CIDOC Fact Sheet No. 3

1. Recommendations for shooting identity photographs

"Photographs are of vital importance in identifying and recovering stolen objects. In addition to overall views, take close-ups of inscriptions, markings, and any damage or repairs. If possible, include a scale or object of known size in the image." (ICOM / Getty Object ID Check List)

CIDOC fact sheets are produced to disseminate, in a simple format, information on aspects of museum documentation. This fact sheet is concerned with the methods used for photographing objects so that they can be readily identified. These recommendations may not apply to all cases. However, there are some rules generally accepted in the museum community. As this fact sheet can only give summarized information, it concludes with some literature for further reading.

2. General considerations

Each object in the collection can be associated with one or more images, including identity images . The image is a picture identification technique that is part of the documentation of the object. Its main purpose is to reproduce the look of the piece in the most neutral and objective as possible in order to allow its unequivocal identification. Any other consideration aesthetics, photographic or technical school. In other words, a good image of identity is not necessarily pretty to see and will often not be suitable for publication in an exhibition catalog.

3. Visible Meta data

Wherever possible, the image of identification should include the following meta data:

- A rule or scale that allows the evaluation of the spacial dimensions. This scale should be on the same plane as the object.

- A colour chart for an image in color or grey tone reference chart for a black-white image.

- The inventory number of the object, clearly legible.

- The name of the photographer.

- The date of the shooting.

- The name of the institution

This information will be visible in the image but placed so that the object can be easily isolated by cropping. It is important to avoid shadows from labels and other elements encroaching on the space of the object.

Metadata should also be recorded in digital image files, however, some editing software may alter or even remove the information, so it is important that it remain visible in the image itself.

Meta data about the image is necessary to ensure the facilitate reuse of the images, their documentary value and respect of reproduction rights.

4. Composition

The shape and contour of each object should be clearly visible, without being interrupted by other items placed in front. The edge of prints, drawings and tables should be visible without being clipped.

Wherever possible, two-dimensional objects, paintings, prints, coins, etc., should be photographed orthogonally, without distortions due to parallax effects.

Three-dimensional objects, including coins, may require several shots at different angles. It is sometimes useful but not necessary to combine these views into a single image.

Include whenever possible details of inscriptions, repairs, damage, such as cracks, or any other distinctive features that will help to differentiate the object from similar items.

5. Techniques

The shooting can be performed with traditional or digital techniques. When using digital photography, use the highest practical resolution and store images in an uncompressed format whenever possible. Low resolution images suitable for Internet use can be prepared from high resolution reference images.

Keep a log of all photographs made. This should contain the identifiers of the objects photographed, the equipment used, technical details of the shooting, name of the photographer.

6. Storage

Store images in an appropriate environment, to ensure both preservation and accessibility. Make and store multiple copies in different locations. At least one copy should be stored off site, away from the collections.

7. Things to avoid

In general, avoid shots of groups of heterogeneous objects, with the exception of sets of objects that belong together: e.g. tea sets, pairs of shoes, burial objects, costumes, etc.

Avoid lighting effects that obscure the details of the object: reflections, shadows, light changes, etc.. The goal is neutral lighting that clearly reveals the nuances, details, textures and possible defects.

Avoid obscuring parts of objects by placing one object in front of another.

Avoid brightly coloured, textured or patterned backgrounds that can be distracting.

8. Suggestions for further reading

Bigras, Carl, *Lighting Methods for Photographing Museum Objects*, Canadian Conservation Institute, 2010