Goodbye Jargons!

An On-Line Collections Resource Project for the

Public: Experience from Heritage Conservation

Centre, Singapore

Authors:

LOW Jyue Tyan and TEH Eng Eng Faith

CIDOC06

GOTHENBURG

S W E D E N

The museum-public relationship went through stages of changes over the past centuries. One of the main reasons for these changes I feel was attributed to the change of ownership from private to co-ownership with the state or full state-ownership. Together with the architectural grandeur in which the collections are displayed, museums and collections no longer represent the idiosyncrasies of the rich who owned them. It is now a public space where interaction, discourse and exchange take place. As cited in John Cotton Dana's essay on the new museums, "museums are no longer just a space where objects are put on display but had assumed the role of an institution which became a laboratory and school, both producer and conveyor of knowledge"[1]. Museums, especially the publicly funded, now have bigger and important roles in the community. As the result of these developments, the use of collections and the ways in which artefacts are documented must also change.

In last year's CIDOC Conference held at Zagreb, Croatia, we shared our experience in standardising our documentation and using more specific terminologies for our collections and the associated challenges in accomplishing the task. At the conference, we informed that the main purpose of this initiative was to embark on an effective and consistent documentation standard for our collections so that not only the information content of our collections is enhanced, but any attempts to search for specific collections would be easier since more specific instead of generic terminologies were used. Only records that are relevant to the search are called up. This project was for internal users and is currently progressing well.

However, it is *not* the purpose of this presentation to provide an update on the progress of the project. This presentation is about the *new work arrangement and changes* as a result of the need to respond to external demands to access the collections. In response to external pressures to have access to the collections, a user-friendly and informative on-line collections resource database needs to be established. Changes in terms of the level of details to capture and format of

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[1] William A. Peniston, 1999. <u>The New Museum: Selected Writings by John Cotton Dana</u>, Wahington D.C.: The Newark Association and The American Association of Museums, p.144

presentation particularly, in the "object description" field have to be reconsidered. Unlike the previous initiative where the internal process of using standardised documentation format and using more specific terminologies were done for collection, we now need to look into the needs of external users, i.e., the general public if we want a successful; on-line collection resource. Our challenges are as follows:

a) Managing the widened jobscope of the working group

The working group which was originally tasked to work on standardising and implementing collections documentation standards (as discussed in the 2005 CIDOC Conference) is now tasked with this additional responsibility to work on presenting the collections contents to the public. Both tasks are to be carried out concurrently. As a custodian to the collections of the 3 National Museums of Singapore, namely, National Museum of Singapore, Singapore Art Museum and Asian Civilisations Museum, Heritage Conservation Centre (HCC) works to ensure accuracy and complete implementation of the new documentation standards for all our collections while curators from the museums follow-up to update or enrich research content including re-writing the "object description" text of the collections. This is so that the needs of both the general public and serious researchers are met. Monthly targets are set to make sure that the tasks are accomplished as planned.

b) Reorganising our resources and work priorities

No additional manpower resources with relevant subject knowledge were provided to work on the on-line collections resource database. Staff from the working group juggle between roles. HCC staff continues to provide collections management, conservation and exhibitions services to the museums and even private individuals while the curators continues with putting up long and short term exhibitions at the museums. We wasted no time in doing what could be done by temporarily help. Data entry clerks were engaged. We deploy our professional resources to contribute in areas which require their professional knowledge and work on the basis of prioritisation so that we could maximise the use of our professional

resources and deliver our collections contents to the public within set deadlines but without bursting our budget.

The working group agreed that the fastest, most practical and sustainable approach to ensure the success of this on-line resource database is to launch those collections with complete information listed in the 'first level' basic fields, followed by artefacts recently on display or recently published. To make it more interesting, these artefacts may be grouped according to subjects or themes. Our approach is to quickly offer what we could to interested users, however, without compromising on the quality of the information delivered. Further research on the rest of the collections would follow so that the 'second level' of information would eventually be available for use, like the rest of the collections.

c) Ensuring that collections information presented on-line are 'palatable' for users

It is also the challenge to look into *simplifying jargons,* which are only understood by the curators or serious researchers. Terminologies used must not only be simple but accurate. To do this, the texts in the "object description" field are made very concised, i.e. not more than 250 words, including careful use of terminologies to avoid or minimise the use of jargons. Where possible, curatorial research information is enhanced or updated to meet the needs of serious researchers. Native languages used in description are italicised and accompanied by our working language, i.e. English. This we feel would enhance the learning experience of users and encourage the use of the collections resource database. The format which information is presented follows a particular sequence from the simple descriptive information in point form, to the more detailed description in short paragraph and finally a sentence or 2 general information about object. Users could choose to read only the sections which interest them.

We are also well aware that we could not use the existing collections information without first editing the contents because this 'raw' information was in the first place built only for internal users, for example, curators, registrar or conservators. Also, designing and delivering an on-

line learning resource requires a conceptualised user-friendly interface. Not to mention the importance of having a good foundation in collections research content which one could use. If this was available, it means half-a-battle won for anyone who wishes to embark on this journey. We need to hold enough information for our collections before we could offer them to other users. In other words, to have ready contents first before we work on conceptualising this user-friendly interface and before we open our database to the public is important. This ideal condition may not happen in today's fast moving world. No one is spared from the fate of multiple tasking. One may not have the luxury of time to solve one problem before we are challenged with another. This is a situation that speaks of our experience when we were told to embark on this on-line resource project because we need to quickly ensure that research content for our collections are available and if they are not, to work on it immediately. At the same time, we have to work on the contents to meet the needs of the general users.

d) Ensure the needs of the general users and serious researchers are met

For this to be possible, the curators need to decide on how best to write their text to meet the needs of two different kinds of users and to provide 'just enough' information by providing different levels of details in each section of the text. It was decided that the format used in exhibition captions be used because captions in exhibitions were formatted and edited for easily reading by the general public. In this approach the levels of information and the sequence in which information appears are as follows:

First Level of Information		Second Level of Information
Image of object	Detailed Information	250 words object description covering the following areas in sequential order: - Historical Background to Objects; - Historical Significance;
Title/ Name of Object: Artist: Dimension: Material: Date: Place: Credit Line: Accession Number:	More General Information	- More details on materials used; - Stylistic Significance of Objects

Those artefacts already on display or those published in catalogues would had met this criteria, as the texts used in exhibition panels or captions would had more information than just physical description. Most importantly, these texts are suitable for use in the on-line resource databases because these texts were originally written for the general public. Majority of these artefacts would also likely to have digital images since they have recently been displayed and published. Where digital image is lacking, priority for photography would be given.

Those of you who were present during last year's meeting may already notice that the text fields on the left i.e. the 'first level' information are just some of the fields the working group was tasked to work on or verify for accuracy, including the use of standard terminologies for our collections. There was no need to worry about the jargons and even format used as the information was for internal users who know the collections. However, with the move to embark on an on-line collections resource database, these considerations become important. We make sure that the collection information is concise and consistent so that it is easy to use

so that the needs of most if not all users are met. This includes the sequence in which the text information appears. To do this, it was decided that all artefacts with the seven basic documentation fields verified and confirmed would be launched in the collections resource database. There are about 60,000 of objects in this category.

However, the eventual goal is to provide more than just physical descriptive content on the collections. We hope to include more information for example, the significance and use of the objects. More time is needed to do this. By doing so, we hope that our on-line collections resource database would be attractive to users as it value-adds to the knowledge and the experience of our users.

e) Attracting and engaging our users

We looked at various interesting collections resource database available in the web and as we know, some are simple while others more sophisticated and have more interactive features. Sustainability is an important consideration for us. With the limited resources and the tight deadlines we have, it is impossible to have sophisticated interactive features for our on-line collections resource database now but we hope we could attract our users by providing good quality images, user-friendly and useful collections information.

There are still much to be done. We have over 108,000 artefacts in our custody. On one hand, we have to continue to work on the implementation of standardised documentation format and terminologies for our collections. This is to enhance the collections data with more specific information to meet the demands of internal users. On the other hand, in the midst of all these, we are faced with another challenging task to present a "jargon-less", user-friendly and informative collections resource database to the public. To accomplish this, much coordination between HCC and museums is needed. Moreover, the absence of interactive features in our on-line resource database also means that concentrated effort to make the database attractive to users is important. Our goal is to have at least 15% of our (priority) collection launched by the end of the year. We are still in the infant stage of our project and everyday is a journey of learning.

Despite challenges that may get in our way as we journey to the final destination, we would continue with our commitment to make this work because we know that this is the right direction to go, if we want to stay relevant.