and whether they felt there was a divide between the items they actively sought and those acquired more passively. What is offered was described as “Random. It’s often people who have a sense of history, who are cleaning up a house or a parent’s house or something like that, who don’t know what to do with things ... It’s quite hard to summarise but it’s often they feel slightly guilty about throwing things away and so they offer the stuff to us because they can’t make a decision... so there’s no real pattern [in what type of items are offered] actually.” (C1)

As mentioned earlier a significant quantity of material is offered to the museum. One curator commented that, “we always follow up on everything that comes to us but what’s difficult is you often don’t have the time to go out and seek the things that you want [to].” (C3) In some instances these offers are fortuitous: “we can be lucky and what people are offering up is exactly what you’re looking for” (C3). At other times, “we’ll be offered the most extraordinary thing ... but it’s nothing in your wildest dreams that you would ever have put into a strategy.” (C5) Then there are also “people calling up and offering sewing machines for example, which is fine, but every museum in the world is offered sewing machines.” (C2) C3 mentioned that a number of offers are turned down and “if we can’t collect it we try and find somewhere else for it to go.”

Curators felt that a divide “totally” (C5) exists between items collected actively and passively. This was discussed in terms of a disjunction.

People have a huge expectation that we’re the nation’s attic... they want us to collect their old washing machine ... but I doubt we’ll ever put a washing machine on display ... So there’s that real disjunction between expectations and the reality. We’ve got two realities going on, we’ve got a collection that’s kind of a traditional museum collection: we’ve got typewriters and irons and heaters, all the usual stuff ... but very little of it surfaces out here in the public experience ... because the exhibitions are narratively driven and they’re big, big narratives, stories of the nation.

It’s very unlikely we’ll get in [the sort of] social history material that is in the collections [into exhibitions] and [that’s] the stuff that people want to give us. [This is] the stuff that people think we want and they think it’s on display, but it’s not. It’s just a huge irony at the heart of what we do... And we do collect their idea often, that’s the irony, but we don’t show it, even though they somehow think we show it. But I feel like saying to people, ‘have you ever seen

a vacuum cleaner on display?’ ... And they love Te Papa, that’s the thing. These people love Te Papa and they think we want their vacuum cleaner. (C5)

By offering objects, the public currently have a large impact on what is collected. While the public do not make the decisions about which objects are selected or decide what criteria these decisions are based on, they do play a vital part in determining the pool of objects to be selected from.

I also asked curators about collection breadth in comparison to collection strength, or depth, as this is mentioned in the Acquisitions Strategy. Active collecting can be seen to provide collection depth; in the process of filling gaps collections are understood to grow stronger, whereas passive collecting can build collection breadth and create areas to be strengthened in future.

C5 spoke about collection breadth and depth, “breadth is happening all the time because we collect so ad-hoc-ly, so you end up with broad borders to your collecting ... the trick is to get some depth into the collections and that’s our biggest... challenge, to get depth, because when we develop exhibitions we need depth.”

In regard to collection depth and collecting for exhibitions, C3 spoke of research showing that “focussing on a particular topic does help to make a really tight and comprehensive collection of objects ... whereas sometimes people feel that if you’re collecting around an exhibition you might end up with a body of objects which are in fact often orphaned but ... you actually end up with a really good, comprehensive collection that can be used in many different ways.”

The idea of items being ‘orphaned’ was also raised by C1 when discussing collection breadth: “Often at an acquisitions meeting we’ll say ‘but it will be orphaned in the collection’ ... An item is less appealing if it is random.” An ‘orphan’ is an item that is considered alone, with no associated items in that collection.

When an item has been identified as being potentially meriting collection the next step involves curators carrying out research into the object and amassing “as much information as we can, any provenance, any photographs, measurements, that sort of thing.” (C1) This process is, in essence, the same for donated items and purchases. There is a weekly acquisitions meeting attended by curators from the History and Pacific Cultures teams. At this meeting curators debate “the pros and cons” (C1), “whether it matches the collecting strategies that we’ve got in place, and sometimes then we have to go back and do a bit more research.” (C3)

Once a consensus is reached, with a majority of curators, ideally all, in support, a “fairly detailed” (C1) acquisition proposal is written. Agreement at the meeting stage does not guarantee an object will be acquired. The proposal is completed electronically on the KE-EMu collection database used at Te Papa.

Every object has to be ... supported by another curator so it's not just 'I want it!' And if it has some kind of significance to another directorate then we'll get cross-disciplinary comment. The object has to be valued [monetarily], it has to be catalogued as fully as we can, and we have to talk about its significance, how it might be used in future products and events, how it might be utilised in research, how it fits into our core projects, our collecting strategy and our collecting plan... you have to set up quite a persuasive argument. (C1)

This is submitted to the Collection Development Manager, who operates across Te Papa's collection areas, and “a conservator and a collection manager... put in their assessment of the object in terms of storage and condition.” (C5) If the item is damaged in some cases a conservator will have input before this point. The ‘whole of life expenses’ of acquiring the object are considered at this stage. Risk management work is also undertaken in regard to things such as legal ownership. The Collection Development Manager evaluates the entire proposal and makes a decision. If there are any issues the curator is asked to reconsider: “Usually we agree with the worries and we withdraw the object. If we don't agree it's because of the significance and that's when we fight for the significance, and usually we're successful on that count, because the significance is such an important criteria.” (C5) An example of this situation was provided by C5.

When we collected a whole lot of family planning material there were two issues. The rubber objects, the condoms and diaphragms, they're perishable, they die, it's just what happens. And we were asked not to collect them. I said no, they are a significant part of women's hidden history. [If] they deteriorate so be it, we still need to document material culture of women's lives in the twentieth century. But there was a packet of matches that... advertised a family planning thing and they said please don't collect the matches because they need to be stored differently, you have to store them in a tin ...and I said that's fine, we'll delete the matches because they just weren't important enough.

The proposal is then finally signed off, which is a tiered process depending on the cost of the object. The vendor is then paid, or a deed of gift is signed in the case of donations, and the object is accessioned. A curator commented on the value of this whole process,

I tend to take a lot of time drafting up an acquisition proposal, as you have to think very hard about why exactly you want to spend public money or time - same thing really. But it actually works in terms of having an official

justification that will convince the powers that be ... that this is a legitimate acquisition ... and a whole team of people have to identify all the various costs and implications. Which is very good too... everything has a cost, there's conservation, there's storage, there's maintenance... so from go to whoa it's actually quite a long process, it can take up to a year ...but it's all part of a complex procedure and making sure that everything is legal. (C2)

The curators I spoke with all agreed that, generally, the cost of purchasing items for the History collection is not a significant constraint on what is collected, as the items are of relatively low value. This is not to say collecting History objects is without financial implications, as pointed out by C2 above. For the most part History acquisitions are funded from Te Papa's general acquisitions budget, which is currently three million dollars per annum. There are some targeted funds used for developing the History collection, such as the Charles Disney Trust. These funds tend to be focused on decorative arts items, with social history acquisitions being funded from the general budget (C2).

Te Papa is obliged to work co-operatively with, and recognise the collection strengths of, other New Zealand museums. I asked curators about how this works in practice. It is an important part of collecting at Te Papa as other New Zealand museums hold nationally significant items in their collections also.

In terms of recognising the strengths of other organizations, C4 mentioned in regard to the Auckland War Memorial Museum that "some things we leave to them because we know they've got other collection items or collection strengths that complement that thing, sometimes they have the same consideration for us." If Te Papa is offered an item that relates to a particular location, such as Hawke's Bay, or a particular subject area, such as war, these items would likely be offered to the Hawke's Bay Museum and Art Gallery or the Auckland War Memorial Museum respectively (C5). C3 commented that this can be challenging as "sometimes there's a lot of overlap between what we want and what one of the other museums in New Zealand might want or need to fill their gap." Consultation with other museums also depends on whether the item is being offered for donation or sale as "there's no point in sending somebody who wants to sell something to a small museum" due to the budget constraints on these organizations (C5). In some instances an item may have strong link to a particular region but the local museum cannot afford to purchase the item. "[If it's] nationally important there's always the chance that we'll [Te Papa] step in, using government funds [and] buy them for the nation." (C2) Currently when buying items via auction

staff are required to demonstrate to the Collection Development Manager that Te Papa is not “stepping on any toes [of other museums]” by bidding (C5).

## **Conclusion**

The Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa Act provides the foundation for collecting at Te Papa, establishing a requirement to collect and for that collecting to relate to New Zealand, New Zealanders and to national identity. The New Zealand-centric nature of the Act is not unexpected as national museums often shape their collections around their location and national identity (see Introduction).

The focus set in the Act is followed in the current Collection Development Policy and Acquisitions Strategy, with repeated references to New Zealand; for example “to document, illustrate and explore the natural and cultural heritage of New Zealand, and those parts of the world that have contributed to New Zealand’s heritage.” (Collection Development Policy 2007, 1.1) The majority of references to New Zealand in the policies relate to collecting items ‘of’ New Zealand, to use Mason’s (2007) term.

The Collection Development Policy also says that Te Papa’s collections “are a resource for the people of New Zealand.” (7) In this way the existing policies also address collecting ‘for’ the nation (Mason 2007). In stating that the collections are for the people of New Zealand, the link between collections and the public discussed in the literature review is shown to relate to the Te Papa context.

Beyond references to location and identity, the Collection Development Policy and Acquisitions Strategy both provide comments on what should be collected by Te Papa. The “concepts of representativeness and significance” (Collection Development Policy 2007, 4) are given. What ‘significance’ and ‘representativeness’ mean to staff and members of the public is discussed in following chapter. The development of collections that “substantially support exhibitions, on-line products, and research and scholarship” is also promoted (Acquisitions Strategy 2008/09). This focus on the future uses of collection items seems to support Weil’s (2004, 289) observation that the increasing focus of museums on public service has impacted on collecting. Knell’s criticism that collection policies lack a “deeper intellectual rationale for collecting” (2004, 13) is somewhat unwarranted in Te Papa’s case. Te Papa’s mission, that of providing “a forum in which the nation may present, explore, and preserve both the heritage of its cultures and knowledge of the natural environment” (The Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa Act 4), provides the motivation for the museum’s

collecting. What the policies do not provide is an understanding of that rationale in action.

The account of the quotidian aspects of collecting at Te Papa provided in this chapter reveals the policies in operation. While the day-to-day business of collecting may seem common knowledge to museum insiders, collecting practice is not typically detailed in the literature. I have had to examine how Te Papa collects because in order to meaningfully discuss what Te Papa should collect, it is important to understand the actual processes involved.

Te Papa's acquisition process includes scope for feedback on acquisitions; mitigating, in part, the concerns over the power held by individual staff when deciding what a museum should collect. When making curatorial decisions about what Te Papa should acquire for the History collection, chance, in the form of offers of donations from the public, is a significant factor in shaping the collection.

## Chapter Two

The central issue of this chapter is answering what should Te Papa collect. It amplifies the discussion in Chapter One, as I examine *why* some items are considered worthy of collection, from the perspectives of Te Papa History curators and the members of the public I spoke with.

The discussion begins by looking at why museums collect objects at all, and then explains what is meant by the term ‘object’. This is followed by a brief examination of collecting intangibles such as oral histories. The need to select objects is then established, before a detailed discussion of ‘significance’ as a basis for deciding what should be collected. The chapter concludes by looking at participants’ comments around collecting sustainability.

### **Do museum objects matter?**

Focus groups participants brought up the question of how relevant collection objects are:

Caitlyn: Do people actually want to see objects?

Hudson: Not really, only if they’re exceptional.

Sarah: I do.

Spalding (2002, 121) asks, “if collections are a means to an end, not an end in themselves, do museums necessarily need them?” (See also Gathercole 1989, 73) With the understanding of ‘object’ used by staff and focus group participants discussed below, it is certainly difficult to imagine an exhibition without objects of some sort. Furthermore, under the Act, Te Papa has a legal obligation to collect and collections are presented as being central to the museum.

In the focus group people went on to state why they found objects to be relevant. “It’s quite important that a museum can cater for different kinds of people, there are some people who are not so keen on just logging into a computer or Googling something ... I would prefer to see objects there rather than just read a whole text book” (Rachael), and: “Museums can’t just display information because you can find that anywhere really, so objects have some kind of sentimental value.” (William)

I also asked curators whether museums should continue to collect. All of the curators I spoke to were definite in their responses that, “You don’t have a museum without collections.” (C1) Collections are seen as integral: “Museums are collections, and then the collections are expressed through the exhibitions ... well, in an ideal world.” (C5) As to why collecting was so important responses were similar to those given above: “Collections are the point of difference.” (C3) It seems then, that both the curators and public questioned agreed that holding collections of objects is a key feature that distinguishes a museum from other sources of information.

## **What is an object?**

It is important to clarify what my participants mean by ‘object’. From my discussions with curators and from the focus groups clearly people have a broad understanding of what can constitute a museum object. One focus group participant stated: “When I think of collections you can think of it really concretely as physical objects like this cup, but you can also think of collections in a more abstract way, like ideas or concepts. And you can stretch it out and say that a museum tells a story and I think things like film and video and those kinds of mediums, not just physical objects, all contribute to that. So I think collecting those is really important.” (Justin)

An equally broad conception of objects was mentioned by C3: “I do think you can make an exhibition without objects, you can, but as I’ve said before I think the other visual material becomes the ‘objects’ and I also think that photographs, people’s stories as told through AV’s [audio-visuals] can be regarded as the objects of an exhibition.”

## **Intangible heritage**

Intangible cultural heritage<sup>8</sup> deserves consideration when collecting given the comments of curators and focus group members. In my discussion with C4 we touched on intangible cultural heritage. C4 noted that the Collection Development Policy now mentions collecting in this area. She/he went on to say: “I think the museum has always done it... so for example we’ve got dozens of... interviews with New Zealand artists that have been recorded on tape by Damian Skinner and they’re oral histories. We’ve got them in the archives. Those interviews like other sound recordings of song, music and performance are, in a sense, objects, those spoken and performed words are as valuable as an object. It’s also context, what we’ve got in the photographic records,

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<sup>8</sup> From UNESCO: “The “intangible cultural heritage” means the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills ... that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage.”



we've got film but we have never called what is captured on it intangible cultural heritage."

Spalding (2002, 8) has questioned the ongoing role of collecting physical objects in the age of photography. I asked curators that if given the option between collecting an object and a photograph of that object in use, which they would collect. This response was typical: "I'd definitely go for the object but, we're trying to be more holistic now. It [a holistic approach] just gives you more material for better exhibitions and publications and nuanced, detailed research and ... I think nowadays we've got more opportunities to be thorough in this area because media technologies are so accessible." (C4)

This accords with the views presented in the focus groups that things other than three dimensional objects contribute positively to museum exhibitions and are worth collecting. When asked the question above another curator replied, "We've always privileged the object, so the object is first...but context is really important and wherever possible we do try and collect people's diary extracts, journal extracts or family histories ... But I think, sadly sometimes, ...we don't always capture it because we're so focused on collecting the object that the contextual information can fall a bit by the wayside, but our practice at the moment is to collect as much as possible." (C5)

While, in general, curators 'privileged the object', there were some circumstances in which a photograph was thought to be preferable. An example of this is given by C5: "if the object's deteriorated, say it's a gas mask from World War Two and it's crumbled, but there's a fantastic photo of the guy who owned it wearing it, well the photo's great." Another curator commented on the possibility of an image fulfilling the role of a three-dimensional object. In regard to the collection of food packaging, "you do wonder... what they're actually saying as opposed to what a good photograph could say of a supermarket shelf in 1972." (C2)

### **What objects should Te Papa collect?**

"We can say that there's significance in everything, but we can't have everything ... you do have to make tactical decisions." (William) Museums need to make choices. If a museum can collect *anything* but they cannot collect *everything*, what should be collected?

I asked curators what it is they are looking for when deciding what to collect. C5's initial comment is indicative of their responses: "Oh, significance." Significance

was the main quality for collecting mentioned by curators. In the focus groups the concept was also used, though the term was specified less often. Below I draw on my interviews with curators and the focus groups to explore what significance means.

### Types of significance

Significance is “a way of telling compelling stories about items and collections, explaining why they are important” (Russell and Winkworth 2009). An item may be significant for a number of reasons. Four “key values” are identified in *Significance 2.0*: historic, artistic or aesthetic, scientific or research potential, social or spiritual (Russell and Winkworth 2009). These categories are not mutually exclusive. In terms of my study, historic, artistic and research potential were all discussed. C5 expanded on the quote above:

Aesthetically is it interesting? Is it interesting design? Is it innovative in its technology? Was it significant at the time it was created? Who made it? Was that person significant? Is it a significant part of their work? Is it representative of their work or is it a minor example? Who used it? Were they significant? Was it used in a significant way? Why was it made? What was it made for? How was it used? Its life history? The history of use, how long was that? Did it change over time?

Research potential was only mentioned by curators. At the end of one focus group I prompted participants with the following question, “what about the research potential of objects? They may never go on display but perhaps they can offer something to the public in a different form. A researcher may access them.” One participant questioned whether researchers were able to access items, which I confirmed. The conversation was not continued by other group members.

Aesthetic significance was raised in the focus groups and interviews. When discussing what kinds of things they felt Te Papa should collect one person responded, “things that are significant in terms of what the art world is doing and also things of beauty and exquisite workmanship?” (Georgia) The curators interviewed also mentioned aesthetics, aiming to collect “very good examples of design.” (C2, also see C5 above) One curator pointed to a shift in the importance of aesthetic significance: “the way our exhibitions are going at the moment... we still value really beautiful examples - well made, key pieces of jewellery or fashion or furniture. But social history’s really important now.” (C3)

Historical significance was the main value referred to by my respondents. When asked about criteria for collecting in the focus groups, members replied:

Charles: I'd say historical significance.

William: I guess that means new and old, things that are of historical significance and things that perhaps will be as well.

Sarah: Cultural significance.

Rachael: You have the practical considerations on one side and on the other you have the essential considerations, that's where you have the historical significance. I wrote there the relevance to people, time, place and then under practical considerations you have to think of the cost, you have to think how you will be getting this particular collection and all that stuff.

When talking about what to collect, C3 mentioned that "one of the key focuses is objects that have got a really significant New Zealand history, personal history or a really good story to tell." Another curator said she/he looked for objects with "a resonance in terms of historical significance." Both members of the public and curators emphasised collecting items connected to everyday life as well as significant historical events such as the World Wars.

#### Significance is relative

Significance may seem an obvious, almost an intrinsic, quality. One curator spoke about the moment when an item of significance is found: "You know it when you see it and just go, 'Oh my word that is it!' You just know and everybody knows. I love those moments." (C5) A question I put to the focus groups involved presenting them with images and information relating to eight items (see Appendix I). These were recent acquisitions to the History collection at Te Papa, though this was not made known to focus group members until the end of this activity. I asked participants to discuss the items and, as a group, decide which ones they felt Te Papa should acquire and why. One object seemed to elicit this type of instant recognition of significance from participants in both groups. The box from Matiu/Somes Island prompted comments such as, "All our criteria, ding, ding, ding" (Charles) and "Look at that, that is just stunning, you'd have to have that." (Harrison) However, significance is not always so apparent or agreed upon.

Rachael: That's exactly the point, it's an effect of the war, it [a wicker washing basket, see Appendix I] shows how ugly wars are.

Charles: But it doesn't though, it's just a laundry basket.

This exchange illustrates that significance, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder rather than being an innate quality of an object, event or place. As Holden Caulfield reflects in *The Catcher in the Rye*, "The best thing, though, in that museum, was that

everything always stayed right where it was ... The only thing that would be different would be *you*.” (Salinger 2010 (1951), 109)

Appraising significance is inevitably subject to an individual’s interests and their knowledge of the item and the broader histories related to it. Reflecting on the discussion of which items they would collect, Sarah said: “I’m thinking about the process we just did, and yes I can see you’d have to have a really vigorous criteria. But I could see that if you ... had a passion for one kind of thing you could find your way around the criteria, so I think it would be important that you would do things in a group so there were people there to challenge your justification for why you are wanting to purchase a particular piece.”

The existing literature around museum collecting often touches on the impact of personal interests. Curators have been criticised by Spalding (2002, 80) for thinking of collections “in terms of their own interests, not those of their visitors”. The selection of collection items is a political process. This was raised by Zac in the focus group: “Museums have a lot of power in a lot of ways, in terms of pushing a certain view of history.” The curators I spoke with raised the influence personal interests have on collecting during my discussions with them. C4 noted, when asked what staff were looking for when deciding what to collect, that: “Partly it’s [dependent] on where you’re working in the museum and what you’re interested in. I think a lot of it comes down to personal taste. I always argue that we have to be curators of our time. And the things we collect, while we try and be as objective as possible, we are always subject to particular tastes or things we think are relevant, the interests and cultural priorities of our time.”

The value of a personal commitment to certain collecting areas was commented on by C5: “Most curators will know their own favourites strengths. Like I know the war poster collection really well and I actively collect for it and it’s very satisfying. But it’s been years of dedication, of knowing the collection, researching it, understanding war posters in general and I made a personal commitment to do it.”

Acknowledging the backgrounds of those doing the collecting was something C5 mentioned during our interview.

I’m a typical museum worker. I’m tertiary educated, grown up in safe nuclear family environment, I’m a fifth generation kiwi, I have certain attitudes and opinions and values, and I really worry that I myself, as person, who I am, is limiting how the collection might grow for the period I’m here ... You know

we're really open...we're trying our best, but we are still of our time and our community and I do think that's a risk for the place... But it's never mentioned 'because it's actually expected that a history curator would be my demographic.

My findings are in concord with Russell and Winkworth's (2009, vii) view that significance is "relative, contingent and dynamic. Views on significance depend upon perspective and can change over time." The relative significance of an item is influenced by a number of factors. Those identified in *Significance 2.0* are a good fit with the points raised by my participants. These are: provenance, rarity or representativeness, condition or completeness and interpretative capacity (Russell and Winkworth 2009). Each is discussed below.

### Provenance

The importance of an object's provenance, history or story was raised repeatedly in the interviews and focus groups. As one curator put it: "The provenance, that's really where the crunch comes." (C1) The terms 'provenance', 'history' and 'story' have varying definitions. 'Provenance' is often used to refer specifically to an object's ownership history, but my participants, curators and public alike, tended to use all these terms interchangeably to refer to "the life story of an item" (Russell and Winkworth 2009). Statements from the focus groups include: "collecting objects that have a story"; "if there's no history attached to it... [it's] just this hand bag"; and "I'm thinking about things like provenance, how did it come to be?" One curator made the point that: "you've got to think of the provenance quite broadly." (C5)

Provenance is one way that the relative significance of an object is established and communicated to others. C4 gave this example: "We probably wouldn't [normally] collect it [an adze]. But if they say it was from the Cook Islands, it was collected by an administrator, the administrator found it on such-and-such beach or gifted to them by locals - that would get collected. But the same adze might not get collected if it had no provenance, so we're always looking for all the angles and stories that we can associate with an object."

The impact of available information on the decision making process became apparent during the focus group discussions. Two items relating to Springbok rugby tours had limited information on my handouts, but members of the group were already aware of the broader history relating to these objects. A comment made by one group member was: "Context is important... we're looking at some of this Springbok stuff... those items in themselves aren't particularly unique or valuable but because of the time

and place they were at, the context. [It is] the historical event that gives it value.”  
(Justin)

It was as people attempted to establish the significance of items with less provenance provided and that were less familiar to them that the most questions were asked, and left unanswered. For example in both groups someone asked about Brigit Brock. No group members were familiar with the name and the groups were unable to establish whether the maker influenced the relative significance of this item. Harrison commented, “If it said Trelise Cooper, if we knew Brigit Brock was a New Zealander, then we’d say we’ll keep that because that’s a New Zealand thing. But if it was just a 80s thing...why?”

Knowledge of an objects provenance can be the difference between it being considered insignificant or significant, collected or discarded: “Even though we’ve got 51 christening gowns in the collection, we still might consider collecting another christening gown if it was from a key person in New Zealand’s history. So we wouldn’t rule it out, the thing that you’d be looking for is a really interesting and significant provenance.” (C3)

In an earlier quote, C4 mentions the idea of an item with no provenance. This was something I discussed with C5. When I asked her/him how important provenance is when deciding what to collect, her/his response was:

It’s really important, unless the object is a really incredible object on its own. But provenance is generally desirable because it authenticates it... probably 75% of the time provenance drives the acquisition ...25% of the time it doesn’t actually really matter where it’s come from. For example, auction objects often don’t have provenance, for example I collected a beautiful Second World War poster recently. An amazing work, it’s actually one of the more significant war posters that were published in the Second World War. And I know all that because of my research ... so I still know the provenance, so that’s not a good example.

I queried her/him on this point, I wondered if *all* items could be considered to have a provenance to some extent. For example, the original owner might be unknown with an auction item, but the maker is known. Her/his response was “... actually now that you say it that way, can anything not have a provenance of some sort?” The only example of an item with no provenance we could think of was something that could not be identified in any way; though it seems unlikely a museum would collect something completely unidentifiable. Provenance, like significance itself, is a relative quality. As

shown with the christening gown example, it is the perceived value of a particular provenance that matters when selecting a collection item.

### Rarity and representativeness

Rachael: Is this the best representation of that period?

William: It doesn't have to be the best representation, it's just one representation of it.

An object's significance also rests on how representative it is thought to be. Representativeness can be used in two senses, both of which impact on collecting. Firstly it can be used to discuss the way an object is understood to represent something else. In this way an author's typewriter might be collected as it is seen to represent a writer's work. The selection of an object representative in this sense may appear quite straightforward, while on other occasions it is more complicated.

The dialogue above is from a focus group discussion about the helmet from the Springbok Tour protests. The rest of the conversation is worth quoting at length as it touches on other points expanded below.

William: I don't know if that's really very symbolic of anything. I don't know if that is the most representative item of the Springbok tour you can find.

Sarah: What would you, what should it be?

William: I don't know, placards from the tour.

Sarah: Placards.

William: Things like handcuffs, or chains that they used to keep themselves in the middle of pitches.

Caitlyn: It doesn't speak for itself.

William: It doesn't really speak for itself, as an item. You can say this was used, but I mean you could take a table and put it in a room and say this was the table at which these people sat for dinner that night.

Charles: So a way to think about it would be if you were a photo journalist during this time, what would you take a photo of, to display... what was happening.

Caitlyn: [If] there was a big dent in it.

Charles: Yeah.

Sarah: Does it represent the fact that things got quite violent and that people felt they needed to protect their heads?

Hudson: See, I like that, I think.

William: I don't dismiss it entirely but I'd have to know what else there was available from the time, what other items. If you had to prioritise something I think that would be low down on the list.

This illustrates a debate about representativeness in practice. William's comment that "you could take a table..." highlights the way in which significance involves considering the extent to which an object signifies something else. As with significance and provenance, representativeness is subjective. This can be seen above and in the comments made about the washing basket presented earlier.

Representativeness is also influenced by what other objects are available, whether universally or within a specific collection. As shown by William's comment: "I'd have to know what else there was." Another participant noted during the object selection exercise that: "We are putting all of these in the context of entire collections, so you wouldn't actually look at one thing and say 'Will we have that or not?' You'd say, 'Ok, here's a bunch of things that represent this and tell the story in this way. So these are the things that best represent it.'" (Amelia)

Secondly representativeness can refer to the extent to which an object is typical. An object's significance may increase at either end of the rarity scale: "That's another thing you have to know. Was it a) really unique or b) was it really typical. Because everything in between is blah." (Caitlyn) This point was repeated by C5. In both the interviews and focus groups the importance of collecting across this spectrum from the representative to the rare was stressed: "They shouldn't just restrict themselves to the really valuable things. If they're a national museum someone should be minding the little bits too." (Harrison)

### Condition

Sometimes the damage is part of the history. (C2)

While it may seem logical that damage would negatively impact on an item's desirability as a collection item, my research indicates the impact of damage on significance is variable. The influence of the condition on 'collectability' will depend on the relationship between the object's provenance, its representativeness and the nature of the damage. C4 stated "It depends what the object is. Sometimes we get things across the table that are damaged. I say 'if that was from Ancient Egypt 2000 years ago we would collect it ... so damaged artefacts can be worth collecting if they're especially rare, depending on how much information you can get about them, how stable they are.'"



Damage may increase or diminish the significance of an item. Caitlyn's comment above, about the helmet, is one example where damage would be considered by some as a positive influence on the item's significance, increasing its representativeness. No other comments were made in the focus groups relating to condition, perhaps because the items they were with presented all appeared to be in good order.

In some instances items are damaged "through their life as a real object", such as "a child's doll house, furniture, dresses... in quite worn condition... but it was all totally handmade and loved to death, and we didn't have anything like it, so we collected it. But bits are broken and I think I might be judged harshly for that in the future but I think as a whole it told a really interesting story about a family making do... You've just got make to sure the story's really robust when you collect material culture that is compromised." (C5)

C3 provided this example, where again the rarity of the object was a consideration: "One of the things that I regret a little bit is, we collected the *Play School*<sup>9</sup> toys, and we were offered Little Ted but his head was blown up ... and he had fire marks all over the body, and we really considered it and... we decided not to collect Little Ted because we thought he was too damaged but, in hindsight... I sometimes wonder if we should have collected it because another little Ted [is] not going to ever exist, not from the 1970s." In this instance it is a case of not being able to "reconcile [the damage] with the life of the object." (C1)

### Interpretative capacity

Interpretative capacity refers to how relevant an object is to "the organisation's mission, purpose, collection policy and programs." (Russell and Winkworth 2009) This topic is addressed extensively in Chapter Three in relation to Te Papa's audiences and its role as a national museum.

### **Multiple uses: sustainability and collecting**

Another point that came out strongly in my interviews was the importance of collecting items that can perform many roles. I asked C1 what she/he was looking for when

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<sup>9</sup> *Play School* was a popular pre-school children's television programme. Based on a format from the BBC, a New Zealand produced version ran between 1975 and 1990. The show featured a group of toys in starring roles, some of which are now part of Te Papa's History collection and others have been collected by the Otago Settlers' Museum.

deciding what to collect: “Basically we’re always looking for objects... that can tell multiple stories, personal stories, more generic stock stories.”

This point was also touched on briefly in one of the focus groups. One respondent said, “maybe the criteria is you can exhibit these things in more than one exhibition, like it has a dual purpose or a multipurpose, you get your money’s worth, you can’t just show it once and go we’ve done that now!” (Sarah) The idea of collecting objects that can be used repeatedly does not seem to appear in the existing literature around museum collecting. Participants viewed it as a desirable trait for an object to have as, “the more we can use it in displays, in books, publications, the more stories it connects to, the more people... the better.” (C4)

Most curators mentioned concerns around the future of collecting connected to “practical, resource issues” (C1), including limited collection storage space in addition to the need for more staff to care for and facilitate access to the collections. This was also linked to reviewing existing collection holdings with a view to deaccessioning some objects. C5 mentioned that “when I see truly significant great things that move people I think it’s really worth the effort. The problem is most of the stuff we have is not in that category.” When discussing deaccessioning she/he noted her/his disappointment at “how much second rate material is in the collections. [While] it’s beautifully looked after, it will never see the light of day, nobody’s interested in it, it’s second rate.”

The issues around resourcing collecting activity also came up in one of the focus group discussions, such as Rachael’s comment, quoted earlier, about the “practical considerations.” Some of the practical issues around collecting, especially the difficulties around ‘collecting forever’ were raised as part of the discussion on what to collect. In regard to the box from Matiu/Somes Island:

Sarah: Do we want the box?

Charles: Yeah.

Hudson: If we don’t have one already, or six already.

Caitlyn: What if we’ve got twenty of them?

Hudson: If we’ve got twenty of them, hell no!

Sarah: But that one might be better, than the other twenty.

Hudson: Doesn’t matter, you can’t just collect forever, it’s silly.

Sarah: But can you have twenty and go, ah, but we really want this one so we will get rid of one of the other ones?

William: But museums don't really get rid of things.

Sarah: Yeah they do, what's called, de...?

Moderator: Deaccessioning.

Hudson: You have to have some kind of perspective, like we don't need fifty different boxes, no matter how beautiful.

The above dialogue again shows how the significance of an object relates in part to its rarity, as the box is understood to be less desirable if it is replicated. It also shows an awareness of some of the issues museums face when collecting.

## **Conclusion**

The opinions of staff and members of the public are largely in accordance on all the matters discussed: the need for Te Papa to collect significant material and to be mindful of sustainability when collecting. This is in contrast to the letters to the editor mentioning Te Papa that I reviewed. Firstly, of the over 1000 letters I examined, only 24 made any mention of Te Papa's collecting activities. Te Papa's collections do not appear to attract much public debate at present. Of the 24 letters mentioning collecting, there was no single dominant theme beyond criticism either for what has been included or excluded from Te Papa's collections. In response to Spalding's (2002, 121) queries about the need for museums to collect, there appears to be strong support for the continuation of collecting activities at Te Papa. The presence of physical objects is considered by those spoken with to be a key feature of a museum. The collection of intangible heritage also emerged as something participants expected Te Papa to collect.

This challenges Knell's (2004, 37) suggestion that museums may move from collecting to recording as a means of addressing the ongoing sustainability of retaining tangible items. Instead the collection of intangible cultural heritage was understood by participants as complementary to collecting three-dimensional items rather than supplanting it. The consequence is a further, rather than reduced, demand for resources to support these activities.

As Pearce (1995, 23) notes the practice of selecting items is central to collecting, and the necessity of making choices was readily acknowledged by focus group members. Significance and the components of identified by Russell and Winkworth;

provenance, representativeness, condition and interpretative capacity encompassed most of the qualities participants felt should guide what Te Papa decides to collect.

The subjective and relative nature of significance was evident in the focus group discussions. It was also commented upon directly by focus group participants and curators. In response to Spalding's (2002, 80) critique, the question is not about curators considering their own personal interests or not, but rather how reflexive museum staff are about this and whether their personal interests intersect with the aims of the museum. It also becomes a question of taking practical steps, such as those discussed in Chapter One, in order to best manage the political elements of deciding what should be collected.

Provenance, in its broadest sense, is a vital part of gauging the significance of an item. The value of contextual information was clear in the focus groups. Its importance was also supported by comments from curators. Provenance is comparative, all objects possess provenance to a degree. Decisions about what should be collected depend on the subjective worth of a particular provenance.

Representativeness is another part of the significance equation. First of all, objects may be selected for collection as a representation of something greater. This can be contentious, especially when dealing with something as multi-faceted as a protest movement or a war. Again, representativeness is an individual judgement. Representativeness also involves the degree to which an object is either typical or rare. Knell's (2004, 26-27) assessment that uniqueness alone is not justification for retaining an object remains true on one level. To be selected for its uniqueness, the object would also need to possess a significant provenance – or museums would be justified in collecting each and every snowflake!

Condition was also a factor in deciding what Te Papa should collect. Rather than it simply being a case of the better the condition, the more likely Te Papa should acquire the item, the impact of condition on significance was dependent on the provenance as well as the rarity of the item.

An awareness of the impossibility of collecting everything and the need to address the practical issues around resourcing collecting was shared by the curators and members of the public spoken with. One way of determining what should be collected, suggested by participants, was the idea of prioritising the acquisition of items with potential exhibition and research applications.

## Chapter Three

Institutional collecting is concerned with collecting for others. This is the ‘interpretative capacity’ component of significance, how appropriate an object is to the museum’s “mission, purpose, collection policy and programs.” (Russell and Winkworth 2009, 40) The audience may encounter the collection through exhibitions or by other means. This chapter begins by exploring public and curatorial understandings of the roles of Te Papa’s collections. A discussion of some of the ways collecting with an audience in mind might shape what is selected follows, especially in terms of collecting controversial objects. Finally what Te Papa, as a national museum, should collect is discussed in detail.

### The roles of Te Papa’s collections

The purposes of the collection impact on decisions about what should be collected. What would be appropriate to hold at one museum, would not be necessarily at another. Two dominant ideas emerged from my research in response to questions about the purposes of Te Papa and its collections. One central theme concerned the importance of relating to audience. The following is part of a focus group’s conversation on Te Papa’s roles as a national museum:

Justin: I would expect a national museum to be able to cater for a wide range of groups, one way or another.

Harrison: If they’re going to choose to hold that, whatever it is, they should preserve it and conserve it and be very good at that because otherwise they shouldn’t take on the role.

Georgia: But also show it to us.

Amelia: It should be collected for us.

Harrison: Not to hide away. Not as *their* treasures, it’s our treasures.

A strong awareness of the public ownership of Te Papa’s collections was apparent in both focus groups. This was often expressed in terms of ensuring the visibility of collection items via exhibitions rather than ‘hiding’ them. One person commented, when asked what advice they would give Te Papa staff, that: “They should, at least, have a big weighting as to what does New Zealand want in their museum ... as

well as what the academics and the experts and the professionals feel is needed. Those two things should be weighed up to make a good archive but also something that's popular, so people will want to go and see it." (Harrison)

Another participant suggested that, "all people should have an opportunity to input into the criteria making process ... Starting a conversation with the people who fund you about what they actually want to see and want you to collect might be a good idea." (Hudson)

In my discussions with curators they all expressed a strong sense that "we are acting on behalf of the tax paying New Zealander, so we don't just collect arbitrarily." (C1) When asked whether consideration is given not only to the content of other public collections (see Chapter One) but to what is held in private collections also, C3 replied: "No ... I feel that we're collecting or preserving objects at this level at the museum ... for the nation of New Zealand people ... the hard thing is often those significant objects are held in private collections but are they best there or are they best at [a] national museum, where we can have them for New Zealand society forever and care for them forever?"

In terms of seeking public input into collecting activity one curator commented: "It is an interesting thing about whether the public ought to be deciding what we have and whether the curators have that authority and knowledge to do it, and if so are they kind of elite and esoteric collections and what would a collection put together by the public really look like? ... I don't think the public, it's not their job, they have a very intuitive kind of understanding of history and culture ... and we need some guiding principles or some overarching shape to our collections." (C1)

The other strong thought expressed by my respondents about Te Papa's roles relates to national identity. The following is part of a focus group's discussion.

Caitlyn: To try and move toward a kind of consensus of what the national identity might be.

Rachael: To present a snapshot of history, perhaps.

Hudson: Maybe to be a critic as well, an institution that's pushing at the boundaries of what the nation is and could be.

Sarah: Kind of challenging us to think, broaden our own view of what our national identity is.

Caitlyn: To preserve objects that are considered to characterise our identity.

Charles: And I guess it's about projecting an identity because it's a big focal point for tourists, how we represent to an international forum as well.

This dialogue illustrates some of the different, and potentially contradictory, tasks people expect Te Papa to play a part in. The final comment touches on the links between addressing national identity as well as audience, in this case visitors to New Zealand, which is picked up at the conclusion of this chapter. When asked about the place of national identity in regard to Te Papa's roles one curator replied, "Well it's there isn't it, because we're a national museum, there's no way round it." (C5) National identity occupies an ambiguous place in regard to Te Papa's collecting. This is something that both curators and members of public touched on and is discussed in more detail below.

### **Collecting controversial objects**

One area where a concern for the public response to collecting was often mentioned in my research related to collecting controversial objects. I asked curators what, if anything, they felt should *not* be collected by Te Papa. The reason behind this question was to help define what should be collected by understanding what is excluded. Many items were discussed by curators as objects to be careful about collecting. Other responses were less negotiable, including not collecting human remains and not duplicating material already held by Te Papa or other public institutions.

Controversial objects were also raised in the focus groups, again with reference to audience. When discussing criteria for collecting a participant commented: "I like this tension though between the challenging objects and what people want to see, because that's often not the same thing." (Caitlyn)

Asked what sorts of items might be described as challenging, the group responded:

Hudson: I think challenging items are sexual items, so things around sex and sexuality, and things around ethnicity and race.

Sarah: I'm thinking about things we might not be very proud of in our history that we might not want to be confronted with.

Similar sorts of objects were flagged as controversial by curators. C5 explained:

There are things we should be careful about and I call them deviant objects, you know [like] things to do with Nazi Germany. Some of it's really interesting and it has a place, like we've collected some philatelic items from the Nazi period because they come on envelopes that are from prisoners of war. You've got to be sensible, you can't just say nothing with a swastika on it, that doesn't make any sense ... I just think you need to be sensitive, you shouldn't collect anything that is going to upset certain communities for good reasons, so something racist but then I wouldn't say that you shouldn't collect racist material per se. We collected a sticker book of golliwogs from the 30s and it's of [its] time and it says a lot about the time, so we collected that. It's a constant weighing up and being careful and sensitive.

C3 commented on how public reaction is a key consideration: "We consider the public when it's something that could be a bit controversial. So, for example, we were offered an object ... I won't say what the object was [but] we felt that public would be opposed to that person profiteering from their illegal activity."

Another curator commented on the importance of collecting controversial material. She/he also discussed one way of doing this in a sensitive manner. "At one stage I wanted to collect gang related material culture such as patches, helmets etcetera... but there are sensitivities around this kind of material because when it pops up at an annual report it has the potential to draw negative attention and controversy ... it became too difficult, so the way I worked around it, I found a book called *Staunch* which was a history of New Zealand gangs and had great documentary style photographs in it. I went to the original photographer and collected a portfolio of those images ... So that was my way around it. But I think we should be collecting material like that. From a broad cross-section of people and lifestyles, from all walks of society." (C4) C3 felt that: "It's important to not always collect the happy, positive side of things but sometimes collect objects that might have an horrific story because they're the kind of things that never get collected."

The consensus among both staff and at the focus group was to collect controversial items "as long as it's relevant. If it's an idea that we are trying to develop at the moment then those objects need to be there, but if it's just for the sake of challenge or shock then not." (Caitlyn)

## **Collecting New Zealand or Collecting for New Zealand?**

It's the national museum so therefore you should collect something of national significance because you have a moral obligation to. (C5)



Something I kind of struggle with is whether the museum should only collect New Zealand stuff or whether it should try and collect stuff from overseas. I remember growing up I really wanted to see something from overseas. (Justin)

Te Papa is New Zealand's national museum and, as C5 states, this places a responsibility on the museum to collect items of national significance. National significance is a complex idea. Building on Mason's (2007) distinction between museums 'for' and museums 'of' the nation, nationally significant material equally encompasses material significant because of its perceived value for the people of the nation as well as items significant due to the way they are understood to be representative of the nation. Items may be significant for both reasons. The latter includes items routinely understood as relating to national identity.

#### Collecting items 'of' New Zealand?

Both curators and members of the public discussed collecting items 'of' New Zealand. In the focus group discussions on what should be collected, the object's association with New Zealand was often raised. The extent to which the item was connected to New Zealand seemed to increase its desirability. For example, one person commented in relation to the Brigit Brock and Souper dresses that: "It depends... say one of those two designers was really key in the history of New Zealand fashion... If that was a key moment in New Zealand fashion history, then you'd need to have that in a certain story." (Caitlyn)

Conversely, the place of items without a clear New Zealand link was questioned intently during the focus groups. Comments included:

Amelia: But why would New Zealand own stuff that's not part of its history?

Justin: The item itself isn't of significance in New Zealand but I guess it depends on what it was doing. Is there a famous photo of someone wearing it in New Zealand, walking down Lambton Quay for example?

In my discussion with curators a strong New Zealand provenance was seen as a positive attribute for a collection item to possess. C3 said that curators "try to gather objects that ... tell the story of New Zealand and New Zealand people."

A variety of items were mentioned that the curators I spoke with considered to be nationally significant. One curator said: "We should be able to say, hand on heart, we've got some really big ticket items, we've got the de Surville anchor, we've got the cannon from the Tory, we've got the 1839 flag... We should be able to say we have a lot

of really nationally significant material and that we're the right home for any material that's still out [there]...that's got to be the ultimate aim." (C5)

Deciding what is 'of' New Zealand is deceptively simple. To paraphrase Taylor (in Mason 2007, 71), what is New Zealand that it can be collected by a museum? Like significance, it may at first seem obvious what is and what is not a New Zealand item. When discussing the de Surville anchor, C2 said: "We collect for the national heritage which is... a bit hard to express in words, but if you're looking for the resonances of objects or the historical associations, a case in point would be the de Surville anchor that we've got in the lobby...in terms of resonance, it's still the oldest authenticated European object ever found in New Zealand. So it's a no brainer that we went and purchased it."

It is not always this clear cut. While initial comments, such as those quoted earlier, indicated a relatively binary view of what was and what was not 'of' New Zealand, as the focus group conversations unfolded a more nuanced perspective emerged. In one focus group it was the Greek vase that brought up this issue:

William: What connection does it have to New Zealand?

Sarah: I suppose its [the vase's] story is that those things were once coveted and we must have had New Zealanders at some time and went out and were archaeologists.

William: I'm not sure if that's the role of Te Papa, more the role of a museum maybe in a Classics department somewhere.

Sarah: Should it go home? (Sarah)

Caitlyn: I think any European national museum that you go to will have a collection of Classic Greek antiques because they all accept their history stems from there and I think if we collect something like this it would just be accepting that we've inherited that European history as well, so it's probably valid for a lot of people who have a European background.

The safety helmet attracted this comment: "I guess what you're talking about is the connection to New Zealand... so it could be something from overseas...like presumably that plastic helmet was made in China but since it was used at a point in New Zealand history it becomes a New Zealand thing." (Justin)

This point was again also by C4, who said: "In this way something like a DJ's turntable can be really significant for Pacific people in New Zealand, even though it's mass produced by a company in Japan or Germany."

This complexity has been recognised by Taylor (2004, 167) who defines Scottish items as, “objects...which grew or were made in Scotland, or were imported and used there” as well as items used by Scottish people regardless of their location. This applies equally to attempting to define New Zealand items, and in practice this definition could include almost anything. Selecting items ‘of’ a place is complicated by the ways in which “globalization and mass production has homogenized material culture.” (Mason 2007, 81)

When I asked about collecting items from overseas, C1 responded by saying: “I don’t think I have a problem with collecting internationally especially if ... [we] can show influence or simply it might be a manufactured item that was extremely popular [in New Zealand]...we’re not just at the bottom of the world, completely self sufficient in terms of material culture, that’s a complete fallacy. We haven’t made ourselves, by ourselves, for ourselves. There’s no such thing as just made in New Zealand.”

When examining objects in terms of their relation to New Zealand there is also the question of which New Zealand, or New Zealanders, they relate to. Depending on an individual’s or a group’s view, different items will be seen as nationally significant and the importance of national significance itself will also vary. National identity tends to be spoken of as singular, with members assumed to share “heritage, language, history and culture ...[when] in fact all that might be held in common is territory, and government.” (Bell 1996, 79) This has an impact on the selection of nationally significant material.

For some, the whole concept of collecting item ‘of’ New Zealand is problematic. One focus group participant asked: “What is the nation ... and what is Te Papa’s role in pushing this idea of what the nation is? ... Why is it focused on New Zealand, that’s what I’m interested in, I’m not a particularly patriotic person so I find the whole idea of collecting a New Zealand museum bizarre. (Hudson)

Another group member argued for having New Zealand as a subject: “It’s a bit of a reaction to what museums were like when I was growing up, it wasn’t about New Zealand, it was about ... England, and so there’s been a sense that New Zealand didn’t really, for Pākehā, have its own identity. It’s about placing New Zealand in the Pacific rather than those old ties back to Europe.” (Sarah)

That Te Papa has a responsibility to “represent everyone” (Caitlyn) was commented on, which another group member felt made it “hard to have a national identity.” (Sarah) This prospect was greeted enthusiastically by some group members,

who commented on the importance of recognising the diverse nature of New Zealand identity. This echoes Phillips's (1996, 110) concerns about the risks of Te Papa presenting national identity.

The conflict between acknowledging diversity, and the focus in the Act on collecting items connected to national identity (see Chapter One), was made by C5: "I guess it's [national identity] tied up in all those iconic objects...but for us the real worry is slipping into kiwiana, so we might collect a Buzzy Bee toy as an object of national identity but it's also an image of kiwiana and people...I don't want to get too hamstrung by ideas of national identity when our nation is becoming so complex."

I asked whether national *identities* was then, perhaps, a more useful term:

I'm looking more at community identities, and they make the nation. So I steer clear of all talk of national identity, in fact it's never on my mind and I never talk or think about it and most of us don't actually, we avoid it like the plague. We hate being told to focus more on it because I think the nation wells up through all the smaller identities. And I think as long we keep collecting broadly and interestingly and keep our eye on the ball all over the place, I think we'll create a collection that gives a feeling of national identity but it has to be plural.

A focus group member also mentioned a way in which these 'smaller identities' build a sense of New Zealand. "As for the New Zealand side of the museum, we've got probably some old Māori heritage as well as European, but it's quite interesting to see the other cultures that they feature. Like they've been doing the Scottish, they had the Italian and all the local versions of those nations in there ... it's good to show the variety of culture that New Zealand has represented in that museum." (Harrison)

C1 discussed some of the intricacies of collecting items popularly conceived of as being 'of' New Zealand, such as Buzzy Bee.<sup>10</sup> We began by talking about the *Play School* toys in Te Papa's History collection.

The public hook into them because of their nostalgia value but I think we've been careful to make sure we've collected them for other reasons, they say a great deal more...I don't feel nostalgic ... when I see them, but I think they're really important objects to have in the collection because they are about the experience of childhood, about television, about British influences on New Zealand television, that sort of thing and that's again this issue about do we just collect Buzzy Bees and jandals and paua encrusted things. It's really tricky... [But] we have to be realistic, we have a range of public visiting the museum,

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<sup>10</sup> A popular children's toy in New Zealand since the 1940s, recognised as an emblematic piece of kiwiana. There is a Buzzy Bee toy in Te Papa's History collection. It was purchased by the museum in 2007.

some will engage intellectually and some will engage nostalgically and sentimentally and we just have to allow people to make their own meanings.

I then asked C1 about the roles of Te Papa's collections.

We're not here to fix identity, to say 'right here it is, we've come up with it, that is it from now on and these objects are our touchstones for it.' I see the role of the collections, collecting for the nation, is to reflect back many facets of experience and identity and identities and we have to remember we're not all sitting around eight hours day feeling like New Zealanders. Our identities are fractured and flawed and sometimes we're not even thinking about identity ... I think we use national identity because we're a nationally funded institution and that justifies our existence but it's not a very nuanced thing to apply at a practical level. And... I mean whose national identity is it?

... We've got a strategy to ... collect relating to our icons, but ultimately what do you collect from Ed Hillary or Kiri Te Kanawa? You just get unique objects that happen to have the sweat of that celebrity on them. They're unique, so they present real problems for exhibitions... we can display them for six months or a year<sup>11</sup> ... I think if you collect around iconic events or national events you can get a much broader sweep of experience.

C3 highlighted that items that seem to reflect national identity still have a place in Te Papa's collections.

It's something that I'm really interested in [national identity] ... [it's] changing as well ... the obvious way to go is to collect kiwiana type objects, because that's the sort of the thing people have fallen back on looking at as being a big part of our kiwi identity. I think we have tried to collect a few of those type of objects but probably we're more inclined to ... try to collect a variety so you can cover a whole range of people and stories... but personally I think some of those [kiwiana] objects are still important to collect too, even if it's just talking about what we think ... and they're a snapshot of what we're thinking now.

Collecting items 'of' New Zealand is recognised as one of Te Papa's roles. It is a complex task which involves grappling with national identity and audience expectations.

#### Collecting 'for' New Zealand?

"Do you put all your resources into just being a New Zealand museum, buying New Zealand stuff and showing New Zealand stuff or do you say we're going to be a showcase of the world for New Zealanders?" (Justin)

Collecting items 'for' New Zealand is also affected by the issues highlighted above. New Zealand is not a unified audience, just as it is not a unified subject. Items 'of' New Zealand and 'for' New Zealand are not mutually exclusive and, as C1 pointed out above, national identity is not an all consuming pastime. Most people are unlikely to be

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<sup>11</sup> This is due to conservation requirements about the amount of time an item can be exposed to light while on display.

narcissistic enough to only be interested in items that reflect their own identities; otherwise a museum would be little more than a hall of mirrors. Instead, as I heard in the focus groups, people have an interest in other people, times and places, as well as an interest in their own identities.

Focus group participants tended to agree that Te Papa has a role showing international material. One focus group respondent offered this comment when discussing the place of international material in New Zealand's national museum: "I'm a painter too, and it was lovely to be able to see a Degas that was in our collection... the little ballet girl sculpture, it was lovely to see some of these masters actual work, not just prints." (Georgia)

This was touched on when the other focus group was talking about collecting the Greek vase. "I was just thinking it depends if we want to say that Te Papa is about forging a national identity or do we want it to be broader, you don't want it to be just about national identity. Is it [the vase] useful because there will be lots of New Zealanders who never have the opportunity to see something like that overseas?" (Sarah)

Members agreed material 'for' New Zealand should definitely be exhibited, but felt Te Papa should not focus on collecting in this area. "That's the role of the touring exhibition, so that those [international] things can come to New Zealand and probably much better examples of those things can come to New Zealand rather than [Te Papa] acquiring them." (William)

Concerns around audience and collecting 'for' New Zealand were also raised, in terms of ensuring collections are representative of and of interest to a variety of groups. Participants spoke of ethnicity, sexuality, religion and age in relation to this point.

Again, the caveat applies that people are not only interested in items that can be understood to represent themselves. In terms of audience appeal, many commented that Te Papa should cater for everyone: "It's for all New Zealanders, so you need to be aware that it's from preschoolers right through to elderly so the diversity comes in there, and recognising that not only is New Zealand bicultural but we have a multicultural society now." (Sarah)

When asked about what she/he would collect if faced with a 'blank slate', C3 commented on collecting "a more diverse range of New Zealand experience, so not just

the white middle classes, look at childhood stories, look at gay men, lesbians, look at contemporary Māori, look at all of those stories, so we've got a much more diverse range of people represented."

A responsibility identified by both curators and focus group members was balancing collecting "for future generations" (Justin) with collecting for display in the present. C5 suggested that "if you're collecting significantly and iconically and you're collecting human history... then you shouldn't worry about the day to day use of it, if it's a robust enough collection it will be of use to future humans."

Some issues associated with ensuring New Zealanders access to Te Papa's collections arose out of a focus group's consideration of the implications of Te Papa collecting 'for' New Zealanders. In one focus group someone asked "whether they [Te Papa] feel a responsibility to everyone, outside the people who can actually walk in their doors?" (Amelia) It was mentioned that this was "more than disabled access, it's access for people that can't get to Wellington." (Harrison) At present 37% of Te Papa's visitors are from within New Zealand but outside the Wellington region; Te Papa aims that this figure is at least 35% (Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa 2009, 28). Another participant said that he liked "the concept of them [Te Papa] not just being the walls of the building ... it does have an influence across the country given its status in many ways."<sup>12</sup> (Justin)

Another question that surfaces when considering what Te Papa should collect is: "is it a museum for us or is it a museum for visitors to New Zealand?" (Georgia) As New Zealand's national museum Te Papa is funded by central government and the collection is understood as belonging to and being held for all New Zealanders. Yet Te Papa's collections are not only for New Zealanders, in some sense they are also retained as part of a global human inheritance.

This research has discussed the importance of collecting for audience. In the 2008/09 year 35%<sup>13</sup> of museum visitors were from outside New Zealand (Museum of

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<sup>12</sup> This point was built on further to examine Te Papa's responsibility to regional museums. "I was thinking, with Te Papa being a national museum it would be cool if it could help out other museums in the regions that aren't as well funded to purchase things and loan them back... I think it's a kind of an obligation that Te Papa has in its collecting, to ... not just cherry pick the really awesome things for itself but a guardianship role for all of New Zealand" (Justin). This does occur at present as shown in Chapter One.

<sup>13</sup> Te Papa aims that "a minimum of 45% of adult visitors" will be from overseas.

New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa Annual Report 2008/09, 28). As Te Papa is partially self-funding, these visitors also contribute financially to the museum.

Focus group participants felt that international visitors were most likely to want to see items ‘of’ New Zealand, as “for New Zealanders, it’s nice for us to see things from overseas sometimes, but for visitors they of course want to see what we have.” (Justin) International audiences are not referred to in the present policies around collecting and were not mentioned specifically by the curators I interviewed.

## **Conclusion**

Audience was seen by respondents as a key consideration when deciding what should be collected by Te Papa. Te Papa’s collections “are a resource for the people of New Zealand” (7) and the curators I spoke with felt that collecting was carried out on behalf of New Zealanders. Members of the public spoken with believed that Te Papa could do more to consult with the public about what is collected. This was considered an important part of building a collection that is relevant to the museum’s public. This is not to be confused with the public *deciding* what should be collected by Te Papa, with participants clearly calling for an opportunity for input rather than seeking control. Both curators and focus group members made links between collecting for audience and access to the items in the form of exhibitions. This further connects with the comments made in Chapter Two on the importance of collecting items that can be utilised by the museum.

It was felt that Te Papa should not only collect things that appeal to its audiences, but also consider whether the item selection might be viewed negatively by the public. This emerged as one of the things staff consider carefully when collecting. At the same time the need to collect in potentially contentious areas was also stressed by staff and members of the public.

When considering what should be collected by Te Papa curators and the public alike placed a premium on items ‘of’ New Zealand to apply Mason’s (2007) concept to collecting. Determining what is ‘of’ New Zealand is more complex than locating items of ‘kiwiana’ or items made in New Zealand. Instead it may include any item, regardless of origin, thought to have a significant connection to New Zealand. Objects ‘of’ New Zealand are those related to New Zealand rather than just New Zealand-ness. To a degree, curators simultaneously rejected national identity as a criterion for selecting material, while accepting that Te Papa’s collection will be related to national identity.



The view of curators spoken with was that a fuller sense of New Zealand's identity or identities will, in time, emerge from the collections only if this broad approach is adopted. The concerns Phillip's articulates in regard to the threat promoting national identity at Te Papa poses to diversity is thus placed in perspective, with curators endeavouring to ensure collections reflect diverse identities.

The need to collect 'for' New Zealander's was also stressed by my participants. This was understood as ensuring collections were inclusive of and relevant to *all* New Zealanders. In order to collect 'for' New Zealanders participants argued that Te Papa should collect a diverse range of material, including but not necessarily limited to items 'of' New Zealand.

Significance is relative and in Te Papa's case, as they seek nationally significant items, opinions will differ on what objects this includes.

In discussing collecting 'for' New Zealand research participants also highlighted the need to consider future audiences. How future audiences can be catered for, given that their needs are unknown, was not addressed in depth.

In most instances Te Papa's audience or the public was taken to mean New Zealanders. However focus group respondents identified that Te Papa's audience is in part international. While Te Papa aims to attract a significant number of international visitors, current collecting policy makes no reference to these audiences. The staff I spoke with made no specific mention of the potential impact of international visitors on what Te Papa should collect.

## Conclusion

This dissertation provides an examination of two intertwined aspects of collecting at Te Papa: how History curators decide what to collect; and what those staff and members of the public think Te Papa should collect. I have explored these topics in depth, from the specifics of the current acquisition process to questioning the very purpose of Te Papa collecting at all. A number of gaps in the literature around institutional collecting, particularly at a national museum, have been responded to. One central gap I have addressed is the previous lack of accounts of institutional collecting that include the perspectives of members of the public. The opinions of those members of the public I spoke with were largely in accordance with the thoughts expressed by the curators in my study. It must be noted that my sample of members of the public was relatively small. Those spoken with were cognisant of Te Papa's responsibilities to New Zealand as a whole and of the many challenges curators face in selecting and caring for collection items at Te Papa. This contrasts with the impression, derived from examining letters to the editor, that the public is indifferent at best and antagonistic at worst to Te Papa's collecting activities.

My first aim in conducting this research was to establish *how* decisions are made about what to collect at Te Papa at a practical level. The acquisition process is fundamental knowledge to Te Papa's curators, but it had not previously been discussed in the literature surrounding collecting nor was an account of this process available to the public. Understanding this process has also allowed me to better comprehend how considerations about what should be collected by Te Papa are dealt with in practice. The process reveals how concerns presented in the literature are addressed at Te Papa, such as the power of individuals to shape collections (Spalding 2002; Vergo 1989; Kavanagh 2004). Staff were quick to recognise that they as individuals do influence the direction the collection takes, supporting Wagstaff's (2008) findings. My research shows that in practice acquisition decisions at Te Papa are the results of curators working with each other as well as with other Te Papa staff. This acts to mitigate the power of any one curator.

Mason's caution that "museums are shaped as much by chance and fortuity as by strategy and design" (Mason 2007, 29) alerted me to the importance of understanding how collection items are sourced. Surprisingly this revealed that

members of the public currently have a significant, if informal, part in the collection process as they are the major source of material donated to the history collection. Curators select what is to be collected, but these decisions are typically made about items the museum has been offered rather than actively sought.

There is scope for Te Papa to make details of its acquisition process publically available. Those members of public involved in my research were largely unaware that Te Papa's curators work as a team, that they consult with other New Zealand museums when collecting and that they may support other museums in the acquisition of nationally significant material. Beyond the acquisition process, there was also limited public awareness that collection objects may be accessed by members of the public. An increased general understanding of these aspects of collecting would assist in the development of a greater dialogue between the public and Te Papa about collections.

In regard to the question of what people think Te Papa should collect, I have three key findings. First, that Te Papa *should* collect. Not only does the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa Act compel the museum to collect, members of the public I interviewed and museum curators expect that Te Papa will collect. The ongoing need for museums to collect has been questioned in the literature (Spalding 2002, 121) as well as being something respondents reflected upon. Ultimately the presence of collection items is considered to be a defining feature of a museum. This includes collecting both physical objects and intangible cultural heritage. The definition of a collection item used by participants was relatively broad. Future research could investigate in more detail how members of the public understand the term 'museum object'. Knell's (2004) suggestion that recordings may displace the collection of tangible objects was not supported by my participants, who spoke of collecting and recording as complementary activities for the museum to be engaged in.

There is also a need, given the size of my sample, for more detailed research into the public's expectations of, as well as their assumptions about, Te Papa's collections. It would be particularly useful to examine the views of donors on the collection. Donors' opinions were not specifically included in this research but the gap between the material offered and what is selected by Te Papa staff warrants further investigation, in terms of what motivates people to offer that material.

Support for Te Papa continuing to collect means the museum inevitably has to face issues around the sustainability its collecting. In this research I have worked

towards establishing what types of items both staff and members of the public believe are worth investing resources in. The ultimate goal is that this understanding may assist in making decisions about which items are a priority for collection care and which items might be candidates for deaccessioning. After all, does a collection object merit retention and the myriad costs attendant with this if it would not meet the collection criteria utilised today? In some quarters it is heretical to even ask this question, but as collections develop there is a real need to make rational choices about what to retain and preserve, as well as what to add.

The museum has a duty to safeguard the past but the aim of this action is to serve present and future audiences rather than it being an end in itself. In addition to selecting and holding significant items, participants felt Te Papa should try to collect items that can be put to many uses by the museum. This idea is not covered in the existing literature on institutional collecting. Further research needs to be carried out in order to ascertain how important this criterion is relative to other selection criteria.

My second key finding is that, according to my respondents, Te Papa should collect *significant* material. Both staff and members of the public agreed that collecting was important but they advocated a discriminating approach. The idea of significance, similar to that detailed by Russell and Winkworth, was how my participants defined items that should be collected by Te Papa. A significant item could be anything at all; its value is derived from its provenance, representativeness, condition and interpretative capacity. The interplay between these qualities is how the relative significance of an object is determined. This study shows that these qualities, and significance overall, are subjective judgements. That significance is subjective rather than objective did not detract from its appeal as a basis for decision making.

There is scope for further investigation into the extent to which the significance of certain objects is shared by different audience segments. Research may also be undertaken into how the worldviews of individual curator's shapes their evaluations of significance.

My third key finding is that staff and members of the public think that Te Papa should collect material of significance to its *audiences*. Collecting for Te Papa's audiences, as well as in ways that connect to national identity, were the key concerns for my participants. In Te Papa's case, curators make the decisions about what should be collected but they make them on behalf of others. In the policy around collecting at Te

Papa these others are constructed as New Zealanders and the collection is tasked with supporting the museum in its mission to “present, explore, and preserve both the heritage of its [New Zealand’s] cultures and knowledge of the natural environment” (The Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa Act 4). In looking at a national museum I have developed a further understanding of what it means for Te Papa to collect using locality as a guide.

My research revealed that Mason’s (2007) ideas of national museums being both ‘for’ and ‘of’ the nation can be applied to their collecting activities. Collecting ‘for’ and ‘of’ the nation had currency for members of the public and curators alike, and these notions were also critiqued by both groups. The members of the public I spoke with wanted the opportunity to have input into deciding what Te Papa should collect. They felt that this would aid Te Papa in the development of collections that are relevant to its audiences. The views of focus group members on collecting were more moderate and supportive of Te Papa than those expressed in the letters to the editor I reviewed. The public encouraged curators to take some risks and challenge their audiences with the items they collect.

Future investigation is required into the idea that by collecting and displaying New Zealand items, international audiences are catered for. At present international visitors are not specifically mentioned in Te Papa’s collection policies and they were not mentioned specifically by the curators I spoke with. There is a need to examine the assumption presented in the focus group that items ‘of’ New Zealand are those of interest to Te Papa’s overseas visitors.

This dissertation has implications not only for understanding collecting at national museums but for any museum that defines its collecting, in part, by location. For example, regional museums are also typically tasked with being both ‘for’ and ‘of’ that place. Furthermore, in the same way a national museum may address international audiences, regional museums also attract national as well as international visitors. More research should be undertaken into the degree to which collecting ‘of’ a place meets the needs of the museum’s diverse audiences.

As indicated above, in carrying out research in a field that has previously received limited attention, I have become aware of many areas that would reward further investigation. It is imperative that museums increasingly look at their collecting activities with a critical eye. Te Papa should collect items that are significant to its

audiences, be they individual researchers or the public more generally. This is a challenge, not least because collecting for audience includes collecting for the unknowable needs of future visitors. It must be addressed though. If collecting is focussed too narrowly on preserving items without remaining conscious of the purposes and the costs of this activity, it risks being literally pointless.

Finally, at the conclusion of the focus groups I asked participants what advice they would give Te Papa curators about deciding what to collect. Their recommendations reflected the content of the discussions and are worthy of inclusion as part of my concluding comments.

They should try and collect unique objects that aren't otherwise being collected ... part of me thinks they should collect everyday items but there's only so far you can really take that.

Not get bogged down by strategy and also use their imaginations and the way that they respond to objects as a human rather than just as museum personnel.

Go for some more depth, rather than breadth.

Be slow to turn anything down...because it might not have value now but who knows what will have value in twenty years or thirty years or a hundred years? They're meant to tell a story in the future too.

Be rigorously ethical in how you acquire what you acquire and be mindful of ... what you already have and how much its going to cost to keep the item.

My advice would be don't be afraid to take some risks with what you are collecting.

When you start to realise that you have so many things and that everything does have a story and does have significance then you just have to choose what's relevant now and what contributes to debate that's going on now.

If collections are the heart of the museum, my research suggests that audiences should be at the heart of collecting. In order to collect material of significance to its audiences, Te Papa staff need to understand who the museum's audiences are and what is significant to them.

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# Appendix I

## Focus group questions

1. **When did you last visit Te Papa and what was the highlight for you?**
2. **Te Papa is New Zealand's national museum. What do think the role of a national museum is?**  
[If collecting is not mentioned, prompt: What about collecting?]
3. **When you think of Te Papa's collections, what kinds of things do you think of?**
4. **a) What are some criteria Te Papa should think about when deciding what to collect?**  
[list them individually, then share. Master list written up]  
**b) What ones do think are the most important?**  
**c) Have we missed anything?**
5. **a) What kinds of things should Te Papa collect?**  
[prompt: everyday? iconic? old? contemporary? etc]  
**b) What should Te Papa focus on collecting?**
6. [images of 8 items recently acquired by Te Papa are presented, with a description of the object on the back.] **As a group, decide what items you think should be collected and what reasons they should be collected for.**
7. **If you had a minute to talk with Te Papa staff, what advice would you give them about deciding what to collect?**
8. **Is there anything I have missed?**

Image:

<http://collections.tepapa.govt.nz/objectdetails.aspx?oid=753762&term=laundry+basket>

Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, GH011722

Laundry Basket

1959

Maker unknown, made in New Zealand

Hand woven wickerwork

This basket was made by an invalided Second World War veteran and sold in a Rehabilitation League shop run by the Returned Services Association, Gloucester Street, Christchurch, in 1959. It was purchased by the donor's mother as a present for her wedding in November 1959, and was used as a laundry basket until 2007.

The RSA (Returned Services Association) established the Rehabilitation League for returning servicemen and women. League factories made furniture, decorative wooden bowls, boxes and paua shell items and much of this was sold in League shops. Ex-servicemen in particular learnt crafts such as basket weaving to make an income, but also for company. By 1947, membership of the RSA reached a peak of 136,000; 92,000 of whom were from the Second World War.

Image:

<http://collections.tepapa.govt.nz/objectdetails.aspx?oid=772283&term=GH015811>

Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, GH015811

Woman's Handbag

1860s

Maker unknown

Hand sewn silk bag with moulded celluloid frame and chain link handle

Image:

<http://collections.tepapa.govt.nz/objectdetails.aspx?oid=709988&term=GH011328>

Hans Hansen/Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, GH011328

Box

1914-1918

Hans Hansen, made in New Zealand

Kauri carcass with inlay of kohekohe, rewa rewa, and paua shell; painted scene to inside of lid

German-born Hans Hansen decorated this box while he was interned as an 'enemy alien' on Somes/Matiu Island during World War I. The island, in the middle of Wellington Harbour, was to be Hansen's home from August 1914 to December 1918 and is painted on the inside lid of the box. Although a prisoner of war, Hansen could still earn extra money for tobacco and other small luxuries by selling carved trinkets and boxes. And despite being officially a security risk, he was permitted to go into town on several occasions to buy materials for his craftwork. It was a lucrative hobby: Hansen even sold an inlaid box to one of the soldiers at the camp for £1/5 (1 pound, 5 shillings, or 25 shillings). Calculating for inflation, this works out at between \$150 and \$200 in 2008. In Hansen's day, 7 shillings and 3 pence bought 1 pound of tobacco, so his earnings from the box could have purchased 4 pounds (1.8 kilograms). Hansen was a tall (1.85 metres or 6 feet, 1 inch), tattooed man working on Wellington wharves for the Union Steam Ship Company at the time of his detention. He had arrived in New Zealand three years earlier, but had put off becoming naturalised. However, New Zealand citizenship did not necessarily help those of German or Austrian descent. Under the War Regulations Act 1914, 4000 Germans and 2000 Austro-Hungarians were registered as 'enemy aliens' - even those who were naturalised. The act also defined men who were of military age like Hansen, who was 29, as security threats, who as such could be detained by the Minister of Defence. Altogether around 450 enemy aliens were imprisoned on Somes/Matiu Island in Wellington Harbour and Motuihe in the Waitemata Harbour, Auckland, during World War I, an indication of a prevailing atmosphere of intense anti-German feeling, which sometimes became hysterical.

Image:

<http://collections.tepapa.govt.nz/objectdetails.aspx?oid=765677&term=GH011699>

Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, GH011699

Safety Helmet

Circa 1980

Wormald

Plastic

Used during 1981 Springbok tour demonstration

Image:

<http://collections.tepapa.govt.nz/objectdetails.aspx?oid=771099&term=GH015796>

Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, GH015796

“The Souper Dress”

1966-67

Maker unknown

Machine sewn dress made from colour printed, paper-like material made from 80% cellulose and 20% cotton

This iconic garment is an excellent example of 1960s youth fashion inspired by the Pop Art movement. The dress is meant to be 'throwaway' fashion in that it was made of a type of paper. Its design was inspired by Andy Warhol's classic artwork featuring the repeating image of the label from a Campbell's Soup can. The 'Souper Dress' was produced in 1967 by manufacturer of Campbell's Soup who gave it away for the price of two soup labels and \$US1. In its styling it represents the classic mini popular at the time but more importantly it represents an excellent example of the intersecting of fashion, art and commerce - the essence of Pop Art.



Image:

<http://collections.tepapa.govt.nz/objectdetails.aspx?oid=700830&term=GH011677>

Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, GH011677

Rugby Ball

1956

Maker unknown

Stitched leather

From 1956 Springbok tour

Image:

<http://collections.tepapa.govt.nz/objectdetails.aspx?oid=741917&term=GH011680>

Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, GH011680

Attic 'black-figured neck amphora'

Circa 510 BC

Potters of the 'Leagros Group'

Ceramic

Image:

<http://collections.tepapa.govt.nz/objectdetails.aspx?oid=764445&term=GH015741>

Brigid Brock/Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, GH015741

Woman's leather suit

Circa 1985

Brigid Brock

Printed leather suit, lined in synthetic fabric

## Appendix II

### Staff interview questions

1. **Can you please tell me about your background, in terms of museum work?**

*[Prompt: when did you begin working in museums? What roles have you worked in? What is your educational background? What are your areas of interest?]*

2. **Do you collect anything as a private individual? What do you collect?**

3. **Thinking about the policies around acquisitions, where do those policies come from?**

*[Prompt: do you have much input into it? What sort of input? How big a role does policy play?]*

4. **Has Te Papa's acquisition policy changed during your time here?**

*[Prompt: how has it changed?]*

5. **How do you source items to acquire?**

*[Prompt: auctions? Online auctions? New Zealand/Overseas? People offering things? Do you think there is a divide between items that you seek and items that you are offered?]*

6. **What kinds of things are you looking for?**

*[Prompt: what do you think drives collecting at Te Papa? How do you balance collection strengths with collection breadth? How important is provenance? What role do existing collections play? What role to specific acquisition funds play? Do you consider what other museums are collecting? Do you consider known private collections? ]*

7. **Once you have identified a possible acquisition, can you talk me through the process from there?**

*[Prompt: what criteria do you use when making decisions? Are there instances when you identify a possible acquisition but decide not to proceed with it? Are there cases when acquisitions don't follow this path? Has this practice changed during your time here?]*

- 8. Do you consider the public when deciding what to collect?**
- 9. What do you think the roles of Te Papa's collections are, given that Te Papa is a national museum?**

*[Prompt: what is the role of national identity when it comes to shaping Te Papa's collections? How do you see the relationship between Te Papa's collections and other nationally significant collections?]*

- 10. What is your vision for Te Papa's collections?**

*[Prompt: how do you see the future of collecting at Te Papa?]*

- 11. If you had a blank slate, what would you collect?**

*[Prompt: where would you start? If it were possible would you collect everything?]*

- 12. Should museums collect context as well as objects?**

*[Prompt: If you had a choice between collecting an object or a photo of the object in use, which one would you acquire and why?]*

- 13. Is there anything Te Papa shouldn't collect?**

*[Prompt: should museums collect at all? Are collections central? How do you feel about collecting items that are damaged? Items that lack visual appeal?]*

- 14. Have I missed anything you think is important?**

## Appendix III

From the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa Act, 1992

### ***7 Functions***

- (1) The principal functions of the Board are—
  - (a) To control and maintain the Museum:
  - (b) To collect works of art and items relating to history and the natural environment:
  - (c) To act as an accessible national depository for collections of art and items relating to history and the natural environment:
  - (d) To develop, conserve, and house securely the collections of art and items relating to history and the natural environment in the Board's care:
  - (e) To exhibit, or make available for exhibition by other public art galleries, museums, and allied organisations, such material from its collections as the Board from time to time determines:
  - (f) To conduct research into any matter relating to its collections or associated areas of interest and to assist others in such research:
  - (g) To provide an education service in connection with its collections:
  - (h) To disseminate information relating to its collections, and to any other matters relating to the Museum and its functions:
  - (i) To co-operate with and assist other New Zealand museums in establishing a national service, and in providing appropriate support to other institutions and organisations holding objects or collections of national importance:
  - (j) To co-operate with other institutions and organisations having objectives similar to those of the Board:
  - (k) To endeavour to make the best use of the Board's collections in the national interest:
  - (l) To design, construct, and commission any building or structure required by the Museum.

(2) The Minister may not give a direction to the Board in relation to cultural matters.

Compare: 1972 No 11 s 11(1)

Subsection (2) was inserted, as from 25 January 2005, by section [200](#) Crown Entities Act 2004 (2004 No 115).