

TIP SHEET

Understanding Provenance (2013)

Understanding Provenance

In general, *provenance* refers to the source or origin of an object.ⁱ In history museums, this usually means the collection of information about the chain of ownership for an item—who owned it when and how they acquired it. Good records of an artifacts’ provenance can show that an ordinary object is a vital piece of our heritage—and it can help protect the museum from legal and ethical problems. Understanding provenance will make you more effective in your work with collections.

Provenance: A Saskatchewan Story

In 2010, Dr David Pantalony, a curator from the Canada Science and Technology Museum, visited the physics department at the University of Saskatchewan. While he was examining some of their old equipment, he found a plaque on a spectrograph—a plaque that connected this piece of equipment to a scientist named Gerhard Herzberg, and through him, to a fascinating story.ⁱⁱ

Gerhard Herzberg (Image 1) fled Nazi Germany in 1935, bringing along a variety of tools and equipment he needed for his research. Sometime between 1937 and 1945, during his time at the University of Saskatchewan, he built the spectrograph Dr Pantalony found. In 1971, Herzberg went on to win Canada’s first Nobel Prize for Chemistry^{iii iv}



Image 1: Gerhard Herzberg
(Source: University of Saskatchewan Archives, Photograph Collection, A-3234)

The story of the spectrograph’s origin—its provenance—turns an obsolete piece of lab equipment into a piece of history, connecting Saskatchewan with a Nobel Prize winning chemist and the events

of the Second World War. In this story, we can see how provenance helps us understand the thoughts and interests of people at a particular time. It allows visitors to see the past in a new light, bringing artifacts to life and showing that they’re much more than dusty old relics.

How does provenance help me understand my museum’s collection?

In the example above, Dr Pantalony was able to learn about the spectrograph’s provenance from the plaque and his own research, but the best time to get provenance information is usually when an object is donated. A brief interview with the donor, and sometimes obtaining bills of sale or deeds of purchase, can tell you a great deal.

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HISTORY OF USE					batch number
object number(s)	object name/ unit description	interviewee	interviewer	interview date	
original owner	place of origin	date	cultural traditions	culture	
other previous owners	place of use	date	remarks		
historical context					
history of use					

Image 2: History of Use form from the Museums Association of Saskatchewan *Collections Documentation Management* handbook (1997)

Museums often collect this information using forms like the History of Use form shown in Image 2.

Getting this information sometimes appears to be nothing more than an exercise in filling in the boxes on forms, and all too often, we write down the name of the donor, cultural associations, dates, what the object was used for, and previous owners' names—and then we stop. However, getting more in-depth provenance information can be one of the most important things we can do when accepting a new object into the museum collection. As we've seen, detailed information about an object's provenance can help us interpret the object for visitors in a much more relatable and interesting way: we can establish relationships, unearth stories, and better understand how this object relates to the present.

How does provenance information protect my museum?

We've seen how provenance information can help us do a better job interpreting our collections, but the documentation of provenance is also important for legal

reasons. We can't simply assume that the donor is the legal owner. Establishing clear ownership titles is important when we accept artifacts into a collection.^v Proof of ownership could be through a bill of sale or will. If clear title is not established, others may step forward later and make claims to that property.^{vi} Making sure that your Gift Agreement is filled out correctly by the donor will also help ensure that they understand they are giving an item to the museum forever, avoiding difficult and painful misunderstandings later.

Documenting provenance also helps museums guard against acquiring objects that the donor got illegally or unethically, which is important in preventing legal problems and protecting your museum's reputation. An object that was stolen from another country or is part of an endangered species acquired after 1975 is not something that the museum should consider collecting.^{vii} Canada has ratified international agreements that protect endangered or migratory animal and plant species. The collection of such species acquired after 1975 should be viewed with a critical eye.^{viii}

A museum must be careful to establish provenance of archaeological and paleontological materials. In Saskatchewan, all archaeological and paleontological material belongs to the province.^{ix} These objects cannot be sold or removed from the province.

Provenance has become a major topic of concern in the art-collecting world,

too. During the Second World War, many people were forced to abandon their property and flee or had it illegally taken away from them. After the war, some of this property entered the art market. Now people and institutions are researching the provenance of art that was created before the war and those sold afterwards, allowing the rightful owners to reclaim their property.^{xi}

We also need to identify culturally sensitive and sacred materials as soon as they enter the museum doors. Museums only collect such items after they have consulted members of the corresponding cultural group.^{xii} Would-be donors may or may not know the cultural significance of their items, so provenance research *before* the museum takes it into the collection is often important. There are various protocols to follow and actions that need to take place when a museum considers accepting culturally sensitive or sacred items into the collection. The Museums Association of Saskatchewan has developed *Standards for the Care of First Nations and Metis Collections*, which outlines what is considered to be culturally sensitive or sacred materials as well as steps to follow when a museum comes into contact with an item of significance.^{xiii}

I see that provenance is important. How do we document it?

We can document provenance with an in-depth interview of the donor of an object. The interview and information collected from the donor can go far beyond what will fit on a History of Use

form. You can ask questions like: Where did you obtain this object? How did you obtain this object? What did you use this object for? Who made this object? Are there some personal stories related to the use of this object? Who were the previous owners? What can you tell me about the previous owners?

A great way to capture these stories is with a donor questionnaire. The Association of Nova Scotia Museums has produced a great example of one of these which can be found on their website: <http://ansm.ns.ca/download-files/file/24-donor-questionnaire-doc.html>

A questionnaire like this lets you fill in more of the gaps in your information about an object.

The information you collect can bring to light topics for further research. And don't forget to look for clues on the object itself! Following up with research into a topic that was uncovered during the interview process may help with interpretation.

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