

Suzanne Cowan

Why inventory? One of the primary responsibilities of a museum is the preservation and care of objects in its collections. Accountability for objects is a large part of that care. Inability to locate an object is at best embarrassing and may be more serious, threatening the reputation of a museum and creating legal problems. In addition, if a theft goes unnoticed and unreported, a museum may be hindered in claiming the object if eventually it is found. Basically, museums perform an inventory so they will know where objects are located and ensure records are accurate. Inventory also provides:

- an opportunity to update location information
- a way to identify objects that need conservation
- a method to establish control of poorly documented collections
- a basis for planning and budgeting any collection-related project
- a means by which the museum can fulfill its legal and ethical obligations to its governing authority and the public
- a way to retrieve information after a catastrophic loss
- an aid to security
- help for collections development or deaccessioning
- an aid to research

TYPES OF INVENTORY

There are several types of inventory; all involve checking the physical location of a particular object against the location record.

- A complete wall-to-wall inventory of the entire museum collection is the most thorough inventory. The inventory crew views every object and records its location or status.
- A section-by-section inventory is thorough, but its scope is limited by some logical unit, such as one area, one collection, or high-value objects. This inventory is very useful when done on a

scheduled basis, rotating areas or collections for inventory.

- A spot inventory is very limited in scope and checks the accuracy of records and the location of a small percentage of the collection.

Generally a complete wall-to-wall inventory is done first, and then the other two inventories are performed on a regular schedule to ensure that record keeping and storage locations are current.

How often an institution inventories the collection will depend on many factors such as size and type of collections, staff size and availability of personnel, the types of records, percentage of the collection cataloged, and computerization. Ideally the collection should be inventoried annually, but this may not be practical if there are many thousands of objects. Establishing a rotation schedule for the inventory of specific areas and doing spot checks of other areas may be more realistic.

Objects on loan to other institutions and objects lent to your institution should be inventoried and their records reviewed at least annually to avoid losing contact with a lender. Losing contact with a lender causes many problems. (See chapter on Old Loans.) These "old loans" have been created in our collections by procedures used in the past, but the objects still need to be accounted for during inventory. It is important to determine whether your state has any statutes that offer guidance regarding unclaimed loans or undocumented objects. Some states have statutes that specifically address these problems in museums.

ESSENTIALS OF INVENTORY

Decide on the goals of your inventory. If there has never been a complete inventory or if it has been many years since a complete inventory, the goal should be to locate every object in your collection. A section-by-section or spot inventory may be your

Inventorying

goal if you simply want to update your records, correct cataloging mistakes, or locate objects for conservation, or if you do a complete inventory frequently.

The first step is to know exactly what information you need and can obtain in the time allowed. Plan your inventory carefully; a well-planned outline for inventory will save time. Develop a schedule and determine the number of staff members needed for the project. The best way to determine the schedule is to do a trial run with a limited but representative portion of the collection. Then, using a breakdown of the appropriate inventory time needed per object, estimate your final schedule, allowing for time taken by other work tasks. Closing your collections during the inventory can be very helpful; be sure to let other museum departments know ahead of time that collections will be closed for inventory and for how long.

A well-organized storage area helps the inventory go more quickly and smoothly. Assign identifying numbers or names to all shelves and storage spaces before beginning the inventory.

Objects on exhibit should be inventoried as well. It is important to check objects on exhibit, especially in "permanent" exhibits, against collection records and to record any damage or change in the objects. Consider closing the gallery or inventorying either on days when you are closed to the public or after hours.

Develop your inventory paperwork, keeping your goals in mind. One method is to develop data sheets to record each object found in the location you are physically inventorying, and then to cross check each object against its catalog or accession record. You should make a note of objects for which you have a record but no matching object. A second method is to use your catalog records and check off objects as they are located. This method is quicker, but you risk missing objects that are out of place or not cataloged.

Developing a code system for taking notes about problems may be helpful. Such a system allows information to be recorded quickly and the problems to be dealt with at a later date. The types of prob-

lems to note include double numbers, missing objects, objects not described properly, conservation needed, missing numbers, missing records, and unclaimed property.

Forming inventory teams of staff and trained volunteers is important. Ideally teams should have one handler, one recorder, and one reader who refers to the current catalog record for the object description and other information. All team members should be trained specifically for the inventory, including handling techniques, forms, problem areas, and amount and kind of information to record.

Many objects have multiple components, so understanding the cataloging procedure is necessary. Objects such as a pair of shoes or a teapot and lid will probably have a single catalog number with a lettered extension and should be counted, therefore, as one item in the inventory. Specimens such as a dinosaur skeleton may have more than 100 bones; all bones should have the same catalog number, but they may be stored in several locations. In such a case, a more detailed description may be needed. It is important that you record all of the components for each object.

One of the best arguments for computerization may be its use in inventory. A computer-generated list of all cataloged objects and locations sorted by the most useful field (e.g., location, catalog number, artist) can greatly speed the process of inventory. A computer can also randomly pick a percentage of objects from your collection to allow a spot inventory.

During inventory it is important to record the catalog number of each object, along with its name and description. Using the catalog number as the unique identifier may avoid problems of nomenclature, especially if object names have changed.

Reconciliation between inventory results and museum records is an important step in the inventory process. Accession records, donor files, photographs, and any original paperwork about the acquisition are examples of records to check during reconciliation. Slides and measurements of objects can be valuable in determining the identity of an object in question. Keeping records, whether com-

puterized or manual, updated as to location and other information is extremely useful. Recording historic location information for every object indicates what has happened to the object since it came into the collection (e.g., loan, exhibit, restoration/conservation, name change, loss of a component). This information is useful in reconciling current records with the original records.

BACKLOGS OF UNCATALOGED MATERIAL

Most museums have uncataloged objects that must be accounted for during inventory. Assigning these objects some type of inventory control number is important; an accession number, a field number, or a locality number may be used. The inventory control number should be marked on all containers or storage locations for the object.

INVENTORY IN DIFFERENT INSTITUTIONS

Art and History Museums

Many art, history, and other museums have existed for many years, some more than a century. Accounting for all objects has proven challenging as old records are usually incomplete, if present at all. There may be many storage areas throughout the museum and in off-site locations. Regularly scheduling inventories can be useful for these museums: comprehensive inventories every five to seven years, annual inventories for objects on loan and objects of high value, and frequent spot checks.

Natural History Museums

Natural history museums often have large numbers of objects in their collections separated by scientific field: vertebrate and invertebrate paleontology, vertebrate and invertebrate zoology, botany, petrology, mineralogy, and anthropology. Even separated into these disciplines, objects may number in the thousands, and some objects may be large and have many components, such as dinosaur skeletons. Many specimens, such as those collected from the same site at the same time, can be cataloged as a single lot (e.g., shark teeth from one locale). Wall-to-wall inven-

tories are often difficult because of the size of the collection, but section-by-section inventories and spot checks have proven useful. Careful cataloging and updating are critical to inventory control.

Living History Museums

Many objects in the collections of living history museums are used in demonstrations for the public, so these museums must deal constantly with replacement of objects. Periodic inventory of collections can identify problems, such as objects losing their numbers due to handling. Living history museums may have several additional goals for inventory, such as distinguishing between original and replica objects, identifying cycles of use and maintenance requirements, and scheduling replacements of objects.

Archives

Inventory by collection is one way to keep up with inventory control in archives. Section-by-section inventory allows a discrete unit to be inventoried and accompanying records to be updated. One problem that archives face is the continuing alteration of storage configurations, which may change with the addition of new cabinets or shelving. Maintaining a log of collection movement as the archives grow can help with inventory control.

Zoos

Inventories in zoos present unique problems. Inventory may need to be done frequently, in some sections as often as every two weeks. Recording of large animals may be easy but others, such as reptiles and birds, are more complicated. For example, many zoos have open exhibition areas for birds that are visited by migratory birds; in this case the zoo birds must be inventoried and not mistaken for visiting birds. Banding zoo birds is one way to deal with this problem. Burrowing animals are not easily found, and individuals sometimes are presumed dead, only to reappear months later. Consulting with curatorial staff on species habits may help with this problem. Poisonous animals must be closely inventoried. Another problem for inventory in zoos is the frequent lending of animals for exhibit and breeding; these must be closely tracked.