



**2024 ICOM SOLIDARITY PROJECT:
COMMUNITY-LED TRAINING**

VOLUME 3:
DOCUMENTATION





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Community-Led Training

VOLUME 3: DOCUMENTATION

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INTRODUCTION

Documentation is a vital part of museum work, providing the foundation for managing, preserving, and sharing collections. It ensures that objects are recorded with accurate and meaningful information, helping museums uphold their responsibility to care for cultural heritage maintaining consistent, accessible records.



“

Museum documentation is the activity of recording and generating diverse knowledge and evidence, in analogue and digital formats, in order to preserve the history of society and nature as reflected by museum collections. It is a core strategic, operational, and transdisciplinary activity that enables the social role of museums as public memory institutions.

”

Trilce Navarrete



FUNDAMENTALS OF DOCUMENTATION

Image credit: Marinda van der Nest - South African National Defence Force, South Africa



Systematic and comprehensive data collection

Effective documentation involves comprehensive records of a heritage asset's condition, history, materials, interventions, and context throughout all conservation stages.



Standardisation and classification

Standardised protocols and classifications promote consistent, objective documentation, improving decision-making and enabling seamless data integration.



Digital tools and integration

Digital tools enhance data accuracy and collaboration, though technical challenges persist, mobile phones provide accessible options for quick condition reporting.



Long-term management and accessibility

Documentation must be preserved and remain accessible for future use, requiring innovative strategies for digital preservation, regular updates, and migration to new formats as technology evolves.



Stakeholder involvement and community engagement

Stakeholder involvement promotes inclusive, sustainable documentation, and artist interviews inform future conservation decisions.



Managerial and contextual documentation

Beyond physical attributes, documenting management practices, financial indicators, and contextual factors is essential for holistic conservation and effective site management.

OBJECT ENTRY & REGISTRATION



Image credit: Celiwe Dlamini - Eswatini National Museum, Eswatini

Use these 4 steps to ensure a seamless intake process and ensure an effective registration.

4 SIMPLE STEPS FOR OBJECT REGISTRATION

1

ACCEPT DONATION



Donor should complete a form that includes name, date, and signature. More information should be included if desired. Museum employee should also fill out their own name, date, and signature, as well as a brief description of the object.



2

ENTER OBJECT IN REGISTER



This entry should include:

- A temporary number
- Date
- Current location
- Name and address of the owner or donor
- Donation/gift confirmation form
- Name and position of museum employee receiving and/or submitting the object
- Phrase or word that briefly describes the object
- Reason for potential entry into the collection



Continued on page 6



3 OBJECT ACQUISITION DECISION

After careful consideration as to whether the object will be beneficial to add to the collection, one of three decisions must be made:

Option 1: The object is not accepted

Object will be returned to the owner/donor. Documentation should reflect the date, reason for declining the object, and proof that the object has been returned to owner.

Option 2: The object is accepted on loan

Short-term loans must be registered and then de-accessioned as per Option 1's instructions. Long-term loans will be given a unique loan number in the Register.

Option 3: Object is accepted and becomes part of collection

Registration continues to ensure the proper accessioning of the object into the collection.



4 RECORD OBJECT DATA

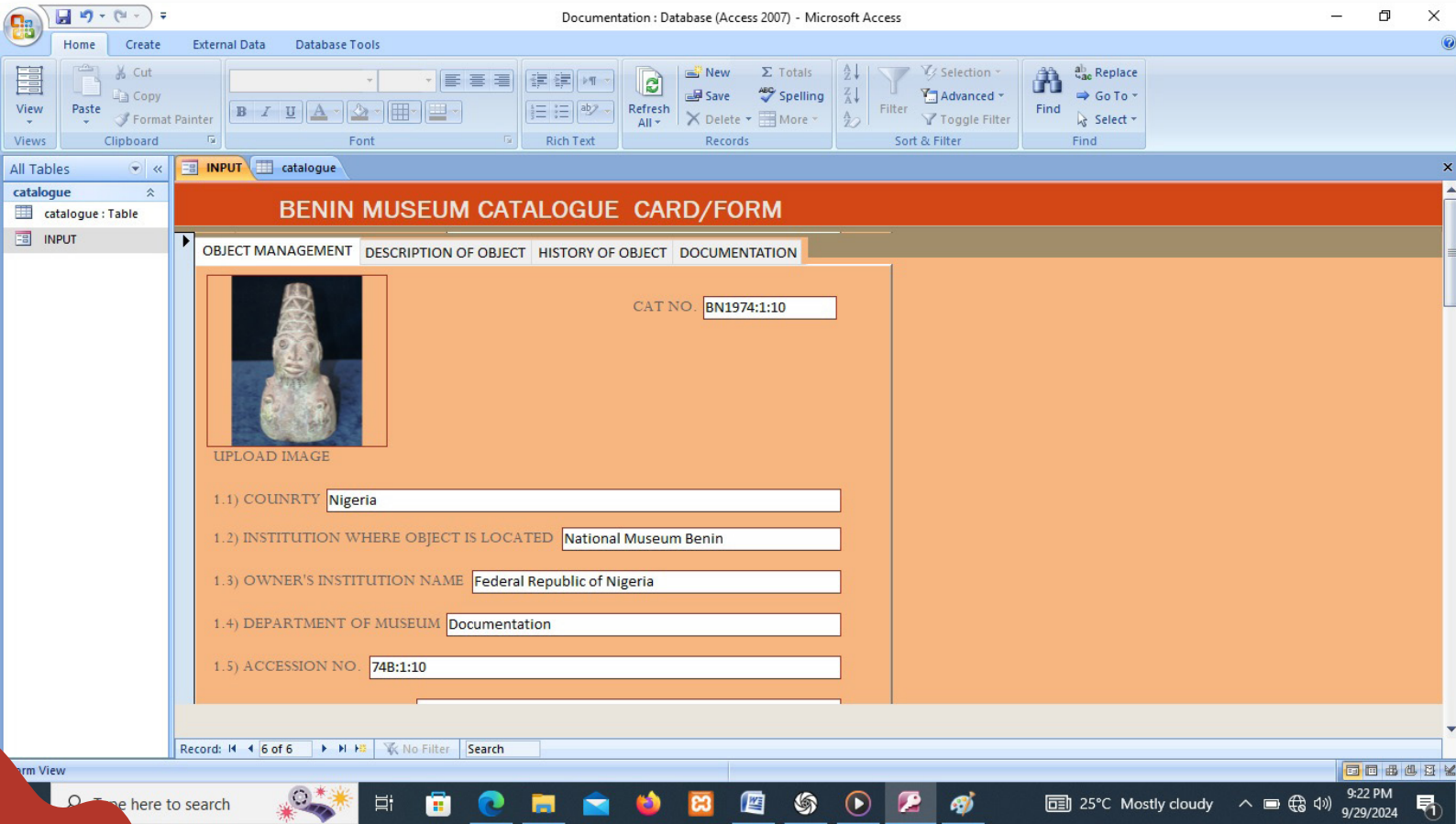
Now the specifics of the object can be recorded and linked to the object's accession number. This will mean that the object is formally part of the collection and should be treated as such, with regular maintenance and condition assessments. Object should now be placed in a suitable environment and its whereabouts recorded.



I strongly believe that conservation is a proactive and ongoing endeavour.



Alexio Motsi



ACCESSIONING AN OBJECT

Image credit: John Osin - Benin Museum, Nigeria



Why do we need to accession an object?

Accessioning a museum object is critically important because it formally integrates the object into the museum's collection in a controlled, documented, and accountable way.



Legal and ethical accountability

Accessioning provides proof of ownership and ensures that the museum has legally and ethically acquired the object. It also protects the museum from disputes over ownership or provenance.



Accurate record-keeping

Each object gets a unique accession number and a detailed record, making it easier to track its location, condition, and history. Good records prevent loss, damage, misplacement, or misidentification of objects.



Preservation and conservation

Accessioning includes a condition assessment and storage plan, which helps to safeguard the object's physical integrity and ensures that proper environmental and handling procedures are followed.



Documentation is a critical aspect of the work conservators, curators, and registrars do. In its simplest form, documentation is simply recording information in whatever format is available, such as a pencil and paper, computer, tape recorder, or video recorder.



Adele Barbato



My experience has taught me that it is essential to work closely with local communities to capture both tangible and intangible aspects of heritage in ways that respect their beliefs and customs.



Aditi Nagar



Research and scholarship

Detailed documentation of provenance, materials, and historical context allows researchers and curators to study the object accurately. Through this, loans, exhibitions, and educational programs can be facilitated.



Collection management

Accessioning allows the museum to manage its collection strategically—knowing what is in the collection, its value, and significance, which supports future planning, including exhibitions, conservation priorities, and acquisitions.



Transparency and accountability

It provides a clear paper trail for audits, reports, and ethical standards. This helps in maintaining public trust, especially for publicly funded museums.

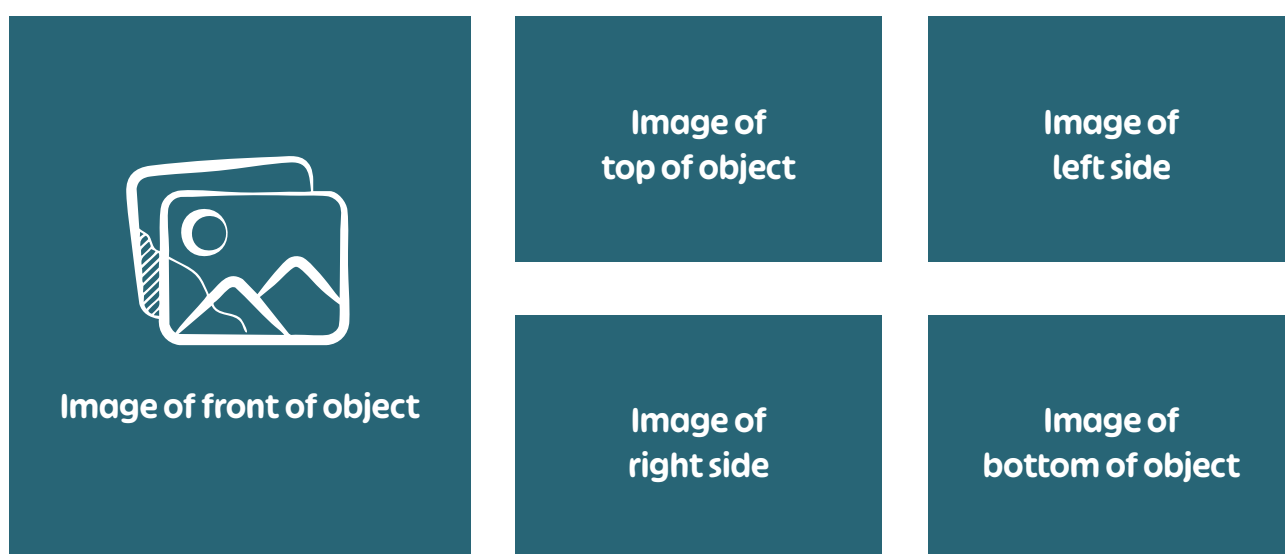


Community involvement

Accessioning is an opportunity to tap into the cultural knowledge within communities around museums and institutions. Community members can assist with provenance and history of objects, as well as weighing in on how the object should be sensitively stored and displayed.

EXAMPLE OF OBJECT ACCESSION FORM

Accession forms will often be tailored to fit the type of objects that a museum deal with. Listed below are some key things that need to be included on an accession form. There are plenty of examples online that can assist you with more specific objects. Don't forget to include photographs!



Object specifics

- Date
- Location
- Accession number
- Registration/catalogue/temporary number
- Name of object
- Measurements in mm (height, width, depth)
- Weight in mg
- Material/s
- Techniques used
- Description of object
- Condition report

Provenance

- Donor
- History of object
- Country
- Date of object
- Historical context

Other

- Ethical considerations
- Treatment history
- Purchase details



DEACCESSIONING

Image credit: Adeniyi Mathew Oluwaseun - National Commission for Museums and Monuments, Nigeria



What is deaccessioning?

Deaccessioning is the formal process by which a museum permanently removes an object from its collection records. It's a controlled, documented procedure that follows strict ethical, legal, and institutional guidelines.



When to deaccession

Objects may be deaccessioned from a museum's collection for several reasons. An item may no longer align with the museum's mission or interpretive goals, or it may duplicate other pieces already in the collection. Some objects are removed because they are too damaged to conserve or display safely. Others may present ethical or legal issues, such as unclear provenance or repatriation claims. In some cases, lack of documentation or doubts about authenticity make retention inappropriate, while objects containing hazardous materials may require disposal for safety reasons.



Why deaccessioning is important

Deaccessioning keeps a museum's collection relevant and ethical by removing unsuitable objects, allowing resources to focus on items of true significance. It also demonstrates responsible stewardship and maintains public trust. Deaccessioning should be seen as the most drastic solution. Particularly when an object is damaged, it is important that measures be put in place to stabilise the object before deciding on deaccessioning as the solution.



Proper data management ensures the accuracy, consistency, and reliability of information about objects, which is essential for the conservation field. By maintaining detailed and organized records, conservators can track the condition of objects over time, identify agents of deterioration, and develop targeted conservation strategies.



Nathael Cano

CONCLUSION

Accessioning is a cornerstone of responsible museum practice, ensuring that every object entering a collection is documented, preserved, and interpreted with integrity. In the African museum context, this process holds particular importance, as it safeguards cultural heritage, supports transparency, and strengthens community trust. By carefully recording provenance, respecting traditional knowledge, and upholding ethical standards, museums can honor both the tangible and intangible significance of the objects they steward. Ultimately, effective accessioning not only preserves the past but also empowers future generations to connect with and celebrate Africa's rich and diverse heritage.



“

The question that I often ask is, “What is more important between material culture and its information?”, a question that I know is difficult to answer, as they are inseparable.

”

Keletso Gaone Setlhabi



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of museums – committee
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