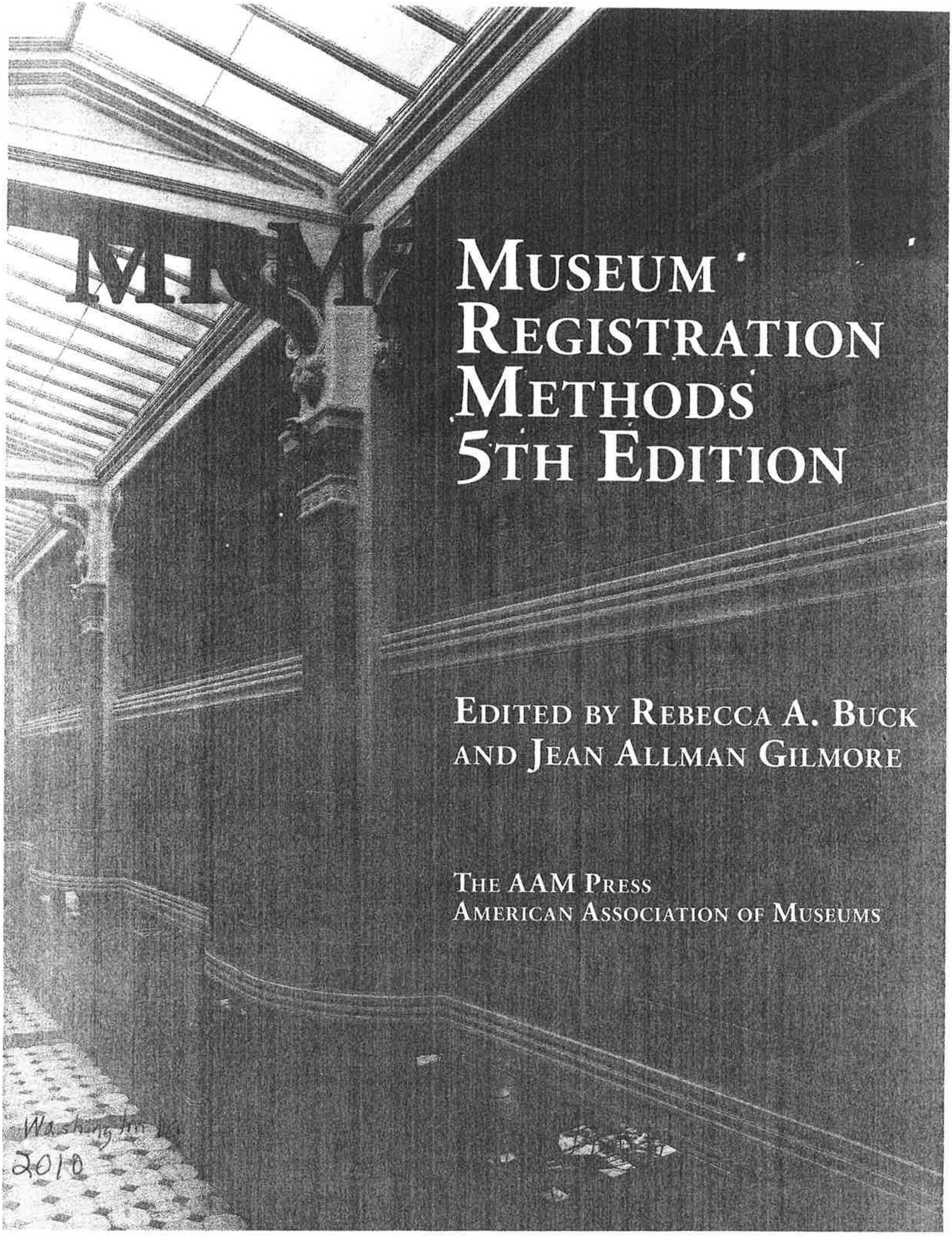

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Museum Registration Methods 5th Edition

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5A | Numbering

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In order to track museum collection objects, to differentiate between permanent, loan and subsidiary collections, and most importantly to provide access to the documentation of objects in a collection, it is vital that a systematic numbering scheme be used. The number assigned to an object is marked on most permanent collection objects, tagged onto objects in temporary custody, and prominently noted on all documentation associated with the objects.

Preferred Numbering Systems

Permanent collection, legally owned objects; compound numbers:

2010.1	Transaction, first of year 2010
2010.1.1	First object is a single unit
2010.1.1.1-10	First object is a set of ten pieces
2010.1.1a,b	First object is a pair, two parts

Suggestions for temporary records, short and long-term loans:

TR1.2010	Transaction, first of year 2010
TR1.2010.1	First object in the transaction
L.2010.1 or	
L1.2010	First loan of the year 2010
L2010.1.1 or	
L1.2010.1	First object of first loan of the year 2010

Museums may also develop numbers for long-term loans to differentiate them from exhibition loans, and for long-term incoming loans. Supplemental collections may have yet another number. It is always best to keep numbering systems to a minimum and to keep them as simple as possible.

Museums have tried many numbering systems over the years. The most important thing about a number, either permanent or temporary, is that it be unique. It must be the key between the object and its documentation. Without a unique number that relates to specific files, an object is at risk of losing its context and information relating to its legal status.

Sequential numbering (1, 2, 3, 4) is based on early library accessioning systems. It is simple and has been used by many museums. Typically, the first object gets number 1, the second object is number 2, and on into infinity. But this system will not adapt and expand with a collection. The same limitation exists with a two-part system (year and object, 76.21-27, 76.28, etc.). An object found after the original count is made cannot be numbered with its original group, making it much more difficult to keep information that should stay with a group of objects – receipts, deeds of gift, warranties of title – accessible for all objects in the group.

Computerization can overcome the difficulties caused by varied early systems, if every number used by the museum is unique. It is possible, for instance, to impose a transaction number on sequential or separated items and pull them together in a database. For instance, in the two-part system, 21.3-10 and 21.15 are found to be from the same transaction. The registrar can review the year and systematically assign a transaction number to which all pertinent object records can be attached. Perhaps the transaction number for this example will be 1921.3.

Systems with alphabetical prefixes become cumbersome if the prefix refers to a collection category, a geographical location or a department. All of those categories may become obsolete or inaccurate with the renaming or reorganization of the referenced categories. A prefix may be useful for loan collections, temporary custody or for subsidiary collections used for teaching purposes but is not recommended for permanent collections.

Prefixes gone wrong:

- P for Persia
- Y for Yugoslavia
- C for crosses and coins, Cambodia or Ceylon
- S for science or sculpture

Museums with several numbering systems may find their record filing complicated and the systems confusing. Some museums have found it helpful to retire old complicated systems and implement a single standard system; however, there can be no attempt to re-number a large permanent collection. A single system applied from a certain date forward will simplify record keeping for current and future activity. Attempts to renumber usually end in chaos.

It is important for a museum to be consistent in its numbering once it has decided on a preferred system. Systems must be used for both temporary and permanent holdings, and each system must have its own sequence. If several departments use different systems they must communicate and make certain that their systems do not overlap and create duplicate numbers. Collections management databases often use the assigned number to identify a record about an object, and duplicate numbers lead to confusion.

Temporary Holding Numbers

A temporary number system helps track objects until they are accessioned and given a permanent number or are returned to the owner. The temporary number may be structured the same as an accession number, as described below, but with a T (Temporary) or TR (Temporary Record) or other prefix (L for loan, E for exhibition, etc.) to distinguish it; or it may be structured as an accession number in reverse, that is, "16.1996" instead of "1996.16."

Permanent Accession Numbers

The most common accession numbering system now used is a compound number separated by a point or hyphen. The first number indicates the year the object is accessioned and may be the whole year: 1995; or a part: 995, 895, 001 or 95, 34, 76. The whole year is recommended; if it was not used in the past, it should have been started with the year 2000.

The second number indicates the sequence of the transaction by which the object/s were formally taken into the collection; 1995.1, 1995.2, 1995.3 indicates the object or group of objects that comprise each gift, bequest, exchange, expedition or purchase. If there is only one object in the transaction, the two-part number typically suffices. If title to more than one object passes to the museum in a given transaction, a third number is assigned to each item in the group: 1995.4.1, 1995.4.2, 1995.4.3. If an object is a set or portfolio of objects, the accession number for each individual part within the whole can reach four parts: 1995.4.3.1, 1995.4.3.2. An object may also be one item with component parts, such as a box with a lid, a chest with removable drawers, or a sculpture that can be disassembled. The whole object is assigned an accession number, such as 1995.5.2, and each part of the whole is given a letter suffix: 1995.5.2a, 1995.5.2b, 1995.5.2c. If there is any question about whether the objects have part/whole or set relationships, the curator in charge of the collection should be consulted. It is generally not within the registrar's realm to know these details in every instance. Registrars deal broadly with objects across a wide range of disciplines; asking the curator helps build relationships and increase accuracy.

Examples of the Standard Numbering System:

10 objects from one donor:
Portfolio of 8 photographs: 1997.1.1.1-8
Six separate photographs: 1997.1.2-7
Coffee pot with tray: 1997.1.8a-c (pot, cover, tray)
Painting: 1997.1.9
Pair of shoes: 1997.1.10a,b

Single object purchased: 1997.2

In this compound numbering system, each separate item has its own distinct identification through the accession number. The accession transactions for each year can be accounted for and the years noted separately from each other. The system allows for growth but does not demand it; each year starts with transaction 1 and ends with the last transaction. Parts can be identified with wholes. Future research that changes the intellectual classification of objects will not interfere with an identification system based on when and in what order the museum acquired them. If an object was overlooked, it still has a place at the end of the sequence for an individual transaction.

Subsidiary or departmental number systems that refer to a systematic classification of the objects, the archaeological site of origin, or some other information useful in research may also be used within a museum. Cross-reference lists to and from the accession numbers are useful for identification of the correct object, for rapid retrieval of stored information or object location. These different numbers should be maintained separately, using the cross-reference lists to move back and forth.

Numbering systems are fascinating, but in the end it is most important that a number used to connect an object to its documentation be unique. That said, there are some very good reasons to used standardized systems.

In the 1st edition of *Museum Registration Methods* (American Association of Museums, 1958), Dudley and Bezold describe the identification numbers in the broad context of their use for accessions, extended loan, or loan for exhibition. There was a reference to a type of catalogue number, called "curatorial" number. By the third edition (1979), the glossary compiled by Patricia Nauert was specific in differentiating between the two:

> Accession Number: a control number, unique to an object, whose purpose is identification, not description.
>
> Catalogue Number: a term used in a variety of ways in museums: (1) in some museums, a catalogue number is assigned to a an object or specimen based on its class; its purpose is description; (2) in some museums, the number described in this book as an accession number is called a catalogue number, in which case its purpose is identification; (3) the number assigned to an object in a printed publication or catalogue of a special exhibition or collection.

Some museums also refer to object number and differentiate that from the accession number. The accession number in this case, for the tripartite system, includes the first two parts and object number includes all three.

2010.1.1	2010.1 is the accession numbe
2010.1.1	2010.1.1 is the object number

Numbering Unprocessed Collections

Registrars are often faced with an array of unprocessed material from the near and distant past *(see Found in Collection chapter)*. Some objects have only temporary numbers assigned while others have permanent numbers that never made it onto the object itself. The range of documentation for objects goes from none whatsoever to a full file complete with deed of gift or bill of sale and acquisition committee reports.

Title must be transferred to a museum before an object can be considered part of the permanent collection and accessioned as a permanent collection object. Thus loans, old or new, never become permanent collection objects. Purchases need proof of purchase—a document that shows the museum paid for the object. Gifts need three distinct parts: donor intent, institutional acceptance, and institutional possession of the object. In the early to mid-19th century everything—loans, gifts, purchases, bequests—was "accessioned." Accession was more about tracking than it was about permanent collection. In current museum practice only objects that are owned by the museum are accessioned into the permanent collection.

Against this background the registrar can begin to work through the material in a museum that was not previously completely processed. If an object arrived in 1972 and in 1972 there was a letter from the donor saying she wanted the museum to have it; and if the curator or director wrote a note back thanking the donor; and if the museum has possession of the object, then the number entered in finishing the process is the next available number in the year 1972. If there was a deed of gift at the time, then 1972 is the year.

If the same object had everything except donor intent, the choice is two-fold: send the donor a letter of confirmation acknowledging that the gift was made in 1972 and assign 1972 as the accession number; or send a new Deed of Gift and record it in the current year (if the DOG is returned to the museum by the donor). The letter of confirmation is preferred because it places the gift firmly within the museum's collection for the complete time it was there and thus makes a stronger commitment. •

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