

## DESCRIBING YOUR ARTIFACTS

Object descriptions should be concise and complete. For a large collection, placing all like items together makes describing them easier. Use one overall description for a single type of object [e.g. a chair], standardize it, and be consistent in its use. This does not mean that all chairs look the same, but rather that they have certain features in common that should be described every time a chair is described [e.g. legs, back, seat, etc].

It is important to use a standardized nomenclature for naming your objects, especially in this age of computerization. Use a published lexicon such as *The Revised Nomenclature for Museum Cataloging* or *The Art and Architecture Thesaurus* or, if the museum has a specialized collection with only a few types of artifacts, develop your own standard nomenclature (*list of words*) and lexicon (*a method of storage and retrieval*).

### Standard questions to answer about an object

- WHO: who made it? collected it? used it?
- WHAT: what is it? what is it made of? what is its condition? what is its number? what does it look like? what was it used for?
- WHEN: when was it made? collected? acquired?
- WHERE: where is it from? where is it stored? where is it now?
- HOW: how was it made? how big is it? how was it collected? acquired?
- WHY: why was it made? why was it collected?

Your standard catalog worksheet should contain the following items (these field names are from the sample worksheets created by Collections Research for Museums):

WHAT IS ITS NUMBER?: catalog number; field number; previous number (if you have more than one numbering system in your museum) (each of these should be a separate field)

WHAT IS IT?: category; type (from your established nomenclature hierarchy, be it *The Revised Nomenclature for Museum Cataloging*, *The Art and Architecture Thesaurus* or one of your own creation)

WHAT ARE ITS DIMENSIONS?: dimensions--measurements of the artifact

DESCRIPTION: general description; including decorative pattern; style; colors

CONDITION: condition

WHAT IS IT MADE OF?: construction material

HOW WAS IT MADE?: decorative technique; construction technique

DATE: date of manufacture

WHERE IS IT FROM?: (culture; provenance/find site) where collected; culture; group; maker/artist

HISTORY: history of object/maker

USE (within cultural setting): function/use

HOW WAS IT ACQUIRED?:

BY MUSEUM: acquired from; how acquired; addition information about collector; part of larger collection from same source?; restrictions

BY DONOR: collected by; collected from

DATE ACQUIRED?:

BY DONOR: collection date

BY MUSEUM: acquisition date

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION: archival materials; photograph; negative; location; references

**Descriptive elements unique to specific types of artifacts:**

Archaeological specimens

reference to a field book number and location information (i.e. site name or number) is important to the proper cataloging of the objects, but the museum might want to limit access by the general public to this information to protect the site.

Basketry

Rim finish & form

Flexibility

Wall Thickness

Diameter-mouth, middle, base, greatest

Count per inch

Fine Art

Artist-date of Birth/Death; nationality  
Signed?  
Title  
Fabric support  
Frame  
Wood Support  
Glass  
Backing

Numismatics (coins/money)

Weight  
Denomination  
Mint Mark

Pottery

Slip--thickness; color; extent; crazing  
Rim treatment  
Diameter-mouth, middle, base, greatest

Textiles

Weave  
Count per inch--warp & weft  
Spin--warp & weft  
Plied/ply--warp & weft  
Corner finish  
Selvage  
Lazy lines