

# **Keeping Up Appearances: Why are interiors important?**

## **Challenging the role of the Curator in Preserving the Interior as a Site of Historic Encounter in the Australian Historic House Museum**



Figure 1. *Meeting of the Trustees, Director and Curators in the Dining Room during conservation works, Elizabeth Farm, Parramatta.* Photograph taken by Peter Stanbury, 16 April 1982, Museums of History NSW. Accessed 2 December 2024. / <https://blogs.sydneylivingmuseums.com.au/cook/then-and-now-the-dining-room-at-elizabeth-farm/index.htm>.

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degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

## Abstract

Interiors in historic house museums are spaces where the private lives of often public figures are made public. This thesis explores the challenges of the intersection of the professional Curator and the presentation of the private person in a public space. It looks at the role of those making and implementing the decisions, from well-meaning amateur to knowledgeable Curator. It challenges the role of the Curator in making these decisions and investigates the outcomes through four case studies that are based in New South Wales. It places these four examples in the wider national and international context. The thesis charts the ways in which conservation and interpretation philosophies and practices influence curatorial decisions.

It recognises and notes the value of the historic interior as a site which holds the witness marks of past occupants. The thesis argues that the accurate presentation of interiors is the primary method of realising their intrinsic value. It analyses other methods for preserving and interpreting historic house interiors, such as in a constructed museum and gallery context, and through virtual reality. It charts the changes in attitude and purpose of these other reconstructions. It looks at the outcomes of changing the context of the interiors by moving them to another (equally charged) location. It concludes that interiors are worth preserving, that the accuracy of their appearance is best achieved by using the information available, the tangible and intangible heritage, the material fabric of the building and so on, in the interior as primary resource, ideally with the interior remaining in its original context of its historic house and, even with flaws and short comings, using an experienced Curator as facilitator despite the challenges they face.

## Statement of originality

I certify that the intellectual content of this thesis is the product of my own work and that all the assistance received in preparing this thesis and sources have been acknowledged. This thesis has not been submitted for any degree or other purpose.

Suzanne Bravery

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As life has demanded that I meet other priorities, this small body of work took much longer to write than the traditional three years. More recently, I thought it important to reflect on whether the thesis was still relevant. Many of the key players have left the building, though few have left the sector. Governments have changed and changed again. More Curators now freelance as consultants than are engaged as ongoing employees of government. This has impacted their ability to nurture house museum interiors as ongoing sites of connection and encounter.

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## Disclaimer

This thesis has been shaped and influenced by my extensive work as a Curator at properties of outstanding historical significance. From 1986 to 2008, I worked with the Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales primarily as the Curator of *Elizabeth Bay House*, *Elizabeth Farm*, *Vaucluse House*, *Meroogal* and *Rouse Hill Estate*. My ongoing research and study contextualised my working experience, including: attendance at the 2006 Attingham Summer School for the Study of English Country Houses, participation at the 2010 Attingham London Houses course, and the 2013 Attingham Study Week in Norfolk. Concurrently, I have conducted extensive private study of historic houses and house museums in Australasia, England, Europe, North America and Asia. This knowledge informs my ongoing commitment to keeping the lives of others (as shown in historic house museum interiors) accessible to the public in an accurate and purposeful manner.

The views and opinions expressed herein are those of the author. They are not designed to, nor do they necessarily, represent the views or opinions of the Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales (January 1980-April 2013), Sydney Living Museums (April 2013-3 October 2022) or Museums of History NSW (4 October 2022-)

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Think of two people, living together day after day, year after year, in this small space, standing elbow to elbow cooking at the same small stove, squeezing past each other on the narrow stairs, shaving in front of the same small bathroom mirror, constantly jogging, jostling, bumping into each other's bodies by mistake or on purpose...think what deep though invisible tracks they must leave, everywhere, behind them.

Christopher Isherwood, *A Single Man* (London: Vintage, 2006), 3-4.



Figure 2. A curated interior. Jan Van Eyck, *The Arnolfini Portrait*, 1434, oil on oak. Panel of three vertical boards, 82.2 cm × 60 cm; panel 84.5 cm × 62.5 cm NG186 National Gallery, London. Accessed 2 December 2024. <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/jan-van-eyck-the-arnolfini-portrait>.

The carefully curated appearance of this private Bruges domestic interior is used as the symbolic context for the recording of a very public declaration, most likely one of marriage. Here, the private is deliberately made public, the viewer is an invited witness. The aspirational is expressed through the appearance of the detailed domestic interior. This leads us to London in 1990...

## Introduction

‘Bouquet residence. The lady of the house speaking.’

(Mrs) Hyacinth Bucket when answering the home telephone in the BBC television series ‘*Keeping Up Appearances*’ (1990—1995).



Figure 3. *Keeping Up Appearances: The Candlelight Supper*, Series 2, Episode 3, ITV, aired September 15, 1991. Accessed 2 December 2024. <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0619155/>.

*Keeping Up Appearances* is a British television situation comedy which aired from 1990-95 with two specials in 1997 and 2008. The central character is an eccentric and snobbish social climber, Hyacinth Bucket, originally from a lower socio-economic background, who insists that her married surname is pronounced ‘Bouquet.’ Hyacinth’s main mission in life is to impress others with her refinement derived from an aspirational affluence. Much of the humour comes from the conflict between Hyacinth's vision of herself and the reality of her background. In each episode, she lands in a farcical situation as she battles to protect her social credibility. This series is syndicated worldwide and is in constant repeat.

Mrs Bucket is the creator and the Curator of a fantasy world which she ‘kept up’ in her external attitude and in the aspirational appearance of the public-entertaining-rooms of her

modest suburban house. Using professional Curators, house museums aspire to be as accurate in the representation of their own historic interiors as Hyacinth aspires for her own interiors to be accurate. Highly subjective representations of the past can be made and used in this way and for this purpose, but they are neither humorous nor responsible nor accurate. When representations of the past are tangible, such as historic house museums, it is essential that their appearance is presented in an accurate and accessible manner. This is especially so for those house museum interiors in public ownership. As Scott Carlin, then employed as a Curator by the Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales (the Trust) states, ‘significant historic domestic interiors are comparatively rare, as the constantly changing needs of domestic use and taste dictate cycles of change and renewal in most houses.’<sup>1</sup>

House interiors are designed, built, decorated, and inhabited for many reasons and are spaces intended for various and sometimes overlapping purposes, by a diverse range of people. Interiors are, more than any other component of a property, susceptible and vulnerable to change, to disturbance and alteration. Interiors of significance, in private or public ownership, require consistent and effective safeguards such as heritage protections that articulate choices made in their presentation, and to protect their heritage value. House interiors are usually the aesthetic and functional expression of the intrinsically personal. Unlike other areas of a property, such as the building structure, interiors are less likely to be the focus of visual or textual record whilst they are in private ownership. Interiors are more likely to appear as backgrounds incidental to photographs or paintings or depictions of people (often the owners or occupiers). Sometimes interiors in the twenty and twenty first centuries are an accidental inclusion such as in ‘happy snaps’ of family events. In eighteenth and nineteenth century

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<sup>1</sup> Scott Carlin, (ed.), *Our Home: Floorcoverings in Australia 1800-1950* (Sydney: Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales, 1997), 5.

paintings, interiors are often rendered as deliberate indications of the wealth or circumstance of the sitter.<sup>2</sup> Examples of this include the 1706 anonymous portrait of *John Middleton with his Family in the Drawing Room*, where the prosperous shopkeeper and his family worked and ate in their elegant sitting room as indicated by the dining table that pulls out and the dresser which holds a knife box.<sup>1</sup> J.M. Gandy's November 1798 watercolour of *The Soane family having breakfast in the Breakfast Room, No.12* shows the traditionally humble room's grand proportions, intricate timber work of the bookcases and the bright colours of the figured carpet.<sup>2</sup> A modest middle-class interior showing the richness of available textiles on walls and floors, floral wall paper and oil lighting is captured in A. Enwood's 1860 oil on canvas *The First Place*.<sup>3</sup> They are the opposite to facadism, where the exteriors are retained but the interiors are destroyed—the very places where the actions, the decisions, the living occurred. When you edit, alter or otherwise destroy the interiors, you destroy these histories.

This thesis argues for the preservation and presentation of historic house museum interiors by professional, educated Curators using best practice through a case study approach looking at examples in Australia managed by the Historic Houses Trust of NSW and its successive organisations, Sydney Living Museums and Museums of History NSW. Throughout the thesis, the term 'Curator' is capitalised as if it were a proper noun to reflect its position as a key subject of this research. This research considers a period where curatorship has moved from a past period of considerable responsibility and individual professional satisfaction to a contemporary situation where Curators may feel their role becoming less clear and less valued. Good house museum Curators use the whole building (internal and external) as a document – an approach which emphasises the importance of respect for, and an understanding of, the original fabric as central to the role of Curating. They value and rely on

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<sup>1</sup> Judith Flanders, *The Making of Home* (London: Atlantic Books, 2014). Plate 24.

<sup>2</sup> Bruce Boucher, *Sir John Soane's Museum: A Complete Description* (China: Pimpernel Press, 2018). Figure 174.

<sup>3</sup> Steven Parissien, *Interiors: The Home Since 1700* (China: Laurence King publishing, 2009). Image on page 135.

the choices made by the occupants: in surface finishes and fittings, in room and furniture location, in the contents of drawers and cupboards, in views to the exterior, and in any material culture extant in the spaces, and about the spaces, to inform decisions about the appearance. With specialist knowledge, skills and experience, and an understanding of the application of current conservation theory and practice, well-resourced professional Curators, are best placed to undertake this task.

This thesis examines how some Australian historic house museum interiors are conserved and interpreted by those charged with this task, and how different models and resourcing affect the accurate preservation, and thus protection, of these interiors. Approaches to the conservation and interpretation of the interiors of four historic house museums: *Vaucluse House*, *Elizabeth Farm*, *Meroogal* and *Rose Seidler House*, are used to investigate the role and influence of Curators, and the impact of public ownership, in determining the appearance of the historic interiors. The four properties are currently the responsibility of the Museums of History NSW (2022-). This thesis maps the various restructures that have occurred to this organisation, which was founded as the Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales (1980-2013) and then the Sydney Living Museums (2013-2022). In doing so it acknowledges the need for the ongoing preservation of historic house museum interiors and touches on the development of the ‘Period Room’ as a site of historic encounter. It examines and sets out aspects of best practice looking to ensure that their appearance is as historically accurate as possible and universally accessible, in other words, physical, intellectual (didactic), experiential and even spiritual access.

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<sup>2</sup> For an Australian example see Susan Hunt, *Australian colonial crafts: floor coverings, textiles, furniture, facsimiles: craft revived for the presentation and restoration of Elizabeth Farm* (Sydney: Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales, 1986)

In exploring these sites and the changes in this organisation, it maps a critical time to record this 'golden age' of historic house museums in the 1980s and 1990s in Australia when there was a noticeable resources investment in the cultural heritage of the nation through an acquisition, conservation and interpretation of house museums, and employment of associated professional staff to ensure accessibility to their historical narratives; and the changes since its demise. Despite the importance of these sites for Australian History there is a noticeable gap in the scholarly literature.

Historic Houses Trust of NSW properties have rarely been the subject of scholarly attention. Key scholar Linda Young has written extensively about house museums, including the lack of reliable evidence for women's role in the appearance of the interiors, about the role and influence of volunteers, and visitors and about heritage interpretation, in both an international and an Australian context. In support of her arguments, Young uses historic houses largely in the public domain. However, when writing about house museums in Australia, rather than using properties of the Historic Houses Trust, for which these themes are relevant for enquiry, and have often been addressed in curatorial work but not in scholarly literature,<sup>4</sup> she has tended to focus on properties of other state based organisations such as the National Trust of Australia (NSW), and local volunteer organisations.<sup>5</sup> More widely, when the HHT properties are the subject of scholarly research, they are, with a few exceptions<sup>6</sup> the subject

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<sup>4</sup> *Meroogal* in Nowra is the obvious example of addressing the roles of women in history through the appearance of the interiors. Since its opening as a state government managed house museum, *Elizabeth Farm* in Parramatta has relied on volunteers as guides to support paid guides whose roles included not only guiding but also housekeeping and security.

<sup>5</sup> Linda Young. "A woman's place is in the house...museum: Interpreting women's histories in house museums." In *Open Museum Journal* Volume 5: Interpreting women's histories in house museums July 2002.

<sup>6</sup> Charlotte H. F. Smith. "The House Enshrined: Great Man and Social History House Museums in the United States and Australia" (PhD diss., University of Canberra, 2002).

Susan McClean. "Negotiating the Nation: Knowledge and Meaning at Vaucluse House in its First Curatorial Period" *Public History Review* Volume 16, 2009, 20-42.

of highly specific research which does not focus on the curatorial role.<sup>7</sup> The bulk of the literature on the properties is often generated by the organisation and relates more to promotion and interpretation.<sup>8</sup>

It is important to reflect on the dearth of written material on this topic because of the marked decrease in funding for the sector. This has meant the reallocation of finite resources away from research that enables the conserving, interpreting, accessing and reviewing of historic interiors. When resources are substantially reduced and redirected from professional positions, the sustainability of historic house museums must be questioned. With the dilution, and at times removal altogether, of Curatorial expertise<sup>3</sup> the public will struggle to make an individual connection with Australia's heritage.

This thesis addresses a gap in the literature about the changes to the role of Curator at Australian historic house museums and acknowledges the challenges of the Curator in preserving the interiors as an accurate site of historic encounter. During the nineteen eighties, Australia experienced a resurgence of interest in a collective colonial past, culminating in the Bicentenary celebrations. The Australian Bicentenary marked 200 years since the arrival of the First Fleet of British convict ships at Sydney Harbour on 26 January 1788. The Australian federal government subsidised tertiary education so that it was offered free of charge in the 1970s and 1980s in Australia. The availability of tertiary educated Curators with expertise in the decorative and applied arts and in a 'new social history' increased, the Burra

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<sup>7</sup> Tania Ann Konecny. "Less is more: Deaccessioning from the historic houses trust of New South Wales" in *Museum Management and Curatorship* Volume 10 Issue 3 September 1991.281-292.

<sup>8</sup>*Insites:newsletter of the Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales* 1991-2013.  
Accessed 24 October 2025. <https://first.mhnsww.au/#record/6373>.

Charter was written, and sufficient government resources to responsibly manage cultural heritage all combined to encourage experimentation and accuracy in conserving and interpreting house museums. Whitewashed walls and green shutters, pretty cottage gardens and mannequin- dominated monochromatic interiors were no longer acceptable as the standard physical representation of a house museum interior. No longer was the house museum seen primarily as a series of arranged, often awkward, lessons for the betterment of its visitors, but refreshingly as a home with an individual narrative and a focus on accurate interiors.

This thesis challenges the need for professional Curators (and through that challenge declares that they are necessary) in the context of preserving interiors in Australian historic house museums. Other theses and publications have examined the role of organisations responsible for historic house museums and the impact that some Curators have had on the presentation of some interiors.<sup>9</sup> These include Cristea's 2014 dissertation about historic houses interpretation and visitor engagement, and Hunt's 1988 reflection on the role of Curators using documentary evidence to make informed decisions on reviewing the appearance of an historic interior. This thesis fills the gap, bringing earlier material up to date and focusing on the crucial role of the Curator in their preservation of the interior through a range of approaches, over the lifetime of the organisation. This thesis uses research from academic literature and draws on the author's extensive curatorial experience in the area. Supported by four case studies of house museums with which the author is familiar, it articulates the various roles of the Curator and the necessity of these roles for realising the accurate presentation of historic house interiors. This accuracy facilitates public access to, and

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<sup>9</sup> Georgia Ioana Cristea, 'Set the stage: An exploration of the Historic Houses interpretation and visitors' engagement' (MSc. Diss., University College, London, 2014). Susan Hunt, 'Eleven Years On: The refurbishment of Elizabeth Bay House' in *Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales Newsletter* (Supplement) no. 18, 1988.

connection with, these sites of historic encounter. The four case studies are offered as templates for use by practitioners.

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<sup>3</sup> ‘Curatorial expertise’ comes from a tertiary educated museum professional with skills, knowledge and experience in the curatorial area. Accessed 22 October 2025. <https://www.jobsandskills.gov.au/data/occupation-and-industry-profiles/occupations/224212-gallery-and-museum-curators>. Accessed 22 October 2025. <https://www.unisq.edu.au/study/career-finder/curator>.

<sup>4</sup> .

Historic domestic interiors are important. When in public ownership, it is the responsibility of the relevant public authority to present these interiors as accurately as possible. This is best achieved using professional Curators, themselves using best practice. The thesis reviews the importance of plans and policies with core institutional documents like Conservation Management Plan,<sup>10</sup> Conservation Policy and Statement of Significance, as forming the basis from which Curators direct and focus the conservation and interpretation of a property and its interiors.

My definition of these terms relies on those used in professional association literature, principally the *Australia ICOMOS Burra Charter*. A Conservation Management Plan guides the use, management and change of heritage items. It includes an understanding of the heritage significance of the item, a set of policies to care for this significance, and guidance on managing the item in accordance with the policies. Using a range of expertise and research appropriate to the item, including consultation with relevant stakeholders, it is a best practice approach to the considered care of the item of significance based on the *Australia ICOMOS Burra Charter*.

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<sup>10</sup> Accessed 2 August 2025. *Australia ICOMOS Burra Charter*. Accessed 2 August 2025. <https://www.environment.nsw.gov.au/publications/statement-best-practice-heritage-conservation-management-plans>, Heritage Council of NSW *CMP Best Practice* “Statement of best practice for conservation management plans’ NSW Government.

These policies and documents are shaped by overarching frameworks such as the 1981 *Australia ICOMOS Burra Charter*, regularly updated, UNESCO material including the 1964 Venice Charter and the 1994 Nara Document on Authenticity, and are best practice management documents and ones that Curators both co-ordinate and follow. A Collections Management Plan is the principal guiding document for the conservation and management of a heritage place. The main objective is to ensure that decisions are made regarding the cultural heritage significance of a heritage place. To that end, A Conservation Management Plan identifies the heritage significance of the place and provides clear policies for the sustainable future of the place. Properties of the Trust are heritage items. A Conservation Policy prioritises preserving the building's historical integrity and cultural significance whilst ensuring its public accessibility through policies for the care of the collection based on minimal intervention and reversible approaches to conservation and interpretation of the original fabric, including movable heritage and buildings. A Conservation Policy is the basis of decision making about the future of the place and contains all the information relevant to the future care of the place and its fabric.

The significance framework is essential to determining the significance, or the importance, of the place in a consistent, best practice manner. Something that has been developed for use with Australian collections is the 2009 document by Winkworth and Russell *Significance 2.0 A guide to assessing the significance of collections*.<sup>11</sup>

A Statement of Significance for a heritage item outlines the reason why the item is important (significant), summarises its key values and shows how those values align with heritage criteria. In answering the question of why is this item important, the Statement of

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<sup>11</sup> Kylie Winkworth and Roslyn Russell, *Significance 2.0 A guide to assessing the significance of collections*. Collections Council of Australia 2009.

Significance informs decisions on how the item should be conserved and interpreted to protect its values. Something of significance is of importance within a contextual cultural heritage framework. A Statement of Significance is a key component of the Conservation Management Plan and the interpretational guide for the Curator to follow. It is a succinct statement on the cultural significance of the place. It is a declaration of value that briefly explains what the historic place is and why it is important. It identifies key aspects of the place that must be protected for the place to continue to be important.

This research argues that historic house museum interiors are worthy of preservation because they are the original objects which bear the witness marks of previous occupants. The term 'original' is defined here as the first or the beginning layer of a building fabric, or an object that was first located in a particular space; and in its unchanged state. As sites of historic encounter, they hold our shared history. Thus, in terms of the arguments presented in the thesis the material is considered integral or intrinsic to its setting such as a door jamb to its door; that it is part of the building fabric, in other words, original to the structure. It is also original in that it is not a copy.

The most reliable way to preserve and make these private spaces publicly accessible is through professional Curators using best practice conservation and significant interpretation techniques that maintain both the authenticity and the authority of these interiors. The challenges that the Curator faces when presenting historic house interiors are considered, including the importance of invisibility-of-self, to the need for the recognition of occupants, ensuring that the integrity of the place is understood, respected, and articulated, and perspectives of contemporary social issues with links to history. . The thesis offers the four case studies as examples of diverse approaches in Australia where Curators have been challenged, and where their approaches towards maintaining accuracy have been shown to work. It is only when an interior is used as the primary evidence for the making of decisions

about its preservation and presentation to the public, that it becomes an accurate and connective site of historic encounter.

Daniel. H. Weiss, Chief Executive Officer of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, wrote on the importance of museums. His premise is that ‘It is difficult to argue with the idea that museums matter.’<sup>12</sup> This is because ‘the cultural life of every city and most communities... is in large part defined by museums,’ accounting for jobs, contributing to the economy, and as ‘the secular temples of our time, revealing a great deal about our...identity.’<sup>13</sup> This seems an obvious statement about one of the world’s iconic museums. The cost benefit analysis of The Met in terms of economy, international cooperation, cultural enrichment and visitor engagement is undeniable, and should continue to underpin the museum’s longevity.

Weiss acknowledges that the position of the museum in society is under challenge, based as it is on trust.<sup>14</sup> Trust that museums are financially viable and morally sound; that acquired objects have a clear provenance; that their care and interpretation is of best practice and without bias. These are all practices that the public assumes the museum adopts, but which are now under question. The pathways that Weiss argues help meet these contemporary museum challenges include ‘proper curatorial oversight of collections.’<sup>15</sup>

In addition to challenges shared with The Met, an iconic art museum, historic house museums also suffer from being differently valued. Museums are a product of the

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<sup>12</sup> Daniel H. Weiss, *Why The Museum Matters* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022), 1.

<sup>13</sup> Weiss, *Why The Museum Matters*, 2.

<sup>14</sup> Weiss, *Why The Museum Matters*, 165.

<sup>15</sup> Weiss, *Why The Museum Matters*, 157.

Enlightenment of the eighteenth century. Historic houses are a far more recent species of museum of the early twentieth century and are arguably more difficult to advocate for as they derive from familiar and private spaces. Young offers a history of house museums in the United States and America using classifications of houses as a guide.<sup>16</sup> House museums started much earlier in the northern hemisphere than in Australia where the first house museum was declared in 1911, *Vaucluse House*. Here, familiarity breeds not exactly contempt, but certainly an audible (public) apathy.

Public perception can be that there is so little that is sufficiently different to experience in an historic house museum from their own house, that a single visit, if a visit is necessary at all, will suffice. This visit is often made when young through an educational excursion, or when older for entertainment such as showing the city to a visiting relative. This may be because the objects are familiar in nature and scale; the lives of the occupants of peripheral interest; recent changes in housing from the stand alone dwelling to living in dual occupancy, medium and high-density housing, and the take up of virtual reality and social media as spaces of experience.

This all misses the point that historic house museum interiors offer access to the original private spaces where people lived and worked. Interiors are about context and connection and play a distinctive role as a physical and intellectual structure for researching and accessing the past. They are a primary resource for researching our past. The building fabric provides the only ‘witness marks’ to those who created, and lived within, the spaces. ‘Witness marks’ are physical and visual records of the life of the occupants of the building. ‘As witness marks,

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<sup>16</sup> Linda Young, *Historic House Museums in the United States and the United Kingdom: A History* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017).

as we encounter the site's in/visible layers.'<sup>17</sup> They are traces or imperfections on the surface of an object, including building fabric, that reveal its history, including how it was made, used, and repaired; not only what was added, but also what was taken away.

In his foundational argument advocating for the use of oral evidence in addition to the available legal documentation to better understand and interpret the individuality in local (British) history, Raphael Samuel also advocated for the use of physical evidence.<sup>18</sup> He suggested that by 'following the grid of the pavement you will come upon one stretch that was used for 'tramcars', another for hopscotch, a third for Jump Jimmy Knacker or wall games.'<sup>19</sup> I would argue that these types of seemingly small or transient marks could be conceived of as 'witness marks' of the past, and positioned as invaluable primary material for the house museum Curator. In contrast to being presented in a formally constructed institutional museum, these domestic objects are contextualised in their original setting.

Pulling the private into the public space with any degree of veracity is a balancing act. One which requires professional expertise. A fascination with the lives of others, largely in their private domestic spaces, is clear in the success of long-running period dramas such as *Downton Abbey*<sup>20</sup> where *Highclere Castle* interiors are the real, provenanced historic backdrop to the scenes of fictional action and form the core point from which the ensemble of actors perform. The series title is not that of the minor aristocratic family, the Crawleys, but of their manor house, *Downton Abbey*. These are the lives that fascinate viewers, and the historic interiors that they connect with.

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<sup>17</sup> Accessed 6 August 2025. <https://www.commonworlds.net/microblog-database/how-might-storying-witness-marks-guide-our-relations-with-place.methodology>

<sup>18</sup>Raphael Samuel, "Local History and Oral History" *History Workshop*, No. 1 (Spring, 1976). 191-20.

<sup>19</sup> Samuel, 1976. 199.

<sup>20</sup> *Downton Abbey* was televised internationally in 52 episodes from 2010 to 2015 with feature length films released in 2019 and 2022 and 2025.

The historic house museum started life as a working and active house, built for its owners and lived in as their home. When the property shifts from private ownership and use to public ownership and use, decisions must be made about what is retained and what is not. The layout of a house, the use of each room, the interior, is generally relatively consistent and stable. Ideally and aspirationally, house museums are a rigorous exercise in historical research that records a particular place at a particular time, in a three-dimensional manner.

The interpretation and presentation of a historic house interior is not straightforward. Unless a house has an original, intact and well-documented collection, interpretation is complex. Even then, the concept of keeping a static appearance, if that is the objective, is a physical and intellectual challenge.

Minor changes in appearance and use are often captured informally through oral histories, and, more formally, major changes are captured through architectural drawings, correspondence and accounts, paintings and sketches. It is rare for a photograph to be taken solely of an interior of a private house unless it is for a publication such as the English periodical, *Country Life*, and then the images should be treated with caution as they are almost invariably staged for effect. The glossy English periodical *Country Life* (1897—)<sup>21</sup> captures images of important interiors—furniture, furnishings—but rarely occupants interacting on an informal basis. The photographs are usually staged and formal and tell the viewer—and the historian—more about the interior designer and photographer than about the occupant—interiors in ideal arrangements with strict formality and best soft furnishings—and reflect little of the individuality of the occupants in terms of their choice of interiors

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<sup>21</sup> Accessed 29 December 2024. <https://www.countrylife.co.uk/publication/country-life>.

fittings and fixtures and decoration, or in their choice of individual and personal objects.

There is little personality about them, which is why provenanced objects are so important.

They provide a clue to their owner's personality, character and wider society. Interiors are private spaces and unless their appearance is recorded for a particular purpose, which almost always results in a formal 'staging' for the shot, evidence of the daily routine and the impact and interaction of the occupants is not recorded.

Many Australian historic houses (they are rarely labelled 'museums') are in private ownership or are partially occupied by a caretaker or tenant.<sup>22</sup> Periodically open to the public, the interiors of these houses are recognised as providing important access to past and perhaps distant, lives. But access is dependent on limited and competing resources for their conservation and interpretation.<sup>23</sup> The significance of these different models of public/private ownership is important to know and is discussed later: the assumed responsibility of public ownership requires an accountability in the integrity and accuracy of the appearance of the interiors.

What happens when the privately-owned home and these interiors are reinvented into a public space as a historic house museum? Maintaining the integrity of these interiors and ensuring public access to them, as a means of accessing the often-private spaces occupied by historic figures of significance is critical. 'Historic figure' is used as a general term to

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<sup>22</sup> An example is *Eryldene Historic House and Garden*, located in Sydney's north shore. Owned, managed and curated by a private Trust, a tenant occupies several rooms in the house. Accessed 5 September 2025. <https://www.eryldene.org.au/>.

<sup>23</sup> Volunteer run *Eryldene*, for example, has set up a Foundation and is constantly requesting donations for the upkeep of the property and thus for the appearance of its interiors. Accessed 25 October, 2025. <https://mailchi.mp/82db7b64594f/keeping-in-touch-eryldene-spring-newsletter-18240279>.

represent a person of national or local interest. In Australia, the short length of European occupation combined with the whims of government, the complexity of the houses themselves (for example their changes in ownership), in their use and appearance over time, and the constant uncertainty of resources, results in there being few historic house museums in public – that is, primarily government – ownership.

## Literature Review

I am interested in writing about this topic not only because of an obvious and substantial gap in the literature, but also because I am passionate about the critical importance of ‘keeping up appearances’ of historic house museums. One where accuracy is the glue for creating a meaningful and connective site of historic encounter. I am concerned that the withdrawal of Curatorial expertise such as mine will result in less focus on the development and maintenance of well-researched and articulated interiors, which will restrict physical, intellectual and experiential access to an accurately conserved and interpreted shared past. This may or may not have been a ‘shared past’ for non-Australian visitors, or for First Nations people, but if the experience is good, resonates in a positive way, then this potentially becomes a shared future. I have chosen this area of research to record and bring to the attention of others the endangered nature of the accurately presented house museum and the associated curatorial profession, so that neither becomes extinct. I argue that little of substance has been written in Australia on the special significance of historic interiors. This is a pity because much has changed culturally within the context of heritage, and by extension, for these interiors.

Much of the scholarly literature focuses on questioning assumptions made about the nature of heritage, and the importance of reviewing and extending its definition and its range, to include

intangible heritage, even when this may be contested or painful, to better attune its relevance to the present and to the future. Key texts include those by DeSilvey and Harrison,<sup>24</sup> Dominic Poulet<sup>25</sup> and Laurajane Smith.<sup>26</sup> These debates and ideas have application to my interpretation of the appearance of interiors in historic house museums as the definition and use of both tangible and increasingly intangible, ‘heritage’ is key to curatorial interpretation.

David Lowenthal writing in the 1980s and the 1990s sets the scene for ideas of curatorial work in heritage with his conceptualisation of heritage and its subjective uses. In his foundational 1985 text *The Past is a Foreign Country*,<sup>27</sup> Lowenthal introduces the concept of heritage by analysing the changing role of the past in shaping modern life and serves as a useful introduction to the dissonance of representing the past. His thesis is that the past allows us to make sense of the present whilst imposing constraints upon the way that present develops. Some aspects of the past are celebrated, others expunged, as each generation reshapes its legacy in line with current needs. In other words, there is a shared past to which we all belong, but it is viewed and used as needed, that is subjectively, by its (re)creators and its users. Lowenthal writes about this in relation to the concept of nostalgia, with a focus on how it has been used extensively as a means of promoting the past in the United Kingdom and the United States in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s.<sup>28</sup> He shows that although the past is

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<sup>24</sup> Caitlin DeSilvey and Rodney Harrison. “Anticipating Loss: Rethinking Endangerment in Heritage Futures.” *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 26(1): 1-7, 2020.

<sup>25</sup> Dominic Poulot. “Introducing Difficult Pasts and Narratives’ in National Museums and the Negotiation of Difficult Pasts” Conference Proceedings from EuNaMus, European *National Museums: Identity Politics, the Uses of the Past and the European Citizen, Brussels* Editors Dominique Poulot, José María Lanzarote Guiral & Felicity Bodenstein EuNaMus Report No. 8. 26–27 January 2012.

<sup>26</sup> Laurajane Smith. “Class, Heritage and the Negotiation of Place” Conference paper presented to the *Missing Out on Heritage Socio-Economic Status and Heritage Participation* conference, English Heritage, March 2009.

<sup>27</sup> David Lowenthal *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1985),13.

<sup>28</sup> and in Australia with for example, the rise of the National Trust--started in Australia in 1956--in the 1960s.

no longer a sanction for inherited power or privilege, it remains a potent focus of personal and national identity and a bulwark against massive and distressing change.

Lowenthal updated his arguments in *Possessed by the past: The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History* in 1998,<sup>29</sup> with an examination of the tensions between the popular ‘heritage’ and the traditional ‘history’. Lowenthal critiques the ways in which contemporary heritage movements embrace historical inaccuracies and simple narratives, leading to a potential degradation in intellectual standards,<sup>30</sup> making I would argue, the role of the professional Curator, even more important.

In 1987 British cultural historian Robert Hewison, warned that the British obsession with the past in the context of a climate of social and political decline, where the past seemed (but recently post war wasn’t) a more pleasant and safer place.<sup>31</sup> Hewison asked how true our image of the past was and whose past was it anyway, questioning the way institutions like the National Trust helped create a past that-he asserts- never was, concerned that while the real economy crumbled the Heritage Industry was turning the British Isles into a vast open-air museum. Certainly, as a tourist visiting the UK in the 1970s and 1980s, the impact of this Heritage Industry in museums and house museums, was an obvious and well promoted attraction for the visitor, and even into the 1990s for the locals, as they happily commemorated various anniversaries with frocked up costumes and sweet treats. The heritage industry using the enthusiasm of the amateur historian may have offered an inaccurate but seemingly pleasant past in Hewison’s 1980s Britain. Using the professionally trained researcher, the more contemporary heritage of Australia and more widely, aims to offer a more inclusive connection

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<sup>29</sup> David Lowenthal *Possessed by the Past: The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1998).

<sup>30</sup> Lowenthal 1998, 14-15.

<sup>31</sup> Robert Hewison *The Heritage Industry: Britain in a Climate of Decline* (Methuen: London, 1987).

with a far better researched and more diverse past and as I will argue central to this has been the role of the professional Curator who has an ability to offer a scholarly focus on how history is presented.

Archaeologist Susie West moves beyond the approaches of the architectural historian and the art historian of viewing the English country house through taste and connoisseurship ‘to an understanding of the different *cultures* brought together in the context of the English country house, we look instead to social history and social anthropology.’<sup>32</sup> English country houses share similarities to the Australian historic house interior not only in age but also often in cultural influence, that is Anglo-Celtic heritage. For West this means a careful balance and study of the homes within their context where: ‘we should be involved in understanding the cultural construction of these houses in their landscapes and the relationships of the houses to their inhabitants, and in adding to the ways in which our present handles these buildings through interpretation.’<sup>33</sup> For West, this is where anthropological and analytical concepts are already available and in common usage by archaeologists wishing to understand material culture.

West offers an anthropologically based archaeological approach of pursuing comparative research questions and explicit production of theory about how cultures operate, with respect here to buildings. So that, a study of what country houses are can work towards the recreation of an ethnography of everyday life, in association with documentary studies. West analyses the house plans of three English country houses to determine an access map: ‘particularly the sense of paths that may be taken through the spaces and of rooms that become more important for their place on the pathways. In this way, the house...can be analysed for patterns in its design, and interpretation can

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<sup>32</sup> Susie West “Social Space and the English Country House” in Susie West and Sarah Tarlow *The Familiar Past? Archaeologies of Later Historical Britain* (Routledge 1999), 104-5.

<sup>33</sup> West, 1999. 105.

move on beyond subjective impression to a theoretically informed and critical look at the available evidence for the world-as-lived and its relationship to the world-as-imagined.’<sup>34</sup> This appears to be a practical and useful approach, relying on the original material of the house interior and on documentary evidence, all used by Curators, especially when considered in terms of the servant/master relationship.

In his 2024 publication, Ben Cowell, current Director General of *Historic Houses* in the United Kingdom, investigates the continued relevance of country houses, for tourism, for employment, and for local history research. He traces the history of the country house opening to visitors from post war Britain and the rise of the National Trust to today. Using visitation numbers and employment statistics associated with country houses open to the public, Cowell concludes that country houses remain a staple of the UK tourism industry. The houses that survived the post war decades have found new purpose and significance. Today country houses as well as becoming wedding venues, film and television productions are also places to eat in, to sleep in to exercise or to dance in—all means of revenue raising but not of historic interpretation; and most using historic interiors.

Research by local historians reveals the multiple ways in which country houses intersect with everyday life. Cowell writes that for as long as interesting new research questions continue to be asked, country houses will continue to attract considerable audiences and remain important. ‘The original intent of these houses – as grand statements of cultural, economic and social power – has been transformed in ways that their original owners could never have imagined.’<sup>35</sup> These country houses are remaking their heritage and their connection with their wider communities. As the role of the country house changes to ensure its sustainability, I would argue that the need for involvement of

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<sup>34</sup> West, 1999, 120-121.

<sup>35</sup> Ben Cowell *The British Country House Revival* (Boydell & Brewer: England, 2024).

the professional Curator to ensure the significance of the place as the basis for its evolving use, remains even more important.

Rakic and Chambers use findings from an ethnographic study of tourists' and locals' experiences at the Acropolis to further the rethinking of the consumption of places by proposing that embodied consumption and construction of places at the point of visitation involves not just corporeal and multisensory aspects, but also cognitive and affective processes. They also argue that consumption and construction of places are simultaneous processes in which both tourists and locals play an active role.<sup>36</sup> So, I would argue, in terms of historic house interiors, the more 'authentic' the place, the more able it is to offer multisensory experiences, the more active the visitor experience. In terms of place, as Creswell states 'place is not just a thing in the world but a way of understanding the world. . . . When we look at the world as a world of places we see different things. We see attachments and connections between people and place. We see a world of meaning and experience'<sup>37</sup>. I would argue that it is the role of the Curator to activate that connection and that this is best achieved by using primary research to create an authentic interior.

Rodney Harrison takes heritage into the future, writing about the role of different forms of natural and cultural heritage conservation as future-making practices in the Anthropocene, and the future role of heritage and museums in the context of the extinction crisis and climate emergency.<sup>38</sup> In his earlier article, Harrison discusses the ways in which heritage enacts different realities and works to assemble different futures, and suggests that a reorientation and reconceptualising of these fields of

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<sup>36</sup> Tijuana Rakić and Donna Chambers, 'Rethinking the Consumption of Places' in *Annals of Tourism Research*, Vol. 39, No. 3, Pergamon, 2022, 1612–1633, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2011.12.003>

<sup>37</sup> Tim Cresswell, *Place: A short introduction*. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 11.

<sup>38</sup> Caitlin DeSilvey and Rodney Harrison (2020). "Anticipating Loss: Rethinking Endangerment in Heritage Futures" in *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 26(1): 1-7.

heritage might ‘be more productively connected with other pressing social, economic, political and ecological issues of our time.’<sup>39</sup> Over the past few decades, many of the things previously taken as ‘given’ in relation to heritage have shifted and changed fundamentally so that the separation of nature and culture, practice and thought, tangible and intangible, is untenable. Heritage is engaged in keeping the past alive in the present, which functions towards assembling futures. Curating (collecting, selecting, attributing value) is one of the four common processes of heritage making.

Moving from largely tangible to intangible heritage, a concept increasingly familiar to Curators, Laurajane Smith writes extensively on the definitions, meaning and use of heritage. Smith focuses on the crucial role of intangible heritage in accessing a more inclusive past, that is one which is not determined by a dominant ideology favouring material culture. Smith uses the term ‘Authorised Heritage Discourse’ (AHD), defined as a ‘dominant way of seeing heritage in this country [England], which privileges grand, old, aesthetically pleasing sites, all too often associated with the aristocracy,,and comforting, sustaining, consensus of nationhood<sup>40</sup> to critically analyse this assimilationist policy which culturally and socially ‘improves’ the viewer. She examines the way in which the dominant, and limited, discourses about heritage create and frame the debate on social inclusion and who may be missing out on heritage and why, writing that ‘Heritage, is in a sense, a way of seeing’ and that this is constrained by the AHD which does not, and never will, speak to the range of cultural and social diversity in England.

Smith’s definition of heritage is that ‘all heritage is intangible, in so far that heritage is a moment or a process of re/constructing cultural and social values and meaning...heritage is *not* the historic

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<sup>39</sup> Harrison, Rodney. 2015. “Beyond ‘Natural’ and ‘Cultural’ Heritage: Toward an Ontological Politics of Heritage in the Age of Anthropocene.” *Heritage & Society* 8 (1): 24–42. doi:10.1179/2159032X15Z.00000000036.

<sup>40</sup>Laurajane Smith “Class, Heritage and the Negotiation of Place,” n.d. Conference paper presented to the *Missing Out on Heritage: Socio-Economic Status and Heritage Participation* Conference, English Heritage, March 2009. There are no page numbers on the electronic book.

monument, but rather the activities that occur at and around those places and objects.’ Smith bases the conclusions about the impact of AHD in this paper on interviews in 2004 and 2007 with visitors to country houses in England. ‘For visitors, the performance of the visit was seen as ‘authentic’, as it provoked feelings and emotions that were seen as ‘real’ or genuine and that helped people feel ‘comfortable’ and secure about their contemporary social position...values and sense of community.’ Smith advocates for looking beyond the AHD so that heritage as a cultural process rather than a thing, where it can challenge and rework cultural and national narratives rather than fossilize them. This fits in well with the movement of the HHT beyond the grand houses of *Vaucluse House* and *Elizabeth Bay House* and even *Elizabeth Farm*, in the mid 1980s with their AHD to modest *Meroogal*; and with the importance of interpreting ALL spaces with the same degree of care (not ruthlessness, but considered, determined, application).

The thesis includes, within the body of the text, a critical analysis of relevant literature regarding Curators, conservation and interpretation practices, and on historic house museum interiors. In essence, prior to the establishment of the historic house museum as a separate category of museum, academics and historians wrote extensively about the nature of collecting objects and the importance of their provenance. This writing addressed every aspect of the object – for example its symbolism as a sign of an event– such as a coatee worn by Lieutenant Henry Anderson at the Battle of Waterloo,<sup>41</sup> – to the power of the object as displayed to evoke in the viewer the cultural forces from which it has emerged, *resonance*, and the power of the displayed object to stop the viewer, *wonder*,<sup>42</sup>– but the object itself had been removed from the context of its original interiors into the context of a display in a

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<sup>41</sup> Susan Pearce, “Objects as meaning: or narrating the past” in *Objects of Knowledge* (London: Athlone Press, 1990), 129.

<sup>42</sup> Ivan Kamp and Steven Levine (eds.), *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 42.

museum.

Collections of ‘great art’ have been removed from the houses of ‘great artists’ or their patrons and placed in ‘great art galleries’ and viewed as a representative collection of an artist or collector or toured as an exhibition. With some exceptions such as Monet’s house in *Giverny*,<sup>17</sup> until recently, the interior in which the art was created was not considered significant in the context of the work. Visitors are able to walk through the domestic interiors of *Giverny* to experience the spaces as Monet and his family might have; but most would remember and connect with the garden and the red bridge arching over the waterlilies pond. For these are the images that the artist chose to paint and the art museums to exhibit. When the interiors of ‘great artists’ have been preserved, it is as a gallery for their works, such as the Delacroix Museum in Paris,<sup>43</sup> or it is the studio which is seen as the most relevant interior, such as the Brett Whiteley Studio in Surry Hills,<sup>44</sup> where there is no visual reference to Whiteley’s domestic living interiors.

In the early nineteen eighties, academics wrote about the ‘new social history,’ moving from the ‘auratic’ experience of the ‘great man,’ to advocating an inclusive view of the past in which evidence of the largely invisible occupants— primarily women, children and servants – informed attitudes towards the treatment of historic interiors, and to a lesser extent historic exteriors and landscapes. Pomfrett and Smith<sup>45</sup> addressed these changes in their writing using Vacluse House as an example. These secondary occupants were often the subjects of temporary interpretation, with little evidence of their presence in the recordings or physical

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<sup>43</sup> Accessed 9 September 2025. <https://www.musee-delacroix.fr/fr/>.

<sup>44</sup> Accessed 9 September 2025. <https://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/visit/brett-whiteley-studio/>.

<sup>45</sup> Jo Anne Pomfrett ‘New reflections on an old house: Vacluse House and its history as a museum,’ *Public History Review*, 3, (1994): 148-166 wrote of these changes in the context of one house museum. Charlotte H.F. Smith ‘The Great House Enshrined: Great Man and Social History House museums in the United States and Australia’ (PhD diss., University of Canberra, 2002) reflected on these changes as shown in certain genres of house museum interiors.

evidence.

An interest in identifying and then accurately documenting the spaces used by all the occupants, including the largely invisible inhabitants, of historic houses was reflected in a more popular writing in Lane and Serle's<sup>46</sup> important visual history of Australian house interiors. This important reference, long out of print, would greatly benefit from a companion volume documenting house interiors from 1914 to 2025.

English speaking popular culture embraced this concept with internationally televised series such as *Upstairs Downstairs* 1971-75 where the lives of servants and masters/mistresses and the interiors they occupied were of equal importance and interest. Fascination with servants continues in the remake of this series in 2010-12, and in *Downton Abbey*, 2010-2015. These series are all based in the familial house with the latter relying on carefully researched dressing of the interiors as central to the locating of fictional characters in a credible historic house narrative. More recently, this post-colonial literature has included First Nations people, whose strong oral tradition informs interpretation of the properties but does not currently intersect with the appearance of the interiors.

Most of the literature written about Curators refers to those working in an art museum, whether as trained workers or consultants<sup>47</sup> or as artists working as Curators, who are not trained as Curators.<sup>48</sup> Similarities are shared with social history museums and historic house museums in terms of the conservation and interpretation of the object as the primary role of

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<sup>46</sup> Terence Lane and Jessie Serle. *Australians at Home. A Documentary History of Australian Domestic Interiors from 1788 to 1914*, (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1990).

<sup>47</sup> Accessed 9 September 2025. <http://www.tate.org.uk/research/tateresearch/tatepapers/05spring/charm>. Helen Charman 'Uncovering Professionalism in the Art Museum: An Exploration of Key Characteristics of the Working Lives of Education Curators at Tate Modern' in *Tate Papers* 2005.

<sup>48</sup> Accessed 9 September 2025. <https://intellectdiscover.com/content/books/9781783203376>. Celina Jeffery *The Artist as Curator* 2 015.

the Curator, to a point. The difference lies in the connoisseurship component of curatorial work. In an art museum, it is often the valuation of the quality of the object individually, including the canon and artistic talent, and as a collection, and the ways in which it is displayed, that are important. This can be seen in the appearance of the Drawing Room at *Vaucluse House* at mid twentieth century, discussed later. In a historic house museum, it is the veracity of the research that underpins the interpretation and preservation of the individual object within its wider, often original, context: that of the historically charged space in which the collection sits, the interior of the house museum.

In the 1990s, little was written about historic interiors in relation to house museums in Australia. With a strong and ongoing International Council of Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) involvement, previous Trust Curator Sheridan Burke advocated for considered and optimal best practice decisions within the wider international historic conservation context.<sup>49</sup> JoAnne Pomfrett and Susan McClean wrote of the museumisation of *Vaucluse House* in the twentieth century.<sup>50</sup> Linda Young wrote on volunteer-run house museums and the depiction of women. Laurajane Smith wrote on the importance of recognising intangible heritage in cultural heritage, including house museums, and the management processes developed to protect it.<sup>51</sup> This literature is vital as it maps the development of interest in the field.

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<sup>49</sup> Sheridan Burke, “Bricks & Mortar, Hearts & Minds: interpretation and management of historical resources” (paper presented at the International Interpretation Conference, Quarantine Station Manly, September 2, 1998). Accessed 4 December 2024. <https://first.mhnsw.au/#record/35046>.

<sup>50</sup> JoAnne Pomfrett, “New reflections on an old house: Vaucluse House and its history as a museum,” *Public History Review*, 3 (1994): 148-166.  
Susan McClean, “Walking through Vaucluse House in its early years,” (paper presented at the Uncover Museum Studies Conference, Australian Museum, September 24, 2004).

<sup>51</sup> Laurajane Smith and Natsuko Akagawa, *Intangible Heritage* (Oxford: Routledge, 2009).

More recently, Charlotte Smith in 2002 and Anna Wong in 2007 included house museums from the Trust in their theses. Smith looked at the origins and *raison d'être* of two categories of house museum, the 'Great Man' and 'Social History' in the United States and in Australia including *Vaucluse House* as an example.<sup>52</sup> Wong looked at the Australian heritage conservation movement through the house museum genre, and how this has shaped national identity and cultural representation of Australia's past and present through collections, conservation, exhibitions, public programs and community engagement, using the history of the Trust as an organisation in the Australian house museum context.<sup>53</sup> And so, there is no need to repeat this history in its entirety. My thesis instead charts the changes to the Trust as it relates to the four case studies and goes beyond 2007 to cover the period up until 2024.

At about the same time in the 1990s, a flurry of writing by academics and practitioners in America and Australia explored the meaning of 'feminism' in the context of house museums.<sup>54</sup> Others, in New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory, wrote of the methodical approach of the Trust to the restoration of the buildings as historic houses.<sup>55</sup> The effect of using historical research as a methodology to inform decisions on the accurate presentation of the historic house interiors was written about by Trust Curators<sup>56</sup> and praised,

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<sup>52</sup> Charlotte H. F. Smith, "The House Enshrined: Great Man and Social History House Museums in the United States and Australia," (PhD diss., University of Canberra, 2002).

<sup>53</sup> Anna Mei Ling Wong, "Keeping house for different masters: history, heritage and house museums in Australia" (PhD diss., University of Sydney, Sydney 2007).

<sup>54</sup> Rosanna Pavoni, "Visiting a Historic House Museum" in *Open Museum Journal*, 5: *Interpreting Historic House Museums* (July 2002). The subject of women and gender in historic house museums continues as a topic of academic interest in for example, Mary Pinkoski, and Lianne McTavish. "A Room of Her Own: Interrogating Gender in a Historic House Museum" in *Feminist Critique and the museum* (Brill, 2020), 267-283.

<sup>55</sup> Maisy Stapleton, "Open House/ The Development of the Historic House Museum" in *Australian Antique Collector*, 22 (July-December 1982), 70-75.

<sup>56</sup> James Broadbent, "Colonial Interiors" in *Historic Interiors: a collection of papers* (Sydney College of the Arts Press, 1984), 16-21.

almost with a sense of palpable relief, by other sector practitioners. The Trust Curators regularly wrote and presented on other aspects of their work, including: the importance of collection management,<sup>57</sup> targeted acquisitions, exhibitions and public programs and familial narratives in ‘bringing a house to life.’ Curators were now talking in detail about these aspects of house museum curatorship that had not happened previously.

Little has been written by those outside the Trust, about the houses in the four case studies since their acquisition by the Trust, and even less about the significance of ensuring that the house interiors are represented accurately and made accessible to the public, or about who is best equipped to do this. Whether that representation is through conservation, preservation, reconstruction, or restoration, best practice dictates that it must be accurate, that is, based on documented evidence of a previous appearance. Former Trust Curator, James Broadbent, advocated the importance of using primary material instead of taste or connoisseurship to determine the appearance of historic house interiors.<sup>58</sup> Broadbent was the first Curator to establish this strategy which set the standard for subsequent house museum Curators.

Most of the literature on historic house museums is self-referential. Trust Curators comment on aspects of the houses, writing about their histories and recent acquisitions or interpretation projects. Other than policies and management reports — usually research documents or operational reviews with recommendations for action, the occasional guidebook or general introductory essays forming the preamble to exhibition catalogues — little has been written by practicing house museum Curators in New South Wales on the presentation of interiors.

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<sup>57</sup> Ann Toy, “Collecting Policies—the Vacluse House Experience” in *Supplement to the Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales Newsletter*, 4 (July 1985), 1-6.

<sup>58</sup> James Broadbent, “Historic House Museums: a talk given at Vacluse House on May 18, 1981, to celebrate International Museums Day,” *Insites: Newsletter of the Historic Houses Trust of NSW*, (July 1981), 3-13.

There has been even less analysis of the methodology used in these approaches. Published articles since the 1990s tend to focus on individual collection objects, general historical commentary, or provide critiques of temporary exhibitions. Whilst these are valuable in alerting members of the public to temporary changes to the interiors of house museums, they are as much a means of increasing visitor numbers as of re-considering the interpretation of the original interiors. Once the importance of the property has been identified in the Statement of Significance,<sup>59</sup> little is written about the nature of the interiors linking the work of the individual Curators with a larger methodological context, and almost nothing about the (elephant in the room) cultural sustainability of house museums.

In the literature on house museums that does exist, academics have written about broader issues, mostly from a theoretical perspective rather than a practitioner perspective. Literature on conservation and its application (including retrofitting historic buildings, the challenges of remedial work in historic structures, and the environmental sustainability of historic buildings) is more prolific. American, Donna Ann Harris, wrote in 2007 about the pragmatic and long overdue approach to determining the significance of the house museum, and therefore, its future in that role and the importance of maintaining its relevance, connection and context. This text is the exception, and although updated in 2020,<sup>60</sup> still awaits a considered response. Australian academic, Linda Young, writes on the focus on house museum types, both local and international, from the practical and feminist perspectives.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> For example, Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales “Vaucluse House Buildings-Statement of Significance” *Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales Minutes* Meeting no. 24, (30 August 1982), Item no. 10.

<sup>60</sup> Donna Ann Harris, *New Solutions for House Museums-Ensuring the Long-Term Preservation of America’s Historic Houses* (Plymouth: Alta Mira, 2007). Updated, enlarged, and expanded as Donna Ann Harris *New Solutions for House Museums: Ensuring the Long-Term Preservation of America’s Historic Houses* (Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2020).

<sup>61</sup> Linda Young, “A woman’s place is in the house...museum: Interpreting women’s histories in

Young addresses the phenomenon of historic houses as a distinct species of museum. By analysing the motivation of the founders, and subsequent keepers, Young identifies a typology that casts light on what they were intended to represent and what their significance is now.

Other than a few scholars (recent publications by Linda Young and Donna Ann Harris focus on northern hemisphere historic house museums), there has been little written, including on the rise of the movement, or that addresses the body of work from the Trust in the early 1980s. Certainly, very little is published about Australian house museums by Australian authors and practitioners. Representative writings about the sector are of value in order to articulate the extensive changes that have occurred over the last few decades. Many house museums are in survival mode and so there are few resources available to advocate for the sector, such as in a focus on writing about the interior as a cultural asset, and so the sustainability of the historic house. Resources are directed towards managing house museums not only as educational, enjoyable, and entertaining spaces, but also (and particularly) to ensuring that they are financially viable.

A successful example of this approach is that of the Johnston Collection in Melbourne. The mission of the organisation is to ‘engage and inspire’ primarily through interpretation of the collection within the blank, but charged, walls of the interiors. Whilst the domestic function of the rooms is clear, they are used as a basis for interpretation but not the interpretational focus, which is the theme of the invited Curators. These Curators can be working in community or

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house museums” *Open Museum Journal*, 5 (2002), 1-24. Accessed 26 December 2024.

<https://researchprofiles.canberra.edu.au/en/publications/a-womans-place-is-in-the-housemuseum>.

Linda Young, *House Museums in the United States and the United Kingdom: a history* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016).

commercial areas. This naturally affects the use of, and public access to, the interiors. It does not, necessarily, affect their significance or their role as a site of historic encounter, which is inalienable.

In 2016, American public historian, Franklin D. Vagnone, wrote in his ‘one-night stands’ series about American house museums as houses rather than museums. Vagnone researches the previous occupants before spending a night in the house to engage with those occupants through the house interiors.<sup>62</sup> This one-night-stand experimental approach has echoes of Anglo-American novelist Christopher Isherwood’s 1964 book, *A Single Man*. Isherwood’s novel depicts a day in the life of a single man, most of which is spent inside his house where the interiors reflect, and are intimately connected with, his past and present life episodes. This experiential approach may in 2016 be new to the US, but it is not new to the Trust. Overnight experiences at the Hyde Park Barracks Museum, a property of the Trust, formed an integral component of an education and public program in the early 2000s.

## Methodology

Research for this thesis includes contemporary and historical literature, publicly available material from the Trust and its successors, including Conservation Plans,<sup>63</sup> Strategic and Business Plans and Annual Reports. It is also based on my personal experience as Curator of three of the four house museums used as case studies, and overseas research.

This thesis addresses a significant gap in the literature as it is drawn from the perspective of a cultural heritage professional with extensive curatorial and museum management experience,

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<sup>62</sup> Franklin D. Vagnone and Deborah E. Ryan *An Anarchists Guide to Historic House Museums* (California: Routledge, 2016). Accessed 3 March 2020. <https://twistedpreservation.com/one-night-stand-series/>.

<sup>63</sup> For example, Suzanne Bravery, *Elizabeth Farm Conservation Plan* (Sydney: Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales, 1997).

who worked within the Trust from 1996 to 2008 as a Curator, but is now writing from a perspective at distance from the Trust. This research draws on extensive curatorial experience at these sites. This research aims to critically examine the philosophies which influence and underpin curatorial approaches to the determining and then maintaining of the visual appearance of historic interiors in a house museum in Australia. This work is written by someone who has inside knowledge of the working of the organisation of which she writes. The author has engaged in intensive management and in philosophical conversations which underpin that management. I have extensive experience in advocating for, and using the competitively available resources, which underpinned the practical visual appearance of these interiors. Now working from a position of academic scholarship and critic, I seek to critically unpack the work of the Trust and the role of Curator in the appearance of the historic house interior. I am using a reflexive methodology<sup>64</sup> where the thesis is a valuable opportunity to critically reflect on my experience as Curator of three of the four houses used as case studies, and the status of the Trust house museums and their historic interiors.

My research relies on publicly available material published by the Trust including Annual Reports, Conservation Management Plans, and Legislation. As a complex data set it demonstrates patterns of similarities and changes in practice and approach. The Annual Reports, Strategic Plans and Legislation reflect the changing priorities within the organisation and its governance, and evidence the availability and use of resources of the organisation. Legislation shows the changing statutory requirements of the Trust from its initial establishment as statutory authority to manage house museums, to later include public

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<sup>64</sup> Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln (eds.) *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research 4*, (SAGE: California, 2011), 662.

buildings and most recently, as a merger with another state organisation, and enables conclusions to be drawn from this data.<sup>65</sup> A core resource for the interpretation, and so the appearance, of the sites is the Conservation Management Plans (CMPs) for every property and their evolution, and then periodically actioning, their review.<sup>66</sup> In examining this, I am able to unpack the organisation's continuing commitment to the considered conservation and management of their houses, and the reasons behind the decisions guiding the appearances of the interiors. In addition, the project investigates how conservation decisions are made, what the influences are on those decisions, and what the outcomes are. The current website for Museums of History NSW states the importance of these plans as a recognition of the qualities of each of the places the organisation manages. 'Each of our places has an individual plan for its conservation and management that embraces the specific qualities, significance and histories of that place and guides our approach to conservation works there.'<sup>67</sup> These CMPs are an integral aspect of managing places of cultural significance and their continued relevance on ongoing responsibility.

Significantly the CMPs rely on primary research about the place and the occupants for their interpretative direction, demonstrating the wide use of evidence and research as part of the management of the sites. To position my research, I have gathered further data and evidence by tracing primary documents including archival material such as the Wentworth Family Papers and the Macarthur Family Papers and Tottie Thorburn's diaries at *Meroogal*. In addition to the primary research, I have also researched the extensive secondary literature by

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<sup>65</sup> Such as the Historic Houses Act, 1980, no. 94. no. <https://legislation.nsw.gov.au/view/pdf/asmade/act-1980-94>; Museums of History NSW Act 2022 No 42. Accessed 24 December 2024. <https://legislation.nsw.gov.au/view/html/inforce/current/act-2022-042>.

<sup>66</sup> Definitions of these Plans are in the thesis.

<sup>67</sup> Accessed 2 August 2025 <https://mhsw.au/about-us/heritage/>.

academics and theorists together with, exhibition catalogues, theses, audio and video media. Although this material is publicly available, my research is the first time that it has been brought together to critically analyse the curatorial approach of the Trust at the four sites of curatorial work.

This thesis is not designed to be a history of the Historic Houses Trust of NSW. Rather it uses the experience of the Trust, an organisation set up specifically to manage and maintain and display historic houses, funded by state government support for the public, as a means of showing how the role of Curator has changed in their interpretation of a historic house museum, and how this has affected the appearance of the interior. In doing so, I argue that what sets the Trust apart from other organisations managing built heritage was the employment of professional Curators. Dr James Broadbent was the first professional Curator employed in 1978 to work on *Elizabeth Bay House*. After graduating from the Museum Studies course, Ann Toy joined the Trust in 1980 as Curator of *Vaucluse House*. Joy Hughes was employed as a professional historian initially at *Vaucluse House*, then as historian across the Trust properties. This position continues to be funded in 2025. Significantly the Trust was the first state organisation in NSW to recognise the importance of, and to employ, these professionals.

This is an important moment to reflect on the profound changes in how history is presented to the public in the context of the house museum. The role of the Curator and its phenomenal changes, with demands and constraints and competing priorities within the HHT maps well with the changes in museology from the use of professional Curators to the democratisation of museums.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> John Pendlebury. "Heritage and Policy" in Waterton, E., Watson, S. (eds) *The Palgrave Handbook of Contemporary Heritage Research*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015 Pp426-441. [https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137293565\\_27](https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137293565_27)

Whilst some has been recorded by practitioners of the changes in the landscape around historic houses and a little of these changes within the historic house,<sup>69</sup> very little, other than some early commentary,<sup>70</sup> has been written about the role of the Curator in the interpretation of the interior. Forty years on, and in a climate of financial constraint and global distractions, it is timely to examine methodologies and determine whether these approaches remain apt so that the interiors ‘keep up appearances’ and ensure public access to sites of historic encounter. To argue for the professional Curator as the one best placed, and who should be adequately resourced, to ensure public access of the publicly-owned cultural heritage, and who can ensure that approaches to the appearance of these interiors are accurate, complex, relevant, managed and maintained.

The purpose of this research is to show the determining and defining difference that professional Curators can make to the accuracy of historic house museum interiors in order to provide a site of historic encounter in the Australian historic house museum; and to offer different approaches and situations for use. In other words, using research from academic literature and extensive relevant experience, as well as case studies to support the argument, this thesis argues for the fundamental difference that a professionally trained and experienced Curator can make to the accuracy of the appearance of historic house interiors, and offer reasons and approaches as to why this is important.

Most of the literature about Curators relates to their role in museums. Haas<sup>71</sup> for example,

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<sup>69</sup> Susan Hunt. “Eleven Years On: The Refurbishment of Elizabeth Bay House” in *Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales Newsletter* (Supplement) no. 18, 1988.

<sup>70</sup> Susan McClean. “Negotiating the Nation: Knowledge and Meaning at Vaucluse House in its First Curatorial Period” *Public History Review* Volume 16, 2009, 20-42.

<sup>71</sup> Jonathan Haas, ‘The Changing Role of the Curator’ *Fieldiana, Anthropology: Curators, Collections and Contexts: Anthropology at the Field Museum, 1893-2002*, 36 (September 30,2003), 237-242.

discussed the changing role of the Curator in the Field Museum and the Ewins<sup>72</sup> advocate for the importance of employing Curators in museums. House museum Curators require similar skills to those in museums, but with an additional responsibility to treat the building, its exteriors and interiors, as an artefact. In fact, the building IS the artefact, the collection, the focus, the site of historic encounter. This physical space, and its (significant) tangible and intangible heritage, is the role of the Curator to preserve, interpret and conserve. This is the difference between the reality of the curatorial work and its representation in literature.

Previous research discusses individual house museums, typically as an example of a particular typology.<sup>73</sup> This research analyses the interpretation of the house museums in the case studies from several perspectives, including: gender,<sup>74</sup> family history, social history, and architectural history. It examines the changing role of the Curator in a broader Australian museum context, such as the art museum. As stated, research exists about the Trust in 2002<sup>75</sup> and in 2007<sup>76</sup>, but there is very little about the influence of specific Curators as selected properties.<sup>77</sup> There is nothing that spans the house museum sector, and nothing that charts

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<sup>72</sup> Accessed 9 September 2025. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09647775.2015.1060865>. Timothy A. M. Ewin & Joanne V. Ewin 'In defence of the curator: maximising museum impact' *Museum Management and Curatorship*, 31, (2016), 322-330.

<sup>73</sup> A Scottish example is Anna Venturini, "Constructions of Authenticity at Scottish Historic House Museums" *Collections*, 16(2) (2020), 139-161. An American example is Vagnone, Franklin D. and Ryan, Deborah E. *Anarchist's Guide to Historic House Museums*. Walnut Creek California: Left Coast Press, 2016.

<sup>74</sup> Linda Young. "A woman's place is in the house...museum: Interpreting women's histories in house museums." In *Open Museum Journal* Volume 5: Interpreting women's histories in house museums July 2002.

<sup>75</sup> Charlotte H. F. Smith. "The House Enshrined: Great Man and Social History House Museums in the United States and Australia" (PhD diss., University of Canberra, 2002).

<sup>76</sup> Anna Mei Ling Wong. "Keeping house for different masters: history, heritage and house museums in Australia" (PhD diss., University of Sydney, Sydney 2007).

<sup>77</sup> Smith, Charlotte H. F. "The House Enshrined: Great Man and Social History House Museums in the United States and Australia" (PhD diss., University of Canberra, 2002) is a rare exception. Smith writes about the work of Bravery at Vaucluse House in terms of incorporating social history in the appearance of the interiors.

the changes in the role, and perceptions of the role, of the Curator in this space. There is a gap in this knowledge as the role of Curators is researched, but mostly in the context of art galleries/museums. This thesis looks at the origin and development of the Curator generally and charts the role of this position specifically in terms of historic house museum interiors from 1980 to 2024.

This research brings up to date and extends previous knowledge by focusing on the role of the Curator in the Australian historic house museum when using the building as primary evidence and curatorial knowledge, skills, and experience, to objectively present these historically charged, and now historically informed, interiors to visitors.

With a decrease in government funding, focus has shifted from the social history paradigm of notions of what our history means, and the longer-term intellectual engagement, to maintaining the house as a building (for example) that complies with government workplace health and safety regulations and that is consistent with revenue-raising practices.<sup>78</sup> Rigorous examination of the primary source (the interior) and critical analysis of its interpretation (as relating to its contemporaries as well as current practice), is essential to any semblance of accuracy in the authentic portrayal of historic interiors and is key to any ‘truth to materials’ in the maintenance and interpretation of its inherent heritage. The more that is known about the interiors, the better able any changes in appearance can be determined, monitored and managed.

The four case studies demonstrate examples of carefully researched and considered interiors, all interpreted as family homes of migrants over more than a century of European settlement

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<sup>78</sup> Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales Annual Reports 1980-2008.

in New South Wales. They offer perspectives on contemporary conservation theory and evolving professional Curatorial practice. When historic house museum interiors are presented as accurately as possible (through meticulous research including examination of the ‘witness marks as previously discussed, of their previous occupants), they are a decisive means of providing intellectual, social and physical access to the personal and private past of the occupants.

Government organisations such as the Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales and its subsequent incarnations, the Sydney Living Museums and the Museums of History NSW, responsible for these four houses, play a key role in ensuring the recognition and regulation of access to that past. Unless interiors in public ownership are seen as assets (where fabrics, furnishings and fittings are itemised and valued) their heritage value (and public access to the narratives of a shared past) will be lost. When historic houses are publicly owned, the provision of access to an accurately preserved and presented interior of a private past is key to the wider sustainability of historic house museums.

## Thesis overview

The ***Introduction*** presents the thesis topic, gives background and context for the topic, and reviews and evaluates the current state of knowledge of the topic. My methodology, aim of the research, and contribution to the topic is covered, as well as an overview of each chapter. This thesis cites examples of interiors which have been conserved and interpreted by professional Curators because of their significance and argues for the ongoing critical analysis of their interpretation to ensure that their significance is not lost to one style or time, and that the interiors remain engaging, vibrant, confronting, pertinent and accessible to all

their audiences.

Chapter One *Preserving interiors: historic house museums, Curators and accuracy in presenting the lives of others* introduces and explores the challenges of Curators in the preservation of historic house museum interiors through the lens of curated historic interiors in the public domain. It places the preservation of the historic house museum interior in the wider context of the preservation of historic houses and historic house museums and discusses the role of accuracy and access as a connection-point with visitors. Historic house museums, *Vaucluse House*, *Elizabeth Farm*, *Meroogal* and *Rose Seidler House*, have been chosen as case studies because their primary significance has been shown in the treatments of their interiors. These four properties demonstrate shifting and, ultimately, circular approaches in the interpreting of significance through the (re)presentation of their interiors.

Chapter Two *Reviewing the narrative: Curator as resourced operative at Vaucluse House* focuses on *Vaucluse House* 69A Wentworth Road Vaucluse. This case study explores the impact of the first professionally educated Curator who used documentary material, current sector practices and physical evidence to reconstruct the appearance of the interiors of the first house museum in Australia, with all its attention to detailed domestic interiors at a particular time, 1827-54 and 1861-62. Well-meaning volunteers with limited resources initially interpreted the interiors as a memorial museum to colonial politician, William Charles Wentworth (1790-1872). Whilst the property, or portions of it, were owned by others prior to Wentworth, and the Drawing Room is derived from the nucleus of Sir Henry Browne Hayes' cottage, the Wentworth family were the only occupants of the house as it stands and as it is interpreted. The treatment of the interiors reflects the priorities and resourcing of government ownership, changes in conservation practice, and the development of social

history. It also charts the emergence and development, in Australia, of the role of the first house museum Curators. From 1980, as a property of the Trust, for the first time, professionally educated Curators <sup>35</sup> were sufficiently resourced to review the narrative through the appearance of the interiors as a site of historic encounter, of a discovery of the lives of the Wentworth family, servants, and the management of a nineteenth century estate.<sup>79</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Tertiary qualified in specific relevant subjects such as Museum Studies.  
[https://www.nma.gov.au/research/understanding-museums/JBarrett\\_201](https://www.nma.gov.au/research/understanding-museums/JBarrett_201)

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<sup>79</sup> Charlotte H. F. Smith, “The House Enshrined Great Man and Social History Museums in the United States and Australia,” 61-99.

Chapter Three focuses on *Elizabeth Farm* 70 Alice Street Parramatta. ***Refurnishing a home: Curator as theatrical producer at Elizabeth Farm*** examines the role of the Curator in selectively refurnishing heavily altered interiors, where little original material remained to present the living arrangements of the family of Elizabeth (1766-1850) and John Macarthur (1767-1834) during the time frame 1793 to 1850. The chapter shows how an innovative curatorial philosophy (of reproducing key provenanced objects, disrupting traditional reconstruction, and removing barriers indicative of museums), opens the house to its original and engaging role as a home. It reflects on the approach of a twentieth century family as early conservation activists, and on the importance of preserving the building as a historic house that encourages visitors to be players on the set, rather than passive visitors at a museum.

Chapter Four focuses on *Meroogal*, 35 West Street, Nowra. ***Conserving the authentic: Curator as imperceptible enabler at Meroogal*** examines the impact of the Curator on the appearance of the interiors where four generations of layered, original provenanced material remained *in situ*. Using specialist knowledge, documentary material, the ICOMOS Burra Charter conservation principle of ‘as much as is necessary, but as little as possible,’<sup>80</sup> the building as document, a specialist heritage consultant and the objective recollections of the last private owner, the Curator preserved the appearance of these historic interiors largely as at their acquisition in 1985.

Chapter Five focuses on *Rose Seidler House* 71 Clissold Road, Wahroonga. ***Reconstructing an ideal: Curator as facilitator at Rose Seidler House*** examines the impact of the Curator on the appearance of the interiors where some original material remained. Using specialist knowledge, the building as primary evidence, documentary material and the subjective recollections of the private owner who as commissioned Architect was also the Honorary

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<sup>80</sup> ICOMOS (Australia) *Burra Charter* re worded conservation principle.

Advisor, the Curator used reconstruction and removed later accretions to return the historic interior to its 1950 Sulman award-winning appearance<sup>81</sup>. This chapter completes the cycle of ‘great man’ and ‘great house’ restoration that began with William Charles Wentworth and *Vaucluse House*. It suggests that the curatorial approach to the appearance of the interiors at *Rose Seidler House* offer a connection between the selectively reconstructed historic house interior *in situ* (in this case in a white rectangular prism), and the historic house interior reconstructed in its totality (a white cube in an art museum).

Chapter Six *Doing more with less: how the reduced role of the Curator affects the accurate presentation of historic house museum interiors* examines the role of Curators since 2000. It analyses their ability to preserve historic house interiors within the context of diminishing resources and new digital technologies, both within Sydney Living Museums and Museums of History NSW, as well as the wider museum sector. The concept of the Period Room, and changes in its appearance, returns. The chapter concludes that whatever form the historic house museum interior assumes — whether preserved *in situ*, recreated in an art museum or created in a virtual reality — their appearance can only be made ‘real’ and accessible when accurately preserved.<sup>82</sup>

## Conclusion

Professionally educated Curators using current conservation theory, primary material and the building fabric as text, are critical to the accurate preservation of domestic historic house museum interiors as a site of historic encounter. This happens when the interiors are thoughtfully conserved (for example according to ICOMOS Burra Charter principles) and

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<sup>81</sup> The Sulman was awarded in 1952

<sup>82</sup> Irit Narkiss “Is this real?” Authenticity, conservation and the visitor experience’ 2009 in *Art, Conservation, and Authenticities - Material, Concept, Context. Proceedings of the International Conference Held at the University of Glasgow, 12-14 September 2007*. (eds.) E. Hermens and T. Fiske, (London: Archetype Publications:2009).

interpreted using careful and comprehensive research. This means determining their historic significance, that their surfaces are accurately finished, that their spaces contain objects, which can include ephemera, appropriate to the significance of the house, and that they are physically, financially and intellectually accessible to visitors.<sup>83</sup> Traditionally, access has been through a visit to a house museum, but increasingly, a portion, if not the whole, of the interiors, can be made available through technologies including the Internet (as used in *Rouse Hill Estate* to provide ‘access’ to the First Floor, which is too dense with fragile, provenanced objects for visitors to safely visit via the stairs). Making use of these curatorial principles and practices and of available technologies amplifies access to the site of historic encounter. These interiors are accessible for all forever; because these historic houses are for everyone forever.

In each of the four case studies, the condition of the interiors upon acquisition influenced the methodology used to treat each property. These approaches were supported by the expertise of their Curators largely using primary documentation. The first Curator of *Vaucluse House* used Wentworth-provenanced objects and Wentworth provenanced interior finishes, the Wentworth Family Papers in the Mitchell Library, and drew on their degree in decorative arts. When *Elizabeth Farm* was a newly-primed blank canvas, the first Curator drew on the Macarthur Family Papers in the Mitchell Library and their degree in colonial architecture. *Meroogal* interiors were filled with four generations of *in-situ* provenanced objects and ‘conservation housekeeping’ which had respected, retained, and replicated, interior finishes and family practice, all supported by a strong, consistent and informed oral history by a then-living relative. The experience of Curators varied to include social history, decorative and

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<sup>83</sup> From 1980, admission was charged to every building the responsibility of the Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales, except Government House. Until 1988, visitation was free on the first Thursday of the month, and until 2008, admission was free on Australia Day. Generally, an additional charge is made for public programs, whether using property interiors or exteriors. In late 2022, general admission was made free to all the properties.

fine arts and a practicing artist. *Rose Seidler House* had original interiors and objects and ongoing involvement with the commissioned Architect (until his death in 2006) as ‘honorary consultant’ with supporting documentation and oral histories. Each property has been conserved and interpreted according to a Statement of Significance which is itself influenced by Curatorial knowledge and contemporary conservation practice.

House museums capture and the Curator and visitor process some of the individual and intangible historic significance within their walls, but they provide the opportunity for the discovery of a shared and tangible historic encounter—the intersection of cumulative dialogues. These can be of distant places, spaces, and times, but are represented by, and are coalesced in, the house museum. The interiors are significant because they are physical evidence of a continuity of change and development reflective of their previous occupants and their familial and larger worlds. Moving forward, this thesis looks at options for preservation of the interiors.

You will not apply my precept...How often have I said to you that when you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, *however improbable*, must be the truth? We know that he did not come through the door, the window, or the chimney. We also know that he could not have been concealed in the room, as there is no concealment possible. Where, then, did he come?

Fictional London detective Sherlock Holmes speaking to his companion Dr John Watson.

Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Sign of the Four* 1890. Accessed 26 December 2024.

<https://sherlock-holm.es/stories/pdf/letter/1-sided/sign.pdf>.

## Chapter One

### Preserving interiors: historic house museums, Curators and accuracy in presenting the lives of others



Figure 4. Vida Lahey, *Monday morning*, 1912, oil on canvas, 153 x 122.7 cm, gift of Madame Emily Coungeau through the Queensland Art Society, Queensland Art Gallery. Accessed 3 December 2024. <https://learning.qagoma.qld.gov.au/artworks/monday-morning/>.

This painting of two women heavy lifting the weekly wash in the laundry at the Lahey family's home in Brisbane, Australia, is a construct curated by the artist. Using her sister and friend as models, the artist portrays women's work in a service interior.

## Introduction

This chapter explores key elements in the preservation of a historic house museum interior through the (re)presentation of publicly available historic domestic interiors. It looks at the role of the Curator, notions of authenticity, (access to) accuracy and the ways in which

interiors have been preserved in house museums. It places the preservation of interiors in the wider context of the preservation of historic houses and historic house museums and charts the influence of community and professional organisations and movements in these areas.

## Historic house museums in the international context

Australian historic house museums as a genre are younger than those in Europe and the United Kingdom (UK). The first house museum in Australia was Vaucluse House, opened to the public in 1911.<sup>84</sup> The first house museum in the United Kingdom was Sir John Soane's House, open to the public in 1837.<sup>85</sup> The Australian tradition of keeping historic house museums is like that of another former British colony, the United States of America (USA).<sup>86</sup> Both countries exhibit their former occupiers' influence and invite comparison. In the context of this thesis, an obvious comparison can be drawn between George Washington's *Mt Vernon*<sup>87</sup> house museum with William Charles Wentworth's *Vaucluse House*. Their initial preservation is both due to community support and an association with 'great [political] men.'<sup>42</sup> Another comparison can be made between the (Walter) *Gropius House*<sup>88</sup> in Lincoln, Massachusetts, and that of his mentee, Harry Seidler's *Rose Seidler House*. The latter was inspired by the former, and both were preserved as houses of 'great [male] architects.' These latter houses were opened to the public with the involvement of curators which influenced the appearance of their interiors.

In contrast to Australia there are few government-owned historic house museums in the UK.

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<sup>84</sup> Accessed 11 September 2025. <https://mhnswwa.gov.au/visit-us/vaucluse-house/> The current MHNSW website gives this date as 1915 but earlier material (see Chapter Two) suggests 1911 or 1912.

<sup>85</sup> Accessed 11 September 2025. <https://www.soane.org/>.

<sup>86</sup> Charlotte H. F. Smith, "The House Enshrined: Great Man and Social History House Museums in the United States and Australia," 2, 4.

<sup>87</sup> Accessed 11 September 2025. <https://www.mountvernon.org/>.

<sup>88</sup> Accessed 11 September 2025. <https://gropius.house/>.

Museums with specific collections are primarily government-owned, but historic house museums are mostly recognised by, or are the responsibility of, the National Trust (UK)<sup>89</sup> which is a charity. In the UK, there is a public assumption that access to historic domestic interiors (including those in manor houses, castles, and country houses where access is historically limited), is now a right. But what does the public see when it visits this UK heritage? Whilst employing a small team of professional Curators (usually responsible for several properties and located off-site) and consultants to direct conservation and interpretation, volunteers are also responsible for ongoing preservation. The government-funded statutory entity, *Historic England*, uses professionals, including Curators, when discharging their responsibilities for the conservation and interpretation of key monuments and sites of which historic houses are a small component.<sup>90</sup>

Historic houses in the UK that are on-occasion open to the public, but that are still occupied and owned by the occupants, are usually not considered ‘house museums.’ The owners do, however, often act as informal Curators influencing the appearance of the historic interiors. A separate British organisation, the *Historic Houses Association*<sup>91</sup> originated as the Historic Houses Committee of the British Tourist Authority and was independently established in 1973 to help owners maintain and conserve significant homes in the interests of the nation's heritage. Most of member properties (c. 1450 houses, castles and gardens) open their doors, from visitors on a day or, special tour, through to film locations, weddings and events, or as memorable places to stay. Historic Houses member attractions receive more than 28 million visitors each year.<sup>92</sup> The families occupy a portion of the

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<sup>89</sup> Accessed 11 September 2025. <https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/visit/houses-buildings?type=article>.

<sup>90</sup> Historic England, *Conservation Principles, Policies and Guidance for the sustainable management of the historic environment* 2008. Accessed 19 December 2024. <https://historicengland.org.uk/images-books/publications/conservation-principles-sustainable-management-historic-environment/>.

<sup>91</sup> Accessed 11 September 2025. <https://www.historichouses.org/>.

<sup>92</sup> Accessed 11 September 2025.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Historic\\_Houses\\_Association#:~:text=The%20association%20originated%20as%20the,hundred%20such%20member%20places%20represented.](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Historic_Houses_Association#:~:text=The%20association%20originated%20as%20the,hundred%20such%20member%20places%20represented.)

(usually inherited) house and, as a business, open the remainder to visitors<sup>93</sup>. Treatment of these interiors varies from house-to-house and can include reconstruction to a time of significance as determined by the owner, with or without professional, historically based and rigorously-researched assistance. <sup>94</sup>

The houses can be modified for revenue-raising activities such as tea rooms, shops and function centres. The creation of family memorabilia rooms in order to firmly place the current occupants within the charged historic interiors, are usually located in spaces that were originally assigned for servants. These modifications often compromise evidence of the original fabric and fittings according to the present occupants' passions and purse. This could be a separate, and fascinating, topic for a thesis of comparative analysis, where the interiors, whilst still important, are used to show the vagaries of the associations that the owners ascribe to their own historic house [museum].

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<sup>42</sup> Charlotte H. F. Smith, "The House Enshrined: Great Man and Social History House Museums in the United States and Australia," 2.

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Accessed 11 September 2025. <https://historicengland.org.uk/about/what-we-do/historic-englands-role/>.

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<sup>93</sup> Such as Broughton Castle, UK, where the Castle is home to Martin Fiennes (22nd Lord Saye & Sele). Accessed 9 October 2025. <https://www.historichouses.org/house/broughton-castle/visit/>.

<sup>94</sup> Such at Tatton Park, UK.. Accessed 9 October 2025. <https://www.historichouses.org/house/tatton-park/visit/>

In the USA, house museums are primarily privately owned and usually managed by a volunteer community-based group, such as an historical society, for whom the house is one of their many responsibilities. As acknowledged by preservation planner, Donna Ann Harris, this form of ownership brings its own resourcing and sustainability issues. Harris cites (as part of both the appeal of the house museum and part of the problem) that ‘house museums to the public...are beacons of the past that provide stability in communities that often are reeling from change.’<sup>95</sup> Typically this means that the house museum is static in location and in appearance and forms an emotional and often reassuring connection with the past. But without resourcing, house museums will struggle to retain a relevant connection with these changing communities. This conundrum applies universally and is an important social reason for the accurate presentation of house museum interiors.

### Historic house museums in Australia: the national context

House museums in Australia are the responsibility of several organisations. As of 2025 there is one national organisation: the National Trust of Australia (NTA) a charity with largely regionally based properties and a numerically static portfolio, that sees it operate in a similar manner to that of its United Kingdom counterpart. Also using off-site professional Curators who are responsible for multiple house museum interiors, the NTA relies on on-site volunteers for visitor interpretation. Some historic houses largely still lived in by their owners, are recognised and classified by the NTA. This recognition may assist with sourcing funding for their maintenance but does not imply legal protection. There is one owners’ group of historic houses which are not museums. House museums are often owned by local authorities or historical societies and managed by those largely volunteer historical societies.

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<sup>95</sup> Donna Ann Harris, *New Solutions for House Museums-Ensuring the Long Term Preservation of America’s Historic Houses* (Plymouth: AltaMira, 2007), 41.

This range of ownership, management and access to funding and to historic interiors means that the resourcing of the two state organisations set up specifically to manage historic house museums in government ownership, is even more critical and publicly accountable.

The Historic Houses Association of Australia Limited (HHA) was formed in 2014 in response to the dissolution of the Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales Membership group. The HHT Members began in 1988 as the HHT Friends, with a remit for organised community support for the HHT through advocacy and revenue raising—often using HHT interiors as the venue and Curators as speakers—for specific projects such as acquisitions.<sup>96</sup> According to its website, this multi state group of owners now ‘represents the interests of historic homes and their supporters...to ensure that...historic properties are valued for the contributions they make to our society’s sense of place.’<sup>97</sup> Funds are raised by events which rely on access to the properties, and especially the interiors, of the members’ houses. Whereas access was initially to the interiors of historic houses the responsibility of a government organisation with professional Curators managing their appearance, with expectations of access to an accuracy of presentation, these interiors are now those of private owners for whom the house is their home and for which they are their own Curators. In terms of future (re)presentations of the appearance of these historic interiors, now would be the time to document.<sup>98</sup>

Many Australian historic house museums are the responsibility of the local authority or of the local historical society. Often this responsibility is shared with the local authority as owner, and the historical society as operator or lessee. There are many examples of this shared responsibility by local government and local historical societies, including *Hambledon Cottage Museum*, Parramatta<sup>99</sup> and *Carisbrook Historic House Museum*, Lane Cove.<sup>100</sup> The

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<sup>96</sup> *Annual Report Historic Houses Trust of NSW 2002-3*. (Sydney: Historic Houses Trust of NSW, 2003), 3. Accessed 9 October 2025. <https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/tp/files/58121/02-03%201%20Intro.pdf>.

<sup>97</sup> Accessed 22 September 2024. <https://www.hha.net.au/> ..

<sup>98</sup> Accessed 24 October 2025. <https://www.hha.net.au/properties>.

<sup>99</sup> Accessed 22 September 2024. <https://www.hambledoncottagemuseum.org.au/>.

<sup>100</sup> Accessed 24 September 2024. <https://www.carisbrookhouse.com/> .

historical society relies on volunteers to enable public access to the site and is usually grant-dependent on its ability to contract professionals to present the interiors. Ongoing competition for scarce resources (of both volunteers and funding) necessarily affects the upkeep of these historic house interiors.

There are only two Australian states in which the government is charged with the responsibility for their publicly-owned historic house museums. In the Australian Capital Territory (ACT), the ACT Historic Places employs Curators and other professional staff for the preservation of *Lanyon*, *Mugga Mugga* and *Calthorpes' House*.<sup>101</sup> In NSW, Museums of History NSW employs Curators and other professional staff for the preservation and interpretation of *Vaucluse House*, *Elizabeth Farm*, *Meroogal* and *Rose Seidler House*.<sup>102</sup> As these latter four houses are the subject of the case studies in this thesis, it is useful to describe the organisation, and its various iterations over the years, that is responsible for their preservation.

### Phase 1: The Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales (1980 -2013)

The Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales (the Trust)<sup>49</sup> was established by an Act of Parliament on July 1, 1980. The Trust was principally funded by the NSW government and managed by an employed Executive Director with paid staff and an honorary Board of Trustees. This structure importantly made it distinctly differed from the National Trust of Australia (NSW) by its government ownership, single state remit and access to key professionals. As such, the Trust actively acquired, conserved and interpreted two nineteenth century houses: *Elizabeth Bay House* and *Vaucluse House*. These two houses were subsequently joined by a further three. In 1984, *Elizabeth Farm*, Parramatta, was transferred

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<sup>101</sup> Accessed 24 September 2024. <https://www.historicplaces.com.au/>.

<sup>102</sup> Accessed 24 September 2024. <https://mhnsw.au/>.

from the Department of Public Works. In 1985, *Meroogal*, Nowra, was purchased from its owner, and in 1987, *Rose Seidler House*, Wahroonga, was acquired by gift from its owner.

Since its inception, the Trust has been the responsibility of several government departments, reflecting the prevailing attitudes towards cultural heritage and the level of personal interest in Cabinet. This early history of the Trust was shaped by the strong constructive working relationship between the then Director, Peter Watts (in office 1981-2008), and the then Premier, Neville Wran (in office 1976-1986), guided and assisted the acquisition, conservation and interpretation of the properties that formed the Trust's portfolio. The strength of this relationship was particularly evident in the acquisition of the four houses discussed in this thesis.

Expectations were high that the newly formed Trust would lead, through their professional staff, best practice for the conservation and interpretation of all aspects of the house museums in their care. And equally, that the state government would resource this statutory authority to fulfil these expectations. These expectations—at least initially—were met. In 1985, Peter Watts stated that ‘to date we have had access to money and to staff. This has meant that we have been able to take a realistic approach to the financial and staffing needs of operating museum houses.’<sup>103</sup>

Over time, like in many parts of the arts sector, financial and philosophical government support for the Trust decreased. Yet at the same time, the Trust portfolio of historic houses expanded with high-profile building transfers from other government departments, all of which had at one time been lived in. From the late 1980s to the end of the 1990s, government

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<sup>103</sup> Peter Watts, “Museum Houses: Costs and Benefits,” *ACT Heritage Seminars*, 3 (October 1985), 3.

priorities changed with support moving to the natural environment over the built environment. As a result, competition for resources increased and the Trust had to periodically review its finances. This forced the organisation from the late 1990s, incrementally directed more of its human resources towards revenue-raising through venue hire, retail, marketing, public programs and establishing a Foundation and a Members group. It is my contention that this affected the ability of the Trust to deliver its statutory obligations. The historic house interiors had been seen by government as the contextual background of historic significance. Due to increasing financial pressure, these interiors were more a tool for revenue-raising as much as a lens through which visitors could access and understand the spaces of a sometimes shared, sometimes alien, domestic past. Ironically, it is the authenticity of the interiors which makes the historic houses such sought after venues.

Management and staffing changes were a recurrent theme across this time lime. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, some Curators took on the role of Curator/Manager such as moving from Curator at *Rouse Hill estate* to that of Curator/Manager at *Elizabeth Bay House*, whilst others of long-standing experience and at Curator level and above, in other words, Senior Curator, Senior Curatorial Consultant and so on, left and were not replaced. Curators were responsible for portfolios of properties, such as moving from Curator of *Vaucluse House* to Portfolio Curator of inner-city houses. Or Curators, once senior officer on site, and since 2009, largely off site as part of a team overseen by an Operational Manager or geographically separated Portfolio Manager. Directors changed. This tempered the amount and nature of the public access to, and the appearance of, the interiors of the house museums.

For some time from the 1990s and continuing into the 2000s, the Trust sought to consolidate its portfolio. With more Australians working more hours, a focus on the self through social media, changes in the education curriculum and increasing cultural diversity, house museum

visitation declined. A perception persisted that once a historic house is visited, there is little reason to return. Once is enough. Public programs were designed to address this assumption, but there was little public interest to visit the historic houses purely for their intrinsic historic importance.

It is highly unlikely that the Trust would acquire houses for the purposes of making them into house museums. Should these houses appear threatened, there are options for their survival. These include acquisition and on selling/on leasing with covenants in the Endangered Houses Fund, partnerships with other government bodies such as *Susannah Place* and the Sydney Harbour Foreshore Authority (1999-2016) now Sydney Harbour Trust, and the provision of specialist curatorial advice to other organisations responsible for house museums, such as the National Trust of Australia (NSW).

In 1986, one of the Trust's Senior Curators established the Conservation Resource Centre at the Trust's then headquarters at *Lyndhurst*, Glebe to collect and document interiors that were key examples of NSW significance.<sup>104</sup> Focusing on provenanced soft furnishing, wall papers, trade catalogues, fixtures and fittings, and images of the material in its original, usually domestic, interior, the collection was designed to save this material for public access. This means that, although an interior may no longer exist, its significant objects, whilst not *in-situ*, are available for research.<sup>105</sup> The establishment of the resource centre highlights that how interiors alone do not tell the whole story, but they do afford the only real opportunity to (re)visit the original spaces of everyday lives — places where major life decisions are made. Salvage of significant objects from a threatened interior in archives allows for partial

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<sup>104</sup> Since November 2004 the Conservation Resource Centre has formed part of the Caroline Simpson Library & Research Collection at the *Mint*, Macquarie Street, Sydney.

<sup>105</sup> Accessed 24 October 2025. <https://mhnsw.au/collections/caroline-simpson-collection/>.

access to the history of that interior and offers a documented model for completing other interiors.<sup>106</sup>

## Phase 2: Sydney Living Museums (2013 - 2022)

In 2013, in actioning the priorities identified in the *Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales Corporate Plan 2010—2015*, Director Kate Clark (2008 to 2013) changed the name and publicly-stated purpose of the Trust to the Sydney Living Museums (SLM). Clark stated that this marketing driven and audience-focused branding offered the organisation ‘to the public... grounded in the idea of ‘experiencing a whole other life’ and based on four core values as a sociable host – we welcome people to our sites; authentically resourceful – our collections are in real buildings and real places; personally fascinating – we help our visitors to make personal connections to our places; reviving – we don’t just revive your life, but revive traditional skills and knowledge.’<sup>107</sup>

The message was clearly one of connection to the collection through active engagement relying on the ‘real’ or I would argue ‘authentic’ buildings and places, and so their interiors for this engagement. My contention is that the professional Curator is the one who ensures that these interiors are accessible to the public and so is integral to the successful actioning of this message that is delivered by marketing. Without a product, there is nothing to market. Without the Curator, I would argue, there is no product. Initially Clark’s message seemed a disconnect between the context and values expressed in the Corporate Plan (which acknowledges that the organisation’s ‘strengths lie in the history of houses, interiors and gardens in New South Wales),<sup>108</sup> and a commitment to conservation and curatorship with

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<sup>106</sup> Accessed 25 October 2025. <https://mhns.wa.gov.au/collections/caroline-simpson-collection/about-caroline-simpson-collection/>.

<sup>107</sup> Accessed 19 December 2024. <https://www.artshub.com.au/news/opinions-analysis/rebranding-a-cultural-organisation-195883-2307940/>.

<sup>108</sup> the *Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales Corporate Plan 2010—2015* (Sydney: Historic Houses Trust of NSW, 2010), 1.

‘good research at the heart of all our work’<sup>109</sup> and financial imperative that focused on ‘property opportunities.’<sup>110</sup> The internal structures of the organisation were reviewed, including the new visitor services model and further development of commercial and retail strategies. On the ground staff cuts in this Review contradicted the Corporate Plan.

However, marketing connected the public interest in food preparation—evident in popular culture in the *The Cook and The Chef* which broadcast on ABC television from 8 February 2006 to 6 September 2009<sup>111</sup>— with curatorial resources directed towards projects such as *The Cook and the Curator: eat your history*.<sup>112</sup> This series of monthly blogs from 23 October 2012 to 21 October 2020 ‘brings together unique public programs, hands-on experiences and how- to workshops supported by collections research, online resources and exhibitions. *The Cook and the Curator* blog is just one way we’ll share our stories, places and recipes with you.’<sup>113</sup> It’s a juggling act to pursue revenue growth that supports ways of viewing the past. Actioned by a house museum Curator and a gastronomer, this project, using the curated, research-based interiors of the houses as well as other curated elements of the physical and archival collection of the SLM, seemed to work-and work well.

Whilst the name change may have been intended to better define the work of the organisation, it led to confusion. Where did the ‘houses’ (the primary reason for the SLM to exist), fit? If the remit was only Sydney, where would *Rouse Hill Estate* (then located outside the Sydney area) and *Meroogal* go? In terms of employment, was the (house) museum to be a hospitality venue? Did it foreshadow a consolidation of house museums within Sydney as the

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<sup>109</sup> *Sydney Living Museums Corporate Plan 2012-13* (Sydney: SLM, 2013), 3.

<sup>110</sup> *Sydney Living Museums Corporate Plan 20012-13* (Sydney: SLM, 2013), 3.

<sup>111</sup> Accessed 30 December 2024. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Cook\\_and\\_the\\_Chef](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Cook_and_the_Chef)

<sup>112</sup> Accessed 26 September 2024. <https://blogs.sydneylivingmuseums.com.au/cook/index.html>

<sup>113</sup> Accessed 30 December 2024. <https://blogs.sydneylivingmuseums.com.au/cook/about/index.html>.

future, or was this reading too much into the new name? And if it was reading too much into it, the new connection to museums would make it more difficult to market the houses, with which everyone can relate. Whether it is recognised as its primary significance or not, every property within the SLM portfolio was at some point a residence, a house. Was it now, in whole or part, a museum?

### Phase 3: Museums of History NSW (2022 — )

In October 2022, a further change was introduced that saw the merger of the State Archives and Records Authority of New South Wales with Sydney Living Museums to become Museums of History NSW, and saw a merging of functions and collections.<sup>114</sup> This Act repealed the Historic Houses Act 1980 and followed the Inquiry into the State Records Act 1998 and the 2020 Policy Paper on its Review. It also resulted in a new name: the Museums of History NSW (MoH).

In 2020, Peter Watts, inaugural Director of the Trust, wrote of his concern about the loss of a place-based organisation in the proposed merger. He explained in his official submission to the Inquiry that from 2008-2020 he had ‘watched the decline of the Historic Houses Trust as the leading place management agency in the country...once admired and respected for its boldness...creativity, efficiency and for finding appropriate...solutions to difficult conservation problems.’<sup>115</sup> His position could be dismissed as an overly subjective concern, except that it is based on forty years of experience in engagement and observation.<sup>116</sup> Watts continued that the Trust has ‘diminished in critical areas of expertise, experience and therefore confidence...eroded to a point where very few in the organisation would

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<sup>114</sup> Accessed 20 January 2024. <https://mhnsw.au/about-us/>.

<sup>115</sup> Peter Watts, “Submission no. 13” into the *Inquiry into the State Records Act 1998 and the Policy Paper on its review* (Sydney: 7 April 2020), 2.

<sup>116</sup> Watts was Director of the Trust from 1981 to 2008; and consultant from 2008.

understand what place-based curation and management means, the very cornerstone of the Historic Houses Act, 1980.<sup>117</sup> All this highlights how over time for Watts the Trust had lost sight of the differences between museums and house museums as charged spaces maintained by place-based Curators.

Furthermore, Watts raised the importance of retaining the integrity of the properties where ‘the place is the primary artefact,’ not as a venue for unrelated museum or art exhibitions as ‘most of the houses are furnished with original, or appropriate, furniture and collections that belong in that place.’ Watts writes that the emphasis of the 1980 Act is ‘very clearly on specific places— their history, significance, conservation, collections, interpretation and access.’<sup>118</sup> I would argue that the logical focus and expression of these attributes are the historic house interiors.

The institutional amalgamation brought leadership change and the temporary appointment of John Vallance from December 2022 to May 2023, sharing his substantive position as State Librarian with that of CEO of MoH. With experience in senior arts management, Mary Darwell took up an interim Directorship of MoH from June 2023 until September 2024, when new Chief Executive Officer, Annette Pitman, who with experience in place management and in public buildings, was appointed. During Darwell’s appointment, the importance of research was acknowledged with a position advertised for a Research Curator<sup>63</sup> across the portfolio. This position would logically assist in MoH’s stated purpose of bringing ‘history to life through diverse voices and viewpoints’ whilst ‘providing greater access to our places and collections through research and creative programming, and to building deep and enduring

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<sup>117</sup> Peter Watts, “Submission no. 13” into the *Inquiry into the State Records Act 1998 and the Policy Paper on its review*, 3.

<sup>118</sup> Peter Watts, “Submission no. 13” into the *Inquiry into State Records Act 1998 and the Policy paper on its review*, 2.

relationships with First Nations people... recognises the complex and contested histories of our places and collections.’<sup>64</sup> This new role suggests how in part the organisation appears to have returned to some of its essential foundations. However, I would argue that the realisation of these aspirations is largely dependent on the delivery of well-researched, accurately presented interiors that connect the public to the past thus bringing history alive. Although research has returned as a key pillar of the organisation, it remains that Curators work off site removed from the interiors and places associated with the organisation’s historic houses.

### The power of historic house interiors

House interiors are important as they bear the ‘witness marks’ of the personal lives and choices of their occupants in their domestic spaces. The building fabric and intact interiors, provide the previously defined ‘witness marks’ in a domestic interior to those who created, and lived within, their spaces. As three-dimensional spaces, interiors are a powerful primary resource for curatorial research. Historic house interiors are especially important when under the responsibility of a public institution. This creates a duty to provide public access to the authentic-accurate- presentation of these ‘witness marks.’ More recently, the expectation has grown to include provision of access to ALL the occupants — a changing and challenging expectation.

For visitors to historic houses, forming connections with previous occupants is a large part of the appeal of the interiors.<sup>65</sup> In contrast to the presentation of objects in a formally constructed institutional museum, objects in the original context of a historic house interior are contextualised within their original setting. So historic house interiors offer greater possibility for a visitor to form a connection with material culture. Giovanni Panna wrote in

2001 of the power of the historic house museum, more than any other museum, ‘to evoke history and put the visitor into direct contact with it.’<sup>66</sup> This type of dwelling ‘is highly evocative because... it...embodies the creative imagination of the people who lived and moved within its walls, who made daily use of the objects that were the original furnishings.’<sup>67</sup> Monica Risnicoff de Gorgas, in 2001, agreed that ‘by engaging with the complex narratives that an Historic House can provide, a particular type of emotional...response...[is] produced by “the presence and absence of the people who once lived in the house.”’<sup>68</sup> Using the appearance of the historic house interiors, it is the role of the Curator to reveal and to connect the visitor with these complex narratives and emotional responses.

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<sup>63</sup> Accessed 12 September 2024. <https://iworkfor.nsw.gov.au/job/research-curator-486062> ‘Utilise your extensive research skills and specialist knowledge in Australian history to enrich the knowledge, understanding and enjoyment of MHNSW’s collections.’

<sup>64</sup> Accessed 20 January 2024. <https://mhnsw.au/about-us/>.

<sup>65</sup> This forming of connections with previous occupants is also important in historic buildings as recognised by Milkenko Jurkovic, “The perception and social rise of Heritage buildings in modern society” in *Innovation in*

I argue that the Curator is the key role that helps to establish and foster these ideas of connection. It is the responsibility of the public organisation to establish and sustain the resources to do so. Masters student, Georgia Cristea, based her 2014 research on observations of the interpretation of *Kenwood House*, London and the *Denis Severs House*, Spitalfields, London, and the results of an online closed questions survey to explore historic houses interpretation and visitor engagement. Cristea found that ‘The historic interiors evoking ‘atmosphere’ enriched by the fact that people actually lived in them, triggers feelings and memories that transport the visitors.’<sup>70</sup> Preserving ‘the metaphorical spirit of the place,’<sup>71</sup> as van Mensch defines it, and of the people who once lived in the house is, according to Cristea, ‘a shared duty and challenge of both the curators and visitors. The interpretation should be extremely careful not to alter but to enhance the intrinsic values and meanings of the house.’<sup>72</sup> It appears essential that a meaningful connection is created and continued between the interior and the visitor. One of the most obvious and defining connections is through an accurate presentation of the interiors.

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*Intelligent Management of Heritage Buildings*, ed. Jaoa Martins (Zagreb: University of Zagreb, 2019). Accessed 26 December 2024. <https://doi.org/10.1484/M.DEM-EB.5.118099>.

<sup>66</sup> Giovanni Pinna, “Introduction to historic house museums,” *Museum International*, 53, no. 2. (2001), 4. Accessed 20 December 2024. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1111/1468-0033.00306>.

<sup>67</sup> Giovanni Pinna, “Introduction to historic house museums,” *Museum International*, 53, no 2. (2001), 7. Accessed 20 December 2024. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1111/1468-0033.00306>.

<sup>68</sup> M. Risnicoff de Gorgas, “Reality as Illusion, the historic houses that become museums,” *Museum International*, 53, no.2 (2001), 1.

<sup>70</sup> Georgia Ioana Cristea, “Set the Stage: An exploration of the Historic Houses interpretation and visitors’ engagement” (MSc. Diss., University College. London 2014), 3.

<sup>71</sup> Peter van Mensch, "Catching the Space between the Objects," *ICOM/DEMHIST International Conference* (Antwerp: Museum Platin-Moretus, 2011),14.

## House museum interiors as a site of historic encounter

A site of historic encounter can be defined as a location where an event occurred in the past. This is a place with historic significance. Although there are clear definitions, principles and policies, the meaning of ‘heritage’ is essentially about one thing: significance. Heritage can be conceptual,<sup>119</sup> intangible,<sup>73</sup> intellectual<sup>120</sup> or physical<sup>121</sup> and involves the original action, thought, object or place. In Western Europe, a strong and sustained connection between the past and the present is reflected in the inclusive approach to cultural heritage shown in the everyday use, and individual and collective intellectual ownership of, substantial collections in museums, including historic house museums.<sup>122</sup> In Australia, this intrinsic and deep connection has proven more of a challenge to determine and develop.

The NSW government introduced the Heritage Act in 1977 to protect colonial housing in inner-city Sydney (at The Rocks, Glebe, and Woollahooloo) from being demolished by property developers. These battles were characterised from 1971-74 as the ‘green bans’ of the Builders’ Labourers Federation, then led by Jack Munday — later chair of the Trust. The government’s Act defined heritage as it related to buildings and monuments, and its assessment processes have been responsible for significant preservation. Since then definitions of what constitutes heritage in NSW have become more nuanced.<sup>123</sup>

<sup>72</sup> Georgia Ioana Cristea, “Set the Stage: An exploration of the Historic Houses interpretation and visitors’ engagement” (MSc. Diss., University College. London 2014), 42.

<sup>73</sup> *The Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage*, UNESCO website definition (excerpt from 2003 Convention). Accessed 3 March 2024. <https://ich.unesco.org/en/convention>. Intangible cultural heritage is defined as the practices, representations, expressions, as well as the knowledge and skills that communities, groups and individuals recognised as part of their cultural heritage.

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<sup>119</sup> Accessed 25 October, 2025. <https://culturalheritagestudies.ceu.edu/concept-and-history-cultural-heritage>

<sup>120</sup> Accessed 25 October 2025. <https://www.collegevine.com/faq/14510/what-does-intellectual-heritage-mean>

<sup>121</sup> Accessed 25 October 2025. <https://ich.unesco.org/en/tangible-and-intangible-heritage-00097>

<sup>122</sup> This can be evidenced by the number and nature of museums

<sup>123</sup> Such as the 2023 updated version of the *Assessing heritage significance Guidelines for assessing places and objects against the Heritage Council of NSW criteria*. Accessed 12 October 2025. <https://www.environment.nsw.gov.au/sites/default/files/assessing-heritage-significance-guidelines-assessing-places-objects-against-criteria-230167.pdf>.

State and local legislative safeguards, where a building of heritage significance is listed,<sup>74</sup> remain subject to challenge and interpretation. This shift can result in negative resourcing implications for historic house museums. There is no federal platform in Australia, to recognise or safeguard the preservation of, or access to, the interiors of built heritage. With the celebrations reinforcing post-colonial identity in Australia complete — the Bicentenary in 1988, the Sydney Olympics in 2000, and the Centenary of Federation in 2001 — federal focus shifted firmly to preservation of the natural environment.

As governments fluctuate in their attitudes to, and resourcing of, the preservation of sites of historic encounter, international professional membership organisations such as ICOMOS continue to develop policies, hone strategies and proactively provide expertise in the conservation and thus protection of cultural heritage.<sup>75</sup> The key policy in Australia of this decision-making process is *The Burra Charter: the Australia ICOMOS Charter for Places of Cultural Significance (the Burra Charter)*. Adopted in 1979, and regularly updated with practice notes, this voluntary charter is used for best practice management and the setting of standards for the conservation of built heritage and material culture.<sup>76</sup>

In the 1970s, professional membership organisations began to form in Australia to connect people working in the sector for training, networking and advocacy. The Australian Museums and Galleries Association Inc. (AMaGA, formerly Museums Australia, established in 1992 from an earlier organisation formed in the 1970s), is committed to the conservation, continuation, and communication of Australian cultural life.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> On the State Heritage Register or Local Environmental Plan (LEP).

<sup>75</sup> UNESCO World Heritage listing includes one NSW government-owned house museum: Old Government House ‘the residence and offices of 12 prominent governors of New South Wales from 1788-1856.’

<sup>76</sup> The ICOMOS *Burra Charter* was influential in determining the approach to conservation and interpretation at *Meroogal* in 1985.

The International Council of Museums (ICOM) international committee special interest group, DEMHIST, was established in 1997 as a ‘forum for debating problems and solutions particular to the conservation and management of historic house museums.’<sup>78</sup> Its goals include the development of standards for conservation and restoration of house museums and members of both ICOM and AMaGA agree to abide by a Code of Ethics, an important component of being a professional Curator.<sup>79</sup>

Whilst there is no specific legislative safeguard for preserving historic house museum interiors as ‘sites of historic encounter,’ there are government authorities set-up for their conservation and interpretation, and organisations at both national and international levels providing best practice guidelines for professionals.

## Authenticity, Accuracy and Access: presenting the lives of others

I am drawing on my heritage experience and on my work as a doctoral scholar to discuss and determine these key themes. Authenticity is a complex and contested term synonymous with genuineness, veracity, credibility, accuracy and objectivity and integrity. here is an important theoretical scholarly dialogue about the definition and use of authenticity as a descriptive term. This is exemplified by the work of John Pendlebury writing from a British perspective on heritage and policy,<sup>124</sup> and Helaine Silverman on the difficulties of defining ‘authenticity’ in <sup>125</sup> ‘UNESCO’s 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Heritage (ICHC) [which]...avoided use of the word ‘authenticity’. Rather, the relevant criterion for inscription on UNESCO’s Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity is expressed in Article 2 of the ICHC, which recognises a living,

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<sup>124</sup> John Pendlebury “Heritage and Policy” in Waterton, Emma and Watson, Steve (eds.) *The Palgrave Handbook of Contemporary Heritage Research* London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, 426-441.

<sup>125</sup> Helaine Silverman “Heritage and Authenticity” in Waterton, Emma and Watson, Steve (eds.) *The Palgrave Handbook of Contemporary Heritage Research* London: Palgrave Macmillan 2015, 69-88.

repeating yet evolving, intergenerational transfer of heritage with communities as the vehicle.’<sup>126</sup>

Silverman traces the development of ideas about authenticity’s interaction with heritage and argues that the [better known typologies of authenticity] ‘are worthwhile only insofar as they clarify our vision of what claims...authenticity-- and by whom--actually do on the ground.’<sup>127</sup> In the context of this thesis, I rely on the definition most relevant to the interpretation of cultural heritage as stated by The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO): ‘the link between attributes and Outstanding Universal Value.’ It is the ability of a property to truthfully, credibly and genuinely convey its Outstanding Universal Value through its attributes. These attributes, or values, are dependent on the site’s cultural associations or context.<sup>80</sup> In other words as historian Vandrewala states, ‘that which is authentic is considered true to its nature, to its most genuine self.’<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Accessed 8 February 2024. <https://www.amaga.org.au/Web/Web/About-AMaGA/About-AMaGA-folder/About-AMaGA.aspx?hkey=c572459e-d5b8-4f40-bc68-9ba7a3f99465>.

<sup>78</sup> Accessed 2 February 2024. ICOM DEMHIST website, see <https://icom-demhist.org/>.

<sup>79</sup> Accessed 2 February 2024. DEMHIST website see <https://icom-demhist.org/what-is-demhist/>.

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<sup>126</sup> Silverman 2015. 75.

<sup>127</sup> Silverman 2015. 70.

At the 1994 Nara Conference, the concept of "progressive authenticities", the layers of history that a cultural property has acquired through time, were considered attributes of that cultural property, was confirmed. curator

The word "authenticity" first appeared in an international conservation-related document in the Venice Charter.<sup>128</sup> It states that reconstruction of heritage sites is not allowed while only the reassembly of the originals is permissible. The early versions of the World Heritage Convention's Operational Guidelines, stated that 'cultural properties must "meet the test of authenticity in design, materials, workmanship, and setting"'.<sup>129</sup> At the 1993 Nara Conference, the concept of "progressive authenticities," which means the layers of history that a cultural property has acquired through time are being considered authentic attributes of that cultural property; was confirmed.<sup>130</sup> The 1994 Nara Document Statute 13 declared that 'Depending on the nature of the cultural heritage, its cultural context, and its evolution through time, authenticity judgements may be linked to... a great variety of sources of information. .. the sources may include...materials and substance, use and function, traditions and techniques, location and setting, and spirit and feeling, and other internal and external factors. The use of these sources permits elaboration of the specific artistic, historic, social, and scientific dimensions of the cultural heritage being examined.' Nara document statute No. 12 also highlighted that authenticity is also a culturally defined term with different communities having ideas of Authentic. This adds another complexity to the definition.

Lowenthal succinctly describes this concept as "'Authenticity is in practice never absolute, always relative."<sup>131</sup> To develop this definition of authenticity in line with my experience as a heritage professional of the historic house is that of as high a degree of accuracy as possible in

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<sup>128</sup> chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://civvih.icomos.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Charter-of-Venice\_1964.pdf. Accessed 29 September 2025.

<sup>129</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nara\\_Document\\_on\\_Authenticity#cite\\_note-An\\_Introduction-4](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nara_Document_on_Authenticity#cite_note-An_Introduction-4). Accessed 12 September 2025.

<sup>130</sup> Pamela Jerome, "An Introduction to Authenticity in Preservation", *APT Bulletin* 39, 2/3, 2008, 3-4.

<sup>131</sup> David Lowenthal, "Changing Criteria of Authenticity," in "An Introduction to Authenticity in Preservation", Pamela Jerome, *APT Bulletin* 39, 2/3, 2008, 4

presentation of the historic house. In the context of this thesis, the term ‘accuracy’ can be described as a correctness and precision, an exactness in curatorial conservation and interpretation of the collection. This is shown in the considered and objective approach by the professional Curator to the appearance of the house museum interior. An example of the use of the term ‘accurate’ is in the detail of presentation of a Victorian posy in the use of researched flowers, appropriate period vase and suitable location in the room. In terms of ‘authentic’ the Curator would have researched that there were such flowers available to the occupiers of the house and were used by one of the occupiers to make posies, that the vase was perhaps one provenanced to the occupiers and known to be used in the interiors in which it was now placed, centuries later, and that the flowers were arranged authentically for the person and the period. Accuracy and authenticity work hand in hand. As Mitrovik writes ‘an historical work can be accurate or inaccurate in relation to different questions we expect it to answer...historians choose the questions they want to address in their work.’<sup>132</sup> This presentation must be based on close observation of, and with respect to, the building fabric and finishes, of comprehensive archival research and the embodiment of the intangible heritage, (the memory and spirit, of the place) through oral histories as an example.<sup>82</sup> Of course, there are many considered opinions on the extent of objectivity in the interpretation of the house museum. Academic, Laurajane Smith, who writes extensively on the nature of intangible heritage in museums, including historic house museums, notes that ‘Although perceived as ‘true reality’ and hence free of manipulation, the historic houses are from their very creation, vehicles for different types of ‘discourses’: power, wealth, politics, taste, national identity or class segregation.’<sup>83</sup> As Cristea notes, ‘these meanings can be intrinsic to the houses, part of their significance or associated with them by others due to the contextual circumstances.’<sup>84</sup> When accurately interpreted by a professional Curator, these meanings can

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<sup>132</sup> Branko Mitrovik “Historical Accuracy and Historians’ Objectivity” in Forland, Tor Egil and Branko, Mitrovik (eds.) *The Poverty of Anti-realism: Critical Perspectives on Postmodernist Philosophy of History* (Maryland: Rowland and Littlefield Publishing Company 2023.) 63.

create enriching and sometimes surprising connections with the visitor.

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<sup>80</sup> Sandra Vandrewala, “Borrowed Notion of Authenticity: Viewing Authenticity of Historic Houses in India using a Western Lens,” *Collections*, 16 (1), (2020), 60.

<sup>81</sup> Sandra Vandrewala, “Borrowed Notion of Authenticity: Viewing Authenticity of Historic Houses in India using a Western Lens,” *Collections*, 16 (1), (2020), 68.

<sup>82</sup> The ‘spirit of place’ has been the subject of international conferences, such as ICOMOS *Finding the Spirit of Place between the tangible and the intangible* 16<sup>th</sup> General Assembly, and the International Scientific Symposium Quebec, Canada, September 29 – October 4, 2008. See also Sarah Staniforth writing on National Trust UK houses “Spirit of Place: A Golden Thread that Runs Through the Management of Historic Places” in International Conference ICOM DEMHIST-ARRE *Authenticity in the Conservation of Historic Houses and Palace-Museums* ed. Elena Alliaudi and John Barnes (Palace of Compiègne: 2014), 59-64.

<sup>83</sup> Laurajane Smith, *Uses of heritage* (Oxford: Routledge, 2006), 28.

<sup>84</sup> Georgia Ioana Cristea, “Set the Stage: An exploration of the Historic Houses interpretation and visitors’ engagement” (MSc. Diss., University College. London 2014), 15.

Academic, Linda Young, writes extensively on the nature and classification of house museums as ways to understand and to approach their preservation, and also to question assumptions about the veracity of the appearance of these dwellings. In 2014, Young noted that ‘Close evaluation of the standards of authenticity in house museums can make a rational person very uneasy... What matters... is less an absolute standard of ‘authenticity,’ and more an understanding of the expectations brought by visitors to each site. In the light of inconsistent practice, does authenticity matter?’<sup>85</sup> From the visitor’s perspective, there are many ways of seeing a house museum, but I would argue that authenticity (or accuracy) does matter if the intention is to foster a truthful, and so meaningful, connection.

Living spaces tend to have familiar components, even across time. This can make it harder to render a historic house as a ‘special place.’ If historic house interiors are to be preserved as a credible site of historic encounter, they must be authentically, that is accurately, presented, their appearance based on extensive research and on the objective management of the professional Curator. These interiors must be physically, intellectually and emotionally accessible as a meaningful connection with their audience, the visitor.

The role of Curators to provide accuracy and authenticity is a key one. This is indeed a challenging role, especially when one considers Lowenthal’s 1985 statement that ‘the past thus conjured up is, to be sure, largely an artefact of the present. However faithfully we preserve, however authentically we restore, however deeply we immerse ourselves in bygone times, life back then was based on ways of being and believing incommensurable with our own.’<sup>133</sup> As Smith suggests ‘that notions of authenticity have evolved over the decades’<sup>134</sup> and indeed the idea that authenticity exists is

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<sup>133</sup> Lowenthal, 1985, xvi.

<sup>134</sup> Smith, 2002, 217.

problematic.

Bearing this in mind, and with the knowledge that decisions on the appearance of historic house interiors need be made using provenanced and primary material, Curators providing accuracy and authenticity means that their role is to objectively use the primary archival material, written, oral, pictorial and the building fabric, without bias or subjectivity, and with an awareness of the philosophical, political, and economic pressures on this action. It is imperative that there is a professional to undertake this work because if there wasn't, then access to the shared past may not be reliable. This is especially so in historic house museum interiors where the past may be contested. I agree with Smith who argues that 'for the professional practitioner, house museums are relics and therefore precious as evidence of time and history.'<sup>135</sup> Primary evidence of sites of historic encounter.

Authenticity emerges as a particularly challenging issue in modern house museums and was the subject of the 2014 DEMHIST Conference, *Authenticity in the Conservation of Historic House Museums and Palaces*. Whilst northern European examples were primarily used, the discussions were globally relevant. Speakers saw the concept of authenticity in historic house

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<sup>85</sup> Linda Young, "Science or faith? Doubtful Truths in House Museums" International Conference ICOM DEMHIST-ARRE *Authenticity in the Conservation of Historic Houses and Palace-Museums* ed. Elena Alliaudi and John Barnes (Palace of Compiègne: 2014), 131-136.

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<sup>135</sup> Smith 2002, 214.

and palace interiors as important. Speaking of *Versailles* as a palace museum, Beatris Saule linked authenticity (as accuracy) to include: provenanced space, identity, age, and the role and use of the place. As Saule says ‘the passage from the research to the project itself raises a whole series of questions related to the interpretation of sources; the real condition of the monument and its collections; the need to protect them; and the desire to communicate its identity to a wide and varied public.’<sup>86</sup> I agree that driving this process is the role of the professional Curator. Saule reassuringly acknowledges that ‘all projects must strive for accuracy.’<sup>87</sup>

Architect Roberta Grignolo acknowledged in the preservation of the interior of an historic house museum that restoration choices were influenced by the building’s condition, the cultural context, the policies of relevant institutions and the valorisation strategies with ‘some changes... inevitable when restoring a modern house and turning it into a museum, and necessarily impinge on authenticity.’<sup>88</sup> This again is where the role of the professional Curator, who can balance competing preservation issues and share where changes have been made, is critical to the authentic and accurate appearance of the historic house interior.

Recent research on the role of Curators in historic houses, and the expectations of the visitor, includes Anna Venturini’s 2018 study of three Scottish house museums. Venturini’s research was based on interviews with the Curators analysing authenticity from a curatorial

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<sup>86</sup> Beatris Saule “Authenticity in Palace Museums; Versailles, between the ideal and the possible” in International Conference ICOM DEMHIST-ARRE *Authenticity in the Conservation of Historic Houses and Palace-Museums* ed. John Barnes (Palace of Compiègne: 2014), 101-106.

<sup>87</sup> Beatris Saule, “Authenticity in Palace Museums; Versailles, between the ideal and the possible” International Conference ICOM DEMHIST-ARRE *Authenticity in the Conservation of Historic Houses and Palace-Museums* ed. Elena Alliaudi and John Barnes (Palace of Compiègne: 2014), 106.

<sup>88</sup> Roberta Grignolo, “Authenticity in modern museum houses. Scope and clarity of interventions” in International Conference ICOM DEMHIST-ARRE *Authenticity in the Conservation of Historic Houses and Palace-Museums* ed. Elena Alliaudi and John Barnes (Palace of Compiègne: 2014), 38.

perspective.<sup>89</sup> It is important—and also a visitor expectation—to display provenanced objects— ‘the real thing’<sup>90</sup> within their original interiors to preserve the appearance of those interiors. While museums decontextualise objects, ‘historic house museums are generally granted the privilege of originality and association.’ These objects would be those once possessed and touched by the original owners.<sup>91</sup> Authentic interiors are those which retain the essence of those who lived-in and cherished them. This is especially relevant in *Meroogal*, and to some extent, *Rose Seidler House*. As one Scottish Curator succinctly notes, ‘If you’re going to a house where Keats was born, you kind of expect the period and Keats to be both authentically represented.’<sup>92</sup>

Venturini cited heroes’ houses ‘as suitable places to investigate perceptions of authenticity, guaranteed by visitors’ willingness to be touched by the “aura of the hero” through contact with the spaces they occupied.’ This is not new,<sup>93</sup> but what is interesting is that it remains current and denotes a departure from the more inclusive house museums in Australia. The popular notion of hero as the associative reason for a historic house museum has developed since *Vaucluse House* with its ‘auratic’ William Charles Wentworth, founder of the Australian Constitution. Heroes are now determined in other ways, such as the feminist hero/ines of *Meroogal* and Elizabeth Macarthur of *Elizabeth Farm*. More recently, Harry Seidler, architect of *Rose Seidler House*, has been seen as a hero of mid-century modern

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<sup>89</sup> Anna Venturini, “Constructions of Authenticity at Scottish Historic House Museums,” *Collections*, 16 (2) (2020), 139, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1550190620903310>.

<sup>90</sup> Anna Venturini, “Constructions of Authenticity at Scottish Historic House Museums,” *Collections*, 16 (2) (2020), 155, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1550190620903310>.

<sup>91</sup> Anna Venturini, “Constructions of Authenticity at Scottish Historic House Museums,” *Collections*, 16 (2) (2020), 142. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1550190620903310>.

<sup>92</sup> Anna Venturini, “Constructions of Authenticity at Scottish Historic House Museums,” *Collections*, 16 (2) (2020), 150. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1550190620903310>. David Hopes interview with Venturini in May 2018.

<sup>93</sup> The ‘auratic’ was also discussed in relation to Wentworth and *Vaucluse House* in Charlotte H. F. Smith, “The House Enshrined: Great Man and Social History House Museums in the United States and Australia,” 61-99.

architecture and of the prefabricated building.<sup>94</sup> As Venturini concludes, ‘this study aimed to emphasize the need, for museum professionals, to...keep chasing the chimera of authenticity.’<sup>95</sup> It is important to identify, respect, record and, where possible, retain the authentic, original, provenanced interiors. In terms of the curatorial role, ‘all curators stated that authenticity was one of the key criteria informing their curatorial practice, particularly in terms of collecting policy’<sup>96</sup> and ‘all curators strongly emphasised the ethical value of transparency in curatorial practice.’<sup>97</sup>

It is the Curatorial responsibility to determine and then maintain the authenticity of historic house interiors in both the physical and social sense. This applies to the original hierarchical use of the interiors, where the Servants Quarters are often sacrificed for Introduction and Orientation purposes, so that the interiors tell only a fraction of the story of the house. When the exterior has been compromised then it is even more important that the story of the interior is presented as accurately as possible. When the interiors have been compromised, there is greater expectation on Curators to ensure that the story told is accurate and is therefore based on primary research that informs the presentation of the interiors in as informative and truthfully engaging way as possible. Curators connect the tangible and the intangible elements of the narrative of the interiors to ensure that they are accurate and referential sites of historic encounter not only of the masters, but also of the mistresses, the children, the servants and everyone in between.

When interviewed, David Hopes said that ‘At the Cottage site, the authentic thing is moving through the building - for most visitors the authentic bit about that is the *experience*, and for some people it can actually become a *spiritual experience*.’<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Such as in the British television series *Grand Designs UK* (1999—) presenter Kevin McCloud’s advocacy of affordable modular housing.

<sup>95</sup> Anna Venturini, “Constructions of Authenticity at Scottish Historic House Museums,” *Collections*, 16(2) (2020), 159. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1550190620903310>.

<sup>96</sup> Anna Venturini, “Constructions of Authenticity at Scottish Historic House Museums,” *Collections*, 16(2)

(2020), 153. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1550190620903310>.

<sup>97</sup> Anna Venturini, "Constructions of Authenticity at Scottish Historic House Museums," *Collections*, 16(2) (2020), 154. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15501906209033>

## The role of the Curator

There is a significant body of literature on the role of the Curator. Curators have been active since at least the sixteenth century,<sup>101</sup> caring for collections and their presentation. This advisory work was often part of a larger role as antiquarian or artist. In the twentieth century, professional Curators emerged, their status changing from museum worker with the development of: specialist tertiary education, a public interest in material culture, an expectation that the care of material culture would be adequately resourced to ensure it was accessible to the public, and an acceptance of ethical standards included in Codes of Conduct in the UK by the Museums Association in 1977,<sup>102</sup> in Australia by Museums Australia in 1982<sup>103</sup>. and globally by the International Council of Museums (ICOM) Code of Ethics in 2015,<sup>136</sup> which is currently under review.

There are many definitions and extensive debate around this role. Much of this is focused on the space of art and even more so perhaps on the role of the Curator in working with contemporary art. Using research based on exploring contemporary museums worldwide, Bajic for example, in 2012 explores the role of the Curator in making an exhibition in an art museum for contemporary audiences and considering issues of cultural identity. She finds that contemporary curatorship utilises the terms: content, concept and community and that transmission of both the tangible and intangible cultural heritage, can only be achieved through an intensive and open communication.<sup>137</sup>

With changes in the nature and location of contemporary art, Cernei in 2014 aimed to identify the role of the Curator including their responsibilities; and question what had happened to the Curator

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<sup>136</sup> Accessed 5 October 2025. <https://icom.museum/en/resources/standards-guidelines/code-of-ethics/> .

<sup>137</sup> Zoja Bojic. *Art curatorship within and outside museum*. Belgrade: Central Institute for Conservation (CIK), Regional Alliance of ICOM for South East Europe (ICOM SEE) and the Singidunum University, Faculty of Media and Communications, 2012. 80.

‘whose whole existence depended on... standard art.’<sup>138</sup> Contemporary curating she notes, is a form of cultural production, a practice increasingly able to expand into more experimental and collaborative models. The Curator is no longer a passive facilitator, as the boundaries between Curators, artists and managers becomes more flexible and blurrier. The definition of the Curator as responsible for the selection and placement of artworks in a gallery space is too restrictive. The contemporary Curator is involved with almost every element and area of art, culture, production, financing, research, administration, and publication. Cernei states that ‘the art world, more than any other, is based on interdependency, and all the people involved in it do their work and exist tightly bound to each other and depending on each other, as all of their work is interconnected. ... I acknowledge that [the Curator’s] role is no more and no less important than that of the other participants that create, study or criticize art.’<sup>139</sup> This is the Art Curator as polymath.

Traditionally, a Curator has been defined as the custodian of a museum or other collection – essentially a keeper of things. As early as 1986, collection care consultant C. Velson Horie,

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<sup>98</sup> Anna Venturini, “Constructions of Authenticity at Scottish Historic House Museums,” *Collections*, 16(2) (2020), 157. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1550190620903310>. David Hopes interview with Venturini May 2018.

<sup>99</sup> Accessed 25 January 2024. <https://thebridalcurator.com.au/curator-the-label>.

<sup>100</sup> Accessed 25 January 2024. <https://curator.io/>. Accessed 25 January 2024. <https://stylecurator.com.au/>.

<sup>101</sup> Carole Paul, “The Emergence of the Professional Curator” in *A Companion to Curation* ed. Brad Buckley and John Conomas (New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons Inc. 2020), 69.

<sup>102</sup> C.V. Horie, “Who is a Curator?” *International Journal of Museum Management and Curatorship*, 5 (3) (1986):267. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09647778609515029>.

<sup>103</sup> A Code of Ethics is a voluntary contract of practice addressing governance, duty of care, transparency in decision-making, and clarity of responsibility. Accessed 4 December 2024. <https://icom.museum/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/ICOM-code-En-web.pdf>. The 2015 ICOM Code of Ethics is currently under review.

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<sup>138</sup> Raluca Cernei THE ROLE OF THE CURATOR IN THE CONTEXT OF CONTEMPORARY ART Dissertação Mestrado em Comunicação, Cultura e Artes Trabalho efetuado sob orientação de: Prof.ª Doutora Mirian Estela Nogueira Tavares 2014 UNIVERSIDADE DO ALGARVE, Portugal.p8.

<sup>139</sup> Cernei. 2014. 69-70.

defined a Curator as ‘a paid officer with knowledge specialisation.’<sup>104</sup> The Curator is responsible for maintaining the well-being of objects in the collection where, as Horie notes, ‘the primary activity of a museum is the curating of its collections.’<sup>105</sup> For the American anthropological archaeologist, Jonathan Haas, writing in 2003, curating is the total process: ‘research and writing, curation of collections, and exhibits and public programs.’<sup>106</sup> In 2010, The Association of Art Museum Curators identified Curators as ‘having a primary responsibility for the acquisition, care, display and interpretation of objects [within the wider remit of] working with their institutions to develop programs that maintain the integrity of collections and exhibitions, foster community support, and generate revenue.’<sup>107</sup>

Curators typically create and manage content. In a museum context, this content relates to an object or to a collection of objects. In a house museum context, it relates to the objects both movable and static wherein the building is included as an object that is not only part of the collection, but also one that defines the context of the collection. Thomas Hoving’s 2006 description of Curators’ work in The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, although not a scholarly text, is useful as a populist definition. ‘Curators discuss how vital details were in assessing the quality, authenticity, and importance of any work of art... Curators’ work is all about looking—intently, intensely, constantly...from the overall work to all its details and back again. The essence of the investigation ...is scrutinizing the details.’<sup>108</sup> In this way, the accuracy of historic house interiors is preserved.

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<sup>104</sup> C.V. Horie, “Who is a Curator?” *International Journal of Museum Management and Curatorship*, 5 (3) (1986), 268. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09647778609515029>.

<sup>105</sup> C.V. Horie, “Who is a Curator?” *International Journal of Museum Management and Curatorship*, 5 (3) (1986), 271. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09647778609515029>.

<sup>106</sup> Jonathan Haas, “The Changing Role of the Curator,” *Fieldiana. Anthropology: Curators, Collections and Contexts: Anthropology at the Field Museum, 1893-2002*, 36,(September 30, 2003), 237.

<sup>107</sup> Accessed 26 September 2024.

[https://archive.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/exhibitions/archived/2010/kaldor\\_projects/themes/the\\_role\\_of\\_the\\_curator/index.html](https://archive.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/exhibitions/archived/2010/kaldor_projects/themes/the_role_of_the_curator/index.html).

<sup>108</sup> Thomas Hoving, *The Curator’s Game: Masterpieces* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006), 6.

My understanding of the role of the Curator is to bring specialist, technical knowledge at a tertiary-level, combined with training in curatorial methods and management, a strong, considered sense of direction, the methodology and objectivity with which to implement these informed decisions, and an understanding that the role is to facilitate sustainable access to the collection. In historic houses, this includes the conservation and interpretation of the collection, the material culture, which includes the buildings, curtilage, landscape and objects as identified in the property's Statement of Significance. In practical terms, the Curator is the key advocate for the collection. The public authority is responsible for the provision of sufficient resources to ensure the effective carriage of the Curator's duties. The Curator, in a public collecting authority, influences public access to the past.

Curators, when managing their collection, bring their own knowledge, skills, and experience, as well as their individual interests. It is the responsibility of Curators and perhaps their employers in the selection of them, to have a solid and objective knowledge and understanding of every aspect of their collection. For historic house museums, this includes not only movable heritage, but also buildings, gardens and grounds, and a detailed and accurate knowledge of the life, personalities, and times of the property's occupants, that they can effectively transfer to visitors.

This knowledge is acquired through the comprehensive research of primary records and provenanced objects, and the archaeological excavation of evidence both below and above ground. It is strengthened by wide reading in contemporary literature, manuals of domestic economy, women's work, animal husbandry, garden movements and social, political, and economic history, and by conversations with colleagues and specialist consultants and, where possible, the house museum's previous occupants. It is a questioning approach that is multi-

layered and multi-disciplined. As Curators create and manage content, research is a critical and core component of their role. As Smith states ‘Evolving historiography, museology and museography have encouraged house museums to become professionally more responsible over the course of their 150-year history. This professionalism has allowed house museums to assume the respectable authority of history museums.’<sup>140</sup> Whilst the interests of the Curator may influence the area of research, the professionalism of the Curator ensures that the research is carried out with objectivity and diligence, and with invisibility. Curators play a key role in this professionalism.

My contention is that to be effective in enabling access to the house museum interiors as sites of historic encounter, Curators need to be objective, and this means invisible. Curatorial invisibility is desirable because it is the work of the Curator that is important, not the persona of the Curator. The few benefits around a ‘signed’ work, are to acknowledge the role of the Curator in making the object or collection accessible to the public, or to clarify the possible perspective from which the Curator presents the material. This is useful in temporary exhibitions such as the 2024 Bonnard exhibition at the National Gallery of Victoria, (discussed later), or when those from special interest groups may be the Curator. Examples of this type of curating of contemporary issues, as ‘curatorial activism,’ has been the subject of recent scholarship by Grindon and Lehrer.<sup>141</sup>

It is the job of the professional Curator and it is the most reliable way to ensure that their job is effective, one of enabling access to a complex, evolving, and nuanced shared past, to be ‘invisible.’ In a shared past that these professionals are curating, not their own or unless clearly indicated, that of a particular group. Even then the same interpretive principles apply. There are opportunities and

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<sup>140</sup> Charlotte H. F. Smith *The House Enshrined Great Man and Social History House museums in the United States and Australia*. Dissertation submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, University of Canberra, February 2002, 16.

<sup>141</sup> Gavin Grindon ‘Curating with Counterpowers: Activist Curating, Museum Protest, and Institutional Liberation’ in *Social Text* (2023) 41 (2 (155)): 19–44. <https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-10383193>; and Erica Lehrer. "Museums and “Curatorial Activism”." in *The Routledge Handbook of Memory Activism*, (Routledge, 2023)., 373-380.

indeed obligations to involve other voices and other perspectives, but these need to be co-ordinated. Longair's 2015 article on the cultures of curating and the limits of authority offers a thoughtful and timely examination of the issues around authority, the museum and the role of the Curator. She examines the nature of 'intellectual authority...a fundamental component of curatorship'<sup>142</sup> and the concept of museums as sites of authority which only tell one part of the story. Longair, former Education Manager at the British Museum, whilst acknowledging its changing culture,<sup>143</sup> defines the role of the Curator as one which is responsible for 'the custodianship and preservation of collections... as well as caring for, preserving, safeguarding, and documenting the collection, a curator might be expected to undertake independent research and publish the results, conceive and mount exhibitions, manage budgets, give lectures and tours of galleries, make new acquisitions, and attract donations.'<sup>144</sup> A polymath, but one whose work is centred on the care of the (museum) collection. Moody agrees that heritage professionals 'work in areas concerned with the interpretation and presentation of...the objects of the past, [and adds that] whose own professional identities and reputations are bound up in this process.'<sup>145</sup> So, not only are Curators responsible for the conservation and interpretation of objects of the past, in other words, in the making of heritage, but also their reputations are reliant on how well this process works. It is important that the work of the Curator is well researched, objective, uses best practice policies and is collaborative, in order to maintain an authority in times of contested history.

In terms of the invisibility of the Curator, there are advantages and disadvantages. As early as 2005, Claire Robins used a recent UK finding of the disconnect between art and design teachers' 'negligible engagement'<sup>146</sup> with the understanding of curatorial issues and outcomes, to discuss the

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<sup>142</sup> Sarah Longair. "Cultures of Curating :The Limits of Authority" in *Museum History Journal* Vol. 8 No.1, January 2015. 1.

<sup>143</sup> Longair 2015. 6.

<sup>144</sup> Longair 2015.2.

<sup>145</sup> Moody. 2015. 114.

<sup>146</sup> Claire Robins. "Engaging with Curating" in *The International Journal of Art & Design Education* vol 4 issue 2 May 2005, 149

definition and practice of the Curator to suggest that ‘engaging with curating has the potential not only to facilitate critical engagement with galleries and museums, but also to empower and inform teachers of these venues as learning resources.’<sup>147</sup> She asks a question that remains pertinent. ‘At the start of the new century in which post-colonialism, feminism and interculturalism inform educational and cultural theory, it is not surprising that galleries and museums are being asked: who has the right to select and represent on behalf of others? Whose story is being told, by whom, and for whom?’

<sup>148</sup> In this example, when the role of the Curator is made visible, there is a greater empowerment of teachers to use the museums as learning resources, as sites of authority. Longair notes that ‘evidence of historical curatorial practice often remains elusive...decisions and discussions might go unrecorded. Historians of museums must use all available evidence to reconstruct the realities of curating.’<sup>149</sup> If the Curator is to be invisible and seen as authoritative, then the reasons behind the decisions of their visible, but unsigned, work need to be documented and made available, especially in times of contested exhibitions.

Without professional curation, there are many other (re)presentations of history which are subjective, nostalgic, and often historically incorrect. These include the genre of historical romance such as the *Bridgerton* series where a sliver of an imagined society is presented, adventure parks with a whitewashed view of history involving cartoon caricatures such as *Disneyland* and the costumed up (re)creation *Society for Creative Anachronism*. Whilst all these are pleasurable past times, and there appears a need for their offerings, they are curated using selected aspects of the past as a more familiar country, to create spaces and places of refuge and a shared connection with others in an often-dystopian contemporary society.<sup>150</sup>

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<sup>147</sup> Robins. 2005. 149.

<sup>148</sup> Robins 2005, 150.

<sup>149</sup> Longair 2015.6.

<sup>150</sup> David Lowenthal posits this in David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

Without the work of Curators, access to the past would be compromised, incomplete and potentially marginalized. This does seem a rather generalized statement. However its veracity lies in the (re)presentation of history. Prior to the professionalism of Curators through tertiary education in Australia in the 1980s, an understanding and representation of the past was fragmentary at best. There was certainly a desire to connect with the past, especially with the history of well-known individuals, such as the ‘frocking up’ event at Vaucluse House in the 1930s to celebrate William Charles Wentworth--here the context of Wentworth’s house was used to add historical weight to the event.<sup>151</sup> Historic houses were acquired at all levels of government and by volunteer organisations to connect with a past. At first through the notion of heritage as nostalgia<sup>152</sup> and later through identification with the inhabitants, including servants and convicts.

Professionally trained Curators are essential to accessing a well-researched and as comprehensive and as balanced as possible, understanding of the past. In this thesis, this is through presenting the historic house interior in a carefully researched and objective manner. Approaches of collaboration are essential to moving towards a more representative and nuanced and inclusive interpretation, especially when there is the opportunity of more accurately representing minorities as appropriate. Curators often use collaboration and co-creation, especially in the determination of exhibitions in a more formal setting of the museum. Curating is a collaborative work. The Curator should not be the only word, that would potentially deny the inclusion of important and changing narratives, but they should as the professional, have the final word.

But it does place pressure on the professional Curator to accurately determine and keep up, the appearance of the historic house interiors. The Curator is in a privileged position with access to

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<sup>151</sup> The connection with the ‘great man’ of William Charles Wentworth through the appearance of the interiors at Vaucluse House is explored in Chapter Two.

<sup>152</sup> Lowenthal, 1985.

primary material and the expectation that they will use this material to enable an accurate as possible access to the spaces and the site in which historic encounters took place. Conversations with others to include their voices where necessary, are essential to this role, but the Curator remains the Co-ordinator and the final arbiter of this procedure.

Former Museum Director Laura Raicovich<sup>153</sup> writes of the importance of these conversations in making changes to the more inclusive representation of Indigenous people in the museum. “The most important thing is to begin in earnest...the work to advance greater equity happens both in stealth and in public. Protests, boycotts, and public letters are all important, not only to raise public awareness, but also to bring allies outside of institutions together. Simultaneously, there is the quieter work that happens inside cultural spaces: the slower, more dogged ways individual people use their powers of influence...they demonstrate the ways in which museums... [are] collections of people who do things together.’<sup>154</sup> Raicovich states that the power of cultural workers to make change should not be underestimated, offering examples.<sup>155</sup> I argue that the Curator is a key person in this slow, quiet, collaborative and effective team.

A key challenge to the role of the Curator in preserving interiors as a site of historic encounter is that their own personalities remain invisible in the presentation. It is the hand of the Curator that ensures the accuracy of the historic house interior, but the invisibility of that hand is critical. Adequate resources are needed so Curators are not left to guess or to fill in the gaps based on their own interests and professionalism. As art critic, Craig Burnett, writes in 2005, ‘the more deeply engaged the curator becomes with the work, the less visible he is.’<sup>109</sup> In other words, the more accurate the Curator is in their work, the more ‘real’ everything they present, necessarily becomes: the more of a simulation that is true to life that

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<sup>153</sup> Laura Raicovich *Culture Strike Art and Museums in an Age of Protest* (London: Verso, 2021), 124.

<sup>154</sup> Raicovich, 2021, 125

<sup>155</sup> Raicovich, 2021, 125.

they create. Whilst this is written about the role of the Curator as facilitator of the artist's work in an art exhibition context, it is relevant to the Curator in the context of a house museum interior where the appearance of the interior could be viewed as an installation.

In 2005, journalist Geraldine O'Brien, in her reflection on the twenty-five year legacy of Curatorship at the Trust,<sup>110</sup> summed this up well in saying that

what you don't see...is the omnivorous research, the scholarship, the sometimes-fierce debate, the sheer thought that has brought this place into being... the work of its Curators...remains central to this aim...the presentation of each place comes from a profound appreciation and respect for the idea that the place itself has something to say.<sup>111</sup>

O'Brien acknowledges that the Trust properties are 'in all their variety and richness, a reflection of the organisation's Curators.'<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Craig Burnett, "The Invisible Curator," *Art Monthly*, 291 (2005), 2.

<sup>110</sup> Geraldine O'Brien, "Curators' legacy," *Insites* (Sydney: Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales Summer 2005), 8-9.

This need for invisibility in the role of the Curator can seem at odds with its art museum counterpart, where the work of the exhibition Curator, sometimes undertaken by a non-museum professional, can be very visible, such as at the National Gallery of Victoria, 2023 Melbourne Winter Masterpieces® exhibition, *Pierre Bonnard: Designed by India Mahdavi*. Interior designer, Mahdavi, used wallpapers based on abstracted details from Bonnard's paintings, as well as furniture, carpets and apertures that evoke windows and doors to transform the usually white-walled gallery spaces 'to evoke a domestic interior using material from original sources.'<sup>113</sup> Mahdavi uses colours, textures and shapes from the domestic interiors in Bonnard's paintings and represents them as three-dimensional scenography within the gallery walls, in more an evocation than a realisation of the original. It is not Mahdavi's intention to present something very like the original interior, but to be inspired by the artistic rendering of it in Bonnard's paintings, so it becomes an interpretation of an interpretation. Whereas when an historic interior is reconstructed within a museum context, it is important to accurately present the original as the basis for a viable connection between visitor and occupant, not through an interpreter whose hand is visible; or when the interior is reinterpreted that there are not too many filters from its original appearance; or otherwise, what is the importance of the original interior?

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<sup>111</sup> Geraldine O'Brien, "Curators' legacy," *Insites* (Sydney: Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales Summer 2005), 8.

<sup>112</sup> Geraldine O'Brien, "Curators' legacy," *Insites* (Sydney: Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales Summer 2005), 9.

<sup>113</sup> Meg Slater, "Melbourne Winter Masterpieces® India Mahdavi and Pierre Bonnard," *NGV Magazine*, 40 (May-June 2023), 42. This exhibition ran from 9 June to 8 October 2023.

Interiors are important. Interiors in public ownership provide a context and a connection to a private past for a public present. Appropriately educated heritage professionals have the knowledge, skills and experience to facilitate this access and to ensure that house museums are relevant, accurate and sustainable. Determining the preservation of historic interiors has been a challenging and complex exercise for Curators. The approach to (and treatment of) original interiors by the ‘keepers’ of house museums, whether by professional Curators or others, can determine whether the house museum is an accurate (re)presentation of the lives of others. Censored history, whether by poor or deliberate decision-making, is not really history. It certainly has no meaning in terms of actual cultural or social history. The Curator in an historic house museum not only undertakes extensive historic research into all aspects of the property and determines the appearance of the interiors according to this evidence but also has an acute understanding and knowledge of the occupants of those interiors.<sup>114</sup>

Gaining more knowledge about these spaces from constant research, combined with best practice conservation approaches, results in the accurate and detailed (re)presentation of the interiors. Informed and assertive treatment of the interiors will encourage authenticity and enable others to understand and connect with the embedded historic encounters within the walls, floors and ceilings of our relatively recent past.

Historic house museums are a living historic document. Their layers are a self-referential archive requiring the care of a professional to use and preserve the appearance of this original material. The actions that happen in the interior are not normally recorded on, or form part of,

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<sup>114</sup> This is a key difference between museum Curators and house museum Curators.

the historic record. Although it is not possible to completely recreate the past as it was once lived, it is possible — and is indeed obligatory — to enable access to aspects of the past which are considered significant. This access is strongly influenced by the documentation and material culture which exists of the periods chosen as well as the understanding, knowledge and cultural values of the interpreters (usually the Curator and the viewer). Of course, no matter how carefully researched and presented the past is, a number of elements will mean a fragmented depiction of another time, whether it is the recent or distant past. These include: the arbitrary survival of objects (this evidence is an important although partial tool to interpret the past), professional attitudes and values of the Curators, current trends in historical philosophy and the prevailing political, social and economic trends. The observations that American Communications Professor Norman K. Denzin makes on the use of evidence in research apply to the Curator in times of change and sometimes competing priorities where to be effective, their role must be one of objectivity, observation and consultation in their interpretation of historic interiors. ‘Evidence is never morally or ethically neutral...it is rather a question of who has the power to control the definition of evidence, who defines the kinds of material that count as evidence, who determines what methods best produce the best forms of evidence, whose criteria and standards are used to evaluate quality evidence.’<sup>156</sup> In house museums, interiors are the most accessible, complete, personal, and clearly traceable, evidence of the past.

In 1985, Watts wrote that one of the differences between the Trust and similar organisations was that ‘each of our houses has a professional Curator as the senior member of staff. This has the obvious result of a more creative approach to presentation, sound research, good standards of cataloguing, ability to mount exhibitions, produce publications and so forth.’<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>156</sup> Norman K. Denzin “The Politics of Evidence” in Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln (eds), *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research* (SAGE: Los Angeles, 2011) 647.

This was the benchmark in house museum best practice not only in Australia, but also internationally. Since then, the role, definition and perception of the Curator has changed. In 2015, the decrease in the number of specialist Curators employed by museums in the UK, concerned Collections Manager, Joanne Ewin, and museum Curator, Timothy Ewin, to the extent that they defined the role of the Curator as a ‘specialist on the collections held by a museum...curators facilitate deeper, more meaningful access to heritage for all in society.’<sup>117</sup>

The Ewins elaborate on their definition of a Curator as ‘someone who thoroughly understands the collections, their context to the history and culture of the communities they serve and in many cases, the academic subjects (cultural, historical and scientific) they pertain too; that is, they are an expert or a specialist on the collections held by a museum, in trust for society.’<sup>157</sup> In other words, a specialist who is responsible for understanding and making accessible, a collection to society.

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<sup>115</sup> Peter Watts, “Museums Houses-Costs and Benefits,” *ACT Heritage Seminars*, 3 (Canberra: ACT Heritage Committee, October 1985), 26.

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<sup>157</sup> Timothy A.M. Ewin and Joanne V. Ewin, “In defence of the curator: maximising museum impact,” *Museum Management and Curatorship*, 31 no.4 (2016), 322-330.

As Longair notes in 2015, a fundamental component of curatorial authority, and so of the curatorial role, is ‘an intimate knowledge and understanding of the institution’s collection. Object identification and documentation provided the building blocks on which to construct a curator’s claims to expertise.’<sup>158</sup> This was in addition to, ‘the multiplicity of tasks expected of a curator could be vast...As well as caring for, preserving, safeguarding, and documenting the collection, a curator might be expected to undertake independent research and publish the results, conceive and mount exhibitions, manage budgets, give lectures and tours of galleries, make new acquisitions, and attract donations.’<sup>159</sup> Now the role of the museum, and so of the curator, is contested by external organisations or individuals.<sup>160</sup> This means that practically the Curator, representing the museum, needs to effectively communicate with those organisations and people, in a way that Ashmore<sup>161</sup> regards contemporary curating as ‘meaning making’ where curators work with artists and communities to interpret collections. Longair argues that this engagement with communities demonstrates how curators learn from their audiences and ‘use their skills as communicators and wider contextual understanding to bring objects and their stories to life.’<sup>162</sup> In other words, as effective collaborators, contemporary Curators can add to their traditional roles of preservation and interpretation of a collection, to bring contemporary stories to life.

Former Curator of British museums and galleries James Hamilton records his despair at the downgrading of the profession of Curatorship in the UK through changes in tertiary courses, and a lowering of funding for galleries and museum and its impact on local collections. Unlike Australia where post graduate courses are offered in Curatorship, ‘what students are now offered is primarily

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<sup>158</sup> Longair, 2015. 3.

<sup>159</sup> Sarah Longair, “Cultures of Curating: The Limits of Authority.” in *Museum History Journal* 8 (1), (January, 2015), 2. doi:10.1179/1936981614Z.00000000043.

<sup>160</sup> Longair, 2015. 4.

<sup>161</sup> Ashmore in Longair 2015. 59.

<sup>162</sup> Longair, 2015. 6.

Heritage Management Studies...Curatorship is rarely...mentioned in these course prospectuses, and so presumably they don't teach it.<sup>163</sup> When added to the funding changes for curatorial positions in local government museums, Hamilton concludes that 'museums and art galleries are a vital sign of a town or city's heartbeat. Without their curators they are just piles of stuff.'<sup>164</sup> Critical to the role of the Curator is the conservation and interpretation of the collection, one that requires position funding.

This challenge to the importance of the role of the professional Curator is reflected in the dearth of definable postgraduate qualifications as prerequisites to employment. Positions as librarians or archivists require definable qualifications, but Curators do not. As Longair notes in 2015 'Even to this day, while curatorial practice is without a doubt a recognized profession, there are still no requisite formal qualifications'. This is 'in spite of the expansion of Museum Studies post graduate programs in universities in the UK and abroad.'<sup>165</sup> Museum and Heritage Studies courses, Master of Art Curatorship and practical TAFE courses exist, but there is no professionally agreed approach or standard curriculum across the teaching and learning spectrum.

The lack of specialist knowledge and research skills was identified as of concern by British museum worker, Elise Coralie Edwards, in her 2007 survey on the skills and knowledge required in job advertisements for Curators in the *Museums Journal*.<sup>119</sup> The title of Curator is fluid in its understanding and use and is being progressively widened to upscale other job titles. An SLM example is the 2014 House Music program for Government House which was introduced by the 'Curator of House Music' a position formerly known as Public Programs

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<sup>163</sup> James Hamilton, "Collections need Curators" in *The British Art Journal* Vol. 19, No. 3. (Britain: Robin Simon, Winter 2018/2019). 67.

<sup>164</sup> Hamilton, 2018/19. 69.

<sup>165</sup> Sarah Longair. "Cultures of Curating: The Limits of Authority." In *Museum History Journal* 8 (1), January 2015. 2. doi:10.1179/1936981614Z.00000000043.

Officer. This dilution of the role of the Curator means that the profession suffers, and by extension, the interpretation of historic house museums suffers. Agreed postgraduate qualifications with clearly articulated transparent outcomes, and ongoing standardised professional training, would enable more certainty in the employment of Curators and their pay scales, and is a key facet to the accurate (re)presentation of historic house museum interiors.<sup>166</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> Timothy A.M. Ewin and Joanne V. Ewin, "In defence of the curator: maximising museum impact," *Museum Management and Curatorship*, 31 no.4 (2016), 322-330.

<sup>119</sup> Elise Coralie Edwards, 'The Future for Curators,' *Papers from the Institute of Archaeology SI* (2007), 113.

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<sup>166</sup> Gabrielle Moser. (2008) "Do curators need university curatorial programs?" *C Magazine* (100). pp. 27-32. <http://openresearch.ocadu.ca/id/eprint/1145/>. Moser argues the importance of tertiary training for Art Curators.

Another challenge to the role of the Curator is the flexibility of the term when used in social media. As Santi Thompson and Michele Reilly point out, the term

‘Curator’ has changed to include social media, so that ‘the process of curating objects to construct cultural narratives and to tell stories has traditionally been reserved for credentialed professionals in galleries, libraries, archives, and museums. However, the rise of the World Wide Web and, with it, the online access to digitise cultural heritage images and objects, has seen the increase of curatorial activities among other groups, including everyday users of digitised materials.’<sup>120</sup>

They use Pinterest as the example of everyday curation. This risks the construction of subjective and incomplete narratives, ones not supported by objective research which may be presented as complete or absolute; and are usually personal stories. <sup>167</sup>

Preservation and interpretation of the historic house museum interior in the post-colonial environment brings its own challenges for professional Curators. Minority groups identified in the late twentieth century as underrepresented and requiring visibility (recognised in the ‘new social history’ of women, children and servants), has in the twenty-first century widened to include people who identify as First Nations people, gender diverse and varyingly abled. Whilst it is unarguably important to represent the diversity of humankind, it is also important to be aware that not all these groups will have been recorded to the extent of the ‘great white male’ of earlier centuries (often as the author of their own (his)tory). As that very visible great white English-speaking male, Winston Churchill, acknowledges ‘history is written by the victors.’

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<sup>167</sup> C. Burnett. *Society of American Archivists* 2005. 35.

<sup>120</sup> Santi Thompson and Michele Reilly, ““Everyone’s a Curator”: Identifying the Everyday Curator” *The International Journal of the Image* (USA 2019), 25.

Since the rise of the professional Curator in Australia in the 1980s the social, cultural, economic, and political environment together with most importantly the space of museums, has noticeably changed both in Australia and around the world. In Australia, funding for the commemoration of the Bicentenary in 1988 and the Centenary of Federation in 2001 focused on amplifying an Anglo centric heritage.<sup>168</sup> Curators were responsible for the conservation and interpretation of these sites of historic interaction, often comparative in type to those in the United Kingdom and United States in terms of venerated historic male achievers such as Wentworth.<sup>169</sup> This interpretation then broadened to include the researched representation of British convicts, and European migrants as servants, for example, at Elizabeth Farm.<sup>170</sup> Showing the influence of the feminist movement and the rise of social history, by focusing on the narratives of less represented women and extended families such as the multi-generational local Thorburn and Macgregor families as a core, but not the only, reason for the acquisition of *Meroogal* in regional town Nowra in New South Wales (and other HHT properties such as *Susannah Place* and *Rouse Hill estate*). The appearance of the interiors and their possibilities for accurate historic interpretation of a particular time and place, was another.

This focus on representing the lives of mainly English-speaking men and women continued into the late twentieth and early twenty first century and remains the basis of the interpretation of the interiors of their houses. Changes in the focus and possibilities of the Curator are now different. Yet the underlying methodology of the Curatorial practice remains, that of using primary sources and the building itself, to accurately present and make accessible, the appearance of the interiors of the past.

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<sup>168</sup> For example, Bicentennial funding for the publication by the HHT of books celebrating women in their houses. Janet Ramsay *The Women of Meroogal*, <https://catalogue.nla.gov.au/catalog/631132>, Carol Liston *Sarah Wentworth: Mistress of Vaucluse*, <https://catalogue.nla.gov.au/catalog/2153527> and Elizabeth Windschuttle *Taste and science: the women of the Macleay family 1798-1850* <https://catalogue.nla.gov.au/catalog/631107>. Nationally, re enactment of the First Fleet arriving in Sydney Harbour on 26 January 1788, in the parade of the Tall Ships on 26 January 1988. Accessed 2 October 2025. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/First\\_Fleet\\_Re-enactment\\_Voyage](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/First_Fleet_Re-enactment_Voyage).

<sup>169</sup> Wentworth and Mt Vernon.

<sup>170</sup> Accessed 2 October 2025. <https://mhns.wa.gov.au/stories/general/sarah-pettit-macarthur-first-servant/>, Accessed 2 October 2025. <https://mhns.wa.gov.au/stories/general/maltese-connection-unexpected-origins-elizabeth-farms-convict-workers/>.

Acknowledging and including First Nations people in a shared history—even when painful—is a current concern of curatorship. Curators from MoH for example, have recognised the importance of including Aboriginal people in the narrative of their properties. An installation at Elizabeth Farm acknowledges the role that Parramatta – the first site of the Native Institution (1814–20) – and the institution’s governing committee had in the control of Aboriginal people. Although Elizabeth Farm was not the site of this institution, one of the members of the committee was Hannibal Macarthur, nephew of John Macarthur, owner of *Elizabeth Farm. Healing land, remembering Country* was unveiled at Elizabeth Farm for NAIDOC Week event in 2020.<sup>171</sup>

Over recent years, there has been an appropriation and use of heritage by different individuals, groups, and ideologies seemingly towards their own interpretation of a shared and public past. Expectations on Curators to acknowledge and potentially include, and possibly modify or change existing representations of that history continue, and offer their own challenges. Acknowledgement of the perspectives of these groups is arguably easier for the art museum Curator than the social history museum Curator. The art museum Curator can commission temporary exhibitions and collaborate with special interest groups, acknowledged as a movement perhaps rather than a change to historic interpretation. It is harder for the social history Curator to do this, being informed by longer term thinking and the physical context of a building with its own history. When time and distance has brought a clarity of contextual thinking the Curator will be able to determine how best to acknowledge and incorporate where appropriate, these concerns. In the last fifteen years, the *MeToo* movement has brought a rethink and a questioning of the intangible relationships between females and males especially in terms of servant and master. How can a Curator represent these relationships especially when there is little evidence and is it their role?

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<sup>171</sup> ‘Healing Land, remembering Country’ by Tony Albert is a permanent installation of a timber green house in the grounds of Elizabeth Farm. With connection to memory and place. <https://mhns.wa.gov.au/whats-on/exhibitions/healing-land-remembering-country/> accessed 13 September 2025.

Activists in the *Black Lives Matter* international social movement<sup>172</sup> aim to address racial inequality in present and past situations, in all spheres and in all races, and to work towards equal respect of these minorities with that of the ‘white’ population.<sup>173</sup> Professional Curators have always been mindful of the importance of an accurate representation of the diversity of people associated with heritage sites and their present-day visitors. How do they address the concern of UK historian Jeremy Black that the political uses to which history has been put in the recent past create a ‘history of grievance’ that is damaging the social fabric of the present.<sup>174</sup> Do they need to do more to better represent minorities? What does this ‘more’ look like? And if there is a need for a greater representation of diversity, how will this impact on existing narratives? But what about the issue of contested histories? What is the Curator’s role, if any, in that? Poulet looks at the relationship between the museum and difficult pasts, between museological discourse and individual or collective sentiment as relevant to the link between history and memory, looking at cultural memory and collective memory, and so the way in which the past is remembered.<sup>175</sup> She examines the way that the memory of difficult pasts is now linked to physical sites, and sites of heritage, discussing the way heritage can be seen as more than cognitive.<sup>176</sup> A recognition of the important role of recognising and including intangible heritage in curatorial interpretation.

An example of the recognition of the work of minority nonwhite groups is the rethink of the Period Rooms at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York,<sup>177</sup> where in the Richmond Room, a curated historic interior, the work of the mahogany cutters is recognised and consciously included in the

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<sup>172</sup> Started in the United States in 2013 and revived in 2020 to raise awareness of police brutality and racism.

<sup>173</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/topic/police-brutality-in-the-United-States-2064580/Police-brutality-after-World-War-II> accessed 16 July 2025.

<sup>174</sup> Jeremy Black *The Curse of History*. (London: Social Affairs Unit, 2008).

<sup>175</sup> Dominic Poulot ‘Introducing Difficult Past and Narratives’ in *National Museums and the Negotiation of Difficult Past Conference Proceedings from EuNaMus, European National Museums: Identity Politics, the Uses of the Past and the European Citizen, Brussels 26–27 January 2012* Editors Dominique Poulot, José María Lanzarote Guiral & Felicity Bodenstein EuNaMus Report No. 8.

<sup>176</sup> Poulot, 2012,4.

<sup>177</sup> <https://www.metmuseum.org/about-the-met/collection-areas/the-american-wing/period-rooms/richmond-room> accessed 11 September 2025.

interpretational narrative that accompanies the room. Its panelling and doors were of the most expensive timber available, mahogany. ‘How can we have a room that’s panelled with mahogany and not talk about the reality of how this material was attained?’ asked Curator Amelia Peck.<sup>178</sup> This perspective aligns with the current reinterpretation of western history and the overdue inclusion of other than white narratives. However, past decisions about the keeping of interiors and of the appearances of these interiors means that the interiors of these people have ironically not been retained. In this way, directed curatorial research can be used to more deeply understand the historic interior.

The COVID 19 pandemic of 2020 and 2021 challenged the role of the Curator. Art Curator Matthew Ryan wrote in 2020 during the Covid 19 Pandemic of the marginalisation and deaths of vulnerable people, and of the value of the present moment ‘I believe that most curators have made peace with the unknowable future...everything has changed. And my relationship with the future is no longer so comfortable.’<sup>179</sup> And revealingly, ‘The past is what I know to be true, so I’ll start and end there.’ In other words, faced with an uncertain and somewhat bleak future, the past is a known and a refuge; a challenge for the Curator to ‘truthfully’ interpret the past when navigating their role in the future. Independent scholar Aastha D. writing in 2021, saw ‘Covid 19 as the Curator of the post pandemic world... where as a curator [it] has prompted museums and cultural institutes across the globe to reimagine the intent, potential and boundaries of what constitutes a museum, what doesn’t, and how these margins can be expanded.’<sup>180</sup> She looked to the (contemporary art) museum as a place of healing, and the role of the Curator as facilitator.

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<sup>178</sup>Harrison Furey and Rachel Smith, *Representing the Complicated History of American Interiors* March 8, 2021. <https://www.metmuseum.org/perspectives/period-rooms-history-of-american-interiors> accessed 11 September 2025.

<sup>179</sup> Matthew Ryan Smith “Curating Before and After the Pandemic” in *Art Review* April 17, 2020. <https://www.centred.ca/curating-before-and-after-the-pandemic/> accessed 20 July 2025.

<sup>180</sup> <https://www.stirworld.com/think-opinions-covid-19-as-the-curator-of-the-post-pandemic-world> accessed 21 July 2025.

There are challenges and opportunities for Curators. Challenges to represent these social changes accurately and opportunities to effectively collaborate with those who are involved, who are another primary source. During these years when museums closed and access to collections was on line, professional staff used the opportunity to clean collections, (such as at *Rouse Hill estate*), to research and to reflect, and to connect the past with the present, such as the effect of the Spanish flu in 1919 on Australian society and its parallels with 2019. Post Covid the role of the Curator more widely seems to be as facilitator of different perspectives in the museum. In terms of the house museum Curator, the role remains similar to that of pre-Covid perhaps with a sharper understanding of what the audience seeks, of the importance of an accurate representation of the past and special experiences, in which to immerse themselves.

The so-called *Culture Wars* of 2021 in the United Kingdom where symbols of tradition are culturally contested, in other words, questioned, and sometimes altered, through such acts as the removal of statues symbolising colonial rule,<sup>181</sup> has global traction. This attempt by interest groups to very publicly rewrite history challenges the curated presentation of history whether in a house museum or in the wider museum and gallery sector. It places even more value on the specialist skills and knowledge of a professional Curator to objectively address contentious or controversial issues. As Moody refers to some of the dissonance of representing difficult histories, which she asserts ‘arises from the process of heritage itself, ‘the negotiation of cultural meaning’ in which heritage managers (and historians) are involved.’<sup>182</sup> She asserts that ‘this negotiation, always necessarily involving conflict, acts to support...and validate the sense of identity...and conceptualisations of place held by some people at the expense of others, through the support of particular versions of history’. Moody’s claim that ‘Historians, working with their own versions or history...are central and active participants

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<sup>181</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jun/13/everything-you-wanted-to-know-about-the-culture-wars-but-were-afraid-to-ask>. Accessed 17 July 2025.

<sup>182</sup> Jessica Moody. “Heritage and History” in Waterton, E., Watson, S. (eds) *The Palgrave Handbook of Contemporary Heritage Research*. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015). 122.

within such process'<sup>183</sup> could be equally applied to Curators; and particularly because of their role in presenting the lived past, social history Curators.

In her 2023 Master's thesis, Tanila examines the invisibility or anonymity of arts and artists both within and outside the art museum, and the challenges this poses to the role of the Curator. She concludes that 'the contemporary art field seems to be offering more space and opportunities for anonymous practice, yet it requires changes in conventional structures for all anonymities to become more visible. Curatorial practice can broaden perspectives on anonymity, while anonymity can also provide inspirational tools for curating.'<sup>184</sup> This exemplifies the changing role of the Curator in interpreting and making accessible not only contemporary art, but also contemporary culture.

Australian author Hannah Kent reflects in her 2025 memoir on her novel written in 2013 about the murder trial of an Icelandic woman in the nineteenth century, based as it was on intensive archival research and a physical investigation of the landscape inhabited by this woman. Kent's two challenges in presenting the past as a site of historic encounter are shared by the Curator in determining the appearance of historic house interiors. These are both the importance of access to original documented details to better understand those who lived in the past, 'Would I have written Agnes' story differently had I known these details? I ask myself. Would I have written it differently now? ;'<sup>185</sup> and the societal influences in our viewing of actions of the people in the past. 'It is surely no coincidence that the mock trial [a representation of the original trial from a modern societal perspective], has occurred during this time of the MeToo movement on social media...Our understanding of the past changes in accordance with our understanding of the present. Yet, a book fixed in time, remains fixed in time.'<sup>186</sup> Certainly fixed in time, and important as an historic record, but like the Curator's work, the author's work can be modified in a revised edition. To retain the

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<sup>183</sup> Moody, 2015. 114.

<sup>184</sup> Tuulia Tanila. "In/visible anonymities: Anonymity in arts and its position in curatorial practice." (2023).<https://aaltodoc.aalto.fi/items/42a8b34d-9d4b-42d4-a782-5e1e52aa5e96>

<sup>185</sup> Hannah Kent, *Always Home, Always Homesick* (Australia: Picador, 2025) 285.

<sup>186</sup> Hannah Kent, *Always Home, Always Homesick* (Australia: Picador, 2025) 285.

integrity of the author's (or Curator's), approach in the original document, the influences on the revisions need acknowledgment.

Another Australian author writes about another historic woman using primary material in the form of the interiors of Elizabeth Farm, Parramatta and extracts from Macarthur correspondence to present a first hand version of little documented colonial life. Kate Grenville, uses an (invented) 'shockingly frank secret memoir'<sup>187</sup> written by Elizabeth Macarthur, found in the roof of *Elizabeth Farm*, to fill in the gaps of the written, mostly male, records. Elizabeth's husband, John Macarthur, 'left a mountain of papers to tell us who he was, but when we go looking for Elizabeth there's almost nothing... The dozens of letters she wrote to her husband... where we might expect to find a trace of the person she was'<sup>188</sup> do not exist. Without these primary sources, but with an interest in the character of the woman who led an extraordinary life, the author has invented their existence. Knowing that letters were found in the Macarthur Papers in the collections of the Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW<sup>189</sup>, and in the times when other histories of minorities such as women and First Nations people are the subject of research, Grenville 'let Elizabeth Macarthur tell her own story.'<sup>190</sup> The author has effectively curated the reader's access to this historic figure and her interactions with her husband and the local Aboriginal people, with whom the author actively consulted, in a novel which follows on from the 1980s 'invisible inhabitants' of historic houses, 'Dedicated to all those whose stories have been silenced.'<sup>191</sup>

As such, the accurate representation of these previously 'invisible' groups' is an ongoing challenge for the professional Curator. This challenge is more easily met inside the

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<sup>187</sup> Kate Grenville. *A Room Made of Leaves*. (Melbourne: Text Publishing Company, 2020) jacket cover.

<sup>188</sup> Grenville, 2020. 3.

<sup>189</sup> Grenville, 2020. 322.

<sup>190</sup> Grenville, 2020. 4.

<sup>191</sup> Grenville, 2020. Dedication.np.

traditional museum environment where objects and their narratives are the pedagogical aim, and where representatives of these groups can input in real time. In the historic house museum interior, objects are important because of their context. Their owners or users are often no longer available. Not all 'invisible' groups leave visible remains. In fact, few do. One of the challenges for the Curator of historic houses is finding ways to best represent the lack of tangible heritage. This may involve using technology. This may involve sensory elements. This may involve the use of intangible heritage. This definitely involves research.

Prior to the recognition of provenance and the 'new history' as being important, decorative style (a preference for specific objects) and the importance of directing visitors into a different and thus 'foreign' past, played dominant roles in the presentation of historic house interiors. It is the role of the Curator, a tertiary educated professional, to go beyond these subjective decisions, to direct the conservation and interpretation of the property, and particularly its interiors, according to heritage significance. This should occur in consultation with other specialist staff and consultants using documentary evidence and relevant best practice policies (from within and outside the organisation). Involvement<sup>121</sup> of the specialist professional Curator began with the availability of postgraduate courses in the 1970s and has influenced immensely the appearance of historic house museums. State government acquisition of historic houses in the 1980s and 1990s brought with it an expectation of intellectual rigour, dedicated resources and recognition of the importance of the identification

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<sup>121</sup> And sometimes intervention, such as the exhibition *Ten[d]ancy* at Elizabeth Bay House 8 July to 22 October 2006, where site-specific installations presented another layer of earlier tenants at the house museum. This exhibition team was a collaboration of art practitioners and Curators, including a house museum Curator.

and maintenance of heritage by those appropriately qualified and skilled, as funded by the public purse for access by the public.

Interiors offer access to earlier realities and past narratives. This access occurs on an individual, personal and informal level, and is maximized when curated in a thoughtful and informed manner. Although written in 1985, this description of the power of the home by Australian architectural historian Robert Irving resonates:

Because houses are the most personal and the most immediate of all architecture, they are also the most revealing. Our responses to their function, structure and aesthetics typify...architecture: to solve the physical problems of providing shelter, and to endow such built spaces with emotional or spiritual qualities. Every house is therefore much more than its physical components. It can divulge its owner's or its builder's character; it can disclose its background of technology and history, and it can display the values of the community of which it is part.

The conservation of original interiors and the acknowledgement of intangible heritage in this interpretation is clearly argued.<sup>122</sup>

Historic house interiors are, when best valued and understood, evidence of the decisions of the individuals who lived there, and often of the same individuals who built them.

Curatorship in Australia is influenced by the length of European history in comparison to Australia as well as its position at the geographical periphery of the northern hemisphere. This can mean a tendency to give greater space and sometimes expectation, for innovation.

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<sup>122</sup> Robert Irving (ed.), *The History and Design of the Australian House* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1985), 9.

From their northern colleagues comes the idea of valuing or keeping the historic house and so keeping up the appearance of the historic house museum. From their own practice in Australia comes the ways in which this might be achieved. Sometimes using traditional approaches and more often, as shown in the four case studies, leading with innovative and experimental or edgy approaches. The tyranny and the beauty of distance.

Curators must be nimble. To conserve and interpret a historic house as per the Statement of Significance and the Conservation Plan (whether as reconstruction, conservation, restoration, preservation or recreation) they need an acute agility. Knowledge, skills and experience must all be available and well-honed in order to meet and address the challenges of the role and of the site. And, usually, to leave no visible mark on the interiors, rather enabling the interiors to ‘speak for themselves,’ through time to communicate their social, economic and political history, and their practical and aesthetic aspects, becoming the connection point between the historic past and the present visitor.

The nineteen eighties in Australia were characterised by a resurgence of interest in a collective colonial past, culminating in the Australian Bicentenary celebrations. The availability of tertiary educated Curators with expertise in the decorative and applied arts and in a ‘new social history’, the writing of the *Burra Charter*, and sufficient government resources to responsibly manage cultural heritage, combined to encourage experimentation and the expectation of accuracy in the presentation of house museums. Whitewashed walls and green shutters, pretty cottage gardens and mannequin-dominated monochromatic interiors were no longer acceptable as the standard physical representation of a historic house museum.

No longer was the house museum seen primarily as a series of arranged (often awkward) lessons for the betterment of its visitors, but refreshingly as a home with an individual narrative and a focus on the accurate presentation of interiors. If these interiors are to be classrooms without artificial walls, then they need to be ones accurately represented. As a trained teacher is one who teaches a class, these lessons are best taught by a trained Curator with the knowledge and confidence to present the interiors accurately. Who knows there is no need to present them with overlays of text and illustration. Who can let the interiors speak for themselves because they have listened to what they have to say and used their knowledge, skills and experience to convey their messages. And used the physical and documentary sources to do this to best practice.

## Conclusion

This Chapter has defined the terms used in the thesis and explored the context of the **house museum**, the **interior**, the role of the **professional Curator** and the different ways that historic house interiors are presented in a **museum context**. The next four chapters consist of case studies analysing four curatorial approaches to the effective preservation of historic house interiors in an Australian context.

They Open A Door And Enter A World.

C.S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe (Chronicles of Narnia)*, (Sydney: Harper Collins 1994).

## Threshold

The term ‘threshold’ can be defined as the entrance, the opening, the starting point or the brink. It is the space that defines and connects a change from one state to another. Typically, this expression describes something new, different and exciting. In the case of the C. S. Lewis quote, the Pevensie children are on the threshold of change, of moving from one, known, world, of opening the door of the cupboard, pushing the coats apart and stepping into another, an unknown world. In the case of this thesis, the threshold is the entrance that enables us to move from the exterior to interior, the site of historic encounter.

Imagine in the middle distance the mellow afternoon light on the external walls of Wharf 9, Hickson Road, in the Rocks, Sydney: an industrial maritime warehouse of striking proportions, its silvered timbers, aged glass panes and orange rusted steel glowing to match that special inner glow one craves when viewing the patina of age so obviously recognised and preserved as an item of cultural heritage by a benevolent government.

It is not until one approaches the boardwalk, reconstructed using recycled timbers to further reinforce the weight of age, of history, of a shared heritage, and allowing politically correct public access to the harbour foreshore, that one sees a machine hoisted above one’s head. Locked like a small child in a timber cradle is a sculpture with an interpretative label offering information on its past—its functional life—its association with its own/our heritage. This machine is from the interiors of the wharf building. The twenty-metre relocation to just beyond the exterior curtilage of its working life has seen its decontextualization, stripped it bare of its original function and made it an object—a piece of post modernism to look at rather than listen to as a repetitive, deafening mechanical workhorse. By its relocation, this

machine's industrial heritage within the context of its original and adjacent interior has been dispassionately neutralised and disenfranchised just as the heritage value of its original interiors has been diluted and discarded. This adaptive reuse of industrial heritage was hailed by the Heritage Council of NSW as 'heritage for the future' and by Howard Tanner, then Deputy Chair, as 'Breathing life into the past, in the end, is what heritage should be about.'<sup>123</sup>

The removal of working industrial heritage from its original purpose-built interiors opens these historically charged spaces for adaptive reuse. The state government's decision to redevelop this wharf from maritime industry to a mix of commercial, residential, and retail—(but no large-scale) industry afford economic advantage—given increased desirability of waterfront property.

The warehouse scale of the interior was significant as a space within a financially valuable landscape. The interior now boasts of contemporary sleek surfaces, of 'stainless steel European appliances' and 'Caesarstone benchtops,' of 'loft apartments,' black outfitted waiters in high-end restaurants and wealthy, smartly dressed customers. This is an adaptive reuse of a heritage building with little interest in its original cultural heritage and even less understanding. But the exteriors look good. They blend with the harbour and provide the anticipated ambience of waterfront property with contemporary expectations of luxurious liveability. Looks good, complies with government policies, and probably feels good should one be able to afford to look or live, inside. Certainly not those originally working with the machinery in the hot, crowded, dirty, loud, rowdy, smelly, environment of these interiors.

Their involvement may be occasional use of the public boardwalk. Opportunities to discover and engage with the working heritage of these invaluable interiors were lost with the

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<sup>123</sup> *Built Environment* (Heritage Council of NSW April 1998).Unpaged.

dissipation of the collection; and opportunities lost for interpretation of the interiors through oral history, images, recording of the original use of these wharves, to add another, connective, dimension, to their contemporary use. Changed access to the historic interiors from public to private, from industry to accommodation, alters the use and therefore the significance of the interiors, as does the removal and dispersal of the machinery for which the interiors were fashioned.

These adaptive reuse decisions have been made in a climate of pragmatic decision making where resources are scarce, and there is a pervasive individual assumption that the protection and preservation of cultural heritage will be appropriately addressed in legislation and in practice. In other words, the individual now feels confident—or disinterested, dispassionate, or perhaps disempowered— enough to delegate decisions about heritage to its elected government; and the superficiality of the appearance of heritage in the restoration of the façade.

Facadism in Sydney CBD popular in the 1980s and 1990s is where the façade, usually of a heritage listed building, is retained whilst the remainder of the building, including the interiors, is demolished, often to be replaced by a contemporary structure of different scale and use to the original. Structural soundness of the retained façade has been a noted issue in the press whilst the use of the interiors which matched the façade is not usually valued and not publicly recorded; thus losing the connection between interior and exterior. An example is the Johnson's Building at 233-235 George Street, Sydney. The double storey heritage listed façade and some of the building survives as the street frontage of Grosvenor Square, a modern purpose-built high rise completed in the Bicentennial year of 1988.

This use of associative heritage as a tradable commodity is a trend apparent in late twentieth century /early twenty first century state government owned heritage sites and includes approaches to the use of interiors of house museums open to visitors. This differs from a more community focused approach to access to interiors earlier in the century, when the level of access was determined by the level of community support and connection and not by the amount of money one was willing to pay for that access.

Interiors are important. Interiors are about context and connection as a physical and intellectual structure for accessing our shared material and cultural heritage. This embraces both tangible and intangible heritage. Interiors in historic house museums, sites of decision and influence, are particularly important. As a three-dimensional space they are a primary resource for researching the past, enabling access to heritage value. The building fabric provides ‘witness marks’ to those who created, and lived within, their spaces. Objects within these interiors add to an understanding of those actions by providing physical evidence of those occupants. Provenanced objects placed within original interiors are the best means of fully understanding these occupants in their private environment. Objects are functional symbols of the past. By providing a charged context, interiors add authority to these objects, and conversely the objects can add authority to the interiors.

Unlike moveable cultural heritage—objects—which are moved from space to space, in and out of context, house interiors are usually stable in layout and relatively consistent in use. Maintaining the integrity—the authenticity— of these interiors and ensuring public access to them, as a means of accessing the often-private spaces occupied by historic figures<sup>124</sup> is critical. The short length of European settlement and attachment to a continuity of social

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<sup>124</sup> ‘Historic figure’ is used as a general term to represent a person of national or local interest.

history, the vagaries of government, the complexity of the houses themselves in terms of changes in ownership, in use and in appearance over time, and constant commitment of resources, mean that there are few house museums in public (that is, primarily government) ownership in Australia. There are many more house museums in private or charitable ownership of volunteer or membership-based organisations, houses often partially occupied for on-site security by a caretaker or manager and periodically open to the public. In these houses, interiors are recognised as providing important access to past and perhaps distant, lives, but access is dependent on limited, periodic and competing resources for their conservation and interpretation.

When capably and considerately conserved and interpreted, house museum interiors facilitate physical and intellectual public access to the people who created, occupied and valued them. Interiors are primary documents which clearly articulate and record change and so provide context to the narratives of these occupants, to their wider social, political and economic environments, and more recently, to the involvement and influence of professional staff, principally and consistently Curators, and an engagement with the public. It is the role of a public organisation such as the Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales, and its successors, to ensure that this access, and that these interiors, are presented in a responsible, accurate, authentic, universal and sustainable appearance. In the 1980s and 1990s in Australia the expectation was clearly that this organisation would not only do this well, by providing direction in the conservation and interpretation of historic houses within their then expanding portfolio, but also that it would take the risks necessary using 'best practice' to ensure that the heritage value of the interior was appropriately realised.

This thesis is inviting us to cross the threshold from the fascination with exteriors to the equally important, but overlooked and under-explored study of historic house interiors. Open the door. Cross the threshold. Step inside...

I loved thinking about history, but experience has taught me that even with hindsight, the past is impossible to untangle with any kind of clarity...so it didn't make sense to presume I could imagine any kind of reliable future. I did try. I tried as hard as I could. I couldn't fill it with anything.

Hannah Gadsby, *Ten Steps to Nanette: A Memoir Situation* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2022), 157.

## Chapter Two

### Reviewing the narrative: Curator as resourced operative at *Vaucluse House*



Figure 5. View of *Vaucluse House* and pleasure garden, 2024. Photo © Katherine Lu for Museums of History NSW. Accessed 27 December 2024. <https://mhns.wa.gov.au/visit-us/vaucluse-house/>.

## Introduction

Focusing on the first house museum in Australia, the largely restored marine villa and urban gentleman's estate, *Vaucluse House*, this case study introduces the role of the Curator and examines the influence of the role in the reconstructed<sup>125</sup> house museum, including provenanced<sup>126</sup> objects and all the attendant consideration for the display of detailed domestic

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<sup>125</sup> 'Reconstruction' means returning a place to a known earlier state and is distinguished from restoration by the introduction of new material to the fabric.' Australia ICOMOS *Burra Charter* 1999, 2.

<sup>126</sup> 'Provenance' refers to the known history of something. Wentworth provenanced objects are known by research to be associated with the Wentworth family.

interiors at a particular time. In this case, the time is 1827-54, and 1861-62. William Charles Wentworth and his family were the first informal Curators of these interiors. Well-meaning volunteers, with limited resources, initially interpreted the interiors as a memorial museum to colonial politician William Charles Wentworth (1790-1872).<sup>127</sup>

The colonial interiors at *Vaucluse House* are among the finest examples found in Australia that are in public ownership. The treatment of their appearance reflects the priorities and resourcing of government ownership, changes in conservation practice and the development of social history. They also chart the emerging and developing role of Curators in Australia. From 1980, *Vaucluse House* as managed by the Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales (the Trust) had, for the first time, a professionally educated<sup>128</sup> Curator who was sufficiently resourced to review the narrative as a site of historic encounter, as a discovery of the lives of the Wentworth family, their servants, and the management of a nineteenth century estate.<sup>129</sup>

The *Vaucluse House* interiors are as important for what they are — records of the decisions of the original occupants in nineteenth century building practice, form, decoration, and use, and of twentieth and twenty first century community and professional, practical, and philosophical interventions — as for what they represent. They are the spaces within which William Charles Wentworth, Sarah Wentworth and their ten children and servants lived. They are where the routine and minutiae of domestic lives took place, away from the very public achievements and controversial character of William Charles. Here, members of the extended family lived from time-to-time in the nineteenth century, of which there has been

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<sup>127</sup> Whilst the property, or portions of it, were owned by others prior to Wentworth, and the Drawing Room is derived from the nucleus of Sir Henry Browne Hayes' cottage, the Wentworth family were the only occupants of the house as it stands and as it is interpreted.

<sup>128</sup> A person with tertiary qualifications in specific relevant subjects, such as Museum Studies.

<sup>129</sup> Charlotte H. F Smith, "The House Enshrined: Great Man and Social History House Museums in the United States and Australia," 61-99.

little interest or documentation. These lives were interwoven with William Charles and Sarah — particularly Sarah in this domestic setting.

This chapter follows the history of the property and analyses its management by the Trust through to 2000. These early years of the Trust management are important to record as an example of how a properly resourced Curator determined the appearance of interiors. This was the model for every historic house then under the responsibility of the Trust.

### Vaucluse House as family home: Wentworth estate (1827 to 1862)

Whilst there is extensive documentation of Wentworth's achievements in the public domain,<sup>130</sup> it is *only* at *Vaucluse House*, his Sydney family home, where physical evidence of his private life has been researched and reconstructed — and which is open to the public. The survival of these largely structurally unchanged interiors is made even more significant as other family houses such as country house *Windermere* in the Hunter Valley, have been substantially altered or, as in the case of the cottage on the Petersham estate, demolished.

The development of *Vaucluse House* during William Charles' ownership shows some of his complex nature. The way he used the house as an aspirational build to enhance his social status is important for understanding later curatorial decisions. William Charles initially expended considerable resources on considerably extending the existing modest building in the fashionable Gothic style, on substantial service buildings, some of which are extant, and

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<sup>130</sup> Andrew Tink, *William Charles Wentworth Australia's greatest native son* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2009). As this biography explores the character and achievements of Wentworth in greater detail there is no need here for further elaboration.

on the appearance of the interiors. He did this at arm's length through colonial architects.<sup>131</sup> Little is known of the house's furnishings in this period other than William Charles's purchase, in 1828, of objects left in the house by previous occupant, Captain John Piper.<sup>132</sup> William Charles did not complete the planned principal rooms or the formal entrance due to the 1840s economic depression. Physical evidence shows that he enlarged the Drawing Room within heightened walls of former occupant and Irish convict Sir Henry Browne Hayes' modest cottage and furnished this room with opulence. A hand painted passionflower wallpaper frieze survives *in-situ* from this decoration. With daughters of marriageable age, the Wentworths curated this interior to impress invited guests with the appearance of a family of wealth and taste, worthy of marital connection.

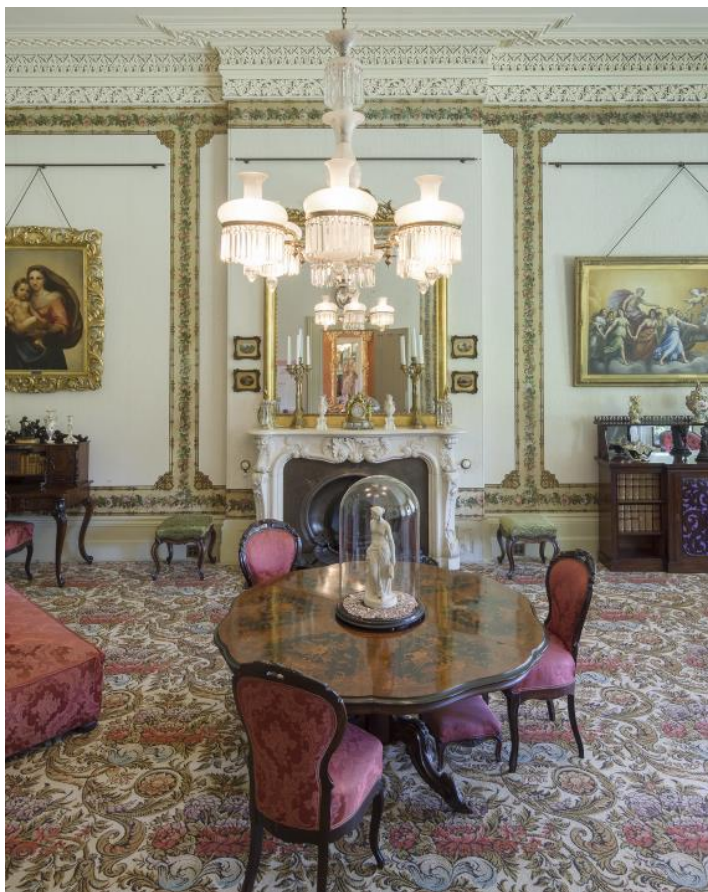


Figure 6. Vacluse House Drawing Room showing original Wentworth passion flower wall paper frieze. Photo © Rob Little. Accessed 29 September 2025 <https://sound-heritage.ac.uk/vacluse-house-centenary-project>.

Some evidence of the original interiors remains in the form of the passionflower frieze

wallpaper. Documents inform Trust curatorial decisions made on presenting the original appearance of the interiors—to a point. The March 1853 onsite auction lists household furniture and effects which the family sold before embarking on a Grand Tour of Europe.<sup>133</sup> The house and grounds were sufficiently attractive to be leased by the Mayor of Sydney. This lease included a Memorandum of Fixtures.<sup>134</sup> A 1900 auction catalogue<sup>135</sup> lists the ‘Furniture and Effects, and Valuable Pictures, Bronzes, Etc...of the Late Eliza Wentworth’. These effects had passed from William Charles to Sarah, to their daughter Eliza. As the catalogue does not include illustrations, there is no certainty that extant objects are from these auctions or lists, or that acquisitions or reproductions are completely correct. However, curatorial research of trade catalogues, combined with an extensive knowledge of the character of the Wentworths, enables the basis of an historically accurate reconstruction—as far as it can go.

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<sup>131</sup> Carol Liston, *Sarah Wentworth Mistress of Vacluse* (Glebe: Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales, 1988), 22. Liston cited William Charles Wentworth to Fitzwilliam Wentworth 15 January 1817 Mitchell Library A756.

<sup>132</sup> Captain John Piper (1773-1851) was a naval officer, member of the NSW Corps, and from 1814 Chief Customs Officer for Sydney.

<sup>133</sup> Excerpt from the ‘Sydney Morning Herald’ 19 March 1853 ‘NOTICE - Catalogues of the Sale of Household Furniture and Effects, at the seat of W.C.Wentworth Esq., M.L.C. on Tuesday next, are now ready, and may be had on application to EDWARD SALAMON, Auctioneer.’

<sup>134</sup> “Memorandum of Fixtures.” Land Titles Office *Book 30* No 389. The fixtures included: kitchen stoves, dressers and shelves, plate rack and two stone washers in the Scullery, copper in the Laundry and chimney pieces in the public rooms and family bedrooms.

<sup>135</sup> Lawson, Caro & Co. Ltd. *Catalogue of the furniture and effects, valuable pictures, bronzes, &c., removed by order of the administrators in the estate of the late Miss Wentworth from Vacluse House, the auction rooms of Lawson, Caro & Co. Ltd., 128 & 130 Pitt Street, near King St., Sydney. To be sold by auction without any reserve*. Friday, 23rd, & Monday, 26th Feb., 1900, Each day at 11 o'clock a.m. *Limited Furniture and Effects, and Valuable Pictures, Bronzes, Etc...of the Late Eliza Wentworth* 1900. Accessed 24 December 2024. <https://blogs.sydneylivingmuseums.com.au/cook/then-and-now-the-dining-room-at-vacluse-house/index.html>.

Although Sarah and William Charles used *Vaucluse House* as their principal Sydney home for only a few decades of their peripatetic lives, creating and keeping up its appearance was important to them. Even when abroad, family correspondence shows Sarah continued an active interest in the appearance of the house interiors<sup>136</sup> and William Charles confirmed his wife's choices<sup>137</sup> to refurnish in the latest European fashion. It is the surviving documentation of these years, the amount and nature of the provenanced collection, and the surviving substantial original layout and finishes of the interiors that allowed subsequent Curators to create a reasonably accurate picture of this occupation, one initially seen as important for its association with William Charles but on review, as evidence of the way a wealthy family lived in nineteenth century Sydney.

### Vaucluse House as memorial museum: Vaucluse Park Trust (1911-1950) & Nielsen-Vaucluse Park Trust (1950-1967)

*Vaucluse House* was resumed by the state government in 1910<sup>138</sup> to enable public access to the Sydney harbour foreshore — not because of the history of the buildings, or the significance of the interiors, which were considered of secondary importance and required constant appeals to government for maintenance. An Honorary Board of Trustees<sup>139</sup> was appointed, and the house and grounds prepared for visitors. The Trustees focused on the practical priorities of external maintenance. The rear of 'Old Vaucluse House'<sup>140</sup> for example, required renovation and was 'repaired as far as possible with material obtained by demolition of "old buildings", including workers' cottages, in the Park.'<sup>141</sup> Many nineteenth century estate auxiliary buildings were demolished, and there is little remaining pictorial documentation. It is these buildings, and these interiors, which would now be considered significant as there are so few extant examples in Australia. The ground floor, without

<sup>136</sup> Sarah Wentworth to Thomas Fisher April 1870, Wentworth Family Papers, 1674-1943 (A868) <https://amugo4tj0e.execute-api.ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/record/nM7IQQLYMLMSS8>.

<sup>137</sup> William Charles Wentworth to Thomas Fisher 18 April 1870, Wentworth Family Papers, 1674-1943. (A868) <https://amugo4tj0e.execute-api.ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/record/nM7IQQLYMLMSS8>.

<sup>138</sup> *New South Wales Government Gazette* 6 July 1910. (3726)

furnishings or interpretation, was opened occasionally to visitors.

Gradually, the Trustees determined that the significance of the site was its association with William Charles Wentworth, the heroic ideal of the man in his public role as colonial statesman — not the Wentworth family. Trustees became ‘desirous of obtaining...authentic information with regard to... the old House and its associations as regards the occupation by William Charles Wentworth [and the Secretary wrote] ...to the... Mitchell Library for any particulars.’<sup>142</sup> Trustees approached Fitzwilliam Wentworth for memorabilia of his father ‘to try and replace...any of the original furniture and effects and restore the House, make it a Museum for Australian Subjects and keep the house in good order as a tribute to the memory of William Charles Wentworth.’<sup>143</sup>

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139 Responsible governance was a priority, and the meetings and resolutions of this Trust—documents still in the Vaucluse House collection and extensively referenced—recorded in detail.

140 Vaucluse House Nielsen Park Trustees Minutes 1911-1925 p15. Minute books of the Vaucluse Park Trust, Nielsen-Vaucluse Park Trust and Trustees of the Vaucluse House Historic Site, from 24 August 1911 to 17 July 1980, with some financial accounts and lists of trustees and office bearers [manuscript records]. Accessed 27 December 2024. <https://first.mhns.wa.gov.au/#record/43079>.

141 “Vaucluse House Nielsen Park Trustees Minutes” (1911-1925), 21. Minute books of the Vaucluse Park Trust, Nielsen-Vaucluse Park Trust and Trustees of the Vaucluse House Historic Site, from 24 August 1911 to 17 July 1980, with some financial accounts and lists of trustees and office bearers [manuscript records]. Accessed 27 December 2024. <https://first.mhns.wa.gov.au/#record/43079>.

<sup>142</sup> “Vaucluse House Trustees Minutes 1911-1925” (20 February 1913, 21. Minute books of the Vaucluse Park Trust, Nielsen-Vaucluse Park Trust and Trustees of the Vaucluse House Historic Site, from 24 August 1911 to 17 July 1980, with some financial accounts and lists of trustees and office bearers [manuscript records]. Accessed 27 December 2024. <https://first.mhns.wa.gov.au/#record/43079>.

In applying the 1921 Vaucluse House Museum Policy,<sup>144</sup> Trustees presented the interiors and their decorative detail as the charged associative spaces where Wentworth had lived and worked. *Vaucluse House* became primarily a memorial museum. According to historian K.R. Cramp, member of the Royal Australian Historical Society:

The historic home is destined to become the Mecca of Australian hero-worshippers...As one ... lingers in the spacious room redolent with sacred memories or contemplates the tiles which one loves to imagine were trod by ... ancient Pompeians, an overpowering... triumph hallows the ground whereon one treads.<sup>145</sup>

It was here where William Charles allegedly made important decisions and took actions of national importance. Clearly, Trustees saw their priority as ensuring that the structure lasted. Perhaps they were exercising political acuity in their house presentation, where visitors could experience a personal connection with individual achievement by walking through the same private interiors through which William Charles walked. It was a curious mesh of emotive symbolism with subjective rendering of a very fallible person. The interiors were seen as a place of spiritual significance, entered with intent to worship its maker. It is as if once inside

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<sup>143</sup> “Vaucluse House Trustees Minutes 1911-1925” (1912-25), 21. Minute books of the Vaucluse Park Trust, Nielsen-Vaucluse Park Trust and Trustees of the Vaucluse House Historic Site, from 24 August 1911 to 17 July 1980, with some financial accounts and lists of trustees and office bearers [manuscript records]. Accessed 27 December 2024. <https://first.mhns.wa.gov.au/#record/43079>.

<sup>144</sup> “Vaucluse House Trustees Minutes No 1” (26 August 1921), 222. Minute books of the Vaucluse Park Trust, Nielsen-Vaucluse Park Trust and Trustees of the Vaucluse House Historic Site, from 24 August 1911 to 17 July 1980, with some financial accounts and lists of trustees and office bearers [manuscript records]. Accessed 27 December 2024. <https://first.mhns.wa.gov.au/#record/43079>.

<sup>145</sup> K.R. Cramp, *William Charles Wentworth of Vaucluse House* (Sydney 1934 ), 21. First published in 1918. This monograph was written to fund maintenance on the house.

the house, the interiors would share their memories for the inclusion of visitors. Interiors provided the associative setting for this narrative.

This notion of associative memory—also known as ‘intangible heritage’<sup>146</sup> — here representing public achievements in private spaces, continued with the climaxing of all tours in the ‘Constitution Room’ where the draft Constitution was allegedly formulated.<sup>147</sup>

Although there is no documentary evidence to support this assertion, and common sense would suggest its drafting in William Charles’s city chambers, its currency continued through the National Parks and Wildlife Service<sup>148</sup> and even into the 1982 Trust guidebook.

In 2009, historian Susan McClean identified the first curatorial period (1918-55) at *Vaucluse House*, as one of the volunteer Curator<sup>149</sup> as some of the interiors—although inaccurately—were arranged with a purpose. Between 1918 and 1928, the tour script emphasised the house’s significance as its association with William Charles.<sup>150</sup> Visitors entered the house from the ‘Reception Room’ with portraits of politicians, continued through the Drawing Room and ultimately to the Library. McClean writes that

This pathway was immensely meaningful to the Trustees for it constituted the route which [they]... believed Wentworth had often trod...visitors were ...encouraged to ritually tread in what the Trustees...imagined were the footsteps of the Great Man, as he entered home and walked through to his inner sanctum, the site of his work.<sup>151</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> Accessed 19 December 2024. An intangible cultural heritage is a practice, representation, expression, knowledge or skill considered by UNESCO to be part of a place’s cultural heritage.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Intangible\\_cultural\\_heritage](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Intangible_cultural_heritage).

<sup>147</sup> K.R. Cramp, *William Charles Wentworth of Vaucluse House*, 21.

<sup>148</sup> Where the post-1975 Guidebook includes illustrations of the ‘Constitution Room’.

<sup>149</sup> Susan McClean, “Negotiating the Nation: Knowledge and Meaning at Vaucluse House in its First Curatorial Period” *Public History Review*, 16 (January 2009), 20-42. Volunteer curator in this context was one unpaid for their curatorial work but used interpretation.

<sup>150</sup> Susan McClean, “Negotiating the Nation: Knowledge and Meaning at Vaucluse House in its First Curatorial Period” *Public History Review*, 16 (January 2009), 27.

It is unlikely that this is the route that William Charles took as, in the absence of a front door, entry was through a gate into the Inner Courtyard. The interiors would not have had this appearance when those steps were made—if the interiors were interpreted as a domestic interior—but as a museum of Australian history this latitude increased the educative value of the interiors as classrooms. This route climaxed at the ‘Constitution Room’, where evidence of William Charles’s accomplishments was displayed to encourage reverence, and where there is a vast difference between knowledge (a certainty about how the rooms were used) and meaning (its representation) in the room’s appearance.

Women were responsible for the appearance of the interiors during much of the early public ownership of *Vaucluse House*. Not only were women volunteers making soft furnishings and room labels, they were also on hand to pose (using enthusiastic initiative) in period costume, however historically inaccurate, and take minutes of Trustees’ meetings. This theme of the representation of women in historic house museums is discussed at length in American and Australian museum literature.<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>151</sup> Susan McClean, “Negotiating the Nation: Knowledge and Meaning at Vaucluse House in its First Curatorial Period” *Public History Review*, 16 (January 2009), 27-28.

<sup>152</sup> For example, Patricia West, “Uncovering and Interpreting Women’s History at Historic House Museums” *Restoring Women’s History through Historic Preservation*, ed. Gail Lee Dubrow and Jennifer Goodwen, (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press 2003) and Linda Young, “A woman’s place is in the house...museum: Interpreting women’s histories in house museums” *Open Museum Journal*, 5 (2002), 1-24. Accessed 26 December 2024. <https://researchprofiles.canberra.edu.au/en/publications/a-womans-place-is-in-the-housemuseum>. The role and representation of women in house museums deserves more than a footnote. The ‘new social history’ is now 30 years old and could form its own retrospective thesis. I address this role more in Chapter Four: *Meroogal*.

At the same time and in the same historic house, interiors were presented in parallel as: a history museum, a decorative arts museum, and a domestic setting. Photographs from the 1930s show the Drawing Room as a vitrine for valuable objects, with ceramics displayed as *objets d'art* in free-standing cases with Wentworth provenanced paintings on the walls. The Family Dining Room appeared conversely 'still in the house museum setting of the Wentworth's everyday dining furniture.'<sup>153</sup> The impact of the patriotic walk diminished and the awe of viewing antique furniture and furnishings began.

In 1985, Curator Ann Toy commented on the 1930s Drawing Room photographs that 'No consideration has been given to the original function of this room or to its important decorative features...the room...provides an exhibition space and... fulfils the public's...image of museums as dusty places full of overcrowded showcases.'<sup>154</sup> Indeed, this is true—but the Trustees' aim was to use the interiors in a way that was familiar. They looked for guidance to other government-owned galleries and museums in Sydney including the National Art Gallery (now the Art Gallery of New South Wales) and the Australian Museum. Here, precious objects were displayed in glass cases and behind barriers in plainly painted rooms. The notion of the house museum with historically charged interiors, and with its primary significance as the home and therefore furnished as such, appears much later in this narrative.

The interiors at *Vaucluse House* were an early example of 'furnishing without research,' government and community preservation with best intentions but without sufficient resources for curatorial oversight. A 1932 inventory lists donations of original Wentworth furniture and

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<sup>153</sup>Susan McClean, "Negotiating the Nation: Knowledge and Meaning at Vaucluse House in its First Curatorial Period" *Public History Review*, 16 (January 2009), 34.

<sup>154</sup> Ann Toy, "Collecting Policies-the Vaucluse House Experience" *Supplement to the Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales Newsletter* 4 (July 1985), 33.

memorabilia from family descendants and the public. These items remain in the collection and on display, including a mangle, ironing table, two kitchen dressers and a flour table. The survival of these objects, used in repetitive and reductive domestic tasks, is unusual. As provenanced objects in their original context, they strengthen the interiors as original domestic spaces. It is clear from this inventory, and from the 1933 photographs, that other material acquired (and of little relevance to the house or the Wentworths), diluted this narrative.

Photographs that include domestic interiors as a backdrop, show historical inaccuracies in the representation of any period. As Toy, Curator of Vacluse House from 1981-88 notes in 1985, ‘the authentic domestic atmosphere of a nineteenth century interior was dispelled by the jarring and incorrect elements... furniture...its irrational arrangement in the rooms.’<sup>155</sup> An elaborately hung four-poster double bed abuts a wall so that it is accessible from one side only to enable a single occupancy—yet sleeping spaces for the ten Wentworth children would have been at a premium. Furniture is displayed and labelled as individual objects rather than as part of a room setting. Interiors were valued as provenanced associative spaces —not as accurately reconstructed interiors.

Others, including Curator Maisy Stapleton, wrote critically about these now obvious shortcomings,<sup>156</sup> and indeed attitudes towards interpretation have changed considerably since the 1930s. However, it is important to remember that these spaces were put together without professional Curators. There was no notion that the way people lived in the past could be similar to life in the present, that the functional presentation and use of these spaces could

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<sup>155</sup> Ann Toy, “Collecting Policies-the Vacluse House Experience” *Supplement to the Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales Newsletter*, 4 (July 1985), 34.

<sup>156</sup> Maisy Stapleton, “Open House: The Development of the Historic House Museum” *Australian Antique Collector*, 22 (July-December 1982), 73.

have value in and of itself as domestic interiors; that one could be confident that domestic interiors could reflect their use without being labeled as giant display cases. There is no need for, or indeed benefit to, ‘museumise’ these interiors to show their associative historical significance.

Until recently, this use of domestic interiors as associative spaces and as classrooms for displaying a generic rendition of rooms (bedrooms are a particular favourite), occurred in house museums run by historical societies. There was often no acknowledged association between the significance of the interiors and the provenance of the objects.<sup>157</sup> Having undergone its own transformation, *Vaocluse House* provides a useful template for how this move to a closer connection between interiors and their furnishings can enrich the authenticity of an historic house interior.

### **Vaocluse House evolves: National Parks and Wildlife Service (1967-79) and Vaocluse House Historic Site Trust (1967-1980)**

*Vaocluse House* interiors continued to be, essentially, a museum display in a (historic house) museum that showed key, tangible, objects that supported the intangible concept of William Charles Wentworth as Hero.<sup>158</sup> Promotional photographs of the more ‘socially important’ rooms (including the Ball (Drawing) Room, the Family Dining Room, and the Main (Principal) Bedroom) supported this concept.

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<sup>157</sup> Linda Young, “A House in History, Heritage and Tourism: Shifting Times at Blundell’s Cottage, Canberra,” *Public History Review*, 12 (2006). <https://doi.org/10.5130/phrj.v12i0.195>.

<sup>158</sup> A subtle shift in the narrative recognised other achievements of William Charles Wentworth, such as his crossing of the Blue Mountains. These were presented in a didactic display in the Stables, and matched the school curriculum.

A 1973 report by antiquarian, Kevin Fahy, and Friends of Vacluse House member, Caroline Simpson, detailed inaccuracies in the appearance of the interiors and gave suggestions for their rectification. These suggestions included returning the ‘Servants’ Hall’ [used as a ‘Period Costume Room’]<sup>159</sup> to its original use as a Butler’s Pantry.<sup>160</sup> It also championed the use of Wentworth-provenanced objects, and giving certain items prominence, such as ‘The Portrait of Queen Victoria [in the Family Dining Room] by Maurice Felton is a most important painting.’ The fame of the artist outweighed the association of the painting and its context. A professional Curator would note that there is no evidence that this portrait was in this room, which was traditionally the setting for family portraits and bucolic landscapes. William Charles’s Study continued its alleged association with the drawing-up of the Constitution— ‘It is a pity that the table is bare when so much of importance to N.S.W. happened on it.’<sup>161</sup> The authors laudably move towards showing the Wentworth family and their servants in the interiors yet continue a narrative of a fine art and political history museum.

The first move towards recognising the importance of these interiors as silent witness to a domestic household of the mid-nineteenth century is a 1975 report by heritage architect, Clive Lucas, on the physical condition of the buildings. Lucas was appointed as consultant architect to the Nielsen-Vacluse Park Trust in 1975, the start of a long professional association with *Vacluse House*.<sup>162</sup> His analytical approach included a detailed survey of the

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<sup>159</sup> Kevin Fahy and Caroline Simpson, *Some Observations on the Interior of Vacluse House* (1973), 3. Unpublished manuscript. Vacluse House files, Museum of History NSW.

<sup>160</sup> Using evidence from a physical investigation of the interior and archival sources, this room, used as the Curator’s Office by the Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales, returned in 2008-2012 into its original function and form as a Butler’s Pantry. This interior is still presented as a Butler’s Pantry with relevant objects added from time to time to add to the interpretation.

<sup>161</sup> Kevin Fahy and Caroline Simpson, *Some Observations on the Interior of Vacluse House* (1973), 4. This report highlighted other inaccuracies such as hanging a portrait of John Macarthur, a political opponent of Wentworth, in the Main Hall, and the use of modern silver and glass vases.

<sup>162</sup> For the scale of work on *Vacluse House* by Clive Lucas and his office, see ‘In the Architect’s Words’ listing. ‘Every space in the 40 roomed house, the 7-stall stable, coach house, outhouses et al has been gone over,

building fabric and finishes, and consultation of primary sources (including illustrations in the Mitchell Library, photographs at *Vaucluse House*, and the 1910 Government Architect drawing) as ‘the most accurate and valuable.’<sup>163</sup> Lucas also used Inventories from Auction Sales of similar houses affected by the 1840s Depression (such as Elizabeth Bay House in 1845) for comparative examples and illustrations.<sup>164</sup> Lucas’s report recommended that ‘interior decoration... must be carried out accurately and... that as a house museum Vaucluse has an educational value in displaying 19<sup>th</sup> century decorative tastes, in this case pertaining to a particular family.’<sup>165</sup>

In 1978, Lucas reported on the proposed refurnishing of the principal rooms on the Ground Floor and in the Kitchen area. Inappropriate objects were withdrawn from display and placed in storage. Lucas’s extensive knowledge of traditional buildings enabled him to make informed decisions on soft furnishings and furniture in association with Curator, James Broadbent, with whom he had worked on the restoration of Elizabeth Bay House. When the Trust was created, it accepted Lucas and Broadbent’s standing documents.<sup>166</sup>

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conserved, restored and reconstructed...this work has brought back many notable interiors, as well as ‘below stairs’ rooms...everything has been based on exhaustive documentary research.’ Lucas’ choice of conservation terms shows the extensive amount of work on the interiors and the importance of their return to original appearance. Unpaged. His brief extended from architect advising on building conservation to making decisions on the interpretation of the interiors.

<sup>163</sup> Fisher Lucas Architects, *Interim Architectural Report on the interior of Vaucluse House, Report 1*, Fisher Lucas Architects for the Trustees of Vaucluse House Historic Site (Sydney February 1975). Unpaged.

<sup>164</sup> Reference works such as *A Pictorial Dictionary of British Nineteenth Century Furniture Design* ed. Edward Joy, (England: Antique Collectors Club,1977), were also consulted.

<sup>165</sup> Fisher Lucas Architects, *Interim Architectural Report on the interior of Vaucluse House, Report 1*, Fisher Lucas Architects for the Trustees of Vaucluse House Historic Site (Sydney February 1975). Unpaged.

<sup>166</sup> Fisher Lucas Architects, *Interim Architectural Report on the Interior of Vaucluse House. Report 1*, Fisher Lucas Architects for the Trustees of Vaucluse House Historic Site (Sydney February 1975). Unpaged.

## Vaucluse House as historic house museum: Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales (1980 to 2000) and the role and influence of the Curator

As Australian historians Graeme Davison and Chris McConville noted in 1991:

What really makes the house of a great man or woman historically important is what makes *any* building historically important...that it throws light on a significant aspect of the lives of the people in the past... as a *document*, as a piece of vital evidence about the...society that created it.<sup>167</sup>

That the main buildings of Vaucluse House survive is due largely to the ongoing commitment of volunteer committees and honorary historians. That the interiors have been restored to the form and function thought to have been experienced by William Charles, Sarah, their children and employees in the nineteenth century, is due to the direction and resources of the Trust, and their decision to use a conservation architect, an historical researcher and a professional Curator as the interpreter of the property.

Creating their own narrative is the aim of most self-made men. As can be seen from the size, scale, positioning and detail of the house and its interiors, Wentworth was no exception. It would be wonderful to be able to write about, engage with, and learn from, the interiors and layout of the original cottage that was the home of Sir Henry Browne Hayes, an Irish nobleman convicted for highway robbery. There is, to my knowledge, no documentation of these interiors and access is spatially and visually limited.<sup>168</sup> Whilst accounts survive of Browne Hayes's expenditure on building the house, including payment for lime, shingles,

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<sup>167</sup> Graeme Davison and Chris McConville, (eds.) *A Heritage Handbook* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1991),71.

<sup>168</sup> Visual access to one of the walls of Browne Hayes' cottage is via a false door in the Drawing Room.

cedar and Norfolk pine boards, nails and iron work, carpenters and glaziers' work,<sup>169</sup> there is no mention of its furnishings. This may be due to his letting of the house, his circumstances in the colony, or perhaps because he had little interest in the interiors—we are unlikely to ever know for certain.

The association of *Vaucluse House* with William Charles Wentworth has been the constant and primary narrative of the property since its acquisition by Wentworth in 1827. The ways in which this narrative has been constructed, reviewed and partially reconstructed, are evident in approaches to the preservation of the interiors. The house has been presented as a memorial museum and associative shrine to 'the great man as hero,' a partial decorative arts museum and then as a house museum that physically purveys social history. When reference is made to Sarah Wentworth, it is not in the context of her own history as a seamstress (for example), but as the wife of William Charles and mother of his children (whose names and lives are known to few). From family correspondence, this title seems to accurately describe Sarah's comprehensive role in managing the estate. By implication, the house interiors show as much about Sarah as they do about her husband—and with the more recent detailed restoration of the Service Wing interiors—even more.

It was not until late in the twentieth century that the building, through extensive research based on a curatorial approach to presenting the interiors, was able to be read as an informative and reliable document in and of itself. The transfer of *Vaucluse House* to the Trust meant that the property as a whole was, for the first time, the responsibility of a public authority which was set up 'to control, manage, maintain and conserve historic buildings or

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<sup>169</sup> Samuel Breakwell papers concerning Vaucluse estate 1803-1838, 1898, 1918. MLMSS 1720. Accessed 23 December 2024. <https://cdn-collection.sl.nsw.gov.au/record/Ydmdjl49>.

places, having regard to the historic, social, and architectural interest and significance of those buildings and places.’<sup>170</sup> With the appointment of a Director, Peter Watts, from the National Trust of Australia (Victoria) and a realistic budget, there was sufficient government acknowledgement enshrined in legislation, combined with the intellectual resources, to methodically approach the preservation of the property as an historic house museum.

There was an overdue opportunity for a professional Curator to review the narrative of *Vaucluse House*. As senior staff member on site, the Curator was to lead, facilitate and co-ordinate the conservation and interpretation of the property. Initially, in the Trust, Curators worked as generalists with specialist knowledge in related subject matter, but they were given overall responsibility for every aspect of the property. Often, they undertook much of the ‘non-curatorial’ work (such as developing and implementing interpretive public programs). Over time, the incremental expansion of the Trust portfolio of buildings brought an increased number of staff attached to service units, where input from the Curator (based on the significance of the property in their care) would ideally, but realistically not always, form the core of the service unit’s output.

According to Davison ‘Historical documents are products, not only of their originators, but of successive processors of editing, revision, translation and interpretation.’<sup>171</sup> With the properties for which they were responsible, particularly with the interiors as three-dimensional historic documents, each successive Trust Curator has focused on an area of specific professional interest and expertise. This includes interiors, colonial architecture, decorative and fine arts, design and technology, social history, servants and masters, gardens

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<sup>170</sup> Historic Houses Act 1980. Accessed 23 December 2024. <https://first.mhns.wa.gov.au/#record/3028>.

<sup>171</sup> Graeme Davison and Chris McConville (ed.), *A Heritage Handbook*, 74.

and grounds, the running of an estate, outbuildings, and archaeology, to do just this—edit, revise, translate, interpret and most of all: research. In effect, actively review the narrative, working with an annual budget to address the Statement of Significance within the Conservation Plan for the property.

The first professionally trained Curator was employed by the Trust in 1981. With a background in fine and decorative arts, Ann Toy joined a team that included architectural historian, Broadbent (with a doctoral thesis on colonial architecture), Lucas, and historical researcher, Joy Hughes, with the occasional involvement of Watts, especially in the reconstruction of the garden and grounds.

Previous Trusts had involved community-minded, committed and well-connected members. The Trust in its formative stages was overseen by Trustees who themselves brought a professional background and knowledge in many of the areas relevant to their honorary roles. Trustees during this early period included: a conservation architect, a senior public servant from the Education Board, an Antiques dealer, the Government Architect, a Director of the Heritage Council, a Member of the Legislative Council and the Director of the Macleay Museum.<sup>172</sup> There was a clear agenda for the conservation and interpretation of the estate (these types of professional terms started to be used), and there were sufficient resources to enable this development.

Broadbent and Lucas had worked together on the reconstruction of another Trust property, Elizabeth Bay House, home of Colonial Secretary Alexander Macleay and his family from 1839 to 1845. It is worth briefly reflecting on the curatorial role and influence of this house in

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<sup>172</sup> *Annual report 1982* Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales (Glebe: The Trust), 1982.

the context of *Vaucluse House*. Macleay was a contemporary of William Charles Wentworth, a public figure and his political adversary. He created similarly scaled house interiors. Prior to being transferred to the Trust in 1981, the *Elizabeth Bay House* interiors had changed radically from their nineteenth century Macleay family appearance. In the twentieth century, the building was refurbished into flats,<sup>173</sup> then meeting rooms, and lastly a grand residence. In an approach similar to that of the volunteer *Vaucluse House* Trustees, the community-based Elizabeth Bay House Trust (1977-1980) assembled ‘a collection of furniture and furnishings...which was regarded to be in keeping with the quality of the house.’<sup>174</sup> This was an aspirational but inaccurate representation of Alexander Macleay’s family furnishings.

In 1990, the Trust reviewed and updated the collection to more accurately represent the Macleay family’s straightened circumstances. This curatorial review advocated a dramatic and controversial change in the appearance of the interiors to achieve this historical accuracy, with the removal of commissioned, expensive, and aesthetically pleasing, soft furnishings that were in the current style of grand houses’ interior decoration. Curator, Susan Hunt, wrote of the crucial role of rigorously researched documentation in curatorial decision-making.<sup>175</sup>

Other than a set of specimen drawers once owned by Macleay and housed in bookcases owned by his son, William Sharp Macleay, and a scientific desk originally lent by the Macleay Museum, which is now incorporated into the Chau Chak Wing Museum,<sup>176</sup>

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<sup>173</sup> The use and appearance of these interiors has been the subject of several interpretational installations at Elizabeth Bay House, such as *Spare Room Elizabeth Bay House* 2007, *Changing Spaces* 2006, and *Ten(d)ancy: Artistic Interventions for Elizabeth Bay House* 2006. These research-based creative installations were the product of partnerships between curators, historians and practicing artists.

<sup>174</sup> Scott Carlin, *Elizabeth Bay House Conservation Plan* Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales November 1997 p53. This detailed property history includes the role of historical sources as a guide to interior decoration.

<sup>175</sup> Susan Hunt, *Eleven Years On, The Refurbishment of Elizabeth Bay House* (Sydney: Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales, 1990).

<sup>176</sup> Chau Chak Wing Museum incorporates the collections of three University of Sydney museums, including those of the Macleay Museum.

Elizabeth Bay House had little provenanced collection. The Trust presented principal rooms and two of the bedrooms, as they might have appeared from 1839-1845. With the demolition of the kitchen wing, the few service areas remaining in the house were used for ancillary functions, administration, and a Curator's flat.

Little documentation was available<sup>177</sup> on either the Macleay house or the private life of the family. Later changes to the building fabric had removed the original detail. Yet the Trust continued its vision of returning interiors to their Macleay function. In the 1980s, the Curator's office was reinstated to its use as the Maid's Room (using documentation from 1840s auction notices and paint scrapes), the Curator's flat became used for Administration, and in the 1990s, the female toilets were reinstated to the Butler's Pantry. In the 2000s the Dressing Room adjacent to the Principal Bedroom was reinstated.

Elizabeth Bay House was an early reconstruction and a pertinent example of the role of professional Curators, and the challenges they face to preserve the interior as a site of historic encounter, as accurately and objectively as possible. Learning from this experience, and with the advantage of a substantial provenanced collection and the active participation of Wentworth family descendants, Curators at *Vaucluse House* prioritised presenting the interiors as accurately detailed as possible to when it was the Wentworth family home.

Trust Curators were influenced by the appearance of interiors in their own, and in other, historic house museums. Collegial sharing of material between National Trust and Curators from other state government and Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales Curators was

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<sup>177</sup> A useful source was auction catalogue James R. Lawson, Lawson, Caro & Co. Ltd. *Estate of Lady S. E. Macleay (deceased) Late of Elizabeth Bay House...Inventory and Valuation of the Household Furniture and Effects Sydney 10 August, 1903*. Mitchell Library, SLNSW, MSS 1440/35 Mackinson & D'Apice Clients Papers.

common at this time. *Lanyon*, a semi-rural holding of a wealthy pastoral family located south of Canberra, overlaps *Vaucluse House* in construction dates, outbuildings, and the period of family ownership. This property is the responsibility of ACT Historic Places, another state government<sup>178</sup> department set up to provide access to the historic places in its care.

In 1982, following the adoption of the Conservation Plan, where the cultural significance of *Lanyon* lay in the survival of a group of buildings relating to one another and in the gardens, it was decided to restore and present the property as a nineteenth century sheep station. Most of *Lanyon*'s contents had been sold, and with little information about the original interiors, Curators researched and determined their appearance as they might have been in the mid to late nineteenth century. Modern carpets were removed, original Entrance Hall floorboards polished, and walls papered with reproduction paper. The interiors reflect stages of occupancy within the main homestead—and by association as examples of interiors in similar homesteads in the area—and so an Edwardian kitchen refitted in the 1960s and remodeled bathrooms of the mid twentieth century were retained.

The appearance of these interiors reflects the collegial sharing of expertise over many years between early *Lanyon* Curator, Elaine Lawson, and Trust Curator, James Broadbent. This curatorial sharing is obvious in the interpretation of mid-nineteenth century interiors using documentary evidence such as household treatises and manuals; in the use of documented soft furnishings and generic period material to enhance room settings as livable domestic spaces; in the approach to conservation housekeeping, and more recently, in public programs. *Lanyon* is a rural property of significance with interiors recreated using documentation in the

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<sup>178</sup> Although the Australian Capital Territory is technically a territory, its responsibilities in scale and scope are like those of a state government.

method of *Vaucluse House*, but *Vaucluse House* interiors include many Wentworth provenanced objects within their original context and interpretation as an historic house museum.

At an influential historic interiors symposium in 1983, where key architectural, historical and curatorial practitioners contributed, Broadbent advocated a change in approach to the presentation of historic interiors.<sup>179</sup> Alerted to the romanticism of recreation based on highly subjective concepts of ‘good taste’ and ‘style’, he demanded style be ignored as the basis for historical reconstruction as it ‘has little to do with colonial interiors and even less to do with their conservation and restoration.’<sup>180</sup>

Broadbent, in his decades as supervisor of curatorial work with the Trust, and as consultant for similar conservation organisations such as the National Trust of Australia (NSW), consistently argued for an objective curatorial approach to the restored interior as ‘an exercise in historical research, analysis, and judgement. It is the aesthetics and the lifestyles of the...occupants of our restored rooms which must be our criteria.’<sup>181</sup> These include the building fabric and the impact of the occupants on the appearance of these interiors. He adds that

Historic interiors should be restored with consistency and quality... We should be able to say...that this is a consistent restoration, of high quality, of an historically important...interior. The breakfast room of Vaucluse House must always have been a dank, second-rate hole; why should we pretend otherwise? And why should we

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<sup>179</sup> Maisy Stapleton, (ed.) *Proceedings of the Restoration and Conservation of Historic Interiors Symposium* (Glebe: Sydney College of the Arts Press, 1983).

<sup>180</sup> Stapleton (ed.), 1983, 19.

<sup>181</sup> Stapleton (ed.), 1983, 21.

restore it otherwise if we have any notions of historical integrity or the ethics of our craft?... when you see it, I hope you will appreciate it for what it is: the subtle restoration of a dank, second-rate hole.<sup>182</sup>

There are practical implications in its adoption, which in this example aims to share the Wentworths' experience of the Breakfast Room. It can be challenging for the Curator to engage the visitor, and for the visitor to then engage, with the interior whose appearance seems disappointing—under lit and humid (when compared with optimal museum viewing conditions—and this refers to another of Broadbent's strong opinions that these are houses not museums—discussed later). According to the Act, the house museum is being managed and conserved to 'increase public knowledge and enjoyment of, and access to, those buildings, places, objects.'<sup>183</sup>

Toy also wrote as the property's first full-time Curator, of the importance of objectivity in interpretation.<sup>184</sup> Under her curatorial direction, objects were taken out of their display cases, catalogued and relocated according to documentary sources, as elements of a domestic interior reflecting the Wentworths' taste and circumstances. It was this taste that required representation, and not the taste of the Curator or the board of governance. Financially valuable objects were now displayed with those of lesser or no economic value, including reproductions or props, according to their function. Context and connection not (financial) currency was seen as the accurate representation of an historic interior.

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<sup>182</sup> Stapleton (ed.), 1983, 18.

<sup>183</sup> Historic Houses Act, July 1980.

<sup>184</sup> Ann Toy, "At Last-A New Philosophy for Historic Homes," *Vive la Vie* (1985), 97.

This approach was supported by Watts, who commented that the *Vaucluse House* interior was being recreated

giving the house a degree of authenticity which the public...seem to respond to... wallpapers, paint colours, carpets, furniture, china, paintings and so on are all of a period. The quantity of furniture and objects which is growing in some rooms may be offensive to modern taste-*but better to shock and educate than soothe and misinform.*<sup>185</sup>

The interiors continued the role prescribed to them by earlier Trustees as educational spaces, but with a shift in focus to one of evidence-based access to the choices made by the occupants. Simply put, the more accurate the appearance, the greater its worth as a site of historic encounter. Visitors displayed a level of sophisticated understanding in response to this change, which would make the Trust's later approach to the treatment of the interiors at *Meroogal*, a logical progression.

Curators were involved with determining the 1986 Vaucluse House Conservation Policy, which with little alteration, remains the policy for preserving the property today. It states that 'in general the interior and exterior of the house should be conserved to reflect the occupation of the Wentworth family in the nineteenth century...the domestic character of the complex should be emphasised using every available piece of authenticated information from the period.'<sup>186</sup>

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<sup>185</sup> Peter Watts, "Vaucluse House-a reassessment" *Heritage Australia* (Summer 1982), 48. *The italics are mine.*

<sup>186</sup> Peter Watts, *Vaucluse House Conservation Plan including stables and outbuildings*, Appendix A (Sydney: Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales 1986). Unpagged.

The Statement of Significance in the Conservation Policy, (based on documentary evidence, physical investigation and usually compiled by the Curator after consultation with other specialists), formed the basis for decisions on the interpretation of *Vaucluse House*. It focuses on the significance of the interiors as charged domestic spaces. The *Vaucluse House Acquisitions Policy* supported this approach ‘to recreate an authentic domestic interior, not only in the choice, but also in the display of the collection [and] to reflect the history of the occupation of this house by William Charles Wentworth and his family and to acquire objects associated with their history.’<sup>187</sup>

Toy contacted Wentworth descendants to access provenanced objects still within their family collections for documentation and for loan. Over time, many of these objects were returned, either through purchase or donation, to their original context, including some objects previously identified and offered to the earlier Trustees who, for financial reasons, were unable to purchase them. This added provenanced detail to the Wentworth family narrative, and veracity to the presentation of the interiors.

Toy reports that ‘reference was made also to other contemporary documents on interior decoration in both English and Australian sources, in particular the household inventories of contemporary colonial houses.’<sup>188</sup> Although more objects had been retained than necessary, given the somewhat confusing approaches thus far to the appearance of the interiors, undoubtedly one of the benefits of the property being in public ownership for so long, was that little had been thrown away. As there were so few physical changes to the fabric of the

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<sup>187</sup> Ann Toy, “Collecting Policies — the Vaucluse House Experience” *Supplement to the Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales Newsletter*, no. 4 (July 1985).

<sup>188</sup> Ann Toy, ‘Collecting Policies — the Vaucluse House Experience’ in *Supplement to the Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales Newsletter*, no. 4 (July 1985).

building and its interiors (and none that were irreversible), it has been easier for Curators to return these spaces to their mid nineteenth century appearance.

Whilst the Trust gently but firmly introduced visitors to a research-based review of the narrative, fellow Curators, such as Maisy Stapleton, complimented the Trust on the results of these Curatorial-led changes from museum room ‘to re-create its domestic atmosphere and to restore...its integrity as a house museum.’<sup>189</sup>

In the Trust’s narrative, it is the nature, role and circumstances of the family who lived within the walls of the property that is significant— as part of the ‘new [inclusive] social history’ movement of the 1970s and 1980s. It was essential to know as much as possible about the Wentworth family and their domestic setting to understand and review the earlier narrative. It was also a path into the increasingly accurate reconstructed appearance of family interiors of a particular period and social background, or in this case, several periods over almost a century.

The interiors now refreshingly become important for the house and the family who lived there. William Charles Wentworth’s achievements are subtly alluded to in the scale, nature, and position of the house, rather than highlighted as the reason for the appearance of the interiors. *Vaucluse House* can be experienced without realising the overt achievements (other than the fluctuations of wealth and social aspirations) of its male owner (this narrative is told elsewhere in publications, exhibitions and on guided tours). These sentiments acknowledge

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<sup>189</sup> Maisy Stapleton, “Open House/The Development of the Historic House Museum” *Australian Antique Collector*, no 22 (July-December 1982), 73.

the concept of *Vaucluse House* as the house of a great man, a national treasure, a political icon, but embrace the interiors principally and primarily as a family home.

These following selected examples, show how some of the curatorial challenges of reconstructing the interiors to their domestic Wentworth appearance have been met.



Figure 7. Rebecca Martens, *Hall, Vaucluse Dec. 7 1869*, pencil sketch, from *Album: sketches around Sydney and in the Blue Mountains, 1853-77* /Rebecca Martens, State Library of New South Wales. DL PX 37. Accessed 28 December 2024. <https://collection.sl.nsw.gov.au/record/1xqZDZkY/L3OMm0ApM0OGb>.

Figure 8. *Entrance hall, Vaucluse House*. Photograph taken by Katherine Lu, 2024, Museums of History NSW. Accessed 24 December 2024. <https://mhns.wa.gov.au/venue-hire/vaucluse-house/>.

The first curatorial challenge was a paucity of images of the interiors. It has been established that the accurate recreation of any historic house museum interior requires meticulous research based on the detailed study of both physical and documentary sources. Nineteenth century water colours by prominent colonial artists including Conrad Martens and George

Peacock, and later photographs, help in understanding the appearance and construction sequence of the estate buildings. However, there is only one known illustration of the interior: a pencil sketch of the Entrance Hall by Rebecca Martens. This sketch shows not only the generic furniture (straight-backed timber chairs, a hat and umbrella stand, barometer), but also the specific pattern in the figured runner, the plaster and marble busts of Thomasine and Sarah Wentworth, the torchère and calling-card table. Trust Curators acquired and placed these elements to recreate the appearance of the interior based on the documented decisions of the occupants.

The second curatorial challenge was recreating a domestic interior where there was known provenanced material. In the Drawing Room, Curators dismantled the decorative arts collection of valuable Wentworth objects that were secured in museum display cases. Using the 1853 Sale Inventory,<sup>190</sup> the 1853 Auction notice for the ‘brilliant-toned rosewood grand piano by Collard and Collard,’<sup>191</sup> physical investigation and other documentary sources (including contemporary illustrations of similar rooms), this interior was gradually returned to its appearance as at mid nineteenth century. Curators positioned provenanced paintings on the walls between the original passionflower wallpaper border. Reproduction soft furnishings enhanced the opulently furnished interior, with its original polished steel grate and elaborate plasterwork cornice. Commissioned and documented fabrics and furnishings make this an extremely detailed reconstruction, and one little altered during Trust ownership.

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<sup>190</sup>Elizabeth Miller and Hilary Young (eds.) *The Arts of Living: Europe 1600-1815* (London: V & A Publishing, 2016), 109. This inventory was as relevant for reconstructing Australian historic interiors as it was for European interiors. Inventories ‘Not only tell us what objects people had in their homes, but can also give us some idea of which rooms they were kept in, and which objects were found together... [They] vary enormously, according to the social standing of the owner, the purpose for which the inventory was made, and the care taken in writing it. Objects below a certain value would have been omitted altogether.’

<sup>191</sup> Excerpt from the ‘Sydney Morning Herald’ 19 March 1853 ‘NOTICE-Catalogues of the Sale of Household Furniture and Effects, at the seat of W. C. Wentworth Esq., M.L.C. on Tuesday next, are now ready, and may be had on application to EDWARD SALAMON, Auctioneer.’



Figure 9. 'Objects of Art' Vaocluse House Drawing Room. Photograph taken by Thomas Lawlor, 1933, Museums of History NSW. Accessed 3 December 2024. [https://first.mhnsw.au/images\\_linked/26768\\_06.jpg](https://first.mhnsw.au/images_linked/26768_06.jpg).



Figure 10. Vaocluse House Drawing Room This image shows the introduction of soft furnishings and use of the Wentworth inventory and provenanced collection. Photograph taken for the 1982 Vaocluse House Guidebook, Museums of History NSW.

The third curatorial challenge was recreating the appearance of an interior about which there was no Wentworth evidence, but which had a strong associative narrative. The role of the Curator in determining the appearances at *Vaocluse House* is clearly visible in every interior, but particularly in the room adjacent to the Breakfast Room. Identified by the first Trustees as

the room in which the Constitution was drafted, it was incrementally altered in appearance — due to its charged association within living memory and review of narrative from ‘great man’ to ‘family house’ — by successive Curators. By dispersing associative furniture into more neutral spaces, redecorating to a more neutral scheme, and by focusing on Wentworth provenanced objects, this intervention changed the room from displaying a charged, unprovenanced narrative to displaying an accurately provenanced narrative based on archival research. As the decades progressed, the room changed in appearance but retained its function as an important introduction to *Vaucluse House* and its occupants, including its history as a house museum. It was this function that allowed the interiors about which more was known to be more accurately presented, and which allowed the display of objects normally kept off display.



Figure 11. *Vaucluse House Study and Library* showing the ‘Constitution Desk’. Photograph taken for the 1982 *Vaucluse House Guidebook*, Museums of History NSW.

The fourth curatorial challenge was reconstructing the appearance of a set of service wing interiors and representing the lives of their occupants, where little original material other than

the physical building and its witness marks survive. The Housekeeper's Room, for example, was used in the 1970s to display china and glass that was of a quality, range and scale which, according to nineteenth century manuals of domestic economy, would not have been stored there. At Trust direction, cases were removed, objects relocated, stone floor reinstated and images of similar Housekeeper's Rooms (usually English), used to recreate this sitting room to its likely Wentworth appearance. Restoration of the appearance of the walls was based on paint scrapes to complete this warm, lively sitting and work room of the head of the female domestic servants. This investigative approach continued into other interiors in the 1990s, with a review of the original colour schemes and subsequent repainting of the Kitchen and Servants' Hall walls.



Figure 12 *Housekeeper's Room in 2022*. Accessed 29 September 2025. <https://www.destinationsjourney.com/vaucluse-house-sydney-historic-home/>.

The 1853 lease documents have been used extensively for informing restoration, including early acquisition of a Russell's patent stove. A reconstruction of the Scullery plate rack, based on the 1853 Memorandum of Fixtures and the extant contemporaneous provenanced

*Rouse Hill Estate* plate rack, was undertaken as well as detailed and painstaking conservation of the Wentworth provenanced dressers (including stripping of japanning and glass) and meat safe in the Kitchen.

In order to narrate the Wentworths' daily life, researching of the domestic economy (largely based on English models), reading nineteenth century recipe books in the Mitchell Library from which Victorian inspired meals were fashioned using the range, acquiring props for visitor engagement, and a realisation of the opportunities presented by surviving outbuildings were undertaken. This type of research continued as the basis for Curatorial decision-making on the appearance of the interiors— and increased and informed visitor access to these spaces.

As with all Curatorial decisions involving changes to the appearance of an object (including a building), visual documentation is required for reference. At this time, and consistent with the *Vaucluse House Conservation Policy*, the Little Drawing Room was reinstated to its earlier painted plaster appearance, with the interior layout based on a contemporary Tasmanian source<sup>192</sup> of similar dimensions and use. Although conservation practice and interpretation methods had changed, and the number of options expanded, since the Trust took responsibility for the site in 1980, reconstruction continued as the preferred method of preserving the Wentworth interiors.

The fifth curatorial challenge was populating the interiors with traces of the people who were crucial to their appearance, those who lived and worked in the house, but were underrepresented in the archives. In Australia, with the employment of professional Curators in the 1980s, and the acceptance of the 'new social history' movement

internationally, women, children and servants, have been more mindful that less evidence generally exists of these ‘invisible occupants’ than of their male counterparts within the interpretational context of the interiors of house museums. Curatorial exhibitions such as *Women’s Work*,<sup>193</sup> were a way of presenting the women, and by association the servants, the ‘invisible occupants’ of the (not so) ‘new social history.’

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<sup>192</sup> Anna Maria Nixon, *The drawing room at Bishopstowe-a rare view of the colonial interior*, pencil on paper (Hobart: Tasmanian Museum & Art Gallery, 1845). Accessed 19 December 2024. <https://shapingtasmania.tmag.tas.gov.au/m/object.aspx?id=15>.

<sup>193</sup> Suzanne Bravery, *Women’s Work* a display of provenanced work boxes in the Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales collection (Sydney: Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales, 1991).

Sarah Wentworth's provenanced chatelaine<sup>194</sup> was displayed in the same location as her husband's unprovenanced 'Constitution Desk.' Each was a symbol of office and status. This 'new social history' accorded with the nationalism of the Bicentenary where everyone, including women, servants and children and previously ostracized convicts, was included in the narrative. This was a good fit with the curatorial review of *Vaucluse House*. Provenanced Wentworth collection showed the more formal side of the family. The daily lives and domesticity, particularly of the women and servants, required generic furnishings and props to support the notion of the family and to strengthen the historical basis of the interiors.



Figure 13. *The Kitchen* Vaucluse House Kitchen showing Wentworth provenanced dresser modified to incorporate glass doors. Photograph taken by Thomas Joseph Lawlor 1933, Museums of History NSW. Accessed 2 December 2024. [https://first.mhnsw.au/images\\_linked/26768\\_18.jpg](https://first.mhnsw.au/images_linked/26768_18.jpg).

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<sup>194</sup> A chatelaine is a portable workbox where needlework tools hang on small chains suspended from an ornamental metal buckle, in the way a housekeeper carried keys on her waistband.



Figure 14. *Vacluse House Kitchen* with Curator Ann Toy and Director Peter Watts, c.1982, Museums of History NSW. Such was the importance of the restoration of this domestic interior that both the Curator and the Director were photographed here rather than in the more opulent or grander interiors of *Vacluse House*. This image commemorated the anniversary of The Trust and the work of the appointment of the first professional Curator at the property.



Figure 15. *Vacluse House* Wentworth provenanced meat safe conserved c.1998 and photographed in 2012 and little changed in 2021. Later paint finishes reflected in paint scrapes. Photograph taken by Suzanne Bravery, 2012, private collection.

Trust contributions to the Bicentenary included commissioned publications on women in their houses, including one on Sarah Wentworth<sup>195</sup> which acknowledged that the appearance and workings of the interiors of *Vaucluse House* were most likely the result of her competent management.

Continued implementation of the Vaucluse House Conservation Plan developed the broader house context. In 1993, *Vaucluse House* was relaunched as the Vaucluse estate where extensive work on the recreation of the estate changed the visitor entry point. A longer walk to the house encouraged visitors to move from one century to another and placed greater weight on the expectation of an historically accurate reconstruction of ALL the interiors. Reversing earlier entry via the Entrance Hall, visitors now tread in the footsteps of the servants, to experience the accessible and engaging interiors of the Kitchen Wing. This idea was similar to the 1930s Trustees didactic route, only this time with reconstructed evidence-based domestic interiors. This approach reinforced the notion of the house in a working estate in which every occupant was important. Rope barriers were removed, ingredients for meal preparation covered the tables, the pantry was packed with props.

The 1986 Conservation Policy continued to guide the Trust in this work until 1994 when it was incorporated into a more detailed Conservation Plan, which recommended that the Cultural Significance of *Vaucluse House* was primarily as the home of William Charles and Sarah Wentworth and their family from 1827—1853.<sup>196</sup>

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<sup>195</sup> Carol Liston, *Sarah Wentworth-Mistress of Vaucluse* (Sydney: Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales, 1988).

<sup>196</sup> Suzanne Bravery, *Vaucluse House Draft Conservation Plan* (Sydney: Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales, 1994, 11-12 using some paraphrasing).



Figure 16. *Children's room, Vacluse House.* © Katherine Lu for Museums of History NSW. Accessed 29 September 2025. <https://mhnsw.au/visit-us/vacluse-house/>.

To strengthen the appearance of a working nineteenth century domestic interior, the Trust adopted the seasonal changes of Victorian 'housekeeping.' In winter, hearths are blackened, fire tools put out, the fire lit, and heavier window furnishings installed. In summer, heavy white cardboard paper fans were placed in the grates, window furnishings changed to be lighter. For Christmas, a fresh pine was placed in the bay window. On the mantelpiece, Victorian Christmas cards were displayed. And in the kitchen, the attendant rich pudding makings on the table. Wrapped toys were placed in the Nursery. Heavy linen case covers were used in the Drawing Room during August, hinting the family rural absence for lambing season. These curatorial practices used sensory elements to further preserve house interiors and separate it from being purely a museum space.

*Vacluse House* interiors are used for educational purposes — education in its broadest sense

of lifelong learning has been a constant and important component of curatorial work at the property. School curriculum-based programs focused on the servants and masters using the interiors through theatre, role-play, to our understanding of the Wentworths and the nineteenth century are installed in the interiors about which less is currently known.

Volunteer guides and Museum guides, all trained by curatorial staff, were available to assist visitors.



Figure 17. *Miss Wentworth's Bedroom*. Photograph taken by Suzanne Bravery, May 2021, private collection.

Curator-led public programs have enabled broader audience access to the Wentworth family, their household and their lives in the nineteenth century. The action for these programs has been largely set in the interiors of the house and has relied on the accuracy of these interiors for their veracity. For example, in spaces such as the Kitchen, practical and relevant programs such as cooking, conservation housekeeping and nineteenth century flower arranging are

undertaken within their original ‘historically charged’ space, enabling visitors to engage with the work of the previous occupants, albeit in a formalised manner.

## Conclusion

From 1980, the vision of a detailed and methodical reconstruction of this colonial mansion was sufficiently resourced as to be achieved. There was a wealth of physical evidence in the building and a significant amount of provenanced material available and valued for interpretation. The following procedure was used to ensure that the historic narrative appeared as accurately as possible in the interiors: employ professionally educated staff and consultants; undertake exhaustive primary and secondary documentary research; physically interrogate the building fabric and undertake archaeological excavations to determine layers of occupation. Next, determine a Statement of Significance as the basis for decision-making and resource allocation to determine the presentation of the property. Finally, write policies as necessary to use in the conservation and interpretation of the property, and schedule a regular revision of all the above components. This comprehensive procedure was repeatedly used as an effective template throughout the duration of the Trust’s existence to underpin the interpretation of *Vaocluse House* and, especially, its interiors.

This chapter has investigated the concepts behind what constitutes a reconstructed house museum presentation that includes provenanced objects to reflect the interiors at a particular time. Initially presented as a national monument to William Charles Wentworth, a formative political, nineteenth century male ‘hero’ and overachiever, the presentation of *Vaocluse House* was then reviewed and adjusted to include and provide an understanding of the lives of his family, servants and of a nineteenth century estate. It has examined the role that

Curators played in the development of theory and historical practice during the conservation and interpretation of the property, and the role of public ownership in determining the site as an accurate space of historic encounter. It has shown why it is important that these interiors are appropriately resourced to, and reviewed to, ensure public access to a segment of Australian history.



Figure 18. *Principal bedroom, Vaucluse House.* © Katherine Lu for Museums of History NSW. Accessed 29 September 2025. <https://mhnsw.au/visit-us/vaucluse-house/>

When I turned back to the house I walked...from room to room. The air in every corner seemed more still. The light gleamed along the board in a more serene way. I had come to hate the marital bed, and even the room it was in... I flung open the French doors--he liked a closed up bedroom where I loved a flow of air-and let in the outside world...How quickly a person could reclaim a space! How little it took!

Kate Grenville, *A Room Made of Leaves* (Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2020), 272.

## Chapter Three

### Refurnishing a home: Curator as theatrical producer at *Elizabeth Farm*



Figure 19. Joseph Lycett (1775-1828), *The residence of John McArthur Esqre. near Parramatta, New South Wales*, 1821, hand coloured lithograph, plate mark 23.2 X 33cm, National Library of Australia: nla.obj-135702197. Accessed 3 December 2024. <https://catalogue.nla.gov.au/catalog/2083373>.

## Introduction

Interiors can only be used as reference for sites of historic encounter (real or imagined, tangible or intangible), if they exist.<sup>197</sup> The role of the professional Curator at *Vaucluse House* was one of a considered editor, removing inappropriate material to reconstruct a more

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<sup>197</sup> For example, in the novel by Kate Grenville, *A Room Made of Leaves* (Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2020). This is a fictional imagining of Elizabeth Macarthur (1766-1850) reflecting on the effect of her husband, John Macarthur, (1767-1834) leaving Elizabeth Farm in 1832.

accurate portrayal of the mid nineteenth century. Conversely, the role of the professional Curator at Elizabeth Farm was one of editing the interiors by addition of appropriate material to reimagine their appearance in the mid nineteenth century. The challenge at Elizabeth Farm was that, unlike *Vaucluse House*, there were no available provenanced objects (these were in other collections) and there was little original interior to furnish. For the Curator to determine the appearance of the interiors and reflect the significance of their association with the family (families over two centuries) who cherished the house as a home this house demanded a different ‘back to basics’ approach.

This chapter uses the 1983 transfer of the nineteenth century bungalow at *Elizabeth Farm* to the Historic Houses Trust as a case study. It examines the role of the professional Curator as theatrical producer to refurnish these historic, and heavily altered, interiors to the timeframe 1793 to 1850. It shows how an innovative curatorial philosophy of reproducing key provenanced objects (the originals remaining in family possession and use), disrupting traditional reconstruction interpretation, and removing barriers indicative of museums, opened the house for access in its original and engaging role as a home. It reflects on the approach of the Swann family’s role as early conservation activists during the twentieth century, and on the importance of preserving the building as an historic house rather than a didactic museum.

## Elizabeth Farm as modest Macarthur home (1793-1850)

Whilst there are other extant Macarthur houses, *Elizabeth Farm* is the *only* one that was lived in by the Macarthurs as a family (from 1793-1850).<sup>198</sup> Merino wool breeder, political activist

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<sup>198</sup> Spanning the period that it was the family home of Elizabeth, from 1793-1850, and residence of John Macarthur from 1793-1832.

and father of eight, John Macarthur established this modest, unfinished dwelling on a working property at the edge of the early settlement of Parramatta, as a home. His publicly controversial character meant that, like William Charles Wentworth, the family required a practical home and constant hearth, that was away from politics.<sup>199</sup> The cottage at *Belgenny Farm*, Menangle, where Elizabeth Macarthur stayed on her visits to Camden (and where sons James and William Macarthur lived from 1818 until 1835 and John Macarthur died in 1834), is also a publicly-owned site of historic encounter with the Macarthurs, but it is not interpreted as a domestic interior. In 1832, after John made Camden the ‘family seat’, he commissioned fashionable colonial architect, John Verge, to design a two-storey, winged house of a stature suitable for one of the colony's wealthiest families. The house was completed in 1835 and lived in by their sons, William and Edward.

The Macarthurs occupied, maintained<sup>200</sup> and considerably extended *Elizabeth Farm* as their family increased and their financial position and social status in the colony improved.

Regular maintenance of the interiors is recorded in their accounts.<sup>201</sup> As correspondence shows, the appearance of the house, and the use of the interiors, was of importance to John and became a preoccupation of his in the 1820s and early 1830s.<sup>202</sup> As accounts show,

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<sup>199</sup> Margaret Steven, *Australian Dictionary of Biography Online*. ‘Macarthur’s serene and puritanical domestic life always offered the most striking contrast to his public life. His home was a reliable retreat, where deference, affection and encouragement flowed to his need.’ Accessed 5 August 2024. <https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/macarthur-john-2390>.

<sup>200</sup> A2899 *John Macarthur-Letters to His Sons 1815-1832* Parramatta Sept 12<sup>th</sup>, 1826, 131 (to Edward Macarthur). A2903-3 June 1819 -25<sup>th</sup> ‘To whitewashing a Room in the Hall, the staircase and Passage, and repairing the Hall fireplace 1 pound. Servants’ Quarters John Norris; Macarthur Family Papers, 1789-1936 (First Collection). <https://transcripts.sl.nsw.gov.au/collection/macarthur-family-papers-1789-1936-first-collection>.

<sup>201</sup> A3004 James and William Macarthur receipted Bills 1841-1881 [1846] James McArthur Sq. to Harrison and Payten For Work done at Elizabeth Cottage Parramatta. including whitewashing the Servants Bedroom, Servants Hall, Kitchen Pastry room and, in 1846, colouring walls of Bedroom and passage in the Bed and Dressing room in Peach blossom and Back Hall in French grey. Macarthur Family Papers, 1789-1936 (First Collection). <https://transcripts.sl.nsw.gov.au/collection/macarthur-family-papers-1789-1936-first-collection>.

<sup>202</sup> A2899 *John Macarthur-Letters to His Sons 1815-1832* Parramatta Sept 12<sup>th</sup>, 1826, 131 (to Edward Macarthur). Macarthur Family Papers, 1789-1936 (First Collection). <https://transcripts.sl.nsw.gov.au/collection/macarthur-family-papers-1789-1936-first-collection>.

Elizabeth used chintzes that John had purchased for resale in the colony to comfortably and elegantly fit out the interiors.<sup>203</sup> Little was altered in the next two decades, as Elizabeth chose to retain much of the *Elizabeth Farm* furniture and interiors following John's death in 1834 that John and she had determined when a wife.<sup>204</sup> Interiors at *Elizabeth Farm*, as restored, reflect decisions made by John in the build and fit out, in its later use by Elizabeth;<sup>205</sup> and by Trust Curators using other primary sources for the soft furnishings and placement of furniture.

Edward inherited the property from his mother upon her death in 1850. With business interests elsewhere, and despite a great affection for the house,<sup>206</sup> he did not take the same detailed interest in its appearance and upkeep as his parents, and the property deteriorated.

The house was full of family furniture when, in 1865, it was sold by Edward to his siblings. Most of the furniture was distributed to family members, forming the basis of collections in the houses of the extended family. Generations later, and for longer than its time at *Elizabeth Farm*, this furniture continues to be used in these interiors. A 1854 catalogue of furniture,<sup>207</sup>

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<sup>203</sup> A2902 *John Macarthur Accounts 1806-1832* such as 12.5.1812 John Macarthur bought of James Hunter and Co. Agents; and 4.1.1813; and A2904 John Macarthur Ledger 1812-1832 p54 London 2 November 1814. Accounts of 1812 and 1813 show the range of materials available for curtains, case covers, tablecloths and towels, including dimity, printed cotton, brown plain cloth, blue plain cloth corduroy, velveteen, fustian, Cambric muslin, Welsh flannel, printed quilting and huckaback. Macarthur Family Papers, 1789-1936 (First Collection). <https://transcripts.sl.nsw.gov.au/collection/macarthur-family-papers-1789-1936-first-collection>.

<sup>204</sup> A2914 *Sir Edward Macarthur letters 1832-1840* 3.10.1835 Edward to James and William Macarthur. Macarthur Family Papers, 1789-1936 (First Collection). <https://transcripts.sl.nsw.gov.au/collection/macarthur-family-papers-1789-1936-first-collection>.

<sup>205</sup> A2906 *Mrs John Macarthur Journal and Correspondence 1789-1840*, 5 June 1832 Woolloomooloo to Edward Macarthur. Macarthur Family Papers, 1789-1936 (First Collection). <https://transcripts.sl.nsw.gov.au/collection/macarthur-family-papers-1789-1936-first-collection>.

<sup>206</sup> 24.12.1860 Cholmondeley Castle, Edward to William Macarthur. Macarthur Family Papers, 1789-1936 (First Collection). <https://transcripts.sl.nsw.gov.au/collection/macarthur-family-papers-1789-1936-first-collection>.

<sup>207</sup> A2919 Sir Edward Macarthur Miscellanea Item D *Catalogue of Furniture at Elizabeth Farm made May, 1854 by H. C. Allport and left in his care by Col l Macarthur*. For example, the Drawing Room Library No.2 - 1 set of Book Shelves, catalogue of Books; Spare Room Library [Pink Bedroom]-1 wash stand, 3 chairs, 1 Ward robe, 1 set Book Shelves, catalogue of Books...servants' Sitting Room [Blue Bedroom], Oak Room [Boys' Bedroom], Back Hall, Servants Hall, Pastry Room, room at the Side of Dining Room...1 Table, 2 Cupboards.

and watercolours by granddaughter Elizabeth Macarthur showing detail of the Drawing Room and the Pink Bedroom were used to inform curatorial decisions on their restored appearance. There is little known pictorial or physical evidence of the interiors in the later nineteenth century when the house was used for rental and commercial purposes.<sup>208</sup>



Figure 20. Elizabeth Macarthur, *Elizabeth Farm Drawing Room*, 1865, watercolour, private collection. Photograph taken by Suzanne Bravery, 2012, private collection.

## Elizabeth Farm as family home and example of early conservation practice: Swann family (1904-1968)

As patrons responsible for the conservation of an historic house that seemed destined for demolition, Elizabeth Swann and local teacher William Swann, who were unrelated to the Macarthurs, foreshadowed the philanthropic foundation, Endangered Houses Fund, of the Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales a century later. *Elizabeth Farm* was purchased by

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Macarthur Family Papers, 1789-1936 (First Collection). <https://transcripts.sl.nsw.gov.au/collection/macarthur-family-papers-1789-1936-first-collection>.

<sup>208</sup> Ian Sansom, *The Conservation of Elizabeth Farm* (Sydney: Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales, 1984), 10. Conservation architect, Ian Sansom, describes this program of cleaning, repairing and redecorating the house: 'stripped out the old wallpapers [probably from the Icely or Billyard occupations] and... the walls of the main rooms were stripped back to (almost) bare plaster, then wallpapered, again and again, during the 63 years of ownership.'

the Swanns as a family home at the land value only as the house was (ironically) ‘too old to be considered an asset...[yet] it would be pure vandalism to destroy such an historic building.’<sup>209</sup> The Swanns recognised the associative and architectural importance of the buildings for the community, from retaining the Western red cedar joinery<sup>210</sup> to giving tours.<sup>211</sup>

Evidence of the Swanns’ occupation of the house has been largely destroyed. The family’s preservation of the house was acknowledged by then Historic Houses Trustee, Delcia Kite, as ‘one of the earliest building conservation initiatives and...a landmark in the history of conservation in Australia.’<sup>212</sup> The family lived in, and cherished, the house for longer than the Macarthurs. They saw themselves as custodians of a place they believed to be important and deliberately changed little. As conservation patrons, and as small businesspeople — using the interiors for dental surgery, violin classes, and secretarial school — the family and the house were a long-standing focus in local cultural life.

Foreshadowing professional curatorial research methods, their daughter, Margaret Swann, consulted the Macarthur papers in the Mitchell Library for first-hand accounts of *Elizabeth Farm*. She found in Elizabeth Macarthur’s letters descriptions of the house. Swann noted visits by Governor William Bligh to see the merino flock with John Macarthur, and to the house to see Elizabeth; and of explorer Major Thomas Mitchell, who stayed overnight in 1835. The importance of the historic association of the interiors was clear to Swann when she

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<sup>209</sup> Margaret Swann, “Elizabeth Farm House 1793 to 1914” *Parramatta and District Historical Society Journal and Proceedings (With Notes)*, 1 (Parramatta: *The Cumberland Argus Ltd.*,1914) 29.

<sup>210</sup> Margaret Swann, “Elizabeth Farm House 1793 to 1914” *Parramatta and District Historical Society Journal and Proceedings (With Notes)*, 1 (Parramatta: *The Cumberland Argus Ltd.*,1914) 24.

<sup>211</sup> Ellen Errey and Elizabeth Plimer *William Swann and Elizabeth Swann of Elizabeth Farm House, Parramatta, 1904 – 1968* (Sydney: E. M. Plimer 1984), 14.

<sup>212</sup> Delcia I. Kite, Speech delivered by The Hon. D .I. Kite, M.L.C. in the Legislative Council on the Heritage of Elizabeth Farm. (From Parliamentary debates 13th November,1985). Unpagel.

wrote ‘what tales these walls would tell...Of people who have lived here and...who have visited.’<sup>213</sup>

In 1986, the Swanns vacated the property and sold *Elizabeth Farm* to community-based Parramatta Museum Trust (1968-1977) to continue its preservation as an historic house that was open to visitors, because of its association with the Macarthurs. Without sufficient resources—adequate funds and appropriately educated professionals basing practice decisions on a Conservation Plan—it was difficult to keep the buildings in good repair. For most of the twentieth century, the profile of *Elizabeth Farm* as an historic house worth retaining, repairing and ensuring public access to, was raised in the public sphere with an expectation that if the property was in public—state government—ownership, this role would be consolidated.

### Elizabeth Farm as the site of conservation theory and reconstruction practice: Public Works Department (1978-1983)

With heritage legislation in development, the government architect used graphic photographs to illustrate a report on the condition of the Elizabeth Farm buildings.<sup>214</sup> Ironically, the exposure of early building fabric normally unseen (such as masonry, joinery and roofing structures), reinforced much of what made the place historically important. This Report was the catalyst for resumption by the state government in 1977.

In 1978, *Elizabeth Farm*, was made the subject of Permanent Conservation Order No. 1, under the auspices of the *New South Wales Heritage Act 1977*. The Act was established in

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<sup>213</sup> Margaret Swann, “Elizabeth Farm House 1793 to 1914,” *Parramatta and District Historical Society Journal and Proceedings (With Notes)* 1 (Parramatta: *The Cumberland Argus Ltd.*, 1914) 29.

<sup>214</sup> F.P. Bridges, and C.P. Weatherburn, *Elizabeth Farm: A Preliminary Report* (Sydney: Government Architect’s Branch, Public Works Department, 1974). Unpaged.

response to community demand for the conservation of the environment. It allowed government control of any works (such as demolition or alteration) to any item identified by the Heritage Council of New South Wales as being part of the state's environmental heritage. Whilst this protected the built environment, and the interiors would not logically survive without the intactness of the enveloping building structure, it did not specifically protect the interiors. This may have been an assumption, but it was not always the reality.

The New South Wales Government Architects Branch of the Public Works Department, supervised by the Heritage Council of New South Wales, restored *Elizabeth Farm* buildings as a record of the oldest surviving examples of colonial construction techniques in Australia.<sup>215</sup> Additions and alterations made by John Macarthur to the original structure were accepted as part of its history. Most of the alterations made after the Macarthur ownership were removed, as they were not considered to be of primary significance. These decisions were reflective of contemporary conservation practice. The Public Works Department took a clearly architectural — as opposed to social-historical or curatorial — approach in this work.

As the focus was on the conservation of colonial architecture, some of the processes in the building restoration greatly challenged the ability of subsequent Curators to provide an accurate presentation of the interiors. Restoration was undertaken using traditional techniques and materials, with the occasional use of modern materials, but no visible record was made between the original fabric and the introduced repair. For example, extensive building work included the injection of damaged roof timbers (dated to 1793) with coloured epoxy resin to make the repairs blend with this original fabric. This timber was the *only* remaining element

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<sup>215</sup> Chris Betteridge, Judy Birmingham, John Maxwell Freeland, Richard Guyot, Hazel King, Clive Lucas, *Elizabeth Farm, Parramatta; reports prepared for the Steering Committee of the Heritage Council of New South Wales for the restoration of Elizabeth Farm, Parramatta* (Glebe: Heritage Council of New South Wales, 1978-79).

of the original build.<sup>216</sup> In retrospect, this approach of ‘retain and repair’ confuses the original appearance of the building and its materials, and in doing so, challenges the reading of its various elements: which aspects were built prior to the Macarthur occupation, and which ones were contemporary with it?

This reductive approach obliges the professional Curator to determine the veracity of the appearance of the interiors and to meld any confusing elements. It also removes the option to return the buildings to a particular period with absolute certainty. Even as *Elizabeth Farm* was undergoing extensive work, conservation theory and practice was changing in Australia, moving away from complete restoration to the retention and clearly articulated repair of buildings where possible. But theory and practice were not yet aligned.

## Elizabeth Farm as site of theatrical experiment: Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales from 1983 the role and influence of the Curator

After a ‘zealous’<sup>217</sup> restoration by the Department of Public Works, *Elizabeth Farm* was transferred to the Historic Houses Trust in 1983 to complete the interiors and open the house to the public as a house museum in June 1984. *Elizabeth Farm* was the third house (following the transfer of *Elizabeth Bay House* and *Vaucluse House*), in the fledgling Trust portfolio. It was the most modest departmental transfer to date, and in many ways the most challenging to interpret with authority. This building was different to earlier Trust properties in its domestic scale, proportion and finish. *Elizabeth Farm* was a modest bungalow in suburban western Sydney, neither a grand house with water views nor one with extensive acreage in the prosperous east. There was no provenanced collection in the house, little discernible

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<sup>216</sup> As this restoration is the subject of a monograph by government architect Ian Sansom, I have mentioned only the work to the interiors.

<sup>217</sup> Sheridan Burke, *Bricks & Mortar: Hearts & Minds Interpretation and the management of historical resources* International Interpretation Conference (Manly 2 September, 1998), 4.

difference between the appearance of the original and reproduction building fabric, and the interpretation plan by heritage consultants advocated the use of the interiors as a series of classrooms in a museum-like approach to educate visitors primarily about the architectural qualities of the building,<sup>218</sup> John Macarthur's contribution to Australian society and the fledgling colony.

The Curator at *Elizabeth Farm* had a challenge: to fashion a concrete shell into the domestic interiors of an early nineteenth century home of a well-known family, the Macarthurs, with a high degree of accuracy and level of visitor engagement. Almost every original finish had been removed by the time responsibility for *Elizabeth Farm* was transferred to the Historic Houses Trust. The interiors were compromised by the removal of layers of patina, even after the application of the first Permanent Conservation Order brought legislative recognition and protection to the property. Physical evidence of the Swanns had been removed, outbuildings dismantled, and any Macarthur furnishings long since dispersed or decayed. This reduction narrowed interpretation content. It can also be argued that it widened interpretation options, but not, I think, options that related to its role as an historic house museum. The interiors were a significantly reworked and near-blank historically charged canvas that encouraged experimentation and the opportunity of painting a particular portrait of colonial family life.

The way these interiors were ultimately presented is indicative of a shift in conservation philosophy and practice, with the inclusion of 'accuracy' as a determiner in the conservation and interpretation of nineteenth century interiors in Australia, and the narratives of their occupants. The first phase of conservation philosophy in the late nineteen seventies

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<sup>218</sup> Chris Betteridge, Judy Birmingham, John Maxwell Freeland, Richard Guyot, Hazel King, Clive Lucas, *Elizabeth Farm, Parramatta; reports prepared for the Steering Committee of the Heritage Council of New South Wales for the restoration of Elizabeth Farm, Parramatta* (Glebe: Heritage Council of New South Wales, 1978-79).

recognised the legal implications of listing or classifying a building as a method of ‘saving’ it from detrimental change.

The second phase, in the early to mid-eighties took this ‘accuracy’ indoors to the interiors of historic buildings with the (re)presentation of *Vaucluse House* and *Elizabeth Bay House* as the family homes of their nineteenth century occupants. Whereas these houses were transferred to the Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales with interiors that had additions rather than deletions, the building fabric of *Elizabeth Farm* had been significantly—and irrevocably—altered during restoration. This physical intervention into the fabric removed most of the evidence of occupation after 1850.

From a social-history perspective, the historical significance of *Elizabeth Farm* is all about the interiors. The interior of the building was the private domain of the very public lives of John and Elizabeth Macarthur. The interior was the core of the cherished home of their children and grandchildren, and of the Swann family. The role of the Curator, and of public ownership, is to enable ‘accurate’ access to the spaces in which these actions took place.

The restoration and adaptive reuse of historic public buildings was a relatively new practice in the 1980s. The *Mint*, in Macquarie Street, Sydney, provides a contemporary example. Restored in the late 1970s, it opened to the public in 1982 as ‘Australia’s first museum of decorative arts, stamps and coins’ under the auspices of a government authority affiliated with the Trust, the *Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences*.<sup>219</sup> The interiors were used to house didactic and thematic displays of the collection where space was not available in other museum buildings. It also referenced the later industrial purpose of the building, but not the

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<sup>219</sup> Margaret Betteridge, “New Museum in colonial buildings,” *Heritage NSW*, 1, no.3 (Spring 1982), 2.

earlier residential component. This influential state government template for adaptive reuse of a restored heritage building, won the New South Wales and national Museum of the Year Awards in 1983.<sup>220</sup>

*Hyde Park Barracks*, adjacent to the *Mint* and also managed by the *Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences*, was restored to its external appearance as a convict barracks circa 1819. It opened to the public as a museum in 1984, with temporary exhibitions of local interest. Material about previous occupants, whether convict, Irish migrant or legal counsel, did not initially appear in these previously residential interiors.

Given these awarded approaches to the adaptive reuse of historic buildings in state ownership, and the imperative of education through exhibitions as a primary museum responsibility, models of interpretation were generally of the historic house as a museum and not as a house (museum). Philosophically and functionally, there is a definitive difference. Elizabeth Farm, whilst fitting into the category of a publicly-owned, recently restored historic building with adaptive reuse, was a house not a museum. As such, a different approach was required to its interpretation, one that focused on professionally curating the appearance of the interiors as a reliable and authoritative site of historic encounter in a domestic setting.

An interim committee of heritage professionals recommended interpreting the building as a museum of itself 'leaving holes in the house (to show architectural features such as lath and plaster ceilings), writing panels (on the domestic interiors) and creating touring exhibitions that did not rely on the context of the property. Basically, doing everything except

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<sup>220</sup> Museum of the Year Awards were auspiced by the national professional museum membership organisation Museums Australia.

appreciating it as a home.<sup>221</sup> Conservation Architect, Ian Sansom, wrote in 1984 that ‘It was agreed that *Elizabeth Farm* should be a museum interpreting the lifestyle of the Macarthur family and the history and evolution of the buildings.’<sup>222</sup> This approach was reflective of contemporary museum practice.

Two other houses, local to the Paramatta area and contemporary with *Elizabeth Farm*, were already open to the public as house museums and available for comparison. Owned by Parramatta Council and operated by volunteers of the Parramatta and District Historical Society, *Hambledon Cottage* (within walking distance of *Elizabeth Farm*), was built by John Macarthur in 1824 for governess, Penelope Lucas. The interiors in the early 1980s were shown as a series of displays of material loosely fashioned into ‘period rooms’ with no clear basis in research, presenting a generic perspective of its occupants. This traditional approach of displaying non-solicited, and largely unprovenanced, material reflected that used some decades before at *Vaucluse House*.<sup>223</sup>

The second house, owned and managed by the National Trust of Australia (NSW), was *Experiment Farm Cottage*. In the early 1980s, it was interpreted as part museum and part cottage of early convict agriculturalist, James Ruse. Sparse domestic displays appeared to have been assembled without any clear basis in research. The Cellar was used to display agricultural tools—another service interior for which the original use was sacrificed for exhibition space. Ruse sold the land (which was significant as the site of the first land grant

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<sup>222</sup> Ian Sansom, *The Conservation of Elizabeth Farm* (Sydney: Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales, 1984), 4.

<sup>223</sup> The 1980s interpretation of the house was reviewed in the 2011 Conservation Management Plan. *Hambledon Cottage* is now ‘a house museum that is open to the public for those that may be interested in experiencing and absorbing the 19th-century lifestyle with the bonus of witnessing and educating themselves on the history of the house and all the people that once lived inside the cottage.’ Accessed 4 December 2024. <https://www.hambledoncottagemuseum.org.au/about-the-site>.

in the colony by Governor Phillip to him in 1789), to Surgeon, John Harris, who built the existing bungalow c.1834 — Ruse never actually lived in the building. It was not until the 1990s that research uncovered an inventory of Harris, which the Trust’s professional Curator then used to interpret the interiors more cohesively. The house was subsequently ‘furnished to reflect the home of Surgeon Harris.’<sup>224</sup>

This uneasy template of part museum, part house-museum with generic displays, was a popular interpretational approach in the 1980s and continues in many house museums world-wide. It was not one that the Historic Houses Trust chose to follow. From the outset, the Trust approached the interpretation of *Elizabeth Farm*<sup>225</sup> as that of a house not a museum. Curator James Broadbent stated in 1981 that ‘I wish that Elizabeth Farm could go to sleep... and be lived in like an ordinary house fulfilling its function.’<sup>226</sup> In the interpretation of *Elizabeth Farm*, described by Director Peter Watts in the 1982 Conservation Plan as ‘one of the most evocative houses relating to the earliest period of Australian European history,’<sup>227</sup> the Trust chose to lead. This was achieved with the development of a plan designed to guide research-based decision-making about the property, and also with a curatorial approach that communicated the importance of the domestic use of the buildings as an historic house. This relied on: accurate interiors, a researched, interconnected and property-specific interpretation of the lives of the occupants, and the considered decoration and functional use of the interiors.

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<sup>224</sup> Accessed 9 July 2012. [www.nationaltrust.com.au/placestovisit/efc](http://www.nationaltrust.com.au/placestovisit/efc).

<sup>225</sup> *Elizabeth Farm* was known as *Elizabeth Farm cottage* (in the nineteenth century) and *Elizabeth Farm House* (in the twentieth century) until its transfer to the Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales and opening as a house museum. This name change meant that the historic house museum referred to both the house and its curtilage, and detaches it from other nearby cottages.

<sup>226</sup> James Broadbent, “A talk given at *Vaocluse House* on May 18, 1981, to celebrate International Museums Day,” *Newsletter of the Historic Houses Trust of NSW* (July 1981), 7.

<sup>227</sup> Peter Watts, *Elizabeth Farm Draft Conservation Plan* (Sydney: Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales 1982).

In the 1980s, soon after the Trust assumed responsibility for the interpretation of the property but when still in the care of the Public Works Department, a Statement of Significance was formed to guide professional practice. The primary cultural significance of *Elizabeth Farm* was determined as it being: the earliest known European construction in Australia and its association with the Macarthur family in the nineteenth century, particularly John and Elizabeth Macarthur, and their pastoral interests. Watts presented the draft Elizabeth Farm Conservation Plan to a meeting of Trustees and curatorial staff. The meeting was held in the Dining Room whilst the property was still a building site. The Historic Houses trust of NSW has been consistent in its approach to the interpretation of these buildings as a house, not as a museum. This directed curatorial interpretation. Recognising the importance of conservation, education and access in its use as a house museum,<sup>228</sup> the Trust aimed to:

1.5.1 prepare management strategies, which will ensure that the operation of this place as a house museum will not prejudice its cultural significance.

1.5.2 devise ways of presenting the house to the public in a way which is evocative of the early development of the colony.

1.5.3 devise ways of helping people of NSW or elsewhere to understand, enjoy and appreciate an aspect of the earliest history of NSW.<sup>229</sup>

In 1984, Watts said that ‘unless a museum house is adding...to our body of knowledge then it serves very little purpose.’<sup>230</sup> In other words, the purpose of a house museum is to educate

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<sup>229</sup> Peter Watts, *Elizabeth Farm Conservation Plan* (Sydney: Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales, 1984).

<sup>230</sup> Peter Watts, “Museum Houses—Costs and Benefits” paper presented at the A.C.T. *Heritage Seminar on Interpretation* (Canberra: December, 1984), 8.

and inform, and *Elizabeth Farm*'s (as stated at the outset in the Conservation Plan),<sup>231</sup> was to interpret and present both the early colony and aspects of the Macarthurs' domestic life to the widest possible audience. This interpretation approach has been largely sustained. Elizabeth Farm remains a place to experience the home of the Macarthurs with layered narratives of its occupants in their colonial context.

*Elizabeth Farm* was the house of a 'great man', but it was more of a cottage than a 'great house', hardly the aspirational edifice of, say, *Vaucluse House* or *Elizabeth Bay House* (Macarthur would utilise that style of architecture later with *Camden Park*, Menangle, unfinished at his death). Not even the long-awaited and incomplete accommodation extensions of the early 1830s were designed to make the house anything other than a comfortable home for a large family.

Today, few of John Macarthur's achievements are available for visitors to see in the house itself, or in the surrounding property. Very little of the original 1793 build is visible, other than a section of restored roof beams. If one were to look for evidence of his achievements, it would be to the pastoral acreage with experiments in merino wool, the bounty of the crops grown on the Parramatta River plains, to the productive acreage still attached to *Belgenny Farm* and *Camden Park*, to the gold medals awarded to him in 1822 by the Society of Arts, London, for excellence in wool production and entrepreneurship in promoting this industry, to his contentious role in colonial politics. It would not be to the house at *Elizabeth Farm*, positioned as it is within industrial suburbs and medium density housing.

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<sup>231</sup> Peter Watts, *Elizabeth Farm Conservation Plan* (Sydney: Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales, 1984).

Much has been written on the exterior of *Elizabeth Farm*—its place in the cultural landscape, its curtilage, its original context in a series of Macarthur grants and acquisitions, in the conservation philosophy of the garden and grounds. Physical evidence exists in aerial photographs, plantings and archaeology. The changes in the landscape have been recorded pictorially and are widely available for examination.<sup>232</sup> The appearance of the interiors offers evidence of wider themes and associations—of colonial trade, of social expectations, of the use and adaptation of English methods, materials, and attitudes to a colony in transition.

This makes the preservation of the interiors of *Elizabeth Farm* as a site of historic encounter even more important. The visible evidence of Macarthur's achievements is in the Macarthur papers, the provenanced family furniture, and in the watercolours of granddaughter Elizabeth (who, with her namesake, cherished the house as a home and 'kept up the appearance' of the interiors in a way that has enabled a more accurate likeness). Curators used these watercolours to provide the 'feel' and the detail of the eastern corner of the Drawing Room,<sup>233</sup> with its single ended couch, loo table and conical vase of flowers, single-hung painting and functional hanging argand lamp. These furnishings were not identified in the Macarthur family inventories, and so their silhouettes have been fashioned from generic furniture and covered in case covers.

Consistent in approach with the interpretation of interiors at *Vaucluse House*, research was undertaken on primary sources in the public domain—copious volumes of family correspondence, diaries, account books, drawings and other records which comprise the

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<sup>232</sup> An example is Joseph Lycett, Conrad Martens et al, Meadows Brownrigg 1844 'Sketch of part of Elizabeth Farm detail of the 'Plan of the Town of Parramatta and the adjacent properties' Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW.

<sup>233</sup> Elizabeth Macarthur *Album of Watercolours* (1865). This is a partial copy of the original held in a private collection.

Macarthur papers in the Mitchell Library. Investigating building fabric and elements of the building construction uncovered during its restoration were used to carefully recreate the appearance of the interiors. As the building ‘conservation’ work had been completed before the Trust handover, the Trust was able to focus only on interpretation.

In her speech to state parliament, Trust Board member Delcia Kite, advocated the Trust as ‘the appropriate organisation responsible for the ongoing management and exhibition of *Elizabeth Farm* because of its special expertise.’<sup>234</sup> This provided clear political recognition of the importance of using qualified Curators, Director and historian. Effective curatorial involvement brings with it a constant (re)evaluation of the interpretation approach, and a reflective and informed attitude to maintenance at the property to ensure as-accurate-as-possible access to the physical and intellectual aspects of the associated history is provided. This is an entirely reasonable expectation of those professionals responsible for historic house museums.

James Broadbent was well placed to interpret the significance of the *Elizabeth Farm* buildings. When appointed as the first Curator of *Elizabeth Farm*, Broadbent brought knowledge and experience from his curatorial practice at *Elizabeth Bay House* and *Vaucluse House*, and a determination not to duplicate their methods of interpretation. As *Elizabeth Farm* still had a ‘good feel’ to it, there was more than an appreciation of pure formal architecture. Broadbent treated the interpretation theatrically. This theatrical approach was a contrast to previous methodologies used by the Trust and other cultural heritage organisations, and one formulated to meet the interpretation needs of a house with little

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<sup>234</sup> Delcia I. Kite, Speech delivered by The Hon. D.I. Kite, M.L.C. in the Legislative Council on the Heritage of Elizabeth Farm (From Parliamentary debates 13th November, 1985). Unpaged.

original built or moveable material. There appears to be no literature indicating that this has been done before, and no precedent for this purist and reductive approach to the presentation of the interiors. This approach is based on principles stated by Broadbent in 1981 that:

the re-created environment must sensibly correlate with the building and its history, and it must be...a tightly-woven fabric wherein no part has precedence over another, and the intrinsic value of an object is of no importance...there is only one criterion for selecting an object: its appropriateness within the limits of one's historical knowledge of the environment being re-created.<sup>235</sup>

This statement reinforced the difference in interpretation between earlier house museums in public ownership (where interiors were presented as a decorative arts museum), and a more logical and critical use of the house museum as a charged space valued for its use as a domestic interior. For, as occupants of a domestic interior, do we not select objects ourselves based on their appropriateness of use in our own created environment? This approach enabled a revision of curatorial decisions when more historical knowledge became available.

Broadbent continued:

the Curator must also be a ... theatrical producer...fusing a collection of objectively chosen artefacts into an historically truthful environment and bringing that environment to life...encouraging the...visitor... to respond to the scene...creating an

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<sup>235</sup> James Broadbent, "Historic House Museums: a talk given at Vaucluse House on May 18, 1981, to celebrate International Museums Day," *Insites: Newsletter of the Historic Houses Trust of NSW* (July 1981), 7.

environment with a life of its own, detached from the experience of the viewer and yet at the same time bridging the audience and the performance.<sup>236</sup>

The Curator was the catalyst in making the immersive whole much more than the sum of the parts.

Recognition of the preservation of the interior as a site of historic encounter in an innovative and engaging treatment by the experienced Curator, encouraged informed access to the extant evidence of the Macarthurs' personal choices of finishes, fittings and furniture. From ongoing informal positive feedback, from the wear-and-tear on the soft furnishings, from the numbers of visitors and the take up of the education programs, the familiar domestic scale clearly attracted and engaged visitors. Active visitors rather than passive viewers were invited to take part in the performance, whether sitting on the furniture, smelling flowers collected from the Eastern Garden or playing the Broadwood piano. This immersive experience focused interpretation on an appreciation of, and engagement with, the building as a house, the only real artefact, rather than as a museum. This meant interpreting one period as significant (1793-1834)—although necessarily 'bleeding' into other times according to available provenanced physical and documentary material, up to 1850. Broadbent's understanding and knowledge of colonial houses, and his passion to make them accessible to visitors in the simplest way, was clear in his writing that 'There is...in breathing life into re-created interiors...a sensitivity...to an *ambience*, disciplined by historical knowledge, for the scene must be acted out within the limitations of documented history. There can be no rewriting of the script.'<sup>237</sup>

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<sup>236</sup> James Broadbent, "Historic House Museums: a talk given at Vaucluse House on May 18, 1981, to celebrate International Museums Day," *Insites: Newsletter of the Historic Houses Trust of NSW* (July 1981), 4.

<sup>237</sup> James Broadbent, "Historic House Museums: a talk given at Vaucluse House on May 18, 1981, to celebrate International Museums Day," *Insites: Newsletter of the Historic Houses Trust of NSW* (July 1981), 4.

*Elizabeth Farm* provides an entirely informed reconstruction of the private life of public figures, available nowhere else in public ownership. The innovative approach used to interpret these interiors was important in terms of leadership for the Trust and for the curatorial profession. This delicately balanced minimalist approach relied on the ability of the interiors to convey the significance of the property. Interiors are seen as the integral backdrop to inform and frame the collections—reproduction objects—and the Macarthur story. It is essential that the interiors are as ‘real’ as the provenanced reproductions, in other words, are an ‘accurate’ portrayal of the Macarthur occupation using ‘real’ objects and ‘real’ settings.

The success of this curatorial approach relied on being able to make the property physically and historically accessible, and palatable. The theatre of a pared-down stage set and the use of key early nineteenth century reproduced Macarthur family provenanced objects, (‘fakes’ but honest fakes)<sup>238</sup> — there was an understanding the original Macarthur provenanced objects would remain in family hands— reconstructed wall and floor finishes and documented fabrics, set the scene for visitor interaction with the domestic Macarthur house. This was played-out in the conservation philosophy and curatorial practice, which focused for its effectiveness on the interiors.

The Trust was selective in its choice of objects to furnish and interpret the rooms. In a 1982<sup>239</sup> note in Peter Watts’ handwriting

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<sup>238</sup> Broadbent’s philosophy on fakes was that it would have been fake to add provenanced objects to a deconstructed interior. I see this approach as honest, open and mostly consistent. James Broadbent, “The honest fake,” *National Trust Quarterly* (July 1993), 27-29.

<sup>239</sup> No date, but most likely c. 1982 when Watts wrote the *Draft Elizabeth Farm Conservation Plan*.

DRAWING ROOM/Key facts Built 1893 (sic) Rebuilt and extended 1826/7. Form and detail generally intact to this period. Inventory of books and furniture from: Sketch of interior c. 1865. Surviving furniture and objects: tea service, silver tea pot, sugar bowl etc., silver water urn, 2 work boxes, possibly rosewood loo table. Eliz. Macarthur purchased a piano in 1810-type not known.<sup>240</sup>

To use original objects was inconsistent with the Conservation Plan; to reproduce everyday objects was inconsistent with the interpretation plan of learning about the Macarthur occupancy, as distinct from other occupancies. Using available primary sources, it was decided to use only key pieces which illustrated the Macarthurs. John's correspondence, Elizabeth's letters and those of their children, show that this was a family home.

The interiors are presented as the family home of Elizabeth and John Macarthur from c. 1793 to 1834, and of the Macarthurs to 1850. 'Elizabeth Farm has a relative intactness of form, interior spaces and detailing pre-dating 1834.'<sup>241</sup> The house was not of ostensibly rich people component of the building as evidence of the taste and attitude of the Macarthurs and their family life as it changed. The differences in its economic, political and social standing were reflected in the growing house. John's increasing insanity was shown in the unfinished bedroom wing.

The Trust was a statutory authority and part of the influential Premier's Department, when Premier Neville Wran opened *Elizabeth Farm* in June 1984. As they walked through the doors of the colonial bungalow, the Premier, his wife Jill Wran, and the official party were

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<sup>240</sup> Museums of History NSW *Elizabeth Farm* house files.

<sup>241</sup> Suzanne Bravery, *Elizabeth Farm Conservation Plan* (Sydney: Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales, 1997), 13-14.

welcomed by interiors that appeared unlike any others in existing house museums. In a bold and innovative move, and consistent with the resources available through public ownership in the decade leading to the Bicentenary and the expectations of professionally educated Curators, interpretation of the house focused on the building as a series of well-researched and functional domestic interiors.

This was not the familiar recreated historic house interior in the manner of other grand houses then managed by the Trust, but a deliberately sparse barely furnished (pared down) colonial interior. This allowed a closer inspection of the house and its details and encouraged visitors to experience the house in a way that is not possible in fully furnished house museums. The interiors did not have barriers, so visitors could move freely. There was no preciousness to the objects, so there were fewer issues of wear-and-tear and security. Reproduction Macarthur provenanced<sup>242</sup> furniture and props were used in a carefully staged manner to suggest the character and interests of the nineteenth century occupants, as much by the presence of certain objects as by their omission. This approach is reflective of contemporary conservation philosophy through physical engagement with original interiors. However, it was so different from the visitor's expectation of house museum interiors, that from 1984, an explanatory note of the interiors as theatre, was handed to every visitor at the entrance. This experiential learning model removed the need for didactic panels within the house or for leaving holes in the building fabric, but it did change the way that the Trust staffed the property.

At *Elizabeth Bay House* and *Vaucluse House*, museum attendants moved about the interiors as security, reinforcing the division between viewer and exhibit as in a purpose-built museum

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<sup>242</sup> Objects with a known and traceable Macarthur ownership.

(such as the *Art Gallery of New South Wales*) where objects are precious, often fragile and always labeled. The position of paid Guide, with responsibilities that included guiding, delivering education programs, security, conservation cleaning, general house presentation and front of house, was devised specifically to interpret the curatorial presentation at *Elizabeth Farm*. This new role replaced that of attendant. This model influenced staffing at other, and subsequent, properties including both houses and public buildings.

In addition to paid guides, volunteers were recruited and intensively trained to guide visitors through the house. These volunteers enabled connections with the local community, many staying for a decade, and some for much longer. This personal interaction between guide and visitor, at its best, emulates the connection between homeowner and invited guest, with the guide meeting the visitor and escorting them to the front door.

The interpretation of the interiors at *Elizabeth Farm* does not reflect the recorded activities and preoccupations of the public face of John Macarthur, such as his role in the Rum Rebellion. This was not the place. The absences and aspirations of Macarthur are noted in the interiors. This includes retaining the differences such as dropping the floors one foot to make the rooms appear larger. The external activities of John Macarthur, as with William Charles Wentworth, are addressed elsewhere in publications and public programs. For example, in 1984, Curators, historians, architects and family members wrote monographs on other occupants including the Swann family, John Macarthur's achievements, and on the conservation of the buildings. These are all relevant areas of importance that do not need to be addressed through the interpretation policy for this historic house museum.<sup>243</sup>

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<sup>243</sup> See Elizabeth Farm Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales 1984 publications by Curator Susan Hunt, Architect Ian Sansom, Researchers Joy Hughes and Beverley Kingston and Swann descendants Elizabeth Plimer and Ellen Errey. Susan Hunt, "Australian Colonial Crafts: Floorcoverings textiles Furniture Facsimiles Craft

Although sparsely furnished by nineteenth and twentieth century appearances, ‘rooms were brought up to a level of understanding’ to enable the visitor to experience the form and function of a colonial house and thus learn by viewing evidence of the changes made to the appearance of the house for environmental (Australian sun and weather through the application of verandahs), economic (Macarthur’s increasing wealth and extensions of the house) and social status and influence (use of architects in extension plans) and Macarthur’s state of mind and actions from 1793-1832 (keeping the Library Bedroom dark as a calming strategy). This acknowledges but resists the temptation to capitalise on the infamous John Macarthur story of encroaching madness by capturing visitors in a series of domestic-scaled interiors that focus on the buildings as the home of the Macarthur family.



Figure 21. *The library bedroom at Elizabeth Farm, Elizabeth Macarthur’s Parramatta home*, photographed by John Storey in 1984. Photograph: John Storey/Sydney Living Museums. Accessed 29 September 2025. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/jul/31/a-room-made-of-leaves-by-kate-grenville-review-the-untold-story-of-an-unruly-woman#img-1>

It was more important that visitors experienced and understood the measure and appearance of the spaces and the ambience of the house, than of knowing the detail of an unrelated 1830s

sideboard through an information panel—unless the sideboard was a reproduction of a provenanced Macarthur piece used in the house. This curatorial policy was tested when, several years after the reopening of *Elizabeth Farm*, the Macarthur descendants' Rothe<sup>244</sup> sideboard, on which the sideboard in the Dining Room was modeled, was willed to the Trust. After some deliberation, a curatorial decision was made *not* to place it on display in its original position, but to include it in the then Conservation Resources Centre as a reference, important for its stylistic appearance as much as for its provenance. If precious objects were acquired for the interpretation of the house, then barriers would be needed to separate the visitor from the objects, experiential spaces contained, and the house would be 'unable to

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revived for the presentation and restoration of Elizabeth Farm Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales" *Craft Australia* (1985).

<sup>244</sup> The Rothes were Macarthur descendants.

speak for itself.<sup>245</sup> There was of necessity a delicate balance between what stayed and what was added. Using domestic-scaled interiors to connect with a shared past was vital for creating an experiential environment that acted as a trigger for memory and connection.



Figure 22. *The dining room at Elizabeth Farm set for breakfast in 2014.* Photograph © Paolo Busato Historic Houses Trust of NSW. Accessed 29 September 2025. <https://blogs.sydneylivingmuseums.com.au/cook/then-and-now-the-dining-room-at-elizabeth-farm/index.html>. This image shows the reproduction of the Rothe sideboard in the alcove.

Broadbent believed that there is an historical integrity to copying something that was known to have been in the house rather than purchasing generic furniture. Curatorial colleague, Ann Toy, wrote in support that ‘this curatorial policy of using only...copies of furniture and objects known to have belonged to the family, has greater integrity than the full or literal recreation of traditional house museums...as their collections are not original and have been largely assembled from anonymous...sources.’<sup>246</sup> This approach differed from the earlier collections management policy at *Vaucluse House*.<sup>247</sup>

Through researching inventories and discussion with Macarthur descendants, much was learnt about the original contents still in family possession. In commissioning reproductions

of Macarthur provenanced objects for house interpretation, veracity was given to the original interiors. This means there were copies of original objects placed in their ‘original’ interiors. The reproduction of key Macarthur objects known to have been in the house, meant that the originals, many of which hadn’t been in *Elizabeth Farm* in a long time, remained in the family collection, to themselves ‘keep up the appearance’ of these interiors. Many of these interiors, such as those at *Camden Park*, are of national significance and so it is important that their amassed collection from generations of Macarthurs remains together.<sup>248</sup>



Figure 23. *Drawing room closet, Elizabeth Farm*. Photograph: Storey, John/Sydney Living Museums. Accessed 29 September 2025. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/jul/31/a-room-made-of-leaves-by-kate-grenville-review-the-untold-story-of-an-unruly-woman#img-3>

<sup>245</sup> James Broadbent, “Notes from a volunteer guide training session at Elizabeth Farm on 26 April 1989” (Sydney: Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales, 1989).

<sup>246</sup> Ann Toy, “At Last-A New Philosophy for Historic Homes,” *Vive la Vie* (1985),101.

<sup>247</sup> See Chapter Two: *Vaucluse House*.

<sup>248</sup> James Broadbent, “Camden Park New South Wales: the home of Mr and Mrs John Macarthur Stanham” (England: *Country Life* December 14, 2000), 38-43.

The use of ‘ephemera’ was limited to that known from other primary sources and those generically available were employed as at earlier Trust properties, such as particular varieties of plants, terracotta pot designs, ‘china’ matting; clearly articulated routines and practices such as seasonal textile changes, including fabric styles and types, and regional differences such as the use of green mosquito netting to cover precious paintings in summer from fly spots. All these devices were used to reinforce the idea of the house as a home not a museum.

To complement the use of these reproductions —enough to make sense of the room and hint at Macarthur personalities, but not too much to distract or falsify the interpretation—Curators carefully researched and acquired reproduction nineteenth century documentary fabrics in original colourways from English and American archives to dress the house. Curators then commissioned their sewing and making up according to colonial pattern books and their hanging according to manuals of domestic economy. Documentary fabrics had been used in a small way at *Vaucluse House*; they now took centre stage in the interactive theatre of *Elizabeth Farm* interiors.

Broadbent was critical in his reference to the number of soft furnishings used in the interiors as a ‘sugar coating’ to the educative pill, but they do appear a necessary and important inclusion, and an acknowledged reference to the way that Elizabeth Macarthur (and doubtless her fellow colonists) used textiles in their interiors. These soft furnishings show the importance of textiles in social and consumer history and their nature as documentary fabrics provides the visitor with an informed view. Domestic textiles were one of the most expensive components of household spending. They have a traditional connection with women, with women’s wealth to marriage (as shown in probate records which record bedding, mattresses and sheets that are worth more than the bed itself), and luxury textiles such as Drawing Room

curtains were very important—not just as pretty or functional devices, but also as a show of wealth. The texture and patterns of the then unfamiliar—to modern visitors—fabrics entice visitors into the rooms, and as Hunt writes ‘used to suggest how the rooms *felt*. This creates a mood, encourages the viewer’s response and stimulates the imagination.’<sup>249</sup>

The role of intangible heritage, the sensory experience in the preservation of the interior as a site of historic encounter was starting to be recognised by scholars. In 1989, after three days of observation, post graduate student Julia Clark concluded in her thesis that the experience of the ‘original’ or ‘real’ interiors was not lost. ‘The simplicity of access enhances the concept that this was a farmstead.’<sup>250</sup> So, this curatorial approach of re-engagement with a domestic interior seems to have worked. Clark writes of the connective value of sensory experiences from the touch of the moulding on the marble fireplace to the sound of the kettle on the hub and the perfume from drying verbena. ‘One is presented with an illusion made real through involvement... history...becomes part of one’s own reality, part of one’s own theatre.’<sup>251</sup>

At a time when social history was being (re)written, Clark argued for a more visible role for servants through the inclusion of the staff kitchen and laundry to show the domestic industry that underpinned the lifestyle displayed in the house, and of women in the house. I suggest that these private, domestic interiors clearly demonstrate the choices of the historically female in society. Women were the creators, occupants and the conservators of the house before social history became fashionable. We know from Elizabeth Macarthur’s

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<sup>249</sup> Susan Hunt, *Australian Colonial Crafts Floorcoverings. Textiles. Furniture. Facsimiles: Craft revived for the presentation and restoration of Elizabeth Farm*, (Sydney: Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales, 1985), 4.

<sup>250</sup> Julia Clark, *An Island of Feeling: An Analysis of the Elizabeth Farm Museum* (1989). Unpaged.

<sup>251</sup> Julia Clark, *An Island of Feeling: An Analysis of the Elizabeth Farm Museum* (1989). Unpaged.

correspondence exactly when the house was painted, when the marble chimney pieces were installed and with what patience she managed internal affairs. It could be argued that the interiors are more reflective of Elizabeth Macarthur and her daughters than of John due to the choices in furniture and furnishings and through Elizabeth's maintenance of the interiors after John's death.

An innovative approach to the interpretation of the building as artefact, and the museum as a working house, was based on a strong desire for visitors to be educated and informed about colonial history through a clear engagement and enjoyment with the spaces once occupied by the original occupants. This house was substantially restored at a time when museums were a familiar and traditionally constructed concept and houses with newly identified heritage values were becoming house 'museums' but there has not been a decision to change their appearance; in fact, the interiors appear similar in substance and structure. In 2023 a Curator led program by the MoH replaced soft furnishings and installed new lighting and art works and projected replacements of soft furnishings 'ensuring a high standard of presentation will be maintained over coming decades.'<sup>252</sup>

Curriculum-based education programs relied on the accurate preservation of the interiors to explore the buildings as a house, and as the home of the Macarthurs. The extremely successful experiential primary school program 'Transported in Time' (1989-), continues decades after the staff, dressed as Macarthur servants from 1828, first lined-up students as convicts for their tickets of leave. This research-based program enables access to the 'invisible occupants' of the 'new social history', the servants of the early nineteenth century,

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<sup>252</sup> MoH Curator Scott Hill presented on "Elizabeth Farm: the challenges of maintaining a 'no barrier' house museum" at the ACAHUCH symposium *Keeping House* (Melbourne, 6 November 2024).

by students carrying out similar tasks in the spaces in which they originally took place—the interiors. Sweeping, dusting, cooking and washing are all relevant to the upkeep of a house. Changes in demographics that mirrored cultural diversity (especially in the local area) increased the interest and engagement of school children in this program.

Conversely, ‘The House that John Built’<sup>253</sup> another ‘hands on’ education program researched and designed for secondary schools, was short-lived. Developed in 1993, it focused on colonial construction methods using visual access to the ‘original’ 1793 roof beams as the basis for students to construct a simpler, similar build. Most of the program took place in the grounds and seemed too big of a leap for students to link the practical to the theoretical.

In the Trust, an unwritten policy is that every piece of interpretation, whatever its form, must be based on the Statement of Significance to make accessible, or amplify, an area of significance for the property. Curatorial research informed experiential public programs, which in turn, relied on the accuracy of associative interiors for their subject matter, and to connect visitors with the narratives of the occupants. Weekend programs included: ‘The Printed Page’ with information on bookbinding and printing; ‘Colonial Colours’ an exhibition of paint colours for home renovators with advice on decorative finishes, Candlelight tours ‘the candles will be lit, the fires burning, and the rooms set up as they would have been used on an April evening in the 19<sup>th</sup> century,’ and ‘Snapshot’ an exhibition of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century photographs and conservation advice. Home renovators were a target audience—a connection to Macarthur and his ‘grand designs.’ Most of the visitors lived in houses and many were inexperienced renovators of older houses, so the programs offered a meaningful connection between nineteenth century practices and twentieth century activities,

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<sup>253</sup> Accessed 29 October 2024. <https://first.mhns.wa.gov.au/#record/13269>.

with practitioners sharing their specialist knowledge. Other programs included *'Baa! Baa! Visit the house of John and Elizabeth Macarthur and the birthplace of the Australian wool industry.'* This popular program showed the importance of Macarthur and the wool industry through activities such as sheep shearing, weaving by contemporary craftspeople and access to descendants of the Macarthur merino flock. The 'educative' experience was hands-on, enjoyable, available to a wide audience, was Curatorially sound being based on the significance of the property and did not cause damage to the interiors. This program was an extension of the interiors to the exteriors and made accessible the heritage value of the property in a way not otherwise possible.

As apartments became the residential norm in Parramatta, *Elizabeth Farm* offered a different and valid experience just by being itself and—looking to the culturally diverse community in the 1990s — to acknowledge their cultural values, particularly through food and dance, with those of the property.<sup>254</sup> These events were chosen with a curatorial intention to create an enjoyable connection with the significance of the property without compromising the appearance or conservation of the interiors.

A common topic at meetings at *Elizabeth Farm* in the 1990s was Curatorial philosophy and practice at the property. Findings from the 'Elizabeth Farm 1793-1993' Bicentennial Seminar on October 24, 1993, reinforced that 'What we are helping to create today is a fuller, more accurate and worthwhile picture of the past...one that reveals themes and issues as crucial to this place today as they were to Parramatta and its environs 200 years ago.'<sup>255</sup>

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<sup>254</sup> Elizabeth's garden was another community connection with growers of heritage plants. In the 1990s, 'Festival of the Olives', a major two-day community event with contributions from the local Mediterranean neighbourhood linked with one of the earliest known olive trees in the colony.

<sup>255</sup> Joan Kerr, *Elizabeth Farm: Proceedings of the Elizabeth Farm Bicentennial Seminar Parramatta 24 October 1993* (Sydney: Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales, 1995), 7.



Figure 24. *The kitchen at Elizabeth Farm*. Photograph © James Horan. Accessed 29 September 2025. <https://blogs.sydneylivingmuseums.com.au/cook/a-spring-in-our-step/index.html>

In accordance with Trust policy, a Reassessment Day was held in 1994 to review the operations and conservation philosophy of the property. Trust stakeholders, including Curators, the Director and other staff associated with the house agreed that the opportunity to appreciate the house and especially the interiors (rooms, sequences of spaces and details through open-access experience, recognition of the historic quality of the house and its association with using original fabric literally and metaphorically—the Macarthurs stood on this stone), was still relevant. The primary significance of the Macarthurs was reiterated, and the importance of using detailed, extensive public and private documentation to deliver this significance was acknowledged. It was noted that visitors were, by and large, the ‘ordinary public’—perceptive but not sophisticated in their knowledge of history, and that most visitors were school children. The property appealed to visitors as an attractive destination. It was experienced as a ‘place’ and not as a museum. The sub-theme of soft furnishings added an ambience, so visitors didn’t feel as if they were being ‘taught.’ This was education through engagement. The Curator’s role is—often to write and once accepted by the Trustees—to

ensure that the Statement of Significance is carried out. The 1997 Conservation Plan containing the Statement of Significance, was based on the spirit of the 1982 document. Conservation and interpretation objectives were clear, their efficacy based heavily on the accurate appearance of the interiors as at the time of John and Elizabeth Macarthur; and allowed change to the appearance of the house only when research based. The Trust aims to interpret the property... by, amongst other things,

Devising methods of presenting the house to the public in a way which is indicative of the early occupants, their way of life, and their contribution to the development of the colony...[and] conserving the existing structures that...illustrate the sequential phases of its occupation and development. The domestic character of the estate should be emphasised using material from... Macarthur occupation: provenanced, generic and reproduced; the domestic character of the house must be respected. Its use as a family home should be reinforced using provenanced and researched material. In general, the interior should continue to evoke the period up to 1834. The house should be brought to life involving as many senses as possible, including smells (fire, flowers), and sounds (fire, cooking), in an imaginative, evocative, and representative way. <sup>256</sup>



Figure 25. *Elizabeth Farm* Drawing Room. Photographer unknown, 2006, Museums of History NSW.

Curators came and went with organisational restructures which moved gradually to the centralisation of the role off site. In the 1980s, the full-time curatorial position at *Elizabeth Farm* came with an Assistant (Education) Curator. The Assistant Curator role was removed and the substantive role became a fulltime Curator with History. This position changed to one of a Curator with Social History and Education—whose curatorial responsibilities were often shared with *Meroogal* in Nowra—to a Curator with decorative arts, thence to a curatorial team based at *Lyndhurst*, the Trust Headquarters in Glebe in 1990 and responsible for three properties. Thence a return to *Elizabeth Farm* to acting Curator, followed by Curators with decorative and fine arts and information management, to Curator and Assistant Curator shared between *Rouse Hill Estate*, geographically close but interpretationally opposite, thence to Assistant Curator (Researcher) and Curator/Managers with social history qualifications and so on. The changes and transformations continue.

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<sup>256</sup> Suzanne Bravery, *Elizabeth Farm 70 Alice Street Rosehill Conservation Plan* (Sydney: Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales, 1997), 13-14.

This disruptive, constantly changing, and distancing approach to the curatorship of this property has placed the preservation of accurate interiors at serious risk. This level of inconsistency of curatorial responsibility and recognition means that staff are confused about the role of Curator. This makes it harder for the Curator to effectively lead the small and usually committed team. I believe that basing a Curator at the property for which they are responsible for the conservation and interpretation, is the most effective and sustainable approach to devising and implementing long-term strategic plans, and to enable daily presentation of the house and its interiors with best practice interpretation. A suitably qualified person is needed to best co-ordinate contractors and consultants and advocate on behalf of the property, effectively manage staff, enable meaningful engagement with the community, and ensure a detailed, accurate presentation of the interiors.

When curatorial expertise was moved off-site, or was shared with another property, it reduced the opportunities for a concentrated focus on making the presentation of the property accessible— accurate, fresh, vibrant, sensory and engaging. A curatorial presence benefits the house and ensures that standards are set and met, they advocate for the place, develop and engage with communities and audiences. Whilst recognising the importance of an on-site Curator, it is also important to acknowledge that the curatorial tenure be capped, and that detailed briefings provide carry-over material. It is important that decisions are questioned, but that any changes are based on a sound understanding of the reasons that these decisions were made in the first place.

When relying on this minimalist presentation of an historic interior, one incorrect or out of place object can skew the entire interpretation. For *Elizabeth Farm* interiors to work as a house not a museum, this delicate balance must be maintained and, of course, reviewed. For this to happen, a responsible Curator with social history and house museum management skills as well as expertise in at least one area of the collection, and a commitment by the Trust to appropriately resource the position (whether shared with another property or with other curatorial work or as a consultant), is essential. ‘Less is more’ may apply to the presentation of *Elizabeth Farm*, but not necessarily to its management structure.

In the decades since *Elizabeth Farm* opened to visitors as a house museum with an emphasis on the domestic character of the ‘house’, there have been different curatorial approaches to the narrative. Several Curators used public programs as the key interpretational device, another linked with other Trust properties, and yet another has seen the house as an ‘installation’ and focused effort on investigating the spaces ‘in between’ the evidence and narratives of the people who lived there.

Curatorial conventions established at both *Vaucluse House* and *Elizabeth Farm* that emulated nineteenth century good housekeeping practices (recorded in manuals of domestic economy), conservation cleaning, respectful of the original surfaces and mindful of those on reproduction furniture, was continued under curatorial direction by Trust staff in the manner of the nineteenth century servant were continued with the changing curatorial presence. As at *Vaucluse House*, soft furnishings have been used to represent seasonal changes in the house, where in summer heavy curtains were removed from the Drawing Room and bamboo fans placed on the mantelpiece, case covers changed, and soft green gauze placed over gilt framed mirrors and large portraits as protection from fly dirt. Flowers were picked from plantings by

the Macarthurs, many imported by John and grown by Elizabeth, in the eastern garden and placed in period vases on the Drawing Room mantel and loo table and on the dressing table in the Pink Bedroom. The house was dressed for Christmas in December. All this reflected the seasonal changes that were occurring on the outside, in the interior. By focusing on the carefully contrived appearance of the interiors, this curatorial work continues to bring the house to life.

## Conclusion

This chapter has shown that the role of professional Curators in interpreting historic interiors is critical; that the use of an innovative and engaging research-based approach to the appearance of interiors works; and that valuing the accuracy of domestic interiors is essential. Despite a rough start with a shell of a building and a small provenanced collection, the curatorial policy of respecting *Elizabeth Farm* as a house and enabling visitor access to its historically charged interiors without barriers (as if in one's own house) continues today. The challenge of determining and maintaining these interiors as a site of historic encounter has been met by professional Curators with specialist knowledge in colonial architectural history, education, fine and decorative arts, design and social history. Representing these interiors accurately continues to be the focus for providing the public with experiential access to the property and its past. This can only be achieved by ongoing on-site curatorial involvement.

For over two centuries, this property, and particularly these interiors, provide a clear example of the quiet role of women operating as family and property managers. As historian Beverley Kingston wrote in 1984 'That this house has survived is in part because of ... women who made it a home...Elizabeth Macarthur and her daughters, [and]... the Swann sisters...cherished it because it was a house with a history to them... There is nothing more

evident in a house than the sense that it has been cherished as a home. And there is nothing less tangible in the historical record than the qualities of the women who have made it so.’<sup>257</sup> This foreshadowed the acquisition of *Meroogal* where the intangible qualities of the women who cherished this home were made tangible.

<sup>257</sup> Beverley Kingston, *Elizabeth Macarthur* (Sydney: Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales Sydney, 1984), 12.

I knew there was no way to unknow it, that once the past throbs in the veins of the present there is no more pretending to be a passenger reading idly on a train.

Dominic Smith, *Return to Valetto* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2023), 220.

## Chapter Four

### Conserving the authentic: Curator as ‘imperceptible’ enabler at *Meroogal*



Figure 26. *Meroogal* Front Entrance. Photograph taken by Suzanne Bravery, 1988, private collection.

‘If women’s presence is evident anywhere in the record of historic material culture and heritage places, then surely it ought to be in house museums.’<sup>258</sup>

#### Introduction

This chapter, using the 1985 acquisition of *Meroogal*, Nowra, as a case study, explores the challenges that the professional Curator faces when enabling the preservation of a domestic interior which will be maintained (largely) ‘as is’ upon acquisition. The accuracy of

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<sup>258</sup>Linda Young, “A woman’s place is in the house...museum: Interpreting women’s histories in house museums” *Open Museum Journal*, 5 (2002), 1-24. Accessed 26 December 2024. <https://researchprofiles.canberra.edu.au/en/publications/a-womans-place-is-in-the-housemuseum>.

*Meroogal*'s interiors is informed not only by the employment of the professional Curator (whose work whilst critical to the success of the project is deliberately 'invisible' here), but also by the objective and detailed sharing of information on the provenance of the spaces, its occupants, and the collection, by Mrs June Wallace, long-standing family member, regular visitor, most recent owner, and latterly, honorary Curator. Heritage consultant, Meredith Walker, was closely involved with *Meroogal*'s adaption to a house museum. Walker used the Australia ICOMOS Burra Charter to guide her work. This blend of professional Curator, honorary Curator and heritage consultant was unusual, and in terms of the preservation of the interiors, it worked very well. The conservation and interpretation decisions that this informal team made, supported by Trust resources, still stand today.

## Meroogal as cherished family home: through the generations (1886-1985)

It is the interiors at *Meroogal* that attracted the attention of the Trust. *Meroogal* was designed by Kenneth McKenzie and built for his sister Jessie Thorburn and her daughters in 1886. McKenzie designed and constructed several buildings in the Shoalhaven area, including *Llanthony* at nearby Cambewarra, a house stylistically similar to *Meroogal*. The interiors at *Llanthony* were considerably altered in private ownership, making the interiors at *Meroogal* even more significant. This provides a useful comparison between approaches to interiors when in private and public ownership. With few exceptions, all the furniture at *Meroogal* was purchased new for the move to the house in 1886 and was late Victorian in design. It was the survival of this furniture that triggered twentieth-century public interest in preserving the interiors.<sup>259</sup>

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<sup>259</sup> Susanne Forge, *Victorian Splendour: Australian Interior Decoration 1837-1901* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1981).

The house had been lived in by a range of people as their home over many years, and when acquired by the Trust, the interiors largely reflected this plurality of occupancy. Whilst the house was lived in for the most part by women, male relatives occasionally stayed, leaving objects as well as recollections. As time passed, service rooms were added, and the household employed occasional servants up until 1916. There is little remaining evidence of servants within these interiors, as rooms were subsequently repurposed. Members of the extended family visited regularly and, as circumstances determined, lived in the house for lengthy periods. Many female family members lived in *Meroogal* until their death. Surviving furniture and witness marks show that as the women aged and their mobility became impaired, they in turn moved from the upstairs to the only downstairs bedroom. The family was not wealthy and occasionally rented areas of the house to short-term guests. From the late 1940s, tenants shared the main house and the detached service wing with the family. Unusually and significantly, several interiors retain evidence of the changes in use and appearance as accommodation.

*Meroogal* was a cherished intergenerational family home, inherited through the maternal line, with minimal change to the form and use of the interiors. In 1956, *Meroogal* was left to three MacGregor sisters who either lived in the house or regularly stayed for several months. The house passed to fourth generation niece, June Wallace, in 1977. In a practice sometimes like that of a Curator, June Wallace consciously chose materials to match as-closely-as-possible those already existing, this included when layering new fabric (like textile, paint or wallpaper) on the old, or replacing it. This layering and dating of fabric show changes in the use of the interiors and the personalities, priorities, and circumstances of the occupants from the late nineteenth to late twentieth centuries. It also shows the availability of furnishing materials and patterns. A hierarchy of rooms was retained, with less formal changes in use on

the ground floor and in the ‘public’ rooms than in the first bedroom floor, service wing and ‘private’ rooms.

From 1978 to 1985, Mrs Wallace regularly visited the unoccupied house to maintain its appearance, often inviting visitors to stay. As the family lived elsewhere, *Meroogal* was placed on the open market in 1985. The property, including its contents, was sold that year to the Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales for use as a house museum, and opened to visitors three years later.

### *Meroogal* as domestic historic house museum: Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales from 1985 and the role and influence of the curator

*Meroogal* was acquired quite quickly by the Trust. It was alerted to the sale of the property by colleagues in the Heritage and Conservation Branch of the Department of Environment and Planning, who were told of the imminent sale by a Nowra resident who was concerned that the collection would be dismantled and the house adversely renovated. A key Trust condition of its acquisition was that the contents, including ephemera, remained intact and within the context of the original house interiors. Whilst the architecture of the building was interesting, it was the interiors that were the primary reason for acquisition — their seeming intactness a record of the layers of occupation.

These Victorian interiors could provide a physical and provenanced reference for informed reconstructions, not as a partially provenanced reconstruction as in previous house museum interpretations; and with an Australian, rather than an English, derivation. Prior to the sale, selected rooms had been photographed for a general publication on Australian Victorian

interiors.<sup>260</sup> The Trust Director, Peter Watts, approached then Premier, Neville Wran, with pages of the book in hand, and was successful in raising funds to purchase *Meroogal* prior to auction.

The acquisition of *Meroogal* was seen as critical in strengthening the Trust's portfolio of properties, particularly due to the cultural significance of its collection. The size of the Trust, the unusually supportive nature of the political and economic landscape, the public interest in Australian history leading to the Bicentenary, the rise of the 'new social history' and the academic interest in feminist discourse, combined to ensure sufficient resourcing to determine and implement the considered conservation and interpretation of this property. This was a stimulating, satisfying and exhausting time to be a house museum Curator in terms of opportunities to question and determine the appearance of significant and diverse properties, with access to generous public resources with which to undertake this work, and heightened the expectations of government and the wider community to achieve excellent results.

Being a relatively 'new' statutory authority meant the Trust was expected and resourced to take 'risks' — though calculated ones. It was important that the Trust set up, and then maintained its reputation as a credible state heritage organisation. In announcing the acquisition, the Premier said:

Meroogal is ... particularly important...for the Trust. It is the first house owned outside the metropolitan area, the first late nineteenth-century house acquired and the

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<sup>260</sup> Susanne Forge, *Victorian Splendour: Australian Interior Decoration 1837-1901* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1981).

only one which has its original contents largely in place...purchased... to help fill a gap in the range of houses shown to the public.<sup>261</sup>

Soon after the Trust purchased the property, a Statement of Significance was formed to guide Trust policy. It was determined that the primary cultural significance of *Meroogal* was ‘as an artefact of history and its evidence of the lives of four generations of one family, its history and its evidence of taste and circumstances.’<sup>262</sup> That which we leave behind was deemed important.

With *Meroogal*, the Trust focused direction and resources on maintaining the interiors as they appeared at the time of acquisition. This presented a new type of challenge for the Curator and required at least the same level of professional curatorial and consultant engagement as the presentation of the interiors at other Trust properties. This challenge was due to the implementation of the Conservation Policy, which advocated the careful preservation of the well-used and everyday objects, without restoring them to new or changing their appearance. So not only was the hand of the Curator deliberately ‘invisible’ or ‘imperceptible,’ so also was the work of the Conservator, working with twentieth century material such as congoium and malthoid floor coverings, about which little was known. Added to the challenge was the distance of *Meroogal* from the Trust’s headquarters in Sydney, and from conservation facilities in Canberra, and the ongoing level of consultation required. The outcome of these challenges was that deliberately few visible changes were made to the property’s appearance, and so a greater authenticity in interpretation, including that of incorporating extensive intangible heritage, was achieved. It was a real luxury, and a preservation necessity, to do

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<sup>261</sup> Meredith Walker, *MEROOGAL 35 West Street Nowra, New South Wales-A Conservation Plan* (Sydney: Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales, April 1986), 1.

<sup>262</sup> Meredith Walker, *MEROOGAL 35 West Street Nowra, New South Wales-A Conservation Plan* (Sydney: Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales, April 1986).

what the Trust did. Local history organisations on the South Coast have done their best in presenting local history but never had a professional perspective.

When the Trust determined that *Meroogal's* cultural significance was *not* its association with great, white well-known males of English descent living in aspirational harbourside mansions or with a substantial pastoral landholding in western Sydney, all with international connections and historical gravitas, but was instead with a modest, productive, intergenerational family of women in regional NSW, the Curator's role in interpreting this narrative was destined to be challenging. There were very few such modest historic house museums with a layered and provenanced collection *in situ* available for reference that were open to the public. Many non-government owned houses of such scale and use, when opened as historic house museums, appeared without their provenanced collection or with modest resources available for preservation. So, the curatorial treatment of this house provided, and then made available, a new template for others to use.

The Curator was guided in decision-making by the 1986 Conservation Plan. This document, used in curatorial best practice as the basis of all decisions about the conservation and interpretation of a property, determined:

The property, together with associated documents and the recollections of people associated with it, provides a remarkable opportunity to understand and demonstrate aspects of the relationships between a family and its individual members and their material culture. The primary significance of Meroogal is as an artefact of history and

its evidence of the lives of four generations of one family who lived in the house, their history and its evidence of taste and circumstances.<sup>263</sup>

The Curator was assisted in decision-making by the physical (tangible) and the intangible heritage of the place. It is unusual to find domestic interiors used by the one family, which offer the cumulative layering of material culture *in situ*, and even more unusual to recognise this as an historic resource. The interiors of *Meroogal*, a rare survival of a two-storeyed Picturesque weatherboard town house with servants' wing, on an outsized suburban block on the edge of a regional river town in New South Wales, are important for their appearance as an unstintingly honest portrayal of the cumulative individual taste and collective circumstances of four generations and a hundred years of continuous family occupation. *Meroogal*'s richly layered interiors form a coherent narrative and celebrate the everyday, the 'ordinary', and the idiosyncratic as important. They provide a counterpoint to previously accepted notions of the historically valuable and culturally significant. With a layered and provenanced collection in its original context, these interiors offered an unprecedented opportunity and challenge to the Trust in terms of engaging visitors in small, domestic, historically charged and often familiar, spaces.

These 'stabilised' interiors, accessible by guided tour and without barriers, deliberately appear little changed from their appearance in 1985 when the Trust acquired the property. The treatment of these interiors is valued as a contemporary example of the conservation principle of 'as much as is necessary, but as little as possible,'<sup>264</sup> of using 'the building as

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<sup>263</sup> Meredith Walker, *MEROOGAL 35 West Street Nowra, New South Wales-A Conservation Plan* (Sydney: Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales, April 1986).

<sup>264</sup> Meredith Walker, *Australia ICOMOS Illustrated Burra Charter*, 1982.

document' that is, respecting every layer of history rather than 'peeling back' to one layer; and of using oral history as the basis for much of the interpretation.

These largely preserved interiors are an example of the influence of contemporary conservation and curatorial practice at a local level, particularly the early use of the Australia ICOMOS Burra Charter by one of its authors,<sup>265</sup> and the application of then-current social history theories, including a focus on women's history. These interiors are reflective of state government heritage priorities (including preparations for the Bicentenary), initiatives, and values, through the provision of protective legislation and funding for the acquisition of the property, and for its management as an asset.

Whilst still in private ownership and used by the family, formal recognition of the significance of the heritage value of *Meroogal* came with its listing on the National Trust Register in 1977, eight years prior to its acquisition for public access. Listing does not imply right-of-access to the public, and the listing of a place in this Register has no legal force, but the National Trust encourages owners to respect the heritage significance of the property. *Meroogal* was listed on the Register of the National Estate on 25 August 1981.

After acquisition by the Trust, *Meroogal* was listed on the State Heritage Register in 1999<sup>266</sup> because of its outstanding cultural significance. *Meroogal* was considered rare due to its intactness.<sup>267</sup> These listings on the Register of the National Estate and the State Heritage Register recognised the significance of the property but did not give legal protection to the preservation of the interiors. Instead, recognition of the heritage value of these interiors has been determined, and somewhat defined, by the philosophies and practice of Curators and

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<sup>265</sup> Meredith Walker is the co-author of the *Australia ICOMOS Illustrated Burra Charter*, 1982.

<sup>266</sup> New South Wales State Heritage Register No. 00953 gazetted 2 April 1999.

<sup>267</sup> Meredith Walker, *MEROOGAL 35 West Street Nowra, New South Wales-A Conservation Plan* (Sydney: Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales, April 1986).

consultants working within the context of the Trust's value of the property as a significant cultural asset; and a recognition of the overriding importance of enabling and ensuring public access to a publicly-owned historic house (museum).

This recognition of the importance of enabling and ensuring public access to the interiors of the publicly-owned historic house includes active investigation of the fabric. Scientific analysis of paint scrapes and building fabric provided evidence to better inform curatorial decision-making in the restoration or reconstruction of *Meroogal's* interiors. Poorly researched historic house museum interiors that ignore physical evidence can appear generic, bland and inaccurate. In the Drawing Room at *Vaucluse House*, we know that the passionflower frieze wallpaper is original to the Wentworths and may have been chosen by Sarah or William Charles, but we do not know that for certain. To direct a visitor's focus to the provenanced Wentworth frieze, the twentieth century main wallpaper infill is a neutral all-over paper patterned to emulate silk moiré, which may have been its contemporary, but for which there is no evidence. This is a considered curatorial decision rather than an uninformed opinion.

At *Meroogal*, on the other hand, using the physical evidence and the available oral histories which 'flesh out' the other dimensions of the women and men who lived in the house, we know who decorated, when and how they decorated, and the reasons for these sometimes very personal decisions. Curatorial exploration of these decorating decisions can enable forecasting to broader socio-economic social history, such as the Great Depression of the 1930s, or to individual taste such as that of an elderly woman who lived at home with little disposable income and had a passion for painting her favourite objects blue. It is a statement in conservation and interpretation and one that recognises and respects the value of provenanced material culture in its original interiors, and of using the building as artefact.

Critical to the decision-making of the Curators and consultants, was the considered contribution of June Wallace, from 1985 until her death in 2010. It was unusual for a Curator to have access to a family member who was able to provide insight into the motivations and circumstances of single women over many generations. June Wallace was a key component in the accurate preservation of this historic house museum, and ably assisted curators in ensuring that the interiors retained their appearance and atmosphere as a home rather than a museum. This valuable assistance included: the loan of objects once part of the interiors and since removed (from furniture to works on paper); the recording over several years (both *in situ* and off site) of exhaustive, extensive, and comprehensive oral histories of the occupants, their lifestyle, the appearances of the interiors and exteriors over a century of change and adaptation, indeed of every aspect of the life of the property, including the provenance of every object in the collection, and the reasons for changes in these appearances.

These recollections were clear, considered and offered a personal, detailed and largely affectionate perspective of the lives and personalities of those who called *Meroogal* home. That the Trust knows so much and, in such detail, of the nature and habits of each of the extended family members who lived there is due in large part to June Wallace's consistent, considered and conscientious recollections. June Wallace's contribution means that visitors can engage with the faces in photographs as individuals and be aware of their personalities and their particular roles within the family and the community; that we know who made the decisions about the pattern of the wallpaper and the paint colour of the ceramics, or whose skills embroidered the pillow shams; that we know how to make Tot's loaf sponge by beating with a knife rather than a fork, or the name of the dog captured leaping joyously in a photograph. June Wallace's passion for *Meroogal*, her love of the family and her incredible

energy for a constructive life was infectious. Her willingness to share this was hugely appreciated as an extraordinarily rare and treasured legacy. June Wallace was, in effect, honorary Curator in the definition of the term as ‘keeper’ of the interiors whilst in private ownership, and of the memories of their occupants in public ownership. ‘[Meroogal] was left to me on trust, to look after.’<sup>268</sup>

June Wallace’s generous sharing of detailed information about the family and the property, enabled a more acute and accurate understanding of the reasons behind decisions in determining and keeping up the appearances of the interiors prior to public ownership. This would not have been possible using written or pictorial documentation alone. June Wallace brought the house and the personalities and routines of its occupants to life. Her reminiscences enable the interiors to be viewed with an immediacy and intimacy, an authority and authenticity, that is rare and valuable in historic house museums. The importance of these recollections, this intangible heritage, has been acknowledged in *Meroogal*’s 1986 Statement of Significance.<sup>269</sup> The critical use of intangible heritage is one of the things that sets *Meroogal* apart from other properties in the Trust’s portfolio, and from other historic houses in public ownership.

The decision to purchase *Meroogal* changed the direction of the Trust. No longer was this statutory authority solely the recipient of transfers from other state government departments of historic houses whose interiors had been altered, sometimes irrevocably. It had now actively acquired a privately-owned house with an ‘authentic’ interior because, refreshingly and perhaps controversially, the everyday and ‘ordinary’ lives of private individuals who

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<sup>268</sup> June Wallace interviewed by Meredith Walker and Suzanne Bravery 11.11.1987. *Meroogal* oral histories. Accessed 20 September 2024. <https://first.mhns.wa.gov.au/#record/11334>.

<sup>269</sup> Meredith Walker, *MEROOGAL 35 West Street Nowra, New South Wales-A Conservation Plan* (Sydney: Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales, April 1986).

were not figures of historical importance, were considered significant enough to be valued as public heritage. This acquisition and the subsequent approach to the conservation and interpretation of the property, particularly to the appearance of the interiors, pushed the Trust further into a leadership role in cultural heritage management at a time when individual and collective heritage was considered a worthwhile investment in the national consciousness.



Figure 27. *Meroogal* Sitting Room. Photograph taken by Irvine Green in 1976, Susanne Forge, *Victorian Splendour: Australian Interior Decoration 1837-1901* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1981).

*Meroogal* was one of the first properties where the provenanced domestic interiors appeared intact. The irony was that the women were so poor, they didn't have the money to renovate or update the interiors — items were held together, patched and repaired, for years. This layering of material was similar to the family approach to the interiors at *Rouse Hill Estate*, a property later managed by the Historic Houses Trust.

The preservation of *Meroogal* was a challenge for Trust Curators and an unusual conservation approach for house museums in public ownership in NSW.<sup>270</sup> In ‘a cautious and steady approach to caring for its fabric’, examples of other interiors with original furnishings in public ownership were consulted.<sup>271</sup> These included National Trust of Australia (NSW) rural properties *Saumarez* in Armidale, occupied by three different families from the 1830s, and *Miss Traill’s House* at Bathurst, home to Ida Traill from 1937-1976. These two properties were, however, comparisons of limited use, with interiors furnished to an earlier period, or the collection layered with contents not always originally from the house.

*Calthorpes’ House*, Red Hill, Canberra, and later *Rouse Hill Estate*,<sup>272</sup> were both government owned and professionally curated historic house museums that offered comparisons of greater relevance, where the layering and provenance of the family collections within the context of their original interiors, was of primary significance.

*Calthorpes’ House*, acquired by the Department of Territories in 1984, offered clear parallels in the nature of the collection and as a workable reference for Curators. As Curator Elaine Lawson wrote in 1988, the property ‘offers visitors a unique look at middle-class domestic life from the 1920s on...The most remarkable thing about the house and its contents is that they have survived.’<sup>273</sup> And perhaps, that they were valued by both their owners and by the professional Curator. Surviving family memories can sometimes ‘dictate’ narratives and unduly influence or reduce the role of the Curator. This does not appear to be the case here.

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<sup>270</sup> Meredith Walker, *MEROOGAL 35 West Street Nowra, New South Wales-A Conservation Plan*, (Sydney: Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales, April 1986). Houses open to the public with ‘notable associated period contents’ included *Saumarez*, Armidale, *Miss Traill’s House*, Bathurst and *Camden Park*, Camden.

<sup>271</sup> Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales Trustees’ minutes 16 June 1986 Item 2.3.1.

<sup>272</sup> *Rouse Hill House* has also been referred to by its managing authority as *Rouse Hill House and Farm* and currently as *Rouse Hill Estate*.

<sup>273</sup> Elaine Lawson in Lisa Keens ‘Calthorpes’ House’ *Belle* (April-May 1988),37.

Lawson continues ‘The house itself gives clues as to how the family lived, as do...very efficient records... Gaps in the information were filled in by the...daughters.’<sup>274</sup> *Calthorpes’ House* was built in 1927 with the interiors completely furnished using a Beard Watson catalogue,<sup>275</sup> with few changes in appearance, until Mrs Calthorpe’s death in 1979.

Curatorial reliance on surviving family members to provide knowledge about a house and its occupants is common to *Meroogal*, *Calthorpes’ House* and *Rouse Hill Estate*. Family memories add another string to the curatorial bow – they are an extra source of information rarely available, and the professional Curator should consider them in the same dispassionate and scholarly way that all other forms of evidence are considered. However, sometimes these memories conflict with those of others family members, or with the physical evidence. At *Rouse Hill Estate*, the conflicting family memories made the role of the Curator more difficult, but they also enabled the communication of differing narratives. Rather than reduce the role of professional Curator, these family oral histories made the role even more important. So, while the memories of family members were used at all three historic house museums, and form an important component of the interpretation, they are not the only basis for this interpretation. The oral histories are just one area of research.

In 1988, Elaine Lawson wrote of the associative value given the ordinary object and decorative treatment by its location in its original context, the domestic interior, and of the importance of the house being both real and intact. Lawson continued:

Unlike most Australian house museums, which... are the product of their curators, Calthorpes’ House remains the product of its owners...In preserving Calthorpes’

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<sup>274</sup> Elaine Lawson in Lisa Keens “Calthorpes’ House” *Belle* (April-May 1988), 38.

<sup>275</sup> Accessed 20 September 2024. [https://dictionaryofsydney.org/entry/beard\\_watson\\_limited](https://dictionaryofsydney.org/entry/beard_watson_limited) accessed 2 April 2024. Beard Watsons was a Sydney retailer and manufacturer of high-class furnishings for the home, renowned especially for its quality furniture.

House, the Commonwealth has accepted the concept that the material world of ordinary people has relevance and significance both for the present and for the future.<sup>276</sup>

Of course, *Calthorpes' House*, in its form as house museum, is the visible product of BOTH its owners and its Curators. In these three houses, the challenge of the Curator was to leave no discernible change to the appearance of these interiors. Interiors were valued as primary evidence of the role of careful and methodical housekeeping in a domestic environment, of the availability of fabrics and furnishings, of contextual examples of individual taste and circumstances, of the importance of women's work and of the pivotal role of the family and the community. An understanding of the appearance and of the use of the interiors derived from extant documents and from oral histories of the extended family. The curatorial role was an enabling, deliberately invisible, and consistently vigilant one. It ensured that the house appeared as 'the product of its owners' rather than of its Curators. The approach taken at *Calthorpes' House* clearly influenced that of the Curator at *Meroogal*.

Continuing recognition of the significance of the 'authentic,' the Calthorpe daughters engaged in public programs on everyday living such as baking and cleaning in their familial home, using the original interiors and collection to engage and inform visitors. At *Meroogal*, June Wallace featured in a short film that recreated domestic labour, such as beating the batter of great aunt Tot Thorburn's sponge loaf with a knife on a dinner plate in the Kitchen. This curatorial-driven demonstration used provenanced objects in the collection, material

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<sup>276</sup>Elaine Lawson, "History, heritage or theatre: the presentation of interiors at Lanyon, Calthorpes' House and Mugga Mugga," *Canberra Historical Journal*, no 36 (Sept 1995), 2-6.

from written and oral histories, and was performed by a family member, in the original context.

Whilst these two historic house museums shared a similar curatorial approach, *Calthorpes' House* was less complex to interpret. There were fewer narratives (two generations of occupants instead of four), and one complete set of well-maintained and little-altered interiors from a department store catalogue, itself retained in the collection. Instead of being removed and replaced, changes in technology were retained in or near their original working location, such as in the placement of superseded stoves side-by-side in the kitchen.

It was not until the opening, in 1999, of another Trust property, *Rouse Hill Estate*, that comparable layered interiors with a lengthy and continuous intergenerational family provenance became publicly accessible. These interiors offered physical evidence of the lives of six generations of the Rouse and Terry family, from 1813 to 1978,<sup>277</sup> left in an 'as is' state when last occupied, but with modifications. The property was resumed by the New South Wales government in 1978 and elements of the collection are presented as at that date. Legal issues around ownership of elements of the collection, conflicting opinions from sparring family members on the curatorial approach taken for the preservation of the collection,<sup>278</sup> and the reality of a family member still living in the house as his home, inevitably influenced the appearance of the interiors. In terms of interpreting family narratives in these charged spaces, the Curator was tasked with determining how these contested histories might play out in the accurate preservation of their appearance.

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<sup>278</sup> From the author's professional experience and as noted in the Visitor Introductory Video from 1999.

*Rouse Hill Estate*, despite its referential layering of furnishings in their original interiors (but not always in their agreed original locations), was at risk of offering the visitor an uneasy compromise. Twenty years elapsed between the date interpretation was originally planned to commence and the date the house opened to visitors as an historic house museum. Physical access by the visitor to these crowded, layered interiors had to be limited using metal barriers in door aprons in the downstairs rooms of the main house. Some rooms were closed altogether. The fragility of the stairs and of the first-floor flooring prevented visitor access to many bedrooms and service rooms.

Using a range of primary sources and the oral histories of many (but the subjective slant of few), combined with a curatorial decision to allow visitors to experience every interior in the house without barriers, visitors to *Meroogal*, as do those to *Calthorpes' House*, have comprehensive access to 'authentic' interiors, in contrast to *Rouse Hill Estate*.

Further primary research made it increasingly apparent that to take *Meroogal* back to a particular point in its history meant the removal and destruction of the most recent layers of occupation. Ten years of resident Tottie Thorburn's late 19<sup>th</sup> century diaries were transcribed, and Curators delved into the wealth of ephemera, slowly uncovering material on every generation of family residency. Curators, conservators and a housekeeper cleaned, conserved and catalogued the collection. Minor invisible repairs and maintenance was undertaken.

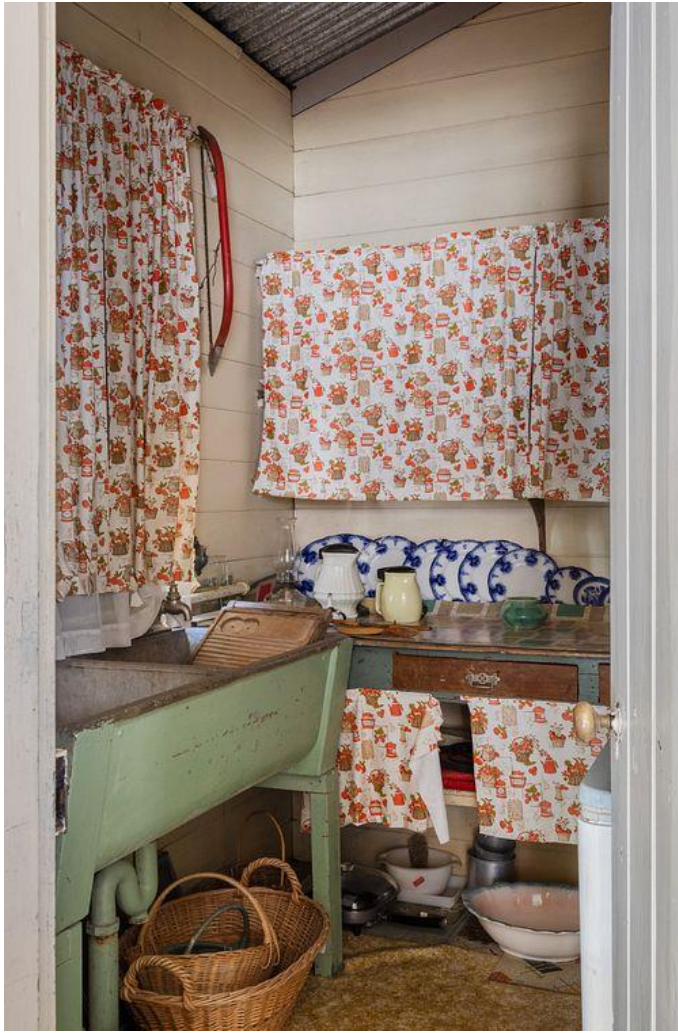


Figure 28 Kitchen, *Meroogal*. Photograph © Katherine Lu for Museums of History NSW. Accessed 29 September 2025. <https://mhnsw.au/stories/general/learn-more-about-meroogal/>

Extensive consultation with the many still-living family members, former residents and neighbours was undertaken. In a then-typical Trust approach of setting and then solving problems with practitioners at all levels (and usually, with the widest definition of stakeholders), opinions were sought from sector practitioners in the technical and interpretative areas (including lecturers from conservation courses, volunteers and Friends

groups associated with other Trust properties), to determine approaches to the treatment and presentation of *Meroogal's* interiors.

The Trust held workshops with internal and external stakeholders including Trustees, curatorial and management staff. Several days of analysis of the comments and experiences were undertaken by the Director and Curator. A day was spent at *Meroogal* with June Wallace, who answered specific questions. All this resulted in the acceptance that all periods of the interiors were important, resulting in a Conservation Policy that acknowledged:

3.4 Any changes must be reversible, and elements removed must be retained in the house. At any stage the house should be able to be returned exactly as the Trust purchased it.<sup>279</sup>

3.6 Acquisition should generally...be limited to either objects which were once in the house; or objects of a generally ephemeral nature... as props.<sup>280</sup>

These general principles of best practice reversible conservation, and of an essentially closed-collection, formed the basis of policies written over the next two years and reviewed and revised over the next twenty.

*Meroogal* interiors were not fixed to one time, they were an accurate representation of continuous use. The unusual layering of seemingly mundane soft furnishings, floor coverings

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<sup>279</sup> Meredith Walker, *MEROOGAL 35 West Street Nowra, New South Wales-A Conservation Plan*, (Sydney: Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales, April 1986).

<sup>280</sup> The (few) props that were used were labelled with the Trust's name and date of appearance at the property. Props were for educational and explanatory purposes and included a bucket for the water pump and could include the reconstructed stables block built to house visitor amenities.

and wallpapers, as well as of personal objects, was recognised as significant — as the visual survivors of occupation. In 1997 Curator, Scott Carlin, reflected that:

Significant historic domestic interiors are comparatively rare, as the constantly changing needs of domestic use and taste dictate cycles of change and renewal in most houses...The integrity of the interior... also influences the question of...significance...Alterations do not necessarily compromise integrity, indeed they can become as significant as the original fabric.<sup>281</sup>

In other words, an interior does not need to be stripped to its original ‘perfect’ appearance to be of value.

Curatorial challenges at *Meroogal* included preserving the appearance of the interiors based on research and not on contemporary influences. Interestingly, while the then contemporary philosophy of the ‘new social history’ (which emphasised the importance of making visible the ‘invisible inhabitants’, including women), was useful in this acquisition, the current restoration trend was not. Walker wrote in 1986 that:

the value of Meroogal as an artefact is highlighted by the fact that most house museums are recreations of interiors necessarily based on extensive research but inevitable involving present day judgments...they [house museums] are fakes-soundly based, but fakes nevertheless.<sup>282</sup>

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<sup>281</sup> Scott Carlin, (ed.) *Our Home: Floorcoverings in Australia 1800-1950* exhibition catalogue (Sydney: Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales, 1997), 5.

<sup>282</sup> Meredith Walker, *MEROOGAL 35 West Street Nowra, New South Wales-A Conservation Plan* (Sydney: Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales, April 1986), 34.

This statement has implications for the ‘authenticity’ of the restored interiors in other house museums, and for the explanation necessary by Curators when these interiors are publicly accessible, as discussed in *Elizabeth Farm*.



Figure 29. Hallway to front door entrance at *Meroogal*. Photo © Katherine Lu for Museums of History NSW. Accessed 29 September 2025. <https://mhnsw.au/stories/general/learn-more-about-meroogal/>.

The overriding value of the *Meroogal* interiors was in their authenticity, which required preservation.<sup>283</sup> The appearance of these interiors was not determined by an external Curator, a real estate agent or a lifestyle publication. They did not conform to, nor were they frozen in, a particular period or external construct. Any decisions that had been made about the composition, appearance or indeed preservation of the interiors were made by the people who lived and worked in them as their home.

The Conservation Plan noted the conscious effort by the family, prior to Trust ownership, to document their lives. This included visually recording the interiors.<sup>284</sup> Family photographs,

from 1887 to 1980, show the exterior of the house (and periodically the garden) as a backdrop for posed groups. Images of the interiors were taken by people outside of the family and as the focus of the photograph not the background. In 1945, photographs were taken by local commercial photographer, Mary Duckworth, of the Kitchen and Sitting Room. In 1967, photographs were taken by architect, Anne Higham, of the Drawing Room. In 1977, conservationist, Bob Brown, captured the interiors of the Sitting Room and other main rooms in detail, in black and white. Together with colour photographs taken by Irvine Green in 1980

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<sup>283</sup> *Pocket Oxford Dictionary of Current English* revised by E. McIntosh Oxford Clarendon Press 1970 defines 'authentic' as 'trustworthy, genuine, not forged'. Whilst the treatment of all house museums should be authentic, I disagree in part with Charlotte H. F. Smith, "The House Enshrined: Great Man and Social History House Museums in the United States and Australia" (PhD diss., University of Canberra, 2002), 221, that 'authenticity... is an aesthetic style choice that is defined according to the historical, scientific and cultural trends of the day.' It is the role of the Curator to ensure that aesthetics is not a component of authenticity. That an interior is 'aesthetically pleasing' should be a by-product of decisions about its interpretation, not the reason for the decisions.

<sup>284</sup> Meredith Walker, *MEROOGAL 35 West Street Nowra, New South Wales-A Conservation Plan* (Sydney: Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales, April 1986). Appendix C, 14.

for publication, these images show earlier furnishing schemes and the arrangement. Little had changed over the decades.

The curatorial approach at *Meroogal* (of retaining the layers of building fabric and collection largely as acquired in 1985), contrasted sharply with a clearly articulated intervention into earlier properties. The practice of removing physical evidence to uncover the layer determined as of significance was a familiar one, and the temptation for Curators to continue this practice, inevitable.



Figure 30. Kitchen at *Meroogal*. Photograph © Sydney Living Museums. Photograph John Storey. Accessed 29 September 2025. <https://mhns.wa.gov.au/stories/general/learn-more-about-meroogal/>.

Of course, the interiors of *Meroogal* weren't a comprehensive representation of their pre-1985 state due to natural attrition through wear-and-tear, updating and disposal, dispersal to other family members and by sale, and the accumulation of components of others' collections as they became available through necessity or by choice. Whilst the interiors contained

elements of previous eras, there was insufficient original material to recreate any one style without the removal of later material or the substantial introduction of new material, both of which would greatly compromise their significance.<sup>285</sup> This realisation influenced curatorial decisions. The treatment of interiors at *Meroogal* once it was in public ownership, represented the practice that occurs in most private ownership situations: an accumulation of material culture. Only now in the 21st century, the suburban mansion is white, uncluttered and starkly modern with little evidence of the peculiarities of occupation, making the accurate preservation of *Meroogal*'s interiors even more important.

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<sup>285</sup> Peter Watts, *Trustees Meeting Minutes* no.63, Item no.3 (c), 16/6/1986. A workshop held prior to the opening with senior staff and other stakeholders looked at five options for presentation of the house: 1) accepting as found, 2) accepting as found with minor modifications, 3) presenting as it was in 1977, 4) resending as it was in 1956, and 5) presenting as it was in 1939. Each option compromised *Meroogal*'s agreed cultural significance by progressively removing original elements and reconstructing missing elements of the fabric, primarily the interiors.

‘Accepting as found’ most accurately reflected the significance of the place and was adopted in the 1986 Conservation Plan. Director Watts commented on earlier workshops that:

Most participants... found difficulty in accepting the implications which would require almost no changes to the house...there was seen to be a real problem in resolving the conflicts between conservation and presentation of the cultural significance of the place and the interpretation and educational function of the house. The Trust has important responsibilities in both areas...*Meroogal* crystallises these difficulties more than any house the Trust, and...most participants, have had to deal with previously.<sup>286</sup>

This was a real and timely challenge for the Curator.

It would be easy, theoretically, (and once would have been quite tempting), to return *Meroogal* to its late nineteenth century appearance when the late Victorian interiors, furniture and furnishings were new. This was when the house was at its most wealthy and arguably appeared at its best. There are dramatic narratives within the oral histories, for example of the long case clock in the Downstairs Hall: its damage in the Terara flood (where the new timber packing case body encasing the original clock face acts as a story of survival). Tottie Thorburn’s diaries through detailed entries of her travels connect the family across the properties of the Shoalhaven. We know the original colours of the paint, the finishes of the interiors and the daily routines of the occupants. These could have been easily restored and recreated but were not, for good reason. This approach would have required the removal of

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<sup>286</sup> Peter Watts, *Trustees Meeting Minutes* no.63, Item no.3 (c), 16/6/1986.

more recent narratives and more recent appearances, important layers in the history of the house and its interiors.

An anomaly in this approach is the treatment of the Drawing Room where the Trust has returned the layout of the furniture to that of a late nineteenth century front parlour. This is against the background of late twentieth century wallpaper purchased to match as-closely-as-possible an earlier wallpaper but determined in design and colour by what was locally and commercially available. This was a choice June Wallace made in keeping with honouring the history of the house and its past occupants. When the house was purchased by the Trust, June Wallace also requested the removal of the bed and cupboard in one corner as the room had been used more recently as an overflow bedroom. A review of this arrangement is overdue to interpret this use of the interior when acquired.

An additional exception to presenting the interiors of the main house 'as at 1985', the 'Sewing Room' in the Back Wing was fitted out as a small interpretation area. This facilitated visitor access to the collection that was not normally available in its original interior. Objects were presented in drawers which logically would be closed, and/or grouped together thematically to interpret aspects of the lives of the women (such as the Mount Mellick embroidery) or were used to demonstrate a conservation approach or availability of materials (such as the display of layers of fabric on a Drawing Room chair).

The larger room in the Back Wing became the Introduction Area where the Conservation Policy was explained, reproduction photograph albums of images from the collection displayed, and where a table of free refreshments stood. Offering refreshments to visitors continues the tradition of women [providing/being] a welcoming area. Ideally, these rooms would be shown as found when acquired by the Trust, but they were 'sacrificed' for the

provision of an Introduction. This is consistent with the approach at *Vaucluse House* and *Elizabeth Farm*, where service interiors or rooms about which less was known, were used to introduce the visitor to the house, but with a major difference: there was acknowledgement of the earlier occupants and appearance of this interior. The layers of original floor covering were rolled, visually documented and stored as objects; evidence of tenancy was retained; and the food safe, table and oven were pushed against the back wall, with an interpretative label describing their role in the history of the house and as another, now disappearing, interior.

In 1988, when *Meroogal* was opened for visitors, the concept of change was adopted as an underlying and unifying theme to communicate the curatorial approach to present it ‘as it appeared in 1985 whilst retaining the character and layers of a century of family occupation’. This was further reinforced by the natural placement of the objects. For example, in the Dining Room where the 1960s pastel-green gas-operated Frigidaire stood adjacent to a mid-nineteenth century red cedar sideboard. Or as demonstrated by the 1960s black-and-white television set placed only a few metres away from a built-in china pantry (little-used since the 1940s) that still contained many original contents.

As real, accurate and distinctive, the interiors (and indeed the whole property), presented significant challenges for the Curator. The critical challenge was conserving and interpreting the interior without changing its appearance. Before the Conservation Policy was determined, reconstruction was considered as at the 1920s when electricity and water were connected, a collection of furniture was donated to the Thorburns and when June Wallace’s memories were the strongest. The Trust proceeded to restore the garden to this decade.<sup>287</sup> After the

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<sup>287</sup> The inconsistency of approach to preservation of the property arose when the garden was returned from its 1985 appearance to that of the 1920s (when there was a great deal of documentation.) This included moving fences, replanting trees and decreasing the size of the overall property. It increased the need for the interiors to

acceptance of the Conservation Plan, Trust reconstruction in the garden moved fences to an earlier configuration than 1985, replaced asphalt and planted citrus to represent an earlier orchard. Whilst based on oral histories and collection photographs, these visually intrusive changes were inconsistent with the curatorial approach to the interiors. Indeed, the reconstruction of external elements to an earlier time confused rather than clarified the significance of *Meroogal*<sup>288</sup> and is overdue for review.

It was in the interpretation of the interiors that the Trust was at its most consistent. Using principles of the ICOMOS Burra Charter and following advice given in the Conservation Plan by heritage consultant, Meredith Walker, that:

A substantial program of works undertaken prior to opening...might suit the mechanisms of funding but it would destroy some of the significance of Meroogal as an artefact; Changes should be undertaken gradually so that their impact can be minimised...mostly comprise repairs... reconstruction of decayed fabric.<sup>289</sup>

The Trust implemented a 'cautious and steady approach to caring for its fabric... [One] reflecting that of the previous owners should be adopted.'<sup>290</sup>

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tell the story of the 1985 acquisition. As the 1920s plantings were largely unsuited to the humid coastal climate, and often developed mould, planting was a process of trial and error. The maxim was that whatever grew after the initial planting, would be resown.

<sup>288</sup> This approach is particularly confusing given that mature original plantings from 1985, primarily the jacarandas, the oldest thought to have been planted in about 1910 and the port wine magnolia, are interspersed with introduced plants originally from the 1920s. There can be a temptation to return a house museum to the period when it looked its best. Whilst all conservation and interpretation must be to best practice, this means in accordance with the significance identified in the Conservation Plan and may be at a time other than when the property looks fabulous. The aim is to present the house according to its significance, to its individual features, not to the same or generalised features as other properties.

<sup>289</sup> Meredith Walker, *MEROOGAL 35 West Street Nowra, New South Wales-A Conservation Plan* (Sydney: Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales, April 1986), Section 5.2.1.

<sup>290</sup> Meredith Walker, *MEROOGAL 35 West Street Nowra, New South Wales-A Conservation Plan* (Sydney: Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales, April 1986), 38.

Between acquisition and opening, the Trust undertook a high level of intervention by consultants, contractors and Curators but a low level of change in appearance. The initial stages of this stabilisation process were a thorough and careful cleaning of the interiors, and a survey of the conservation needs of the contents. Trust staff methodically vacuumed, brushed and damp-cleaned internal surfaces. Contractors washed the external walls and vacuumed the roof cavities.<sup>291</sup> Much of the furniture was in good condition, but some was fragile. The Trust sought to retain the history of each object as apparent in the signs of wear and the evidence of mending. The approach to the conservation of paintings, the objects needing the greatest attention, was to do as much as was necessary to save but not improve them: warped frames, discoloured photographs and mismatched mounts were stabilised but not restored, retaining their authenticity.

Whilst the house was closed to visitors, locals who were familiar with the family, or had an association with the property, often knocked on the door wanting to look inside. There was a curiosity about what was happening, and an ownership of the house and its interiors as part of a shared heritage through connection with the family. Some of these connections were captured in oral histories.

The central issue for the Trust was reconciling the need to conserve the often fragile and densely-layered fabric of the interiors with the need to provide physical access to visitors, and to make the significance of the property clear to those visitors. Recommendations of the 1987

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<sup>291</sup> Robert Griffin, *Meroogal Operations Review* (Sydney: Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales, 1995), 9. Accessed 27 December 2024. <https://first.mhnsw.au/#record/26630>. Curator Robert Griffin comments that ‘in retrospect it now appears that the intensity of this conservation process often caused the primary aim of the conservation philosophy to be overlooked. This aim, to preserve the collection as evidence of a way of life, has again become the focus of the conservation programme.’ Perhaps this was always the focus, but the newness of the approach and its contrast to the methods used earlier by the Trust, meant that it may have been overdone. Griffin continues ‘While some areas have shown wear...the interiors remain in remarkably good condition. This is largely the result of careful conservation maintenance...and cleaning undertaken by staff.’

Draft Management Plan<sup>292</sup> were adopted to enable visitors to fully engage with the collection without intrusive barriers. Conservation cleaning practices referred to how the house was kept before public ownership, and strategies for minimizing wear-and-tear on original surfaces were developed and implemented. These strategies included: limiting opening hours, capping numbers on a timed guided tour, and requiring visitors to wear protective footwear prior to entering the house. In some instances, where the floor covering was too fragile to survive constant wear, a protective layer (such as a drugget on the Drawing Room carpet or non-abrasive and often— but not always— inert, transparent overlay on the Kitchen congoleum) were used. This sacrificial covering, whilst modifying the appearance of the interiors, recognised the value of the original surface so that the patina of living by the occupants is not overlaid by that of the visitor. June Wallace’s approach to conservation housekeeping foreshadowed that used by Curators as guided by the principles in the ICOMOS Burra Charter: ‘As much as is necessary, and as little as possible.’<sup>293</sup>

The application of these protective practices can also, perhaps unwittingly but certainly usefully, increase the sense of specialness of the place and its interiors, to visitors. Aspects of this conservation housekeeping approach have been adapted and used in other Trust houses<sup>294</sup>

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<sup>292</sup> Meredith Walker and Suzanne Bravery, *Meroogal Draft Management Plan* (Sydney: Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales August 1987).

<sup>293</sup> Meredith Walker, *MEROOGAL 35 West Street Nowra, New South Wales-A Conservation Plan* (Sydney: Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales, April 1986), 39. ‘In terms of the Burra Charter, the care of the fabric, buildings and contents will predominantly comprise preservation, restoration, maintenance and some reconstruction-but only of existing fabric which is decayed and causing damage or is very fragile or of great intrinsic value. There should be no reconstruction of missing fabric, in cases where the existing fabric is in good condition.’

<sup>294</sup> *Rouse Hill Estate* Curator, Lynn Collins, developed and delivered— in association with the Trust’s Housekeeper, Matthew Scott— intensive conservation housekeeping workshops that were open to all Trust staff, based at, and using as the example, *Rouse Hill Estate* in the 1990s.

and recorded and shared more formally in housekeeping manuals<sup>295</sup> across the Trust and in publications.<sup>296</sup>



Figure 31. *Meroogal* Kitchen with protective transparent covering over original congoletum. Photograph taken by Suzanne Bravery, 2010, private collection.

Whilst consistently maintaining this conservation approach to the property, each successive Curator has focused on an area of their professional expertise, including conservation housekeeping, decorative and fine arts, social history and visual arts, all expounding the interests and actions of the *Meroogal* women and men.

The ‘new social history’ encouraging public recognition of previously ‘invisible’ inhabitants, was trending globally in cultural heritage philosophy when the property was acquired. The Trust’s practice of presenting the women of *Meroogal* as important through the preservation of the interiors and commissioned publications, aligned with this philosophy and determined

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<sup>295</sup> Suzanne Bravery, *Housekeeping Manual for Museum Guides* (Sydney: Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales, 1993).

<sup>296</sup> Suzanne Bravery, (ed.) *The Art of Keeping House* (Sydney: Hardie Grant, 2004).

to make these women visible largely through feminist histories. This association with women has been a critical and consistent theme in the interpretation of the *Meroogal* interiors and in the ongoing connection of the community with the property under both private and public ownership. At *Meroogal*, the oral histories of a living (female) relative enabled access to recent and relevant stories that were of and by women. It was unusual to have a living relative available for oral history as historic house museums are so often in the public domain after the death of their occupants. *Meroogal* was a good fit with a matriarchal inheritance through generations of mainly single women; and where the primary source of material on every aspect of the property was the observations of the woman who had lived and who shared these experiences from the child to the adult.

At *Meroogal*, feminist historians were able to connect to historical methodology. So many theoretical treatises have been written (about the motivation and roles of single or unmarried women),<sup>297</sup> but here was a practical example to enable reconsideration of the theories. Unmarried women in the nineteenth century were not supposed to be happy or to have actively chosen their state. *Meroogal* demonstrated that unmarried women can live pleasant, viable and useful lives despite economic and ideological pressures. Layers of research reveal a rich texture or relationship by which women connect with each other as mothers and daughters, aunts and nieces, sisters and friends. At *Meroogal*, patterns first laid down in the 1880s and 1890s were repeated by each generation. The way in which these women used the house, cared for and altered the fabric of the building, is still apparent and provides insights into their characters and circumstances.

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<sup>297</sup> Janet Ramsay, *The Women of Meroogal* (Sydney: Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales, 1988), 6. This legacy extended beyond *Meroogal* as Ramsay acknowledges that ‘June Wallace by sharing the story of her family and her own vivid memories of her...aunts... has made a significant contribution to historical recognition of the lives of Australian women...making *Meroogal* a case study in colonial middle-class family life with patterns of loyalty, affection and duty.’

American textile historian, Jane Nylander, wrote in 1990 about the representation of women in house museums, and showed that there was still a need for heritage organisations to look to the Trust for guidance in policy, starting with how the Significance of *Meroogal* was determined and implemented. ‘The material culture that still exists in the form of historic house museums can make the lives of women compellingly real and accessible. But in today’s museums, how often are women’s stories told? In what way? Who decides?’<sup>298</sup> Surely this is the role of the professional Curator using research, knowledge and experience to provide evidence that supports the primary research, especially of the interiors.



Figure 32. The ‘big balcony bedroom’ at *Meroogal*. *Meroogal*, © Sydney Living Museums. Photograph John Storey Accessed 29 September 2025. [https://mhns.wa.gov.au/stories/general/learn-more-about-meroogal/..](https://mhns.wa.gov.au/stories/general/learn-more-about-meroogal/)

Australian academic, Linda Young, wrote in 2002 of the depiction of women in house museums, where women are often considered an adjunct to the significant other male. This is exhibited from the naming of the house (such as ‘*Blundells Cottage*, Canberra ACT) to the interpretation of interiors and their role (which are sometimes clumsily and often narrowly

shown as ‘mother in the nursery’ and ‘wife in the bedroom’).<sup>299</sup> Although Young indicates that this does not apply to *Meroogal*, the practice does occur in volunteer organisations and, more often than it should, in properties in public ownership. *Meroogal* provides a workable template, formed by professional Curators, for the considered recognition of women in the domestic environment of a historic house museum. The *Meroogal* template incorporates, questions and stretches the traditional spaces where women are stereotypically placed.



Figure 33. Little bedroom at *Meroogal* 1987. *Meroogal* © Sydney Living Museums. Photograph John Storey Accessed 29 September 2025. <https://mhns.wa.gov.au/stories/general/learn-more-about-meroogal/>.

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<sup>298</sup> Jane Nylander *Fabrics for Historic Buildings: A Guide to Selecting Reproduction Fabrics* (Washington DC: Preservation Press, 1990).

<sup>299</sup> Linda Young, “A woman’s place is in the house...museum: Interpreting women’s histories in house museums” *Open Museum Journal*, 5, (2002), 1-24. Accessed 26 December 2024. <https://researchprofiles.canberra.edu.au/en/publications/a-womans-place-is-in-the-housemuseum..>

In 2003, American author, Bonnie Hurd Smith, wrote of the need for house museums to recognise the embedded role of women in their making. ‘Visitors want social history, and they expect women’s history.’<sup>300</sup> In this context, *Meroogal* leads as a working example of a social history house museum with women as a consistent and meaningful interpretative focus. Hurd Smith comments on interiors as a resource for understanding earlier women:

The lives of women who came before us can be frustratingly difficult to understand... Students of women’s history...look for documentation in other...places, and historic house museums are one such resource. We can walk through the rooms where women ate, slept... gave birth, raised children, read, wrote, discussed issues of the day, and planned action.<sup>301</sup>

These are charged interiors. This acknowledgement of the importance of the tangible and intangible heritage of women in domestic interiors is a change from earlier associative references, such as William Charles Wentworth in his personal spaces at *Vaucluse House*. These are complementary interpretational approaches. The reliability of the accuracy of these domestic interiors, the spaces where the visitor looks and learns, is critical to a credible understanding and acknowledgement of the women of our past and largely depends on the (professional) curatorial approach. For women’s history to matter, historic house museum interiors need to be valued, respected and accurately presented. At *Meroogal*, using June

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<sup>300</sup> Bonnie Hurd Smith, “Women’s Voices: reinterpreting historic house museums” *Her Past Around Us; Interpreting Sites for Women’s History* (eds.) Polly W. Kaufman and Katherine T. Corbett, (Florida: Krieger, 2003), 97.

<sup>301</sup> Bonnie Hurd Smith, “Women’s Voices: reinterpreting historic house museums” *Her Past Around Us; Interpreting Sites for Women’s History* (eds.) Polly W. Kaufman, and Katherin T. Corbett, (Florida: Krieger, 2003), 87. Hurd Smith also talks about the marginal presence of women in American house museums, such as *Mount Vernon*, when houses were preserved as shrines to great white male political and literary figures.

Wallace's recollections, curatorial experience and a preservationist approach, we can be confident that it does matter.

Public ownership of the *Meroogal* interiors enabled physical access to a past that was only partially available in images and familial memory. Vida Lahey's painting,<sup>302</sup> for example, shows women washing. At *Meroogal*, we can identify the women who washed and walk into the Laundry interior as a provenanced site of historic encounter with women's largely undocumented, unpaid, and often undervalued, repetitive, invisible and essential work.<sup>303</sup> Rather than being a conjectural reconstruction of a moment in time *Meroogal* interiors are a primary source that conveys the circumstances and attitudes of the occupants over many years. By extension, these interiors were representative of aspects of their contemporary social, political and economic environment, and of the work of similarly placed women, for whom there is no such evidence.

Whilst *Meroogal* necessarily focuses on women's history due to its own history, the curatorial approach and template also demonstrate that it is important and possible to convey not only women's history, but all history as an inclusive history. Gender issues are a component of the appearance of these domestic interiors and are indicative of broader social history trends, such as the Feminist movement. This is a matriarchal house passed from mother to daughter, and from aunt to niece. Male relatives and friends figure in the lives of the women over the generations, influenced the design and layout of the house, and from time

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<sup>302</sup> See Figure 4. *Monday Morning* Vida Lahey 1912 oil on canvas, Queensland Art Gallery where the wash in the tub and at the copper was always on a Monday.

<sup>303</sup> As noted in contemporary literature for example Belinda Probert *Working Life: Arguments about work in Australian Society* (Melbourne: Penguin, 1989). The cover features a detail of the oil painting *Maid of All Work* by Tudor St George Tucker (1862-1906). Chapter Five examines "Housework as a Female Occupation."

to time, chose this house as their home. Women, however, ensured that the house was operational and that their own lives were full and satisfying.

Initially, there was concern that this authentically-layered time capsule of social history was too sophisticated a concept for the visitor to understand and appreciate as a valid interpretation of our collective past (conditioned as the general visitor was to recreated interiors and meticulously-conserved objects in architecturally distinctive buildings that were shrines to prominent historical males). Visitors, however, were able to adapt to and understand the concept of a continual family occupation and layered interiors as primary (re)sources.



Figure 34. Piano in the drawing room, *Meroogal*. Photo © Katherine Lu for Museums of History NSW. Accessed 29 September 2025. <https://mhnsw.au/stories/general/learn-more-about-meroogal/>.

The domestic everyday objects at *Meroogal* were different from those in other house museums. They were familiar — as familiar as the contents of your grandmother’s house — in place and time, but not in individual association.<sup>304</sup> For visitors, these objects and interiors

were not their objects or interiors, but they were representations of the familiarity of similar objects and interiors, within their personal histories. Similar objects played an important part in our childhood memories, were usually considered expendable because they were more sentimentally than financially valuable, often incomplete, or outdated, and routinely disposed of or dispersed on our grandmother's death. Their importance was by association and in context and as an often-missing component of a personal heritage. These interiors and the collection were historically valuable not only by association with a personal and individual past, but also with a collective and often incomplete present. By extension, one hopes this enables the visitor to reflect on the heritage value of their own familial interiors.

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<sup>304</sup>Frans Gujzenhuot, "Empty Places: Historic House and National Memory," *Historic House Museums as Witnesses of National and Local Identities* ICOM/DEM HIST International Conference, (Amsterdam:2002), 18. 'For the majority of us, the house we grew up in is the most important framework for our childhood memories...we usually can picture the room in which we...played as children...Sometimes it is impossible to determine whether these images really are embedded in our own memory, or whether we are remembering photographs...we only realise...the importance of these memories and images for ...our individual youth...when we have to clear out the parental home.'

Additionally, a large section of visitors to *Meroogal* bring experiences to this historic house museum often intersect with a past ‘in living memory.’ This means the visitor is both more willing, and usually more able, to connect with the property, often as the house (and home) of their aged parents (or grandparents from a child’s perspective) and, conversely, more critical of the appearance of accuracy and significance of that collection. It can also mean that the same visitors do not necessarily see the property as special or significant when its narratives and its material culture appear so like their own. This provides a challenge for the Curator at *Meroogal* to deploy a range of strategies, usually as public programs, which amplify the Statement of Significance whilst connecting with visitors, to encourage visitors to value the interiors and to return to the house.

Public programs and education activities at *Meroogal* have focused on the importance of intergenerational family, and more widely, on investigating the role(s) women have filled over the life of the house. This focus included: primary school program, ‘Kith and Kin,’ which used reproductions of material in the collection; Antiques Fairs, Garden Days and (contentiously) re-positioning *Meroogal* as ‘The Women’s History Place.’ The *Meroogal* Women’s Art Prize (2001-current) uses the water colours, painted ceramics, needlework and woodwork that appear in *Meroogal*’s interiors as inspiration points. The theme of the Prize connects artists to the property and is inspired by the women who lived there. These programs, based on an amplification of the Statement of Significance, are designed to engage and inform diverse visitors.

*Meroogal* was clearly cherished by its occupants, as evidenced by the nature and composition of the collection, the wealth of detail, the nature of the ephemera, the distinctive and individual taste in the use and decoration of the interiors — all retained and maintained even when the house was not lived in as a permanent home. When using the house as an ‘occasional home,’ June Wallace would return for three days a month to mow the lawn, clean the house, return the towels and washers that she had washed in Sydney, and air the interiors. But, first and most importantly, she would pick a small bunch of flowers from the garden and place them in a vase on the Kitchen bench near the window to let the neighbours know that she was there. When visiting from Sydney, Trust Curators continued this tradition.

## Conclusion

As a modest regional dwelling, with an *in-situ* collection of evidence offering a way of life of the domestic history of one family, mainly women, over a hundred years, the acquisition of *Meroogal* filled a gap in the Trust’s portfolio of historic house museums. The interiors are a record of the individual and collective taste and circumstances of the four generations who lived there, and since 1985, of the decisions made by individual Curators in the context of Trust ownership and management. There are parallels in decision-making and similarities in practice. Both within private and public ownership, decisions were made based on the belief that the property was kept in trust for the future, whilst enabling physical access to the present, and intellectual access to the past.

This chapter shows the importance of the role of the Curator, the role of a family member operating as honorary Curator, and heritage consultants in informing the preservation of the interiors of *Meroogal*. It posed different curatorial challenges to those of earlier house

museums. Preservation of the interiors as sites of feminism, as examples of ‘making do’, of conservation housekeeping, of the daily lives of intergenerational family members by professional Curators was reliably informed in their primary research by June Wallace and in their approach by Australia ICOMOS principles of the Heritage Consultant.

*Meroogal*'s interiors clearly show how its occupants made the most of their lives. To provide access to the heritage value of the collection, the real and authentic, need to be recognised, respected and retained. The interpretation at *Meroogal* offers the everyday as important and provides a measured balance to previously accepted ideas of what is historically significant.

We haven't re-created the past here. The past is gone. It can never be re-created. What we've done is reconstruct the past—or at least a version of the past. And I'm saying we can make a better version.

Dr Henry Wu

Michael Crichton, *Jurassic Park* (1993).

## Chapter Five

### Reconstructing an ideal: Curator as facilitator at *Rose Seidler House*



Figure 35. *Rose Seidler House*. Photograph taken by Darren Bradley, 2017, Museums of History NSW. Accessed 19 July 2023. <https://www.themodernhouse.com/journal/house-of-the-day-rose-seidler-house-by-harry-seidler/>.

‘Modernism isn’t a style. It’s just an attitude of using the needs and the materials and the wherewithal of any particular era.’<sup>305</sup>

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<sup>305</sup> McHugh, Siobhan *Harry Seidler: His Life and Work*. Harry Seidler interviewed by Siobhan McHugh on 11 and 18 October 2003. Audio 720.92 SEI audio CD 720.92 SEI, Caroline Simpson Library & Research Collection, Museums of History NSW. Accessed 28 December, 2024. <https://first.mhnsw.au/#record/15372>.

## Introduction

This chapter, using the 1988 acquisition of *Rose Seidler House* as a case study, explores the role of the professional Curator working with an Honorary Architect/Advisor in the preservation of a domestic interior where the selective reconstruction to its ‘optimal appearance’ from 1948-50 is heavily influenced by the contributions of its creator, Harry Seidler. It shows how the professional Curator can use a relationship with ‘a joyful sparring partner’<sup>306</sup> as the basis for honing the appearance of interiors. It completes the cycle of ‘great man’ and ‘great house’ restoration that began in the early twentieth century with William Charles Wentworth’s aspirational interiors at *Vaucluse House* and closes at the end of the twentieth century with Harry Seidler and his aspirational interiors at *Rose Seidler House*. In other words, the same curatorial argument that was used at *Vaucluse House*, and then in the context of broader historical approaches revised, was used again at *Rose Seidler House*, to interpret the interiors. This is despite twenty years between curatorial arguments and shows the determining influence of the Curator. The interiors at *Rose Seidler House* focus on a ‘design for living’ template of a Modernist home where the ‘latest’ technology and architectural thinking is on display. The interiors at *Vaucluse House*, whilst including the ‘latest’ in furniture and furnishings, were built successively in response to practical needs as the nucleus of a family home.

This chapter reflects on how the restoration of the interiors at both properties resulted in the loss of later, more recent and little-documented, layers of living. This contrasts with the approach taken by the Curator-led selective recreation of interiors at *Elizabeth Farm*, and to

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<sup>306</sup> Peter Watts, *Eulogy Harry Seidler AO OBE 1923-2006* given at Harry Seidler’s memorial service (Theatre Royal, Sydney, 6 April 2006). Unpaged.

the preservation of interiors at *Meroogal*, which were presented to the public largely as they were when the property was acquired in 1985.

It suggests that the curatorial approach to the interiors at *Rose Seidler House* offer a connection between the selectively reconstructed historic house museum interior (in this case within Seidler's Modernist white rectangular prism), and the historic house interior reconstructed in its totality (Margaret Olley's studio relocated to fill a white cube in an art museum). The two approaches are similar in their techniques and preservation of historic house museum interiors. The difference is that the first is a design-focussed house valued for its architecture and design — an architect's house museum in its original landscape and context. The second approach is an artist's studio and associated living spaces valued for its association with the artist, Margaret Olley, as a private working interior, moved from its original context with all its personal collection to the artificial construct of a contemporary art gallery.

## Rose Seidler House as promotional project and private home (1948-1988)

The house was commissioned by Rose and Max Seidler, Harry's parents, in 1948, and lived in as their home from 1950 to 1967. During this time, the Seidlers kept the house well maintained and it was used as an advertisement for Seidler's architecture. In 1969, it was rented by an American family and used as it was designed, as a family home. From 1972 to 1980 it was lived in by Elizabeth Evatt.

As a Jewish family living in Vienna, the Seidlers were affected by the occupation of Austria and the Second World War, which threatened both their home and their lives. Harry's mother, Rose, filled a container with dark, heavy furniture and precious flatware and silverware from the family apartment and together with her husband Max, migrated via England to Australia in the 1940s. Harry, now a trained architect after studying under Josef Albers and Bauhaus practitioner, Marcel Breuer, and working with Walter Gropius, joined his parents in Australia in 1948 to fulfill his mother's request to 'come and see us because we want to build a house.'<sup>307</sup>

The topography and size of Rose's building site in Sydney reflected that of Connecticut, Massachusetts, with which the architect was familiar. Harry was warned by his brother Marcell that, in Australia, 'If you want anything modern, bring it. It doesn't exist here,'<sup>308</sup> Harry arrived 'with light fittings and the most modern of chairs'<sup>309</sup> imported from America. The concept, design, layout and content of Rose's house, was determined by Harry in New York. The floor plan was based on the unbuilt Thompson house in Foxborough, Massachusetts. Although its twin in Wahroonga would not be located by a lake, but in land purchased as a large bushland site, Harry made only minor changes to the plan of the original Thompson house. From his work with Marcel Breuer in New York, Harry had a clear idea of where to go, what to look for, and how to envisage the space within the house.

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<sup>307</sup> Harry Seidler, *Transcript of an interview between Harry Seidler and Mrs Hazel de Berg 13 January 1972*, (Canberra: National Library of Australia). Original recording. <https://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-214637934/listen>.

<sup>308</sup> Siobhan McHugh, *Harry Seidler: His Life and Work*. Harry Seidler interviewed by Siobhan McHugh on 11 and 18 October 2003. (Sydney: Museums of History New South Wales). Accessed 27 December 2024. <https://first.mhns.wa.au/#record/15372>.

<sup>309</sup> Janis Wilton, *Interview with Harry Seidler* (Sydney: Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales) 1982. Accessed 29 December 2024. <https://collection.sl.nsw.gov.au/record/904o3Kpn>.

Both Gropius and Albers influenced Harry's approach to design and colour, as seen in the *Rose Seidler House* interiors. Albers' training 'in active visualisation to predict what is going to happen'<sup>310</sup> informed Seidler's visual perceptions. Designing the interior of the building was as important as creating the exterior because 'visual design has nothing to do with interior/exterior ...only compartmentalised in the nineteenth century, today it is a continuum.'<sup>311</sup> Gropius taught 'by proving, questioning and insisting on [a]...methodical approach to design; social use, technology and aesthetics had to be married... We left there...destined to play our part in transforming the visual man-made world.'<sup>312</sup> Harry brought this philosophy to his planning of *Rose Seidler House* as an integrated interior where all elements of the space were equally important in its design. Not only the furniture, but also the appearance of the interiors was designed to be a completely immersive, total experience in Modernism.

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<sup>310</sup> Harry Seidler, *Transcript of an interview between Harry Seidler and Mrs Hazel de Berg 13 January 1972*, (Canberra: National Library of Australia). Original recording. <https://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-214637934/listen>.

<sup>311</sup> Alice Spigelman, *Almost Full Circle-Harry Seidler* (Rose Bay: Brandl and Schlesinger, 2001), 157.

<sup>312</sup> Harry Seidler, *Transcript of an interview between Harry Seidler and Mrs Hazel de Berg 13 January 1972* (Canberra: National Library of Australia). Original recording. Accessed 28 December 2024. <https://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-214637934/listen>.



Figure 36. Dining Room, *Rose Seidler House*, 1950. Photograph taken by Marcell Seidler © Sydney Living Museums. Accessed 24 December 2024. <https://blogs.sydneylivingmuseums.com.au/cook/rose-seidler-a-wonderful-hostess/index.html>

Whilst constrained by the lack of building materials post-World War Two, Harry focussed his attention on the interiors of *Rose Seidler House*, using available materials to build it, then furnishing it with fixtures and fittings which largely survive today. Harry's focus on the design components — neutral colours, bright highlights and a range of textures, and technology, including whitegoods — was aimed at exposing nineteen fifties Australia to European Modernism. Trust Curators have organised the reupholstery of many of the original chairs, which were designed by contemporary designers such as Jorge Ferrari-Hardoy, Eero Saarinen and Charles Eames, and brought by Seidler from the northern hemisphere, as well as a sofa by Sydney designer Paul Kafka. Similar material has been used and the furniture placed in its original position. Original appliances that were no longer available were replaced by similar appliances.

Upon completion of *Rose Seidler House*, there was to be nothing in this display home that didn't conform with Modernism, even if the object belonged to Rose, who had previously redecorated their Viennese family apartment in the latest style. Harry recalled Rose was the ideal client supportive of the build, (including selling her beloved Viennese furniture in Australia to help finance its construction) and of the Modernist design, (when the house was built and the interiors furnished, storing precious coffee and silver sets in specially designed and fitted drawers and cupboards that were out of sight). His mother kept the house immaculately, conforming strictly to its original design and layout, which remains 'intact.'<sup>313</sup> Rose's influence appears elsewhere in the design and maintenance of the ornamental and productive garden, a dramatic contrast to her son's architectural design.<sup>314</sup>

Harry carefully curated the interiors of *Rose Seidler House* to promote the appearance of the Modernist ideal, and invited potential clients, artists, architects, and media to visit.<sup>315</sup> Soon after building completion, Harry staged several major functions, for its public opening in January 1951. These included a visit by Walter and Ise Gropius' in May 1954, and a visit by Eero Saarinen in 1956. The few photographs of the interiors that are available in public collections were taken by Harry's brother, Marcell, and are nearly all promotional black and white shots of the family using the house as designed, or of Harry with his teachers and colleagues admiring the interiors. Nothing — including flower arrangements and scatter cushions — is out of place. These images were used to inform the Trust's reconstruction.

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<sup>313</sup> *Rose Seidler House 1892-1967* brochure (Sydney: Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales, no date). Unpaged.

<sup>314</sup> Alice Spigelman, *Almost Full Circle-Harry Seidler* (Rose Bay: Brandl and Schlesinger, 2001), 184. Seidler's parents moved into their new house in late 1950. 'Every detail was important to Rose Seidler. She was fastidious to the point of perfection... The furniture, the lighting, the colour scheme, every aspect of interior design was carefully planned for her needs. No knick-knacks from the past came to the new house; she understood and shared her son's taste.'

<sup>315</sup> Peter Emmett, *Mid Century Modern-Rose Seidler House Wahroonga 1948-50 Conservation Plan* (Sydney: Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales, November 1989), 26.

Although the private presence of Harry's parents was influential in the commissioning and maintaining of appearances of the interiors to their initial ideal standards, they appear little in photographs of the interior and have had little presence in the interiors. Photographic documentation of the occupation by Rose and husband Max was mainly for publicity purposes. The images show a few carefully-placed family photographs on the built-in furniture in the Lounge Room, Rose's multi-coloured South American rug in the playroom, and the glass vases of large and mono-coloured and single design flowers in one bunch. So, although the house was theoretically the 'home' of Harry's parents, the interiors appeared as a demonstration or 'exhibition home' for the practical application of Modernism.

Harry was confident that he could teach Australians to change their attitudes to modern architecture, and wrote in various home and building journals about design:

'The house...caused quite a stir...a direct transplanted of European through eastern United States developments in architecture... plonked straight on to the north shore...People were absolutely staggered by it...I felt it to be a social responsibility to be able to produce... not just building but architecture...I wanted for good taste to reach the average man.'<sup>316</sup>

Harry's intention was for *Rose Seidler House* to be an affordable, designed alternative for building material shortages, historical suburban building styles, and middle-class families in Australia.

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<sup>316</sup> Harry Seidler, *Transcript of an interview between Harry Seidler and Mrs Hazel de Berg 13 January 1972* (Canberra: National Library of Australia). Original recording. <https://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-214637934/listen>.

Official acceptance of the architect's domestic work by his peers attracted additional coverage from more traditional magazines and the weekend supplements produced by metropolitan dailies. Before Harry's arrival in Australia, *Australian Home Beautiful* had conducted a vigorous campaign for modern domestic housing and interior design and 'tirelessly promoted the open plan house'<sup>317</sup> from the 1930s through to the 1950s. Earlier Modernists, Sidney Ancher and Arthur Baldwensin, looked to Modernism with an Australian take. In the 1950s, *Rose Seidler House* was seen as new and different. The nature of the materials, the expanse of the glass windows, the incorporation of labour-saving devices, the bi-nuclear plan and flexibility of spaces in their entirety were new to the Australian landscape. Once built, reporters noted crowds of up to 4 people thick looking into the house on weekends.<sup>318</sup> More people viewed the house after it won the Sulman Award in 1951, making it what the *Sunday Herald* of 17 August 1952 called, 'The Most Talked About House in Sydney.'<sup>319</sup>

The interiors were significant for their influence on Australian architecture, for bringing a pure 'geometric' Modernism to the suburbs, and as an extant example of Harry Seidler's early work. Harry's focus was on an architect-designed, aesthetically pleasing and practical interior. These interiors were where the differences between contemporary Australian domestic architecture, and ways of planning and using interior spaces, were most obvious.

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<sup>317</sup> Michael Bogle, "Modernism and the media: Rose Seidler House (1948-52)" in *Nuts and bolts, or berries : early modernist architecture in Australasia : Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand 1993 annual conference, 25, 26 & 27 September, Perth, Western Australia : papers and proceedings*, edited by Ian Kelly (1994), 11.

<sup>318</sup> Towards the end of 1950, Harry organised the first public viewing of the house to 160 people. 'Woman' magazine 'liked it. We liked even more the minimum furniture and the maximum cupboard space, the splashings of blues, yellows and reds... the way the study, dining space and living room were all grouped in one spacious area.' *Sunday Herald* 25 August 1952. Accessed 24 December 2024. <https://mhns.wa.gov.au/stories/general/environment-living-rose-seidler-house/>.

<sup>319</sup> Michael Bogle, "Modernism and the media: Rose Seidler House (1948-52)" in *Nuts and bolts, or berries : early modernist architecture in Australasia : Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand 1993 annual conference, 25, 26 & 27 September, Perth, Western Australia : papers and proceedings*, edited by Ian Kelly (1994), 11.

These innovations have since been incorporated into the Australian consciousness and are still used in interiors — not as exhibition homes as *Rose Seidler House* — but in mass produced, affordable dwellings. These interiors were the forerunners of practical methods of construction, and an analysis of functions, materials and appliances within the house. Later adaptations included furniture of a Modern ‘style’ and the incorporation of personal taste, a more flexible approach to ‘living’ the experience.

*Rose Seidler House* interiors were remarkably intact, and little altered since their completion, despite occupation by owners and renters over many years. Harry carried out renovations from 1980-82, initially to prepare the house again for rental, but on learning of the restoration of the Gropius house Massachusetts as a museum, Harry determined, in 1985, that *Rose Seidler House* would serve the same function as that of his mentor. Seidler devised the plan to gift the house and site to a heritage organisation as a public museum.<sup>320</sup>

## Rose Seidler House as Modernist resource centre: Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales from 1988 and the role and influence of the Curator

*Rose Seidler House* was acquired by the Trust as an early and outstanding example of purist Modernism in Australia. Harry Seidler gifted *Rose Seidler House* and its collection under the Taxation Incentives for the Arts Scheme to the Premier and Department of Planning for the Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales (the Trust) to manage in 1988.<sup>321</sup> The Deed of Gift stated that the ‘house and grounds surrounding it shall be maintained in their unchanged original condition as designed in 1949, and as fully restored in 1982.’<sup>322</sup> The Conservation

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<sup>320</sup> Peter Emmett, *Mid Century Modern-Rose Seidler House Wahroonga 1948-50 Conservation Plan*, 29.

<sup>321</sup> Catriona Quinn, *Rose Seidler House-Its Development as an Historic House Museum by the Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales* (Dip. Museum Stud. diss., University of Sydney, 1989), 6.

<sup>322</sup> Peter Emmett, *Mid Century Modern-Rose Seidler House Wahroonga 1948-50 Conservation Plan*, 105

Policy noted significant variations in detailing, finishes, fittings and contents between ‘as designed in 1949’ and ‘as fully restored in 1982’ and so adopted ‘as built in 1950’ as the benchmark for conservation of the house and contents.<sup>323</sup> Rose gardened; and whilst much of the original furniture was still available, the house had changed in materials, including carpet, curtains and soft furnishings, paint colours, and so in appearance. These preservation challenges for the professional Curator included realising the approach to the recreated appearance of the house and the interiors as originally built. After research and restoration, *Rose Seidler House*, opened as a house museum three years later in 1991.

*Rose Seidler House* was the first twentieth century house acquired by the Trust. In 1988, with six pre-1850 houses in its collection, the Trust’s focus appeared to be on curating the nineteenth century. Unusually for the Trust, the significance of *Rose Seidler House* was determined as its association with the Modernist ideal especially evident in the interiors, rather than for the social significance of the occupants. The occupants were themselves significant as representatives of post-World War Two middle class Jewish European immigrants. This determination of significance of the site, rather than of the occupants, echoes the original government acquisition of *Vaucluse House* in 1911 to enable public access to the foreshore, rather than for its social wear-and-tear historical significance.

At the time of acquisition, *Rose Seidler House* was one of only three twentieth-century houses that was either open to visitors or being planned as house museums. The others were: *Calthorpes House* (1927), Red Hill, Canberra, home of the Calthorpes, (administered by the Cultural Facilities Corporation) and *Eryldene* (1914), Gordon, Sydney, home of Professor

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<sup>323</sup> Peter Emmett, *Mid Century Modern-Rose Seidler House Wahroonga 1948-50 Conservation Plan*, 110

Eben Gowrie and Mrs Janet Waterhouse (administered by the community based *Eryldene* Trust). Both these historic houses were designed for, and used as, family homes.

Collecting the contemporary is an ongoing challenge for any collecting institution, whether as small objects (decorative arts) or as large structures (houses). It is generally accepted that sufficient time and space will have elapsed from the date of creation for an object before it can be seen as representative or definitive enough to be included in a publicly managed museum collection, and that this can only really occur after other examples have been professionally assessed through comparison or contrast. This makes the acceptance of the *Rose Seidler House*, nearly forty years after it was built and by a now internationally regarded architect, not only a generous gift but also a safe decision.

Or so it would appear. However, the curatorial practice of the Trust adheres more to ‘considered’, ‘thought provoking’ and ‘historically ground breaking’ than ‘safe and predictable’. Whilst the then-contemporary nature of the gift was a conscious attempt to ‘balance’ the Trust’s portfolio of domestic houses (heavily weighted towards the nineteenth century), *Rose Seidler House* was significant for its embodiment of the mid (twentieth) century Modernist philosophy. It was also significant for its association with its architect and donor, Harry Seidler, a world-renowned practitioner of Modernism; his work and perspectives well documented especially in this house, his first Australian commission.

Interest in preserving twentieth-century architecture as heritage began to gather momentum in the 1980s. In response to threats to the fabric and curtilage of some key early twentieth-century buildings, professional groups, such as the International Working Party for Documentation and Conservation of Buildings of the Modern Movement (DOCOMOMO),

were established to research these places, raise awareness about their importance and help retain those worth preserving. According to conservation architect, Susan McDonald, DOCOMOMO was ‘the key group developing approaches to the conservation of Modern Movement buildings... [the use of new materials such as rubbers, plastics and concrete offered new challenges.] In many cases the conservation of Modern Movement buildings sacrificed the original physical fabric-material authenticity-to restore the architect’s vision-design authenticity.’<sup>324</sup> These issues were also grappled with in the curatorial approaches to the treatment of the interiors at *Rose Seidler House*.

There has been an expectation since the 1980s that the preservation of the house museum, and especially its interiors, will relate primarily to its social significance (which relates to the occupants of the house, their lifestyle choices, their achievements, their place in local and national society, their political persuasions, their servants and livestock, their gardens and grounds and their possessions.) Significance was placed on social associations of the occupants of the house with their own house and within their society. *Vaughan House*, *Elizabeth Farm* and *Meroogal* are relevant examples. The interpretation of interiors is the key to an understanding of this significance. It has been accepted by professional Curators, and expected and anticipated by visitors, that the component of interacting with an historic interior is significant and can be the primary acknowledged reason for visiting the site, for valuing it.

In this context, the interpretation of the interiors of *Rose Seidler House* may challenge the uninitiated visitor. The lack of personal material culture, and particularly provenanced

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<sup>324</sup> Susan MacDonal, “The Real Thing: Authenticity, Heritage, Significance and Conservation” in *The Double Dimensions: Heritage and Innovation: Royal Australian Institute of Architects. Papers from a symposium held in Sydney in August 2004*, 27.

material culture in a house consistently occupied by a couple (the architect's elderly parents) for 17 years, is unexpected. Conversely, the interpretation at *Rose Seidler House* places emphasis and an expectation on the interiors to be educational in terms of immersive teaching about aspirational design principles and initially questions the notion of 'house' in the 'house museum.'

As at other Trust properties, primary sources were used to inform curatorial decision-making about the appearance of the house interiors. These included: oral histories, pictorial material, plans, popular publications, scholarly publications, council records and files and general historical material on the period.<sup>325</sup> Additionally, a detailed comparative analysis of Gropius' *Lincoln House* (1938), Breuer's houses (1946-48) and work by Harry's Harvard contemporaries (1948-50) indicated the source of many general and specific design features of *Rose Seidler House*, such as the foyer, playroom, central fireplace, kitchen servery, divider curtain and colour scheme.<sup>326</sup>

The appearance of interiors at *Meroogal* and at *Rose Seidler House* was influenced by the detailed and personal contemporary recollections of family members as shared with Trust Curators. These oral histories assisted the development of the Statement of Significance which guided the Trust's interpretation. The oral histories of June Wallace at *Meroogal* covered every aspect of the property, from the appearance of the interiors over most of the twentieth century, to the provenance of every object in the collection. Harry Seidler, at *Rose Seidler House*, focussed largely on the conception and realisation of the house. Harry advised

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<sup>325</sup> Catriona Quinn, *Rose Seidler House-Its Development as an Historic House Museum by the Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales*, 17.

<sup>326</sup> Peter Emmett, *Mid Century Modern-Rose Seidler House Wahroonga 1948-50 Conservation Plan*, 93.

the Trust on the details of construction and on the appearance of the interiors, largely using his memory, printed material and some images.

The difference between these two oral histories lies in the focus of the use of the interiors as occupied houses. June Wallace guided and assisted Curators with social details, peopling the house with the living, their foibles and their strengths. Harry focussed on the house as an architectural aspiration, with occupants being a component of that ideal. His was a vested interest in the appearance of the interiors as the ideal as at 1950, at the place and time of the Sulman Award, as the reflection of recognised achievement. The strength and consistency of involvement of Harry as architect, joint owner and Honorary Advisor, in the maintenance of the house and in its interpretation, is unique within the Trust's experience and until his death in 2006, in consultation with the succession of Curators, was obviously influential in the manner and method of achieving these outcomes.

The difference between *Rose Seidler House* and other houses in Trust ownership, was the ongoing contribution of the original architect 'for life.' Harry Seidler was legally bound to act as Honorary Advisor to the Corporation on the maintenance of the property.<sup>327</sup> Once officially handed over to the Trust to manage, 'Director Peter Watts, and...Curator, Peter Emmett...carried out a closer investigation of *Rose Seidler House* as a museum, in close consultation with Harry Seidler.'<sup>328</sup> These conversations formed the basis of the Conservation Plan. Emmett noted that Seidler's 'continuing practice...will...have a significant influence on public interpretation of *Rose Seidler House*. This is to be welcomed, for *Rose Seidler House*, like any historical project, is brought to life through the perceptions...of the living.'<sup>329</sup>

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<sup>327</sup> Peter Emmett, *Mid Century Modern-Rose Seidler House Wahroonga 1948-50 Conservation Plan*, 105.

<sup>328</sup> Peter Emmett, *Mid Century Modern-Rose Seidler House Wahroonga 1948-50 Conservation Plan*, 29.

<sup>329</sup> Peter Emmett, *Mid Century Modern-Rose Seidler House Wahroonga 1948-50 Conservation Plan*, 39.

As Honorary Advisor, Harry gave definite directions on the reconstruction of the interiors, but provided few anecdotes or insights into how these interiors were used. It was a project house, an exhibition model for a way to live. It was an academic exercise, as was its recreation by the Trust. There was little shared information on the people who lived there. This was an exhibition house with its own expression of individuality. The house was named after his mother, Rose, yet the only extant expressions of her personality are in the garden and stored in cupboards within the house. The model house for the modern woman was built for a traditional woman who wanted to support her son's career. This was a box of innovative ideas transferred from the northern hemisphere which when opened would influence the interiors of contemporary Australian homes.

Harry, in terms of a holistic approach, was more like an honorary Curator than an Honorary Architect. The difference is that the original creator can influence the appearance of the interiors, and theoretically, there is no hypothetical reconstruction. If using the definition of Curator as 'keeper', then the Honorary Architect, as an educated professional has greater expertise in a particular subject area, that of the Modernist design principles used in determining the interiors and the exteriors of the house, than the professional Curator, and was able to act as a reference. The advantages of this arrangement were the familiarity with which the Curator knows the work, especially in terms of provenance and decision-making, access to materials including documents and archives, networks and the 'back story.' A potential disadvantage is the subjectivity brought to the practice. Harry's modernism continues to influence contemporary practice, including at a popular level.<sup>330</sup>

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<sup>330</sup> *Grand Designs Transformed* ABC television series televised on Thursday 18 January 2024. The principles and appearance of Seidler's domestic interiors in houses such as the *Rose Seidler House*, are used as the basis for decision-making for a suburban transformation in the nearby suburb of Wahroonga.

*Rose Seidler House* underwent a program of conservation in the late 1980s prior to opening as a house museum and resource centre for mid-century modern architecture. The Trust recreated the interiors with furniture arranged according to Seidler's design of 1948-50, and as used by his parents with little change to 1967. Evidence of later occupation was removed. Original fittings, fixtures and American furniture survived and was conserved. As far as possible, furnishings, fabrics and appliances evident from photographs and Seidler's memory were reinstated. According to the 1989 Conservation Policy 'the optimal expression of the cultural significance of the house and contents rests on the absolute purity of the original "as built in 1950"...as a visual and experiential demonstration of mid-century modern design theory and practice as interpreted by...Harry Seidler.'<sup>331</sup> Original furniture was retained and as furnishings wore out, were replaced under curatorial guidance, as-closely-as possible with like.

Conservation architect, Susan McDonald, in 1996,<sup>332</sup> and Trust Assistant Curator, Linda Rector, in 1991, wrote about the problems of locating materials like those used by Seidler. Rector was responsible for much of the sourcing of materials to keep up the appearance of the interiors. Her remarks are worth including as they reflect some of the practical details of the curatorial challenges of replacing twentieth century materials like-with-like:

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<sup>331</sup> Peter Emmett, *Mid Century Modern-Rose Seidler House Wahroonga 1948-50 Conservation Plan*, 112.

<sup>332</sup>Susan Macdonald, "Reconciling Authenticity and Repair in the Conservation of Modern Architecture", *Journal of Architectural Conservation*, 2 (1) (1996), 36–54. Accessed 27 December 2024. doi:10.1080/13556207.1996.10785152. 'Much of the flooring was extensively damaged and needed attention during the conservation works but was simply no longer available. The Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales took the decision to provide temporary replacement materials, approximating the original, until sufficient salvaged material could be collected in the future.'

The polyester crepe used for curtains is unavailable...glass vitrolite originally used for bathroom walls is available only in Japan, at prohibitive expense. These materials...were cheap at the time, and...unlikely to have survived. The difficulty in replacing 1950s fabrics highlights Rose Seidler House's unique position in the Trust, whose expertise is centred on Nineteenth Century interiors... Document fabrics and carpets for Nineteenth Century interiors exist in both public and private sphere. A comparable service in post-war materials does not...Compromise is inevitable.<sup>333</sup>

Rector continues:

Curtains, carpets, bedspreads and Hardoy chair covers have been reproduced as closely-as-possible to the original furnishings. The task has not been easy as many 1950s fabrics are not available ...with constant searching...a close match was...found for all the materials...Locating whitegoods for the kitchen was the most painstaking task of them all...Eventually the Crossly refrigerator, Bendix washing machine, Dishlex dishwasher and Simpson stove were located and meticulously restored.<sup>334</sup>

So, whilst Seidler closely informed the reconstruction of the appearance of the interiors, the Trust's professional Curators, conservation housekeeper and contract builders and craftspeople, researched, consulted and sourced the reality that was available.

Much of the original collection, including the Eero Saarinen womb chair and Grasshopper chairs, the Hardoy chair (the only original Hardoy chair in Australia), the dining and lounge

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<sup>333</sup> Linda Rector, "Rose Seidler House," *Renovating New South Wales* (Sydney, September 1991).

<sup>334</sup> Linda Rector, "Rose Seidler House," *Renovating New South Wales* (Sydney, September 1991).

chairs designed by Charles Eames and manufactured by his studio in 1945, were retained and returned to their reconstructed interiors. Together with other pieces designed by Seidler, including the dining table, bedside units, vanities, stools and desks, this collection is a significant assemblage of twentieth-century furniture. The significance of this provenanced furniture increases, placed as it is in its original context in this house museum interior.



Figure 37. Playroom at *Rose Seidler House*. Photo © Katherine Lu for Museums of History NSW. Accessed 29 September 2025. <https://mhns.wa.gov.au/visit-us/rose-seidler-house/>.

This curatorial approach — of restoration and reconstruction — contrasts with conservation approaches of the mid 1980s, which favoured a closer working with, rather than replacement of, materials. Harry's involvement provided continuity and reference for the Trust's presentation of the interior. His ongoing commitment to the interiors of the house as an exemplar of Mid Century Modern as architect, co-owner, landlord, restorer, and Honorary Advisor with the Trust, all over a period of half a century, was influential. It was a considered and constant control of the form, function, and intellectual and physical access to the interiors. The Trust drew 'on Seidler's knowledge of the original construction, materials,

methods and finishes and memories of the life of the house, whether accurate or idiosyncratic.’<sup>335</sup>

Superficially, it would appear paradoxical for the historic house museum Curator, often a social historian, to be responsible for such a house museum. However, a succession of Curators with fine arts and material culture experience, and the occasional social history Curator, have been engaged in the property on the reconstruction, conservation and interpretation focusing primarily on the interiors. Whilst the content focus may be different from the traditional historic house museum interior, the principles of conservation and interpretation remain the same. Although the house was built relatively recently, Quinn stated in 1989 that it was not ‘a straightforward presentation of an untouched forty-year-old house. A highly developed philosophy of museum method, decisions about materials, authenticity and reproduction are as vital...[here]as at any other Trust property.’<sup>336</sup>

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<sup>335</sup> Catriona Quinn, *Rose Seidler House-Its Development as an Historic House Museum by the Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales*, 6.

A comparative example of the reconstruction of the interiors of a twentieth-century architect-built family home to restore its design intent, is that of the *Rietveld Schröder House* in Utrecht, the Netherlands. Built in 1924 by Dutch architect, Gerrit Rietveld, for Mrs. Truus Schröder-Schräder and her three children, the architect and the client worked together to create this *De Stijl* house. As with the *Rose Seidler House*, the design was heavily influenced by contemporary art design movements, and the restoration and reconstruction informed by an architect associated with the original concept. Architectural Professor, Roberta Grignolo, commented in 2014 that

The objective of restoring the authenticity of the design idea...[was]... extremely tricky. The house was not taken back to a given date; instead each part was brought back to the solution that according to the restoration architect... a former collaborator of the master-best represented Rietveld's design intent...the boundary between "scientific reconstruction" and personal interpretation can easily be crossed, however unknowingly; and the end result and its different degrees of authenticity risk being misleading if they aren't explained to the public.<sup>337</sup>

This is the difference between authenticity and accuracy.

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<sup>336</sup> Catriona Quinn, *Rose Seidler House-Its Development as an Historic House Museum by the Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales*, 14.

<sup>337</sup> Roberta Grignolo, "Authenticity in Modern House Museums: Scope and Legibility of Interventions" in International Conference ICOM DEMHIST-ARRE *Authenticity in the Conservation of Historic Houses and Palace-Museums* ed. Elena Alliaudi and John Barnes (Palace of Compiègne:2014), 32.

The Trust used the experience of reconstructing *Rose Seidler House* interiors to inform their approach to the preservation of other significant twentieth-century houses in Sydney. These included the *Walter Burley Griffin House*, Castlecrag, an experiment in retaining the significant interiors and some curtilage of an important architect designed twentieth-century Modernist house. This was achieved through purchase, conservation and on-selling with statutory protection and private covenants in 1993-94; and a bequest of the *Ken Woolley House*, Mosman to the Trust. Through public programs including exhibitions and Members tours, the Trust initiated public programs that enabled limited access to other twentieth and twenty-first century interiors in Sydney, those not in the Trust portfolio, without financial liability or Trust interpretation, and offered different and complementary experiences to house museums.<sup>338</sup>

Harry Seidler provided a consistent, articulate and well-documented perspective on his first commission in Australia. His involvement defined the house and its interiors by a primarily singular perspective. Trust resources have extended to part-time Curators or Assistant Curators, over the years of public ownership. Each Curator has worked within a clear and tight brief determined by the Deed of Gift, and with the Honorary Architect using the Conservation Plan.<sup>339</sup> Utilising the original interiors and the provenanced designer furniture collection (which has remained in the house since its completion), demonstrates Modernist art, architecture, design theory and practice and the influence of Seidler on architectural

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<sup>338</sup>Examples include exhibitions such as *Marion Hall Best: Interiors* at the Museum of Sydney from August to November 2017 (and previously at Hyde Park Barracks); and Members tours of interiors in public and private ownership.

<sup>339</sup> Peter Emmett, *Mid Century Modern-Rose Seidler House Wahroonga 1948-50 Conservation Plan*, 101.

philosophy and design. The care and control of *Rose Seidler House*, in terms of local, national and international philosophy and practice, is significant, with decisions made on the conservation and interpretation of the interiors by the professional Curator and the architect providing continuity of purpose as Honorary Advisor, influential in the keeping of contemporary house museums in the future.

*Rose Seidler House* is a selective reconstruction of the original building and contents, owing to the involvement of Harry Seidler from 1981 to 2006, done with the intention to ‘restore’ but essentially involving reconstructing much of the building fabric, especially finishes and fittings. From the Trust point of view this owner/architect involvement is a part of the continuing history of *Rose Seidler House* but not the focus of cultural significance.’

Consistent in the narrative has been the presence of largely unaltered and intact interiors. Wall colours changed subtly, soft furnishings and floor coverings were replaced with like when worn out, and appliances updated. The layout and design and the furniture, fixtures and fittings, were little altered from 1950 to 1980. Even the everyday objects, and the three Albers prints, were returned to the interiors as an important component of the restoration. The interiors were witness not to great changes of fashion, circumstance, or personality, but to the normal wear-and-tear on the house when lived in by several different people.



Figure 38. Kitchen, *Rose Seidler House*. *Rose Seidler House*, Museums of History NSW. Photo © Jamie North. Accessed 29 September 2025. <https://mhnsw.au/visit-us/rose-seidler-house/>.

At *Rose Seidler House*, the Trust engaged the visitor with the curatorially reconstructed interiors in several ways. The first was by opening the house one afternoon per week. After viewing an Introductory DVD, visitors enter through the front door. They are encouraged to leave their shoes at the door to protect the reproduction carpet from unnecessary wear. There are no barriers and visitors can walk through the spaces and experience the interiors as a house rather than as a museum. This is the only way that visitors can currently engage with these spaces and the design ideals they represent. Other ways of engagement through focussed public programs, including a lecture series on modern architects and architecture, the education program *Design for Living: A Program for Design in the Visual Arts*, a joint project with the New South Wales Board of Studies, using the Modernist features of the house, art, architecture, design theory and practice and its interiors, and the extremely popular annual *Fifties Fair*, are no longer offered. The demise of these long-running programs increases the importance of an accurate presentation of the interiors as the primary way to access a Modernist house because this where the visitor experiences the Modernist ideal in its practical reality.

## Conclusion

This chapter has shown the outcome of a partnership between the Curator and the family member as Honorary Advisor, in determining an informed reconstruction of historic interiors. The approach to the appearance of the interiors at *Rose Seidler House* brings to full circle the curatorial treatment of *Vaucluse House* as reconstruction. In an innovative approach as theatrical producer and using selectively reproduced provenanced objects and researched soft furnishings, the Curator enabled physical and sensory access to the *Elizabeth Farm* interiors. Using the oral histories and generosity of a family member and preserving all objects as important the Curator was an imperceptible hand in the approach to the appearance of the layered interiors of *Meroogal*.

This Modernist house of a white rectangular prism connects to the period room in the white cube of an art museum as the reconstructed Margaret Olley interiors in Chapter Six. However different in the appearance of their interiors, both are designs for living reflective of the environment of their creator; and both have been recreated using a Curator.

Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio: a fellow of infinite jest,  
of most excellent fancy: he hath borne me on his back a thousand times;  
and now, how abhorred in my imagination it is! my gorge rims at it.  
Here hung those lips that I have kissed I know not how oft.  
Where be your gibes now? Your gambols? your songs?  
your flashes of merriment, that were wont to set the table on a roar?  
Not one now, to mock your own grinning? quite chap-fallen?

Hamlet reflecting to his friend Horatio on the skull of Yorick.

William Shakespeare *Hamlet* Act 5 Scene 1.

## Chapter Six

# Doing more with less: how the reduced role of the Curator affects the accurate presentation of historic house museum interiors.

### Introduction

In previous chapters, I used case studies of four house museums, that were the responsibility of the Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales (the Trust) during the 1980-90s (a ‘golden age’ for house museums), to discuss the critical role and influence of professional Curators in determining and keeping up the appearance of the interiors of historic house museums.

Since the early 2000s, the landscape has shifted in terms of understanding, appreciating and consequently resourcing, historic house museums as sites of historic encounter. In this chapter, I argue that a change in the allocation of curatorial resources can affect the accuracy of the presentation of interiors. I look at some of the reasons for this change, and the effect on house museum curatorship at the Trust. I reflect on the inclusion of, and sometimes inevitable reliance on, technology as an interpretative tool and means of accessing house museum interiors and narratives. I return to the concept of the ‘period room’ and changes in its appearance. I conclude that whatever form historic house museum interiors assume — whether preserved *in situ*, recreated in an art museum or created in a virtual reality — their presentation can only be made real when accurately preserved by a professional Curator.

## Curators doing more with less

The argument for professional Curators preserving the accurate appearance of historic interiors remains relevant. The accuracy and immediacy of connection of a provenanced historic interior is still valued. Journalist, Lee Tulloch<sup>340</sup> writes in 2024 of the importance of accessing provenanced objects. Tulloch cites Coco Chanel's suede couch where the dressmaker sat to receive visitors in her apartment. The original fabric was unfortunately replaced in a recent renovation not by a professional Curator who would have respected the provenanced object, but by a designer, who valued the appearance of the apartment design. Tulloch 'loved the fact that Coco's sofa was worn...It's the everyday things that I find touching in these rooms... I'd much rather visit a place that was a real home, one that has its living history preserved. A place with a human scale.' Four professionally curated historic house museums of MoH perhaps?

An interior that is presented *in-situ*, that is the product of significant research and observation, that is the space where historic encounters took place and where the intangible heritage of these encounters is embedded in the building fabric and form, is the real thing, the authentic and the accurate. This is versus the reproduction or experience as viewed through a diluting lens or filter, which can distance or alter the original experience, the viewer's connection with an historic encounter. The impact of the dilution of the authentic and accurate has implications wider than this government funded organisation, as other authors have noted.<sup>341</sup> The 'real thing' can be questioned because of the interventions of

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<sup>340</sup> Lee Tulloch, "Coco Chanel: the story sofa," *The Sydney Morning Herald Traveller* (March 16, 2024), 21.

<sup>341</sup> Donna Ann Harris, *New Solutions for House Museums-Ensuring the Long-Term Preservation of America's Historic Houses* (Plymouth: Alta Mira, 2007). Updated, enlarged, and expanded as Donna Ann Harris *New Solutions for House Museums: Ensuring the Long-Term Preservation of America's Historic Houses* (Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield 2020). Case studies reinforce the central argument that not every house museum can be sustained long term. Linda Young, *Historic House Museums in the United States and the United Kingdom: A History* (Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016). The arguments in this publication extend beyond these two continents.

conservation.<sup>342</sup> It can be determined in terms of fakes, replicas or copies. Whatever it is, the ‘real thing’ is not so real without its original context. In an historic house museum, that context is the interior.

Recently appointed Chair of MoH former New South Wales Premier Bob Carr would appear to agree with the argument that the accurate appearance of the interiors is a ‘work in progress’ and the ongoing research for same, a necessary one. Carr’s concern that Australia’s historic buildings—house museums— cannot be treasured without romanticising them is the basis of his call for debate on their representativeness. He states that ‘we’ve got to ask how we can nurture and curate our stock of historic houses and [represent] how the servants, the farm labourers, the First Nations people who lived in the neighbourhood at the same time’.<sup>343</sup> Whilst this is not new (as mentioned in their recognition in the 1980s ‘new social history’ and the acquisition of *Meroogal*) what is refreshing is that his attention in this influential management position is firmly directed towards using ‘the whole house’ to show a more inclusive narrative. In the way the early Trustees of Vaucluse House used *Mt Vernon*, home of former President George Washington, as their inspiration for interpreting William Charles Wentworth as auratic, Carr uses *Monticello*, home of former President Thomas Jefferson, as his model for greater inclusiveness of all their occupants. Carr’s vision is that ‘history is part of our civic literacy....if you know where your country comes from, you’re better placed to know where it’s headed. ...historical awareness feeds a lively...patriotism.’ In other words, the inclusive representation of all the occupants of the houses in an accurate manner is critical

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<sup>342</sup> Irit Narkiss, “Is this real?” Authenticity, conservation and the visitor experience’ 2009 in *Art, Conservation, and Authenticities - Material, Concept, Context. Proceedings of the International Conference Held at the University of Glasgow, 12-14 September 2007.* (eds.) E. Hermens and T. Fiske, (London: Archetype Publications:2009).

<sup>343</sup> Kelly Burke, “Bob Carr is up for a debate: can Australia treasure its historic buildings without romanticising them?” *The Guardian* 11 December 2024. Online. Unpaged. Accessed 16 December 2024. <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2024/dec/11/bob-carr-is-up-for-a-debate-can-australia-treasure-its-historic-buildings-without-romanticising-them>.

to the better understanding of our history and to the sustainability of a civic society. It's a worthwhile 'work in progress.'

In July 1980, the New South Wales government funded the Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales to set up, conserve and maintain historic house museums for public education, interpretation and enjoyment. Initially, the establishment of the Trust enabled houses and buildings from other government departments to be transferred to one statutory authority. This state government support encouraged the Trust to explore the acquisition of houses outside the government domain, and outside the urban centre. As shown earlier, in fulfilling the 1980 Historic Houses Act, the curatorial treatment of these houses reflected both current social history and conservation trends, and subsequently in their practice, significantly added to, and often led, knowledge in these areas. Examples of this enrichment of curatorial led knowledge for the sector include recognising the importance of archival and physical evidence-based research in informed decision-making, and the critical role of conservation housekeeping in managing and maintaining interiors. This enrichment is also through connections with the community using public and education programs based on the Statement of Significance of the property, the merit of recording previous occupants' experience with the houses; and of course, the pivotal role of the Curator in determining, co-ordinating and reviewing all these areas.

After the expenses of the Australian Bicentenary (the Bicentenary) and the 2000 Sydney Olympics, funding for cultural heritage didn't return to late twentieth century levels. In New South Wales, the government actively encouraged public/private partnerships to fund the expansion of the *Museum of Contemporary Art*, major capital works at the *Australian Museum*, and to build *Sydney Modern* at the *Art Gallery of New South Wales*. The impact of

funding cuts for museums in general meant that focussed projects, such as digitisation of material at the *State Library of New South Wales*, rather than the acquisition of houses as historic house museums, or their ongoing maintenance and program delivery, were funded.

This public/private partnership in a landscape of finite and competing resources continues, with government sourcing private philanthropy to support the land acquisition, construction and fit-out of the *Powerhouse Parramatta* in western Sydney, with the *Powerhouse Ultimo* closed for three years for controversial ‘heritage revitalisation.’<sup>344</sup> The initial idea of a reconnection of the *Powerhouse Museum* with Darling Harbour, strengthening its historic ties with Sydney Technical College (now the University of Technology), and the *Australian National Maritime Museum*, was discarded in favour of a new building in western Sydney. Plans (as part of an earlier Ultimo land sale iteration) to disperse objects from the *Powerhouse* collections to under-resourced regional museums were met with strong opposition from museum and heritage professionals due to the insufficient financial, logistical, or professional resources and a concern about the movement of material away from its long-standing purpose built interior, an adaptive reuse of a historic building.

More recently, a decision was made to retain the Ultimo site, the original *Powerhouse Museum* (formerly the *Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences*), as a design centre. Some of the collection will be moved to *Powerhouse Parramatta*. Public uncertainty about the final location and display status of signature objects such as the Bolton and Watts steam engine or the Catalina flying boat, has not yet been addressed by the organisation. With the dismantling of the subject specialist curatorial structure, support for making considered decisions about the ongoing presentation and interpretation of the collection is severely reduced. This ties in

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<sup>344</sup> Accessed 23 May 2024. <https://powerhouse.com.au/visit/ultimo>.

with the broader impact on the role of the Curator and house museums. Removal of the term ‘Museum’ from the *Powerhouse Parramatta* site implies that this is no longer the building’s primary function. The official website supports this notion,<sup>345</sup> where STEM experiences, student accommodation, a demonstration kitchen and commercial venue hire feature alongside the presentation of one gallery with no mentions of the extensive and world class applied arts and technology collection.

With major museums, such as the *Powerhouse* and *Sydney Modern*,<sup>346</sup> refocusing on revenue raising for new buildings, fit out, on relocating collections, and whilst at Ultimo, on bringing in ‘block buster’— pre-packaged exhibitions often with little local content or local curatorial contribution— curatorial numbers at these venues have dwindled substantially, with specialist professionals leaving<sup>347</sup> and not been replaced. Existing Curators are responsible for an entire area rather than for a collection or specialist material such as glass or ceramics. It would be reassuring to think that this contraction of curatorial expertise is just part of the ongoing cycle between funding of infrastructure versus daily running costs and an investment in intellectual knowledge for cultural enrichment. However, this trend is now spreading wider across the sector and is reflected in the changing role of the Curator at the Trust where the focus has moved from using Curators as specialists to a more general role. Have house museums been the canary in the coal mine?

As successive New South Wales governments have expected organisations such as the Trust to actively seek complementary funding sources to address any funding shortfall, in 2001 the

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<sup>345</sup> Accessed 28 August 2024. <https://powerhouse.com.au/visit/parramatta>.

<sup>346</sup> Accessed 28 August 2024. Linda Morris, “Art Gallery of NSW faces multimillion-dollar government funding shortfall” in the *Sydney Morning Herald* 9 November 2023. <https://www.smh.com.au/culture/art-and-design/art-gallery-of-nsw-faces-multimillion-dollar-government-funding-shortfall-20231031-p5e9eq.html>.

<sup>347</sup> Accessed 23 May 2024. Margaret Simpson <https://www.maas.museum/inside-the-collection/2021/01/13/career-of-a-powerhouse-museum-curator/>.

Trust set up the philanthropic Foundation for the Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales.<sup>348</sup> The Trust encouraged the long-standing Friends group to develop into a more integrated Members group, covering more properties and adding events to their fund-raising calendar. The success of these fund-raising events relied heavily on connections with Curators, both to inform and to present, and on the accuracy of the preservation of the house museum interiors.

In a landscape of greater competition for finite resources, in 2004 the Trust moved from *Lyndhurst* in Glebe to the restored *Mint* buildings in Macquarie Street — sharing the street with its political masters. This politically astute move significantly raised the profile of the Trust at the big end of town. It enabled administration to be centralised and raised the profile of the *Conservation Resources Centre* to become the *Caroline Simpson Library & Research Collection* (these naming rights the result of a substantial bequest and an early example of public/private partnership). It also enabled the Trust to lease spaces for commercial events to raise revenue.

As revenue raising became increasingly important to the ongoing operations of the Trust, resources were gradually directed away from curation to general administration and management. With the expansion of the promotions unit to include marketing and sponsorship (especially of temporary exhibitions), the Trust restructure contracted the number and influence of Curators. However, marketing relies on content, and one of the key roles of the Curator is to undertake research and interpretation for use within the house museum interior — and by extension in marketing and public programs. Without the Curator,

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<sup>348</sup> Accessed 28 August 2024. <https://www.acnc.gov.au/charity/charities/a8ceb490-38af-e811-a963-000d3ad244fd/profile>.

there is no content. The nuances and details that make a historic house a working house, so fascinating and engaging, are lost. The historic house museum becomes more of a building open for viewing, than a lived in home. There is no preservation of the interior as a site of historic encounter, or at least not as an historically accurate or referential one.

## A challenging environment: curating house museums post 2000

Since 2000, the number and nature of tertiary courses training Curators and other museum professionals, such as conservators, has contracted and changed focus. This results in fewer professionals to work with, and advocate for, historic house museums (or indeed for museums of any kind). Examples of these changes include: Macquarie University, Sydney, ceased its practice-based cross-disciplinary programs in Museum Studies<sup>349</sup> variously available at undergraduate and at post graduate levels (2002-2013); James Cook University, Townsville, no longer offers Museum Studies; The University of Queensland's Master of Museum Studies and Graduate Certificate will be phased-out from 2025.<sup>350</sup>

Those institutions with a changed focus away from tertiary qualifications appropriate to a professional Curator include: the Australian National University, Canberra, which offers a Master of Museum and Heritage Studies with connections to Canberra's cultural organisations.<sup>351</sup> Deakin University, Melbourne, offers post graduate<sup>352</sup> course work in Museum Studies at Graduate Certificate, Graduate Diploma and a Master of Cultural

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<sup>349</sup> Accessed 29 May 2024. [https://amusine.typepad.com/the\\_last\\_hurrah/museum-studies-at-macquarie-university-.html](https://amusine.typepad.com/the_last_hurrah/museum-studies-at-macquarie-university-.html).

<sup>350</sup> Accessed 29 May 2024. <https://visualarts.net.au/news-opinion/2024/proposed-closure-uqs-museum-studies-programs-raises-alarm/#:~:text=The%20only%20tertiary%20qualifications%20offered,in%20Museum%20Studies%20from%202025.>

<sup>351</sup> Accessed 29 May 2024. <https://cass.anu.edu.au/degrees/master-museum-and-heritage-studies>

<sup>352</sup> Accessed 29 May 2024. <https://www.deakin.edu.au/study/find-a-course/arts-humanities-and-social-sciences/cultural-heritage-and-museum-studies>.

Heritage and Museum Studies available online and in person. The University of Sydney<sup>353</sup> offers a Graduate Certificate, Graduate Diploma and a Master of Museum and Heritage Studies, with an emphasis perhaps less on the museum studies component and more on ‘the growing area of local and global heritage.’<sup>354</sup> Perhaps future proofing employment?

Australian academic, Jennifer Barrett, wrote in 2011 when she was Museum Studies Course Director at the University of Sydney of the tension between theory and practice in developing knowledge about museums and how they work.<sup>355</sup> Barrett argues that ‘museum studies provides vital opportunities for maintaining and developing vibrant museum practices’ and that changes in the museum sector demand vocation-based courses that are best delivered by practitioners. With a contraction in resources for training and for employing Curators, where do the practitioners to deliver the courses and to interpret the house museum interiors come from?

There is no evidence that the number of museums is decreasing, or that there should be fewer professionals responsible for the preservation of our cultural heritage. In fact, given broader state government commitments to Arts and Culture over the next decade in states such as Queensland (with the Summer Olympic Games in Brisbane in 2032), more appropriately qualified museum professionals will be required. According to Penelope Benton, NAVA Director, ‘These programs are essential in preparing the next generation of gallery, museum, archives, and library (GLAM) professionals.’<sup>356</sup>

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<sup>353</sup> Accessed 29 May 2024. <https://www.sydney.edu.au/arts/schools/school-of-art-communication-and-english/museum-and-heritage-studies.html>.

<sup>354</sup> Accessed 29 May 2024. <https://www.sydney.edu.au/arts/schools/school-of-art-communication-and-english/museum-and-heritage-studies.html>.

<sup>355</sup> Jennifer Barrett, “ ‘Protecting the past, safeguarding the future’: museum studies, the profession and museum practice in Australia” in *Understanding Museums-Australian museums and museology* (eds.) Des Griffin and Leon Paroissien, (Canberra: National Museum of Australia, 2011). Unpaged.

<sup>356</sup> Accessed 29 May 2024. <https://visualarts.net.au/news-opinion/2024/proposed-closure-uqs-museum-studies-programs-raises->

Since 2000, in each of the four houses discussed in this thesis, Curators have continued to conserve and interpret the properties according to their Conservation Plan and Statement of Significance, but at a slower pace than in the 1980s and 1990s. From 2009 to about 2022, each of the houses was one in a portfolio of properties falling under the responsibility of a single Curator. This change to being off-site with responsibility for more than one property, has particularly impacted *Vaucluse House* and *Elizabeth Farm*, each of which, for many years, had a property-specific full-time Curator. Occasionally, the Curator might be responsible for another house (*Rouse Hill Estate* was grouped with *Elizabeth Farm*, and *Elizabeth Bay House* with *Vaucluse House*), but was able to direct an Assistant Curator.

In other words, a Curator (whether at Assistant Curator, Curator or Supervising Curator level), was on site at their property every day. This enabled a focus on the development and management of historical detail and the defining of essential differences between the houses, rather than showing by default the more stereotyped and easily presented similarities. The Curators role is vital to the accurate preservation of the individual, idiosyncratic historic interior. With the staffing changes, Curators were less able to engage with the daily and detailed house museum responsibility. This is because Curators have been responsible for several properties. Other than an initial set-up with a full time Curator at *Meroogal* and variously Assistant Curator with Supervising Curator and Curator shared with another property at *Rose Seidler House*, little curatorially in terms of responsibility, other than the amount of time available for the Curator, has changed.

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[alarm/#:~:text=The%20only%20tertiary%20qualifications%20offered,in%20Museum%20Studies%20from%202025.](#)

The Trust's model of largely on-site and specific property Curators changed for the first time in 1990. Curators were transferred from their individual properties to operate out of the then Head Office in *Lyndhurst*, Glebe, as a curatorial team, visiting properties as required. This created a curatorially-reactive template, rather than one of initiative-taking house museum preservation, evident especially in the lack of detail and understanding of the nuanced presentation of the interiors, and the loss of critical connection with staff, volunteers, and the community. Daily interpretation of the interiors was not possible, nor was there sufficient interpretation direction and support for property staff to undertake it at a curatorial level.

After a year long trial, Curators returned to their properties as a physical presence. But this idea of moving Curators away from a particular house museum to be responsible for several houses, which was based on the model used by non-government charity organisations, the National Trust (United Kingdom) and National Trust of Australia (NSW) was used later and continues to be used. Under this model, Curators are responsible for a group of house museums, or an aspect of the interpretative work such as project-based work, of the organisation. The various restructures of the Trust resulted in the incremental implementation of the NTA model where 'portfolio Curators' are responsible for several houses and/or buildings that are grouped according to chronology or distance. Curatorial time is divided between several properties, usually combined with another project such as an exhibition or public program.

Ongoing restructures also resulted in fewer curatorial positions as Curators had no substantive position. Long-standing Curators left as their key curatorial positions were deleted, downgraded or merged. This loss of corporate knowledge with curatorial and other specialist staff occurred with little or no handover or acknowledgement of their considerable,

pivotal, and often highly influential, contribution to the Trust. The message was clear: the role of the specialist Curator who incorporates the knowledge, skills and experience of the house museum Curator, was now less valued or understood.

With fewer resources directed towards curatorial work, the Trust seemed challenged in addressing its original mission. Over the last twenty years, the Trust and its successive organisations have lost an enormous amount of curatorial and cultural heritage knowledge. Between 2000-10 the Senior Curatorial Co-ordinator and Senior Curatorial Consultant left the Trust, taking with them years of knowledge, specialist experience, and authority in both the curatorial and heritage areas. The knowledge, skills and experience of these professional Curators has enriched other cultural organisations, especially in the appearance of historic house museum interiors. Former Senior Curatorial Consultant and one of the Trust's first Curators, James Broadbent, consulted to the National Trust of Australia (NSW) where his specialist knowledge of interiors and the ability to use soft furnishings in recreating the feel of historic nineteenth century interiors has been well utilised in *Old Government House*, Parramatta. From research visits to these NTA properties over many years, it is clear to see that the presentation of the interiors has prospered under his direction. The substantial loss to the Trust of this curatorial leadership in the rigorous and highly influential approach to historical interpretation has not been replaced.

Since 2000, the Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales has changed name twice and responsibility for cultural collections once. In 2008, the organisation changed its name to Sydney Living Museums (SLM), but not its portfolio. Levels of curatorial engagement and thus influence with the day-to-day and the detailed interpretation of the interiors has incrementally and overall, significantly decreased. This is shown by changes to the placement

of Curators within the organisational chart, that also reflect the diminishment of their ability to act as advocates for presentation of the house interiors.

When the brief of the SLM seemed a little uncertain as was the role of the Curator, Curators used archival material and the interiors (mainly) of the historic house museums to create social media blogs, such as *The Cook and the Curator* in order to connect with audiences.<sup>357</sup> This blog used food to link current audiences with past residents. ‘The Eat Your History project...brings together...public programs, hands-on experiences and how-to workshops supported by collections research, online resources, and exhibitions. *The Cook and the Curator* blog is just one way we’ll share our stories, places, and recipes with you.’<sup>358</sup> As the house museums continued to open, but with fewer *in-situ* curatorial resources, there was an increase in the number of printed articles, digitised and made available online. Curators were rising to the challenges of their role by utilising technology to connect the virtual and physical spaces, to bring audiences in the digital world into the interiors of the historic house museums.

COVID intervened in 2020-21, as a challenge and an opportunity for the Curator. With properties closed, house interiors underwent a conservation ‘deep clean’ and a further digitisation of collections, with financial resources used to produce virtual tours by Curators.<sup>359</sup> When professionally done, these tours assist in the preservation of the historic house interior, especially in the preservation of the fragile interior both in terms of historic appearance and as a reference in terms of disaster management and recovery. At *Rouse Hill Estate* a virtual tour built on an earlier digitisation program coordinated by the Curator and

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<sup>357</sup> Accessed 4 June 2024. <https://blogs.sydneylivingmuseums.com.au/cook>.

<sup>358</sup> Accessed 11 April 2024. <https://blogs.sydneylivingmuseums.com.au/cook/about/>.

<sup>359</sup> For example, at *Rouse Hill Estate*. Accessed 5 June 2024. <https://mhsw.au/visit-us/rouse-hill-estate/>

Conservation Housekeeper, enabled usually restricted access to the First Floor and to the contents of some of the cupboards. Curators used the authenticated material culture from the historic house interiors to support research on areas of interest. This research adds to the accuracy of the interiors to which the material culture belongs. There remains a need to ensure there is a strong overall curatorial presence responsible for the day-to-day presentation of the interiors.

In 2022, Sydney Living Museums amalgamated with the State Archives and Records Authority of New South Wales<sup>360</sup> both publicly funded organisations, to form a new organisation, the Museums of History NSW (MoH) with a remit ‘to engage people in our past’, under a single CEO. Under the Organisation Chart<sup>361</sup> (as at 12 December 2024), the House Museums Portfolio formed part of the Director Museum Operations & Visitor Services, responsible NOT to the Chief Executive Officer, but to the Chief Operating Officer. Curatorial & Research reports to Director Programming, Production & Audience. This separates Curatorial & Research from City Museums Portfolio and the House Museums Portfolio and Horticulture and Venue Services & Events in Director, Museum Operations & Visitor Services under the Chief Operating Officer; and locates Heritage under Director, Strategy & External Relations; Access Services comes under Director Collections, all under the Chief Executive Office (all now responsible to the CEO). I would argue that the Curator plays a pivotal role to connect these areas, and that to separate these complementary roles creates a competing and ineffective series of silos. This Organisation Chart appears to

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<sup>360</sup> This new ‘home’ for the history of NSW brings together the historic houses, museums, and collections previously in the care of Sydney Living Museums with the archives and records in the NSW State Archives and Records Authority of New South Wales.

<sup>361</sup> Accessed 12 December 2024.

<https://cdn.sanity.io/files/zl9du87e/production/2e80e0f32a9b554728e93d7282f2208dd8543aee.pdf>.

separate and disassociate the intertwined role of the Curator with heritage. The role of the Curator is greater than the sum of its individual parts.

The Act of 2022 retains the parameters of the Historic Houses Act of 1980, including if the MoH is of the opinion ‘that the property is of no commercial value - disposing of the property otherwise than for valuable consideration.’<sup>362</sup> I suggest that by their very purpose, as educational institutions, that house museums are of no commercial value and find it disturbing that this sentence was retained 43 years after it was first included. An opportunity to remove this clause that is open to subjective interpretation has been lost. Whilst much has been modified to better reflect current times, there are still items of concern. An example is *Division 2 14 acquisition of a building or site for ‘restoration’*. ‘Restoration’ is such a subjective term — what about conservation or preservation? Another example is ‘for another purpose approved by the Minister.’ What does this mean? Will resources be directed away from the conservation and interpretation of the buildings towards other buildings? Further, Clause 14 910 (b) states ‘lend property in circumstances Museums of History NSW thinks fit’ is open to confusion and is certainly a challenge for the Curator.

In a climate of changing management and Board membership (sometimes with limited experience in managing historic houses and properties), the role of an experienced and professional Curator is even more important. In fact, the Curator is critical to the credibility of the organisation in best managing and preserving its assets.<sup>363</sup> Curators have again been moved off site, away from their houses, this time to the *Mint* in Macquarie Street because this is where there is room. This transfer of Curators from houses to administration, and the

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<sup>362</sup> Museums of History NSW Act. Accessed 27 December 2024. <https://legislation.nsw.gov.au/view/html/inforce/current/act-2022-042>.

<sup>363</sup> Accessed 27 June 2023. <https://mhnsw.au/about-us/>.

deletion of positions such as Manager and Curator from the *Caroline Simpson Library & Research Collection*, has also meant a change from specialist Curator (when the position of Curator had been retained) to a more generalist social historian.

There is a greater reliance on non-curatorial staff, those who are located at the property, to maintain the appearance of the interiors. Chief Guides now run the education component of the interpretation. Guides are not required necessarily to hold professional qualifications in teaching, but their customer service experience is important. Traditionally, Guides deliver educational programs developed by Education specialists in consultation with Curators. Volunteer Guides are not required to hold formal teaching qualifications, rather they must attend a training program focussed on the history and significance of the property and on the appearance of the interiors, usually coordinated and delivered by Curators. Curators are available on an as needs basis, but who determines when that might be? Where, effectively, are the house museum Curators? Who controls the presentation of the interiors of the house museums to the public and ensures that they are accurate?

Expertise brought in at senior management level often has had little or no house museum experience. Since 2000, five people — Director Kate Clark (2008-2013), Executive Director Mark Goggin, from the Powerhouse Museum, (2013-July 2019), Adam Lindsay,<sup>364</sup> former State Archives and Records Authority of New South Wales CEO, (2019-December 2022), interim CEO Dr John Vallance, State Librarian (January 2023-May 2023) and Mary Darwell appointed initially for twelve months (June 2023-August 2024 ) — have led the Trust. In September 2024 Annette Pitman with expertise in arts, heritage and cultural leadership, in

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<sup>364</sup> Linda Morris, “New Museums of History rocked by leadership change” in *The Sydney Morning Herald* December 30, 2022. Accessed 21 March 2023. <https://www.smh.com.au/culture/art-and-design/new-museums-of-history-rocked-by-leadership-change-20221227-p5c903.html>.

place but not in house museums, was made a permanent appointment to the position of Chief Executive Officer of MoH, with the aim of bringing stability to the role and certainty to the organisation's future. This contrasts with the leadership of one Director, Peter Watts, for the first twenty-eight years.

As a publicly funded organisation responsible for heritage assets of considerable significance, MoH effectively has no publicly articulated strategic direction, certainly not one that directly relates to the accurate preservation and presentation of house museum interiors. This is obviously extremely concerning. However, there is acknowledgement that 'our places and collections...comprise some of the most significant historical sites and material in the country. With this as our foundation, we bring history to life through diverse voices and viewpoints, supporting audiences of all backgrounds to gain fresh perspectives on our past.'<sup>365</sup> Logically and historically, this bringing of history to life would rely on the knowledge, skills and experience of a Curator. In late 2024, there are currently no Curators specifically responsible for a house. Curators with extensive and detailed house museum experience are currently employed as generalists or responsible for projects and located off site. Day-to-day management of the interiors has devolved to non-curatorial staff. The challenge for Curators to accurately preserve and present interiors continues.

These organisational shifts reflect a broader change in attitude towards the relevance, and by inference, the sustainability, of house museums. American historian, Donna Ann Harris,<sup>366</sup> wrote in 2007 and again in 2020, of the challenges facing house museums and of the

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<sup>365</sup> Accessed 12 December 2024. <https://mhns.wa.gov.au/about-us/>.

<sup>366</sup> Donna Ann Harris, *New Solutions for House Museums-Ensuring the Long-Term Preservation of America's Historic Houses* (Plymouth: Alta Mira, 2007). Updated, enlarged, and expanded as Donna Ann Harris *New Solutions for House Museums: Ensuring the Long-Term Preservation of America's Historic Houses* (Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2020).

importance of rationalisation and review. Although written in an American context, assumptions that a house museum is worth only one visit, that there are an increasing number of competing interests for leisure time, and that social history needs to recognise and reflect the culturally diverse contributions to the house museum in its interpretation, are shared with Australian visitors. Particularly relevant is the critical notion that the house museum, and its interiors, must be historically accurate. If not accurate, then in a contracting economic and changing political landscape, how can this be a house museum worth resourcing? Of course, the house museum is more likely to be historically accurate when the professional Curator is in charge and is adequately resourced.

Using results from a survey of curatorial positions advertised in the *Museums Journal* and personal views of senior members of the museum profession, Edwards wrote in 2007 of concern about the future for Curators, citing issues of postmodernism which have affected their ability and status, by ‘calling on new voices and narratives... in the future curators will be affected by changes in technology, new computerized applications and competition for funding.’<sup>367</sup> All of these changes have occurred as forecast and affected the Curator offering challenges and opportunities.

Another method of curatorial access relying on the accurate preservation of the historic house interior is that used in the *Caroline Simpson Library & Research Collection*. The credibility of displays and public programs is reliant on the accuracy of an informed historic interior. One that is determined by the Curator. Provenanced material continues to be used as a reference for the informed recreation of interiors, with public access through curatorial and

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<sup>367</sup> Elise Coralie Edwards, “The Future for Curators,” *Papers from the Institute of Archaeology SI* (2007), 98-114.

reference librarian led programs such as ‘Creating Imagined Interiors’<sup>368</sup> and appointments. Forums such as *Sound Heritage Sydney*<sup>369</sup> bring together musicians, scholars and heritage practitioners to discuss what and how music was played in historic houses and explore ways music can be used to reveal new narratives for contemporary visitors.<sup>370</sup> The latter then plays the music in the historic house interiors, adding this transient sensory element to their resonance.

## Updating the Four Case Studies (2000 to 2024)

After a statistical analysis and costing review,<sup>371</sup> recommendations to reduce opening hours at *Elizabeth Bay House*, *Vaucluse House*, and *Elizabeth Farm*, were implemented in 2009 alongside with staffing changes. Access to both *Vaucluse House* and *Elizabeth Farm* halved for general visitors, from six days to three days a week, to enable greater staff availability for education programs. *Vaucluse House* opened on other days to booked groups and commercial hires. The curatorial to management staff ratio was reversed. *Vaucluse House* continues to offer Education programs, replacing one based on accessing the Butler’s Pantry for one which explores the lives of all members of the Wentworth household and actively uses all areas of the restored interiors in ‘Child’s Play.’<sup>372</sup> *Elizabeth Farm* continues to offer the same primary school program ‘Transported in Time’<sup>373</sup> based on convict workers that after more

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<sup>368</sup> In this program, experts discussed approaches to creating interiors for house museums and film and television productions. Visitors could view the collections from the Caroline Simpson Library that had inspired the projects discussed, including the production of ‘The Lost Flowers of Alice Hart’ (Amazon Prime), the reinterpretation of *Everglades*, Leura, and the revitalisation of the Drawing Room at *Vaucluse House*. Accessed 4 June 2024. <https://www.linkedin.com/feed/update/urn:li:activity:7199950090906591232/>.

<sup>369</sup> Jeanice Brooks, Matthew Stephens, Wiebke Thormählen, eds. *Sound heritage : making music matter in historic houses* edited by Abingdon, Oxon ; New York, NY: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2022.

<sup>370</sup> ‘Sydney Living Museums (now Museums of History NSW) and the Sydney Conservatorium of Music invited a range of experts from across Australia, the UK, and New Zealand to participate in a symposium at Elizabeth Bay House to explore the history of music making in the Australian home and its international contexts.’ Accessed 11 June 2024. <https://mhnsw.au/stories/general/sound-heritage-sydney-making-music-historic-places/>.

<sup>371</sup> *Annual report 2006-7*, Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales, (Glebe: The Trust), 2007.

<sup>372</sup> Accessed 28 August 2024. <https://mhnsw.au/learning/childs-play/>.

<sup>373</sup> Accessed 28 August 2024. <https://mhnsw.au/learning/colonial-life-elizabeth-farm/>.

than thirty years, would logically need reviewing. This program uses the interiors as historically charged ground for simple research-based activities including cleaning, carrying water, and baking on the kitchen stove. Props can sometimes remain in the house long after the children have left, creating a confused interior for visitors.

Opening hours at *Rose Seidler House* and *Meroogal* remained static. *Rose Seidler House* no longer offers school programs. The education program at *Meroogal* has changed from one about ancestry, 'Kith and Kin' to 'Then and Now: Playing with the Past'<sup>374</sup> investigating how home life has been changed by domestic and leisure technologies since the late nineteenth century. The interpretation of accurate interiors and the accumulated collection are critical to this program. All properties open after-hours for public programs and events, and often extended hours for school holidays.

Acknowledging the plurality of historic contributors to the accurate appearance of the properties continues to be an important Curatorial responsibility. In the 1980s, this acknowledgement of largely 'invisible' inhabitants of women, children and servants, was in the presentation of the house interiors initially in the Kitchen and Service Areas, and gradually throughout the house in both the private (Bedrooms, Nursery) and in the public (Drawing Room, Little Tea Room, Orientation or Introduction) rooms. In the 2000s, at each of the properties, there's been a more recent recognition of the presence of First Nations people OUTSIDE the house such as in a permanent installation at *Elizabeth Farm*, Parramatta.<sup>375</sup> Placing these 'invisible' inhabitants in the interiors in an accurate presentation is dependent on the availability of curatorial resources not only to undertake primary research

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<sup>374</sup> Accessed 28 August 2024. <https://mhns.wa.gov.au/learning/then-and-now-playing-past/>.

<sup>375</sup> Accessed 8 October 2024. <https://mhns.wa.gov.au/whats-on/exhibitions/healing-land-remembering-country/>.

using documents and the witness marks of the interiors, but also on the ability to meaningfully engage with the oral traditions of those whose ancestors may have featured in these historic encounters.

## Vaucluse House

In 2005, the role of the full-time Curator changed to that of a full-time Curator/Manager.

Energy was directed outside the house to the surrounding grounds in both researched physical reconstruction and through public programs. This role was supported by an Assistant Curator who focussed largely on the interpretation of interiors, maintaining the status quo of the interpretation of the Principal Rooms and Bedrooms with occasional, detailed and transient interpretation, such as ‘Moments in Time’ and telling the story of those whose lives were reflected, but largely untold, in the Service Areas.

Recent additional research about convict’s lives brought the Butler’s Pantry to the fore. The Curator moved out of this space and a reconstructed interior informed by archival and object-based research, based on the 1910 Government Architect’s Plan, physical investigation of the building fabric and referencing Wentworth provenanced furniture, moved in. The Schoolroom, where temporary interpretative displays on the family, the estate and on nineteenth century contemporary social history had been mounted for over a decade, where less was known about its use, transformed into the Curator’s Office. These decisions enabled access to interiors reconstructed with a greater degree of accuracy.

As less evidence survived, recreating the Stables (as used by the orchardists, hostellers and gardeners), to show the lives of the people who worked to support the owner, their aspirations and their lifestyle, was more challenging. There is now access to these spaces and original

finishes of the Men's Rooms in the Stables, but the challenges of the Curator extend to a more comprehensive recreation of the interior. How to include the sensory elements of these interiors, which would have smelt of sweat, tobacco, leather dressing and a combination of saddle and lamp oil?

Complete conjectural reconstruction limits physical access to the space, but this is the approach adopted and consistently used by the Trust for the interpretation of the interiors at *Vaucluse House*. As acknowledged in the Conservation Plan, it is as important to tell the servants' narratives as the masters', and to focus on understanding the function and form of these interiors through cross reference with other similar interiors, and perhaps with other interpretational devices such as that already mentioned of smell or sound (as music for example) or general oral histories as audio.

The curatorial interpretative approach at *Vaucluse House* was naturally influenced by the priorities of the Trust and the ways in which public interest in aspects of the property were gauged. The property as a place of stories, as a household of nineteenth century characters, an interesting woman and 'that one-time highly celebrated patriot'. Scholarship informing interpretation has been subtly made apparent in the ground floor room, which may have been William Charles Wentworth's estate office, now an Orientation Room. This interior has been redesigned to share the stories of the site, through archival material and objects, such as Sarah Wentworth's chatelaine, not normally on display within their original spaces, from its First Nations people connections, its ownership by Sir Henry Browne Hayes and occupation by the Wentworth family, to its transfer into public ownership and the creation of a museum. Objects once belonging to the Wentworth family jostle with more idiosyncratic material from the property's early museum phase.



Figure 39. Orientation Room, *Vacluse House*. This image shows how research has informed a more accurate presentation of this interior from allegedly Wentworth Study to a curatorially informed Orientation Room that embraces all aspects of the history of the house from private residence to public memorial museum to historic house museum. Photograph taken by Suzanne Bravery, May 2021, private collection.

Utilising the knowledge and skills of appropriately experienced Curators is essential to the accurate presentation of historic interiors. More recently, this work, arguably a core component of the responsibility of the organisation to fund, has relied more on a public/private partnership for this to happen. This is evident in the 2017 refurbishment of the Drawing Room – considered one of the finest surviving colonial interiors in Australia–built and furnished by William Charles and Sarah Wentworth in the 1840s. The refurbishment was supported by private donations to the Sydney Living Museums Foundation.<sup>376</sup> No pictorial evidence of the original Drawing Room survives, so the recreation relied on an auction

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<sup>376</sup> Accessed 1 March 2020. <https://sydneylivingmuseums.com.au/stories/reviving-vacluse-house>.

advertisement in the Sydney Morning Herald in 1853, when the family was preparing to leave Australia for England. It listed a variety of furniture for sale, comprising ottomans, sofas, and easy chairs in ‘elaborately carved rosewood’ and upholstered in crimson silk damask. Without a fragment of this original upholstery, SLM worked with English suppliers to source damask of an appropriate design, colour, and quality. As a significant original finish, the colour and design of the floral wallpaper frieze was an important reference point and guided the decision-making process. The furniture was expertly reupholstered in custom-woven crimson damask. The window furnishings were created by a small local business with expertise in soft furnishing, using 19th-century sources. The tassels for the box ottomans were meticulously copied from an example in the *Caroline Simpson Library & Research Collection*. Soft Furnishings Group of volunteers hand-stitched silk hangers into the wool bullion fringe for the window furnishings. This work was managed and overseen by the portfolio Curator with expertise in historic soft furnishings and input from architecture and interiors specialist Dr James Broadbent. In 2017, SLM was able to direct the priorities of this funding, but for how long? And what will be the potential effect on the accuracy of the appearance of the interiors?



Figure 40. *Vacluse House* Drawing Room. This image shows how placing importance on limiting physical access to the space to manage the conservation of the collection overrides access to an understanding of the totality of the use of the space. The ongoing consideration of both curatorial and conservation collection requirements. Photograph taken by Suzanne Bravery, June 2012, private collection.

A self-guided audio tour gave voices to the house's occupants, including the servants, within the interiors they worked and lived. 'When it comes to historic interiors, even the most lovingly furnished spaces are silent.'<sup>377</sup> Publicity for the audio tour states that it aimed to address audience research where preference for stories of people clearly outweighs those of objects, furniture, and architecture; and where a mobile personal device enables the interiors to be unobstructed by labels. This had been the subject of public programs over many years. Audience research showed 'around 40% of our visitors prefer to explore the place without a guide.'<sup>378</sup> Does this mean that 60% preferred to explore the house on a staff-led tour?

The organisation has been consistent in returning the house to the period of the Wentworth occupation, not 'playing house' as were previous Trustees when they yielded to the

<sup>377</sup> Accessed 20 March 2020. <https://sydneylivingmuseums.com.au/stories/eavesdropping-wentworths>.

<sup>378</sup> Accessed 20 March 2020. <https://sydneylivingmuseums.com.au/stories/eavesdropping-wentworths>.

temptation (without thorough research) to complete Wentworth's incomplete house—respecting the building fabric, materials and social history reflected in the house.

The organisation's focus appears to be on revenue-raising rather than research and resources as seen in the balance of staffing being directed towards the Marketing and Retail units which once served the Curator. The irony of this situation is that anecdotally, these interiors are sought after as the informed backdrop for venue hire because they are so carefully researched with such an attention to detail. Unless there is an ongoing commitment to Curatorial expertise to keep up the appearances of the interiors, they will lose their commercial attraction.



Figure 41. *Vacluse House* Drawing Room as used for an unrelated contemporary art installation *Narcissus Garden* by Yayoi Kusama. Photograph taken by Suzanne Bravery, May 2021, private collection.

More recently, the use of interiors for (arguably inappropriate) interventions has challenged the role of the Curator in preserving the interior as a site of historic encounter. Yayoi Kusama's *Narcissus garden*, a mass installation of 1500 mirrored balls arranged on a lawn at the Venice Biennale was created in 1966.<sup>379</sup> It was recreated for the Drawing Room and the fountain at *Vaucluse House* in 2021. Clearly appropriate for its original artistic purpose, it hardly seems relevant to an 1840s Drawing Room. This is in contrast with earlier artistic interventions at *Elizabeth Bay House* based on curatorial research,<sup>380</sup> interventions which cleverly and creatively told stories of previous occupants.

The 2024 visitor experience is of a reconstructed house interior which has changed markedly in layered detail of presentation, in the opening up of the Butler's Pantry, the return of provenanced material to original location, in the update of the Orientation Space and sadly in the return of the Little Drawing Room to a family history area.

## Elizabeth Farm

Broadbent's initial interpretation of *Elizabeth Farm* remains central to the ongoing curatorial interpretation. Conservation cleaning, nineteenth century housekeeping and presentation has continued: the Library Bedroom kept dark to soothe Macarthur's madness and the Kitchen fire lit every day (fire restrictions permitting). Public programs continue and are developed as the continuous public and community connection. These programs increased in number and later exponentially in size, involving all areas of the Trust in marketing and staffing them. An

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<sup>379</sup> Monique Leslie Watkins, "Yayoi Kusama Flowers that Bloom in the Cosmos 2022," *Look* the magazine of the Art Gallery of New South Wales members, (February-March 2023), 24.

<sup>380</sup> These included *Ten[d]ancy: Artistic Interventions for Elizabeth Bay House* in 2006, based on the Macleays as previous tenants of the house. Accessed 29 May 2024. <https://mhns.wa.gov.au/whats-on/exhibitions/tendancy-artistic-interventions-elizabeth-bay-house> and *Spare Room* in 2007 focusing on the artists who lived in the house. Accessed 29 May 2024. <https://suepedley.com.au/media/pages/works/uv-la-marina/1e90a9c1b2-1632890190/spare-room-at-elizabeth-bay-house.pdf>.

interpretative tool, audience developer and visitor statistics increaser, they were extremely successful. Until the size and number of white marquee stalls took over the carriage loop and the house became the backdrop and not the focal point of the event.



Figure 42. *Elizabeth Farm* Oak Tree Room ‘*Scarlet Fever*’ contemporary installation shows how the intangible heritage of the property can be accessed in a temporary interpretation managed by the Curator. Photograph taken by Suzanne Bravery, 2005, private collection.

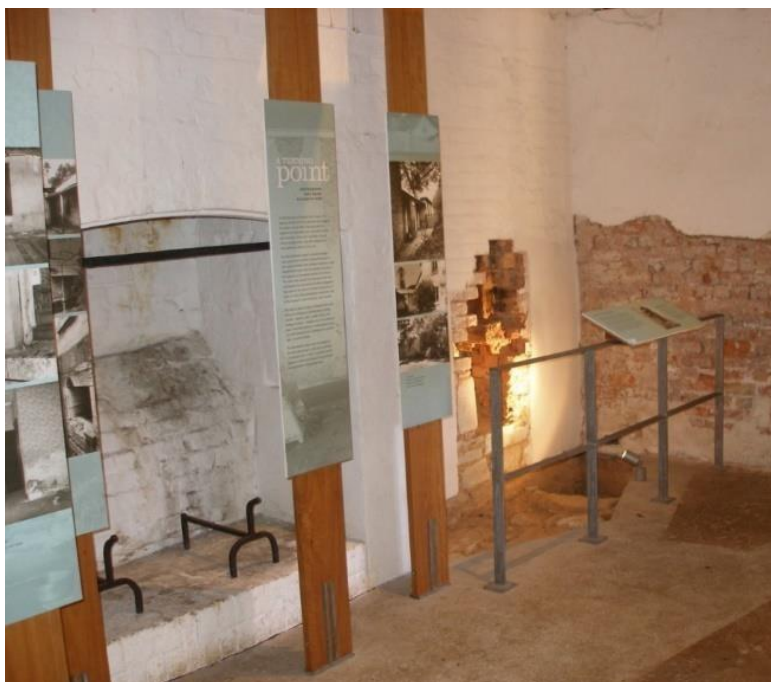


Figure 43. *Elizabeth Farm* Laundry interpretation panels and building construction. Photograph taken by Suzanne Bravery, June 2012, private collection.

The interiors at *Elizabeth Farm* continue to be presented using primarily provenanced reproductions and as a theatre set. Sometimes, to introduce more knowledge than is immediately visually available through the interiors, a series of temporary installations interpreting events and players in the history of the property are provided. These incursions into the fabric of the interiors which appear more permanent, but may be reversed, are made. These include removal of a Laundry wall to reveal an earlier stove (previously known from research), and removal of part of the Entrance Hall floor to reveal the Cellar. Both these removals of building fabric alter the nature of the visitor's experience to become one of a house museum (making it reminiscent of the 1970s proposal referred to in Chapter Three), where the rooms are presented as education classrooms rather than house interiors. The introduction of the iPad as a key component of the self-guided tour provided an alternative method of offering access to research-based interpretative material about the building fabric, which would allow these incursions to be reversed and the rooms returned to their historic domestic use.

This remains a challenge as the story of the Macarthurs recedes in relevance and other stories of migration and settlement, of diverse histories, require a space to be told. But is it in this space? In these interiors or elsewhere? And are the strengths of these interiors in their resilience for use as educational facility? 'Transported in Time' continues telling the stories of diversity in convicts in a contextual manner.

When *Elizabeth Farm* was one of three properties managed by the portfolio Curator, it is essential that the differences and significance of this house are clearly maintained. *Elizabeth Farm* is a tremendous asset, but without constant rigour and the time and experience required to maintain the interiors, they will appear tired. A Curator-driven review of policy is timely.

Reduced opening hours for general admission has meant a decline in general visitation since 2008. There remains a commitment to primary school education through the program 'Transported in Time,' which is ripe for review after many years of operation. There is a fiscal responsibility of the Trust to ensure that public funds are spent wisely, but it is also important that access to the house is made as widely available to the public as possible. With the contraction and withdrawal of some public programs, which previously enticed visitors to the property, a careful consideration of decisions that impact access is required.

In terms of venue and function hire, *Elizabeth Farm* is another 'authentic' backdrop to a photo opportunity for white bridal parties in horse drawn carriages with the ambience of an historical connection.

Initially, the Trust used the interiors in an emotive, engaging, and educative tool, with lessons not from the rooms as classrooms but as experiences and sensory exposure to the colonial world through the building fabric, the Macarthurs and their social, political and economic sensibilities, to learn about trade, textiles, building construction, servants and convicts in formal education programs. Public programs were used to focus and expand this knowledge with take-home experience and souvenirs.

So, it seems that the property is experiential for primary school students only. This edgy educative and experiential approach has mellowed and become diluted. Details and therefore significance are being lost. This no longer appears as the immersive experience offering that placed the organisation at the head of its game. Neither the house nor the Macarthurs are centre stage. Sharp and concise, correct, and fresh lessons are not available nor a priority. The

priority is keeping the doors open to visitors on a reduced budget. Without dedicated curatorial resources—not one Curator across three properties— this is not a sustainable nor appropriate approach to recognising and preserving the interiors of this house [museum].

Decades after the initial desire to provide access to the ‘real thing’ to visitors, these provenanced reproductions remain extremely important as an academic foundation for all visitors. The way in which the house museum is used to represent a colonial interior in a wider historical context is almost as important; experiences of living in a bungalow are more unusual than the norm in contemporary society. One of the challenges of the Curator is allowing visitors to access this experience.

The heritage significance of *Elizabeth Farm* lies primarily in its role as a (colonial) house. The interiors are an integral component of allowing access to the spaces used by the occupants as their home. Broadbent’s curatorial interpretation and procedures, implemented in 1984, established the significance and use of the building as a house, as it was used when in private ownership by Elizabeth and John Macarthur: ensuring that maintenance is sound, that windows open, floors are polished, and the myriad of detail in the colonial routine such as seasonal flower arrangements, fires lit and soft furnishings straightened, was undertaken. It is disappointing when visiting the house in July 2019 to find incorrectly placed material, such as the hearth rug from the Children’s Bedroom placed as a sofa rug, the light in the Library/Bedroom that was dimmed to ease Macarthur’s anguish was as bright as other lights in the house, the opaque beer wash on the Laundry windows to deter visitors looking into service areas removed, and the winter fire dormant in the Drawing Room. The afternoon was cold and wet, yet every door was open to the verandah. A considered consistency in

interpretation has given way to a series of rooms set up as lessons of a more general nature than as the family home of the Macarthurs.<sup>381</sup>

The immersive warmth of a family home through the appearance of its interiors is lost with such unnecessary resource driven, slap dash pragmatic decision, showing a lack of historical detail, discrepancies in the day-to-day presentation and visual interruption and a lack of adherence to curatorial procedures. This undermines the power of the property to give visitors an understanding of the house as a home. As a complementary tool, use technology where possible to connect visitors to research. Ensure however that material is presented with detail and curatorial care, the spaces of the interiors presented to accurately portray the life of the Macarthurs, the primary significance of the property. These interiors should have the appearance of a rigorously researched recreation not a pastiche of history lessons.

The 2024 visitor experience is of a restored house interior which has changed in nuance with the absence of detail of cut flowers in the Drawing Room and Pink Bedroom and removal of books from the two Verandah Rooms. The 2023 Curator led refurbishment commissioned a full set of soft furnishings and relocated key reproduction paintings.

## Meroogal

During the late 1990s, interest in *Meroogal* started to wane and the Trust struggled with its interpretational approach. *Meroogal: the Women's History Place* served for a few years as the property's by line. This seemed a good fit for the four generations of women who lived

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<sup>381</sup> Observations based on personal experience. On a cold and wet afternoon in July 2019 the author visited *Elizabeth Farm* and then National Trust owned *Experiment Farm* where she experienced a warm and inviting welcome from volunteer guides and a research-based guided tour where the house was clearly kept up as a home.

there, for whom this was home, but it was also home to children and men, and this approach appeared to alienate those who were not women, or who were not academics. Everything that differentiated the property seemed to also make it difficult for visitors to engage with and make sense of it. There was no great man or woman, no cultivated and cosmopolitan interiors, no historical distance from the visitor, and no central Sydney location.

*The Meroogal Women's Art Prize*, a non-acquisitive competition and exhibition, was developed in 1998 as a way of further engaging the community with the collection and still runs today. Female artists from across New South Wales, who are aged 18 years or over, are invited to submit works, in any medium, that respond to the historic house of *Meroogal*, its former occupants, and its meaning within broader historical and contemporary contexts. Selected artworks are displayed and photographed throughout the property. The works connect to visitors, provide new perspectives on the personal stories of the people who once lived there, and the rich collection of objects that are still contained within the house.

The idea for the Art Prize took shape as staff began to work more closely with the collection: lace making, crocheting and fine stitching, and recipes for preserves, cakes and biscuits, were recognised as evidence of once-cherished skills that were now disappearing from the community. In a curatorial decision to value the interiors as inspiration not as a backdrop, the art works were designed to sit in the interiors. Without wearing them out, the interiors are the main event. Without the interiors, there is no subject matter and no art prize. A subtle but important curatorially-informed change.

Physical access to 'conserved' interiors is deliberately little changed from their appearance in 1985 when the Trust assumed ownership of the property. The curatorial approach to the preservation of the interiors continues the tradition of conservation housekeeping but

incorporates a broader approach to building maintenance and replacement of worn and dangerous fabric. A workshop held in February 2003 addressed curatorial concerns about the applicability of the Conservation Policy in the reality of minimal intervention to the collection, ‘When is one patch a patch too many?’<sup>382</sup> Conservation housekeeping of the collection interiors was continued.

As mentioned, according to the interiors ‘as found’, there appears a greater representation of women than men. Examples of feminine spaces in other Australian house museums include in *Calthorpes House*, *Miss Porter’s House*, Newcastle and the *Margaret Olley Art Centre*. *Meroogal* was inherited by women and evidence of their daily lives fills the interiors. In the 2010s, a curatorial temporary rearrangement of the Downstairs Bedroom from overflow bedroom at the time of acquisition to the recreation of the bedroom to that of Robert Taylor Thorburn of the 1890s was made possible with the donation of his provenanced material and information on its location in the room.

When updating the interior, temporary changes in use of the interiors to other times can make physically accessible other parts of the narrative, if changes are clearly identified and based on documentary evidence, both in terms of building fabric and collection and oral histories. With the loss of the temporary display room in the Back Wing, may come a temptation to thematically arrange objects from drawers or cupboards, such as night wear or under wear, or arrange the objects in cupboards and then open them as displays. This is a house that was

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<sup>382</sup>*Meroogal Conservation Plan Review Workshop* held on Tuesday 25 February 2003 in the Mint Meeting Room, Sydney. The meeting reviewed Trust practices and resolved to maintain the philosophy, ‘as much as is necessary and as little as possible,’ through careful conservation and active housekeeping. This recognised the significance of both housekeeping and the house and its contents as endorsed in the 1986 Conservation Plan.

lived in, and the interiors must reflect that everyday use. There can be a fine line between museum and house.

Retaining as significant the material that can be discarded when grandma's house is disbursed, the material culture that is retained is usually the sentimental and of material value is an ongoing strength of the collection of *Meroogal*. Selected pieces of jewellery, special mementoes and photographs are handed down. There is usually little if any, evidence of the interiors in which these objects were contextualised, in which they had their original value. These interiors may be remembered by those who accessed them but are rarely recorded other than as a background to a photograph of a family member. Sometimes they are recorded in an individual's memory only. This memory changes over time and access to the original interior is limited and confused. Not authentic and accessible only to the individual and a few others. Not a public memory and not a public experience to enrich and share.

Complexity of conservation approach and sophistication of audiences to understand that the ordinary is important, is rapidly being lost and is an important component of our heritage—in other words—the seemingly ordinary, the mundane, the familiar, is imbued with strong heritage values—as material culture and the holiday house, or house of intermittent occupation, reminiscent of the movement between country towns and the city and the strength of family ties. Strong heritage values placed on the house and the contents by the occupants. It was important that these objects be kept—and kept in good order. Care in housekeeping and importance given to keeping records, diaries, family, and friends photographs, photographing the house.

Economic rationalism, rapidly displaced state governments and a new Trust Director with a focus on centralisation and consolidation mean that neither the financial resources nor the personal connection nor the Trust policies would encourage or support such an acquisition. And the contraction of/lack of access to wider social heritage values would mean these narratives, changing circumstances which affect almost every family, but which are unusually valued and recorded in the interiors of *Meroogal*, would remain in the private rather than the public domain and we would be the poorer for it. This is the point of difference from the other Case Studies.

The 2024 visitor experience is of a preserved house interior which has changed little—other than the absence of cut flowers in the Kitchen and Sitting Room and the installation of Perspex coverings over collection housed in drawers—in appearance since opening in 1988.

### Rose Seidler House

With the death of Harry Seidler in 2006 and subsequent promotion of a temporary incumbent, there was, for a while, no Curator directly responsible for *Rose Seidler House*. Through this time, continuity of Trust engagement with the property was via the Trust Manager who had worked with Harry Seidler and every Trust Curator since 1991. In 2009 curatorial responsibility for the property changed from portfolio Curator to being spread across a curatorial team.

In an ongoing effort to present accurate interiors, Curators reviewed the original soft furnishings (especially the curtains), with alterations made according to more research. Discussions, like those for *Meroogal*, were held on the preservation approach to the interiors, and how far conservation should be taken, and when the object should be retired or made

unavailable. This approach of recreating the appearance of the original soft furnishings as far as possible (which extended to the 2018 reupholstery of the four-seater lounge) was implemented, where the curatorial approach was based on photographic and physical evidence and used existing material.<sup>383</sup>



Figure 44. Dining Room and Kitchen, *Rose Seidler House*, 2023. This image shows how little the interiors have changed in appearance since 1950. It reaffirms the importance of ongoing curatorial involvement in using professional expertise, commissioning soft furnishings and locating whitegoods, to match the originals as closely as possible. Much of the furniture is original to the house. Photo © Jamie North. *Rose Seidler House* collection, Museums of Sydney NSW. Accessed 26 December 2024. <https://mhnsw.au/digitising-our-collection-rose-seidler-house-collection/>.

Public programs continued through the early 2000s, with the ongoing success of the Fifties Fair, which attracted up to 2000 people. A highlight for participants was their access to the interiors, ‘Visitors to the fair are able to wander through *Rose Seidler House* - regarded as the 1950s dream home - and view its original furniture and fixtures.’<sup>384</sup> Visitors were encouraged to dress in their understanding of 1950s fashion (in complete contrast to the archival evidence

<sup>383</sup> Accessed 4 June 2024. <https://mhnsw.au/stories/general/conserving-harry-seidlers-sofa/>.

<sup>384</sup> Accessed 11 April 2023. <https://www.sydney.com.au/fifties-fair-2016.htm>. Promotional material for 2016 Fifties Fair at *Rose Seidler House*.

of the Seidlers' dress and fashion sense). Whilst most of the action, including stalls, refreshments and dancing took place in the grounds, the interiors were made accessible for self-guided tours during the day. The final Fifties Fair was held in 2016.

The interiors at *Rose Seidler House* continue to be used for lectures and discussions on topics on the theme of Modernism, usually held in partnership with other organisations, such as DOCOMOMO. This enables professionals to discuss the Modernist concept in a Modernist interior, *in-situ*. The house is also used for commercial photography, relying on the accuracy of the property for credibility in context. Previous public programs and education activities have been reused or removed altogether. For example, *Design for Living at Rose Seidler House*, is not currently available. Curricula change, and so do education programs to address that change, but there is currently no education program for this significant mid-century property. Curator-led tours of the house continue on special occasions, such as the Australian Heritage Festival organised by the National Trust in 2024.

The 2024 visitor experience is of a recreated house interior which has changed little in appearance since opening in 1999. A 2004 documentary interview with the architect, *Frozen Music*, continues as the Introduction.

## Recreated house interiors: the Period Room in Art Museums

With the focus of MoH shifting from the conservation and interpretation of the house museums in their care to the use of the houses as one means of interpreting the history of the state, there is an opportunity to look to other examples of curatorial-led work in the accurate representation of historic house interiors. Whilst it is valid and reasonable for house museums to be one way of interpreting history, this does not undermine the importance of what they

offer specifically. They are the spaces in which their occupants lived and worked, the private domestic interiors of often public figures and offer encounters which other means of interpreting history cannot. The loss of access to the public, the dilution of historical narratives within these interiors, the generalising of the curatorial role, the absence of nuances in presentation of these interiors, is of concern. And the further away we go from the core presentation and philosophy the less access there is to the interior as an accurate site of historic encounter. This leads us back to the presence and role of period rooms in museums.

Period rooms are curated spaces shaped by scholarly research, museological trends, curatorial tastes, and specific collections. While some of the rooms are presented as traditional galleries, the majority are furnished interiors reflecting a specific historical moment and artistic style. In many of the rooms, the furnishings are not original to their architectural settings but have been chosen to give visitors an idea of how an interior from the selected period may have appeared.

Since the 1980s and advent of a greater interest by Curators in the presentation of social history, period rooms have changed from being aesthetic and imagined creations to research-based reconstructions in a space specifically designed to offer a measure of historical and certainly feasible, context. Whilst these period rooms do not offer the connection to space and time that house museum interiors do, they nevertheless offer a viable option for the reconstruction of an as-accurate-as-possible interior, especially when the original source is under threat of destruction. When required due to destruction or sale of the original building, period rooms can offer a viable alternative for the preservation and presentation of interiors and should form part of the Curator's toolkit.

A contemporary example of the pivotal role of the professional Curator in preserving the interior as a site of historic encounter is the *Margaret Olley Art Centre*. The studio and other inspirational working spaces of Australian artist Margaret Hannah Olley (1923-2011) were transferred from her house at 48 Duxford Street, Paddington, Sydney, to a purpose-built wing in the Tweed Regional Gallery, Murwillumbah. This transfer goes beyond the studio to incorporate key contextual interiors of her house — far more akin to an historic house interior than a period room.



Figure 45. R. Ian Lloyd, *Margaret Olley in her studio in Sydney, New South Wales, Australia at 9:22am on December 13th, 2005*, printed 2009, photograph, gift of the artist through the QAGOMA Foundation 2010. Donated through the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program. QAGOMA / © R. Ian Lloyd. Accessed September 5 2024. <https://blog.qagoma.qld.gov.au/margaret-olley-her-works-reflect-her-personality-perfectly/>.



Figure 46. One of the several curated views available to visitors into the re-creation of Margaret Olley's Duxford Street house at the Margaret Olley Art Centre, Tweed Regional Gallery. Photograph taken by Suzanne Bravery, August 2023, private collection.

Central to the *Margaret Olley Art Centre* is the recreation of areas of Olley's home studio.

This unusually includes original architectural elements such as windows and doors, relocated from Olley's Paddington home. The rooms where Olley lived and painted for 26 years, and were so significant to her practice, were relocated: the Yellow Room and the Blue Kitchen (Olley rented out the other rooms). The relocated interiors are filled with over 20,000 objects all carefully catalogued and cleaned and reinstalled, collected over many years as subject matter for her paintings. This project, led by a Social History Curator, was fastidious in approach, using standard museum practice in the logistics of the operation, and the standard historic house museum approach to the presentation of the interiors. There are no 'hero' objects. Each object was as important as the other, whether a chipped tea pot or original oil painting. Even the light was recreated through skylights, the lingering smell of oil paints and cigarette smoke in the fixtures and furnishings<sup>385</sup>— A challenging inclusion for the Curator of

the house museum interior—and the sound of the radio on Classic FM. Director, Susi Muddiman, noted in 2014 that ‘Still to this day, the concept of building a house inside a white box art gallery is bizarre to me.’<sup>386</sup> An intersection between art museum and historic house museum, between the Social History Curator and the Art Museum Curator.

Whilst the *Margaret Olley Art Centre* is not the interior of a historic house museum, it is the detailed and accurate recording of an interior and not just the façade of a house. This is important and echoes the approach that the historic house museum Curator would take. An approach where the interior appears as if the occupant has just stepped out. ‘If Olley’s house was a cavern of objects and memories, all of this—and the very sense of her amongst it—has been transplanted to create a stunning installation, like an overgrown Cornelian box, that implies that the artist herself has stepped out, but only for a moment.’<sup>387</sup>

The difference between period room recreations and historic house museum interiors is, of course, the context in which the interiors are displayed and made accessible. In the context of a traditional museum, visitors experience the museum interiors as layered vertically, as in a stratum, relocated from their original context.

The transfer of Olley’s period rooms goes beyond the studio to incorporate key contextual interiors from her Paddington house. This is far more akin to an historic house interior in this sense than a period room, as Julius Bryant in 2009 notes ‘the enduring value and authenticity of each artist’s studio as a museum interior is not in doubt, for they are full of fully provenanced memorabilia, documented archaeologically ‘as found’ and reconstructed

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<sup>386</sup> Susi Muddiman in Rebecca Baillie, “Margaret Olley’s artistic treasure chest home recreated in northern NSW gallery” *ABC News* 13 March 2014.

<sup>387</sup> Susi Muddiman, “Margaret Olley Art Centre set to honour an Australian Icon,” *Australian Arts Review* (14 March 2014), no author and unpagged.

painstakingly. Like a miracle-working holy relic, each studio conveys a positive charge or creativity to its tuned-in admirer.<sup>388</sup>

Australian Academic Chiara O'Reilly states in 2024<sup>389</sup> that 'the objects have demonstrated an ability to work both as a site of physical encounter and digitally that have all seen MOAC develop new ways to 'unlock' Olley's house. The preservation of the three interiors and the collection of [objects] alongside works by Olley...ensure an intimacy that preserves and extends the lived life within her still lifes.' In other words, this 'restaged'<sup>390</sup> interior moving with its objects entangled with the lives of the occupant, from private to public continues to ensure the preservation of the interior as a site of historic encounter; that of Olley with her own curated and the MOAC recurated spaces.

Initially the role of the period room was an art object or as a 'taster' of fashion and style, especially of 'high art'. It was not always representative of interiors at a particular time or place or across strata of society; not at all authentic in the way that 'real' interiors are, but does that matter when it was created? Now with appropriate curatorial direction and engagement, and a clear purpose or reconstruction not recreation, this sometimes-maligned construct can offer a solution to the disappearance of interiors of historic significance. The art museum does not become the historic house, and the context is different, however the intent is consistent with that of Curators in historic house museums in keeping up the appearance of

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<sup>388</sup> Julius Bryant, "Museum period rooms for the twenty-first century: salvaging ambition," *Museum Management and Curatorship* 24, no.1, (March 2009), 77.

<sup>389</sup> Chiara O'Reilly, "The Entangled Lives of Still Life: Margaret Olley Art, Objects and Display," *Material Selves Object biographies and identities in motion* (Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2024),23-41. Accessed 16 December 2024. <https://www.bloomsburycollections.com/monograph-detail?docid=b-9781350416475&tocid=b-9781350416475-chapter1>.

<sup>390</sup> Chiara O'Reilly "The Entangled Lives of Still Life: Margaret Olley Art, Objects and Display," *Material Selves Object biographies and identities in motion* (Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2024),27. Accessed 16 December 2024. <https://www.bloomsburycollections.com/monograph-detail?docid=b-9781350416475&tocid=b-9781350416475-chapter1>.

the interiors. The interiors are valued for the same reason; the skin, the carapace is different, an art museum or gallery, not an historic house museum.

## Conclusion

This chapter demonstrates the critical role of the professional Curator in enabling access to a shared past through considered presentation and conservation of interiors in house museums. When the importance of this role is misunderstood or undervalued, the accuracy of the house museum interior is challenged, and access to our shared past compromised.

It is only in historic house museums, where the interiors are in their original context— that is in the house for which they were constructed— that there is access to an authentic site of historic encounter, where the action of the previous occupants took place and where there are witness marks to this action. In terms of best practice, the interiors of historic houses are usually presented to be as-close-as-possible to their original build and fit-out, whether as the first iteration, or as an iteration of a later moment in time. Some objects are presented in their original context, others are shown— through primary sources and informed opinion— to have been there, or that similar objects have occupied the space.

As mentioned, sometimes the very existence of the interiors of historic houses is threatened due to physical changes in circumstance. These circumstances can include demolition of the building, either with or without the demolition of the façade. In their own linear history, these changes can be alterations to the interiors that change their function such as from bedroom to bathroom or simply a change of mind in keeping up with, or leading, fashion in home decoration.

When the interiors are considered of importance and unable to be retained *in situ*, there are ways in which to retain and to relocate, for example as a reference object in a specialised collection (such as the Caroline Simpson Library & Reference Collection) or retain and reinstate elements of the room such as the period room within an art museum. Documenting the interiors through photographs, taking oral histories and collecting objects and ephemera are all useful methods to understand and to access elements of the interior. Whilst elements of the interiors are retained, it is important to remember that these are only a part of the original whole, 'the real thing.'

The historic house interior can only be a site of historic encounter when in its original domestic context and when professionally presented by Curators focussing on the building itself and on the witness marks of its occupants as the basis for preserving the accuracy of its appearance. When resources are moved elsewhere and curatorial roles are confused, diluted or removed, perhaps the period room in the art museum and the objects in the reference collection will be the only viable access to a domestic historic house interior. If this is the case, then the same level of intellectual rigour needs to be applied to the collection, documentation and recreation of the appearance of these interiors, whether in part or full, as would occur in a historic house interior, under professional curatorial direction. It is an investment in preserving our past that requires resources; and it is already underway.

In the last twenty years, the commonalities between the four properties are the reliance on the veracity of the historic interiors to connect the visitor to the occupants, and the decrease in curatorial resources to present these interiors with nuance, especially in terms of daily presentation such as cut flowers, winter fires, placement of furniture that makes sense historically and practically, and an increase in interpretational tools such as labels. What has

improved is the wider recognition of others including First Nations people, in the presentation of the properties but not in the interiors.

All this is a response...It's not more complicated than that. Of course, we can always throw in execution of the craft — how *well* one paints-and the history of the piece, its provenance, and we can come up with value. But always the value for me will be the response. How it moves one.

And that makes it worth saving?

Protagonists Evelyn and Ulysses discussing Jacopo Pontormo's 1528 altar piece *The Deposition from the Cross*

Sarah Winman *Still Life* (London: 4<sup>th</sup> estate, 2021), 25.

## Conclusion

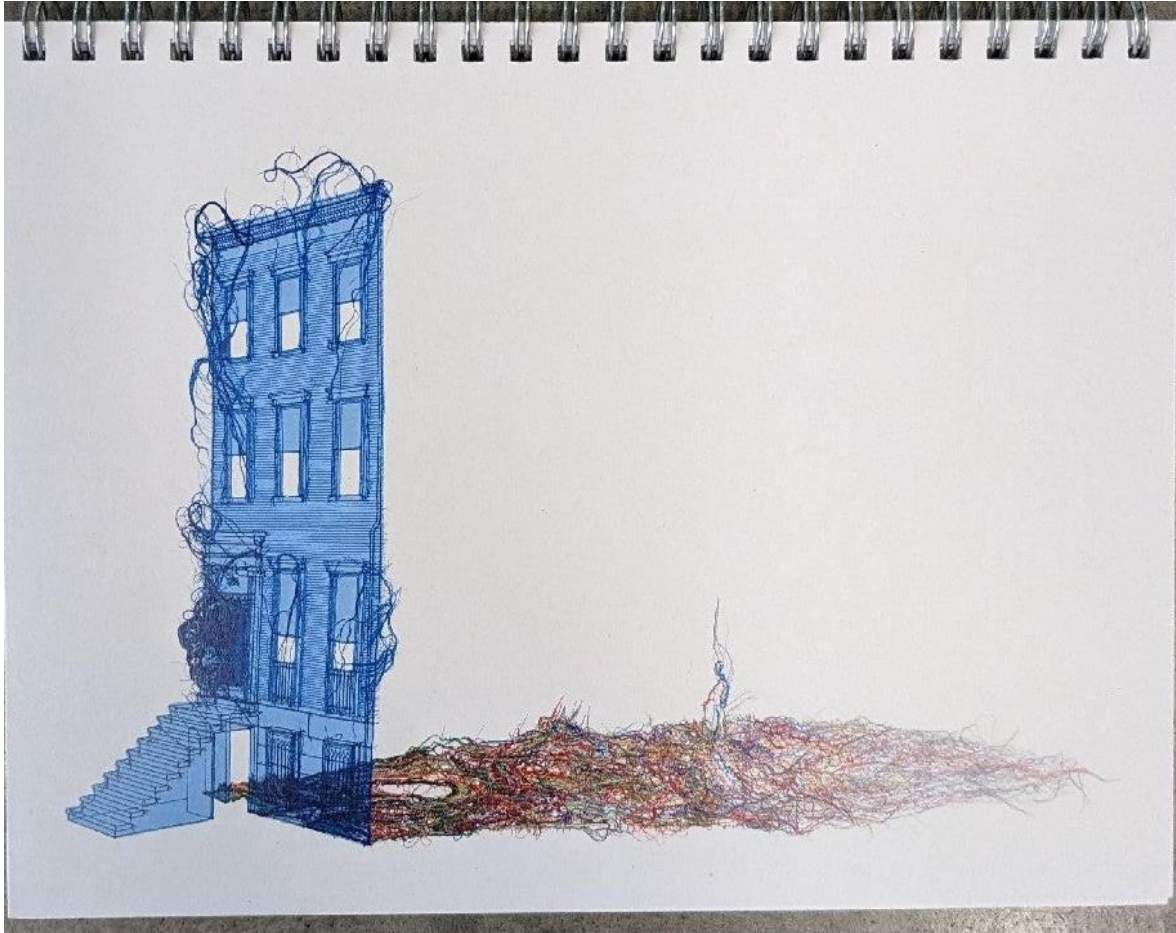


Figure 47. Do Ho Suh, *Blueprint*, 2013, thread embedded in STPI cotton paper, 11.8 x 15.7 cm. Accessed 2 December 2024. <https://www.mca.com.au/exhibitions/do-ho-suh/>

This image by South Korean artist, Do Ho Suh, shows the façade of a New York tenement about to fall into its unravelling interiors. Do Ho Suh has represented significant aspects of these interiors that are important to him in his sculptural installations. These elements of interiors include composite Entry Halls, the stair from the tenant to landlord in New York City, and fixtures and fittings such as a toilet, a sink and a stove. The life size representation of domestic structures of personal meaning, and the associative memories of these interiors as homes, is a consistent theme in Do Ho's visual art practice. The rendering in mesh, coloured

not to be realistic, but rather to be emotive, is of such detail that the object is clearly recognisable and could be used as a reference for social historians researching appliances available in New York in late twentieth century/early twenty first century apartment interiors. Do Ho's work tells us about the importance and value of interiors. This can be used to enable the viewer to reflect on the value of the historic house interior as a site of historic encounter. Although the artist's interiors are not historic house museum interiors, they show one way in which domestic spaces of historic encounter can be publicly accessible, and perhaps to a different audience than that of house museums.

Since this research was conceived in the late 1990s in response to the withdrawal of public access to historic interiors some things have changed, and some remained the same.

Facadism continues in both commercial<sup>391</sup> and non-commercial buildings in Sydney with the demolition of historic interiors (usually without them being recorded prior) and the retention of exteriors. In Newcastle in 2023, I was saddened but not surprised, to see this treatment of historic buildings in the 2020s and their interiors as in the 1980s as part of a 'revitalisation' of the Central Business District. However, in the redevelopment of the wharves around the inner Sydney Harbour, such as at Walsh Bay and at Woolloomooloo, from working industrial areas to commercial and residential use, public access to the adaptively reused interiors has increased. Whilst the residential areas are only for residents, much of the other interiors are accessible to experience either as creative spaces or through their size and structure and occasional interpretation panel, to visualise and connect with their past use.

Historic interiors are important. In an historic house museum, interiors are the publicly accessible spaces where previous generations privately walked, thought, discussed, dreamed,

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<sup>391</sup> An earlier example of which is the Johnson's Building at 233-235 George Street, Sydney the heritage listed façade and some of the building, of which survives in front of Grosvenor Square, a modern purpose-built high rise completed in 1988.

cooked, read and bathed; and where they left their tangible and intangible marks. Interiors are an *in-situ* context for moveable material culture; they are vulnerable, changeable, diverse and a critical site of shared and individual historic encounter. And unlike the building facades in which they exist, interiors are not necessarily protected by legislation, even when in the public domain.

Changing government priorities have resulted in the diminishment of resources for built heritage. The Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales was set up specifically to care for, using best practice, selected houses as historic house museums for the public. The reputation of the new organisation attracted financial and political resources sufficient to attract curatorial staff of the highest standard and to maintain them over more than a decade. In terms of the Trust and its successors, the use of curatorial expertise has diminished through the ‘restructuring’ of senior curatorial staff out of curatorial positions, moving Curators off-site, making Curators responsible for several properties (a ‘portfolio’ rather than one or two properties), sometimes using curatorial skills for tasks such as exhibition design that is unrelated to the house museum, and using the term ‘Curator’ as organiser.

The accurate presentation of interiors as sites of historic encounter for the public provides challenges for the professional Curator. However, Curators continue their role in caring for specific elements of properties, such as the refurnishing of the Drawing Room curtains at *Vaucluse House*, where in 2017, the expertise of the Curator was harnessed to enrich the accurate appearance of the soft furnishings. Or in public program partnerships with other off-site professionals, such as the 2024 ‘Creating Imagined Interiors’ at the *Caroline Simpson Library & Research Collection*.<sup>392</sup> Forums such as *Sound Heritage Sydney*<sup>393</sup> explore ways

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<sup>392</sup> Accessed 4 October 2024. <https://mhnsww.au/whats-on/events/creating-imagined-interiors/>.

<sup>393</sup> Jeanice Brooks, Matthew Stephens, Wiebke Thormählen, (eds.) *Sound heritage : making music matter in historic houses* edited by Abingdon, Oxon ; New York, (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2022).

music can be used to reveal new narratives for contemporary visitors.<sup>394</sup> As such, Curators continue to be recognised for their specialisms in preserving the interiors of Australian historic house museums, but in a more ad-hoc manner and without the subtle, nuanced and essential direction and involvement in the accurate presentation of historic interiors that reflect the daily operations of property as per the historic period.

Do Curators need to acknowledge, within historic house interiors, current social trends to secure resources for preservation? Acknowledging the diversity of occupants is critical to a more inclusive understanding of the reasons behind the appearance of these interiors. This requires resources for ongoing research. In the late twentieth century, this was an acknowledgement of the previously ‘invisible’ occupants of women, children and servants, including migrants. In the early twenty first century, this is an acknowledgement of the presence of First Nations people. As mentioned, at each of the properties, there’s been a more recent recognition of the presence of First Nations OUTSIDE the house such as in a permanent installation at *Elizabeth Farm*, Parramatta<sup>395</sup>. There is no known evidence of their occupancy within the interiors. So are the interiors the right place to reflect the diversity of Australia’s population? Do we stretch them to include this diversity in the site of historic encounter or err on the side of rigorously researched material? Or is the accurate appearance of the interiors a work in progress? I suspect the latter. Accurately preserving the interiors involves using the witness marks of the interior, documentation and oral traditions, as primary research, to accurately preserve the interiors. The addition of a professional considered curatorial lens would add necessary context and depth to more recent debates.

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<sup>394</sup> Accessed 11 June 2024. <https://mhnsw.au/stories/general/sound-heritage-sydney-making-music-historic-places/>. “Having pondered these questions for some time, Sydney Living Museums (now Museums of History NSW) and the Sydney Conservatorium of Music invited a range of experts from across Australia, the UK, and New Zealand to participate in a symposium at *Elizabeth Bay House* to explore the history of music making in the Australian home and its international contexts.”

<sup>395</sup> Accessed 8 October 2024. <https://mhnsw.au/whats-on/exhibitions/healing-land-remembering-country/>.

These curatorial challenges have occurred within the larger context of organisational change. There has been a contraction of house museum opening hours since 2013, as well as several changes in organisational leadership, and reprioritisation of government resources. All of which have affected access to accurately presented house museum interiors. COVID-19 affected everything including the disappearance of historic house museums from the public consciousness. Free admission and targeted public programming were implemented to revive visitation in the post COVID 19 reopening in 2022. The New South Wales Government has encouraged the Trust and its successors to be responsible for generating more of their funding. Resources have been moved from curatorial into marketing; venue hire is a key component of this revenue raising. Whilst there appear to be fewer resources for curatorial involvement in maintaining the interiors, there is a greater emphasis on the need for these interiors to appear accurate. Historical accuracy is a key point of difference for commercial hire where the accuracy of the interiors transcends economic rationalism. Without the professional Curators overseeing the appearance of the interiors, this historical accuracy is vulnerable to compromise.

Using four house museums within the portfolio of the Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales and of the Trust successors, with which the author is familiar—*Vaucluse House*, *Elizabeth Farm*, *Meroogal* and *Rose Seidler House* — this thesis has shown the mechanisms and expertise which enable Curators to accurately present the lives of others through the interiors within their care. The case studies show how relationships between the Director of the Trust and senior staff, consultants and honorary Curators (usually family members) are a decisive element in determining access to, and thus enriching the appearance of, interiors as sites of historic encounter. Each case study shows the importance of using rigorous, innovative and engaging approaches to the conservation and interpretation of building interiors that are informed by a comprehensive set of priorities and policies based on the

Statement of Significance. It shows the importance of respecting and utilising the differences in the interiors when making decisions about their appearances in terms of significance; and not only that interiors are important, but also that maintaining interiors in their original context enables a deeper understanding as their site of historic encounter.

This research, through the case studies of curatorial work in the late twentieth century with changes tracked over time, is as relevant in the early twenty first century. Public access to accurately preserved historic house museum interiors remains of concern. Using the approach of the Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales (the Trust) from 1980 to 2005, this research shows that the most reliable way to preserve the interiors of historic house museums as a site of historic encounter is by using a professional Curator located on-site. It is evident that between these dates, a ‘truer’ appearance of the houses was created. The value of the Curator is clear; and so is the importance of adequate funding to enable this work.

Now is a time to ‘do more with less’ so it is imperative that the lessons learnt from the near past are available as reference for the present and for the future, or public access to the past, will be severely compromised. The public continue to yearn for access to the interiors of historic house museums. Not only in terms of visual appearance, but also in terms of a more private or personal connection. Sound research is recognised as the means of accessing a connective past for the person connecting with their own personal history, in countries such as the UK, and in Australia, where the popular television program ‘Who Do You Think You Are?’ relies on the accuracy of public records from archives, museums and libraries to support the oral tradition of families. The tangible, and often the most emotional, component of these histories is when the subject visits an ancestor’s house and most importantly, its interior. This is where the action took place. This is where the person can stand and connect and begin to understand who they really are.

It is the role of the professional Curator to determine and maintain or keep up the appearance of historic interiors — including as new research comes to light. In the 1980s and 1990s, the Curator was the leader and enabler, and sometimes theatrical producer, of ordered approaches to this work. Curators worked with professional peers, writing Conservation Plans and Statements of Significance, starting with the interiors shaping the properties as a whole and the Trust as an organisation. Curators necessarily influenced how the Trust operated. Curators were the senior, full-time, person on site, responsible for one property with their office located on the property, or when responsible for two properties, there was usually an Assistant Curator located at the other property. The Curator's expertise was usually in decorative arts, social history and/or museum studies. Curators became house museum specialists, their advocacy for the authenticity of the property strong. Their on-site presence enabled researched interiors to be presented with veracity, depth, detail and a commitment to best practice for access for all visitors.

House museums in public ownership owe the Australian public access to accurately curated historic interiors. This level of access will not always be available in privately-owned house museums. It requires best practice templates, and professional curatorial knowledge to enact and build-on these templates, and to determine others. The four case studies are presented for use across the sector and more widely as just such best practice models for use to ensure that historic house museums hold historically charged, accurately presented, powerful interiors. For although there will be more house museums, there may not be the resources nor, if we are not careful, the appropriate levels of expertise that we witnessed during the golden age of house museums in the 1980s and 1990s.

Whilst there is not necessarily a legal safeguard for the maintenance of interiors in these historic houses, there is an acknowledged obligation for the New South Wales Government

to preserve these interiors. The accurate preservation of these interiors brings its own, and ongoing, resourcing requirements. This investigation of the ways in which the historic house interiors in the care of the Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales and its successors are preserved, shows how an appropriately resourced government organisation can provide models for the preservation of historic interiors for use by the broader sector. These models are only able to be offered because of a government commitment to the resourcing of the Trust and its Curators to use relevant legislation and considered sector policies to realise the house museum interiors as sites of historic encounter. It has argued for the continued involvement of highly experienced Curators in the conservation and interpretation of these interiors as public keepers of a public asset. And for reasonable access to be provided to that public asset that was once a private space. Only then can the importance of these house interiors be fully understood and enjoyed.

Enabling access to a heritage that is accurately conserved and interpreted is the role of the professional Curator of a historic house museum. When this role is diminished, resulting in historic interiors losing their nuance and their distinctive differences to become general and non-specific, this denies the public access to its own heritage. There is a clear duty of care and of responsibility for the publicly-owned and managed house museum organisation to provide effective models in terms of professional knowledge and experience, and in terms of appearance of the houses and grounds, but especially the interiors — for this is where most visitors feel the strongest connection. If the interiors are inaccurate then the government entity is irresponsible to even open the doors of these historic houses. And it is essential and morally responsible that the doors are open, and that access this heritage is available to all.

Writing about museums by Curators and academics has moved towards writing about curating an authentic interior in publicly-owned museums and art museums. These purposely

constructed vitrines for the interpretation of objects necessarily decontextualises and largely disconnects the objects (and therefore their historical charge) from their original settings. It is only in the historic house museum interior where the full story of an object and its associative users can be told. This is where the actions involving the object took place. However, these interiors are the result of individuals occupying their domestic spaces. There were private spaces that were not originally designed to be public spaces. They are spaces of imperfection, of change, of choice.

The appearance of these interiors can be best presented by professional Curators. These professionals face many challenges — especially regarding resourcing — but their core challenge is that of making the private public, of making the domestic interesting, of accurately preserving the appearance of the interiors as sites of historic encounter. The four case studies show ways in which these challenges can be met. They can be used as models for others and to act as a record of what is possible when professional Curators are enabled to undertake best practice. The inclusion of other modes of preservation of interiors, such as the Margaret Olley Art Centre, show more recent options for presenting an interior when the original context of its house is unavailable, but where its significance requires considered public access.

Further studies could be undertaken. As this thesis is from a curatorial perspective, former Curators of the Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales, Sydney Living Museums and Museums of History NSW may be prepared to be interviewed. As Curators with twenty to thirty years of experience of working with historic house museums leave their substantive positions, it is critical that at least a sample of their perspectives on working life is captured in order to offer an historical context for decision-making. This is especially crucial given the threat to the curatorial position due to diminished resources. Currently, there is no formal

mechanism in place (such as a structured oral exit interview) to record individual experiences that are drawn from a formative, innovative and active period in determining the historic house interiors. As 'Curator' is not a universally standardised term in the way that architect is, there is an opportunity to make a comparative analysis with other professions. It may be timely to research the diverse and inclusive visitor experience, exploring how connections are made with the interiors, and recognising these in future interpretation. It would be useful to explore the impact that the non-government historic house owner has on an historic house as a site of historic encounter when opening the interiors to visitors.

This thesis explores the challenges of the intersection of the professional Curator and the presentation of the private person in a public space. It looks at the role of those making and implementing the decisions. It challenges the role of the Curator in making these decisions and investigates the outcomes through four case studies that are based in New South Wales. The thesis charts the ways in which conservation and interpretation philosophies and practices influence curatorial decisions.

It recognises and notes the value of the historic interior as a site which holds witness marks of past occupants. The thesis argues that the accurate presentation of interiors is the primary method of realising their intrinsic value. It looks at the outcomes of changing the context of the interiors by moving them to another (equally charged) location. It concludes that interiors are worth preserving, that the accuracy of their appearance is best achieved by using information available with the interior as the primary source and using an experienced Curator who is themselves using best practice.

This thesis argues that the case studies show the ways in which the professional Curator is essential to ensure access for all to accurate interiors in an historic house museum. There is no other place than the house museum in which to conserve and interpret an 'authentic'

interior. There is another place in which to conserve the house museum interior. It's just that the exterior location has changed, but the methodology used to conserve and interpret and to ensure that the interior is 'authentic' remain the same and continues to require the direction of the professional curator. This thesis maintains that professional Curators are essential to 'keeping up the appearances' of the interiors.

The cultural heritage landscape has dramatically shifted and contracted, resulting in the Trust and its successive organisations moving away from offering a single approach to authenticity and access to Australian heritage. Now this approach is one of several, with digital reconstructions of historic interiors such as *Scott's Discovery Hut Virtual Reality Experience, Antarctica*,<sup>396</sup> socially rather than declaratively focussed period rooms, and reconstructed interiors in a white cube gallery (such as the Margaret Olley Art Centre in Tweed Regional Gallery)<sup>397</sup> offering informed access to historic interiors often under curatorial direction--although outside their original built context.

In May 2023 in one of his final statements as Director of the National Museum of Australia, (NMA), Mat Trinca refers to the importance of being accurate and true in the presentation of history. When speaking of the role of the NMA in recognising and representing Frontier Wars, Trinca's stance dovetails with the argument of this thesis that this approach of accuracy and truth is essential to rendering the accurate appearance of the historic house museum interior. Trinca's statement is that 'this place, in common with a number of other cultural institutions in the country, has to look to their past and tell it honestly.'<sup>398</sup>

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<sup>396</sup> Accessed 2 October 2024. <https://nzahf.org/share/virtual-reality-discovery-hut/>.

<sup>397</sup> Accessed 27 September 2023. <https://gallery.tweed.nsw.gov.au/visit/margaret-olley-art-centre>.

<sup>398</sup> Accessed 12 December 2024. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-05-03/mat-trinca-director-leaving-national-museum-australia/102292284>.

The final word goes to Daniel H. Weiss, Director of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York who when referring to the aims of (an art) museum could very well be referencing that of the historic house museum when he wrote in 2022 that ‘the museum, at its best...is...the place to contribute to, or even provoke, new ways of seeing and thinking.’<sup>399</sup> Appropriately resourced and reviewed to ‘keep up appearances,’ the interiors of these historic house museums will continue to act as access and connection to Australian heritage, and as reliable, researched and inspirational models for the conservation and interpretation of other house museum interiors. All this requires commitment, courage, resources and professional Curators.



Figure 48. Hand painted blue jug, *Meroogal*. Photo © Katherine Lu for Museums of History NSW. Accessed 25 October 2025. <https://mgnsw.org.au/organisations/meroogal/>.

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<sup>399</sup> Daaniel H. Weiss, *Why the Museum Matters*, 72. Recently appointed MoH Chair Bob Carr clearly agreed with this in his 11 December 2024 interview as mentioned in Chapter Six.

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