

Museum Essentials: Working with Collections

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Collections are there to be used and enjoyed, because if they're not used and enjoyed, then we have to question why we have them.

Really the concept of a dynamic collection is one that we really think about as a living organism, a thing that's being used, being enjoyed and being valued.

We have a responsibility for the collections in our care; many of them have been around for a long time and we want them to be around for a long time to come, so my principle way of working has always been to leave collections in a better condition than I find them.

Here at UCL for instance we have relatively large collections, and if we don't have documentation we're not able to keep track of those collections, and then we're not able to care for them; and that might be doing simple things like re-boxing, making sure stores are better organised, making sure it's cleaner, because that can really extend the life of a collection.

If we lose that documentation that object could be hidden and won't be found until somebody stumbles across it in twenty or thirty years' time, so the documentation forms the roadmap to the collection. Without documentation, what we have is a bunch of stuff that we can't really use.

Technology is really what's exciting about current documentation. We can create context for collections in a way that was much harder to do previously, so we can be using interviews, we can be using film, it adds richness and depth to the way that we view and understand objects and for the visitor who's looking at them.

The sheer scale of having to deal with even a thousand objects in a collection can be really overwhelming, so the way to do it is to break it down into small pieces.

It might be worth thinking about how you prioritise in terms of targeting your work into specific areas bringing groups, maybe volunteers or staff together to work collectively to achieve shorter, smaller goals is a really good way of working and you will make progress.

Whether you're dealing at a large scale or a small scale the responsibilities are fundamentally the same. Our job is to make sure we do our best to care for those collections and make sure we preserve them for the future, but also make them available for current use so there's always a balance.