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The state of collecting in a State: numismatics in NSW

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This paper is dedicated to Joyce Hanley whose recent passing is a great loss to Australian numismatics and whose warmth and generosity of spirit will be sadly missed by all who knew her. [Editor's note: see obituary for Joyce Hanley]

During the last sixteen years I have witnessed in the Powerhouse Museum many changes affecting the development of the numismatic collection; its presentation and its management. These include greatly enhanced access via the web (but reduced presence on the floor), broadening curatorial responsibilities, generous State funding gradually becoming less generous, increasingly complex procedures that take more time, but deliver a better result, and the elevation of historically important numismatic material to 'gilt-edged' investment. In addition there have been changing museological attitudes to collections and collecting that have encouraged less emphasis on expertise and, as a consequence, that have dissipated expertise, energy, and research focus. My observations in this paper will mostly relate to the history of numismatic collecting at the multi-

focused Powerhouse Museum, which will by necessity be a very different story to those museums with a more specific focus (eg. Australian Centre for Ancient Numismatic Studies (ACANS) at Macquarie University) or who currently enjoy generous acquisition funding such as that currently seen in federal institutions. I hope to generate discussion in which the future of numismatic collecting, both personal and institutional, can be reflected upon and discussed.

Like many readers, I began my involvement with numismatics as a window to the past. I can still conjure up the feeling of wonder at the accumulated centuries in the Elizabeth I hammered sixpence I held in my hand after purchase at London's Petticoat Lane market as a youth. No matter that the Queen's head had been erased by the vicious scribbles of a Tudor-period detractor; the weight in my hand and the legends and shield had taken form between 1558 and 1603 and that was what mattered. Events, personalities, battles and myriad associations with the times were all inherent in that little silver disc. It is hard to imagine that not everybody shares this thrill, especially

given the popularity of history and archaeology in films and television. Appealing to all age groups, the past is conjured up in media spanning interactive games, big budget movies such as *Indiana Jones*, and popular documentaries such as the BBC's *Time Team* or, even more relevantly, the ABC's *Collectors*. I acknowledge that the weight of history is not the angle from which all collectors come, but it is often the beginning. Over time, my own appreciation has greatly broadened and these days I can appreciate among many numismatic themes for (what shall be seen is) a topical example: Amor bread token dies, as residues of social history and connections to much changed, even if far more recent, times.

Institutional support for numismatics

Prior to some recent purchases by museums in Australia, I mistakenly wondered if the days of major numismatic purchases by institutions were numbered. I was worried that the auction rooms were to be dominated by individuals whose bidding ceiling was dictated by investment mentality, both in the pursuit of rare quality items and a concomitant interest in driving up the prices and further securing numismatic's reputation as a sound investment. However, thankfully, this does not seem to be the case and, if institutional purchase confirms a discipline's cultural importance, we should all be pleased at recent acquisitions of numismatic relevance.

The purchases of the Charlotte medal by the Australian National Maritime Museum and Timothy Millett's convict love token collection by the National Museum of Australia are hugely significant events that give key objects a place in the nation's collections. When we consider that around A\$1.5 million changed hands in these two transactions, it is a clear verification that numismatic items are still valued as culturally vital remnants. It is no accident, however, that both purchases were of extreme significance to Australian history as well as the focus of each institution and, I would suggest, it is also relevant that neither institution has a specific history of collecting numismatics.

The Charlotte medal and Millett collection were bought as important examples of significant events and periods in Australia's past, and I do wonder whether, ironically, an institution with a defined collection of numismatics such as the Powerhouse Museum actually alienates the varied nature of the constituent parts of the discipline from those who control the purse strings. In other words, could the real significance of numismatic items and their role in so capably representing unique connections to social, political, civic, and military records actually be lost in an arcane word that many cannot even pronounce? It is perhaps then, for reasons other than mere funding, that these two spectacular numismatic purchases were made by federal institutions unburdened by isolating

terminology. In forming an opinion, I ask you to consider the treatment of the pre-eminent numismatic collection in the country, that of the Museum Victoria, and what I consider to be the shabby treatment of its esteemed curator, John Sharples.

It should be acknowledged that the Charlotte medal was acquired with assistance from the National Cultural Heritage Account, but they required a contribution (and in this case I imagine a *substantial* contribution) by the requesting institution. I discovered this requirement to my regret when applying for assistance to acquire the copper test piece for the holey dollar auctioned by Noble Numismatics in March 2007. The Powerhouse Museum didn't have the funds, and representations to Macquarie Bank for corporate sponsorship didn't earn a reply. You win some, you lose some, but from my perspective, any item going to an institution is a win for the State as well as the standing of the discipline. After the Charlotte medal's purchase I sent a congratulatory note to the director of the Australian National Maritime Museum noting how pleased the late curator, Pat Boland, would have been to see the medal in a museum. Pat, on behalf of the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, had been the under bidder to John Chapman at its last sale in the 1980s and Pat considered the Charlotte medal the Holy Grail of Australian numismatics. I wanted to share this story with the Australian National Maritime Museum in the hope

that the medal would remain a part of that object's history.

Both the Powerhouse Museum and Museum Victoria have undergone major overhauls in their change from traditional to ultra modern museums of international standing. The evolving of the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences (MAAS) to Powerhouse Museum in 1988 was much more than a greatly enlarged space, glitz and interactivity. To bring about such a major change there had been a new leader in 1979; Dr Lindsay Sharp, a historian, was the first non-technical research appointment to director that the Powerhouse Museum had seen in its then 100 years' history.¹ Sharp's vision and whole-hearted State government support combined to develop a very different museum to the cramped and under-funded MAAS.² To judge from the impact on numismatics (and philately), these two museums suggest that while more relevant, engaging and popular museums are to be welcomed, the combination of a broadened scope and aggressive popularity is potentially contrary to specialist collections in terms of focus, development and display.

History of the Powerhouse Museum numismatic collection

So let's step back a bit and look specifically at how the numismatic collection has developed in content and numbers. The Powerhouse Museum was a progeny of the 1879 Sydney

International Exhibition, which in itself was the direct descendent of the granddaddy of all international exhibitions, London's 1851 'Great Exhibition of the Works of Industries of All Nations', in what fondly became known as the Crystal Palace. The birth of museums and galleries (the Art Gallery of NSW is also an 1879 sibling) from such exhibitions similarly emulated the Victoria and Albert and Science Museums beginning in 1851.

By 1961 the MAAS had an opportunistic collection relevant to its general collection and usually accessioned in the H (miscellaneous) or Applied Art Registers. These included a discrete collection of international coins, engineering medals and awards won for displays by the museum itself; for example, at the Franco-British Exhibition in 1908 (A960 & A961 later renumbered N18071 & N18072, Fig. 1). In 1961, however, the disparate numismatic collections of NSW were merged into a single collection by government decree and consolidated at what is now the Powerhouse Museum. The Australian Museum's (see <http://www.australianmuseum.net.au/>) collection was the largest, but its once-logical placement at what was, at its inception, the only museum in Australia was seen over time as an anachronism. By the middle of the 20th century it was considered that numismatics was better suited to the applied art and technological focus of the MAAS/Powerhouse Museum.

The numismatic registers of the Australian Museum accompanied the collection and saw the appointment of the collection's part-time curator, H.P. (Pat) Boland, who continued to add newly acquired material into the ex-Australian Museum's N-prefix register.³ Added to the centralised collection were the Art Gallery of NSW and Mitchell Library collections, although missing, due to the legal terms of the bequest, was the significant Dixon collection in the State Library of NSW.⁴ Pat Boland in his role as curator at the MAAS, rather than acting as mere caretaker, instead embarked on an aggressive acquisition policy that saw some of its most significant items come into the collection, particularly Australian material (Donnelly and Sheedy 2006). Pat was especially busy in the 1960s due to the decimal change-over and people's increased interest in their small change; which may have included, they hoped, the much-talked about 1930 penny. The addition to the Museum's territory of the Hyde Park Barracks and especially the Sydney Mint site (as will be discussed below) added a further impetus to the numismatic collection's visibility and relevance.

By the early 1980s the rest of the Power Museum's broad collection experienced a similar growth to Pat's earlier lead in numismatic collection development, as staff endeavoured to fill new themes such as domestic history, which had been identified as essential for the redevelopment of the MAAS on



Figure 1. Medal, Franco-British Exhibition, awarded to Technological Museum, silver, 1908 (N18072).

its converted Powerhouse site. Numbers were further swollen by the multiples of similar (organic based) items collected to allow regular changeovers, and thus able to share over time the deteriorating effects of exposure to light. Staffing was at its greatest height in the mid to late 1980s, and currently the museum runs at nearly 200 fewer full-time people than those heady days, an important factor considering the increased level of documentation and research expected in a modern museum.

The opening of the Sydney Mint Museum in 1981 further stimulated the relevance of the, by then, greatly swollen numismatic collection. Both this first and the second 1993 Sydney Mint Museum incarnation under MAAS/Powerhouse Museum control gave prominence to the numismatic collection at a perfectly suited site, although it wasn't until the substantial 1993 interior redesign by Burley Katon Halliday that the Powerhouse Museum was given access to a part of the

coining section at the eastern side of the courtyard. During much of the MAAS tenure at the Sydney Mint building, the numismatic collection was stored at the Mint site. The heightened visibility of the numismatic collection displayed at the Mint, combined with Pat's personal charm and knowledge, attracted a great number of excellent donations. These included, from Tom and Joyce Hanley, the 1862 and 1879 medals awarded to the Deputy Mint Master, Robert Hunt (Fig. 2), as well as the wide-ranging collection of WD Bush (Figs 8, 9 and 10), who enjoys the status of being arguably the most generous single donor to the Museum to date (Donnelly 2006). Between 1980 and up to his death in 2006, Bill Bush gave close to half a million dollar's worth of numismatic material. Bill Bush lived in Vancouver, Washington State but, as a US citizen, he received no benefit other than altruistic satisfaction. This material can be seen on the Museum's website (<http://www.powerhousemuseum.com/>)



Figure 2. Sydney International Exhibition medal awarded to Robert Hunt, 'Honorary Member of Commission', silver (51mm diameter), 1879. Gift of Thomas and Joyce Hanley, 1995 (95/284/1).

using the 'Search our collection' under the 'Collection & Research' tab.

When control of the Sydney Mint was removed from the Museum in 1997 (it later reopened under the Historic Houses Trust in 2004), the display collection returned after more than fifteen years to the Powerhouse Museum, which was then a very different institution.⁵ The loss of a dedicated site with a strong numismatic relevance was, I think, a disaster for the collection, and this was only partially reversed by its later comprehensive presentation on the Museum's website. I have often wondered if, ironically, it would have been better if the Mint had not been an interlude (1981 to 1997) in the collection's history for, upon its 'return' to the MAAS, it was a seemingly foreign area inherited due to the loss of a more relevant and suitable site. In fact, the collection had been returned to

its home institution. In the years leading up to its opening in 1988, display space at the Powerhouse Museum had been hard fought and long divvied up among the various departments. Numismatics as a discrete collection based at the Sydney Mint had missed the boat and, by 1997, coincided with a view that specialist collections needed to be thematically displayed and integrated within displays. Philately had also been based at the Mint with a dedicated display and suffered the same fate, but the nature of numismatics at least made it easier to incorporate a selection of items within many displays, for example, on the Boulton and Watt beam engine, Loco No 1, *What's in Store*, *WS Jevons*, and the recently opened *Back to the 80s*. Nevertheless, scale is an issue and on an object list the ratio of object types, including numismatics, looks reasonably balanced, but in reality one



Figure 3. Silver stater, Aspendos, Pamphylia, (Asia Minor, modern Turkey), 385-370 BC (Purchased 99/80/1).

or two coins and medals are not nearly as visible as, for example, even a single garment or piece of furniture. As at the month of November 2009 there were not more than 200 numismatic items on display in the Powerhouse Museum, including coins, medals, and badges.

During the course of the same period that the numismatic collection featured at the Sydney Mint, a new change had taken place in the focus of the institution, perfectly justified it must be said, but profound in terms of the development of the collection. This was the general focus on Australian history and material culture that was rightly taken up with gusto in the evolvement of the MAAS into the Powerhouse Museum. Over the course of the 90s Asia, too, became a collecting and exhibition priority, and the numismatic collection took advantage of this direction. Kenneth Sheedy, now director of ACANS, acquired in his time as curator in the late 80s to early 90s a fine selection of Australian agricultural medals with relevance to Sydney Mint

production. Material outside this area could and can be justified if relevant to an upcoming exhibition, but otherwise the justification for material outside these key areas is hard. The silver stater from Aspendos featuring two wrestlers (Fig. 3) was bought for display in the *1000 years of the Olympic Games* exhibition of the Sydney Olympic year in 2000, and Chinese representational money was purchased for supporting displays of the Great Wall of China exhibition in 2007. However, with ACANS and the Nicholson Museum's increasing role in this area, purchases of ancients will be few and far between, although gifts (preferably not overlapping with ACANS) are most welcome!

Thus far, in this paper we have seen the Powerhouse Museum numismatic collection grow with the consolidation of NSW collections, followed by further growth thanks to the new prominence of the Sydney Mint, only to suffer with the Mint's change in ownership and subsequent return to an already

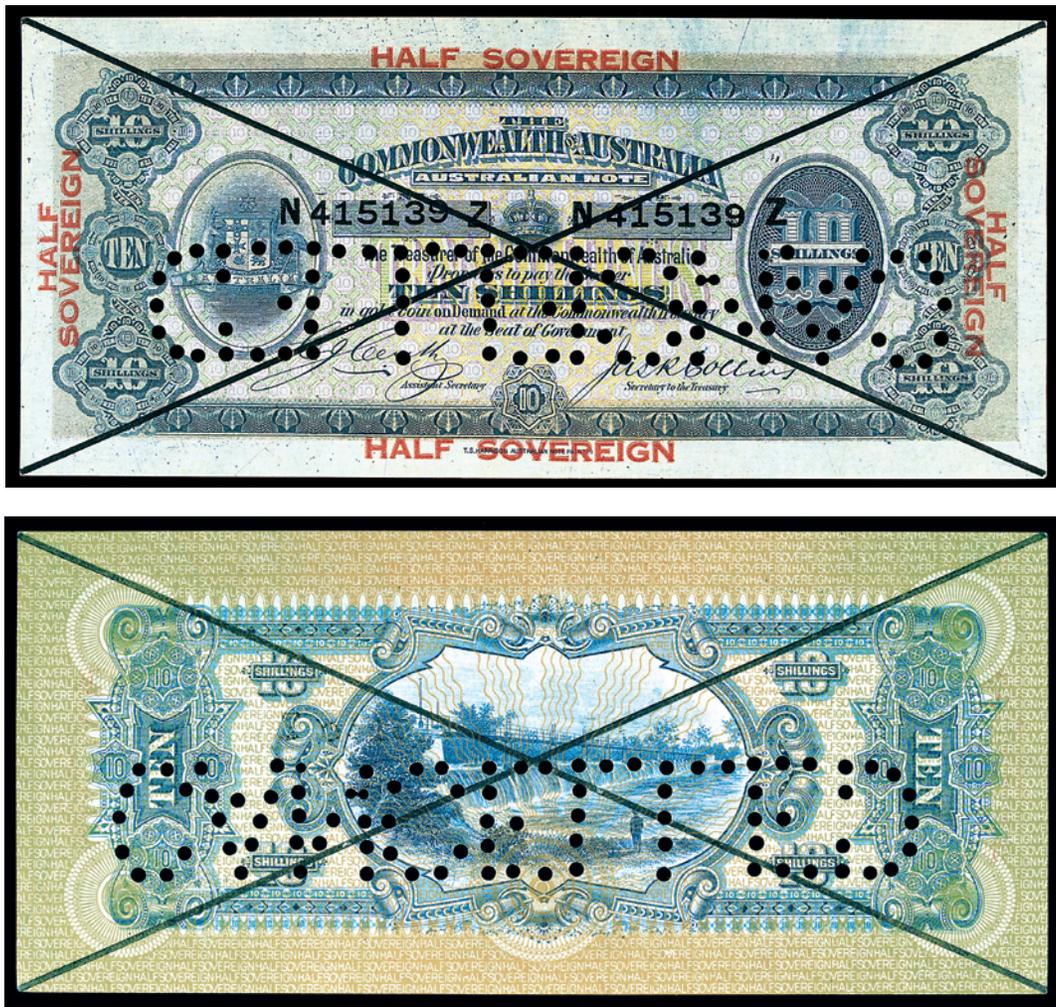


Figure 4. Banknote, ten shillings, completed 1923/25, George V, N415139Z. Gift of Reserve Bank of Australia, 1984 (N21296-1).

full museum space at the Powerhouse Museum.⁶ To this we can also add economic impacts and changes in collecting practice. Economic issues encompass factors both internal and external to a museum. Internally, along with greater professionalism and accountability, there is far more time spent per acquisition and consideration

of processing costs including storage space and management. Vastly improved documentation and recording of provenance and context is, of course, to be wholeheartedly welcomed in a modern institution, but the impact on museum costs and resources is a real one. The decision to acquire an object requires careful consideration and

justification and can take a whole day. Of the three main fields in the acquisition fields of the Museum's collection database, 'significance' is a narrative evaluation demonstrating why the object is worthy of addition to the collection, and 'reasoning' covers all the aspects relevant to that object as discussed in detail in 'Significance 2.0' (Russell & Winkworth 2009)⁷ A visit to any recent (or recently updated) acquisition on the Powerhouse Museum website will demonstrate how worthwhile this extra effort is.⁸ However, gone are the days when we can justify the time required to acquire, for example, an ephemeral token commemorating a club meeting; the acquisition process has become a self-regulating filter.

Then we have the external economics that include greatly increased prices of numismatic items due, in large part, to the targeting of museum-quality numismatic items for investment, especially for self-managed superannuation funds. The concomitant rise in prices of quality material can be prohibitive to many institutions and certainly to the Powerhouse Museum in the recent and current economic climate. Increasing prices over all collecting areas combined with shrinking State subsidies is not a good mix for developing the collection. Thankfully there are still generous gifts including those under the Cultural Gifts tax scheme to bolster growth, but this makes for opportunistic rather than focused development.

Contemporary collecting: spoilt for choice?

The last subject to be covered in this paper relates to greatly increased production in numbers and types of material, with the resultant changes in personal collecting practice and the impact this has had on institutional collecting. The enormously wide range of material available and, most importantly, *targeted* to collectors makes contemporary collecting difficult for, clearly, it is impossible to be comprehensive let alone exhaustive. In the face of such a 'plethora of modern production many museums have simply thrown in the towel with collections frozen or, worse, abandoned' (Spalding 2002: 9). Further choices involve museums becoming period pieces that recreate the days of less challenging times or '*turn themselves into high-tech, interactive theme parks and put most of their collections into storage*' (Spalding 2002: 9). Of relevance to numismatics is the enormous range of Royal Australian Mint products. The now-retired production manager of the Royal Australian Mint (RAM), Ron Gardener, for many years kindly arranged a selection (even the Royal Mint couldn't be exhaustive!) for the Powerhouse's collection (Fig. 6), but this no longer happens. My current approach with contemporary Australian numismatics is to be opportunistic and rely on gifts and bequests. A large bequest by James and Mary Brady included nearly 400 items (totalling nearly \$40,000) of



Figure 5. Banknote, fifty pounds, George V, completed 1923/25, Y507840. Gift of Reserve Bank of Australia, 1984 (N21296-12).



Figure 6. 2008/171/1 Coin sets (29), circulating / uncirculated / piedfort / proof, packaged commemorative and collector's sets including, Sir Henry Parkes / Tribute to Sir Donald Bradman / International Year of the Family / The Centenary of Women's Enfranchisement. Gift of Royal Australian Mint (2008/171/1).

both RAM and Perth Mint products that, in date range, neatly preceded the period of donations by the RAM. This acquisition, together with the WD Bush material (Figs 8, 9 and 10), was finally fully accessioned in 2008 (but photography is on-going!).

Targeting acquisitions

Considering production across the board it is not surprising that collecting *per se* is a growing and popular pastime. However, this doesn't necessarily include the young being active in traditional collecting areas

such as numismatics and philately. This impacts on museums inasmuch as demand from this sector could greatly benefit arguments for greater visibility. Peering into rows of coins at the British Museum when I was a boy brought me huge pleasure, but such youngsters if they exist these days are not vocal! The real growth in numbers of collectors can be seen in the sourcing of ephemeral or commonplace material from popular culture. For example, it is documented that a UK collector placed a small advertisement in a monthly magazine proposing a new club devoted

to collectors of McDonald's 'Happy Meal' toys, which are given away free with children's meals. Three thousand enquiries were received before the next issue of the magazine!⁹ Inevitably, a proportion of these collectors would be under 20 (although, apparently, adult collectors of these ephemeral toys are well represented) and it would be nice, but perhaps overly optimistic, to imagine a similar response from any age group to an advertisement from one of the Australian numismatic collecting societies. So, why is the collecting of numismatics not seemingly of appeal to the young? Clearly, collecting is not dead, but compared to these new areas, is numismatics considered too highbrow? Here we get into the sociologists realm, which is beyond the scope of this paper but, if we accept that our area is currently taking a back seat among the young, can we expect them to gravitate as they age and mature? Perhaps the oft-repeated lament regarding the young not being interested is just recognising a change in trend, that is, collectors of numismatic material are starting at a later age than used to be the case. It is gratifying that a proportion of investment-driven collectors was motivated to the area through interest.¹⁰ No doubt the dealers among us are better exposed to observing these trends, and it would be good to have some feedback on this speculation since sales and prices do not seem to be suffering from a lack of interest.

The modern museum has become

less an encyclopaedic storehouse dedicated to collecting the rare and beautiful for the betterment of the masses and, instead, has moved to being a venue where education and entertainment merge and collecting is at best, general and, at worst, sporadic. For a display of gold sovereigns, for example, this is the difference between a selection representing every monarch and a couple of examples showing, respectively, a Sydney Mint and imperial reverse. The including of different mints and years within those mints is up to the specialist institution, collector or the producing mint itself. The growth of the Powerhouse Museum numismatic collection involves mainly Australian items of interest, including numismatic machinery building upon industrial history and related to the history of manufacturing in Australia. The machinery from Amor-Sanders and Prestige Badges (ex Melbourne Mint) has been covered by me at an earlier NAA forum. Most recently, a range of milk and bread token dies were acquired via a good friend and affiliate of the Museum, Les Carlisle (Fig. 7). These had been saved from Amor's store, and the aluminium test strikes that were made were also acquired. These dies could easily be justified as supporting material to previous Amor factory acquisitions and, in the process, improved representation of an important Sydney minting facility. The dies were also relevant to Sydney's social history and were suburb-specific in their



Figure 7. Amor bread dies: Steel cylindrical dies (66) made by Amor, Sydney, to produce milk and bread purchasing checks for Dairy Farmers and various bakeries in a number of Sydney suburbs including Ashfield / Bexley / Canterbury / City / Cronulla / Enfield / Kingsford / Manly / Marrickville / Mosman / North Sydney / Waverley / Willoughby, c. 1920-1940. Gift of Leslie Carlisle OAM (2009/57/1-1-51).

identities; most Sydney suburbs from Mosman to Cronulla are represented. Thankfully such acquisitions are easy to justify and valuable additions to the State's collection.

Additionally, a few international items have also been acquired when there is relevance to Museum displays, for example, the stater from Aspendos and the ancient Chinese representational currency, as mentioned earlier.

However, any activity is sporadic and far broader than a decade ago. The last numismatic-related item I purchased was the printing plate engraved by the American Banknote Company for the Sydney International Exhibition of 1879 (2007/121/1:2) but, demonstrating our broadening responsibilities, the latest item I have purchased was a modernist chair by Gerrit Rietveld made in Utrecht in 1932 (2009/22/1).



Figure 8. Among the thousands of donations from US donor, the late Bill Bush, is a rare Fijian five pounds overprint on Reserve Bank of New Zealand 1934 note, Serial Number 4K 828807, paper, provisional issue during World War II, New Zealand / Fiji, 1934 / [1940] Gift of William D Bush, 2008 (2008/142/1-6).



Figure 9. Also from Bill Bush, pre-Columbian arrowheads as examples of exchange commodities. Primitive currency (25), obsidian / igneous rock / sedimentary rock / slate, probably New Mexico, United States of America, 1000-1500 CE. Gift of William D Bush, 2008 (2008/233/2)

Conclusion

The numismatic collection is a jewel among the Powerhouse Museum's holdings. I maintain that no other part of the collection can provide a tangible link to so many Australian and international events, from General Gordon's emergency Khartoum money (2009/2/1, Fig. 10) to Culver's medal commemorating the insertion of the last rivets joining the Sydney Harbour Bridge (N21454), to Thomas Mitchell's Military General Service Medal and

bars (87/1558), to Tiger money from Thailand (89/477) and the very earliest of electrum coins of Asia Minor (2003/48/1), to 23 medals awarded to early Sydney Horticulturalist, John Tomas Baptist (eg. N12514, Fig. 11) along with many others. The Powerhouse collection is relevant to many of our exhibitions and those of other institutions to whom we regularly lend.¹¹ Furthermore, the collection's presentation on the web makes it accessible to all and, as documentation



Figure 10. Uniface banknote, 2500 Piastres, signed by General Gordon, emergency issue during the Siege of Khartoum 1884-1885. Gift of William D Bush (2009/2/1).



Figure 11. Award medal Floral & Horticultural Society exhibition, February Show 1843, awarded to John T. Baptist, silver. Transferred from the Australian Museum, 1961 (N12514).

improves more and more, will have images and improved information. No doubt people have noticed that when searching for numismatic items many Powerhouse objects appear. The Powerhouse has expended a great deal of energy in creating a web presence that maximises public access to the collection. Right from the beginning a decision was made to present the collection 'warts and all'. Although there are fewer acquisitions than in the past, provenance and context are far better documented and available to a much wider audience across the globe. Numismatists have been well represented in the Museum's professional awards; Robert Carson was an Honorary Associate, Pat Boland and WD Bush were Life Fellows (Pat was the only non-director staff member so awarded) and, as recently as 2008, Les Carlisle was given a Distinguished Service Award by the Museum. Times have changed, but there are improvements too and the outlook is by no means bleak.

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Notes

1. Davidson and Webber (2005): 32.
2. Since the 1930s, director's comments in the annual report have frequently called for new and greatly-expanded premises.
3. This system continued until 1985 when an annual prefix was adopted. Since then, developing collection databases have necessitated a third numerical system.
4. Tom Hanley, who catalogued the Dixon collection and knew it better than anyone, was of the opinion it should have also come to the Powerhouse.
5. The greatly extended and stunning renovation conducted under the Historic Houses Trust has made visible far more of the site, but the numismatic focus is greatly dissipated.
6. The glass wall of 2500 years of gold coins was removed from the Sydney Mint's Bullion Room with the intention of displaying in the Powerhouse. Sadly no space or opportunity was ever found to be suitable.
7. 'Significance 2.0' is available on the web: <http://significance.collectionscouncil.com.au/home>

8. <http://www.powerhousemuseum.com/> 'search the collection' tab.
9. Martin, P. (1990): 2. Martin also notes later in the book that adults started to collect but many fell away when McDonald's recognised this and began to cater for the broader demographic (1990: 95). He mentions other people were attracted at this point and one can't help comparing the attitude of collectors to the almost infinite variety of Royal Australian Mint and Australian Post Office collectable material where the main challenge, if one doesn't specialise, is to avoid bleeding one's bank account dry!
10. SMH Feb 3 2010.
11. For example, the Historic Houses Trust 2008 exhibition and publication on gardens featured examples of Baptist's medals.

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