

# Collection-level description: separating the woods from the trees

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***Abstract:***

*This paper describes a project at the State Library of NSW to develop structured machine-readable collection descriptions to provide online access to our collection strengths.*

## Background

The State Library of New South Wales has a history tracing back to the establishment of the Australian Subscription Library in 1826. It is one of Australia's premier research libraries with its collections forming a key part of Australia's cultural heritage. There are extensive pictorial and manuscript collections including such unique national treasures such as 9 of the 11 extant original First Fleet journals, as well as vast holdings of published library materials such as books, serials and maps, now complemented by online databases.

Much of this intellectual capital and cultural wealth is still currently accessible only via card catalogues and supplementary paper-based finding aids located within the library buildings and thus available only to those who are able to visit the site. Approximately 25% of the total 4,623,791 collection items, 9,533 linear metres of manuscripts and 5,368 hours of oral history have online records – only bibliographic formats catalogued since 1980 and original materials (manuscripts, pictorial collections and maps) catalogued since 1992.

In February 2002, the *Jean Garling Performing Arts Project* commenced with the goals of improving access to the Library's collections using a significant collection, the Performing Arts, as the test case, and developing a model that could be applied to other significant collections. As the performing arts is a very broad subject strength encompassing a number of clearly defined subject areas such as theatre, dance, opera, film, radio, television, circus, puppetry and magic, it was decided to focus on 'dance'. Dance was a lifelong interest of the project benefactor, Jean Garling, whose Bequest made the project possible, enabling the appointment of a full-time project officer.

Jean Garling (1907-1998) is the third greatest benefactor to the State Library of New South Wales after the bequests of David Scott Mitchell in 1907 and Sir William Dixson in 1952. In her will, Miss Garling left the Library a substantial sum to be used for the development of the State Library's performing arts collections. Over several decades she had a close association with the State Library, which was up the road from her apartment at the Astor in Macquarie Street. She was a founding member of The Library Society in 1983 and was designated a Governor Benefactor of The Library Foundation in 1992. Indeed she continued a family tradition of contribution to the professional and cultural life of New South Wales which began with the arrival of Frederick Garling Senior in 1815 as the colony's first Crown Solicitor.

The *Jean Garling Performing Arts Project* was undertaken in stages. The first stage was primarily a research and discussion phase. The possibilities for enhancing access to significant resources in our collections were explored, not only by the Project Officer through targeted research, but also in the Project Steering Committee meetings. Members luxuriated in the opportunity to engage in informed discussion and debate around the issues described below. This iterative process eventually provided sufficient concrete direction to proceed with clear strategies to achieve the project goals and a second implementation stage followed.

## Issues

During the first stage, the major issues impacting on client access to collections via the Library's website and catalogues were identified and assessed (State Library of NSW 2003).

Clients who visit the Library in person or via the website are diverse, ranging from staff of public libraries and government agencies to individual students, scholars and those

undertaking research for business or professional purposes, as well as people pursuing recreational interests.

A survey conducted in 2001 revealed that many clients are not aware of the breadth and diversity of our collections, nor how to efficiently find what they want. The research also revealed that most clients would like to be more independent in their use of the Library, and that our services need to be communicated in a variety of ways including information on the website.

In particular, clients are not adequately aware that many of the Library's most significant holdings are not recorded in the two online catalogues, WEBCAT (2003) and PICMAN (2003). The fact that many significant items do not have electronic records leads to even greater complexity for clients who must not only search online but also look up card catalogues and paper-based finding aids. The existence of two catalogues, WEBCAT for published formats such as books, maps, serials, CD-ROMs etc and PICMAN for original materials (manuscripts, pictures, photographs, oral history etc) adds to the confusion. At times, even staff are unsure as to which catalogue is the more appropriate access point.

Library websites are a major communication medium for users, providing information on services, facilities and collections. Currently website users are exposed to general descriptions of the State Reference Collection and the Mitchell Library including the Pictures and Manuscripts Collections. However, there is no real description of many significant collections. For example, a search of WEBCAT will find records for items formerly held in the *Dennis Wolanski Library*, a well-known performing arts collection which was transferred to various cultural institutions from the Sydney Opera House Trust in 1997. There is no information about the collection as a whole, its origins, provenance, or subject coverage.

Moreover, the presentation of results in online catalogues is arbitrary, resulting in the loss of any contextual information. For example, an 'all keywords' search for 'performing arts' yields 746 titles in WEBCAT and 451 records in PICMAN. How do clients make sense of the Library's performing arts collections through these large results sets? The only real authoritative source is the Library's paper-based collection development policy, which is essentially a librarian's management tool and certainly not designed to provide clients with the context they seek.

The Internet has increased client expectations and many people assume that everything significant can be found online and preferably the full text, not just bibliographic records. With the advent of digitisation, another issue is how to present digital collections in a meaningful way and show relationships with other parts of the website and the catalogue records themselves. And finally, while the Library is embarking on a targeted retrospective cataloguing program and fundraising for the entire retrospective conversion of its card catalogues, with item-level description, it will be many years before this is completed.

What is required is an immediate, simple and cost-effective online solution to alert clients to the existence of collections, pointing them towards the vast holdings of items, because, to quote Lorcan Dempsey (1999)

*“ The value of the library is that it saves users' time, that it releases the value of the resources it manages, that it effectively brings together users and resources over time. ... it is not enough for the library to provide access to a part of its collection through a catalogue;*

*another through a set of annotated web links or resource database; another indirectly through abstracting and indexing services; and so on; with no relation between them. It is likely that the collections and services will be brought together at some higher level."*

## Strategies

In seeking to address these issues, two initial strategies were adopted:

1. The implementation of a simple search interface or metasearch. The metasearch interface would allow clients to search across all our databases and resources in a single search, eliminating the need for prior understanding of which formats are covered by which catalogue. This second strategy is now being pursued through the *Metasearch Software Project*, which is implementing software to allow federated searching and other improved functionality for clients.

2. Development of a model for improving access to areas of subject strength based on collection descriptions which will be published on the Library's website. The remainder of this paper will focus on this strategy.

It should be noted that the State Library adopted a functional granularity approach to defining what constitutes a collection, based upon the model developed by Heaney (2000) which defines a collection very broadly as an aggregation of items. The nature and size of the aggregation, whether it is subject, format or provenance-based for example, is dependant upon the resource discovery needs of the user.

## Collection Description

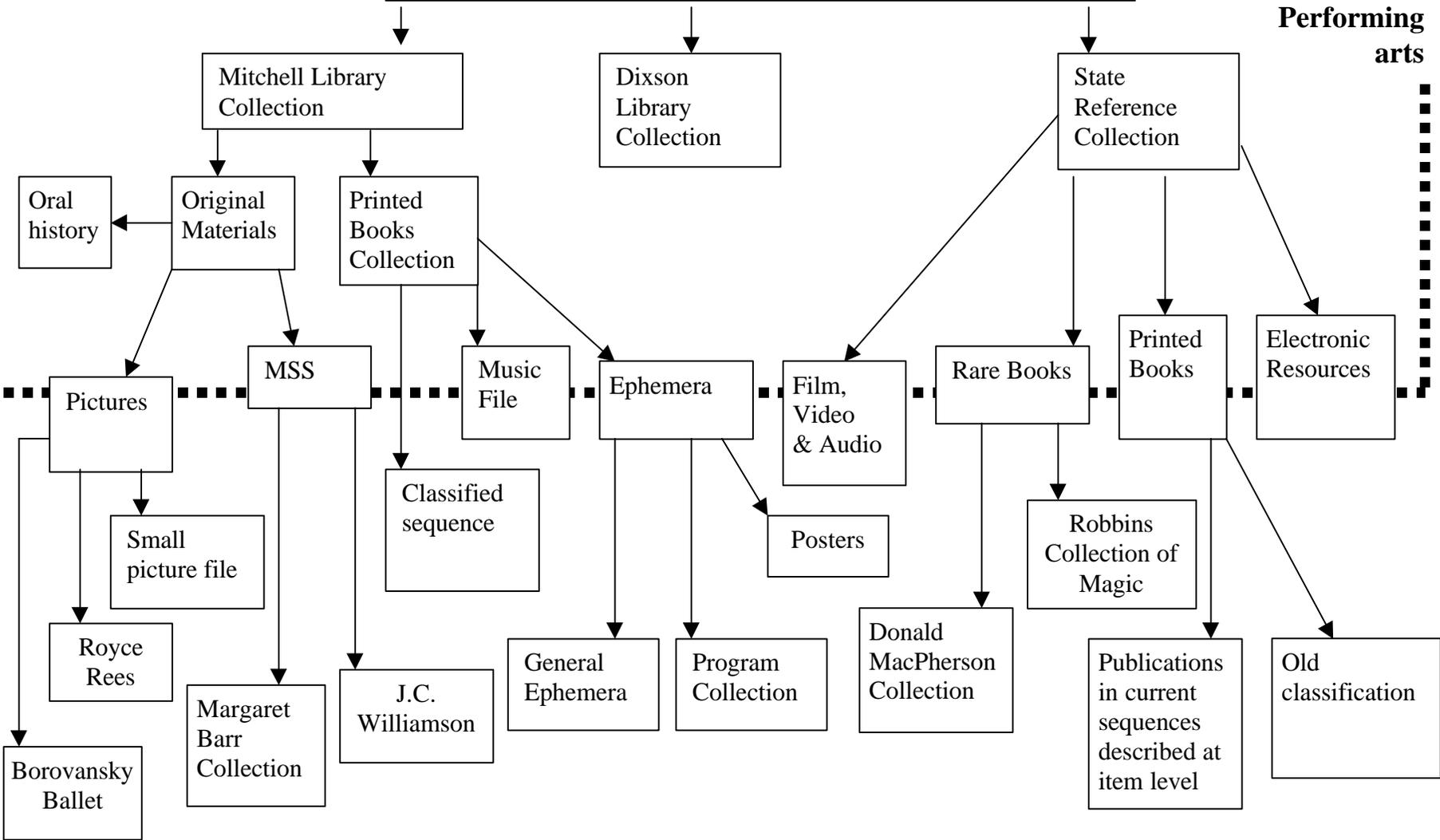
### Framework

The development of a Collection Description model first of all required a framework within which all the Library's collections could be represented and the particular role of Collection Descriptions understood, both in relation to the whole and at item level. The concept of the *information map* is applicable:

*"The information landscape can be seen as a contour map in which there are mountains, hillocks, valleys, plains and plateaus. ...The scholar surveying this landscape is looking for the high points. A high point represents an area where the potential for gleaning desired information by visiting that spot (physically or by remote means) is greater than that of other areas. ... the scholar is concerned at the initial survey to identify areas rather than specific features - to identify rainforest rather than to retrieve an analysis of the canopy fauna of the Amazon basin. ... The task is to devise mapping conventions that enable scholars to read the map of the landscape fruitfully, at the appropriate level of generality or specificity"* (Powell, Heaney & Dempsey 2000).

The framework, or *information map*, of the Library's holdings is represented by the diagram below which shows a hierarchy of separately named and formed collections and sub-collections in a range of formats. Each of the collections consists of many thousands of item-level records and can be subject, format or provenance based.

**State Library of New South Wales Collections**



The concept is familiar to staff but not necessarily to clients who are generally presented with item-level information and little guidance to understand underlying arrangements and relationships of the Library's collections. In many ways our collections are formed for housekeeping reasons - format based, efficient storage - and do not necessarily have meaning for clients. Subjects such as the Performing Arts, indicated by the dotted line, can be seen as cutting across the hierarchy of collections, representing a different slice or profile based on an externally recognised and understood topic, rather than hidden in a Library-based cataloguing approach.

## Standards for Collection Description

The Library has some 'collection-level description' on its website in the form of online exhibitions, guides and *Getting Starteds* to give a few examples. However, these are comparatively unstructured in contrast to the consistent, machine-readable metadata in the item-level descriptions in our catalogues, especially when compared with bibliographic standards such as MARC21. The approach taken in this *Project* was to develop similar structured, machine-readable records for describing collections, based upon an existing standard, to provide online access to subject strengths.

An environmental scan of performing arts collections and web access strategies of other Australian collecting institutions was undertaken. Initiatives in the UK and USA were examined in the search for a suitable standard.

Research revealed several initiatives with suitable standards for 'collection descriptions'. The three main initiatives which are described below are the *Research Support Libraries Programme Collection Description Project*, the *Dublin Core Collection Description Working Group* and *Encoded Archival Description*. Each of these recognises the importance of the concept of 'collection descriptions' in the context of networked information services and the need to complement item-level records and voluminous databases with a more general overview of holdings in specific subject areas. Even where item-level records exist, 'collection descriptions' can provide a gateway to database holdings and link to relevant holdings in other sites.

### Research Support Libraries Programme (RSLP) Collection Description Project

Robinson and Johnston (2003) trace the interest in collection-level description in the UK to -

- "Demand to improve the disclosure of holdings in libraries ... where in many cases, comprehensive description at item-level is not available
- Increasing pressure on library resources and a recognition of the benefits of collaboration and resource sharing between libraries
- Requirement for a user to be able to compare broadly similar entities, not only across libraries but across the information management domains where the nature of 'items' may vary widely
- The development of digital services which seek to deliver integrated access to the descriptions of resources (both physical and digital)".

The *RSLP Collection Description Project* (Powell 2001) is a collaboration between UKOLN and Michael Heaney (Associate Director, Oxford University Library Services Directorate) and is funded by the RSLP with support from the Online Computer Library Center (OCLC).

An entity-relationship model for collections has been developed by Heaney (2000). The model is intended to be applicable to physical and digital collections of all kinds including library, art and museum materials. Heaney defines a collection very broadly as “*an aggregation of items*”.

The *RSLP Collection Description Project* has developed a metadata schema based on Heaney's model. The collection description is made up of linked descriptions of the 'collection', its 'location' and three related agents. The collection descriptions are implemented using the Resource Description Framework (RDF) encoded using Extensible Markup Language (XML). A web-based tool has been developed that allows the construction of RDF descriptions by filling in a web form. There is a detailed set of data entry guidelines and an enumerated list of collection types (Powell 2000) associated with this tool outlined below. Examples of these collections at the State Library are given in brackets after each collection type.

- *Subject* – a collection of material on a particular subject (eg Robbins Collection of Magic)
- *Form* – a collection of materials in the same format (eg Posters)
- *Special* - a collection on a certain subject or period, or gathered for some particular reason (eg Donald MacPherson Collection)
- *Dispersed* – a collection on a single subject not kept together and not referred to by a special name (eg performing arts collection)
- *Virtual* – a collection on a particular subject made available online (eg Federation Ephemera)
- *Working* – a collection brought together for a particular purpose or exhibition which is then disbanded (eg Villas of Darlington)

The RSLP schema is not a replacement for existing detailed collection description formats such as *ISAD(G)*, nor for MARC or Dublin Core “*rather, it should be seen as a schema for making relatively simple high level descriptions in a wide variety of contexts*” (Powell, Heaney & Dempsey 2000).

### **Dublin Core (DC) Collection Description (CD) Working Group**

The *Dublin Core Metadata Initiative* set up a working group to develop a DC-based application profile which can be used for collection-level descriptions. The Group is using the collection description attributes of the RSLP Collection Description (CD) schema as a starting point. In the first instance, DC CD has focused on the properties/attributes of the collection itself. A draft application profile for collection-level description has been developed (Dublin Core Collection Description Working Group 2003) and will be taken to the next meeting of the DC Usage Board.

Interestingly, for the *Jean Garling Project*, which encompasses collections from across the Library, this work by the RSLP and the DC Working Group represents a cross-fertilisation of ideas between the library and archive communities. Of course, collection-level description is not new to the archival community. Several projects and institutions in the UK, the US and Australia have been using Encoded Archival Description as the standard for their descriptions of archival collections.

## Encoded Archival Description (EAD)

EAD is a standard for encoding archival finding aids using either Standardised General Markup Language (SGML) or XML schemas. It is administered and maintained by the Society of American Archivists and the Library of Congress (2003). While EAD was designed for the encoding of hierarchical finding aids to archival collections based on provenance, Rinehart points out “*while archivists emphasise provenance and a hierarchical analysis ...EAD does not enforce these descriptive criteria*” (Rinehart 2001, p. 174).

In the UK, institutions participating in the *Archives Hub*, a national gateway to descriptions of archives in universities and colleges, send EAD-encoded collection descriptions to a central file server at the University of Manchester. There is an online ISAD(G)/EAD template or repositories can create their own EAD files, following the *Archives Hub* guidelines (Archives Hub 2003).

In the USA, the *Online Archive of California* (2003) and more recently the *Museums and the Online Archive of California Project* (2003) have been investigating ways of integrating collections information from museums and archives as well as library special collections, historical societies and other organisations. The EAD standard was chosen for encoding the collection guides which are delivered to a central server where they can be searched by researchers and others wanting access to content across institutional and community boundaries.

The State Library of NSW had some practical experience of EAD through its participation in the *Australian Literary Manuscript Collections Project* (2000) - the first significant collaborative application of EAD in Australia. The Library contributed 15 finding aids in EAD format to the *Guide to Australian Literary Manuscripts* - a web service which provides access to the contents of 86 collections of Australian literary manuscripts. Six Australian libraries, led by the University of Western Australia, collaborated to build this national database of finding aids. Guidelines for the retrospective conversion of finding aids into EAD were developed for the project (Burrows 2000).

Other leading Australian cultural institutions have adopted EAD, notably the Australian War Memorial for its private records and ephemera collections. The National Library of Australia is also using EAD and plans to convert its existing finding aids to EAD-encoded XML. According to Dack (2002, p. 60), the “*National Library is committed to the conversion of its manuscript finding aids to Encoded Archival Description and to the deployment of this standard as a key component of the national information infrastructure*”.

## Choice of EAD

After examining the various approaches, the *Jean Garling Performing Arts Project* chose EAD as the standard for its collection descriptions. EAD was chosen because it is a scalable, well-established, open standard and the expertise existed within the Library. Other Australian institutions were also well advanced in their application of EAD to manuscript finding aids. This *Project's* application represents an innovative use of EAD, which was primarily designed for encoding hierarchical archival finding aids. In the *Garling Project*, EAD is used for a dispersed collection, consisting of many formats related by subject rather than provenance. EAD was also chosen for its flexibility. Its descriptive elements are available at all levels, facilitating detailed collection-level description as well as detailed description of items within a collection. It is also hospitable to embedded links to external files and objects, such as related guides and records, as well as digital images.

## Collection Guide to Dance Prototype

The next stage of the *Project* involved creating a prototype using the subject Dance in order to see the application of EAD to a collection strength.

### Survey

The first task involved surveying the Library's Dance collections to provide content for the collection guide. A small team identified our holdings on dance in Australia, as well as significant individual items across all formats. The survey also documented existing modes of access and flagged important collections for which manual records only existed. It gathered information on the condition and preservation status of material, identifying items requiring treatment. Potential areas for acquisition to address gaps in existing holdings were revealed and recommendations made for processing priorities for existing material.

Significant items, including manuscripts, photographs, drawings, posters and ephemera relating to dance were identified and digitised. They covered a range of formats, time periods and styles of dance. 170 images were digitised, 70 pages of text transcribed and 64 links to images created in catalogue records. The digital images were also used to illustrate the 'collection description' through hypertext links to digitised highlights.

The survey confirmed that the Library has a significant Dance collection with particular emphasis on social dance and dance as popular entertainment in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The main strength is in unique materials – manuscripts, photographs, and early runs of theatre and performing arts journals and programs. The challenge for the *Project* was to improve access to these holdings without embarking on a costly retro-conversion process.

### Creating the Prototype

Information from the survey was used to create a *Collection Guide to Dance*. Content for the collection description was informed by the DC metadata for collection-level description, which had used as its starting point the RSLP CD schema. The *Guide* presents highlights and material relating to dance in different formats, while providing subject information supplemented by a selection of digital images with descriptive text and links to relevant records in the Library's databases and to related websites.

The EAD tags used in the encoding of the *Collection Guide to Dance* can be seen in the table below. Guidelines for EAD developed by the *Australian Literary Manuscript Collections Project* (Burrows 2000) and the *Research Libraries Group (RLG) EAD Advisory Group* (2002) were followed as closely as possible. Using EAD for a multi-provenance, subject-based, dispersed collection rather than a hierarchical, single-provenance archival finding aid means that some tags are not appropriate, even though they are considered essential for archival description in the Guidelines mentioned above. For example, the elements <origination>, <unitid>, <extent> and <bioghist> in the highest-level <did> were not used in the *Collection Guide to Dance*. This demonstrates the flexibility of the EAD DTD, which does not require these elements for valid XML.

Main EAD tags used in <i>Collection Guide to Dance</i> (in order)	Application in <i>Collection Guide to Dance</i> (CG)	ISAD(G)v2	MARC 21	DC
<ead>				
<eadheader>				
<eadid>	Uniquely identifies the EAD-encoded CG	3.1.1 Reference code(s)	856\$u	Identifier
<filedesc>				
<titlestmt>				
<titleproper>	The formal title of the CG		245\$a	Title
<author>	The person responsible for the intellectual content of the CG		245\$c	Creator; Contributor
<publicationstmt>				
<publisher>			260\$b	Publisher
<date>			260\$c	Date
<address>				
<profiledesc>				
<creation>	The person responsible for the encoding of the CG		500	
<date>	Date of initial encoding into EAD			
<language>	The language in which the CG is written			
<language>				
<revisiondesc>				
<change>			583	
<item>				
<date>				
<frontmatter>	Prefatory text for the CG			
<titlepage>				
<titleproper>				
<publisher>				
<date>				
<sponsor>	Source of funding for the project			
<archdesc>	level="collection"	3.1.4 Level of description		
<did>				
<unittitle>	The name of the collection	3.1.2 Title	245\$a	Title
<unitdate>	Date range of creation	3.1.3 Dates	260\$c	Coverage (Temporal); Date
<repository>			852	
<physloc>			852	
<physdesc>		3.1.5 Extent and medium of the unit	300	Format
<langmaterial>	The language of the materials in the collection	3.4.3 Language / scripts of material	546	Language
<language>			041	
<abstract>			520	Description

<b>Main EAD tags used in <i>Collection Guide to Dance (in order)</i></b>	<b>Application in <i>Collection Guide to Dance (CG)</i></b>	<b>ISAD(G)v2</b>	<b>MARC 21</b>	<b>DC</b>
<scopecontent>	A free-text summary that describes the scope and content of the collection including an indication of its strength(s)	3.3.1 Scope and content	520	Description
<dsc>	type="combined"			
<c01>	level="series" Each format is treated as a series	3.1.4 Level of description		
<did>				
<unittitle>	The title of the series i.e. the name of the format			
<scopecontent>		3.3.1 Scope and content	520	Description
<c02>	level="subseries" or "item" Used to highlight subseries or items within each format	3.1.4 Level of description		
<did>				
<origination>	Used when applicable, i.e. when a single creator is responsible for a subseries or item	3.2.1 Name of creator	100, (persname) 110, (corpname)	Creator
<unitid>	Used when applicable, i.e. when a subseries or item has a unique call number	3.1.1 Reference code(s)	050, 090, 099	Identifier
<unittitle>		3.1.2 Title	245\$a	Title
<unitdate>	Used when available	3.1.3 Dates	245\$f	Coverage (Temporal); Date
<scopecontent>		3.3.1 Scope and content	520	Description
<descgrp>				
<accruals>	Information about anticipated additions to the collection	3.3.3 Accruals	584	
<acqinfo>	How the collection was acquired	3.2.4 Immediate source of acquisition	541	
<accessrestrict>	Conditions that affect the availability of the collection	3.4.1 Conditions governing access	506	
<userrestrict>	Conditions that affect use of the collection after access has been granted	3.4.2 Conditions governing reproduction	540	
<controlaccess>				
<subject>			650	Subject
<persname>			600, 700	
<corpname>			610, 710	

## Tools

Version 2002 of the EAD Document Type Definition (DTD), released in December 2002 (Encoded Archival Description 2003), was used for the *Project*.

A simple text editor, NoteTab Pro, was used to create XML files in EAD format. The XML file was then parsed and validated against the EAD DTD using an XML validator. A series of Extensible Style Language (XSL) style sheets were created to process the XML file to produce a static HTML version of the collection description, generated using Saxon, the open source Extensible Style Language Transformation (XSLT) processor (Kay 2003). The documents and software reside as a stand-alone system on a desktop and the HTML file is loaded to a server where it is accessible from the Library's website. The software packages used to parse and validate the files and to generate the HTML are available via the Internet.

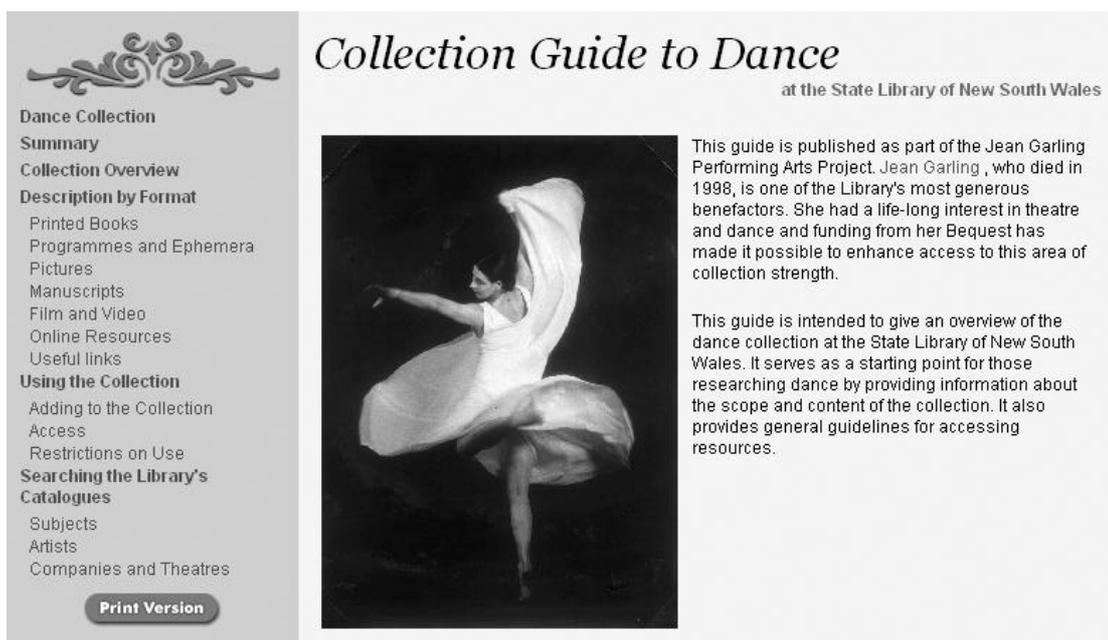
## Outputs

Until the Library invests in an XML-based content management system for its website, the *Guide* will be presented as an HTML document, without the full benefits of the searchability that the XML encoding can ultimately provide. However, the existing site search provides keyword searching of all text. A web content management system would also store and generate HTML on the fly from XML files.

Currently, the *Guide* may be accessed in three ways:

1. through a link from the MARC record for the collection via the catalogue/s. It is planned to use a new product, XML Harvester, under development by the Library's integrated library management system vendor, Innovative Interface, to add bibliographic records for the collection guide(s) to our online catalogue - WEBCAT.
2. via search engines such as Google or the local Verity site search.
3. through a link from pages on our website that list significant collections by subject strength. A new heading, *Collection Guides*, was created within the *Guides* section under *Find* (State Library of New South Wales 2003).

[www.sl.nsw.gov.au/collguides/dance/](http://www.sl.nsw.gov.au/collguides/dance/)



**Collection Guide to Dance**  
at the State Library of New South Wales

**Dance Collection**  
Summary  
Collection Overview  
Description by Format  
Printed Books  
Programmes and Ephemera  
Pictures  
Manuscripts  
Film and Video  
Online Resources  
Useful links  
Using the Collection  
Adding to the Collection  
Access  
Restrictions on Use  
Searching the Library's Catalogues  
Subjects  
Artists  
Companies and Theatres

**Print Version**



This guide is published as part of the Jean Garling Performing Arts Project. Jean Garling, who died in 1998, is one of the Library's most generous benefactors. She had a life-long interest in theatre and dance and funding from her Bequest has made it possible to enhance access to this area of collection strength.

This guide is intended to give an overview of the dance collection at the State Library of New South Wales. It serves as a starting point for those researching dance by providing information about the scope and content of the collection. It also provides general guidelines for accessing resources.

## Challenges and Plans

A number of issues and challenges have been identified through the *Project*. Firstly, the introduction of a new entity (the *Collection Guide to Dance*) raised questions about the relationships that Collection Descriptions have to other parts of the Library's website and resource discovery tools. Existing collection descriptions include subject-based *Getting Starteds*, manuscript collection guides, online exhibitions, descriptions in the collection development policy and topic-based pathfinders. More importantly, do the new collection guides easily convey their function to the user? Will users be able to easily distinguish the function of various items on a similar subject? For example, what is the distinction between a sports collection guide, a digital sports collection and a sports exhibition site to our users and how do we represent this? If we are to provide our clients with logical and intuitive access to our resources, the relationships between these resources need to be defined and clearly represented. To address this issue and to inform the redevelopment of the Library's website that will occur as part of the implementation of a content management system in late 2003, staff are now working on establishing a set of guidelines and a structure for multiple pathways and their relationships – the *information map* referred to earlier (Powell, Heaney & Dempsey 2000).

Secondly, a formal evaluation of the usefulness to clients of the model developed and applied to the *Collection Guide to Dance* will be carried out. It is likely that this will be undertaken when more Guides are created, in order to provide a body of work for consideration. To date, there has been client input through consultation and evaluation by several experts in the field of dance and significant input from Information Services staff to content and structure.

The process used in the survey of the Library's Dance collections to provide content for the collection guide will be streamlined when creating future Collection Descriptions. However, there was an unintended benefit from the survey, which was carried out by staff with an interest in, and knowledge of, the Dance holdings. The subsequent publication of the *Guide to Dance* proved an excellent mechanism to capture the subject knowledge that staff have developed over many years and make it available to all. With much of the Library's subject expertise residing in baby boomers due for retirement in the next 5 to 10 years, the Project may have an even more critical role in preserving that knowledge for future generations. Further collection guides will be produced by baby boomer subject experts such as the architecture guide, which is now under way. Just as it is the mandate of the State Library to preserve the collections for future researchers, a Collection Description model may enable the preservation of context and knowledge, as well as achieving the initial goal of improving access – separating the woods from the trees and even stimulating new growth.

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