Goran Zlodi
University of Zageb
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences
Department of Information and Communication Sciences
gzlodi@ffzg.hr

From museum documentation to the determination of cultural property status: key standards and Principles

● The purpose of this paper is to provide a survey of key guidelines, standards and principles related to museum documentation in the context of registration of collections of cultural properties. The paper also examines the possibility of single-level (individual and group) and multi-level description of groups of museum objects. In addition to theoretical and professional considerations, this paper should also serve as a foundation of future practical guidelines and manuals.

Key words: museum documentation, data standards, museum collections registration procedure, cultural asset

KEY REGULATIONS, STANDARDS AND GUIDELINES RELATED TO MUSEUM DOCUMENTATION IN THE SPECIFIC CONTEXT OF REGISTRATION OF COLLECTIONS AS CULTURAL PROPERTIES

Along with the *Regulations concerning the form, content and management of the Cultural Property Register of the Republic of Croatia* from 2011 (hereinafter: Regulations concerning registration), and the *Regulations concerning the content and management of museum documentation on museum material* of 2002 (hereinafter: Regulations concerning documentation), in the introduction we shall single out several standards and guidelines of key importance for the theme of this paper, and draw attention to some other standards later on in the text.

CIDOC's international guidelines for museum object information (hereinafter: CIDOC guidelines) are important because they were the first with an ambition to offer the data structure for all kinds of museum collections and also served as the basis for the

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CIDOC-CRM conceptual reference model. The *Categories for the description of works of art* (Baca et al. 2006) describe the data model determining the conceptual framework and access to data on objects and represent one of the most complex data structures (532 data structures) along with an exhaustive interpretation and instructions for the application of single categories. Another important standard is SPECTRUM which is focused less on cataloguing and more on the standardisation of museum procedures, which is especially important for museum collection management (SPECTRUM 2009).

TEN KEY PRINCIPLES FOR CATALOGUING CULTURAL HERITAGE OBJECTS (CCO)

In order to facilitate the linking of principles with practice, the structure of this paper has been developed in line with the ten key principles explained in the book *Cataloguing cultural objects: a guide to describing cultural works and their images* (Baca et al. 2006: 2-3). These principles (Ten Key Principles of CCO) are the foundation of the book and an extraordinarily important reminder for the determination of priorities in establishing documentation systems:

FIRST KEY CCO PRINCIPLE: DETERMINATION OF THE LOGICAL FOCUS FOR EACH WORK RECORD, WHETHER THE WORK IS AN OBJECT, A WORK CONSISTING OF SEVERAL PARTS, OR AS PHYSICAL GROUP OR COLLECTION OF OBJECTS

In the Republic of Croatia museum documentation is kept in accordance with the by-law currently in force – the *Regulations concerning documentation*. Article 11 is the only place in the Regulations which refers to single museum objects and groups of museum objects making up a whole. Museum objects making up a whole, or consisting of parts, are given one inventory mark (number), and every part is mandatorily given a sub-mark (suffix) ("Regulations concerning the content and management of museum documentation on museum material", 2002). The article describes the assignment of inventory marks to objects and their marking, but does not mention the production of records for each inventory mark or sub-mark or provide the possibility of single-level (group) or multi-level processing.

The marking and equipping of an object with an inventory mark is certainly important – it establishes the line between the object and documentation. CIDOC's work sheet 2 provides practical instructions how to mark objects and also mentions objects consisting of several component: "When an object consists of several components likely to be dismantled or separated, each part should be numbered. The same applies to fragments of a broken object".

In this sense CIDOC Guidelines introduce the "suffix" concept: "When an object consists of separable or separate parts, the object number may be qualified using a different suffix for each part" (Grant at el. , 1995: 71). But they also introduce the possible description at group level: "In the case of natural science or archaeological collections, or other

collections with many similar objects or specimens grouped together, the inventory mark can be determined for the group of objects or all the objects without distinguishing single objects" (Ibid.). In order to avoid any arbitrary interpretation of this instruction, the Guidelines furthermore prescribe the following: "For each collection it must be decided whether to describe each part of an object or set as separate records, or as a single set or object, listing the separate components by name and numbering them." (Ibid. 79).

SPECTRUM goes a step further and prescribes that organisations must have in-house regulations on cataloguing determining the "level and depth of cataloguing appropriate to the collection" (SPECTRUM 2009, 101), and adds another important note regarding the level of cataloguing:

"Organisations should have clearly defined levels of cataloguing to ensure that consistency is maintained, making reference to the status of the collection and the type and size of the collection being catalogued. In some cases (e.g., a significant complex object with much associated contextual information) it will be desirable and possible to catalogue object at item level and develop extensive records.

In other cases (e.g., large collections) it will be more appropriate, or only possible, to catalogue at the level of the collection or group, and the inventory level may suffice. The note clearly shows that one needs a special category which will record the level at which the record has been catalogued; however, before recording the question arises of the criteria about the decision on the level at which the object will be catalogued (the note mentions only the size of the collection as a criterion, which certainly requires the development of additional criteria).

CCO recommends the following criteria to be taken into consideration in order to help institutions in decision-making on the minimum level of cataloguing which can certainly help us in dealing with groups of objects or objects consisting of several components:

•   size and requirements of the collection;
•   focus of the collection;
•   expertise of the cataloguers and availability of information;
•   expertise of the users;
•   technical capabilities. (Baca at el. 2006, 8).

Taking in mind all these criteria, it would also be appropriate to work on projections of the time requited to achieve a given level of arrangement and processing of the collection. Leonard Will (2015) provides useful starting points for such projections on his web pages, and such calculations need to become an integral part of planning in museums.

Having defined the cataloguing policy by means of the mentioned criteria and, on that basis, decided which documentation level to apply for single objects, we need to record the level. That is, in documenting museum objects consisting of several parts, both the user and the system must clearly know the record type in order to establish reliable supervision over the inventory and insight into the number of objects in the collection. CCO recommendations are very useful for the purpose:

"The record for a group, collection or series may have the same fields as a Work or an Image Record, but a group, collection or series record should be flagged (like Work and Image Records) with Record Type so that it is clear to the user that this in an aggregate record, not a record of a single work. Records for individual works or images can be hierarchically linked as part of the group, collection or series record.".

The mentioned record type suggested by CCO is more practical than the name for the field introduced by SPECTRUM - level of cataloguing[1] - and in Croatian it might lead to confusion with the level of record completeness.

In the CDWA standard such a field is called catalogue level and it belongs to the "core" metadata part. It is defined as an "indication of the level of cataloguing represented by the record, based on the physical form or intellectual content of the material" (Baca and Harpring 2000). The possible values have also been determined for the mentioned field: item, volume, album, group, subgroup, collection, series, set, multiples, component, box, fonds, portfolio, suite, complex, object grouping, performance, items (Ibid.). Basic guidelines and usage explanations are given for every example.

Useful guidelines for multi-level, description can also be found in the archivist standard ISAD (G), *General Standard for the Description of Archival Material* (ISAD(G) 2001, 12), in terms of the design of description from the general to the special, of fonds linkup and avoiding the repetition of information already mentioned at a higher hierarchical level.

The ISBD *Library Standard* (integrated edition, 2011) also deserves due mention; in Supplement A of the Croatian edition (IFLA 2014, 291) it also provides for a possible multi-level description, but no clear guidelines on the use of single-level vs. multi-level descriptions (on the one hand, in library catalogue practice we still have the European tradition of multi-level descriptions, whereas the Anglo-American tradition prefers the single-level option).

SECOND KEY CCO LEVEL: INCLUSION OF ALL OBLIGATORY DATA CATEGORIES

According to the *Regulations concerning registration*, the document enclosed in the registration procedure defines the "list of objects in the collection with the basic data (name, author, time of creation, dimensions, material, technique)". This lays down the compulsory categories of data for the procedure of the registration of a collection as cultural property, and although the registration procedure has not been prescribed in the *Regulations concerning documentation*, in museum practice it is derived from primary museum documentation and represents a specific de facto standard regarding the minimum compulsory categories.

Practice has shown that some information categories certainly need to be included in the mentioned list for specific types of museum collections. Thus, the category site is extremely important for archaeology, ethnology and natural sciences.

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1   The term has probably been taken over from archive and library terminology related to multi-level description.

In the broader context of museum documentation the *Regulations concerning documentation* do not prescribe the minimum data in the Inventory Book and Museum Object Catalogue, although some data categories are not applicable to certain kinds of collections (e.g., to natural science collections). This is why we often return to the *Object ID standard* (*Object ID: An International Standard for Describing Art* 1997), developed in a broader heritage environment (developed jointly by museum, antiques shops and Interpol experts), prescribing the key procedures and minimum data categories for describing heritage objects (Thornes, Dorrell and Lie 1999). Ultimately, greater flexibility will have to be ensured in determining the compulsory set of appropriate categories for collections of specific type, size and character.

Just as in the case of the level of cataloguing, SPECTRUM requires organisations to define, within their in-house cataloguing regulations, "the required minimum or core content of the catalogue record for different types of objects" on the one hand, and, on the other hand, "the expected content of a typical full catalogue record for different types of objects" (SPECTRUM 2009: 101).

Third key CCO principle: creation and implementation of additional local rules allowing the discovery, exchange and use of information for different purposes

Along with the existing regulations which must be continuously improved because of the development of information science as well as because of the new capabilities of information and communication technology, we also need, as all the so far mentioned standards and guidelines have shown, to develop and implement additional regulations in order to achieve the multiple objectives of museum documentation and, eventually, meet the requirements of different groups of users.

Fourth key CCO principle: use of controlled terminology

With regard to this principle CCO guidelines refer to terminology within the Getty Vocabularies Program and the normative files of the Library of Congress.

Fifth key CCO principle: Creation of local normative files in line with standard published terminology and local terms and names. Structuring of local terminology with the help of a thesaurus wherever possible. Recording and documenting decisions on local terminology

The starting point for local normative files can be found, for example, in *Documentation and Classification of Museum and Art Gallery Objects* published in 1987 in *Muzeologija 25*.

Sixth key CCO principle: application of data structure standards

The already mentioned standards (Object ID, CIDOc Guidelines, SPECTRUM, CDWA) provide the list of categories and, hence, data structuring.

Seventh key CCO principle: understanding that cataloguing, classification, indexing and presentation are different but related functions

CCO guidelines offer a range of examples explaining the differences between cataloguing, classification and, especially, indexing, i.e., the assignment of index terms from normative files and data presentation.

Eighth key CCO principle: consistent establishment of links between object groups and single objects and the related visual documentation

This principle is extremely important for the correct interpretation of links among museum objects (especially ensembles and objects belong to an ensemble) and navigation through the information system.

Ninth key CCO principle: Consistent use of punctuation and other syntax rules

This rule is extremely important in order to ensure consistent data recording and interpretation.

Tenth key CCO rule: for English-language information systems and users, use English language data values whenever possible

This principle is listed from the perspective of the English speaking area. In the context of application of the Croatian language, this principle can be interpreted – e.g., when the tile of a work is given in English - by stating that its translation into Croatian also needs to be provided.

Objectives and principles of museum documentation

Along with defining the museum documentation principles, we must also define the objectives of museum documentation. Thus, CIDOC Guidelines list the following objectives:

- ensuring accountability for objects; determination and identification of objects owned by the museum and the recording of their storage;

- contribution to object security; creation of object status data, and description and producing ownership evidence in case of theft, disappearance etc.;

- historic archive; creating and recording information on the production, collection, ownership and use of objects, and protection of long-term data value;

- obtaining physical and intellectual access to objects; this refers to access to objects and to documentation, i.e., object information (Thornes, Dorrell and Lie 1999: 9).

Therefore, the objectives define what needs to be achieved in order to achieve a specific purpose and meet the functional properties of museum documentation. This is why the Guidelines include, and that is of special importance, for each data group the respective objectives and functional properties.

When speaking of the principles to be taken into account when developing bibliographic systems, Elaine Svenonius notes that "... principles differ from objectives in that objectives state what the system needs to achieve, whereas principles determine the nature of the way in which those objectives are met" (Svenonius 2005, 11). Well-considered principles need to result in different forms of standardisation: guidelines, regulations and, finally, standards. "In many fields of various activities these standards are obvious or trivial, but not also in the world of museum documentation, mainly because museums possess and document unique objects often of a particular nature" (Bearman 1997: 8).

In answering the question of how to document Ivo Maroević explains that the question already impinges upon the quality of documentation, thereby determining the character of documentation and the level affording data comparability. Principles come to expression in an ideal methodology of documenting cultural heritage (Maroević 1986: 269-273), and they must be respected if we want a systematic and efficient implementation of the documentation process. The principles of good documentation are the limits we must not transgress if we want to achieve good results. Thus, Maroević lists principles such as respect of the values of heritage objects, functionality, precision and accuracy, timeliness, comprehensiveness, graduality, selectivity and continuity.

In 2012 CIDOC published the *Statement on the principles of museum documentation* (International Council of Museums 2012) as an aid to museums in the drawing up of their internal regulations on collection documentation and management. Although the mentioned principles have been developed at a higher level of generality than CCO rules (and coordinated with the ICOM Code of ethics for museums), they represent an important starting point for the further development of documentation regulations and guidelines.

CONCLUSION

This paper has reviewed the theoretical and professional sources related to the registration of a collection as a cultural property, i.e., its reliance on documentation procedures such as inventory control and cataloguing. It offers considerations related to the possible single-level (single and group) and multi-level description of groups of museum objects. The conclusion is that there are no unequivocal rules referring to all museum objects regardless of their kind, size and other collection features. In order to avoid the

total arbitrariness of rules, we have pointed out the importance of drawing up in-house rules within the institution, rules which will prescribe the ways and levels of processing for specific collections. Another important point highlighted in the paper is efficient supervision (through appropriate data categories) of the level of object documentation in order to obtain reliable insight into the orderliness of specific collections.

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