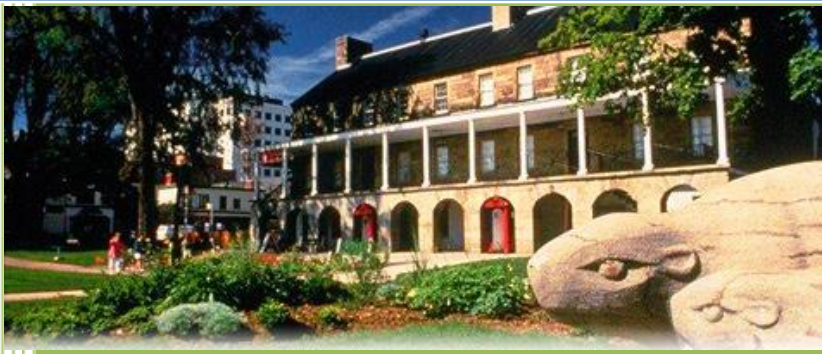
Artefact Labelling & Marking Handbook



Fredericton Region Museum

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Labelling and Marking Museum Objects

Why do it?

Every item in a museum collection must carry its identity number at all times, so that it can be linked to the information a museum holds about the object. If this bond between the object and its documentation is broken, the consequences may be serious. At best, time will be wasted because of the need to track down documentation and re-establish the link. At worst, the object will lose its provenance and other associated information for all time. Note that marking an object is not intended to act as a security device in the case of theft of the object.

When is it done and who does it?

Marking and/or labelling an object should be done as part of the accessioning process. Items on loan or not yet accepted into the collection should not be marked. Preference should normally be to physically mark objects: however in some cases this may not be possible. These guidelines will help you label and mark the items in your collections in ways which are:

- *Secure* - The chances of accidental removal of the label or mark from the object must be extremely low;
- *Reversible* - It should be possible for a label or mark to be removed intentionally from an object, even after 50-100 years with as little trace as possible;

- *Safe for the object* - Neither the materials applied to the object nor the method by which they are applied should risk significant damage to the object;
- *Discreet but visible* - The recommended methods should not spoil the appearance of the object, nor obscure important detail. However, the number should be visible enough to reduce the need to handle the object;
- *Convenient and safe for staff and volunteers* - Materials should be easily available in small quantities at a reasonable price, and should not pose significant risks to health if used in accordance with the guidelines recommended.

Health and Safety

Before using any technique, assess the health and safety risks associated with it. As with any work involving the use of potentially hazardous substances consider, for example, the need for:

- Washing of hands before and after a labelling and marking session;
- Adequate ventilation;
- Disposal of waste;
- Cleaning and care of equipment;
- Hand and eye protection;
- Safe storage of materials and safe methods of decanting them;
- A ban on food, drink and smoking in the work area.

Materials to Avoid

It is tempting, for the sake of cheapness and convenience, to substitute non archive alternatives such as TippexTM or clear nail varnish for white ink and Paraloid B72. These materials are unsuitable, and should never be used on museum objects for the following reasons:

- TippexTM dries to form an inflexible surface layer subject to cracking and detachment. It is not designed for long-term stability, and may discolour and deteriorate with age. If it comes into direct contact with the surface of an object, it can be extremely difficult to remove and leaves an unsightly white residue; TippexTM has a tendency to dry out and thicken in its container, making it difficult to apply smoothly, and resulting in an obtrusive and unsightly mark;
- Different manufacturers produce clear nail varnishes to a variety of formulations. They are not designed for long-term stability, and their ageing properties are unknown. However, in common with many other polymers, they are likely to cross-link with age, resulting in embrittlement and discolouration, and possible loss of primary information;
- Nail varnish remover is not a substitute for laboratory-grade acetone. It is a different solvent called amyl acetate.

Remember that any chemical substance, unless it has been developed or tested within the museum profession so that its properties are known, may have adverse effects on museum objects. Always check with

a conservator before proceeding. Also remember that even commonplace materials like TippexTM can contain harmful chemicals, and bear hazard warning symbols. Treat them with the same care you would any other chemical, and observe CoSHH and H&S regulations for their use, storage and disposal.

Workspace and Manual Tools

Space is important when documenting objects, as the risk of damaging items is increased in a small, cluttered or badly lit area. A designated cataloguing space is ideal, with a table large enough to hold both your cataloguing tools and the objects. It should be well lit and secure, as there will be times when collection materials are left unsupervised. It is the cataloguer's responsibility to ensure object's security during cataloguing and their return to storage on completion.

Your kit should include the following items:

- acid-free card or tyvek labels

- Pigma pen or Indian ink (white and black) and fountain pen
- 2B-6B pencils
- quality eraser
- scissors
- 6mm and 12mm white cotton tape
- white cotton string, and
- sewing needles and white cotton thread
- Varnish (basecoat and topcoat) and paintbrush
- Varnish remover and Q-tip

All cataloguing tools and materials should be on hand when you begin, and they should be of good quality. To complete the catalogue worksheet, you will need:

- blank worksheet
- HB pencils
- a quality eraser, and
- a legal sized file folder
- pen, preferably retractable

You will also need the following items for examining objects:

- a metric measuring tape
- metric ruler
- white cotton gloves, and
- latex or powder-free nitrile gloves

Apart from the worksheets, these materials are available at museum supply stores, art shops, pharmacy and stationary stores.

Gloves are used to protect objects from the oils and salts of your skin while they are being handled. Cotton

gloves are mainly used, but for objects with smooth surfaces, such as glass, they pose a risk. These objects are easier to grip with latex or nitrile gloves. Latex gloves are more readily available and affordable than nitrile gloves, which can be purchased at the pharmacy.

To begin numbering, place the object on a clean empty bench top. You may want to cushion it or protect it with a layer of acid-free paper or foam. The surface of the object should be clean before you begin. Dust can be removed with a sable brush.

Handling Objects

During cataloguing, you will need to handle collection objects to some degree. A guiding principle is that objects should be handled as infrequently as possible, as this reduces the risk of damage and deterioration.

Even when an object is small and light, it should be handled with both hands and with great care. In most cases, gloves should be worn so that objects are

protected from the oils of your skin and remain in as pristine a condition as possible. There will be occasions on which you should exercise your discretion about the sense of using cotton gloves. These would be simply too slippery when handling, for example, objects made of crystal, glass or some ceramics. You can wear latex or nitrile gloves, or is gloves are not worn, make sure your hands are clean and dry before handling objects. To reduce the risk of damage, you can examine objects over a padded or covered bench top.

Before moving an object, check for points of weakness and / or damage that could be exacerbated through handling or lead to it being dropped. These will determine how it should be handled and carried. Handles or rims may have been weakened by age or general deterioration, so avoid carrying objects by these components; always support objects by their base. If you are moving two or more small items, it is advisable to place them in a padded box or padded plastic tub before moving them. Otherwise, make sure the objects are moved one at a time.

When furniture is being moved, it should be carried and not dragged. Often it will require more than one person, so ask for help and have an agreed game plan and clear pathway before you begin. If a small team is required, it is best that one person directs and supervises activities. Remember to check doorway clearances before you begin.

Positioning of Labels and Marks

- Avoid physically unstable surfaces. Also avoid placing labels or marks across a line of weakness or fracture;
- Choose a position so that the number is unlikely to be visible when the object is on display but is accessible in store;
- Avoid decoration and painted /varnished /pigmented /waxed areas;
- Avoid surfaces where the mark is likely to be at risk from abrasion, such as surfaces on which it normally rests, or where touched during handling;
- Mark all detachable parts of an object (using suffixes to the accession number);
- Locate the number so that the handling necessary to read it is minimised (consider marking the packaging or adding an extra tie-on label as well);
- With composite objects, mark the part on which the most secure method can be used;
- Where duplicate marks are made these should be in different positions on the object (bearing in mind, of course, the other principles listed above).

See *Number Location for Specific Types of Objects*

Basic Techniques

Writing on the Object

Barrier coat

- Acryloid (Paraloid) B72 (white or clear)

A copolymer of ethyl methacrylate and methyl acrylate supplied in 100% resin pellets which are soluable in

acetone, toluene, and xylene. An excellent general purpose resin/adhesive.

Acryloid is used as a barrier coat on the object. B72 has the best ageing characteristics of any barrier coating, it does not change colour and stays soluble in solvents. It does not dissolve in white spirit. Acetone is quick drying. It may damage some types of objects.

Top coat

- ???

~~B67 20% in white spirit is used as a top coat. B67 also has good ageing characteristics but yellows a little in time. It is used dissolved in white spirit to reduce the risk of the barrier coat of B72 being dissolved.~~

Materials

- Barrier Coat: Acryloid (Paraloid) B72 (white or clear)
- Top Coat: ???
- Permanent black markers or Pigma pens and permanent black ink
- Permanent white markers or Pigma pens
- Acetone
- Artists brushes or brush in cap containers
- Paper towels
- Cotton swabs

Tools Tool	**Pros**	**Cons**
Metal pen e.g. Mapping pen or Rotring pen or Rotring and Indian ink	Traditional and excellent in experienced hands	May scratch and blob
Brush	Kindest to most surfaces	Hardest to control
Felt tip or roller ball pen with pigment ink	Easiest to control	Ink may not be acid free or permanent

Method

1. Read the Health and Safety data sheets and check that you are working in a well-ventilated area.
2. Select a clean area on the object's surface.
3. Support the object if necessary so that you will be able to leave it to dry after marking.
4. Fill the cap brush or an artist's brush with the Acryloid (Paraloid) B72 solution but do not overload it to avoid drips.
5. For non-porous surfaces: with one steady movement first move the brush in one direction to make a mark only slightly larger than the size of the number to be applied. Then stroke again in the opposite direction to use the solution on the other side of the brush. Then leave it to dry. Some people find it easier to apply single brush strokes.

6. For porous surfaces, it is important to build up enough lacquer to prevent the ink penetrating the surface. Apply at least three coats of B72, allowing it to dry before applying the next coat. Enough lacquer has been applied when it dries to a fairly consistent smooth dull sheen. Hint: try this out on a similar trial surface or even paper first then see if you can remove the number or if the ink has penetrated the surface.
7. The ink should be applied in quite thick strokes with a pen appropriate to the size of the number you want to write. Leave it to set for a minute before applying a top layer of the ???. If the ink is applied too thinly it may be damaged by the top layer of ???.
8. Only one layer of ??? should be necessary, spread lightly over the surface to avoid smudging of the ink below. You can add additional layers after the first is dry to give added protection against the number being worn away.
9. If you make a mistake wipe it off with a swab soaked in acetone.

Sewn on Label

Materials

- Cotton twill tape
- Permanent markers or Pigma pens and permanent black ink
- Washed or unbleached cotton tape in various widths (to wash cotton tape soak it very hot water)
- Tie on tags
- Fine cotton or polyester thread

Method

1. Assess the object and decide whether to sew on a label, attach a tie on label, or make a special tag. If you are going to sew on a label it must be possible to stitch into the textile without causing damage. Tie on labels should be attached through a buttonhole, or similar, so that the fabric is not damaged.
2. Choose a location. Bear in mind whether the label needs to be visible when the textile is in storage. If the textile is going to be rolled it may be worth marking a long cotton tape with the same number and tying it round the rolled textile.

3. Choose a tape width or label size appropriate to the object size.
4. Write the label neatly. This is easier with a marker.
5. For a standard flat cotton tape sewn-in label cut the tape approximately 5mm longer at each end than the finished length of the label, Turn under the raw ends and stitch in place with several long stitches at each end in a fine thread, preferable one that matches the textile not the label.
6. Tape can also be used to make looped labels sewn to the textile at one end only. This is particularly suitable for flat textiles with a hemmed edge. The loop can be arranged so that the number can be seen with the textile flat in store, but tucked beneath for display. The stitching can be concealed in the hem so that it cannot be seen from the right side.

Loose Label

(For small objects such as buttons)

Some objects, such as buttons, are too small and detailed to be marked, nor is it easy to tie a label onto them. The only option is to use a loose label:

1. Examine the object to check if the method is appropriate. If in doubt, consult a conservator.
2. Write the object number on an acid-free paper or Tyvek label using a suitable drawing ink and drawing pen. Put it underneath the object in its storage tray.
3. Take a photograph of the object, and mark the object number on the rear border of the print using a suitable drawing ink and drawing pen (record the

weight of the object as an additional means of identification).

Always keep the label with the object. When the object (and hence label) is moved, a proxy card should be put in its place.

Coins can be placed coin holder and the accession number written on the outside.

Tie-on Label

Pros:

- Easy to get from conservation suppliers;
- Easy to write on;
- Noticeable and easy to find;
- Can be written on in pencil or pen.

Cons:

- PH (acidity) should be tested if you do not know the origin;
- Tyvek is slightly more difficult;
- Easy to remove and lose;

- Paper labels may fall apart in a flood;
- Fibres from cotton may stick to artefacts;
- String may be nylon not cotton and deteriorate and harm the object;
- Cotton string may wick oil from the object, oil may cause ink to run;
- Paper and cotton labels are an insect food source.

Materials

- Use white acid free paper or card labels or Tyvek tags with tape or string.

Method

1. Examine the object to check if the method is appropriate. If in doubt, consult a conservator.
2. Write the object number on an acid-free paper or Tyvek using a suitable drawing ink and drawing pen.
3. Pass tape, string or thread (as appropriate to the object) through hole in label.
4. Tie tape loosely round the 'hole', 'handle' or 'neck' of the object using a reef knot or by looping it round and through itself.

When possible, objects should have a tie on label to reduce handling items in the collection.

Pencil Mark

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).

1. Examine the object to check if the method is appropriate. If in doubt, consult a conservator.
2. Number the object in pencil on the reverse, using gentle pressure.
3. If newly sharpened, scribble with pencil until it writes smoothly.

Number Location for Specific Types of Objects

As a rule, place the accession number in the same location on all objects of the same type. The list in this section includes standard locations and techniques for marking various types of objects.

Object	Location	Marking Material
Armor	Inside each element.	lacquer and ink
Baskets	On base. Do not place catalog numbers on a portion of the basket that may conceal diagnostic information. Tag baskets that are fragile.	lacquer and ink or tag
Beads	Place on the edge or on an attached tag. Put the object in a clear vial container or polyethylene bag	tag or place in a marked container

	with a paper label inside.	
Books	On endpaper (blank leaf inside front cover), lower edge near spine, and on lower edge, right hand corner on back of the title page. Loose pages must receive the same catalog number, individually on reverse, lower right.	soft pencil (#2H, HB or softer)
Buttons	On reverse side or same procedure as beads.	tag or place in a marked container
Ceramic, glass, pewter	On the underside, but avoid parts that would be abraded when the object is moved. Label whole ceramic vessels on the exterior base, near the center. Number shards on the undecorated surface. Use multiple applications of lacquer on porous surfaces to build up a base that will	lacquer and ink

	prevent absorption of ink.	
Clothing	Place the number on cotton twill tape, and sew it on the costume to the neckband or waistband. Sew the number on in a location that is easily seen during inventory but not so obvious during exhibition.	sew-on label
Coins	On the edge/rim. *Do not* number mint condition coins. Place the number on the container holding the coin.	lacquer and ink
Documents, photos, prints, letters, postcards and envelopes	Reverse, lower right corner.	soft pencil (#2H, HB or softer)
Dolls wooden or china head	Back of neck or bottom of foot.	lacquer and ink
Firearms	Inside trigger-guard, or on the breech of the barrel opposite the lock, or on the lower right butt.	lacquer and ink
Flags/pennants/banners	Reverse side at top of hoisting edge.	sew-on label
Framed image	Reverse, lower right corner of frame.	lacquer and ink

Furniture	Near the inside top of the right rear leg; or for pieces without legs, on the right side near rear corner. Number heavy objects on the right side/leg at the base. Place number so it can be seen easily during inventory, but not obvious when on exhibit.	
beds	Top of back, right head post or foot rail.	lacquer and ink
trunk/chest	Top right corner of back.	lacquer and ink
chairs, sofas	Top right of back leg, or seat frame.	lacquer and ink
mirrors	Lower right corner of back of frame.	lacquer and ink
stoves	Top right corner of back.	lacquer and ink
tables	Apron or top right corner of a leg at one end of table.	lacquer and ink
Jewelry	Smooth surface on the right lower corner on reverse side. Number cotton twill tape and sew around necklaces, bracelets and rings.	lacquer and ink or cotton twill tape

Model vehicles, boats	Right side of back end or stern.	lacquer and ink
Paintings	Reverse, lower right corner. Number both stretcher and frame, in case they are separated. *Do not* place numbers or labels on the front or back of the canvas. For heavy frames that are difficult to remove from the wall, use the lower right corner on the side of the frame. Number scroll paintings on the scroll knob.	lacquer and ink
Rugs, tapestries and drapes	Reverse side, lower right corner.	sew-on label
Scabbard	On reverse of the throat, at top, or (absent a throat) on the body near an opening.	lacquer and ink
Scrapbooks, albums	Lower corner near spine inside front cover.	soft pencil (#2H, HB or softer)
Sculpture in the round	At the rear of the base near the bottom; also at the lower edge of the back of pedestal.	lacquer and ink
Sculpture in relief	Lower right of back	lacquer

	or edge in an inconspicuous place.	and ink
Stamps	Write the number on the back of the stamp with a soft pencil. You can also place stamps in acid-free containers, and label the container.	soft pencil (#2H, HB or softer) or place in a marked container
Stone	On base center. Do not put a number on flaking areas.	lacquer and ink
Swords, daggers and knives	On reverse of the blade, on ricasso just below the counter guard, if it will not likely be scraped off by the scabbard.	lacquer and ink
Tools	Working part of tool (on head rather than on handle.)	lacquer and ink
For further information on placement of numbers, see *The New Museum Registration Methods.*		

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