

# Museum Collections in the Information Age

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**W**ith the growing accessibility of computer hardware and software, the mushrooming popularity of the Internet, and its ever-increasing availability of public information for educational and research uses, cultural institutions are faced with new expectations and demands for the intellectual content of their resources. By the end of the 20th century, many institutions had automated or had started the process of automating their collection records.

## ***Why automate museum collection records?***

When a museum undertakes a project of automating its collections records, the goals of the project usually include:

- Adoption and enforcement of uniform vocabulary and documentation standards
- Consistency of accession, exhibit, loan handling, and deaccession processes
- Facilitated electronic data interchange between institutions
- Enhanced staff accessibility to collections data
- Increased accountability for museum artifacts
- Improved production (or staff) efficiency
- Assisted museum policy implementation
- Better ways of educating the public
- Risk management and disaster planning for collections data
- Efficiency of records storage
- Quicker and more comprehensive access to information, which encourages further research and more efficient response to queries
- Improved interpretation of museum collections for the public

Although many of these goals can be accomplished using manual methods of documenting collections and processes, a computerized application is particularly well suited to accomplishing these goals. At the beginning of the 21st century, many museums have done a good job of addressing these goals through automation, with the notable exception of providing robust public access to all their valuable information.

## ***How can a museum balance public access to and preservation and protection of collections?***

Let us review National Park Service museums as an example. The implementation of the original National Park Service Automated National Catalog System (ANCS) in 1987 and the current usage of ANCS+ (a customized version of *Re:discovery for Windows*) address many of these automation goals for the National Park Service, which cares for one of the world's largest and most diverse collections. However, ANCS+ is primarily used by national park personnel, who do not always make it readily available to the general public. Much of the information collected and tracked by ANCS+ is of no interest to the public or is inappropriate for public access due to security or other valid restriction reasons. However, there is a significant amount of descriptive, historical, scientific, and interpretive information that the National Park Service (or any museum) has a responsibility to make easily accessible by the public. Such availability is the fulfillment of one of a museum's primary goals of interpreting collections for the public and making them accessible.

Unfortunately, making collections physically available to the public often directly conflicts with another primary goal of museums—that of caring for and protecting these collections. A major benefit of the new information age is that now museums can make electronic facsimiles of collections available to the worldwide public without endangering the collections themselves.

If an institution makes these electronic facsimiles available to the public using standard web browser software, it can fulfill its education and access mandates, while at the same time protecting the originals. Some national park sites make this information readily accessible to the public using these means, but most have not yet done so. In the future, we will see an increased emphasis on this method of providing appropriate access.

## ***Have institutions other than museums seen the need to make their information resources available to the public?***

Libraries are a great example of institutions that have historically had a need to make collections information available to the public. Over the past 30 years, libraries have used various methods to make their information available both at the library location and remotely. For many years now, major bibliographic databases

have been available through various online facilities that primarily serve libraries as they catalog books (non-unique objects). Two such major databases are

- RLIN, the Research Libraries Information Network, a service of the Research Libraries Group, Inc., and
- OCLC, the Online Computer Library Center, Inc.

The information contained in these databases is available to member institutions, not the public. The goal in developing these large databases is to allow libraries to use pre-written descriptions of books and other materials to avoid costly re-cataloging efforts. Not only does recataloging involve a duplication of effort, it may also yield questionable results depending on the expertise of the catalogers. To avoid these pitfalls, member libraries download standard bibliographic records for inclusion in their in-house computerized or printed card catalog. Public access to the information contained in the central databases at RLIN or OCLC is, therefore, only available to the public through the member library facility.

Now with Internet access, the public seeking book-related information can make a virtual visit to many libraries that have made their computerized card catalogs available to web browsers. As a result, Internet users can search these posted card catalogs to get information about a book or to learn if an individual institution has the book.

***What special problems exist for museums that want to provide public access?***

**Uniqueness.** Library collections are usually composed of non-unique collections and therefore catalogers are able to use standard descriptions. Museum collections contain many unique items. Although an object may have similar qualities to an object at another institution, the museum staff must still create a unique catalog entry. Therefore, in order to get information about a museum object, one must obtain that information directly from the museum. In the past, this meant contacting or going to the museum.

**Care for the Collection.** Museums make collections available to the public via public display, either at the institution or through traveling exhibitions. However, only a small portion of the collection is actually on display at any one time. The remainder of the collection is kept in storage and may be unavailable to the public. The reasons that a large part of collections are kept in storage may be many, including a lack of exhibit space, preservation and protection sensitivities, and the need to

select a few items to be representative of the whole. All objects are not needed to tell the story, but they provide the research basis for the story. Since many of these artifacts are delicate, museums must find a way to make the collection available and at the same time exercise proper care. If a library book becomes damaged or lost, unless it is a rare or unusual book, it often can be replaced. If a museum object is lost or damaged, it is not replaceable.

***How can a museum make appropriate information available to the public?***

The Internet provides museums, worldwide, a way to display and interpret their collections (through images and text facsimiles) to the public without risk to the collection and at the same time protect sensitive information such as donor, appraisal, and location data. Museums making their collections available to the public through the use of a standard web browser are inviting everyone to view their resources.

***How does the public search a museum collection on the Internet?***

An example of a public search of a collection database is provided by the Springfield Armory National Historic Site. This site is available through the National Park Service web site, Park Net, at the Springfield Armory home page <<http://www.nps.gov/SPAR>>. In this example, the user types the word(s) of interest “Jefferson Davis,” and clicks a Search button as shown in Figure 1. The results are presented first in a list format showing all related image thumbnails and a summary of all catalog information that relates to Jefferson Davis, as shown in Figure 2. The user can view a higher resolution version of the images by clicking on the thumbnail image or additional details from the artifact catalog by clicking the object title as shown in Figure 3. In this example, the catalog notes that appear below the area shown in Figure 3 state that this rifle model first saw

*Fig. 1. User types the word(s) of interest and clicks a Search button.*

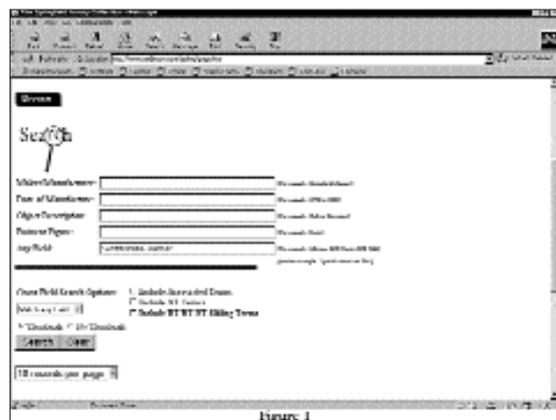


Fig. 2. Search results show a list of catalog records found with brief descriptions and image thumbnails.



Fig. 3. User clicks on object title to view a higher resolution image and additional catalog record details.



action in the hands of Colonel Jefferson Davis's First Mississippi Volunteer Infantry Regiment during the Mexican War.

**How can a museum protect sensitive or unedited catalog details from being displayed to the public?**

The institution displays only a selected subset of the data. The institution can determine which fields are shown and which records are displayed. The staff can edit records with public viewing in mind and make those edited records available. The public then sees only the appropriate portions of the selected records on the web site.

**Summary**

As Internet facilities improve in speed and become available to more and more people

around the world, this new forum will become increasingly important as a way to interpret collections and educate the public. For today, images and text are still the only practical visual media for most Internet users. However, in the near future, sound and video presentations will become more common. As museums automate collections and describe them in images and text, they must always keep in mind their public audience. It is likely that what they write today will be read by the world tomorrow!

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# The International Pillage of Cultural Property

This year marks the 30th anniversary of UNESCO's Convention on the Means of Prohibiting the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property. Adopted in 1970, this treaty forms the largest and longest standing framework for international cooperation in the ongoing effort to reduce the incentive for further pillage of archeological sites and of ethnological objects important to the traditional practices of indigenous and cultural groups around the world. So far, 91 countries

have become party to the Convention, including the United States. Countries differ in their implementation of the Convention, the United States having perhaps the most unique approach as set forth in the 1983 Convention on Cultural Property Implementation Act. The administrative apparatus for this U.S. government effort originally resided at the former U.S. Information Agency, but since October 1, 1999, is the domain of the U.S. Department of State where the president has delegated his decision-making responsibilities. The enforcement function