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Collection-Based Research in Museums
Understanding, Structure, Visibility

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Masters in Arts
in
Museum Studies
at Massey University, Palmerston North, New Zealand.

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Abstract

This thesis questions whether collection-based research in museums is misconceived and if so, in what ways can it be improved to benefit practitioners. It argues that concern about collection-based research in the literature is unjustified. Current definitions of research are overly broad or focus on academic outputs that do not reflect current museum practice. Public research undertaken in medium-sized museums cannot be judged using ill-fitting academic frameworks. Instead, this thesis develops a research framework that is museum specific.

This thesis carries out an in-depth case study of The Nelson Provincial Museum and The Suter Art Gallery. It interviews staff to gather data showing that practitioners in the two institutions undertake wide-ranging and diverse collection-based research. The interviews also observe that collection-based research has varying levels of visibility, fragmented structure and is not always well understood. This thesis uses both the strengths and realities of current practice to create models and suggest methods to improve visibility, structure and understanding of collection-based research for the benefit of practitioners.

The strengths and realities of current practice are combined with a theoretical grounding in object research, provided by material culture and museum studies, to create a definition and a set of research principles and processes. The definition, principles and processes are tested by application to two object case studies – a watercolour by John Gully and a sample of dunite rock. Research into these objects covers both the object file and exhibition development. The results are broad and informative and show how, with greater understanding, structure and visibility, research can benefit practitioners through increased usefulness, accessibility and accountability.
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List of Figures

Figure 1: Myself, working at The Suter Art Gallery. Image courtesy of The Suter Art Gallery, Te Aratoi o Whakatū, 2011.................................................................9

Figure 2: The Nelson Provincial Museum, Trafalgar Street, Nelson. Image courtesy of The Nelson Provincial Museum, 2006. ..........................................................12

Figure 3: Permanent exhibition at The Nelson Provincial Museum. Image courtesy of The Nelson Provincial Museum, 2006. ..........................................................12

Figure 4: The Suter Art Gallery, Te Aratoi o Whakatū. Image courtesy of The Suter Art Gallery, Te Aratoi o Whakatū, 2008.................................................................14

Figure 5: Works on Display at The Suter Art Gallery. Image courtesy of The Suter Art Gallery, Te Aratoi o Whakatū, 2007.................................................................14

Figure 6: John GULLY (England / Nelson, b.1819, d.1888). Riwaka 1888. Watercolour on paper, 322 x 486mm. The Bishop Suter Art Gallery Founding Donation, gifted by Mrs Amelia Suter in memory of her husband Bishop Andrew Burn Suter in 1895, accession number 6. .................................................................19

Figure 7: Dunite Sample. Nelson Provincial Museum collection: G.12.78-3. .......... 19

Figure 8: The Suter Art Gallery. Image courtesy of The Suter Art Gallery Te Aratoi o Whakatū, 2011. .................................................................................................38

Figure 9: The Nelson Provincial Museum Research Facility, Isel Park. Image courtesy of The Nelson Provincial Museum, 2009. ..........................................................38

Figure 10: Cedric Savage: The Golden (Bay) Years, 2011 exhibition at The Suter. Image courtesy of The Suter Art Gallery, Te Aratoi o Whakatū, 2011.........................40

Figure 11: Photos of early immigrants in Haven Ahoy! 2010 - 2011. Image courtesy of The Nelson Provincial Museum, 2010. ...............................................................44

Figure 12: Tight, cramped bunk spaces are shown in Haven Ahoy! 2010 - 2012. Image courtesy of The Nelson Provincial Museum, 2010...........................................44

Figure 13: Curator Anna-Marie White works in the storeroom at The Suter Art Gallery. Image courtesy of The Suter Art Gallery, Te Aratoi o Whakatū, 2008 ..............47

Figure 14: Storeroom at The Nelson Provincial Museum Research Facility, Isel Park. Image courtesy of The Nelson Provincial Museum, 2010. .......................................50
Figure 15: Collection-Based Research Continuum. .............................................................. 55

Figure 16: Registrar Daniel Campbell-MacDonald conducts research at The Nelson Provincial Museum. Image courtesy of The Nelson Provincial Museum, 2009. ................. 63

Figure 17: Curator Anna-Marie White working in The Suter storeroom. Image courtesy of The Suter Art Gallery, Te Aratoi o Whakatū, 2008. ...................................................... 63

Figure 18: Curator Errol Shaw gives a public talk about the Woollaston 101 exhibition 2008. Image courtesy of the Suter Art Gallery, Te Aratoi o Whakatū, 2008. ............... 66

Figure 19: John GULLY (England / Nelson, b.1819, d.1888). Riwaka 1888. Watercolour on paper, 322 x 486mm. The Bishop Suter Art Gallery Founding Donation, gifted by Mrs Amelia Suter in memory of her husband Bishop Andrew Burn Suter in 1895, accession number 6. ................................................................................................... 99

Figure 20: John Gully. Nelson Provincial Museum, Tyree Studio Collection: 31359. ... 100

Figure 21: Mary TRIPE (New Zealand, b.1870, d.1939). Portrait of Bishop Suter 1902. Oil on canvas, 1280 x 1200mm. Collection of The Suter Art Gallery, Te Aratoi o Whakatū. Purchased in 1902 by public subscription, accession number 75. ................. 102

Figure 22: John GULLY (England / Nelson, b.1819, d.1888). Western Coast of Tasman Bay 1885. Watercolour on paper, 750 x 1320mm. Purchased by public subscription in 1885 as the first painting of a public art collection in Nelson, accession number 66. . 102

Figure 23: John Gully as a young man. Nelson Provincial Museum, Fletcher Collection: 2689. ......................................................................................................................... 106

Figure 24: John GULLY (England / Nelson, b.1819, d.1888). Sources of Godley River, Glassen and Godley Glaciers, 3550 feet 1862. Watercolour on paper, 265 x 574mm. Collection of Alexander Turnbull Library. Reference number C-096-004................. 107

Figure 25: John GULLY (England / Nelson, b.1819, d.1888). Before the Storm - Riwaka 1888. Watercolour on paper, 298 x 515mm. Collection of The Suter Art Gallery, Te Aratoi o Whakatū. The Bishop Suter Art Gallery Founding Donation, gifted by Mrs Amelia Suter in memory of her husband Bishop Andrew Burn Suter in 1895, accession number 11. ............................................................................................................... 109

Figure 26: John GULLY (England / Nelson, b.1819, d.1888). Rimu Trees - Riwaka. Watercolour on paper, 438 x 308mm. Collection of The Suter Art Gallery, Te Aratoi o Whakatū. The Bishop Suter Art Gallery Founding Donation, gifted by Mrs Amelia Suter in memory of her husband Bishop Andrew Burn Suter in 1895, accession number 3. 109

Figure 27: Mrs Amelia Suter sits while Bishop Suter stands with a flower and magnifying glass, conducting a botany class. Bishopdale Botany Group. Nelson Provincial Museum, Tyree Studio Collection: 179294. ................................................................. 111
Figure 28: Site ReScene, 2011. Image courtesy of The Suter Art Gallery Te Aratoi o Whakatū, 2011. ................................................................. 113

Figure 29: A family looks at the unframed, milar-encapsulated paintings in Site ReScene, 2011. Image courtesy of The Suter Art Gallery, Te Aratoi o Whakatū, 2011. ................................................................. 114

Figure 30: John Gully's three paintings of Riwaka surrounding Tim Wraight's Sticks to aid an artist in climbing to a good vantage point 2011, in Site ReScene, 2011. Image courtesy of The Suter Art Gallery, Te Aratoi o Whakatū, 2011. ................................................................. 115

Figure 31: Site ReScene, 2011. Image courtesy of The Suter Art Gallery, Te Aratoi o Whakatū, 2011. ................................................................. 118

Figure 32: Dunite. Nelson Provincial Museum Collection: G.12.78-1. ................................................................. 121

Figure 33: Aerial view of Dun Mountain. Lloyd Homer, GNS Science. ................................................................. 122

Figure 34: Red Mountain, Mount Aspiring National Park, Southland. Lloyd Homer, GNS Science................................................................. 125


Figure 36: The sparse slopes of Dun Mountain. Lloyd Homer, GNS Science. ................................................................. 127

Figure 37: Microscopic image of olivine in dunite. GNS Science. http://pet.gns.cri.nz/PET_detail.jsp?ID=5681................................................................. 128

Figure 38: Ferdinand von Hochstetter. Nelson Provincial Museum, Copy Collection: C849. ................................................................. 129

Figure 39: Hochstetter and Haast’s geological map of the Province of Nelson. Published in F. Hochstetter and J. Haast’s Geological and topological atlas of New Zealand. Auckland: Delattre, 1864. Map 6. Sir George Grey Special Collections, Auckland Libraries. NZ Map 5694e. ................................................................. 130

Figure 40: Opening of the Dun Mountain railway line in the Brook Valley, Nelson. Nelson Provincial Museum, Copy Collection: C2640................................................................. 132

Figure 41: Dun Mountain railway line. Nelson Provincial Museum, Copy Collection: C2638. ................................................................. 132

Figure 42: John GULLY (England / Nelson, b.1819, d.1888). Dun Mountain House. Watercolour, 220 x 330mm. Collection of The Suter Art Gallery, Te Aratoi o Whakatū. Presented by Mrs Laurenson in 1958, accession number 301. ................................................................. 137
Figure 43: John GULLY (England / Nelson, b.1819, d.1888). *Dun Mountain Line*. Pencil on paper, 182 x 149mm. Collection of The Suter Art Gallery, Te Aratoi o Whakatū. Gifted by Diana Roper in 2007, accession number 1037. ........................................... 137

Figure 44: Food Safety section of *Extraordinary Frontiers; Cawthron Science, Innovation and Mysteries from our Environment*, 2011-2012. Image courtesy of Nelson Provincial Museum, 2011. ......................................................................................................... 139

Figure 45: People and Environment section of *Extraordinary Frontiers; Cawthron Science, Innovation and Mysteries from our Environment*, 2011-2012. Image courtesy of Nelson Provincial Museum, 2011. ......................................................................... 139

Figure 46: Dunite with other rock samples on display in the education storage box. *Extraordinary Frontiers; Cawthron Science, Innovation and Mysteries from our Environment*, 2011-2012. Image courtesy of Nelson Provincial Museum, 2011. ........ 140

Figure 47: Historic Cawthron section of *Extraordinary Frontiers; Cawthron Science, Innovation and Mysteries from our Environment*, 2011-2012. Image courtesy of Nelson Provincial Museum, 2011. ......................................................................................... 140

Figure 48: Anna-Marie White works in The Suter Art Gallery storeroom. Image courtesy of The Suter Art Gallery, Te Aratoi o Whakatū, 2008. ................................................ 150

Figure 49: *Riwaka* in *Site ReScene* 2011. Image courtesy of The Suter Art Gallery, Te Aratoi o Whakatū, 2011. ........................................................................................... 157

Figure 50: Colonial era dresses from *Unpicking the Past*, 2008. Image courtesy of Nelson Provincial Museum, 2008. ............................................................................. 165

Figure 51: Items from The Nelson Provincial Museum dress collection on display in *Unpicking the Past*, 2008. Image courtesy of Nelson Provincial Museum, 2008. ........ 165

Figure 52: Three key elements of collection-based research. ................................. 166

Figure 53: A definition is the keystone of collection-based research. ....................... 167

Figure 54: Six essential elements of effective collection-based research framework. 168
# Abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Name</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>JC</td>
<td>Julie Catchpole</td>
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<td>PHB</td>
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<td>SP</td>
<td>Sally Papps</td>
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<tr>
<td>AMW</td>
<td>Anna-Marie White</td>
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