

# Acquisition and accessioning

## Definition

Taking legal ownership of objects, especially (but not always) to add to your long-term collection through the process of accessioning: the formal commitment by your governing body to care for objects over the long term.

## Scope

In legal terms, acquisition involves a 'transfer of title' from the previous owner to you. The procedure gives you proof of ownership, and it assigns a unique number that will link each object to the information you hold about it.

Accessioning has a very specific meaning: it brings with ethical responsibilities to preserve objects over the long term, and should not be done without careful thought in the light of your agreed collecting policy. This procedure assumes that most of the objects you acquire will be accessioned.

However, you might acquire objects for other reasons, such as using them in handling activities or as display props. In that case, use part of this procedure but do not formally accession the items. Occasionally you might accession things you already own that have become significant over time (eg Victorian display cases).

*This is a Spectrum primary procedure. UK museums must meet the standard set out below to fulfil the requirements of the Museum Accreditation Scheme.*

## The Spectrum standard

You must have a **policy** on acquiring objects, which might be part of a wider collections development policy covering disposals too. Either way, in deciding your policy you will most likely need to consider these questions:

- What kinds of objects might you acquire and why?
- What legal and ethical issues will you consider before acquiring objects?
- Who can authorise acquisitions, particularly for the accessioned collection?
- What are your normal terms and conditions for acquiring objects?
- What steps will you take to check the provenance of potential acquisitions?

- How will you calculate the ongoing costs (eg additional storage) of potential acquisitions?
- How will you establish who owns any associated rights (eg copyright) and what is your policy on acquiring such rights?
- What is your format for numbering new accessions and the preferred labelling and marking methods for different types of object?
- How long should it normally take to complete the accessions process?

You should also have a written **procedure** that explains the steps to follow when acquiring objects. Spectrum's suggested procedure is a useful starting point, but however you do it, your own procedure should meet the following minimum requirements:

Minimum requirement	Why this is important
You only acquire objects in line with your agreed policy and applicable laws, treaties and codes of practice.	Your collecting activity is ethical and serves your museum's mission.  Objects are not acquired at the whim of individuals.
You have written evidence that the undisputed owners of acquired objects have transferred title to your museum.	You can prove legal ownership of your collections.  You do not acquire heirlooms whose ownership may be disputed within a family.
You make donors aware of the terms by which their gift or bequest is accepted by you.	Donors understand that objects they have given might not always be on display, or might be disposed of in future.  You minimise the risk of reputational damage if donors or their heirs are later unhappy.
You give a unique number to each accessioned object and securely label or mark it with this number.	You can link each physical object with the information you have about it.
You keep all relevant information about the acquisition of objects, accessible via their unique numbers.	You have as much documentation as possible about the provenance of your collections.  You can refer to the original documents in case of any future problem, such as the heirs of a donor thinking that a gift was only on loan.

Minimum requirement	Why this is important
You have a tamperproof record of all accessioned objects, using their unique numbers.	You have a formal record of your accessioned collection.  It would be difficult for a thief on the inside to cover their tracks by deleting all record that an object ever existed.
As backup you have an up-to-date security copy of all accession records.	You do not lose this important information in a fire or similar disaster.  You have an extra level of security against anyone tampering with the primary accession records.

## Suggested procedure

### Assessing potential acquisitions

#### Make a case for the proposed acquisition.

This should usually be done in writing, following your acquisition policy. Depending on the circumstances, this might involve due diligence research into legal and ethical matters, or to clarify the intellectual property rights associated with a proposed acquisition. Keep a copy of the acquisition proposal and record its location so that you and others can find it in future.

#### Evaluate the proposal.

Follow the procedure and guidelines set out in your acquisition policy. See also **Note 1** for additional guidance. Keep a copy of the formal evaluation (eg the minutes of the relevant board meeting) and record its location so that you and others can find it in future (cross-referenced by the numbers of objects you go on to acquire).

Inform the owner if you are not acquiring the objects, and return them if they are with you already. This should usually be in writing, and should set out your reasons for not accepting an offer, with reference to your acquisition policy.

### Obtaining title and recording copyright

#### Obtain title to the objects and written evidence of this.

See Note 2 for guidance on the kind of acquisition records you should keep. Evidence of title to the objects should include the following documentation:

- A reference to the formal title of the legal body that is acquiring the object.
- The name and address of the previous owner of the object and of any agent.
- A brief description of the object.
- A signature confirming transfer of title to you.
- The method of acquisition.

See **Note 3** for additional documentation recommended for bequests, field collection, gifts, purchases, exchanges and treasure. See **Note 4** for advice on how to proceed with objects found without numbers (eg during the *Inventory* procedure).

All original documents supporting title should be located in a secure, fire-proofed area as a core part of the long-term documentation about the collection. Record the *Document location* of supporting paperwork, in the relevant object records so you and others can find them in future.

### Record copyright or other associated rights if known.

If not done already, where relevant and if possible establish and record the owner of the copyright and other rights associated with new acquisitions.

Go to *Rights management*.

## Receiving objects not already with you

### Plan for the arrival of the objects.

Considerations might include where they will be stored and who will carry out the acquisition process.

Go to *Object entry*.

## Processing new acquisitions

### Label or mark each object, or group of objects, with a unique object number.

Your policy should specify the format of object numbers. If relevant, numbers for unaccessioned objects (eg in handling collections) should have a different format from those for accessioned objects. Parts of a single object may be assigned the same root number, but with a unique extension appended to each one. Where large numbers of similar objects are gathered together in a secure container, the container may be numbered, its contents counted and the total recorded (eg beads in a box, a box of sherds, or a tray of insects).

The method used for labelling and marking an object, or group of objects, will depend on its material and condition. You should normally physically mark objects, but in some cases this may not be possible and labels should be securely attached instead.

Generally, labelling and marking techniques should not damage an object, but this may not always be possible (eg in the case of larger objects). Sometimes durability is more important than reversibility. Seek specialist advice from a conservator if in doubt. You should develop written conventions covering the location of labels or marks.

## Record initial information about the acquisition and the objects acquired.

Record the following information for each object, or group of objects, identified by the object number:

### Object identification information

- The **Object number**.
- The **Number of objects** acquired associated with the Object number.
- The type of object - **Object name** (use a standard term source).
- Any **Title** of the object
- A **Brief description** containing sufficient information to identify each object, or group of objects, and any separately numbered parts. The description should be sufficient to allow identification in the absence of the object number (including, eg a simple name, measurements).
- Any **Other number** and **Other number type** (eg a number allocated by another organisation before the object was acquired).

### Acquisition information

- The method of acquisition - **Acquisition method** (use a standard term source).
- Name and contact details of the source of the acquisition (donor or vendor):
  - **Acquisition source** (use a standard form of name).
  - **Address**.
- The date of acquisition - **Acquisition date** (use a standard format).
- The entry form number (if available) - **Entry number**.
- The transfer of title form number, if separate from entry form - **Transfer of title number**.
- Any conditions (or reference to any conditions) pertaining at the time of acquisition - **Acquisition provisos** and **Acquisition funding source provisos**.
- The reason for the acquisition - **Acquisition reason** (use a standard term source).
- Any additional information about the acquisition of the object - **Acquisition note**.

Record any other relevant information about the acquisition, including:

## Object history and association information

- The history of the object, or group of objects - *Object history note*.

## Object use information

- The acknowledgement that should be used when the acquisition is displayed and published - *Credit line*.
- Any information about restrictions on using the object, or group of objects (eg may not be loaned, only accessible by staff, or not accessible by external researchers):
  - *Use restriction* (use a standard term source).
  - The date when the restriction applied from - *Use restriction date* (use a standard form).
  - Any other information about the restriction - *Use restriction note*.

## Object owner's contribution information

- Any additional contextual information received directly from the acquisition source - *Owner's personal experience*.

Try to note down all available information associated with each object, or group of objects, at the time of collecting, particularly where objects are removed from their context.

**If the objects were a gift, send acknowledgement to the donor.**

Include the relevant object numbers and information about how they can access the items in future.

## Accessioning new acquisitions

**If the objects are to be part of your accessioned collection, create a formal, tamperproof record that the objects have been accessioned.**

For those objects acquired to become part of your accessioned collection, this will be an archival record of the accession. See **Note 2** for guidance on what form this record might take. If you use a traditional accession register, enter a subset of the information you recorded for the acquisition:

- Entry number.
- Object number.
- Date acquired.
- Who it was acquired from.
- Basic descriptive information, including:
  - Object name.
  - Title (if relevant).
  - Brief description.

- Any other important historical information about the object, or group of objects.
- Any other relevant notes.

## Guidance notes

### Note 1: Evaluating proposed acquisitions

As noted already, preparing a proposal to acquire objects may well involve due diligence research into legal and ethical matters, or to clarify the status of associated intellectual property rights.

Do not acquire objects if there is any doubt about the seller's or donor's rights of ownership, or if you have any other legal or ethical concerns. You are not obliged to accept offers or bequests, and the terms on which collections are accepted should be clearly understood by the donor.

When you are offered collections, you should reserve the right to take out those items not wanted for your accessioned collection. A note about the group in its entirety should be recorded (eg on the entry form) before any weeding takes place. Where, however, you are offered a collection which is an archive, or where the significance lies in the collection itself (rather than its individual objects), the collection should not be broken up or weeded without careful consideration.

As part of the evaluation process, objects may need to be assessed for any potential health and safety hazards.

Objects accepted in lieu of tax are subject to specific requirements that are detailed in the official scheme guidelines. Otherwise, avoid acquiring objects with terms and conditions (eg that they must always be on display). Take professional legal advice if in doubt.

### Note 2: Accession records

#### Security of accession records

Accession records should be maintained and backed up using auditable, futureproof and secure methods, either paper-based or electronic. Access to the records should be controlled, and a permanent, tamperproof record kept of all changes. If your accession records are entirely digital, you should take extra care to guard against tampering and the danger of losing information as formats and technology become obsolete. You can find the latest guidance on keeping accession records secure on the Collections Trust website.

Duplicate copies of your accession records should also be maintained, and kept at an alternative location (ideally another museum or similar organisation). Copies should be produced often enough, and kept securely enough, to prevent the information being tampered with.

## **Accession registers**

If you use traditional accession registers, they should be bound, on archival paper, with numbered pages. They should be filled in, in permanent ink, in accession number order. Archival quality accession registers can be ordered from the Collections Trust. They have 147 numbered double pages with pre-printed column headings.

## **Object entry forms**

The Collections Trust object entry forms have a section for transfer of title, so that the object entry procedure can begin the process of transferring title if applicable.

## **Transfer of title forms**

The Collections Trust transfer of title forms are a useful way of capturing further information about transfer of title, and confirming transfer with the owner. It is not always necessary to use separate transfer of title forms and your museum should decide whether it needs them or not. They can be useful for the following reasons:

- Listing in detail the items being acquired. It is sometimes not possible to do this on object entry forms.
- A separate transfer of title form can be filed in the object's history file for easy reference.
- Making it clear to the donor that title is being transferred, particularly for very valuable or significant acquisitions.
- If the person who signed the object entry form was not the owner.

## **Note 3: Additional evidence of title**

Depending on the method of acquisition, obtain in addition the following documentation:

### **Bequests**

- Legal copy of the will, if possible.
- A copy of probate (or confirmation in Scotland).

### **Field collection**

- A reference to collection site and other field collection information (eg grid reference, site code).
- Evidence of right of title as appropriate.
- Evidence of internal and external justification for the collecting.
- Proof that the collecting is legal.
- Evidence of external responsibilities (eg memoranda of understanding with others).
- Evidence of compliance with CITES (The 'Washington' Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora) plus export and import permits where applicable.



## **Gifts**

- The signed offer of an object from the donor, including any terms specified - although any gift with conditions is strongly discouraged.
- The signed acceptance of the object by you, including any agreed terms.
- Information about all gifts should be accessible by donor name.

## **Purchases**

- A signed statement from vendors stating that they are the legal owners.
- A signed statement of the provenance of the object (if known).
- The original invoice and receipt identifying the goods purchased.
- The details and conditions of any grant aid received for the purchase.

## **Exchange**

- The transfer of title to the object for which the non-monetary exchange was made.

## **Treasure**

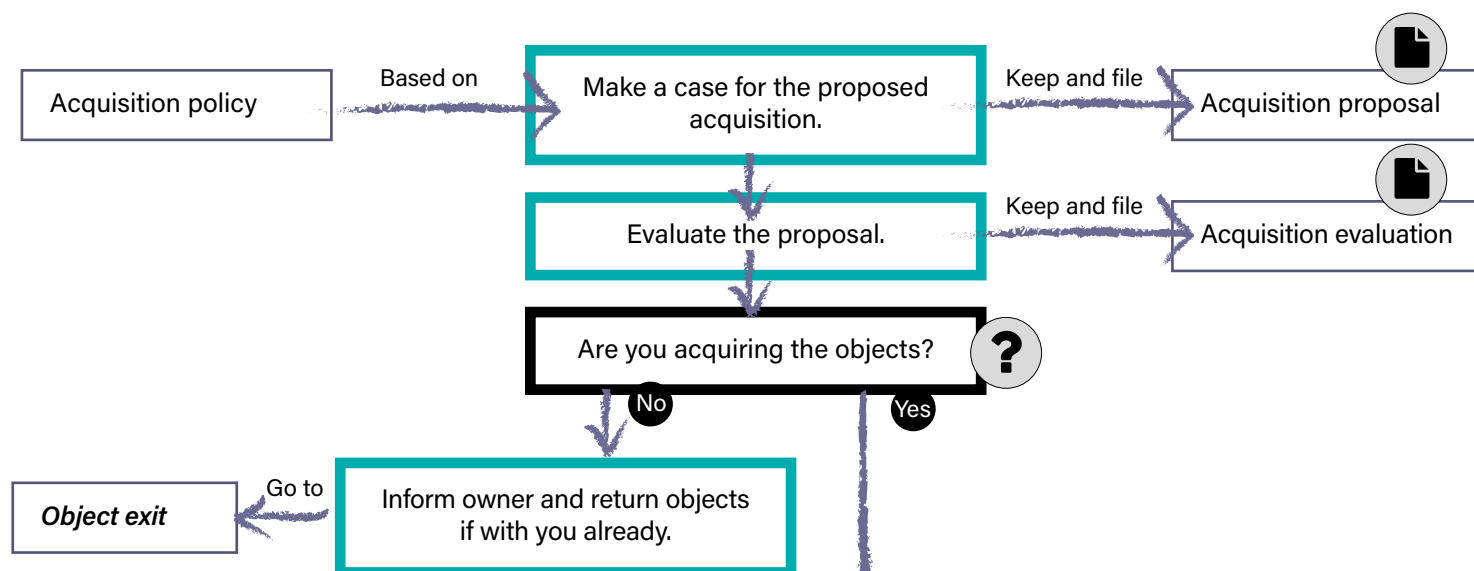
- A record of the treasure inquest, including any expert report submitted as evidence.

## **Note 4: Objects found in your museum without numbers**

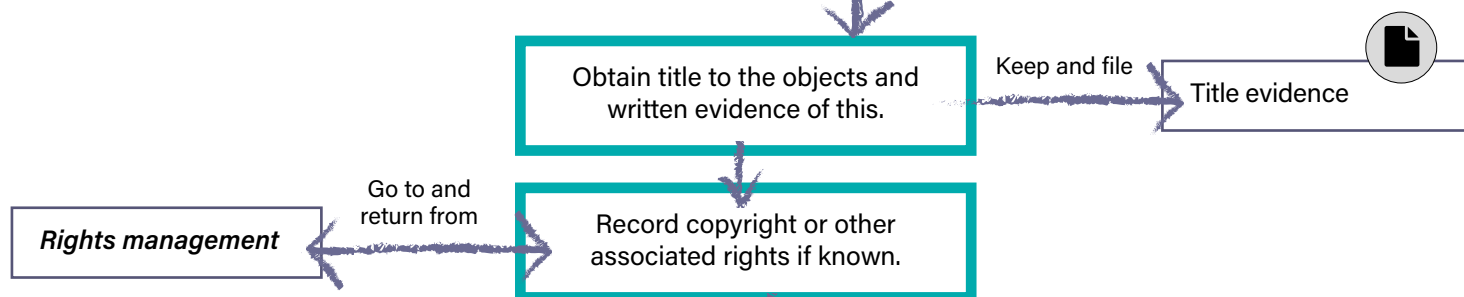
Objects found in your museum with no number or provenance, for example during audit or inventory, may only be accessioned if you are confident that they are your property and they are required. Every effort should be made to trace the origins of such objects, including all possible external sources and internal records (eg entry records, correspondence, and loans files) and to reconcile them with existing records. In such cases, always document and retain all information about the find and any subsequent accession. This will enable the audit trail to be picked up in the case of any subsequent claims to the object.

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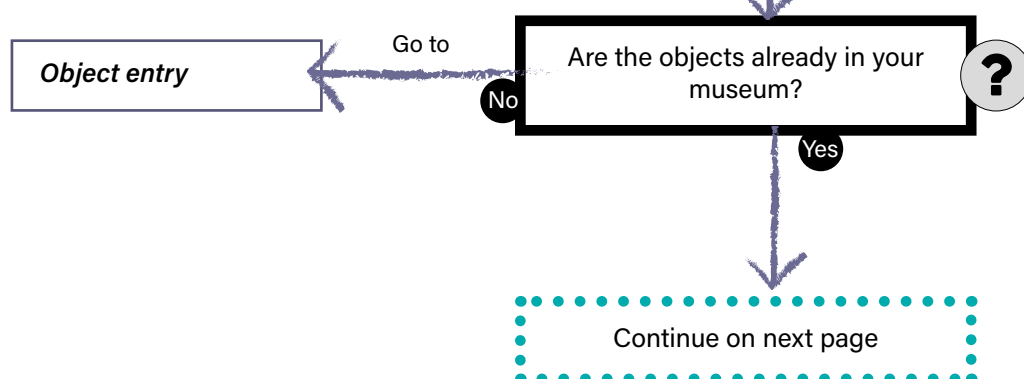
## Assessing potential acquisitions



## Obtaining title and recording copyright

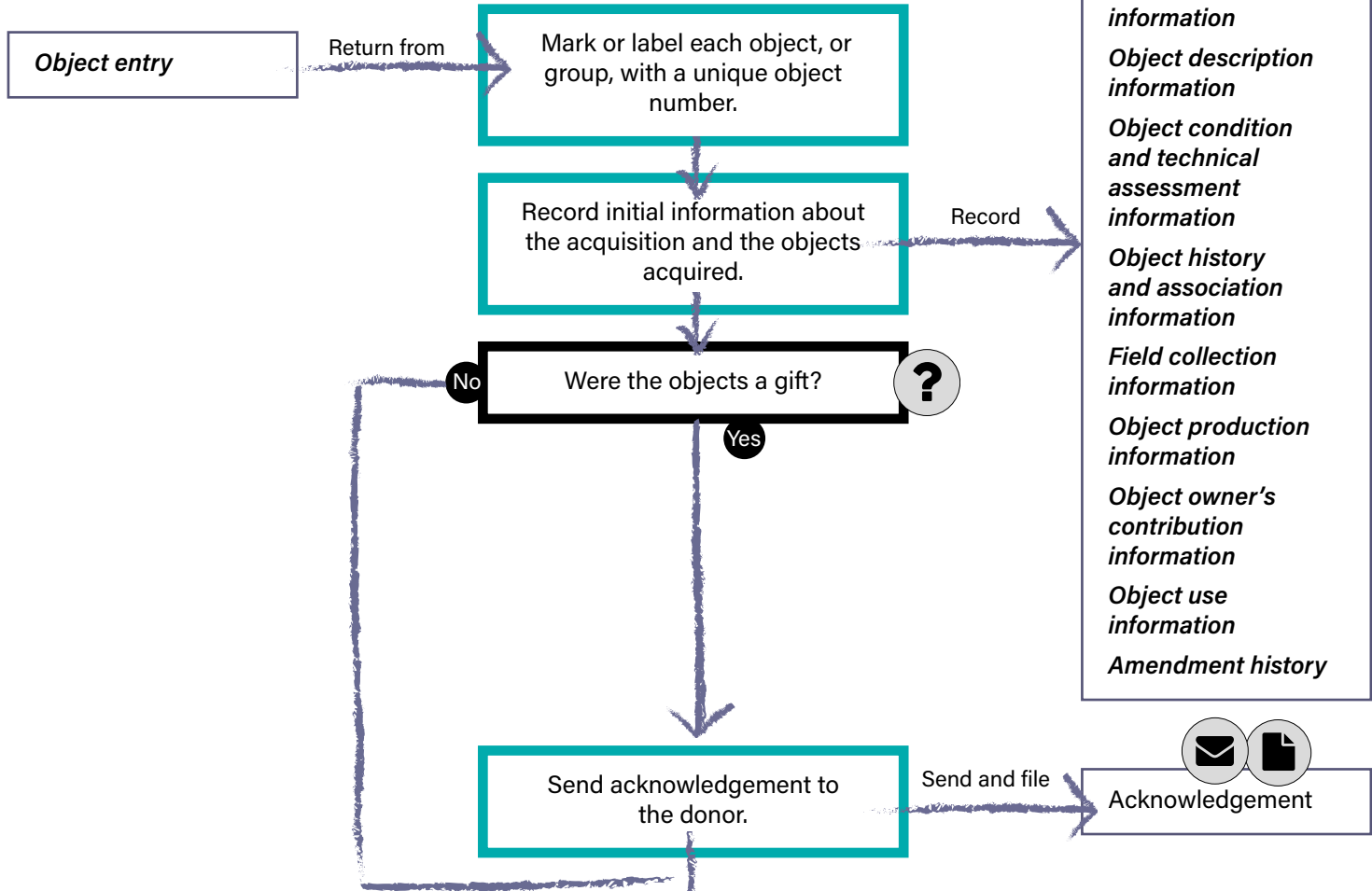


## Receiving objects not already with you



# Processing new acquisitions

Continued from  
Receiving objects  
not already with you



# Accessioning new acquisitions

