

You Want Me to Do *What*?

The Importance of Periodic Inventories

Part II: Reconciling An Inventory

In Part I we discussed the process for conducting an inventory of our collection. Following that process we have systematically gone through our storage and exhibition spaces and made lists of all the items in our collection. Now what do we do with all those pieces of paper we generated? That is the second phase of the inventory process—the reconciliation. This reconciliation phase cannot take place until an inventory of the entire collection has been completed.

The first part of the reconciliation is relatively simple whether you are using a manual or computer catalog. Since the inventory sheets include the accession number and a short description of the artifact, go through the inventory sheets and update the catalog records with the current location of each artifact. Simple, right? Sure it is, IF all the artifacts are numbered AND all the numbers and descriptions match the catalog records AND all the catalog records are present and accounted for! Unfortunately, most of us will find that we don't have perfect records and some of our artifacts are not numbered or have deaccessioned themselves on the shelf or there is some other problem that crops up. We find that when we did our inventory we had to assign quite a few temporary numbers or when we go through the inventory sheets to update the records we find that some of the numbers do not match any existing catalog record. Now what?!

During the reconciliation process you will find that you have three categories of 'problems'. First, artifacts with seemingly correct accession numbers have no corresponding catalog record or the catalog record that does not match. Second are the artifacts with no numbers which were assigned temporary numbers during the inventory. Third, there are left over catalog records for which you found no corresponding artifact. The solution: The artifacts in first two categories need to be matched up with the records in the third. Computerized records can make this task easier, but do not forget to check your manual records too. They can hold valuable information that will assist with this matching.

Start with the first item. It is a blue widget with red dots. Pull up on the computer or from your object catalog all the records for widgets, concentrating on the records that have not yet been matched to an artifact. Look for the record that represents a blue widget with red dots. Hopefully you will only have one such record. If not, look at the size, shape, condition or other distinguishing characteristics to match the widget to the correct record. You may need to physically compare all your widgets to the catalog records to be sure of the match. When the correct record for the widget has been found, update the catalog record with its current location and, if necessary, number or re-number the widget with the correct accession number. Continue this matching process until you either run out of artifacts or catalog records.

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If you find you have more artifacts than records, a more thorough search of your donor, accession or other records may be in order. If you find the records for the artifact, process it now by assigning an appropriate accession number and add it to your collection catalog. If you find no records, process the artifact as "Found in Collection" either under it's assigned temporary number or other appropriate accession number and add it to your collection catalog.

If you find you have more records than artifacts to match to them, then you may have some serious issues regarding the security of your collection. The records may reflect artifacts that have been lost, stolen or removed from the collection without the proper paper trail being generated. A serious reevaluation of the museum's procedures should be undertaken.

Correcting discrepancies in the museum's paper trail, properly managing your collection and underscoring the importance of following procedures regarding handling and security of the collection are just a few of the reasons for conducting periodic inventories. The sooner you begin, the more comfortable you will feel about your stewardship of your collection.

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

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This is an opportunity for small museums to computerize their collection records using a very user friendly database software.

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SERVICES

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