



## **ACTIVITY 2: Assessing Significance (30 min)**

- 1) Work alone or with your museum team.
- 2) Based on your knowledge of a single object in your collection (and the information you brought), complete the following steps before writing a concise statement of the object's significance.

*Note: Refer to the Significance Assessment Criteria and example attached.*

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1. Provide basic information about the object and its history

2. What is the history and provenance of the object?

3. Who are donors, owners, and knowledgeable people?

4. Explore the context of the object

5. Analyse and describe the materials and condition of the object

6. Compare the object with similar items in your collection or other collections

7. Identify related places and objects

8. Assess significance against the criteria – see attached criteria questions for prompts to consider different types of significance. Remember it is okay to mark “none” if it doesn’t fit a criteria.

Historic:

Aesthetic:

Scientific:

Social / Spiritual  
Significance:

Provenance:

Representativeness /  
Rarity:

Condition:

Interpretive  
Potential:

9. Write a statement of significance

## SIGNIFICANCE ASSESSMENT CRITERIA QUESTIONS

*Significance assessment is a collaborative process that draws on the knowledge, skills and experience of a range of people, including donors and people in the community knowledgeable about the subject or object. Make sure you consult as widely as possible to fully understand the context, history, and significance of the object, and research more information where relevant. Use the questions to help draw out the precise qualities of the object's significance. One or more criteria may apply and criteria may be inter-related. An object may be highly significant even if only one or two criteria apply. Think of the criteria as a framework to assist you to consider and describe **how** and **why** the object is important.*

*A significance summary statement is a reasoned assessment of the meaning and importance of an object. It is more than a description of what the object looks like. A statement of significance summarizes **how** and **why** the object is important. A significance summary statement is not set in stone and may change over time. From time to time it should be reviewed as circumstances change and knowledge develops. Significance summary statements are excellent sources of information for exhibit labels and other interpretive activities.*

### Historic significance

- Is it associated with a particular person, group, event or activity?
- What does it tell us about an historic theme or process or pattern of life?
- How does it contribute to our understanding of a period or place, activity, person or event?

### Aesthetic significance

- Is it well designed, crafted or made?
- Is it a good example of a style, design, artistic movement or the artist's work?
- Is it original or innovative in its design?
- Is it beautiful?

### Scientific or Research significance

- Do researchers have an active interest in studying the object today, or will they want to in the future?
- How is it of interest or value for science or research today or in the future?
- What things in particular constitute its scientific or research interest and research value?

*Note: This criterion only applies to objects of current scientific value, or with research potential such as archaeological collections. Objects such as scientific instruments are generally of historic significance.*

### Social or Spiritual significance

- Is the object of particular value to an ethnic or cultural community or group today? Why is it important to them?
- How is this demonstrated? Is the object kept in the public eye? Is its meaning kept alive for the group (eg by being used in an annual parade or ceremonies, or by maintaining traditional practices surrounding the object)?
- Has the Museum consulted the community about its importance for them?
- Is the object or collection of spiritual significance for a particular group?
- Is this spiritual significance found in the present?

*Note: Social or spiritual significance only applies to objects and collections where there is a demonstrated contemporary attachment between the object and community. Items of social history interest are of historic significance. If the object has spiritual or social significance this needs to be demonstrated through consultation with the community or group.*

### Provenance

- Who owned, used or made the object?
- Where and how was it used?
- Is its place, or origin, well documented?

### Representativeness / Rarity

- Is it a good example of its type or class?
- Is it typical or characteristic?
- Is it unusual or a particularly fine example of its type?
- Is it singular, or unique?
- Is it particularly well documented for its class or group?
- Does it have special qualities that distinguish it from other objects in the class or category?

### Condition, intactness or integrity

- Is it in unusually good condition for its type?
- Is it unusually intact or complete?
- Does it show repairs, alterations or evidence of the way it was used?
- Is it still working?
- Is it in original, unrestored condition?

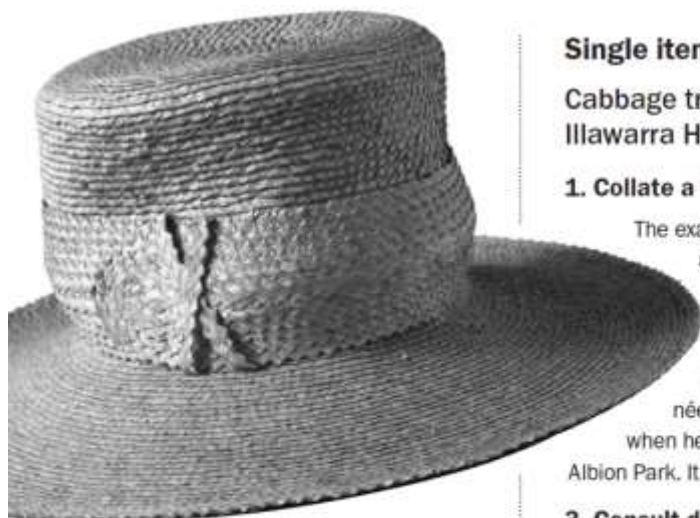
*NOTE: In general, an object in original condition is generally more significant than one that has been restored.*

### Interpretive potential

- Does it help the museum tell a story?
- Can you learn something about the object's wider context and associations, or about its materials, design and function?
- How is it relevant to the museum's purpose, collection policy and exhibition program?
- Does it represent an opportunity to use some different interpretation strategies?
- Is there anything else in the collection that can tell the same story?

*Significance Assessment Criteria are © Heritage Collections Council (HCC), Commonwealth of Australia, 2002  
Worksheet is a tool of Heritage Collections Council and Museums & Galleries Foundation NSW*

*For more information about purposes and 'how-tos' of significance assessment, see Significance 2.0: A Guide to Assessing the Significance of Collections, 2009*



Cabbage tree hat made by Mrs Lionel Hurry for her nephew Albert Denniss, about 1900  
Reproduced courtesy of the Illawarra Historical Society, Wollongong



George French Angas  
Britain/Australia, 1822 - 1886  
Cabbage Palms, Dapto, Illawarra  
1844-05, Dapto, New South Wales  
watercolour on paper  
32.8 x 23.5 cm  
Gift of Miss EM Johnson  
Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide

## Single item: illustrated step-by-step process

### Cabbage tree hat, c. 1900

Illawarra Historical Society, Wollongong, NSW

#### 1. Collate a file with all the information about the item and its history

The exact acquisition date is not known, however the Society has detailed notes about the history and provenance of the hat. It was a gift on behalf of the late Miss AR Hurry, daughter of the maker of the hat, around 1969.

#### 2. Research the history and provenance of the item

Notes associated with the hat record that it was made by Mrs Lionel Hurry, née Sarah Denniss, for her nephew Albert Denniss, son of her brother George, when he was a small boy holidaying with her at Vine Cottage, Flinders Street, Albion Park. It was probably made in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century.

#### 3. Consult donors, owners, and knowledgeable people

The Society's notes associated with the hat were presumably written at the time it was donated from information supplied by the donor. These notes include information about the family's arrival in Australia, their home and work. They record Mr WA Denniss making a small tool to strip the cabbage palm leaves into narrow widths before plaiting.

Additional information collected by the Society from local sources builds up a picture of the patterns of manufacture of cabbage tree hats by people in the Illawarra. Of particular note is the reference that other members of the Denniss family used Aboriginal people to climb the cabbage trees to collect the palm 'hands' for plaiting in exchange for a 'halfmoon' damper. Other information records the Tibbles family making quantities of hats to sell twice a year at their stand at the Sydney markets, and Mrs Brooks of Kangaroo Valley putting the palm hands on the laundry roof to be bleached by the sun and frost.

#### 4. Explore the context of the item

Cabbage tree hats were a characteristic feature of the dress of men in the Australian bush in the nineteenth century. First recorded in 1799, the hats were worn by convicts, shepherds, poets, explorers, larrikins and the well to do. They are described in the works of writers such as Henry Lawson and Mary Gilmore, and in numerous paintings and photographs of daily life on the goldfields and in the bush. Later in the nineteenth century, the larrikins of Sydney's Rocks area were also marked by their cabbage tree hats and known as the 'cabbage tree mob'.

Straw plaiting was a rural craft in Britain. It was taught to convicts awaiting transportation on the hulks, and it remained a prison craft in Australia throughout the nineteenth century. Straw plaiting was done by shepherds in the bush, who were often emancipated convicts. The craft was suited to occupations and circumstances where there was plenty of time and limited resources. By the second half of the nineteenth century the hats were made by men and women in many circumstances, from factories in Sydney and regional towns, to housewives and rural workers supplementing farm incomes. They were sold to drovers and other travellers along the main roads of NSW. Sometimes the plaits were sold separately to be later made into hats. Very fine cabbage tree hats were exhibited in numerous international exhibitions.

The cabbage palm, *Livistona australis*, is a distinctive feature of the Illawarra landscape. The palm figures in many nineteenth-century illustrations and travellers' descriptions of the region. Every part of the cabbage tree palm was exploited by early settlers for housing, food, furniture and hats. The reference to Aboriginal people gathering the palm 'hands' for plaiting offers an important insight into the coexistence and cooperation of Aboriginal people and European settlers in the Illawarra. The notes kept by the Society highlight some of the ways women supplemented income by making and selling hats, and they point to trade routes and cultural relationships that are not documented in other sources.



## 5. Analyse and describe the fabric and condition of the item

Like other cabbage tree hats, this example is made by first boiling and bleaching the palm leaves. They were then stripped into narrow widths using a variety of tools and blades; the width of the strip affects the fineness of the plait and the quality of the hat. The strips were then plaited together, this one with five strands. To make the hat, the plait was wound from the crown out, overlapping the plait beneath, and then sewn down to make the high crown and wide brim of this example. Additional blocking and steaming refines the shape. This example has a worked band of plait around the crown. It is lined and has the owner's name inside the crown with a leather thong for fastening under the chin.

## 6. Compare the item with similar items

There are about ten cabbage tree hats in museum and library collections in Australia. About half are provenanced to particular owners (for example, Marcus Clarke's hat in the State Library of Victoria), but this example is the best provenanced known at present, with specific and contextual history from the region. Comparison also highlights the quality of the straw plaiting. Other examples show the same type of band around the crown and a variety of shapes, from this style to boater types.

## 7. Identify related places and items

The cabbage palm, *Livistona australis*, is a much loved feature of the Illawarra escarpment and rainforest gullies. Stands of cabbage palms are still prominent landmarks in the Illawarra.

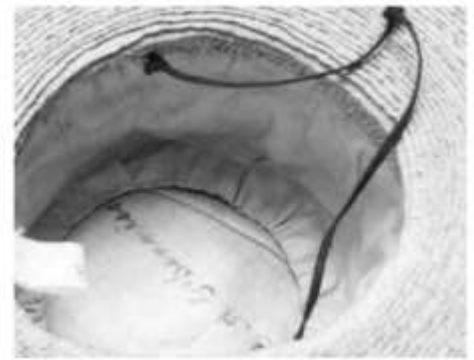
The Society has many items in its collection related to the Denniss and Hurry family homes. Also associated with the hat are three rolls of cabbage tree plait, possibly left over from making the hat.

## 8. Assess significance against the criteria

Primarily historically significant. The hat is both rare and representative of vernacular bush dress, in excellent condition and well provenanced. Its provenance means this example is a reference point for studying unprovenanced cabbage tree hats. It may also have some artistic value for the quality of its craftsmanship as a fine example of straw plaiting. The hat interprets a distinctive feature of the Illawarra environment.

## 9. Write a statement of significance

This cabbage tree hat is a fine well-provenanced example of a hat that was characteristic of bush dress in nineteenth-century Australia. Such hats are historically significant as the only distinctive item of Australian dress entirely made from Australian materials. The hats have a special place in the developing mythology of bush life, described by authors such as Henry Lawson. It is typical of such descriptions that one could not determine the wealth and status of the wearers under their battered and sun-darkened cabbage tree hats. The wearing of cabbage tree hats by convicts, shepherds, settlers, miners on the goldfields, explorers in the outback and larrikins in the inner city, highlights the egalitarian character of nineteenth-century men's vernacular dress in Australia. This cabbage tree hat and its history help tease out the relationship between Aboriginal people, settlers and the environment in the Illawarra. The hat exemplifies exploitation of local materials, and informal ways of supplementing incomes. Cabbage tree hats demonstrate the adaptation of traditional British skills to the raw materials available in the environment, driven by climatic needs. This example is significant for being provenanced to a particular locality, with the capacity to interpret the distinctive history and character of the region.



Detail showing the interior lining of the cabbage tree hat with the owner's name in ink.  
Reproduced courtesy of the Illawarra Historical Society, Wollongong.



Kerry and Co., Sydney, Australia c. 1884–1917  
Cabbage palms, Illawarra  
Glass negative  
Photo: Charles Kerry Studio  
Reproduced courtesy of the Tyrrell Collection  
Powerhouse Museum, Sydney

Boater style cabbage tree hat, c. 1860–1880  
Photo: Andrew Frolows  
Collection: Powerhouse Museum, Sydney  
This style of cabbage tree hat is shown in sketches by the artists ST Gill and William Strutt

