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Collection Inventory Basics

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With more than 35,000 museums scattered across the United States it is hard to imagine the number of objects cared for by these institutions. Whether their collections number in the millions or just a few hundred, each one is worthy of care and attention. Tending to each object's needs requires time, resources and staff. At times, sorting through the multitude of recommended collections management tasks can become overwhelming. As we attempt to maintain accurate records while following professional standards and best practices, our heads can begin to spin. In the face of these frustrations we may find ourselves asking, "Where do I start?"

Many times the best answer is to undertake a basic collection inventory.

WHY?

In its simplest form, performing a collection inventory is the act of taking stock of all of the collection objects in the possession of a museum. The reasons for performing collection inventories can come in many shapes and sizes. When boiled down however, the carrying out of a collection inventory is needed for minimum collections accountability. If you are unsure of what is in your store rooms, where items are located, or if your paperwork is up to snuff, an inventory is the first place to start. As stewards of collection objects held in the public trust, museums have



ONLINE RESOURCES

[Sample Inventory Worksheet](#)
(AASLH)

[Retrospective Documentation and Making an Inventory](#)
(Collections Trust UK)

[Collections Reviews](#)
(MuseumTrust UK)

["Location = 'Let us Know': Inventorying a Collection on the Move"](#)
(Winterthur Museum)

[Museum Handbook: Inventory and Other Special Instructions](#)
(National Park Service)

[Small Museums Cataloguing Manual](#)
(Museums Australia)

FROM OUR LENDING RESOURCE CENTER

[Collection Conundrums](#)
(Rebecca A. Buck and Jane Allman Gilmore)

[The New Museum Registration Methods](#)
(Rebecca A. Buck and Jane Allman Gilmore, eds.)

[Registration Methods for the Small Museum](#)
(Daniel B. Reibel)

Find the resources above by visiting the Lending Resource Center [website](#).

a responsibility to make these items accessible. In that spirit, keep the following things in mind when determining if you are ready to begin the inventory process:



- Performing a collection inventory allows staff to verify the physical location and accuracy of catalog records related to the objects in the museum's care.
- Undertaking a collection inventory also allows you to identify where problems exist between objects and documentation. It can also enable you to pinpoint what collection management work needs to be done.
- Once problems and needs are identified, museum staff can create a plan to tackle those problems. Having a plan in place will make documentation of the collection more manageable going forward.
- By physically going through the collection, staff may also uncover possible conservation and preservation needs in the process.
- Inventorying is also a safeguard against theft. If a museum does not know what it has, where it is located, and what condition it is in, it may not know when an item has gone missing. If a theft is noticed, but no documentation exists there will be no descriptive information to aid in its recovery.
- One of the most basic reasons and benefits for performing an inventory is to get to know your collection. If you are unsure of what you have and could profit from a better understanding of your overall collection, an inventory can be like a first date. It will give you the chance to begin to learn about your collection objects in a more relaxed way. As you delve further into the relationship, and tackle deeper research, cataloging, and record keeping you'll uncover more about where they came from, their life experiences, and what makes them unique.



A collection inventory can help you take stock of all of the collection objects in the possession of your museum.

HOW?

Once you have determined that undertaking an inventory is for you, the next step is to actually start. As with any task, it can be difficult to determine what steps to take first and in what order to complete them to ensure success. No matter what, make a plan of action and stick to it. If setting a time frame will help keep you on task then set a start date and end date. Determine what the scope of your inventory will be. Will you inventory the entire collection at once? Or will you conduct mini-inventories and review one segment of the collection (such as furniture or artwork) at a time? Determine who will be involved with running and carrying out the project. Always remember the goal should be to physically verify the presence or absence of objects and update the existing records with your findings. When it comes time to carry out the inventory you'll want to keep a few things in mind:

- Before starting, decide how you are going to approach your inventory. Will you move through the collection shelf by shelf? In numerical order of your catalog records? Or by grouping like items together?

- Once you have settled on a method, systematically work your way not only through storage spaces, but also your exhibits, display areas, and properties, so you don't accidentally miss something.
- Keep in mind that the work should be relatively simple and repetitive, but may be very time consuming based upon the number of objects in the museum's care.
- As you work your way through your items, record every collection object you find. You can use an Excel or Word document on a computer, a pad of paper and pencil, or a pre-prepared worksheet. Use whatever is easiest and most comfortable for you. Just be sure to write everything down.
- As you record your findings make sure that for every object you encounter, you note the object's name, accession number, location and date, and a brief description (including condition).
- After completing the physical verification of all of your objects and recording the basics you'll be ready to move on to next steps. This will involve comparing what you found in your inventory to records such as accession registers, card catalogs, institutional records, objects files and collection databases. At this point you can begin to update your records with correct locations and conditions, address and resolve discrepancies, and also note if an item was unable to be found.



Inventory your collection systematically so you don't accidentally miss something.

WHERE TO START?

Because collection inventories are part of standard museum practice, many online resources are available for free at the click of a mouse or button. Whether it is a sample inventory worksheet, a manual for collections management, or a story about someone else's experience, these and other resources are being shared by our colleagues regularly. Consulting these resources will assist you with getting started on your project and will help guide you throughout the process.

This is a free publication. Anyone may subscribe.

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