What do [Captain James Cook's dress sword](#), [a set of miniature editions of the works of Shakespeare](#), [a compass belonging to Ludwig Leichhardt](#), [a fleam or bloodletting knife](#) and the keystone from [Mary Reibey's house](#) have in common?

They are all on display, along with other unique items, in a new display Artefact or Fiction, on show on LG1. Curated by Learning Services, these items offer an insight into the diverse collections of the State Library and relate to the new NSW Syllabus for the Australian Curriculum. Selected to assist students understand, question or investigate a particular period or event in Australia’s history, this display provides a unique opportunity for students and teachers to get ‘up close to the real thing’. The term artefact is deliberately used to reflect the language of the syllabus which is built around the historical inquiry method and source analysis.

The opportunity to engage with original collection items is an essential element of all our learning programs and you can [find out more](#) about what’s on offer onsite and via our FREE virtual excursions.

Some of the most intriguing artefacts on display are those relating to Captain James Cook. From researching the collections we know that many of the Cook artefacts on display were purchased for the NSW Government in 1887 by Sir Saul Samuel (1820–1900), NSW Agent-General in London at the time. He had seen the Colonial and Indian Exhibition in Kensington in 1886 which displayed artefacts amassed by John Mackrell, the great nephew of Elizabeth Cook’s cousin Isaac Smith. These objects had passed down to various members of Elizabeth Cook’s extended family as her children had all predeceased her. The collection included 115 “relics” from the Pacific and personal items belonging to James Cook and his wife. Artefacts had also been passed down to other relatives including Reverend Canon Frederick Bennett, Mrs. Thomas Langton, H.M.C.Alexander and Mr. William Adams and these collections were also purchased by Sir Saul Samuel for the NSW Government. The artefacts were deposited in the Australian Museum in 1894. In 1935 and again in 1955, this collection was examined and the non-ethnographic items were transferred to the Mitchell Library while anthropological artefacts stayed in the collections of the Australian Museum.
Artefacts can be extremely problematic for collecting institutions as they may be difficult to authenticate. They are often passed down through families where the story about the artefact changes over time. Hallmarks on the other hand are a good indication of where, when and who made a particular artifact. The challenge for students visiting the Library will be to discover if all the artefacts really did belong to Captain or Mrs. Cook – a history mystery to resolve!

The displays are based around the themes of convict history, Australian exploration, the Gold Rush, William Shakespeare, Captain James Cook, Aboriginal culture collections and the history of photography. Come on in and check them out!

**Source URL:** https://www.sl.nsw.gov.au/blogs/artefact-or-fiction

**Links**