

More Detail from Discussions Brought Up during the "Unmanaged Collections" Webinar from Angela Kipp

Open Mercury Sources

Mercury was used as an open source in some measuring instruments like blood pressure meters, steam gauges or barometers. We also found it in open containers in an automatic musical organ where it served as switch. In all these cases it's metallic mercury, which you recognize as silvery fluid, like you know it from old thermometers. It has nothing to do with the dangerous compound that so sadly killed the famous U.S. chemist Karen Wetterhahn and with the mercury poisoning you get from eating contaminated fish.

The danger comes not so much from touching it (although you shouldn't do it) but from the fact that mercury evaporates at room temperature and you are inhaling the toxic vapor. Even in small doses it can accumulate in your body over time and damage the nervous system.

You can identify it either by seeing it as a silvery fluid in an instrument or by knowing it through research. A first aid measure might be to contain the object in an airtight container. Be careful: as the mercury evaporates and can't escape, there will develop a high concentration inside of the container, so you should label it accordingly so no one opened it. Sometimes you can seal the small opening that allows the air to come into contact with the mercury. We did this on some of our medical instruments, but I would highly recommend doing this with a conservator who has special knowledge of how to do this, which we had luckily on staff.

To test if there is mercury in the air you will need a specialized firm. We used a specialized conservation lab that had the necessary equipment. The testing methods the local firefighters have to test for mercury are only for mercury accidents where high amounts of mercury are spilled, not for the low doses that come from off-gassing instruments. Of course, if you want to make sure there was no mercury accident in your storage room in previous years, those testing methods may assure you that it's not an immediate danger to work in your storage area.

If you have to store an object that contains mercury I would highly recommend to either have the mercury removed or have it sealed by a specialist and then store it in an airtight container. The lower the room temperature and the higher the air exchange rate, the better.

Mold

Mold comes in many different forms and I would always (always!) contact a specialized conservator to identify it before I do anything. Even if you are certain that you have identified the kind of mold there might be a different form you haven't realized.

Then, I'd first try to find the cause and remove it before treating the objects. But I would definitely treat the objects, even if the cause were removed.

There's a good webinar on *mold*.

Radioactivity

It is not a bad idea to have a Geiger counter in your tool box, especially if there is a nuclear power plant in your area. We had a drop-off donation of an engineer's working equipment that contained a calibration tool that made our counter go nuts. Also, check your storage area before starting to work. Firefighters and refuse utilization firms often have Geiger counters for their work and might be willing to help.

Accession Numbering Systems

In most cases I would keep the various old numbering systems and just write a reference guide of what was used when and how. Renumbering projects are huge tasks and more often than not I have seen them not followed through consistently. An additional issue, can arise if the old accession numbers were used in research, literature, or exhibitions. So, if you don't follow through with adding the new number to ALL the files and ALL the records you likely cause more confusion without improving clarity.

In the cases where the same accession number was applied to different objects, I would give the objects new, unique numbers and cross-referencing the original number in the files and the database.

Sorting

There's always a certain danger of losing context while sorting. That's why it is important to take photos of the situation frequently. You also might like to note where you found something in your database.

Upper Management

It's always hard to convince upper management and boards why collections work is the core of all other museum activity. Often, pointing to standards and best practice is next to useless. However, there are a few things that might work if you point them to it:

- They might be held responsible for legal issues, i.e. when something doesn't belong to your institution but you exhibit it and the rightful owner shows up, discovers it and files a lawsuit.
- The bad publicity and the social damage done to the institution and individual board member when the above happens.
- Health issues: if you don't investigate health hazards and someone becomes seriously ill (preferably a visitor, but even staff members will do) and sues the institution this will become really expensive.



- Storage costs: break down the cost for storage space in terms of heating costs, rent, maintenance per square inch to give them an idea why a restrictive collections policy might be a good idea.
- Never miss a chance to educate them: give them a storage tour and point them to the issues, let them help you search for something, clean something, determine ownership, etc.
- Join an accreditation program. Often the pressure needs to come from outside and they tend to listen more to foreigners than to their own staff.
- Make collections work more visible by writing about your objects and your work in the local newspaper or your institution's newsletter or website. If your community gets interested in your collection and its issues, chances are upper management does, too.

Backlog in Registration Files / Unclear Ownership / FICs / Drop-off donations

There was some confusion on what to have at the first logical exit. In most collections with a long and wild collecting history it is an illusion to have all the ownership issues can be cleared within a reasonable time. Instead, you will have to clear ownership status as you are processing your collection. However, what you **should** do at the beginning of your journey is to collect all the files with information you can find and store them together in one place. Some letters of intention might slumber on your director's desk, while others might be in an accession file, and yet, others might be in the heating room for whatever reason. Collect them and bring them together so you can go through them as you try to find out if an object does belong to your institution or not.

A clear collections policy will help to communicate what you can accept in your collection and what you can't.

It pays to make your work more visible so people understand why a museum can't collect everything "old". Of course, especially in smaller institutions, diplomacy is key. You should always appreciate that people are thinking about you when offering something. Sometimes, it helps to explain that you already have something similar. Sometimes, it helps to explain the cost of storage. Sometimes, people will get angry if you say "no" —there's nothing you can do about that.

Regarding drop-off donations, you might want to train front-house staff in how to say "no" and deal with difficult visitors. I remember one colleague on the RCAAM listserv had a printed out reminder showing a sad looking puppy and reminding front-house staff that their registrar will be just as sad when they accept a drop-off donation without documentation. It also might help to let this *video* circulate.

Miscellaneous

You can subscribe to the Registrar Trek Blog RSS-Feed *here*.

The penguins are from the user "OpenClipart-Vectors" at *pixabay.com* and released under Creative Commons license CC0 Public domain.

The cat names:

Siamese: Curly

Tortoiseshell: Betty

Three-legged Tiger Tomcat: Bass

All three are from a shelter and were happy to help for the good cause.

