Creating a master list for the ‘official collection’

Susie Davies, RA, Excavating MacGregor, 2017

In 1897 MacGregor referred to the assemblage of artefacts which he had begun depositing in the Queensland Museum as the ‘British New Guinea Collection … the official collection of this Colony.’ After two years of solid work, we have now created a Master List of the 10,970 objects in MacGregor’s Official Collection! This is an essential element of our project since we plan to examine the collection as sets of multiple assemblages. Why did this seemingly simple task take so long? Recounting our methodology highlights the complexity of dealing with museum records from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, long before procedures were standardised, let alone converted into digital formats.

The first consignment sent by MacGregor, containing nearly 3,000 items, arrived at the Queensland Museum in late October 1892. The accessioning, storage and display of such a large collection of artefacts would present challenges for any contemporary museum let alone a nineteenth-century institution with few qualified staff. To make matters worse, it seems there was no list of contents. Curator Charles de Vis, assisted by untrained employees, appears to have been unfazed. He systematically gave numbers to the objects (Figure 1) and recorded object type, general description and measurements in the Ethnology Register (New Guinea). Subsequent consignments were accessioned into either the first or second volume of this register. The Ethnology Register (New Guinea) (Figure 2) proved to be the most reliable source for making a definitive Master List of MacGregor’s multiple consignments, for no contents lists have been located.
Figure 1. Lime Gourd (9678). This lime gourd (9678) shows the distinctive style of red paint numbering which is largely associated with objects from Transfer 46. The ‘Mac 3239’ relates to the later re-registration of this object into the MacGregor Collection Register in 1919. Image courtesy of the Queensland Museum, not for reproduction.

Figure 2. Ethnology Register (New Guinea), Volume 1, p. 56. The numbers on the left side are the QM registration numbers (e.g. 9465). Transfer numbers are seen at the top of each page (right side), in this instance ‘T46’ (Transfer 46). Localities were recorded to the right of the Transfer number. Blanks in this area indicate that the object had no accompanying locality label. The red ink numbers are ‘Mac’ numbers assigned to objects from 1915. Image courtesy of the Queensland Museum, not for reproduction.

The task of transcribing data from the Ethnology Registers was not without problems. While the poor condition of some pages presented challenges in ascertaining localities and registration numbers, a more serious problem were duplicated numbers. Occasionally, MacGregor artefacts were given numbers that had been previously assigned to objects from other collections (Figure 3). From time to time registration was broken up by the arrival of non-related collections that were entered in and among the MacGregor objects. For example, the sequence of numbers related to Transfer 52 was interrupted by several hundred objects (mainly arrows). After much debate we eliminated these because they are not associated with a relevant transfer number.
To help understand problems identified when working with the registers and to confirm the receipt of official collections and any subsequent outwards transfers or exchanges, archival research was undertaken. Receipt of objects associated with the official collection was (with one exception) traced through the Queensland Museum’s Donor Register, Volume 3 (1887-1899). Collections of natural history and ethnology received from MacGregor were usually treated as an inwards governmental transfer. Each consignment was assigned a specific ‘Transfer’ number (e.g., Transfer 46; Figure 4). Twenty consignments dated 1889-1898 during MacGregor’s administration of the British colony were traced through the Queensland Museum registers. Eight contained ethnographic material (sometimes mixed with natural history).
specimens): 1892 (Transfer 46); 1893 (Transfer 47); 1894 (Transfer 52); 1896 (Transfer 55); 1897 (Transfers 60 and 68); and 1898 (Transfers 70 and 74).

Figure 4. Donor Register volume 3 (1887-1899), p. 95. This page shows the receipt of the first collection of ethnology from MacGregor in October 1892. A single-line entry records the receipt of the collection as Transfer 46 (see column titled 'Transfer'). Image courtesy of the Queensland Museum, not for reproduction.

A survey of the Queensland Museum Inwards Correspondence files and registers revealed letters from MacGregor (and others associated with the administration) concerning the shipment and general nature of collections. Other sources, such as the Minute Book of the monthly meetings of the Board of Trustees, provided some background information about the arrival of consignments and occasionally, progress with unpacking and accessioning. As previously noted, no lists of contents were found in association with any archival correspondence accompanying the collections. The laborious task of making lists of the collections appears to have been left to curator Charles de Vis as he unpacked the collections (Figure 5).
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The process of creating the Master List and database has involved careful transcribing of data from the Ethnology Registers (New Guinea) into a spreadsheet. All the peculiar spellings (and abbreviations) for localities (and objects) recorded in the registers were transcribed as they preserve the historical integrity of the collection. This is valuable because closer scrutiny of the localities shows that some are associated with specific government officers who were involved in their field acquisition. This method of documenting the collection greatly increases the capacity for extracting ‘collecting episodes’ and associating them with particular individuals and/or Papuan communities. Consequently, a much broader and more complex picture of the collection emerges, as one not solely connected to MacGregor himself.

The Master List database also tries to match the ‘de Vis’ number sequence (i.e. original registration number) with subsequent catalogue numbers assigned to the objects at the Queensland Museum and other institutions where they were transferred. At the Queensland Museum, ‘Mac’ prefix numbers relate to the MacGregor Collection Register, commenced in 1915. This document has been found to be seriously flawed and is a very poor account of the collections sent by MacGregor. Firstly, since this register was created to provide a record of the official collection in the Queensland Museum at that time, it does not record the duplicates dispersed to other museums in 1897 (around 3,000 objects) or objects exchanged or transferred out before 1906. Secondly, it includes some 650 non-Macgregor objects (comprising 16 various collections) which were inadvertently accessioned into the MacGregor Collection Register (Figure 8). E prefix numbers in the Queensland Museum relate to the period from 1911 when objects found lacking labels or information were re-registered into a new E Register (Ethnology Register). Seemingly no attempt was made to match the objects with items in the 1890s Ethnology Registers (New Guinea). Thus, it is possible that there could be objects with an ‘E’ prefix in the Queensland Museum which may be part of the official collection, since the location of around 700 objects on the Master List cannot be accounted for at present.
While a Master list and associated database of the official collection is a major achievement that will be invaluable for future research, additional forensic and archival research is required to settle some issues regarding locality discrepancies and to take advantage of data recorded on original object labels. Trying to ascertain the whereabouts of the 700 missing objects is at the top of the list!

By Susie Davies, 24 March 2017.