A 150-year collecting history

An art collection can represent an institution’s history; a collection is shaped by the tastes, values and agency of individuals and groups over time. Just as artists are frequently championed as the commentators of an age, so too can art collections reflect social and political as well as personal histories.

Despite its size (over 25 000 items), the University of Melbourne Art Collection is not encyclopaedic; it does not seek to present an unbroken narrative of the history of art. Instead it tells multiple stories of research, teaching, acquisition, commission and benefaction—stories that are often human in their scale.

The University of Melbourne Art Collection is a collection of collections. Throughout its 150-year history, the university has received many significant bequests of private collections and artists’ studio collections as well as individual artworks. These singular collections range in scale and scope, comprising canonical as well as more idiosyncratic artworks reflecting the passions, personalities and expertise of collectors. Key collections include the Russell and Mab Grimwade Collection, the Leonhard Adam Collection of International Indigenous Culture, the Collection of Dr Samuel Arthur Ewing, the Classics and Archaeology Collection, the Gerard Herbst Poster Collection and significant representations of work by Australian artists Rupert Bunny, Ludwig Hirschfeld Mack, Hugh Ramsay, Edith Alsop and Norman Lindsay.

Teaching programs have informed the collecting practices of individual departments (the Madhubani drawings from North India displayed on level two are a brilliant example). Similarly, works by artists who have taught and studied at the university have been acquired and donated. Several key figures within the university’s history have established trusts which provide for the ongoing care of the collection.

This exhibition is a celebration of the university’s acknowledgement of the importance of visual art to the quality of our lived experience. Its commitment to this ideal has given rise to a distinctive and significant collection. Besides offering an opportunity to reconnect with some of the collection’s special highlights, we hope that this presentation will also serve as a point of departure for each viewer’s open-ended journey of engagement with the collection.