



Collections Research News

FALL 2005

Collection Management and Security Numbering Museum Artifacts

How, you might ask, can those silly little numbers all those curators, registrars and collection managers spend so much time applying to museum objects help with collection security? Actually they play a vital role not only in collection management but in collection security. Those little numbers are the key to connecting the object to its documentation—the description, the source, the location and the condition of the object. They can also connect the physical object to a photograph—a print, slide or digital image. All of which can be of vital importance should the object turn up missing one day. Does ‘missing’ always mean ‘stolen’? Not necessarily. ‘Missing’ could simply mean ‘misplaced’ or ‘moved’ or ‘not numbered’.

Not only is it important to maintain detailed descriptive documentation on each object (including what it is, what it looks like, how big it is, what it is made of, etc.), but it is important to maintain the link between that documentation and the physical object to which it refers. That link is accomplished through the physical number assigned to each object, variously called the accession number, catalog number or object number.

These numbers need to be affixed to the objects in such a way as to not fall off, be rubbed off or be too easily removed. Conversely, we do not want to make the number so permanent that it will irreparably damage the artifact. That is why we DO NOT use magic markers or regular ball point pens to mark directly on the artifact.

Since 1994 registrars and conservators have been conferring on the best materials and methods for associating permanent numbers with museums objects. Unfortunately there is no definitive answer available which will work for every type of object. 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. By reversible we mean that it could be removed, if necessary, without damage to the artifact.

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COLLECTIONS RESEARCH FOR MUSEUMS HAS A WEBSITE!

Now you can visit us on the web at
<http://museumcollectionmgmt.com>

NEW TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES FROM COLLECTIONS RESEARCH FOR MUSEUMS

ONLINE TRAINING CLASSES

Collections Research for Museums has teamed up with the Northern States Conservation Center to offer two new Online classes: **The Basics of Museum Registration** and

Collections Management: Cataloging Your Collections. Check the Museum Classes Online website at www.museumclasses.org or contact us for more information. Other classes are available.

OUR 2005 MUSEUM CLASSES ONLINE SCHEDULE

September 18 through October 15: MS 207:
Museum Collections Management: Cataloging Your Collection

Look for the Basics of Museum Registration in 2006.

HANDS-ON TRAINING SEMINARS IN ESTES PARK, COLORADO

Collections Research has teamed up with the Westend Training Center in Estes Park, Colorado for a 4 day
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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.

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 labels and should be considered for many types of objects. While considered the safest marking method for the objects, this can be the least secure method as the tags can easily be removed with nothing more than a pair of scissors or a knife.

The next method of labeling is placing a barrier layer directly on the object surface and writing the number on the barrier layer. As curators, collections managers and registrars we must 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. Not knowing which solvent to use can be a problem when someone is attempting to remove an identifying number from an artifact. Case in point, many years ago a Denver area Meteorite Laboratory got a call from a museum, which had purchased one of their meteorite specimens, requesting information on how to remove the specimen number. They had tried all the solvents they could think of, but still could not remove the small white number that had been painted on the specimen. In actual fact the museum had probably removed the top layer of lacquer immediately, but because the number had been painted on with watercolor, none of the solvents would touch it. How were they to remove that number from the specimen? A small amount of plain old water worked quite

nicely!

The third method, 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. The only acceptable instrument for this technique is a soft pencil. We never use ink or paint when directly marking a paper artifact, since the ink can never be removed.

The forth and final method for marking museum objects is a combination of methods one through three. The most common combination is one of the two direct marking techniques combined with a tied on tag. This can be useful in storage to prevent unnecessary handling of objects during inventories and exhibit preparation. The tags can be removed for exhibit and replaced when the objects are returned to storage. This method also prevents complete loss of connection with the object's number should a tag be misplaced or lost.

The combination of tags and direct marking has been employed in museums currently using barcoding for tracking their objects. A barcoded tag is placed with, or tied to, the object in such a way as to be visible for scanning. Then staff can quickly scan a drawer or shelf without handling the objects unnecessarily. Physical verification would still be required to be certain that the barcode was associated with the correct object or that the object is still where it is supposed to be. Barcoded labels are also used for cabinet, drawer and shelf tags and seem to make periodic inventorying of collections go more smoothly.

Another new method of marking museum objects that is being explored is the use of radio frequency transponders. This technology has been used with live collections in Zoos for a number of years and is now being explored for possible application with museum objects. The exact method of attachment to a museum object is still being worked out. In most cases this means gluing the transponder to the object or making a hole in which to place it or

embedding it in a repair. None of which seem to be very palatable to most museum staff. However, if a method of attachment could be found that allowed us to 'do no harm' to the object, this technology could be the most secure and easily traceable marking method yet.

Training Opportunities, Cont. from page 1
workshop in Collections Management for small Museums entitled Collections Management in Times of Change. This workshop is paired with a one day Grant Writing workshop. Check our website or contact us for more information.

WESTEND TRAINING CENTER 2005 SCHEDULE

Collections Management in Times of Change: October 17 through 20
Grant Writing: October 21

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**.

(*Collections Research News* is a service of Collections Research for Museums, Inc, 4830 E Kansas Dr, Denver, CO 80246 (303)757-7962, Toll free: 1-877-757-7962, email: schaller@rmi.net. Website: <http://museumcollectionmgmt.com>. Questions, comments or story suggestions are always welcome.)

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CATALOGING/COLLECTIONS
MGMT HELP OR TRAINING**

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