Cataloguing

Definition

Managing the information that gives your collections meaning, not as an end in itself but to record and retrieve what is known about your objects.

Scope

Museums create a catalogue record for each object, or group of objects, either on computer or cards. Such records give an at-a-glance summary of key information. They should be searchable so that users, both internal and external, can find records quickly and easily. Catalogue records should link or cross-refer to other relevant information held on file (eg in another part of your computer-based system or in a filing cabinet of object history files) or elsewhere (eg online).

Cataloguing builds on your inventory information; catalogue records are more than the limited, finite inventory-level minimum for accountability that tells you an object exists and where it is. If you have met the inventory requirements you know the numbers and locations of everything in your collection, but the names might be very general (eg pot, postcard, drawer of herbarium specimens). Inventory-level information is not expected to tell you which pots are Roman, which postcards show your town in the 1920s, or how different plants are used medicinally.

A modern museum catalogue is no longer the definitive final record that cannot be shared until it is ‘completed’ by those with exclusive editing rights. Rather, cataloguing is an open-ended framework for recording and linking to a wide range of information that might come from anywhere. This information is generated through the use of collections: through research and interpretation that can – and should – be inclusive. No object has just one story, as users bring different perspectives.

See Documentation planning for advice on how to break work down into manageable smaller projects.

No museum has finished cataloguing because there is always more to learn. Note that Spectrum does not specify any particular level of cataloguing beyond the minimum needed to meet the inventory standard. There is no ‘ideal’ catalogue record; your approach to cataloguing must be carefully considered at policy level, taking into account your museum’s mission and the needs of different users.
You should have a policy on cataloguing. This could either be a standalone document or part of a wider collections management policy. Either way, in deciding your policy you will most likely need to consider these questions:

- What is your broad approach to cataloguing different parts of your collection (e.g., some parts catalogued as individual objects and others at group-level only)?
- Are you aiming to meet any external cataloguing standards (e.g., using templates, classifications or terminologies agreed within subject specialisms)?
- How does your approach to Use of collections, and cataloguing the resulting information, meet the principles of sector ethical standards?
- What collections information supports the mission of your museum and the needs of different users?
- Beyond the inventory-level minimum, what should be in a ‘core’ catalogue record for different parts of your collection? And why?
- If you have not already met your ‘core’ standards, what are the priorities for doing so?
- How will you ensure names, dates, places, and other keywords are recorded consistently?
- What catalogue information will you make available to your users, and how?
- Who can edit and add to information about the collections, and how are contributions authored and attributed?
- How will you protect confidential information, including personal data?
- For new accessions, what is your target time for creating the agreed ‘core’ catalogue record?
- How will you make sure that new useful information arising from other procedures, for example Use of collections, is referenced in catalogue records?
- How do you record, and keep up to date, the evolution of your documentation systems and practices (e.g., numbering systems, use of terminology, manual records)?