

Discovering physical objects: Meeting researchers' needs

Summary

October 2008



The study of physical objects and artefacts plays a core part in research in a wide range of subjects and disciplines. Researchers need to discover and gain access to objects, as well as to publications and the data relating to them. Museums have traditionally played an important role in supporting research, but sustaining these levels of support is becoming increasingly difficult as curators face increasing demands on their time.

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Enlightenment Gallery 2003 © The Trustees of the British Museum



Researchers' needs

The Research Information Network report *Discovering physical objects: Meeting researchers' needs* looks at how researchers in four disciplines (archaeology, art history, earth sciences, and social and economic history) find out about collections of objects relevant to their research and at how museums and other organisations are trying to assist them in their search.

The evidence gathered by the report, shows that:

- researchers want online finding aids that enable them to plan their visits to museums and collections and to see and, where possible, to handle objects for themselves
- researchers use a variety of methods to find out about objects that might be relevant to their research, but contact with curatorial staff is crucial
- most researchers are unaware of the online catalogues that have been, and are being, developed by museums and related organisations
- researchers believe that there is a lack of consistency in the arrangements that different museums make for direct access to objects.



What researchers need above all is online access to records in museum and collection databases to be provided as quickly as possible, whatever the perceived imperfections or gaps in the records. This is an essential first step towards improving discovery services that will benefit researchers as well as other users.

Researchers' traditional reliance on the expertise of specialist curatorial staff as the key finding aid is no longer sustainable due to the pressure which their extended roles now place on their time. Once records are available online, technological developments that allow researchers and others to easily add to and amend the content of these records have the potential to help all museums and other collections to improve the quality of their records.

A Parthian horseman,
leaded bronze belt buckle,
Parthian, 2nd-3rd century
AD © The Trustees of the
British Museum

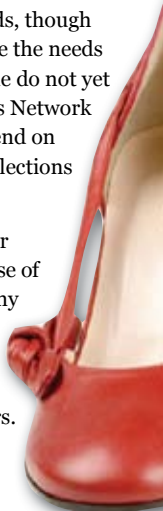


Museums' perspectives

A number of museums have begun to develop online finding aids, though specifically our study suggests that in doing this, only a few have the needs of researchers in mind. The UK-wide services currently available do not yet provide the detailed information researchers need. The People's Network Discover service has great potential, but its usefulness will depend on the willingness and ability of individual museums and other collections to make their records available online.

The report shows that many museums seem reluctant to put their records online: because of large cataloguing backlogs, and because of concerns about records being inaccurate and/or incomplete. Many curators over-estimate both the resources they need to make existing information useful to researchers and the technical barriers to putting their records online in their current state and they also under-estimate the value of those records to researchers.

Technological developments offer opportunities for cross searching, for making records findable by Google and other



search engines, for linking to associated documentation, and for integrating museum catalogues with other resources, such as library catalogues. In order to realise the potential of the beneficial changes that are now being offered by technological and related developments, there needs to be a change in culture within the Museum world, a change to encourage more openness, more sharing and more collaboration.

The report recommends that the Museums Libraries and Archives Council (MLA) should work with funders, the Collections Trust and other agencies to encourage and support projects that develop and enhance quality online catalogues and encourage collaboration between researchers and museum staff. Better communication and collaboration between researchers and curators offers huge potential for enhancing information and services that will benefit researchers and the wider community.



Court Shoe, 2005 © Discovery Museum, Tyne & Wear Museums

The way forward

Following discussions with both curators and researchers, the report suggests that:

- 1.** All museums and other collections should make the research data in their content management systems available online as soon as possible, without waiting until backlogs are cleared or records improved to levels of perceived ‘perfection’.
- 2.** Museums and other collections should develop and publish on their websites a ‘researchers’ charter’, including clear policies on the arrangements for visits by researchers and covering other areas such as the support and facilities available for browsing collections, handling objects, sampling and testing, and loans.
- 3.** All online catalogues and portals should make clear on their website’s home page the nature and scope of their records.
- 4.** When dealing with backlogs and enhancing existing records, curators should establish, with advice from researchers where possible, clear criteria for determining whether and in what circumstances collection level or group, as distinct from item-level, descriptions are appropriate.

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Curator and staff at work: (left to right) Kent Tomey (Clun Museum Curator), Jane Thompson Webb (BMAG: Collection Care Officer), Anthea Henton (Shropshire Flying Collections Assistant) © Shropshire County Council and Renaissance West Midlands



5. Online catalogues should, wherever possible, include images, notes about and links to, sources of relevant contextual information.
6. Researchers should be encouraged to submit amendments and enhancements to catalogue records, and curators should establish systems for handling such input from researchers, including using Web 2.0 technologies where appropriate.
7. All online museum and collection databases should be made available for cross searching through the Collections Trust/Culture 24 Integrated Architecture Project.
8. Museums and other organisations should take active steps to make researchers aware of the nature and value of their current and new online finding aids. Museums need to work with collections management software suppliers to ensure that their records are findable through Google and other search engines.
9. MLA and Collections Trust should work with funders and other agencies to encourage and support projects to develop and enhance high-quality online catalogues and particularly those that involve collaboration between researchers and curators responsible for several collections.
10. MLA and other agencies should work with museums and libraries to explore the potential for linking databases of objects and of textual information.

A full copy of the report is available at **www.rin.ac.uk/objects**

More information

The Research Information Network will facilitate discussion on the implementation of these recommendations and welcomes the support of interested organisations. Please contact Sarah Gentleman, email sarah.gentleman@rin.ac.uk or telephone 020 7412 7214 for more information.

About the Research Information Network

Who we are

The Research Information Network has been established by the higher education funding councils, the research councils, and the national libraries in the UK. We investigate how efficient and effective the information services provided for the UK research community are, how they are changing, and how they might be improved for the future. We help to ensure that researchers in the UK benefit from world-leading information services, so that they can sustain their position as among the most successful and productive researchers in the world.

What we work on

We provide policy, guidance and support, focusing on the current environment in information research and looking at future trends. Our work focuses on five key themes: search and discovery, access and use of information services, scholarly communications, digital content and e-research, collaborative collection management and storage.

How we communicate

As an independent voice, we can create debates that lead to real change. We use our reports and other publications, events and workshops, blogs, networks and the media to communicate our ideas. All our **publications** are available on our website at **www.rin.ac.uk**



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