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## Annual Museum Inventories

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**Annual Museum Inventories**

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## **Abstract**

### **Annual Museum Inventories**

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This thesis will examine the inventory process for museums. Inventories are a great way for museum registrars to update information about each piece in their collection. They can also be used to establish what items may need conserving. Most importantly, conducting annual inventories of a collection is the best and only way to keep track of all objects in the collection.

For this thesis, I have interviewed eleven registrars or collections managers from eleven different museums for this thesis. They were selected by inquiring information from a number of different museums across the country. The staff members from these eleven museums supplied me with the most information, and they were readily available to be interviewed. Museum staff members were asked questions about the type of inventories they conduct, how often they conduct them, and who is responsible for the task. Out of the eleven museums in this sample survey, all of them conduct regular inventories. Based on this, I found that museum inventories can take many forms. Each museum decides what inventory works best for them, given the nature of their collection, the amount of it that is on view or in storage, and the personnel available. There is no one

size fits all. The important thing that can be learned in this thesis is that museum inventories do take place on a regular basis.

**For My Mom, Dad, Erin, Grandma, Baba, Aunt Diane, and  
Debbie, who have been there and supported me my entire life  
And for Elie, whom I love with all my heart**

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Finally, thank you to my family and friends, who all supported me throughout this process.

## Introduction

According to the International Council of Museums (ICOM), a museum is “a permanent institution in the service of society and of its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment, for the purposes of education, study, and enjoyment.”<sup>1</sup> By this definition, one of the main tasks of a museum is to care for its collections. An important aspect of this task is to conduct regular inventories of all objects. Inventories are a perfect way for museum registrars to update information about each piece in their collection. They can also be used to establish what items may need conserving. Most importantly, conducting annual inventories of a collection is the best and only way to keep track of all objects in the collection.

Although the majority of registrars realize how important conducting these regular inventories is, the question of whether they actually *are* conducting them is not easy to answer. Based on a sample survey conducted with registrars from 11 different museums, all 11 of the museums conducted some sort of regular inventory. This paper concludes, based on this survey, that most museums *are* conducting regular inventories, whether complete or a partial.

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<sup>1</sup> *International Council of Museums Operating Policy*, Revised February 15, 2007, [http://icom.museum/download/eng\\_aug2007/2006DIV12-eng-Musees.pdf](http://icom.museum/download/eng_aug2007/2006DIV12-eng-Musees.pdf) (June 5, 2008).



## **Chapter 1:**

### **Why Inventory?**

The staff of a museum is responsible for making sure the objects in the museum's collection are safe and cared for. Each piece must be considered a valuable entity in the collection. Museum staff should be aware of the location of all objects at all times. Staff needs to be aware if objects are stolen, missing, or damaged, and they must have a record of exactly what pieces need extra care. The best way to keep track of museum collections is by conducting a period inventory of all objects. In their book, *The New Museum Registration Methods*, Rebecca Buck and Jean Allman Gilmore explain exactly what conducting these inventories can provide.

Inventories provide:

- “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 and 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”<sup>2</sup>

If inventories are truly to benefit a museum, they must be conducted on an annual basis. That way, the most updated information on each object is available whenever it is needed. As will be discussed later, conducting inventories is mandated by many museums’ collection policies. Therefore, museum staff has a professional responsibility to conduct them. Inventories also must be conducted if a museum wishes to seek accreditation by the American Association of Museums. As will be discussed later, the AAM Accreditation Committee will not accredit a museum that does not conduct regular inventories.

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<sup>2</sup> Rebecca Buck and Jean Allman Gilmore, *New Museum Registration Methods*, (Washington DC: American Association of Museums, 1998), 117.

## **Chapter 2:**

### **Skipping the Inventory**

Although there are many positive reasons to conduct inventories, some museums still do not conduct them on a regular basis. In many museums, staff feels there is not enough time or manpower to conduct one annually. A staff member at a University museum in Texas explains, “To do a complete inventory would require additional staff members because we can barely get our regular jobs done as it is.”<sup>3</sup>

Other museums do not conduct regular inventories because staff members do not see them as a priority. A registrar at the Hudson River Museum in Yonkers, New York, stated, “The...museums that I have worked at have collections that were too big and had too much other stuff going on to actually perform an annual inventory. It was never...considered a priority.”<sup>4</sup>

Based on the sample survey conducted for this thesis, it appears that museum staff members who feel that conducting inventories are not important are at a minority. The benefits of conducting regular inventories outweigh the reasons to not conduct them. The next chapter will show an example of one museum that greatly benefited from conducting an inventory of their collection.

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<sup>3</sup> Anonymous staff member of a museum at The University of Texas, Interview by Author, October 25, 2007.

<sup>4</sup> Erica Blumenfeld, Registrar at The Hudson River Museum, Yonkers, NY, Interview by Author, October 25, 2007.

## **Chapter 3:**

### **Benefiting from an Inventory**

The Civil War and Underground Railroad Museum in Philadelphia Pennsylvania is an example of an institution that has greatly benefited from initiating regular inventories in 2005. Indeed, their first inventory turned up some important objects that for some reason were not in the museum's master list of objects. The museum was organized in 1896 and houses artifacts of the Civil War as well as a library of over 10,000 volumes of war material. Once called the Civil War Library and Museum, the institution was renamed in 2003. Hundreds of former Grand Army of the Republic soldiers and their families have donated artifacts to the museum.

In 2005, the staff at the museum decided to conduct the first inventory of the entire collection to see what artifacts they really had in their collection. In the words of John C. Rumm, the museum director at the time, "We want to figure out what we've got that we know about, and what we've got that we don't know about and what we don't have that perhaps we should."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Stephan Salisbury, "History Gets an Inventory at Museum," *The Associated Press State & Local Wire*, March 20, 2005.

The huge inventory led to two major discoveries. The first was a dented silver pocket watch. It was found amongst other artifacts in the museum's basement and, like others around it, was unmarked in an old box. Careful research of the records and additional outside research showed that the broken pocket watch once belonged to Brevet Capt. John O. Foering, who was wounded in a battle during the Civil War in Kennesaw Georgia. The staff found out that the dent in the watch was caused by a bullet hitting it while it was in Foering's vest pocket. Indeed, the watch allegedly saved Foering's life. Foering went on to become a grain inspector at the Port of Philadelphia and helped this port become one of the most successful ports at the time.

The second major artifact found during the museum's inventory, also in an unmarked box, was a torn burgundy silk handkerchief. Although it was not found near the silver pocket watch, it turned out that the two were intimately connected. When the museum staff researched the handkerchief, they found that it was also Foering's, and that the torn pieces of the silk resulted from the same bullet that hit the pocket watch.

According to Andrew Coldren, the assistant curator who discovered the pocket watch, "He (Foering) saved the watch for posterity. Not only did he save it, but his wife gave it to the museum. It saved his life, and you can say subsequent generations of his family owe their existence to this watch. And to discover the handkerchief that may have been wrapped around it adds to the intimate and profound meaning. This is what the museum is all about."<sup>6</sup>

Since their first inventory, the staff at The Civil War and Underground Railroad Museum has kept all records up to date and all of their objects cared for. Because of the

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<sup>6</sup> Stephan Salisbury, "History Gets an Inventory at Museum," *The Associated Press State & Local Wire*, March 20, 2005.

major discoveries with the initial inventory, the museum has continued to inventory their collection on a regular basis. This has greatly benefited the museum. Their entire collection is well-documented, and all objects' locations are kept up to date. It is doubtful that there ever will be any major "discoveries" again because their objects are so well documented. Conducting inventories in general helps museum staff notice mistakes that have been made. Museum staff can fix these mistakes a lot more quickly if the inventories are conducted on a regular basis. The Civil War Underground Railroad Museum is an institution that sees the benefits to regular inventories.

## **Chapter 4:**

### **AAM Standards**

Museums should conduct regular inventories of their collections if they are interested in becoming accredited, or intend to remain accredited, by the American Association of Museums (AAM). Since the first museums were accredited in 1971, AAM accreditation has brought national recognition to all that earned it. AAM accreditation shows that a museum meets the highest professional standards.

To become an accredited institution, a museum must go through a thorough accreditation process. The process begins with a review of the mission of the museum and an assessment of the extent to which the institution is following its mission. The review commission then looks at the ways in which the museum fulfills its various functions, including collections management, exhibition, and education. As for the management of the collection, the subject of this thesis, the AAM expects the following from accredited museums:

“\*A current, approved, comprehensive collections management policy is in effect and actively used to guide the museum’s stewardship of its collections

- 80 percent of the permanent collection is formally accessioned and an appropriate and reasonable percentage of the permanent collection is cataloged, inventoried, and visually documented

- The human resources are sufficient, and the staff have the appropriate education, training, and experience, to fulfill the museum’s stewardship responsibilities and the needs of the collections
- Staff are delegated responsibility to carry out the collections management policy
- A system of documentation, records management, and inventory is in effect to describe each object and its acquisition (permanent or temporary), current condition and location, and movement into, out of, and within the museum
- The museum regularly monitors environmental conditions and takes pro-active measures to mitigate the effects of ultraviolet light, fluctuations in temperature and humidity, air pollution, damage, pests, and natural disasters on collections
- An appropriate method for identifying needs and determining priorities for conservation/care is in place
- Safety and security procedures and plans for collections in the museum’s custody are documented, practiced, and addressed in the museum’s emergency/disaster preparedness plan”<sup>7</sup>

It is noteworthy that the AAM requires a “system of inventory.” That means that it does not dictate how often or how an inventory is conducted, but it does require that it be systematic. The AAM Commission also requires a sample of the inventory information in order to review as part of the accreditation process. Therefore, if an institution has any interest in being regarded as one of the best and well-respected museums on the U.S., conducting regular inventories is critical.

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<sup>7</sup> Julie Hart and Elizabeth E. Merritt, *A Higher Standard: Museum Accreditation Program Standards*, (Washington DC: American Association of Museums, 2005), 25.



## **Chapter 5:**

### **Collection Policies**

Conducting regular inventories on museum collections is often a part of museums' collection policies. A collection policy is "a written document, approved by the governing authority, that specifies the museum's policies concerning all collections-related issues, including accessioning, documentation, storage, and disposition... They provide standards for exercising good judgment."<sup>8</sup> The governing authority is the executive body that "is charged with the fiduciary responsibility for the museum."<sup>9</sup>

One of the main ways to establish and continue to have updated documentation on objects is to conduct inventories. Many museums include annual inventories in their collection policies. The Conner Prairie Living History Museum in Fishers, IN is an example of this. This museum's collection policy states that they must perform regular inventories on their collection. Their policy also states that their documentation must always be up to date and corrected if there are any problems. This museum's inventory practices will be discussed in the next chapter of this thesis. The Conner Prairie Living History Museum is just one institution that includes inventories as a main responsibility

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<sup>8</sup> James B. Gardner and Elizabeth E. Merritt, *The AAM Guide to Collection Planning*, (Washington DC: American Association of Museums, 2004), 69.

<sup>9</sup> James B. Gardner and Elizabeth E. Merritt, *The AAM Guide to Collection Planning*, (Washington DC: American Association of Museums, 2004), 70.

in its collection policy. Many other museums have included it as well. Therefore, museum staff has an ethical responsibility to perform these regular inventories in order to go along with what they have set forth in their policy.

## **Chapter 6:**

### **Survey of Museums**

Conducting an inventory should be a yearly process for all museums. Inventories help museum staffs keep track of where their objects are located, whether the records are up to date, and whether or not an object needs extra care. Inventories should be conducted on a yearly basis so that any mistakes can be fixed as quickly as possible.

This chapter will focus on 11 different museums. The steps the staff of each museum takes to conduct the inventories are different with each museum. The museums also differ in the amount of objects they inventory at a given time. Of the 11 museums surveyed, all 11 of the museums conduct regular inventories. Although these museums go about the inventory process in different ways, the inventories are being conducted. Based on this survey, it can be concluded that most museums are conducting regular inventories.

**The James A. Michener Art Museum, Doylestown, PA:**

The James A. Michener Art Museum was established in 1988. Named after the Pulitzer-Prize winning writer and native of Doylestown PA, James A. Michener, the museum houses over 2,300 objects. In an interview conducted with the collections registrar at the art museum, I learned how the museum's collection is kept track of. According to the registrar, the museum, which is "small to mid-size," conducts a partial inventory each year.<sup>10</sup> Because the museum has a vast number of paintings in their collection, they conduct an inventory on these works every year. They also inventory one other category of the collection each year. For instance, one year, in addition to the paintings, staff members will inventory all of the sculptures, the next year, all of the works on paper. The museum, in addition, does spot checks of a selection of items every year. This means that they pick a number of randomly chosen objects and make sure they are in the right location and are documented correctly. That way, even objects that are not scheduled to be inventoried that year are checked to make sure everything is documented accurately.

The staff of the James A. Michener Art Museum usually conducts inventories of the objects in the galleries on the one day a week the museum is closed because it is not possible to close off sections of the museum in order to carry out the inventory. Objects in the storage areas, of course, are inventoried anytime.

The registrar explains that she and her staff use their electronic database to conduct their inventories. They print out spreadsheets from the database which includes the most recent information about each object in the collection, including its location and current condition. All of the information on these spreadsheets was updated at the end of

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<sup>10</sup> Sara Buehler, Collections Registrar, James A. Michener Art Museum, Interview by Author, October 25, 2007.

the last inventory the staff initiated. The museum staff inventories the objects item-by-item checking them off the list and updating information if necessary. The staff makes sure the objects are in the location indicated in the database and that all of the condition reports on the objects are up to date. All of the information is updated for the next time the objects will be inventoried.

Even though this museum conducts an inventory every year, the registrar admits that problems still arise. In the past, for example, objects were missing from the location where they were supposed to be, only to be found somewhere else in the collection without any record of the move at all. When asked what could be done to make it easier for museums to conduct annual inventories, the registrar says, “Inventories take up so much staff time and energy. Other than creating efficient procedures and having as many trained staff as possible, it is a thorough and sometimes tedious job that just has to be done.”<sup>11</sup>

## **Parks Canada**

Parks Canada is a government agency set up to care for 30 historical sites in 4 Canadian provinces. Established in 1911, Parks Canada is the world’s first national park service. In an interview with the Parks Canada registrar, a great deal was learned about

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<sup>11</sup> Sara Buehler, Collections Registrar, James A. Michener Art Museum, Interview by Author, February 23, 2008.

the inventorying practices of the agency. Though Parks Canada is supposed to conduct inventories every year, the registrar admits, “With staff and funding cuts, we are finding it harder and harder to impose the rule at our historic sites.”<sup>12</sup>

Like the James A. Michener Art Museum, the Parks Canada agency uses its database system as the point of departure for their inventory. The data base Parks Canada uses is the Artifact Information System (AIS). Every artifact in all of the agency’s historical houses is listed in the database. The staff can search by catalog number, location, accession number, or nomenclature. With their database, the staff has all of the information at their disposal.

Parks Canada conducts inventories in two ways giving staff the choice as to which one they want to use. In the first way, staff members print out room by room inventories from the database. Each artifact has its own line with a catalog number and description. They use various color highlighters for a range of inventory problems. The yellow highlighter, for instance, means that everything is as it should be and is in its place. Objects highlighted in pink are missing. Blue highlighting indicates that there is some other type of problem- either the condition has changed, part or all of the catalog number has worn off, the database says the item is a chair while the catalog number is found on a table, or an object is there but there is no record of it anywhere. Notes as to what the problem is are written in the margins of the sheets or on a separate piece of paper. According to the registrar, “This is a very simple way of taking inventory. But, it works, and works well, so why mess with it?”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Elizabeth Crook, Registrar, Parks Canada, Interview by Author, December 15, 2007.

<sup>13</sup> Elizabeth Crook, Registrar, Parks Canada, Interview by Author, February 28, 2008.

The other way in which Parks Canada staff members may conduct an inventory is by downloading data for a room, building, or entire site to a lap top or handheld device. When a catalog number is typed into the lap top or handheld device, the AIS program gives the user the choice to check off that everything is fine with that object or to make notes about it. The Parks Canada registrar believes that this way is easy in theory. It makes reconciling the objects easier since all new information goes directly into the database rather than having to be transferred from notes on paper. However, the registrar is of the opinion that it is cumbersome to drag a lap top from room to room or building to building. Keeping the computer's battery charged or having extension cords all over each room can make things difficult. The registrar explains that the majority of her staff prefers to conduct their inventories using the first method, using their clip board and pen in hand instead of the lap top.

The reconciliation process begins after all of the objects have been looked over and notes have been made. The staff checks all of the problems and makes sure all of the artifacts have the correct catalog numbers and checks for other problems. Database errors are also corrected at this time. At the end of the reconciliation process, all of the objects' information has been recorded and information on them is as most up to date as it can be.

In order to make annual inventories easier, the registrar suggests bar coding all items. The bar codes would make it easier to scan and have all of the information on that object in front of you in a database. However, the registrar explains that this would be difficult for the majority of institutions because bar coding takes up a lot of staff time to create as well as a lot of money to purchase.

The registrar also believes that annual inventories would be easier to conduct if the management teams of institutions realized how important they are. If they understood their importance, the management would fund them better and more people could be hired to carry them out. Explains the registrar, “Management has to realize how important collections management is and how important it is to take an annual inventory. We have to protect our objects. In the ideal world, we would have adequate staff and money. Sometimes, the only way an inventory gets high priority is if you have something unfortunate happens such as a break-in or if damage happens from wind or fire.”<sup>14</sup> The staff at Parks Canada realizes the importance annual inventories are on institutions like their own.

### **The South Street Seaport Museum, New York, NY**

Unlike the James A. Michener Art Museum and Parks Canada, the South Street Seaport Museum had not been conducting inventories on a regular basis. A registrar at the museum explained in an interview that the South Street Seaport Museum had conducted only sporadic inventories in the past. The staff would take a section of the collection to inventory when time permitted them to do so. It was only recently that The South Street Seaport Museum decided to conduct a complete inventory. The registrar I interviewed is currently in charge of their first inventory of the museum’s entire collection. The majority of the inventory work will be completed by this registrar alone.

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<sup>14</sup> Elizabeth Crook, Registrar, Parks Canada, Interview by Author, February 28, 2008.



Any assistance she may need in handling some of the items will come from one of the museum's interns. Since a complete inventory has never been done before at the museum, the registrar does not know how long the process will take to complete. She has only given the museum director a vague outline as to how long it may take to accomplish the task.

In order to begin the inventory process, the registrar takes her list of all objects in the collection, their accession number, and the site of where they are located in the museum. The list had not been updated recently. The registrar will go through each room in the museum with the list. If the item's location matches what is stated on the list, the registrar checks off the item on the list. Any objects that are not on the list are added to it. The registrar is creating a second list of the objects that are missing from where they are supposed to be located. All of this information is then put into the museum's database. The registrar hopes to eventually locate all of the objects and to have them placed in the correct area of the museum. As she states, "I'm hoping by the time I get through all of the museum, all of the items will be accounted for. So far, so good."<sup>15</sup>

The registrar in charge of the inventory feels that a greater number of staff members working on the project would make inventories easier to conduct. She feels that if money were available to hire high-quality interns who could help with the data entry, there would be more staff available for conducting these inventories. Currently, the majority of museums do not have the extra money to pay interns. Therefore, the interns that are available are not experienced in working in museums. "Our best interns often last the least amount of time because they end up getting paid positions elsewhere,"

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<sup>15</sup> Molly Nora, Registrar, South Street Seaport Museum, Interview by Author, February 20, 2008.

the registrar explains.<sup>16</sup> If museums were able to pay these interns, or they were able to hire permanent part-time employees, there would be more experienced staff available to help with the inventories.

### **Indiana University Art Museum, Bloomington, IN**

Indiana University Art Museum conducts an inventory every year. Established in 1941, the museum began as a small university art museum. Over the years, however, the Indiana University Art Museum has grown into a well known museum with artifacts from around the world. The collection, which includes over 38,000 objects, ranges from African masks to works by Monet and Picasso. Inventorying all of these objects each year would take up a lot of the staff members' time. The museum does not have enough staff to conduct a complete inventory every year. However, the Indiana University Art Museum inventories portions of the collection annually.

It usually takes the museum staff 6 months to complete one of their partial inventories. The registrar of the department is in charge of the inventories, but they usually have a few other staff members helping them out periodically during the process. During an inventory at the Indiana University Art Museum, the registrar or another staff member checks the objects' locations, overall descriptions, and their conditions. The

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<sup>16</sup> Molly Nora, Registrar, South Street Seaport Museum, Interview by Author, February 20, 2008.

staff also takes photographs of each object to put in their records. To try to keep their records as up to date as possible, the museum also conducts periodic condition checks on all objects, not only those included in the partial inventory. A record of the partial inventories is kept both electronically in their database and in a hard copy version. The hard copies of the inventories are kept in a separate holding area.

It is a great solution for museums that do not have a lot of extra staff to follow in the footsteps of the Indiana University Art Museum. If there is not enough time or staff to conduct an inventory of every object every year, museum staff should conduct partial inventories every year. This way, if an object should end up missing, the museum staff still would have some idea as to when it disappeared by checking the periodic inventories.

### **Museum X, Montana**

The information given by a staff member at a museum in Montana preferred for his/her museum, as well as him/herself, to be anonymous. For the purpose of this paper, this museum will be called Museum X and the staff member will be referred to as “he”.

Museum X has one employee in charge of all the inventorying. Because of this, there is not enough time to conduct an entire inventory each year. Instead, like the Indiana University Art Museum, the registrar at Museum X conducts partial inventories. The registrar takes a part of the collection and conducts an inventory on those objects. For instance, one month out of the year he may inventory all of the hats in the collection.

After that, he would inventory all of the dresses, shoes, etc. In this process, all of the objects in the museum's collection are inventoried at least every few years.

Museum X uses the Past Perfect program to help conduct the inventories. The registrar starts out by running a "location" report from the program. Then he checks off all the objects that are included in the report and are found in the correct location. He then adds the "extra" objects that are not included in that location report but appear in the collection. He also makes notations about the objects that appear in the report but are missing from the collection. Then he checks through his location report to look over all of the objects that are considered "extra" to see if there is a proper location for them somewhere else in the museum. If the object was never placed in the system with a proper location, the registrar decides where the object best fits in the museum and marks the change. The registrar then checks through all of the collection records for the objects that appear on the Past Perfect report but cannot be found. Once these items are located, all of the information about them is updated in the database.

The registrar at Museum X stresses the importance of keeping a record of every object and updating this record as often as possible. At the museum, the staff is supposed to "pink sheet" objects pulled for exhibits at other institutions. The pink sheet includes information such as the object's accession number, the name of the object, and information about where the object will be sent (i.e. the name of the museum, location, and name of the exhibit). When the object is returned, it is placed back into its proper location. The information on the pink sheet is placed in their database to keep record of where the object had been. The database is also updated when the object is returned and placed in its correct location. The pink sheet is pulled and thrown away.

Like the staff at other institutions, the registrar at Museum X believes that inventories would be easier for museum staff to conduct if there were more staff members available to help. The registrar at Museum X feels that he needs another staff member to help with the reconciling. At Museum X, the majority of the work happens at the end of the inventory when everything must be reconciled. By the time the actual inventorying is complete, the staff at Museum X does not have the time to fix all of the problems.

### **DC Booth Historic National Fish Hatchery, Spearfish, SD**

Like Museum X in Montana, The DC Booth Historic National Fish Hatchery conducts a partial inventory every year. The Fish Hatchery was established in 1896 and has become a very popular fishery museum over the years. The Hatchery houses about 175,000 objects. About 99% of these objects are located in storage.

The curator at the Fish Hatchery is the only full time employee at the site and has to conduct the partial inventories alone. Like the registrar at Museum X, she has found it to be a difficult task to complete without the aid of other staff members.

When the curator at the Fish Hatchery begins conducting the inventories, she waits until the museum is closed before she goes through any of the objects. “If cases need to be opened, I’d rather visitors not be around,” explains the curator.<sup>17</sup> The curator has an easier time inventorying the items that are in storage because she does not have to worry about the public.

The curator prints out a form from the database with a list of what objects should be in each location of the museum. She then looks to make sure that everything is where it should be and that the objects have the correct accession numbers on them. She also makes notations on the form if some information about the object is incorrect. The information is then recorded in the computer database so that all of the catalogued objects are updated. The inventory record and the catalogue record are then checked for consistency to make sure all of the records are correct and up to date.

Some objects have been found during past inventories that were never cataloged. These objects do not have a lot of information in the database except for an accession record. This record is usually a very brief entry describing the object. Usually, nothing is updated in the records for these objects. The curator does not have the time to look in the accession file and update where the objects are. She says, “I rarely do this-other things are a higher priority.”<sup>18</sup> All problems with objects are noted, but not everything is reconciled since there is not enough time for the curator to do this alone. The forms from the inventory are placed in a binder and put in a fire rated file.

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<sup>17</sup> Randi Sue Smith, Curator, DC Booth Historic Nation Fish Hatchery, Interview by Author, February 15, 2008.

<sup>18</sup> Randi Sue Smith, Curator, DC Booth Historic Nation Fish Hatchery, Interview by Author, February 15, 2008.

The curator at the Fish Hatchery hopes to shortly have the time to update all of the objects in the collection. Some of the objects have not been updated with current information since 1998. She also hopes to go through all of the accession records and make sure everything is cataloged and recorded.

### **Weatherspoon Art Museum, The University of North Carolina at Greensboro**

The Weatherspoon Art Museum also conducts a partial inventory on its collection every year. The museum, which houses a collection of modern and contemporary art, alternates between inventorying their two storage facilities every year. In odd years, they inventory their upstairs vault, which contains unframed works on paper. In even years, the staff inventories their downstairs vault, where they house sculptures, paintings, and other framed works. This way, the museum is never more than two years away from identifying whether an object has gone missing or has changed location without the database being updated.

Whether the staff is inventorying the upstairs or the downstairs vault, it takes about one month (or 20 working days) to complete the process. Nearly 97% of the collection is in storage (or 5,270 of its 5,418 objects). The inventories are usually conducted by two people; one registrar and one graduate student, intern, or volunteer. At

times, one other staff member is needed to assist with handling the larger sculptures or paintings.

After all of the objects are inventoried, the staff checks for discrepancies between what the printout from their database says and what the actual object's tag or label states. For instance, they check the accession number, the artist's name and spelling, the title of the work, and the medium. The staff takes note as to what objects may need conservation attention. They also assess how some of the objects are stored and whether storage materials need to be replaced. In the past, the staff has noticed that some of the tissues around objects were crumpled or torn in the storage facilities and some folders were curling at the edges. These problems were quickly resolved by replacing the tissue or folder in order to make sure nothing poses a threat to the object. The staff also updates the tags or labels if needed. They also photograph certain objects if they need to be updated in the records.

Because the Weatherspoon Art Museum is a university museum, they are audited at the end of each fiscal year. During this audit, a random selection of objects is chosen to show to the auditors. All of these objects' records must be up to date and available upon request. The staff at the museum prefers to run the inventories in the summer right before the audit. Because of this, it is sometimes difficult to find a graduate student or intern to help with the inventories since the school year is over. However, the staff at the museum always seems to find enough help to conduct their inventories every year.



## **Conner Prairie Living History Museum, Fishers, IN**

The Conner Prairie Living History Museum conducts three inventories every year. The entire museum is made up of 5 historical sites at the same location. The purpose of the museum is to teach the visitor about the lives of pioneers in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. There are about 30,000 objects in the collection. At least 10,000 of these objects are reproductions. They also have about 20 paintings and 100 prints. The museum's collection policy requires that the staff conducts annual inventories.

The first inventory of the year (the staff calls it the Winter Inventory) occurs between mid-February and mid-March. At the time, they inventory the grounds of the entire site. The second inventory occurs in the fall when the staff has more time to commit to the job. It covers 1/3 of the storage areas. About 85% to 90% of the museum's collection is in storage. The section of the storage area that is being inventoried rotates each year. Last year, for instance, they inventoried what they call "AF-2," which is predominantly textile storage. This year, they will inventory another 1/3 of the storage, "AF-3," which is all of the large scale objects in storage. In 2009, they will complete the cycle by inventorying the final 1/3 of the storage, ("AF") which includes every other item in storage that has not been inventoried over the past two years. The third and final inventory of the year is conducted between Thanksgiving and Christmas when they inventory the William Conner House, a former residence of the American trader and politician.

The actual inventories take about five weeks each. The reconciling process takes another two to three weeks. The inventories are each conducted by five staff members for six hours a day. The reconciling is done completely by the registrar. The inventories are not conducted during regular business hours but are scheduled on days when the museum is closed to the public. This is easy for the Conner Prairie Museum for it closes the historic grounds at the end of October and open again for five days in November. The November inventory is scheduled around those five open days. They re-open the grounds on April 1<sup>st</sup>, so the winter inventory is scheduled for the days before they re-open. The inventories of the storage areas are done during the time when the museum is open to the public.

When the registrar is reconciling the inventories, she checks the accession records, donor files, photographs, and original paperwork of the object. She also checks the location of the objects and makes sure all information is consistent and updated if needed. All of this is repeated on a yearly basis.

### **Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, Kansas City, MO**

The Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art has become somewhat more lax on their inventorying in recent years. The museum, established in 1994 as a museum housing both high quality contemporary and modern art, used to perform a full inventory

every year. It took the staff about a week to complete inventorying the collection of about 1,000 objects (with 80% of these objects in storage).

A few years ago, the staff at the Kemper Museum decided to start inventorying ¼ of the collection twice a year. That way, the entire collection is inventoried in two years. The staff divides the collection into four separate sections so that every piece is inventoried within that 2 year time frame. The staff believed that by inventorying less objects at a given time, the project would be less daunting. However, according to the Collections Manager and Registrar, the project “seems to be more easily back burned.”<sup>19</sup> The registrar did not explain why the staff has become somewhat lax on their inventorying. Regardless, the staff eventually completes their inventories and after every two years, the entire collection’s records have been updated.

### **Palmer Museum of Art, Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA**

The Palmer Museum of Art opened in 1972 and was renovated in 1993. The museum houses American and European paintings, drawings, photographs, prints, sculptures as well as African and Japanese art. The staff at The Palmer Museum of Art

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<sup>19</sup> Amy Duke, Collections Manager and Registrar, Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, Interview by Author, November 20, 2007.

conducted a complete inventory of their collection last summer for the first time in nine years. The project took three weeks of full time attention from the museum's registrar and her assistant, and part time help from another assistant as well as 15 volunteers. The staff shut down the department for these three weeks in order to complete the entire inventory. Because the museum cannot shut down the department for three weeks every year, they have decided to henceforth conduct a partial inventory every summer.

During these partial inventories, the registrar chooses a group of objects in the collection and inventories them. The groups of objects are categorized between six sorting groups: paintings, works on paper, sculpture, photography, decorative arts, collage, and assemblage. The staff inventories one group per year, and then in the seventh year, they plan to conduct a complete inventory.

### **The Jewish Museum of Maryland, Baltimore, MD**

The Jewish Museum of Maryland was established in 1960 and has become a center for Jewish culture. The staff at the museum conducts an inventory every three years. When they conduct an inventory, they do a full inventory of all of the 3-D items, which total about 7,000 items. They also choose a portion of the archives or photograph collection to inventory. There are about 20,000 accessioned archival items and at least

20,000 photographs. These inventories usually take about two weeks of full time work by interns. The reconciliation and data entry takes another two weeks to complete.

According to the registrar at The Jewish Museum, “annual inventories just seem like too much effort.”<sup>20</sup> The main reason the staff conducts inventories every three years is because within that period, most of the items have rotated through one display or another. Therefore, the inventories are conducted in order to make sure all items are in their proper location. This is important even though the staff updates the status of items as they use or remove them, using the Past Perfect Program.

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<sup>20</sup> Jobi O. Zink, Registrar and Curatorial Associate, The Jewish Museum of Maryland, Interview by Author, November 20, 2007.

## **Chapter 7:**

### **Steps to Conducting a Perfect Inventory:**

One of the main goals of any museum is to care and preserve the objects they are housing. Some of the most important ways to care for these items is to keep track of them, make sure they are in their correct location, make sure their records are updated, and that they do not need any further conservation. All of this can be done by inventorying the collection. Below are some guidelines for the best way to conduct inventories at any museum, whether small or large.

- Have a planned outline for the inventory. It is important to set up guidelines of what objects will be inventoried and what information needs to be found or updated in the museum's system. The amount of staff and time should be carefully thought out beforehand as well.
- If possible, close off the collection that is being inventoried. If not, try to conduct inventories on days or hours that the museum is closed to the public.
- When a museum is first established, or when staff at an existing museum decides to start conducting inventories, it is important to first

begin with a wall to wall inventory. This is the most thorough way to go through every item in the museum's collection. Every item must be identified with its current location or status. The records of every item must be accounted for and up to date.

- After the initial wall to wall inventory, the museum must conduct section by section inventories. The schedules of what part of the collection will be selected to inventory and when should be planned out. When one category or section of the collection is fully inventoried, staff must then rotate to another category until all of the objects in the collection are updated.
- When staff size or staff availability makes it difficult to conduct section by section inventories as often as needed, spot inventories need to be performed. A small percentage of the collection is chosen to inventory and all records must be up to date in the museum's system.
- Objects that are temporarily on loan to other institutions need to be updated in the system so that their current locations are known.
- Inventory paperwork should be simplified and organized. Staff should develop their own system that best fits their goals of the inventory. For example, setting up colors for each type of issue (red for objects that are missing, blue for objects that need to be conserved) may make it easier for staff to organize what needs to be done in the reconciliation process.
- Limit the amount of staff working on the inventory to the minimum. Having too many people working on the project could make it difficult

to run smoothly. For instance, one staff member may have a different way to code the paperwork, which could lead to confusion when things need to be reconciled.

- If possible, use a computerized database to help with the inventories. It will make the process go by quicker than if everything is updated on paper.
- Objects found that have never been catalogued must be assigned a number, and their information should be put in the system.
- Reconciling the objects means that accession records, photographs, files on the objects need to be checked and updated. All problems with the objects (duplicate catalog numbers, missing files) need to be fixed.
- Copies of these records, both electronically and on paper, should be stored in at least one off-site location.



## Conclusion:

As has been discussed in this paper, with the help of the sample survey in this thesis, the majority of museum registrars are conducting inventories on a regular basis. Based on the 11 museums interviewed, even though the process takes time and energy from the staff, most of the museums see the importance and benefits of conducting them. Inventories are the one true way to keep track of collections. Conducting inventories on a regular basis aids museums in noticing, in a timely fashion, that items are missing or damaged, or that there are mistakes in the documentation.

What can be learned from the case studies discussed in this thesis is that it is extremely beneficial to inventory a museum collection annually. If an institution follows all of the guidelines and inventory procedures, mistakes still can happen. However, if a museum is not conducting inventories on a yearly basis, it would be easy to assume that more of these problems would arise. Conducting annual inventories makes it is easier to spot these problems. Issues with objects and their records could go on for years without the knowledge of anyone on staff if the collection is not being inventoried regularly. The examples of the 11 museums all conduct inventories in some way every year, whether it is a complete inventory or partial inventories. If there were more staff available to help in the process, *all* of the museums would be able to conduct complete inventories on a yearly basis. Museums that conduct annual inventories are truly at an advantage over museums that do not. The inventories help the museums keep their collections organized and safe, which is one of the main purposes of any museum.

Any museum that intends to become or remain accredited by the American Association of Museums must conduct regular inventories, as it is included in the accreditation guidelines. Inventories have also become a part of some museum's collection policies. Therefore, museums should be conducting regular inventories in order to remain true to their mission or goals for their institution.

Inventories can take many different forms: annual, periodic, whole, or partial. They provide opportunities to update objects' location information. They can be used to see whether or not objects need conservation. They can be used as a method to update all documentation about each object. Based on the sample survey conducted in this thesis, it is apparent that museums *do* see the importance in this task and they are conducting inventories on a regular basis.

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