

Object Files: Getting Started on Significance Assessment

Object files are the starting point for significance assessment and just about any collection work. They are the essential museum reference for the most important objects in the collection.

Object files are an effective way to organise information about your most significant objects. They are a reference point for anything to do with the object, holding all the museum's knowledge about the item, its history and significance, and life cycle since it came into the collection.

The object file can be any type of folder. You can anchor the pages at the top left hand corner with a brass paper fastener or spike, available from stationary shops or newsagents. Alternatively plastic sleeves help keep the information in order. If keeping original material such as historic photos or an instruction book on the file, always put it in a secure pocket or sleeve.

The object name and number should go on the outside of the file, and along the edge that will be visible when the file is shelved or held in a filing cabinet. You can also put a copy of a photo of the object on the front.

Keep the object file in a secure, designated place. **The object file should never leave the museum.** If you are working on object research at home always make a duplicate file. Keep both the original and copy up to date by transferring information as it is developed. Mark the duplicate file so it isn't confused with the museum's original records.

An object file is always a work in progress, information is added whenever anything comes to light, or when the object is conserved or displayed in the museum

Why use Object Files?

To collate research about the history and provenance of an object or collection, ensuring that this vital information is recorded

To ensure that relevant information about the object is readily accessible

As a source of information to guide management and use of an item or collection, including preparing labels for exhibition, assessing significance and informing decisions on conservation

What goes in an object file?

Anything relevant to understanding the object, its history, significance and what's happened to it in the museum

Object files include:

Donor details: name, address, phone number

Acquisition information: date acquired, copy of receipt, object number, catalogue sheet or a copy of the catalogue entry

Photos of the object: if possible take photos of the object in situ, before it is moved into the museum, and where relevant take or copy photos of the maker or

user. Also include photos of the object on display in the museum. Where relevant include details or different views or angles.

Notes or information from the donor, preferably written by the donor

Notes from conversations with people who know about the object or this type of objects

Copies of all kinds of historical and contemporary references from books, retail trade catalogues, newspapers, letters, local histories, oral histories etc

Copies of historic photos, paintings, drawings or any pictorial material showing similar objects in use. There may also be archival films that could be noted on the file. These images help you understand the context of use and provide clues for further research and interpretation.

Information about the maker or manufacturer, photo of the maker or manufacturer or the place where it was used

Information about the industry and how it was made or used

Documentation about conservation or restoration work on the object. Include before and after photos, notes about the process and materials used, notes about new material added to the object, or fabric removed or replaced, the date the work was done and by whom. Save samples of what has been removed or replaced, and samples of the new material added to the object. NB Always assess significance before any conservation or restoration work to the object. The statement of significance helps to guide treatment decisions.

Information about the exhibition history of the object: where shown, duration of exhibition, travelling displays, copy of object label, photo of the object on display.

Information about similar objects in other museums or in private ownership, with photos if possible. CAN is a useful source of information but also check with other museums in the district.

If the object has been published or referred to in a newspaper or magazine article, include a copy for reference

Use all of this material to develop a statement of significance for the object. Make notes in point form about the meaning of the object and why it is important.

Keep adding notes to the object file as information comes to hand. Include copies of publicity about the object.

Consider recruiting new volunteers to work on object files and collection research. Target people who like doing research or know the particular subject or family. Focus on the museum's most important objects where the provenance¹ and history has not been recorded. Track down donors and don't be embarrassed about asking for more information. Most donors are really pleased the museum is working on their donation.

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¹ Provenance is the life history of an object, especially the origin, history, associations, previous owners and context of use.