COLLECTIONS DOCUMENTATION PRACTICES: A CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract - **This paper/poster introduces the three-fold dimension of collections documentation as activity, means and product. After an examination of current documentation practices through well-established documentation standards, we argue that in current practices, documentation functions as means for preservation and care of museum objects. However the function of documentation as a means that improves understanding, interpretation and engagement with collections is not supported, because of the current structure, the scope and purpose of documentation. Finally, a new approach that invites users' perspectives in documentation is proposed.**

INTRODUCTION

The term "collections documentation" is encountered in its three-fold dimensions: (a) it describes the *activity* of gathering, storing, manipulating and retrieving information that museum holds about its objects in its care in order to identify them and consists of the *procedures* that a museum should follow to manage its collection (e.g. object entry, loans, acquisition, etc.); (b) it is the *means* by which museum staff and visitors can find the information they need either to look after the objects, or to expand their knowledge and get engaged with museum collections; it is rather the bedrock of all subsequent museum activities; (c) and it is the final *product*, namely the information being recorded in documentation systems and published on the web or used by handheld electronic devices inside the museum galleries. This information refers both to object's identification (description, measurement, physical characteristics) and to the data that is recorded to support collection management procedures (e.g. conservation, cataloguing, etc.). Therefore, it is a central area in the heart of the museum that allows proper management, understanding and interpretation of museum collections, now and in the future [1].

Issues concerning collections documentation cannot ignore issues of making meaning and having access to collections information. Documentation practice is the basis upon which all other uses of collections are built (exhibitions, publications, educational programs, multimedia presentations, etc.) and practices of interpretations begin [2.1] [2.2]. This paper/poster aims to answer if current documentation practices give the opportunity to people to engage fully with museum collections in order to understand, explore, enjoy, use and create meaning for objects.

In order to answer the above question we will investigate the categories of museum information that they are currently documented through the examination of two well known documentation standards from two professional documentation associations, CIDOC and MDA, that are activated internationally and in UK respectively; it is about

the International Guidelines for Museum Object Information: The CIDOC Information Categories [3] and SPECTRUM: The UK Museum Documentation Standard [4].

CURRENT DOCUMENTATION PRACTICES

Documentation standards can be used as a guide to good practice to museum documentation in order to enable museums to choose the procedures and the categories of information they need to record about their collections. Almost every museum has its own procedures that satisfy its own specific needs and collection type requirements. So the use of well-known documentation standards is fully deliberate, because they represent a common language among practitioners and a common basis for such a diverse topic.

We have chosen to examine two documentation standards that both they are well established in museum community and they have an international impact. The SPECTRUM: The UK Museum Documentation Standard created by the MDA (Museum Documentation Association) and established in partnership with the museum community. It contains procedures for documenting objects and the processes they undergo, as well as identifying and describing the information which needs to be recorded to support the procedures. The International Guidelines for Museum Object Information developed by the CIDOC (International Committee for Documentation) of ICOM and includes information categories for collections management as well as object description.

Below in Table 1, we compare the recommended categories of information from each standard to have an informed view of the focus of current museum documentation and the types of information categories that are recorded; the mapping between the two documentation standards will reveal the commonalities and the differences between the two recognizable standards in order to categorize the information groups they suggest and to make explicit the collection management procedures incorporated in the museum documentation process.

The CIDOC Information Categories (June 1995)	The SPECTRUM Information Groups (3rd edition, 2005)
Object Information	
Description Information	**Object description information**
Mark and Inscription Information	*Inscription included in description*
Material and Technique Information	*Material and technique included in description and production*
Measurement Information	*Measurement/ Dimension included in description*
Image Information	
Institution Information	**Organisation Information**
	Location information
	Address information
	Date information
	People information
	Place information
Location Information	**Object location information**
Object Association Information	**Object history & association information**
Object Collection Information	**Object collection information**

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	Object identification information
Object Name Information	*Object name included in identification*
Object Number Information	*Object number included in identification*
Object Title Information	*Object title included in identification*
Object Production Information	**Object production information**
Part and Component Information	*Components included in description*
Recorder Information	**Record management group**
	Amendment history
	Use and provision of information
	Record information
Reference Information	**Reference information**
Reproduction Rights Information	**Object rights information**
	Object rights in information
	Object rights out information
Subject Depicted Information	*Subject is included in description as content*
Procedures	
Object Entry Information	**Object entry information**
Acquisition Information	**Acquisition information**
Condition Information	**Condition and technical assessment information**
Deaccession and Disposal Information	**Disposal information**
	Loan in information
	Loan out information
	Movement information
	Object exit information
	Conservation & treatment information
	Audit information
	Insurance information
	Indemnity information
	Loss/damage information
	Valuation information
	Use of collections information
	Object requirement information

Table 1. CIDOC information categories and SPECTRUM information groups: mapping

From Table 1 arises that both documentation standards recognize information categories for objects and procedures. However, CIDOC guidelines focus in the detailed categories that describe physical characteristics of the objects and in some basic collections management procedures such as object entry, acquisition, condition and deaccession and disposal. SPECTRUM, on the other hand, groups information categories referring to the object's description (e.g. a new category Object Identification introduced to include object name, title and number) and introduces extra and specific collections management procedures signifying the new focus of museum community for efficient management of collections.

Besides the above extensive standards, there are others, known as *data standards*, that, though they provide guidance on documenting museum collections, do not provide the information categories for collections management procedures; these data standards define only the information categories that describe museum objects and usually they are addressed to specific types of museum collections (for example, artworks, ethnographical objects, archaeological objects, etc.). A minimum datalist is provided to some of these standards, so museums are able to document at least the basic information categories of the objects in their care for accountability purposes.

Below in the figure 1, we present the Minimum Datalist that Africom Handbook [5] suggests for Humanities collections; it is visible the descriptive information categories that documents mainly the physical characteristics of an object and the relationships between them. Collections documentation is a time-consuming and expensive activity both in financial and human recourses; and for this reason, small museums or museums with limited staff are recommended to follow at least this minimum datalist in order to have a basic documentation structure.
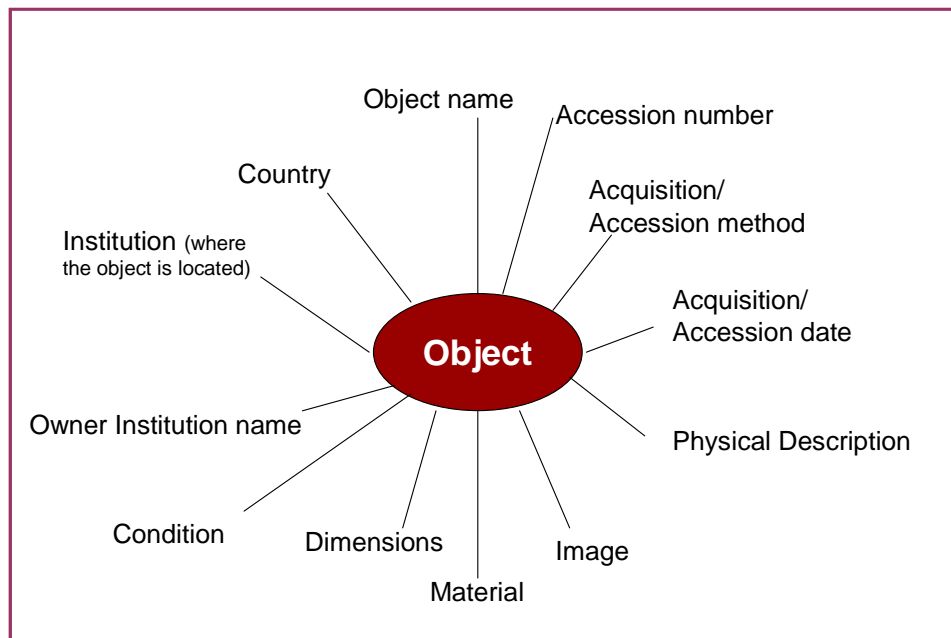

Figure 1. Minimum information documented for an object.

Finally, we can recognize two kinds of collections documentation structures that summarize the current documentation practices in museums as it is arises by the precedent examination of well-known documentation standards:

(a) the one that records the minimum information about an object or a group of objects, that is absolutely necessary for its/ their identification (see figure 1) and

(b) the one that includes information categories for collections management as well as objects' description (see figure 2).
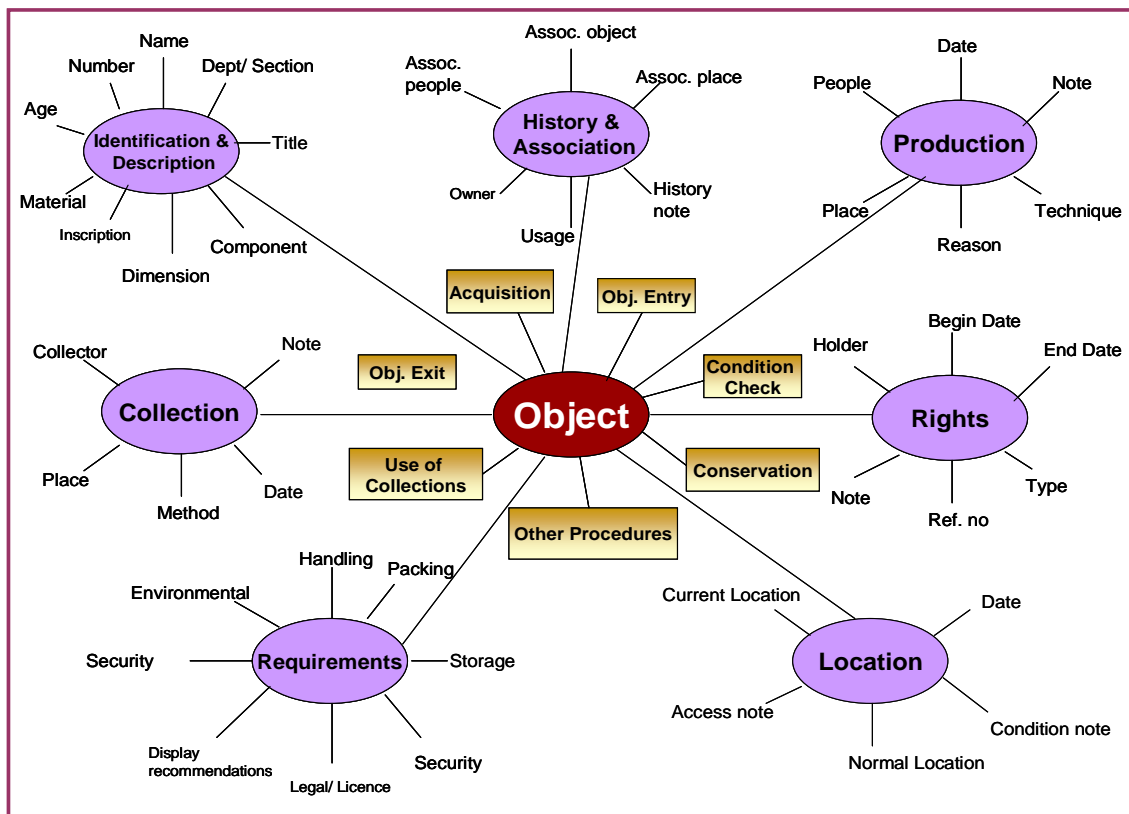
Figure 2. A schematic presentation of SPECTRUM selected information groups and information units.

Figure 2 is a schematic presentation of a selection of SPECTRUM Information Categories, as these were presented in Table 1. The subcategories of SPECTRUM are also presented, known as information units in SPECTRUM jargon [4]. In this figure, it is also obvious that the object is at the centre of the whole documentation approach, since all information categories and collections management processes develop around it.

USE OF COLLECTIONS DOCUMENTATION

The conclusion from the precedent section is that current documentation practices are object – centric; all data that is documented refer to particular objects. This data can be stored manually in hand – written records and files or they can be handled and processed by computerized systems. The information for objects and collections

management procedures, which is recorded in manual or automated documentation systems, is the final product of documentation, the result of the activity of gathering, recording and manipulating this data.

Internal users (e.g., curators, registrars, conservators, etc.) of collections documentation have at their disposal a powerful tool to care for and preserve collections, to create reports and to meet audit responsibilities; e.g. a collection manager can easily find the physical description and classification of an object, information about the history of it prior to its acquisition, details of its subsequent incorporation into the collections, etc. He/She is able to follow the object from the storage to the conservation department or the exhibition gallery or even to another museum. All this management data is stored into the documentation system and enable its users to obtain knowledge of the "life cycle" of an object in the museum [6].

The information for objects, which are stored in collections database, can be published on the web and the general public can obtain a view of the objects of museum collections. Such an example is the one from the permanent collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art (see Table 2) that it is presented below as a highlight from the collection of the Department of the European Sculpture and Decorative Arts in Metropolitan.

Accession Number	1982.45
Artist/Maker(s)	Sculptor: Il Riccio (Andrea Briosco) (1470-1532)
Title	Satyr
Object Name	
Date	16th century (ca. 1506–08)
Culture	Italian (Padua)
Made in	Country: Italy City: Padua
Medium	
Classification	Bronze
Dimensions	H. 14 1/8 in. (35.9 cm)
Credit Line	Purchase, Gifts of Irwin Untermyer, Ogden Mills and George Blumenthal, Bequest of Julia H. Manges and Frederick C. Hewitt Fund, by exchange; and Rogers and Pfeiffer Funds, 1982
Department	European Sculpture and Decorative Arts
Markings	
Description	

Description
This striding satyr, with its curvilinear contours and masterly control of chasing, was executed about 1507, at the height of Riccio's powers. He had probably just completed his pair of Old Testament bronze reliefs for Sant'Antonio in Padua and had embarked on

the model for what was to be his greatest work, the bronze paschal candlestick in the same church. The elaborate decorations on the candlestick include satyrs among the many nearly freestanding statuettes. The highly activated surfaces of the bronzes for which he was famed reflect Riccio's training as a goldsmith. His poignant renderings of satyrs, half-human and half-animal, were especially popular among the humanist collectors of the early Renaissance, who may have seen them as emblematic of the Neoplatonic notion of the spirit trapped in flesh.

Image

Table 2. A documentation example from the Metropolitan Museum of Art Website Permanent Collection, European Sculpture and Decorative Arts, Collection Highlights.

This example that concentrates on the raw information and the physical characteristics of the object prompts us to make the following observations; a selection has been made from the recorded information in the collections database, because the information for the procedures of collections management have been omitted; the "voice" of the text corresponds to the authority of the anonymous curator of the Metropolitan and this object record has been written mainly for internal users.

Actually, is this raw information (file photo with maker's name, description and accession number, etc.) adequate to satisfy the needs of web audiences who are often unable to interpret this information? This question continues the debate that has started some years ago and contests the capability of the information stored in collections databases for inventory control and management purposes to really engage the need of online users when museums opened up access to their collections on their websites [7.1] [7.2] [7.3] [7.4].

Although collections documentation can reflect complex relationships between objects, this is usually limited to situating an object within a set (a group or a collection) [7.3]. The relationship between an object and other objects, people, or theories (usually a key element of an interpretation paradigm) is seldom reflected in online museum collections databases [8]. Museums need to wrap layers of interpretation around the bare fact of an object before the public can begin to grasp its cultural and social significance. The more raw materials are available, the more they have to be mediated by indexing and in-depth-interpretation in order to become valuable for the public.

Innovative documentation projects have emerged recently in the international museum community that recognizes the limitations of current documentation practices;

they explore new documentation models for digital collections [2.1]; they develop a new documentation methodology in co-operation with the MDA for culturally diverse audiences [9] and they explore the social tagging and folksonomic description in art on-line museum collections [10].

These projects give some insights for the new directions that current documentation practices should follow and support the grounds for new targeted approaches to be driven by users' needs and interests.

FROM ITEM-CENTRIC COLLECTIONS DOCUMENTATION TO USERS' PERSPECTIVE

Collections documentation practice is hidden behind the scenes, away from museum visitors. The predominant assumption is that visitor is a figure seen as being detached and separated from all other museum processes. Thus, with visitors tidied away in public spaces, the museum staff, in the private spaces, gets on with collections, documentation, display and other activities [2.2]. Moreover, museum in these activities is very authoritative and consequently the activities lack the personal reference that could engage people more easily.

Current collections documentation practices grew out of a drive to ensure museums were publicly accountable for the public assets they held. Documentation records information that describes the objects associates them to their history or to other objects and relates them to collections management procedures. It answers to questions like "what is it", "who made it", "when and where was it made", "what is it about", "who owns it", "where is located", "what is its condition", "what is it related to" and so on. All these questions put in the centre the objects and record information about them and the transactions and activities that are involved in, but they leave potential users, whether museum workers or visitors, out. Documentation does little to enable users to find answers to questions like why an object is significant and for whom; where the information and opinions that museums present are coming from; how museum professional combines information in order to make meaning of the objects; whether the data about the use or the production of an object can reveal anything about the effectiveness of its original purpose or the impact it may have had upon its user, and so on [9].

However, museums need to make a stronger case for their collections as powerhouses of knowledge and ideas [11]. To achieve this, museums need to invest more in research, develop more partnerships with communities outside the museum and do more to make the knowledge associated with collections available [12].

Furthermore, if we consider collections documentation as a *tool* to find information for objects, to expand knowledge for them and engage people with collections, then we should involve actively visitors in documentation practices. Usually when museums open their own processes up to visitors, the results can be very rewarding [11]. Lately, there are examples where history museums invited successfully visitors – volunteers to documentation projects and other museum activities [2.2].

In the figure below, we propose a collections documentation schema that incorporates users' perspectives, either museum staff or visitors, about the objects into documentation practices. We claim that such a schema could form the basis for better interpretation of objects and other inspiring uses of collections either into the museum or on the web that could involve a diverse range of people.
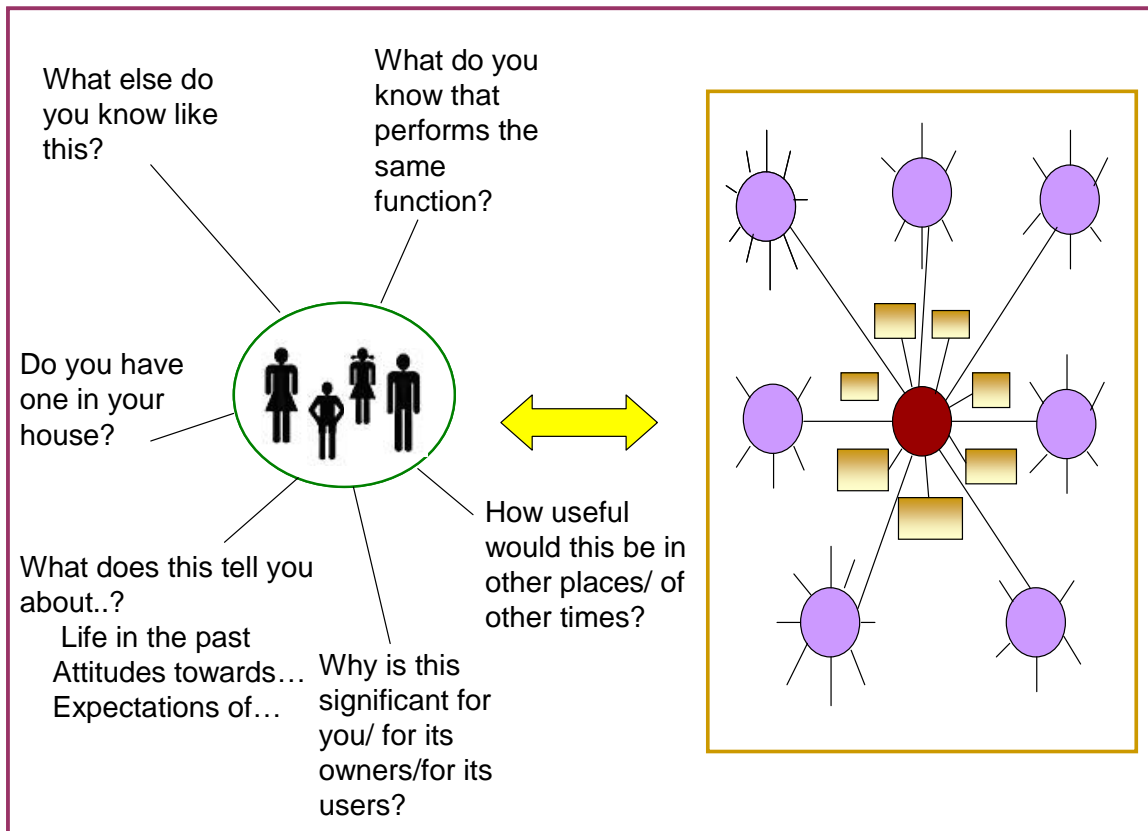
**Figure 3. Proposal of revised documentation structure including users'
perspective**

This proposal functions complementary to current documentation practices that
concern objects and the management of their information. So, the proposed revised
documentation structure invites users to "speak" with objects, to think about them and
discover how they are related to objects and why objects are cultural and social
significant for them now, and in the future. This approach is also influenced by current
museum theory and practice that understand the importance of getting the museum
visitor actively involved in the process of interpretation and creation of meaning in the
museum [13.1] [13.2]. Actually the proposed schema incorporates Hooper – Greenhill's
ideas for objects analysis and visitors engagement with them [14].

CONCLUSIONS

By documenting and presenting users' perspectives, either museum staff or visitors
about the objects, a new mode of interaction between people, objects and the museum is
formed. The perception of the museum as an institution changes from a withholder or
controller of information and stories to an open container. This is not a threat, a
cancellation of curatorial authority; on the contrary, this empowers museums to
consider their role and their ability to offer greater autonomy to their audiences.

Museums incorporating users' perspectives in collections documentation challenge
to transform documentation from a *means* to find object – related information to
effective and sustainable "knowledge environment" that invites users to engage with

collections while allowing self-guided interpretations and the construction of multiple meanings.

Museum can also utilize new technologies that make it easier to offer more than one perspective on an object or collection; to offer visitors a variety of pathways through ideas and information about its collection. What museum need is a cultural shift within institution that will encourage people's reaction and thoughts about the objects and incorporate them into its documentation practice that forms the basis for many other activities both inside and outside the museum.

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