Review of Pacific Collections Appendix 2: The Review Method

National Museums Scotland

University of Aberdeen

Perth Museum and Art Gallery

Glasgow Life

Museums Association Esmée Fairbairn Collections Fund

Pacific Collections Review Project - Our Review Methodology

The following is an overview of the methodology developed and implemented in the *Pacific collections in Scottish Museums: Unlocking their knowledge and potential* project.

Aims & Objectives of the review
- Identify scope for future research
- Develop improved understanding of the relationship between the Pacific collections held at the partner museums, but also of relationships with other associated collections in Scotland
- Establish the wider regional, national and international relevance of the collections at the partner museums
- Identify key individuals, such as collectors, associated with the collections
- Identify strengths and gaps in the collections

Research of Review Methodology

A number of successful collections review projects have been carried out in the UK in recent years. One such review with similar aims, and consequently potentially relevant methodology, to the Pacific Collections review project (PCR) focused on the Egyptology collection at Salford Museum and Art Gallery. Their method is presented in the publication 'What's in Store? Collections review in the North West'.[1] The review focused on a collection of 375 objects and followed the steps below:

1) The curator began by collating archival information on the specific collection to be reviewed
2) A reviewer was given a list of the objects exported from the museum's database and a dedicated workspace in the stores near the objects
3) The review was then done *in situ* in 2 stages, the first stage taking place over 3 days. Relevant archival material was reviewed and areas for further research were identified. Members of staff were consulted to ascertain the history of the collections and how they are used in house, on loan etc. (NB. This part of the process initiated more detailed research of key objects). A digital camera was used throughout the project to keep an up-to-date record of any objects in need of further detailed research
4) After a break for research, a second visit was arranged over 2 days to follow up any loose ends

The Appendix in 'What's in Store?' sets out recommendations for a hypothetical review project. These recommendations suggest five elements on which a review can focus as follows: curatorial review; use; significance; collections care; and museum context. While to some extent all five elements were to be considered in the PCR, the elements of 'Curatorial Review' and 'Significance' seemed most relevant. Curatorial Review looks at a number of aspects from a curatorial perspective including the range of a collection in terms of breadth and quality, curatorial opinion, comparison with similar local and national collections, and acquisition details. It provides a factual summary of the collection, including quantitative and qualitative information, and highlights any unusual or notable objects. Significance takes into account local,

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[1] Available online at http://i.dmtrk.com/CmpDoc/2008/479/270_collections-review-in-the-north-west.pdf

regional and national significance and considers factors such as uniqueness and historical importance.

Renaissance East Midlands (REM) also published relevant techniques in their 'Reviewing Significance' publication. Their approach to collections review has two strands, one of which is based on the Australian significance model and incorporates a significance assessment process. This strand of the review assesses a collection or individual objects for significance in terms of provenance, uniqueness, visual and sensory impact, condition, historical meaning, and exploitability (i.e. potential for research or education). Assessing these criteria in the course of a review facilitates the production of a statement of significance for the object and/or collection. REM has made available a significance assessment grid and a statement of significance template via Collections Link. These were considered potentially useful resources for the Pacific Review Project to help generate Collections Level Descriptions (CLDs) on completion of the review process.

Another successful collections review project of particular note is the review conducted by University College London from 2007 to 2009[2]. This was on a much larger scale than the PCR in terms of number of objects, subject areas, staffing, and timescale. UCL aimed to produce a broad overview of all aspects of collections care, use and significance. Their approach involved a clear system of grading on thirteen different review categories. Objects tended to be looked at in groups based on their location in store. Replicating this approach was unrealistic for the PCR as it would have required greater staff resources and time. It was felt the quantitative approach of the model could present a challenge to the fulfillment of the learning and knowledge sharing aspects of the project.

It was seen as potentially useful to consider the UCL grading system and their recommendations for building a review framework when producing CLDs. The UCL toolkit suggests that a unique review framework can be constructed by looking at project aims and objectives, working out the kind of information needed to make them workable, and breaking these down into meaningful categories.
Categories suggested for the PCR project were as follows:
  - Research: Assess whether a collection is currently used or has been used in research, has potential use, or has little potential.
  - Historical and Intellectual Significance: Ask if the collection has international, national, or institutional significance in terms of connections to collectors, events, the development of a discipline, and such like.
  - Uniqueness: Are there objects or groups of objects in the collection that are unique or rare? This can be in the world, UK, Scotland, or within the particular institution.

A further category emerged as a priority area after talking with staff at partner institutions. This category related to the storage of objects so would not be included in a CLD but would lead to recommendations for future work and could inform future funding proposals. The additional category can be defined as follows:

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[2] UCL collections review toolkit is available online
http://www.ucl.ac.uk/museums/research/review/documents/CR_Toolkit_Final

- Storage space: Assess whether boxes or shelves are overfilled, whether they are grouped with objects from same geographical region, and whether sacred or secret items are stored appropriately. Also check if storage materials are conservation grade or if old materials need to be replaced.

Case Study: Trialling our method

Building upon initial research of other review methodologies summarised above, a trial review was carried out on the Hawaiian Islands collection at National Museums Scotland (NMS). This collection numbers just under 100 artefacts, of which over half are status objects.

The time spent on the trial review falls into three categories. The first category is research, which was conducted through consultation of primary sources of documentation and extensive reading. The second category is store time, which was time spent in the National Museums Collections Centre by Chantal Knowles (CK) and Eve Haddow (EH) looking at artefacts. The third element is the updating of data held on NMS's collections management system. Research and store time fed into this part of the review. At the beginning of the review process data was exported from NMS's collections management system into a spreadsheet, referred to as the 'datasheet', and data was inputted onto this to be imported back into the collections management system later.

A detailed record was kept of all activities carried out as part of the review and is available for consultation. This record is accompanied by a personal learning log which has been updated on a regular basis. To summarise, the time spent on reviewing the Hawaiian Islands collections at NMS can be broken down as follows:

Days spent in store: 1.5 days plus extra hour checking location of barkcloth samples (12 hours)
Time spent updating data: 4.5 working days (33 hours)
Research time: 3.5 working days (25 hours)
Total: 9.5 days + 1.5 days generating Collections Level Descriptions (81 hours)

Evaluation

Set out below is an evaluation of the trial of our review methodology including suggested actions that were given for going forward with the project.

Time spent in store
Looking at objects in the museum store was an important mechanism for learning. Knowledge was developed from looking at objects but more specifically from listening to CK's commentary while looking at objects.

EH and CK spent a total of 1.5 days in the stores. This amounted to less time actually looking at artefacts than originally anticipated. This time would understandably be increased for larger collections and so for particularly large collections it may still be unrealistic to anticipate being able to look at everything. Reviewing the bark cloth was the most time consuming task as it involved unfolding large textiles. This should be factored in when reviewing other collections which contain a large proportion of textiles. It was agreed that it could have been a more

efficient use of time to type up all notes onto the datasheet in store rather than noting them by hand to be typed up back in the office later.

After meeting with colleagues in the Collections Services department to discuss the datasheet later in the review process, it emerged that it would have been beneficial to record object dimensions and materials while in store. As set out in the opening discussion of other reviews and review methodology, this type of data was not a priority for our review. However, information on materials has since been added to the datasheet and, where time constraints allow, data on the dimensions of artefacts could be added in the course of future reviews. However, recording this type of data for larger collections of objects may not be possible as time constraints could force a sacrifice in terms of focus on other areas of the review.

While in store, improved storage needs were highlighted as a priority requirement for artefacts, specifically three feather capes, one of which is on long term loan. There were also trays which had been over packed during a store decant.

Research
Quantifying research time spent on a specific collection is more challenging than recording store time or that spent adding data. One afternoon per week has been set aside for reading and research for the duration of the project. Reading and research forms a key part of the learning element of the project. In addition to this scheduled time, material is regularly consulted on an ad hoc basis. Due to the broad scope of the project, not all allotted research time will be spent reading material related to the specific collections area being reviewed at that particular point of the project. It is important to continue this approach as the purpose of the whole project in terms of the development of subject knowledge is to learn about multiple areas of the Pacific rather than to become a specialist in one island group.

Reflecting on the Hawaiian Islands collections review, it is anticipated that there will always be more time required to search for reading material the first time a particular geographical region comes into focus. Once a bibliography and background knowledge has been built up for a particular region, this will be useful for the reviews at all partner institutions. Time was spent during the Hawaiian review becoming familiar with other relevant sources of information at NMS such as registers of specimens, day books, and supplementary files. Again, it is likely this will always be most time consuming on the first consultation at each institution.

Updating of data
The addition of data to the datasheet has been the most time consuming part of the review process. It was not possible to meet with NMS Collections Services to discuss the data transfer until after the review process had begun. Following this meeting, the time spent manipulating data greatly increased. Some previous work had to be amended and there were also aspects of the data to be added which had been postponed until after this meeting. A discussion should be held with those responsible for collections management at each museum to ensure that the work of the project fits into their approach prior to any collections review at partner institutions.

There are several other ways in which it may be possible to save time spent on data manipulation in future reviews. A priority is for EH to be trained to allow permission to enter data directly onto each institution's collections management system. This way information can

be directly uploaded and immediately available. Although using the datasheet facilitates comparison of data and allows a block import back onto the database useful for certain fields, the multiple fields can become confusing to navigate. This was exacerbated by a need for the inclusion of differing columns for new and old data, thus creating a datasheet double the size. Additionally, exporting from Adlib does not export multiple entries for one field so it became necessary to flick between the datasheet and relevant Adlib records. Again this can become confusing and time consuming. Another way to save time on data entry is mentioned above and that is to enter data directly onto the datasheet in store.

As the review progressed, material was generated which could be added to the supplementary files for objects. Rather than spending a large amount of time adding to existing files and creating new ones, this is a task which can be carried out at a later date by a curatorial volunteer.

Looking Forward

The trial review of the Hawaiian Island collection at NMS achieved the following:
- The improvement of Adlib records and generation of material to be added to supplementary files relating to the collection
- Identification of improved storage needs for certain artefacts
- The development of subject knowledge by the project curator and improved confidence in working with Hawaiian material
- An overview of the highlights of the Hawaiian material at NMS as well as key collectors and links to other collections

The following suggestions were made for improvement of the review process:
- Type data in directly to the datasheet verbatim while in museum stores in order to save time
- Receive training in editing the Collections Management System so that some data can be updated straight away rather than awaiting a Collections Services import from Excel
- Record object materials and dimensions in museum store as these are often missing from records
- Develop a volunteer project plan so that a volunteer can assist in updating supplementary files

The trial review facilitated the generation of a Collections Level Description of the Hawaiian Islands collection. This drew on existing models of CLDs from differing institutions and has utilised the REM Significance Assessment grid and the UCL review model as suggested above. The CLD is now ready to be incorporated into the NMS Collections Management System and included on the project website.

Combining the practices utilised in the trial review with suggested points for improvement allowed an effective methodology to be carried forward for the duration of the project.