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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



