



Australia's librarians are a vital component of our research institutions. Shutterstock

A library without librarians is just a shed full of books

Published: December 14, 2016 2.22pm AEDT

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For some years we have been researching the how, why and wherefore of exhibitions of Australian art. We have tracked down retired curators and art museum directors, recording their memories before they fade.

We have crossed the country to see exhibitions. But most of the time we have been buried in archives and libraries. While large public libraries are excellent for general research, those small specialist libraries attached to state and national art museums are our essential tools of trade.

With the exception of the Edmund and Joanna Capon Research Library at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, these libraries are by appointment only. All the meticulously researched exhibitions of Australian and international art depend on their museum libraries – they track down works of art and tease out ideas from distant publications.

These libraries are our treasure trove. The Art Gallery of New South Wales press cuttings book goes back to the 1890s. There are international art journals dating from the 1890s, invitations to every imaginable exhibition, annual reports from the most unlikely places – as well as transcripts of scandalous court cases.

Most art museum libraries hold material associated with their own collections and exhibitions. Two institutions, however, have made their libraries international research hubs. At the Art Gallery of New South Wales, a succession of librarians have collected archives from Australian artists, curators and institutional records. The renamed National Art Archive is central to the proposed Sydney Modern Project.

For many years its secret weapon has been the head librarian, Steven Miller, the author of scholarly books and erudite blog posts while the visual resources librarian, Eric Riddler, has an uncanny ability to track down obscure archival photographs and identify the protagonists.

At the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra, James Mollison, its first Director, knew that an outstanding research library was an essential tool in positioning the gallery as an international leader. He acted accordingly in funding the library. When he was a young education officer at the National Gallery of Victoria, he had access to the specialist records that have been expanded into the Shaw Research Library, presided over by the ever helpful Luke Doyle.



The National Gallery of Australia: its library is now open only four days a week. Robert Montgomery/Flickr, CC BY

Thanks to Mollison's foresight, for almost 40 years the catalogues, books and archives at the National Gallery of Australia have been the envy of those who don't live in the city. The monetary value is A\$37 million, but the worth is much more.

The Chief librarian, Joye Volker, and the senior librarian, Helen Hyland, are both well-known to interstate and international visitors who have benefited from their detailed knowledge of the collections. Their assistance to researchers has extended to sending digital versions of archives meticulously recorded over many years.

The retired Betty Churcher wrote most of her book, *Australian Notebooks* (2014), in the library, while Sasha Grishin's *Australian Art: a History* (2014) says of Joye Volker and her staff: "It would not have been possible to complete this book without their assistance."

When the Federal Government announced in September it was eliminating 63 positions from national cultural organisations, both Volker and Hyland were "let go". With the "natural attrition" from other staff, this means the National Gallery library is now only open four days a week. Tough times mean hard decisions.

But libraries without librarians are just storerooms. Specialist librarians can make apparently tangential leaps and suddenly produce a raft of documents that give answers to questions the researcher is yet to ask.

As well as hard copy resources, when we visited Queensland's Gallery of Modern Art Research Library Jacklyn Young and Cathy Pemble-Smith gave ready access to digital files and data bases. Specialist research librarians save months of time for hard pressed academic researchers and curators.

At the Art Gallery of South Australia Jin Whittington is surely one of the state's living treasures with her specialist knowledge and generous spirit, answering constant queries on the finer details of the archive and library. Specialist librarians and archivists are crucial for primary research.

At the recent Art Association of Australia and New Zealand annual conference, the subterranean topic of conversation was the very future of the National Gallery's library. Budget cuts may lead to its holdings being transferred to the equally under-resourced National Library.

Anthony White, president of the association, which represents art historians, curators and artists, said:

The art-specific knowledge that art librarians provide, as well as their unique expertise in advanced research skills, are indispensable for those historians, critics and curators who are opening new avenues in thinking about global visual cultures that speak to contemporary concerns.

This sorry tale is not unique to art, or even to Canberra. It is a part of the inevitable consequences of a succession of "efficiency dividends" by the Commonwealth Government which is placing public institutions on a diet akin to anorexia.