

# TIP SHEET

## How to Label Historic Artifacts (2016)

# How to Label Historic Artifacts

Artifact numbering and labeling is an important part of collections management. Without either one, museums cannot track their collections or utilize them to complete research or create exhibitions.

Every time the museum acquires an object into its permanent collection, this is termed accessioning. When an object is accessioned into the museum collection, it is given an accession number. This unique number ties each object to all of its related, important documentation and allows the museum to track it throughout its lifetime. How does one determine what this number is?

### What is an accession number and how should I create one?

An accession number is unique and is typically of a tripartite system, such as 2015.001.010.

- 2015 represents the year that the object was accessioned; it is important to always use the full year number not something like 15 to shorten it.
- 001 is the sequential lot number/group number in the year; this group of objects was the first received in 2015.
- 010 is for tenth object in that group; there might be 100 objects in the group and each gets its own individual object number. If the next object in the group were to be given a number it would be 2015.001.011.

Your museum might use a different numbering system, this is perfectly acceptable; just remember that each accession number needs to be unique.

All parts, often called components, of the object need to be labeled as well. Component numbers can be determined as such:

Example: Object = Teapot with lid.

2015.001.010a = teapot

2015.001.010b = lid

OR

2015.001.010.001 = teapot

2015.001.010.002 = lid

Either way is correct, as long as your museum is consistent. In both systems, the A and B or the 01 and 02 tells museum workers that these components are part of one object and vice versa.



*Both the lid and the base of the object is labeled.*

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What number should you start at? Your museum should have a running list of the numbers that they have used. If you are beginning a new year, you should start with YEAR.001.001.

## How should I apply an accession number?

Now that we have determined how to allocate accession numbers, how should we attach it to our objects? To determine which method is best, the primary decision point should be the material that the object is made out of and its condition. If the object is unstable or if you are unsure what method to use, a paper tag is probably best<sup>1</sup>. There are other decision points such as porous surfaces, soft surfaces, reactive surfaces, or if it is unknown how the surface will react to a particular labeling technique. At a museum, you must also consider the situation that the object will be in: Will it be cold? Is the object going to be on display?<sup>2</sup>

Other points of consideration must be what are the available labeling materials. Materials that are used to label museum objects must be reversible, long lasting, light fast, and waterproof. Museum conservators continually make suggestions on what materials fit these criteria. Museums also use these very specific materials to ensure that dissociation does not



*Tape is never used to adhere artifact labels*

occur; this is one of the *Agents of Deterioration* described by the Canadian Conservation Institute (CCI). Dissociation “results in the loss of objects, or object-related data, or the ability to retrieve or associate objects and data”.<sup>3</sup> In sum, dissociation is the result of the breakdown of the links between



*Two inappropriate labeling methods were used here. One metal fastened tag and some adhesive residue indicating where a former label once was.*

<sup>1</sup> Powerhouse Museum. (nd). *A Simple Guide to Labeling Museum Objects*. Retrieved on November 3, 2015 from [www.powerhousemuseum.com/pdf/preservation/A\\_Simple\\_Guide\\_to\\_Labelling\\_Museum\\_Objects.pdf](http://www.powerhousemuseum.com/pdf/preservation/A_Simple_Guide_to_Labelling_Museum_Objects.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Lockshin, Nora. (2015). *Marking and Labeling Collections Webinar*. Retrieved on November 2, 2015 from [www.connectingtocollections.org/markings-and-labeling-collections/](http://www.connectingtocollections.org/markings-and-labeling-collections/)

<sup>3</sup> Canadian Conservation Institute (CCI). (2014). *Preventative Conservation and Agents of Deterioration*. Retrieved on September 9, 2015 from <https://www.cci-icc.gc.ca/resources-ressources/agentsofdeterioration-agentsdedeterioration/index-eng.aspx>

an object and all the information gathered about it, including its history. Dissociation will most likely occur due to mislabeling objects or the utilization of inappropriate labeling techniques that would result in a label falling off creating that disconnect.

To ensure that this doesn't happen, let's go over a few basics about artifact labeling.



*Purchasing a labeling kit like this will help you get started.  
Image: Northern States Conservation Centre*

## What makes a good label?

- *Numbers need to be inconspicuous but accessible.* It is aesthetically unappealing to see the object label, but there's no point in labeling the object if you can't find the label. The size of the label should also be proportionate to the object.
- *Labels should be applied consistently in the same area.* This way you know where to look every time. Check to see if your institution has specific areas that labels are consistently applied to, such as the back inside cover of a book on the upper right side.
- *Numbers should be placed in an area protected from friction/rubbing;* these actions could cause the number to wear-off or fall-off.
- *Numbers should be legible and clear;* write clearly to ensure that there is no confusion between 1 and 7; 6 and 9; and I and L. As well, choose colours that are in contrast to the object's colour to ensure visibility.<sup>4</sup>

- *Labels are to be reversible and applied using conservation approved materials.* Products that are used to mark museum objects must be reversible, long lasting, light fast, and waterproof. Conservators continually test available materials for these qualities.

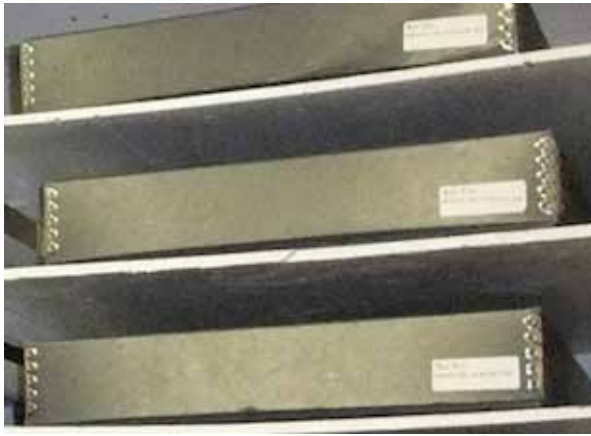
There are also a few additional things to take note of during the labeling process:

- Old numbers should always be left in place. This could be a historic label or an old accession number.
- Numbers should be written on all detachable parts of an object to ensure that all pieces can be linked should they be physically separated. Detachable parts could include a lid or a removable lining.
- Numbers should be applied to supports to reduce unnecessary

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<sup>4</sup> Alberta Museums Association. (2014). *Standard Practices Handbook for Museums*. Edmonton, Alberta: Alberta Museums Association.

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*External labels reduce unnecessary handling of objects*

handling, such as shelving or artifact containers.

- Numbers should not be placed onto physically unstable surfaces, such as rust.<sup>5</sup> Applying a number to an unstable surface may cause damage to the object during the labeling process or could be a future area of loss that the object label might fall off, causing dissociation.

## Labeling Methods

There are 4 very common methods of labeling museum artifacts.

1. Cloth label
  2. Pencil marking
  3. Varnish label
  4. Paper label
1. **Cloth label** – This method is typically used on textiles, baskets, or hats. The accession number can be written onto an unbleached, cotton tape with a tight weave. Numbers are applied to the cotton tape via typewriter

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<sup>5</sup> Collections Trust. (2008). *Labeling and Marking Museum Objects Booklet*. Retrieved on November 3, 2015 from [www.collectionstrust.org.uk](http://www.collectionstrust.org.uk)

or written using a waterproof, fade-proof, and “bleed proof” pen, such as a Pigma or Sakura IDenti-pen. The cotton tape is attached to the object via loose stitches with a soft, colourfast, cotton thread passed through the weave of the museum object fabric. Sometimes, Tyvek or Reemay may be used in place of the cotton tape.

2. **Pencil marking** – This method is typically used on paper products, such as books and prints, as well as bare wood and unglazed ceramics. A soft 2B pencil is best to complete the labeling. Do not press so hard into the object that you leave an imprint.<sup>6</sup> A soft, white, vinyl eraser can be used to remove the numbers.
3. **Varnish label** – This method is typically used on hard surfaces, such as glazed ceramics, metals, and glass. The varnish that is used is Paraloid/Acryloid B-72. A base layer is placed onto the object, the number is written utilizing a white or black acrylic fluid or Pigma or Sakura IDenti-pen<sup>7</sup> and then a top layer of Paraloid/Acryloid B-72. Each layer does need time to cure between applications. Alternatively, the accession number can be typed on a computer and printed onto acid free paper and adhered in-between layers of Acryloid B-72.

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<sup>6</sup> Delfino, Gina N. (July 2000). Tech Talk: Artifact Labeling II. *Interpreter*. Retrieved on November 3, 2015 from [www2.mnhs.org/about/publications/techtalk/techtalkjuly2000.pdf](http://www2.mnhs.org/about/publications/techtalk/techtalkjuly2000.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Delfino, Gina N. (May 2000). Tech Talk: Artifact Labeling I. *Interpreter*. Retrieved on November 3, 2015 from [www2.mnhs.org/about/publications/techtalk/TechTalkMay2000.pdf](http://www2.mnhs.org/about/publications/techtalk/TechTalkMay2000.pdf)

To remove the number, apply acetone to a cotton swab (Q-tips can be an alternative) and roll over numbered area. This method should **not** be used on plastics, waxed, or lacquered/painted objects, as the solvents will erode these layers. **Do not** use this method on corroded or porous objects either.

4. **Paper label** – If a museum worker is unsure of what to do, a paper label is the best choice. The paper should be acid free or made of Tyvek. The number can be applied to the label using pencil and the tag attached to the object in a secure manner, such as tying it onto a button or clasp. It is best to use a paper label on fur, leather, corroded metals, wax, plastic, basketry, and fragile objects.<sup>8</sup>

There are new products on the market all the time and may not be listed here. If you are unsure of the suitability of a product you have found, contact a conservator or the Museums Association of Saskatchewan. Unacceptable materials/techniques for labeling museum artifacts include:

- Nail polish
- Permanent marker (Sharpie)<sup>9</sup>
- Correction fluid (white-out)
- Metal or metal edged tags

<sup>8</sup> Braun, Thomas J. (Summer 2007). Short Communication Alternative Technique for Applying Accession Numbers to Museum Artifacts. *Journal of the American Institute for Conservation*, Vol. 46, No. 2. Retrieved on November 4, 2015 from [www.mnhs.org/preserve/conservation/docs\\_pdfs/ApplyAccessionnos.pdf](http://www.mnhs.org/preserve/conservation/docs_pdfs/ApplyAccessionnos.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> Alten, Helen. (2002). *Testing Pens Helps Determine Applicability in Museum Object Labeling*. Retrieved on November 3, 2015 from [www.collectioncare.org/pubs/Jul162010.html](http://www.collectioncare.org/pubs/Jul162010.html)

- Wire, nails, pins, staples, screws, or other metal fasteners
- Pressure-sensitive labels, stickers, and tape (Label maker tape; masking tape; iron-on tags)
- Ballpoint ink
- Chalks
- Rubber cement
- Spray Varnish
- Engraving

### Practice, practice, practice!

When starting to use a new method of labeling, practice on an object that is not an artifact. This allows you to get a used to the new technique.

Sometimes object labeling can be complicated. Not quite sure what to do? Need to know where to purchase supplies? Ask a conservator or Museums Association of Saskatchewan.

### Additional Resources:

#### Videos:

SHARE Museums East: <http://sharemuseumseast.org.uk/videos/>

#### Blogs:

Ellen Carrlee Conservation. (nd). *Collections Labeling: Material by Material*. Retrieved on November 3, 2015 from <https://ellencarrlee.wordpress.com/2011/11/25/collections-labeling-material-by-material/>

#### Websites:

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The State Historical Society of Iowa. (2004). *The Field Guide for Museums*. Retrieved November 3, 2015 from [http://www.iowahistory.org/education/assets/the\\_field\\_guide\\_for\\_museums.pdf](http://www.iowahistory.org/education/assets/the_field_guide_for_museums.pdf)

Wyoming State Museum. (nd). *Numbering Artifacts: A How-to Slideshow*. Retrieved November 3, 2015 from <http://wyomuseum.state.wy.us/pdf/NumberingArtifacts.pdf>

Wyoming State Museum. (nd). *Using the Trinomial System to Identify Artifacts and Creating an Accession File*. Retrieved November 3, 2015 from <http://wyomuseum.state.wy.us/pdf/UsingtheTrinomialSystem.pdf>


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