



Recommendations for Applying Accession Numbers to Museum Objects: Part 1

by Gina Nicole Delfino

This Tech Talk article is adapted from Nicole Delfino's booklet, "Suggested Procedures for Labeling Artifacts." This is the first of two articles. The Part 2 will appear in the July 2000 issue of the Interpreter and will continue with the three-dimensional objects section, paper and photographs, and hard-to-label objects, and include a quick-reference checklist. The booklet may be obtained by contacting Delfino at her labeling kit firm, Archival Collection Systems, 651/457-5399.

Labeling museum objects with accession numbers is an important responsibility. An accession number identifies the artifact as part of your collection, links the object with its documentation, and allows you to keep track of your inventory. Without this number, an object may become virtually inaccessible.

This article offers suggestions for labeling artifacts in an archivally sound manner. Remember, however, that there are variations within most collections, so in placing labels you must often employ your common sense.

An artifact's label must not only be durable to remain legible over time, but also removable, should the need arise to make a change. The process of labeling should never cause harm to the object. Its location should be easy to find, yet be in an unobtrusive place so as not to be distracting while the object is on exhibition. The writing should be as small as possible while still legible. Write numerals as clearly as possible, as follows:

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

There are several methods for labeling objects. The type of label used depends on the type of material to be marked.

Editor's note:

TECH TALK is a bimonthly column offering technical assistance on management, preservation and conservation matters that affect historical societies and museums of all sizes and interests. Comments and suggestions for future topics are welcome.

Textiles, clothing and fine basketry

Materials to use

- Black Sakura Micron Pigma™ pen (waterproof, fade-proof and does not "bleed")
- White plain-weave 100 percent cotton tape, 3/8 inch wide, non-adhesive, and without starch
- White or black fine 100 percent cotton sewing thread
- Fine ball-pointed needles
- Scissors

Where to label

1. Clothing with a neckline: inside center back of neck (do not obscure existing label)
2. Clothing with a waistline: inside center back of waistband (do not obscure existing label)
3. Hats: inside center back, where crown and brim meet
4. Flat, long, or large textiles: 2 labels: back, lower right AND upper left corners
5. Fine basketry: bottom or back, depending on structure
6. Fragile or fragmented textiles that cannot withstand stitching: on storage support

Method of labeling

Marks should not be made directly onto fabrics. The number is written onto a piece of cotton cloth tape that is then carefully sewn onto the object.

First, be sure the textile is out of potential harm's way (i.e., away from pens, scissors, etc.).

Keeping the pen away from the textile, use the Micron Pigma pen to write the accession number clearly onto a piece of cotton cloth tape before attaching the tape onto the textile. Leave about 1/4 inch on each end to fold underneath; this saves the edges from fraying.



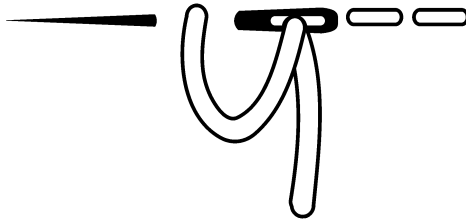


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Choose white thread for light-colored pieces, and black thread for darker ones. If black or white is still too obvious, colored thread may be used so long as it is 100 percent cotton and colorfast. Make three back-stitches (see diagram 1) on the cotton cloth tape tag (not the textile) to anchor the thread without using a knot. Make small whip-stitches all the way around the label using as few as necessary to securely attach the label (see diagram 2).

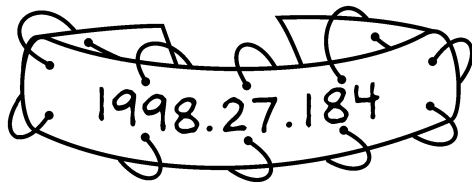
The aim is to make certain the label cannot later be snagged, causing damage to the object. When making stitches, use a single strand of thread and be sure not to pierce fibers. Instead, sew between fibers, through gaps in the weave (see diagram 3). Use a magnifying glass if necessary. Finish with three more back-stitches, on the tag only, and without using knots.

*Diagram 1:
back stitch,
used to anchor
the thread on
the cotton cloth
tape tag.*



When it is inappropriate to attach labels directly, for example with fine basketry, the labels can be sewn in a loop around large, stable fibers. First, apply the number to the cotton tape, wrap the cotton tape around a stable point, then sew the ends of the tape together, forming a slightly loose loop.

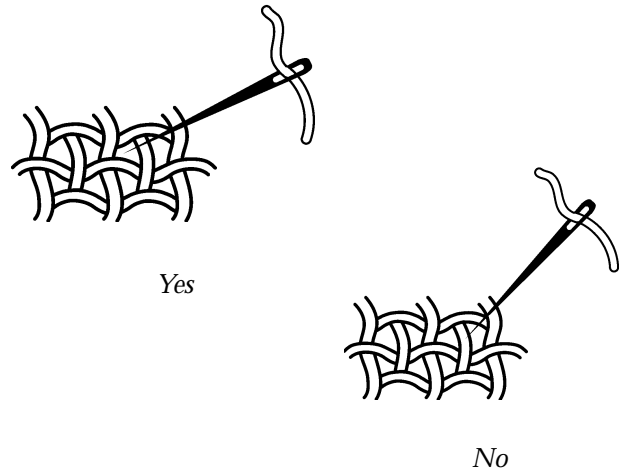
*Diagram 2:
whip stitch
around tag.
Use as few
stitches as
necessary to
securely attach
the label.*



NOTE: Never sew onto fabric that is in poor condition. If sewing a label onto an object could cause it harm, it may be necessary to label its storage support (see part 2, page 6).

Deciding how to label beadwork can be difficult. If the beadwork is sewn onto a textile (applied or “lazy stitched”), proceed as you would for other textiles, taking extra care not to harm the beads or the threads that hold them to the textile. If the beadwork is woven or loom-work, you may be able to sew a label onto the underside. Stitch between the threads

Diagram 3



that hold the beads only if those threads are strong and in good condition. If the beadwork is sewn onto leather, sew on a label only if you can do so using pre-existing holes. Otherwise, use a cotton tape loop if possible (see above), or simply label its storage support. Do not try to apply a label directly onto fragile beadwork; proceed as for other fragile pieces (see part 2, page 6).

To remove a sewn-in label, carefully snip the threads against the tag, being especially careful not to let the scissors touch the textile. Pull the snipped threads slowly, without tugging or causing any strain to the textile.

Three-Dimensional Objects

Materials to use

Acryloid B-72, 20 percent solution in acetone/toluene
Black Sakura IDenti-pen™, 441 series, permanent ink, dual-point marking pen
Titanium white Golden fluid acrylic paint, Golden Artist Colors, Inc.
Polymer medium (gloss), Golden Artist Colors, Inc. (water-based acrylic emulsion)
Acetone, 100 percent

NOTE: These solvents are considered hazardous and should be handled accordingly. Read the health hazard information located on page 6 of this issue.



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Where to label

Three-dimensional objects come in all shapes and sizes. Choose an unobtrusive area, usually on the back or bottom of the object; the back lower right-hand corner is preferable, if it would be appropriate. Clear or transparent objects are difficult, so try to label along an edge where it would be least noticeable. If possible, the label should not be visible while on exhibition.

If an object is lacquered, plastic or wax, or if it has a corroded or porous surface, do not apply a direct label; instead, use a paper-and-string tag (see part 2, page 4) or cotton cloth tape loop (see page 4, above). Some lacquers, plastics and waxes are soluble in the solvents used. A friable, crumbling surface is not stable enough to hold a label, and a porous surface could absorb the B-72. Directly applying a B-72 label to these types of surfaces might damage an object irreparably.



Method of labeling

Most three-dimensional objects can receive B-72 and ink labels. This method requires some extra care and concentration, because you are making an application directly onto the object. A clear B-72 barrier is applied to the object to create a removable writing surface onto which the number is marked; this is followed by a clear gloss seal that protects the number from scratches.

1. First make sure the surface you will mark is clean and free of corrosion.
2. It is to your advantage to label a group of objects at one time, since this method requires a waiting period between steps.
3. Be aware of drips sliding down your brushes. Try to remove as much excess as possible before approaching the object.
4. When writing with the IDenti-pen, be certain the surface you are writing onto is completely dry. If it is at all tacky, you may clot the pen's nib, rendering it unusable.

Barrier Layer

Brush on a barrier layer of B-72 in a thin rectangular layer. Its size should not be excessive, yet should be able to accommodate the number and a top coat within its boundaries. Allow the B-72 to dry for at least 30 minutes, so that it is not tacky to the touch. If the barrier layer surface is irregular or porous, a second thin layer may be applied to improve the writing surface. Allow it to dry completely again. If the B-72 remains tacky for more than an hour, remove it with acetone, discard your supply and make a fresh batch.

If your supply of B-72 becomes too thick, it may be thinned with a very small amount of acetone, added two-to-three drops at a time. Adding too much acetone at once will make your supply too thin for further use. If your supply becomes yellow, discard it and make a fresh batch.

Accession Number

For light colored objects, neatly write the object's accession number directly onto the barrier layer using the extra fine nib of the black IDenti-pen. (NOTE: Both ends of the pen have writing nibs—use the smallest one.) Do not extend your writing beyond the edges of the barrier layer. Allow the ink to dry completely (at least five minutes).

For dark-colored objects, first brush a thin layer of white acrylic paint over the barrier layer, making sure to stay within its boundaries. Do not brush the acrylic paint directly onto the object's surface. Once the white layer dries completely (about 45 minutes), you may proceed as for light-colored objects.

Some people prefer to use ink and a quill pen to write their numerals; however, quill pens present a danger with blotting and scratching due to their hard, sharp nibs. Instead of risking this danger, the above method should be adopted.

Seal

Brush a thin coat of acrylic gloss medium over the number to ensure it will not be abraded. The gloss will go on white, but will dry to a clear finish. The top

Dangerous Materials Warning

Removable self-stick notes, as well as any other adhesive tapes or labels, leave residue (sometimes unseen) that will attract dirt and/or cause yellow stains over time. DO NOT use these items for temporary labels or any other purpose. While convenient, they ultimately cause harm, and are not appropriate for use with museum objects. Nail polish and correction pens or fluids are also potentially unstable materials and should not be substituted for the proper materials listed in this article. Not even all materials labeled as "archival" or sold by "archival" suppliers are necessarily appropriate for these specific purposes.



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coat should be smaller than the barrier layer. By using this material instead of a second layer of B-72, you remove the risk of dissolving the barrier layer and smudging the number. Again: Allow it to dry completely before moving the object.

If your supply of acrylic gloss medium becomes too thick, it may be thinned with a very small amount of water, added two-to-three drops at a time. Adding too much water at once will make your supply too thin for further use.

This section will continue in Part 2 with the topic of removal of labels, in the July issue.

Bibliography

- Alten, Helen. *Materials for Labeling Collections*, Collections Care Network, Vol. 1, No. 6, Winter 1996. Minneapolis: Upper Midwest Conservation Association
- Denton, P. Lynn, and Sara J. Wolf. *Labeling Museum Specimens*, Conservation Notes, No. 11, January 1985. Austin: Texas Memorial Museum

Supplies and Suppliers

Artifact Labeling Kits

Archival Collection Systems (ACS)
137 Fourth Ave. North
South St. Paul, MN 55075
651/457-5399

Pens, Paint, Gloss Medium, Pencils, Erasers

Local art stores
ACS (address above)

Acryloid B-72, Archival Tags, Cotton Tape, Gloves

University Products, Inc.
517 Main Street, P.O. Box 101
Holyoke, MA 01041-101
1-800-628-1912
ACS (address above)

Cotton Thread, Needles

Local fabric stores
ACS (address above)

Health Hazard Information

Acetone and toluene are moderate-to-serious hazardous materials and can cause some health complications if not handled properly. If you will be using these solvents, either alone or in solution with Acryloid B-72, read the Material Safety Data Sheet (MSDS) for each solvent. MSDSs can be obtained on request from the material supplier. When handling these materials, take the following precautionary steps:

1. Work in a space with good ventilation. Avoid breathing vapors and use a respirator if necessary. A half-mask respirator fit-tested for individual use with Organic Vapor filters is recommended.
2. If your hands will be in direct contact with solvents, wear solvent-resistant gloves.
3. If the potential for splashing exists, wear chemical safety goggles.
4. Alert yourself to the nearest accessible location of a water supply.
5. Keep containers tightly closed and upright when not in use.
6. Never place solvents near a heated area or source of ignition. They are highly flammable.
7. Make sure your work space is neat and that solvents are not in danger of tipping over.

Warning signs of over-exposure are:

- Irritation of the skin, eyes, nose, throat or mucous membranes.
- Drowsiness, headache, dizziness, nausea, loss of coordination or fatigue.
- Redness, burning, drying and cracking of the skin.
- Burning, tearing and redness of the eyes.

If you are experiencing any symptoms of over-exposure, discontinue your work in the exposure area immediately and get some fresh air. Wash directly exposed skin with soap and large amounts of water for 15-20 minutes. Flood directly exposed eyes with large amounts of water for 15-20 minutes. Alert your supervisor to your symptoms and seek medical help if problems persist.

Do not dispose of any solvents in the sink or garbage. Dispose of solvents in accordance with local, county, state and federal regulations.

Gina Nicole Delfino is associate registrar in the administration department, division of library and archives of the Minnesota Historical Society. She worked in the MHS museum collections department prior to her present position. She has been a conservation technician at the Science Museum of Minnesota and with Conservation Technical Associates in Connecticut, and worked as an intern at the Cooper-Hewitt National Museum of Design in New York.