



Governance Paper No 9.1 - Art Services - Policy – Parliament House Art Collection – Preservation Policy

Date:		Expiry:	
Approved:	Secretary	File No:	11/1539
Contact:	Assistant Secretary Parliamentary Experience Branch	Extn:	

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Introduction

1 The purpose of this policy is to ensure that the cultural assets in the Parliament House Art Collection are kept in an accessible condition over time commensurate with their cultural significance and financial value.

Background

2 The Australian Parliament House was designed and constructed with an intended life-span of at least 200 years. The Parliament House Art Collection (PHAC) is a public collection of significant heritage value, created specifically for Parliament House and containing over 6,000 art and craft works. The program was designed to function as an essential element of the building's architectural fabric. The architects wanted the building, and the art and craft work within it, to reflect the unique qualities of Australia – especially the environment, the climate, and the light. The art and craft works also reflect aspects of Australian culture, character and identity, and showcase the best of Australian contemporary art and craft practice.

3 Preservation of the PHAC is directly connected with the long-term preservation of heritage values at Parliament House. The collection is managed by the Department of Parliamentary Services (DPS).

4 As the PHAC is a working collection the management task is to minimise decay and maximise the life span and availability of the artworks in the PHAC for their intended purposes. The nature of the PHAC, and the building in which it is housed, present unique challenges in terms of the physical preservation of collection items. This policy recognises those challenges.

5 DPS and its antecedent organisations have developed policies for the proper registration, preservation and protection of the collection. This involves ensuring the integrity and security of the PHAC by exhibiting, storing and caring for objects according to accepted international museum standards while at Parliament House, and ensuring the proper exhibition, storage and maintenance conditions for those objects when off-site (e.g. on short or long-term loan).

Display environment

6 Access to the collection by Members and Senators is a central aim of the PHAC. This results in the PHAC being distributed amongst a large number of suites and general circulation areas in Parliament House, and in display environments that vary, particularly in terms of light levels.

7 Risk factors that impact on the collection are varied. The following represent examples of the day to day risks that face the collection:

- a. exposure of individual artworks to excessive light, heat, food, moisture and other environmental factors;
- b. physical damage to the building or individual art works as a result of deliberate malice;
- c. accidental damage through other activities being undertaken in the building – this can include actions by any of the over 3,000 individuals who work in the building daily or the additional 2,000 plus contractors or sessional employees who undertake a range of tasks in the building;
- d. insect infestation; and
- e. accidental damage to individual artworks while being handled and moved around the building.

Preventive conservation

8 DPS adopts a range of practical protective measures for objects in the collection. These aim to minimise deterioration and damage to works of art, therefore avoiding the need for invasive conservation treatment in the future. These measures include:

- a. museum-standard registration practices for all collection items;
- b. conservation framing using UV-protective glazing and archival quality materials;
- c. quality hanging fittings and fixtures on all works;
- d. appropriate packing, storage and transport arrangements for individual items;
- e. detailed annual stocktaking and movement recording procedures;
- f. ensuring appropriately qualified and trained individuals handle the PHAC;

- g. educating the building occupants regarding the cultural significance of the PHAC;
- h. educating building occupants with strategies for all building occupants to contribute to enhancing the day to day management of the PHAC (e.g. awareness of environmental hazards such as light and heat);
- i. implementing a regular maintenance program within the resources available;
- j. minimising the risk to works that are already showing signs of wear, to ensure that they are maintained for the long-term;
- k. isolation of works from building maintenance works as required;
- l. ensuring appropriate Statements of Requirements are developed for all tendering processes for conservation; and
- m. ensuring the art storage areas adopt international museum-standard practices for the storage of artworks.

9 DPS also recognises that preservation begins with the appropriate selection of artworks for acquisition. The acquisitions policy specifies that works must be in good condition, requiring no more than minor conservation. If there is a concern that a work will present significant conservation problems in the future then it will not be acquired. All works accessioned into the collection are assessed and their condition recorded.

Collection maintenance program

10 Preservation underpins the collection maintenance program, which is an ongoing and routine part of the operations of the Art Services Section. Collection maintenance strategies include:

- a. monitoring the condition of artworks on an ongoing basis, and particularly each time they are moved;
- b. protecting individual items identified as being at risk;
- c. treating individual items where damage is identified (minor repairs only – professional conservators are used where an object requires special attention);
- d. using archival packaging to protect artworks when being moved or stored;
- e. maintaining cleanliness in storage and work areas;
- f. using a systematic approach to clean artworks on display on a regular basis; and
- g. maintaining comprehensive records of condition and treatment information in relation to individual artworks.

Collection storage

11 Appropriate storage is essential for the long-term preservation of the PHAC. Onsite storage is available for all PHAC items. In 2011 this facility was upgraded to provide a high standard of storage that is consistent with international museum standards in terms of lighting, temperature and humidity controls, and protection from dust and other pollutants. Environmental conditions are monitored by Parliament House's building management system, with additional monitoring through data sensors in areas where art is stored.

12 Appropriate storage units are provided for a range of media such as paintings, works on paper, sculptures and craft works. Archival materials are used for the storage of works.

Pest management

13 Parliament House is subject to regular pest management controls to detect and eliminate pests. Works of art are checked for the presence of pests upon delivery to Parliament House and where necessary are quarantined from the collection until appropriate treatment is arranged.

Art handling and movement

14 In Parliament House artworks are moved by appropriately trained staff, using art handling equipment and materials to safely move and store the collection. PHAC artworks transported to or from other sites (e.g. loans, new acquisitions) are handled by specialist artwork removalists wherever possible. The packing and transport is intended to reduce the risk of damage through vibration, impact and abrasion, temperature and humidity extremes, pollutants and light.

Stocktake

15 The objective of the annual stocktake program is to ensure that locations are correctly recorded, and any discrepancies investigated, and that any objects in the care of the Art Services Section are appropriately recorded and accounted for. Each year a sample of 10% is taken and DPS Art Services has well-developed procedures to guide the stocktake program.

16 During the course of each stocktake, an initial assessment of the current condition status is made. This assessment is based on observable physical impairment or deterioration. Works requiring treatment are then prioritised according to the nature of the conservation required and other factors such as the significance and/or value of the object and the likelihood of early intervention preventing further damage.

Conservation of collection

17 DPS uses a risk management methodology to assess the relative risks and threats to the various items of the PHAC. Assessments are made by appropriately qualified professional Art Services staff with the assistance of outside conservation expertise as required. The methodology is used to determine the priority in which artworks are to be conserved. The methodology covers criteria such as:

- a. the inherent qualities of the object/artwork such as the extent to which an item is affected by ultraviolet light;
- b. the aggressiveness of the particular threat;
- c. theft;
- d. failure of building systems such as plumbing;
- e. the amount of time that the artwork has been on display;
- f. any physical damage that has occurred to works; and
- g. the extent to which works are required to be moved.

Digitisation of collection

18 The PHAC digitisation program has digitised almost the entire collection, with a high resolution digital record available for most works. This process is integral to the preservation of the collection by providing a visual record of the physical condition or artworks for future reference in the event of deterioration being observed or damage sustained. The digitisation program also reduces the need to access original collection items for research and viewing.

Emergency preparedness

19 The staff in DPS Art Services have over recent years participated in a number of initiatives to improve management of the PHAC. This includes participation in an ACT wide national cultural institutions agreement to come to mutual aid in the event of any one of the major institutions suffering a threat.

20 Staff participate in Disaster Recovery workshops and attend refresher training to keep their knowledge and skills in this area up to date. Disaster response bins are located in key locations where artworks are stored.

De-accessioning and Disposal

21 De-accessioning is generally regarded as good collection management practice, to ensure that collections remain relevant and in good condition. The Australian National Audit Office confirmed the importance of de-accessioning in the 2004-05 performance audit *Safe and Accessible National Collections*.

22 DPS has a separate policy that covers de-accessioning and disposal of objects from Parliament House Art Collection.