

Exhibition labels

Rock excavated during construction of State Library Station

c. 400 million years BCE

sedimentary anisotropic rock layer

Gift of CYP Design & Construction Joint Venture, 2023

H2023.119

Excavated from beneath the Library, this is a piece of bedrock: the solid, foundational surface of the Earth. In terms of age, it is the oldest 'memory' in the collection. It perhaps also serves as a reminder that the land itself might be considered our oldest library.

Maker unknown

(active 1850s)

Leather boots found during the renovations of The Ian Potter Queen's Hall, State Library Victoria, built into the fireplace chimney

c. 1856–64

leather, fabric laces

H2019.126

These boots, one slightly larger than the other, were likely hidden away during construction work on the Library in the 1880s. They were not discovered until 2019. Scholars believe that shoes were hidden in the walls, chimneys and ceilings of public and private buildings to protect their occupants against evil forces.

Carleton E Watkins

(1829–1916)

Castle Rock, Columbia River, Oregon

1867, printed c. 1871

albumen silver photograph

Gift of Mr Frederick Wright, 1871

H87.204/18

Photographs were among the earliest non-book items added to the Library's collection and a series of international views provided a form of 'armchair' travel. Carleton E Watkins's extraordinary images, like many of the works in the Library's open-access collection, were stamped to remind would-be thieves of their public ownership. In this image, the inky 'tattoo' imprints a mark of safekeeping onto a landscape with its own complex history of possession.

The Sears Studio

(active c. 1900–05)

Interior of The Queen's Hall, showing a member of staff sitting at the Enquiries window

c. 1910

gelatin silver photograph

H4716

In the early years of the Library, locating a book from the printed catalogue often relied on the memory of staff. As the collection expanded beyond what could be reliably recalled, Thomas Francis Bride (1849–1927), the third Chief Librarian, introduced a 3-digit code for each book. These were written in pencil in each book and are still visible today. Linked to a catalogue card and floorplan, the codes form part of a physical system that brings order to the collection.

Photographer unknown

(active 1940s)

Les Smith (compiler)

(active 1940s)

Public Library job

1947

album of gelatin silver photographs

Gift of Rex Smith, 2003

H2003.67/11

In this album, contractor Les Smith mixed photographs of his work on the Library's glass dome with his family snapshots. In doing so, he anticipated social-media accounts that now routinely blur our private and professional selves, or the eclectic mix of snapshots found on our smartphones. Today, photography shapes experience so thoroughly that it might seem to be a substitute for it. Perhaps this is why our phones ping with notifications like 'You have a new memory', prompting us to find meaning in an algorithmically assembled slideshow of our own lives.

Maker unknown

(active 1850s)

Brass gong with wood striker

c.1857

brass, wood, cord

H98.208/1

Struck once a day by Library attendants from the 1850s to the mid 1990s, this gong provided visitors with a daily reminder that the Library would soon be closing. Its loud, reverberating tones were replaced by a pre-recorded announcement.

William Strutt

(1825–1915)

Studies of a woman holding a crying baby

c. 1864

pencil on paper

H2011.102

Victorian bushfires of 1851 inspired this figure sketch, one of many William Strutt made for his painting *Black Thursday, February 6th, 1851*. The catastrophic fires burned a quarter of the State and killed 12 people and more than a million animals. Strutt sketched from contemporary accounts of women and children running from their burning huts, though he completed the painting in England more than a decade later. These stories were relayed to him when he was visiting Melbourne at the time of the event. This woman and child are hazy figures in the centre of the final painting, which is on view in the Cowen Gallery next door.

Maker unknown

(active 1870s)

Pocket watch owned by Edwin Living

1870

metal movement, silver case, chain

Gift of Joy and Tony Palermo, 2023

H2024.14

After robbing the bank at Jerilderie, bushranger Ned Kelly also stole this watch from the bank's accountant, Edwin Living. Kelly then pressured Living to help publish a 'manifesto' describing his life story, including his murder of three policemen. In exchange for his help, Living asked for the return of his watch and Kelly agreed. But instead of circulating the 56-page document that would become known as the Jerilderie Letter, Living handed it to the police. Both the watch and the Letter are together again as part of the Library's collection.

PND (People for Nuclear Disarmament)

(established 1960)

Stop the war

c. 1990

poster

9934242923607636

The Riley and Ephemera Collection started in 1956 with donations of material from Frank Riley that recorded political activity in Victoria. The collection, which includes material from the 19th century, continues to grow, and preserves T-shirts and badges, as well as printed matter such as posters and flyers. These items might otherwise vanish, because they are specific to an event or period and created quickly and cheaply. Yet their once-urgent messages frequently have continued relevance.

Dyranda Prevost

(1941–2004)

Late Sunday lunch at the Okuma family home, Kew

1990

gelatin silver photograph, selenium toned

H92.400/37

During the 1980s, the Library commissioned photographers to document the lives of Chinese and Italian migrants to better represent the diversity of people living in Victoria. The Library asked for images of 'work and workplaces and the family and home life, leisure activities, religious practices and the process of adaptation and change across generations'. Photographs of Greek, Lebanese and Vietnamese communities followed, and those of Maltese, German and Japanese communities. Also

included were copies made of photographs that members of the public offered to the collection.

Vicki Louise Couzens
Keerray Woorroong/Gunditjmara
(Born 1960)
Tuuram gundidj
2004
possum skin, cotton, nylon
H2006.152

Vicki Couzens's cloak holds cultural knowledge of the Keerray Woorroong clan. Burned designs trace connections to the Keerray Woorroong homelands in the Western District of Victoria through ancient and contemporary stories. Read from left to right and top to bottom, the cloak – like those made tens of thousands of years ago – remembers important sites, events, and practices: swimming holes, body markings, gatherings, food sources and totems.

Ian Banks
(1928–2013)
Record of forgettable transactions
1972–2012
Collection of 194 diaries: printed paper, illustrations and written text
H2016.400/1–194

Although titled 'forgettable', the 194 diaries that Ian Banks wrote over 40 years are a feat of memory. He records his meals, the contents of his mailbox, the cost of petrol and café

meals. He documents shopping at the Victoria Market, attending various clubs, descriptions of his photographs, and meetings with friends. Banks was a taxi driver, and cars are a running theme. Some days are memorialised by nothing more than pasted-in medical labels and food packaging. These mundane details, delivered with the detachment of a report, leave Banks unknowable. Emotion is rarely revealed, as in his entry of 26 March 1978, when he simply writes: 'We had a good day.'

Edward Wilson

(1813–78)

The dust is troublesome

c.1842–78

watercolour on paper

Gift of Miss Sheila Schön, 1997

H97.136/10

This sketchbook was originally intended for Edward Wilson's niece, and is lovingly illustrated, though he inscribed it 'Australia Felix: Cartoons from the daily life of an infectionate uncle'. Wilson turns the challenges he faced establishing himself in early colonial Melbourne into a narrative about the heat, the birds that eat his crops, the kangaroos who laugh at him when he falls off his horse, and the troublesome dust. But the sketches also describe the pleasure of a bite of watermelon after a day's work, sitting by the river, and meeting Aboriginal people he recounts as 'a few friends'.

Tiney Grant (compiler)

(active 1870s)

Scraps

1870

human hair, pressed leaves, photographs, newspaper cuttings

and postcards in scrapbook
MS 16008

Tiney Grant carefully preserved and labelled pressed leaves, locks of hair, poems, photographs of scenery and buildings and people, calling cards, newspaper cuttings and postcards. Their scrapbook, like many items in the Library's vast collection, has no associated file or additional information beyond the material object itself. It alone can tell us about Tiney Grant and their life. Only it knows who has held it and turned its pages before it arrived at the Library. Now it prompts us to consider what generative potential rests in fragments, incomplete records and partially told stories.

Nicholas White

(1875–91)

Portraits of Edward de Lacy Evans in dress, and in a three-piece suit

1879

albumen silver photograph (carte-de-visite)

H96.160/147

Edward de Lacy Evans (c. 1830 – 1901) was assigned female at birth with the name Ellen Tremaye. Shortly after arriving in Australia from Ireland in 1856, Evans presented and identified as a man. He married three times and worked in various roles including as a miner, a blacksmith and a labourer. In 1879 he was committed to psychiatric institutions by his extended family and after being forced to identify as female, was discharged and deemed 'cured'. Evans was written about extensively by the media, and memorabilia like this 'trick' carte-de-visite exploited his story. With few opportunities for work he 'performed' briefly as a sideshow act and then lived the remainder of their life in the Melbourne Immigrants' Home.

Various photographers

(active 1900s)

'The memory room' in Bland Holt album of family photographs

1907–09

album of gelatin silver photographs

MS8827/13/PHO63

Joseph Thomas (Bland) Holt was a well-known actor and theatre entrepreneur famous for staging spectacular effects such as a hot-air-balloon ascent, driving scenes with real cars, and tricks with live animals – including horses that galloped from Little Bourke Street into the theatre. This family album – full of playful portraits and holiday snaps – also includes a photograph of an empty parlour. Stuffed with expectant chairs, framed images, piano, fireplace and good lighting, this room has all the requirements of a gathering space, but the handwritten label describing it as 'the memory room' indicates its underlying role.

Photographer unknown

(active 20th century)

Hypnosis scene, at a performance by Van Loewe, South African hypnotist

1953

gelatin silver photograph

WG Alma conjuring collection

Bk.11/No.126

In 1953 a packed crowd at The Wonderland Theatre in Wagga Wagga was introduced to the world-famous hypnotist Mr Leon Van Loewe. Van Loewe demonstrated his powers of mental telepathy and mnemonic skills before inviting the audience to experience the influence of hypnosis. According to a contemporary newspaper report, each volunteer succumbed to

the hypnotist's prompts to feel extreme heat or extreme cold. In response, they began fanning themselves and trying to remove their clothes, or attempted to warm up and hide under a rug – in both cases with no memory of the experience afterwards.

Georgiana McCrae

(1804–1890)

Nine studies of the eye

c. 1830s

paint on ivory

MS 12831

Memory research suggests that while we sleep, we forget. While resting, our brains tidy up and filter memories, making forgetting essential to our cognitive and emotional wellbeing. As if emerging from that sleep-state, surreal, individual eyes look out in all directions from this tiny dream-like study. Painted just prior to photography's invention, Georgiana McCrae's study illustrates that before the camera, appearances could be preserved only by memory and the mind's eye.

Dorothea Francis

(1903–1975)

Margaret Francis

(1909–1988)

Sketchbook

1931–40

pencil, watercolour, gouache and pastel on paper

Gift of Mr Jim and Dr Helen Alexander, 2000

H2011.94/51

This sketchbook was shared between the two sisters, artists Dorothea and Margaret Francis. Both contributed figure studies and experiments in form and colour, sometimes distinguished with their individual initials. The sketches run in both directions

throughout the book but, when the book is read from left to right, this unattributed nude is upside down. Heightening this strange view of the drawing is its imprint on the opposite page, a copy head-to-head with the original and an accidental memento, perhaps, of the book's two owners.

Howard Arkley

(1951–99)

Lists of ideas for exhibition and artwork titles, planning notes, schemes and reminders

1982–83

school exercise book

© The Estate of Howard Arkley, Courtesy Kalli Rolfe

Contemporary Art

MS14217/3/14

Artist Howard Arkley's notebooks, penned ecstatically, helped grip his rush of thoughts. They contain mundane to-do lists, ideas for artwork titles, notes to self, sources of inspiration, quick sketches and draft texts. The shorthand embodies Arkley's energetic and eclectic style, and while the notebooks clearly connect to his finished works, they have an intimacy that can make reading feel voyeuristic.

Batchelder & Co. fl.

(1866–95)

Mr. Lambert as Daddy Hardacre

1866

album of albumen silver photograph, toned

H98.40/16

In this studio portrait, J. C. Lambert, well-known comedy actor of the mid 19th century, restages his best-known roles in character studies for the camera. An accompanying text

laments photography's inability to commit his voice to memory but admires how, as a 'modern science', it can forever preserve the truth of his feelings as they appear on his face. Nearing retirement, Lambert assembled this album to rescue his celebrity from oblivion and give his current and future admirers a permanent memorial.

Albert Tucker

(1914–1999)

Bert's self-portrait sold to Guy Reynolds

1939–45

gelatin silver contact print

Albert Tucker Photograph Collection, Heide Museum of Modern Art and State Library Victoria

H2008.98/559

When asked about his working methods, artist Albert Tucker described his interest in drawing from memory, though he also found it unreliable. In 1939 he bought a camera and regularly photographed his friends, events, landscapes and himself. The Library holds more than 600 of his contact prints. Tucker settled for these tiny images as the most affordable way to have his photographs printed. He would have to view them using a magnifying glass, creating a slightly strange encounter. This out-of-focus image of a painted self-portrait seems also to capture the gap between life and the images that document it.

Mirka Mora

(1928–2018)

Album of holiday photographs

1965

album of gelatin silver photographs with captions

Courtesy of the Estate of Mirka Mora

MS 13611

Artist Mirka Mora was arrested in 1942, caught up in the largest French deportation of Jews during the Holocaust. She was released from a concentration camp and avoided further arrest by hiding in French forests for three years. In 1951, after reading about Melbourne in a novel, she moved here with her husband and became one of the city's most celebrated artists. This souvenir gift from a holiday with John and Sunday Reed – important local art dealers – is more a work of art than strict documentation. Befitting the group's bohemian sensibilities, its playful imagery and poetic narrative create a vivid recollection of their Aspendale trip.

Hellen SKY

(Born 1952)

A day on the Lake: Mr Xiao Kemin enjoys a boat ride

1983

gelatin silver photograph, hand-coloured

H89.206/24

This photograph is from a series documenting instructors from the Nanjing Acrobatic Troupe working with the Australian performance company the Flying Fruit Fly Circus. The Troupe travelled to Australia as part of a cross-cultural exchange with China and had a significant impact on the circus arts here. Photographer Hellen Sky spent three months with the Troupe. These images, each embellished with careful hand-colouring and handmade borders, memorialise a friendship between artists developed through the intimacy and physicality of living and training together 6 days a week.

Hayley Millar Baker

Gunditjmara/Djabwurrung

(Born 1990)

Untitled (so he mixed arsenic with half the flour and a

raging thirst was created)

2018

inkjet photograph on cotton rag

H2018.529

This collaged image is from Hayley Millar Baker's body of work, *A Series of Unwarranted Events*, in which she interprets the frontier violence faced by the Gunditjmarra people. In the early 1840s, on the Wannon River, west of the Grampians | Gariwerd, a hut-keeper was employed by the Henty brothers, who were among the earliest European settlers on Gunditjmarra land. The keeper noticed his flour rations were being stolen by local Gunditjmarra and Jardwadjali people and, in response, mixed arsenic into the flour bags. Dozens of people lost their lives after consuming cakes made at the river with the poisoned flour. The arsenic induced extreme thirst, drawing them into the water where they drowned.

Creator unknown

(active 1850s)

Letter and envelope from the Dead Letter Branch

1853

paper

H6029

A dead letter is one that seems to have lost all memory of its destination and origin – unable to go forward to its intended reader, unable to be returned to its sender. But memory loss in the library, most pronounced in objects such as this partially destroyed letter and envelope, can be generative. This is where memory's disappearance, rather than being only a loss, can leave space for new stories and experiences and, potentially, new memories.

Maker unknown

(active 1850–1900)

Police swing baton

undated
wood, rubber, leather
H24625

During the Police Strike of 1923, many men, including returned servicemen from the First World War, expressed concern for the safety of their families. Many volunteered to be a Special Constable and were issued with a baton and badge. This baton possibly belonged to a Special Constable. It can be a productive thought-experiment to consider 'object memory'. We might ask, for instance, 'What does an object know or what has it experienced, especially when its story, owner or maker is not recorded?' An object of power such as this one, designed to induce fear and heighten authority, offers much to consider from different perspectives.

Ernest S Fysh
(1876–1942)
Spiderwebs over rushes in a lake
1909
gelatin silver photograph
Gift of Mrs Anne Tindall, 2000
H2001.74/23

The camera captures an intricate network of spiderwebs in fine detail, yet that very precision is at odds with how little this photograph tells us about where, exactly, this scene was found. This absence of location information may, in its own way, mirror memory itself – selective, fragmentary, and arbitrary in what it chooses to preserve.

Photographer unknown
(active late 19th century)
Unidentified man
undated

gem tintype
Gift of Mrs A Holloway, 1984
H85.55/894A

This undated, unidentified portrait by an unknown photographer immediately puts the work of understanding back on us: Who is this person? How did he come to be in this Library? Physically, the Library's vast collection is stamped, numbered, labelled and indexed. In the catalogue, a record is a reference to a real person, place or object: a memory awaiting summons. But this portrait carries none of that detail. How do we interpret an item with so little to go on? For the Library, the work of documenting, housing and carefully preserving each thing in the collection is a protest against forgetting.

May Moore
(1881–1931)

Mina Moore
(1882–1957)

Bells N.Z.

1910–20

gelatin silver photograph, toned
H38782/1124

French essayist Roland Barthes writes about the details in a photograph that unexpectedly move us as inflicting a kind of

wound – using words like ‘sting’, ‘cut’, and ‘little hole’. In this group portrait taken by the sisters May and Mina Moore, there is an actual, literal hole in the print: a figure in a dress has been neatly snipped out, erased from the gathering and cut out of the time otherwise fixed in the photograph. We’re left wondering what led to this person’s removal – and an image that captures both togetherness and its rupture.

Photographer unknown

(active 1960s)

Herald & Weekly Times (publisher)

(established 1840)

Area of St Kilda, Victoria, where Linda Stillwell went missing
1968

gelatin silver photograph

Gift of *The Herald & Weekly Times Limited*, 1977

H38849/5721

Pasted on the back of this photograph is a newspaper clipping imploring readers to send their memories about the circumstances of 7-year-old Linda Stillwell’s disappearance: ‘Nine people were at this spot at 5 p.m. on Saturday ... They’re probably somewhere in Melbourne. Maybe YOU are one of them. Maybe YOU know who they are. They are people police desperately want to see. They may hold the vital clue to Linda’s whereabouts. You probably know this spot ... So now YOU can be a detective.’ To this day, Linda’s whereabouts remain unknown.

Photographer unknown

(active 1970s)

Aerial view of Melbourne, with proposed building

c.1971–74

gelatin silver photograph

Gift of the Department of Transport, 2014
H2014.1019/7

The architect and the purpose of this proposed building are unknown, as is the context for the design and the reason it never eventuated. Along with every decision made by a city – to build, demolish, extend, renovate, replan or rezone – there exist countless alternate possibilities. The storerooms, plan drawers and hard drives of every architect and planner's office contain speculative proposals that, for any number of reasons, remain unrealised, destined to gather dust and fade from memory. Collectively, these projects form an alternate, invisible society, an archive of ideas and ambitions that never materialised.

Makers unknown

(active early 20th century)

122 keys, mostly unlabelled, from the La Souef family papers

undated; between 1930 and 1950

metal, string

YMS 13490

Some of these keys have labels such as 'Monkey House' and 'Hippopotamus Round' because they were once used at the Melbourne Zoo. The origins of most, however, are unidentified. One of the greatest fears within any collecting institution is the loss of connection between a record and the item it describes. Cut loose from the organising system, it risks never being available for public viewing. These keys are carefully stored in their cardboard housing, and easily found, but what they might unlock is up to us to imagine.

Yallourn Brickworks (manufacturer)

(active 1920–c.1960)

Clay pressed red bricks imprinted with the word 'Yallourn'
1920

clay, sand, lime

Gift of Ms Carolyn Fraser, 2019

PCLTRE 787

The State Electricity Commission created an entire town for workers at the Yallourn Power Station and open-cut coalmine in Victoria's Latrobe Valley. Built on the British 'garden city' model, Yallourn was designed to be beautiful, walkable, and conducive to a productive workforce. Architect designed and publicly owned, the town was unique in Australia, with schools, sportsgrounds, banks, library, hospital, theatre, and a committee to ensure houses and gardens were kept tidy. But in 1968 Yallourn began to be torn up, to mine the brown coal beneath it. Families were displaced across the region, leaving remnants like this brick to restore us to that place.

John William 'Chummy' Fleming

(1863–1950)

Anarchy flag

c.1920

cotton

H89.109/2

John William 'Chummy' Fleming is remembered as a pioneer unionist, anarchist and an instrumental figure in starting May Day celebrations in Melbourne. He worked in a boot factory in England from the age of 10, an experience that contributed to his lifelong commitment to social justice. After migrating, he agitated on behalf of numerous causes, including prison conditions, female equality, working conditions, and support for the unemployed. For almost 50 years, Chummy held public meetings and lectured on the banks of the Yarra in front of two

handmade red flags, stitched in white with the words 'Freedom' and 'Anarchy'.