

Managing Museum Property

BY K.D. MCGOWAN

Introduction

Museums collect, preserve, exhibit and use various types of artifacts. In order for artifacts to be useful, they must be readily found when needed. In order to be found when needed they must be tracked at all times. That is why as soon as objects are brought into a museum's collections a tracking system must be implemented. This tracking system starts when a written record is created to show where the artifact came from, its history, why it is significant or unique, and where it is located in storage or on exhibit. Without a written record no one would remember why an old desk is significant or who owned a rare Picasso. What is the use of a chair from Franklin Roosevelt's (FDR) White House if no one knows its history? Just as significant, what is the value of owning FDR's chair if the artifact cannot be found in the collection? Lastly, without written proof of the museum's ownership of a given artifact someone else may try to claim ownership of it. It would not reflect well on the institution if it could be proven that the museum did not have legal ownership of a given item. Therefore, without proper record keeping the historical significance of the piece, or perhaps even the piece itself, may be lost forever.

Accessioning

In order to keep track of an artifact it must first be documented. This includes being assigned a permanent number, provide an item description, enter all relevant information about it in files and on cards, cross-referenced, and stored in a safe location where it can easily be found when needed. Each object that is brought into the permanent collection is assigned a unique number that allows it to be connected with its documentation. This numbering must be used consistently, so that only one item in the collection possesses that number.

Documentation begins like this. An artifact is brought into the museum for accessioning. Accessioning is the for-



mal processing of an object into the permanent collection of a museum. A receipt, sometimes called an entry form, is created, which is signed by both the giver and receiver of the object. Information included on the receipt includes the name and address of the owner, telephone and fax numbers, the date object was received, why object is being accepted in the museum, and a description of artifact. A copy goes to the donor and at least one to the museum.

Records of Artifacts

The artifact is then entered into an "accessions register," also called the master log. One of the most important tools in documenting museum items is the accessions register. An accessions register lists all of the year's accessions in the order in which they were added to the collections so that each object is numbered in consecutive order. It should also include name of the object, its source, cross references to card and other files in which information on that item is located, as well as the history of the object. Many museums use a bound ledger written in ink as an accessions register because it is more difficult to alter these entries. Some museums keep these on computers in automated databases. If a museum keeps their accessions register on computer then, on a regularly scheduled basis, they should be copied, dated and stored off site to protect that information.

The most common numbering system used by museums for identification consists of two or three or even more numbers separated by a point or hyphen. It works something like this; the first number is the year the artifact was accessioned. The second number shows the sequence in which to object was acquired that year. For example, the number 2004.1 would indicate that the object was the first object acquired in 2004. The next object, from a different donor, would be numbered 2004.2. However, if more than one object was acquired from one source, in one transaction, then the objects in that transaction would be assigned a third number. For example, if a donor gives four items to

the museum at one time, and they are accessioned as a lot, the objects may be assigned the following numbers:

- 2004.1.1,
- 2004.1.2,
- 2004.1.3,
- 2004.1.4.

Each object is labeled with its unique number. This number may be written directly on the object, in an inconspicuous location, or on an attached label or tag. Care should be taken so as to avoid damaging the artifact with this identification number.

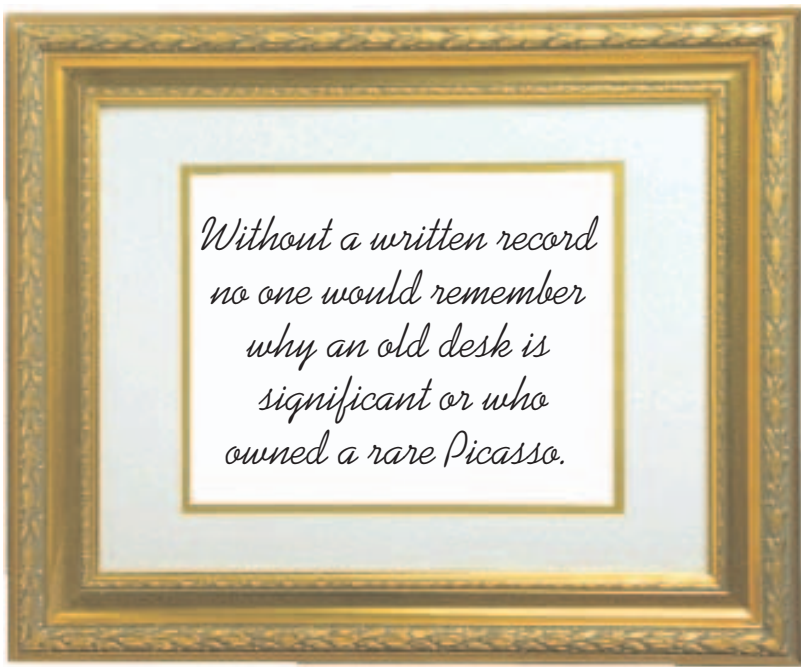
After numbering the objects an accession file, or supplementary information file, is created. All documentation that was created in the purchase or acquisition of the object(s) is included in the file and the assigned (accession) numbers are noted on each sheet. A worksheet is created to bring together all information that is available about the object and its acquisition. This may include the information regarding the receipt, transfer of title, donor card, bill of purchase, photo of the object, etc.

A card catalog entry is then completed to record everything that is known about the object or what the particular museum needs to know readily. The card is then added to the card catalog. The card catalog is divided into separate headings such as chairs. Chairs may be further subdivided into different kinds or styles. Under these headings the cards are then filed in numerical order by accession number. The catalog contains the complete record of all that is known about every artifact in the museum. These may be kept in paper files or on the computer.

Information about the object is recorded manually in several places and cross-referenced for ease in locating an object. Indexes can be created, both on paper and on computer, to help with information retrieval. Information may also be included on source cards (donor or vendor), artist cards, category, subject, classification files, etc. The trend is to put more information on computers but card catalogs and files are a good choice too, especially for small museums that cannot always afford to put everything on computer.

Location Files

Another type of file, which is of great importance, is



the location files. They are usually listed in accession number order and contain a file for each item in the collection. They are used to record object movement and location. The location files must be updated whenever objects are moved to new locations. Because location files may need to be updated more frequently than most files they should be easy to use and easy to update. Physical inventories should be done periodically to verify the accuracy of location files.

Physical Inventory

An inventory is a detailed accounting of property. In a museum setting it is done to make sure the objects are located where the records indicate they are located. There are several types of inventories, which can be used for this purpose. They include:

1. A complete inventory of all artifacts in a museum's collection. Every object is surveyed and its location is noted.
2. A section by section, or cyclical inventory, which is as thorough as a complete inventory but is done on a limited section of the collections.
3. A spot inventory is done to check on the accuracy of the records of a very small number of artifacts.

The type of inventory used is dictated by several factors including the date of the last inventory, the types and value of the objects, and the results of the last inventory. Reconciliation of the records and locations must be done at this time to correct any errors found, for example artifacts that are missing.

Storage

A separate area should be provided for storage. Ideally storage areas should be safe for artifacts to protect and preserve them. Like items should be stored together especially those with similar temperature and humidity requirements. For example, costumes, rugs and other cloth items can be stored together under the heading "textiles." Storage areas should provide easy access for users of the collec-

tion. Each storage area should be clearly labeled with a list of the objects they contain. Also, objects in storage should be placed so that their accession numbers, labels, or tags are readily visible. This should help minimize object handling and breakage.

Deaccessioning

There are times when it is necessary to take something out of a museum's permanent collection. The formal removal of an object out of the museum's permanent collection is called deaccessioning. Disposal of items from the museum's collection must be done in an ethical way in accordance with the museum's collections policy. Steps in the process of deaccessioning should be followed according to the museum's policy. It usually begins with the curator of the collection finding a reason to deaccession a given artifact. These reasons to deaccession an artifact might include a change of mission for the museum or an artifact is broken beyond any repair.

The curator must then justify in writing why it should be deaccessioned. It must be verified that the museum has legal title to the artifact and if there are any restrictions on its disposal. Outside written appraisals or opinions may be included in the documentation. These justifications are then presented to the museum's governing board and they must give their formal approval for the deaccession.

When accepting gifts, the museum should accept only what it really wants, what it can afford to take care of and what it intends to keep. This alone will help keep the number of deaccessioned items to a minimum. Deaccessioning should be avoided when possible because it will often be met with disapproval by the public. However, deaccessioning may be needed when objects are broken, lost, stolen, worn out or are found to no longer be within the scope of the museum's collection.

Deaccessioned items may be disposed of in many ways. They may be destroyed, sold in private sale or auction,

given or exchanged with another museum, or returned to the donor.

Records of the object, including the paperwork justifying deaccession, are required even after the object has been disposed of. A note in red ink should be entered on the accessions register stating the type of removal (broken, stolen, etc), date of removal and date of the board's action. Catalog cards should be removed from their regular place and put in a "dead" file.



Ethics

Accessioning and deaccessioning must be done according to ethical practices. Ethical codes are often included in the museum's collections policy. You don't want to offend donors by accepting an artifact and then immediately deaccessioning the artifact because it doesn't fit the museum's mission. You don't want to create legal issues. You don't want museum staff or board members to benefit from the sales of parts of the museum's collections. These are bad for

public relations and you don't want to instigate any lawsuits. Following the museum's ethics policy should help avoid these.

Summary

Museums need to have a process to accession artifacts, record those artifacts into their ledgers, find, in a timely manner, both the artifact under its care and the paperwork attached to that artifact, and deaccession artifacts when no longer required. A good tracking system that is simple and easy to use, in conjunction with a good museum collections policy, will help you do that. Each museum may have slightly different means to control its property but the basics must be there to control, protect, preserve, track and use a collection wisely. ◆

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