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# CUNNINGHAM DAX COLLECTION



22993 Decorated Jacket C Dax  
Collection CDC



22993 Chunder and Spew C Dax  
Collection CDC

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## Location

KENNETH MYER BUILDING, THE UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE, 30 ROYAL PARADE PARKVILLE,  
MELBOURNE CITY

## Municipality

MELBOURNE CITY

## Level of significance

Registered

## Victorian Heritage Register (VHR) Number

H2201

## VHR Registration

March 12, 2009

## Heritage Listing

Victorian Heritage Register

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## Statement of Significance

Last updated on -

### *What is Significant?*

Named after the psychiatrist Dr Eric Cunningham Dax (1908-2008), the Cunningham Dax Collection comprises some 12 000 art works created by people who have experienced mental health issues. The Collection also includes some archival material such as photographs, documents, and records associated with the history of psychiatric services in Victoria.

In his position as Victoria's most senior government official in mental health from 1952 to 1969 Dr Eric Cunningham Dax led a transformation in the way the care of people living with mental illness. He made interventions which had a profound impact on the development of mental health services in Victoria, including the introduction and practice of art therapy in Victoria's mental health institutions during the 1950s.

The majority of the collection consists of works that were created by patients during art and occupational therapy programs conducted at various Victorian mental health institutions; Larundel, Royal Park, Beechworth and Ballarat Hospitals, and the Malvern Clinic between the late 1940s to 1980s. The value of art as therapy was two fold; it served a recreational and healing purpose for patients but to psychiatrists of that era patient art could illustrate aspects of a person's experience of mental illness.

As well as works which were created in a clinical context during the 1950s to the 1970s, the Cunningham Dax Collection also includes works created by people from non-clinical art programs such as community art programs and art works created in private settings by sufferers of mental illness or psychological trauma. Many of the works in the Collection dating from the 1980s onwards are of this category and have been gifted to the collection by the artists or their families.

The Cunningham Dax Collection continues to play an active role in the Victorian community demonstrated by the continued additions to the collection and the high level of public interest in the exhibitions and public programs derived from the collection. The Collection consists of works made in a diverse range of media including 47 textile objects, ceramics, collages, paintings, some 11,000 works on paper, and photographic and other archival material.

### *How is it significant?*

The Cunningham Dax Collection is of historical and social significance to the state of Victoria.

### *Why is it significant?*

The Cunningham Dax Collection is historically significant to the State of Victoria for its association with the long professional life of Dr Eric Cunningham Dax, and his achievements in mental health reform in Victoria. The Collection is of historic significance as a record of the lived experiences of hospital patients in Victoria from the 1950s to the 1960s and of sufferers of health illness and psychological trauma since then.

The Cunningham Dax Collection is socially significant in that it serves as a resource to educate the community about the experiences of people living with mental health issues.

## **Permit Exemptions**

<span class="c1">General Conditions: 1. All exempted alterations are to be planned and carried out in a manner which prevents damage to the fabric of the registered place or object.</span> <span class="c1">General Conditions: 2. Should it become apparent during further inspection or the carrying out of works that original or previously hidden or inaccessible details of the place or object are revealed which relate to the significance of the place or object, then the exemption covering such works shall cease and Heritage Victoria shall be notified as soon as possible.</span> <p class="c1">STANDARD EXEMPTION - MOVEMENT OR RELOCATION</p> <p class="c2">The temporary relocation, movement or external loan of a registered heritage object does not require permit approval by the Executive Director pursuant to the <i>Heritage Act 1995</i> where the activity is performed in accordance with the accepted standards, policies and procedures of the organisation concerned.</p> <p class="c1">STANDARD EXEMPTION - CONSERVATION</p> <p class="c2">The conservation, research or analysis of a registered heritage object does not require approval by the Executive Director pursuant to the <i>Heritage Act 1995</i>, where the activity is performed in accordance with the accepted standards, policies and procedures of the organisation concerned. </p>

Construction dates	1940,
Heritage Act Categories	Registered object,
Other Names	CUNNINGHAM DAX CENTRE, CUNNINGHAM DAX COLLECTION, MENTAL HEALTH RESEARCH INSTITUTE OF VICTORIA,
Hermes Number	22993
Property Number	

## History

The history of the Collection is closely intertwined with the history of mental health services in Victoria over a period of sixty years. Most significantly it represents a lasting legacy to its founder, Dr. Eric Cunningham Dax who initiated a series of important reforms to mental health services in Victoria during his tenure as Chairman of the Mental Health Authority from 1952 until 1969. Dr Dax's reforms included dividing the care of people with intellectual disabilities from those who were mentally ill, initiating child psychiatric services, psychogeriatric services, forensic psychiatric services and services for people with alcohol dependency. He was also closely involved in setting up Australia's first telephone counselling service. While Cunningham Dax introduced modern treatments, including the use of antipsychotic and antidepressant medications and general anaesthesia for electroconvulsive therapy (ECT), he was best known for his pioneering work in community treatment and the moving of psychiatric treatment from asylums to community settings. By the end of his professional life Dax had attained international recognition for his ideas about the humane treatment and care of people in public mental institutions and about the support needed to enable them to live more independent lives in the community.

Dax was also among the first to appreciate the detrimental effects of stigma attached to mental illness which he felt was the result of fear and ignorance. As such, he felt strongly that mental health care required the support of the general community and found that the artworks of his patients could offer a most interesting and accessible form of public education about mental health. It provided a way of presenting a more sympathetic, less paternalistic face to the public, and thus had political implications for the way in which people with mental illness were perceived and treated by the state. In this regard the Collection reminds contemporary audiences of relatively recent changes in psychiatric care, which have seen a shift from custodial care (incarceration in asylums) to deinstitutionalisation and community-based treatment programs.

Dax was among the first to bring occupational therapy into mental health in Victoria, introducing art and music programs for patients and bringing in artists and musicians to restore humanity to those archaic institutions. Dax's pioneering work in this regard laid foundations for the study of creativity and mental illness and was a precursor to present day art therapy programs. Institutionalised patients were encouraged to draw and paint freely, without instructions, in order to help their psychiatrists understand their subjective experience of their mental illness. Consequently the works had the status of medical records and were kept with the patients' written records. Provenance, in the form of the creator's name and the date and place of making is known for approximately ninety percent of the works dated to this period. Written records also exist about some artists which provide further contextual information about these works.

The Collection is of historic value on a number of levels, but perhaps most fundamentally as a record of the lived experiences of mental hospital patients in Victoria from the 1950s to the 1960s. As such, the art works offer a unique opportunity to learn about the lives of patients in these institutions of a previous era which are otherwise contained in patient records which inevitably reflect clinicians' perspectives rather than those of the patients.

Dax's chairmanship of the Mental Hygiene Authority ended in 1969 following an invitation from the Tasmanian government to assist in developing community mental health and welfare. Dax relocated to Hobart where he was based for a little over a decade. During this time Dax was informed that the art works stored in the asylums across Victoria were in danger of being discarded. He ensured this did not eventuate and after returning to Melbourne in the 1980s, Dax devoted much time to cataloguing the works he had taken into his care during

his retirement. Dax saw the collection as having huge educational potential and was determined to preserve the works for the education of those charged with caring for patients with mental illness and of the community more broadly.

Since the early 1980s the collection has continued to grow. Works have been donated by patients, former patients and their families. Collecting has also broadened to include works sourced from diverse groups whose members have either experienced the trauma of child sexual abuse, the holocaust, war or migration, or have been affected by conditions such as autism or Alzheimer's disease. These works have been produced outside the asylum system under very different conditions and circumstances to those collected in the 1960s and 70s.

The Collection was formerly established at the University of Melbourne in 1985 but has since relocated and currently operates under the auspices of The Mental Health Research Institute of Victoria. Over the past five years The Collection's expansion has been matched by an extended range of programs to increase its visibility and use. This has occurred within the expressed aims of The Collection to 'promote widely a greater understanding of people who experience mental illness and/or psychological trauma, and to foster an appreciation of their creativity through the preservation and ethical presentation of their original works.'

## Assessment Against Criteria

h. Special association with the life or works of a person, or group of persons, of importance in Victoria's history.

The history of the Cunningham Dax Collection is associated with the professional life of psychiatrist Dr. Eric Cunningham Dax and the history of mental health services in Victoria during the mid twentieth century. Dr Dax initiated a series of important reforms to mental health services in Victoria during his tenure as Chairman of the Mental Health Authority from 1952 until 1969. One of Dax's reforms was the introduction of art therapy to the mental health institutions of Victoria. The collection of art works known as the Cunningham Dax Collection is a legacy of Dax's pioneering work in reforming mental health care in Victoria.

The Collection consists of art works made in a diverse range of media including 47 textile objects, 179 ceramics, 33 collages, 95 paintings on canvas, 110 paintings on board/masonite, 11,000 works on paper, 30 photographs and other archival material.

## Plaque Citation

### CUNNINGHAM DAX COLLECTION

Works created by psychiatric patients were collected initially by Dr Eric Cunningham Dax, Victorian Chairman of Mental Health from 1952 to 1969 who introduced art therapy and other reforms to the Victorian mental health system

## Extent of Registration

The registration includes all of the objects which are listed on the catalogue of works which is held by the custodians of The Cunningham Dax Collection as at October 1, 2008.

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*This place/object may be included in the Victorian Heritage Register pursuant to the Heritage Act 2017. Check the Victorian Heritage Database, selecting 'Heritage Victoria' as the place source.*

*For further details about Heritage Overlay places, contact the relevant local council or go to Planning Schemes Online <http://planningschemes.dpcd.vic.gov.au/>*