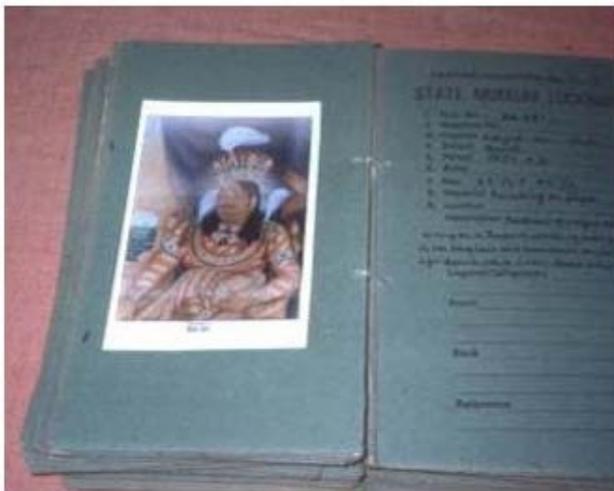


I. DOCUMENTATION OF MUSEUM COLLECTIONS

A GUIDE FOR DOCUMENTATION WORK FOR MUSEUMS IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES



For the Museum Section,
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ÉCOLE
DU PATRIMOINE
AFRICAIN



ICCROM

DOCUMENTATION OF MUSEUM COLLECTIONS. WHY? HOW?

Practical guide

**Anne Ambourouè Avaro,
with the contribution of Gaël de Guichen and Alain Godonou**

**DOCUMENTATION OF
MUSEUM COLLECTIONS.
WHY? HOW?**

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WHY? HOW?

Practical guide

Publication:

Written by: Anne Ambourouè Avaro (Ecole du Patrimoine Africain – EPA), with the contribution of
Gaël de Guichen (ICCROM) and Alain Godonou (Ecole du Patrimoine Africain – EPA)

Coordination for ICCROM: Isabelle Verger

Proofreading: Alain Godonou, Isabelle Verger

Translation: Michael Westlake (English), Claudia Pettinau (Spanish)

Layout and cover:

Illustrations : Flaubert Meye Edou

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Introduction

The ICOM code of ethics (<http://icom.museum/ethics.html>) and similar texts relating to professional ethics require that museum collections be documented.

“Documentation of collections. Museum collections should be documented according to accepted professional standards. Such documentation should include a full identification and description of each object, its associations, provenance, condition, treatment and present location. Such data should be kept in a secure environment and be supported by retrieval systems providing access to the information by the museum personnel and other legitimate users.” ICOM Code of Ethics, 2006, 2.20

Thus, in order to be considered professional and in compliance with the required standards, “...every museum should be capable of meeting the minimum standard whether it is a small community collection with one or two volunteers or a national institution with scores of staff and many thousands of visitors”, **Jerry Weber**, senior adviser, quality standards, MLA (Collections Link, <http://www.collectionslink.org.uk/accreditation>).

It was in order to help small museums and reach the minimum required standard of documentation for their collections that UNESCO and ICCROM commissioned two studies from the Ecole du Patrimoine Africain – EPA. One of these involved making an inventory of the various initiatives that have taken place over the last 20 years in small museums in sub-Saharan Africa in terms of collections documentation (manual and/or computerized), the other of reviewing existing documentation resources on the Internet, which could be used by small museums in order to guide them in the creation or reorganization of their documentation system. All of which in order to provide a useful tool to these museums in the form of a guide.

The Guide that we here provide is primarily directed at small museums (having less than 5000 objects) with limited resources, but it can also be of use to large establishments, since the principles are the same. It will allow institutions to have the minimum requirements **for a basic documentation system – we shall concentrate here on the “administrative” management of collections –**, by guiding them toward Internet resources that will enable either to start up a documentation system from scratch, or to improve the existing system. Most of these Internet resources have been published by EPA-ICCROM, CIDOC, the Museum Documentation Association through its Collections Link portal, the US National Park Service, the French Ministry of Culture, the Canadian Heritage Information Network (CHIN) and the Canadian Conservation Institute (CCI). EPA-ICCROM aide-mémoires have been available in paper form for many years and have been put online specially for this project.

The procedures shown here are the minimal requirements and are therefore simplified. Each institution will be able, if it so wishes, to adapt them to its own standards, or according to national standards.

1- Why document?

Museums acquire objects and create collections because the objects convey a significant message or messages. These may be variously historical, religious, economic, technological, and so on. When an object is moved from its place of origin and its context, its significance is reduced and becomes more reliant on the documentation linked to it.

Furthermore, when an object arrives at a museum, it begins a “new life”: it will be studied, positioned, exhibited, restored, loaned and transferred, and will be placed alongside many other objects. It will thus be necessary to identify it in a unique way, and to facilitate the management of every aspect of this new life.

The value of a collection (whether it be for purposes of research, education or interpretation), its safety and its accessibility therefore depend to a large extent on the quality of the documentation associated with it.

Documentation is thus the organization of information.

Basic documentation is needed for the “administrative” management of collection. It enables the museum quickly and effectively to:

- establish proof of ownership
- locate a specific object
- find out the total number of objects making up the collection
- carry out an inventory
- establish the (always unique) identity of an object
- link information to an object
- access information in an efficient and economical way (saving space, time or effort)
- contribute to the safety of collection
- carry out an insurance valuation

From this basic documentation it is possible to supplement it, if so desired, in order, among other things, to

- understand an object and bring it to life (history, use, social or religious value, etc.)
- present it in a permanent or temporary exhibition
- make it of interest to the public or researchers
- analyze collections with a view to making acquisitions
- have a record of the acts of conservation/restoration which the objects have undergone
- plan preventive conservation, organization of stores, etc.

Through their experience, museums have developed practices that are to a greater or lesser extent shared.

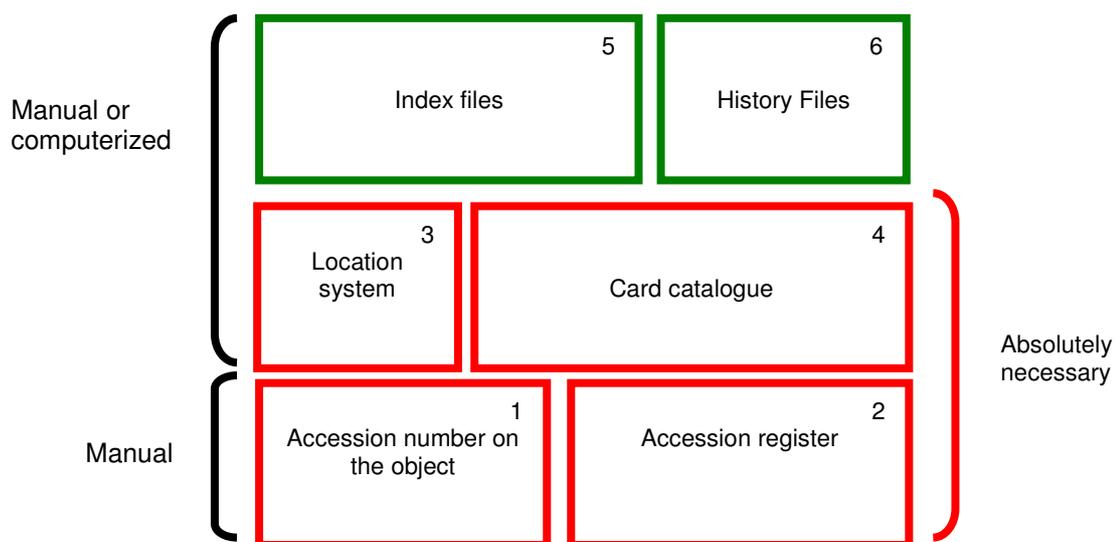
The documents containing information should together form a **system**, a so-called **documentation system**.

A **system** is defined as “a set of elements related both to each other and to their environment and organized in accordance with a goal¹”.

A museum’s documentation system is a set of elements (Accession number, Accession register, manual or computerized files, etc.) that are related to each other and to the museum environment and which are organized in order to manage the objects in the museum’s collection. The different information media of a museum’s documentation system are interdependent and enable cross-reference searches to be carried out. The information they contain is often duplicated, but organized in a different way.

¹ In Françoise Raynal and Alain Rieunier, Définir des objectifs pédagogiques, 1987, IPNETP-Les Nouvelles Editions Africaines, Abidjan

A documentation system is composed of the following 6 elements:



The 4 elements in red form the basic documentation on which this guide focuses. In the table below, some examples of their use show the relations between the different elements.

Use \ System elements	Accession number	Accession register	Card catalogue	Location system	Index files	Documentary dossiers
Proof that an object belongs to the museum	X	X				
Locating an object			X	X		
Knowing the total number of objects in the collection		X	X			
Carrying out an inventory or retrospective documentation	X	X	X	X	X	X
Analyzing the collections					X	
Launching collection campaigns					X	X
Designing an exhibition					X	X
Doing research					X	X
Planning preventive conservation					X	

2- How to set up a basic manual documentation system from scratch.

Once an object has been accepted by a museum, it should be listed as belonging to the collection. Its registration consists at a minimum of giving it an Accession number, writing the number on the object, listing the object in the Accession register and assigning it a permanent place in the museum.

The following reference points on good documentary practices provide you with the resources to create the basics of your documentation system, so as to have the minimum needed for the administrative management of the collections.

2-1 Accession number

The Accession number identifies each object in the collection in a unique way. It will never be given to any other object. It is the key to accessing all documents comprising the museum's documentation system, because it allows each object to be linked to the documents referring to it. It should be attached to the object.



Existing resources:

- ❖ Aide mémoire for Documentation in museums, n° 1, The accession register, § : Accession number, EPA-ICCROM

http://www.epa-prema.net/documents/ressources/1-Accession_register.pdf

The "Accession number" paragraph of this resource provides two accession number formats currently in use, as well as the steps to follow for numbering items comprising several parts.

- ❖ Aide mémoire for Documentation in museums, n° 2, Brief guide to the manual marking of objects, EPA-ICCROM

<http://www.epa-prema.net/documents/ressources/2-Marking.pdf>

Practical advice for marking or labeling objects.

- ❖ Labelling and marking objects, CIDOC

[http://cidoc.mediahost.org/FactSheet2\(en\)\(E1\).xml](http://cidoc.mediahost.org/FactSheet2(en)(E1).xml)

Clear and comprehensive resource, with practical information on how to mark and label objects. Easily printable.

- ❖ Placing registration numbers on paintings and sculptures, CCI notes (Canadian Conservation Institute), n° 1/5, Ottawa, 1994.

- ❖ Application of acquisition numbers on textiles, CCI notes (Canadian Conservation Institute) n° 13/8, Ottawa, 1994

<https://www.cci-icc.gc.ca/bookstore/index-e.cfm>

You will find practical information on marking and labeling objects. ICC Notes can be ordered on the ICC website or by fax, mail, telephone or e-mail. There is a charge, however.

- ❖ Numbering, Collections Link

<http://www.collectionslink.org.uk/index.cfm?ct=assets.assetDisplay/title/Numbering/assetId/186/fileDownload/true>

Useful resource which explains the various possible formats of accession numbers.

- ❖ Running a Museum: a Practical Handbook, Patrick J. Boylan (Ed.), UNESCO-ICOM, p. 21-22

<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0014/001410/141067e.pdf>

The paragraph on Numbering and marking of objects in the collection (p.21-22) gives general information on how to mark an artifact.

In French:

- ❖ Inventorier des collections de musées, § LES SECRETS DU NUMÉRO D'INVENTAIRE, Ministry of Culture, France.

<http://www.culture.gouv.fr/culture/infos-pratiques/fiches/fiche3.htm>

This resource makes reference to the DMF (Direction des Musées de France) standards, particularly in relation to the columns of the Accession register. The accession number format described here is the three-part format. At the bottom of the document you will find the basic procedure to follow for affixing the accession number to the object. In French only.

In Spanish:

- ❖ Lina Nagel Vega. Editora. *Manual de Registro y Documentación de Bienes Culturales*. DIBAM, GETTY. Chile. (2008).
<http://www.aatespanol.cl/taa/publico/portada.htm>
- ❖ Luis Caballero Zoreda. *La documentación museológica*. Boletín de la ANABAD, Tomo 38, Nº 4, (1988), pags. 455-496
<http://dialnet.unirioja.es/servlet/articulo?codigo=798916>
- ❖ Luis Caballero Zoreda. *A propósito del "sistema de documentación para museos"*. Boletín de la ANABAD, Tomo 33, Nº 3, (1983), pags. 493-500.
<http://dialnet.unirioja.es/servlet/articulo?codigo=964749>

If these resources become unavailable, you will be able to find some of them on the EPA website:
<http://www.epa-prema.net/documents/ressources/number.htm>. They were captured in March 2009 and checked in June 2010.

2-2 The Accession register

The accession register is an official administrative document. **All** objects in the collection should be listed in it in chronological order of accession number.

- It proves that the object belongs to the museum
- It serves as the basis for setting up the museum's entire documentation system
- It is the museum's memory

It should be **bound in hardback** format and its pages should be **numbered**.

Information relating to the object is arranged in columns. The number and names of these columns vary according to the museum.

Two photocopies should be made of the accession register. One, kept in a different place from the original, will be retained as is and regularly updated. The other can be used as a working tool.



From the moment you begin describing the objects, attention must be paid to the terms you use, since this will be important later, when your museum moves on to computerizing the data (See Section 5, How to computerize the system § 1). This is why we have here included a resource on describing objects, so that you can begin thinking about the words you will be using. We recommend that you look at 5-1 where there are further resources that will help your work on the standardized description of your collections. This will enable you to save time when you move on to computerization.

Existing resources:

- ❖ Aide mémoire for Documentation in museums, n° 1, The accession register, EPA-ICCROM
http://www.epa-prema.net/documents/ressources/1-Accession_register.pdf
This presents the Accession register: format, headings, security.
- ❖ Aide mémoire for Documentation in museums, n° 3, Recommendations for the description of objects, EPA-ICCROM
http://www.epa-prema.net/documents/ressources/3-Object_description.pdf
Here you will find advice on describing objects and on standardization.
- ❖ Aide mémoire for Documentation in museums, n° 4, Taking measurements, EPA-ICCROM
http://www.epa-prema.net/documents/ressources/4-Taking_measurements.pdf
Practical advice on measuring an object: equipment, units of measurement, procedure.
- ❖ Registration step by step: when an object enters the museum, CIDOC
[http://cidoc.mediahost.org/FactSheet1\(en\)\(E1\).xml](http://cidoc.mediahost.org/FactSheet1(en)(E1).xml)
Relatively clear and simple overall, although some parts are rather less clear than others. It explains, step by step, the procedure to adopt for registering an object when it arrives at the museum, from issuing a receipt through the creation of index files. The recommended procedure may be rather lengthy for what we know of the targeted museums.
- ❖ Accession records, Collections Link
<http://www.collectionslink.org.uk/index.cfm?ct=assets.assetDisplay/title/Accession%20Records/assetId/155/fileDownload/true>
The various steps and documents needed for correct registering of collections. Although referring to MDA practices, this is a good useful resource that may be adapted to the targeted museums if necessary.
- ❖ Accessioning, in *Museum Handbook, Part II, Museum Records*, US National Park Service

<http://www.nps.gov/history/museum/publications/MHII/mh2ch2firstfile.pdf>

This useful resource is in the form of a series of questions and answers referring to situations that are typically encountered in museums. It is designed for the United States National Park Service museums, hence all the references and instructions concern these. However, there are good examples, advice and instructions that can be applied to many museums.

- ❖ Documenting museum collections, in Museum Handbook, Part II, Museum Records, § C and F, US National Park Service

<http://www.nps.gov/history/museum/publications/MHII/mh2ch1.pdf>

This takes the form of a series of questions and answers. Those concerning the workspace, the equipment and the protection of documents will be useful.

In French:

- ❖ Inventorier des collections de musées, § LES SECRETS DU NUMÉRO D'INVENTAIRE, Ministère de la culture, France

<http://www.culture.gouv.fr/culture/infos-pratiques/fiches/fiche3.htm>

This resource presents the characteristics of the Accession register. It makes reference to the DMF (Direction des Musées de France) standards, particularly in relation to the columns of the Accession register. The DMF standard requires a "14-column register". Although rather old (1995), this is a useful resource and a degree of common sense will allow readers to distance themselves in regard to the DMF standard.

In Spanish:

- ❖ Lic. Armando Gagliardi, Ant. Patricia Morales.(Coord). *Normativas Técnicas para Museos. Dirección de Museos de Venezuela. Venezuela. (1993-94).*

http://museosdevenezuela.org/Documentos/Normativas/Normativa3_1.shtml

If these resources become unavailable, you will be able to find some of them on the EPA website:

<http://www.epa-prema.net/documents/ressources/register.htm>. They were captured in March 2009 and checked in June 2010.

2-3 The Card catalogue

The card catalogue, or catalogue, is the basic file of the documentation system. The cards in it are classified in ascending order of accession number, in the same order as the accession register. They should not be removed from the catalogue. For this reason they are perforated at the bottom and held in place in the file by a metal bar. These catalogue cards show the location code of the object concerned. This is why the card catalogue should not be made publicly available.

Existing resources:

- ❖ Aide mémoire for Documentation in museums, n° 7, Cards and files, EPA-ICCROM

http://www.epa-prema.net/documents/ressources/7-Cards_files.pdf

Definitions of manual cards and files, description of catalogue cards and index files, separators and classification system.

- ❖ Registration step by step: when an object enters the museum, CIDOC

[http://cidoc.mediahost.org/FactSheet1\(en\)\(E1\).xml](http://cidoc.mediahost.org/FactSheet1(en)(E1).xml), Stage 4

Stage 4 gives examples of different headings on the cards of the card catalogue.

- ❖ Cataloguing objects, Collections Link

http://www.collectionslink.org.uk/manage_information/doc_cataloguing/doc_cataloguing_factsheet

Definition of a Card catalogue, list of the main information to be included in it, suggestions on how to complete the cards and on the formats and the classification system.

In Spanish:

- ❖ **Manuales de Inventario de Bienes de Interés Cultural**, Desarrollado por: Ministerio de Cultura, Programa de Inventario y Registro del Patrimonio Cultural Colombiano, Dirección de Patrimonio Colombia

<http://www.mincultura.gov.co/?idcategoria=1821>

- ❖ **Guía para el inventario, catalogación y documentación de colecciones de museos: arqueología, arte, etnografía, historia.** Ministerio de Cultura, Museo Nacional de Colombia, programa Red Nacional de Museos, Colombia, 2004

[http://www.museoscolombianos.gov.co/inbox/files/docs/guiainventario.pdf?](http://www.museoscolombianos.gov.co/inbox/files/docs/guiainventario.pdf?PHPSESSID=b848a65024200492c3de8a0271b10d43)

[PHPSESSID=b848a65024200492c3de8a0271b10d43](http://www.museoscolombianos.gov.co/inbox/files/docs/guiainventario.pdf?PHPSESSID=b848a65024200492c3de8a0271b10d43)

- ❖ Blanca Noval. **Manual para la elaboración de una ficha de identificación de un bien cultural.**

CONACULTA-INAH. México. (s/f)

http://www.conservacionyrestauracion.inah.gob.mx/txe/manualficha_ident.pdf

❖ Martha Isabel Tapia Gonzalez. *Instructivo para el llenado de la ficha institucional de identificación de Monumentos Históricos muebles e inmuebles por destino*. CONACULTA. INAH. México. (2007)

http://www.conservacionyrestauracion.inah.gob.mx/txe/instruc_fichaident.pdf

❖ *Inventario de Bienes Culturales de la Iglesia en Chile. Manual y Fichas de Inventario* Mauricio Infante V., y Comisión Nacional de Bienes Culturales de la Iglesia, Conferencia Episcopal de Chile, 2008.

<http://www.iglesia.cl/bienes culturales/>

❖ Isabel Bravo Juega, *Normas para desarrollar la ficha-tipo de inventario para museos militares*, MILITARIA, Revista de Cultura Militar, No 7, Servicios de Publicaciones, U.C.M. Madrid, (1995)

<http://revistas.ucm.es/amm/02148765/articulos/MILT9595110403A.PDF>

❖ Lina Nagel Vega. Editora. *Manual de Registro y Documentación de Bienes Culturales*. DIBAM, GETTY. Chile. (2008).

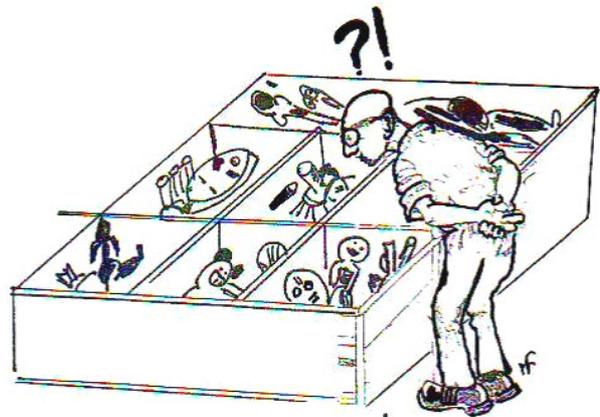
<http://www.aatespanol.cl/taa/publico/portada.htm>

If these resources become unavailable, you will be able to find some of them on the EPA website:

<http://www.epa-prema.net/documents/ressources/catalogue.htm>. They were captured in March 2009 and checked in June 2010.

2-4 Location system

The permanent location of all objects in a collection should be logged, as well as when they are moved (loan, conservation, photography, etc.). This will enable objects to be found easily and losses and thefts to be detected promptly.



2-4-1 The location code

The location code indicates the permanent location of every object in the museum, so that:

- an object can be found
- removed
- and returned to the right place,

in the least time and with least effort. It is preferably written on the catalogue card of the artefact, or if there is no card catalogue, in the Remarks column of the photocopy of the Accession register.

2-4-2 Loans and object movement register

The loans and object movement register is a document whose pages are numbered and stamped. Whenever an object is moved, either from the permanent exhibition or from the store (for loan, study, to be photographed, or for conservation or restoration, etc.), this is recorded in the register.

For each object, there will be a written entry (in ink) of the accession number, the reason for moving it, the person taking the object, its destination, the removal date, and then, when the object is returned, the date of the return and the name of the person who receives it.

Existing resources:

❖ Aide mémoire for Documentation in museums, n° 5, The location system, EPA-ICCROM

http://www.epa-prema.net/documents/ressources/5-Location_system.pdf

This resource gives practical advice on the format of location codes and their use.

❖ Aide mémoire for Documentation in museums, n° 6, The Loans and Object Movement Register, EPA-ICCROM

http://www.epa-prema.net/documents/ressources/6-Loans_register.pdf

Characteristics of the Loans and Object Movement Register, function and column headings.

❖ Location and movement control, Collections Link

<http://www.collectionslink.org.uk/index.cfm?ct=assets.assetDisplay/title/Location%20and%20Movement%20Control/assetId/184/fileDownload/true>

Useful resource that explains why it is important to keep track of an object's movements, and the various means and tools to do this, etc.

In Spanish:

- ❖ Lic. Armando Gagliardi, Ant. Patricia Morales. (Coord). *Normativas Técnicas para Museos. Dirección de Museos de Venezuela. Venezuela. (1993-94).*

http://museosdevenezuela.org/Documentos/Normativas/Normativa3_4.shtml

If these resources become unavailable, you will be able to find some of them on the EPA website:

http://www.epa-prema.net/documents/ressources/location_syst.htm. They were captured in March 2009 and checked in June 2010.

2-5 Other

Depending on the policies of different countries or the supervising authorities, the standards applied may include other basic documents, such as entry records, transfer of title forms, etc.

Existing resources:

- ❖ Entry records, Collections Link

<http://www.collectionslink.org.uk/index.cfm?ct=assets.assetDisplay/title/Entry%20Records/assetId/176/fileDownload/true>

The documents and procedures recommended by the MDA for all objects entering the museum, for whatever reason (loan, study, identification, etc.) and however long its period of time in the museum.

- ❖ Accession records, Collections Link

<http://www.collectionslink.org.uk/index.cfm?ct=assets.assetDisplay/title/Accession%20Records/assetId/155/fileDownload/true>

The documents and procedures recommended by the MDA for the acquisition and recording of collections acquired by a museum, as well as some basic definitions and advice.

In Spanish:

- ❖ Lic. Armando Gagliardi, Ant. Patricia Morales.(Coord). *Normativas Técnicas para Museos. Dirección de Museos de Venezuela. Venezuela. (1993-94).*

http://museosdevenezuela.org/Documentos/Normativas/Normativa3_2.shtml

http://museosdevenezuela.org/Documentos/Normativas/Normativa3_6.shtml

If these resources become unavailable, you will be able to find some of them on the EPA website:

<http://www.epa-prema.net/documents/ressources/other.htm>. They were captured in March 2009 and checked in June 2010.

3- How to reactivate an abandoned or incomplete documentation system.

3-1 A word of warning

Initiating a documentation project is not without its risks. Documentation reflects the museum's professional practices, and the history of its collections and of the people who are responsible for them. Among the reasons for documentation are checking the inventory or retrospective documentation, which should be an operation regularly carried out by all museums. Unfortunately, all too often this turns out not to be the case.

Thus all too often also, a documentation project reveals that the collections are not complete (or that certain objects have been substituted). Now comes the difficult part. How should the situation or situations revealed be interpreted? Who should be held responsible? The person initiating the project? His or her predecessor? Their predecessors? In short, all this can result in a police investigation, something that is rarely agreeable and can have unpredictable consequences – especially since, according to the code of professional ethics, losing objects in a museum, for whatever reason, amounts to professional misconduct.

Therefore it is strongly advisable to initiate such a project only with the agreement and support of the supervisory authorities, to avoid doing it alone, to undertake it as a team with, if need be, a representative of the supervisory authority, and to have the final report signed by all the members of the team, while of course taking care to mention any critical situation in relation to the collections.

3-2 Non-exhaustive evaluation of different possible situations

In your museum, what is the current situation? You will need to analyze the existing state of affairs, starting from the recommended minimum needed (Section 2) to make an assessment and establish the necessary courses of action.

The resources cited in Section 2 will help you determine the required standard, and will also enable you to find out what to aim for.

A suggestion

- **Think first of all solutions that will allow you to bring the existing system up to standard** (see example 3-2-1.1), without having to redo everything, because the more one starts from scratch, the more mistakes one makes and the more discouraged one becomes. Also avoid solutions that require excessive handling of the objects, adding numbers, or erasing accession numbers, which can result in damage to objects.

3-2-1 Accession numbers

1- My museum's accession number format does not correspond to any of those shown in the cited resource documents. Should we alter the accession numbers on our objects?

No! In general, it is better to avoid changing your numbering system and renumbering your collections. Doing so is a long and costly process and is bad for the objects, and can be a source of mistakes. Don't forget that the key thing about an accession number is that it be unique to each object, and that it enable all the documents referring to an object to be linked to it.

2- There are several object numbering formats that have been used by different curators. The register therefore includes numbers in different formats. Should we standardize, by choosing one format and applying it to the objects that don't have it, which would mean adding a number to each object concerned, and making the necessary change in the register and on all documents pertaining to the object?

No. As stated above, the important thing about an accession number is that it be unique to each object, and that it enable all the documents referring to it to be linked to it. If this objective is attained, it doesn't matter if the numbers are not in the same format. Nevertheless, in future keep to a single

format and describe it in the Procedural Manual, in order to perpetuate this choice for future generations of curators.

3- We have been using an accession number format, but we would like to change it. Do we have to renumber all the currently numbered objects?

No, again as stated above, the important thing about an accession number is that it be unique to each object, and that it enable all the documents referring to it to be linked to it. If you really need to change the accession number format, it is not necessary to alter the old numbers. Begin your new numbering system with new acquisitions, and explain in your Procedural Manual why you changed the format and what the new format is.

4- Our Accession numbers contain the initials of the museum/department which the objects belong to. Is this a mistake?

No, this is perfectly acceptable.

3-2-2 Accession register

Is the situation of your museum exactly as described in 2-2?

- If so, well done!
- If not, take the necessary steps to improve the situation.

In the latter case, there follow a number of scenarios that we have encountered in our missions in various museums. If any apply to your situation, they may help you improve the situation in your museum.

1- We have a “register” like the one described above, except that it is not bound or in hard covers (it consists of loose sheets / it is in notebook form). However, the columns are more or less the same and all the object are listed in it, in chronological order of accession number.

1a- Contact a printer or a bookbinder to find out whether it is possible to bind and put covers on this document, so that you can then use it as a register.

1b- If it is not possible to get the document properly bound and covered, you can,

- in the case of loose pages, hold these together with a binder or put them in a flapped folder (if possible made of non-acidic cardboard). Close this list, adding under the last entry, “List closed on [date] due to non-conforming format. Further entries will be made in Register no. 2”, signed by the curator/director. Then obtain a register that conforms to standard, title it “Register no. 2”, and continue recording your acquisitions in this new register. Make sure you carefully keep the old list.
- in the case of a notebook, close it, adding under the last entry, “List closed on [date] due to non-conforming format. Further entries will be made in Register no. 2”, signed by the curator/director. Then obtain a register that conforms to standard, title it “Register no. 2”, and continue recording your acquisitions in this new register. Carefully keep the old notebook.

2- We have several complete and incomplete registers.

Here you must use your common sense. We cannot cover or list all possible cases (different registers with different accession numbers, different registers with different accession number formats, different registers with the same objects recorded, etc.).

You should bear in mind that the important thing is that each object in the collection be recorded in a single document which has the characteristics indicated in the resources in 2-2.

You can, however, use the various registers as resources, since they may contain information concerning the objects (provided that this is not contradictory).

Use the complete register by preference if it conforms to the norms. If the accession number format also conforms to the norms, you will not need to remove the numbers from all the objects.

3- We have a register, as described in 2-2, but not all the objects in the collections are listed in it. The last entry was made several months/years ago.

Bring your register up to date. That is to say, record in it all objects that have not so far been listed there, after first giving them an accession number (if this has not been done already) and affixing the number to each object.

4- We have a list of objects, without accession numbers

Obtain a register that conforms to the norms, give each object an accession number, affix the number to the object, and list each object in the collection in the new register, while making use, if possible, of the information contained in the list.

Keep the list as an archive document.

5- We had an accession register, but it has disappeared.

The “disappearance” of an accession register is a serious matter, since the accession register is an administrative document that records everything making up your collection. Thus if it falls into the wrong hands, it can be used to plan or conceal a theft.

- Carry out a thorough search of the museum (stores, offices, exhibition rooms, restoration laboratories, teaching workshops, etc.) to make sure that the accession register is not there.

- Notify your supervisory authority of the disappearance, if this has not been done already.

- Carry out an internal inquiry to find out, if possible, the date and circumstances of the disappearance of the accession register, in order possibly to determine who may be responsible and to take the necessary measures (possibly through your supervisory authority, if this is the procedure), such as notifying the police, etc.

- Strengthen security in the museum: change the locks, change or strengthen the access procedures to the collections, make the security staff and museum team aware of the situation, regularly check the stores and exhibition rooms.

- Make a new accession register, taking care to indicate on the opening page that it is a reconstructed register following the theft of the previous register:

- 5a- If you possess a photocopy of the lost accession register, use it to re-create a new register conforming to the norms. It will suffice to recopy the photocopy or make a fax, which you will then have bound. If the photocopy is not up to date, record any objects not listed there in the new accession register.

- 5b- If you do not possess a photocopy of the register, list all the objects in a new register in ascending order of accession number.

- And if, after reconstituting the register, you find the old register at some later point, we advise you to return to the old one if it conforms to the norms, adding any entries to it that have been made in the meantime. Keep the other register in the archives.

6- We do not have an accession register but we have field cards for all/most of the objects

Obtain a register that conforms to the norms, and record in it all the objects in the collection, after having allocated and affixed an accession number to each object, making use of the information contained in the field cards.

Classify your field cards in ascending order of accession number and archive them.

7- We record in the register all objects that arrive at the museum, even temporarily. Is this a good procedure?

In fact some museums do register all objects arriving at the museum, even if their acquisition by the museum has not yet been decided. This practice can, in the long term, lead to confusion: if there are objects that are “missing”, one does not know whether they are missing because it has been forgotten to specify that they have been returned to their owner or whether they have disappeared (theft, loss, etc.). In addition, this practice does not give a clear idea of what is in the collection.

Other museums have an entry register, in which are recorded all objects arriving at the museum (for reasons of study, or acquisition, or for consideration prior to possible acquisition). If an object is accepted for the collection, it is then registered in the accession register; if not, it is returned to its owner, with the return date recorded in the entry register. This procedure avoids overloading the accession register, and ensures that only objects belonging to the museum are listed there.

We recommend the second option.

3-2-3 The Card catalogue

Is the situation in your museum strictly as described in 2-3?

- If so, well done!
- If not, take the necessary measures to improve your situation.

In the latter case, there follows various scenarios that we have encountered in our missions in various museums. If it applies to your situation, it may help you improve the situation in your museum.

1- We have not got a card catalogue.

Create one by following guidelines in the recommended resources.

2- Our card catalogue is incomplete.

Complete it by following guidelines and standards in the recommended resources.

3-2-4 Location system

Is the situation in your museum strictly as described in 2-4?

- If so, well done!
- If not, take the necessary measures to improve your situation.

In the latter case, there follows various scenarios that we have encountered in our missions in various museums. If it applies to your situation, it may help you improve the situation in your museum.

1- We have 1500 objects stored in the museum store. The store is divided up into 18 sections. We have not numbered the sections, but we have given them a letter of the alphabet. But we have numbered the shelves. The location codes are shown in the master cards of the objects. Do we have to redo the location system of our store, by numbering the sections, and changing all the cards as a result?

It is not really necessary. When you acquire new shelving, number these, starting from 1. You will therefore have, for example, some sections of shelving carrying the letters A to R, and others 1 to n. The important thing is that the codes be logical, that they are not duplicated, and that they are written in the documents that will enable the object to be found.

2- We do not record movements of objects in a loans and object movement register.

Buy a register, decide on the headings, and in it write down all movements of objects in the collection.

3- We record object movements in a ring-binder.

Buy a register, decide on the headings, and in it write down all movements of objects in the collection.

4- How to check the inventory.

Checking the inventory involves confirming the actual presence of every object belonging to the museum, i.e. recorded in the accession register, in general by comparing existing objects with information held in the accession register.

For this operation, which will generally take some time and a considerable amount of concentration, you will also use the loans and object movement register to check the whereabouts of the objects not found in the museum.



Existing resources:

- ❖ Aide-mémoire for Documentation in museums, n° 8, Inventory control, EPA-ICCROM

http://www.epa-prema.net/documents/ressources/8-Inventory_control.pdf

This aide-memoire explains, step by step, how to carry an inventory check.

- ❖ Retrospective Documentation and Making an Inventory, Collections Link

<http://www.collectionslink.org.uk/index.cfm?ct=assets.assetDisplay/title/Retrospective%20Documentation%20and%20Making%20an%20Inventory/assetId/189/fileDownload/true>

Description of the process to be followed for making an inventory.

In French:

- ❖ Circulaire n° 2006/006 du 27 juillet 2006 relative aux opérations de récolement des collections des musées de France, Ministère de la culture, France.

http://www.culture.gouv.fr/documentation/joconde/fr/partenaires/AIDEMUSEES/circulaire_recolement2006-006.pdf

A very useful PDF document (416 Ko) which can be downloaded, copied and/or printed. It explains the planning and implementation of an inventory check (retrospective documentation), as well as the results of and follow-up to the operation. A model retrospective documentation card is also provided, together with instructions for use.

In Spanish:

- ❖ Lic. Armando Gagliardi, Ant. Patricia Morales.(Coord). *Normativas Técnicas para Museos. Dirección de Museos de Venezuela. Venezuela. (1993-94).*

http://museosdevenezuela.org/Documentos/Normativas/Normativa3_3.shtml

If these resources become unavailable, you will be able to find some of them on the EPA website:

<http://www.epa-prema.net/documents/ressources/inventory.htm>. They were captured in March 2009 and checked in June 2010.

5- How to computerize the system.

Moving over to computerization involves a number of prerequisites. The main ones are the standardization of the vocabulary used to describe the objects, choosing and obtaining the equipment best suited to your needs and environment, training the staff in how to use it, and having the means to carry out its maintenance.



5-1 Standardization of data

Some objects can be described in an exact, even coded, way, following an established convention. This, for instance, is the case with musical instruments. Rigorous scientific studies have been carried out by ethnomusicologists, and there exist description grids for each type of instrument.

Standardized descriptions are very often associated with a particular discipline (e.g. ethnomusicology, archeology, natural history, etc.)

So that the documentation may be standardized, it is advisable, insofar as possible, to use the **same vocabulary and the same descriptive system** for objects and similar items in a given museum. To this end, a **thesaurus** or a **list** (glossary) is most often used. The latter, unlike a thesaurus, is not or is only slightly hierarchized. A number of thesauruses are available, according to disciplines, subjects, etc.

If you do this from the outset, even if your museum is not computerized, it will allow a more efficient use of collection management software when it is deployed by your institution.

Existing resources:

- ❖ Aide-mémoire for Documentation in museums, n° 3, Recommendations for the description of objects, EPA-ICCROM

http://www.epa-prema.net/documents/ressources/3-Object_description.pdf

Here you will find a number of suggestions for describing objects and on standardization.

- ❖ Handbook of standards, Documenting African collections, ICOM

<http://archives.icom.museum/afidoc/light/welcome.html>

This manual is available online but is also published in paper format. It is useful even for users who do not adhere to AFRICOM standards. It provides a thesaurus, or rather terminology lists for different areas: country names, categories by function, materials, etc.

- ❖ Vocabulary of basic Terms for Cataloguing Costume, ICOM

<http://www.mda.org.uk/costume/vbt00e.htm>

Although this resource is concerned mainly with European dress, it may provide ideas or vocabulary for our targeted museums and offers a framework that can be added to. Images help some aspects of costume to be better understood.

- ❖ Thesaurus principles and practice, Willpower Information, Information Management Consultants

<http://www.willpowerinfo.co.uk/thesprin.htm>

Good introduction to issues of standardization and thesauruses. Rather complicated toward the end of the document.

- ❖ Terminology Control, Collections Link

<http://www.collectionslink.org.uk/index.cfm?ct=assets.assetDisplay/title/Terminology%20Control/assetId/190/fileDownload/true>

Good short introduction to checking terminology and syntax.

In French:

- ❖ Vocabulaires scientifiques, Ministère de la culture, France

<http://www.culture.gouv.fr/documentation/joconde/fr/partenaires/AIDEMUSEES/telechargement.htm>

These lists (lexicons and thesauruses), which are updated twice a year by the Joconde network, can be downloaded in RTF format for offline use. They contain the terminologies for use, techniques and materials, study methods, legal status, periods, subjects, iconography, etc., for the documentation of the fine arts collections. In French only.

- ❖ Définitions des techniques, médiums, matériaux et supports (déc. 2003), Ministère de la culture, France

<http://www.culture.gouv.fr/documentation/joconde/fr/partenaires/AIDEMUSEES/def-techniques1.htm>

or

<http://www.culture.gouv.fr/documentation/joconde/fr/partenaires/AIDEMUSEES/def-tech.rtf> (Word document)

This list of terminology can be downloaded in RTF format for offline use, and can be used to document fine arts collections even by museums that do not belong to the Joconde network. In French only.

If these resources become unavailable, you will be able to find some of them on the EPA website: <http://www.epa-prema.net/documents/ressources/computerisation.htm>. They were captured in March 2009 and checked in June 2010.

5-2 Equipment and software

There is a whole range of possible computer solutions for managing your collections. You can arrange to set up an in-house or customized data base, or you can obtain a ready-made system commercially. There are various ways of choosing and setting up new systems.

Existing resources:

- ❖ Collections Management Software Selection, CHIN/RCIP

http://www.pro.rcip-chin.gc.ca/gestion_collections-collections_management/selection_logiciel-software_selection/index-eng.jsp

Excellent online course that guides you through the process of defining your needs and helps create methods for evaluating, selecting, implementing and maintaining a computerized system. Provides theory, advice, references and exercises for each of the nine modules.

- ❖ Criteria Checklist, CHIN/RCIP

<http://www.pro.rcip-chin.gc.ca/sommaire-summary/evaluation-review-eng.jsp>

A list for helping choose a collection management software package. It reviews most aspects of collection management, and indicates those considered variously to be essential, desirable or unnecessary. The list can be downloaded. It is not directive – it is up to the user to decide what he or she needs.

- ❖ Capture Your Collections, Small Museum Version, CHIN/RCIP

http://www.pro.rcip-chin.gc.ca/contenu_numerique-digital_content/petits_musees-small_museum/index-eng.jsp

Online course made up of nine modules, specially designed to help voluntary workers, curators and managers in regional, local or specialized museums to better manage the process of digitizing images. It deals with technical information on images and digitization, image management, costs, legal problems, standards, etc.

In Spanish:

- ❖ Andrés Carretero Pérez, et al., *Normalización Documental de Museos: Elementos para una aplicación informática de Gestión Museográfica*. Ministerio de Educación y Cultura, España, 1998

<http://www.mcu.es/museos/MC/NDM/index.html>

- ❖ Georgina DeCarli, Christina Tsagaraki. *Un Inventario de Bienes Culturales ¿Por qué y para quién?* ILAM. Publicación Electrónica, Mayo 2006.

<http://documentos.ilam.org/ILAMDOC/IBC-porqueYparaquien.pdf>

- ❖ Gonzalo Lara Pacheco, Alberto Castro Thompson, Clara López Guzmán, Guillermo Chávez Sánchez,

Dante Ortiz Ancona. *Digitalización de colecciones. Texto e imagen. Volumen 1*. UNAM. México (2008).

<http://www.digitalizacion.unam.mx/>

If these resources become unavailable, you will be able to find some of them on the EPA website:

<http://www.epa-prema.net/documents/ressources/computerisation.htm>. They were captured in March 2009 and checked in June 2010.

6- How to maintain the documentation system.

It is essential to keep your documentation system up to date, whether it be manual or computerized.

All new acquisitions should be recorded in the accession register within a week of their acquisition. Objects which are no longer part of the museum's collection – as a result of being stolen, destroyed or disposed of – should be marked as such in the accession register.

If you have a manual documentation system, consisting of an accession register, card catalogue (or computerized catalogue) and index files, it is essential to keep the files in order. Any card removed should be systematically returned to where it came from. A file which is not in order is almost useless, since access to the information will no longer be possible on a logical basis.

The files should be kept up to date. All newly arrived objects should be inventoried, and any changes should be systemically entered in all files pertaining to the object concerned. In this way, the files do not risk becoming “fossilized” or obsolete.

If you have a computerized system, the above recommendations also apply. Any new acquisition or any modifications in regard to an object – alteration of its position, restoration, additional information concerning the object, etc. – should be entered into the collections management software.

Documentation should evolve with the object, following its trajectory both before and after its arrival in the museum. If the documentation system is not kept up to date, it will quickly become useless.

There are two essential elements for keeping a consistent and up-to-date documentation system, as explained below.

6-1 The registrar

It is essential to appoint a registrar. He or she will be responsible for updating the documentation system.

No object shall be moved without authorization by the registrar, who will enter long-term moves on the object's card and all moves in the loans and object movement register.

No new acquisition shall be put into the stores without having been recorded by the registrar in the accession register and without a catalogue card being created or the acquisition being entered in the collection management software.

Existing resources:

❖ Aide mémoire for Documentation in museums, n° 9, The Registrar, EPA-ICCROM

<http://www.epa-prema.net/documents/ressources/9-Registrar.pdf>

The missions, tasks and qualities required of a registrar.

❖ Collections Theft Response Procedures, p. 12, Registrar, 2001, Getty Conservation Institute

http://www.getty.edu/conservation/publications/pdf_publications/theftresponse.pdf

Simple resource in PDF format (256 Ko) which explains on page 12 the missions and tasks of the registrar.

In Spanish:

❖ Lic. Armando Gagliardi, Ant. Patricia Morales.(Coord). *Normativas Técnicas para Museos.* Dirección de Museos de Venezuela. Venezuela. (1993-94).

http://museosdevenezuela.org/Documentos/Normativas/Normativa1_4.shtml#Funciones

If these resources become unavailable, you will be able to find some of them on the EPA website:

<http://www.epa-prema.net/documents/ressources/registrar.htm>. They were captured in March 2009 and checked in June 2010.

6-2 The Procedural Manual

The Procedural Manual contains clear instructions for standardizing the recording of information about the collections in a museum and for showing how the documentation system functions. The registrar

will record the procedures used for the documentation of collections in this manual and will keep it updated if the procedures change.

The Procedural Manual shall remain in the museum, and will be handed over to successive registrars. In this way, whoever may be the person responsible for documentation, the procedures will stay the same. This will ensure that documents are standardized and that the procedures are adhered to.

Existing resources:

❖ Developing a Documentation Procedural Manual, Collections Link

<http://www.collectionslink.org.uk/index.cfm?ct=assets.assetDisplay/title/Developing%20a%20Documentation%20Procedural%20Manual/assetId/169/fileDownload/true>

This resource will help you design a Procedural Manual for your museum, by providing you with a basic Procedural Manual plan which you can adapt to your specific requirements.

❖ Documentation Procedural Manual Template, Collections Link

<http://www.collectionslink.org.uk/index.cfm?ct=assets.assetDisplay/title/Procedural%20Manual%20Template/assetId/310/fileDownload/true>

A model in RTF format for writing a Procedural Manual, which may help you design your museum's Procedural Manual. If you use this, do not forget that it is an English model, and is therefore based on MDA recommendations. You will need to adapt it according to your particular situation.

If these resources become unavailable, you will be able to find some of them on the EPA website:

<http://www.epa-prema.net/documents/ressources/manual.htm>. They were captured in March 2009 and checked in June 2010.

Conclusion

Documenting collections is a professional duty, without which a museum does not deserve to be called a museum.

We hope that this Guide will help you to see this a little more clearly and will provide you with the basic answers that will enable everyone to find their own solutions to the many problems they will face in the context of a documentation project.

Remember that most of the resources listed in this Guide are Internet publications, and that they can therefore disappear or change their address at any time. To reduce this risk, we decided, *for most of them*, to host them as well on the EPA (Ecole du Patrimoine Africain) server. We also give you both the original link, which we advise you to visit first, and an alternative link in case the original becomes inaccessible. This alternative link may, for technical reasons, display slight differences, for example in terms of page layout.

For some aspects of the documentation, the resources listed here will not be a substitute for training. Moreover, if you have the opportunity and means for this, get in contact with institutions that offer thematic training in documentation of collections. We cannot here offer an exhaustive list, since it would be always liable to be subject to modification. However, international organizations such as UNESCO and ICCROM, which offer a degree of permanence, will always be able to direct you, if need be, to the right references.