



Recommendations for Applying Accession Numbers to Museum Objects: Part 2

by Gina Nicole Delfino

This is the second of two Tech Talk articles adapted from Nicole Delfino's booklet, "Suggested Procedures for Labeling Artifacts." The first, which appeared in the May 2000 issue of the Interpreter, discussed textiles, clothing and fine basketry, three-dimensional objects, and included a bibliography and list of supplies and suppliers. The booklet may be obtained by contacting Delfino at her labeling kit firm, Archival Collection Systems, 651/457-5399.

Three-Dimensional Objects(continued)

Removal

If a mistake or change is made in an applied label, it can be carefully removed with solvents. All layers can be removed with acetone applied with a cotton swab. Be sure never to re-dip a dirty swab into your supply of solvent. It is important to keep your solvents clean.

Use solvents sparingly. They should not come in contact with an object's surface more than necessary.

Do not pour solvents into the sink. Dispose of solvents in accordance with local, county, state and federal regulations.

Alternative methods

The approved methods for labeling three-dimensional artifacts can vary widely, both because of the multitude of materials that make up three-dimensional collections, and the number of acceptable materials available for labeling them. Beyond the suggestions described so far, there are several alternatives that may be more appropriate for your collections or staff.

Other barrier layers

Acryloid B-67 dissolved in mineral spirits (or other petroleum distillates such as petroleum benzene, naphtha, or Stoddard's Solvent) is slightly less-aggressive on most material surfaces and slightly less hazardous to operators; however, it may yellow slightly over time and it requires a longer drying period.

Soluvar is a commercial version of Acryloid B-67, often combined with another acrylic resin. An

inherent problem with commercial brands is that the formulations may change without notice.

Rhoplex is a water-based acrylic emulsion similar to the acrylic gloss medium used for the seal coat, and it is much less hazardous to operators. Once dry it is only soluble in ethanol or acetone, though it is sometimes easier to peel off mechanically. Like the acrylic gloss medium, it is not as durable as the Acryloid B-72 and therefore not the most ideal barrier layer for most materials.

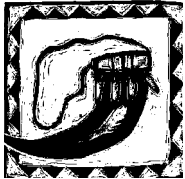
Other labels

Some institutions do not like to have a white field used for labeling their dark objects. While there are no suitable white markers that can be used with the same ease as the IDenti-pen, there are a few paint pen options available. The white Zig pen has been found to be acceptable, as well as the Tria pen filled with white fluid acrylic paint or ink. Both of these require some practice and skill, as the paint is liable to blot or smear easily.

If consistently good penmanship is a problem, some have found that cutout printed accession numbers are a useful alternative. A four-to-eight point accession number is printed on archival-quality paper on a laser printer. The number is cut out and placed on the barrier layer while it is still tacky. A seal coat is still advisable, once the barrier layer is dry. The stability of the inks with this method is somewhat questionable, however, because of the variability of laser printer inks.

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.





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Paper and Photographs

Materials to use

Hard pencil, 2H
Soft pencils, 2B and 6B
White Staedtler Mars-Plastic vinyl eraser

Where to label

Both paper and photographs are labeled on the backside (verso), lower right corner. Try to write behind the border of a photograph, rather than behind the printed image. If a paper article has printing on both sides, choose the side where the label would seem least obtrusive for exhibition.

Method of labeling

Make sure the surface on which you lay the front of the paper/photograph is clean and dry. It is a good idea to put a piece of white paper on the surface first.

With a suitable pencil, as prescribed below, lightly write the accession number onto the appropriate area. The pencil should not be dull, yet not so sharp that it could cause damage. Be certain not to press so hard that the pencil leaves an imprint. You should not be able to see the label from the front side.

Most normal papers with smooth surfaces and in stable condition can be labeled with a 2H pencil. Some papers are very fibrous and could be damaged by a hard pencil. For these, use the softer, 2B or 6B pencils. They are more likely to smudge, but they won't tear the fibers in the paper. Photographs can be labeled with a 6B pencil.

Mistakes may be erased with a gentle touch of the white vinyl eraser.

Hard-to-Label Objects and Secondary Labels

Materials to use

2H pencil
Archival paper tags with soft cotton string

Where to label

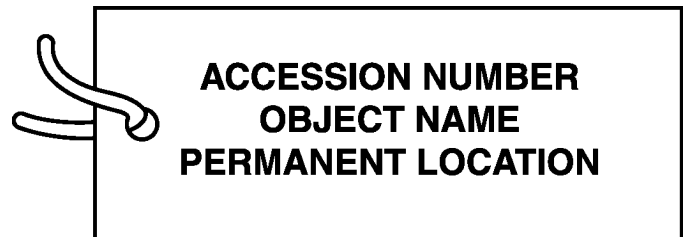
Objects made of fur (skin), leather, or which have heavily corroded or porous surfaces cannot hold an applied label. Instead, their primary label will be a paper and string tag, or, if appropriate, a cotton cloth tape loop (see Part 1, page 4).

Textiles and three-dimensional objects can receive a secondary, paper and string tag label for storage. Paper and string tags are not used alone (unless the material demands it, as above) because they can be easily lost or mutilated. For storage purposes, they do provide more accessible identification, reducing the amount of handling of the objects, and also allow you to include more information.

Choose a strong holding point that will not break, tear or abrade easily if the tag is pulled or caught. If the sharp edges of the tag seem to be a potential hazard, round them off or use soft Tyvek™ paper instead. If no safe area can be found, the tag may lie next to the object without being attached. If a garment is stored on a hanger, attach the tag to the hanger and make sure it does not rest on the fabric. If a textile lies flat in storage, situate the tag to its side, so it does not rest directly on the fabric.

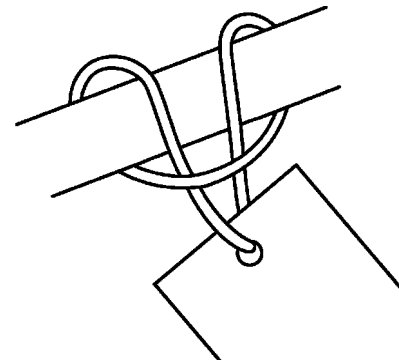
Method of labeling

With a 2H pencil and all uppercase letters, neatly write the following information onto a tag:



The backside may have various additional kinds of information, such as date, style, source, etc.

Attach the tag by pulling it through a loop in the string (see diagram 4 below). If the point of attachment is too wide to pull the tag through without stressing the object, remove the pre-attached string and add a longer one (100 percent cotton) that will comfortably accommodate the object.



Right: Method of attaching paper tags.



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Fragmentary and fragile objects

If you are uncertain about the safety or possibility of labeling an object, do not proceed to apply one. Even a paper and string tag is unusable in certain cases. Sometimes it is appropriate to label the housing or support for an object as opposed to the object itself. This not only saves the object from being harmed by the act of labeling it, it also reduces further handling of fragile pieces to locate their identity.



Above: An artifact labeling kit

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.

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 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. Alert your supervisor to your symptoms and seek medical help if problems persist.

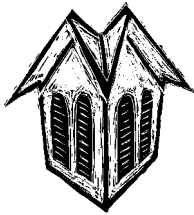
Do not dispose of any solvents in the sink or garbage. Dispose of solvents in accordance with local, county, state, and federal regulations.



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Quick Reference

MATERIAL TYPE	primary LABEL TYPE	LABEL LOCATION
glazed ceramics, glass, metals, wood, stone, ivory, bone, some kinds of basketry	B-72 and ink	unobtrusive area (usually bottom or back)
leather or skin (fur), heavily corroded metals, unglazed ceramics, plastic, wax, lacquered surfaces, other porous surfaces	paper and string tag or cotton cloth tape, loop	unobtrusive spot that will not be harmed by the string; tie loosely
clothes with neckline	cotton cloth tape	inside center back of neck
clothes with waistline	cotton cloth tape	inside center back of waistband
hats	cotton cloth tape	inside center back, where crown and brim meet
shoes without leather soles	B-72 and ink	bottom of sole, close to heel
socks, gloves	cotton cloth tape	inside opening
flat, long, or large textiles	cotton cloth tape	back, lower right and upper left corners
fine basketry	cotton cloth tape, loop	unobtrusive area (usually bottom or back)
paper, photographs	pencil	back, lower right corner
fragile or fragmented objects	pencil	storage support



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 Conservation Technical Associates in Connecticut, and worked as an intern at the Cooper-Hewitt National Museum of Design in New York.