
revisiting collections: revealing significance

an ALM London project



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revisiting collections

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REVEALING SIGNIFICANCE**

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revisiting collections: revealing significance

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The Arab Hall, Leighton House Museum. Photographer: Andrew Ward.

The project

The *Revisiting Collections* project springs from ALM London's commitment to supporting London's archives, libraries and museums to develop innovative, but sustainable approaches to making the richness of their collections accessible for enjoyment and engagement by all Londoners.

The project focuses on the ways in which researching and documenting newly understood information about the objects in existing, 'traditional' museum collections can be used as the basis for reaching out to culturally and ethnically diverse audiences within the capital. The approach was influenced by the findings of *Reflections*, a London Museums Agency study conducted in 2003. This showed that many London museum staff felt their collections lacked material that could be used to make links with and serve a diverse audience because their museums hadn't done enough to collect contemporary objects directly from minority groups.

In addition, while many of the museums had run community focused outreach and exhibition projects, it was clear that the information generated by this work was seldom incorporated into the museums' organisational archive or used to enrich collections documentation.

Revisiting Collections starts from the premise that there can't be a generalist or specialist museum collection in London that doesn't in some way reflect the city's centuries' long position at the heart of a network of worldwide exploration, trade (including the trade in human beings) and imperialism. The project seeks to explore how this has impacted on every aspect of the capital's wealth and daily life, on science, aesthetics, technology and culture, and what that reveals about the intertwining histories of our contemporary world city's diverse population.

As indicated in *Delivering Shared Heritage*, the report of the Mayor's Commission into African and

Asian Heritage published by the Greater London Authority in July 2005, much research has been done, and much is ongoing, to show how London's place in this international network has been reflected by the presence in the city of communities and individuals from all parts of the world, from earliest times.

Less concerted research has been done to explore the impact on the objects used and traded by Londoners of all classes; the objects that now reside in our museums. *Revisiting Collections* approaches these objects with a view to revealing the information inherent in their materials, design and manufacture that demonstrates an historically world wide context. The pilot project provides a methodology for recording this information and also for recording each object's history of associations and usage, both in and out of the museum context. Beyond that, the method allows for the capture of the layers of meaning and significance that each object might hold for viewers from different social and cultural backgrounds.

An additional impetus for the project was the awareness that museum documentation is often used more as an internal collection management tool than as a way of revealing rich layers of information about collections to potential users. Even when catalogue databases are posted online, the available information can be thin and basic, with limited tools and vocabularies for searching. Fuller information might be held in related electronic or paper files, but here access has to be mediated through the museum staff. A key objective of the *Revisiting Collections* project is to advocate the value of collection documentation as a genuinely democratic tool for access.

The project was launched in autumn 2004 with input from a steering group whose expertise included collection based research, interpretation, management, and documentation and the study of Black and minority history in London. Representatives from the Museum of London kept *Revisiting Collections* in step



Artist in residence Karimah Bint Daoud found starting points for her work in the 'revisited' interpretations of Leighton House Museum's Arab Hall.



MoDA's 2005 *Outrageous Wallpaper* exhibition included visitors' responses that will now become part of the collection documentation. One viewer felt this 1928 Sanderson paper had "depths and highlights that could keep your imagination in overdrive forever".



Early 17th century tiles from north western Iran, now on the walls of the Arab Hall in Leighton House Museum. The figures are shown at leisure, eating and drinking in a garden setting.

with complementary projects being undertaken by the London Museum Hub and funded by *Renaissance in the Regions*.

The project brief was put out to tender in November 2004 and consultants Val Bott, Jon Newman and Alice Grant were appointed in January 2005. Because of budgetary restrictions the project had to be substantially completed within the financial year 2005-2006 and this impacted on its scope, the methodology adopted and the outcomes.

The brief required the team to develop a methodology to be rolled out and enable museums:

- To conduct research into their existing collections and identify objects or groups of objects that offer material evidence that contributes to our understanding of the interlinking histories of a culturally diverse population.
- To make these objects and information about them accessible to a wide range of users through re-documentation and ultimately re-labelling, re-display and re-interpretation.
- To use this enhanced understanding of the relevance of their existing collections as a platform for proactive work with new audiences.

The consultants were required:

- To research and develop a methodology to interrogate museum collections and documentation systems in order to reveal new ways into an understanding of the meaning and significance of museum objects to a culturally diverse audience. As part of their fact finding to inform the project, the consultants were required to identify examples of programmes of work in which a rigorous approach to documentation has enabled museums or similar organisations to create culturally accessible services.
- To test and further refine the methodology by piloting within two museums' collections, with a view to serving one or more ethnic or cultural minority groups.

In a competitive process the two lead partner museums selected for involvement in the research and development stage of the project were Kingston Museum and Leighton House Museum. It was later agreed to involve a third partner, the Museum of Domestic Design and Architecture (MoDA) to 'dry run' the developed methodology. Funding was made available to the three museums to compensate for some of the staff time spent on the project.

The steering group was clear that the consultants and museums should work with community based focus groups to investigate what information individuals from minority cultural groups might seek to know about the origins, history and meaning of objects held in London's museums.

Because of the time constraints it was necessary for the consultants to undertake the desk research phase of the project at the same time as developing the methodology. In addition it was felt necessary to restrict the focus groups to individuals that already had some connection with the two lead partner museums. The two groups were drawn from a variety of cultural backgrounds.

Working with these small groups the consultants developed the stimulation and recording of individual viewer's responses to single or grouped objects as a key focus of the project.

A full description of the consultants' approach and work with the partner museums is given in their report *Revisiting Collections: discovering new meanings for a diverse audience*, downloadable from the ALM London website.

The toolkit developed by the consultants 'for the capture of information to enhance the meaning and significance of museum collections for new and culturally diverse audiences' is also downloadable from the website and forms the second part of this publication.

The outcomes

The project has generated a toolkit that offers:

- A prompt and tool for curators to re-assess known information about an object, its history, its owners and its users and to bring this into the documentation record.
- A prompt for curators to gather and record full information about an object's history of use and its users from donors and other sources when first acquiring material and during any later updating of the documentation record.
- A prompt and tool for curators to open up collections for inspection and comment by a multiplicity of viewers, and for recording their individual responses regarding the personal and wider cultural significance of objects.

The toolkit is simple and straightforward, but using it can make a marked difference to how collections are approached and understood. All three of the partner museums confirm that using it as an overlay to their existing documentation systems has been challenging and useful and has changed their ways of thinking about both documentation and interpretation.

All agreed on the value of a tool that can bring external perspectives on objects into the museum record. The curators and their colleagues valued giving respect and prominence to other voices when interpreting their museums' collections and felt that in the future they would be likely to use this aspect of the *Revisiting Collections* toolkit to capture outcomes from community based outreach, project or exhibition work.

All welcomed the project's prompting and freeing time for them both to re-examine the paper trail of information about objects within their own collections and to refer to external sources for specialist expertise.

At Kingston much of the *Revisiting Collections* work centred on the museum's costume collection. Research into existing history files gave the museum

exciting new insights into the collection. This revealed the South Asian trading connections of the owner of a pair of 19th century embroidered waistcoats and significant links between Kingston and a Rumanian village, symbolised by the gift of some 19th century traditional dress.

The team at Leighton House Museum focussed primarily on the ceramics collection embedded within the house's famous Arab Hall. The *Revisiting Collections* approach is being used to inform re-interpretation of the Hall on the museum's website during the autumn of 2005. An Islamic artist in residence, working at the museum from July–November 2005, has incorporated her responses to the objects chosen for the project into her work, and Education Officer Alan Kirwan reports her finding "a wealth of starting points in the new interpretations".

In addition, all three museums saw considerable value in incorporating the learning points from *Revisiting Collections* into their acquisition policy and process. Kingston Museum is considering forming a community based panel to inform the museum's acquisition activity and decisions. MoDA will be more proactive in collecting contextual information from donors and other sources and incorporating this into the object record.

Taking the outcomes forward

In practical terms the project has made an exciting start and generated a hugely useful toolkit, which museums can adopt now to reassess how they approach the documentation process and how they use their existing documentation systems. For the pilot project to have succeeded in the longer term it is vital that its approach and outcomes become mainstreamed into standard documentation practice and supported by technical development. ALM London is delighted to be taking this forward in partnership with the MDA (formerly Museum Documentation Association), as part of MDA's *Collections for All* initiative, launched in September 2005.



Fragments of 19th century Rumanian male costume presented by a Walachian village mayor to Kingston in thanks for the donation of funds for medical relief in the early 1990s. Photographer: Keith Hathaway.

ALM London sees that there are project objectives which still need further development. In particular:

- More work needs to be done to investigate directly what Londoners and visitors from a diversity of backgrounds want to know about our museum collections. What intrinsic or supporting information needs to be researched and revealed to bring the objects to life and demonstrate relevance to individuals' personal or communal heritage?
- The toolkit needs to be further developed to offer scope for information that might be inherent or implicit in the object to be recorded and made searchable. This will include the significance of materials, trade routes, and world wide influences on design and manufacturing processes.
- Curators need further guidance towards locating sources of information and support that will help them identify and understand the relevance to a culturally diverse audience of materials, process, form and decorative styles.

Next steps:

ALM London and MDA have agreed to take the outcomes of *Revisiting Collections* forward in partnership.

During late 2005 and early 2006:

ALM London will host a facilitated 'brainstorming' event with an invited audience to investigate what individuals from a multiplicity of social, cultural, religious and ethnic backgrounds might want to know about the objects in museum collections, their origins, their design and function and their history of use and ownership.

The event will be used to explore how the methodology might be used to address every aspect of Londoner's diversity and to probe how best to tackle the physical, intellectual, educational, emotional, linguistic, social, cultural and economic barriers that obstruct equality of access both to collections and to full and rich information about their meaning and content.

Informed by the outcomes of the brainstorming event and supported by ALM London, MDA will undertake further piloting to refine and develop the methodology and toolkit in partnership with a small number of additional museums.

Under the banner of *Documentation for Diversity*, MDA will develop a web presence for the outcomes of the *Revisiting Collections* project and related work being undertaken elsewhere in the museum sector. The site will include a downloadable MDA fact sheet distilling the key points of the methodology. MDA will also develop a training module based on the *Revisiting Collections* toolkit.

Comment from MDA...

MDA is the UK's lead organisation on documentation and collection information management for museums. A key strand of our *Collections for All* advocacy campaign addresses the potential of documented information in helping museums to promote diversity through innovative approaches to the use of their collections.

The *Revisiting Collections* project has provided us with an opportunity to examine the potential, the challenges and the implications of using collection documentation in this way, and will make an important contribution to the ongoing development of SPECTRUM, the UK museum documentation standard.

In partnership with ALM London, we will be developing *Documentation for Diversity*, a new suite of products and services which will help curatorial staff to re-assess their documented information. This is an exciting development for MDA, and we are grateful to ALM London for their ongoing commitment to standards in collections information management.

Nick Poole, Director, MDA
www.mda.org.uk

revisiting collections

NEW INTERPRETATIONS AT LEIGHTON HOUSE MUSEUM



Artist in residence Karimah Bint Daoud.
Photographer: Olivia Woodhouse.

In 2005 Leighton House Museum took part in ALM's *Revisiting Collections* project. The museum had already begun the process of evaluating how it interpreted its collections and the knock on effects this had in terms of perception by diverse audiences. It was therefore a natural progression for Leighton House to address the issues raised by *Revisiting Collections*.

A key component in the success of the project was the ability of all services within the museum i.e. curatorial, education and front of house to work together and link with external focus groups in

meeting an identified target. The target in this instance being the appreciation of the house and its collections as products of culturally diverse exchanges and not merely the legacy of a narrowed vision of art history. The new perspectives on the documentation of objects has enabled learning and interpretation to open up doors of access for those who might not normally see a Victorian historic house museum as being relevant to them.

This is given tangible form in the work of Leighton House Museum's artist in residence from July to November 2005, Karimah Bint Daoud. Karimah worked with the new interpretations not only to inform the creation of her own artwork and textiles but to illustrate to the visiting public and schools that all artefacts have multi-faceted stories to tell. A notable example of Karimah's residency is the production of vibrant kaftans which are inspired by a series of 17th century Persian figurative tile panels at the museum. New research and a more lateral approach to documentation has, for these artefacts, shed light on issues such as social custom and cultural identity, concepts that standard documentation struggle to convey. As further information is developed it will be disseminated through all interpretative methods at the museum, for example the website, guides, panels and written materials.

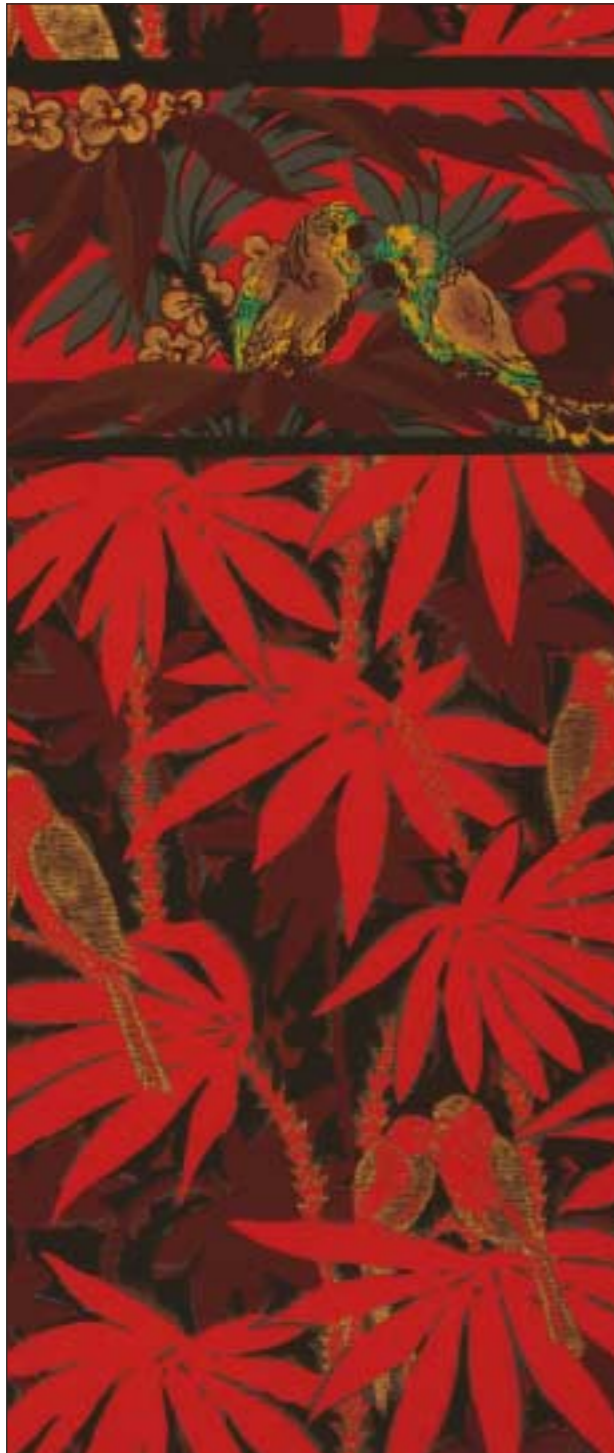
It is the telling of these various stories and the necessary layering of information that is the success of the *Revisiting Collections* initiative.

Alan Kirwan
Education Officer, Leighton House Museum
www.rbkc.gov.uk/leightonhousemuseum

revisiting collections

a toolkit for the capture of information to enhance the meaning and significance of museum collections for new and culturally diverse audiences

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND



Viewer's responses were key to MoDA's 2005 *Outrageous Wallpaper* exhibition and will be captured by using the *Revisiting Collections* template. A comment on this 1926 Cole and Hill paper was "Very 'Del Boy!'".

Reason for the project

The *Revisiting Collections* project was a response to the findings of the London Museums Agency study, *Reflections*, completed in 2003. This revealed gaps in the knowledge within museums regarding their own collections and too little of the kind of imaginative, lateral thinking about those collections that could reveal their potential relevance and value to diverse audiences. There was little evidence of curators thinking about researching, re-cataloguing and re-interpreting existing holdings to reveal their relevance to today's Londoners, though some museums are attempting to collect recent and contemporary material to represent the diverse communities which they serve.

This issue persists and therefore *Revisiting Collections* explored the idea that a solution to this difficulty may be found in the better management and provision of information relating to collections. The aim was to provide a means of encouraging museums to provide clear and full descriptions, to disclose appropriate contextual information and to improve ways of engaging with potential users, in part by encouraging the recording of responses to objects or collections by a wide variety of people from culturally diverse audiences.

Effective and full documentation not only makes the curators' job more straightforward but greater knowledge of museums' holdings is likely to encourage wider use of the objects in their care. However, it has become clear that engaging non-users will be easier for all groups of potential users, whatever their cultural origin, if documentation is thoughtful and detailed, uses language with sensitivity and makes explicit cultural connections such as the trade links by means of which imported raw materials influenced our clothing and domestic equipment and access to imported ceramics and textiles influenced design.

Overview of the project

Revisiting Collections involved three elements:

- Desk research to identify how far museums have already found effective ways of making explicit the relevance of their collections.
- Discussion about what elicits responses to objects with two small focus groups and consideration of the aims of the partner museums in the project.
- Development and testing of a suggested methodology.

Priorities for consideration in the project

included consideration of:

- The practical business of recording information in a retrievable manner.
- How the information may be used, both internally as a management tool for the museums themselves and, looking outwards, as a means of developing new approaches to exhibiting and presenting collections, labelling individual objects, and designing education/outreach materials, web-sites and publications.

Scope of information recording

Every object can reveal something about the past, from its raw materials, methods of construction, age and design, or from evidence of use, modification or adaptation. Some artefacts may only be fragments of an original, while others carry makers' or users' names, inscriptions or other marks, providing direct evidence which can be explored further. Those who want to 'read' the story an object can tell need access to the object, a questioning mind and some modest forensic skills. Some objects prompt emotional or intuitive reactions in those who see or handle them. Some are inspiring. Some enable the viewer to make connections with their own experience or memories in a way that stories alone could not do.

Anyone can create a story around an object or group of objects, for their own pleasure or to share with others.

Curators seek a notion of 'truth' in the way they document objects. They use their own expertise, knowledge and professional conventions to record basic information essential to identifying a specific object or group of objects within the collections in their care. Documentation is still seen by many museum workers as a tool for the management of the collections rather than a major step towards opening them up for a wide variety of uses. Busy curators may record only the bare minimum, relying upon their systems of history files, housing associated photographs, conservation reports, archives and correspondence, to provide a context for these objects.

Curators tend to see the addition of contextual detail as an element of presentation or interpretation rather than documentation. As a result the information usually recorded in a database does little to enable a potential user, whether it is a museum worker or someone else, to find answers to such questions as whether the object is commonplace or rare, how culturally significant it may be, whether the wear and tear of use can reveal anything about the effectiveness of its original purpose or the impact it may have had upon its user.

As we begin to open up access to more and more collections on museum web-sites it will become increasingly important to create databases which include images of the objects themselves as well as appropriate contextual information. This should include detailed - and therefore useful - rather than minimal descriptions of objects to enable those browsing the records to select specific items which interest them. In addition, real or imagined stories and personal responses or added information should be recorded,

Alice Grant
Val Bott
and
Jon Newman

offering ways of seeing these objects from new perspectives. Examples of how some museums are already addressing the documentation of collections drawing on this wide pool of available knowledge are provided in the full Project Report available on the ALM London website: www.alm-london.org.uk.

Project outcomes and implications

The *Revisiting Collections* project has explored ways in which the documentation of collections can play a key role in increasing access to them, especially for those who rarely use such objects and specifically for those from culturally diverse backgrounds who may have different needs or bring different perspectives to bear upon museum collections. By providing opportunities for small focus groups to explore aspects of collections and to offer their own ideas and impressions we have begun to test and confirm the idea that observing and describing objects and having access to contextual information are essential components in understanding them. Viewers and users of collections who interact or engage with the objects have a richer experience than those who simply look at them and read the labels the curators have provided.

The challenge has been to identify practical ways in which such information can be recorded and shared within the museum databases. It has become clear that museum staff may fail to record some basic information because they feel that it is too time-consuming a process when they face large backlogs of documentation. In addition, some may feel unconfident when describing objects about which they do not have sufficient specialist knowledge; in a small local history museum, for example, the range of material to be covered can be extremely broad and the number of curatorial staff very few.

None of the ideas we have developed in this project is wholly new. We believe, however, that the recent priority given to presenting collections in galleries and developing educational activities has so far ignored the potential opportunities offered by the effective management of collections-related information and its use as an accessible, encyclopaedic resource for the enjoyment of a wide public. Furthermore, those who use museum collections have the ability to enhance our understanding and enjoyment of them if they are allowed to contribute additional information or responses. This may also foster a sense of pride and ownership in those whose views become part of the collections database or are incorporated into exhibitions, strengthening the idea that collections are for everyone.

HOW THE UNITS OF INFORMATION WERE SELECTED

Identifying potential Units of Information

A primary objective of the *Revisiting Collections* project was to develop an understanding of the range of information which might encourage culturally diverse audiences to engage with museum collections.

Extensive Units of Information are provided in SPECTRUM, the MDA's industry standard for the description and management of museum collections.

As a first step, these were reviewed and Units of Information identified which it was felt might be relevant to the project in that they could be used to describe aspects of objects and their associations which might be of interest to users from different cultural or ethnic backgrounds.

Each of the museums participating in the *Revisiting Collections* project then invited representatives of different cultural and ethnic groups in their respective localities, to take part in a focus group to inspect and discuss a selection of objects from the museums' collections. Detailed notes of the discussions were taken; these were then analysed to identify the kinds of information which were discussed. These fell into a number of categories as described below:

- **Intellectual responses to the objects**

These were contributions or expressions of interest in the context of the objects, establishing them within a particular tradition or movement and finding new links with other objects, people, events, places or cultures.

- **Cross-cultural or associative responses**

These were contributions which focused on common themes and uses for the objects, enabling respondents to identify points of familiarity to their own lives.

- **Narrative responses to the objects**

These were stories, family traditions or imaginary contexts which were inspired by the objects, based on individuals' own experiences or imaginations.

- **Instinctive responses**

These were reactions to the physical presence and form of the objects; their form, texture, design or function.

The different individual information elements distilled from the focus groups were compared to SPECTRUM and where possible, mappings were made with existing Units of Information. The aim of this approach was to ensure compatibility and interoperability of the information recording with existing documentation systems and professional practice.

Each element of information was subject to the following process in order to ensure maximum compliance with SPECTRUM, to avoid overlapping with or duplicating existing Units of Information and to ensure the clarity of the resulting recording format:

- **Direct mapping**

Where possible, a direct mapping was made with an existing SPECTRUM Unit of Information. Naming conventions were applied and any data dependencies were carried over. This was possible in a substantial proportion of Units of Information, particularly associations and people/person/place information.

- **Amended mapping**

If an existing Unit of Information had the potential to support a newly identified recording need, but required specific additional guidance in relation to the recording of a particular cultural context or perspective, the existing Unit of Information was

used but with a different naming convention or additional recording guidance. Examples include the suggestion of additional guidance for the Object history note, suggestions of possible terms for recording some Units of Information or amendments to the name of a Unit of Information, e.g. 'Viewer's name' (as opposed to Associated Person, which was felt to be too generic in this context).

- **Creation of new definition**

If no existing Unit of Information was able to be used in any form, a new one was proposed, with specific guidance and, wherever possible, fitting with the existing naming and structural conventions already used in SPECTRUM. An example is Cultural display requirements, which sits alongside the existing 'Display requirements' and 'Storage requirements'.

Testing the Units of Information

Two museums took part in the testing of the Units of Information: Leighton House Museum and Kingston Museum. Although each museum had an existing documentation system which could have been adapted to accommodate the proposed documentation format, due to the condensed timescale of the project, neither museum was able to undertake this work at the time of testing, but each planned to incorporate the documentation in future projects. As a temporary measure, an MsOffice Excel spreadsheet format was developed for the documentation of a testbed of 20-30 objects in each museum. Curatorial, archival and documentation staff undertook the documentation work, and initial feedback was provided on an iterative basis in the early stages of recording work. This resulted in the release of three versions of the recording format, each incorporating the results of

feedback in order that the documentation process could proceed smoothly. A number of extensive discussions were held based on contributions from each of the museums and the resulting format which is now reflected in the Toolkit below, has benefited greatly from the experiences and contributions of the participating museums.

The information recorded was then reviewed with a further focus group in each museum and the results of these discussions are to be incorporated.

Evaluating the Units of Information

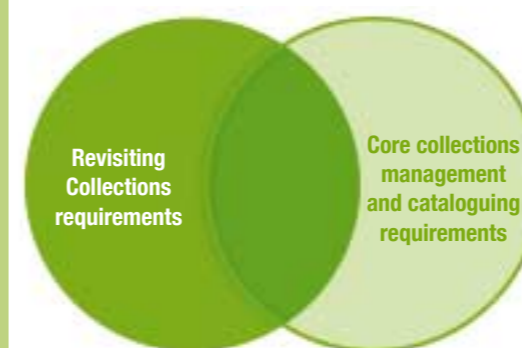
The Units of Information proposed in the Toolkit which follows are very much a 'work in progress'. A number of developmental stages will need to be addressed in order that the proposed format and guidelines can be used across the community. These include:

- Mapping of the proposed format to SPECTRUM v.3, released towards the end of this stage of the project.
- Incorporation of final comments from the initial participating museums.
- Incorporation of the results of testing by a further participating museum.
- Incorporation of feedback from the initial participating museums as they continue the recording and use of information using the proposed format in separate projects over the coming year.
- Requests for, and incorporation of, feedback from the wider community.

01 PREPARATION

1 Relationship to existing recording and documentation standards

The Units of Information proposed in the Toolkit are complementary to the documentation requirements set out in SPECTRUM within the context of the Museum Accreditation Scheme. The Units of Information proposed here therefore do not encompass the full range of recording required for collections management and cataloguing functions outside the scope of this project. Clearly, the ability to identify, locate and describe objects beyond the scope of the Units of Information set out here is critical to the management of and provision of access to collections. The Units of Information proposed here, however, are simply those which have a specific relevance to this project, although it is assumed that core Units of Information such as Object name, Location or Object number for instance, would still be required in order to create a record permitting the management and full use of a collection.



2 Testing information

The Units of Information used will depend on:

- The collections being described.
- The audience involved in the documentation process.
- The nature of their interest and interaction with the collections.

2.1 Find out what users know and what they want

In order to select the most appropriate Units of Information it will be necessary to test what types of information users may be interested in either contributing or learning about the collections. A useful way of developing an understanding of users' knowledge, interests and requirements is to carry out discussions with users in small focus groups. The aim of the focus groups should be to invite contributions, questions and opinions from the participants, the results of which will inform the scope of the information gathering exercise.

2.2 Running focus groups

Each focus group might be offered a small number of objects from the collections, together with available information which is associated with each object. Their responses should be documented, then compared and mapped to the Units of Information set out in Section 2 below.

There exists an extensive literature describing the running of focus groups with audiences; the *Inspiring Learning for All* initiative (www.inspiringlearningforall.org.uk) provides a starting point for understanding some the relevant issues. Specific issues relating to undertaking focus groups in relation to the *Revisiting Collections* project are described in the full Project Report, available at www.almlondon.org.uk.

2.3 Creating and evaluating sample records

As a result of the focus group it will be possible to use the Units of Information to create sample records, recording relevant information which has either been captured from the focus group participants, or researched in response to stated

needs and questions asked. These sample records should then be offered to a second discussion group and their responses used either to affirm or amend further the information recorded.

Once a recording format has been agreed with potential users, it will be possible to begin the process of creating a recording mechanism to support the main part of the project.

3 Capturing information

The process of capturing information is one which is not usually considered in particular depth in the museum setting since the providers of information are often museum staff. Creative, innovative ideas may therefore be required in order to capture information from other sources.

3.1 Researching sources within the museum

In the first instance, information may be gleaned from sources within the museum which have not yet been formally documented in either paper-based or digital information systems. These might include paper files, exhibition catalogues, cuttings or other 'grey' or ephemeral sources. Consider also inviting known experts, either from within or outside the museum, to expand the existing object records in areas which have not yet been documented. This will enable a full range of knowledge to be documented which may subsequently spark a further contribution or personal response from a viewer of the object.

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3.2 Capturing information from sources outside the museum

The process of capturing information from different external audiences will vary according to the nature of the audience. Some users (e.g. school or Further Education students) may be more confident in the use of ICT to record responses; this may be particularly appropriate when working with remote users. In these instances, it may be possible to use web-based applications such as that used in the *Every Object Tells a Story* project commissioned by Culture Online produced by the Victoria and Albert Museum, with Ultralab and Channel 4, (see www.everyobject.net). However, this means of capture may exclude many audiences and may be obtrusive or cumbersome in circumstances where real objects are being used to provoke responses from viewers.

Many museums have developed expertise in the use of oral history recording such as the Museum of London (see www.museumoflondon.org.uk) and the recording of responses by viewers by mediators or third parties may be productive. Further techniques might include interviews using a prompt sheet or the provision of paper-based recording opportunities in galleries or study rooms; the Manchester Museum has worked both with organised school groups and with the general public in drop-in sessions to record responses such as poetry and drawings (see <http://emu.man.ac.uk/mmcustom/narratives/index.php>). Further use of discussion or focus groups may also be fruitful. The particular issues encountered in the *Revisiting Collections* project may be useful in determining the best technique for use with a specific target audience; details are available in the full Project Report on the ALM London website: www.almlondon.org.uk.

A key point of information capture is the point when an object is donated to the museum. Here, the

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owner may know more than he or she realises, or may not be aware that their experiences of, or knowledge of an object, is of potentially equal or greater cultural value than even the object itself.

Projects such as exhibitions and events can often provide a useful springboard for the acquisition of knowledge about collections and for seeking responses to collections which might otherwise be difficult to obtain. Here, the method of interaction will vary according to the event. It may need to be opportunistic, or it may be possible to structure an event around the actual process of learning more about the collections, or about peoples' responses to the collections, from specific cultural standpoints.

3.3 The role of museum staff

Museum staff may need to play an active social role as mediator, questioner or interpreter, but will need to be careful not to skew, override or otherwise negate the contributions made by users.

There should be an awareness that users may not feel able or qualified to comment on the collections. Just as this is a new direction for many museums, so it is for new and existing audiences. Participants may need reassurance that their contribution may be both valid and valuable from a number of perspectives.

4 Adapting your existing recording system

A number of the Units of Information set out in Section 2 below may not be catered for in your existing documentation system. Those Units which are not yet included in SPECTRUM v.3 have been submitted to MDA for consideration for inclusion, but inevitably systems will take some time to reflect the expanded scope. Museums will therefore need to consider how

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to document any information which is gathered as part of an exercise to extend documentation to encompass varying cultural and personal responses to collections.

4.1 Review and map fields

The first step should be to review the existing fields supported by your documentation system and map those Units of Information selected for your recording project, to those existing fields.

4.2 Communicate with support staff and other users

If this process identifies Units of Information which are not currently supported by your recording system then the next step should be to meet with the staff member(s) responsible for supporting your system within the museum in order that a course of action can be agreed. It may be that there are other users with the museum, or in other areas of larger organisations (e.g. library, archive or records managers) who also use the application to support their work; any changes to the system may conflict with or affect their use of the application in some way. System support staff may be best placed to help identify and resolve any such issues.

4.3 Local adaptation of the system

Some collections management applications allow system managers to create new fields and/or cataloguing views locally. If museums are able to undertake this work, it should be done by someone with proper knowledge of the system, and with the appropriate communication with support staff and other users. Changes made to the system should be properly documented and the use of the new fields should be explained in the online help text (where available) and/or in the system manual. The availability of controlled terminology where required (as indicated in Section 2 below) will need to be assured and users will need training in the use of the new fields.

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It is advisable to test any new recording fields prior to release to users and to ensure that a backup is made of the database content prior to adaptation and testing.

4.4 Supplier adaptation of system

Many museums may not be in a position to update their systems locally, either because the application will not permit them to, or because they do not have the requisite skills in-house. In these circumstances it will be necessary to submit a statement of the museum's revised recording requirements to the supplier of the system and to agree a means by which they can update the recording facilities. This may be achievable within the existing support contract, or on a paid consultancy basis. It may be, however, that the supplier is reluctant to undertake the work for various reasons, particularly since it will mean that the museum has a customised data structure as a result, which may cause difficulties for future upgrades. In these circumstances, it may be necessary to establish with the supplier whether the additional recording features might be available within their standard package in the future, and to make temporary local recording arrangements in the meantime.

4.5 Temporary recording solutions

Any temporary recording arrangements carry risks including:

- The potential to use staff time setting up and managing additional recording systems.
- The need to ensure the ongoing compatibility of data with the main data recording system.
- The need to reconcile the data into a single source at some point in the future, which may incur additional costs.
- The need to make an explicit link between existing and new documentation, within each recording system, in order that the additional information is not lost in the future.

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- The potential to compromise the existing data structure if additional recording is not properly documented.

The museum may decide to identify existing unused fields as 'holding' fields for capturing content on a temporary basis, ensuring these are fully documented in order to enable migration to an alternative location at a later date. This option should only be undertaken with the support of available technical staff.

Alternatively the museum may decide to record information offline in associated documentation files, either in alternative digital formats or using paper-based documentation. These resources should be clearly identified and stored according to existing organisational policies for digital media or object-related documentation.

Individual digital or paper-based files should be accessible by Object number.

4.6 Linking with existing documentation

Existing records should refer to these external documentation sources using available Reference fields within the existing object record to create links which will be visible to users in the future, who may otherwise not be aware of the additional documentation sources.

02

THE UNITS OF INFORMATION

description and history

02

Object history note	Use Object history note to record a description of the history of the object. This may include aspects of the object's history which are not known through documentary evidence, but which may be deduced from examination of the object itself, such as the condition of the object, the materials used to make it or its likely use. Ensure that the reason for any conclusion based on examination of the object is documented here.
Usage note	Use Usage note to record a description of the use of a particular type of object, but not for details in the history of a specific object.
Material	Record a term identifying a material used in the creation of the object.
Material source	Record the name of the place of origin of the material at the most specific level known. Use usual conventions for Place name recording. Note: It is necessary to record the Material if recording the Material source.
Condition check /assessment note	Record a description of the physical condition of the object. This may be an extended narrative, but if necessary use Condition check/assessment reference number to refer to an external document if there is not enough space within the field to record all the detail required.
Condition check /assessment reference number	The information recorded here should be a visual description of the condition of the object, and should not include the reason for a particular aspect of the object's condition.
Field collection place	Record the name of the place of discovery or field collection of the object at the most specific level known. Use usual conventions for Place name recording.
Field collection note	Record additional information about the discovery or field collection of the object. This might comprise a narrative description of the specific location, and context of the discovery of the object, including the reason why it was likely to have been there. Note: The Field collection place does not have to be recorded with the Field collection note, but each may hold value for users.
UNIT OF INFORMATION	USE

02 associations and references

Related object number	Record the Object number of an object which is related to the object being documented.
Related object association	Where appropriate, record a single term describing the nature of the association of an object to the object being documented, e.g. 'depiction', 'design'.
Related object note	Record a narrative description of the nature of the association of an object to the object being documented.
Associated activity	Record a single term describing an activity associated with an object.
Associated activity note	Record a description of, or comment relating to, an activity associated with the object. Note: Although not necessary to record the Associated activity when recording the Associated activity note, recording the single term may help retrieval of, and access to, the Associated activity note.
Reference number	An identifying number for a reference, e.g. file number, image number.
Reference association	A single term describing the nature of the association of the reference, e.g. 'depicted', 'cited'.
Reference note	A narrative description of the reference (this may be a description of an image or an abstract of a written reference).
Reference type	A single term describing the type of reference recorded, e.g. 'image', 'report', 'letter'.
Associated organisation	The name of an organisation associated with an object.
Associated people	The name of a cultural or ethnic group associated with an object.
Associated person	The name of a person associated with an object.
Associated place	The name of a place associated with an object, recorded at the most specific level known.
Association type	Where appropriate, a single term describing the way in which an organization, people, person or place was associated with an object, e.g. trader.
Association note	A narrative description of the nature of the association of an organisation, people, person or place, with the object being recorded.
UNIT OF INFORMATION	USE

02 use of the object

Selector	The name of the Person selecting an object for use such as display, outreach, review etc. This is likely to be a member of the museum staff, but may be e.g. an external guest curator or another institution borrowing an item for display or research.
Selector's occupation	Record the occupation (or position within the organisation) of the person making the selection, e.g. 'curator', 'community representative', 'education officer', 'diversity officer'.
Selection date	The date the object was selected for use.
Selection purpose	A single term describing the purpose of the object's selection, e.g. 'display', 'external research' etc.
Selection note	A narrative description of the reason why the object was selected for this specific purpose
Label text	A narrative description relating to the object or a group of objects, intended for public access either within a building or a digital resource. Note: 'Label' has been used here to emphasise the match with the SPECTRUM Unit of Information; in fact as with any Unit of Information this could be renamed at a local level.
Label text date	The date when a particular Label text was written.
Label language	The language in which a particular Label text was written.
Label purpose	A term describing the purpose of a particular Label text, e.g. 'sign', 'display label', 'online learning resource'.
Label audience	A term describing the audience at which a particular Label text was aimed, e.g. 'general', 'KS2'.
Label author	The name of the Person who wrote the Label text.
Label note	Record any relevant commentary relating to the Label text, e.g. to emphasise that attitudes expressed in a label are no longer politically acceptable.
Display/event title	The name of the display, exhibition or other event for which a particular Label text was written.
Display dates	The start and end dates of a Display/event for which the Label text was written.
UNIT OF INFORMATION	USE

02 owner's contributions

Owner's name	Record the name of a Person known to have owned the object.
Ownership dates	The range of dates between which the object was known to have been owned by the Owner.
Owner's personal significance	A description of how and why a particular object or type of object is known to have been of particular importance to an Owner. This may include reasons why the object was particularly relevant to their life; reasons why the Owner collected the object, or decided to sell, donate or bequeath it or a reminiscence of an event, situation or other memory prompted by the object. Note: If the significance is a reflection on, or conjecture regarding the significance of an object, a description of feelings about, or personal relevance of an object, then use the Owner's personal response Unit of Information (see below).
Owner's personal response	A description of the way in which the Owner responded intuitively to the object. This may include one or more different types of personal response, including a description of the Owner's feelings about an object beyond their personal experience of it; a description of why the Owner 'connected' with an object, or regarded it as personally special; a description of the broader cultural meaning which the Owner attached to an object; a description of the aspects of an object which the Owner felt were of particular artistic, historical or cultural significance, their response to it from the point of view of a different cultural standpoint or conjecture as to what the object might have meant to another individual connected with the object, such as the creator, user or previous owner.
Owner's reference	Documentation of any additional reference to the object provided by the Owner, e.g. an event, object document, person or organisation. If verified, this may be recorded by Museum staff more fully in the appropriate area.
Owner's cultural group/ethnicity	The cultural group or ethnicity with which the Owner identified themselves.
Owner's biographical note	A narrative description of the known personal history of a Person.
Owner's occupation	A single term describing the occupation of a Person.
Comment	Any observations or comments on the Owner's contributions which the museum wishes to make, e.g. the way in which the information was obtained, or any discrepancies noted.
UNIT OF INFORMATION	USE

02 viewers' contributions

Viewer's name	The name of the Person providing the Personal response to an object. If the viewer prefers not to be specifically named this may be omitted.
Viewer's role	A single term describing the role of the Viewer in relation to the object, e.g. 'user', 'researcher' or 'visitor'.
Viewer's personal significance	A description of how and why a particular object or type of object is of particular importance to a Viewer. This may include reasons why the object is particularly relevant to their life or a reminiscence of an event, situation or other memory prompted by the object. Note: If the significance is a reflection on, or conjecture regarding the significance of an object, a description of feelings about, or personal relevance of an object, then use the Viewer's personal response Unit of Information (see below).
Viewer's personal response	A description of the way in which the Viewer responded intuitively to the object. This may include one or more different types of personal response including a description of the Viewer's feelings about an object beyond their personal experience of it; a description of why the Viewer 'connected' with an object, or regarded it as personally special; a description of the broader cultural meaning which the Viewer attached to an object; a description of the aspects of an object which the Viewer felt were of particular artistic, historical or cultural significance, their response to it from the point of view of a different cultural standpoint or conjecture as to what the object might have meant to another individual connected with the object, such as the creator, user or owner.
Viewer's reference	Documentation of any additional reference to the object provided by the Viewer, e.g. an event, object document, person or organisation. If verified, this may be recorded by Museum staff more fully in the appropriate area.
Viewer's cultural group/ethnicity	The cultural group or ethnicity with which the Viewer identified themselves.
Viewer's biographical note	A narrative description of the known personal history of a Viewer, especially where this is of relevance to their responses recorded above.
Viewer's occupation	A single term describing the occupation of a Viewer, e.g. 'artist', 'teacher', 'student', 'unemployed', 'retired' etc.
Comment	Any observations or comments on the Viewer's contributions which the museum wishes to make, e.g. the way in which the information was obtained, or any discrepancies noted.
UNIT OF INFORMATION	USE

03 IMPLEMENTATION AND CONTINUING DEVELOPMENT

1 Issues relating to the use of the Toolkit

1.1 Interoperability with existing documentation systems

Section 1.4 above sets out the process of adapting existing documentation systems to accommodate the Units of Information proposed in the toolkit; it also describes ways in which temporary recording solutions can be deployed. The main key to ensuring the compatibility of the existing and new information recording is the use of SPECTRUM, and the mapping of new and existing fields to the format set out in SPECTRUM. However, it will also be necessary to ensure that any temporary recording system is able to export data in a standard format, which can be uploaded into the main collections management system in the future. The simplest means of ensuring this is to make the relevant collections management system provider aware of the project proposals and to seek confirmation of their ability to accept data from specific software applications (e.g. MsOffice Excel, Access etc.) at such a time when their structures are able to accommodate data matching the additional Units of Information. Suppliers may indicate ways in which the museum's use of such applications will make the eventual upload process easier when it does happen.

1.2 Completeness

During the field testing of the toolkit concern was expressed by participants that they may not be able to populate all the fields which were identified. It should be emphasised that the scope of the recording identified within this toolkit is not mandatory. Not all Units of Information identified in Section 2 above may be relevant to all types of object, or of interest to all audiences. Some information may not be

known about an object, nor might it ever be known. The testing of the Units of Information as proposed in Section 1, will inform museums as to the appropriate information able to be recorded within a specific project. This information may change between projects depending on the audience participating, and the purpose of the project being undertaken.

1.3 Attributions

Contributions made should be clearly attributed to their source in the eventual record. The point of view of a museum staff member, an external researcher, an owner or donor and a viewer or user of an object may differ for many reasons. This will not necessarily mean that any view is wrong, but the source should be documented in order that other users of the information can form an appropriate judgement about the degree of authority which should be attached. This does not simply mean that a museum staff member's view will carry more weight, but that the interpretation of information will vary according to circumstances. For example, a former user of a tool or wearer of a garment will have specific and unique knowledge of that item. Some viewers may not wish to be personally identified in the record, but completion of supporting Units of Information (eg 'viewer's role, viewer's personal significance etc) will serve to contextualise their responses to an object.

2 Vocabularies

A number of the Units of Information proposed here require the recording of narratives; indeed, these are extremely important elements of the provision of contextual, personalised responses to collections. However there is also a clear need for the development of controlled terminologies in order that some aspects of the proposed documentation can be recorded

consistently in a way which will enable users to retrieve specific items or groups of items according to certain criteria. Examples include the retrieval of responses to collections from specific ethnic or cultural groups, or the identification of objects with associations with particular places or peoples. In some instances, the additional of new terms to existing vocabularies will be required; in others, entirely new controlled terminologies are needed. The documentation toolkit indicates where controlled terminology is required; it is suggested that MDA may wish to work with the museum community to develop these vocabularies as it has in the past.

3 SPECTRUM

The different evaluation stages described in the Introduction will result in a range of issues being resolved, including the integrity of the proposed Units of Information. It is anticipated that the Units of Information proposed here with either result in the adaptation of existing Units of Information within SPECTRUM v.3, or the inclusion of new Units of Information. The launch of SPECTRUM v.3 marks the beginning of a new approach to the future development of SPECTRUM, whereby regular updates can be submitted for consideration and inclusion; it is hoped that the results of the *Revisiting Collections* project will be a timely demonstration of SPECTRUM's ability to reflect the developing needs of the museum community and importantly, our different users and audiences.

4 Data Protection Act

It was felt that the provision of personal information by contributors of information would be helpful in shedding light on, or explaining, responses to objects being described. During the testing of the proposed format, however, participants in the museums' focus

groups were often reluctant to provide information about themselves. This underlines the need from a cultural as well as a legal perspective, for museums to adhere to the requirements of the Data Protection Act. Reassurances of contributors' legal rights under the Act should be provided; museums also need to ensure that they are able to meet the requirements of the Act as set out at <http://www.informationcommissioner.gov.uk/eventual.aspx?id=1038&expmovie=1>.

revisiting collections

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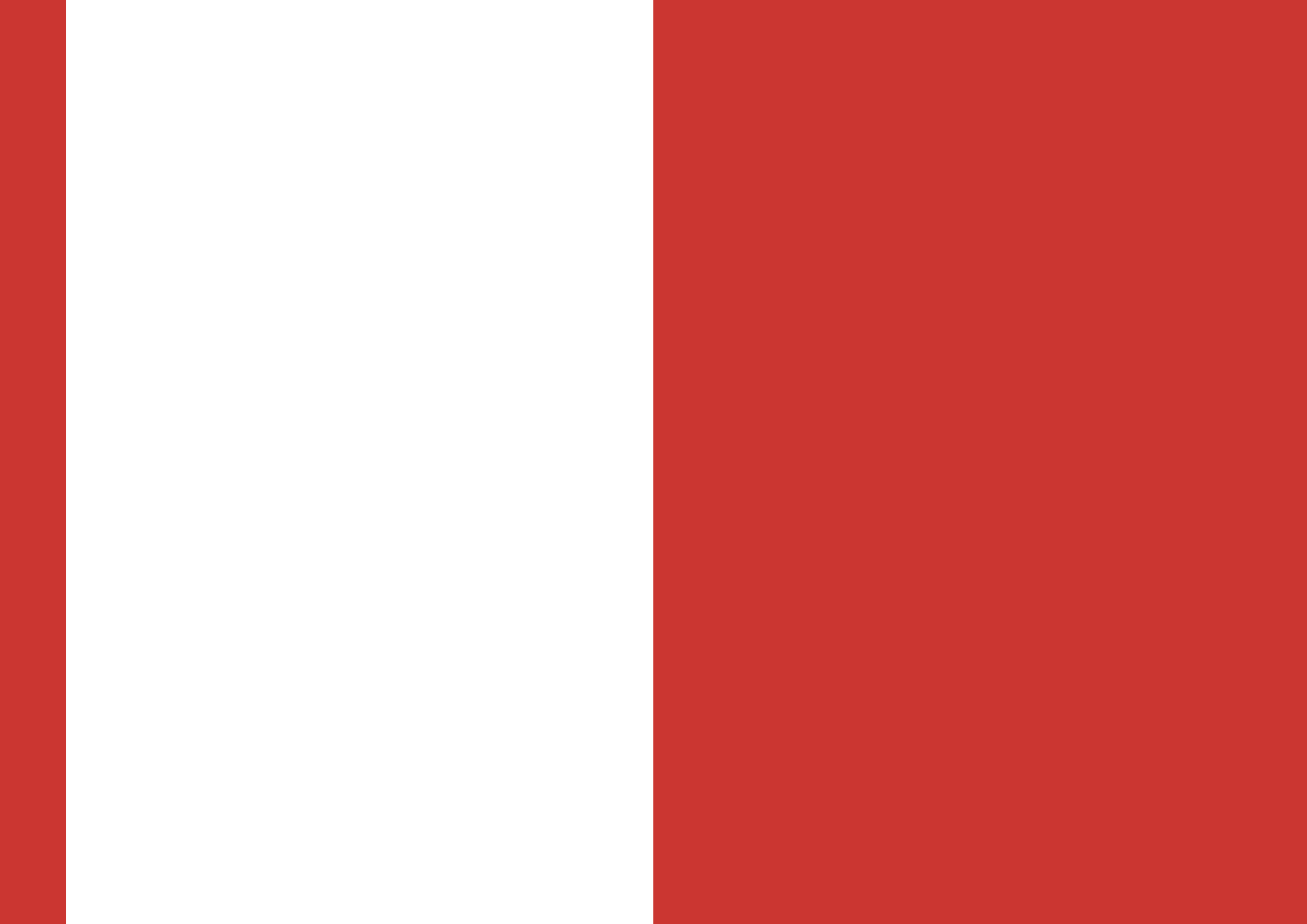
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