

Research Guidelines for Indian Artifacts and Subject Matter

Plains Indian Museum, Buffalo Bill Center of the West, Cody, Wyoming

The following information is useful in performing your own research, but also for purposes of providing complete and accurate information to other parties and institutions (museums, galleries, collectors, appraisers, insurance etc.).

Step 1 – Documenting Your Artifact

- **Measurements:** Measure the artifact, overall height then width and depth (thickness) in both inches and centimeters.
- **Materials:** Describe the material used to make the artifact as accurately and precisely as possible. If unsure of a material, add a question mark in parentheses (?) or add "possibly sinew," etc.
- **Artifact Name:** Provide a descriptive name for the artifact as best you can, either based on observation, or other sources (books, catalogs, museum exhibits, museum records).
- **Inscriptions, attachments, or accessories:** Record any tags, notes, or writing on or with the artifact. Also note any containers or unattached pieces. Copy inscriptions exactly as they appear and note locations of inscriptions or attachments.
- **Provenance:** Develop a provenance (ownership history). Indicate when, where, how and from whom the artifact was acquired. If possible, go back to the source of this information (the seller, owner etc.) and obtain prior ownership information. Interview people who might have known the individual and the artifact – show them photographs if possible. Even general information is useful. Have copies of bill of sale, receipts, letters, notes, photographs, newspaper or magazine articles/advertisements, journals, etc. that relate to the artifact and your acquisition of the artifact.
- **Exhibitions:** List exhibitions in which artifact may have appeared. Also research exhibitions of similar artifacts to learn more about the type of artifacts. Most exhibitions have catalogues, brochures, label copy, and other information that is useful in research.
- **Photo Documentation:** Videotapes are useful for your own needs in documenting collections for insurance purposes, but still photographs are most useful when dealing with museums, collectors, galleries or researchers. Photograph front and back of artifact, making sure to record overall appearance as well as any significant details. Professional photographs are not always necessary as long as photographs are clear, focused, of useable size, and in color. A ruler placed in the frame for scale is also useful. The date the image was taken, and by whom, is also needed in case there is a change in the condition of the artifact.
- **Opinions of Authenticity:** Provide copies of any prior opinions regarding authenticity, any other examinations, or relevant correspondence relating to the artifact.
- **Value:** List the selling price and year that the artifact was purchased, and from whom. The selling price may or may not be an indication of the artifact's current value. A

qualified appraiser can provide you with a value for insurance and other purposes. While the Buffalo Bill Center of the West does not perform appraisals or valuations of any kind, a list of suggested appraisers is available.

Step 2 – Performing Your Own Research

Many museums have limited resources to provide research time on artifact identifications, and may charge for this service.

Research: It is a good idea to start with broad-based research of the subject matter that is related to your research topic or artifact. Search relevant records, and obtain background information from general sources such as library books, magazines, newspapers, journals, public records, historical societies, internet and other sources. Auction records are also of use in researching like artifacts. Local libraries are a good place to start, and can often assist with loans of books from larger libraries. Libraries around the nation may fulfill requests for research inquiries regarding specific subjects and can provide you with a listing of titles. Libraries and museums will also allow you to make research appointments (be sure to call ahead of time for approval and scheduling) to research your subject. Museums or galleries may have similar types of objects to which you can compare yours.

If you are able, purchase books that you feel are most helpful so that you can start your own research library with available texts. The more background information you have, the better your overall understanding of the artifact as a collections piece and within its original context. You may find examples of similar artifacts within books, catalogues, etc. for comparison. If not, you can usually photocopy relevant information unless it is from a fragile source, like a photograph or original document. With all photocopies or notations, be sure to write the source including title, author, date, photographer, catalogue or accession numbers and any other important notes on the photocopy.

There are numerous websites to check as well, but beware of relevance of information. See if the individual (s) are affiliated with an organization or if their qualifications are listed. Anyone can have his or her own website, so you want to make sure their information is accurate and objective. Many websites will offer bibliographies for their sources of information or further reading. Make your search as specific as possible.

Bibliography: Keep a current bibliography of all sources investigated, and photocopy title pages and relevant information, including web pages (print out). If you need help putting together a proper bibliography, the *Chicago Manual of Style* is a good resource, as are other style manuals. This information is also available on the web.

Step 3 – Caring for Your Artifact

Conservation/Condition: Provide copies of treatment reports for any conservation work (cleaning, repair and other treatments) or restoration work (replacements or additions). If no work has been done, list any known damage, condition problems, missing areas, general state of the artifact and dates when any damage/problems occurred. The Buffalo Bill Center of the West can provide you with a list of qualified conservators, as well as general suggestions on storage and handling. When in doubt, store item safely in a container that will protect it from extreme changes in temperature and humidity, and keep away from light and heat sources. Handle only when necessary. Recommended conservation care websites include:

- <http://bacc.org/> Balboa Art Conservation Center
- <http://www.cci-icc.gc.ca/index-eng.aspx> Canadian Conservation Institute

Do not attempt to clean or repair your artifact as this may alter its condition and will change the integrity of the object, and may contribute to permanent damage. Always consult a qualified conservator, or a collections department staff member in a museum for guidelines.