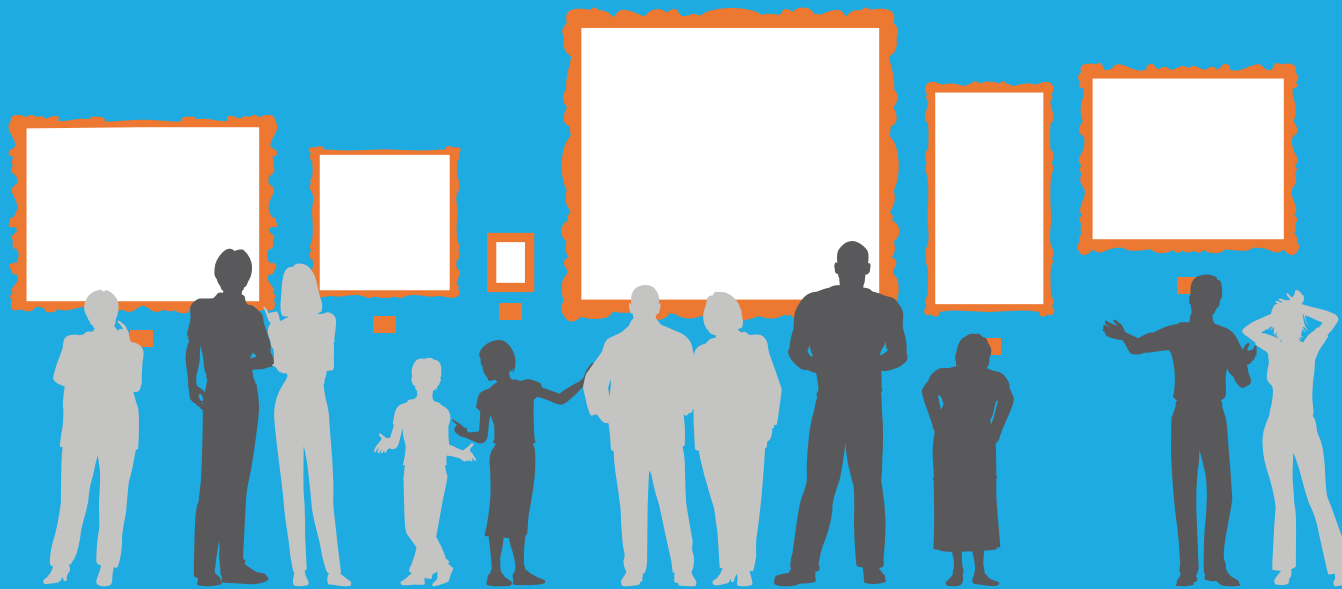


BEST PRACTICES

FOR COLLECTIONS DOCUMENTATION AND OBJECT CATALOGUING





BEST PRACTICES FOR COLLECTIONS DOCUMENTATION AND OBJECT CATALOGUING

Tracking detailed object information is essential to the health of any collection. Not only does adhering to high collection information standards preserve information for the future, but it also makes day-to-day activities—from preparing exhibition lists to managing conservation work—more efficient.

Standardizing collection information is facilitated by an enterprise Collections Management System (CMS) combined with a good understanding of how to best utilize the software to create suitable collection information standards for your own collection. Let's take a step back and look at what it means to properly record collection information, and how to best go about it.

COLLECTIONS DOCUMENTATION, OBJECT CATALOGUING AND COLLECTIONS MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS

COLLECTIONS DOCUMENTATION

Permanently recorded supporting evidence of the acquisition, preservation, management, and intellectual use of museum collections. Collections documentation ensures collection information is protected and secured.

OBJECT CATALOGUING

Recording the identification, history, and description of an object. The cataloguing process also documents how the object is managed such as, accessioning, location and movement, changes in condition, handling requirements, exhibition history, and loan history.

Elements of a catalog record include: a unique identifying number that links the record to the object, usually the object's accession number; object title or name; artist or maker of the object; cultural affiliation of artist or maker; geographic place names for site of manufacture; provenance; dimensions; materials; classification; condition; and location of the object.

A COLLECTIONS MANAGEMENT SYSTEM (CMS)

Software designed to catalog and manage the objects in a collection, publish online collections, plan and manage exhibitions and loans, and manage your digital assets. Collections management activities are greatly enhanced by computer technology. Searching and sorting through data in a CMS is much faster than using a manual system.

Relational collections management systems keep data in separate tables, each "related" to the other by means of a common field, such as an accession number. Relational database systems have many advantages, such as, one-to-many relationships: i.e. one artist record linked to many object records, or one exhibition record linked to many object records. With this type of database structure, no piece of information is entered more than once.

STRUCTURING AND ENTERING YOUR INFORMATION

In order to realize the benefits of data management, data must be consistent and controlled. First, it is important to focus on how information is structured and entered.

The following three elements of data standards enable consistent and reliable ways to find like objects. These standards may be different for each collection based on the information required to meet each institution's needs:



1. DATA STRUCTURE STANDARDS

- Determine the information you want to record
- Identify which fields are essential and which are optional

2. DATA CONTENT STANDARDS

- Describe the content of a field (what information is entered)
- Create guidelines for entering data into that field (how the information is entered). For example, guidelines for style, grammar, and the use of abbreviations.

3. DATA VALUE STANDARDS

- Determine terminology used for a particular field and authorities (lists of acceptable values) that guarantee consistency of information entered

CONTROLLING TERMINOLOGY

Controlling terminology ensures consistency of information entered into particular fields, which equals reliable and consistent query results. Some examples of controlled terminology include authority lists and Thesauri. It is not necessary to control vocabulary in every field but rather focus on fields that will be used for indexing and queries, such as:

- Classification (paintings, drawings, ceramics, etc.)
- Locations (Gallery 1, Gallery 2, etc.)
- Overall condition (excellent, good, fair, poor, etc.)

The following resources for terminology standards have been developed to encourage standardized use of terms and common reference resources. These resources provide structured vocabularies for recorded information, and facilitate the discovery of objects when searching.

- Art and Architecture Thesaurus (AAT),
Getty Research Institute
<https://www.getty.edu/research/tools/vocabularies/aat/index.html>
- Union List of Artist Names (ULAN),
Getty Research Institute
<https://www.getty.edu/research/tools/vocabularies/ulan/index.html>
- Thesaurus of Geographic Names (TGN),
Getty Research Institute
<https://www.getty.edu/research/tools/vocabularies/tgn/index.html>
- Cultural Objects Name Authority (CONA),
Getty Research Institute
<https://www.getty.edu/research/tools/vocabularies/cona/>
- Chenhall's Nomenclature
<https://aaslh.org/resources/affinity-communities/nomenclature/>

CREATING SUPPORTING POLICIES

Museum policy establishes guidelines for collections documentation. Policies for collections management systems are necessary to assure access to and control of collections information. These policies include the:



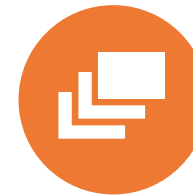
MAINTENANCE AND AUTHORITY POLICY

Identify staff with the authority to add, modify, or delete records; identify procedures for editing information; and identify procedures for maintaining database backups.



ACCESS AUTHORITY POLICY

Identify who has access to view and use collections information.



DATA STANDARDS POLICY

Provide guidelines for the structure of database records; identify mandatory fields; identify format and content of each field; enable sharing of information; ensure accessibility of information, and ensure against loss of data.

THE BENEFITS OF APPLYING DATA STANDARDS

Standards in data collection and museum policy can better protect the objects in your collection by ensuring object information is never lost, as well as making the workload for staff much more manageable. They do this by facilitating:

- Increased access to records
- Consistent retrieval of information
- Increased quality and accuracy of data
- Data that can be easily adapted to new developments in technology or documentation
- Data that can be efficiently exported into another system
- Exchange of data within the museum and with other institutions
- Data that can be easily published on the web



RESOURCES ON CATALOGING STANDARDS

Investigating the various cataloguing standards developed by the museum community can help you create a process that will most benefit your collection. These cataloguing standards include:

- The International Documentation Committee (CIDOC)
<http://cidoc.mini.icom.museum/>
- Categories for Describing Works of Art (CDWA and CDWA Lite)
https://www.getty.edu/research/publications/electronic_publications/cdwa/introduction.html
- Cataloging Cultural Objects (CCO)
<https://vraweb.org/resources/cataloging-cultural-objects/>



IN SUMMARY

Gaining better control of object data through proper collections documentation and object cataloguing in a CMS gives objects in the collection greater meaning and value by making them more accessible and useful to both staff and the institution's wider communities. It also gives staff the ability to more efficiently plan exhibitions, loans, conservation work, and much more by simplifying complex workflow. Digitally documented object data done well, prepares an institution for future uses of the collection, such as moving object data to mobile applications and the web.

Finding the right CMS to support your institution's needs, and partnering with a CMS provider that can help you structure your collection information to get the most benefit, is a key to success.



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