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A Custodian's Challenge: A Museum Documentation Standard for All? Experience from Heritage Conservation Centre (HCC), Singapore

Summary

The challenges in documenting museums' collections are a reality in the absence of agreed standard in capturing useful information. As a collection custodian to artefacts which ranges from modern art to historical and folk antiquities, any attempt to establish a documentation standard catering to all needs of the museums is difficult. A lack of terminology controls and thesauri suitable for our Asian collections is yet another problem we face.

Historically, before the establishment of the Collections Unit in 1991 and subsequently the HCC in 1998, documentation of collections was done in various ways. Many records were incomplete with few or no information because of an absence of syntactical discipline in the entire documentation process. Even with the most advanced computerised system, it is highly possible that the system could yield incomplete results during a search because of a relaxed terminology and syntax control. Searching through manual records is even near impossible because of the volume of our collections.

The active public programmes and various developmental projects of our National Museums call for a need to solve the problem. We not only have to ensure that internal problems hindering effective access to collections is solved, we have to look into facilitating public's access to the information and knowledge stored in the museums. The Integrated Museum Collections Management System (IMCMS) project embarked by HCC and the National Museums in 2004 provided a good platform to solve our problems.

This presentation aims to share the difficulties that we encounter in developing a documentation standard for all our collections in a single database and the compromise reached in several negotiations processes. Considerations on the impact of the museum-public relationship were given to ensure greater access to the collections.

Heritage Conservation Centre (HCC), an institution of the National Heritage Board (Singapore) is tasked with custodianship responsibilities to document, manage and conserve the collections of the 3 National Museums, namely

National Museum of Singapore, Asian Civilisations Museum and Singapore Art Museum. In HCC, collections management duties are undertaken by the Registration Department whereas the Conservation department takes care of both preventive and interventive aspects of conservation. Our purpose-built central repositories and conservation laboratories, houses a myriad of collections from modern works of art, to precious and folk antiquities. Collections records are created in electronic and paper formats. To facilitate collections management and preventive conservation processes, most artefacts are categorised and stored according to their material composition in different climate-controlled repository rooms. Occasionally when it is hard to decide on the material composition of the artefacts, for example, the mixed media types of collections, the original functional intent of the artefact would be the determinant in our categorisation exercise. Such categorisation methods served us well until recently. With the active public programmes and museums' development projects, requests to access the collections increased many folds. While we were able to ensure good inventory accountability and the posterity of the collections in our care, we were faced with challenges resulting from the increasing demands to access the collections both internally (i.e. the museum curators) and externally (i.e. public). Our task is to explore the root of the problems in order to find solutions for them. The root of the problem was in the inconsistent documentation standards used for these collections.

Historically, before the establishment of a Collections Unit in 1991, which became HCC in 1998 the documentation of the collections was done in various ways, with varying levels of information captured during the documentation process. Some collections records contained rich information but many were either incomplete or had no information. The kinds of information captured were also different. Some records had acquisition details but in other records, such details were not found. There were also no clear guidelines on the level of information to be documented in an acquisition process. All these were due to an absence of syntactical discipline in the entire documentation process.

A lack of terminology control and thesauri suitable for our Asian and local collections is yet another problem we face. All our collections were from the Asian region. Curators were faced with the difficult choice between using native (i.e. non-English) or English descriptors. We are aware that it is sometimes difficult to adequately describe an object if we replaced a native word with rich cultural or ceremonial connotation with plain English word. The meaning of the object is lost if we could not find a suitable word to describe it. For example, the Malay word 'keris' gives quite a different meaning compared to English words 'dagger' or 'knife', although technically speaking, all descriptors are correct. Take another example, the noun 'game' does not adequately describe the Malay word 'tikum'. What is lacking here if we do not use a native descriptor, would be the context in which both objects were used. Sometimes, mother tongue languages are used to describe an object. The Cantonese term 'cheongsum' cannot be adequately replaced by the English

word 'dress' or words 'Chinese long dress' because there are many kinds of Chinese dresses, including Chinese costumes worn by Chinese women. 'Cheongsum' refers to a specific type of Chinese ladies fashion.

Assuming that we have decided to use these native descriptors and we have no problems understanding them, i.e., we have the language proficiencies, our problems do not end here. No one outside our region is able to effectively access our collections because of the language barrier. All these languages are not international working languages. We are only able to reach out to a handful of audiences. In addition to the 4 official languages (English language being the official working language), there are at least eight other dialects used in Singapore. This problem is not just confined to international audiences, it is also relevant locally.

Also, except the Malay language, the use of alphabets in these native descriptors could cause another problem since there is no 'official' or 'correct' way to spell these words. It is acceptable to arrange the alphabets in anyway as long as they sound like the native terms when pronounced. For example, I can spell 'cheongsum' as 'cheongsam' as long as they sound like the Cantonese dialect term when read. Having cited the Malay language as an exception because of the use of alphabets in writing, it is also highly possible that some Malay words are spelt differently because people from different Asian regions spell these terms differently. For example, we can use the Malay words 'sarong' or 'sarung' to describe a tubular garment. All these flexibilities and inconsistencies could affect the search function and results of the most sophisticated and advanced collections database because of this relaxed terminology and syntax control. Searching the manual records is near impossible and highly inefficient because of the volume of our collections. We have over 108,000 artefacts in our collections. Including records created for individual parts of an object, an estimated number of manual records one has to plough through is about half a million.

With the above challenges, steps to improve our collections documentation standards started in 1991 when the Collections Unit was formed. With the collections now centrally managed, the first documentation standard for collections was devised. This standard format provided a good documentation guideline to staff. 37 artefact categories were also created to facilitate the artefact classification process. Some artefact categories were unique to a particular museum. Other than accession numbers, important information for example, description, dimension, period, provenance, material, category and acquisition-related details were included in this form. Photography of artefacts in 35mm-slide format also started in 1995. A digital imaging database for our collections was set up in 2003. Attempts to control the relaxed use of terminology were made. Generic descriptions for example, garment, textiles, ceramics, sculptures were used instead of specific terms of references. Native terms which served as an elaboration were recorded if provided by the curators. Despite the difficulty of cataloguing different types of collections from the three National Museums, the entire cataloguing process became more

organised and documentation standards more consistent. This initiative had also improved the accountability process. A simple electronic database for our collections was also completed in 1998. In view of the limited resources and the growing collections, information from old collections records were transferred directly into the database without 'cleaning up'. We were also able to apply the new standards only to new acquisitions.

With the increasing demand to access the collections and the changing needs of the different museums, our simple electronic collections database became unable to meet these diverse needs. Not only was it unable to cater to the administrative needs of the museum, the search functions in this database was not effective because of the inconsistent documentation standards which was migrated from the first database. The use of generic terms of reference to describe an artefact did not help facilitate users' search because too many irrelevant records were called up from the collections database when a generic term of reference instead of specific descriptors given to objects is used. The absence of a digital image in the collections database makes distinction between one garment from another impossible. Museums started to create their own pockets of database to meet their needs. Additional information on collections from further research was not integrated but saved in different databases. Knowledge management was not effective and we risk losing these valuable contents when information is not integrated.

With funding from the Ministry of Information and the Arts now, Ministry of Information, Communication and the Arts, National Heritage Board was able to embark on the Integrated Museum Collections Management System (IMCMS) in 2004. The development of the IMCMS provided an excellent platform for HCC and museums to discuss ways to solve the problems related or caused by inconsistent documentation standards. A committee comprising of representatives mostly curators and administrators from the museums, registrars and visual resource personnel from HCC was formed. In this forum, we were able to solve the following problems:

- a) A documentation standard for our collection to facilitate interoperability between systems or databases in the new IMCMS;
- b) 'Pockets' of collections databases containing valuable object information including conservation information, permanent storage and actual location of artefacts were integrated into the IMCMS. Access to information is opened to all internal users;
- c) Acquisitions and artefact documentation processes were streamlined. This helps to ensure that the information in the IMCMS is kept most updated. This arrangement also helps to improve the integrity of the collections data because the collection data were entered directly into the IMCMS from the beginning of the acquisition process by the curators (and not the hourly-rated data-entry staff) who know their collections best. There is also a measure of accountability and control;

- d) We are in agreement with the museums' suggestions to re-instate the use of more specific description instead of generic terms of reference in the IMCMS. This is aimed to facilitate the search function of the IMCMS. Curators agreed to provide the descriptions;
- e) Individual roles and responsibilities for the contents in the new IMCMS were also clearly defined at the forum. HCC would provide information related to visual documentation of the objects whereas the museums would provide research content to the objects;
- f) We agreed on a system, which allows us to define specific search criteria and reports generation functions.

More time and efforts are needed to solve some pertinent issues. We are not able to solve the below problems immediately:

- a) Developing a thesauri for our Asian Collections;
- b) Bringing the research content of all data in the IMCMS to-date. This is especially for the pre-1991 collections;
- c) Checking the integrity of the information migrated from the first collections database into the IMCMS;
- d) Bringing the digital images of collections to-date;
- e) High-resolution digital images of every artefact in the IMCMS, the issue of copyright, access and the measures to prevent the misuse.

In addressing the need to develop a thesauri for our Asian collections, we have plans to set up a working group comprising of curators, registrars and perhaps academics to work on this thesauri. We recognise that a collections database could not function to its fullest capacity if terminology and syntactical control is unresolved.

Museums and HCC would also continue to beef up the collections content in the IMCMS. At the IMCMS discussion forum, all agreed that 'patching up' of records where research content is weak is most imperative. Curators have started to embark on an intensive research and study on the pre-1991 collections while HCC deals with the documentation-related and inventory issues. Research information and all documented details of the physical attributes, including acquisition details of the collection is updated both in hardcopies of collections records and in the IMCMS. Research on collections started concurrently with the patching up of missing information in hardcopy records. Additional research information would also be entered directly into the IMCMS. The entire exercise involves physical access to the collections. Verification on the information previously recorded is part of this exercise.

HCC also took the opportunity to review collections documentation standards in our hardcopy collections records. Various international documentation standards were studied and adapted to suit our needs and requirements. Some examples of these standards are Canadian Heritage Information Network data dictionary, the Information Categories from International Committee for Documentation (CIDOC) of ICOM, Art Information Task Force, Categories for the Description of Works of Art (AITF, CDWA); funded by J. Paul Getty Trust and the Museum Documentation Association (MDA)'s SPECTRUM. Additional information fields, which are necessary to be captured in order to facilitate our collections management work processes are included in our new documentation standards. We also aligned our documentation standards with the IMCMS, which is in compliance with the Dublin Core standards.

This review exercise was not done in isolation. All staff were involved from the planning and implementation stage. We feel that this is important so that consistency could be achieved. All meeting proceedings were also documented. Work started in Feb. 2005 and our focus is on the pre-1991 collections since the documentation standards for this group of collections are more disorganised. There are about 48,000 artefacts in this category. We will on to work on the rest of the collections next year.

In order to prevent future recurrence, the new IMCMS requires important research information for example, historical significance and stylistic significance to be entered into these compulsory fields before new acquisitions could be processed.

Visual documentation is an important information in any documentation standard. As part of the exercise, HCC is also tasked with providing high resolution digital images of all artefacts in the IMCMS. We migrated about 50,000 high resolution digital images from existing artefact image database into the IMCMS. About 60,000 artefacts will be digitised in 3 years time.

The above exercises also provided us with opportunities to check the integrity of our databases. Most of our collections data in the first collections management system were entered by temporary staff who were not qualified to decide the relevant data in the acquisition forms for the relevant fields. There are much cleaning up of the records to be done. However, the most challenging project would be developing the thesauri for our Asian Collections. The current arrangement, which allows users flexibility in the terminology, used in documentation only address the needs of the curators who describe the objects during a search. It does not address the immediate needs of an external user or a lay person. Given the complexity of the job, it is highly possible that we will take a few years to achieve this.

We have just started the preliminary phase of implementing the IMCMS and we are taking humble but practical steps to first look into our internal needs.

We must have in place a documentation standard that is clear and easily understood by its users so that the wealth of information in our museums could be used and access by others. Our future plan is to have the IMCMS launched in the worldwide web as a collections resource base. Today, the avenues for public's access to the collections have yet to reach its full potential. HCC and the National Museums would continue our commitment to work on this in the next few years to bring this plan to fruition.