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Moving exhibits: Curators tasked with handling Powerhouse Museum treasures

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When the wondrous collection of the Powerhouse Museum was last valued for insurance purposes at \$310 million, one object alone was deemed irreplaceable – and it wasn't the iconic Locomotive No.1 that stands pride of place at its entrance. Object number 18432, the world's only working Boulton and Watt steam engine, which heralded the arrival of the Industrial Revolution in Britain, was judged priceless.



Basement collection: Powerhouse Museum curatorial director Peter Denham with a moulded porcelain elephant vase from England, 1882, and a vase by Kate Rohde, 2016.

So how do you move a steam engine with a flywheel two storeys high and a cast iron beam weighing 9.2 tonnes?

"Carefully," curatorial director Peter Denham said. "Very large objects are the most complex to move in terms of weight and size but small objects can have equal significance and with these objects you don't want to lose them either."

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This is the herculean effort facing the 14 conservators, 22 curators and 14 registration staff of the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences as the NSW government pursues its business case to shift the museum to its preferred site on the banks of the Parramatta River.

The staff are not without practice. Over the past year they have supervised the transfer of 55,000 objects to the Museum's Discovery Centre in Castle Hill on top of the existing 150,000 objects stored there.

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But this will be no ordinary house move, either.



Peter Denham with Wes Standfield's mousetrap-making machine. Photo: Ben Rushton

For any iconic category A item, like the sphere or Mawson's sleds, a written risk assessment must be completed before they go out on loan and the objects must be accompanied by two people when moved around the Ultimo campus.

"I try and look at an object with the same care as a patient in hospital," Mr Denham said. "The only difference is we are not saving lives."



Priceless: Locomotive No. 1. Photo: Dallas Kilponen

The Technological, Industrial and Sanitary Museum, as it was originally known, was first housed in the galleries of the Garden Palace in the Botanical Gardens, displaying porcelain, glass crystal, tapestries, books and carpets as well as machinery from the colonies.

The palace burned to the ground on September 22, 1882 and all but a few of the museum's 200 objects were lost.



Peter Denham in the Powerhouse basement.

The copperplate writing of the museum's stock book show the collection was restarted within days with gifts of botanical specimens, samples of raw cotton bronze figurines, candlesticks, vases bottles and trays.

The collection has evolved, Mr Denham said, through serendipity, philanthropy and curatorial scholarship: "We've set it up to be an encyclopedic collection," he said, "but it's more a kaleidoscope to me, at every turn there is something new, everything from fashion to automobiles."



Some of the clothing hidden away.

What is on display at the Powerhouse is a small fraction of the 500,000-plus items contained within its collection, one of the largest in Australia. Among its most unusual treasures is the timeball, still in original condition, that sits at the front of Sydney Observatory.

Stories of Australian ingenuity, industry, celebrity, history and culture are contained in the drawers and shelves of the nearby Harwood Street premises, which serves as the museum's treasure store.

The former tram sheds, also known as location code Z, are kept at a stable temperature of 20 degrees and 50 per cent humidity.

As in the Powerhouse's exhibition halls, there are no windows here, sunshine being destructive to the life of an exhibit. Underground tunnels encircle the basement to act as a buffer to any outside vibration.

Behind a vault door, double-locked, barred and as heavy as you might see in a movie western, are working guns and jewellery of the purest gold, souvenirs from the gold rush.

One of the museum's most recent acquisitions, Catherine Martin's red sequined dresses for the Baz Lurhman production of *La Boheme* hang in tissue on a zip-locked trolley.

The ball gowns join a collection of wedding dresses, hats, kimonos, a [patchwork smoking jacket](#) much admired by John Paul Gaultier, and every type of shoe dating from 1770, including a prototype of the first elastic-sided boot made for Queen Victoria.

In 2012 Bill Gates toured the museum's hidden collection, admiring the Russian and Chinese space technology and the museum's planimeters, instruments that measure the [area](#) of an irregular shape.

The MAAS collection is being added to all the time, through object and financial donations by donors, many through the federal government's tax incentive scheme.

"Deaccessions" occur rarely, when an item has either lost significance or is replaced by a better sample.

Assistant registrar Terry Mooney has the steadiest of hands. He was present when the Powerhouse's largest exhibit, the Catalina flying boat, was put together from five sections and lifted to the roof top. "I've been here 30 years and I may have damaged one or two things. It's a rare thing."

Twice a year the museum is audited for its collection management processes and security procedures.

As part of business case preparations for the relocation, "additional collections focused work" is being undertaken, reportedly scoping the collection and the complicated logistics of removal and storage. As with all information prepared for the business case this is considered to be cabinet in confidence.

KEY PIECES

Most valuable/priceless – the [Boulton and Watt](#) steam engine

Biggest object – the [Catalina flying boat](#)

Most recently acquired: Costumes designed by Catherine Martin and worn by Nakajima Akiko for the 1996 production of Baz Luhrmann's *La Boheme*, and *Deer Vase* by Kate Rohde

First acquired: [Bronze shard](#) fragment of wreath from a statue of Queen Victoria, 1882

Lightest object: Wool sample from Samuel [Marsden's flock](#), 1805
