Caring for our cultural history is both a delight and a privilege. Whether we are owners of historic objects, curators in major museums or volunteers in heritage sites, we have in our care precious and unique objects which describe the history of the world. With this trust comes the responsibility to manage our collections to the best of our ability and to care for the objects so as to ensure their preservation.

Collections management is fundamental to any collection of cultural objects. As well as basic inventory, it encompasses information, preservation, movement, documentation, exhibitions and access. These areas of activity should be addressed for every collection, whether large or small, public or private. Collections management can be summed up as: know what you have and where to find it. This knowledge provides owners and managers of cultural collections with the information they need in order to locate and care for the objects entrusted to them and to plan strategically for the future.

Any collector of art must have some knowledge of what he has acquired and where it is. This can be as simple as recollections of where things came from, or the most detailed record keeping. The collector may simply have notes on the artists and the titles or cultural classifications of the objects he has collected, or he may keep detailed records of dates, places, invoices and other information. As to location, most collectors know where their objects are, even if they are distributed around one or several buildings, while, at the other end of the scale, the precise location of a museum object is usually noted and re-documented each time it is moved.

Any method of keeping records of a collection of cultural objects can be
called a collections management system. It usually has two parts, containing information on:

1. What is in the collection – what was purchased; received as a gift, donation or bequest; or acquired in some other way.
2. Where the objects are now – their present locations; or a record if they have left the collection through sale, donation, transfer, loss or destruction.

These two basic items of information form the foundation of collections management, which is the organization of a collection of cultural objects so as to ensure that everything is accounted for and can be located. This fundamental can include as much or as little information as is required. In the case of what has been acquired, the records can include details such as dimensions, purchase price, a description of each object and its insurance value. For locations, there may be a system for making sure that the whereabouts of each object is logged in one central place or register and that each time an object is moved, whether it be a permanent or temporary move, the date of the move and the new location are recorded. In this way, the history of an object can be built up and added to with every move. The most sophisticated records systems allow collectors to generate a huge range of information on their collections as well as to manage and document object movements down to such detail as condition, weight, packing information and journey times.

The reasons for having such a system are obvious. Any collection of objects has a history or collecting perspective and it is useful to know what that history or ethos is in order to shape, define and add to the collection. Knowing what you have is fundamental to owning anything, and there is a particular necessity for information about cultural objects or works of art and their history. Not only do cultural objects often have high monetary value, but they also have intrinsic value on account of their history, context or aesthetic qualities. As such, they deserve to be respected and treated with care. They are also, in no small sense, part of the cultural history of their nation, region or family, and in this way can be regarded as being in the possession of their owners only for a time, then being passed on to posterity. It can therefore be said that owners of cultural objects have a responsibility to look after the artefacts in their care and to pass them on to the next generation in good condition. This means not only taking care of them but also keeping records and holding and adding to the information.
On a more practical level, knowing what you have is essential, should there be any reason to divulge information about the collection. This could be for insurance purposes, where the insurer requires a detailed description and a value in order to provide cover. For insurance of highly valuable objects, a photograph and a professional valuation may be required. In cases of loss or theft both the insurance agent and the police will require as much information as possible and any chance of recovery will be greatly improved if these details are available. If an estate has to be disposed of, property will need to be listed or inventoried in order to calculate the value and this will be far easier if records have been kept and information is available on the objects in question.

For museum collections, custodians have a duty to record and hold information on the objects in their care. Record keeping is part of the professional management of a collecting institution and is a sign of good practice. Collections management is essential to researching, conserving, displaying, lending and exhibiting cultural objects.

Knowing what you have and where it is can be seen to be fundamental to any collection of cultural goods. It simplifies all the processes of purchasing, managing, moving or insuring precious objects. It also adds greatly to the enjoyment of collecting and exhibiting if the history or context of the object is known, recorded and understood.

A brief history

There have been collectors and collections for as long as there have been houses and buildings. In the early third century BC, the Library at Alexandria had, in addition to its ‘biblion’ a ‘museion’. The ancient Romans kept ‘treasures’: Julius Caesar dedicated six of his cabinets of gems to the Temple of Venus, and we know that Roman shrines contained many precious objects. The early Christian church was also a collector of precious stones and plate, as well as of relics of saints. Armies took home all manner of war booty, which could find its way into the church, a private collection or the collections of a local municipality.

Private collections of ‘curiosities’ were well known in Europe by the 16th century and consisted of objects from the natural world, such as shells, precious stones, exotic birds and fossils, works of art and artefacts of particular skill. Although they were usually the pastime of the wealthy, there are records of such collections being created by people from all levels of
society from the Holy Roman Emperor to scholars and priests. The earliest record of such a collection in England is of that of Sir Walter Cope, mentioned in 1599, which states that he brought back many curiosities from his travels. The next collection of note is that of John Tradescant (d.1638), the Museum Tradescantianum, which formed the basis of the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford.

Some private collections of precious objects and fine art could be viewed by members of the public on application and would be displayed either in a picture gallery or in a ‘cabinet of curiosities’: a special room designed to display the objects together. The earliest printed collection catalogue in England was the *Description of the Earl of Pembroke’s Pictures*, written by Carlo Gambarini in 1731 and illustrated by George Vertue. Some collectors wrote their own catalogues, such as *A Description of the Villa of Horace Walpole*, with an additional list of the ‘Principal Curiosities’ written by Walpole to describe the contents of his villa at Strawberry Hill, near London.

There was no such thing as ‘collections management’ in those days, but there are lists and inventories as well as illustrated descriptions of these collections, some of them annotated with locations and classifications. Published catalogues of private collections began to appear in the late sixteenth century, as collectors were keen to display their possessions as a sign of social standing. These published catalogues demonstrate the importance of lists, descriptions, classification and location.

Inventory would certainly have been an aspect of household management. The inventory of the estate of Henry VIII, for example, undertaken at his death in 1547, lists, among 17,810 moveable goods, works or art including paintings, maps and furniture. The Museum Tradescantianum, mentioned above, published a catalogue of its collection in 1656, classified under 15 headings according to the type of object.

The earliest example of a collection open to the public is thought to be the Amerbach Cabinet, a private collection bought by the University of Basel and opened to the public in 1671. In the United Kingdom, the Ashmolean Museum is generally regarded as the first public museum. Elias Ashmole, a collector in his own right who had also acquired the collections of John Tradescant, left the collections to Oxford University in 1691. The museum was founded for academic purposes but could also be visited by any member of the public on payment of a fee.

Travel across Europe increased in the 18th century and many works of art were brought home from the Grand Tour. Significant collections of paintings
and sculpture grew up in country and town houses, often accompanied by catalogues and classifications. Books on how to collect and consider art were produced. The auction houses of Sotheby’s and Christie’s date from the second half of the 18th century and indicate the growth of art acquisition.

Most public museums were founded from private collections. The Medici Collection became the property of the state of Tuscany in 1737; the Saxon Royal Family Collection was opened to the public in Dresden in 1768; and the Louvre, housing the collections of the former French monarchy, was opened in 1793 after the French Revolution. In the UK, the situation was different: the British Museum was founded in 1753 and opened in 1759; the foundation of the National Gallery, 60 years later, was largely the result of a significant private collection becoming available.

The earliest museums would have had inventory systems, usually a handwritten list or a card index based on library systems. Curators, responsible for keeping information, gradually developed from being amateur experts into professionals in their own right. Information at this time would have been minimal: for objects usually a brief description; for paintings, usually the name of the artist, the title and medium. Generally there would be no provenance details, dimensions or location. Often a value would be listed only on purchase or when an inventory was drawn up for probate purposes.

By the 19th century, new museums were keeping records of objects, and accession registers became common. These registers, still of crucial importance today, generally list only the object’s date of entry, artist, title and medium. On rare occasions, provenance information, measurements and value are also recorded.

Once an object had been accessioned into the collection, the information would be transferred to an index card, kept by the curator. This might or might not have listed additional details. For a large museum with several departments, this individual approach could lead to a variety of indexing systems, each under the control of a different curator, with no unified system of cataloguing. Today some large museums have inherited the problem of a variety of different cataloguing systems maintained according to the history of each collection and the methodology of individual curators.

Collections information and management was very much the domain of the curator until the mid 20th century, when large American museums began to systematize record keeping and created the position of museum registrar. The role of registrar was familiar in other institutions, such as universities and hospitals, where they were the record keepers and custodians of
regulations and information. Museum Registration Methods was first published in 1958. The profession of museum registrar was formally established with the founding of the Registrars Committee of the American Association of Museums in 1977.

In Europe, the first association of museum registrars was the United Kingdom Registrars Group, formally constituted in 1991, although collection administrators had been meeting unofficially since the late 1970s. Since then, the profession of registrar has grown in Europe, with many countries establishing registrars’ societies and others having informal gatherings of those concerned with the care and management of cultural collections.

The Australian Registrars Committee was founded in November 1990 to promote the profession of museum registrar and to encourage professional museum registration practices. In 2007 the name was changed to the Australasian Registrars Committee, so as to include New Zealand.

The term ‘collections management’ has grown from this need to organize, classify and control and now covers all aspects of dealing with cultural objects. The increase in the movement of museum objects and a growth in the number of international exhibitions are giving rise to the creation of national and international standards for collections management.

In 2009 the British Standards Institution published a code of practice for collections management, thus defining the variety of areas covered by collections management and establishing a framework for policies and processes.

**An international perspective**

Collections management is an internationally recognized term in museums and cultural collections. There are many international organizations with an oversight of museums that set internationally accepted standards for the care and management of cultural goods.

There is a general understanding of shared values and standards, so that works on loan from one institution to another will be cared for in a similar way and handled and moved under the same care and conditions. While not all collections participate in international touring exhibitions or significant exchanges of cultural objects, all understand this duty of care and preservation.

The International Council of Museums (ICOM) has a branch in most countries and a number of standing committees which address areas such as
collections care and documentation, e.g. the International Documentation Committee (CIDOC). Membership is open to all museum professionals. In addition to fostering greater connections between countries, ICOM acts as monitor of correct museum practice and has produced a Code of Ethics which sets out the principles of caring for collections of cultural objects. ICOM also maintains the ICOM Red List, which gives details of countries or regions particularly at risk of looting or illegal export of cultural artefacts.

There are many international organizations for museum professionals, such as the International Group of Organisers of Exhibitions (Bizot Group), which addresses issues of lending and borrowing cultural goods for exhibitions.

Most countries have a museums association which draws its membership from national, regional and independent bodies. In the UK this is the Museums Association. In Europe, the Network of Museum Organisations (NEMO), links these various organizations for purposes of information exchange and standardization.

The European Committee for Standardization (CEN) produces pan-European guidelines on the conservation, storage, environment and transport of cultural goods.

**Summary**

Collections management is about knowing what you have and where to find it and covers a range of activities relating to documenting, moving, storing and displaying objects of cultural significance. From the beginnings of keeping ‘treasures’, collectors have had the desire to list, inventory and classify. The concept of collections management has grown out of the profession of curator and is now recognized internationally as applying to the range of skills and functions required to look after cultural collections.

**References**

2. Hubertus Golz (1526–83) visited some 970 collections of curiosities all across Europe and described them in detail.
3. The nucleus of the collection is pictures from the collection of John Julius Angerstein, which the British government purchased on his death.
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5. British Standards Institution, PAS 197:2009 Code of Practice for Cultural Collections Management (sponsored by the Collections Trust).


