

## State Library of Western Australia

# Collection Interpretation Strategy 2023-2025

### Purpose

The State Library collects, preserves, and shares Western Australia's documentary heritage. Our collections reflect the culture and memory of Western Australia over time – its changing society, diverse communities, individual lives, and connections with the world.

This Interpretation Strategy works in conjunction with the aims of the Collection Strategy, to engage with all Western Australians through our collections, foster a sense of belonging, and strengthen and sustain the relationship between the community and the State Library. It is informed by community consultation, consultation with Aboriginal stakeholders, research, and analysis of best practice approaches towards interpretation in the collections sector.

Interpretation aims to communicate the significance of our collections and engage the community with the breadth and diversity of the collections. Interpretation brings to life stories of the past and present in an inclusive, relevant, and meaningful way. Interpretation complements the State Library's collection development and management, client services, and public programs.

UNESCO defines interpretation as the full range of potential activities intended to heighten public awareness and enhance understanding of cultural heritage. This definition is helpful for the interpretation of documentary heritage collections. Interpretation can take many forms including print and digital publications, public programs, exhibitions, and installations (in situ and online), podcasts and video productions, creative works, community activities and ongoing research, training, and evaluation of interpretation.

This Interpretation Strategy guides how interpretation will facilitate connections between the community and the State Library's West Australian collections in digital and physical spaces until 2025.

## **Vision for Interpretation**

The State Library's vision for interpretation is to strengthen and sustain the relationship between the community and the State Library's West Australian collections and to enhance the public value of our collections.

## **Interpretation Principles**

Five principles guide the State Library's approach to interpretation:

- 1. Everyone's story is important**
- 2. Ethical interpretation**
- 3. Holistic collection development and management**
- 4. Community collaboration**
- 5. Equitable access**

### **1. Everyone's story is important**

The State Library's collections reflect the diverse voices of West Australians past and present, and there are many opportunities for interpretation to offer connection with these voices. Encountering different people and their varied experiences through interpretation of our collections can create understanding, empathy, and revelation. Interpretation will emphasise the multiplicity of voices and perspectives in our collections in ways that challenge and interest visitors, leading to new insights and understandings.

### **2. Ethical interpretation**

The State Library's West Australian collections have ongoing relevance for the community that require ethical treatment and care in interpretation and collection management. Some collections may reflect traumatic past events and difficult histories for example histories of Aboriginal dispossession, institutional abuse, wartime experiences, refugee stories and many other powerful histories. Implementing an ethical approach to interpretation will enable us to empathetically work with communities to ensure respectful treatment and representation of these collections.

### 3. Holistic collection life cycle management

The State Library has a holistic understanding of collection life cycle management that incorporates the interpretation of collections along with acquiring, sharing, and caring for collections. By reframing interpretation as an integral part of collection management, we will improve our relationships with donors, visitors, and collaborators. This holistic approach will enable interpretation activities to contribute in a more integrated way to contemporary collection development and management.

### 4. Community collaboration

The State Library develops relationships and collaborates with organisations and the community to aid interpretation. Community collaboration leads to interpretation and collection development opportunities. Our collections are used for interpretation throughout the State and beyond and as we develop relationships and collaborate with community, we will create new opportunities for interpretation.

### 5. Equitable Access

We provide multiple modes and formats for equitable access to interpretation and to ensure inclusivity for people with a range of different needs, multicultural and linguistic backgrounds as well as regional and remote areas. The State Library aims to create an accessible and inclusive place for the community both online and in the State Library building in the Perth Cultural Centre. Interpretation meets with our [Disability Access and Inclusion Plan 2019-23](#), our [Multicultural Plan 2021-22](#), as well as community expectations.

### Interpretation Objectives

The State Library's objectives for interpretation are to:

- 1. Understand, convey, and sustain the significance of the West Australian collections.**
- 2. Apply a thematic approach to interpretation.**
- 3. Work with Aboriginal communities to interpret collections and stories in an ethical and culturally appropriate way.**
- 4. Understand and respond to audience needs.**
- 5. Develop interpretation that builds on the State Library's unique role.**

## **1. Understand, convey, and sustain the significance of the West Australian collections.**

### **Our West Australian collections have international, national, state, and local significance.**

Understanding, conveying, and sustaining significance is integral to interpretation and collection development and management.

While significant, the State Library's collections are also fragmentary and partial. A vast portion of our collection is unknown and underutilised, and its significance is not well understood. To understand significance, we need to research the collections and involve the community and collaborators in this process to gain insight into the meaning of collections.

The West Australian collections span a period of over 200 years - from pre-colonial European maritime exploration of the Indian Ocean; to colonisation of the Swan River; dispossession histories and settlement schemes; impacts of pastoral, pearling and mining industries; waves of migration; the World Wars and the Great Depression; mining booms and busts; histories of activism, environmental and heritage conservation; increasing visibility of LGBTQI+ lives; and contemporary collecting of the COVID-19 pandemic and the reconciliation movement in WA.

These collections provide a direct link to the voices of past and present individuals and communities. One of the major strengths of the State Library's collection is its expression of personal accounts and viewpoints. Letters, diaries, oral histories, photographs and personal films and videos all provide a direct connection with individual lives. They are primary sources that provide evidence of the past and help to create a picture of the social fabric of the community over time. Hopes, disappointments, tragedies, family networks, enterprise, social activities, rituals, as well as the mundane details of life, are all captured.

**Knowing our collections and their significance is a key step in being able to interpret and sustain significance.**

## **2. Adopt a thematic approach to interpretation**

### **Themes give purpose to communication about topics or subject matter.**

Themes link tangible elements – the things people can see and touch – with intangible qualities – the beliefs and values that are part of human experience. Themes are key messages within interpretation that elevate communication from simple information transmission to something greater, allowing personal connection with collections and more meaningful engagement.

We will adopt overarching and program specific themes to guide how we connect our West Australian collections with communities. Interpretation will link themes and

subjects within our collections and reflect creative ideas that will stimulate a new way of thinking about WA's past and present.

The State Library aims to invigorate community understanding of our West Australian collections and their relevance to the contemporary community by adopting themes for interpretation.

[A thematic approach to interpretation will enhance understanding of the West Australian collections and the State Library's relevance to the community.](#)

### **3. Work with Aboriginal communities to interpret collections and stories in an ethical and culturally appropriate way.**

#### **The State Library's West Australian collections are of immeasurable value to Aboriginal communities throughout the State.**

Our collections are housed in the State Library building on Whadjuk Noongar land and relate to Aboriginal communities across the State. These collections can be sources of cultural pride and identity, and are inextricably linked to connections with family, community, and Country. These collections are entwined with the history of colonisation and associated trauma which has ongoing impacts. Truth-telling is needed to come to terms with our shared history and can be a path towards healing for communities. We will work with Aboriginal communities to practice a strength-based approach to interpretation of the State Library's West Australian collections.

Interpretation will:

- Be guided by participation, consultation, and collaboration with Aboriginal communities across the State - 'Nothing about us without us' when developing interpretation relating to collections and histories of Aboriginal significance.
- Bring Aboriginal people's voices and perspectives into focus, and in doing so create, build, repair and strengthen relationships with Aboriginal communities.
- Seek opportunities to interpret collections of non-Aboriginal origin, through Aboriginal ways of knowing, to facilitate truth-telling, share knowledge and grow cross-cultural insights.
- Be guided by the ATSILIRN protocols developed by AIATSIS.
- Recognise Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property (ICIP) and implement the NSLA (National and State Libraries Australasia) position statement: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Collections and Services in NLSA Libraries (2021)

The State Library's location in the Perth Cultural Centre is rich with significance and interpretive possibility. The library is situated on Whadjuk Noongar land, the location of a wetland, originally an ecology dense with paperbark trees and a source of sustenance and community for Noongar people prior to being filled in and subject to urban development. It was a place of learning, and cultural knowledge that continues

to be reflected today in ongoing use of the Perth Cultural Centre. Acknowledging and representing this cultural significance, as well as the State Library's role within it, is an opportunity to not only develop our existing relationships with the contemporary Noongar community but also build a shared understanding of this place. This is a way that the State Library can support the visibility of the Perth Cultural Centre's location on Noongar country. This depth of understanding will add to the special meaning of our collections and the experience of the State Library as a destination in the Perth Cultural Centre.

Working with Aboriginal communities to interpret collections and stories in an ethical and culturally appropriate way will strengthen relationships with the community and aid preservation of Aboriginal history and heritage for the future.

#### **4. Understand and respond to community needs.**

**Our community can actively participate and collaborate in interpretation.**

*We need opportunities to 'listen' and 'hear' the records and collections - the records are living as they relate to relationships and people - they are much more than things. (Aboriginal consultation group meeting, 2021)*

*People want to be able to see themselves in the collections: to feel like they belong. (Stakeholder interview, 2021)*

Interpretation can create ways of connecting the community with collections. Understanding the interests and needs of the community will help to create more impactful interpretation. We need to better understand community needs across the State and throughout the regions.

Community research for the Interpretation Strategy and Collection Strategy has shown a desire for the State Library to:

- Reach out to communities and enhance access to collections across the regions and online.
- Embrace emerging digital media in interpretation.
- Create sensory and immersive opportunities for experiencing collections.
- Inspire and empower the community to collect, care for and share their own heritage or stories.
- Create opportunities for communities to actively participate in the discovery of collections.
- Provide opportunities that strengthen the living relationships between collections and communities.
- Collect and share contemporary stories.

Understanding and responding to community needs is an ongoing process which will strengthen relationships with community and help to create more meaningful interpretation.

## 5. Provide interpretation that builds on the special role of the State Library

**The State Library has a special role within the community that offers a unique approach to interpreting our West Australian collections.**

The State Library shares collections both digitally online and physically in the building and supports clients in their discovery and research. The process of discovery can lead to unexpected insights and surprising revelations. Researchers pursue many different avenues of enquiry and ask unique questions of the collections. Different researchers produce different understandings of the same collections.

Interpretation of the heritage collections will foster a sense of discovery, juxtapose materials to show different points of view and ask different questions, and engage emotions as well as the intellect.

State Library interpretation will demonstrate these qualities:

**Reflective** - making meaning through thinking and reflection, critical inquiry, and intellectual and emotional engagement.

**Immersive** - making meaning through sensory experience.

**Relational** - making meaning through conversation and dialogue.

**Participatory** - making meaning through involvement.

Online interpretation of digital collections is vital to reach communities throughout the State and beyond, and the website will be a key platform for interpretation. Social media plays a key role in promoting our collections and provides a vehicle for raising awareness about collections in an online environment.

**Providing interpretation that builds on the special qualities of the State Library will create a unique interpretive profile for the library.**

### **Links to other strategic documents**

- State Library of Western Australia Strategic plan 2018-2022
- State Library and State Records Office Disability Access and Inclusion Plan 2019-2023
- State Library Collection Strategy
- Western Australian Multicultural Policy Framework
- Cultural Infrastructure Toolkit 2030+