16.1 Unravelling significance

As you have progressed through your dress register entry you have been encouraged to think of all possible aspects of your garment. You will have developed some ideas about why this garment is an important one, to your collection, or to the wider historical context.

Discussion with donors, museum colleagues, family and those interested in the history of the community, not necessarily costume lovers, can be very helpful. Other people may lend a variety of perspectives to the significance of your garment. The garment can be assessed and written up as a group effort. For more information go to the Collections Council of Australia website, http://www.environment.gov.au/heritage/publications/significance2-0/.

When you write a significance statement, imagine how you would enthuse a young person about this garment, someone who knows nothing about it or its history. Ask yourself questions that the person might ask you. You need to pull together all aspects of the information you have collected in a general way so it reads easily and tells a story. It should start with a paragraph of about 100 words that describes and sums up the garment’s physical appearance and historical context. Further detail can then be added to the significance statement to help with a broader understanding of its importance.

Good luck and don’t let the formal term ‘statement of significance’ dampen your creativity! Here are some examples to inspire you.

**Port Macquarie Historical Society**

Statement by Debbie Sommers (5/02/09)

This is an historically and socially significant and highly valued object within the Port Macquarie Historical Society’s extensive costume collection. It was made by a local woman Maude Keena for the marriage of Lena Nicholls to Joe Campbell in 1909.

The dress is beautifully designed and made. It has a number of fine details and was made using both machine and hand stitching. It is an excellent example of a local woman’s sewing and embroidery skills and evidences the high quality of those skills. Unfortunately, the silk fabric used is contributing to the fragility of the costume. It is a rare provenanced costume within the collection from the early 20th century. The maker of the dress and the costs of the fabric used were recorded by the owner/donor and this information adds to the significance of the dress. The silk voile cost 2/6 per yard, trimming on the bodice cost 1/6 per yard, material over shoulder 1/2 per yard and Mrs Keena charged 1 pound to make the garment.

A wedding photograph of the couple held in the Port Macquarie Historical Society collection also records the dress (see back cover). Lena Campbell was a well known local woman who worked hard for a number of local community groups including the Red Cross, the Women’s Agricultural Security Production Service (WASPS) and the Presbyterian Church. Later in life she was a foundation member of the Port Macquarie Croquet Club.

This wedding dress is an important object to interpret and reference marriage and rights of passage themes, women’s crafts and sewing skills, women’s fashion of the early 20th century and textiles — their uses and storage.
Historic Houses Trust of NSW
Statement by Maria Martin and Lindie Ward (20/11/09)

This black silk satin bodice about 1885 was worn by Bessie Rouse (1843–1924) who was mistress of Rouse Hill House from her marriage in 1874 to Edwin Stephen Rouse (1849–1931) until her death 50 years later.

The bodice is part of the extensive Rouse Hill House & Farm museum collection of garments and accessories from about 1870 until the early 1990s — men’s, women’s, children’s and even dolls’ clothes. Rouse Hill House is one of the oldest continually occupied houses in Australia, the property being crammed with more than 20,000 objects expressing the realities, hopes and dreams of six generations in rural NSW.

This low square necked evening bodice features in a photograph of Bessie Rouse taken in 1887. Close scrutiny reveals that it was originally styled with a high round neck suited to mourning wear, and later altered by lowering the neckline and replacing the earlier sleeves with lace-inset three quarter sleeves. Whalebones are inserted on each side of the front to assist in creating a crisp shape. At the centre back the bodice features dovetail pleats to enhance the waistline and sit fashionably over a bustle skirt, which no longer survives.

Exceptionally well provenanced, the bodice survives in the house where it was possibly worn, stored, remodelled, repaired, laundered and even played with for dress-ups by children of later generations. It survives with a multitude of family possessions including sewing implements and supplies, dress and hat trims, women’s magazines that may well have inspired it, photographs that record it worn by Bessie Rouse, invoices from the maker Madame Bernice Beattie that also possibly record it along with her label inside the bodice, something not often used by Sydney dressmakers at this time.

Alterations to the bodice from a more austere style possibly designed for family mourning to the elegant evening bodice photographed on Bessie effectively document a standard practice in Victorian times, the redesign and recycling of garments. This stemmed from a respect for quality materials, a desire to update and conform to the latest fashion trends from overseas, a high regard for personal resourcefulness and a great reluctance to waste anything.

A later history might be found in the fabric of the bodice too as some of Bessie Rouse’s descendants loved playing dress-ups and staging amateur theatrics using especially kept discarded garments. Subsequent alterations, therefore, might reflect this convivial aspect of later Rouse and Terry family history.
Coffs Harbour Regional Gallery and Museum
Statement by Cheryl Dal Pozzo (3/11/09)

This garment is significant as it is part of 100 piece collection of clothes that belonged to the Bayldon family who were important members of Coffs Harbour society from 1870 to the present day.

This dress is the only one in the collection which is accompanied by documentation showing an original wearer. Annie Amy (born 1841) was photographed wearing this dress sometime in the 1870s. It is thought that this dress could be her wedding dress from her first marriage. Annie later married Hurtle Fisher who was a significant figure in the late 19th century and became known as the ‘Father of Victorian Thoroughbreds’.

The Bayldons were a very important family in the history of the Sawtell and Toormina region of NSW, just south of Coffs Harbour and this is remembered even today. When the local council established a new housing estate near Sawtell it was called Bayldon in William Bayldon’s memory but in later years it was incorporated into Toormina. As well as this a local primary school in Toormina is called the William Bayldon Public School.

The size of the collection also makes it significant, with well over 100 pieces covering underwear, skirt, blouses, jackets, hats, scarves and accessories. It is rare to have so many garments belonging to one family and to be in such good condition.

Another significant point is that the collection has been handed down through the generations. Cheryl Dal Pozzo, who donated the items to the Coffs Harbour Regional Gallery and Museum, inherited the clothes from her aunt Nancy and she inherited the clothes from her grandmother, who had collected them from her sisters.

As well as this continuous chain of ownership there is documentation of family members from many generations enjoying some of the dresses in the collection. There is photo of Ms Dal Pozzo’s great great-aunt Annie, her aunt Nancy, her cousin Beryl and her niece Megan wearing this outfit.