The print collections of the Australian War Memorial and Imperial War Museum: examining the relationship between collection and institution
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Theatrette, Sir Roland Wilson Building, Bld #120, McCoy Circuit, Canberra

As national institutions, war museums in Australian and the United Kingdom display collections with a view to presenting national histories of these countries at war to a general public. However, their art collections contain pieces that are varied in subject matter and sometimes controversial or contradictory with the museum's stance on history and conflict. My project aims to interrogate the relationship between museum and collection using two collections as comparison case studies: the fine art print collections of the Imperial War Museum in London and the Australian War Memorial in Canberra. I approach this topic asking to what extent institutional remits steer collections or individual museum staff personalities influence the composition of collections, and to what extent collections are formed serendipitously or due to the materiality of the objects or the broader social context of these objects? I apply a material culture studies reading to the collections, and in this way I read across the objects to form a picture of a collection and its fit within the museum, in order to aid analysis of the various influences on the collection and the reasons for them, and the collection's role in the institution.

I am finding that collections are not just acted on by museums, but museums may be shaped and influenced by the collections that evolve within them. This research will contribute to academic and curatorial knowledge about the role that art collections play in national history museums, an area of inquiry that is attracting attention in the field of Museum Studies.

Alexandra Walton completed her Bachelor of Art History and Curatorship with Honours at the Australian National University in 2007, and then worked as an assistant curator in the Australian Prints and Drawings Department of the National Gallery of Australia, and subsequently in the Art Section of the Australian War Memorial. The current research topic reflects her on-going interest in printmaking and curatorship, along with a new interest in Museum Studies. Alexandra returned from a four month fieldwork trip to the Imperial War Museum, London in January this year.

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All welcome

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