



Collections Research News

Summer 2009



Elements of Successful Collections Management

Part 5

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 continue with our discussion of safe and proper numbering methods.

❖ **Numbering Museum Artifacts: Methods and Materials**

In the previous issue we discussed using tags, both tied and sewn on, for numbering our artifacts. In this issue we will discuss the use of barrier coats and writing directly on objects.

➤ **Barrier Coats**

This method of labeling involves placing a barrier layer directly on the object surface on which the number is written.

- ✓ Always consider removal prior to applying a barrier layer or top coat and be aware that the solvent used to dissolve these materials can cause damage to the artifact. Even water-based emulsions must be removed with a solvent.
- ✓ Never use a barrier layer on plastic as it can cause permanent damage to the object.
- ✓ There is some disagreement in the field regarding using a barrier layer on porous objects. Some say you should, to keep the number from soaking into the object, and some say you should not because the barrier coat will soak into the object. Current opinion is that a thicker than normal varnish should be applied to porous objects. The thicker consistency will prevent the barrier material from soaking too far into the surface and it is preferable to have some of the barrier layer remain than have the numbering ink absorbed into the surface.
- ✓ Please remember: solvents and base coats dissolved in solvents should only be used in a well-ventilated area. Many of these substances can be toxic. Do not use fingernail polish or white-out as a barrier coat (see Fall 2008 Newsletter.)

➤ **Materials and Methods:**

Acceptable clear barrier materials are those which possess the following traits: stability, reversibility, fast drying, resistance to water; it must be safe for the artifact, thin enough to flow and thick enough to form a film. Currently accepted solvent-based clear varnishes include: Acryloid/Paraloid B-72 and B-67; polyvinyl acetate resins (AYAA, AYAC, AYAF, AYAT); or Winsor & Newton Winton Varnish. A water-based clear varnish called Aquasol is available and Winsor Newton or Rhoplex 35A Acrylic Gloss Medium may also be used.

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In addition to the traits listed for clear varnishes, colored base coats should possess good adhesion, be non-flaking, and be pigment-based rather than dye-based. The following are acceptable colored base coats: Acryloid B-72 with pigment colorant such as titanium dioxide (Liquid Label); or water-based products such as Rotring white artist color opaque waterproof acrylic; Golden; or Aqua-tec. A note of caution, water-based products may not be as durable as solvent-based varnishes and when dry must still be removed with solvents. If you use a white base coat always apply a clear barrier layer first and then apply the white over it. You may wish to consider using a white ink, acrylic paint or watercolor to write the number instead of using a white base coat and black number. The results will be much less obtrusive and more esthetically pleasing.

The most common solvents are: Acetone, which can dissolve paint, ink, plastic and coatings; **Toluene**, which is much more toxic than acetone and dissolves the same kinds of materials; **Ethanol**, which can dissolve shellac varnishes on furniture, inks, paints and plastics; **Petroleum benzene and related petroleum distillates such as Naptha or Mineral Spirits**, which are also toxic and can damage waxes and waxed surfaces but usually leave most paints, plastic and other surface treatments alone.

Proper materials for applying the number to these base coats were discussed in the Fall 2008 Newsletter. Golden's Fluid Acrylics in Carbon Black or Titanium White make the best choices for numbering inks and can be applied with a fine brush or used in a TRIA Pen. Rotring's Acrylic Artists color #597137 Black is also recommended, as is China White watercolor paint.

If your object is subject to excessive handling or the number is likely to be worn off by abrasion, a top coat can be applied over the number. It has been suggested that the top coat be a different material than the barrier layer, so that the top coat and number can be removed without disturbing the barrier layer, but this is not required.

➤ Writing Directly on the Object

The third method for numbering objects, writing the number directly on the object, is the preferred technique for marking paper and photographs and could be considered as an option for plastics. Bear in mind, however, that any number applied directly to plastic objects should be considered permanent since solvents and even water can be damaging.

For paper, use a #2 (HB) or softer (#1) pencil and press lightly. If possible, mark the mat (if present) rather than the work itself. Always place the number on the reverse side of the work. For two-sided works, mark both sides in the margin with a different number (ex. 1234.a and 1234.b). If there is no clear area to mark the work, mark its container.

For marking photographs a #2 or softer pencil is recommended. The Schwan All Stabilo pencil works well on resin-coated photographic paper. (This pencil also comes in white which works well for marking dark papers like old black photo album pages). There is a nice 100% graphite pencil available, which is wonderful for hard to mark papers and artifacts. Again, press very lightly so as not to damage the emulsion or make an imprint. Number only on the back near an edge and away from the image portion of the photograph.

A wax pencil (Berol China Marker) may be used to mark plastics. It also can be used for resin-coated photographic papers if the Stabilo pencil does not work, but it can smear so care should be taken to interleave photographs with acid-free paper or place them in individual Mylar sleeves to prevent transfer.

Do not use inks or paints on paper or photographs. If necessary, acrylic paint or watercolor can be used on plastic, but the number should be applied in an inconspicuous location away from any maker's marks.

Next time we will discuss a few new innovative methods of numbering and tracking museum objects. Sorry we did not have room to finish the discussion this time. But stay tuned!

2009 TRAINING SCHEDULES

ONLINE TRAINING

MS103: Basics of Museum Registration
Look for it in January, 2010

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
April 5 to 10, 2010

Check our website for details and next year's schedule: <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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