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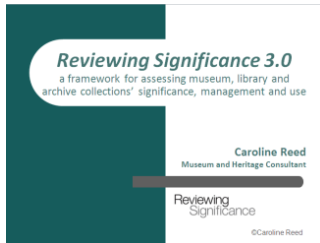(Tried and Tested: Flanders values cultural heritage)
26 March 2019 Herman Teirlinck Building, Havenlaan 88, 1000 Brussels

11.10 am – 12.00
Reviewing Significance 3.0 Caroline Reed and Frea Vancraeynest from Histories

1
I have been invited to talk to you about *Reviewing Significance 3.0*, which is a methodology for reviewing collections and assessing their significance that I have worked on with colleagues in the UK since about 2010.

I would like to thank you for inviting me today and to thank FARO for inviting me last year (and again this week) to present *Reviewing Significance 3.0* as part of their series of 'Masterclasses'.

The aim of the *Reviewing Significance* method is to help organisations to understand their collections better – what they are, how they are being looked after, how they are being used - and also their meaning and value for the organisation itself and for a variety of users.

I am going to tell you how the methodology was originally designed, how it has been developed since then - and very briefly how it works.

For the last 10 years or so I have been a freelance consultant working mainly with UK museums and archives, helping them understand and work with their collections in ways that can engage both existing and new audiences much more deeply.

In particular I have tried to develop processes, tools and ways of thinking that can be applied to a wide range of collections – in museums and archives, including film archives, and also in libraries.

My freelance work has been a continuation of approaches I developed between 2001 – 2008 when I headed up on collections for Museums, Libraries, Archives London (MLA London) – part of a network of regional agencies that were finally merged into Arts Council England in 2011.

Before that, for about 25 years, I worked with collections and their users as a museum curator, mostly in small specialist museums, but starting out at London's Imperial War Museum.

Both as a consultant and when at MLA London I have collaborated very closely with staff at the UK's Collections Trust –and they have published various reports and methodologies for me on their website – including *Reviewing Significance 3.0* which Frea and I are talking about today.

2   Renaissance East Midlands – *Reviewing Significance*

As a freelancer in 2009 I was commissioned by Renaissance East Midlands (another regional agency) to develop a framework that would help museums across five counties in the middle of England to review and assess their collections - so that they could:

‘collaborate, rationalise resources and serve users better’.

At that stage I had already written a ten-year regional collections strategy for East Midlands museums and I had led some piloting work there using *Revisiting Collections* – another, quite challenging, ‘process’ designed to help museums and archives open up their collections and engage external community groups in deciding how objects and archival records can be better understood, documented and interpreted.

I led on developing the *Revisiting Collections* methodology while I was still based at MLA London.

3   Collections Review and Significance Assessment

Right from the beginning I knew I wanted the new Renaissance East Midlands framework to comprise two complementary processes – Collections Review and Significance Assessment.

We had agreed that
- Collections review would generate essential evidence for prioritising resource allocation and seeking external funding + support

While
- Assessing collections’ significance and potential would provide a vital foundation for strategic collections management and development across the region – including any ‘rationalisation’ needed

By **Collections Review** I mean
- building an accurate, comprehensive picture of what an organisation holds in its collections, where everything is, its condition, how it is being cared for and how it is being used

To achieve that involves
- looking right across the collections and surveying current standards of care and management in some detail – including the extent and accuracy of catalogues and other documentation

It means
- using staff knowledge and internal records to understand who is currently using the collections – how much and for what purpose

And
- recognising what further potential there might be for more extensive or different forms of usage

And by ***Significance Assessment*** I mean
- focussing on individual items or specific sections of the collection and assessing their meaning and value for the organisation and for identified groups of current and potential users

And from that
- creating a clear, 'stand-alone' narrative to communicate the outcomes of the assessment and support decision-making and profile-raising

In *Reviewing Significance*, these processes are designed to be used either independently or together

4 Influences
I was already aware of two impressive pieces of work that I wanted to draw on to inform the new methodology.

Collections Review
The first was the **University College London Museums and Collections** department's *Collections Review Toolkit* developed between 2007-2009 by Jayne Dunn and Subhadra Das

At that time in UK museums there was beginning to be a lot of discussion about collections review, but there wasn't an agreed approach to how best to undertake it.

There was a rather worrying emphasis on the <u>practicalities</u> of 'rationalisation' – including de-accessioning, transfer and disposal from museum collections. There was rather less focus on the decision-making process that would inform and support these irreversible changes.

We all know how much collections cost to store and maintain, so much of the impetus for review and 'rationalisation' was coming from museum funding bodies – especially local authorities who were themselves under increasing pressure to cut costs and raise revenue - especially after the 2008 financial crisis.

There was also some momentum coming from the UK's Museums Association – the professional body for museums and museum workers. They published their first 'Disposals Toolkit' in 2008 – I would say focussing very much on the 'how' of disposal rather than the 'why' – or indeed 'whether'.

UCL Museums and Collections were very conscious that all big decisions about the long-term fate of collections must be not only very thoroughly considered – but also well informed.

They weren't afraid to consider disposal, but they knew that, before that, they needed to have a confident overview of their collections and how they were being used – or under-used. As an academic institution, they placed a high value on research and teaching usage as well as public access.

They had 380,000 objects dispersed across 4 museums and 14 departmental teaching collections. They developed a highly efficient approach that allowed <u>every</u> object in those collections to be looked at and the results collated by 2 staff members - and a few student helpers - over a 2-year period.

That created a genuinely revealing 'snapshot' that has informed their work with collections ever since.

I invited Jayne and Subhadra from UCL to work with me on the East Midlands project.

Significance Assessment
I wanted to tie their systematic, comprehensive, evidence-building approach to something more subtle and selective. An approach that could help East Midlands museums be really sure that they understood the significance of what they hold in their collections – why things might have been collected in the first place, how different elements in the various collections linked together and what the items might mean to both current and potential users.

I wanted the approach to involve input from a range of internal staff – not just the people responsible for managing collections - and also from external partners.

The only significance assessment criteria familiar to most museum and archive staff across the UK at that time were fairly basic.

We did (and do) have a scheme called 'Designation' that invites local authority and independent museums and archives to demonstrate that they hold material of national or international importance. They could then be eligible to apply for some collection-focussed government funding.

I wanted to look beyond those 'national / international' criteria and develop an approach that gave equal value to many <u>other</u> types of significance – regional and local, but also for specific community and user groups.

So the second of my influences was the Collections Council of Australia's *Significance* model. Their *Significance 2.*0 was published just as I was beginning to work on this in 2009. That outlined an approach to making value assessments of individual objects and whole collections against 4 '**primary criteria**' - including 'historic significance' - and 4 '**comparative criteria**' including 'provenance' and 'condition'.

The resulting assessment was condensed into a summary '**Statement of Significance**'.

I liked the approach a lot, but I did feel that that the Australian model didn't give museums quite enough support to get themselves to the best possible end result.

I wanted to create some basic tools that would support that process and also give a structure for including multiple perspectives and voices in the final 'Statement'.

 My thinking on that was informed by work I had already done using the *Revisiting Collections* community engagement model I mentioned earlier. Museum staff had often found that using 'Revisiting' could be revelatory - giving them a completely new understanding of what their collections could mean to new audiences.

So, the first edition of *Reviewing Significance* drew on these three sources – on the slide
UCL *Collections Review Toolkit Rubric*
Collections Council of Australia *Significance 2.0*
MLA London / Collections Trust *Revisiting Collections*

All of those are still available online

5   *Reviewing Significance* **- 2010 - 2018**

In the East Midlands Jayne, Subhadra and I worked with six very different pilot museums, We developed and published the first iteration of *Reviewing Significance* for Renaissance East Midlands in 2010.

Since then there have been 3 re-workings - mainly drawing on consultancy work I've done with other museums, archives, film archives and eventually a library:

- 2011 – I worked with a film archivist to adapt the model for moving image collections – sponsored by for Screen Heritage UK + Film London
- 2012 – I produced a revised and streamlined *Reviewing Significance 2.0* (still just for museums)
- January 2018 – I produced the current, much updated, version - *Reviewing Significance 3.0* covering museum, archive and library collections.

    That drew on work I'd done on the archives of London's 60 year old Royal Festival Hall and Southbank Centre - and also on a big, two-year project working with staff at the Royal College of Surgeons of England

All of those were published on the Collections Trust website:

… and lastly, since our FARO 'masterclass' on *Reviewing Significance 3.0* in March 2018, Anne-Cathérine Olbrechts has published online a Dutch language version of one of the main Significance Assessment tools and - as you will hear - Frea Vancraeynest of 'Histories', is developing a further revised version of the same tool - to be used in the assessment of intangible cultural heritage.

6   **So – the process and the tools:**

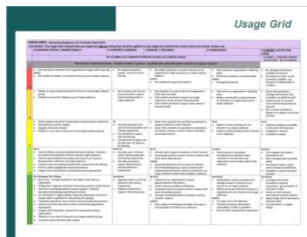*Reviewing Significance* **– the** *Collections Review* **process**

I know – given the focus of this symposium on 'value' - you will probably be most interested in the **Significance Assessment** element of *Reviewing Significance 3.0*, and I will speak mainly about that, but I do want briefly to explain the '**Collections Review'** element.

The *Reviewing Significance* **Collections Review Process** is intended to give organisations a <u>comprehensive</u> overview of what they hold. It makes provision for every object, book or archival deposit in a collection to be physically checked.

That can seem overwhelming, but the Process makes the task achievable by breaking the collections down into *Review Units* - defined strictly on a space-by-space basis rather than by theme or object type. A *Review Unit* might be a shelf or box-full of material in a store.

The survey team work their way systematically through every item in the Unit – and through all the Units in a store.

They don't spend time searching around to find related material held elsewhere.

Usage Grid

7   The *Grids*

The Process offers a quick, but thorough, technique for 'scoring' each *Review Unit* against set criteria presented on two **Grids** (Roosters).

As with the UCL 'Rubric' there is one Grid for 'Collections Management' and another for 'Usage'.

'Collections Management' covers issues like: condition, storage, environmental management, security, emergency planning and the level and quality of cataloguing.
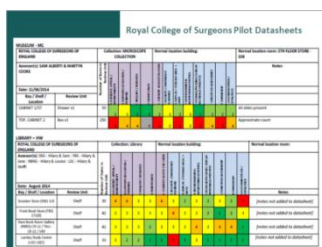
The 'Usage Grid' – seen here - looks at levels of display, research and educational use and also at material's popular appeal and marketability. It encourages the survey team to consider both the material's current usage and its potential.

The surveyors compare each Review Unit against the criteria given on each Grid and allocate a score. You'll see that the least demanding criteria are at the top, so you work from comparison with the 'lowest' standards of care or levels of usage to the 'highest'

Note that the rows are colour coded from red (lowest) to green (highest).

Just a quick point:
You'll see the Usage Grid *does* include a 'Significance' column. That's intended to help you decide on a quick, <u>indicative</u> 'score' for significance. That means that by the end of the review the survey team will have made at least a very basic significance assessment for <u>everything</u> in the collection - and the process will often highlight areas where applying the full *Significance Assessment Process* would be of real value.

Royal College of Surgeons Pilot Datasheets

8   Presenting the Data

The system allows for recording brief explanatory notes – either about individual items or about the whole Unit.

Then, scores for all the 'Collections Management' and 'Usage' criteria, are presented on a spreadsheet where the red-to-green traffic-light colour coding helps easy presentation and analysis.

The colours flag up anomalies – for example between care and usage value - indicating where and how urgently intervention might be needed.

The real benefits of the process are its focus, speed and comprehensiveness. It requires a very small team to dedicate most of their work time to completing the survey. The surveyors don't have to be subject specialists or conservators - although they do need access to expert guidance.

The result is a genuinely informative, one-off snapshot where everybody gets much better, clearer and more accessible information about the collections – and an evidence base for forward planning and resource allocation.

9   *Reviewing Significance* – the Significance Assessment Process

The *Reviewing Significance* Collections Review and Significance Assessment processes are seen as complementary. You can use them either separately or together.
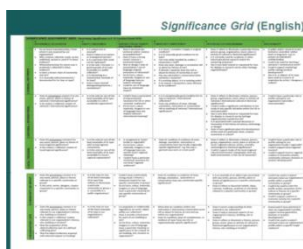
Very few organisations would want or need to undertake detailed Significance Assessments of all the material in their collections. The assessment process I'm describing here is designed to be used on selected items or on groups of material and the assessment will always have a clear purpose in mind.

This could be choosing or prioritising material for a display - or a digitisation, preservation or access programme. It could be decision making about acquisition, dispersal or disposal.

Significance Assessment can be a vital tool when collating evidence to support a funding bid or to justify a particular allocation of resources.

Experimenting with the processes of Significance Assessment can dramatically change the way organisations think about their collections – and inform the way staff approach decision making as they set about their daily work.

10   The *Significance Grid - English*

Rather than offering criteria for 'scoring', the *Significance Assessment Process* gives you a set of 'thinking tools' that support a systematic approach to assessment and to presenting the outcomes - as in the Australian model - in a clear, concise **Statement of Significance**.

The main tool is another matrix – the 'Significance Grid'. Instead of criteria for comparison, this uses prompt questions to stimulate group discussion. The Grid is supported by a note-taking 'Template' to help capture and structure the group's responses. Here is the Grid. In English

11 The *Significance Grid - Dutch*
– and now in Dutch – produced last year by Anne-Cathérine for FARO and published online.

12 The *Significance Grid – columns*
I am afraid I am going to be talking about it in English!

The column heads relate to the different sorts of information we might know about the material:
A provenance/acquisition – Where the material came from – it's creators, its chain of ownership and why it came into your organisation in the first place**.**
B rarity/uniqueness – Is the item unique, unusual or a good or typical example of its type?
C sensory/visual quality / emotional impact – Does the item demonstrate creative accomplishment? Was it innovative or influential? Might it have a strong visual, sensory or emotional impact?
D condition / completeness – What is the material's condition and does that affect its significance? Has there been conservation work – or restoration?
E historical / cultural meaning – What are the material's historical and cultural associations?

F exploitability – Could the material be useful for research, income generation, profile raising?

13 The *Significance Grid – rows*
The rows encourage looking at what 'what we know' means for various user groups:

The idea is that at every stage you explore what you know under each of the column headings and at the same time think about what that might mean for your organisation and for each of the user groups identified on the Grid.
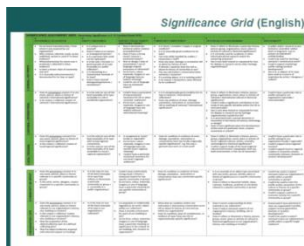
It is worth saying at this point that all the *Reviewing Significance* Grids and other tools are intended to be flexible. So you are free to change the user groups named here to suit your own situation and needs.

For example, when I worked with the Royal College of Surgeons in London they weren't especially interested in local - versus national audiences, but they did want a new row on the grid for medical professionals.

On the standard Grid apart from a general catch-all
1   *general / key points*
...the groups identified are:
2   *national / international*
3   *local / regional*
4   *community / group*
5   *organisationally or site specific*

Significance Grid (English)

14   The *Significance Grid – English*
The assessment team work their way down each of the columns in turn. The prompt questions in each box nudge the team to delve into their own knowledge and all the background information that the organisation holds about the material under scrutiny - and then to examine what that might mean from each of the 'row' perspectives.

To achieve the best results – and depending on the purpose of your assessment - you are likely to want your team to represent <u>all</u> the sorts of people who use collections as part of their work in your organisation – from front-of-house though education, outreach, community engagement, cataloguing, marketing, collection management or research to conservation.

You are also going to want outside support. Perhaps from academics and other experts, but also from people who might have directly relevant life or work experience that relates to the material.

So, for example, looking at the Grid under '***Provenance***' do we know who the maker or collector, owner or donor was? What do we know about them?

If we don't know much, does that undermine the item's purpose and value? If so, that will need to be addressed in the final Statement – it is important for the Statement to express negative assessments of significance as well as the positives.

If we do know the full provenance – is the creator or former owner important generally in the world – are they internationally significant, or perhaps regionally or locally? Or to a particular community or group? Do they have a particular relevance to our organisation?

As well as what we know factually – under '***provenance'***, '***rarity/uniqueness'*** *and **'condition / completeness'*** - we are also prompted to think about associative, emotional or aesthetic responses. This comes particularly under ***sensory/visual quality / emotional impact*** and ***historical / cultural meaning***

15 *Significance Assessment – working together*

I realise that the process I have described could sound quite laborious. The point of having all the prompt questions there on the Grid is to make sure that nothing gets missed - the assessment group is pushed to consider aspects that they might otherwise ignore.

To make the assessment session run smoothly, jobs have to be allocated. The session will need a chair and a note taker - using the 'Statement of Significance Template'. I always recommend audio recording as well. Depending on how much material you are tackling, the actual assessment session might only take an hour - more likely two - but staff will have put time into preparing the material and outside experts are probably giving you their time for free.

So there is a clear investment of time and effort. That said, I don't think I have ever attended a session that seemed too long or too structure-bound. In my experience the conversations stimulated by using the grid are always surprising, illuminating and exciting for the participants – triggering all sorts of new ideas about how material might be used and interpreted.

I would just say here I think it is important for the Process to be led and 'owned' by internal staff – even if you need some external consultancy support. As I have said - the idea is for the thinking processes to become a part of your organisational culture easy to communicate and apply
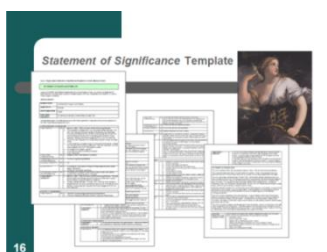
16   **Producing the *Statement of Significance***

After the session it will be the note-taker's job to draft the Statement of Significance and circulate it for agreement by the team. They will also record any immediate actions to be taken and any extra research to be done.

The final Statement needs be able to stand alone as a clear and convincing narrative for communicating the meaning and the public and organisational value of the individual item or group of material that has been assessed. It needs to be easy for governing bodies, managers, colleagues and potential partners and funders to understand and use. And it should be added to your organisation's long-term records.

I'd like to stress that, to be genuinely useful, it is important for that narrative to capture <u>all</u> the viewpoints that have emerged during the assessment session – both positive and negative.

And that is one of the reasons why we don't use scoring as part of the Significance Assessment Process. The Statement <u>is</u> be evidence-based and so should be seen as 'authoritative', but it shouldn't pretend to represent some sort of organisational 'objectivity'.

Instead it will acknowledge that there will always be a <u>range</u> of opinions about the material's significance - a spectrum of 'subjectivities.'

17   Netherlands methodology *Assessing Museum Collections*

If wanted, of course, you can adapt the Significance Assessment methodology to include a score, but I would only ever advocate that if you need to 'rank' items for a very specific, short-term purpose – something like prioritising for digitisation.

And, as I am sure you will know, the Cultural Heritage Agency of the Netherlands 'six steps' methodology 'Assessing Museum Collections (2014) <u>does</u> include a score.

And yet it is very closely allied in thinking to *Reviewing Significance*. I remember talking at length to one of its authors, Tessa Luger, at a Collections Trust conference back in 2012 and I think you will see that, certainly in the English versions, the use of language is very similar across all three significance assessment models - the Australian, the Netherlands' Dutch and *Reviewing Significance*.

18

I do hope that has given you a very quick, but useful introduction to *Reviewing Significance 3.0* and that you will have a look at the full methodology and tools online.

You'll find there is much more information about allocating roles and running Significance Assessment sessions there - as well as all the stages of conducting a Collections Review

Also it's worth noting that all the English language ***Collections Review* + *Significance Assessment*** tools are downloadable in 'document' format – so they can be readily customised to suit your organisation's needs
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Which takes us neatly to Frea Vancraeynest from HISTORIES

As part of a Department of Culture, Youth and Media funded pilot project, since late last year I been supporting Frea on a very particular type of adaptation of the methodology – which she will tell you about: