Documenting Photographs

We seem to have many different types of photographic collection, how do we distinguish between them?

**Permanent collections**
If your museum has been offered a photograph that comes within your collecting policy and you would like to keep it as part of the permanent collection, then it needs to be accessioned. This could be a photograph in any format. For example, it could be a historic print, a modern print, a negative, a slide or even a digital image. Your museum's permanent collection may well include historic prints but it could also include contemporary photographs.

**Support collections**
Not all objects owned by museums are formally added to the permanent collections: there are other types of support collections held in museums for example 'handling collections' and 'education collections'. Photographs will be added to these support collections when a member of staff takes photographs for an exhibition, records a special event in the museum, or takes a photograph of an object for reference purposes. Objects held in these collections do not have the same status as those held in the permanent collections but they still have to be managed and accounted for.

You are still responsible for support collection of photographs and need to make it clear for the benefit of future staff where they have been acquired from and why. The Inventory control procedure gives guidance on your responsibilities. Its Minimum Standard states that you must:

- Enable accountability for any object, at any time;
- Enable the provision of up-to-date information about all objects in the care of the organisation - including loans in and out, temporarily deposited objects and other unaccessioned objects;
- Provide a reference to ownership of each object;
- Provide the current location of each object.

If you acquire photographs from members of the public that you wish to keep in support collections, then you need to make it clear to the donor that the donation will not form part of your museums permanent collections.

**Do we have to have a Collecting Policy for photographs?**
(see Acquisition - Policy requirements)

Your museum should have a written Collecting Policy: in it you will need to refer to your policy for photographs, in the same way that you refer to the collecting of other types of object.

**What do we do when a member of the public donates a photograph to the museum?**
(see Object entry; Acquisition; Inventory control)

If a photograph if is left at the museum by a member of the public, your normal object entry procedure will apply. If you want to acquire the photograph for the permanent collection then it should be accessioned. If you want to add the photograph to a support collection it should be documented as such and the donor should be informed.
What do we do about photographs taken by members of staff?
(see Acquisition; Inventory control)

What you do with photographs taken by members of staff as part of their work depends on why you want to acquire them. If you want to acquire the photograph for the permanent collection then it should be accessioned. If you want to add the photograph to a support collection it should be documented as such.

Which format of a photograph should I accession?

It is the use of a photograph, rather than the format it is in, that will determine how it should be documented. Any kind of item can be accessioned into a museum's permanent collection providing it comes within the museum's collecting policy.

Any type of photograph can be accessioned but sometimes you may need to make a decision about what format to accession: for example, you may acquire a negative and a print of an image at the same time. Opinions vary as to which you should accession, but most museums agree that where possible it should be the most original version of an image available to you. If you want to make copies of photographs, better quality will be achieved by using an original negative rather than copying a print.

For more detailed guidelines on accessioning see the Acquisition procedure in SPECTRUM and the Collections Trust Accession Records factsheet.

How do we acquire title and copyright of a photograph?
(see Acquisition - Steps 6-7 and Rights management - Procedure)

Part of your museum's normal accessioning procedure includes acquiring title to an object. If a photograph is still in copyright, you will also need to sort out copyright issues as well. At the point when you acquire a photograph it is advisable to establish who owns the copyright and formally transfer ownership to the museum if possible.

Do photographs have to have special different types of accession number to other objects?
(see Acquisition - Step 9)

When you have decided to accession a photograph you will need to allocate an accession number. Your museum should already have a policy for deciding the format of its numbers, and this should be followed for photographs.

It is important to remember that the accession number is a code for identification and cross-referral. Accession numbers should not be 'intelligent'. They should not contain any other information such as storage location or type or date. They should just be a number, the purpose of which is to help you find the right entry in your recording system. Additional information, such as classification, should be stored in additional fields of information in your cataloguing system. This means that any re-ordering of the collection need not result in having to re-order the numbering system.

For more information see the Collections Trust factsheet on Numbering.
How do we accession large groups of photographs or albums?  
(see Acquisition - Step 10)

Museums often acquire photographs in large numbers. For example, your museum might be given a large collection of photographs in a variety of formats from a single photographer. Museums are also often given albums that contain large numbers of photographs. If you are thinking about acquiring a very large collection of photographs you should think about the resources you will need to make the collection accessible before you decide whether to accept the donation.

For collections of this type, it is acceptable to accession large groups as one item, and perhaps plan to return to the collection at a later date to document in more detail. If photographs are gathered together in a secure container, the container may be numbered, the contents counted and the total recorded. Note that for security reasons if you are bulk-documenting you should always count the number of items in the group and record this in the accession register.

How do I mark a number on a photograph?  
(see Acquisition - Step 13)

As a general rule photographs can be marked in pencil on the reverse. Paper is easily marked with a good-quality 2B pencil, which can be removed with a very soft, clean eraser or Draftclean granules (available from conservation suppliers).

You should:
- Examine the object to check if the method is appropriate. If in doubt, consult a conservator;
- Number the object in two separate locations in pencil on the reverse, using gentle pressure;
- If newly sharpened, scribble with pencil until it writes smoothly.

If you are accessioning a glass or other negatives the number should be marked on the packaging.

For more information see the Collections Trust factsheet on Labelling and marking museum objects.

What if we acquire another version of a photograph we already own?  
(see Acquisition and Inventory control)

Your museum may own many versions of the same image. This is particularly the case with commercially produced postcards. You may be offered a postcard that is the same as one that is already accessioned in your museum's collection but is much better quality. If you want to keep the new photograph then you will need to document it as a new object. Although it may be the same image as one already in your collection other important information about it will be different. For example, the acquisition details will be different and are important to record.

If you want to add the new photograph to the permanent collection then you will need to accession it. You can then cross-reference versions of the same image.

If you don't want to accession a photograph, but want to keep it in a support collection, you will still need to document it and make it clear to the donor that this is the basis on which you are accepting their donation. It is still important to cross-reference it to an accessioned version of the image.
What do I do if a member of the public offers us a photograph for copying? (see Object entry; Acquisition; Inventory control; Rights management)

A member of the public may bring in a photograph for you to see, and may be happy for you to make a copy of it for the collections.

If the photograph is left at the museum the usual object entry procedure will apply. Entry records log every item left in the care of the museum at the time of arrival.

How you document the acquisition of the copy photograph will depend on what you want to acquire it for. If you are making a copy to add to your museum's permanent collection then it should be accessioned and your normal accessioning procedure followed. If you want to keep the photograph in a reference or support collection then it needs to be documented as such.

Make sure that all copyright details are recorded as part of the entry documentation.

What about making copies of photographs already owned by the museum? (see SPECTRUM Procedures: Use of collections, Rights management)

You will probably need to make copies of photographs in your collection for a variety of purposes (if you are legally able to do so).

Museums need to document and manage information about the reproduction of items in their collections. It is important that reproductions are documented as such to prevent them become mixed up with originals in the permanent collection. SPECTRUM recommends that, the following information should be recorded in your catalogue record about reproductions:

- Reproduction number (where appropriate);
- Brief description of reproduction, with reference to original object and its accession number if appropriate;
- Date of reproduction;
- Person or organisation requesting the reproduction;
- Person or organisation who made the reproduction;
- Reason for reproduction;
- Type of reproduction;
- Description of the reproduction (which part of the object was reproduced, what else appears in the reproduction);
- Copyright ownership details;
- Copyright note (restrictions etc);
- Location of reproduction.

How do we sort out backlog collections of undocumented photographs? (see SPECTRUM Procedure: Retrospective documentation)

Many museums have large collections of unsorted and undocumented photographs. For detailed guidelines on backlog collections in general see the Collections Trust factsheet on Retrospective documentation and the Collections Trust publication Documentation: a practical guide. However there are specific issues to think about when carrying out retrospective documentation of photographs.

Do a preliminary sort
It is worth spending time physically sorting undocumented photographs before you start accessioning them. For example, check whether you have multiple copies of the same image and see if you can find the original image before you start accessioning copies. It may also be that there are obvious groups of photographs that are worth reassembling before you accession. Think about your collecting policy for photographs
Decide which photographs you will include in your permanent collection and which would be better in a support collection. However, when you are carrying out retrospective documentation you may have to work with the decisions that were made at the time the photograph was collected. Your museum has a responsibility to previous donors who expected that their gifts would be included in the permanent collections. If it is obvious that a photograph was intended for the permanent collection you will need to accession it even if you would not make that decision today.

Reuniting a photograph with the information about it
When carrying out retrospective documentation for photograph collections it is not unusual to come across photographs that have lost all their accompanying information. These photographs of completely unidentifiable people and places become almost impossible for museums to use.

However, you will need to think carefully before deciding whether to dispose of these photographs if you have no information about their status in the museum. The Museums Association *Ethical Guidelines on Disposals* state:

'A museum should make exhaustive enquiries if it wishes to consider removing items of unknown provenance. Poor documentation is not in itself a reason for disposal.

They may turn out not to be the property of the museum and could be reclaimed by the legal owner at a later date. Alternatively they may in fact be in the accession register, but not recognised as such because, for example, they are not labelled.

Furthermore, some items that are effectively part of the permanent collections may not have been formally accessioned because of an administrative oversight of a documentation backlog. It is advisable to ensure that the collection is fully documented before considering disposal.'

When accessioning these photographs retrospectively it is only possible to describe them in the accession register as 'unidentified'.

**Sources of help and advice**

See also:
Harrison, Margaret & McKenna, Gordon. *Documentation: a practical guide*. Cambridge:
SPECTRUM

SPECTRUM is a standard created by and for the museum profession to promote good practice in museum documentation. It covers all those areas of museum activity that produce information, and is the result of contributions from documentation practitioners in museums throughout the UK. It is available free, for non-commercial use, at: http://www.collectionstrust.org.uk/spectrum

SPECTRUM defines 21 Procedures, which describe the process of documenting and managing objects in a museum.

Section 4 of the Accreditation Standard uses SPECTRUM as the basis for its documentation requirement. The 'minimum records' referred to can be achieved by following the 8 SPECTRUM Primary Procedures:

- Object entry
- Loans in
- Acquisition
- Location and movement control
- Cataloguing
- Object exit
- Loans out
- Retrospective documentation

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