

# Museums & Galleries NSW

## Cataloguing

Cataloguing objects is very important because it is the means by which the information about your collection is recorded permanently in a methodical and consistent way. Your catalogue should be a permanent record of all the objects in your collection and all the facts you know about each object. It is the central way of making that information available to the community, whether that be children from the local school, some one chasing up their family history or a university student coming to research a thesis. A catalogue is what ensures that the information will always be available and that it will outlast individuals, who tend to come and go in historical societies, museums and archives and take the information they have in their heads away with them! An **Object Information sheet** is a guide to the sort of information you can gather about each object in your collection. Remember that any stories which the donor has about when they got the object, how they used it and what it means to them is very important, as are any supporting materials such as photographs or operating manuals etc.

Museums link this information, which is stored in the files, to the object by giving each object a unique number. It is similar to the way libraries number their books and means that you can always match an object to the information about what that object is and where it came from.

The **catalogue worksheet** is the most frequently used document in collections management. Museums should use a standardised form that makes the retrieval of information easier and helps the museum control its collection through its focus on particular data. Provision on the form should be made for acquisition number, object name, description (including measurements), manufacturing or production details, provenance or history of the object, its current location, display or storage requirements, source of acquisition, the name of associated reference files, its classification or collective identification (indexing) and perhaps its significance to the whole collection. Remember the worksheet is not a static document and may need to be frequently updated as more information comes to light.

The aim of the catalogue description is to provide a clear, concise picture that enables another reader of the worksheet to visualise the object and recognise it immediately if searching for it. The description should refer to the physical properties of the object - the materials of its composition, its colour, shape, structure, texture, decoration, finish, distinguishing marks and any other feature. The condition of an object and its state of completeness should also be mentioned. Such information also allows the museum to monitor whether an object has deteriorated since acquisition.

As important documents the catalogue sheets must be carefully maintained. Some organisations file these sheets by year using a loose-leaf system. Alternatively, they can be individually placed in a folder, file or envelope, along with the original receipt, a copy of the record of gift, the object information sheet etc. The folders  
Museums & Galleries NSW, 43-51 Cowper Wharf Road, Woolloomooloo NSW 2011  
t: 02 9358 1760 | f: 02 9358 1852 | w: [www.mgnsw.org.au](http://www.mgnsw.org.au) | e: [info@mgnsw.org.au](mailto:info@mgnsw.org.au)

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are then filed numerically with the acquisition number recorded on a corner that protrudes from the shelf edge permitting easy access.

Any information you have about an object should all be kept together and if you have many documents about an object, a file may be the most practical way of keeping it all together.

## **Guide to Completing Catalogue Worksheet**

### *a) record registration number and date of acquisition on sheet*

The primary source for these details is the acquisition register or your inventory list. It is especially important to transcribe the number correctly as it is the major identifier for an object and is unique.

### *b) record object name:*

Sources for this section include the registers and your classification scheme (such as Summerfield's classification scheme) or thesaurus which is explained below. It helps if you keep the name simple and consistently document like items under the same name. As this is the section that is usually copied onto your indexing resource a brief description in addition to the object name is advised. With this in mind a prescribed format should be followed when filling in this section. For example, object name should precede media, then maker's name, place of origin and date. Thus a coin purse from Melbourne dated 1879 may read, Coin purse, leather & brass, Smith & Hogbin, Melbourne 1879.

### *c) record description:*

Try to provide a visual image of the object. Imagine the reader of your catalogue worksheet has never seen it before. Focus on the physical characteristics, the object's colour, shape, texture, decoration, finish, media and distinguishing features. Detachable components of the one object, eg. hat and coat set, and their respective numbers also need to be mentioned. The description will be better if you move from left to right, top to base etc. rather than in a more random manner. Simple, objective terms should be used.

### *d) record any distinguishing marks:*

Any inscriptions, labels etc. and their exact placement on the object should be noted. It is best if text is transcribed on the sheet or a sketch is included.

### *e) record the dimensions:*

The organisation will have to agree to standard units of measurement being used so that all objects can be measured in the same way i.e. cms or mms. The maximum dimensions should be recorded, eg: from longest point to longest point.

### *f) record the condition of the object and its completeness:*

Record the condition of the object as it appears when catalogued. Again a standard needs to be developed for descriptors such as 'excellent', 'poor' etc.. Remember to note the area where any tears, missing beads etc. exist. This information will allow personnel to monitor the object's condition. It will also aid in deciding whether an identical or similar object should be acquired.

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### *g) record the producer/manufacturer:*

The source for this information is the 'object information sheet' or the object itself that is explained below.

### *h) record the place of manufacture:*

Source is the object or the 'object information sheet'.

### *i) record the object's provenance:*

Details concerning the history of the object such as its use, its former owners etc. establish the object's context prior to its entry into the museum and help bring the object to life. The coin purse ceases to be only a three dimensional object but can also be viewed as a representative of the period of its production, illustrative of its owners etc. These stories and background should be taken from the 'object information sheet' or other notes taken from the donor or from others who may be familiar with the items. On the catalogue worksheet there is only limited room for this information. Try to condense the story or include only the most significant information. You can always add further pages to the object file or refer the reader to specific reference files associated with individuals or significant venues in a locality.

### *j) record references:*

This section is created to note the reference material that the cataloguer has used to obtain their information. The source of further information could also be noted here, should the interested party wish to go beyond the potted history provided on the catalogue worksheet or database. This material may include bibliographies, the registration number of related objects and reference files containing pertinent newspaper clippings, photographs which are not objects, photocopied articles, pages from magazines or journals, handwritten notes and so on. This material is best managed by creating reference files relating to specific families, local industries, buildings etc. Each file should be labelled related to the subject it contains. Terms used in specific indexing aids can be used to label files. Of course each file should also contain a list at the front that records which objects are relevant to the subject area.

### *k) assign index terms (subject classification/object name):*

This section of the worksheet requires the cataloguer to assign a prescribed 'tag' to the object that will best express its relationship with the collection as a whole. In short the cataloguer must decide where the object fits in. The decision that is made is extremely important as this index performs as a directory to the collection and is most often thought of as the 'catalogue of the collection'. It is the resource used to answer inquiries such as 'Do we have a sea chest in the collection?', 'How many sea chests do we have?' or 'What marine artefacts do we have?' The index is therefore extremely important and requires much consideration in establishing and maintaining. The Summerfield Classification scheme is the most commonly used in Australia and a copy of the primary and secondary levels of classification is enclosed. To order a complete version, contact the West Australian branch of Museums Australia on (08) 9427 2770.

### *l) record the current location of the object:*

The current location of the object and the date this was recorded should be noted on the catalogue worksheet. As location may change this section needs to be updated.

### *m) record the current significance of the object to the collection:*

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This section refers to the value of the object in relation to the whole collection. A rating scheme needs to be established whereby each object is accredited. For example, '1' may denote rare objects, '5' may suggest a fairly replaceable object. Such ratings can determine an organisation's decision to lend an object, have it professionally preserved or individually insured. The 'object information sheet' and an organisation's reference files can help determine significance. Remember as new information concerning an object comes to light, its significance may alter. Consequently your catalogue will have to be updated.

*n) record the object's handling/storage/display requirements:*

The consideration of these requirements is a means of preserving the object. For instance, a paper or textile based object should be removed from display each year and rested in a dark, dry storage facility for three years. An object with a handle should always be carried with a hand supporting the base. These needs should be noted on the catalogue sheet and observed.

*o) record the object's exhibition history:*

This is another means of preservation. It allows personnel to note when the object was last displayed and influences exhibition and loan decisions.

*p) record details of the object's source eg. donor:*

Details are available from the acquisition and receipt registers.

*q) check catalogue worksheet to confirm all documentation activities have been completed, sign and date sheet.*

## Possible Additional Components of the Worksheet

- Although not essential it is advisable to provide a collections management checklist somewhere in an organisation's collections management procedures. The catalogue worksheet is an apt location for this. Through considering the many tasks that have been performed to enable cataloguing to take place, you can be assured a strong information trail has been laid. If on the other hand you believe cataloguing is the only documentary activity required, you will be reminded that this is not the case and other tasks await if collections management is to be carried out effectively in your organisation.
- If photographs of objects are taken as part of the cataloguing procedure in your organisation, the negative number should be recorded.
- Some organisations prefer to account for detachable pieces of the one object not as part of the general description but through a separate acknowledgment.
- The provenance area can be further broken down to include a reference for the object's association with people, places, events and themes.
- A place for professional conservation treatment to be recorded may be relevant.

**Fact Sheet**

**Museum XXX Catalogue Sheet**

**Date of Acquisition:** \_\_\_/\_\_\_/\_\_\_ **Acquisition No:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Object Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Description:** \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Distinguishing Marks:(inscriptions, serial no, patent dates, trade marks, labels etc and their location)**

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Dimensions (cm):**    Height                  Width                  Length                  Diameter  
                                 \_\_\_\_\_                  \_\_\_\_\_                  \_\_\_\_\_                  \_\_\_\_\_

**Weight(if necessary):**                  \_\_\_\_\_

**Condition and completeness:** \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Maker:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Secondary Maker:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Place of Manufacture:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Provenance: (History, previous owners, historical importance):**  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**References: (books or research files)** \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

