

TIP SHEET

Assessing Significance

1. Introduction

This tip sheet will help museum staff and volunteers assess the significance of their collections in a practical way. This is important because:

- Looking at collections from multiple perspectives will expand understandings of how our collections are significant.
- We can prioritise caring for our most significant collections.
- We can look at ways to share our less significant collections in places that may hold them in higher regard.
- We can increase access to our collections and how they relate to our audiences.
- Multiple definitions of significance can offer additional tools for interpretation and audience engagement.

2. Matching Significance to Mission

The tip sheet 'Significance in the Museum Context' defines significance and gives examples of many types of significance. These types can be used to assess significance. When significance of an object or collection has been assessed, this information can be used to evaluate the relevance of the object to your Mission Statement.

Your Mission Statement should include language that makes it easy to understand what types of collections are considered essential to enacting the narrative

your museum is responsible for. If this is not the case, consider revising your Mission Statement so that there is a clear relationship between your Museum and the collections that are considered significant.

3. Including Significance in Policies

There are several policies that should address significance in relation to your collections.

Your Acquisitions Policy (sometimes called Collecting Policy) should define what collections your Museum considers significant or desirable in order to enact your Mission.

- Your policy can define significance for high, medium and low priorities for your collections.
- Your policy may include assigning collections of less significance to handling or educational type collections, reserving the highest standards of care and preservation for collections that are deemed the most significant.

Your Collections Management Policy and / or procedures should assign the task of assessing significance to the appropriate staff member or volunteer position within your staffing structure.

- Usually a Curator will have responsibility for assessing the significance of an object or collection, but this may need additional expertise when the object is outside of their specialist knowledge.
- An Archivist, a Conservator, and a Collections Manager can also be consulted for assessments of an objects significance.

- Collections from cultural groups, especially Indigenous Nations, should have the significance assessed by a knowledgeable person from the community where the object was made.

Part of your Preservation Policy should include a Preservation Strategy that lists the highest priority objects for conservation treatment.

- This list should look at the significance of objects that require specialist care, along with curatorial priorities, exhibition plans, programming needs and research requirements.
- Be sure that any evidence related to the significance of an object is documented so that it is not removed or 'treated'.

3.1 Collections Scope / Description

Thinking about your collections as a whole, it can be a useful exercise to write a brief description (150 – 200 words) that gives an overview of your collections. This document can focus on the strengths of your collection, and the themes or concepts related to your Mission, that your collections illustrate. This document can be used in grant applications or on your website – anywhere that you want to have a general overview of what is in your collections.

Ideas to include:

- The overall purpose of your collection (how it relates to your Mission).
- Details of your most significant objects or sub-collections, and why they are considered significant.
- The history of your collection, how it developed, how it relates to other socio-economic factors in your area.
- The history of your museum, how it relates to local history and to your contemporary communities.
- Sub collections and disciplinary strengths.
- Activities the collection supports.

4. Factors Influencing Significance

Multiple factors can impact the significance of an object or collection. The more documentation or information known about an object the easier it will be to make a justifiable assessment of significance.

- Any information that is known about an object or collection should be in the database catalogue record.
 - Information that is known but that is private or restricted should have precautions taken so this information can be properly managed.
- For some collections, the original order (for archives especially), relationship to your museum or building, and / or internal relationship between the objects within the collection, adds to the significance.
 - For archival collections, the order or structure in which the collection was created and used gives insights into how the collection was formed and referred to over time.
 - If you change the order you should record these changes, and why the decision was taken to re-order the materials, so that the original order can be re-assembled if required.
- Significant relationships between your museum and objects should be recorded as part of the documentation for the collection.
 - For example, if you have a social history museum that is in a historic dwelling, a broken chair that is part of the remaining 'original' contents of the building has significance because of its relationship to the original use of your building – it is not simply a 'broken chair'.
 - This type of information needs to be recorded so that collections can be properly managed and so decisions can be taken that consider the fullest possible amount of information.

- Significance objects are more likely to be your highest priorities for exhibition, proper storage and overall collections care.
 - For example, your exhibitions will engage visitors when you have collections displayed that have texts and labels that explain their significance, and that consider multiple perspectives of the collections.
 - Your most significant collections likely cannot always be displayed. When they are in storage ensure they have proper storage mounts, climate controls, pest controls and security controls in place.
 - All museums have limited resources so having ways to prioritise which collections need to have the *most* care taken is essential for good collections management.
 - Conservation treatments require decisions to be taken that prioritise collections care. One of the ways to justify that one object was selected over another is by evaluating its significance, which can then guide the decision making process.
 - Most museums are publicly funded or supported so we need to be able to show that we are making the best use of our funds for the interest of all our communities.

5. Legislative Significance

If your collection contains objects that are designated as, or will apply to be, Cultural Property, it is essential that you can describe their significance in the terms required by the Canadian Cultural Property Export Review Board¹ [CCPERB]. The factors that are taken into account for designation as 'Cultural Property' include provenance, condition, rarity, authenticity, research value and regional importance.

"A description of an object's observable features

is not sufficient to establish that the object is of outstanding significance"². This statement is also true for our discussion of significance.

6. Ethical Significance

Ethical considerations require looking at a wide range of factors when assessing significance.

- It may be necessary to give additional weighting to significance that may be assigned by people outside your museum.
- For example, a historic ceremonial shirt may be monetarily valuable because of its rarity and because it is desirable to private collections, and of great local significance because of its relationship to a local Indigenous Nation. However, to the ancestors of the person who made or wore the shirt, the significance is personal and related to the history of their family and their Nation. Significance exists for both the contemporary relatives and the Museum, but for ethical reasons, as well as the considerations required by the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*³, the needs of the related individuals should be given higher regard than the needs of the museum.

7. Value and Significance

The monetary value of an object is different to its significance because significance cannot be measured in dollars. However, the monetary value is likely going to be higher when an object has a significance that is recognized in ways that can be commodified, usually based on it being unique or desirable.

- For example, a painting by Picasso has monetary value because Picasso is recognized internationally as a famous artist, so the association of the painting with Picasso is what gives it monetary value.
 - Over time, the value can increase or decrease depending on external factors.
 - The significance of the painting in economic terms would then increase or

¹ <https://ccperb-cceebc.gc.ca/en/index-en.html>

² <https://ccperb-cceebc.gc.ca/en/certification-of-cultural-property/outstanding-significance.html>

³ <https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/declaration-on-the-rights-of-indigenous-peoples.html>

decrease but the other ways of assigning significance to the painting would not change over time.

- Personal, historical or disciplinary significance will not change just because the painting is worth less money if trends in collecting decrease.
- If the information about the painting is revealed to be different than what the value and significance were originally based on, this can impact both the value and the significance.
 - For example, if the painting was found to be a forgery, the original personal, historical and disciplinary significance will change to reflect this information, but the story behind the forgery itself might reveal new significance for the painting.

7.1 Assessing Value

Assigning monetary values to collections is necessary for insurance purposes, to make sure that you have adequate coverage at your facility and to make sure that collections on loan are adequately covered. Museums do not typically give values to private possessions apart from loans – these requests are best referred to professional appraisers or auction houses.

- For donors requesting a tax receipt, staff with suitable experience at your museum can give an appraisal for objects or collections under \$1000 CAD. For anything over that, a professional appraisal is needed. The museum can provide contact details for appraisers if the donor requests this, but it is in the donors interest to seek an independent appraisal. To avoid any conflict of interest it is recommended that donors pay appraisal costs, for which the museum can issue an additional tax receipt⁴.
- Be sure to adjust your collections valuations for inflation on an annual basis.

- It is inappropriate to assign values to human ancestral remains.
- For sacred and ceremonial belongings that are in your collections, assigning values should be done sensitively and in consultation with the Indigenous Nations whose ancestors made or owned the items.

8. How to Assess the Significance of an Object or Collection

These steps will guide you through the process of assessing the significance of an object, and can be used to assess a collection of related objects. This can help produce a somewhat objective assessment of significance and to rank object selections for prioritising resources, or for exhibition selections. If possible, have the assessment of one object undertaken by different people, to see a variety of responses.

- Something that has personal significance to you, but that is not related to the Mission of the Museum will have a lower ranking than something that is related to the Mission.
- This is a tool that can help to guide decisions, but because all museums, their collections and collection histories are unique, it should be used with caution and in relation to other policies.
- This tool can be used for assessing the significance of new acquisitions when they are being presented for consideration by your Acquisitions Committee.

Tip: If your object is significant because it is 'the first' of something, or was owned or used by 'the first --', be sure to use specific language that accurately describes the type of 'first'. Was it the first 'ever'? Or the first 'European' ?

⁴ For more on this see MAS' Standards for Saskatchewan Museums 2016 : Management G. Risk Management – Liability; Collections A. Collections Management – Identification, Authentication, and Appraisals.

Type of Significance	Brief Analysis (use N/A if not applicable) – include a few words to explain your observations, including associated places or people	Assign a numerical rating based on Relevance to Mission? (Not related – 0; 5 – somewhat related; 10 – Very related)	Assign a numerical rating to the strength of Significance Type (0 – none; 5 – somewhat significant; 10 – very significant)	Totals Less than 30: low significance; 30-70: medium significance; 70-100: high significance
Personal				
Relational				
Individual / Group				
Institutional				
Local				
Cultural				
Tangible / Physical				
Intangible				
Historical				
Disciplinary				
Regional				
Provincial				
National / Nation-al				
International / Inter-Nation-al				

⁵ For more on this see Jean O'Brien, *Firsting and Lasting: Writing Indians out of Existence in New England* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).

9. Additional Considerations for Significant Objects

Significance is subjective, but when done with care, reflection, and consideration of multiple perspectives, it can provide useful ways to interpret your collections and to justify decisions taken by your museum in managing your collections to the best extent that your resources allow.

- You must consult relevant Indigenous Nations when assessing significance of belongings used or created by their ancestors. This is not only a requirement of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, but best practice in museum ethics.
 - Culturally appropriate collections care can only be done by working under the guidance of appropriate Nations or cultural groups.
 - Indigenous Nations are the experts and highest authorities on their own culture and cultural creations.
- Remember that your museum might not be the best location to provide long term care for significant collections that are deemed more significant to another organization or group.
 - We are custodians of our collections, not 'owners'.
 - Consider any parallel significance as a way to develop new or existing partnerships and a chance for new opportunities.
- Some assessments may need to be done by people with specialist knowledge or training.
 - The Museums Association of Saskatchewan can help with sourcing specialist advice.
 - Post on list-servs to locate specialists in other museums [CS-AAM; can-muse].
 - Reach out to universities or colleges to locate specialists.
 - Your local Friendship Centre or the Saskatchewan Indigenous Cultural Centre can help locate appropriate knowledge keepers and Elders.

CONTACT US!

Phone:

(306) 780-9279 Toll-Free in SK 1-866-568-7386

Email: mas@saskmuseums.org

424 McDonald Street
Regina, SK S4N 6E1

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