

TIP SHEET

Research and Documentation of Significance

1. Introduction

This tip sheet will help museum staff and volunteers research and document the significance of their collections.

- This is important because museums need to justify the reasons behind designating objects or collections as significant.
- Assessing significance may need research beyond the knowledge of museum staff or volunteers.
- The reasons behind assessing an object or collection as significant, or not, needs to be documented so this information can be revised and referred to in the future.

Please use this tip sheet in conjunction with related tip sheets 'Significance in the Museum Context' and 'Assessing Significance'.

2. Researching Significance for New Acquisitions

The procedure for gathering information for acquisition proposals should include recording all known details about a new object or collection. This information will assist the acquisitions committee in determining the significance of the new acquisition for your museum. Part of this process should include clearly linking the proposed acquisition to your collecting policy, which is based on your Mission Statement.

When an object is presented for consideration, be sure to ask the source (donor or seller) for as much information as possible, including but not limited to:

- Who made it, when it was made, what it is made from, past owners.
- Any past valuations, appraisals or how much they paid for it, and when.
- Any details about where it was found, purchased or retrieved from (how it was found, the context of its discovery / recovery / purchase, the location, who found it, when it was found).
- Any known hazards (if it has been treated with, or contains, chemicals; if it is radioactive).
- Any associated legal requirements (firearms, CITES).
- Any copyright or intellectual property restrictions.
- Digital copies of any photographs or other documents that relate to the object (object in use, certificate of authenticity).

Tip: Your museum can actively seek or collect objects that demonstrate events that are significant to your Mission as they occur in real time. Record the significance of these collections as they are gathered. For example, in summer 2020, a Museum of Health Care would be actively collecting and seeking collections that demonstrate the covid19 pandemic. Gathering collections that are significant to 'now' means that your museum will be able to preserve and interpret them for future generations.

3. Recording Research on Significance

Research may be required to determine the significance of objects. Some objects or collections are considered significant because of their association with a person, or their collector. Think as widely as possible about different types of significance in order to record the many ways an object can be significant. This is important because it can unlock new exhibit and interpretative possibilities for your collections.

- It may not be possible to locate information about your specific object, but it may be possible to find details about similar objects, or things made by the same the manufacturer, through the internet.
- Museums that focus on objects or collections similar to what you are researching may be able to assist you with leads from their own research projects.
- All of your objects should have an individual catalogue record in your collections management database and a paper object file for hard copies of documents.
- Any research undertaken that uncovers new or unknown information about an object should be saved, in digital form, and / or printed for inclusion in the paper file, depending on your established Cataloguing Procedures.
- If you have information from an oral recording include the audio file, with a note of the time (or time span) on the recording where the information is shared, on the related object catalogue record.
 - If someone shared information with you in person you can record what was shared in a word document, which can then be uploaded to the object catalogue record in your collections management database and stored in the paper object file.
 - Be sure to include the name of the person, what they said in as exact wording as possible, how they know this information,

your name, when it was told to you, and when you are making the note.

Tip: Websites change over time, and links can break. If you find information online it is best practice to 'print to pdf' or take screen shots you can save in a word document that can be saved as a pdf¹. These can be printed and added to the paper object file, and uploaded into the database record as an attached reference file that provides necessary support for any new information you have discovered.

- In your object catalogue record, you may have a text field where you can summarise the significance of the object.
 - Other fields that can be used to record details that relate to the significance of an object include Maker Name; Date Made; Location Made; Collection Type; Provenance; Narrative; Research Notes; Description.
 - Be sure to consult your Cataloguing procedures and any data entry guidelines to determine the best place to record details about an object's significance in your database.
 - If there are no instructions in your data entry guidelines, consider adding clear instructions on the fields to use for recording significance so that any future data entry can be done in a consistent manner.

4. Research Resources

It's important to think widely and to be creative when you are considering where to undertake research. Not all research resources are published in books. People carry a lot of knowledge and can be approached to share expertise about collections. This list is meant to be a starting point for research resources, but is by no means comprehensive:

- Your local library or archives
- Gathering oral history / responses to the object from people in your communities

¹ For more on pdfs as the preferred format for digital archiving see <https://www.pdfa.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/FlyerPDFA-en2015.pdf>; <https://www.loc.gov/preservation/digital/formats/fdd/fdd000125.shtml>; <https://www.archives.gov/files/preservation/technical/guidelines.pdf>.

- Holding focus groups
- Consulting with local community groups
- Consulting with First Nations / Indigenous communities and organizations
- Internet resources like archive.org have searchable, digitized publications
- If you have access to a university or college library database often this gives access to platforms that contain huge numbers of digitized periodicals and other publications like Gale: Scholarly Resources for Learning and Research²; HathiTrust Digital Library³; Google books⁴; JSTOR⁵; Archive.org⁶. Some of these have free access, others require a subscription. It may be possible to access these through a local university, college or your local library.
- Artist databases like the Getty Union List of Artist Names⁷
- Local newspapers (some of which may be searchable online)
- Clubs or special interest groups whose focus relates to the object
- University or college departments
- The provincial museum or the national museum that has collections similar to the object
- Museums that are focused on the type of thing you are researching

Tip: Remember that not everything in print is factual or accurate by today's standards, and a lot of publications present a narrow focus or world view. For example, anthropological publications from the 1800s and 1900s often present a white supremacist, racist view of other cultures, and should not be considered authoritative today. It is always better to consult people / Nations directly if you are interested in researching cultural objects.

5. Recording Significance for Conservation

Conservation treatments may need to be undertaken to consolidate or stabilise significant objects or collections. Be sure that the catalogue record and / or object file includes photographs and a summary of any physical evidence related to the significance of the object, and that the conservator undertaking the work receives this information.

- The conservator will document all of the work that is undertaken on the object.
- They will normally not remove or obscure anything that is part of the object's significance, but each treatment will need to be assessed on a case by case basis.
- The conservator should submit a treatment proposal for approval prior to undertaking any work.
- For objects that are considered significant, ensure the proposal does not include removing or altering anything that is related to the object's significance.
 - For example, it may be possible to repair the structure of the object without changing the appearance.
- Be sure to discuss the treatment in detail with the conservator if there is anything specific that should not change.
- If replacement parts are going to be added, be sure the conservator understands the significance of the object so that suitable solutions can be determined during the treatment proposal process.

² <https://www.gale.com/>

³ <https://www.hathitrust.org/>

⁴ <https://books.google.com/>

⁵ <https://Jstor.org/>

⁶ <https://archive.org/>

⁷ <https://www.getty.edu/research/tools/vocabularies/ulan/>. See other Getty resources here <https://www.getty.edu/research/tools/>.

6. Recording Significance for Collections Management

Be sure that labels and database catalogue records are very clear about the significance of an object, or collection, so that mistakes are not made when undertaking standard collections management processes.

- For example, a wooden box of lantern slides that are padded with an old piece of fabric might have the fabric removed and replaced with acid free padding, so if the box and all of the contents are significant because they were owned by a person with local importance, be sure to include these specific details in the Catalogue Record.

7. Sharing Significance in Exhibit Labels and Texts

When displaying significant objects and collections in exhibitions be sure that the texts and labels highlight these important details. This can enhance the reputation of your museum in the eyes of your visitors.

- Be sure to consider the significance from multiple perspectives, so that texts and labels respect the diverse backgrounds and world views that your visitors bring with them.
- Use specific language and precise words so that the information shared is accurate, and does not only portray one point of view.
- When you are drafting texts, it can be helpful to answer leading statements like 'this is important because...', which can then help you articulate the different types of significance in specific ways that will be interesting to your visitors.

- The final text drafts can remove 'this is important because...' and just focus on the significant information in a concise way.
- When you are writing descriptions or captions to accompany object photographs online you should focus on the significance of the object, as well as the basic core data that tells what it is.

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'⁸?

8. Additional Considerations for Research and Documenting Significance

If it is determined that an object or collection has more significance to another museum or organization you should include this information in the Deaccession Proposal, for accessioned objects.

- For non-accessioned objects, make note of the reason for the transfer in the associated paperwork or at minimum, on the object exit form.
- The object should be transferred along with the full Catalogue record and any supporting documentation to ensure no information is lost in the transfer process.

⁸ 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).

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