

CATALOGING

Why is cataloging so important?

Cataloging is the process by which you establish a detailed informational record on each artifact in your collection. The catalog record documents the description, history, condition and significance of an object.

Object ID is an international standard for describing art, antiques and antiquities. Through the cooperation of museums, customs officials and law enforcement around the world, the Object ID program has established a checklist of questions and information that provides a minimum level of documentation for museum artifacts.

- This minimum level of documentation requires the following information:
 - Type of Object (what is it?)
 - 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 (applies mainly to art works; does the object have a title by which it is known or identified?)
 - Subject (applies mainly to art works; what is represented in the work?)
 - Date or Period (when was the object made?)
 - Maker (who made or manufactured the object?)
 - A short description of the object
 - Take photographs of the object (overall views and close-ups of marks/damage/repairs)

- Certainly, there is more information that a museum will want to keep in its collection catalog.
 - The unique history of this particular artifact. The story that makes it important for the museum to acquire it in the first place. This could be the object's connection to a particular person, place or event. Whatever it is that makes this artifact

unique, it should help tell the story that drives the museum's mission.

- The unique nature of this particular artifact. Is it a prototype of an invention? Is it the type specimen for a species or subspecies? Is it the only specimen from a rare meteorite fall? The largest diamond in the world? The Mona Lisa? Or is it the best example of a mass-produced artifact that we are all familiar with?
 - Even if it is the Mona Lisa, it should relate to the mission of the museum and fall within the museum's collection policy or it should not be acquired by your museum.

All this information should reside in one place, your collection catalog. The collection catalog can be a series of card catalogs sorted by various headings such as classification (with main headings, secondary headings, etc. that follow your nomenclature standards), accession number, location, association (with a place, person or event) and donor. A lexicon (the list of terms used in your classification scheme) card file is also a good idea, especially if you are not using a published nomenclature, such as *The Revised Nomenclature for Museum Cataloging*. These days your collection catalog can be computerized. This makes searching for individual artifacts or groups of artifacts much easier.

Your collection catalog is as important as the artifacts themselves. Artifacts mean very little in the scheme of things without their stories. Therefore, you should keep your collection catalog as safe and secure as you keep your artifacts. An added benefit of the collection catalog, that cannot be matched by the artifacts, is that the catalog can be duplicated and a copy can be maintained in a secure off-site location in case a disaster hits the museum. Make sure you do this! And update that off-site copy on a regular basis, especially if you are making a lot of changes to the catalog!