

COURSE 4.396
SPECIAL PROBLEMS IN VISUAL ARTS
Distributing Meaning
Spring 2005
Professor: Allan McCollum

FROM: MUSEUM-L

(Museum-L is a general purpose, cross-disciplinary electronic discussion list for museum professionals, students, and all others interested in museum related issues. All museum related topics are acceptable for posting and discussion at this time. Membership in Museum-L is open to anyone with e-mail service.)

Date: Wed, 12 Jan 2005 14:20:15 -0500
From: Wanda Edwards <Wanda.Edwards@OCFL.NET>
Subject: Artifacts vs. Props
To: MUSEUM-L@HOME.EASE.LSOFT.COM

There seems to be some confusion in our institution about the difference between an artifact and a prop, especially when they are used in exhibits. I've tried to explain the difference, but not always with success. I think part of the problem stems from the company that designed and built some of the permanent exhibits in new building. Sometimes they went to flea markets and junk stores and bought "old stuff" to incorporate into their designs. Of course, that "old stuff" tends to look like some of the artifacts from our collection that are also on display. Does anyone have clear, simple definitions that I can share with our staff?

Thanks for your help. This list is always a great source of information.

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Explore. Connect. Imagine. Reflect.

Date: 1/13/2005 2:31:57 AM Eastern Standard Time
From: "David E. Haberstich" <DavidH5994@AOL.COM>
Subject: Re: Artifacts vs. Props
To: MUSEUM-L@HOME.EASE.LSOFT.COM

In a message dated 1/12/2005 2:56:44 PM Eastern Standard Time,
Wanda.Edwards@OCFL.NET writes:

I don't think you'll ever find such a definition. Since virtually anything might be a potential collection artifact, especially in history museums, it's more a question of what the museum chooses to DECLARE is or is not a collection artifact. A museum declares or defines an object as part of its permanent collection by accessioning it, cataloging it, and numbering and marking it appropriately. If you're scrupulous and consistent about performing this fundamental museum operation, there shouldn't be any difficulty in distinguishing a

collection artifact from a "prop" or other ancillary item--the "artifact" (long ago we used to say "specimen") bears a museum number and the non-"artifact" doesn't. Some museums, nervous that an accessioned object might accidentally slip into an exhibit without its requisite number (and later get mistakenly tossed out as a presumed prop), have insisted that even "props" be clearly identified as such to avoid mixups.

One man's hunk of junk may be a museum's treasure. The museum, in its curatorial wisdom, makes the call. Sometimes it may be a very arbitrary decision. Frankly, I think that even an object contributed by an exhibit designer deserves to be marked and tracked and/or catalogued if it's going on exhibit, even if it's not going to be accessioned. Your catalog record can specify that it's a low-value prop suitable for disposal if you wish.

Distinctions need to be made in some clear manner, but there's no clear, simple "definition" per se.

David Haberstich

Date: Wed, 12 Jan 2005 15:14:19 -0500
From: Shannon Lindridge <collections@THEHISTORYCENTER.NET>
Subject: Re: Artifacts vs. Props
To: MUSEUM-L@HOME.EASE.LSOFT.COM

Objects in our collection are defined by certain criteria, summed up simply "Is the artifact relevant to Tompkins County History." If the objects do not fit into that criteria they are not considered artifacts in the collection, and are either deaccessioned or transferred to the education collection.

As far as meaning of a prop, I think of a prop in an exhibit as an object which maybe a reproduction or an original that a visitor may touch our manipulate within an exhibit's setting to better understand the message of the exhibit.

Perhaps to help clear up the confusion, would it be possible or suitable for the props used in the outsourced exhibits be replaced with actual artifacts from the collection?

Shannon

from generation to generation
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<<mailto:collections@thehistorycenter.net>>

Date: Wed, 12 Jan 2005 14:53:19 -0600

From: John Kelton <jkelton@ECLECTICGROUP.COM>
Subject: Re: Artifacts vs. Props
To: MUSEUM-L@HOME.EASE.LSOFT.COM

I remember seeing great artifacts/props at the Abraham Lincoln Museum in Fort Wayne, IN. All were well protected behind vitrines, in secure cases with excellent lighting. When I read label copy for a prop it would say "Abraham Lincoln used a double headed axe LIKE THIS to split fence rails" After that, I began to read all of the labels to see what was a true Lincoln artifact and what was a prop.

--

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and Interpretive Planner
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Date: Wed, 12 Jan 2005 14:13:51 -0700
From: John Martinson <jmartinson@PN.USBR.GOV>
Subject: Re: Artifacts vs. Props
To: MUSEUM-L@HOME.EASE.LSOFT.COM

As a prior Curator of Collections at a large living history park/museum, we had a great majority of our collection out in the village. Those objects used for demonstrations were "props" or "living history items" and not included in the annual inventory. However, since there was value to many of these items (antiques, etc.) I had a separate file for tracking our living history items.

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RECLAMATION
Managing Water in the West

Date: Thu, 13 Jan 2005 09:22:57 -0500
From: Jenna Carroll-Plante <JCPlante@SHAKERS.ORG>
Organization: Canterbury Shaker Village
Subject: Re: Artifacts vs. Props
To: MUSEUM-L@HOME.EASE.LSOFT.COM

Wanda,

We have a growing prop collection that we call our "Education Collection" and recently found it necessary to distinguish between EDU items and artifacts. We now also differentiated between types of EDU items, such as those donated or purchased to be used by staff (looms, antique tools...) and those requiring more care (antique props or

reproductions of artifacts used in exhibits and not easily replaceable). I created an Education Collection Policy with a ranking system that I somewhat modeled after The Henry Ford's. I'd be happy to email you a copy off of the Listserve if you're interested. I do not track EDU items in our collections database, PastPerfect, but do apply EDU#s and track them into MS Access. The trick has been to get non-curatorial staff to bring items to me before they get dispersed throughout the Village and end up getting mixed into my artifact collections. I try to have copies of invoices, thank you letters, and/or deeds of gift for every EDU item because donors show up every year to see their 'stuff' or staff get confused about what the museum purchased and owns or what they purchased and own. I hope this helps. Good luck!

-Jenna

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Date: Fri, 14 Jan 2005 08:30:40 -0600
From: Education <education@HASTINGSMUSEUM.ORG>
Subject: Re: Artifacts vs. Props
To: MUSEUM-L@HOME.EASE.LSOFT.COM

We simply use a separate "Use" collection for props and educational objects which have no place in the main collection. All items are stored separately from the main collection and all are documented within a separate "Use" collection data base and assigned accession numbers which begin with "USE." In example, the first accession for the use/educational collection for the year 2005 would be given the following accession #: USE2005-001-001. Hope this helps, Marcy

Date: Thu, 13 Jan 2005 14:03:53 -0800
Reply-To: Museum discussion list <MUSEUM-L@HOME.EASE.LSOFT.COM>
Sender: Museum discussion list <MUSEUM-L@HOME.EASE.LSOFT.COM>
Comments: DomainKeys? See <http://antispam.yahoo.com/domainkeys>
From: Lisa Holley <holley13@YAHOO.COM>
Subject: Re: Artifacts vs. Props
To: MUSEUM-L@HOME.EASE.LSOFT.COM

Wanda-

At the museum I used to work at, we too grappled with the props vs. artifacts question. When we catalogued items we developed a code to use. After the number we added a one letter code:

A = artifact

P = prop

R = recreation (for items we had made to look exactly like an artifact

we couldn't obtain)

We also indicate if an item was a recreation to the museum visitor.

Lisa

Date: 1/13/2005 9:05:08 PM Eastern Standard Time
From: "David E. Haberstich" <DavidH5994@AOL.COM>
Subject: Re: Artifacts vs. Props
To: MUSEUM-L@HOME.EASE.LSOFT.COM

I think this is a good system. My museum used to use a variation of it. I'm not sure what our current practice is since I've been on the archives side of the aisle, although I recently heard an administrator inveigh against the idea of labeling replicas as such on the grounds that visitors don't care (to which I responded that I know for a fact that at least some do care).

I do have a quibble, Lisa, which I hope you'll excuse, especially since you're no longer associated with that museum. I hope your labels said "re-creation" rather than "recreation," since the latter is open to mispronunciation and misunderstanding. In any event, I would opt for a word like "replica" or "facsimile" rather than "re-creation."

David Haberstich

Date: Thu, 13 Jan 2005 09:25:29 -0500
From: Misty Tilson <Malgv@AOL.COM>
Subject: Re: Artifacts vs. Props
To: MUSEUM-L@HOME.EASE.LSOFT.COM

I'm glad someone brought up this discussion. I struggle with this alot when the curator wants to acquisition something into the permanent collection that he would use as a prop in an exhibit. For instance he brought in a 20 year old bottle of salad dressing (nothing unique, a brand that is still being made) as a new acquisition because he might need it in an exhibit display for instance if we had a scene of a grocery store. So our problems are props that don't even rate a label in an exhibit, so they are just used to set the scene. So does anyone else have items like this, do you store them? I've tried to explain that items like that can be aquired when needed, and should not go in the permanent collection.

I apologize for not signing my name, but I'm a little embarrassed by the salad dressing.

(of course I have other issues with the donors as to why they retained a bottle of salad dressing for 20 years.)

Date: Fri, 14 Jan 2005 09:46:24 -0500
From: Anne Lane <alane@CHARLOTTEMUSEUM.ORG>
Subject: Re: Artifacts vs. Props

To: MUSEUM-L@HOME.EASE.LSOFT.COM

Don't feel bad, Misty. I once worked for an organization that had, in its past, accessioned all their office furniture and a mule.

Anne

Anne T. Lane, Collections Manager
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Winter Featured Events and Exhibits:

North Carolina Slave Narratives, February 5, 2:00 - 4:00 p.m.

Stitched from the Soul Family Day, February 12, 1:00 - 4:00 p.m.

An Evening with Robert Bruns - the Scottish Bard, February 26, 6:30 - 10:30 p.m.

Civil War Encampment, March 5, 10:00 a.m. - 4:00 p.m.

Vecinos/Neighbors on exhibit until August 2005

Stitched from the Soul: The Farmer-James Collection of African-American Quilts, on exhibit until March 2005

Solving the Rock House Mysteries, now on exhibit

For information on these and all other events, please call (704)

568-1774 or visit us online at www.charlottemuseum.org

Date: Fri, 14 Jan 2005 10:06:59 -0500
From: Deb Fuller <debfuller@GMAIL.COM>
Subject: Re: Artifacts vs. Props
To: MUSEUM-L@HOME.EASE.LSOFT.COM

So do you have to deaccession the mule when it dies or does it stay in the collection post-humously? What if it gets sent to the glue factory as opposed to being burried on the property? And where do you put the accession number? Brand it on its butt or use an ear tag?

Deb

Date: Fri, 14 Jan 2005 08:48:19 -0800
From: Rene Legler <RLegler@CREHST.ORG>
Subject: Artifacts vs. Props
To: MUSEUM-L@HOME.EASE.LSOFT.COM

We have three categories of collections: permanent, exhibit, and teaching/education collections that are added to our database. Permanent collections have no prefix, exhibit items which have an "E" prefix, and teaching collections which have a "TC" prefix. Exhibit and teaching collections are items that we considered expendable and not terribly tragic if they end up broken or missing. We collect items for the exhibit collection that we have duplicates of in the permanent collection which might be interesting to put on exhibit and become our first choice for institutions who wish to borrow items from us.

Rene Legler

Registrar
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Date: Fri, 14 Jan 2005 13:53:46 -0500
From: Aaron Goldblatt <aarong@METARCHDESIGN.COM>
Subject: Re: Artifacts vs. Props
To: MUSEUM-L@HOME.EASE.LSOFT.COM

Please Touch Museum had a brilliant system based on the mnemonic of a traffic light:

Red - hands-off, accessioned
Yellow - careful, supervised handling, accessioned (usually natural science objects like mineral specimens safe for handling)
Green - hands-on, not accessioned but inventoried, sometimes reproductions or duplicates of Red or Yellow objects

The system ultimately proved to be better in theory than practice (like most systems) as there were always struggles with who was responsible for what and other issues exposing the devil in the details. That never stopped me from being really impressed with its elegance. My hat is still off to Donna Horowitz, then curator, who developed it.

Aaron

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Date: 1/14/2005 10:27:30 PM Eastern Standard Time
From: "David E. Haberstich" <DavidH5994@AOL.COM>
Subject: Re: Artifacts vs. Props

Misty, you didn't sign your name, but it showed up in your message anyway. I'm curious about your curator's collecting strategy. Is the grocery store exhibit a real possibility or is it just a casual idea? Since you'd need a lot of "props" to stock such a display, it seems to me that you'd want to postpone collecting until the exhibit concept got closer to reality. If the salad dressing is intended for the permanent collection as an example of a ca. 1985 consumer artifact (which might or might not go on exhibit someday), that's one thing, but, if your museum has the typical storage limitations of most museums, I'd think that stocking up on miscellaneous unaccessioned "props" to fit miscellaneous undeveloped exhibit ideas would be, well, premature and a

potential storage burden.

David Haberstich

Date: Wed, 19 Jan 2005 08:42:04 -0500
From: Wanda Edwards <Wanda.Edwards@OCFL.NET>
Subject: artifacts vs. props
To: MUSEUM-L@HOME.EASE.LSOFT.COM

I want to thank everyone who responded to my question regarding the use of artifacts and props. Most of the responses dealt with how to handle props and artifacts within collection records. My main concern is how to avoid confusing volunteers and other staff members. For example, how do you explain that this old table is an artifact, not to be moved around at will, not to have anything set on it without Mylar barriers, not to be touched by anyone except staff but this other old table is a prop and it can be moved around, used for receptions to hold food and drinks and anyone can touch it?

What makes something an artifact and what makes something just an expendable prop (excluding reproductions)? I hope this question will prompt some interesting discussions.

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Date: Wed, 19 Jan 2005 12:09:30 -0500
From: David Ryan <dryan@CI.COLOSPGS.CO.US>
Subject: Re: artifacts vs. props
To: MUSEUM-L@HOME.EASE.LSOFT.COM

Dear Wanda,

Whenever I'm training new staff or volunteers in artifact handling I start with a little philosophical discussion about what an artifact is. I tell them that once an item is accessioned and becomes part of the museum's collection it is no longer what it once was. If it is a table, we no longer use it as such; if it is a chair we no longer sit in it. If it is a record player, we no longer play records on it; if it is a clock, we no longer wind it and it no longer tells time.

The reasoning behind this is that every time you handle something, you use it up a little. Every time you use it, you use it up some more. We have a public trust responsibility to make artifacts last forever. Although the laws of physics prevent this, we do everything in our power to make them last as long as possible. We want these things to

be around in virtually the same condition 100 years down the road (I personally can envision 100 years more than "forever"). There is no way we can fulfill that obligation if we continue to use these things.

So, props or "museum use" collections are used in the manner they were intended to be used. They are used up and discarded. Artifacts, on the other hand, are imbued with a preservation mandate and must be protected from handling and use. I hope this helps.

Sincerely,
David Ryan
Registrar
Colorado Springs Pioneers Museum
www.cspm.org

Date: Wed, 19 Jan 2005 09:49:45 -0800
From: Katie Wadell <katie@HEYDAYBOOKS.COM>
Subject: Re: artifacts vs. props
To: MUSEUM-L@HOME.EASE.LSOFT.COM

Dear Wanda,

One way I like to explain the difference between a prop and an artifact is by using the metaphor of the story. An artifact is an object supported by a compelling story; a prop is an object disconnected from its story. Thus the old table that belonged to a local family, complete with photos of family parties sitting around it and an approximate date, is an artifact. An old table that a board member bought at a garage sale last March is a prop. But a table designed and commissioned by a prominent architect tells the story of design, even if it was bought at a garage sale.

Ideally, you should be able to sum up the story in a few words, and those words should include "This thing...." not "things exactly like this...." A copy of Mao's little red book bought from the Black Panthers is an artifact, but without that hint of story, an absolutely identical little red book, published in the same place in the same year, is a prop and should not be accessioned. (Can you tell I've said that a dozen times before?)

I hope this helps!

Katie Wadell
Berkeley Historical Society

Date: 1/20/2005 4:16:29 PM Eastern Standard Time
From: "David E. Haberstich" <DavidH5994@AOL.COM>
Subject: Re: artifacts vs. props
To: MUSEUM-L@HOME.EASE.LSOFT.COM

That kind of reasoning might be applicable to mass-produced objects of relatively recent vintage, but it's hardly a universal guideline. Not everything a museum might want to accession has such a provenance or "story" of ownership and use. Sometimes the "story" is its

manufacture, technological, and general sociological significance, or, in the case of a work of art, its aesthetic significance. The "story" of an archaeological artifact may need to be teased out by scientific analysis and informed speculation. A mass-produced object, originally plentiful, may be collectible and museum-worthy solely due to its current rarity; many such items lack individual records of provenance. That doesn't automatically disqualify them from being considered museum "artifacts" and relegated to the status of mere expendable "props."

Any object, including something fresh off the production line donated by the manufacturer, can be considered a museum artifact if the museum chooses to so designate it. So I'm repeating what I wrote originally in this thread: the distinction between an artifact and a prop essentially is the museum's choice. It's incumbent upon the museum to take steps to make this distinction clear to anyone who might come into contact with its artifacts, through appropriate marking and handling policies. Ultimately, the only "story" a museum staff member needs to relate to anyone handling an artifact is to stress that it IS a collection artifact, regardless of why it was so designated, and that it must be protected and handled in accordance with museum policies and procedures.

Whenever there is any risk that a museum artifact might be mistaken for a prop, or vice versa, perhaps clear, easily seen "artifact" and "prop" tags should be considered.

David Haberstich

Date: Wed, 19 Jan 2005 22:13:45 -0500
From: "Scott D. Peters" <scott@LATKE.NET>
Organization: Historically Speaking
Subject: Re: artifacts vs. props
To: MUSEUM-L@HOME.EASE.LSOFT.COM

I would argue that there are some items in collections that are better preserved by use, rather than lack of use.

But functioning mechanical items of almost any kind may better preserved through careful operation on a limited schedule that keeps their works and various mechanical operations functioning. Through lack of operation parts lose lubrication, rust and seize. For example, a record machine or victrola in good working condition should be run every once in a while just to keep the moving parts moving. (The platters or cylinders are a completely different story.)

A well preserved table, however beautiful and/or significant, is still a table. It's form and function are obvious. An immaculate Edison Talking Machine is nice to look at. But a working Edison Talking Machine is something else indeed!

That doesn't mean you should let just anybody run the machine. That would be counterproductive. Curatorial staff should establish schedules whereby the machine will be run for short durations to keep the parts working as they were intended. Perhaps as part of an occasional public program?

Just my 2 cents.

--

Scott D. Peters
Historically Speaking
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Date: Thu, 20 Jan 2005 14:26:41 -0500
From: Steven Stewart <sireleven@YAHOO.COM>
Subject: Re: artifacts vs. props
To: MUSEUM-L@HOME.EASE.LSOFT.COM

I would like to add a little more about what a prop is at our museum.

Often we are given, purchase, acquire through trade, etc. several examples of the same artifact, whether that be a buggy, a fork, a camera (same model, etc.), whatever. (This might include an artifact that matches one already in our collection. So this donation event is not restricted temporally.) If given this opportunity we will choose the best one, condition-wise, for the permanent collection and the other for the prop/education/study collection. Often times we will actually choose 2 or 3 of the best for the permanent collections and the other for the prop. Needless to say, we cannot possibly store and care for properly every single item that comes through our door that is an original (Trusteeship responsibilities).

Then as regards the prop item, we tell docents, visitors, other staff, etc. that everyone learns in different ways. By touch, reading, sight, olfactory, etc. As a museum whose mission includes preservation, interpretation, AND Education we must keep this in mind. If we do not use props (Hands on items) we would be falling short of those that can learn easier by touch or closer up scrutiny of an item, thus falling short of our potential Education and interpretation goals. Granted these prop items are expected to be used up (destroyed, deteriorate, etc.) eventually, we have taken every step possible with contingency plans as well (the other 2 examples kept) to ensure that a representative example is still being preserved. This can be applied to non-material history as well. When an oral history is done, an archive copy that is not accessible to the general public is kept of the audio, video, if applicable, and transcript in addition to the multiple copies that are used as Prop items for the public to access.

Hope that all made sense!

Steven Stewart
Chief Curator
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Customs House Museum and Cultural Center