

Registration step by step: when an object enters the museum

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This page is the Web version of a Fact Sheet developed by the CIDOC Services Working Group, Registration step by step: when an object enters the museum/Un objet arrive au musée: Enregistrement étape par étape. It is one of a number of pages about museum information standards prepared by the International Committee for Documentation of the International Council of Museums (ICOM):

"It is an important professional responsibility to ensure that all items accepted temporarily or permanently by the museum are properly and fully documented to facilitate provenance, identification, condition and treatment." (ICOM Code of Professional Ethics, 1990, p. 31, nr. 6.2)

CIDOC fact sheets are produced to disseminate to the museum world, information on aspects of museum documentation in a simple format. This CIDOC fact sheet shows, in 8 steps, how an object can be registered after entering the museum. This step by step method is applicable, depending on the museum's circumstances, to both manual and computerized registration systems.

Given are the minimal registration requirements. This implies simplification. A museum might like to add more information to these basic data, according to its own (or national) standards. The fact sheet closes with some literature for further reading. Museums dealing with backlogs in registration or unregistered collections, should follow steps 4 to 8.

Step 1

The object is brought into the museum. The person bringing it in is given a receipt which includes the following data:

- brief object description
- date of entry
- name and signature of the museum employee receiving the object
- name, address and signature of the person bringing the object

The museum holds a copy of the receipt and uses this for step 2. Step 1 can usually be omitted if a staff member brings in the object.

Step 2

The object is entered in a Register, with numbered pages and columns for the following data:

- provisional (sequential) number
- date of arrival
- name and address of the owner or person bringing the object (if not a museum employee)
- identification (object key word or brief description)
- reason for entry
- temporary storage location
- name of museum employee receiving and/or bringing the object

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Step 3

Three options are possible concerning the disposition of the object:

- it will not be acquired for the collection (A)
- it will be accepted as loan (B)
- it will become the museum's property (C)

N.B.: as ownership is concerned, in most countries a legal document has to be produced.

A. The object will not be accepted by the museum

In the same Register the following has to be recorded:

- date of return
- reason for return
- name and address the object is sent (back) to
- name of recorder

Registration is now finished for an object that will not become part of the collection.

B. The object is accepted as loan

Short-term loans (e.g. for an exhibition) are recorded and de-accessioned like A on expiration of the terms of the loans. Long-term loans will be given a unique loan number, which is noted down in the Register. Registration continues with step 4.

C. The object becomes the museum's property and is allocated a unique inventory number

The object is marked (or labelled) with this number, which is also recorded in the Register. Registration continues with step 4.

Step 4

The object data are now recorded on a registration form that is well structured into data sections. The form should contain at least the following sections:

- institution name
- inventory number
- object key word
- brief description and/or title
- acquisition/accession, method
- acquired/accessioned, from (person/institution)
- acquisition/accesion, date
- permanent location

Museums are advised to tailor a form to their specific needs and may add sections on: material/technique, measurements, temporary location, condition, cultural and/or historical references, natural history references, site, production (artist, date), price,

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photo(negative)number, handling, conservation, notes, etc. While in most sections structured data should be entered in predescribed ways using controlled terminology lists, "brief description and/or title" and "notes" normally contain free text.

Step 5

As part of the registration procedure, an object should be photographed (and/or drawn). The negative or drawing number should be recorded on the form.

Step 6

The object is now registered and can be taken to its permanent (or temporary) location. At least the permanent location data are entered on the registration form.

Step 7

For security reasons, a copy of the registration files should be kept in a safe place, preferably outside the museum building. For legal reasons the museum will have to possess a document to prove the status of objects in its collection. To achieve this, the museum can use the Register or (photo)copies of registration cards. These copies (or computer print outs containing the same data) will have to be bound, while the pages have to be numbered and signed.

Step 8

These 7 steps ensure that the minimal data concerning a museum object are recorded. To make the information and thereby the objects more accessible, indexes can be created. For computerized registration this is done automatically, while for manual registration, files with index cards should be produced.

This method is most suitable for museums with few short-term loans. It combines (in steps 2-3) a Register with an Inventory. For museums with many short-term loans, another possibility is to record all objects entering and (!) leaving the museum on receipts (see step 1). The receipts are sequentially numbered and the museum keeps a complete set of copies as the Register. Registration on forms (from step 4 onwards) is the same for both methods.

More...

Stuart A. Holm, *Facts and Artefacts. How to document a museum collection*, [Cambridge] 1991, ISBN 0905963792

D.H. Dudley, I.B. Wilkinson, *Museum Registration Methods*, Washington D.C. 1979 (3rd ed.)