

1.1 Getting started

What garments should I put on the Australian Dress Register (ADR)?

We are looking for well provenanced men's, women's and children's dress from NSW, prior to 1945. Garments are chosen for their significance, which refers to the historic, aesthetic, technical and social values associated with a garment. There is no limit to the number of entries that can be provided by an organisation or private individual but it is recommended that only one entry is undertaken at a time. Generally when there is information on the provenance of a garment and a range of associated material (photographs, stories etc) it will ensure an interesting entry. Poor condition is not a reason to exclude a garment but it means it will need to be photographed on a sloped backboard rather than on a mannequin. As it is a visual website, the quality of the photographs is important. The register is a wonderful way of providing access to a garment which may be rarely seen by the public due to its fragility, the remoteness of a museum or because it is held in a private collection.

Where to start — create an object file

In order to help you decide which garment/s to put on the Australian Dress Register, it is recommended that you create an object file (*pictured right*). This is where you collate as much information as you can about the garment. During the process of creating an object file, your research will give you a better understanding of the importance of a garment and its significance to your collection. Copy relevant information on the person or family; the place where they lived or worked; their contribution to the community; or associations with particular places and events. Also explore holdings of historic photographs and records of births, marriages and deaths if relevant. Talk to former volunteers or office bearers who may remember when the object was donated or if it underwent restoration. Track down family members or former donors for more information.

What is an object file?

An object file is simply a folder containing all the relevant information about an object stored in a standardised format. This information might otherwise be scattered in various files, computer



databases, records and archives. It is a reference point for anything to do with the object, and contains all the organisation's knowledge about the item, its provenance, history, significance and life cycle since it came into the collection. Object files are the starting point for significance assessment, possible conservation treatment and interpretation for display. Generally each object has its own object file, but a similar group of items may share a single file, or a group of related items from the one donor.

How are object files used?

- To catalogue objects and develop statements of significance.
- To document the history and memories around an item, passing on the story of the item to the next generation of custodians.
- To assist conservators in conservation planning and treatment.
- To develop object labels for interpretation or exhibitions.
- For all aspects of management of the item and collection, including storage, security, valuations etc.

What goes in an object file?

Anything relevant to understanding the garment, its history, significance and what has happened to it in the museum. Object files may include:

1. Documents

- Donor details: name, address, phone number.
- Acquisition information: date acquired, bill of sale, purchase receipts, invoices, object number.

2. Agreements

- Gift agreements: also called 'deed of gift'. This notes the transfer of ownership to the museum, with corresponding letters of acknowledgement and a thankyou letter.
- Copyright licences: decide at time of acquisition if the museum has exclusive or non-exclusive use of copyright and put it in writing.
- Loan agreements: either for incoming or outgoing loans, made between museums or from individuals to museums.

3. Cataloguing information

- A catalogue sheet, detailing the physical description of a garment.
- Photos of the garment, the maker and owner.
- Notes or information from the donor, preferably written by the donor.
- Notes from conversations with people who know about the garment and remember seeing it or similar items in use.
- Family information/family trees.
- Any correspondence relating to the garment.
- Digital images, audio and videotapes of people talking about the garment.
- A statement of significance and all the references and research that help to form the statement of significance. Provenance and production information feed into an understanding of why a garment is significant. See '16.1 Unravelling significance' and 'Other websites' (*Significance 2.0*) information sheets on the resources page of the ADR website.

4. Production information

- Information and photos about the maker or manufacturer and the place it was made.
- Information about the design and the process of making the garment.
- Information about the industry and how it was made or used.
- Copies of historic photos, paintings or drawings showing similar garments in use.
- Information and photos about similar garments in other collections, museums, similar organisations or in private ownership. CAN (Collections Australia Network) is a useful source of information.

5. Condition

- A condition report — this records the condition of a garment when it enters the museum and also when the garment is put on and taken off display, when a garment is loaned and received back. Taking clear photos of the garment from all angles shows the condition effectively.
- For any conservation work, including before and after photos, notes about the fabric removed or

replaced, the conservation process and materials used, the date the work was done and by whom. Save samples of what has been removed or replaced, and samples of the new material added to the object. NB: always assess significance before any conservation work to the garment. The statement of significance helps to guide treatment decisions.

- Items that come with the garment that could cause damage, such as rusty safety pins, paperclips or acidic tags, should be removed, stored in a plastic bag, labelled and put in the object file.
- Information about the exhibition history of the garment: exhibition venue and duration, environmental conditions, travelling displays, a copy of label text, and a photo of the garment on display.
- Loans — write a new condition report for incoming and outgoing loans. Using photographs is a very good idea in case of damage.

6. References

- Copies of all kinds of historical and contemporary references from books, retail trade catalogues, newspapers, letters, local histories, oral histories etc.
- If the garment has been published or referred to in a newspaper or magazine article, include a copy for reference.

Storing object files

Object files should be kept in a fireproof cabinet in a secure designated place. The object file should not leave the museum or organisation. If working on object research at home, always make a duplicate file. Keep both files by transferring information as it is developed. Mark the duplicate file so it isn't confused with the museum's original records.

It is advisable to hold the files in acid-free folders with a label, accession number and photo marked clearly on the cover. Documents created by the museum should be on acid-free paper with museum letterhead. It is good to make a duplicate copy of all original documents for the file. When examining an object, it is safer to take notes using a pencil, then transfer the notes in pen or on the computer before adding to the file. If you have acidic items in your file such as photos, original papers or newspapers, if possible store them separately in mylar envelopes or plastic sleeves.

An object file is always a work in progress, information is added whenever anything comes to light, or when the object is conserved or displayed. Keep adding notes to the object file as information comes to hand.