



Collections Research News

Summer 2008



Elements of Successful Collections Management

Part 3

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 three elements in previous issues. In this issue we will address thorough and accurate documentation of collections.

❖ REGISTRATION

What is “Registration”? Registration is the process of creating, acquiring, and keeping the records on a museum collection. It is the first step in Collection Processing. Before we can begin this process the museum needs a transfer of ownership document: Deed of Gift; bill of sale; copy of will; contact for repository, or other, arrangement. Without this ownership documentation the museum has no business processing an item into its collection. Time spent on other people’s property is time away from the museum’s stewardship responsibilities toward its own collections.

What is involved in the registration process? Registration is about identification, numbering and assessing the condition of the new artifact.

➤ Identification

What is it? What exactly is the ‘thing’ the museum has accepted into its collection?

It is important to establish the provenance or history of the artifact by asking the donor, checking published sources and consulting with experts. Asking the donor about the object and its history is one of the most important things that can be done when considering an object for inclusion in the collection. In most instances, the information you have on an artifact will come in the door with it. If you fail to get the information at the time of donation, by the time you get back to the donor he/she may not remember, may have moved away and cannot be located, or may have passed away. Then you have lost important information about the artifact—its story. All the published sources and experts in the world cannot help you recreate the individual history of a particular artifact. That can only come from those who used it or have first hand knowledge of its use and history.

➤ Numbering

Registration is also about assigning a unique identifier to each artifact which will connect that object to its documentation. That documentation will include the transfer of ownership paperwork, background information on the object and its history, and the catalog record created for this object.

We will discuss numbering in the next issue in some detail.

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➤ **Assessing Artifact Condition**

When a new artifact comes into the collection it is important to examine it for wear or damage from use or misuse and for signs of infestation (insect pests) that might impact the rest of the collection. It is important to record the current condition of the object at this point as a baseline for comparison in the future. Note cracks and soiling, fading or warping or any other damage seen. Remember to base your overall assessment of condition on the object's age—this widget isn't in too bad a shape for being 100 years old! Any changes in condition from this point can be tracked and, hopefully, traced to a cause that can be mitigated and corrected.

❖ **CATALOGING**

Once the object has been identified, numbered and its condition recorded, the next step in the process is cataloging. What is the purpose of cataloging? The purpose of cataloging is to describe the artifact in detail—draw a picture of it with words.

Some years ago the Getty Institute and law enforcement around the world got together and created Object ID. Its purpose was to establish a minimum level of description for each art object or artifact to make it easier to trace should it go missing. If all artifacts have been described using these standard elements, then your artifacts can be considered to have been properly documented. However, there is much more that can be said about your artifacts--the things that make them important for your mission and programs—that is, their story. The people they are connected to, the times in which they were used, the object's life history, all those things that make it more than just another 'old thing' and makes it valuable to your institution and your educational mission.

So, what are these standard descriptive elements?

- Type of Object (what is it?). We should have already answered this during the Registration phase of processing.
- Materials & Technique (what is it made of and how was it constructed?)
- Measurements
- Inscriptions and Markings (signatures, maker's marks, etc.)

- Distinguishing Features (anything about the object which would uniquely identify it so you can tell this one from another similar object?)
- Title (this applies mainly to art works; does the object have a title by which it is known or identified? Title also may apply to photographs).
- Subject (applies mainly to art works; what is represented in the work? Subject definitely applies to photographs also.)
- Date or Period (when was the object made?)
- Maker (who made or manufactured the object?)
- A short description of the object. Don't just say 'bowl' or 'shirt'. That is not enough. Describe the shape, the color, the foot, the rim, handle/no handle for the bowl. For a shirt: long sleeve, short sleeves; cuffs/no cuffs, type of collar, buttons/zipper, etc.
- Create an image of the artifact. Take photographs of the object (overall views and close-ups of marks/damage/repairs). Photographs can be digital, film or slides. Scan it (paper-based artifacts). Draw it (the old-fashioned way).
- Keep It Secure! This means not only keeping the object itself safe, but also protecting the records. Keep hard copies of your catalog offsite in a secure location; backup your computer databases regularly and keep copies offsite; restrict access to the main catalog to collection staff; place a copy with limited access at the disposal of researchers and monitor their use of it.

Cataloging also involves research and observation which establishes the object's place in history and connects it to the story that the museum is trying to tell. Without this story, the educational and display opportunities for each object in the collection are less that optimal.

The remaining elements will be addressed in subsequent issues. Stay tuned!

2008 TRAINING SCHEDULES

ONLINE TRAINING

- MS103: Basics of Museum Registration
Look for this class in January-February 2009
- MS207: Collections Management: Cataloging Your Collection
Look for this class in July 2009
- MS007: The Mission Statement: Is It Really That Important?
November 10-14, 2008

NEW CLASS

Collection Inventories
October 27 to November 21, 2008

WESTEND TRAINING CENTER

Collections Management in Times of Change
Check our website for upcoming classes

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.

(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: information@museumcollectionmgmt.com
Website: <http://museumcollectionmgmt.com>

Questions, comments or story suggestions are always welcome.)

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4830 E. Kansas Dr. Denver, CO 80246
(303) 757-7962

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