1. THE ACCESSION REGISTER

DEFINITION

The accession register is a unique and irreplaceable official administrative document that establishes the museum's **legal right of ownership**. It contains key information about the museum's objects and serves as the basis for setting up its entire documentation system.

FUNCTIONS

- Designates the objects belonging to the museum
- Identifies each object with an individual number
- Enables a periodic audit to be carried out of the objects in the museum
- Enables the whole collection to be evaluated

CHARACTERISTICS: PERMANENCE, TRANSPARENCY, SECURITY

1. Permanence
The accession register is a document made to last. It should be **bound** so that the pages cannot be easily removed and should be in **hardback format** to ensure its durability. The information it contains should be written in good quality **ink** and, as far as possible, on acid-free archive-quality paper.

If the accession register is computerized, there should be a copy of it printed with good quality ink on acid-free archive-quality paper. The reason for this is that in the event of an electricity failure, it must be possible to access the information contained in the accession register. In particular, it is important not to forget to write the **date** at the bottom of each printed page and for the collection curator to **sign** each page.

2. Transparency
It must be possible to detect immediately whether the register has been altered:

- The pages should be numbered in succession (1, 2, 3, … n), in order to identify any missing pages;

- The total number of pages in the register should be indicated on either the first or the last page. This enables any missing pages at the beginning or end of the register to be detected.

No information must be removed or falsified:

- The register should not have any **erasures** (words completely scored out) or alterations (new words superimposed on what was previously there);

- If an alteration due to an incorrect entry is unavoidable, it is better to put a single line through the existing entry and write the correction following it. This correction should be countersigned by the collection curator;

- If a correction is made, the original text should always remain legible under the correction. Never erase it or use correcting fluid (Tipp-Ex, Blanco, etc.).

3. Security

Access. Access to the accession register is kept to a limited number of people working at the museum. It should under no circumstances be made available to anyone outside the museum. Nor must it leave the museum (except to be restored if necessary).

Protection. The accession register should be kept in a safe place, i.e. where it cannot be stolen or damaged by water (floods or broken pipes) or fire.

Backup. A photocopy of it should be made so that if the original disappears, a copy of it will remain. However, for this system to be effective, it is necessary to:

- Keep the photocopy in a different place than the original (in another office or if possible in another building).

- Update the photocopy **at least once a year** by adding to it the pages that have been completed in the original register since the last update. It is pointless having a photocopy of the register that stops in 1994 if the original register continues up until 2010, since if the original register disappears, you will lose 16 years of entries, information and legal right of ownership.

- Completely renew the photocopy **every 5 years** because photocopies have a short life-time. The ink is often of poor quality and tends to fade after a few years.

Do not forget:

❖ The name and address of the museum should appear on the first page.

❖ The name and signature of the collection curator should appear on each page once it is full.

❖ Under no circumstances should the accession register be used to locate or find information about an object: it should be removed from its secure place only when a new object is accessioned. Location codes and other information should appear in the card catalogue or in the index files. The accession register is an important and unique legal document; the more it is consulted, the more it will deteriorate.

CONTENTS OF THE ACCESSION REGISTER

Although these may vary from one museum to another, the key headings of the register are:

Order number: to find out the number of object the collection contains (1156, 1157, 1158, etc.)
Accession number: in some museums, this number is called the *object number*.
Description: descriptive summary of the appearance and physical state of the object.
Origin: region, village, socio-cultural or ethnic group, etc.
Date of entering the museum: accession date (even if this appears in the accession number).
Acquisition   **- place and mode:** purchase, gift, bequest, collection, excavation;
                 - name of the person through whom the acquisition was made;
                 - date of acquisition.
Observations: any further information that may be useful.

ACCESSION NUMBER

Function
The accession number establishes the (always unique) identity of an object. It proves that the object belongs to the museum's collection and serves as the access key for all documentation concerning that object.

Numbering formats
There are several ways of numbering the objects. However, most museums use either the *single serial number system* or the *three-number (trinomial) system*.

- *The single serial number system*: each object receives a unique number written in a single ascending series, from "1" to "n". For example, object n°12784 is the 12784th object to enter the collection. This system works better in small rather than large museums.
- *The three-number system*: simultaneously provides information on the year of accession, the batch number (in order) for each year and the number of objects in that batch. The numbers are separated by dots (.).
  e.g. 1995.5.2.
    1995 : year of accession
    5 :   the fifth batch of that year
    2 :   the second object in that accession batch

Objects with several items
For objects comprising two or more distinct and detachable parts (e.g. a knife and sheath, a quiver and arrows), each item is identified by a sub-number (consisting of a fraction where the numerator is the item number and the denominator is the total number of items).

e.g. : a knife and sheath (two distinct and detachable parts)

> Knife : 2002.2.3-1/2
> Sheath : 2002.2.3-2/2

Do not forget:

❖ The accession number should be shown on the object.

❖ The same number should never be assigned to two objects.

❖ To avoid any misunderstanding, the year should not be abbreviated to two figures ("2002" not "02")

❖ The position of the year within the accession number should not alter ("2008.05" not "03.2006").

❖ Slashes (/ or \ ) should be used only if they are absolutely necessary, because they can be confused with the figure "1", especially in handwritten documents such as the accession register.

REGISRATION PROCEDURES

Simultaneous marking and registration
An object will only belong to the museum's collections when it has been accessioned, i.e. when it has received its accession number and this number has been **marked on the object** and **written in the accession register**. It is recommended that these two operations be carried out at the same time, or at least on the same day, in order to avoid:

- having objects that have been marked but not yet written in the register or
- having objects that have been written in the register but not themselves numbered.

Retrospective registration
Objects that have been in the museum for a long time and have never been given an accession number (or which have lost it) are accessioned with an accession number prefixed by the letter "R" (**R**etrospective).

- If the museum uses a **single serial number** system, the "R" is placed at the end of the accession number: 7458 **R**

- If the museum uses the **three-number** system, the new number will be: 1996.**R**.1, where the "R" replaces the batch number. In this case, the year will be the year of accessioning, not the year of arriving in the museum.

After registration: location code and files
1. Assigning a location in the museum to the object (stores or on display) and giving it a location code,
2. Completing the catalogue card,
3. Registering the location code on this card,
4. Creating the complete series of index cards.

Objects with several numbers

❖ If an object has been numbered several times during its existence and has more than one number, it is very important to keep **all** its numbers and to resist the temptation to replace them by a new unique number.

❖ The old numbers are part of the object's history and can be extremely useful during an inventory check or if one needs to recover the information contained in the old history files where the old numbers are used.