

Researching at the NGA



The National Gallery of Australia's (NGA) Research Library is well-known for its catalogues raisonn , rare books and early serials. However the Research Library also houses a manuscript, ephemera and oral history collection to assist researchers.

Manuscript Collection

The personal papers, visual arts ephemera and interviews held in the Research Library allow researchers to be drawn into a conversation with the visual arts; traveling through time to discover the story behind a painting, sculpture or textile held in the Gallery's collection.

The collection includes the papers of former Gallery Director's James Mollison and Bernard Hall, providing a commentary on their personal lives. The material resonates with traces of the author's personality – just like the tangible, physical presence of letters and diaries can be seen to carry the weight of memory. As with all personal collections, there are gaps in the information because the recipients' replies are not cited. Occasionally the conversation about art is one-sided.

Visual Arts Ephemera

The artists' ephemera records the journey of an artist through a life of art-making, publicity and exhibitions. The Research Library's collection of visual arts ephemera consists of printed materials primarily intended to be useful for a short period of time. Individually these items might seem peripheral, but cumulatively they can throw a particular light on art history, offering not only factual detail but an evocative link with the past.

The Research Library also collects the ephemera created by the NGA, covering twenty-five years of exhibition and collecting history. The ephemera relating to two exhibitions in particular, *Rembrandt: A genius and his impact* in 1997 and *Monet and Japan*, 2001 illustrate how these exhibitions

impacted upon the Gallery's marketing plan as well as illustrating how the public interacted with the Gallery as an institution. These were considered 'blockbuster' exhibitions, attracting vast crowds and unprecedented media attention.

James Gleeson Interviews

At this year's UNESCO Memory of the World Conference held at the National Library of Australia (NLA), the James Gleeson Oral History Collection was inscribed into the UNESCO Australian Memory of the World Register as being of significant Australian cultural heritage.

The *James Gleeson Oral History Collection* comprises 98 interviews, 2000 photographs as well as edited transcripts of interviews undertaken by well-known Surrealist artist James Gleeson in the late 1970s. In 2006, the Research Library, in collaboration with the NLA, digitised Gleeson's interviews, for the purpose of both preservation and access.

As primary, unpublished sources, these records are of great significance to the history of Australian visual arts in the twentieth century. The interviews are currently being added to the Research Library's catalogue and a website has been created to provide a sample of the interviews, including audio and images at <http://nga.gov.au/Research/Index.cfm>

Research Library Staff

All aspects of the Gallery's operations, including a public reference service are supported by the Research Library, with enquiries coming by phone, email or the Gallery's website. In common with other art museum libraries around the world, the Research Library also offers personal access to researchers with a special need to use this intriguing collection.

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Fringe-dwelling librarians

The challenge for libraries is how to provide the best possible service with minimal resources. Having worked exclusively in special libraries for 24 years - from large to tiny libraries - networking has been a lifesaver.

As health information officer at Therapeutic Guidelines Limited (TGL), I have been dwelling on the fringes of librarianship. My responsibilities include tasks such as literature searching, obtaining journal articles, and managing reference databases, collection and serials management. But I am no longer a library insider and some avenues of co-operation and networking are now closed.

As a member of professional groups, joining e-lists is essential. While listing TGL on the Australian Library Gateway and the Australian Interlibrary Resource Sharing Directory (VTGU). I cannot afford to contribute holdings to Libraries Australia, and my attempts to join collection-sharing co-operatives have failed. In this situation, document delivery would be impossible without corporate membership of a major library, giving us access to inter-library loans.

While I can fulfil my client information needs for the time being, I am not sure it is good to be a fringe-dweller for too long. Having a unique purpose is a major element in defining a special library (TGL is the only organisation of its kind in Australia). Over time, even if individual items in a collection are not unique, it becomes a 'unique' entity because no other collection with a similar focus exists.

Librarians are pioneers in the uptake of information technologies yet there are boundaries to be pushed and questions to be asked. How many small collections are invisible to us? How can we encourage smaller operators to contribute to nationally visible collections? Until these questions are answered, many special libraries will remain on the fringes.

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