

MCPP the year in review: *virtual projects—real successes*

In its 15 years of existence the Museums and Collections Projects Program has never experienced a year like 2020 – unsurprising given all facets of the University’s operations entered completely uncharted territories, as much of the world did when the reality of the COVID pandemic took effect. Widespread restrictions accessing the campus meant that for the first time we were operating a museums and collections focused Program without access to the collections! Irrespective of lockdowns, students still needed to secure internships and develop their vocational skills in preparation for graduation and future employment. Further, the University wanted to keep providing its students with a rich study experience and connectedness to the campus. How then could we continue to offer the project experience in a way which did not compromise the benefits the Program offered, if accessing the physical collections and campus could not be part of the process? These meaningful collaborations, normally realised through varied collection management, curatorial and preventative conservation projects were suddenly disrupted. So, what happens when accessing the physical space of the collections is no longer possible? The Program adapts! After the initial transition, and with collections staff themselves adjusting to the move off campus, thoughts were directed to which student projects would be possible in this virtual space. After extensive consultation with collections staff, existing projects (initially meant to be worked on campus and ready to go just prior to lockdown), were reviewed, adapted, redesigned and excitingly, new projects were developed that could work in the virtual campus space.

It is remarkable to see what is possible, and this year’s projects, while less in number (not all projects could be adapted and so were put on hold), were important for what they achieved. They were successful in continuing to offer students and volunteers professional development opportunities and encouraged networking. The projects were especially significant for participants, for they enabled a connectedness to others and the campus, at a time defined by isolation. This connection was likewise felt by their mentors – who were also operating remotely. Projects provided a shape to the day, a meeting to attend, collections to discuss and discover and a marker in the week. Interestingly, this new working environment encouraged more accessibility



IMAC Award recipient Ruby Kerrison on location at the Barber Institute of Fine Arts, University of Birmingham.

around the projects offered, and consequently a student based in South America could partake in a project with a team based in Melbourne! While we do not wish for a repeat of the circumstances that necessitated this accessibility, the success of enabling projects in the virtual space and the positive outcomes they generated is something that the MCPP will continue to explore. As the UoM advances a dual campus model, project possibilities now exist that are not limited to the physical space.

And now the projects....

This pandemic has shown that for museums and collections worldwide there are many creative and meaningful ways to enable engagement with collections in the virtual space, and MCPP projects have certainly demonstrated this. While the interaction with an object up close is something that is difficult to replicate, and consequently many of the ‘hands on’ preventative conservation and cataloguing projects were impacted by the restrictions accessing the collections, other project areas have grown and thrived. Project opportunities for Program participants were developed in new dynamic spaces which may not have occurred had this been a ‘normal’ year. These projects, while missing the physical object, nonetheless enabled students to increase their professional skills set, make discoveries in new areas, create content for audience engagement, and interrogate questions central to museums in this global landscape. This year students and volunteers boldly navigated these new spaces. Following is an introduction to the Program participants and their projects:

At the **Old Quad**, Art History student **Gabrielle Bergman** was assigned a research project which focused on three areas – the creation of a digital timeline on the history and achievements of women at the University, a social history of the Old Quad and an exploration of the Princess Ida Club. The content created was uploaded to the Old Quad website and showcased insights into UoM’s history while providing Gabrielle the opportunity to hone and develop her research skills.

At the **Baillieu Library Print Collection**, Master of Arts student **Adelaide Greig**, recent Art History graduate **Bianca Hull** and Masters in Creative Writing, Editing and Publishing student **Ana Jacobsen** engaged with the collections and shared their fascinating findings through the [Archives and Special Collections blog](#). Their posts highlighted the outstanding collections to a wider audience. Topics covered included methods of intaglio printing and apocryphal pictures, through to conversations with contemporary artists, an exploration of the Middle Eastern manuscript collection, and a ballet themed gift to the Rare Music Collection. While the bloggers may have faced restrictions in physically accessing the materials due to the pandemic, the blog by contrast was not constrained by boundaries.



MA Art Curatorship student Karl Sagrabb researching and writing for his Ian Potter Museum of Art project.

At the **Medical History Museum**, **Ruby Kerrison** studying Indigenous Studies and Gender Studies, was assigned an exhibition research assistant role and explored and identified items in the collection to be included in an upcoming exhibition on the Royal Children's Hospital 150th anniversary. Under guidance, Ruby utilised online resources to identify potential items, images and archival documents to include in the exhibition.

Two students completed internship placements at **Science Gallery**, with **Hilary Kwan** BA (Anthropology and History) and **Lingyu Yang** MA Art Curatorship, both having the opportunity to be part of the exciting 'Mental' exhibition which will open the Gallery in its permanent new Melbourne home next year. They researched opening exhibits, created artwork overview documents (which looked at art works from an audience experience angle), compiled artist information, artwork descriptions, considered potential collaborators, drafted text labels and explored questions around accessibility of artworks. The internship experience gave them firsthand insight into curatorial practices, and both Hilary and Jingyu have enjoyed the project tasks and excellent support they have received from mentors. While developing their professional skills base, both appreciated staying connected to the campus by the great communication channels facilitated through weekly meetings, emails, working on google drive and messaging through Teams.

At the **Harry Brookes Allen Museum of Anatomy and Pathology** several interesting projects have taken place. Under the curator's guidance, students **Jessie French**, Grad Cert. in Arts (History and Philosophy of Science), UoM and

Mariana Perez Bobadilla, PhD Creative Media, City University of Hong Kong and based in Mexico, worked together on a fascinating research project that explored the use of new technologies in making the museum's collections more accessible – particularly relevant in the current virtual environment! Even the considerable difference in times zones did not hinder the great progress the team made. They explored potential applications for geolocation beacons to be utilised within the physical museum space to provide visitors with a richer experience eg. content from diverse practitioners including historians and anatomists. They also investigated various applications for VR, including how to use it in a COVID safe way, and explored rich-media applications for storytelling and engaging ways to present the collection online to increase its audience to global networks. A related, but separate research project at the Museum has seen MA Art Curatorship students **Elizabeth Mitchell** and **Emma May Walsh** examine issues around Disability Access in relation to online museum collections and exhibition accessibility. They considered ways exhibitions can be improved and how they can be better utilised in the virtual space.

Also at the **Harry Brookes Allen Museum**, MA Art Curatorship student **Emma Walsh** and MA Global Media Communications student **Jiayue Lin** have been involved with a collection management project with the Comparative Anatomy Collection. Working in consultation with the collection manager, Emma and Jiayue have learnt much about the collection and its management by updating and adding to its catalogue documentation. While there were some limitations in fulfilling all aspects of this project remotely, Emma and Jiayue have added much to the existing catalogue, refined content, ensured a consistency of approach and actioned improvements in the layout of the information, all important learning opportunities. Emma commented the biggest challenges in working remotely on the catalogue has been not being able to access the collection to double check vague entries or verify strange pieces of information as ordinarily this would be done relatively easily with the specimen right in front of you for checking!

At the **Rare Music Collection**, **Caroline Colbran**, MA Arts and Cultural Management, UoM recently commenced a Research Assistant project focusing on the Melbourne Conservatorium musicians. Using images from the collection as a starting point, Caroline has been able to explore previously unresearched performing musicians who trained at the Melbourne Conservatorium of Music (MCM) and her discoveries will be featured in the [Archives and Special Collections blog](#).

Mel Simpson, Graduate Diploma of Urban Horticulture, UoM has commenced a research project at the **Herbarium** that is an ideal fit to her area of study interest. For the project, she has researched the historical contributions of H.B. Williamson, an amateur botanist and Honorary Keeper of the Herbarium at the University of Melbourne (1929-1931), in describing the Victorian flora. Working in consultation with the Herbarium's curator and using various archives, Mel utilised the historical documents to investigate the contribution Williamson made to the discovery of Victorian plant biodiversity. It is anticipated that these discoveries will be curated to provide display materials for online exploration and future Herbarium tours.

Philippa Saunders Post-Doctoral Researcher, Dept. Microbiology and Immunology, UoM has been involved in a curatorial project with the **School of Chemistry Collection**. The exhibition's theme 'Chemistry in Colour' aims to transform the history of chemistry from 'sepia into bright hues, to demonstrate the integral role that colour has played in chemistry and continues to play today'. While the restrictions around accessing the campus have meant plans for the exhibition have temporarily been placed on hold, it is anticipated that the themed display will be installed in the cases on the ground floor of the Chemistry Building once campus access is again possible.



Recent Arts graduate and Special Collections blogger, Bianca Hull.

ASC Digital Presence project. The project aligned with Carmen's area of study, and completing the internship enabled her to gain excellent practical experience and skills in her discipline area. Through the project and under guidance, Carmen assisted in the development of a new and integrated digital presence for Archives and Special Collections across their websites and social media platforms.

International Museums and Collections Award

The [IMAC Award](#) is a unique exchange opportunity between the University of Melbourne and University of Birmingham. Recipients travel to the partner university and benefit from a one-month placement working with their collections and museums. Under the guidance of conservators, curators, collections managers and academics, the student embarks on a specially tailored program which enables them to experience and develop their skills in different fields of collections work, discover new areas of interest and expand their professional networks within an international landscape. This year, due to the impact of the pandemic on travel the IMAC Award was not able to be offered. We are taking this opportunity to review the Award and when international travel and exchanges of this type are again possible will continue to build on the unique experience the Award opportunity represents. Fortunately, in January, Ruby Kerrison a Bachelor of Arts student (Indigenous Studies and Gender Studies) as the 2019 Melbourne IMAC Award recipient was able to safely travel to Birmingham as planned and undertake her placement. Ruby had a wonderful experience, and in the excerpt below shares highlights from her placement.

Reflections on a month long placement at the University of Birmingham

I applied for the IMAC Award because as an undergraduate student with an interest in museums work I felt like I didn't have hands-on experience within the sector. The IMAC Award felt like an opportunity to experience the world of museums and collections before committing myself to a post-graduate course. My weeks were spread out between each of the sites, meaning I was doing something different every day.

Research and Cultural Collections was my main 'hub' throughout the experience. During the first week at RCC I was scheduled to attend workshops with the UoB cultural interns. These workshops included discussing upcoming commissioned projects at the Shakespeare Heritage Trust and developing exhibition proposals at Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery. I am grateful I was able to sit in these sessions with the UoB interns. They were career specific and incredibly useful at demonstrating work within museums and collections. It was the first time I have ever been able to connect with a group of like-minded peers my age who were interested in museums and collections work. My main project, [was] developing a piece of writing on the temporary John Walker exhibition. I loved being able to work intensely and collaboratively in creating a piece of work for the RCC.

Most of my time at the Barber Institute was with the Learning & Engagement Team. With the school groups I was able to tag-along to tours of the museum for children and assist in art workshops. I enjoyed witnessing how the traditional art collection was made accessible for young children in ways I hadn't encountered before. Likewise, in the workshops there was a clear linkage between the museum's collection and the work that was produced by the children. My main project was developing a handout document and presenting a talk on a 13th century German arm reliquary. The reliquary is the only object in the collection that contain human remains. My task was to address this by providing information on the ethics of human remains in museum collections in the UK. It was a great opportunity to learn from each of the team members about their perspectives and how this conversation relates to their work from curation, education and marketing. Having this discussion was invaluable and has given me the space to consider these issues from multiple perspectives.

At the [Ian Potter Museum of Art, Karl Sagrabb](#), MA Art Curatorship UoM, has been engaged as a research assistant. Through his project Karl developed his research and written publication skills while exploring the outstanding art collections at the Potter. Karl's project experience enabled him to apply these skills across several assignments that have covered areas from historical research for public engagement through to copyright. There have been some challenges in undertaking this project and Karl found researching without being able to physically access the artworks or archives due to the restrictions a hurdle. However, the limitations encouraged creative thinking and innovative approaches to gathering information which were excellent skills to cultivate. The experience of developing new content, in formats that were accessible to the wider public, was an aspect of the project that Karl found especially rewarding, and the application of these skills perfectly complemented his Masters study program.

Within [Archives and Special Collections, Carmen Mok](#), MA Marketing and Communications, UoM completed an internship and was involved with the



Ruby Kerrison at the Barber Institute on the UoB campus.

Reflections on a month at the University of Birmingham continued...



University of Birmingham campus.

reproduced for the museum's promotional material. I had no prior experience or interest in natural history museums, but I really appreciated having the opportunity to work with the Lapworth. The assigned project demonstrated the creative cross-disciplinary possibilities in museums work. The Lapworth's engagement with the creative arts is a focal point of their public programming and it was exciting to learn about this aspect of the museum.

The biggest takeaways from the experience was a practical understanding of the various roles within museums and collections work. By gaining a wide variety of experiences across a diverse set of museums and collections I have been able to locate new interests and hone in on pre-existing ones. I look forward to taking the various knowledge and perspectives I have gained and applying it to my future work in museums. The IMAC Award allowed me to finetune my specific interests (research and curation) within the field and understand how this role looks in an everyday professional context. I am so grateful to experience multiple environments at Birmingham, altogether they gave me invaluable insight into what a career in the museums and collections sector looks like. I have come back inspired and confident to engage with the museums and collections world in Melbourne and the UK.

Ruby Kerrison, April 2020

For more details see <https://imacaward2020.tumblr.com/>

At the Cadbury Research Library, I was assigned the task of [conservation] cleaning maps from the collection. The conservator was helpful in explaining her work and what processes she undertakes, not just relating to the map cleaning project. Prior to cleaning the maps, she gave me some handling training that was useful throughout the placement and has developed my confidence to work with objects in a safe manner. As someone with no prior knowledge or experience with conservation it was an experience that expanded my horizons as well as responding to my interests. I mentioned my interest in some of the UoB collections at the research library and she set up meetings with archivists. I really appreciated her responding to my interests by creating these opportunities to engage with the collections on a deeper level through the perspectives of both archival and conservation work.

At the Lapworth Museum of Geology I had the opportunity to talk to the director, about his work and career path. His assigned project for me was to select visually interesting objects from the archive to be



Ruby Kerrison carrying out a basic conservation clean of a rare map in the Cadbury Research Library, UoB.

Year's end

As the year draws to a close it is timely to reflect on all that has been achieved during this extraordinary time. For the Program participants and the collections staff who have supported their projects it has been a unique experience with much accomplished and learnt. While there continued to be excellent results for students in professional skills development and project work achieved, of note and equally impressive, were the less tangible outcomes - especially the sense of connectedness and purpose that project engagement generated. Perhaps it is in these more abstract areas that the students (and collections staff) found the most significant and lasting impact was made. This year has shown an enriched University experience can be successfully realised in both the virtual and physical campus spaces.

Thank you to all who have been involved with the collections and projects this year. Best wishes for the festive season and year ahead.

Helen Arnoldi
Museums and Collections Projects Coordinator
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