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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

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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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# Abbreviations

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**JC**

Julie Catchpole

**PHB**

Paula Haines-Bellamy

**PM**

Peter Millward

**SP**

Sally Papps

**AMW**

Anna-Marie White



# Introduction

## Collection-Based Research in Museums

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### **Introduction**

Museums have many faces. As public institutions designed to interpret our past, entertain, enlighten and educate us in the present and safeguard our material culture for the future, museums have many competing priorities. Some are more obvious than others. The International Council of Museums (ICOM) defines a museum as an organisation:

...in the service of society and its development... which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment... (ICOM 2007).

This definition showcases the multi-faceted nature of public museums.<sup>1</sup> Museums Aotearoa uses the ICOM definition of museums in its code of ethics (Museums Aotearoa 2003, p.3).

The New Zealand code of ethics is divided into three sections which detail responsibilities held by museums, their governing bodies and their staff. The first section describes a museum's responsibility to its public and collections. Interestingly, research is not included in these over-arching responsibilities (Museums Aotearoa 2003, p.4). According to the code of ethics, research is a responsibility staff members have to the collections they work with. They are expected to 'study' them to the best of their ability and available resources (Museums Aotearoa 2003, p.8).

Yet, museum public purpose directives and responsibilities effect how research is approached. Method, interpretation and intellectual history take a back seat to the agendas, research priorities and funding capacities of those commissioning the work (Dalley 2005). At the same time, historian Randolph Starn (2005, p.68) claims "it is no stretch ... to suppose that museums actually deliver more history, more effectively, more of the time to more people than historians do." History, as presented by museums, enters and helps shape the public consciousness. Surveys consistently show that the public have great deal of trust in museums and this brings "a responsibility to accuracy, authenticity, and professionalism" (Alexander 2008, p.318). This means that research should not be judged against academic or commercial criteria. Museum collection-based research is unique to museums.

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<sup>1</sup> Museums Aotearoa adopted a slightly earlier version of this definition and incorporated it into its code of ethics (Museums Aotearoa 2003, p.3). The older ICOM definition adopted by Museums Aotearoa is slightly different. The words "material evidence" were originally used instead of "tangible and intangible heritage".

However, “in the main, museum professionals are actively engaged in their day-to-day work and only a few take time to reflect and to report on their experiences to stimulate debate and raise the quality of museums practices” (Alexander 2008, p.317). Very little research about the extent and usefulness of collection-based research in museums has taken place (Anderson 2005). There is a commonly held assumption that, in the list of priorities demanding the attention and resources of museums, collection-based research has systematically slipped down the rungs and in many cases fallen completely out of sight (Graham and Jomphe 2010; Brandon and Wilson 2005; Graham 2005). This has been attributed to changes in museums related to visitor-centric shifts and the new museology. In 1995, Elaine Heumann Gurian wrote that:

...in twenty-five years, museums will no longer be recognizable as they are now known. Many will have incorporated attributes associated with organizations that are now quite distinct from museums ... the process has been and will continue to seem gradual and inevitable ... the emerging hybrids will be embraced by the museum community ... there is the opportunity for the changed museum to make a more relevant contribution to our society (p.31).

The role of collection-based research within these changed museums is currently unclear. Just how much resource priorities of the new museum overshadow collection-based research is demonstrated in David Dean’s (1994) book about exhibition development, from concept design to final evaluation. Research is not evident in any step of this process. It is even more telling that objects and concepts are placed at polar opposites. Dean’s exhibition guide concentrates on displaying either objects to look at or concepts to learn from and museum-based scholarship is not even considered. Possibly he felt that research is self-evident. Collection-based research may still play a role, but that the role is often not visible.

## Where has research gone?

Fears in museums that collection-based research is being overshadowed have led to a small number of studies and conferences. Several attempts to stimulate discussion occurred in the 1990s, but these failed to develop into any significant literature (Brandon and Wilson 2005, pp.349-350). The most noteworthy work from this period is the United Kingdom Museum and Galleries Commission report, *Lifting the Veil* (Gunn and Prescott 1999), which recognises research as a key function of museums and undertakes a broad assessment of the state of museum research in the United Kingdom. Since then, the most comprehensive published material resulted from the 2003 Canadian Museum Association Research Summit in Ottawa (Brandon and Wilson 2005; Graham 2005).

The issue remains bubbling below the surface and occasionally resurfaces. In 2006, *Museum Practice* published an issue on collection-based research (Gascoigne 2006a; Gascoigne 2006b). None of these publications profess to understand the root causes of the fear that research has disappeared. However, they do enumerate the invisibility of both collection-based research and the issues surrounding it, and the need for more research about research.

New Zealand museums are in a similar position to the rest of the world, however even less has been published. In 2006, the Auditor General's Office published a report on collection management in New Zealand. Part of this report discusses causes of cataloguing backlogs and why they are difficult for museums to overcome. The report also identifies research as the most commonly missing information from object files.

## Museums and Objects

Object research in museums draws together threads from museum studies, material culture studies and social history. Museum studies has considered ways of applying material culture studies methodologies to research objects (Wehner and Sear 2010; Jones 2008; Hicks 2001; Elliot et al. 1994; Prown 1982). However, these approaches focus on material culture studies aims and no one methodology has become standard practice. Furthermore, widespread use of these methodologies within museums is not evident and very little discussion appears in the literature.

This study builds on the existing tradition by combining material culture studies methodologies with museum priorities. This is particularly important as commentary is increasingly common on the reduction of curators and their traditional roles (Villa Bryk 2001; Murdoch 1992; Ross 1990), the reduction of objects in display galleries (Conn 2010; Starn 2005) and the reduction of scholarly literature being produced by museums (Gascoigne 2006a).

Museum and material culture studies have always had a close relationship. Studying objects from the museum is an integral part of the science of early anthropology. The term material culture dates from this period. However, developments within the discipline of anthropology involved a shift from the attempt to justify itself as an empirical science, to a humanities-based discipline empirically studying culture, rather than things. Close scrutiny of objects in museums became less fashionable. Museums continued as storehouses of things and anthropology concentrated on academia (Hicks and Beaudry 2010; Tilley et al. 2006).

In more recent years, two major shifts have given new life to this history. Firstly, throughout the 1980s, *la nouvelle museologie* developed in France, followed by the

Anglo-American new museology (Desvallées and Mairesse 2010, p.55; Vergo 1989). Together they set in motion a wave of literature that reconceptualised the museum and continues to do so (Anderson 2004; Weil 2002; Hooper-Greenhill 2000). Although the new literature has a tendency to focus on what Stephen Weil (1999) described as the shift from “being about something to being for somebody”, and observes how objects are disappearing from public galleries (Conn 2010; Starn 2005), some museum studies scholars, most notably Susan Pearce (1994), have led a reconsideration of the position of objects in museums.

The second shift occurred much more recently. Studying objects in museums is being revived via a multidisciplinary focus on material culture, led by archaeologists and anthropologists. Building on earlier theorists such as Arjun Appadurai (1986), Igor Kopytoff (1986), Jules Prown (1982) and Daniel Miller (1987), the recent *Oxford handbook of material culture studies* (Hicks and Beaudry 2010), claims that, although not yet a discipline in itself, material culture studies has reached the ‘Material Culture Turn’. It has established itself as a reputable interdisciplinary approach and is being developed and explored in many academic disciplines (Dudley 2010; Candlin 2009; Tilley et al. 2006).

Concurrent with the above developments in material culture studies, a separate but related school developed in the United States out of a history and folklore background. Theorists such as Henry Glassie (1999), Steven Lubar and David Kingery (1993) and Thomas Schlereth (1992) built up a school of thought with closer ties between the museum, material culture studies and the discipline of history. Schlereth (1992) claims his past research has been useful “in history courses, artefact research and museum exhibitions”. However, other writers stress the distance that has developed between historiography and the museum and material culture studies. This distance has culminated in a perceived divide between the academy and theory, and the museum and object (Starn 2005).

A recent example where this divide has been crossed and the integrity of the object, theory, scholarship and accessibility all maintained, is in Philip Jones' *Ochre and Rust* (2008). Jones closely investigates a limited number of museum objects in order to question colonial Australian historiography. He provides an illuminating example of how museum collections can contribute to historiography and build more nuanced and progressive understandings of the past.

## **Aims and Objectives**

This study aims to demonstrate how collection-based research can be improved to benefit practitioners. It first questions whether, as the literature suggests, there is a current misconception about collection-based research and then explores why this has occurred. In order to build a museum-specific epistemology of research, this study explores the three crucial concepts of understanding, structure and visibility as a centre point from which collection-based research can be enhanced.

This study aims to combine the strengths and realities of current museum practice with the theoretical grounding in object research provided by material culture and museum studies to build a greater understanding of collection-based research. The original aim of this thesis was to develop an object research methodology. However, as the study progressed, it became evident that the building blocks of collection-based research were not clear to practitioners or the museum sector as a whole. This realisation resulted in a variation of focus. Now, this thesis attempts to build these missing blocks. It begins with a usable collection-based research definition. From there, it develops a structural framework which combines a conceptual and procedural understanding of the aims and outcomes museums are using when undertaking collection-based research.

## Scope of Study

Many museums budget resources for research into visitor and exhibition evaluation, among other areas. This study does not cover those areas, but concentrates on collection-based research, pertaining to in-house, collection and object research. Although this appears straightforward, there is currently no clear definition which covers this essential part of museum practice, a point which is elaborated in chapter one.

The central focus of this study is on social and cultural history. Art and science are included as they relate to the object case studies but they are generally applied through a historical lens. Art theory or scientific research are more traditional museum pursuits and are more closely aligned with academia. Public history in the museum and academic history in the university have grown apart. Approaches and outputs are very different in appearance. This thesis explores what makes historical research, with all of its cross-disciplinary leanings, unique to museums.

Traditional research resulting in academic articles and periodicals has been passed over in this study in favour of exhibition-based research into collection objects. There are two main reasons for this. Firstly, collection-based research in the case-study institutions is primarily driven by public programmes. Exhibitions are the most common form of this. Secondly, this approach allows investigation into the changing research drivers in museums and the overall effects that this is having on collection-based research in museums as a whole.

This thesis chooses to work within a Western world view. This is to do with my choice of objects, institutions and my own experience. Taonga Māori may need to take note of different frameworks.



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

As already established, international literature has raised fears surrounding the current role of collection-based research in museums, but few studies have attempted to get to the core of the issue through empirical research. This study will take a focused case-study approach in order to provide a detailed snapshot of current practice in medium-sized New Zealand museums. Focussing on collection-based research, this study aims to get to the core of research frameworks.

The two case-study institutions are The Nelson Provincial Museum and The Suter Art Gallery, both situated in Nelson. As two of the oldest museums in New Zealand, they make an effective pair of case studies (Denzin and Lincoln 2008). Both are over one hundred years old and are well recognised and established. These choices mean that there is variety in the core functions of the studied institutions, one being social history and the other being art. Aside from these different foci, the two institutions have many similarities. Both are public institutions which receive funding from the Nelson City and Tasman District Councils. Although sporting a long history, these institutions have only

relatively recently maintained dedicated professional staff. Both have a detailed history of enthusiastic work by volunteers and board members. Having worked at both institutions, I have an on-going working relationship with both, allowing for insight gained from being a part of their working and collection research environments.

Whereas much collection-based research literature makes broad sweeping assumptions across museums, when examples are used they often come from larger institutions which sustain research budgets. The Suter Art Gallery and The Nelson Provincial Museum are both large enough to sustain a team of museum professionals, while small enough that collection management is undertaken by a small number of staff and research must be balanced amongst a plethora of other tasks. This means that the interview participants have a broad understanding of how research is approached in their institutions as they are personally involved in a wide variety of its aspects. The interviewees are also clearly aware of limitations to collection-based research as they often need to make these value judgements themselves.

It is hoped that this study will create greater awareness of researchers' aims and outputs which will help lift collection-based research from the doom and conjecture filled position it is teetering on. Instead, placing it in a position where it can be developed and empowered alongside future shifts in museum directives.

## **Limitations**

This thesis is not intended to be a definitive outline of how collection-based research should be approached in museums. It begins by looking at the existing literature which shows that there is much speculation about research in museums but little detailed analysis. This creates a prototype research framework supported by the experiences of staff in medium-sized institutions. This framework is tested and evaluated using two

objects, but the constraints of the study have not allowed for detailed testing in an institution. Collection-based research in museums requires a lot more research and development to attain more concrete solutions, rather than the possibilities given here.

Institution case studies are limited to two, providing some variety while allowing a detailed study within the bounds of this thesis. This thesis also chooses to narrow its focus to the benefits of research to practitioners. Stakeholders and the public have been referred to where practitioners have given their own views or to speculate where benefits to them may be accrued. However, interviews only take place with practitioners. The views of stakeholders and the public have not been sought. Their understanding, expectations and appreciation of collection-based research, in relation to its usefulness, accessibility and accountability could support a whole new study.

## **The Nelson Provincial Museum**

The Nelson Provincial Museum is the oldest museum in New Zealand. It was founded as the Literary and Scientific Institution of Nelson, by the officers aboard the *Whitby* and *Will-Watch* before they had ever landed in New Zealand (Brereton 1948, p.11). By 1842, the library and attached museum storeroom were open (Brereton 1948, p.23). The museum continued as part of the Nelson Institute until the mid-1960s when the Nelson Provincial Museum Trust Board was formed to take control. In 1973 a purpose-built museum in Isele Park meant that the pivotal Bett collection of books and Tyree collection of photographs could be retrieved from their long term loan to the Alexander Turnbull Library (Nelson Historical Society 1977). Having survived multiple moves, a fire, and nearly 170 years, the Museum is today situated back on the same town acre block where it began, with the Museum research facility and storerooms a ten minute drive away in Isele Park.



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



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

The museum has a diverse collection which focusses on objects relevant to local history which is reflected in its collection policy. It sees itself as protecting, preserving and promoting its taonga while acting as a gateway for the public to explore local Nelson and Tasman heritage (The Nelson Provincial Museum 2010). As part of this, research is on-going at the Museum. It has a reputation for nationally recognised social history exhibitions. *Haven Ahoy!* was runner up for best social history exhibition at the 2010 Museums Aotearoa awards while the dress exhibition *Unpicking the Past* won its division at the awards in 2008. Recent publications include the *Unpicking the Past* catalogue (Haines-Bellamy 2008) and a book on Appo Hocton, the first naturalised Chinese man in New Zealand (Stade 2010). Currently, the museum is rehousing and digitising its collection of 150,000 glass plate negatives. These are all searchable online through the Nelson Provincial Museum website as they become available.

## **The Suter Art Gallery**

The Bishop Suter Memorial Art Gallery first opened its doors in May 1899. Bishop Andrew Burn Suter was a dedicated patron of the arts. He collected local and international artworks and established the Bishopdale Sketching Club (now The Suter Art Society). His wish to use his art collection to establish a public gallery in Nelson was well known and after a stroke which precipitated his retirement in 1890, he and his wife Amelia began looking for a suitable piece of land. After his death in 1895 Amelia bought land at the current site and set the gallery in motion before she returned to England and passed away a year later (Butterworth 1999, p.13). Three years later the Gallery became the third public art gallery in New Zealand, behind Auckland and Dunedin (Butterworth 1999, p.16). It permanently exhibited its collection, much of which was part of the original Suter bequest which included a large collection of John Gully watercolours.



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



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

The 1970s saw the beginning of a new era as British-born Austin Davies started as the Gallery's first professional director. This period also saw significant new developments to the original building and rationalisation of the collection (Butterworth 1999). The collection of John Gully watercolours has slowly continued to grow and remains one of the Gallery's most well-known collections. Another nationally significant collection held by the Gallery is The Toss Woollaston 101 collection. It was donated by the artist in the 1970s and includes 101 sketches and studies. The Suter Art Gallery also has a significant collection of local ceramics.

Today the Gallery prides itself on its vision as a pathway to art in Nelson. It is generous with its time and access to collections and produces a diverse exhibition schedule. These include collection-based exhibitions and a wide range of New Zealand artists. Research into collections is constantly occurring (Taylor 1997) and a significant catalogue is produced with each Port Nelson Suter Biennale (White 2010 and 2008; The Suter 2008; Catchpole and White 2007).

## **Case-Study Methodology**

Using the two case-study institutions, this thesis will investigate and examine what is researched and how, as well as why the research takes place and influences on this. The case studies look closely at how staff members perceive collection-based research in their institutions and how they approach it in their day-to-day work. Overall, each participant provided a broad concept of what they believe research is. This was hoped for in the choice of case studies (Denzin and Lincoln 2008). Both institutions participate in the same community (although one is a history museum and the other is an art gallery), deal with similar stakeholders and are limited in the number of staff they can feasibly employ. The larger a museum, the more likely it is that a curator will have time to set aside for research (Thomson 2002, p.61). These case studies have been chosen as institutions where staff members have a broad range of responsibilities.

Both institutions employ professionally qualified staff, but due to their small numbers they must cover a large range of responsibilities. At The Suter Art Gallery, the director and curator were interviewed. There is no collection-based staff at the Gallery and the curator's role includes that which would usually apply to a collection manager or registrar. The director and collection manager were interviewed at The Nelson Provincial Museum, as well as the external curatorial contractor who is employed to undertake the majority of larger in-house exhibition projects. These five participants covered most aspects of collection-based research roles in the two case-study institutions, from the policy level, through exhibition and collection development and care.

The interviews take a semi-structured approach. Before the interview date, each participant was provided with a list of questions to be covered in the interview, giving them time to think over the relevant issues. The list followed a basic format that changed slightly depending on the role the participant played at their institution. For example, the two directors were questioned about policy and strategy of their institutions, while participants that worked more directly with the collections were asked to focus on research processes in their day-to-day work. The actual interviews aimed to cover, in detail, all of the issues on the pre-written sheet, but took a relaxed approach and allowed the participants to discuss the elements they thought most pertinent. This approach attempts to explore the two institutions as a cultural world, focussing on the way each approaches collection-based research and letting each participant ascribe their own meanings and descriptions to how they experience and achieve the work they do. It was hoped that ultimately a definition for collection-based research in museums would be discovered embedded in the language of the participants.

The two case studies were chosen partly because of my prior working relationship with both institutions and with each of the participants. Because of this, rapport was quickly established and information was easily conveyed with trust and confidence (Denzin

and Lincoln 2008, p.130). Each interview was recorded and then transcribed and the transcription returned to the participant to look over. Transcriptions were edited into complete sentences to make meanings clear and allow the participants to read their own words comfortably (Roulston 2010, p.107). Although each participant was offered the chance to make any amendments to their transcription that they felt appropriate, none chose to make any changes. In the beginning, the possibility of follow-up interviews was discussed with each participant, but later this was not felt to be necessary (Roulston 2010, p.86-87). Once the transcriptions were returned, they were coded using a thematic analysis. The themes were developed from both the main areas the study focussed on and recurring themes that appeared in the participants' transcripts (Roulston 2010, pp150-153). These themes are discussed in chapter one.

Ethical consent to support this study was obtained from Massey University. The project is registered on the Low Risk Database which is listed in the Annual Report of the Massey University Human Ethics Committees.

## **Object Case Studies**

Investigation into current practice provides a background for the second part of this thesis. It helps draw together the context of collection-based research to better comprehend its underlying structure. This understanding then contributes to developing a research definition and a set of research principles and processes. Based on the empirical research from the case-study institutions and the rich tapestry of museum studies, material culture and social history theory, a research framework will be developed which aims to define and structure collection-based research in museums and encourage its visibility. This framework will then be tested and evaluated by application to two object case studies.

One object was chosen from each of the case-study institutions. *Riwaka* 1888, a watercolour by John Gully, was chosen from The Suter Art Gallery and a sample of dunite rock with no known provenance was chosen from The Nelson Provincial Museum. Both of these objects have strong links with the local region. *Riwaka* is a Tasman Bay landscape by a Nelson artist of national importance and formed part of the Gallery's original bequest of artworks. Dunite is a type of rock found throughout the world, but only in two areas of New Zealand. It is named after Dun Mountain in Nelson.

The two object case studies are very different. This thesis aims to use these differences to best test the research framework developed. It shows how the same approach to research processes and principles can have comprehensive results with very diverse objects. The object case studies demonstrate that it does not matter whether the object is well-provenanced and has obvious ties to local Nelson-Tasman social history or whether it has almost no provenance to provide research leads.

## **Outline of Thesis**

This thesis is divided into five chapters. The first chapter begins by considering literature relating to collection-based research. It demonstrates how collection-based research in museums has been misconceived. This chapter shows the lack of, and need for, a museum research definition. Several definitions have been posited over the past fifteen years, but each one focuses on different aspects, and none of them have been commonly acknowledged. Chapter one develops a research definition which takes into account the experiences of the case-study interview participants and places them alongside international commentary.

Chapter two juxtaposes the literature review of chapter one alongside a study of the processes, realities, strengths and weaknesses of collection-based research at The



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.



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

Nelson Provincial Museum and The Suter Art Gallery. One of the key findings of this chapter showed that the interview participants are adept at managing their resources and producing large amounts and variety of research, but at the same time expressing very different ideas of what collection-based research entails.

Chapter three uses the definition of collection-based research and takes it a step further to create a set of research principles and processes. It draws together museum, material culture and social history theory and places these alongside findings from chapter two regarding the experiences of the interview participants at The Nelson Provincial Museum and The Suter Art Gallery. It is intended that, by drawing these two aspects together, research principles will be created that are both practical and useful while being strongly grounded in theory. This chapter draws together the strengths of their current practice while reinforcing it with a stronger understanding of collection-based research to allow for greater efficiency and design of research.

These research principles and process are tested in chapter four. The research framework developed in the previous three chapters is applied, using two object case studies, one each from The Nelson Provincial Museum and The Suter Art Gallery. Using these two different objects allows the research framework to be analysed and evaluated to show how it is flexible and detailed enough to allow for in-depth research into two very different objects, a 19<sup>th</sup> century watercolour and a geological sample.

Finally, chapter five analyses and evaluates findings from the first four chapters. It explains the central role that understanding, structure and visibility play in collection-based research. It then argues that a museum-specific research definition, principles and processes underpin these three central elements to improve collection-based research for the benefit of practitioners.

This thesis shows that a dynamic research culture exists at both The Nelson Provincial Museum and The Suter Art Gallery. These institutions have provided an insight into museum research capable of reconfiguring understandings and approaches to collection-based research and allowing it to be seen clearly for what it is, a contribution to our knowledge of the material evidence of people and their environment.



# Chapter One

## Defining Collection-Based Research in Museums

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### **Introduction**

This chapter questions whether concern in the literature about collection-based research is justified. It examines what has been written about collection-based research with particular focus on the past twenty years. It explores the history of research in museums, considering possible causes of concern about research, how this has been approached in the literature and reasons why the concern is unjustified.

There is only a small body of literature about collection-based research. Major conferences on research in museums took place in 1990 ('Scholarship in Museums'

sponsored by the Royal Society of Arts, London) and 2005 (Canadian Museums Research Summit, Ottawa). These conferences both generated collections of literature. However, what is written rarely goes beyond a call for more research to explore the issues in greater depth. One study that did attempt a greater depth of analysis is the 1999 British Museums and Galleries Commission report *Lifting the Veil* (Gunn and Prescott). Through surveys and interviews, Gunn and Prescott attempt to create a picture of the state of research in British museums at the end of the century and compare this to memories of a decade earlier. Although the report stated that its findings would enable better understanding if compared against a repeat study ten years later, no further study has yet been undertaken.

The literature suggests that current definitions of collection-based research are contradictory and incomplete. This reflects findings from interviews with staff at The Nelson Provincial Museum and The Suter Art Gallery. I quickly discovered that the interview participants did not have a commonly shared definition of collection-based research. Therefore, this chapter will conclude by creating a comprehensive definition to be used throughout the rest of this thesis.

## **Collection-Based Research in Museums**

A survey into the literature surrounding research in museums pulls together a muddled image of conjecture, confusion and doom. Publications are few and far between (Anderson 2005, p.309) and merely reiterate that something is wrong, but what it is they cannot quite say, more research is needed (Anderson 2005, p.310). Although there have been several larger scale attempts to bring this issue to the fore, each time it slips below the surface to fester with assumptions that research is fast disappearing (Gunn and Prescott 1999, p.10). Yet, ask any collection-based staff member what they do in their day to day work and research, in a variety of guises, appears constantly. The fear that research roles are being overlooked and prioritised

out of existence has roots in a variety of areas, including new people or story focussed museum directives, redefinitions of curatorial roles and being required to display tangible outcomes to stakeholders. Through these marked changes, which have been accelerating during the past few decades, the museum has become a very different place. Many activities have developed new definitions very different from what they originally were. Collection-based research is no different.

Suzanne Keene (2005) posits research as the most important and all-encompassing use of museum collections. Yet, it is widely accepted that collection-based research has slipped so far down the rungs of museum priorities that when resources become tight it is often the first casualty (Gascoigne 2006a, p.50; Anderson 2005, p.299; Thomson 2002, p.61; Gunn and Prescott 1999, p.9) and pressures on resources are mounting (Anderson 2005, p.310; Gunn and Prescott 1999, p.9). It is generally accepted that the nature of research into collections has changed, creating a process that is broader, more fragmented and geared towards particular outcomes (Gascoigne 2006a). A pervasive fear that research in museums is disappearing has been consistently growing over time (Nevling 1984; Mori and Mori 1972; Lindsay 1962). However, the strongest theme recurring in the literature is the need for further studies, both qualitative and quantitative, to explore this issue further (Anderson 2005; Gunn and Prescott 1999). Surveying the literature over the past fifty years, but focussing on the previous decade, highlights this as an issue. The majority of the work written in this period surveys the literature before it, perpetuating earlier fears, while little is actually based on a solid foundation of new data. More research about research is needed (Anderson 2005, p.310).

### ***Causes of Concern about Research***

There are several different theories that consider why collection-based research in museums is suffering. This perceived decline can be juxtaposed alongside several

contemporaneous changes in museum culture, direction and priorities. Stephen Weil (2002) captured the essence of this change in his article titled, "From being about something to being for somebody", placing the public at the centre of the museum evolution. These changes have been much focussed on in recent years. *La nouvelle museologie* began in France in the early 1980s (Desvallées and Mairesse 2010) and soon influenced the related Anglo-American new museology (Vergo 1989). The movement continued to develop (Hooper-Greenhill 1992; Karp and Lavine 1991; Weil 1990) towards what has been variously described as a paradigm shift (Anderson 2004) or the post-museum (Hooper-Greenhill 2000). Revolving the museum around visitors sets a shift of museum priorities in motion. Although collection-based research is often considered one of the defining parts of a museum's purpose, it has found itself sinking out of sight while other higher profile aspects, such as exhibitions and marketing, take its place and the funding that goes with it. However, it is not clear why making museums 'for somebody' rather than 'about something' means a reduction in the amount and quality of research undertaken. Research plays an important role in the 'about something' museum. But, a solid grounding in research is important in making best use of the museums major asset, its collection, even when designing popular exhibitions for the benefit of 'somebody' (Cossons 1991, p.187).

This shift to a public focussed museum model has included a shift to story-centric museum exhibitions. Exhibitions, and the public and education programmes that go with them, have become the major drivers that maintain a museum's momentum and swallow a large portion of their resources. A significant proportion of exhibition guide publications do not even mention research as one of the steps of exhibition creation (Rouette 2007; Te Papa National Services 2001; Dean 1994; Belcher 1991). Research is either not considered a necessary element or taken totally for granted. The current National Services guide warns that "planning for a successful display may start two years before opening date. It may involve months of consulting, writing and rewriting, designing, budgeting and obtaining money" (Te Papa National Services 2001, p.2). Research is never mentioned although other minor steps such as rewriting are.

The current stakeholder accountability climate (Legget 2009; Weil 2002; Barrett 2001) also demands transparency in museum activities. Collection research does not traditionally lend itself to transparency and therefore struggles to hold its place over more visible activities such as exhibitions which draw people into the museum.

These changes in the museum environment can also be seen in shifts which more directly affect collection-based research itself. Redefinitions of curatorial and research roles (a particularly hot topic in the 1990s, Villa Bryk 2001; Caton 1993; Murdoch 1992; Mayer 1991; Ross 1990), along with new types and fluid definitions of museum research, all contributed to the confused position of collection-based research in today's museums. A strong focus on digitisation and collection rationalisation and care have taken up time and resources which otherwise, in the past, may have been purely dedicated to research.

That collection-based research is an essential function of the museum is not being questioned. What is being questioned is how much is taking place, in what ways, by whom and whether it is in enough depth to be of any real relevance. In short, this thesis questions whether there is a problem with collection-based research in museums.

### ***Museum Research in the Literature***

As mentioned above, there is only a small body of literature discussing these issues and the majority is personal opinion or surveys of what has already been published. Very little relies on first hand research questioning why these fears exist and how they relate to the points raised in the previous paragraphs. The most detailed study conducted into collection-based research was undertaken in 1999 by the British Museum and Galleries Commission (Gunn and Prescott). A total of 215 museums

completed a questionnaire on research in museums and from these questionnaires, thirty participants were chosen to complete in-depth interviews. The broad study quickly established that there was no standard definition for research in museums. The result is an important, although contradictory, study which raises as many questions as it answers. Where possible, the study asked participants to describe what the current situation in their museum was as well as the situation ten years previously. Much more detailed and focussed answers were given for the 1999 period. Unfortunately, although the report stated that it would become much more valuable if repeated again in a further ten years, this has not happened. Therefore, rather than showcasing changes over time, the report shows a confused and contradictory picture where those involved in collection-based research can tell that something is wrong, but what it is they cannot quite put their finger on.

These issues have brought together like minds to discuss what they entail. Two major conferences on collection-based research and the challenges facing it have taken place. The first conference, 'Scholarship in museums', sponsored by the Royal Society of Arts in London in 1990, was followed by the Canadian Museums Research Summit in Ottawa in 2005. 'Scholarship in museums' showed a polarisation between the old and new school of 'scholar' and 'administrator' directors, a debate relevant to many aspects of the museum community in the 1990s.

The Canadian Museums Research Summit aimed to address the perception that research in museums was not being advocated in the industry and that the Canadian Museums Association was failing to defend the needs of curators and researchers (Brandon and Wilson 2005, p.353). It was felt that the conference showed curators and researchers to be more empowered than they often appear – that research had become a fundamental pillar of the new federal museum policy and was embedded in missions at the museum level. The conference also recognised that museum researchers need to reach out and make their work more visible (Brandon and Wilson 2005, p.357).

As well as conferences, both the Canadian and British Museums Association journals *Muse* and *Museum Practice* published special issues on research in museums. The autumn 1991 issue of *Muse* looked at changes in the museum industry affecting both research and curatorial roles. It questioned the role played by research, pointed out that a lack of collection-based research only remained viable in the short term and urged those working in the area to accept constraint and find ways to move forward (McGillivray 1991, pp.63-65). The issue also focussed on curators and considered how their role was changing and developing (Mayer 1991, p.38). *Museum Practice* took a more exemplar approach in their issue on research. The issue included two articles by Laura Gascoigne (2006a and 2006b) which looked at changes in the nature of research and ways to secure funding to ensure it continues.

The issues surrounding collection-based research in museums do not appear to have been solved or to have gone away, but very little has been published in the last few years. Two articles published in 2010 focus on similar recurring issues, although Graeme Were (2010) applies these to research in university museums and Mark Graham and Denyse Jomphe (2010) evaluate the success of harnessing specialist expertise through programmes of co-staffing research scientists between a museum and university. Neither of these articles consider what the field is like today for the average, medium-sized museum.

There have been no published sources regarding collection-based research in New Zealand. In 2005 the Auditor-General's Office produced a report called *Management of heritage collections in local museums and art galleries*. Although not considering collection-based research, the report did look at collection digitisation throughout New Zealand. As mentioned in the introduction, it discovered that research files were those most likely to be missing from the newly created object files and discussed a lack of provenance as a problem with collections which is also contributing to stalling access.

## ***Concern about Research is Unjustified***

As can be seen, there is a pervasive fear in the museum industry that collection-based research is being prioritised out of a tenable position and that something needs to be done about it. What the literature does not say is what. It posits some ideas that may help, such as giving research projects greater visibility to the board, public and other museum staff (Graham 2005, p.288), but does not dig deeper to unpack assumptions and the basis for these fears. This trend may result in perpetuation of felt notions, rather than questioning and closer examining what defines collection-based research in today's museums. Most interestingly, both Laura Gascoigne (2006a, p.50) and Suzanne Keene (2005, p.45) raise the question of whether there is a problem with the amount of collection-based research being undertaken in the first place, although neither author elaborates on this any further. This study aims to unpack and question some of these assumptions about collection-based research within two narrow, but focussed, case studies. It will start this by examining current definitions of research in museums and developing a collection-based research to be used in this thesis.

## **Defining museums and objects**

Before going any further it is important to define several concepts. The most common words used in this thesis are museum, object and research. Each term is slippery and has its own baggage and connotations trailing behind.

The ICOM definition of museums was mentioned in the introduction of this thesis. This study uses that definition and defines a museum as an institution that collects, cares for, interprets and presents representations of material culture, tangible or intangible (ICOM 2007).

The word 'object' has been purposely used. Theorists have debated which word is best used to describe the myriad things filling our museums (Knappett 2008; Henare, Holbraad and Wastell 2007). 'Object' has been chosen here as it is broad enough to avoid much of the baggage that comes with the terminology of 'artefact', while not being so broad as a 'thing'. Once the object has entered the museum it becomes a museum object. It is not just anything, it is a chosen object. The word 'object' also comfortably represents artworks. It refers to the thingness of something while not alluding to either its artistic singularity or commodity-like commonness.

## **Current Definitions of Research**

Defining research is much more difficult. Research in museums defies definition. This is the first problem evident in the literature on collection-based research and it clearly surfaced in all of the participants' interviews as well. There is no one definition for collection-based research in museums. Each article provides its own definition and, for simplicity's sake, many of these remain very broad without explaining exactly what is, and is not, captured by it.

For example, R. G. W. Anderson (2005, p.298) describes research as "concerned with the production of new knowledge based on the use of artefacts or natural objects as evidence" and further elaborates that the article focusses on "'traditional' research in 'traditional' museums, that activity which leads to the publication of museum monographs or articles in periodicals which deal with fine and applied art, archaeology, numismatics, history of science, ethnography, and so on" (p.298). This is a very narrow view of research which feels out of date.

In contrast, the Canadian Museums Research Summit defined research in more aspirational terms as "the key that unlocks our material heritage. Without it,

collections are inert and meaningless, devoid of any context, relevance, and role. Research is fundamental to the creation of new knowledge” (Brandon and Wilson 2005, p.356). Although this definition links research to the creation of new knowledge, it does not directly say that research must create new knowledge. For the purposes of the conference this definition would have provided a broad scope to initiate inclusive discussion. However, as a definition for research practice, it gives vague boundaries and, arguably, almost anything could be included within its scope.

A more useful definition is provided by the British study, *Lifting the Veil* (Gunn and Prescott 1999, p.45), which explains that “the term **research project** is taken to include collections documentation and cataloguing, research associated with work on displays and exhibitions, scholarly books and articles, field research, technical research, conference papers and lectures, but not routine investigations associated with normal accessioning and responding to public enquiries.” This definition focuses on specific outcomes and expects research to fit tidily under its headings. It was created after consultation, via questionnaire, with a broad range of British museum staff members who showed some very different understandings of what constituted research. The study highlighted that:

there is no agreement on a detailed definition as to what constitutes museum research, and the differences are marked both among types of museums and among specialisms. While there is broader agreement about the aims and objectives of museum research, even here there are differences of opinion, and variations of emphasis (Gunn and Prescott 1999, p.43).

An obvious difference of opinion showed a split between natural sciences which saw research as the production of new knowledge and material culture disciplines which argued for the reinterpretation of knowledge already known.

The variation in definitions shown above is symptomatic of a profession in flux. In 2006, after a discussion with Maurice Davies, the deputy director of the United Kingdom Museums Association, Laura Gascoigne (p.50) wrote about how the characteristics of museum research were changing, rather than the volume being

produced. Davies went on to point out that “what still needs to be done, and thought about, is the nature of research in your average museum.” This echoes Neil Cossons belief that the only way to protect and encourage scholarship is to manage and use change creatively (Cossons 1991, p.185) The literature continues to reflect no more than a confused collection of possible definitions, none of which give enough credit to the variety and ingenuity present in the day-to-day research activities of professional staff in an average museum.

Exhibition preparation was by far the most common museum activity linked to collection-based research by the case-study participants. Most museum funding is secured on a project basis and short term projects such as exhibitions appear to produce the largest injection of focussed research in both of the case-study institutions. Although a lot of collection management necessitates research (from accessioning and cataloguing through to preparation for deaccessioning), this type of research is completed to a more routine mandate. Available time tends to dictate depth and staff members are required to move on as quickly as practicable to focus on the next object. Staff members at both institutions demonstrate a desire to do more research, but feel that it is a luxury and that it is difficult to justify the expense. One research project currently underway at The Nelson Provincial Museum is the inventory, re-housing and digitisation of 150,000 glass plate negatives. Although an important project, funding is focussed on collection care. Efforts to identify subjects are being made with the help of the public but the actual effects of research are likely to be longer term and resulting from the much more accessible management of the resource.

Museums take an object-based approach to research which is not always well understood. Perspectives on research were contradictory and risked failing to recognise research leads through narrow definitions:

*An object is research, just not written. It's a different language. It has got characteristics, it hasn't been made or anything like that, it's still got little bits of words but it is a visual language (SP).*

*Having an object in the collection is a benefit, but it is just the object. Whereas getting the context of the object, the provenance of the object, is just as important (PHB).*

Therefore, a definition is needed that is broadly applicable and able to cope with changing characteristics as museums negotiate how best to proceed in the future. It must focus on processes and the nature of research, rather than just research outcomes, in recognition of the multipurpose approach undertaken by many staff members who are short of time and resources. Collection-based research in museums should aim to take a ladder approach. Each new piece of knowledge is attached to the appropriate object to provide a stable higher rung for the next piece of knowledge to stand on and reach that extra bit higher.

### ***Collection-Based Research Definition***

*Collection-based research in museums includes all activities which aim to enhance or develop new knowledge or new ways of understanding museum objects. This includes, but is not limited to, examination of the physical object, development of provenance and enriching the links and relationships of the object with other objects or information sources. New research must be recorded in an accessible and accountable way so as to become a building block on which further research can stand with sure footing. Researchers must endeavour to make their research outcomes as visible as feasible to colleagues, stakeholders and the public in general.*

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has shown that concern about collection-based research in the literature does not have a strong foundation. Definitions are inconsistent and do not reflect all aspects of research undertaken. The next chapter will look at current practice from the perspective of practitioners at The Nelson Provincial Museum and The Suter Art Gallery. It seeks to discover whether these fears are justified or whether more questions about their causes need to be asked.



# Chapter Two

## A Survey of Current Practice

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### **Introduction**

This chapter undertakes a survey of current practice at The Nelson Provincial Museum and The Suter Art Gallery. I interviewed the directors from each institute, along with staff members directly involved with collection care and research. These interviews aim to extrapolate the processes, realities, strengths and weaknesses of collection-based research in the two institutions. The interviews allowed for exploration of the issues raised in chapter one in greater depth and within a geographically small framework. Moreover, they provide a snapshot of the issues involved, as currently experienced by medium-sized institutions in New Zealand. The experiences of staff members in The Nelson Provincial Museum and The Suter Art Gallery are laid alongside the international literature which was discussed in the previous chapter, demonstrating the universal nature of the issues.



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



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

Firstly, the interview participants' views on the importance of collection-based research will be discussed. Secondly, the strengths and realities of research in the two case-study institutions will be detailed. In particular, this section will consider research policies and strategies at an institutional level and research priorities as they apply to individual employees before taking a broad look at the issues which complicate, slow down and even prevent research from occurring. Finally, this chapter will question whether there is a problem with the approach taken to research and how it is achieved in museums.

## **Why Research is Important**

The importance of research, as discussed by the interview participants, is quite universal in nature. However, the three main elements which stood out are particularly relevant to medium-sized organisations. These include how new research about an object increases its value, how it is important to continue building a knowledge repository for the future and the important effects of connecting people and objects:

*The more you know about an object the better the stories. The more you know, the more interesting the object becomes, and the more valuable (PM).*

In this way, research also helps the collection to stay dynamic and not become a dusty cliché on a forgotten shelf. It is important to keep up to date with cataloguing research because, as one participant pointed out, object research becomes increasingly difficult as the trail cools. The majority of leads are best gathered from the donor before accessioning.

Cataloguing research becomes the base for a local knowledge repository. Although exhibition research appears to create a wealth of new object information to contribute to this repository, this is often not the case. Exhibition files are difficult to quantify at an object level, require space to store and are time consuming to search back through.

They can still be very helpful, but many files are currently not easily accessible. At the same time, some relevant object research is easily attached to the object file and does increase knowledge. For example, the recent Cedric Savage exhibition at The Suter Art Gallery included two paintings from the Gallery's collection. The majority of the exhibition paintings were loaned from private collections throughout the Marlborough/Tasman region. The research which gathered these artworks together helped create a more detailed background for the two collection works.



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.

## Strengths and Realities of Research

This next section gives an overview of the nature of collection-based research as experienced by staff members at The Nelson Provincial Museum and The Suter Art Gallery. Understanding the strengths and realities of collection-based research is an important starting point for this study. It highlights what works well and what does not. This is invaluable when seeking ways to improve collection-based research to

benefit practitioners. It will also contribute to raising the profile of research and creating pathways for it to grow and develop.

In order to understand the elements of research in medium-sized organisations, the following section will first consider how it is approached by the case-study organisations, focussing on the strategies they use to fit research into their staff members' busy schedules and tight resource constraints. Second, this section will concentrate on the staff members and look at how they prioritise different types of research in their day-to-day work. Finally, a close examination of the major issues and stumbling blocks that the study participants felt encroached on their ability to research their collections and disseminate this information will be discussed.

### ***Research Strategies***

Research is clearly considered a part of collection activity and is an important factor in exhibition development. The entrenched position of research suggests two possible outcomes. As Mark Graham points out, "no one will deny... that museum research is vital for understanding the collection, for its proper conservation and use in exhibits, cultural events and educational programmes" (2005, p. 290). However, in almost the same breath he states how as "one of those foundation elements, sometimes [research] must elbow its way amongst the new list of activities to maintain a base of operation and to justify its role in the life of a museum" (2005, p. 288). The entrenched nature of research in the museum is not enough to safeguard a significant dedicated proportion of museum resources. In fact, this entrenched nature runs the opposite risk of creating apathy. Collection-based research is no longer a clear cut part of the museum world and continuing to assume this can create the "indifference, or lack of awareness, of the developments that were changing... museum practice and eroding museum research" (Brandon and Wilson 2005, p. 353) that led to the Canadian Museums Research Summit.

In terms of The Nelson Provincial Museum and The Suter Art Gallery, it was quickly obvious that research strategies at an institutional level are unclear. That research tends to be taken for granted as 'part and parcel' of what staff do could explain this to a degree, however it is clear that both case studies achieve much of their research by taking opportunities as they present themselves or by using exhibitions as research drivers. Neither case study has a research policy. It is something that has never been seen as an issue:

*I think we can't say that we sit down and do research... but we can say that we are researching all the time. It is just part and parcel of what we do. I think that if you sat down and analysed what you did do, you would find that most of it is research (PHB).*

Both case studies demonstrated strategies that allow each institution to make the most of collection research opportunities. It is widely recognised by the interview participants that research opportunities must be taken as they appear and exhibitions are the most common space for this:

*Our knowledge and information about the collection can be enhanced through the process of developing an exhibition. That is ideal, where we would get that cross over. Collection items are going to come out into an exhibition and we can burrow more deeply into those objects. Or those objects are reinterpreted because they are going to enter a different context than perhaps they were in on another occasion when they were exhibited (JC).*

Exhibitions are usually considered research drivers, but this is not always the case:

*Sometimes we build whole shows to get works out. I built a whole collection show to get an artwork out so that I could get it photographed. We built it in a meaningful way and it was supported in an intellectual context and everything else, but really it was all about getting that work out (AMW).*

*The way I have been operating exhibitions is that I try and build into the exhibition budget some additional staffing for curatorial work... A number of our collection staff are part time... so when there was a specific task like Haven Ahoy! that needed some additional work done on it, we were able to give... our registrar some additional hours in which she was able to verify... objects in that exhibition...The objects were cleaned, photographed, measured, their records were checked and the records were consolidated (PM).*

The ability of museums to provide experiences for their publics while creating opportunities to undertake research about objects was also discussed by several interview participants. Being accommodating to ad hoc visits from the public can produce surprising and gratifying opportunities for research. Combined with having object files prepared and accessible, allowing for quick reference, this can contribute to building trust between the public and museum. Providing links for people back to the collection is an important aspect:

*People get so excited to connect with an object or fact or event in their family history. People like to be grounded or connected somehow. Nowadays people move around so much and families change, it's really nice to have some little cobwebby line back to something (SP).*

An opportunistic approach to research is considered essential in an environment pressed for both time and resources. Investing time in impromptu collection visits can bring the best out of research that may otherwise become very difficult to obtain as the knowledge holders become harder to reach. Fostering these kinds of experiences, by creating opportunities for the public to be involved in the collection, helps ensure that information continues to trickle in. Always being open to research opportunities can also have surprising results as one participant explained:

*You never know what is out there. It can surprise you, but there is always a way to integrate it. I guess you have to be prepared that something might be so*



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



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

*wonderful that it becomes a catalyst to send you down a whole different tangent (SP).*

### ***Research Priorities***

A closer look at collection-based research, as experienced by staff in their everyday work, allows a better understanding of the drivers and boundaries that are constantly being negotiated. Firstly, it must be asked whether these research limitations are the reality of research in a medium-sized museum, or whether they merely provide convenient justification to not work harder to achieve more. It is clear that research limitations are the reality, but an element of justification may also slip through. Unchecked idealistic research is justly discussed as unrealistic in the museum context, instead focussing on the need to keep research and public programmes moving forward at a steady pace. What this does not consider is the nature and legacy of collection-based research. Leaving out this long-term aspect of collection-based research lends a possibility of, over time, losing sight of the forest for the trees. This section will look at the way practitioners in the two case-study institutions balance research in their day-to-day work and how they manage transparent accountability, visibility and the long-term aspects of research.

Scholarly research, as achieved by universities, is not what museums, and in particular medium to smaller-sized museums, are aiming for. Research is object-based and tends to measure success in terms of visitor numbers (Gascoigne 2006b, p.59). The need to balance research and day-to-day operations was well described by several participants:

*I think that is the milieu that we work in. I could beat my chest and say it is a problem because we don't burrow down into things deep enough, but then I could just as easily flip to being the manager and say that you just have to determine your priorities. If you have a vast collection and you have a huge great backlog of cataloguing, you can't have the luxury of burrowing down into*

*things. You have to have some method to make quicker decisions and there might be some bad decisions that are made in that process in too much haste. But if you dilly dally around too long, then that backlog just turns into an even bigger log jam (JC).*

*To do that really hard core, good research is nearly impossible for the sheer fact that you can't get that amount of time off. With three full time staff members, one of us has to be here and present all the time otherwise the building doesn't function... But if it is an exhibition and you are working towards a deadline, you can tell the reception to hold all calls, because you are pulling in a team and at some point you have to deliver out to that team and you have to have done the research. So that is why you build exhibitions from the collection - to get the work done (AMW).*

When it comes to creating this balance in the course of an ordinary work day, some participants had not thought about it, instead assuming that some form of research forms a part of each day's work. Other participants were much more aware of the levels of research they set out to achieve each day. However, the extent to which this mind set facilitates research production remains unclear.

Transparent accountability also plays an important role in collection research. The need to produce tangible outcomes not only affects the quantity of research, but also the quality. Rigid time constraints mean that depth of research tends to suffer to other priorities (Gascoigne 2006b, p.50; Anderson 2005, pp. 299 and 307):

*There probably isn't the time to go very deeply, because nowadays, if your museum or gallery is part of a local authority, or something like that with all these performance standards and measures that we have got to do, we really do need to be putting out something that can be perceived by the public to be of value (JC).*



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.

This focus on the public and accountability has been well utilised by participants as a way to be both accessible and approachable, while at the same time making the most of research opportunities as they arise. Issues tend to be dealt with as they develop, but this approach has some very positive outcomes:

*People just turn up and want to see the collection – I always try to do those... Some of my best experiences with respect to collection research have come from ad hoc or impromptu, unanticipated visits from people (AMW).*

Back in 1984, Lorin Nevling, then director of the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago, lamented that “developing recognition by the local community will be a slow process, but it is one that may be an absolute necessity if basic research is to remain a museum function” (p.193). This issue continues today as evidenced by one participant:

*It is a shame though, because collection research isn't immediately obvious. It is like you are saving money. You save it and you save it and you never spend it.*

*Exhibitions are like spending heaps of cash and being really glamorous and drawing lots of attention to your activities (AMW).*

*I have found that the object research process is almost conditioned by the way in which you approach it – the reason. An exhibition has prestige. General collection research is housekeeping. I don't get very far with general housekeeping. People don't have the love for it. But, if there is an obvious, glamorous, high profile output, they will talk to you for ever. Even better if there is a publication, then they will take you very seriously (AMW).*

The importance of visible, yet cost effective, research outcomes does not appear to have been developed much beyond the, often very transitory, exhibition model. It is clear that visibility and accountability are a synonymous part of research in the contemporary museum (Were 2010, p.293; Gascoigne 2006a, p.50; Brandon and Wilson 2005, p.350; Graham 2005, p.288).

Long term contributions of research were not discussed by the participants except to regret the lack of scope and budget for research publications. It was generally felt that plenty of research was occurring, but a lot of exhibition work is not readily available after the exhibition closes. By not producing some form of publication, much of the research being done is in danger of having a best before date and not being available in the long term:

*I think there is less budget to make a publication... And there is probably less market for people wanting to take a book away and buy it. I was thinking about that with the Art Gallery, because there was a great exhibition where they got Cedric Savage's paintings all together – I loved that. It would have been awesome to have a book. I think there is definitely opportunities missed for funding reasons, but I think the research still happens... I think that it is a problem, because if you take Haven Ahoy! there is so much new information about Nelson in that exhibition, or about life in that time. It is just there for a fleeting moment and now it is gone (SP).*

## ***Research Issues***

There are many issues which make extensive collection-based research in medium-sized museums difficult. The interview participants were all clearly aware of these and concentrate on ways to best manage them. There are issues of dealing with inherited information databases and cataloguing backlogs. However, the obvious issue that plagues all aspects of the non-profit industry is that of time and resources, both human and other. Basically, these all boil down to funding. Both case studies were aware of the need to work within these frameworks, however it was suggested that manipulating them to the best light possible was a matter of strategy and something that deserved more scrutiny.

Completing the basics of collection-based research work is a time-consuming and labour-intensive exercise. The 2006 New Zealand Auditor-General's Report on management of heritage collections looked at and supported the digitisation of collection records throughout New Zealand, while recognising the stress this placed staff under (Auditor-General's Office 2006, p.66). Pressures to get on top of cataloguing is an international phenomenon and the 1999 *Lifting the Veil* report listed cataloguing as a major consumer of research time (Gunn and Prescott 1999, p.55):

*It's unfortunate if those records are not full records, or there are many records and the information is scattered across those many records for that one object. It is actually quite hard to choose objects for exhibitions because of the nature of the data. If we did have some time, it would go into that type of research, to get the data sorted to make the likes of exhibition development a lot easier... And that also flows onto people doing research. It is hard for them to come and do research and you look up an object and you present them with lots of records and lots of data that you are actually not quite sure about (PHB).*

These issues can also be further exacerbated by continuous reorganisation of electronic systems or changes in staff which precipitate a variety in cataloguing styles.



Figure 14: Storeroom at The Nelson Provincial Museum Research Facility, Isele Park. Image courtesy of The Nelson Provincial Museum, 2010.

Records aside, museums always have and likely always will suffer from a lack of time and resources (Anderson 2005, p.310; Graham 2005, p.290). Although “research is still an integral and essential part of a healthy museum operation, the intense financial stresses to meet the ever-lengthening list of expectations and operations of a modern museum pull forcibly on resources that might have been allocated to research in the past” (Graham and Jomphe 2010, p.109). This issue provides a clear framework which staff members in the two case-study institutions negotiate competently on a daily basis. As this is an aspect of museums that is unlikely to change, this section will now focus on how The Nelson Provincial Museum and The Suter Art Gallery negotiate it.

Working with, rather than against, the exhibition priority appears a tried and tested way of ensuring research momentum is kept up. Research attached to exhibitions has the highest priority whereas collection research is able to be put off for a later day when more time is available. Marrying these two types of research together appears to be the most successful way to approach accountable, in-depth collection research. The more uses research can be put to and the more it is needed to complete something

visible straight away, the greater the mandate to put aside other work and concentrate on it. Fitting research into everyday work priorities appears less considered by the interview participants. Most had not thought much about this and assume that research is just a part of doing their job properly. This mind set is likely to be tied into the project-based nature of the majority of research in contemporary museums. It is easier to plan projects, such as exhibitions, into the broader strategy, rather than budget for a proportion of the many types of daily activities that could possibly fall under the category of research.

A lack of resources, including time, money and specialist resources, was the most lamented detrimental effect on the research output cited by the interview participants. They often linked it to museum size:

*I feel very isolated here intellectually. I have to buy books myself. We have no magazines. We subscribe to Art New Zealand and Art News. I don't get Art Asia Pacific. I can't even buy those books at the bookshop. I go to my colleagues' institutions... and I look at the journals and magazines that are available to them and it just makes me feel really sick because I ask – what don't I know? (AMW).*

*If you are doing something that is scientific and you need a microscope, or you need something to measure things by or anything like that - what do you do? We don't have that equipment. So producing scholarly research or object-based, scientific research, which would be more my interest, would be hard in a regional museum situation where you don't have the resources (PHB).*

The participants linked these issues to the differences between medium-sized regional museums as opposed to larger ones in central locations. This is a theme that appears in the international literature as well and explains how the:

new emphasis on interdisciplinary calls for a breadth of scholarship beyond the reach of your average museum. While the larger institutions have the capacity to organise major research projects across departments, and call on outside

experts, smaller institutions lack the infrastructure and, quite often, the specialist staff (Gascoigne 2006a, p.50).

The end result is that medium-sized museums may begin to rely on external people to do their research. The Nelson Provincial Museum reproduction agreement requires researchers to provide the Museum with a copy of their publication as a way to ensure that collection-based research is stored in the museum archives for further reference.

*It's not that a small museum doesn't attract people with specific interests, it's that the opportunities for them to follow their narrow field of speciality is probably far less. So you get people with a much broader range of knowledge. Much, much broader (PM).*

## **Is there a Problem?**

The first question that chapter two hopes to answer is whether there is in fact a problem. Both Suzanne Keane (2005, p.45) and Laura Gascoigne (2006a, p.50) pose this question but neither interrogate it looking for an answer. The *Lifting the Veil* report (Gunn and Prescott 1999, pp. 16-17) claims that it is important to recognise a diversity of research opinions, as shifts in research fashions could be affecting the perception of the amount of research actually being done.

Both case-study institutions demonstrated themselves as very public and exhibition focussed, matching current international trends. Both also showed an awareness of the need for accountability in their actions and projects. Collection-based research has to prove its usefulness in order to be included in museum projects. Neither case-study institution publishes on a frequent or regular basis. However, when considered against the shifting functions and fluid definitions of collection-based research, redefinitions of curatorship and evolving roles of staff members, both case studies appear to be producing a substantial amount of research, albeit without traditional visible methods.

This is interesting when applied against the definition of research supplied in chapter one and repeated below:

*Collection-based research in museums includes all activities which aim to enhance or develop new knowledge or new ways of understanding museum objects. This includes but is not limited to examination of the physical object, development of provenance and enriching the links and relationships of the object with other objects or information sources. New research must be recorded in an accessible and accountable way so as to become a building block on which further research can stand with sure footing. Researchers must endeavour to make their research outcomes as visible as feasible to colleagues, stakeholders and the public in general.*

This definition aims to help practitioners undertaking research to understand what collection-based research entails, to structure its different aspects in useful ways and requires them to make outputs visible. A definition is crucial for effective collection-based research. It supports and guides practitioners as they work. The above definition of research emphasises three parts; understanding, structure and visibility. The aim to develop new knowledge and understandings refers to an awareness of the actual processes of research, a focus on accessibility and accountability ensures that the research done is well structured and useful, while the final section places an onus on the researcher to reach out and raise the visible profile of their work.

It is all very well to sit quietly in the corner, somewhere in a museum store and discover fascinating things about forgotten objects. However, in the changing museum world, there is little room for 'research for research's sake'. Therefore, the above definition places a requirement to share the research and contribute to an overall knowledge repository. This definition argues that, in the museum context, research without a use is not really anything at all. Research is not only about process, but about aims and outcomes as well. For research to be successful it needs to be well understood, structured and the outputs made visible.

This final section of this chapter will consider collection-based research undertaken in the two case studies against broader shifts in museum practice. It will question whether there really is a problem with the research outputs chosen and achieved by The Suter Art Gallery and The Nelson Provincial Museum, or whether definitions of research have simply not yet caught up with changes in the industry. These findings will be considered against an examination of the research definition above and how it relates to research understanding, structure and visibility.

### ***Collection-Based Research Definition and Understanding***

The first half of the research definition created in chapter one focusses on what makes collection-based research in museums research.

*Collection-based research in museums includes all activities which aim to enhance and develop new knowledge or new ways of understanding museum objects.*

This definition creates a continuum of types of research which can be seen in figure 15. Some of the confusion shown in chapter one's analysis stems from varied understandings of the term research in relation to museums. Those who claim that research no longer occurs in museums, to any great extent, tend to restrict their definition to research type 1. Many museums do not have the resources available for their staff members to undertake substantial research projects that are not public programme orientated. On the other hand, many staff members claim that the majority of work they undertake in the museum falls under the banner of research. To a great extent this thesis' definition of research accepts this claim, but at the same time it recognises the need to set boundaries.

The first step in understanding how research is being approached is recognising what type of research it is, to what end, and if it is even research at all. Therefore, this definition goes so far as to include cataloguing research and collection-based

	Types of Research	What is does	Examples
1	Research which develops new knowledge	Substantial new contribution to knowledge	Publication level research which contributes to the subject's field
2	Research which develops new ways of understanding	New interpretations of old knowledge	Exhibitions which examine collections in new ways or using new themes or links
3	Research which enhances new knowledge	Contributes further to research which develops new knowledge	Fieldwork work study with the collections that produces new knowledge or is designed to feed into later study which will develop new knowledge
4	Research which enhances new ways of understanding	Preparation for in-depth research	Preliminary exhibition research etcetera
5	Research which aims to develop new knowledge	Developing a new contribution to knowledge but the research has not yet reached a stage of fruition	Developing a research project over an extended time period which may contribute to the subject's field when completed, but as yet is still in early stages
6	Research which aims to develop new ways of understanding	Looking for new sources of object information and knowledge from within the collection and archives	Creating and recording links and relationships between collection objects which may lead to new ways of seeing
7	Research which aims to enhance new knowledge	Making research visible and accessible and methods transparent to encourage greater engagement by those outside the institution	Research designed to be used as stepping stones for other researchers
8	Research which aims to enhance new ways of understanding	Developing collection documentation	Cataloguing research

Figure 15: Collection-Based Research Continuum.

exhibition proposals but stops short at data-banking. Data-banking includes cataloguing activities that are more like general housekeeping, such as tidying and organising records and basic registration procedure. While these activities are not included in the definition of research, it is recognised that the different steps of a research project in the resource-stretched museum environment are often divorced from one another. Seemingly disparate snippets of knowledge may build up over time until there is enough available to justify an exploration into its feasibility as a public programme research project. Therefore, as a definition, collection-based research has a solid core which stretches out to a more flexible grey area at its edges.

### ***Collection-Based Research Definition and Visibility***

The above definition also focuses on visibility of research in order to address the suggestion that the “greatest risk to research in museums is when no one realises that it is being carried out” (Anderson 2005, p.311). Shifting functions and fluid definitions are being negotiated well by those actually carrying out the task in the case-study institutions, but it remains to be questioned whether this is well understood by others more removed. The *Lifting the Veil* report found a need to raise the profile of research and understand its fluid nature (Gunn and Prescott 1999, p.57). After twelve years this need still needs addressing.

Redefinitions of curatorial roles have been internationally felt across the museum sector, but this is an issue that is less pertinent to medium-sized institutions. These institutions have never had great numbers of staff and curators have always needed to play a diverse role, showing a broad skill base rather than a finely-tuned specialism. Laura Gascoigne (2006a, p.52) wrote how “with changes in the museum industry some curatorial independence may have been lost, but other things will be gained. Museum research is changing because museums are changing.” Research accountability, now commonly demanded of curators, will provide a framework that researchers in

medium-sized museums can better utilise in order to show justifications in their own projects.

### ***Collection-Based Research Definition and Structure***

Therefore, although research is carried out competently in the case-study institutions, it is not always well structured. How this research fits into the long-term goals of the institution is less clearly defined. Quality research is being produced, but its long-term accessibility, after completion of the immediate project, is more questionable. Using research databases allows for a research trail, but increased accessibility and visibility of research files may allow for a better overall understanding of the central and long-term role of collection-based research in the museum. The definition is a structural keystone for collection-based research. Building on this keystone, the next chapter will combine current practice and object theory with the collection-based research definition in order to create greater structure.

## **Conclusion**

Interviews with staff members at The Nelson Provincial Museum and The Suter Art Gallery reveals that research is being undertaken at a fruitful rate. However, the types, processes and outcomes of research vary and understandings of collection-based research are not always in sync with this. To begin unpacking this myth of disappearing research, a definition has been developed in chapter one that not only addresses the actions of research, but its outcomes as well.

Findings from studying current practice at the case-study institutions, international literature and developing a research definition all suggest that collection-based

research can be improved by increasing understanding, structure and visibility. This will be addressed in the next chapter which will combine current practice with underlying museum, material culture and social history theory to create a set of research principles and processes.

# Chapter Three

## Principles and Processes of Research

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### **Introduction**

This chapter will develop research principles and processes that can be used to structure collection-based research. It will build on the previous chapters by taking an understanding of how collection-based research is approached and achieved at the Nelson Provincial Museum and The Suter Art Gallery and using this as the foundation for developing research principles. The previous chapters showed the all-pervasive, ad hoc nature of collection-based research. They made clear that, contrary to the fears of international literature, a large amount of research is being constantly undertaken. Chapter one and two suggest that this fear stems from a lack of research understanding, structure and visibility caused by changes in the museums as a whole.

This chapter will concentrate on building understanding, structure and visibility by creating a set of research principles which are underpinned by both the realities of collection-based research in medium-sized institutions and the background history of museum development and object theory. It will follow the concept of the object/subject dichotomy from its beginnings and examine its central position in understanding objects in museums today. I posit that the principles developed will provide museum professionals with a guideline that, not only provides structure and substance to their understanding of how they are approaching collection-based research, but also encourage more visible and transparent research with greater longevity and variety of uses.

This chapter will be divided into three main sections. The first will focus on data gathered from The Nelson Provincial Museum and The Suter Art Gallery. It will consider current research structures and how these are approached by staff. The second section focusses on the relevant theory and chronologically follows the development of the disparate, though connected areas of museums, anthropology, history and art. This section culminates with a discussion of the object/subject dichotomy and the combination of objects with image and text. Finally, the chapter highlights the different elements which feed into object research in museums and orders them into a set of research principles. The original aim of this thesis was to create a research methodology, providing a framework for museum staff to use when researching their collections. After spending time in the case-study institutions, it was fast apparent that the constant, yet ad hoc, nature of collection research left little time for rules. Instead, this chapter aims to provide a set of research principles which can be applied to all research in museums, no matter their scope or purpose. A sound understanding of object theory, with a focus on museum environments and the subject/object divide, creates a solid grounding in both object research and use. By creating this flexible structure, I hope that it will remain applicable in a greater number of situations and contribute to collection research being both well-grounded in theory, but also visible and above all else, as useful as possible.

A definition for research was given in the first chapter. The research principles developed in this chapter will pull together all aspects of collection-based research in medium-sized museums; from day-to-day realities to the diverse sources of object theories which underpin them. Chapter one looked at the realities of object research and developed a research definition designed to include all aspects of collection-based research and help structure and highlight achievements. This definition is repeated below:

*Collection-based research in museums includes all activities which aim to enhance or develop new knowledge or new ways of understanding museum objects. This includes, but is not limited to, examination of the physical object, development of provenance and enriching the links and relationships of the object with other objects or information sources. New research must be recorded in an accessible and accountable way so as to become a building block on which further research can stand with sure footing. Researchers must endeavour to make their research outcomes as visible as feasible to colleagues, stakeholders and the public in general.*

This definition will be applied to everyday research at The Nelson Provincial Museum and The Suter Art Gallery. The broad nature of the above research definition reflects the nature of research in the two case-study institutions. Staff members work hard and skilfully juggle many competing priorities. This definition attempts to respect this varied workload and provide a definition which, although inclusive, still creates boundaries and encourages museum professionals to think more closely about what they are doing. What this chapter is trying to do is work from within the current system, taking the best parts that work well and providing them with more structure, a more transparent grounding and presenting them in a more visible way. To achieve this aim, this chapter will begin with a closer understanding of research structures in medium-sized institutions.

## Current Research Structures

All of the interview participants discussed research as something which is constantly occurring. The discussion tied into the nature of their job and the participants' constant desire to improve and develop their collections. This can be seen in the following comments:

*I think that we can't say that we sit down and do research... but we can say that we are researching all the time. It is just part and parcel of what we do. I think that if you sat down and analysed what you did do, you would find that most of it is research (PHB).*

*I try to do [some research] every single day. You have to otherwise your day just gets eaten up with emails and generally being a good sort in a can do, provincial context (AMW).*

To display a greater understanding of the pervasiveness of research and the opportunistic ways which it is approached by staff, different types of research and how they are understood and achieved will be examined. Firstly, by looking at collection management research which is centred on the object file and then turning to more subject-based research, including exhibition and publication.

### ***Registration, cataloguing and deaccessioning***

Research at the registration stage is centrally important for museum objects. It is the point where the object is often still connected to its previous life and once this connection has been removed, it can become much more difficult to place the object in context with any level of detail. One research participant describes the importance of sitting down with the donor and talking through as much information as they can provide. Another participant focusses on the physical research aspect of registration as the point where the object is closely examined and its details recorded. After the initial



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

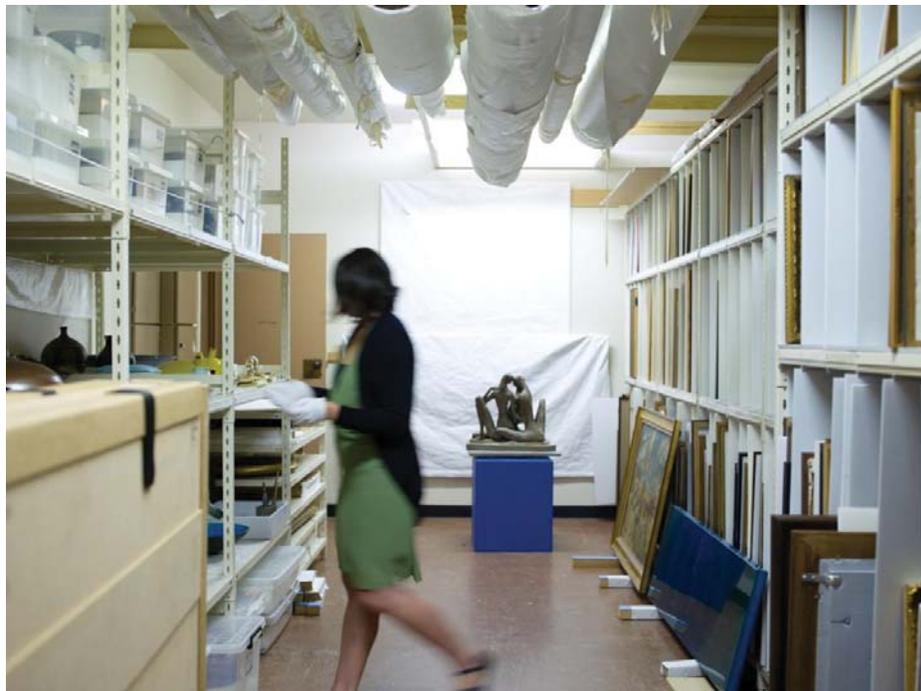


Figure 17: Curator Anna-Marie White working in The Suter storeroom. Image courtesy of The Suter Art Gallery, Te Aratoi o Whakatū, 2008.

registration period, further cataloguing is likely to take place on an ad hoc basis and generally because the records are needed for another project. This may be an outgoing loan where the records will be sent to another institution or The Nelson Provincial Museum provides another example where all exhibition object records are improved before the objects are returned to the store as part of the exhibition process.

Research also takes place at the end of an object's time in the museum. In order to ethically justify deaccessioning, all decisions should be backed by thorough research. Interestingly, deaccessioning proposals, as a reason for researching, can become the reason an object takes a stronger position in the collection, as one interview participant describes:

*I have done so much research on objects that could be potentially deaccessioned that half the time, by the time you have finished the process, they enter the collection because you find out something funky about them. Which is kind of the point of the highly formalised deaccession process (AMW).*

Each of these aspects of collection research relies closely on the current documentation system. Documentation systems have received a lot of focus in museums in recent times. Advances in collection management techniques and professional training of staff have put pressure on museums to conform to 'best practice'. The 2006 New Zealand Auditor-General's report on management of museum collections focussed on collection management systems in museums. Collection-based research barely found a mention in the report except to note that of all the information missing from object files, research was the most common. Both of the case-study institutions use Vernon CMS to digitally manage their collections. The ability to link records together was considered the most important research factor by the interview participants, along with the databases' ability to leave a verifiable research trail. The centrality of the database is highlighted with the comment that:

*For the most part, my object research revolves around Vernon. Using Vernon and improving the quality of the records (AMW).*

Any set of research principles must work within the relevant digital database system and use it to enhance research, while at the same time maintaining an understanding of its structure and limitations.

### ***Exhibition and publication Research***

Research for exhibition and publication often takes a different approach. It normally starts with a subject and/or theory and works back towards objects which fit within its frameworks. This is primarily an epistemological approach to research as opposed to the more ontologically-based building of object files. Varieties of exhibition research approaches are listed by one interview participant as:

*It might be a topic or even whether that topic is worth pursuing. Once you have settled on a topic, it might be about a theme or it might be about an artist or group of artists. Or if it was a media based exhibition, for instance printmaking, it might be about different printmaking methods and how that applies and how that can then be interpreted to the public (JC).*

Exhibitions generally bring a group of objects together and it is the thread that holds these objects together that becomes the central focus. The thread, theme, or topic can come in countless varieties but the objects must fit inside it rather than dictate their own directions. Once exhibition research has begun it is normally given a higher priority in the museum as it has time frames which it must adhere to. The benefits of research under the exhibition banner are discussed by a participant:

*If it is an exhibition and you are working towards a deadline you can tell the reception to hold all calls, because you are pulling in a team and at some point*



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.

*you have to deliver out to that team and you have to have done the research (AMW).*

But the flip side of this is that the research must also be very focussed and to the point.

Publications also take a similar structural approach to research. This can be clearly seen in the recent Puke Ariki publication *Contested Ground: Te Whenua I Tohea* (Day 2010). The blurb describes how “the authors throw new light on the controversies and characters of this turbulent period, examining the origins of the wars, the military tactics and tools employed, and the imagery and literature surrounding the conflict.” The contents of the book reflect this passage and the only area where museum objects take more than a subsidiary role is the focus on military tools, but this section still remains subject dominated. However, not every publication follows this method. *Taonga Maori in the British Museum* (Starzecka et al. 2010) is written as a highly detailed collection-focussed catalogue and the Whanganui Regional Museum book *Te*

*Ara Tapu* (Horwood and Wilson 2008) balances a richly detailed narrative which is structured by whakapapa and directed by the taonga it describes.

Understanding the way that museums structure their research and how this is influenced by the research purpose is an essential part of getting the most out of the available resources. Understanding the current structure, with its strengths and weaknesses, allows the best use of what is already in place when developing a set of research principles and processes. This study of current practice has focussed on two medium-sized institutions. These institutions are well positioned to develop an understanding of their current research structures, because, due to more limited resources and staff numbers, staff must cover a broad experience base and take a pragmatic view as to what and how much is achievable. This gives them a good understanding of both the strengths and limitations of collection-based research. On the other hand, these smaller institutions can be more difficult to analyse due to the more opportunistic ways that they operate. The literature tends to use examples from larger institutions with research budgets and even research policies (Graham and Jomphe 2010; Winker 2008; Gascoigne 2006b; Reid and Naylor 2005). Their examples then, although interesting, can appear less applicable to those in medium-sized institutions. Using medium-sized institutions in this study allows for a quick path to the core of current practice in all museums.

## **Understanding Research Theory**

As well as an understanding of research structure, research principles and processes must also have a solid grounding in theory. This section will start with the development of the museum, anthropology and art history and follow the split between the museum and academic theory. The development of the new material culture studies will be traced right through to the possibility of a material culture turn. This will include close examinations of object theory and the object and museum. Two

threads of art history and the art museum, and public history and historiography will also continue throughout the section, culminating with the postmodernist shift and how this affects the different disciplines, particularly where they connect between the object and the museum. What this section is trying to achieve is to trace the birth of the museum alongside the disciplines of history, anthropology, art and material culture while emphasising both similarities and differences that present themselves. In particular, this section will focus on the subject/object dichotomy, how this has shifted over time and what it promises for the future of the object in the museum.

### ***Ideas and Things***

The birth of the museum and early anthropology are closely tied together (Hicks 2010, p.34). Museums gathered type collections which archaeologists and anthropologists (or ethnologists) used in their studies. This connection weakened as the subject/object divide began to grow. In the early twentieth century a large division developed between the two (Hicks 2010, p.34). The school of anthropology drew away from the museum and its objects and instead began to focus on academic theory, rebasing itself in the university. Similar changes were happening in the history department. Academic history placed huge emphasis on theory and archival documentation and drew further and further away from the museum (Starn 2004; Pearce 1989, p.5).

The birth of the public museum is also closely tied to the display of art (Bennett 1995). Born from the French Revolution, the art museum was a place where private art collections could be made public (Bennett 1995, p.89). The Louvre is an important embodiment of this. However, the art museum became an elite place where grand narratives of Western art and culture could be idealised.

With the loss of academic object-based study, the history museum turned to the art museum for ideas. History museums began to display their objects along a narrative/subject basis borrowed from the art museum and this is now the dominant method of exhibition display. Interestingly, the grand narratives of the art museum are now under threat and object-based displays are instead gaining greater currency.

Today, lamenting the loss of the central position of the object from museums is common (Conn 2010; Keene 2005). Exhibitions have reduced their reliance on objects to impart their message to such a degree that commentators have questioned the need for objects in museums full stop (Gurian 2006; McLeod 2004). Museum staff also began professionalising the industry, building their own body of theory and training industry entrants. At the same time, specialisms in the museum became harder to find. The image of the old curator, hidden away in the back of the museum store, devoting his life to the study of minutiae of some forgotten insect, has become an image of what not to look like. Instead, curators tend to be more generalist and project driven. As discussed in the previous chapter, these shifts also coincided with a reduction in the number of curators in larger museums. Fewer curators are left to cover larger gaps.

The story continues slightly differently in art museums. Artwork continues to play a central visual role in galleries but the narratives being told have shifted. David Carrier explains that the intertwined relationship historical art museums, contemporary art galleries and academia have contributed to differences between art and history museums. Carrier explains how:

Art-history writing, developing at the same time as the art museum, structures historical presentations of art. Art criticism evaluates the contemporary art displayed in galleries. Aesthetics identifies the entire field of art, past and present. Just as art writing is divided into art criticism, which typically is journalistic reporting, and art-history writing, which provides a historical perspective on older art, so art world spaces are divided into galleries where contemporary art is shown, and museums, which provide historical visual narratives. The primary goal of the museum is to tell the story of art from its origins up almost to the immediate present. The art gallery displays

contemporary art, and so enables the visiting critic to evaluate new painting and sculpture aspiring to enter the museum. Museums and galleries thus supplement one another, as do the writing associated with them, art history, and criticism (Carrier 2003, p.112).

Although Carrier creates quite stringent boundaries between the different parties, in many cases they are much more complex (Whitehead 2007; Preziosi 2005). What is important is that art museums have retained their central position in the production of art theory, whereas history museums have largely gone in a different direction to their academic counterparts.

There are two central issues to deduce from the above background of the development of museums alongside anthropology, archaeology, art and history. Firstly, it is important to note the shift in the museum from being object centric to subject centric and the reverse occurring in the art museum. This will become a central theme in the following paragraphs which will trace the position and possibilities of the museum object over time. Secondly, the theoretical shift of the academic disciplines must be traced. Academic disciplines are also subject to fashions and their developments have a strong trickle-down influence over the museum. However, this section hopes to show how museum research methodologies can and have borrowed from all of these different disciplines in order to contribute to a set of research principles and processes uniquely suited for use in the museum sector.

### ***Material Culture Studies and the Museum***

The term material culture was commonly used in early anthropology but it fell from favour and instead anthropologists, such as Bronislaw Malinowski, began focussing on the functionalist social aspects of the discipline, spending extended periods living amongst their subjects and considering their material belongings only as a subsidiary element of their culture (Pearce 1989, p.4). This direction continued to develop over the first half of the twentieth century, until material culture studies began to re-

emerge in Europe in the 1970s in an attempt to reconcile structuralism and semiotics (Hicks 2010, p.29). Contemporaneously, an American movement also began developing material culture from a social history position (Glassie 1999; Lubar and Kingery 1993; Schlereth 1992). By the 1990s, the new material culture studies had set down strong roots. Its theories became popular in the new museology which was also developing throughout this period.

The new museology appeared on the scene in Anglophone countries with *The New Museology* (Vergo 1989) and has proliferated since that period (Weil 2002 and 1990; Hooper-Greenhill 2000 and 1992; Pearce 1992 and 1989). It covers many areas of the museum industry, but object analysis and exhibition theory are relevant here. From the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s Susan Pearce made a large impact on the fledgling museum studies literature, particularly in the field of object theory (1992 and 1989). She emphasised the unique contribution that material culture can make to our understandings of society and individuals (Pearce 1989, p.2) and claimed that only through understanding this can museums interpret and present it to the public in meaningful ways (Pearce 1992). Pearce also edited many volumes which brought together the thoughts of a variety of commentators from different disciplinary backgrounds in usable formats (2000, 1995, 1994 and 1990). Her 1994 volume, *Interpreting Objects and Collections*, in particular brought together a wide range, in both background and date originally published, of articles focussing on the interpretation and understanding of objects and collections.

The proliferation of literature exploring object theory in the museum trailed off at the turn of the century and only a small selection of works have been published in the past decade. Simon Knell edited a collection of articles in 2007 which focussed on objects and the museum and, most recently, Sandra Dudley's 2010 volume encourages the materiality of increased physical engagement with museum objects. However, although not directly in focus, museums have not disappeared from material culture literature. Many anthropology and art history texts continue to return to the museum

as a place where we engage with, celebrate and explore our material past (Henare et al. 2007; Whitehead 2007; Shelton 2006; Preziosi 2005; Carrier 2003; Myers 2001).

### ***Postmodernism and New Directions***

The advent of postmodernism rippled in effect throughout academic disciplines and along to challenge everyday practice in the museum. Museums had espoused an early belief that the arts are capable of bringing society together and reducing social problems through elevated thought and study (Hooper-Greenhill 2007, p.196). Since the postmodern shift, society has been focussing on celebrating diversity rather than perfection and has begun questioning grand narratives. Visitors have increasingly become participants in museums as the museum as forum has gained ground over the temple (Karp and Lavine 1991, p.3; Cameron 1971).

With the postmodern shift, multiple gazes of multiple communities in the visitor-centric museum quickly complicated museological debates (Karp 1991, p.12). Museum power bastions of the white middle class began to be undermined by a need to satisfy market demands and re-imagine multicultural identities. This idea of multiple communities is further complicated by the realisation that even individual people have multiple identities that overlap and contradict one another (Karp 1992b, p.20). Visitors bring these multiple identities of multiple communities to the museum (Karp 1992a, p.3) and contribute to the completion of the text presented and received (Mason 2005, p.205; Weil 2002, p.212; McIntosh 1999, p.44). This postmodern influence is one aspect of Eileen Hooper-Greenhill's 'post-museum' which is developing more nuanced understandings of the relationships between culture, communication, learning and identity (Hooper-Greenhill 2007, p.1) and represents a feminisation of the museum in encouraging responsiveness, partnership and diversity (Hooper-Greenhill 2000, p.153). It negotiates and embraces the complexities of the postmodern world "with nimble flexibility and creative fluidity" (Hooper-Greenhill 2007, p.1) while positively engaging

with the concept of value through a focus on accountability and performativity (Hooper-Greenhill 2007, p.200). It makes visible the power of museum pedagogy (Hooper-Greenhill, 2007 p.200) to clearly reveal its inherently biased nature, and oppose the power retained by the stubborn image of the museum as neutral (Karp 1991, p.14).

However, this strong visitor-centric focus with its postmodernist underpinnings, has led some commentators to feel that objects have lost out (Conn 2010; Gurian 2006; Keene 2005). Exhibitions and public programmes have become elevated in importance at the same time that the number of objects used in exhibitions is reducing and often those that are there become mere illustrations of the exhibition narrative. This shows yet another shift towards subject which leaves the object further behind. The next section will interrogate the polarity of subject and object and discuss possibilities of approaching museum work with both of them balanced and working together. First, however, the post-modernist experiences of other disciplines must be given space to feed into this narrative.

Revisionist history and post-modernist understandings made dramatic changes in the discipline of history. Master narratives were interrogated and re-imagined with multiple stories from multiple perspectives. The historiographical concept of revisionism recognised that historical interpretation is a product of now and that all historical narratives can always be reinterpreted in line with changing social values, beliefs and understandings. History and theory must always stand on the shoulders of those who come before to reach out towards contemporary relevance. Relevance is everything. These ideas can also cross over to an understanding of a museum object file which can never be completed. An object will continue to grow its history and interpretations and understandings of it will also continue to evolve alongside developments in culture and society. A historical object remains a product of both its past and its present.

The grand narratives of art began to be questioned and new world views began to find places in art museums. Christopher Whitehead argues that the project of art history display privileged an inherently spatial concept of art history articulated through objects which has the effect of obscuring alternative art histories (2007, p.58). Multiple cultural perspectives crept in as art began to both look for new materials and deconstruct gallery spaces till the grand narratives were no longer recognisable in much modernist and postmodernist art.

The entrenched nature of postmodernist theory in academic disciplines has encouraged many new ways of looking at culture and society. While this has been occurring, the small material culture school has also been gathering strength. The recently published *Oxford Handbook of Material Culture Studies* (Hicks and Beaudry 2010) gives a comprehensive overview of the current status of material culture studies but argues that the multidisciplinary developments represent a series of crossroads which point in many different directions. Although exciting, this does not yet provide enough coherency to constitute a 'material turn' (Hicks and Beaudry 2010, p.20).

### ***The Museum Object and Object Theory***

One important aspect of museum object theory is the consideration of the position and value of the object in the museum. An object's position in a collection affects its value to that institution. Being the best example in an area the institution is proud of increases the object's value over being just another duplicate or example. However, these positions can change over time as new things are added to the collection, shifting an object's value in relation to the other objects around it. Provenance and context are now considered key aspects of object value and an object with strong connections to personas outside of the museum and other objects within the museum has a high value, even if it appears a lesser object.

This raises the importance of understanding the different stages in a museum object's life. Firstly, an object is made with a purpose in mind, whether it is something as mundane and ordinary as an eating utensil or with the hope of being aesthetically pleasing and artistically valued. The newly created object then sets forth in the useful section of its life. After it has ceased being useful, the object may be placed on a shelf or stored somewhere as a reminder of memories associated with it, or simply in the hope that it may one day become useful again. When the object finally reaches the museum it gains a new identity as a museum object. It has ceased to be useful for the purpose for which it was created, but, perhaps due to its good fortune in simply lasting, the object is given a new purpose within the museum.

The art museum object takes a slightly different trajectory. Often it can come directly from its maker to the museum and the museum continues to exhibit it for the use it was made for. In this way the art museum is much more implicit in helping to create the provenance of their objects, although the history museum may do this too.

Consideration of the stages in an object's life and how the object meaning changes with time and circumstance has a strong background in material culture studies. Early material culture studies placed a strong emphasis on exchange (Mauss 1923) and tended to split this between gift and commodity exchange. Arjun Appadurai (1986), in his seminal work, sets out to break down the separation of gift and commodity and question the centrality of exchange in commodity theory. He discusses the 'social lives of things' and claims that objects move in and out of commodity phases throughout their social lives. In another essay in the same volume, Igor Kopytoff (1986) questions the polarity between an object and a person. He applies a cultural biographical approach to things to achieve a broader understanding of the society it belongs to. Kopytoff's object biographies will be returned to later in the chapter as it is used as a model for developing object files.

Daniel Miller (2010; 2005; 1995 and 1987) is also an important theorist whose ideas have had a large impact on the way objects have been portrayed. His work places material culture at the forefront to show the different ways it is capable of illuminating culture, from shopping theory to houses, and side steps around the problem of exchange. His objectification of culture is a useful step in object research along with his demonstration that materialism in culture is not necessarily bad. Objectification brings the subject/object divide closer together and discusses their relationships, rather than assuming their differences. Miller shows an appreciation for both things and the aspects of culture that they can illuminate.

### ***Research Methodologies***

Several object research methodologies have been proposed over the years. These methodologies are much more focussed than the structures developed throughout this thesis, but they provide an important touchstone for the development of object and collection-based research. Their focussed nature concentrates on a single object. Therefore, they are not subject to the differentiation of approaches between collection management and exhibition research used when applying the research principles developed in this thesis. This thesis began as a proposal to develop a collection-based research methodology. As the research interviews began though, it quickly became apparent that the many separate demands on research did not leave much room for one concise methodology. A new approach needed to be found.

One of the most widely discussed object methodologies was developed by Jules Prown and published in 1982. Prown came from an art history background and although his method was developed surrounding artworks, it was designed to apply to all material culture object research. He advocated the use of objects as a source of primary data and not just as things (p.1). Prown's methodology ran from description, through deduction, to speculation. Description focusses on reading the object and its materials

at that particular moment in time (p.7). This moment also informs the “particular encounter between an object with its history and an individual with his history [which] shapes the deductions” (p.9). The deduction stage involves handling and interacting physically with the object where possible. Prown suggests that to understand the material culture of an object, all preconceptions must first be removed. This must continue until the researcher reaches speculation when the field is opened up to creative imagination (p.10). Speculation allows new questions to be raised and then investigated. Prown’s method puts emphasis on interpreting objects by experiencing them. Although a fascinating model, it is time consuming, very object focussed and would be difficult to achieve on a large scale in museum collections.

Susan Pearce contributed immensely to literature on material culture in museums. In one of her edited volumes (1994) she included a methodology developed by R. Elliot et al. (1994). This article again put material culture research into a three step process. Like Prown, it begins with observable data, then comparative data, supplementary data and then conclusions. Each of these steps, except the conclusions, requires an ordered approach looking at material, construction, function, provenance and then value. Each of these approaches are supplied with a checklist of questions. Elliot’s methodology is highly structured. It is the extent to which order and structure control these methodologies that make them appear impractical when working in a pressured environment with time and resource constraints. Although Elliot created quite a different and more rational approach than Prown, both methodologies leave little room for the realities and coping mechanisms, such as opportunistic research, found in the survey of current practice.

Philip Jones (2008) concentrated on objects which were capable of bridging Australian Aboriginal and colonial worlds and interrogating them to discover a new history of cultural encounters in the liminal space between the two. He did not detail a method, but his fresh approach to interrogation of dominant narratives through material culture research helped inspire this thesis. Jones took an ontological approach to

researching his objects. He explores their histories looking for the factors that made them different from other similar objects. He then allows each of his objects to build new theories of engagement around these aspects which make them different.

Object biography frameworks are another aspect that informed the development of this thesis. Kirsten Wehner and Martha Sear (2010) describe how they used a Kopytoffian cultural biography model in the development of the Australian Journeys exhibition at the Australian National Museum. Although never explaining exactly how the object biographies were approached, these object focussed narratives were then used in an effort to allow the individual objects to play centre stage in their own stories. All objects considered for the exhibition had cultural biographies developed by their relevant curators. These cultural biographies were then used to help make the final object choices. Robert Hicks (2001) also takes a similar approach in his discussion of material culture research into scientific measuring instruments. He gives an example of the areas of research required to build the object biography. Materials, design, production, use, meaning, social context and relationship to other instruments and methods are all listed (p.188). This method appears more usable in a busy museum environment where sections can be completed with as much or as little depth as desired.

After gathering a snapshot of current practice based on The Suter Art Gallery and Nelson Provincial Museum, it appears that a more holistic approach to structuring collection-based research is needed. This is started by developing a definition for research and continues with a set of research principles and processes. The principles bring together the structure and processes of research. It does not just create principles, but also suggests a means of implementing them. The principles are created in a graduated way. Institutions can implement the research framework in parts over time and it remains applicable with varying levels of research depth and expertise.

### ***Igor Kopytoff: 'The cultural biography of things'***

In 'The cultural biography of things: commoditization as a process' (1986) Igor Kopytoff put forward a ground breaking and much referenced argument that the anthropological theory of biography could be applied to things. He argued that asking typical people biography questions of things could further contribute to the study of culture (1986, p.66). To do this, he questioned the Western and Christian polarisation of people and things as singular and commodity (1986, p.84). To begin with, he uses the example of slavery to show a dominant history of commoditisation of people and positions this alongside a discussion of different cultural approaches to abortion which highlight dominant Western and Christian notions of the self as a singular and inalienable entity. Alongside this, Kopytoff develops a detailed argument demonstrating how things too move in cycles of commoditisation and singularisation. He shows that not all things are always commodities, though they retain a commodity potential, much like people. As the slavery era appears more distant, our contemporary world is placing more and more emphasis on people's ability to market and trade themselves and one another.

Questioning this polarisation between things and people provided an important breakthrough in the study of material culture. Kopytoff drew an analogy between biographical study of people and things in a small scale society to show how culture defines them both. He described how:

In small scale societies, a person's social identities are relatively stable and changes in them are normally conditioned more by cultural rules than by idiosyncrasies. The drama in an ordinary person's biography stems from what happens within the given status. It lies in the conflicts between the egoistic self and the unambiguous demands of given social identities, or in conflicts arising from interaction between actors with defined roles within a clearly structured social system. The excitement in the biographies is of the picaresque variety. At the same time, the individual who does not fit the given niches is either singularized into a special identity – which is sacred or dangerous, and often both – or simply cast out. Things in these small-scale societies are similarly modelled. Their status in the clearly structured system of exchange values and exchange spheres is unambiguous. An eventful biography of a thing is for the

most part one of the events within the given sphere. Any thing that does not fit the categories is clearly anomalous and is taken out of normal circulation, to be either sacralized or isolated or cast out (Kopytoff 1986, p.89).

Therefore, both the biographical study of people and things can be used to explore and interrogate the social system and its cultural understandings. Kopytoff goes on to describe how a complex society complicates biographies of people before showing that things in complex societies are complicated in very similar ways, both buffeted by changing values and identities.

Kopytoff's biography of things provides a useful model from which to approach research and the object file as it encourages the object to contribute to understandings of culture and society. This encourages the usefulness of objects in the museum setting. It is important to note that object biographies can and have been used successfully in exhibition development and that, while this chapter is using the model to create an ontological, object-based record, as a research model it has other uses as well. The object file is a place to store multiple and multi-layered biographies and although exhibitions and outreach programmes have begun to recognise the multiple narratives in which objects fit, in order to entrench this in the museum system these multiple narratives must be stored in the object file as "it is at the level of the catalog that the enduring identity of the objects exists" (Srinivasan et al. 2010, p.747). Kopytoff accepts that each person has multiple biographies which take into account parts of their life while ignoring other parts. He claims that biographies of things must be treated similarly. This is true in a directed situation, such as exhibition research. However, the object file as object biography becomes a place of storage of all the disparate pieces of biography as yet available. It is this position as object biography holding pen that allows the object file to become a collection of ontological field notes. New directions may be discovered with the juxtapositioning of the multiple and multi-layered biographies, and at the very least, when needed for project-based research, the object file has the potential to become, over time, a rich resource to dip into and extract the relevant sections.

Kopytoff's ideas have been further developed in museum literature over the past few decades. His ideas were quickly developed and applied to museums by Susan Pearce in *Museums, Objects, and Collections* (1992) and Charles Saumarez Smith in 'Museums, Artefacts, and Meanings' (1989). Object biography theory has continued to be applied to the museum context as a way to develop collection research. Many of these studies are anthropologically based and there are a series of articles published that trace cultural biographies of objects with Pacific origins in European museums (Bell and Geismar 2009; Sperlich 2006; Gosden and Marshall 1999). In 2005, Samuel Alberti wrote a survey of the history of museums based on object biographies in their collections. His chosen field was science and natural history, but his work could be applied to all types of museum objects. He described the method's efficacy in museums due to its appealing narrative hook and ease of use on the surface which is underpinned by a comprehensive theoretical grounding capable of providing deeper analysis (Alberti 2005, p.561). The use of object biographies in museums is then further espoused by Ramesh Srinivasan et al. (2010) as a way to incorporate the multiple ontologies of different cultures, and communities within those cultures, in a dynamic way. Current focusses on digitisation are suggested as the point where the traditional catalogue has an opportunity to be reworked. These different ways of seeing and understanding the world can be added to and entrenched in the permanent object files. Taking this approach to object files gives the object the chance to move within multiple circles and embody cultural knowledge covering wide ranging research directions. It also gives the object a chance to develop new ontologies that have perhaps gone unnoticed due to focusses on narrative or archive-based themes. An example of this is Philip Jones book *Ochre and Rust* (2008). Jones took Australian museum objects which came from liminal cultural backgrounds. He then provided each with an object biography, its very own narrative. This provided some interesting insights into the contact period between Aborigine and Europeans in Australia. It gave Philips a platform from which to highlight differences in the contact story, rather than brush past them in a hunt for similarities. This approach created a more nuanced version of Australian history.

## *Ontological and Epistemological Approaches*

A recurring theme of the subject/object dichotomy has been running throughout this chapter. The divide has been slowly closing until it can arguably be removed altogether. Miller's (1987) concept of objectification built further on Appadurai's (1986) position of objects and together they have provided the spring board from where the entrenched anthropological distinction between things and meaning, which has contributed to the reduction of objects to illustrations, can be questioned (Henare et al. 2007, p.3). Amiria Henare, Martin Holbraad and Sari Wastell (2007) have proposed a methodology where "with purposeful naivety, the aim... is to take 'things' encountered in the field as they present themselves, rather than immediately assuming that they signify, represent, or stand for something else." This approach is a reaction to what they perceive as an obfuscation of the discipline by writers who make use of assumptions in order to claim simplification of method. Instead, Henare, Holbraad and Wastell have stripped the object/subject dichotomy back to its core and set out to build new theory from its base. In effect, both are returned to the starting line and allowed to grow simultaneously without one being privileged over the other. This re-envisioning of things as a starting point for study suggests good things for increasing the value of object use in museums in the future. The long history of elevating information over objects in the museum has meant a slow but steady decline of object use (Dudley 2010, p.3). Balancing the value of subject and object as information sources has possibilities of long reaching change.

Back in 1989, Susan Pearce (p.2) stated that "material culture is studied because it can make a unique contribution to our understanding of the workings of individuals and societies – because, in short, it can tell us more about ourselves." This shows that this approach to material culture has been well understood for years. However, writing sixteen years later, Henare (2005, p.3) highlights the fact that although this point has been made many times, the next step of translating it into practice has never been consistently applied. Interrogating the subject/object divide is central to this thesis.

Removing the pre-conceived notions of polar positioning of subject and object opens up the museum as a place where new knowledge can be developed in new ways. Using the resources at hand, a museum is placed in a prime position to combine subject and theory with their collections in order to present new, richly layered ways of understanding to the public.

In order to make the most of this re-configuration of the subject/object position, an understanding of the underlying research concepts must be reached. Anthropology tends to take an epistemological approach to research (Henare et al. 2007, p.7). This allows for the creation of a theory and then testing it through fieldwork. However, over the past thirty years, a disparate collection of anthropologists, including Bruno Latour and Alfred Gell, have been taking a more ontological approach to their fieldwork (Henare et al. 2007, p.7). An ontological approach allows fieldwork to begin before assumptions become entrenched through to research outcomes. It allows researchers to work in their chosen field and let the data dictate the subject and theory as it becomes apparent. Case studies are less likely to be forced to sit within ill-fitting boundaries and more likely to give rise to their very own version of theory. Therefore, what Henare, Holbraad and Wastell attempt to do in their book, *Thinking Through Things* (2007, p.7), is “to propose a methodology where ‘things’ themselves may dictate a *plurality* of ontologies... [they] advocate a methodology that might create a multiplicity of theories.” This multiplicity of theories is especially important when researching and presenting different cultures (Henare et al. 2007, p.23). It allows for a celebration of differences rather than a search for similarities.

Breaking down the subject/object dichotomy and understanding their underlying methods of research is important in developing museum research principles which balance the use of both object and narrative. The ontological and epistemological research methods described above match the two main divisions of museum research. The majority of museum exhibitions tend to start with a theory or narrative and build out from there, giving exhibition research an epistemological framework. Museum

objects which are used in these exhibitions are a part of the research process, but rarely the initial starting point. In fact, more often they become mere illustrations to make the narrative more interesting. On the other hand, object files in the museum database are centred around the object itself. This allows the object to be the starting point for research and dictate its own narrative, taking an ontological approach. This research is generally considered with high priority by museum staff, but, due to constraints in time and resources it is often the first type of research to be left on the backburner when more visible demands arise. Being able to recognise and understand the differences between ontological and epistemological approaches and how they affect research outcomes allows for a more aware researcher to produce more nuanced projects and recognise and understand when they are making assumptions.

### ***Links and Relationships between Objects***

However, it must be pointed out that databases are not purely object-centric tools. Especially since the move to digital databases, the possibilities for managing sets of links and relationships between collection objects have added another facet to collection-based research. Those staff members interviewed who work regularly with their museum's collection database emphasised the importance of researching, developing and using these links and relationships. Creating the link often does not have an immediate use, but it is something saved for a later day:

*Sometimes I have been cleaning up or I find my way through the archives and I find documents which have information that is immediately relevant to a particular object but not required, you know, I just found it. In the past we have never had the facility to be able to create a broader database. So now if I find something, say in the trust board minutes, I make a copy of it and put it in the artist's file and I make a note of it into Vernon. And really what I am working towards is the day where I come back the other way and I want that painting for an exhibition and I have to go and find all the stuff that's attached to it - that's what I work for every day (AMW).*

Creating pathways between records allows objects to be seen in new ways. Staff interviewed found this type of research centrally important. Their role placed them in a position where the links could be discovered. Creating these pathways between objects allows faster access to broader images of history and, the more detail in the records, the more connections that can be rediscovered. A throwaway comment in a local history document can bring history to colour. One interview participant described how an unpublished document mentioned a great aunt who went to school with Frances Marsden and thought her snobby for insisting her red hair was actually auburn. That the Marsden family of Isel House were red headed had until this discovery been forgotten, but a closer inspection of the family photographs on display in the house museum suggest that not only Frances, but her father too had frizzy red hair.

### ***Objects, Text and Images***

Many medium-sized institutions like The Nelson Provincial Museum are home to not just their local material culture heritage but also archives and photographic stores. Often these areas have traditionally been kept quite separate and objects, documents and images have become disconnected. However, this does not mean that possible connections are not there. One interview participant told the story of a wedding dress donor. When they sat down to talk it was discovered that the museum held photos of the donor's family, including an image of the donor herself. She agreed to supply the names of those in the images and after further discussion it was also discovered that the photo collection held an image of the house she grew up in. It is also thought that there is a relevant family history document in the archives. Therefore, what began as just a wedding dress became the catalyst for connections across the three main collection areas.

Combining objects, text and images in research does not have a strong history; the three are rarely included in any one methodological framework (Knappett 2008, p.146). Carl Knappett (2008) has studied the relationship between these three research mediums and how their relationship to each other alters their status. He describes how museum display, although retaining a latent thing-ness, treats an object like an image and likewise, being part of a museum collection can objectify an image or text. Knappett (2008, p.154) calls for a closer analysis of the networks and relationships between these three research sources, but claims that understanding these three sources from within the bounds of actor network theory allows them to decentre their assumed human primacy and relational definitions and examine them with “analytical impartiality” (Knappett 2008, p.140).

## **The Role of the Researcher**

Finally, before moving on to the case studies, it seems prudent to pause for a discussion of the researcher’s role in research outcomes. There are two parts to be aware of. Firstly, the researcher is most likely to find what is useful to their current project and discard research that is irrelevant to it. While accepting that this is a reality of project-based and outcome-focussed research, the researcher should remain aware of their use and manipulation of context of knowledge. This leads into the second point. The longer a museum object remains in the collection, the more attenuated its ties with its former, pre-museum life become. Therefore, research can often become more vague and difficult as it becomes more temporally distant. As official record and memory keepers for the objects in their care and public understandings of local history and memory, museums need to be aware that research and interpretation of objects have possibilities for long reaching effects.

My role as researcher in the following two case studies is to demonstrate the importance of the objects to the museum collections and highlight a variety of their

possible uses in different circumstances. As this is my aim, in these circumstances, it is likely to be achieved to some extent. However, showing the possibilities of importance of one museum object should not necessarily raise the importance of that object over other similar ones. Instead it should provide merely one jig saw piece in a jumble of possibilities. This should be especially noted in relation to the dunite sample which is one of a group of ten in The Nelson Provincial Museum collection. These samples currently have very little to distinguish them from one another.

I have chosen to focus on cultural and social history research in relation to the case-study objects with only brief forays into the histories of art and science. This research focus has been chosen in the interests of time and word constraints. As previously discussed there are many possible biographies available for an object and layers within those as well. There are also more scientific methods of research that have not been used. No analysis of the actual physical object has been undertaken. Arjun Appadurai's (1984) theory of the social life of things has also not been examined. Kopytoff's (1984) method of cultural biography was chosen due to the direct focus on the object itself. Appadurai's social life of things puts objects into their context of the type of object that they are. It focusses on the trajectories of these object types to inform the research about cultural and social norms rather than a micro study of the individualism of just one object. Although Kopytoff's approach is focussed on in these case studies, the two approaches are complimentary.

## **Research Processes**

The above sections follow the relevant developments in the museum and university disciplines which feed into object research today. The developments of material culture have been closely traced, especially where they intersect with the concepts of the subject and object. This is laid alongside developments in museum theory and developments in historiography and art history have also been examined. The next

section will take these ideas and discuss their relevance as elements of research principles and processes. They will be placed alongside aspects of current practice that have shown to be working well such as a flexible approach to research and the use of digital databases which currently dictate research frameworks.

### ***Constructing Knowledge***

The most important part of the production of research is the creation of new knowledge or new ways of understanding museum objects. This is stated in the first sentence of the research definition:

*Collection-based research in museums includes all activities which aim to enhance or develop new knowledge or new ways of understanding museum objects.*

However, the researcher must remain conscious of the constructed nature of all new knowledge produced. The museum has been described as both a Western construct in itself as well as a place where knowledge and memory is constructed. Researchers must remain aware of the trust that the public puts in the knowledge that they produce and work with integrity. In order to achieve this, the different stages of an object's life must be understood. In particular, the ways the museum portrays an object can affect how it is portrayed and remembered in the future. Finally, the researcher must also recognise their complicity in the above processes and be aware of the role they are playing while creating new knowledge, new ways of understanding objects and new social memories.

### ***Research Perspectives and Theory***

Approaching research with integrity necessitates an understanding of the theories and methodologies being used. This creates an aware researcher who does not just miss areas by accident, but as much as possible makes choices as to what to focus on and

what to leave out. It is important to have an understanding of whether research is being approached by an ontological or epistemological starting point and the differences between focussing research on the object or subject. Due to the sources available in museums, researchers must also be clear about the differences between objects, documents and images and make choices about how they are going to use these different sources. Finally, it is important that researchers recognise the possibilities of multiple perspectives and remain aware of the dangers of continuing to stereotype or ignore parts of narratives.

### ***Research Frameworks***

By understanding the different theoretical approaches to research in the museum, researchers can make the best use of resources, whether researching for an exhibition or building object files in the database. By treating object files as a form of object biography under the Kopytoffian model, different stages in an object's life can be recognised and a more inclusive understanding of the object developed. At the same time, by understanding the approach taken to objects in exhibition research, researchers can give the object as much or as little agency in the narrative as they choose. The action of making this choice suggests that the object has a more important role away from the finished exhibition, even if while on display it is used as mere illustration.

It is important to remember that the museum is a public forum. The outcome of research is often directed towards the public and not fellow researchers. This means that both the processes and outcomes will look different from research produced in the university. Museums have a variety of stakeholders who all affect how the research is approached. This gives museum researchers less freedom to take their research where they want. The outcome must also be digestible for the everyday public, meaning that museum researchers must often take complex ideas and present

them in clear, informative and educative ways for a large cross-section of society. Although it is important for museum researchers to understand the theory behind what they are aiming to achieve, the final product is likely to leave the majority of this understanding behind the scenes.

### ***Managing Sources***

One of the most important aspects that arose out of the survey of current practice in the case-study institutions was the pragmatic approach taken every day with flexibility to adapt to the ad hoc nature of much collection-based research. The ability to manage this approach to research becomes a great asset to museums when considering the long-term outcomes of collection development and research. Many of the research opportunities that present themselves to the case-study institutions would be very difficult to find if they were being specifically searched for. The reality and strengths of this flexible approach to research was one of the main reasons to produce a set of research principles over a research methodology.

However, making good use of long-term approaches to research could be improved. Making an effort to link exhibition research to object files allows the research to be reused and become a building block for future projects. It is also important to put protocols in place for transparency in research. If information is to be relied on by future researchers, a comprehensive research trail is essential.

The final aspect that warrants mention is visibility. When those not directly involved in research cannot see it occurring, they may assume that it is not happening at all, especially when it is not being reproduced in traditional forms such as publications or academic articles. By taking the time to ensure research is visible to other staff members, stakeholders and the public, researchers may find that they gain more

encouragement and support. Dissemination and accessibility of research is essential, but researchers should endeavour to take this one step forward and make it clear to everyone that research is taking place and outcomes are being achieved.

### ***The Digital Connection***

The role of digital databases is quickly growing in museums throughout the world. This final section will take the framework discussed above and apply findings regarding digital aspects. Collection management is becoming increasingly reliant on digital collection management systems and these systems are becoming increasingly central in storing knowledge. Both case-study institutions use Vernon CMS collection management system. This system is well utilised in collection management but has underutilised research and knowledge storing potential. Being designed along a specific research structure, for example the Kopytoffian model outlined in chapter two, would make it easier to dump research outcomes accessibly into the relevant object files. This system could also be further developed to assist with accessibility of collection-based research. The digital object file could allow for public and private versions of object biographies and web-based applications could facilitate community speculation and interaction with the public version. A centralised research section could focus on object biographies while providing links with exhibition research, linked research files and simple methods for batch updating research files.

Digital collection management systems are also central in discovering links and relationships between objects and between objects and knowledge sources. This role of discovering and enhancing links and relationships was a strong thread in the participant interviews. Interview participants felt that museum staff members are best placed to facilitate the discovery and rediscovery of these connections.

## Research Principles

This list is a synthesised version of the above discussion of the elements of collection-based research. It takes the findings of the thesis so far and creates ten principles designed to encourage, direct and safeguard collection-based research.

1. *Creation of New Knowledge* – All research should aim to enhance and develop new knowledge or new ways of understanding.
2. *Integrity* – Museums staff members should make a commitment to excellence in all research undertaken.
3. *Transparency* – All research should be recorded in an accessible way so as to show a clear research trail and remain a useful stepping stone for any relevant future research.
4. *Ethical* – All research shall be approached in line with professional ethical standards.
5. *Commitment to Multiple Perspectives* – Researchers should be aware of their museum's social responsibilities and strive to illuminate rather than perpetuate stereotypes and grand narratives.
6. *Accountability* – The results of research should always be disseminated or made available to the public.
7. *Implicitness of Researcher* – Researchers should be aware of their own role in the construction of knowledge and memory.

8. *Research Environment* – Museums should foster an environment conducive to research and support staff to make progress as far as resources permit.
9. *Flexibility* – Museum staff members should show flexibility in their research methods in order to make the most of unexpected opportunities and best engage with the public.
10. *Visibility* – Researchers should ensure their work is as visible as feasible to colleagues, stakeholders and the public in general to allow greater understanding of their achievements.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has examined the history of research in the museum and how this can be compared and contrasted with research in the relevant disciplines of history, art, anthropology and archaeology in the university. It has shown how these different areas have drawn from and contributed to each other's theory and methodology, especially in the multidisciplinary area of material culture studies. This chapter has laid this history of research alongside the survey of current practice at The Nelson Provincial Museum and The Suter Art Gallery and discovered that there are aspects of both current practice and object theory which can be drawn together. Rather than produce a research methodology, this chapter has created an overview of the processes of good practice along with a set of ten research principles. These principles cover those relating to rigorous and responsible research across the board, as well as aspects particularly suited to the museum environment. The next chapter will take these principles and processes of museum research practice and apply them to two object case studies. This will test the principles and processes and evaluate how useful they are in the busy, everyday environment of medium-sized museums.



# Chapter Four

## The Object of My Subject

### Case Studies

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#### **Introduction**

*The Object of My Subject* aims to draw together and evaluate the previous chapters by applying them to a research scenario. Chapter two surveyed current collection-based research in two medium-sized case-study institutions to discover that contrary to the fears of international literature, research is being constantly undertaken in museums, albeit within different frameworks from those recognised in the past. Over the past thirty years many changes have occurred in the museum sector and, although never closely examined, these changes have had a spill over effect into today's museums. Understanding these changes, the nature, structure and processes of collection-based research in museums and encouraging its visibility within departments and to the

broader stakeholder community will all contribute to improving research practice in museums. The previous chapter applied chapter two findings to research theory, focussing in particular on the processes of research. It culminated in a discussion of research principles and how to approach them in practice. This chapter will take those principles and processes and apply them to two case studies.

The first case study is from The Suter Art Gallery collection. *Riwaka* 1888 is a watercolour painting by John Gully. The painting holds a significant position in the Gallery because, although being one of a collection of 48 John Gully paintings and value wise coming somewhere in the middle of that list, it is a part of the original bequest from which the Gallery began. The Gully paintings in the original bequest have been a well-known part of the collection since the day The Bishop Suter Memorial Art Gallery first opened its doors in 1899.

The second case study could be said to have less auspicious beginnings. It comes from the collection of The Nelson Provincial Museum and is a sample of dunite, a rock. Dunite rock commonly comes from Dun Mountain but how and why it came into the Museum collection is not known. It is one of ten samples of dunite and until recently it had no known museum record, only an inventory number painted on its side where it lay with other rock samples in the collection store.

This chapter will take these two, outwardly very different, case studies and submit them to the process developed in the previous two chapters. First, each case study will be explored ontologically. This will begin with their current records and the relationships between information sources. An object biography framework (Kopytoff 1986) will then be applied to the records to frame the existing information. This biography will be divided into different stages of the object's life, from creation, through collection, display and storage. The above exercises should hopefully open up suggestions for new research directions. Next, relationships with other parts of the

collection will be explored to show the connections and information gained from being part of a group or set. The object will next be approached from an epistemological grounding. This will use the exhibition that the object has recently been a part of as a starting point and explore the position of the object in the exhibition, including what it represents or illustrates. This section will highlight the ways in which project, in this case exhibition, research effects the way the object is approached and therefore remembered, both in its records and in the public memory. Finally, a discussion of record transparency, research flexibility and visibility will take place.

These two case studies will use the object as a starting point for research and highlight the myriad opportunities this envisages, especially as the more knowledge gained, the more unknown that becomes apparent. At the same time project-based research, as the most common form of research in museums, will be overlaid with its different aims and outcomes. This will illuminate the very different types of ontological and epistemological research approaches and show how they work together to create the object out of the knowledge which surrounds it. Case-study findings will be further examined in this chapter by questioning how greater understanding and transparency of research processes can contribute to improvements in research practice in museums and whether this will result in more effective research that benefits practitioners.

## **Researching Collection Objects**

This thesis divides examination of the two case-study objects between ontological and epistemological approaches to and outcomes of research. Before going any further, it must be clarified that this division is a constructed one useful in this situation. It is useful because it divides research styles roughly in a similar place as collection management-based cataloguing research and public programme-based exhibition research. However, although there is a long history which polarises subject and object,

more recently the two have been shown to sit comfortably much closer together (Henare, Holbraad and Wastell 2007). This ties in with studies which break down the polarised construct that the Western world has placed between the object and subject (Henare, Holbraad and Wastell 2007). Although these constructs have been separated in this chapter in order to interrogate collection-based research approaches and outcomes, they are not intended to be understood as polarised. Instead their imprecise and fluid boundaries will be highlighted wherever possible. It will become clear that ontological cataloguing and epistemological project-based research have numerous crossovers between them.

It must also be noted that other theorists recognise different divisions in collection-based research which have not been used here. Karen Harvey (2009) discussed the difference between object-centred and object-driven approaches to research and this model has since been applied to research in New Zealand and Australia by Bronwyn Labrum (2010). This distinction is also described as having fluid edges, but argues that object-centred research focuses on developments and changes in objects or series of objects, whether technological or cultural or both, while object-driven research tends to focus on context and cultural histories surrounding objects. Although these distinctions highlight useful machinations of research, the distinction is less useful within the structure of this chapter. This chapter attempts to focus on the practicalities of research in relation to its beginning and end points. Distinctions between object-centred and object-driven research do not fit comfortably within the subject/object framework used to explore the case studies. Both object-centred and object-driven research fit predominantly within object or epistemological-based research and less so within research that builds its narrative before choosing objects which demonstrate that narrative.

## ***Riwaka* 1888 – Case Study One**

Traipsing along the side of the land, hills rising to the right and Tasman Bay encroaching on the left, patches of grass poking through and trees, remnants of a forgotten forest, grow slowly through time as John Gully, artist, draughtsman, schoolteacher, immigrant, frail with advanced years, puts down his walking stick and sits to pull out paper and watercolours. From this suggestive, though imagined, scene to the dark store of the Suter Art Gallery 124 years later, *Riwaka* plays an interesting role as part of the Gallery's founding bequest. Yet, being just one of the Gullys, and a not so magnificent one at that, it only receives the occasional chance to come out and play. Perhaps it can be termed as a period of deserved rest for the light sensitive watercolour which spent so many years permanently on the wall of the sky-lit Gallery.



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.

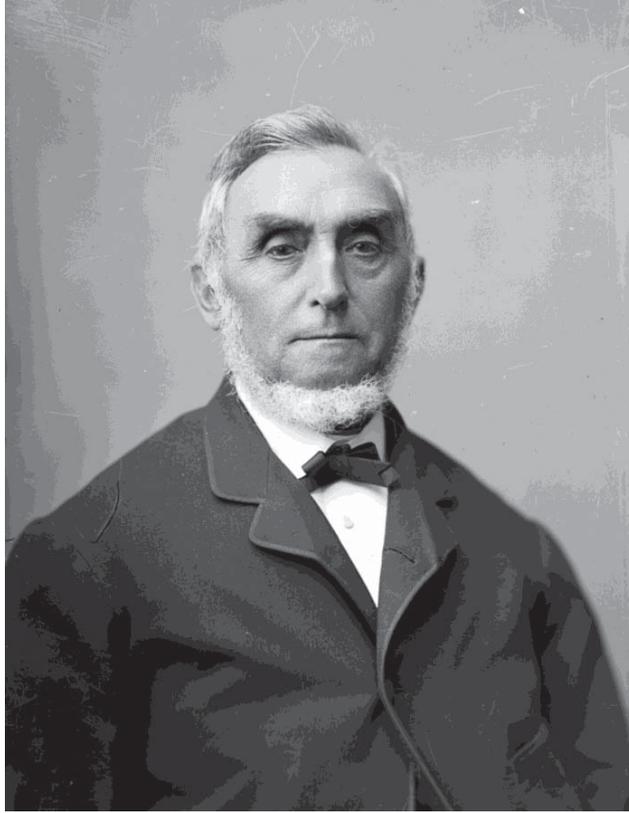


Figure 20: John Gully. Nelson Provincial Museum, Tyree Studio Collection: 31359.

John Gully (1819-88) emigrated with his family from Bath, England to Taranaki in 1852. Proving not much of a farmer Gully painted a handful of commissions during this period, mostly of settlers' homes. With the advent of war in 1860, like many Taranaki immigrants, the Gully family fled to Nelson where John Gully took up a position as the drawing master at Nelson College. He only stayed at the school a short while before becoming a draughtsman for the surveyors' office. The majority of extant Gully paintings were painted in the 1880s, many after he retired from the surveyors office. Many are notable in their ambitions. They have an accomplished and often sublime grandeur. *Riwaka*, painted in the last year of his life is a more modest effort, somewhere in between a field sketch and a studio watercolour.

To place a qualifier on the first description, John Gully painted two watercolours of Riwaka in March 1888, a matter of months before his death from pancreatic cancer. Although the thought of the artist traipsing around the hillside in the last months of his life creates a pleasing image with romantic undertones and although he likely did make this trip to Riwaka at this time, this cannot be definitively known. *Riwaka* could have been created from the comfort of his studio at home. But, even if the painting has never been home to Riwaka, its creator most definitely had. John Gully was known to regularly go walking and painting with his friend, colleague and fellow artist James Crowe Richmond and they often headed off from Nelson in the Golden Bay direction. On 20 March 1883 Dorothy, Richmond's daughter, wrote to a friend:

“...Father is going for a month's sketching with Mr Gully (the 'Turner of N.Z.' and a very nice man). They will start in a week and go across the bay beyond Totaranui to a place called Takaka in the mountains by the sea...” (Dorothy Richmond quoted by Gully 1984, p.89).

All conjecture about its creation aside, from here *Riwaka* became one of a set. A contemporary of Gully, Bishop Andrew Burn Suter of Nelson was a dedicated and active supporter of the arts. He had a substantial personal art collection and founded the Bishopdale Sketching Club (predecessor of the Nelson Suter Art Society) in 1889 (Butterworth 1999, p.16). Most importantly for this story though, he was a great supporter of John Gully. He added numerous Gully paintings to his personal collection, organised exhibitions in the Bishopdale Chapel and even raised a public subscription for Gully to paint a studio watercolour which was intended as the founding artwork of what was to be Bishop Suter's final gift to Nelson, a public art gallery. *Western Coast of Tasman Bay* 1886 hung in the municipal chambers until Mrs Amelia Suter opened the Bishop Suter Art Gallery on 31 May 1899, four years after her husband's death.

Whether Bishop Suter purchased or was gifted *Riwaka* is not known. Whether he acquired it in 1888 or sometime in the next couple of years before a stroke took away his quality of life is also not known. However, *Riwaka* was to become one of 26 Gully paintings which were part of the Bishop Suter Art Gallery Founding Donation which

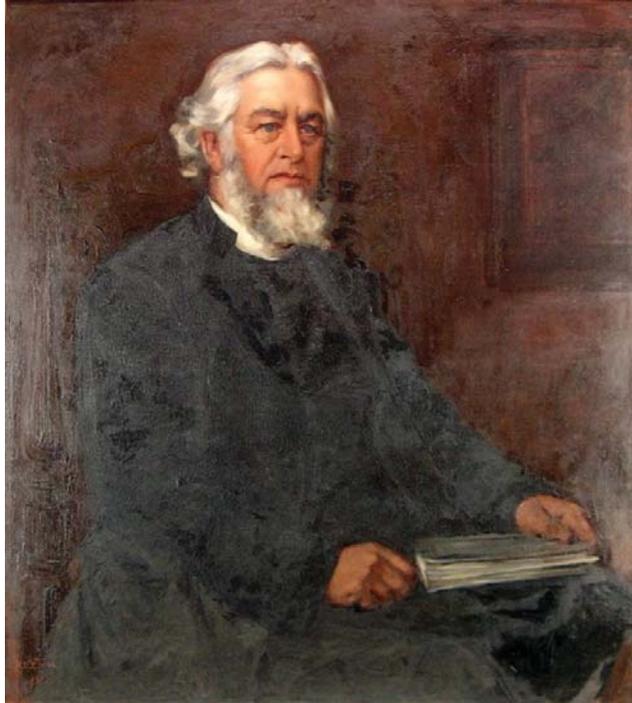


Figure 21: Mary TRIPE (New Zealand, b.1870, d.1939). *Portrait of Bishop Suter* 1902. Oil on canvas, 1280 x 1200mm. Collection of The Suter Art Gallery, Te Aratoi o Whakatū. Purchased in 1902 by public subscription, accession number 75.



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.

was gifted by Mrs Amelia Suter in memory of her husband Bishop Andrew Burn Suter in 1895. These Gully paintings, along with *Western Coast of Tasman Bay* and various other works collected by Bishop Suter became the nucleus of Nelson's public art collection.

The paintings were hung on the gallery walls and there they stayed. For decades they remained unmoved, *Riwaka* among them. When there was a temporary exhibition, screens were simply set up in front of the walls and behind them the paintings continued to hang. In the 1970s the Suter Art Gallery hired its first professional director, Austin Davies, and things started to change. For starters, the permanent collection came down from the walls and *Riwaka* found a new home in the darkness of the collection store. Since then, *Riwaka* disappears a little from the Gallery story. Exhibition records are not comprehensive and just how many times the unassuming artwork has been on display is unknown.

In September 2011, the entire Gully collection was hung, by this time some 48 artworks, in the *Site ReScene* exhibition. Local artists were chosen to contribute a piece of their own work in response to one of Gully's. Motueka woodcarver Tim Wraight chose *Riwaka*. With his father, he sat in the collection storeroom with the painting and then they went out and traipsed over *Riwaka*, with the hills on one side and the sea of Tasman Bay on the other. With a walking stick to ease his way, Wraight finally found what he was looking for. The tree in the painting was still there looking out over Tasman Bay, still standing testament to what was once forest. It was the right type, right age and right view. Wraight contributed three carved walking sticks to the *Site ReScene* exhibition, the wood taken from the tree in the original *Riwaka* painting, and named his work *Sticks to aid an artist in climbing to a good vantage point* 2011.

## ***Ontological Approach to Riwaka 1888: A Biography***

As discussed in the previous chapter, an ontological approach to researching *Riwaka* will focus on the object itself. In a way, it has a sense of directionless research. The research is approached without an intended outcome in mind. This kind of research is important to museum objects, in particular where little is known about them and a research starting point is difficult to find. However, the *raison d'être* of ontological research is not directionless. Ontological research is important because it treats the research subject, in this case the object, as the starting point from which all else is built. It does not begin with preconceived notions and theories which the new research is required to fit in with. Instead, it allows the possibility of a multiplicity of theories to structure the research and findings. It recognises the subtle, and not so subtle, differences of each research subject and allows the differences to dictate research structure, rather than basing the structure on perceived similarities of earlier research and perhaps missing new directions or ideas.

This methodological research theory is useful to apply to museum object files. Seeing the object file as a repository for all knowledge and information makes use of the strengths of new generation digital databases where connections and relationships can be more easily linked and traced. *Riwaka's* object file in Vernon CMS is described as a skeleton record, a partially created research tool for the future. As discussed in the Auditor-General's report *Management of heritage collections in local museums and art galleries* (2006) back-cataloguing and digitisation are currently major focuses in New Zealand museums. Therefore, this is a useful time in which to take a closer look at how digital object files are best structured for future use and growth. Igor Kopytoff's (1984) theory of object biography will be laid over *Riwaka's* Vernon CMS object file as a tool to envisage what a mature object file may look like.

So how would one go about applying this to an object file? The extended Vernon CMS object record for *Riwaka* tells a pretty straight forward story; mostly it is the artwork story outlined above. The story found in the object file tells of how John Gully immigrated to New Zealand from England in 1852 and the important role he played as a colonial watercolourist. *Riwaka* was painted in the final year of his life, a month before his health began to deteriorate. The story continues with Bishop Andrew Burn Suter, after whose death the Bishop Suter Memorial Art Gallery was established to commemorate him. During his life he collected Gully's work and this collection was bequeathed to the Gallery after his death. *Riwaka's* story, according to its object file, ends here. It provides a linear narrative with very little extra detail that is not readily discoverable in published sources. According to the object file, the painting has had a rather ordinary life. It has stayed within the boundaries set up when it was created. The physical artist file from the curator's office only adds a little extra contextual information to the digitally-based information. It contains a handful of newspaper articles dating from before the painting was added to the Gallery collection. There is no more after that.

We can break *Riwaka's* object biography down into three main areas; creation, before becoming part of the gallery collection and after becoming part of the gallery collection. These three periods fit with many objects trajectories, although some objects will need more divisions.

### ***Creation***

When John Gully arrived in Taranaki in the mid-1850s, his story is likely to have mirrored the general pioneer experience. Why he chose to travel to New Zealand with his family is not known but he settled in Taranaki as a bush farmer. These choices are curious, but maybe he was seduced by New Zealand as a land of plenty and left for a new start like so many others. This is what family tradition asserts, that Gully was

seduced by Charles Hursthouse's images of New Zealand, and in particular New Plymouth (Gully 1984, p.14).

Born in Bath, England, Gully trained as an ironmonger. He started in the foundry before transferring to draughting and design (Gully 1984, p.16). In the 1840s, Gully went into partnership with his father's ironmongery business (Gully 1984, p.17). When Gully arrived in New Plymouth with his wife Jane and their first three children, he quickly discovered the hardships of the life that he had chosen and that he was no farmer. The family had not been in Taranaki long before Gully took over the Omata store and became postmaster. They moved around the area several times until the Taranaki Wars drove them South, along with many other settlers.



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



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. This painting was included in Julius Von Haast's illustrated lecture *Notes on the Mountains and Glaciers of the Canterbury Province, New Zealand*.

Gully's story following his arrival in Nelson is somewhat different. When he first arrived he took the position of drawing master at Nelson College before joining the surveying office as a draughtsman. It was this role in the surveying office that gave him more opportunities to pursue his art. He worked with sketches from several surveyors including painting the images for Julius Von Haast's illustrated lecture *Notes on the Mountains and Glaciers of the Canterbury Province, New Zealand*, which was delivered to the Royal Society of Geographers in London.

Gully also made many sketching trips during this time and James Crowe Richmond was a regular companion. Richmond befriended Gully while the two lived in Taranaki. A politician, Richmond also worked for the surveyors department in Nelson and helped Gully find employment there. He too was a keen artist and The Suter Art Gallery holds a collection of his work. It is possible that Richmond accompanied Gully on the sketching trip where *Riwaka* was painted, also likely to have been the final sketching trip Gully ever made. *Riwaka* was painted in March 1888 and the next month Gully fell ill and died in November of the same year.

The painting itself could be described as unfinished. It is part way between a field sketch and a studio watercolour. *Riwaka* is part of a series of three paintings which show the prolific nature of his work in the final years of his life. The majority of The Suter's Gully collection was painted during the mid-1880s, after Gully's retirement. This period shows a level of refinement developing in Gully's work and is also when he produced the majority of his large studio works, several of which were collected by Bishop Suter and later became part of the founding bequest of the new Gallery. The *Riwaka* scene is also interesting because during the 1880s it was suggested to Gully that the power and beauty of the sublime, depicted in many of his watercolours, was giving the wrong impression of New Zealand back in London. Although beautiful they did not reflect the ideal of a land of plenty that the far colonies were being depicted as to potential colonists. While preparing work for the Colonial and Indian Exhibition in London 1886, also known as the Colinderies, Gully firstly supplied two paintings and the following reaction was printed in the Nelson Evening Mail and reproduced in Gully's biography, written by his great grandson:

Mr. Gully supplies two, one of them being a lovely view of Lake Wakatipu with the surrounding mountains, some of them snowclad, bathed in the rich warm glow of the setting sun... The other is a more homely character, being a view of the Waimea Plain looking towards Nelson on a hill on Mr. Sutton's farm near Richmond. This though a beautiful picture is not of the style of landscape in which Mr. Gully's undoubted powers are displayed to the best advantage, as he revels in the scenery of a wilder and grander character, but it was painted at Dr. von Haast's particular request as that gentleman begins to fear that the impressions produced by the pictures sent HOME from New Zealand will be that it is a country consisting of little else but rugged mountains and beautiful lakes (Gully 1984, p.97).

The *Riwaka* painting is not a grand depiction of the sublime but quite a pastoral or controlled scene. It only hints toward the sublime as it looks down the gully, past the trees and out across Tasman Bay. This much quieter style of image also appears in the other two *Riwaka* paintings completed at this time. One is very similar in subject while the other has moved somewhat inland and focuses on a wilderness taming image of a



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.

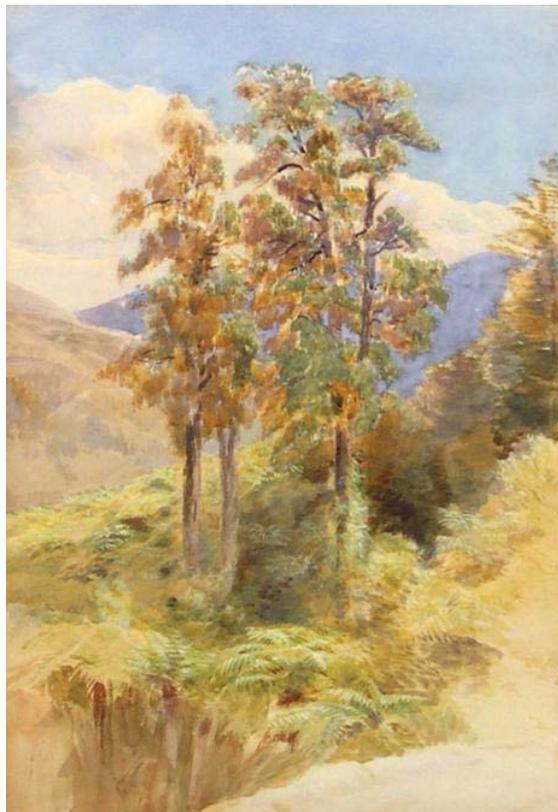


Figure 26: John GULLY (England / Nelson, b.1819, d.1888). *Rimu Trees - Riwaka*. Watercolour on paper, 438 x 308mm. Collection of The Suter Art Gallery, Te Aratoi o Whakatū. The Bishop Suter Art Gallery Founding Donation, gifted by Mrs Amelia Suter in memory of her husband Bishop Andrew Burn Suter in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

hillside with a new fence and pockmarked with blackened tree stumps, the casualties of the development of the land. Perhaps the paradox of the land of plenty comes through in Gully's work, between the land of plenty and opportunity, compared with rugged but beautiful hardship. While moving to New Zealand made it temporarily difficult for Gully to make his way in life economically, at the same time it surrounded him with grand subject matter which allowed him to continue to make a living after his retirement and until the end of his life. The paradox of the beautiful bountifulness and space was one which many colonists must have had to come to terms with, so different in nature from pastoral Britain.

### ***Before Collection***

There is little here to say that has not already been mentioned. Bishop Suter was a patron of the arts and established the Bishopdale Sketching Club, now known as the Nelson Suter Art Society. However, little is known about Bishop Suter's art collection before it came to The Suter or how he came in possession of the *Riwaka* paintings. These must have been some of the last to be painted by Gully. What can be said is that *Riwaka* did not spend long in Bishop Suter's collection as the Bishop only survived Gully by seven years. Bishop Suter had been intending to retire to England and wanted to donate his collection as the founding bequest of a public art collection in Nelson. Sadly, he died in 1895 after suffering a stroke which severely impeded his abilities in 1890. The collection, including *Riwaka*, was then cared for by his wife, Mrs Amelia Suter, who fulfilled the Bishop's desire by opening the Bishop Suter Memorial Art Gallery in 1899. Throughout these negotiations *Riwaka* was just one of a collection and not the most important in that collection. Its identity and social role during this period lay in being part of this collection.



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.

### *As Museum Object*

Early exhibition and collection records at The Suter Art Gallery are scarce. It is likely that *Riwaka's* identity continued to be subsumed by being part of the Gully collection and the original bequest from Bishop Suter. Until the 1970s the entire collection, including *Riwaka*, hung permanently on the Gallery walls. There was no collection store and even when temporary exhibitions took place screens were simply placed in front of the permanent collection. It is possible that *Riwaka* contributed to interactions between the public and the collection during these 70 years, but there is no extant record and those kinds of memories are often the last to be recorded. In 1976 The Suter Art Gallery employed its first professional director, Austin Davies, and things began to change for the collection. For *Riwaka*, along with much of the collection, this meant being retired from display. Exhibition records are patchy and it is not known how many times *Riwaka* was subsequently exhibited.

Only a small amount of information directly relevant to this artwork is available in the object file. Other research directions are possible. If resources and usefulness permitted, a scientific analysis of the physical object could be undertaken. However, more accessible research would be archival based, in particular in Wellington at the Alexander Turnbull Library, National Archives and Te Papa Tongarewa. Trawling through these archives looking for mention of *Riwaka* 1888 would be a time consuming and most likely unfruitful mission. However, this could provide a better picture of Gully's time in Nelson in relation to The Suter Art Gallery Gully collection as a whole, which in turn could possibly filter down to further information relevant to the *Riwaka* painting. *Riwaka's* role as a colonial artwork by a New Zealander, important in New Zealand's art history narrative, also has scope to be further interrogated. The last biography written about John Gully was published in 1984 by his great grandson, John Sidney Gully. Although a well-known and much mentioned colonial artist, there has been very little in-depth work accomplished.

### ***Links and Relationships***

The digital object file provides a clear pathway through the artist, John Gully, to all of the works by him in the collection. This link is either available through the Vernon CMS database or through the physical artist file. Using a digital database provides many possibilities for finding new links and relationships. All of the works from the original Suter bequest are listed as related objects, whether still in the collection or deaccessioned. Apart from obvious possible relationships, such as media or period created, there is a list of subject tags. These include both fixed field subject categories such as 'colonial' and 'landscape', but also free text field subject objects with a diverse list including 'foreshore', 'tree stump' and the 'Richmond Ranges'. However, it must be remembered that using a digital database in this way to look for links and relationships is only as good as the information put into it.

### ***Epistemological Approach: Site ReScene (Sept – Oct 2011)***

While recognising that there are many crossovers between object file and public programme or exhibition research approaches, this next section will focus on exhibitions. *Site ReScene* had several driving forces shaping it. Running through September and October 2011, it was during both the end of the winter exhibition season and the 2011 IRB Rugby World Cup. These two factors pulled against one another. Nelson's economy depends strongly on tourism which peaks over summer. Therefore, the winter exhibition season is seen as a time to work hard for the local audience who support the Gallery all year round. This audience is seen as sophisticated and very knowledgeable about their own collection. At the same time, it was hoped that the Rugby World Cup would bring a greater number of tourists and therefore, the exhibition also aimed to showcase art of the Nelson Tasman region. Three exhibitions ran over this period; *Site ReScene*, Chiara Corbelleto's (New Zealand Italian artist) exhibition of sculptures and David Matches' *The Match: Portraits of New Zealand Rugby Players*.



Figure 28: *Site ReScene*, 2011. Image courtesy of The Suter Art Gallery Te Aratoi o Whakatū, 2011.



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.

As one of these three concurrent exhibitions *Site ReScene* answered a long-standing call to exhibit the Gullys while showcasing selected local artists who each responded to a Gully painting of their choice. As the exhibition came together, it began to be seen as an opportunity to bring all of the Gullys out. This was a big decision because of the condition of some of the paintings. While some of the Gullys have been conserved, not all have and some are even unframed, severely light damaged, stored in solander boxes and encapsulated in milar. Bringing out the damaged works alongside the large, conserved studio works also provided a polite way of showing the local audience the difficulties of putting the Gully's on display more often.

Hanging the entire Gully collection then led to a research project. The exhibition research was object based and treated as collection research. However, the works were still researched as Gully paintings which are part of the Suter collection of Gully's work. *Site ReScene* was primarily about the Gully collection and secondarily about showcasing local work. The research done on *Riwaka* was important because it is part of this story. But Gully, as an artist, remained centrally important in the research by

being the glue that tied everything together. The central theme of the *Site ReScene* exhibition was the collection as a whole and in a way, by adding contemporary artists to this central theme, it put a slant towards considering the relevancy of the collection to today's gallery visiting public.

### ***Riwaka in Site ReScene***

Firstly, *Riwaka* was important to the exhibition by being a part of the whole. Without *Riwaka*, The Suter Gully collection exhibition would have been incomplete. Secondly, the exhibition was grouped geographically and *Riwaka* hung with the other two *Riwaka* paintings and alongside three carved walking sticks. Tim Wraith, a local sculptor based in Marahau, at the entrance to the Abel Tasman National Park, chose *Riwaka* to respond to in his work *Sticks to aid an artist in climbing to a good vantage*



Figure 30: John Gully's three paintings of *Riwaka* surrounding Tim Wraith'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.

*point* 2011. Living close to Riwaka for much of his life, Wraight is intimately knowledgeable about the area. After spending time with *Riwaka* in the collection store, he and his father began walking through the Riwaka hills until they believed they found the place where Gully would have sat to complete his watercolour painting. They found the tree in the painting still growing. Wraight took home a branch from the tree and used it to carve the three walking sticks which hung alongside *Riwaka* in *Site ReScene*.

Due to the intensity which the artists were able to focus on their chosen artworks, interesting new research or knowledge was uncovered. Wraight, with all of his knowledge of the Riwaka area and the time he put into finding the exact spot that the painting *Riwaka* depicts, provides an authoritative argument. He placed the artwork in quite a different location than had been previously thought. These kinds of outcomes occurred with several of the local artists while they were responding to their chosen works. Most significantly, artists discovered that many of Gully's works were very difficult or even impossible to position. They discovered that Gully was quite willing to move geographical features to perfect his artworks. Sometimes this occurred to the point where it is possible to suggest that no such place as that shown in Gully's painting exists in New Zealand.

Because Wraight chose *Riwaka* to respond to in his own work, *Riwaka* was given a more elevated position in the exhibition that it may have otherwise achieved on its own. Although it remained grouped with the other Riwaka works, it was the central piece of the three because it worked with the sculptures. The caption that accompanied Wraight's artwork stated:

*Sticks to aid an artist in climbing to a good vantage point 2011*

*Set of three*

*Kamaha wood*

*These tokotoko (walking sticks) are made from the dead branches of a kamahi tree which is depicted in John Gully's Riwaka (top right). The tree is located in the centre left of the painting in what is described as a general bush area. At the time that Gully made this painting, the tree would have only been a sapling.*

*This identification is based on a unique set of skills and local knowledge. The artist worked with his father, a Motueka-based agriculturalist and horticulturalist, to identify the site (located on the Drummond farm on the Takaka Hill road). When the artist trekked to this site, Tim identified an old tree which he judged to be well over one hundred years given its girth and size (although he is quick to point out that he can't be absolutely sure unless he cuts down the tree).*

*This identification is based on his specialist knowledge as an established wood carver working in native timbers. The motifs that have been carved into the surfaces are typical of Tim's style and are stylistic designs based on huhu, thorn and seed forms.*

*These tokotoko pay homage to Gully, who Tim respects as an intrepid tramper. Tim figures that Gully would have cut more than a few walking sticks in his time to gain access to the high and difficult vantage points that we see in this exhibition.*

On a broader note, the choice to exhibit the entire Gully collection, warts and all, allowed a different effect to take place. Curator Anna-Marie White stated that while she wished to respond to criticisms that the Gallery was not bringing the Gully's out on display she did not want to turn the exhibition into a funding drive. Without being explicit, this exhibition allowed The Suter Art Gallery public to experience the Gully collection as a whole and gain a better understanding of its component parts. By placing the impressive and conserved, well-known Gully's alongside those which had not been on display since the 1970s and were not even framed, a better understanding could be reached as to why, although there are 48 Gully artworks in the permanent



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

collection, some are not suitable for display. Even though *Riwaka* does not fall into this category, this understanding is important due to the value of each of these works which comes from being part of this group.

### ***Recording Transparency***

Researching for exhibitions like *Site ReScene* and developing object files is extremely important. But, in order to take a long term view to collection-based research, transparent records which reflect this work must be developed. Academic referencing styles are not generally witnessed in museum exhibitions where, although backed by detailed and sound research, public accessibility and engagement are primary concerns. A balance needs to be struck between the two. This allows museum staff to stand on the shoulders of the giants before them. Transparent and accountable records provide staff with a valuable launching pad from which to build the next time that research regarding that object is undertaken, rather than forcing the staff member back to the drawing board. When recorded in the object file, it will contribute

over time to building more comprehensive and useful object biographies. In *Riwaka's* case this should include Wraight's location research, including his reasoning behind his conclusions. It may also include Wraight's personal interactions with the artwork. While seemingly less important, these interactions provide clues to social and cultural perceptions of *Riwaka*. Why he chose the work, what aspects of the work spoke to him, how he went about understanding and responding to the work and what he discovered are all questions which give insight into local understanding of place, time, ownership and the ability of art to reach across them.

### ***Flexibility***

Showing flexibility in research has been discussed in earlier chapters as an important approach capable of providing results in resource-poor institutions, albeit in a haphazard way. *Site ReScene's* approach essentially opened the door to these kinds of research opportunities. Inviting artists to take one work from the collection and intensely focus on it provided that work with the time and energy that Gallery staff could rarely justify. Also, because they approached the work as artists rather than museum professionals, this gave an opportunity for different kinds of approaches and different research outcomes.

In the *Riwaka* case study this manifested in an authoritative pin-pointing of the subject location that placed the work in a different position from that which had earlier been assumed. It also provided extra detail about the subject objects. By finding the exact tree painted by Gully, Wraight was able to properly identify it and approximately age it. Without The Suter Art Gallery's aim of reaching out to the local artist community in relation to the Gully collection, this research would not have been undertaken, much less in a recordable and authoritative way.

## ***Visibility of Research***

The *Site ReScene* exhibition labels gave a variety of information relating to the individual artworks. While the exhibition portrayed the Gully collection as a whole, the individual labels were used as a medium to impart specific research about the majority of the works. The information in the labels was chosen with the audience in mind and related most often to the subject matter, location, the artist and his work or information which gave visitors extra reference points when looking at the artwork. *Riwaka's* label read:

*The Bishop Suter Art Gallery Founding Donation, gifted by Mrs Amelia Suter in memory of her husband Bishop Andrew Burn Suter in 1895.*

*Riwaka is shown at the end of summer with the Richmond Ranges in the background. Gully's health began deteriorating soon after this painting was completed and he died later that year on 1 November 1888.*

When this is compared to the current *Riwaka* object file, it is quickly apparent that not much more is known about this painting individually. Therefore, although appearing brief, the label did share what available and relevant research there was.

Another area of research visibility was discussed in chapter two. It considered the advantages of comprehensive records that can be quickly and effectively accessed by staff. It was suggested that the ability of staff to respond to questions with aptitude, especially when those questioning are passing visitors, often leads to surprising new research opportunities and directions. One staff member discussed how the ability to quickly access and then demonstrate institutional knowledge led to building trust and sometimes even new relationships with the public.

## Dunite Sample – Case Study Two

Dun Mountain stands tall above Nelson city. The dun coloured rocks that gave the Mountain its name lie weathered on the tops. They have seen much. Geologists tell us that there is another part to this Mountain. But the other part is named for a different colour. Red Mountain in Mount Aspiring National Park, Southland and Dun Mountain share their make-up of dunite rock, even though time and the Alpine Fault have pulled them some 460 kilometres apart.

While the mountains of the South Island danced, the rocks stood on the side of Dun Mountain and watched as the world grew around them. People arrived on the Mountain. They were not interested in the unassuming dunite but came to the Mountain for other rocks, namely pakohe (argillite) which they used for all manner of



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



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

tools and weapons. For many years they continued to come and carry rocks down the Mountain. Then a new group arrived, bringing with them machines which they used to mine copper and wheel it back down to the small town below.

Far away, in another story, a group of men set out to name the world around them. They saw power in the naming and organising of everything. They gathered things together in great cathedrals of knowledge, laid them side by side and considered what it was these things had to teach them. As they became surrounded by more and more named things they set out on great journeys to faraway lands where classifications had not yet set foot. Ferdinand von Hochstetter was one of these men. Working for the Austrian Government as a geologist he set out on a voyage around the world, stopping for some time in New Zealand. During a sojourn in Nelson he studied the makeup of Dun Mountain and discovered that the primary rock was not serpentine as previously thought but a mixture of that and another rock, a type of olivine. Hochstetter named it

dunite, after the Mountain. The sample received its name to be recorded in the categorisation of the world. It would be assumed that at this time a first sample would have found its way into the collection of the Nelson Institute.

Was this our sample? We do not know. Most likely not. Sitting dusty and, not forgotten but not remembered either, our dunite sample shares its name with nine other known samples in the museum collection. It is thought that it was possibly collected in 1971 but the dunite sample's provenance details are slim, its only note that it was collected from Dun Mountain.

But, at some point our dunite sample did come down to the town and became a museum object. During the 1990s the dunite sample found a new home in a box with other rocks. A number was painted on its side to identify it and it began travelling to local schools, being passed from child's hand to child's hand. When this stopped, it returned to its shelf in the dark of the collection store. Until recently. Not only is it out on display for a period in the *Extraordinary Frontiers* exhibition, it also received a new object file and a photograph.

### ***Ontological Approach to Dunite Sample: A Biography***

Focussing ontologically on the dunite sample itself seems much more difficult than an individualistic artwork such as *Riwaka*. The dunite sample is one of ten in the Nelson Provincial Museum collection. It has no known provenance, except from a 1970s hand written note in a geological catalogue saying it was collected from Dun Mountain. This leaves a period of over one hundred years in which it may have entered the collection. The only known event in its cultural biography is a period in the 1990s where it was used as part of a geological education kit and taken to local schools. Before research for the Cawthron exhibition there was no known information about the dunite sample.

It was during this research that the 1970s geological catalogue was rediscovered and the dunite sample was photographed and given a new Vernon CMS catalogue record.

However, accepting that there is very little provenance information for the dunite sample does not remove the possibility of other types of knowledge being attached to the rock. The history attached to the rock, including social, cultural, scientific and economic, has the possibility of illuminating different aspects of Nelson's past, its museum and science and education over time.

Very little is known about the dunite sample and this is reflected in its object file. Apart from speculation about the object's possible collection date and a note referring to the specimen's use by the Museum's School Service, there is no available provenance. This paucity of records for the duplicated object makes this exercise an interesting comparison with John Gully's *Riwaka*. *Riwaka's* object file told a simple linear story, whereas the dunite sample appears to tell no stories whatsoever. This next section will explore possibilities for the dunite sample object file to demonstrate how the ontologically based object biography methodology can contribute to broader understandings of objects and their relation to culture and society and help build a basis for the creation of new knowledge.

### ***Creation***

Dunite is a kind of ultramafic rock called peridotite (Campbell and Hutching 2007, p.40). It is one of the Earth's basement rocks. Basement rocks normally form and remain in the Earth's crust. Peridotite is an exception. It is formed in the Earth's mantle but it can become a linear, snake-like line which stretches across the surface of the Earth, called an ophiolite. These are rare but can be found right across the world (Johnston 2008, p.86).

In New Zealand, dunite is found in the Dun Mountain Ophiolite Belt. The Dun Mountain Ophiolite Belt is one of the most studied in the world. It surfaces at Dun Mountain, Red Mountain in Southland and Piopio in the King Country. In places it is up to 10 kilometres wide (Johnston 2008, p.87). Red Mountain and Dun Mountain were once joined before being forced apart by the Alpine Fault and ending up 460 kilometres distant from each other (Campbell and Hutching 2011, p.39). Where the Ophiolite Belt continues to run under the surface of the Earth, it can be mapped by its magnetic properties. Peridotites are strongly magnetic (Johnston 2008, p.87). This can be seen in figure 35, as well as Hochstetter and Haast's 1860 geological map of the Nelson area. The Dun Mountain Ophiolite Belt was formed in Early Permian time (c. 285 Ma) and in Late Permian time (c. 255 Ma) attached to Gondwana (Johnston 2008, p.87).

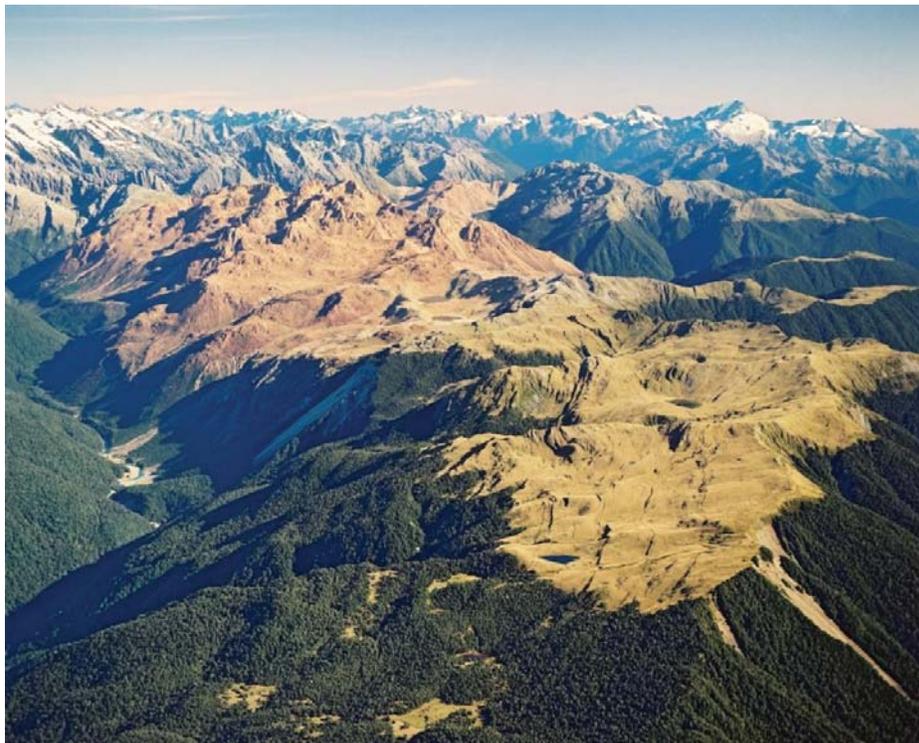


Figure 34: Red Mountain, Mount Aspiring National Park, Southland. Lloyd Homer, GNS Science.

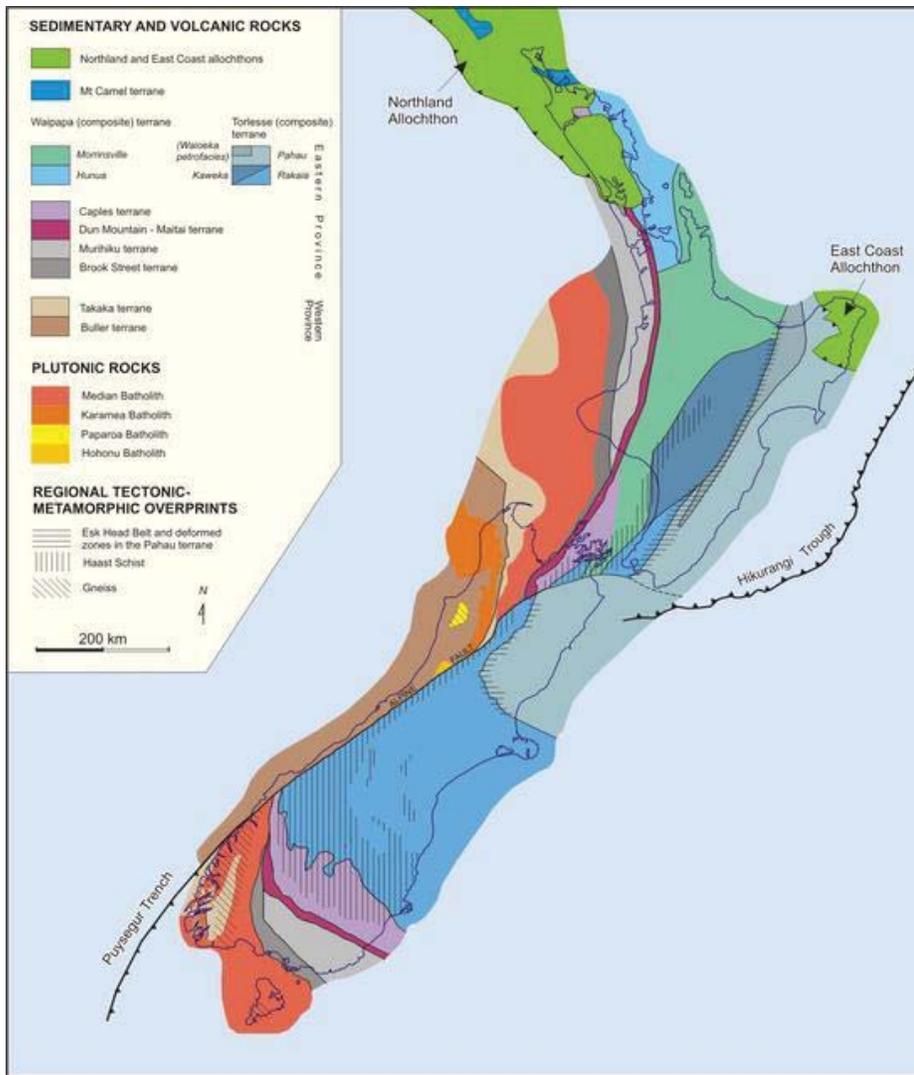


Figure 35: Map showing basement terranes of New Zealand. GNS Science. <http://www.gns.cri.nz/Home/Our-Science/Energy-Resources/Geological-Mapping/Geological-Origins-Research/Geological-Basement/Basement-terrane-of-New-Zealand> The Dun Mountain Ophiolite Belt is shown by the purple line that runs the length of the country.

For many years, the origins of ophiolite belts confused geologists. An explanation evolved in the 1970s, tying their existence into the concept of plate tectonics. Ophiolites are created when two tectonic plates push against one another. A piece becomes detached from the subducting plate, or the slab going downwards, and becomes part of the distorted continental crust. This process, which lifts the mantle rocks to the Earth's surface, is very rare (Johnston 2008, p.87). Peridotites are often altered by hydrothermal fluids in the Earth's crust to its more common form of

Serpentinite (Johnston 2008, p.86). The Dun Mountain Ophiolite Belt has a large amount of Serpentinite along with the less common dunite.

Dunite is primarily made up of the mineral olivine. Olivine is what gives the rock its green colour. It is bright when freshly cut, but it fades to a beige, dun colour on exposure. Dun Mountain was named for its colour which is caused by the dunite rocks on its surface. Dunite is composed almost entirely of olivine with a little chromite (Graham 2008, p.323). Olivine is rich in minerals like magnesium and iron, and magnesium makes it difficult for plants to grow because it stops them from taking up calcium. This makes areas such as Dun Mountain and Red Mountain conspicuous for the sparse colouring of their tops, especially in contrast to the bush coated slopes surrounding them (Johnston 2008, p.86). This means that it was the chemical properties of dunite that caused Dun Mountain to be named after the colour of its tops. While at the same time the name of the Mountain then provided a fitting name for the rock when Hochstetter discovered it in 1859.



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

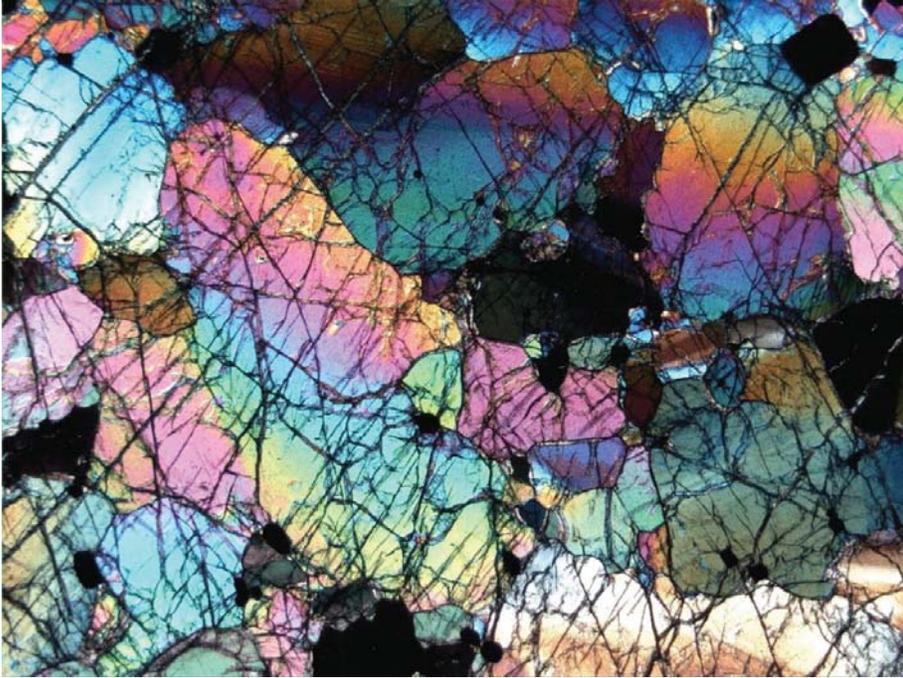


Figure 37: Microscopic image of olivine in dunite. GNS Science.  
[http://pet.gns.cri.nz/PET\\_detail.jsp?ID=5681](http://pet.gns.cri.nz/PET_detail.jsp?ID=5681)

The chemical properties of dunite also make the rock type optically fascinating. When a microscopic slice of ground-down dunite is examined in polarised light, the magnesium-rich olivine provides a rainbow spectrum of colours. This can be seen in figure 37. Fractures in the rock, crossing grain boundaries, show as the mesh of dark lines. Small, jet black specks are chrome spinel grains which does not let light pass through. Microscopic images of rock samples are useful because they reveal greater detail about the rock's type, history and mineral properties (Graham 2008, p.87; Blatt, Tracy and Owens 2006, p.46).

Dun Mountain is the type location of dunite. The rock type was discovered and named by Ferdinand von Hochstetter, an Austrian natural historian, who visited New Zealand in the late 1850s. He was travelling with an Austrian Government funded voyage around the world. He spent the first part of his sojourn in New Zealand in Auckland but when invited to visit Nelson he could not resist a chance to explore "the garden of New Zealand" (Von Hochstetter 1867, p.23). Once arriving in Nelson he quickly arranged to

extend his stay for further exploration. While in Nelson he decided to investigate Dun Mountain. Once he returned to Austria he wrote a book in which he described Dun Mountain and the new type of rock that he found there:

On approaching the harbour of Nelson from the high sea, a bare mountain ridge is seen rising to a height of about 4000 feet which owes its name "Dun Mountain" to the rusty-brown (dun) colour of its surface. It consists of a very peculiar kind of rock, of a yellowish-green colour when recently broken, but turning rusty-brown on the surface when decomposing. The mass of the rock is olivine, containing fine black grains of chromate of iron interspersed; it is distinguished from serpentine for which it was formerly taken, especially by its greater hardness, and its crystalline structure. I have called it Dunite (Hochstetter 1867, pp.473-474).



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



This places an added interest in the dunite sample because it came from its 'type location'. Hochstetter was part of a tradition of natural scientists attempting a rationalisation of the world. The enlightenment period saw a huge boost in scientific activity, with particular emphasis on what can be observed. The research of men such as Charles Darwin, alongside Carl Linnaeus' system of taxonomy, set in motion a huge hunger to collect, categorise and understand the world around them. There are many histories of natural science museums (MacKenzie 2009; Sheets-Pyenson 1988) and suggestions of how the ordering of the natural environment of colonies was part of taming and control being exercised by the empires overrunning them (Shelton 2006). Rocks played a very important part in this story. Rocks were one of the most informative and simplest objects to collect and display. The Otago Museum began its collections with a geological display and when James Hector moved to Wellington to become the first director of the new Colonial Museum (now Te Papa) he brought his collection of rocks from when he worked as the Provincial Government Geologist in Dunedin. The removal of this collection of rocks caused outcry in Dunedin and was considered a great loss to the Otago Museum. The Nelson Institute also had a substantial early geological collection which was donated by Hochstetter after his visit.

Dun Mountain has always been recognised for the rich mineral strip that runs across it. At first it was used to mine pakohe (argillite), a type of stone essential to Māori trade and way of life, being one of the major source materials for everyday tools. Dun Mountain argillite was traded up and down the country. Then in 1852 some copper ore was found in the Maitai River (Palmer 1975, p.7). This precipitated a mining endeavour that was more enthusiastic than successful. Even though the copper lodes quickly gave out, the mining company had already paid for the first railway in New Zealand to be built to connect the mines with the Port. It was horse drawn. Even by the time of Hochstetter's visit in 1859, he agreed with the pessimism that the copper would not last.



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



Figure 41: Dun Mountain railway line. Nelson Provincial Museum, Copy Collection: C2638. The sparse vegetation suggests this photo was taken on the slopes of Dun Mountain.

Other mining ventures at Dun Mountain have been explored. Two of these involved exploration of economic uses of dunite. Dunite bricks were discovered to be more corrosion resistant than traditional types of bricks and in the late 1930s there was considerable interest in using them to line steel furnaces. Powdered dunite, mixed with chromite and magnesium, could be made into bricks which substantially extended the life of steel furnaces (Johnston 1987, p.136). Broken Hill Proprietary Company (BHP) of Australia began laboratory testing and Dun Mountain was chosen as a suitable source. It was proposed that the site could provide 12,000 tonnes of dunite annually (Johnston 1987, p.136).

However, this large scale production never took flight. There are several reasons contributing to this. BHP began on the mistaken belief that Dun Mountain was in a mining district. There was confusion over who held the mining rights to the area and negotiations took place with the wrong parties. The Mines Department in Wellington was not even informed (Johnston 1987, p.136). This was finally resolved and work commenced in October 1939. BHP quarried enough dunite to complete their laboratory testing (Johnston 1987, p.137).

At this point the Mines Department agreed that, subject to a land survey, a mineral license could be granted to continue the quarry. While BHP supplied funding for the survey, the Company did not wish for it to take place unless the license was a guaranteed outcome. This appears to have created a convenient stalemate. BHP's testing was not complete and World War Two was causing shortages in labour and transport. The contract was allowed to lapse (Johnston 1987, p.137). In 1966 the Mapua company, Lime and Marble Ltd, also began testing dunite, but nothing developed (Johnston 1987, p.137).

During the same period that BHP was investigating dunite, it was also demonstrated that dunite could be used to make reverted superphosphate (Johnston 1987, p.137).

Superphosphate is a fertiliser designed to supply phosphorus to the soil. It has been, and continues to be in some areas, centrally important to farming in New Zealand. Reverted superphosphate is an insoluble type of superphosphate.

Using dunite in superphosphate has several advantages. Chemically it has very similar effects to lime superphosphate but the addition of magnesium in the dunite improves the physical qualities of the fertiliser. It does not easily cake which is useful when spreading the fertiliser on fields, especially if it has been stored for a period of time (Johnston 1987, p.137).

However, many of the benefits of dunite-reverted superphosphate also exist in serpentinite-reverted superphosphate which is more economical to produce. Serpentine superphosphate is particular to New Zealand and was increasingly produced throughout World War Two when it became more difficult to ship superphosphates from Europe. Although Dun Mountain has large deposits of serpentine, other more economic quarries have been preferred (Johnston 1987, pp.137-138).

Since then Dun Mountain, with its store of dunite, has been largely left alone with only the occasional tramper, hunter or day walker making their way past.

### ***Before Collection***

This section will be very short as the lack of object provenance means that it remains uncertain whether this period has any relevance at all. It is possible that the dunite sample was collected at some point, maybe held in a private collection, maybe even used by a Cawthron scientist. But this is all wishful thinking and very likely never

happened. The rock could also have been collected and delivered directly to the Museum.

What does allow some speculation is the date which the dunite sample entered the museum collection. A geological catalogue created in the 1970s was recently found at The Nelson Provincial Museum. Before this discovery, our dunite sample had been chosen to take part in the *Extraordinary Frontiers: Cawthron Science, Innovation and Mysteries* exhibition. It was chosen because it was part of a geological education kit used in the 1990s. This educational collection was exhibited together in its travelling box. All that was known about the dunite sample at this stage was that it had an accession number recorded on it and another number that related to a geological map in the education kit. Research discovered the forgotten catalogue. The catalogue provides only a minimal amount of detail. It notes that the dunite sample was collected from Dun Mountain and in another column records a number. Perhaps this number is the date that the dunite sample was collected, but it is not known for sure.

### ***As Museum Object***

As a museum object the dunite sample is likely to have spent the majority of its life in the collection store, although this is not certain. Records are patchy and a geological specimen is not the most glamorous object at the best of times. The one known activity that the rock took part in since being accessioned into the collection was being part of an education resource kit. Staff members took this education kit with them when they visited local schools. Children were allowed to hold the rock samples and could locate its number on a map of the local area to discover more about the rocks.

The choice to use the dunite sample in the Cawthron exhibition, *Extraordinary Frontiers*, represents a possible turning point in the object's museum career. Very little

was known about the object, not even the date when it was accessioned into the collection. It is possible that it is listed in an accession register but even if this entry could be found it is unlikely to hold any more than basic information and minimal provenance. Inclusion in the exhibition means the dunite sample gained a digital file and a photographic record. It is unlikely that the object ever had a physical file record. This digital and photographic record will make the object easier to discover and reference in the collection. It will also make it more noticeable relative to the nine other dunite samples in the collection store which have neither digital file nor photograph.

### ***Links and Relationships***

Looking at the Vernon CMS object file record for the dunite sample shows no apparent links and relationships. This is partly because only a small proportion of The Nelson Provincial Museum collection has been digitally catalogued. Earlier cataloguing records do provide links. The 1970s geological catalogue shows the links found within the geological collection in the Museum. It also links our dunite sample with other types of rock samples that were included in the *Nelson Rocks and Mineral Display*. What this display was and when it took place remains elusive, it is simply a note on the cataloguer's page.

That the dunite sample was included in the *Extraordinary Frontiers* exhibition is due to its 1990s role in museum education. Its Vernon CMS record provides a link which connects all of the rock samples that were included in this education kit. Due to their use in the exhibition, each of these samples received the same treatment as the dunite sample and had a digital object and a photographic file created.



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.



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.

Another connection that can be made is to other objects in the collection with links to Dun Mountain. Interestingly, this link provides an opportunity to link the two case-study objects together. During similar time periods, Ferdinand von Hochstetter and John Gully both made trips to Dun Mountain in relation to their separate careers. Where Hochstetter visited the mountain and named one of its most predominant rocks, The Nelson Suter Art Gallery cares for a Gully watercolour sketch of the Dun Mountain area, looking out from Dun Mountain hut. Although an attenuated link, it is interesting how far connections can stretch and how a connection can be made between these two, outwardly very different, objects.

***Epistemological Approach: Extraordinary Frontiers (Nov 2011 – Apr 2012)***

*Extraordinary Frontiers: Cawthron Science, Innovation and Mysteries from our Environment*, November 2011 – April 2012, is a collaborative exhibition between The Nelson Provincial Museum and The Cawthron Institute. It brings to light the activities and projects The Cawthron is engaged in at the cutting edge of science. The exhibition begins with a historic section before broadening out to explain to the public The Cawthron's work in food quality, aquaculture, water quality and bio-security.

The Cawthron celebrated its ninetieth anniversary in 2011. In recognition of this, The Nelson Provincial Museum proposed an exhibition and the idea was picked up by The Cawthron Institute Trust Board. *Extraordinary Frontiers* is a continuation of the on-going relationship between the two institutions that has existed for many years.

Objects do not play a central role in the exhibition. They are used as illustrations to help explain the stories put together by The Cawthron staff members. The Museum only holds a small collection of objects which relate to Cawthron activities. Therefore,



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.

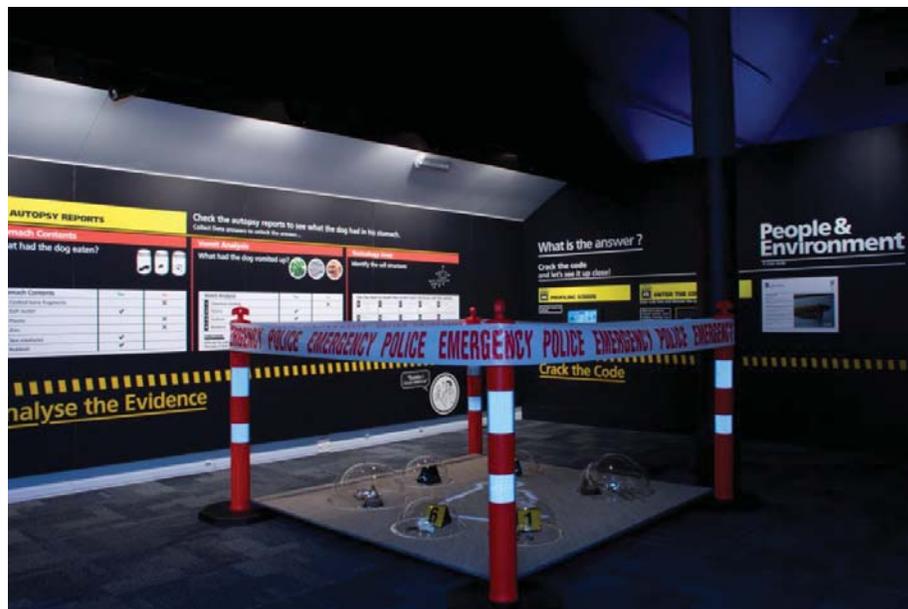


Figure 45: People and Environment section of *Extraordinary Frontiers; Cawthron Science, Innovation and Mysteries from our Environment*, 2011-2012. Image courtesy of Nelson Provincial Museum, 2011.



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.



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.

most of the objects in the exhibition came from The Cawthron Institute which supplied some of its older and less used items. The majority of Cawthron objects in The Nelson Provincial Museum collection are natural history specimens. Because Cawthron objects in the Museum collection are spread between natural history specimens, models and photographs, they are found in different areas of the museum. The exhibition was a useful tool to link this collection together into a coherent group.

### ***Dunite Sample in Extraordinary Frontiers***

The dunite sample is found in the historic section of *Extraordinary Frontiers*. Designer, Sally Papps, described how she wanted an area of the exhibition to acknowledge historical aspects of The Cawthron Institute, especially as the Institute used to have its own museum. The dunite sample sits, one of a collection of rock specimens, in the education box it is normally stored in at The Nelson Provincial Museum. This part of the exhibition creates the effect of a curio cabinet. Objects were partially chosen due to the historical way they are presented. Different objects sit in the glass case, some historically labelled, others, like the dunite sample and the box containing it, with no label at all.

The contemporary parts of *Extraordinary Frontiers* were written by a staff member at The Cawthron Institute. This was part of desire to let the scientists tell the stories in the exhibition. This aim was carried over into the historical part of the exhibition. Instead of researching and writing labels for this part of the exhibition, Papps presented this section using the voice of the scientists.

Using this approach, not all of the objects received detailed research and interpretation. The dunite sample falls into this category. It was included in the exhibition because it is stored in the education box. The education box is convenient

because it ties into an important aspect of The Cawthron Institute's public service role. Presentation of the samples in the education box also contributed to the desired curio cabinet effect. However, in reality, the geological education box was chosen due to time constraints. There was little spare time to make individual mounts for lots of small, separate objects and the historical section of *Extraordinary Frontiers* is only a small part of the whole exhibition. The geological education box solved this issue by gathering together a collection of geological samples and presenting them in a way that fitted in with the narrative intention and visual design of the historical section of the exhibition.

Therefore, inclusion in *Extraordinary Frontiers* did not result in any further exhibition-related research about the dunite sample. The sample, as part of a group of objects, is used to illustrate the historical concept of natural science in relation to the history of The Cawthron Institute. Sharing knowledge about the individual rock type is secondary to this role and therefore not relevant in this context. However, as discussed in the earlier section, *As Museum Object*, inclusion in the exhibition did mean that the dunite sample went through a process of digital cataloguing which included some research about the object itself.

### ***Recording Transparency***

This case-study object has, as yet, provided little that requires recording. With so few provenance details there is very little about this individual sample of rock that has been discovered. The research which could be recorded would relate to what the dunite sample could represent. However, then the record for each of the ten dunite samples would be almost identical. The records for the ten dunite samples would need to clearly display what information relates to the dunite sample as an object type and what relates to it individually. Making this distinction clear and easy to follow will help retrieve the relevant information quickly and effectively, even though there is very

little that makes this particular dunite sample different from any other dunite sample and in most situations those differences would be irrelevant.

### ***Flexibility***

Flexibility was clearly displayed in the research into the dunite sample. Without the outside request by the Cawthron Institute to undertake an exhibition of their institutional history the dunite sample would still be sitting on a shelf in the darkness of the collection store. The collaboration between The Cawthron Institute and the Museum allowed research into the objects to take place. Although only a small amount of Nelson Provincial Museum objects were included in the *Extraordinary Frontiers* exhibition, those that were used the exhibition as a research and cataloguing driver. In the case of the dunite sample, this not only included digital cataloguing and photography, but also the research that led to the discovery of the 1970s geological catalogue. The difficulties of further research with the available resources meant that research stopped here. However, what was discovered still suggests possibilities, even if they have not yet been achieved.

### ***Visibility of Research***

The use of the object in the *Extraordinary Frontiers* exhibition is an obvious way that the research is made visible. Apart from publically displaying the object, creating the dunite sample's record now means that it is digitally searchable. It is much more accessible within the Museum. But, due to the level of the information in the digital file, not much would be gained by accessing the record save that the object exists and its location in the collection store. This level of information is unlikely to change without some very fortuitous, unsolicited research leads suddenly turning up. Unfortunately the dunite sample is likely to remain no more than a sample of dunite rock.

## Conclusion

This chapter has highlighted some of the possibilities created by building object biographies for John Gully's *Riwaka* 1888 and a sample of dunite rock. Both of these objects play an important role in local Nelson history from the second half of the nineteenth century, yet to place them side by side they could not be more different. Whereas the Gully painting was part of a well-documented collection, the dunite object file was, until recently non-existent. However, both case-study objects were able to produce a substantial object biography by considering the material and social history surrounding them and drawing on art and science history. In entirety, both object biographies were capable of highlighting the many possible research insights and directions that objects could produce.

This chapter has clearly showed that although provenance asserts knowledge and provides useful research leads, it is not essential in teasing out new knowledge based on cultural or social history using a material culture approach. This is clearly shown with the dunite sample which has no known provenance, only a collection location and a number which looks suspiciously like a date.

The two objects were used very differently in their respective exhibitions. The Gully painting was chosen for its exhibition due to its collection role and had the effect of creating new local imaginings of colonial subjects and occurrences in the production of the Wraight artwork which accompanied the painting. On the other hand, the dunite sample was chosen for its ability to represent a concept, that of education and science history.

This chapter has examined the elements of chapter three research theories and principles by applying them to two case studies. These two very different types of case

study, with greatly differing levels of prior knowledge, allow this chapter to showcase ways in which a grounded understanding of research can be applied to everyday collection-based research tasks. The case studies show how this approach to research can slowly build a repertoire of knowledge and allow even the most apparently mundane objects to contribute to understandings of local, cultural and social history. It also showcases the flexibility and usability of this type of collection-based research, especially the way it is recorded into the permanent object files. The next chapter will take these case studies and question how they apply in everyday museum work and how they demonstrate the use of greater understanding, structure and visibility in collection-based research.



# Chapter Five

## Understanding, Structure and Visibility

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### **Introduction**

This chapter draws together earlier findings which demonstrate how collection-based research can be improved to benefit practitioners. It is divided into sections which emphasise how understanding, structure and visibility all contribute to effective collection-based research. Section one, *Understanding Research*, gathers key findings, reported in chapter one, to outline how practitioners understand research and its importance. It then explains why a collection-based research definition is necessary to improve understanding of collection-based research.

In section two, *Structuring Research*, I suggest that opportunistic research, impelled by exhibitions as research drivers, when combined with clear understanding of ontological and epistemological approaches to research, improves the clarity of the research structure. And, in turn, that greater structure benefits practitioners.

Thirdly, in the section *Levels of Visibility*, I posit that creating usable, accessible and accountable research improves the visibility of that research. Accordingly, I argue that low visibility is central in creating misconceptions about collection-based research.

The chapter concludes by examining the relationship between these elements. I seek to explain how a research definition, research principles and processes feed into, and improve, understanding, structure and visibility of collection-based research. All six elements are central for effective collection-based research which benefits practitioners.

## **Understanding Research**

Understanding is a vital element for improving collection-based research. It is difficult to improve anything when it is not clearly understood. This section discusses findings indicating how practitioners understand research and its importance. That these do not fit comfortably side by side suggests that research is not always well understood. Developing a collection-based research definition, which is capable of becoming the keystone of research understanding, structure and visibility, is the crucial first step.

## ***Understanding the Importance of Research***

Staff members believe research is important. It is one of the core activities of museums. Three main points expounding this are raised. Firstly, staff members believe research increases collection value. An object on its own still has a place in the museum, but an object with links, relationships and provenance has many more uses. Secondly, the museum is an important local knowledge repository. Often, when practitioners respond to public enquiries by demonstrating knowledge about an object, trusting relationships grow. This then encourages further public knowledge contributions. Finally, research helps collections stay dynamic. Research produces knowledge and contributes to collection relevancy for local communities.

All of these aspects remain in staff members' minds throughout their everyday work. More significantly, all of the participants expressed their enjoyment of research. Comprehensive research projects appear important to staff job satisfaction. The more detailed the research discussed, the more enjoyment was expressed. This is the reasoning behind in-depth research being deemed a luxury. In-depth research is an activity that all the participants wished they could engage in more often, but all felt tension reconciling it with their pressing workloads.

## ***How Staff Understand Research***

Staff members believe they are constantly engaged in collection-based research. Interview participants, who work directly with collections, believe that although in-depth research is a luxury, collection-based research is an essential core of their normal work day. Staff either specifically set out to achieve this or assume that it does occur as a significant part of each day. The interview participants focussed on balancing detailed research with day-to-day tasks. However, it is by balancing the



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

different types and depths of research activities, and allowing them all to move forward, that museum collections are most dynamic.

To some extent, staff members take research for granted. They do not articulate conscious thought into the processes and structures they use when undertaking collection-based research. Chapter two takes this understanding of research processes a step further by combining strengths of current practice with museum and material culture object research theory. This leads to the useful distinction of ontological and epistemological approaches to research.

Ontological research can be understood as a collection management research approach. It places objects at the centre of a web and looks for new strands leading out from it. Each new radial strand is a new piece of knowledge about the object. These are then linked by circular strands showing relationships between pieces of

knowledge. In this way, all disparate bits of information about the object contribute to its overall understanding. The object is the centre of its own theories and narratives.

Epistemological knowledge is more often associated with project-based research. The subject sits at the centre of the web and the object is one of the radial strands reaching out from the centre. This means that the subject's theories and narratives are already outlined and evidence is gathered, including objects, which explain and illustrate it.

Understanding these two approaches to research and the different outputs they produce helps to structure research in both the long and short term. If outputs from both kinds of research approaches are recorded in the object file then, over time, a more comprehensive image about the object will be created. This makes the object more accessible, whether it is information about that object or type of object that is required or a narrative is being told that the object can contribute to. This division of research was developed from approaches staff members take in their everyday work and articulating them in a new way.

The long and short term scope of research can be treated in a similar way. Staff did not discuss long term issues as such, but they did show an awareness of the issues surrounding them. They talked about the long-term value of the research they do and lamented the lack of publications making this research more readily available. The Nelson Provincial Museum and The Suter Art Gallery have goals for focusing collection-based research in the longer term. However, time pressures mean that research is not always well recorded. Thinking about the structures, processes and long term outcomes of collection-based research is not well represented in international literature either.

## ***Research is Not Always Well Understood***

In particular, this lack of thought about the structure and processes of collection-based research stems from the lack of a commonly-applied research definition for museums. Chapter one examines the literature referring to collection-based research in museums and gathers a variety of research definitions. Each definition was designed for a particular purpose and none match. The definitions do not agree whether research should produce new knowledge or not. Perceived boundaries of what research entails are far apart, reaching between everyday documentation and cataloguing through to scholarly endeavours. However, every definition has a common focus on research outputs, even though they are of different kinds. Outputs include the tangibility of a refereed article, specific collection-based work, and the abstract concept of providing collections with context, relevancy and role (Anderson 2005, p.298; Brandon and Wilson 2005, p.356 and Gunn and Prescott 1999, p.43).

Interestingly, the interview participants reflect many of the facets evident in these three published research definitions. Scholarly research resulting in refereed articles is labelled 'pure research' and most participants consider it a largely unattainable luxury in their institutions. But, these same participants also recognise other types and outcomes of research. Each participant gave a slightly different account with emphasis on different areas. Therefore, the definition developed in chapter one is designed to be broad and flexible enough to cope with future changes that museums will negotiate, although with definite edges to give it use value in daily endeavours.

## ***A Research Definition is Necessary for Understanding***

A definition is the keystone to understanding collection-based research. Only once its parts and boundaries are defined, can research be further structured. Therefore, a definition contributes to research understanding in two ways. Firstly, it clears away

confusion about what collection-based research actually is. And secondly, it can then be used as a springboard to build further structure for the benefit of practitioners. Chapter three uses the collection-based research framework to outline object studies. The definition can be separated into three main parts.

Firstly, the definition specifically includes 'examination of the physical object, development of provenance and enriching the links and relationships of the object with other objects or information sources'. In both case studies, cataloguing and updating the object file meant a return to a physical examination and description of the object. Linking the Riwaka painting to Gully's actions during the period it was painted contributes to the object's provenance. However, the majority of research for both objects branched from enriching their links and relationships, especially with information sources. Linking the Riwaka painting with a contemporary artist, local to the painting's subject location, has the effect of rebounding new research/knowledge about the subject location. The dunite sample on the other hand is mainly linked to new information sources which help provide the object with historical, cultural and geological context. Linking the dunite with the other rocks in the education kit has the added effect of further developing the rock's career as a museum object. This creates new knowledge about the rock in its role in science education and museum community outreach.

Secondly, the research definition states the importance of recording research '*in an accessible and accountable way so as to become a building block on which further research can stand with sure footing*'. This is a weak point of exhibition research where, due to time and resource constraints, research often stays divorced from the objects which contributed to it and remains solely in the exhibition file. This is not always the case though. *Site ReScene's* exhibition format meant that research was undertaken early in the development phase and fed directly into the relevant object files. This approach was taken so that complete object files could be given to the participating contemporary artists to assist in their work.

The final part of the research definition places an onus on researchers to '*endeavour to make their research outcomes as visible as feasible to colleagues, stakeholders and the public in general*'. This undertaking is not very difficult for projects, such as exhibitions, which are directed towards the public and stakeholders. It is more difficult for collection management-based research. Unfortunately, the level to which collection management-based research has been undertaken and recorded in the case-study institutions has not been sufficiently covered by this study to be able to judge its extent.

## **Structuring Research**

Structuring research approaches is the second major element of effective collection-based research. Traditional forms of research in museums are already highly structured. Science, art history or anthropology, to name a few disciplines, work using academic frameworks and produce more traditionally recognised outcomes, such as books or articles. This thesis focusses on collection management-based research and short-term projects. Short-term projects are limited to exhibitions as this proved a useful model at both The Nelson Provincial Museum and The Suter Art Gallery. Although both institutions do produce more traditional publications, these are not regular. The majority of research taking place relates directly to collection-management or exhibitions. This prevalent, although less traditionally revered, research plays a central role in medium-sized institutions and yet it has rarely been closely examined.

This section begins by evaluating opportunistic research and exhibitions as research drivers. These are both current approaches to research at the case-study institutions which were included in the research principles and processes developed in chapter two. Development of principles and processes used ontological and epistemological research approaches as an organising tool to highlight differences between collection

management and project/exhibition-based research. These three strategies show how greater structure can benefit practitioners.

### ***Opportunistic Research***

Opportunistic research is a very time effective and successful tool. It provides both concrete new knowledge and future research leads. It is the ultimate multitasking. Although it appears the antithesis of structure, the case-study institutions show that it is an important reality and a well-managed tool.

Its success relies on the way it takes opportunities to gather knowledge when knowledge holders are most willing to give. It engages with the public on the public's terms and contributes to building collaborative relationships. Slow timeframes attributed to research do not fit with many people's busy lives. Letting them contribute within their own timeframes allows them to direct proceedings in a way that lets them be comfortable. By enabling them to direct the proceedings, new research directions which were previously unconsidered can be broached. These new directions may be passed over unnoticed where research is approached with set subjects and questions, as discussed in ontological approaches to research. Opportunistic research also bridges spaces that museum resources cannot hope to. It makes use of visits of donors, artists, their families or specialist researchers from around New Zealand and the world which staff members cannot feasibly replicate. This is again important when building collaborative research relationships.

To make the most of opportunistic research, new information must be quickly and comprehensively recorded in an accessible manner. It otherwise runs the risk of solely building on knowledge stored in staff members' heads. This knowledge then becomes

ultimately lost to the relevant objects when that staff member moves on from the museum. This is an issue that museums have struggled with for many years.

### ***Exhibitions as Research Drivers***

The second major research strength found in chapter one is the use of public programmes, and in particular exhibitions, as research drivers. Today's museums are most likely to gather extra funding based on proposals for short-term projects. Having a clearly articulated outcome in mind is more likely to secure funding. Research projects must be both visible and outcome focussed to be taken seriously in contemporary museums where accountability plays a dominant role. Using exhibitions as drivers is the most efficient way this is achieved in the two case-study institutions. Due to timeframes and the glamour of exhibitions, exhibition research tends to have a much higher priority than collection-based research. The Nelson Provincial Museum harnesses this by using exhibitions to enhance object files for all collection items included in exhibitions. This includes cataloguing, imaging, re-housing and basic provenance research.

Chapter three used the two object case studies to examine how exhibitions are used as research drivers. Including *Riwaka* in *Site ReScene* meant that it was included in the Gully collection research which took place at the inception of the exhibition preparation. It also gave the painting an opportunity to be chosen by a local artist, which it was, and subjected to further research and interpretation of that artist's choice. This resulted in detailed location and subject research by a local with expert knowledge of the area. On the other hand, including the dunite sample in its exhibition generated little new information. However, *Extraordinary Frontiers* was used as a driver to tidy up the dunite sample's digital object file. In this case it meant creating one.



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

### ***Ontological and Epistemological Approaches***

A flexible and practical collection-based research structure must be underpinned by understanding how research is approached in museums. Applying findings from chapter one to discussion of object theory in chapter two highlights a major division in approaches to collection-based research. It makes clear that, although collection management and exhibition-based research both put emphasis on objects, they often approach object research in different ways. Collection management tends to start with an object or groups of objects and move outwards. Exhibition research often sticks to a theme or narrative and uses objects to illustrate and explain. Chapter two divided these two approaches along ontological and epistemological lines, but the approaches should not be considered as polarised. Both collection management-based and exhibition research are capable of using both approaches.

Research into the case-study objects in chapter three further illuminated the differences between object file research from an ontological approach as opposed to exhibition research from an epistemological approach. Taking an ontological material culture approach to object research, using a Kopytoffian cultural biography model, displayed further research possibilities inherent in both case-study objects. The piece of dunite was collected due to its importance as a natural history sample. Applying Kopytoff's cultural biography model sets the scene for a broader understanding of this object which crosses natural science, geology, social history and material culture boundaries. The object's life cycle is split into periods of creation, collection and after inclusion in the museum. These periods examine the role of dunite in the creation of New Zealand, its position as a type specimen named for Dun Mountain in Nelson, and its role as museum object. This cross-disciplinary understanding of the object is possible even though the dunite sample has no known provenance before coming to The Nelson Provincial Museum. The date that it entered the collection is not even confirmed.

In contrast, epistemological research into John Gully for the *Site ReScene* exhibition contributed to the *Riwaka* painting, but in more peripheral ways. The date and location of the painting were linked to Gully's actions at the time and speculation that this painting may have been the fruit from a final sketching trip is raised. However, this information is useful because it adds more to The Gallery's understanding of John Gully as a local artist, which then contributes to knowledge about its Gully collection as a whole. It only provides one more piece of knowledge directly relevant to the *Riwaka* painting and positions it in relation to Gully as artist and subject.

### ***Benefits of Structuring Research***

Taking time to understand and structure research has benefits for practitioners. Well-structured research is more useful, accessible and accountable. Structuring research

fosters greater research design, encouraging further depth. It supports an awareness of theories and methodologies which is important when claiming accountability and integrity of research in the museum as public forum. Recording findings in an accessible manner boosts future usefulness for practitioners. It also promotes community accessibility where information can be quickly retrieved in response to public enquiries.

## **Levels of Visibility**

The importance of visibility in museum research has been raised in the literature (Brandon and Wilson 2005; Cossons 1991). This leads to the question, if no one knows the research exists, is it really research at all? Requiring all research to be visible has been specifically included in the collection-based research definition. As this next section will confirm, issues of visibility are considered one of the major causes behind the current misconception about collection-based research. Research at The Nelson Provincial Museum and The Suter Art Gallery is currently visible but could be promoted further.

Research visibility is important to staff members, stakeholders and the public. Improving visibility not only nurtures understanding and support for research amongst staff members, it also presents accountability to stakeholders and the public by providing tangible evidence of what goes on behind the scenes. It also helps disseminate research, especially amongst staff and the public. Research becomes much more accessible when people can see that it is there.

## ***Misconceptions Reduce Visibility***

Misunderstandings about research have reduced its visibility. Chapter one outlines changes that have taken place in museums and how understandings of what collection-based research entails have changed. Defining research too broadly or focussing on academic outputs both misconstrue research and make it difficult to see what is really going on. Clearly articulating and presenting collection-based research to other staff, stakeholders and the public allows achievements to be acknowledged and better understood at all levels.

## ***Current Visibility***

Staff members are very clear that collection-based research must appear accountable. This is understood at both policy and practice levels. The Nelson Provincial Museum and The Suter Art Gallery both incorporate research into existing policy. Neither have a specific research policy. The Nelson Provincial Museum has a section in its current collection policy dedicated to research. It states:

Research of the collections to establish provenance or for interpretation, publication, and other appropriate purposes, is encouraged:

- Research should relate to NPM [The Nelson Provincial Museum] objectives and conform to established legal, ethical and academic practices including national and international copyright legislation.
- The acknowledgment of intellectual sources in all forms (published, transmitted, spoken, depicted, or other means of traditional or technological communication) is required.
- The results of research should be communicated with the public and the professional community. Where appropriate, any results, including publications, recordings, videos etc., from research must be deposited in the Museum library.
- When museum personnel prepare material for presentation or to document field investigation as part of their duties, or the museum funds the research, the NPM retains all rights to the work, unless there

is an agreement to the contrary. This does not preclude publication of the research in a professional journal or other publications observing standard scientific principles with respect to authorship and related matters.

- Any research of culturally sensitive objects requires appropriate consultation / approval conditions and for all Taonga Māori this will involve Te Tai Ao Komiti (The Nelson Provincial Museum 2010).

Research is not included directly in in the current statement of intent or strategic plan (The Nelson Provincial Museum 2011a and 2011b). These documents describe the Museum as a research facilitator rather than leader. The statement of intent says that the “Museum collection is a basis for research by institutions, academics and the general public” (The Nelson Provincial Museum 2011a). In-house research is not mentioned and no direct reference is made of research at this level of policy. The collection policy focusses mainly on management of research undertaken. However, staff members show that at a practice level, research is constantly occurring. This suggests that the use value of research is not being recognised at policy level.

The Auckland War Memorial Museum publishes its research policy on its website (Auckland War Memorial Museum Trust Board 2001). This document is a little over one page long and claims that gathering knowledge is an essential part of collection activities. It puts a focus on core research which looks into collections and their objects. It states:

Research undertaken by the museum shall:

- be encouraged and supported as part of relevant staff duties, the role of relevant volunteers and as a service to Museums users.
- meet appropriate ethical, professional and scholarly standards.
- not be regarded as complete until it is made publicly accessible in an appropriate form.
- be enhanced by actively seeking research and scholarly collaborations with external agencies beneficial to the museum (Auckland War Memorial Museum Trust Board 2001).

Dedicating a policy to in-house research allows aspects unique to collection-based in public museums to be emphasised. This policy then has greater chance to influence policy at a higher level and increase visibility of research to stakeholders.

Linked to this ambiguity of research roles is the way research is approached in practice. Although collection-based research is constantly occurring, more ambitious projects carefully demonstrate accountable use of resources. This suggests that research stands on unsteady ground. Often accountability is managed by fitting research within the bounds of other projects, such as using exhibitions as research drivers. Showing accountability for traditional forms of research and their outputs has become more difficult and curators today are often considered facilitators between the collections and the public rather than collection specialists. This is clearly represented in The Nelson Provincial Museum policy.

### ***Visibility is Improved When Research is Structured***

This ambiguous position has been partially created by the lack of a definition for collection-based research that is commonly understood. Understanding of what is, and what is not, research has become a grey area. Once this grey area is understood, and then structured, it is much easier to make it visible. The institutions have only had teams of professional staff in their recent history. Before this, lack of clearly understood structure meant research at the case-study institutions was often minimal, found in disparate locations and has been misplaced or separated from its relevant parts. Current staff members continue to negotiate this legacy. However, improvements are still necessary to make the most of the material culture resources these institutions care for.

Use of digital databases is one way this could occur. If digital database object files are structured in such a way that research can be quickly and easily added to them as and when it becomes available, this will make the most of the opportunistic model of collection-based research. A helpful image of this process was explained by one of the interview participants and quoted in chapter one:

*It is like you are saving money. You save it and you save it and you never spend it. Exhibitions are like spending heaps of cash and being really glamorous and drawing lots of attention to your activities (AMW).*

Digital object files should also include methods for quickly attaching exhibition research. Project-based research allows a greater concentration of time and resources and the outcomes of this should be harnessed to achieve the primary objective as well as be utilised in the longer term.

This is especially important as traditional research methods producing refereed articles and periodicals are no longer as common an outcome. More often collection-based research is project based. This has the effect, in many cases, of approaching research with tunnel vision. The project is treated as an entity in itself. Time and resources are tightly constrained and everything is concentrated towards the final outcome. Once the project is over the research files may, or may not, be linked to relevant object files or stored away in case they are of later use. Because the research files are created for a specific purpose, unfortunately they are not easily referred to for later research on different themes. There is potential for a lot of basic research to be repeated numerous times over years without being recorded in detail in an easily accessible form.

Improving digital object file formats help past research to stay more accessible, useful and therefore visible. It will also allow institutions to better record research with thought to research outcomes and long term scope. This will contribute to more streamlined and visible collection-based research in the future.

## ***Improved Visibility Benefits Practitioners***

Making all research outputs clear to other staff, stakeholders and the public raises the profile of research and encourages it to be better appreciated. This includes both short and long term collection-based, as well as the inherently more visible, project/exhibition research. More appreciation and awareness of research has benefits for practitioners. When other staff members are aware that the research has been done, they can make use of it in their own work and even add to it. When the public can see all the different research taking place, research becomes more accessible and accountable. They are able to access the parts they find interesting or relevant. Trusting relationships are built with the recognition that the collections are being cared for and used effectively. This accountability is also important at a stakeholder level. All different levels of visibility are important and benefit practitioners in different ways.

Visible research also brings respect within the museum sector. Both traditional and less recognised forms of research are capable of achieving this. Recently Anna-Marie White travelled to New York to take part in a Smithsonian Institute symposium on native arts. Her paper was called "Good Māori, Bad Māori: Connoisseurship and Contemporary Māori Art". This more traditional research output not only contributes to her individual professional development, but also contributes to the reputation of The Suter Art Gallery where she is curator. Traditionally less recognised research outputs such as exhibitions also enhance institutional reputation. In 2011, The Nelson Provincial Museum was the finalist for exhibition excellence – social history at the Museum Aotearoa awards for the well-researched exhibition *Haven Ahoy!* This continues a tradition of excellence in exhibitions after The Museum won this section in 2008 with *Unpicking the Past*.



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



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

## Improving Understanding, Structure and Visibility of Collection-Based Research

The above sections have illuminated the relationships between understanding, structure and visibility. The final section will take this one step further and explain their central role in collection-based research and how a research definition, principles and processes all contribute to allow more effective research with greater benefits to practitioners.

### *Thinking Through Things*

Understanding, structure and visibility are all interrelated. Each is an essential facet of collection-based research. This is depicted in Figure 52.

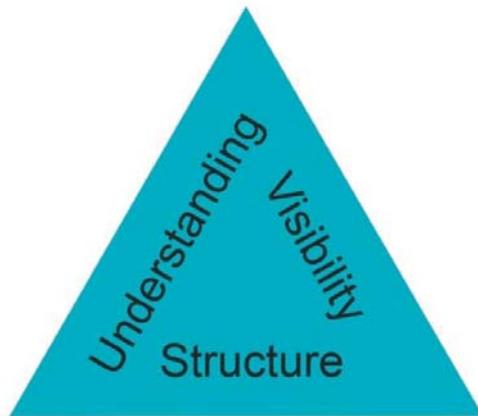


Figure 52: Three key elements of collection-based research.

Without understanding collection-based research, it cannot be well-structured. Which activities should be included and how to best approach, disseminate and record them would all be confused. Without structure and understanding it becomes difficult to make research visible to the public, stakeholders and other staff. Only the most

obvious activities are likely to be promoted and not the quiet, behind the scenes tasks which have equal importance in the longer term. Without all three components working together research would not be effective. It would not be usable, accessible or accountable to any high degree. Understanding, structure and visibility are all essential elements of effective collection-based research.

However, Figure 52 does not show how collection-based research can be improved for the benefit of practitioners. It also does not include the research definition which has been revealed as the keystone of collection-based research. Without a definition, research cannot be understood or structured and much of it is likely to occur quietly and unnoticed. Figure 53 includes a definition as the keystone of collection-based research.

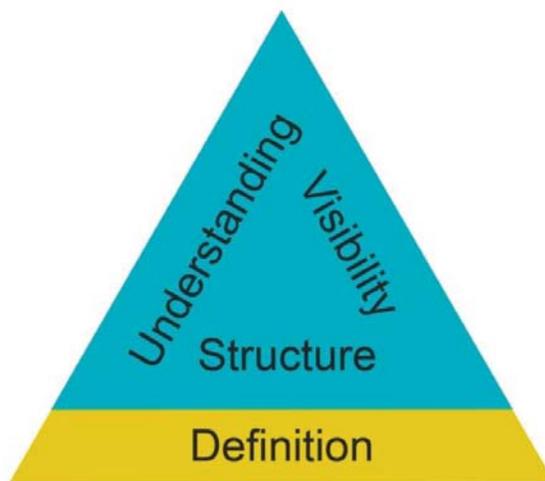


Figure 53: A definition is the keystone of collection-based research.

Reflecting further, Figure 53 still does not fully explain the relationship of the elements discussed in this chapter. One further step is needed.

The thesis recognises that research in museums requires study because it is different from other kinds of research. It is not subject to the same demands and outcomes of

academic research and does not match research in the business world either. The public purpose of museums has a strong bearing on the way that research is approached, as well as its outputs. Museums are public institutions expected to contribute to their local communities. They foster a sense of belonging in place and time, as well as being a respected educational facility reaching from the past, to the present and into the future. These broad principles affect the way museums operate. They belong to and serve their communities. Collection-based research must fit within these boundaries. This is one of the reasons that development of a research methodology was passed over in this thesis in favour of principles and processes. It is the principles and processes that are capable of improving collection-based research for the benefit of practitioners.

### ***Principles and Processes***

A definition remains the keystone of effective collection-based research. However, research principles and processes feed from the definition and help improve understanding, structure and visibility. This is shown in the final figure 54 below:

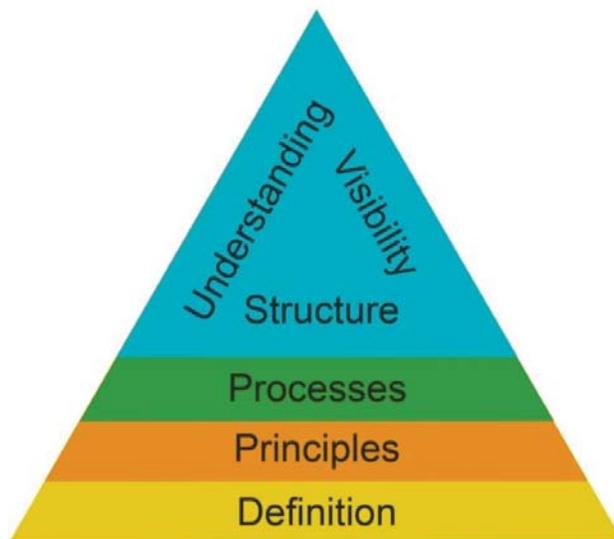


Figure 54: Six essential elements of effective collection-based research framework

Developed in chapter two, and tested by application to the *Riwaka* painting and dunite sample in chapter three, principles and processes are an essential part of the research framework developed in this thesis. They clarify and reinforce research structure which, in turn, supports understanding and visibility.

Principles provide an organised way to understand and execute object research. The research processes give guidelines about how these principles can be put into action. Once an effective structure is put in place, collection-based research can be clearly and diligently recorded as it takes place, making it more readily visible and accessible to other staff, stakeholders and the public. Therefore, principles and processes are an important step towards improving collection-based research for the benefit of practitioners.

Chapter three demonstrates how using the principles and processes developed in chapter two elucidate understanding and structure. Object case-study research is divided between ontological and epistemological approaches and a Kopytoffian model is used to develop object biographies. The outcomes are detailed and informative and designed to be useful and accessible. Being useful and accessible encourages visibility and accountability. Therefore, developing principles and processes is the important final step towards improving collection-based research in this thesis.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has distilled findings from this thesis to show the central importance of understanding, structure and visibility to collection-based research. It has then taken this one step further by demonstrating how, with the use of a research definition, principles and processes, the three elements can be improved so that research becomes more useful, accessible and accountable. These improvements benefit

practitioners, especially in their relationships with other staff members, stakeholders and the public by raising the profile and appreciation of collection-based research. The next chapter will draw these findings together into a final conclusion.

# Conclusion

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## **Introduction**

This thesis questions how collection-based research can be improved to benefit practitioners. Answering this query meant asking fundamental questions about research in museums. What is research? What does it achieve? Why is it important? Beginning with an impression, gathered from the literature, that there is something wrong with research in museums, this study returned to the foundations of collection-based research to create building blocks, including a definition of research, research principles and processes. These building blocks contribute to effective research which is better understood, structured and made visible.

The key finding of this study is that practitioners at The Nelson Provincial Museum and The Suter Art Gallery believe collection-based research is useful and that they do a lot of it. Peter Millward, CEO of The Nelson Provincial Museum highlighted the importance of research with the statement:

*It is the research, depending on how you define it, that is fundamental to the work of the museum. If there was no research going on at all, then your collection would never develop. And you certainly wouldn't be improving the breadth of information and the links between the information that enables you to tell good stories (PM).*

This belief in the importance of research is reiterated in the literature. However, the literature also suggests that less research is being produced and to a lower standard. This thesis finds that this is a misconception about collection-based research. It is partially caused by changes in museums, especially in the past twenty years, and poor understanding of what research entails. Instead, The Nelson Provincial Museum and The Suter Art Gallery were found to undertake competent and diverse collection-based research.

This study then considered how collection-based research can be improved to benefit practitioners. It found that collection-based research understanding, structure and visibility are all crucial elements of research practice in museums. These elements are underpinned and improved by a collection-based research definition, principles and processes. Improving these six elements has benefits for practitioners through increased usefulness, accessibility and accountability of research outputs.

## **Understanding**

Understanding museum-specific research, what makes it unique and what museum activities should be included in it, was the first task of this thesis. The need to elucidate

this was clear from interviews with staff at the case-study institutions. When asked about her understanding of research, one of the research participants replied:

*I started thinking about this and it is actually quite hard. I think for us, research is the basis of what we do but it takes lots of forms. So, from the public coming in the door wanting to do their own research through to us taking in a donation and on the spot doing some research with the donor and recording that (PHB).*

Chapter one and two developed and expounded a definition of research. This definition became the foundation of the research framework developed in this thesis. Clarifying a definition of research then allowed for the development of a research structure, including a set of research principles and processes.

## **Structure**

It is clear that museum professionals in medium-sized institutions have many pressures on their time. Undertaking research in this environment is not easy, as described below:

*You have got to be really passionate about what you do to not only do your job of looking after the collection, but also to then take the next step and do research and go through a valid process for that research... It is quite hard. And it is a shame because if you look at the collections that a lot of these institutions hold, they are well worthy of scholarly research (PHB).*

The research principles and processes, developed in chapter three, aim to structure research to achieve benefits for practitioners within the constraints of their workplace. The principles and processes are designed to structure approaches to research with understanding, integrity and awareness of research aims and outcomes. They encourage transparent recording of details so that research is easily attached to its

relevant objects and retained for later use. The principles and processes intend to structure collection-based research so that it is as useful and accessible as possible with the resources available.

This research framework, including the collection-based research definition and supported by principles and processes, was tested, in chapter four, by application to two objects. This showed the variety of knowledge which could be attached to each object as well as the differences caused by approaching research from a collection-based, as opposed to exhibition-based, research viewpoint.

## **Visibility**

One of the most important findings of this research is the importance of visibility. This was nicely summed up by one of the interview participants:

*In the end it is only you and the staff that know that you had all this other stuff going on. The public don't know any of that; they only see what ends up out there on the floor (JC).*

Therefore, visibility is specifically included in both the definition of collection-based research and the principles of research. It is visibility which promotes the greatest usefulness, accessibility and accountability of research. If no one knows that the research has taken place, then no one will know to look for it.

## Conclusion

The concepts of understanding, structure and visibility are interrelated. Without understanding, research is undefined, unorganised and goes somewhat unnoticed. Without structure, research is less efficient. It is less useful or accessible. Understanding is confused and some parts are more obvious at the expense of others. Without visibility, research is not as accountable. Structure and understanding mean little if no one can see their outputs. Therefore, each element depends on the other two and together, understanding, structure and visibility are all required for effective collection-based research that advantages practitioners.

Collection-based research understanding, structure and visibility all benefit practitioners by improving usefulness of objects and their supporting information, accessibility of knowledge about the collection and accountability of research-based projects. Using a collection-based research definition, principles and processes to support understanding, structure and visibility increases the effectiveness of research practice.

A collection-based research definition is the keystone of effective research. It brings together all the fundamental aspects of research and defines them in a museum-specific form. Research principles are developed using the definition as a foundation. Processes animate the principles, making them useful in day-to-day routines.

Applying this framework to two objects reveals how using opportunities as they arise, perceiving the differences between ontological and epistemological approaches and creating clear systems for recording data all add to improved understanding, structure and visibility.

This leads to the final conclusion that understanding, structure, visibility, a definition, principles and processes are all essential elements required for effective collection-based research.

## **Final Thoughts**

Two final remarks must be made about this study. Firstly, as discussed in the limitations at the beginning of this thesis, comprehensive *in situ* testing of the research framework is not possible. The framework has been developed, outlined and preliminary testing has taken place. Applying the collection-based research framework to two object case studies allowed the possibilities of this prototype to be explored. However, how the framework will stand up to rigorous use in a medium-sized institution is not clear. With this in mind, the framework has not been designed with rigid boundaries. Parts of this study are capable of being implemented individually from each other, even if it is only a clearly thought-out, in-house definition of collection-based research.

Secondly, this thesis has concentrated on improving collection-based research for the benefit of practitioners. Although stakeholders and the public are central components of the museum community, including them was beyond the scope of this study. Interviews only took place with museum employees. However, findings suggest that much of what benefits practitioners can also benefit stakeholders and the public. Three benefits to practitioners have been emphasised. While usefulness of research focusses on benefits to staff members, accessibility and accountability benefit not just staff members in their work but the broader community as well. This broader importance of collection-based research ties in with the public purpose of museums and could support a whole new study.

Collection-based research is central to the dynamism of museum objects. Staff members have shown that research is part of what they most enjoy about working in museums. Back in 1968, Thomas P. F. Hoving, former director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, claimed that museums possess “a great potential, not only as a stabilizing, regenerative force in modern society, but as a crusading force for quality and excellence”. This statement remains just as true forty-four years later. If collection-based research re-positions itself with greater understanding, structure and visibility, it has the potential to again play a central role in museums as they continue this journey.



# Appendix

## Ethics Documentation

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## **In-House Object Research in Museums**

### ***INFORMATION SHEET***

#### **Researcher Introduction**

*This project is undertaken by Megan Wells in fulfilment of the degree of Master of Arts in museum and heritage studies. The thesis will consider in-house object research in museums, focusing firstly on the way research is approached in medium-sized museums and secondly looking at object research methodologies. This research is undertaken to gather data for the first section.*

#### **Project Description and Invitation**

- *This project is divided into two parts. The first part is investigating in-house research into collections in medium-sized institutions. This investigation will aim to discover how research is approached by staff, what research is taking place and what influences this. It will be achieved through a series of interviews with staff members of medium-sized institutions, which will then be compared and contrasted with international literature.*
- *The second part of this project will take a closer look into object research methodologies.*
- *I invite you to participate in research for the first part of this project.*

#### **Participant Identification and Recruitment**

- *Your institution has been chosen due to its size and locality.*
- *Two medium-sized museums (one history and one art based) have been asked to participate to allow for in-depth study but with some variation.*
- *Staff members involved in collection-based research have been asked to participate.*
- *Of these staff members, several will be asked to participate in further discussion and interviews. This will be agreed upon between the interviewee and researcher.*

#### **Project Procedures**

- *Participation involves one initial interview. Follow up discussion and interviews will be undertaken as discussed by the interviewee and researcher.*
- *The initial interview will take approximately 60 minutes.*

## Data Management

- *Data gathered through these interviews will be used to develop an understanding of the role, extent and influences on in-house research in medium-sized museums. This data will then be compared and contrasted with international literature.*
- *The interview will be recorded and a transcript produced. This transcript will be returned if requested and the interviewee may make any changes at this point.*
- *A summary of the project findings will be provided where requested.*

## Participant's Rights

*You are under no obligation to accept this invitation. If you decide to participate, you have the right to:*

- *decline to answer any particular question;*
- *withdraw from the study until transcript has been returned and accepted;*
- *ask any questions about the study at any time during participation;*
- *provide information on the understanding that your name will not be used unless you give permission to the researcher;*
- *be given access to a summary of the project findings when it is concluded;*
- *ask for the recorder to be turned off at any time during the interview.*

## Project Contacts

*If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact the researcher.*

*Researcher:*

*Megan Wells*

*03 548 0575*

*[Meganwells579@gmail.com](mailto:Meganwells579@gmail.com)*

*Supervisor:*

*Susan Abasa*

*06 350 5799 xtn 2409*

*[S.F.Abasa@massey.ac.nz](mailto:S.F.Abasa@massey.ac.nz)*

*"This project has been evaluated by peer review and judged to be low risk. Consequently, it has not been reviewed by one of the University's Human Ethics Committees. The researcher(s) named above are responsible for the ethical conduct of this research.*

*If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research that you wish to raise with someone other than the researcher(s), please contact Professor John O'Neill, Director, Research Ethics, telephone 06 350 5249, email [humanethics@massey.ac.nz](mailto:humanethics@massey.ac.nz)".*

## ***In-House Object Research in Museums***

### **PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM**

I have read the Information Sheet and have had the details of the study explained to me. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I understand that I may ask further questions at any time.

I **agree/do not agree** to the interview being sound recorded.

I **wish/do not wish** to have the transcript of my recordings returned to me.

I **agree** to participate in this study under the conditions set out in the Information Sheet.

**Signature:** ..... **Date:** .....

**Full Name – printed** .....

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