



Collections Research News

Fall 2008



Elements of Successful Collections Management

Part 4

There are nine major elements of successful collections management in museums and all of these elements should be present to insure your museum is fulfilling its public trust and collection stewardship obligations. These key elements are:

- ✓ Clear Museum Mission Statement
- ✓ Mission-driven Policies and Procedures
- ✓ Knowledge of proper handling procedures
- ✓ Thorough and accurate documentation of collections
- ✓ Knowledge of safe and proper numbering methods
- ✓ Inventory control
- ✓ Safe and stable environment
- ✓ Consistent and sound access procedures
- ✓ Safe and secure exhibition practices

Collections Research News addressed the first four elements in previous issues. In this issue we will address safe and proper numbering methods.

❖ Numbering Museum Artifacts: Methods and Materials

In general, materials used for marking museum objects should not damage the object or be harmful to the person applying the label and they should be reversible. The ideal numbering system should be easy to use and teach, and use easily obtainable materials. There are four techniques for attaching numbers: placing the number on a separate material and attaching it to the object; apply a barrier layer and write the number on that layer; write directly on the piece; or a combination of these. When choosing a technique and/or material, one should consider not only the material itself but the solvent used to remove it. This can be critical for objects made of plastic or other sensitive material.

➤ Materials

- ✓ Use: acrylic paints with mineral pigments rather than dyes; mineral pigmented inks and disposable pens; pencils; wax pencils; & watercolors with mineral pigments. A word of caution regarding disposable marking pens: the formula could change without notice so test the pens for light fastness and make sure they are non-acidic. Recommended brands include Pigma Pens, Marsgraphic Pigment Liner, Identi-Pen 441 series (Sakura), and All-Stabilo Pen 166P.
- ✓ Do not use: oil paints; inks with dye colorants; paints that contain ammonia; or appliance paints. Fingernail polish is not a stable barrier material for use on museum collections. The main ingredient in fingernail polish is cellulose nitrate (yes, that is the same material those flammable movie films are made of) and over time it yellows, shrinks, stains and oozes acid! Another commonly used material not recommended is white-out or a similar product. The formulas in these materials vary considerably and they will yellow and flake off over time.
- ✓ White & black inks or paints are recommended. Purple has been suggested for reproductions. Red is no longer recommended because it cannot be seen by color-blind individuals. Use a fine paint brush (000 or 0000) or a refillable TRIA pen for number application. Be careful when using a quill pen and nib or drawing pen. Their metal tips can easily scratch your object.

➤ Methods: Tags and Labels

Of the four methods for associating a permanent number with an artifact, the least damaging method is to place the number on a separate material and attach it to the object. This technique involves the use of tied-on tags or sewn-in

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labels and should be considered for many types of objects.

This is the best method available for marking plastics since these materials can be subject to damage from inks, solvents and even water. Write the number on an acid-free paper tag and loosely tie it to the object with Teflon tape or place it with the object in its storage container.

Acid free paper tags can be tied to many types of objects using cotton thread, cotton twill tape, Teflon tape (Plumber's tape), or Glide™ unwaxed dental floss. (Glide™ is a Teflon monofilament. Other brands are made from nylon fibers which will readily deteriorate.) Polyester thread may be used on stronger pieces, but care must be taken since this thread can cut into or damage fragile objects. As a rule of thumb, the material used for the tie should be weaker than the object to which it is attached. If there is ever a question regarding which will break first, it should be the tie and not the object! Tags with metal edges should not be used because of the potential for rust stains from the metal. Be careful about using colored thread for ties because the color may bleed when exposed to moisture, oils or other liquid. If a colored cotton thread is desirable, be sure to test it for color-fastness.

Use wire ties only for large machinery or similar pieces and then use only galvanized stainless steel, aluminum or vinyl coated wire which will not corrode or rust. Be sure to seal the ends of the vinyl-coated wire by melting the vinyl or covering the ends with wax (be aware that the vinyl will eventually break down and the tie may have to be replaced). Polyethylene or polypropylene ties [Zip-Straps or Zippies] may also be used on larger, non-fragile objects.

Sewn-in labels are used for textiles, clothing, bags and some baskets and soft leather items. These labels should be made from cotton, polyester or linen fabric tape (un-sized and un-coated), Tyvek or Reemay (non-woven polyester with no

coatings). Choose your marking ink with care and wash the tags prior to attaching them to remove any acid from the ink and assure its fastness. Use permanent pigment-based pens or inks to write the numbers. A permanent Laundry Marker works well.

Sew the tags to the object with appropriate weight thread. The thread should not be stronger than the object itself. Generally, a single strand of cotton thread will serve. Polyester can be too tough and silk can deteriorate. Use a fine, blunt needle and go between the yarns of the material rather than through them. Use caution when using this method on flexible baskets or soft leather. Never pierce the basket material when sewing on a label. If you cannot go between the basketry stitches, choose another method of attaching a number. Sew the label around the construction threads on leather objects, if they are strong enough, and never put holes in the leather itself.

Under no circumstances should adhesive labels or "sticky notes" be used on museum collections!

There are currently only two acceptable methods of adhering labels to artifacts. The first uses Japanese tissue paper with wheat or rice starch paste or methyl cellulose as the adhesive. This technique is used for bark cloth, baskets or wooden objects with uneven surfaces. The second method uses acid-free, lignin-free, 100 % rag paper on which the number is written in ink or printed with a laser printer. This label is cut from the sheet and adhered to the object using an acrylic emulsion (Rhoplex AC 33®) or PVA emulsion (Jade 403®). The techniques used for both methods are described in various publications including those listed at the end of this article. Never adhere a label to a flaking or painted surface.

In the next issue we will discuss the other numbering methods: Barrier coats and numbers; and writing directly on the object. We will also touch on new technologies for numbering and tracking artifacts. Stay tuned!

2009 TRAINING SCHEDULES

ONLINE TRAINING

MS103: Basics of Museum Registration
January 19 to February 14, 2009

MS207: Collections Management: Cataloging Your Collection
July 6 to August 1, 2009

MS007: The Mission Statement: Is It Really That Important?
July 13 to 17, 2009

MS218: Collection Inventories
November 2 to 30, 2009

WESTEND TRAINING CENTER

Collections Management in Times of Change
March 16 to 20, 2009

Check our website for details:
<http://museumcollectionmgmt.com>

SERVICES

FILEMAKER® PRO CATALOGING TEMPLATES

Collections Research for Museums can assist small museums with computerizing their collection documentation using off-the-shelf database software.

Training is available for our database and in general FileMaker Pro techniques.

ON-SITE TRAINING

Collections Research for Museums offers classes for small museums in Cataloging and Collections Management. The course is designed for those museums which have small, non-professionally trained or volunteer staffs. It covers the basics of marking, handling, measuring, and cataloging, plus general care and storage for all types of objects and materials.

PROJECT SERVICES

We also offer a variety of other services to museums, large and small. These range from simple inventories to complete and thorough cataloging of collections. Feel free to contact us for more information. We provide a free initial consultation.

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Questions, comments or story suggestions are always welcome.)

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