

Values and Collections / Collections and Values: Towards an online tool for collection value assessment

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Although value and significance assessments are gradually becoming common in the museum field, they are labour intensive and organisationally demanding activities for collection managers and institutions. As a result, they are often perceived as unfeasible and postponed indefinitely. Nevertheless such assessments are vital to ensure proper collection management today and in the future. In the case of image and audiovisual collections, assessments are often even more complex due to the vast number and complex nature of the documents.

Based on a study of the most commonly used value criteria in the built heritage, archival and museum field, a conceptual framework for collection value assessment was created and translated into an online tool. The creation of this tool and the fine-tuning of the methodology provides a first step in mapping the rationale behind collection management in a structured way and to visualise the shifts in value that (image) collections undergo.

Introduction

Managing collections, whether they are small, prestigious, large or priceless is a constant decision-making process. We decide upon which objects to put on display, which ones to prioritize for digitisation and which objects to deaccession. We use our expertise to analyse the risks to our collections and to safeguard them for future generations. When making risk assessments we are guided by the value we attribute to the objects in our collections. Whether we are conscious of it or not, this value judgment will often play a determining role in our discussions. Although this rationale is quite often an organic process, to justify collection management plans it is nonetheless important to push the analysis further and identify clearly the type of values on which we base our decisions.

'Value has always been the reason underlying heritage conservation.'¹ If we consider an object to have value we select it for preservation and safeguard it in a museum for future generations. As such it is evident to investigate this notion of 'value' further. Nonetheless, it is important to identify not only the value and significance of a collection but also to whom it matters. Since the late 1990s there has been an increasing interest in carrying out value and significance assessments of cultural heritage. Since the first publications,² many methodologies and schemes have been developed for the analysis of the value and significance of sites and collections. Today, assessing values is widely understood as

¹Mason 2002, p. 7.

²The National Archives and Records Service 1982, Michalski 1992, Menne-Haritz & Brubach 1996, Ashley-Smith 1999, Avrami & Mason 2000.

an essential component in conservation planning and plays an important part in the management of cultural heritage. However methodologically, such assessments are fraught with difficulties.³

The purpose of value and significance assessments

Value and significance assessments are primarily used to formally establish the cultural significance of what is currently considered to be 'heritage'.⁴ However, and perhaps more important from the collection managers' point of view, such analyses can also be used to supply the necessary arguments for preservation planning as well as providing information about diverse collections. Value and significance assessment has become a common practice, especially in the archival field, for (de)accessioning items, establishing priorities for conservation and digitization, etc.⁵ Likewise, in the built heritage field the method is used to identify the best conservation methodologies in relation to the specific significance of a site or ensemble. Although perhaps less apparent in museums, 'value' often is a core concept in the activities related to their mission.⁶ Exhibitions exploit the value of collections, conservation treatments safeguard their value while research enhances their value. Identifying the value of an object is essential in the identification and mitigation of the risks to which the collection is vulnerable.⁷ This is done through risk assessment.

Valued pioneers and predecessors

One of the first major studies in the area of value and significance assessment in the cultural heritage field was undertaken by the *Getty Conservation Institute* in the late 1990s. Although 'Assessing the Values of Cultural Heritage' remains a key publication, there have been many attempts to create schemes and methodologies since 2001. One of the most important ones is 'Significance', issued by *The Collections Council of Australia* in 2001 and 2009.⁸ This method is used primarily to state the significance of an item or collection and consists of five main steps. The starting point is the item or collection, which are researched in terms of their history, provenance and context and compared with similar items. The research takes into account four primary criteria: 'historic, artistic or aesthetic, scientific or research potential and social or spiritual' and four comparative criteria that act as modifiers of the main criteria: 'provenance, rarity or representativeness, condition or completeness and interpretive capacity'. The result is a summary of the objects' meanings and values in a statement of significance. In 2013 the Dutch *Rijksdienst voor Cultureel Erfgoed (RCE)* published 'Op de museale weegschaal', a methodology primarily aimed at museums.⁹ In this approach, the starting point of the analysis is not so much the object or the collection itself, but the institutional context. Central to the analysis are two questions – 'Why is a value assessment performed and which purpose does it serve?' and 'Which criteria are researched and how are they evaluated' – that are asked before analysing the collection or items. The method is based on a framework of criteria created according to a specific context and purpose, and only after this is a collection or item is analysed accordingly.

³Mason 2002, pp. 5-6.

⁴De la Torre 2002.

⁵The National Archives and Records Service 1982, Menne-Haritz & Brubach 1996, Beentjes 2011.

⁶Versloot 2013, p.9.

⁷Ashley-Smith 1999, p. 175-182, Meul 2008.

⁸Russel & Winkworth 2010.

⁹Versloot 2013.

Image collections

Since the establishment of photography in the 19th century, image collections have been created on a large scale and have largely contributed to our current culture. Today image collections are omnipresent in various kinds of institutions. Whether considered as documents or as heritage objects in their own right, they represent a specific value. Nowadays we find ourselves often confronted with so-called legacy collections of photographs, negatives, slides, digital files, etc.. These have often undergone a disconnection between their initial use and current status. Nonetheless, they act as visual testimonies to the past and thus also represent a certain importance and value to be preserved for the future.

Given their vast size, unstable physical nature and ambiguous status, image collections require different approaches and methods than more 'traditional' museum collections. Identifying the value of an image or image collection is complicated. Firstly, unlike other cultural objects, the photographic object is highly complex: as well as its positive/negative facet, it can easily be reproduced, resulting in several 'originals' and copies. Likewise, the image content and the material manifestation of the photograph can in many institutional contexts be treated as two separate concepts. Secondly, the status of image collections is often unclear or ambiguous. Despite this, the identification of the value of photographic collections is highly dependent on the status they are given within a specific context and use. For example, the initial purpose of most historic images was documentary. Nowadays, they are more often considered as heritage themselves for their intrinsic value, surpassing their initial usage. This shift in status is problematic as it redefines the value of the photographic object/image and complicates management even further.

Because of these complexities the identification of values and their components (even on a collection level) proves to be a mental stumbling block for most collection managers. As a result value assessment of image collections is often put on hold and the huge potential value of these images is either never identified or even lost.

Value assessment for image collections

Based on an extensive study of the existing literature, the criteria and methodologies that play a role in the identification of value of images were compiled. Overall the same concepts such as historical, social, cultural values, etc. are used. Next to these main criteria, most methodologies also use so-called comparative criteria, such as uniqueness, ensemble quality and state of conservation.¹⁰ However these concepts are mostly only vaguely defined, which makes them difficult to use. In the archival field the notion 'intrinsic value' is often used to describe the external formal features of items. Intrinsic value is ascribed to 'permanently valuable records that have qualities and characteristics that make the records in their original physical form the only acceptable form for preservation'.¹¹ In the same way that archives make a distinction between intrinsic and informational value, a similar differentiation can be made between the image content and the photographic object itself. For instance a photograph can have an important historic value as far as the image is concerned, but when we consider the photographic support as an independent entity, the historic importance might be valued less. Likewise an uninteresting image might have a historically significant type of support. Furthermore some repositories will tend to focus on the image content while others will give equal importance to both the material and image related components of a photograph. For some collections much of the value is represented by the physical artefacts, whereas for others, for

¹⁰Russel & Winkworth 2010, Versloot 2013, Reed 2012.

¹¹The National Archives and Records Service 1982, Menne-Haritz and Brubach 1996.

instance image collections, this might be the other way around. As such a proper analysis of the value of a photographic object should allow for such detailed differentiation.

A second observation from our literature study is that most of the currently used methodologies in the museum field rely on so-called statements of significance. Such statements are in most cases labour intensive and as a result value and significance assessment for large and complex collections is often considered organisationally demanding. Moreover, the relative value and importance of our collections are subjected to many shifts that are both time and context dependent.¹² Many image collections have undergone a change in use since their creation. At the same time our view on heritage and what falls within the scope of this definition has changed. As a result the significance and the value of the collections and objects in our care also change. It is thus fundamental to map and offer a tool to better understand these changes.

Furthermore, assessing the value of a collection is a complex discussion and experts often have difficulties in reaching a consensus. In most cases there are many justifications as to why something has value, but these are formulated from different viewpoints and there is no common basis or method for comparing the various assertions.

There is thus a need for a consistent methodology which can be used in the different contexts of photographic collections. This should respect institutional traditions as well as taking into account the unique and specific elements which define image collections. Likewise there is an overall need for more specific definitions of the value criteria, for example how historical value can be assessed for photographs.

Value to assess!

When we assess the value of our collections we have a specific goal in mind: to know which items represent the highest value for the repository. These collections or objects are thus considered to be the most important ones and are prioritised in the collection management plan, for conservation, etc. Moreover, identifying the value distribution of the different collections and objects for the repository is essential to assess risk in terms of expected loss.¹³

The proposed methodology relies on the creation of a value pie representing the relative value of each collection or item for the repository. In such a pie chart each of the slices represent different (sub)collections or objects. The size of each slice is dependent on the attributed value and corresponds to the part of the total collection value of the objects or (sub)collection it represents.¹⁴ The principle of the method is also to visualize to which degree A is more important than B and why, whilst enabling a detailed analysis.

The methodology is subdivided into four phases: a first preparation step, two assessment steps and a final report phase.

0. Context identification

Before starting the assessment it is imperative to properly define the context of the collection and the repository's expectations towards the collection. For this three fundamental questions are asked:

- **WHO?** What is the mission mandate of the repository and how does this relate to the collection?

¹²Eastop, Bülow & Brokerhof 2012, Racine et al. 2009.

¹³Michalski & Pendersoli 2011, pp. 31-33.

¹⁴Michalski & Pendersoli 2011, p. 31.

- **WHY?** In which way is the collection important for the repository? What is the role of the collection? Is it primarily an archival collection? Is it still actively used? Is there an active use foreseen in the future within the institution's mandate?
- **HOW?** Has the repository the (legal) means to preserve the collection? Should the repository conserve the collection?

When defining the context of the assessment and the collection, the available information plays an important role in the outcome of the analysis. As such it is important that mission statements, policies, mandates, an overview of the collection and its contents, its use, etc. are accessible. Quite often the mission mandate of the institution does not fully overlap with the personal feelings of the experts assessing the collection and as such there is a risk that the assessment will not correspond with the institutional mission of the repository. Likewise it is significant to establish who will assess the collection and to state why these experts were chosen.

1. The components: selection – weighting – scaling

The first step in the methodology is to define the different value criteria in accordance with the information compiled in the preparatory phase. As well as selecting which components to use, the user is also asked to rank these according to their importance for the repository.

Table 1: Definition of the different rankings of the assessment criteria	
Not important	This criterion is not mentioned or supported in the mission mandate of the repository and does not have an impact on any of the activities of the institute.
Slightly important	This criterion has a moderate impact on some of the activities of the institute.
Moderately important	This criterion is in some way (but not formally) supported by the mission mandate of the repository and has an impact on some of the activities of the institute.
Important	This criterion is supported by the mission mandate of the repository and has an impact on the mission of the institute.
Very important	This criterion is central to the mission mandate of the repository and has an impact on the daily operation of the institute.

For instance a photo museum might find the aesthetical component to be equally important to the research value, whilst this might differ for a library. The principle of the proposed method is that all the components together represent 100% of the potential value of the collection. When assigning a weight to each of the criteria, the user defines how much of the total value is represented by each criterion.

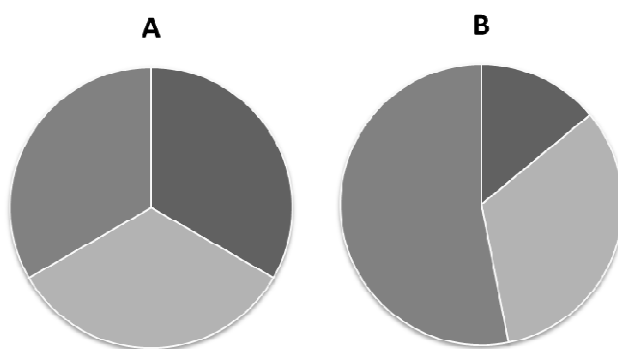


Fig. 1: Pie chart representing the relative importance of each selected criterion for the repository. A: The three criteria having a different weight for the repository (slightly important - moderately important - very important). B: The three criteria are equally important.

Thirdly, for each of the components evaluation scales are defined. A proper description is vital in order to establish what 'high' and 'low' value exactly mean.

Table 2: Overview of the scales per component	
Very high value	Twice as valuable as 'High value' and 100 times more than 'Low value'
High value	Five times more valuable than 'Moderate value' and 50 times more than 'Low value'
Moderate value	Ten times more valuable than 'Low value'
Low value	Ten times less valuable than 'Moderate value' and 100 times less valuable than 'Very high value'
No value	

2. Assessment of the (sub)collections or objects

Once the framework for the assessment has been created in step 1, each of the collections or items can be assessed in step 2. Here the user analyses to which extent the collection matches with the criteria defined in the previous step.

The criteria

Next to defining the methodology, we also needed to draw up the various criteria applicable to image collections, as well as defining them. Based on our research we were able to identify 89 possible components which were divided into three main groups:

- **Characteristics:** Most of these criteria are closely related to the nature of the photographic object and facilitate judgments in terms of the technical quality and state of conservation of the collection. These include the quality of the collection, its uniqueness or rarity and an evaluation of the collection's context (provenance, ensemble value, etc.).
- **Use values:** This second group discusses the use values of the collection. Subdivided into six categories, it analyses the research value of both the image and photographic object, the legal elements tied to the photograph, its informational value, its frequency of use, the current institutional use and the stakeholders on which the collection has a potential impact.
- **Heritage values:** This third category discusses the heritage value of the collection. The main criteria of this group are historical, socio-cultural, ecological, aesthetic and more specific photo-historical values.

Each of the three groups has several main criteria that are further divided into subcriteria to allow a detailed analysis. For example historical value has 'age', 'representativeness' and 'associational values with specific topics such as place, subject and theme' as subcriteria.

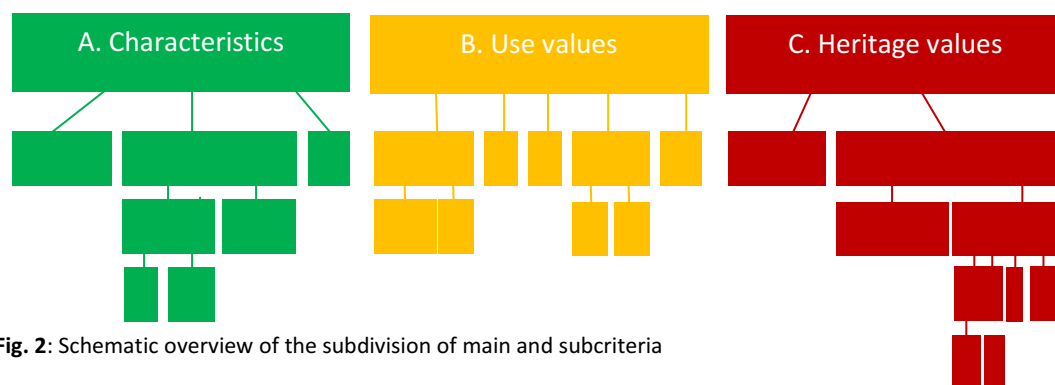


Fig. 2: Schematic overview of the subdivision of main and subcriteria

iCAT: Image Collections Assessment Tool

The main goal of the creation of the online Image Collections Assessment Tool (iCAT) was to condense all the detailed methodology and the 89 possible assessment components into a user-friendly platform, whilst making it possible to see the results immediately.

The website (<http://valuetool.kikirpa.be/>) is subdivided into two main parts: a publicly accessible part where the methodology and setup of the tool is explained, and a private part where the user can use the methodology to assess his collections. In a first step iCAT allows you to select various (sub)criteria and to assign a specific weight to each of them. Each component is described and an example is also provided. In step 2 the user can describe one or more collections and assess them according to the assessment framework defined in step 1. Here we use defined categories stating what is high, moderate and low value. Likewise we allow the user to submit free text in the comments field to explain why they have selected a specific score. Based on the answers provided in steps 1 and 2, the system automatically generates a report visualising the different components and their relative importance, as well as the feedback of the respondents. As an aid to visualisation, we also incorporated boxplots where, for example, the user can see whether there is a consensus about a specific collection, whether collection A is much more important than collection B, or if the difference in importance between collections is much more subtle.

We also wanted workings of the tool to be transparent, so we included the whole creation process into the website. This allows users to learn why we developed the tool in such a way and to better understand the rationale behind it.

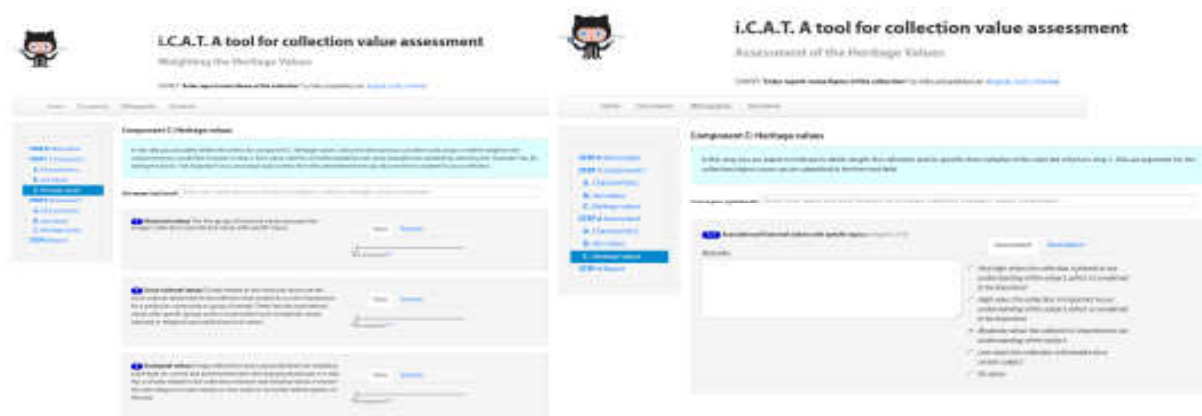


Fig. 3: iCAT: screenshots of step 1 and 2

Towards a user-friendly and popular iCAT

The development of the tool started in December 2013 with the creation of a prototype to translate the proposed methodology into scripts and formulas. At this point we also incorporated the 89 value criteria as well as their description. After the first feedback sessions we decided that it was necessary to define in more detail what ‘important’ and ‘high’ and ‘low’ means. Also, many of our users wanted to incorporate and visualise more variables such as an identification of the users assessing the collections as well as the weights and collection scores assigned by each expert.

Based on this feedback a first version of the tool was developed after which we decided to organise a one-day workshop to live test the tool. Several users representing different contexts, such as museums, libraries, archives, etc. were invited to work with the tool and to provide us with some technical and conceptual feedback. The first comments included a general request to elaborate more on the preliminary or preparation phase. We therefore decided to expand the tool with a full preparation step 0 where we explain to the user step by step what types of information to gather

together, how to identify and consult the various stakeholders and how to moderate the 'value debate' within their institution. Users also wished the tool to be visually simplified; although it should contain more data, it should display less information.

Conclusion

We have fine-tuned the methodology and redefined the functionalities of our image collection assessment tool according to our users' experiences. Although much improvement and development is still needed to make iCAT widely usable, we are convinced that the tool will become a valuable instrument for collection managers dealing with image collections. One of the main advantages is that iCAT visualises how we think about our collections and allows us to objectively explain why we prioritize A over B. Likewise it offers a means to allow future generations an informed insight in our current decisions. Furthermore, offering the tool to different contexts provides them with a common language. As such discussing value becomes a way of actively adding value to collections and enables us to think outside our institutional boxes.

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