

ICCROM-UNESCO PARTNERSHIP FOR THE PREVENTIVE CONSERVATION OF ENDANGERED MUSEUM COLLECTIONS IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

DOCUMENTATION OF COLLECTIONS SUMMARY OF FINAL REPORT 2007

In the last 25 years, the number of museums and the size of collections have been growing rapidly while resources are spread more and more thinly. In developing countries, for many museums the situation is overwhelming, with often no access to the network of resources and expertise which exist in other countries.

UNESCO and ICCROM have decided to combine their know-how, experience and networks in order to contribute significantly to museum capacity in ensuring the preservation and access to their collections. The actions will focus on fundamental preventive conservation issues, in particular, the need for reliable and dynamic documentation of collections, the need to identify preventive conservation priorities, the need to improve preservation and access of collections in storage, and the need for effective emergency preparation and planning.

In the area of 'Documentation of collections', the objective is:

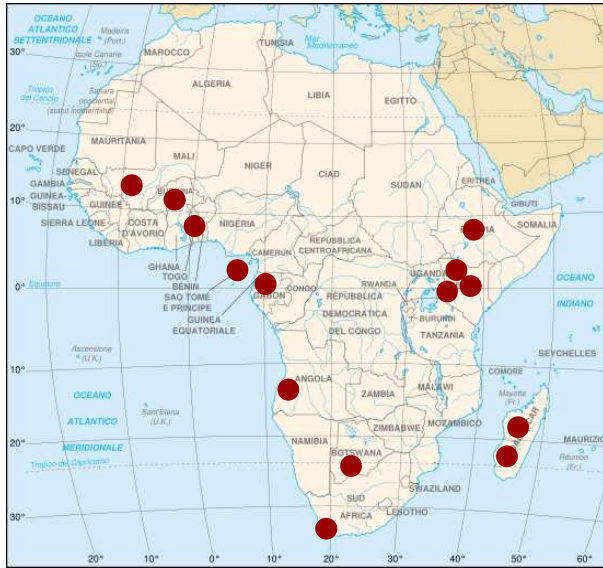
"To provide smaller museums from developing countries with the necessary skills and tools to analyze their current documentation systems and to guide them through a user-friendly method for computerized documentation systems for their collections. Inexpensive, powerful, easy-to-use and efficient software should be identified and adapted to museum needs."

ACTIVITIES IN 2007

1) The first part of the project consisted in carrying out an **evaluation of the various initiatives and documentation systems for museum collections** which have taken place during the last 20 years in the smaller museums in developing countries. This would then allow orientating better our next actions. Considering our limited funding, it was decided to undertake the survey in one region only.

(a) SURVEY

ICCROM and UNESCO asked for the expertise of the *Ecole du Patrimoine Africain* – EPA (School of African Heritage) which prepared and carried out the survey from April to September 2007. The survey was purposely limited to 14 national museums in 11 different countries of Sub-Saharan Africa, English, French, and Portuguese-speaking. The selected museums represented a variety of collections and experienced various initiatives and documentation systems for museum collections.



Musée Historique d'Abomey, Benin
 Musée National du Burkina Faso
 Musée national des Arts et Traditions du Gabon
 Robben Island Museum, South Africa
 National Museum of Botswana
 National Museums of Kenya, Kenya
 Fort Jesus Museum, Kenya
 Kisumu Museum, Kenya
 Musée régional de Huila, Angola
 Museo nacional de São Tomé
 National Museum, Ethiopia
 Musée du Palais d'Andafiavaratra, Madagascar
 Musée de l'Université d'Antananarivo
 Madagascar, Musée national du Mali

Results of the survey

Ten out of the 14 selected museums¹ replied and provided the information below:

		Number of objects	Number on objects	Registered in accession register (AR)	Master file	Index files	Other	Computerized
1	Abomey, Benin	1400	Yes	Yes	Yes	4 incomplete	MR	0 (Object ID)
2	Ouagadougou Burkina Faso	About 6000	Yes	Yes	Yes	Non	MR	300. Stopped (Object ID)
3	Libreville, Gabon	2400	Yes	No AR	No	No	Movement Register (MR)	419 (ActiMuseo)
4	Robben Isl. South Africa	About 6000	?	There is AR	No	No	MR	Very few. Stopped (Logosflow on MS Access)
5	Kisumu, Kenya	About 2500	No	No AR	No	No	No	-
6	Huila, Angola	About 3500	Partially	No AR	Incomplete (50%)	3 incomplete (50%)	No	No
7	Sao Tomé	About 1400	No	No AR	No	No	No	30 (Word)
8	Madagasc. 1	About 1300		No AR	No	No	MR	Few. Word (destroyed)
9	Madagasc. 2	7000	Yes	No AR	Oui	No	MR	10%. Excel
10	Bamako, Mali	About 10000	90%	90%	Yes (90%)	No	MR	FileMakerPro (current, 3668 soit + 1/3)

¹ Fort Jesus Museum and the National Museums of Kenya were not considered for this study because of the size of their collections (more than 500,000 objects). The National Museum of Botswana was contacted several times but did not reply.

Weak points :

- 50% of surveyed museums do not have an accession register
- In many museums, no staff is dedicated to and responsible for the documentation of collections
- Because of staff mobility, trained personnel is often allocated other tasks than documentation
- Lack of support from hierarchy
- Surveyed museums do not see the need for documentation because the museums have very few activities.
- 90% of museums who have attempted computerization failed.

Main reasons include

- ✓ no internet access, therefore no update of the anti-virus and of the software
- ✓ 2 software only (out of the 6 software which were introduced in those museums) were considered satisfying and have future prospects in the institution
- ✓ Lack of maintenance (material failures)
- ✓ Poor training to use the software (too short)
- ✓ Lack of follow-up and assistance during the implementation of the documentation system

However, it is good to know that:

- ✓ 9/10 museums that replied have computer equipment in normal operating condition
- ✓ 8/10 museums that replied have a staff who was trained in documentation
- ✓ All museums that replied have electricity.

Conclusion of the survey

There is a real problem associated with the implementation of computerized documentation systems in small museums. The conditions for their successful implementation are not met in terms of maintenance of equipment, staff training and initial state of documentation. Museums are often faced with backlog situations which are difficult to analyze or solve. Computerized systems are then wrongly seen as the answer/solution to these situations. Furthermore, going from a manual to a computerized system is not an easy process. It needs time, work, reading, tests, communication, decision making, standardisation, typing skills, numbered and accessioned artefacts, etc.

Another key problem is that smaller museums seem to be little active: They do not feel the necessity for a documentation system, whether manual or computerized, because they have few activities which require the use of the collections (temporary exhibitions, research, etc.) Therefore, there is a contradiction between the desire of having a computerised documentation system and a real need for one.

In parallel to the survey of museums, an evaluation of the software used was carried out.

(b) EVALUATION OF SOFTWARE

Two of the six software used, or which had been used by these museums, were tested and evaluated:

- OIR (former Object-ID)
- and ActiMuseo.

ActiMuseo is a professional and complete collection management software, for active museums. OIR is a basic software, with limited research facilities, adapted to museums with no great activity and working rarely on their collections.

OIR, which is free, could be used by small museums which have little activity, but one would need to make sure that OIR can be exported to other database formats in case the user wishes to change to a real collection management software. Smaller museums should not be condemned to limit their activity because the software they are using is itself limited. Smaller museums could expand and inactive museums become active. Before advising systems such as OIR, it is important to check their export possibilities. In the case of OIR, in its present version, the software does not seem to have any perspectives of evolution.

Comparatively, ActiMuseo can better meet the needs of managing an active museum, because of its subtlety, flexibility and capacities of evolution. ActiMuseo is planning to develop an Express window specifically designed for small museums in developing countries. If this is confirmed, it would make the software more user-friendly since the current number of fields can be discouraging to many professionals. Once they are familiar with the system, and as the need arises, museum documentation staff should be able to open more fields. Important to note that ActiMuseo is developed with FileMaker Pro, so its export facilities are greater than OIR.

2) The second part of the project consisted in an **evaluation and planning meeting** at EPA in Porto-Novo, Benin, in September 2007, to discuss the results of the survey and to decide on further steps for the ICCROM-UNESCO initiative. The meeting benefited from the participation of some of the surveyed museum staff.

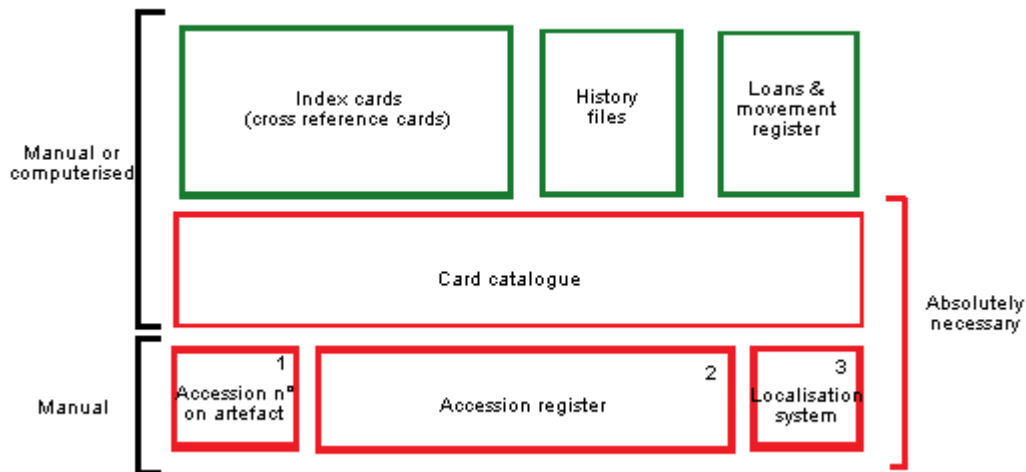
The following recommendations were completed and discussed during the evaluation meeting:

1. A primary goal should be to ensure that smaller museums can actively engage in facing and solving their documentation backlog situation. No museum starts from scratch, and the task of putting order in former documentation situation may sound daunting to many.

In 2008, ICCROM-UNESCO initiative will focus on the following minimum standards to achieve for all museums:

All the museum artefacts are numbered and registered in a hard backed, bound accession register. An appropriate location system relates the museum documentation system with the physical location of each museum artefact.

The diagram below, showing the different elements of a documentation system, shows that the accession register is an essential document and **the accession number is the basis of the whole documentation system**, whether manual or computerised.



2. Ensure the involvement and support of Heads of museums:

Heads of museums are engaged in the process and aware of the importance of an updated and complete documentation system, whether manual or computerised. They give the necessary impulse and ensure that the work is carried out to its completion.

3. Avoid double initiatives:

Any initiative in an institution takes into account other initiatives in progress in the institution itself or in the country.

4. Ensure sustainability of computerized documentation systems

Make sure that the maintenance of the computer equipment is included in any project, i.e.:

- ✓ availability of in-house computer scientist or possibility of out-sourcing expertise, and funding for equipment maintenance
- ✓ availability of internet connection OR other system to update anti-viruses
- ✓ Phased training and assistance provided by the organisation who is distributing the software or method. Initial training is not enough. In the initiatives carried out by EPA, the most successful were those for which there was personalised follow-up over several months. It seems that a team cannot be left alone to tackle the immense task of inventorying and documenting. In the case of the KIT initiative, the insufficiency or lack of technical support was regretted.

ACTIVITIES IN 2008

As a result, in 2008, UNESCO and ICCROM proposed to develop and test guidelines and recommendations which would allow the staff of the smaller museum to analyze existing museum documentation and to define the most appropriate actions to upgrade their documentation system to the minimum standards described above (in 1.)

The actions will include:

- (a) confirm or adjust the relevance of the results of the survey made in Sub-Saharan Africa in relation to other contexts, in particular Latin America and Asia.
- (b) explore what information and tools are already widely available (literature, web resources) in the area of documentation system upgrading.
- (c) develop an approach and related tools to guide the analysis of existing documentation systems/situations and the implementation of the basic steps to improve or correct the situation.

The production of these guidelines will include French, English and Spanish versions and will hopefully be available online.

- (d) select 1-2 museums in each of three regions (Africa, Asia and Latin America) in close consultation with UNESCO and the national authorities, to carry out in 2009 the assessment and improvement work.

PROJECT PARTNERS AND CONTACT PERSONS

EPA – Ecole du Patrimoine Africain, Porto Novo, Benin

- Alain Godonou, Managing Director
- Anne Ambourouè Avaro (Author of the final report), Publishing Dept. Coordinator

ICCROM – International Center for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property, Rome, Italy

- Catherine Antomarchi, Unit Director, Collections Unit
- Isabelle Verger, Project Assistant, Collections Unit
- Gaël de Guichen, Advisor to the Director-General of ICCROM

UNESCO, Paris, France

- Laurent Lévi-Strauss, Deputy Director for the Division of Cultural Heritage
- Nao Hayashi-Denis, Assistant Programme Specialist, Section of Museums and Cultural Objects, Division of Cultural Objects and Intangible Heritage

Date: June 20, 2008

**For any comments and suggestions, please contact Isabelle Verger,
iv@iccrom.org**