



THE UNIVERSITY OF
SYDNEY

Sydney University Museums

COLLECTIONS GUIDELINES

SECTION 4: DOCUMENTATION SYSTEM

Macleay Museum
Nicholson Museum
University Art Gallery

SECTION 4: DOCUMENTATION SYSTEM

4.1 Overview

4.1.1. Definition

Collection documentation is defined as information about collection objects and specimens, as well as the activities involving them, such as acquisition, accessioning and cataloguing, deaccessioning and disposal, condition and conservation, valuation and insurance, location and movement control, loans, exhibitions and other types of access.

This information is recorded in written or electronic form within a system that enables objects and specimens to be connected to associated information. With an effective, standardised documentation system, a museum is able to facilitate collection policies, collection care and accountability, as well as collection access, interpretation and research.

4.1.2. Purpose

Sydney University Museums (SUM) recognises that an effective documentation system is fundamental to the integrity of its collections and an essential component of professional museum practice. The purpose of these guidelines is to establish a system that unifies the separate recordkeeping practices of SUM's component museums under a centralised system designed to ensure that objects and specimens are reliably documented to a set standard, that such information is efficiently retrievable, and that the documentation system itself is secure.

4.1.3. Objectives

The objective of these guidelines is to enable SUM to align its collections documentation system with accepted professional standards, the need for which is established by the International Committee for Documentation of the International Council of Museums (ICOM-CIDOC) in its *Statement of Principles of Museum Documentation* (2007), and by the National Standards for Australian Museums and Galleries, which state that:

- The museum has an effective system to record and retrieve information about its collection. (Standard C1.4)

Through adherence to professional best practice, SUM intends that for each object or specimen in its collection:

- There is an accurate record in the appropriate Accessions Register.
- There is a registration number that uniquely identifies the item with that register entry.
- That number is marked or otherwise labelled on the item.
- SUM has documentary proof of legal title that also meets ethical standards.
- There is a robust link with all associated documentation.
- SUM has an accurate and current record of location.
- SUM has an accurate and current record of valuation.
- All documentation meets the SPECTRUM Documentation Standard (2009).

4.1.4. Scope

This guidelines section focuses on object and specimen documentation and the means of documentary control for material in the SUM permanent collections. With the exception of accessioning and marking, the guidelines also apply to material on loan to SUM.

Practices for documenting collection related activities are also referenced, but should be read in association with the relevant sections of the overall collections guidelines.

The education and custody collections, as well as collections-related property such as unaccessioned assets and the reference library, fall outside the scope of these guidelines, as does documentation of the University of Sydney Union (USU) collection and collections belonging to other University departments.

4.2 Principles

- 4.2.1. SUM affirms that information relating to an object or specimen's history, origin, and use is as significant as the item itself. Therefore, the maintenance of current, accurate collections documentation that tracks both collection information and collection-related activity is of primary importance to the professional management of SUM collections.
- 4.2.2. SUM will maintain a documentation system that will combine electronic and paper formats, provide for easy retrieval of information, and be preserved by proper handling and storage.
- 4.2.3. SUM museums have built documentation systems that vary from each other, however, SUM aims to centralise its documentation system through use of its KE EMu online collections database and standardised documentation procedures.
- 4.2.4. The SUM collection documentation procedures will meet the *SPECTRUM Documentation Standard* (2009).
- 4.2.5. SUM will ensure that its documentation objectives (as defined in section 4.1.3) are met for all new acquisitions and will have a plan to achieve them for collections acquired prior to these guidelines.
- 4.2.6. SUM places great emphasis on the creation and maintenance of good quality documentary material relating to individual objects and specimens, as well as themes and people of relevance to its collections. As such, SUM will actively seek opportunities to increase the quantity and quality of collection documentation.
- 4.2.7. SUM will monitor evolving standards and technologies related to museum collection documentation practice and will, within resource constraints, implement those that are considered to be beneficial to current collections management and curatorial needs.
- 4.2.8. Management of collection documentation pertaining to Indigenous Australian material will comply with the national Museums Australia Indigenous heritage policy, *Continuous Cultures, Ongoing Responsibilities* (2005), the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Protocols for Libraries, Archives and Information Services* (1995), and the University's repatriation policy, *Policy and Procedures Concerning the Management of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Ancestral Remains and Culturally Significant Items* (1996).
- 4.2.9. The SUM collection documentation system will enable ready incorporation of information into education and interpretation material and online exhibitions and learning resources.

4.3 Collection Records

The SUM collections documentation system is comprised of a network of paper and electronic records that together ensure collection items are accounted for and provide efficient links between collection items and all associated data.

4.3.1. Records Network

Information about collection items, as well as the activities involving them, will be organised into a documentation system that will include:

- Accession Files (documenting source of legal acquisition)
- Accession Register (including a unique registration numbering system)
- Object / Specimen Labelling (with registration number)
- Object / Specimen Files (research, published material, significance assessments)
- Catalogue (database / cards with agreed nomenclature), which include minimum datasets, image records, location and movement control records, valuation histories, and associated activity records.

4.3.2. Accession Files

SUM will document and retain records of accession activity for all objects and specimens acquired for the permanent collection.

Each accession activity will be assigned a unique accession lot number.

Accession records will record details of the donor, vendor, or field collection, and include evidence of the transfer of legal title and any related correspondence or documentation referring to the accession as a whole.

Evidence of transfer of legal title may include a deed of gift form signed and dated by the rightful owner or representative, a traceable receipt of purchase, or an official transfer agreement between legal parties (eg governments, other museums, and universities).

4.3.3. Accession Register

SUM will maintain an Accession Register for each collection area that lists each item in the order of acquisition and describes each item in terms of its source, origin, provenance, materials, dimensions, condition, and value.

Each object or specimen in the collection will be permanently assigned a unique identification number, called a registration number, which will be recorded in the Accessions Register.

The registration number will be marked on all documents pertaining to the object or specimen in issue.

4.3.4. Object / Specimen Labelling

To provide a link between collection items and associated data, each object and specimen will be discreetly marked with its registration number in an indelible but reversible manner. If direct application of a number is not possible, the item will be tagged or stored in a labelled container.

4.3.5. Object / Specimen Files

SUM will produce and maintain individual object and specimen records that include provenance information, significance assessments, condition reports, use restrictions (cultural, legal, or other intellectual or moral property rights), as well as related correspondence, research, published material, and images.

In order to enhance their significance and interpretive potential, SUM will document objects and specimens in their original context and record information obtained through owners, makers, community members, scholars, exhibition and research.

4.3.6. Catalogue

SUM will compile and maintain a unified cataloguing system that will provide a centralised place for all known documentation of an object or specimen, and cross reference registration numbers with more detailed information contained in the files.

The catalogue will be recorded in the KE EMu collections database and augmented as necessary by older card-based systems.

The catalogue will record intrinsic and associational information about each object and specimen in a standard format with agreed nomenclature. The standardised categories basic to all collections will be supplemented by additional categories that customise the catalogue to each collection area.

The *SPECTRUM Documentation Standard* (2009) will identify a minimum catalogue dataset, as well as quality standards for intrinsic and associational data. Such standards will be sufficient to record an item's origin and to identify the item within the limits of knowledge available to clarify the scientific, historic or cultural value of the item.

Sources of information will be cited, dated and referenced in a way that will ease verification of accuracy or future augmentation.

4.3.7. Image Records

Photographic documentation of the collections is important for identification and management purposes. Images minimise the need to handle objects and specimens and facilitate inventory, security, insurance, research, education and exhibition activities.

SUM will progressively create a complete photographic record of its collections through photography of all new acquisitions, and all material involved in loan, exhibition, publication, or research activities. Stocktaking activities may also incorporate a photography component.

SUM will progressively create digital images of its collections, whether through original photography or the scanning of existing images to established sector standards. Associated metadata will be captured and recorded to a set standard.

SUM will seek to attach a digital reference image to each KE EMu catalogue record, except in cases where this is not practical (eg bulk registered specimens) or appropriate (eg restricted material).

4.3.8. Movement Control Records

In order to establish baseline accountability for its collections, SUM will carry out a comprehensive program of inventory control in accordance with the University's

Heritage Assets: Valuation and Stocktaking Policy and Procedures (2007). Any change of location must be recorded on the collections database in order to maintain interim movement control.

4.3.9. Valuation Records

In order to establish baseline accountability for its collections, SUM will carry out a comprehensive program of valuation conducted by independent valuers in accordance with the University's *Heritage Assets: Valuation and Stocktaking Policy and Procedures* (2007). Any change of valuation must be recorded on the collections database.

4.3.10. Activity Records

In addition to accession and catalogue records, documentation will be kept for activities related to the collections, such as deaccessioning and disposal, condition and conservation, valuation and insurance, location and movement control, loans, exhibition and other types of access. Practices for documenting these activities are referred to in the relevant sections of the overall collections guidelines.

4.4 Records Retrieval

The collections documentation system for SUM will be structured to support effective management and retrieval of information by museum staff and other legitimate users.

4.4.1. Filing System

The collections documentation filing system will be clear and consistent, with information files organised alphabetically, numerically, or chronologically, depending on the type of information.

Records will be clearly organised, labelled and kept current.

Record retrieval will be through the registration number or activity (accession, loan, or exhibit) number as appropriate.

Registration numbers will be given by sequential count within a curatorial division. Activity numbers will be organised by year.

Digital records outside KE EMu will be managed in keeping with the filing standards and procedures of the University.

Digital records will use archival digital media and formats and be interchangeable to ensure longevity of access and quality of records.

4.4.2. Database

KE EMu, the SUM centralised collections database, will be maintained and further developed to improve efficiency in retrieving and manipulating collections data.

The database search function will enable retrieval of relevant information about individual objects / specimens or collection activities by searching for standardized field criteria (such as registration number, accession date, item name, classification, source, provenance, material, or activity number).

As resources permit, SUM will progressively enter collections information onto KE EMu to enable easier management by staff and facilitate future online access to the collections by museum audiences.

Procedures will be developed to assess the quality of information in the databases and develop methodologies to improve the quality and accuracy of the information.

Further development of KE EMu will take into account current and future needs of the collections and stakeholders, and will be done in consultation with the University's Information and Communications Technology department to ensure adherence to University standards.

4.5 Records Safekeeping

The collections documentation system will ensure that collections-related data, ranging from paper records and photographs to modern digital formats, are preserved.

4.5.1. Physical Safety

Collections records will be considered a permanent resource and will be created, handled, and stored using only those materials and procedures that ensure their long-term preservation.

Collections records will be housed in designated, secure locations under the direct supervision of curatorial or collection management staff.

Collection records will be safeguarded from hazards such as fire, water, loss, degradation, theft and vandalism.

Original legal documents and other significant paper based records will be stored in locked, fireproof cabinets.

4.5.2. Backups

Within resource constraints, SUM will aim to progressively digitise or otherwise duplicate information contained in significant paper based records.

The KE EMu database and other electronic records will be backed up at regular intervals, with backups stored in a secure, off-site location. This process will be maintained in cooperation with the University's Information and Communications Technology department.

Digital information will be transferred from superseded systems and file formats into current systems.

4.5.3. Restrictions

Physical access to original collection documentation will only be made available to curatorial and collection management staff. Supervised access may be given to volunteers, interns, and researchers. Additional protections may be made for files pertaining to restricted collections.

A system will be in place for controlling access to the KE EMu collections database to prevent unauthorised modification of data or inappropriate access to confidential or sensitive information.

For guidance on the release of confidential or sensitive information, see section 8.0 Collections Access and Use.

4.6 Implementation

4.6.1. Responsibilities

Documentation is the responsibility of each SUM staff member with collection related responsibilities. Specifically:

- The SUM Director is responsible for ensuring that adequate staff and resources are provided for this essential component of museum business.
- The Collections Manager will maintain database function, as well as collections-related insurance, valuation, inventory and loan records. The Collections Manager will also maintain current information on the location, standards, and retention schedules for backups of all electronically based collections records.
- The Senior Curators are accountable for the maintenance of all accession and deaccession records, as well as cataloguing, research, and exhibition records pertaining to collections within their areas of responsibility.
- The Senior Curators, in consultation with the Collections Manager, are responsible for establishing a documentation plan within their respective collection areas to support these guidelines, to address both new acquisitions and documentation backlogs.
- Collections staff will regularly refine accessioning, cataloguing, and information storage facilities and procedures, to ensure that all documentation is readily accessible to staff and others.
- All senior staff will be responsible for training collections management and curatorial staff in activities pertaining to collections documentation.

4.6.2. Documentation

Documentation of collections will proceed in accordance with the *SPECTRUM Documentation Standard*.

Administrative records relating to the collections and their management will be kept in compliance with the filing standards and procedures of the University's Recordkeeping policy.

4.6.3. Reporting

In accordance with University formal reporting requirements, SUM reports on its collection documentation activities to:

- Internal Audit Office on an annual basis with a "Certificate of Verification of Heritage Assets" for all collections within its care.
- Risk Management Office on an annual basis to confirm updated values for correct insurance coverage.

4.6.4. Review

The SUM Collections Documentation Guidelines will be reviewed every five years.

4.7 Related Documentation

4.7.1. University References

Archives and Record Management Services. (2000). *University Recordkeeping Policy*. Sydney: University of Sydney.

Finance and Accounting Department. (2007). *Heritage Assets: Valuation and Stocktaking Policy and Procedures*. Sydney: University of Sydney.

Macleay Museum. (1996). *Policy and Procedures Concerning the Management of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Ancestral Remains and Culturally Significant Items*. Sydney: University of Sydney.

4.7.2. External References

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Library and Information Resources Network. (1995). *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Protocols for Libraries, Archives and Information Services*. Canberra: ATSILIRN.

International Council of Museums. (2007). *Statement of Principles of Museum Documentation*. Paris: The International Committee for Documentation of the International Council of Museums (ICOM-CIDOC).

McKenna, Gordon and Patsatzi, Efthymia, eds. (2009). *SPECTRUM: The UK Museum Documentation Standard (version 3.2)*. Cambridge, UK: Collections Trust.

Museums Australia. (2005). *Continuous Cultures, Ongoing Responsibilities: Principles and guidelines for Australian museums working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural heritage*. Canberra: Museums Australia (national office).

National Standards Taskforce. (2008). *National Standards for Australian Museums and Galleries (version 1.0)*. Melbourne: Museums Australia (Victoria office).