

# AVATAR'S ABODE TRUST ARCHIVES:

## Preservation Needs Assessment

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# 1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Avatar's Abode Trust Archives (the Archives) collection is housed at Avatar's Abode, a 99 acre property at Kiels Mountain in the Sunshine Coast Hinterland. The property is held in perpetuity for the followers of notable Indian spiritual leader, Avatar Meher Baba (Merwan Sheriar Irani) (1894-1969).

The Archives' collection has items ranging in date from the 1930s through to the present. It comprises of documents, publications, pamphlets, photographic and audio-visual material, and artefacts specifically associated with Meher Baba. The holdings cover the early development of the Sufi movement in Australia relating to Inayat Khan, Meher Baba's Australian visits in 1956 and 1958, the development of Avatar's Abode in 1958, and archival material relating to his close disciple Francis Brabazon, and other early Australian followers. The historic buildings, structures, grounds and sites at Avatar's Abode used or visited by Meher Baba are also part of the collection.

The Archives' collection is managed for the Avatar's Abode Trust (the Trust) by the Archives Committee (the Committee) which was formed in 2013. A key objective stated in the Avatar's Abode Trust Deed is,

“(g) To preserve and protect “Baba’s Room” and those articles and items associated with Avatar Meher Baba that are deemed sacred by the directors.”<sup>1</sup>

The Committee meets quarterly and is responsible for implementing, monitoring and evaluating the *Collection Management Policy*<sup>2</sup>. It provides an annual report to the Directors of the Trust and a Director of the Trust is also a Committee member.<sup>3</sup>

The Committee works collaboratively with other Trust committees. This includes the committees responsible for the maintenance of the significant buildings and sites on the property.<sup>4</sup>

According to the Committee's current draft *Collection Management Policy*, the overriding mission of the Archive is to:

“...collect, preserve and share information relating to the history of Avatar Meher Baba's connection to Australia for current and future lovers of Meher Baba and for those who seek to know more about Him”.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Avatar's Abode Trust, *Collection Management Policy*, Draft - 3 August 2021, p.4

<sup>2</sup> Avatar's Abode Trust, *Collection Management Policy*, Draft - 3 August 2021

<sup>3</sup> Op.Cit. p.4

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

<sup>5</sup> Op.Cit. p.2

To effectively preserve the collection, the Policy's states a number of key principles to underpin the long term care and use of the collections:

- Maintaining professionally accepted standards and methods for the storage, handling, treatment, care, conservation, preservation and sharing of the unique collection of items associated with Meher Baba and His connection to Australia.
- Provision and maintenance of adequate storage facilities at Avatar's Abode to safely house and preserve the collection.
- Develop and implement responsible guidelines and procedures for acquisition, access, sharing, and all aspects of collections care. <sup>6</sup>

Throughout the history of the Archive, there has been continuous engagement with a range of external consultants with cultural heritage and/or conservation expertise.<sup>7</sup> There has also been a close working relationship with the Avatar Meher Baba Trust Archives in Meherabad, India. This has ensured a long track record of well cared for collections and the evolution of preservation best practices. The formation of the Archives Committee in 2013 facilitated the development of a more structured, formal approach to the management of the collection. This has resulted in a professionally run Archive managed by a very dedicated Committee and an active, hardworking team of volunteers. The desire to ensure the collections are preserved correctly has meant Archive volunteers have received training in a range of preventive preservation activities by attending external workshops and by working with visiting conservators.<sup>8</sup>

An onsite assessment of the Avatar's Abode Trust Archive was undertaken over a total of 5 days between August – October 2021 by conservator Lydia Egunnike (M.AppSc. Materials Conservation, Professional Member – AICCM<sup>9</sup>) as part of a Preservation Needs Assessment<sup>10</sup> commissioned by the Avatar's Abode Trust Archives. The assessment methodology was carried out in accordance with the AICCM's Preservation Needs Assessment template<sup>11</sup>. The findings from the onsite assessment, in combination

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<sup>6</sup> Op.Cit. p.3

<sup>7</sup> Refer to *Collection Management Policy*, p.p.13 -16 for details.

<sup>8</sup> More details of training in *11. Training needs/skills assessment*

<sup>9</sup> AICCM – Australian Institute for the Conservation of Cultural Materials: Australia's professional body for the conservation profession.

<sup>10</sup> Egunnike, Lydia, *Avatar's Abode Trust Archives – Preservation Needs Assessment*, October 2021.

<sup>11</sup> Australian Institute for the Conservation of Cultural Materials, *Preservation Needs Assessment Template – 2008-2009*, 2009, accessed 30 September 2021, <https://aiccm.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/PresNeedsTemplate.pdf>

with internationally recognised preservation standards, have been used to develop the recommendations outlined in this report.

## 2. KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

Outlined below is a summary of the key recommendations resulting from reviewing the information gained during the onsite assessment and consideration of relevant international and national standards and guidelines for preservation of cultural heritage collections.

### ***Short term recommendations (within 12 months)***

- To assist in the long term preservation and management of the Archives, the collection should be formally assessed for significance in accordance with the process outlined in *Significance 2.0*.<sup>12</sup>
- Using the recommendations from this report, develop and implement a comprehensive *Preservation Plan* to provide focused long-term management of the Avatar's Abode Trust Collection.
- As part of the *Preservation Plan*, develop and implement formal collection care and handling guidelines.
- As part of the *Preservation Plan*, refine the existing Integrated Pest Management program which includes regular collection inspection and cleaning programs for all locations where collections are stored and/or displayed.
- Develop a formal preventive preservation training program for Archive volunteers involved in the care of the collections to ensure they are familiar with the *Preservation Plan* and their role within the work program.
- With the assistance of the recommendations outlined in this report, assess the collections to ensure significant objects are not at risk. Use the results of this assessment to develop a *Collection Storage and Treatment Plan* to implement prioritised changes to storage practices and/or enclosures as required and damaged/deteriorated objects receive appropriate treatment. This plan will be linked to the *Preservation Plan*.
- Complete the development and implementation of a *Disaster Preparedness Plan* for the collection and provide training for Archive volunteers in using the plan (including object salvage methods).

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<sup>12</sup> Russell, Roslyn and Winkworth, Kylie, *Significance 2.0*, Collections Council of Australia Ltd, 2009.

- Source and install suitable generators to ensure the air conditioning and dehumidification units in Baba House and the Reception Centre archive rooms and the film freezer underneath the Farmhouse remain running during power outages.
- Ensure the digitisation of the audio-visual collection meets relevant national and international standards.<sup>13</sup>
- Develop and implement a *Digital Preservation Policy* and accompanying *Digital Preservation Procedures* to provide a coordinated and ongoing set of processes and activities that ensure long-term, error-free storage of digital content (i.e. born-digital and digitised collection material) to allow retrieval and interpretation, for the entire time span the content is required.<sup>14</sup>
- Carry out a needs assessment to identify and analyse the specifications for a purpose-built Archives building recognising that current storage facilities are not suitable for the effective long term preservation of the collection.

***Medium term recommendations (within 3 years)***

- Continuation of the Integrated Pest Management program and preventive preservation activities as outlined in the *Preservation Plan* including routine cleaning and monitoring of environmental conditions.
- Ensure collection care and handling procedures are in place and Archive volunteers involved with the collection are properly trained and receive annual refresher training in preventive preservation.
- Continue implementing and updating prioritised actions outlined in the *Collection Storage and Treatment Plan* ensuring new acquisitions are included.
- Ensure the *Disaster Preparedness Plan* and disaster training remain up to date and kits are kept fully stocked.
- Review the *Digital Preservation Policy* and procedures to ensure current best practice is in place.
- Engage a qualified Conservation Architect to carry out a comprehensive condition assessment of Baba's House, the Meeting Hall and the Farmhouse and then work with the Trust, Archives Committee and other key stakeholders to develop and implement a site-wide Conservation Management Plan.

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<sup>13</sup> Please refer to *Appendix 5*. for relevant standards.

<sup>14</sup> Please refer to *6.2.4 Digital files* for more details.

- Incorporate planning for the new Archive building's design and construction in the Trust's strategic planning.

#### **Long term recommendations (within 5 years)**

- Review the *Preservation Plan* and preventive preservation program (e.g. environmental monitoring, pest management, cleaning etc.) and instigate any amendments as needed. ensure all volunteers involved with the collection are properly trained.
- Continue implementing and updating prioritised actions outlined in the *Collection Storage and Treatment Plan* if not complete. Ensure new acquisitions are included.
- Ensure the Disaster Management plan and disaster training remain up to date and kits are kept fully stocked.
- Continue the digitisation program and ensure an ongoing maintenance/preservation program for digital files is in place and implemented to ensure future access.
- Ensure the Conservation Management Plan is actively followed and any necessary preventive or active maintenance or repair actions are included in the Trust's ongoing strategic planning.
- Review the *Digital Preservation Policy* and procedures to ensure current best practice is in place.
- Design and construction of the purpose-built Archive building to meet relevant collection storage standards and guidelines.

#### ***Eight main recommendations were made following the assessment:***

1. Develop and implement a comprehensive long term *Preservation Plan* to encompass prioritised preventive preservation strategies including storage, display and handling guidelines, housekeeping, pest management, and environmental monitoring.
2. As part of the *Preservation Plan*, refine the existing Integrated Pest Management program to continue and improve methods for monitoring and responding to all biological issues (i.e. pest and fungal activity).
3. Training of volunteers involved with the collection in preventive preservation techniques included in the preservation plan including safe collection handling and use, Integrated Pest Management and object cleaning methods.

4. With the assistance of the recommendations outlined in this report, and as part of the larger *Preservation Plan*, develop and implement a *Collection Storage and Treatment Plan* to ensure significant objects and collections are not at risk.
5. Develop and implement an object-based Disaster Preparedness Plan and provide disaster training (including object salvage) for relevant staff on an annual basis. Include floor plan of Collection Store identifying high priority collection items. Shelving housing high priority material can also be marked with moveable magnetic markers for quick retrieval in a disaster scenario.
6. Develop and implement a *Digital Preservation Policy* to preserve and ensure long term access to digital collection items.
7. Develop and implement a *Conservation Management Plan* for the long term preservation of the on-site heritage buildings.
8. Commence a needs assessment to identify and analyse whether a new purpose-built Archives building is required.

***Key issues required to carry out the recommendations include:***

- Guidance and funding to develop and implement a comprehensive *Preservation Plan* with accompanying Policy to encompass prioritised preventive preservation strategies including storage and handling guidelines (including digitisation), an Integrated Pest Management program and environmental monitoring.
- Funding and training in effective implementation of the Disaster Management Plan including disaster salvage procedures.
- Ongoing funding to maintain disaster kits.
- Training and/or guidance to develop, implement and maintain an effective *Digital Preservation Policy*.
- Funding and support for the design and construction of a purpose-built Archive building.