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Classification of museum objects and criteria for a national repository,  
with the example of the Historical Museum of Serbia.

The paper deals with the classification of museum objects and the criteria for their selection in a museum of national importance (national museum) such as the Historical Museum of Serbia, as well as with the role and importance of the process of documenting and classifying objects in the context of their classification into a certain group which falls, in this case, under the competence of the Historical Museum of Serbia. It also represents an effort to point out, with the concrete example of documenting and classifying of objects of cultural heritage important in Serbian history, not only the complexity and importance of the system of preserving, documenting and classifying objects in a system of cultural heritage protection, but also the problems and deficiencies in the actual museum documentation practice, and to offer the foundation for the introduction of a new, additional classification targeted to the improvement of the documenting system. The paper is the result of a years-long involvement in the museum documentation system and the perception of problems closely related to the process of documenting and classifying objects. The problem was not articulated very much at the time when museum documentation was conducted in a conventional way; however, with the introduction of new technologies and informatics into museology, it has become more apparent. The shortage of uniformity in documenting and classifying objects, as well as in terminology, has been affecting not only the communication between the object and the expert/user, but also the possibility of exchange of information and knowledge about the objects on different levels.

The term classification, to classify, suggests the arrangement (of objects) into groups based on ways that they are alike and to be considered as belonging to a particular group. The prevailing and basic classification principle in Serbian museums is a museum collection. One of

the classification systems also in use is that developed by the MDA (Museum Documentation Association), based on the purpose of objects, and which has been applied to all types of museum objects. However, museum practice has showed the necessity of introducing new classifications, based on the division in the basic sciences, with the aim not only to upgrade the level and quality of the existing system of documenting and classifying objects, but also to create a file for each object as a set of all relevant information which would reveal all features and meanings associated with the object. The main reason for the introduction of new classifications lies in the fact that large deposits of similar objects are kept in a wide range of similar museums (city, regional, memorial) in Serbia and that they have to be classified uniformly, regardless the criteria for their collecting and where they are kept. This is also derived from the role and task of the Historical Museum of Serbia as a part of the national repositories system, which is aimed at linking museums and museum collections of the same type and improving their documentation systems.

The Historical Museum of Serbia is among a few Serbian museums which developed its own information system for documenting/registering museum objects. It was the result of thorough analysis of documenting systems used by the museums within its competence. The poll conducted among these institutions showed all the diversity and lack of uniformity when it comes to the level and quality of documenting/registering museum objects, terminology and classification.

The introduction of an information system into museum documentation practice and the creation of an electron file for each object enabled the storage of different information related to an object (photos, texts, audio and video recordings, press clippings etc.) in one place. Furthermore, this was a good basis for the implementation of international standards and classifications, for the standardization of the quality of information about the object, as well as of all other parameters necessary for the identification of an object important in Serbian history. At the same time, the creation of such a comprehensive system of cataloguing, i.e. registering of museum objects and keeping records about the processes in the system of cultural heritage protection, has provided complete documentation about one object as a set of information, interpretations and ideas for research purposes, and made them widely accessible.

In general, classification can be arranged in different ways, depending on what has been used as a criterion for classification. Speaking of museum objects and funds, they are classified

into museum collections, based on their qualities and features, i.e. the materials they are made of. However, what is common to both the Historical Museum of Serbia and other complex museums is the fact that one type of object can be registered in different collections. The reasons for this may be various, including inexpert organization of museum collections; our focus here will be on the documentary value of an object, and, more precisely, the reasons for its acquisition and inclusion in a museum collection. For example, a ring can be part of the Ethnographic Collection (if it is part of folk costume), of the Applied Art Collection (if we take into consideration the artistic and craftsman quality of its execution) or the Memorabilia Collection (if it belonged to a certain prominent figure). The clothes can be observed through the perspective of being part of an official dress or folk costume, a poster can be important for its content or artistic features, while a photograph can even be part of the Ethnographic Collection if it bears the record of the appearance of a folk costume or a folk custom. This is not necessarily considered as a problem in museums with developed information systems for cataloguing objects. Among other reasons, one of the purposes of the implementation of computers in museum practice is faster and easier access to the information about an object; one has to define his/her search request and get information regardless of which collection the object belongs to. The problem appears when we need information about the object which will precisely classify it and differentiate it, by its purpose, from other objects in the same group. Such problems – or rather, challenges – have imposed the need for additional classification, based on the purpose of objects, which would improve the quality of registering/cataloguing objects and a higher level of classification uniformity. This does not mean that a new approach exhausts the classification itself and that faster access to the required information is the prevailing reason for its introduction. It has to be observed through the perspective of the improvement of the documenting system and the total set of information related to one object.

A classification based on the purpose of object, as used up till now, before the era of the introduction of information systems into museum practice, did perhaps meet the needs both of experts and other users, when information about one object was less accessible. It can be also applied in smaller museums, the funds of which are limited. However, in a complex museum, such as the Historical Museum of Serbia, this classification can be considered as a first step in the process of classification of the cultural heritage. The demand for a more precise and complete documentation about one object by putting together all relevant data about it, in which an expert

would provide all the necessary classifications for the identification of an object, as well as the demands of time and technology, indicate the necessity for the introduction of a new, additional classification within each group of objects.

To make this classification possible, a list of all objects from the Museum's collections was first made, classifying each object according to its purpose, based on the division not only into social sciences, but also into natural and technical. This was necessary because some objects, such as weapons and military equipment or sports equipment, can be collected both in museums of history and of science and technology. The basic principle for this new classification was an already accepted model of division: **Field/Scope/Group**, in which **Field** determines the association of the object with a certain field in the sciences, **Scope** determines the scope of its purpose, while **Group** more precisely determines the object's appertaining to a certain group within the same type.

The model of this new classification will be shown with respect to several examples of objects from the fund of the Historical Museum of Serbia. In the Collection of Flags, there are over one hundred different flags, varying from those from the early 19<sup>th</sup> century (First Serbian Uprising), through state and party flags, to those that belonged to various political parties and movements which determined the reinstatement of the multiparty parliamentary system in Serbia during the 1990s. What all these objects have in common is the name – flag; if we set the term 'flag' as our search request, the final outcome would be a list of all the flags kept in the Museum. With additional classification, which enables the division of flags according to their purpose, they can be classified, for example, as state signs (ensigns) and symbols (national, regional, church, war flags, flags of political parties, individual flags, individual signs).

Example 1:

Collection of Flags

Object name: Flag

Full object name: Flag of Karageorge Petrovic

MDA Classification: Communication and symbol

Field: Heraldry

Scope: Symbol

Group: Individual signs

Example 2:

Collection of Flags

Object name: Flag

Full object name: Flag of Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia

MDA Classification: Communication and Symbol

Field: Heraldry

Scope: State signs

Group: Flag

Example 3:

Collection of Flags

Object name: Flag

Full object name: Flag of Krusik Cultural Society

MDA Classification: Communication and Symbol

Field: Heraldry

Scope: Symbol

Group: Flags of organizations, societies and associations, labor actions

We will show another example, from the Collection of Weapons and Military Equipment. The Collection consists of a large number of objects divided, on account of the technology of manufacturing, into two categories: local workshop production, which emerged from handwork, and large-scale, i.e. serial production; they can also be classified as side arms and fire arms. Among fire arms manufactured in local workshops, rifles are the most represented. Their number and diversity of firing systems permits an insight into the long-lasting process of the development of weapons, the complexity of which also indicates the military-technical and socio-economic development of the Serbs in general. When speaking of mass-produced weapons, fire arms are the most represented again, comprising different systems and types of arms, including flintlock and percussion models, modern semiautomatic and automatic rifles etc. The diversity of the Collection itself has imposed the need for additional classification, which will provide us not only with more precise identification of these objects, but also a faster and easier search among the many objects bearing the same name – ‘rifle’.

Example 1:

Collection of Weapons and Military Equipment

Object name: Rifle

Full object name: Flintlock rifle, type 'dzeferdar'

MDA Classification: Weapons

Field: Military technique

Scope: Fire arms – small arms

Group: Flintlock arms

Example 2:

Collection of Weapons and Military Equipment

Object name: Carbine

Full object name: M1877 Werndl–Holub Carbine of Austro-Hungarian Cavalry

MDA Classification: Weapons

Field: Military technique

Scope: Fire arms – small arms

Group: Single-shot breech loading rifles

Example 3:

Collection of Weapons and Military Equipment

Object name: Rifle

Full object name: M70 AVJ Automatic rifle

MDA Classification: Weapons

Field: Military technique

Scope: Fire arms – small arms

Group: Automatic rifles