



FACT SHEET

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Social History

The Collective Memory of Women

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The two most enduring institutions of civilisation are libraries and universities with libraries chronologically placed long before the establishment of universities.

The *Encyclopedia Britannica* records that the earliest known library was an organised collection of clay tablets containing political and religious transactions in Babylonia in the 21st century BC, and which recorded the contribution of the dynasty and leader of the day. In that sense the very first library **was** a collection for someone special.

It is very reassuring to know we live in a society that recognises and understands the significance of collecting and preserving for the benefit of future generations the immeasurable amount of information resources available – the published and unpublished manuscripts, books and journals, memorabilia, art works, maps, drawings, photographs, audio and visual recordings – the list is endless - to ensure that what is created today **will** become the history of tomorrow.

Across the four major collecting domains – libraries, archives, museums and galleries - is a treasure trove of recorded memory, history and information. Coupled with an inherent responsibility for the provision of conservation, enhancement and dissemination of learning and knowledge **all** our collecting domains are challenged by societal change and technology. Our collecting institutions are not just custodians but providers of access to the documentary, the published record and collective memory in all its formats.

Collective memory can be represented in many and varied ways – a collection of manuscripts, a lifetime of diaries, a journal of events, a wall hanging, a family quilt, a box of photographs. By acknowledging collective memory we are providing from our past and present a wealth of history for the generations to come.

Let me cite one example

In 1999 a small, diverse group of women with a common link – an acquired brain injury - were invited to co-ordinate the task of creating a wall hanging that would be a gift to the people of South Australia and a tool to educate the community about their continued capacity to be creative and contributing members of society.

It was the beginning of a journey that would surprise and delight not only the Adelaide community but also the women themselves. The Women with Acquired Brain Injury – or the WABI Group – as they became known was formed.

Three years later through the creation of a large wall hanging – the WABI Project brought together a piece of art that represents the true meaning of collective memory.

Each woman designed and completed a panel that tells a story; a story that depicts something personal and significant from her life before the brain injury – and through their individual creativity each panel was woven together to construct a wall hanging – a personal yet public affirmation of their life, a memory, a story told.

The collective memory of women is not as widely examined nor as clearly identified in our collections as that of men. When we reflect upon or read about famous people or famous places - the ones that readily come to mind are by and large those associated with men.

There is however, a growing significance of women's collections in our collecting institutions – both nationally and internationally - and the voice of these women is the subject of a forthcoming conference to be hosted by the Bob Hawke Prime Ministerial Library.

Following the success of the 2005 conference related to women's collections, Simply the Best 2 will focus on *reflections of women through records*. The conference program is outstanding with a wide cross section of presentations that will be of interest to everyone in the general community and in particular to librarians, archivists, museum curators, historians, scholars and writers – **anyone** that is with an interest in the collective memory of women.

Conference speaker, Lena Tornqvist, is the Keeper of the Astrid Lindgren Archives at the National Library of Sweden and will present her keynote address on this significant national and international collection. Astrid Lindgren – Swedish author and writer of Pippi Longstocking - one of the world's most famous children's books – holds a unique position in Swedish society and left a comprehensive archive of original manuscripts, notebooks, diaries, artefacts and letters.

The Astrid Lindgren Archive is so significant it has been classified by UNESCO for inclusion in the Memory of the World Register to preserve for all humankind.

The conference program has been themed to include papers related to women and health, women and education, women and politics, research and social justice.

Local and interstate speakers will present their experiences of women's collections, their discovery into research in our libraries and universities and focus on the significance of oral history as it relates to collective memory.

Like the wall hanging project there are many ways of preserving the story of women and their achievements, in turn bringing gender balance to research, to history and to our collecting worlds. By unlocking the rich and often private world of women and the influences that have shaped their lives, the records of women in our libraries, archives, galleries and museums are being opened, talked about and presented to others in a forum that has the potential to touch us all.

The Bob Hawke Prime Ministerial Library has, as one of its collection contributors, the papers of former South Australian Labor Senator, Rosemary Crowley and her personal papers are certainly the female jewel in the archives of the Prime Ministerial Collection at the University of South Australia.

Rosemary's recent conference paper titled *Alive and Archived* reflected her participation in the process of arranging and preserving her own collective memory – an opportunity that is unique - as most personal collections are gathered together following the death of the individual.

In preserving the Crowley Papers the Hawke Library **is** indeed a link in the chain of preservation; a sense of self and in the provision of evidence - not only of collective memory but of significant historical context in the political sphere of the Hawke era.

By providing an opportunity for those who have a story to tell, our libraries, universities and other collecting repositories act as the catalyst to a resource for scholars, researchers and members of the general community who seek access to that story, the collective memory and the women in our lives – past, present and future.

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