

Collections Research News

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So why can't I call a spatula a pancake flipper?



The importance of using standardized nomenclatures.

Why is it so important to have a standardized list of terms to identify the objects housed in a museum's collection? Can't we just call these items what we have always called them since we were small? With regional and cultural differences in the United States and around the globe we run the risk that others will not understand to what we are referring when we use a colloquial term to identify one of our objects. How many people know what a muffineer is? A few probably. How many people know what a sugar shaker is? More probably. How many people know that these two terms refer to the same thing? Do you know the difference between a spatula, a pancake flipper and a cake turner? Or between a spatula and a scraper? Or is there a difference at all?



Since museums began they have been categorizing, sorting and describing their collections so that they can easily find individual objects and/or their records. They have been subdividing their catalog cards into household goods, personal items, clothing, furniture and other such categories. They have given objects names like shoe, hat, dresser, table, stapler, or cup and they have assumed that when they want to find all the cups in the collection that they have been placed in the 'cup' section of the catalog. This assumption is not always correct. What one person may call a cup, another may call a glass, and yet another may call something else.

The onset of the computer age, and more recently the age of the global Internet, has made the issue of standardization one of major importance to all museums. If museums continue to aspire to having their collections online, and regional coalitions continue to be formed to combine resources to place their collective collections online, standardized terminology is essential.

In a manual catalog system of cards, the human brain can overcome inconsistencies in terminology by checking an entire section of related cards and scanning for the proper type of artifact. Not a very efficient method, but it works. In a computer system, standardization in terminology is crucial to finding all the objects for which one is searching. The computer 'brain' is literal. It will find only those items it has been asked to find. It can not make assumptions or 'leaps of faith' when being asked to make a search. If asked to find all the cups, it will only find those items actually identified as 'cup' and nothing more.

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(Cont. from page 1) So how does one go about creating a standardized list of terms? Fortunately, there are a couple of groups who have already done the work for us. The two most common nomenclatures available to museums are *The Revised Nomenclature For Museum Cataloging* and *The Art and Architecture Thesaurus*. *The Revised Nomenclature* is based on an earlier version by Robert G. Chenhall and was created as a system for describing man-made objects. *The Art and Architecture Thesaurus* was created as a system for describing works of art and architectural components, but is being expanded to include terms for describing historical artifacts as well. Both lists are hierarchical in nature, beginning with broad categories (such as Structures), subcategories (such as Building Component) and finally the individual terms themselves (such as Brick). *The Revised Nomenclature for Museum Cataloging* is published in book form by the American Association for State and Local History and can be purchased from AASLH or through the American Association of Museums. It is also built into the computer software PastPerfect. *The Art and Architecture Thesaurus* is compiled by The Getty Institute and is available online at www.getty.edu/search.

As museums become more computer dependent, a rose by any other name does not smell as sweet any more! If your computer is going to effectively catalog your collection, you must standardize the terms you use to describe it.

FILEMAKER® PRO CATALOGING TEMPLATES NOW AVAILABLE FROM CRM

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

Collections Research for Museums has created a collection database using the commercial software FileMaker® Pro. Cataloging templets are available for object collections, photographic collections and archival collections.

We will customize a cataloging screen for those of you who have specialized collections. We can also connect your database to an imaging system to allow photographs of the collection to be incorporated into the database.

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

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

For more information, give us a call at (303) 757-7962.

The course is individualized to suit the needs of each museum. Classes are given on site at the museum and utilize the museum's own collection.

The course is priced according to length and may include up to 10 people.

A list of suggested reference material, general supplies, and suppliers is provided, along with samples of cataloging worksheets for ethnographic/historical/art, geological, natural history, and photographic collections.

If you would like more information on topics covered and costs, give us a call at (303) 757-7962 or drop us a line.

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**.

Also, if you need help preparing your NAGPRA summaries or inventories, we can help. Give us a call.

(*Collections Research News* is a service of Collections Research for Museums, Inc, 4830 E Kansas Dr, Denver, CO 80246 (303)757-7962, email: schaller@rmi.net. Questions, comments or story suggestions are always welcome.)

SERVICES

Collections Research for Museums offers **classes for small museums in Cataloging and Collections**

Management. The course is designed for those museums which have small, nonprofessionally 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.