

APPENDIX D: CLASSIFYING MUSEUM PROPERTY

A. GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

One of the basic tenets of museum property management is that the collection is organized according to some rational scheme and is maintained so it can be preserved, studied, or interpreted for public benefit. Classification systems provide the structure that bring even large, diverse collections under intellectual control. With a rational frame of reference, growth and management of the collection can be planned to provide maximum physical and intellectual accessibility to further the bureau's mission of public service.

Classification systems can be almost as diverse as the museum property being classified, and have evolved within a variety of disciplinary contexts. No single reference can provide a detailed classification system for all types of museum property. All classification systems, however, share common characteristics in that they reflect the thinking of active professionals in the discipline being classified.

Most classification systems are hierarchial, with major divisions being based on the most obvious distinctions among groups of objects and/or specimens. Each division is further subdivided into increasingly smaller units. The standardization of discipline-specific classification systems is essential for efficient data entry and retrieval. Each bureau should provide bureau-specific guidance for classifying the various collections in its custody. For specific details, refer to discipline-specific literature such as that listed in Appendix H. Further information on classification is provided in Appendix A. The museum property survey, a mandatory report, requires that data be submitted on classifications described in B through J below. Refer to Chapter 4 in this Volume.

The following discipline-specific classifications are provided as a suggested guideline for developing a bureau classification system.

B. ARCHEOLOGY CLASSIFICATION

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Archeological collections are those items recovered as a result of archeological techniques, including surface collection and excavation on land or underwater. Such objects may be classified according to general time period (e.g. prehistoric or historic [in North America before and after European contact]), material of manufacture, and provenience. Other attributes, such as manufacturing techniques or typology, may be recorded on the catalog card. In some cases archeological objects may be considered contemporary and indistinguishable from objects classified as history or Native American collections, except for the fact that they were retrieved by archeological techniques. Thus, it is the method of retrieval in which the archeological objects are found that separates them from other disciplinary classifications.

Archeological collections may be grouped by the location from which they are collected, site number and name, and features within sites. Materials collected from a particular site may be subdivided by the material of manufacture. Material categories commonly include animal remains, plant remains, stone, ceramic, metal, glass, and other materials. Each of these may be further sub-divided to represent material categories identified during analysis by trained specialists.

Cataloging categories should be flexible enough to accommodate varying levels of analysis and identification. Bureaus are encouraged to identify and standardize terms to be used. Such standardized lexicons should be based on common usage within the archeological profession, and should accommodate regional variations.

C. NATIVE AMERICAN (ETHNOGRAPHIC) CLASSIFICATION

Native American (ethnographic) classification refers to those contemporary Native American objects made or used by or associated with, contemporary Native Americans peoples. "Native American" refers to a contemporary Indian tribe, people, or culture indigenous to the United States, and includes any tribe, band, nation, or other organized Indian group or community of Indians, and natives of Alaska, Hawaii and the U.S. Territories. The objects usually are grouped first by general cultural area, then by specific cultural

Swanton, John R.
1946

The Indian Tribes of North America.
Smithsonian Institution, Bureau of
American Ethnology Bulletin 137,
Washington, DC

D. HISTORY (OBJECTS) CLASSIFICATION

The classification of historical museum property is outlined in The Revised Nomenclature for Museum Cataloging: A Revised and Expanded Version of Robert G. Chenhall's System for Classifying Man-made Objects by Robert G. Chenhall (Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1988 [revised by James P. Blackaby and Patricia Greenol]). This classification system, is widely used by North American history museums. Objects are categorized according to their original intended function. The book includes an extensive lexicon of preferred object terms. All are assigned to one of the following ten categories, which are further divided into subheadings.

- ! Structures
- ! Furnishings
- ! Personal Artifacts
- ! Tools and Equipment for Materials
- ! Tools and Equipment for Science and Technology
- ! Tools and Equipment for Communication
- ! Distribution and Transportation Artifacts
- ! Communication Artifacts
- ! Recreation Artifacts
- ! Unclassifiable Artifacts

E. HISTORICAL AND/OR SCIENTIFIC DOCUMENT COLLECTIONS

Historical and/or Scientific Document Collections refer to documents created, received, accumulated, or generated by a person or an organization in the conduct of affairs and management of resources. Documents created by the Federal Government are called "records." Certain records may be managed as museum property under the classification of historical and/or scientific document collections. Refer to

Appendix C. Document Collections are preserved because of their continuing value. Archivists have developed procedures for archival processing of a document collection that go far beyond basic cataloging. The catalog record, however, provides accountability and minimum access to the intellectual content of the documents. Cataloging procedures for historical and/or scientific documents are discussed in Appendix C. Each discrete collection within the repository's total holdings should be cataloged separately, regardless of size.

F. ART CLASSIFICATION

For the purposes of Departmental classifications, art is generally limited to fine arts and is grouped according to the technique used to create it (e.g., sculpture, paintings, lithographs, and watercolors). The cataloging system may further classify the art by time period, style or "school," or by individual artist, or cultural affiliation.

G. BIOLOGY CLASSIFICATION

Classification of biological specimens is based on the discipline of systematic biology, which arranges taxa into groups based on their evolutionary relationships as revealed by detailed study of paleontology, anatomy, genetics, and behavior. Starting with the most general, taxonomic categories include kingdom, phylum (for animals) or division (for plants), subphylum, class, subclass, superorder, order, suborder, superfamily, family, subfamily, genus, species, and subspecies. The scientific name commonly used by scientists includes both the genus and species (e.g., Canis familiaris is the scientific name for domestic dog).

Except in the case of the most common species, taxonomic specialists are needed to accurately identify specimens fully and with certainty. Collection managers should therefore rely on labels, research data, and classification outlines from scientific publications. Researchers usually prepare their specimens for curation. If the unit's collections include biological collections, it is useful to maintain a library of field guides and selected scientific books for

reference use. Biological collections are usually arranged systematically (i.e., all specimens of a single species are stored together).

H. PALEONTOLOGY CLASSIFICATION

Paleontological specimens add the dimension of time to biology. Any evidence of life from earlier geologic time periods is called a fossil. A fossil may be the preserved remains of a plant or animal, a natural cast, or only a trace (e.g., footprints or trackways), to cite a few of the possibilities. The paleontological classification system is the same as that used for living species, but the

paleontological species list includes many additional entries of extinct taxa.

For documentation purposes, the geological context of paleontological specimens is as important as their biological affiliations. Thus, records should include space for stratigraphic information in addition to the biological taxonomy. Some institutions organize their fossils by geologic time periods, others arrange them taxonomically. The choice depends on the nature of the collections and the needs of its principal users.

I. GEOLOGY CLASSIFICATION

Geology collections may include rocks (igneous, sedimentary, metamorphic, or fault-zone materials), minerals (grouped by their chemical composition), surface process materials (illustrating weathering by wind, stream, lake, marine, or glacial action), organic materials (hydrocarbons, resins, and bitumens), extraterrestrial materials (meteorites, tektites, and terrestrial impact features), and soils. Many of these material categories overlap. The objective of the collector should indicate what category is most appropriate. A specimen collected to document glacial striations, for example, would be classified as a surface process material, even though it may be composed of granite (an igneous rock).

J. CLASSIFICATION OF ENVIRONMENTAL SAMPLES

Environmental research may result in composite samples, such as water, precipitation, air, and sediment. To classify composite environmental samples, consider the primary purpose for which the sample was collected. For example, if the purpose for taking a water sample is to study biota, then the sample may be considered a biology specimen. Similarly, if the sample is for sediments, it may be considered a geology specimen. If the sample contains elements of more than one classification, it should be cross-referenced in all categories represented.

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