

**The importance of cataloguing.  
*Covering the past and present of objects***

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Over the last ten years I have worked in public and academic libraries, museums and heritage sites. They all have their own individual quirks, challenges and joys but something that joins them all is the importance of their catalogue or inventory. Knowing what is 'in stock' not only makes it easy to search and research but also provides protection, insurance and a level of responsibility for the collections. Once an object or collection is added to a catalogue it suddenly becomes 'watched' or 'noted'.

In my current role as Collections Assistant, I have been pulling together various disparate existing catalogues to create one solid and central inventory at an internationally important heritage site.

We, as heritage professionals, may have been aware for a while the importance of cultural heritage, but the public in general are now becoming more and more aware of how significant it is. Much has been lost in the past - not just to conflict but also a lack of understanding of how to process and respect our heritage.

I have come across incidents in which an object that is old and tattered has been discarded because it has no longer been considered an aesthetically-pleasing part of the collection. These acts were by no means done in spite or malice but can be blamed on a lack of joined-up thinking on the important part all objects can tell us - regardless of their physical appearance.



*Catalogued items Tropical museum Amsterdam  
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Whatever the background of an institution, cataloguing is reassuringly familiar. Depending on the time and resources available, your work can be in-depth or very simple. Of course, the more information that can be included the more valuable a resource a catalogue can be.

However, a few important fields can be all that is needed. Every item should be given an individual number with each separate part having its own number linked to this root (e.g. a lidded pot would be 01234/1- pot and 01234/2 lid). A title, brief description and measurements are all useful pieces of information as is provenance if known and a comment on the condition.

Having the basic information like this is therefore covering the 'past' and 'present' of an object - even if briefly. If more information is known, e.g. a maker, nationality, object type, past conservation work etc then it starts to create a bigger picture - one that is not only ensuring the physical knowledge of an item but also its intellectual properties. A photograph can also be invaluable for identification and retrospective condition reporting.



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The best argument for cataloguing collections is that it allows for auditing and prioritization. Once the basic information is in place for an object, it can be checked, measured and built upon.

In times of conflict or disaster, if specialists know what they are working with they can judge how to best deal with the workload, priorities can be identified and preservation can be carried out methodically without risking objects further by delaying essential work.



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