

## INTRODUCTION

### 1. THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A COLLECTIONS MANAGEMENT DEPARTMENT AT THE NATIONAL CULTURAL HISTORY MUSEUM, PRETORIA

A. Fahy is correct in her assertion that the historical development of collections and the way in which they have been managed affects all other activities of the museum.<sup>1</sup> This is indeed true with regard to collections management as it is practised at present at the National Cultural History Museum, Pretoria.<sup>2</sup> Not a day passes without the staff being confronted with problems which are the legacy of actions that have been taken with regard to the collections over the 113 year history of the Museum.

Although the term “collections management” is relatively new, the techniques involved in managing the collections in a museum are as old as the institution itself. To understand what these techniques were and why they took the particular form they did, makes it of course much easier for present-day staff to cope with problems and to find solutions.

The first department of collections management by that name at the National Cultural History Museum was only created in 1986 as part of the restructuring of the curatorial departments. In a policy document laid before and approved by the Board, U.S. Küsel, the director, proposed that three new departments be formed, namely collections management, period research and a specialized documentation and information retrieval department. The collections management department would be responsible for the professional and technical maintenance of the collections and for object research. In the period research department, research in allocated periods and subjects within individual time frames would be undertaken. The information department would receive full particulars of an object from the

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<sup>1</sup> A. Fahy, Introduction, in A. Fahy (ed.), *Collections management*, p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> The National Cultural History Museum was known as the National Cultural History and Open-Air Museum from its inception in 1964 until 1989 when the name changed. The Museum moved into a new functional building with a collections facility, display areas, educational and public amenities and staff accommodation (situated at 149 Visagie Street, Pretoria) during 1999 - 2000. For the history of the establishment of this Museum and its predecessor, the Transvaal Museum, see chapter II of this research project.

curator, and these would then be processed for eventual retrieval.<sup>3</sup> It was suggested that a new organogram such as this would benefit both the staff and the collections, as the staff would have more opportunities for research in an extended field of work and the collection would be better maintained and documented.

This was a radical innovation in which the collections were for the first time divided in terms of material, such as textiles, metals, ceramics, documents and vegetative objects, and not (as was the case previously) in terms of either academic discipline or specialized subject, such as anthropology, archaeology, cultural history, history, numismatics and philately. The task allocated to the collections management department was regarded as the one with the greatest responsibility as it had to maintain and control the Museum's entire collection.<sup>4</sup>

This was also the first indication that all was not well with the way in which the Museum had been documenting its collections. According to the director, information about the collections in the Museum was difficult to trace because of obsolete and incomplete indexes and retrieval systems.<sup>5</sup> The director was also worried about the tendency of curators to develop their own indexes and catchword lists.<sup>6</sup> The time was therefore ripe to establish a specialized documentation and information retrieval department, in other words a central documentation centre. The first head of the documentation centre was appointed in January 1987.<sup>7</sup> Soon afterwards the name of the department was changed to the "information centre".<sup>8</sup> The aim of the information centre was to centralize documentation, set standards

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<sup>3</sup> National Cultural History Museum Archives (hereafter NCHMA), Versamelings-, bewarings-, dokumentasie- en navorsingsbeleid vir die Nasionale Kultuurhistoriese en Opelugmuseum, Annexure E and decision R1986/15/4, Board of the National Cultural History and Open-Air Museum, agenda and minutes, meeting 21 May 1986.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., Report of director, Annexure C, Board of the National Cultural History and Open-Air Museum, agenda, meeting 27 August 1986 (curatorial report, J. Malan, p. 8).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., Versamelings-, bewarings-, dokumentasie- en navorsingsbeleid vir die Nasionale Kultuurhistoriese en Opelugmuseum, Annexure E, Board of the National Cultural History and Open-Air Museum, agenda, meeting 21 May 1986.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., Report of director, Annexure F, Board of the National Cultural History and Open-Air Museum, agenda, meeting 18 February 1987 (curatorial report, J. Malan, p. 2). This report covered the previous three months, including January 1987.

<sup>8</sup> Personal file E. Grobler, Memorandum, Voorstelle vir die reorganisasie van die inligtingsentrum, dd 8 May 1989, p. 6.

and act as co-ordinator between other museum departments.<sup>9</sup> The centre had to deal with in-house documentation training as well as to set up a section for information science. It was envisaged that this section would control, codify and verify records prior to entry into a computerized database, still to be developed. Standard terms were to be used and new acquisitions, accessioning and movement of objects handled.<sup>10</sup> Subsequently a section for computer services and one for movement of objects had to be established. Storage control, the mediathique and the archives also fell within the ambit of the information centre.<sup>11</sup>

There were still several departments dealing with museum documentation after the establishment of the information centre. Various documentation procedures, such as accessioning, inventorizing, cataloguing and marking<sup>12</sup> still remained the duty of either the curators of the various museums<sup>13</sup> or the collections management department. Initially, the information centre was only responsible for “further documentation”.<sup>14</sup> A cataloguing project was also undertaken by the staff of the collections management department under supervision of the information centre.<sup>15</sup>

No wonder that various restrictions handicapped the smooth functioning of the information centre: it had no authority to enforce improvements. Furthermore there was little co-

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<sup>9</sup> M. Hölscher, The information centre, *Museum Memo*, 17(3), September 1989, p. 28.

<sup>10</sup> See glossary. Location control, i.e. the recording of the movement of an object in a museum to and from its permanent location in the museum’s storage rooms is one of the most important collections management principles. For example, an object could be moved for exhibition, research or loan purposes. According to Roberts “the basic principle underlying the design of the location control procedures is the need to locate any group or individual item listed in an inventory, without excessive delay or expenditure of effort, using either direct or indirect methods”. D.A. Roberts, *Planning the documentation of museum collections*, p. 100. The documentation of museum collections should therefore include the location and movement of objects.

<sup>11</sup> Personal file E. Grobler, Memoranda, Voorstelle vir die reorganisasie van die inligtingsentrum, dd 8 May 1989, pp. 10 - 13 and Voorstelle t.o.v. die dokumentasie afdeling, dd 12 August 1989.

<sup>12</sup> See glossary.

<sup>13</sup> In 1987 the following so-called satellite museums resorted under the National Cultural History and Open-Air Museum: the Voortrekker Monument and the Kruger, Pierneef, Pioneer and Sammy Marks Museums and the Willem Prinsloo Agricultural Museum.

<sup>14</sup> Personal file E. Grobler, Memorandum, Departement Spesialiteitsmuseums and job description, dd 26 February 1987.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., Memorandum, Katalogiseringsprojek 1988/89, dd 23 August 1988.

operation between the various departments and the curators did not have sufficient knowledge of the latest developments in information science and museum documentation.<sup>16</sup>

Clearly the restructuring of the professional section of the National Cultural History Museum was not on par with international practice, as no museum elsewhere had both a collections management and an information/documentation department. One or other of these terms was used for the department that dealt with collections management: acquisitions, accessioning, location control, information processing and retrieval, loans, data entry, inventories and accountability. With regard to conservation there was an anomaly: conservation could be part of collections management or it could be a separate department.<sup>17</sup> The result was that there was again a restructuring of departments at the Museum in August 1989. The new structure included departments for period research, object research, information documentation and conservation.<sup>18</sup> And this time there was no collections management department.

Yet another change was imminent because the professional staff had identified many other problems in the structure, notably the bad condition of the storage areas due to restructuring, the hierarchal line to be followed, the allocation of tasks, the aid available for researchers and students from outside, and the selection of new acquisitions.<sup>19</sup> A report was drawn up to address these concerns. The goals of the information centre were also clearly outlined: the improvement of interdepartmental communication, effective control over and accountability for object information and the standardization of procedures.<sup>20</sup> The functions of the centre were identified as systems control, acceptance of new acquisitions, storeroom control and terminology control.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., Memorandum, Voorstelle vir die reorganisasie van die inligtingsentrum, dd May 1989, p. 7.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., M. Hölscher, Reisverslag van me Marianne Hölscher na Engeland, die VSA en Kanada - Augustus tot September 1988.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., Memorandum, Personeel- en pligtereorganisasie, dd 16 August 1989, organogram.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., Memorandum, Knelpunte, dd 21 November 1989.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., Report, Verslag oor die herorganisering van die samestelling en funksies van die Nasionale Kultuurhistoriese Museum se Vakkundige Afdelings, p. 7.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

One aspect of the work of the information centre was brand new because the Museum was entering the exciting transition to the computer age.<sup>22</sup> The fact that the Museum could benefit from computerization had already been addressed as early as 1983, when two staff members attended a computer symposium and reported back to management. Although it had already become fashionable to use computers, it was only in 1987, with the first seminar at the National Cultural History Museum, held on 23 April 1987 and attended by 70 delegates, that computerization was regarded as a practical reality. The seminar focused on MUSNET, a data network for museums, a computerized information service and a proposed data standard.<sup>23</sup> This seminar paved the way for the use of computers in the Museum; computers would also play a decisive role in the documentation system. The centre was destined to play an important role in training staff in computer use, maintaining hardware and developing databases.

Yet another change in the restructuring of the National Cultural History Museum loomed on the horizon in November 1991 when the National Productivity Institute completed their survey on the functioning and culture of the Museum and the dissemination of information.<sup>24</sup> Although the Board had several queries,<sup>25</sup> the restructuring went ahead with the establishment of the following departments:

- Department of Professional Services comprised two sections, one dealing with research and the other with the museums ( the Voortrekker Monument and the Kruger, Pierneef, Pioneer and Sammy Marks Museums, the Willem Prinsloo Agricultural Museum and the Donkerhoek [Diamond Hill] site),
- Department of Administration,
- Department of Promotion and Source Generation, and the
- Collections Management Department.

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<sup>22</sup> M. Hölcher, The information centre, *Museum Memo*, 17(3), September 1989, p. 28.

<sup>23</sup> NCHMA, Report, Verslag oor die seminaar: Inligtingsdienste in museums, Annexure F, Board of the National Cultural History and Open-Air Museum agenda, meeting 20 May 1987.

<sup>24</sup> P.J.J. Dorfling and A. van Eeden (exec.), "Uitvoerende opsomming: 'n evaluering van organisasie-funksionering, organisasiekultuur en die vloeï van inligting van die Nasionale Kultuurhistoriese Museum" (unpublished report).

<sup>25</sup> NCHMA, Decision R1991/34, Board of the National Cultural History Museum minutes, meeting 19 November 1991.

The new collections management department comprised three sections, namely these of conservation, maintenance and information services. The aim of the department was the compilation of the Museum's collections management policy that had to cover all aspects of collections management, as well as the implementation of the policy. Furthermore it had to inform the staff about the new system and train them how to apply it.<sup>26</sup> For the first time the collections management department was on par with the accepted definition of the functions of such a department; nonetheless the way forward was extremely onerous as the curators and the collections management personnel had to develop an entirely new dispensation and re-define the responsibilities for the management of the collections.

One of the most important subsections of the department was the computer services section that had to computerize all collections activities, particularly the data on the collections. The Museum acquired at least fourteen computers and two file servers to realize these aims and appointed a specialist to establish the database. Priorities outlined for the database were the following:

- identification of objects in the Museum's collection (data with regard to objects in the collection that had already been located physically and entered into inventories had to be captured),
- identification of the objects the Museum should have in the collection (data on accessions in the catalogues<sup>27</sup> had to be captured), and
- location of these objects (data on the whereabouts of objects on movement control forms had to be captured).

As the work on the database progressed, it became clear that one of the most important aspects was location control. Without computerization it would have been a herculean task to document and keep track of the movement of objects from one storage location to another, from one satellite museum to another and from the various storage buildings into the new Museum building (African Window) in 1999.<sup>28</sup> The retro-entry of catalogues in

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., National Cultural History Museum Management Committee minutes, meeting 20 January 1992.

<sup>27</sup> See glossary, historic use of catalogue.

<sup>28</sup> For the history of the various storage spaces and buildings and the movements of the collections since 1990, see G. Balkwill "40 Years in the wilderness - the promised land at last - (almost)", paper delivered at the South African Museums Association (SAMA) Annual Congress, 5 June 2003.

the database started in 1990 and was completed in 2005. Amendments to these entries are ongoing, as documentation problems emerge again and again.

Both location control and the retro-entry of catalogues revealed numerous accession number problems and these became one of the reasons that precipitated this research.<sup>29</sup> Some of these problems went as far back as the 1920s, pre-dating the establishment of the first collections management department in 1986, but little was done to pinpoint the exact nature of the confusion, to identify possible causes or to establish the curatorial history of the collections.

## 2. COLLECTIONS MANAGEMENT PROBLEMS

Although the functions of the information centre, which are closely associated with collections management, featured very strongly in the entire restructuring process, it seems that the basis for these decisions was theoretical rather than practical. There is little to indicate exactly why an information or documentation centre was so important to the Museum. Except for the director's reference to outdated retrieval systems, there is scarcely any indication of the very real problems that had to be solved by the information centre. For example, previously each curatorial department had full autonomy for documentation, with the result that there was no standard way of keeping object records. To organize and retrieve information was an awkward exercise.<sup>30</sup> By 1989, according to the head of the information centre, several attempts had been made to establish a thorough retrieval system, but due to practical problems this was not followed through. The result was that a large amount of object information was irretrievable.<sup>31</sup>

Problems with the management of the collections, especially the method of documentation, were manifold, but few attempts had been made to analyse them. The first two in-house

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<sup>29</sup> Information received from G. Balkwill, head of the collections management department, National Cultural History Museum, 25 February 2004.

<sup>30</sup> M. Hölscher, The information centre, *Museum Memo*, 17(3), September 1989, p. 28.

<sup>31</sup> Personal file E. Grobler, Memorandum, Voorstelle vir die reorganisasie van die inligtingsentrum, dd 8 May 1989, p. 6.

attempts both pertain to the anthropology collection. In 1960 various catalogues that had been used in the anthropology section were scrutinized and problems identified.<sup>32</sup> In 1977 a more detailed description was given of the documentation in the ethnology division, also listing the catalogues and identifying the curators.<sup>33</sup>

Two academic dissertations written in the 1960s also mention collections management problems. In a M.A. dissertation by L. Oosthuizen<sup>34</sup> the problems with the provenance of the petroglyphs, i.e. the lack of proper documentation or insufficient documentation and marking, is clearly set. He identifies the fact that the objects may never have been numbered, or that the accession numbers have faded so badly that they are undecipherable.<sup>35</sup> Oosthuizen does not attempt to explain the reasons for the documentation problems.

The obscurity of the provenance of a collection in the National Cultural History Museum, the so-called Dordrecht Collection, led P.J. de Beer to investigate the origin and existence of the Zuid-Afrikaansch Museum [South African Museum] at Dordrecht in the Netherlands.<sup>36</sup> The collection arrived at the Transvaal Museum from the Netherlands in 1921 and De Beer deplors the fact that because of poor management it did not survive intact. This he says was due to the fact that 23 years elapsed before a trained curator took the matter in hand. Previously the cataloguing had been done by untrained caretakers. In this way the collection had been subjected to the harshest neglect and deterioration.<sup>37</sup> De Beer gives a short résumé of the possible causes, but provides no detailed explanation of the lack of management of the Dordrecht Collection.

The next attempt to analyse some of the problem areas in the documentation of the collections at the National Cultural History Museum was undertaken as part of a

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<sup>32</sup> NCHMA, File ET1/60 Etnologiese Afdeling, Konsepverslag: Toestand in Museum, pp. 3 - 4, n.d.

<sup>33</sup> C.S. van der Waal, "Gesiedenis van die Volkekunde-Afdeling van die Nasko-Museum, Pretoria 1893 - 1977" (unpublished article), pp. 14 - 18.

<sup>34</sup> L. Oosthuizen, " 'n Beskrywing van en kunskritiese beskouing oor die versameling petrogliewe in die ou Transvaal-museum Pretoria" (unpublished M.A. dissertation, University of Pretoria, 1964).

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., pp. 117 - 118.

<sup>36</sup> P.J. de Beer, "Die 'Zuid-Afrikaansch Museum' te Dordrecht 1902 - 1921" (unpublished M.A. dissertation, University of Pretoria, 1967).

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., pp. 143 - 146.



conservation survey in 1989.<sup>38</sup> The anthropology and archaeology collections as well as the numismatics and the philately collections were studied. So too was the cultural history collection, which consists of works of art, militaria, furniture and other household utensils, vehicles, manuscripts, books and photographs, textiles, ceramics and glass and jewellery. Also included in the report were collections at the Voortrekker Monument and the Kruger, Pierneef, Pioneer and Sammy Marks Museums and the Willem Prinsloo Agricultural Museum.

The report covers the documentation situation as it was at the time (1989), but did not address the causes of the problems identified, although solutions were suggested. The survey paid particular attention to the existence or absence of inventories of the respective collections, marking and numbering as well as loans. In some cases it also focuses on the accessioning and the relevant catalogues. The following summarizes the documentation report:

- Complete inventories were available for some of the collections, other available inventories were incomplete and confusing, and for many collections there were no inventories.<sup>39</sup>
- Various types of documentation were kept for loans, such as registers, loose loan agreements on file, lists, a carbon copy book and a receipt book.<sup>40</sup>
- Accessioning was done in each department by the staff concerned with the collections. In some cases the staff member was a professional officer. In others it was an assistant under supervision of the professional officer. In this way the accessioning was kept up to date for almost all the collections.<sup>41</sup>
- The marking of objects differed from one collection to the next. Objects were temporarily marked with a label until the numbers could be affixed permanently with ink and sealed with incralac. In one case (archaeology objects) mowilith was used as basis and permanent white ink for the numbers; documents were marked with ink and paper money (notes) were

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<sup>38</sup> H.A. Jansen van Vuuren (comp.), “Die bewaring van museumvoorwerpe in besit en beheer van die Nasionale Kultuurhistoriese en Opelugmuseum Pretoria, 1989” (unpublished report).

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., pp. 4, 16, 109 and 189.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., pp. 4, 16, 36, 45, 82, 171, 189, 255 and 314.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., pp. 4, 62, 255 and 314.

found with the accession number attached to the note with sellotape.<sup>42</sup>

- A significant problem was identified when the accession numbers were deleted when the works of art were restored and not remarked. This made identification and replacing in the storage system very difficult.<sup>43</sup>
- There were many textile acquisitions dating from the 1960s and 1970s that had not been numbered at all; others had no information.<sup>44</sup> The situation was no better with regard to the furniture and other objects made primarily of wood.<sup>45</sup>
- Catalogue cards were only kept for the metal and leather objects, the archaeology collection and anthropology collection.<sup>46</sup>

In short, the documentation system at the Museum could not be regarded as an information retrieval source; it was vague and incomplete, with no standard procedures or manuals.<sup>47</sup>

The conclusion reached was that at the time all aspects of curatorial work, preservation, promotion, enquiries, displays, maintenance, transport, storage, documentation and research for all the collections were still the responsibility of either the curators or the so-called collections managers. The result was that none of these were executed properly. Collections management as a network of all object-oriented functions was proposed as a solution to the problem.<sup>48</sup>

As work in the information centre continued, other problems surfaced. For example, catalogues were still distributed among the different sections, whereas they should all have been in the information centre. Particulars about objects were not readily available and had to be traced in catalogues, receipt books, catalogue cards, cataloguing forms and even in

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., pp. 4, 82 and 189.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 16.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 109.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 45.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., pp. 130, 254 and 314.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., pp. 464 - 465.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., pp. 470 - 471.

old filing systems. Documentation on objects donated and objects on loan could frequently not be found at all.<sup>49</sup>

A project initiated to inventorize all museum objects, and simultaneously obtain basic curatorial information was launched in April 1992.<sup>50</sup> Its aim was to make a detailed survey of all objects in the collections that were to be stored or displayed in the new building allocated to the Museum.<sup>51</sup> The survey identified one of the most pressing problems of Museum documentation, namely the great number of un-accessioned or apparently un-accessioned objects, i.e. objects without an accession number. To all intents and purposes these objects did not exist in the Museum documentation: it was extremely difficult to correlate them with the extant catalogues, receipt books or other records. Basic collections management information was incomplete or non-existent. It was almost impossible to locate the objects and to answer enquiries that related to these objects if there was no record at all. To alleviate the problem it was decided to introduce a system of accessioning these objects as unnumbered or without a number and to enter them into temporary catalogues.<sup>52</sup> In this way very basic information could at least be captured, but the problem was not by any means solved.<sup>53</sup>

Computer technology highlighted the collections documentation problems that already had been encountered in the manual system. One of these was the repetition of accession numbers for one object.<sup>54</sup> The reason why decisions were taken many years ago, either by the professional officer, director, Museum Committee or Board of Trustees, to duplicate accession numbers has never been fathomed by present-day collections management staff. Perhaps the original number was lost either through wear and tear, or was never marked on the object. Possibly the transferral of objects from one catalogue to another, or even from

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<sup>49</sup> NCHMA, File 2.1.1.3, vol. 1, Quarterly reports, Information Centre, May, June and July 1990 and February, March and April 1991, August, September and October 1991.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., File 2.1.1.3, vol. 2, Quarterly reports, Information Centre, April - June 1992.

<sup>51</sup> Collections management department, departmental file, Opname van museumvoorwerpe.

<sup>52</sup> These catalogues were identified with the abbreviation "O" (Afrikaans: *ongenommer*) and the relevant code, for example OHG, i.e. unnumbered objects in the cultural history collection.

<sup>53</sup> Oral information, M. Schulze, 9 February 2004.

<sup>54</sup> One painting, for example, was erroneously numbered three times. It was recorded in the Art Catalogue as A.C. accession no. 419 and in the Historiography Catalogue, vol. 21, as H.C. accession no. 18046 and in vol. T14 as H.C. accession no. 32733. For the use of the word historiography, see glossary.

one collection to another, was to blame or the error could be put down to the introduction of new catalogues in the documentation system.<sup>55</sup>

An analysis of the collections management procedures that were followed by the Transvaal Museum has not yet been compiled. The only attempt to unravel this problem for one particular collection was carried out in the numismatics collection, when a project to compare each item in the collection with the catalogues was launched in October 1998. Serious accession number anomalies were identified. This led to a report and a policy document that carried a clear message to all registrars.<sup>56</sup> If reasons for renumbering objects could be determined for the Museum's collection, it would be a boon to the collections management department. This research attempts to do exactly that.

Documentation problems not only involve accession numbers, but are also concerned with establishing the correct names and other particulars of donors. In cases where there is no information whatsoever about donors, there is the possibility of trouble if descendants make enquiries. Then too, the incorrect spelling of surnames or the donation attributed to the wrong donor (perhaps because the initial documentation was lost) also present problems. Other areas of concern are the incorrect identification and misnaming of objects, and incomplete descriptive information so that it is impossible to distinguish between similar objects. Efforts were indeed made to compile manual index systems, but these were not properly maintained and are therefore of limited use as information retrieval systems.

The troubles in the collections management department are, moreover, aggravated by the fact that now for the first time in more than a 100 years, all the collections of the National Cultural History Museum are in storage in one building, and that probably less than 5% of the objects are on exhibition. Control of the objects during the move to the new building, the unpacking process and arrangement in storage have unleashed a new crop of documentation problems. On the other hand the fact that the staff are now in the same building as the collections for the first time in more than 40 years, and that the objects, the previous manual documentation systems and the data bases are readily available, are positive

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<sup>55</sup> Objects were, for example, transferred from the Historiography Catalogue to the Numismatics Catalogue or to the Kruger and Photographic Catalogues, or from the Historiography Catalogue to the Kruger and then to the Numismatics Catalogues.

<sup>56</sup> G. Balkwill, "Subdivision of items between numismatics collection (Nu) and miscellaneous collection (Misc)" (unpublished article).

aspects as far as the Museum is concerned. The Museum uses the new circumstances to sort out problems as they occur, and to make the necessary amendments to the documentation system immediately. In this way the collections management department is making leeway in upgrading the collections documentation.

Although many of these problems are museum documentation concerns, a number of the issues that have been identified by the present collections management department of the National Cultural History Museum relate to collections management in general. Examples are the departmental organization of the Museum and its resources, such as trained staff, the growth of the collection without the necessary support systems, the functions of the curatorial departments and the previously inadequate and impractical storage spaces. If the history of the Museum is taken into consideration, these shortcomings and the way they have been handled, may have a direct bearing on the present situation experienced by the collections management department of the National Cultural History Museum. Further investigation into these aspects, that have not been covered by this research project, should be undertaken in the near future.

Broadly speaking, insight into and knowledge of the history of collections management in museums is vital to furthering our understanding of its operations. E. Crissman, the curator of the Historic Cherry Hill, Albany, New York, USA, puts it simply when she says: “I have found that it is important to really understand the curatorial and collections management history of the collections or institution I am working with”.<sup>57</sup> Although an article by M. Aleppo deals with one particular aspect of documentation, i.e. conservation records and the attendant registers and index cards, it bears witness to the importance of describing and analyzing the history of documentation. Aleppo describes the evolution of documentation over a period of 160 years at the National Archives, UK, and says that this long tradition provided an opportunity to describe the evolution of documentation systems and to comment on current practice.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> E. Crissman, Cataloguer training, <erin@HISTORICCHERRYHILL.ORG>, dd 22 September 2004.

<sup>58</sup> M. Aleppo, 160 Years of conservation documentation at the National Archives, UK, *The Paper Conservator*, vol. 27, 2003, p. 97.

### 3. A RESEARCH PROJECT BECOMES A NECESSITY

At the end of the 1990s it was clear that the concerns facing the collections management department of the National Cultural History Museum were not abating. Moreover, the predicament concerning the collections had its roots in the past and could not merely be attributed to the changes in the organizational structure of the Museum since 1986. Only an in-depth survey into historic collections management practices at the Transvaal Museum – the precursor of the National Cultural History Museum – would provide conclusive answers to many seemingly insoluble issues.

On 19 June 2001 the Management Committee of the National Cultural History Museum therefore decided to approve the instigation of a research project to analyse the consecutive practices followed by the Transvaal Museum for a period of 51 years, from 1913 to 1964, when the National Cultural History and Open-Air Museum was established. This was to be done with specific reference to collections management for the anthropology, archaeology and history divisions. The study was to ascertain whether these historic practices had any direct bearing on collections management problems encountered in the present. The factors within as well as outside the Museum that had dictated these practices during the period 1913 to 1964 also had to be investigated.

#### **Hypotheses**

In view of the above, and before the study commenced, the following hypothesis was constructed. It was then discussed during a seminar for doctoral students held at the Department of Heritage and Museum Studies of the University of Pretoria on 14 March 2002:

- There is a direct relationship between previous collections management practices at the Transvaal Museum and the problems present experienced by the collections management department of the National Cultural History Museum.

To test this hypothesis, several questions presented themselves. How were collections previously managed and was there in fact some vestigial collections management system, albeit in a “primitive” form? In what way was the system applied? Were clear and unambiguous policies followed in the implementation of these early collections management practices? Were trained staff appointed to curate the anthropology, archaeology and history

collections, or was in-house training provided? Were there changes over time? And if so, what were these changes and why had they occurred?

These questions were made all the more challenging by the fact that for many years the anthropology, archaeology and history divisions were administered by a natural history museum, which led to another hypothesis:

- A general museum with a strong bias towards natural history had an adverse effect on the anthropology, archaeology and history collections held at the Museum.

#### 4. SOURCES

Before the present study of the collections management practices at the Transvaal Museum for the anthropological, archaeological and historical collections commenced, a survey of museological sources was done in order to become fully conversant with any similar research done elsewhere and thus to avoid duplication. The survey showed quite clearly that a detailed analysis of past collections management practices in museums in South Africa had not been attempted, although some researchers had devoted a page or three to collections management issues.

##### **General museological literature**

Since the early twentieth century museums in South Africa have generated a plethora of pamphlets, brochures, catalogues, broadsheets and leaflets. Most have concentrated on the public as target group and provide basic information on the museum or specific displays. Newsletters and bulletins were also issued, giving a broad overview of museum activities, and usually targeted in-house readers, or were written for friends of the museum and the general public.

As time passed guide-books were also published. By 1932 five museums in South Africa had issued guides or handbooks. The guide of the Durban Museum was regarded as the best encountered by Sir Henry Miers and S.F. Markham<sup>59</sup> and cost 6d. Seven institutions

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<sup>59</sup> Miers and Markham were sent to South Africa by the British Museums Association to complete a survey financed by the Carnegie Corporation. C.K. Brain and M.C. Erasmus, *The making of the museum professions in Southern Africa*, p. 3; H.A. Miers and S.F. Markham, *A report on the museums and art galleries of British Africa*, preface.

provided catalogues, of which the one produced by the Durban Art Gallery was highly recommended. It included information on the origin of the collection and the history of the methods used by the artists.<sup>60</sup>

The first directory of South African museums and art galleries<sup>61</sup> was published in 1933 by the British Museums Association. Entries were arranged in alphabetical order according to the town or city, and in the case of South Africa, the relevant province was also given. Population figures (for whites and coloureds) were indicated. The first entry was Bloemfontein, with its two museums and a herbarium; the last was Tulbagh, followed by Windhoek in South West Africa (Namibia). In almost all cases the entry includes the visiting hours, entrance fee, and a general description and the scope of the museum collections, including the publications, educational activities, staff and finances. The directory was the companion volume to *A report on the museums and art galleries of British Africa* by Miers and Markham.

The first and second editions of *Guide to the museums of Southern Africa* was compiled by H. Fransen in 1969 and 1978 on behalf of SAMA. They respectively include a short introduction on the history of museums in South Africa, followed by entries with a precis of the particular museum's history and/or development. This publication was intended to give common information on where the museums were located, the visiting hours and what they had to offer to the general public in the way of displays. Aspects such as documentation and conservation received no attention at all. A guide published on the museums of the Cape Province in 1982,<sup>62</sup> follows the same pattern as Fransen's. These publications are well illustrated.

The *Museums Transvaal*,<sup>63</sup> a guide to the museums in the Transvaal published in 1991, has no illustrations and gives no information on the history or development of the museum, but

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<sup>60</sup> H.A. Miers and S.F. Markham, *A report on the museums and art galleries of British Africa*.

<sup>61</sup> The Museums Association (comp.), *Directory of museums and art galleries in British Africa and in Malta, Cyprus and Gibraltar*.

<sup>62</sup> H.M.J. du Preez (comp.), *Museums van Kaapland. 'n Gids vir die provinsie-ondersteunde museums van Kaapland*.

<sup>63</sup> Transvaal Regional Branch of the Southern African Museums Association (comp.), *Museums Transvaal. Guide to the Museums in the Transvaal*.



nevertheless purports to give useful information for tourists who are planning a sightseeing tour or holiday route in the area. It gives a list of the type of museum, the theme, location, admission, facilities and services.

Museums have traditionally been research driven, and the publication of scholarly research results has always been regarded as an important museum function and a compulsory facet of the work of museum professionals. Such published research has concentrated mainly on the specialized academic disciplines of the museums, usually in the journals published by the museums themselves. Examples are the *Southern African Humanities* (Natal Museum); *Southern African Field Archaeology* (Albany Museum); *Annals of the South African Museum*; *Navorsing van die Nasionale Museum Bloemfontein*; the *Adler Museum Bulletin* (Adler Museum of Medicine); *Military History Journal* (South African National Museum of Military History); *Annals of the Transvaal Museum*; *Cimbebasia* (National Museum of Namibia) and *Research by the National Cultural History Museum*. Museological subjects are unfortunately more often than not taken for granted and have not been subject to rigorous research.

In many cases the centenary of the museum or similar celebration precipitated a research project or a publication, for example *A history of the South African Museum 1825 - 1975*, by R.F.H. Summers, published in 1975. Summers based his research on museum records, and provides detailed notes on his sources, including both unpublished and published museum material, but he makes no mention of catalogues and registers. He devotes one page in the text to catalogues, although more attention is paid to E.M. Shaw and her contribution to museum documentation. Shaw was the only museum ethnologist in South Africa for about 25 years.<sup>64</sup> In the main, Summers describes aspects such as the collections, accommodation problems of the museum, displays, staff, the hierarchy of research departments, the library and publications. Collections management practices as separate issues received no attention.

*A history of the Kaffrarian Museum* was written by B.M. Randles in 1984, the centenary year of that museum in King William's Town, and deals with the curators or directors who headed the museum since 1898, providing highlights during their tenure. In *Collections and*

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<sup>64</sup> R.F.H. Summers, *A history of the South African Museum 1825 - 1975*, pp. 74 - 75 and 142 - 143.

*recollections* by C. Quickelberge, issued on the centenary of the Durban Natural History Museum in 1987, the functions of the museum are emphasized with chapters on education, display, collections and research, scientific work and the library. There are also three chapters on the development of the museum.

The silver jubilee of the National Cultural History and Open-Air Museum was celebrated in 1989 with the issue of a catalogue, *Reflection of a collection*, compiled by E. Grobler and J.A. van Schalkwyk. This publication covers the history of the Museum since 1892, and focuses on the collections, the way collecting has been done and collecting policies; the nitty gritty of museological aspects such as conservation and documentation, are not discussed. The publication *Staatsmuseum 100*,<sup>65</sup> commemorating the centenary of the Staatsmuseum [State Museum] of the South African Republic in 1992,<sup>66</sup> recalls the development of the Staatsmuseum as the “mother” museum with its three descendants, the Transvaal Museum, the National Cultural History Museum and the Museum of the Geological Survey. Again, museological aspects are only mentioned in passing.

### **Academic research**

Museum professionals often choose a museum-related topic for a master’s or doctoral degree at a university. In 1979 E.C. van Niekerk submitted a M.A. dissertation on the history of the Port Elizabeth Museum.<sup>67</sup> This dissertation deals mainly with the tenures of the directors and attention is paid to accommodation, displays, finances, staff, the library, administration, research, the board of trustees, publications and natural history facets such as the bird cages, the aquarium/oceanarium, the tropical house and the snake park. Although some attention is given to the human sciences under the directorship of J.R. Grindley, Van Niekerk comes to the conclusion that little historical research had been accomplished. She asserts that this is evidence that in a general museum a cultural history section cannot function successfully alongside a natural history section. She is of the opinion that two

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<sup>65</sup> N.J. Dippenaar (ed.), *Staatsmuseum 100. National Cultural History Museum, Museum of the Geological Survey, Transvaal Museum*.

<sup>66</sup> The Boer Republic in the Transvaal was known as the Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek [ZAR], or the South African Republic.

<sup>67</sup> E.C. van Niekerk, “Die geskiedenis van die Port Elizabethse Museumkompleks, 1856 - 1975” (unpublished M.A. dissertation, University of Port Elizabeth, 1979).

separate museums should instead be established so that each of these aspects receive the necessary attention.<sup>68</sup>

With regard to collections management, Van Niekerk notes that it was only in 1970 that the historical collection was removed to a separate workroom. The collection was then arranged chronologically and thematically, and a receipt book and a catalogue were opened. The next year an inventory of all the historical objects was made.<sup>69</sup>

In 1981 a M.A. dissertation by H. Oberholzer,<sup>70</sup> dealt with the administration of national museums in South Africa. As this was part of the requirements for a master's degree in public administration, museological matters pertaining to collections, documentation and conservation were not discussed; instead the focus was on the organisation and administration of museums and legal matters.

Although several doctoral theses dealing with museum matters have been completed, few of them deal with to collections management matters. The thesis written by Oberholzer<sup>71</sup> is an administrative rather than a museological exposition of conservation and relates to very broad conservation issues on a national level. The role of museums in conservation constitutes only a part of the dissertation.

Küsel's thesis on the development of the Transvaal Provincial Museum Service<sup>72</sup> emphasizes the museum service as a central organization that planned, co-ordinated, controlled and partly financed provincial and affiliated museums. He discusses in detail museological matters for which the head office of the Transvaal Museum Service provided guidance to provincial and municipal museums, including documentation, typology, collecting, displays, restoration and preservation.

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., p. 218.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., p. 224.

<sup>70</sup> H. Oberholzer, Administrasie van nasionale museums in die Republiek van Suid-Afrika, *Memoirs van die Nasionale Museum Bloemfontein*, vol. 17, June 1982 (M.A. dissertation, University of the Orange Free State, 1981).

<sup>71</sup> H. Oberholzer, Beleid vir die bewaring van die materiële kultuurerfenis, *Memoirs van die Nasionale Museum Bloemfontein*, vol. 22, July 1987 (D.Admin. thesis, University of the Orange Free State, 1987).

<sup>72</sup> U. Küsel, "Die ontwikkeling van die Transvaalse Provinsiale Museumdiens" (unpublished D.Phil thesis, University of Pretoria, 1987).

The museological thesis by H.A. Moolman on site museums<sup>73</sup> devotes a page and a half to collections management matters, such as collecting, documentation and restoration, but the principles of preserving a site museum are explained in more detail. Although the tenets of collections management were firmly established by the 1980s, it is clear from the above that they were regarded as fringe issues or even outside the scope of such studies. Moreover, it was apparently taken for granted that museum management would realize their importance and implement them.

The term “museum practice” in the subtitle of a doctoral thesis in archaeology by P. Davison,<sup>74</sup> refers to fieldwork, collecting, classification and exhibition. Davison asserts that:

In the process of bringing systematic order to previously unmanaged collections, artefacts were registered, catalogued and documented according to a set format. These procedures can be regarded as collectively transforming an object into a museum specimen. Through this process the status of an object increases, it is recontextualized and its meaning is circumscribed for museum purposes. Museum processing creates a more precise identity for an object than it ever had when in use and, furthermore, it becomes durable even if ephemeral in other circumstances. In practice an object becomes a specimen through being given a place in a classification system and, once classified, the annotated artefact both gives substance to the category and becomes more resistant to other interpretations.<sup>75</sup>

In describing the process of cataloguing, for example with regard to the Krige Collection at the South African Museum, Cape Town, Davison is concerned particularly with “the principle of making an artefact into a specimen, i.e. the object has a new reality constituted in the set of attributes by which it has been described”.<sup>76</sup> She also shows how meanings, represented in museum practice, have been conveyed to the museum visitor through visual representation in displays, rather than an objective reflection of reality.<sup>77</sup> In this case museum practice as used by Davison differs from collections management practices as set out in this study of the Transvaal Museum.

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<sup>73</sup> H.A. Moolman, “Die bydrae van terreinmuseums tot die bewaring en interpretasie van die Suid-Afrikaanse omgewing” (unpublished D.Phil thesis, University of Pretoria, 1993).

<sup>74</sup> P. Davison, “Material culture, context and meaning: a critical investigation of museum practice, with particular reference to the South African Museum” (unpublished D.Phil thesis, University of Cape Town, 1991).

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., p. 108.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., pp. 121 and 123.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., p. 138 and abstract.

There are two studies that do focus on one particular aspect of collections management, namely documentation. The first was submitted in part requirement for a post-graduate diploma in museology by G. Balkwill and is entitled “The design of a documentation system for a systematic geological collection”.<sup>78</sup> The first chapter is of particular interest to my research on the collections management practices of the Transvaal Museum, because it identifies the reasons for embarking on his study. One of Balkwill’s main motivations was the inadequate documentation of the geology collection at the University of the Witwatersrand over a period of 90 years. This is precisely the reason why the present study of collections management at the Transvaal Museum – over a period of 51 years in this case – has been undertaken. In Balkwill’s essay the documentation situation of the geology collection is unfortunately only given in outline, with no in-depth analysis provided on the factors that led to the inadequacy of the documentation. Essentially the study deals with the theoretical aspects of a geology documentation system.

A doctoral thesis by H.F.L. Immelman deals with the principles and practice of museum documentation.<sup>79</sup> She examines the state of collection and information documentation in museums at the time of writing and the problems encountered during automation of the information unit records. Although the history of museum documentation is discussed, there is only a short section that deals with museums in South Africa. This study offers an excellent, but very broad overview of the needs of museum documentation, and looks in particular at principles that would ensure the smooth functioning of computerized data bases. In this case too the study is concerned with theoretical concepts of museum documentation rather than with collections management *per se* and the essential problems encountered in a particular museum.

## **Literature on the National Cultural History Museum**

### Popular articles

The history of the National Cultural History Museum and its predecessors, the Staatsmuseum and the Transvaal Museum, has been written many times in a variety of guises. They have appeared in magazines, newspapers, guide-books and have even been

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<sup>78</sup> G. Balkwill, “The design of a documentation system for a systematic geological collection” (unpublished paper for post-graduate diploma in museology, University of Pretoria, 1987).

<sup>79</sup> H.F.L. Immelman, “Museum documentation: principles and practice” (unpublished D.Phil thesis, University of Natal, 1993).

ronoed as information sheets. The first article to appear was probably an illustrated article printed in the *Strand Magazine* in 1900, entitled “The Boer ‘Tower of London’. A visit to the Staats Museum, Pretoria”, an interesting view of the Staatsmuseum and its displays, written by J.C. Harris. In the *Museum Journal* of 1902 another article appeared with the title “Transvaal State Museum”. In the first volume of the *Annals of the Transvaal Museum*, dated April 1908, the director, J.W.B. Gunning, wrote “A short history of the Transvaal Museum”, an illustrated article giving Gunning’s views on the Museum and its aims after the Anglo-Boer War.

In the first newsletter of the Old Pretoria Society the director of the Transvaal Museum, V. FitzSimons, contributed “Historical collections of the Transvaal Museum”.<sup>80</sup> A roneoed article, “The National Museum, Boomstreet, Pretoria”, appeared in 1952, written by Kotie Roodt-Coetzee on behalf of the Committee for the Van Riebeeck Festival. There is also an Afrikaans version. Roneoed articles, in both Afrikaans and English, appeared in March 1954, with the titles “A short history of Kruger House Museum, Pretoria” and “A short history of the Transvaal Museum”. Both these were written by FitzSimons.

Yet another roneoed article by the same author, again titled “A short history of the Transvaal Museum”, appeared in January 1958, and another piece with the identical title, also by FitzSimons, was published in *Pretoriana* in 1959.<sup>81</sup> It was accompanied by a copy of the circular letter issued by the Staatsmuseum in 1893, in which an appeal was made by the chairman of the Curatorium [board of trustees] for donations. Coetzee wrote on “ ‘n Opelugmuseum vir Pretoria” in the *Pretoriana* of December 1964, and in the same edition an article appeared on “Die Nasionale Kultuurhistoriese en Opelugmuseum, Pretoria”, by P.J. Coertze.<sup>82</sup>

In a supplement to the newspaper *Hoofstad* of 23 September 1970, W. Prinsloo wrote an article entitled “Hierdie museum het ‘n lang pad geloop”. In the *Bulletin of the Transvaal Museum* “A history of the Transvaal Museum” appeared in Afrikaans and English, written

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<sup>80</sup> *Pretoriana*, 1(1), September 1951, pp. 8 - 11.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 29, April 1959, pp. 9 - 16.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 46, December 1964, pp. 2 - 21.

by FitzSimons and L. Brain in 1972.<sup>83</sup> An article on the history of the Staatsmuseum by J. Ploeger, appeared in *Pretoriana* in 1992.<sup>84</sup>

The Transvaal Museum has also featured in various guide-books. One example is the two editions of the *Johannesburg and Pretoria Guide*, published by Dennis Edwards & Co. and another is *Pretoria, the administrative capital of the Union of South Africa*, issued by the Pretoria Municipality, the Pretoria Publicity Association and the Pretoria and District Chamber of Industries. In the book *The Transvaal and its mines*, edited by L.V. Praagh, a section is devoted to the Transvaal Museum.

In broad terms all these articles tell the basic story of the development of the Staatsmuseum and its successor, the Transvaal Museum, but scant attention is paid to the museological and curatorial work carried out in the Museum. The reason is probably that such details would not have been of interest to the target group for which the articles were written. Then again, it was taken for granted that the curators were capable and knowledgeable when it came to museum practices, such as collecting, documenting and conserving; they would have implemented these procedures as a matter of routine.

#### Academic research

Various aspects of the history and the collections in the National Cultural History Museum, dating from the time of the Staatsmuseum and the Transvaal Museum have been covered in academic studies over the years. The first of these, a master's dissertation, was entitled “’n Beskrywing van en kunskritiese beskouing oor die versameling petrogliewe in die ou Transvaal-museum Pretoria”, written by Oosthuizen.

Another was written in 1967 by De Beer: “Die ‘Zuid-Afrikaansch Museum’ te Dordrecht 1902 - 1921” for a master's degree. De Beer's doctoral thesis<sup>85</sup> followed and devotes some attention to the collecting and preservation functions of an open-air museum. In particular the role of the National Cultural History and Open-Air Museum in establishing such a museum in South Africa receives close attention.

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<sup>83</sup> *Bulletin of the Transvaal Museum*, no. 13, 30 November 1972.

<sup>84</sup> Ploeger, J., Die Staatsmuseum 1892 - 1904, *Pretoriana*, no. 100, April 1992.

<sup>85</sup> P.J. de Beer, “Die fenomeen opelugmuseum in kultuurhistoriese perspektief” (unpublished D. Phil thesis, University of Pretoria, 1979).

My own master's degree in museology on the development of the Staatsmuseum,<sup>86</sup> besides dealing with issues such as the Curatorium, staff and museum accommodation, also pays specific attention to museological aspects and functions of the Staatsmuseum, including the aims, collecting, conservation and documentation. S. Markgraaf's M.A. in museology<sup>87</sup> focuses on the origin and development of one collection, the paper collection, in the National Cultural History Museum. It also deals with two important collections management aspects, namely preservation and a conservation policy.

From the above it is clear that no previous in-depth research has analysed factors such as the organization of the Transvaal Museum, changes in emphases and environment, staff responsibility for collections, collections policies (or the lack of policies), and the way in which documentation sources have been designed and utilized. Nor has there been any scrutiny of the various stages through which an object passes until it finally becomes part of the museum collection. It is significant to note that failure to manage the collections satisfactorily has been identified clearly in at least two of the earlier studies mentioned above, those by Oosthuizen and De Beer.

### **Notes on sources used**

In order to find answers to the questions posed in the hypotheses it was imperative to make extensive use of the primary sources located in the archives and the collections management department of the National Cultural History Museum. The libraries of the Transvaal Museum and the National Cultural History Museum also provided useful material, including periodicals, journals and scientific literature.

### Primary sources

In the main the sources in the National Cultural History Museum can be divided into three broad categories that correlate with their provenance and also with the chapters and the themes for this thesis. The three categories are:

- archival sources, found in the Museum archives, such as closed correspondence files, annual reports, internal reports, recommendations,

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<sup>86</sup> E. Grobler, "Die Staatsmuseum van die Zuid-Afrikaanse Republiek en sy historiese en etnografiese versamelings" (unpublished M.A. dissertation, University of Pretoria, 1994).

<sup>87</sup> S. Markgraaf, "Papier en die papierversameling van die Nasionale Kultuurhistoriese Museum, Pretoria: ontstaan, aard en bewaring" (unpublished M.A. dissertation, University of Pretoria, 1995).



memoranda and minutes, that have their origin in the management and administration of the Museum; including the reports of the various commissions and committees of enquiry on museum matters,

- documentation sources (in the collections management department), that have their origin in the collections management functions, performed by relevant divisions or departments, such as the series of acquisitions registers dating from the time of the Staatsmuseum, the various catalogues used for and in the anthropology, archaeology and history divisions at the Transvaal Museum, the loans registers and the catalogue cards, and
- the objects in the collections.

The first category was used in the main for the history of the Transvaal Museum from 1913 to 1964 and for aspects that are pertinent to the development of collections management practices. These include organizational and environmental changes, departmental organization, resources (staff, collections), exhibitions, responsibility for documentation, the design of the documentation system and conservation (chapters III and IV).

The second category was used for the detailed exposition of the collections documentation with regard to aspects such as the collection of objects, acquisitioning of those objects, cataloguing, loans-in and loans-out, information retrieval and de-accessioning. The third category was used to correlate the findings on documentation with the objects themselves (chapters V and VI).

- Archival sources

The Transvaal Museum was managed by a director, who in turn was responsible to a governing body (originally called the Museum Committee) and since 29 June 1933 known as the Board of Trustees. The minutes of their meetings are available from March 1905 to 12 June 1964.<sup>88</sup> At this final meeting of the Board two separate boards were constituted for the Transvaal Museum and the National Cultural History and Open-Air Museum respectively.

These minutes are a valuable source of information on the decisions taken about the general business of the Museum, including museum administration, accommodation and problems

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<sup>88</sup> One volume could not be traced, i.e. the volume containing the minutes from 9 April 1954 to 3 February 1956.

of insufficient space. They also cover staff matters, correspondence, development of collections, field trips, the grant-in-aid received from the government, the budget, ongoing shortage of funds and other financial matters. It is notable that the priorities of the Committee and Board are clearly manifested in the minutes, and that they show a decided preference for natural history.

Little detailed information about collections management policies and practices could be gleaned from the minutes. Matters that were discussed pertain to specific issues that needed the attention of the Committee or Board, such as security (in the case of theft or war circumstances), loans, or the availability of money to purchase objects for the collection.

The minutes also portray the changes that took place at the Transvaal Museum from the late 1940s, such as the appointment of board members with a human science background and the increasing attention given to the historical division of the Transvaal Museum. These changes are also reflected in the minutes of the Historical Sub-committee,<sup>89</sup> a new body that was constituted in June 1955 to serve the interests of the history division and to raise these matters in Board meetings.

The minutes of the Sub-committee reflect the new priorities set by the history (later the cultural history) division, such as the development of the collection, the need for funds, the restoration of objects, the appointment of trained staff and, although on a limited scale, documentation matters. The movement towards autonomy for the cultural history division and the establishment of the National Cultural History and Open-Air Museum can also be traced in the minutes.

The minutes of the Board of the National Cultural History and Open-Air Museum and the National Cultural History Museum were used to compile the introduction to this research project, in particular the continuous change in circumstances of the collections management department at the National Cultural History Museum.

The annual reports for the first few years after 1913 could not be traced in the Museum's archive, but some were found in the National Archives. It also appears that no reports were

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<sup>89</sup> Copies of the minutes are also on file.

written for the period 1920 to 1935. From 1935 onwards the annual reports of the Transvaal Museum were retained, first in roneo-format and from 1951 they were printed. In comparison to the minutes, the annual reports provide more insight into the organization of the Transvaal Museum, its achievements and its day to day problems. The general reports of the director contain information about museum visitors, the number of acquisitions, donations and field trips. Research and publications such as the *Annals of the Transvaal Museum* also feature, as do show (exhibition) and study collections. These and other issues such as the maintenance of the buildings, staff matters and the audited financial statements, are all supplemented by reports from the natural history divisions/departments and other divisions. Although the reports were written by individuals such as the chairman of the Museum Committee or the Board, the directors, the keepers, professional officers and curators, they nonetheless reflect not only the administrative process but also the wide-ranging interests of the Transvaal Museum as a vibrant natural history institution.

The annual reports also portray the changes that took place at the Transvaal Museum from the late 1940s and the detailed reporting by the history division was particularly useful. These reports were invaluable in providing information on collections management practices in the anthropology, archaeology and history divisions, giving information about the displays, the study collections, the duties of the staff and the growth of the collections. The Museum's various departments and divisions, and the change of the history division into a cultural history department in its own right, can also be traced in the annual reports.

With the establishment of the National Cultural History and Open-Air Museum in 1964, the correspondence dealing with anthropology, archaeology and history matters was withdrawn from the closed and current record filing systems of the administrative section at the Transvaal Museum. It was then converted into a new closed filing system (later called System No 1) and retained in the archives. This system comprises correspondence dating from 1892 to 1964. Unfortunately not all the correspondence was located at the time and several boxes were added to the archives later. These were not incorporated into System No 1.

Many of the incoming letters, and more particularly the replies (usually written by the director, but not exclusively so) shed light on collections management practices. For example, it seems that the practice of naming the donor on the label in the display was often

used to encourage donors. Although the correspondence was useful in extracting “unwritten” policy statements and methods of display, it also reflected the involvement of the director with the history division over a period of many years, until a professional officer for history was appointed in 1953, and on occasion, with the anthropology and archaeology divisions. Other sources include the letter books of the Transvaal Museum (1917 - 1921) and two diaries (1947 and 1949) that had belonged to the director.

In March 2003 Coetzee donated a variety of photographs and documents, including manuscripts, lectures, newspaper and magazine cuttings, notes, speeches and letters, to the National Cultural History Museum. These records have fallen into disarray. Although the arrangement of the records has still not been finalized, a preliminary sorting was attempted to make the relevant records accessible for this research.

These have indeed proved invaluable, because many of them bear testimony to Coetzee’s attempts to identify, display and conserve cultural history and historical objects. This is particularly true of those already held in the collection of the Transvaal Museum prior to her appointment at the Museum in 1953. Her commitment to the preservation of South Africa’s cultural heritage, her passion for knowledge and the driving force that motivated her to develop the history division of the Transvaal Museum and later to establish and expand the National Cultural History and Open-Air Museum are well documented.

Internal reports, articles and memoranda, usually unpublished, that were drawn up at the Transvaal Museum, the National Cultural History and Open-Air Museum and the National Cultural History Museum, proved very useful. For example, the unpublished article, “Gesiedenis van die Volkekunde-Afdeling van die Nasko-Museum, Pretoria 1893 - 1977” and the report, “Konsepverslag: Toestand in Museum” provided pointers on the progress of the anthropology division in this research project that otherwise could have been missed.

The reports of commissions and committees of enquiry are another valuable source of information on general museum matters, but also provide information on the Transvaal Museum in particular. The report published in 1932 on museums and art galleries of British Africa by Miers and Markham<sup>90</sup> is the first of four reports on museums in South Africa

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<sup>90</sup> Although a copy of this report was obtained from the Transvaal Museum library, it is grouped with the other reports that form part of the Museum archives.

during the period covered by this study. In comparison to the other three compilations by governmental commissions and committees, this particular one was conducted by the British Museums Association.<sup>91</sup> It has an abundance of facts on the distribution of museums, the history, administration and finances. There is also information on staff matters, accommodation, the collections and displays, educational activities, fieldwork, research and publications, but there is no information on the documentation of collections in the 1930s.

Miers and Markham recommended that a commission of enquiry on museum matters should be appointed by the South African government.<sup>92</sup> The first of these was only appointed in October 1948 (the Du Toit Commission), and was some years later followed by the Cilliers Committee in 1960 and the Booyesen Committee in 1962. The reports of all these commissions are useful in the verification of the vested interests of the Transvaal Museum in this research project. They also throw light on events that led to the establishment of the National Cultural History and Open-Air Museum.

- Documentation sources

Registers and catalogues form the backbone of a museum. These sources, usually handwritten, provide the primary and basic information about the collections. They not only serve as a guide to the numbering system used for the acquisition and accessioning of objects; they are also directly associated with the manner in which the collections were managed. They are also important in that they give a contemporary record of the management style used. They were therefore useful in various ways for this study.

At the Transvaal Museum most of these volumes have been preserved,<sup>93</sup> even those pertaining to the collections of the Staatsmuseum. They can be divided into two categories:

- acquisitions entry registers (the entry documentation of, or recording of an acquisition with its initial entry into the museum in a register), and

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<sup>91</sup> H.A. Miers and S.F. Markham, *A report on the museums and art galleries of British Africa*, p. iii.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., p. 44.

<sup>93</sup> As far as can be ascertained five catalogues are known to be missing, i.e the Ethnographica Catalogue, another ethnology catalogue, and the C. Cat, D. Cat. and N. Cat catalogues.

- catalogues (the formal permanent inclusion of an acquisition in the museum's collection by means of a unique accession number in a catalogue).<sup>94</sup>

Without the close perusal and detailed analysis of these registers and catalogues the two chapters (chapters V and VI) on documentation at the Transvaal Museum could not have been written. In many cases the acquisitions registers and catalogues provide the only extant particulars about the objects in the collection. Additional information in the catalogues, provided by the curator or staff member who compiled these records and the problems they encountered, also throws light on the present collections management problems experienced with particular collections. As far as possible information on how, when and why these catalogues were compiled, were sourced and added to the relevant chapters. The existing loans registers also provided insight into the way the collections were enlarged by loans.

In comparison to the registers and catalogues, previous information retrieval systems did not survive the passage of time intact. Only very few examples of the early anthropology card catalogues from the 1920s were preserved by J. van Schalkwyk, the present head of the Research Department of the National Cultural History Museum. The card catalogue compiled by Coetzee could still be consulted, albeit in a very depleted form.

- **Objects**

The aim of this research project is to establish the ways in which previous collections management practices were to the benefit or detriment of the collections – and more to the point, to the objects in the collections held at the National Cultural History Museum. Thus the objects were essential as evidence of good practice and alleged malpractice. In the case of some of the problems that survive in the records, the passage of time and curatorial effort had obliterated the evidence on the objects themselves. Nonetheless objects were found that could still bear testimony to errors such as more than one accession number for one object, accession numbers without a code, numbers on labels and unnumbered objects.

### Secondary sources

A wide variety of museological literature and handbooks on collections management and collections documentation was used to construct a comprehensive account of the development of modern collections management practices. The *South African Museums*

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<sup>94</sup> Also see glossary.

*Association Bulletin (SAMAB)* was also helpful in tracing the development of collections management in South Africa (chapter I).

One author who needs particular recognition for his contribution to the exposition of collections management and the documentation of museum collections is D. Andrew Roberts. His report on the results of a project undertaken from September 1981 to March 1983 to investigate the state and future development of documentation procedures in museums, *Planning the documentation of museum collections*, was published by the Museum Documentation Association (MDA) in Britain in 1985. Roberts is thoroughly acquainted with collections management and museum documentation, having joined the MDA as a research assistant in 1977; he then became secretary in 1979 and director/secretary in 1987. He was also chairman of the International Committee for documentation of the International Council of Museums (ICOM - CIDOC) and worked at the Museum of London.<sup>95</sup> This book was invaluable in giving structure to the present research and the arrangement of the subdivisions in the chapters on collections management practices and collections documentation (chapters III, IV, V and VI). These could not have been compiled without frequent reference to his work.

More limited use was made of the Internet to provide personal details, current definitions of the museum as institution and thoughts on collections management, but for detailed research on collections management practices at the Transvaal Museum in the period under discussion, web pages were inadequate.

## **5. ARRANGEMENT OF CHAPTERS**

Seen in broad perspective, this study is a museological investigation into museum matters, examining the very basic levels of how objects are handled from the moment they enter the museum until their placement, either in storage or on display; it also studies the way in which information about these objects is collected and disseminated.

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<sup>95</sup> D.A. Roberts (ed.), *Collections management for museums*, p. xvi; The museum information profession and the International Committee for documentation of the International Council of Museums (ICOM - CIDOC), <http://www.willpowerinfor.myby.co.uk/cidoc/prof.html>, 7 June 2004.

In chapter I the ideal collections management situation, as it is recognized in the international museum world today, is set out. This includes a short history of the development of collections management practices both overseas and in South Africa. In order to put collections management within the framework of the particular Museum dealt with in this thesis, the history of the Transvaal Museum from 1913 to 1964 is discussed in chapter II. These dates have been specifically chosen for the following reasons:

- Gunning, the director of the Transvaal Museum, and previously director of the Staatsmuseum, died on 25 June 1913. Gunning's contribution to the development of the Staatsmuseum and the early years of the Transvaal Museum has already been discussed in a dissertation.<sup>96</sup> He was succeeded by H.G. Breijer, whose application was approved by the Museum Committee on 11 December 1913.<sup>97</sup> The year 1913 is thus a clear starting point for research on a new beginning at the Museum.
- The year 1964 may be regarded in a similar light, in other words the inception of an autonomous museum, the National Cultural History and Open-Air Museum, and the discontinuance of responsibilities for the anthropology, archaeology and history collections at the Transvaal Museum, which it had managed for 60 years.
- Between 1913 and 1964 lies the year 1953, which must also be regarded as a crucial date. In that year the Transvaal Museum grasped the opportunity, for the first time since the establishment of the Staatsmuseum, to appoint a trained professional officer for the history section. This set a course towards the new museum and a new cultural history museology in South Africa.

Detailed analyses of collections management practices at the Transvaal Museum during two periods, that is 1913 to 1953 and 1953 to 1964, are discussed in the chapters that follow. First, aspects such as organizational changes, resources and staff are covered. The growth of collections, collection policies, storage and display, the documentation framework and conservation are also dealt with (chapters III and IV). The next chapters (chapters V and VI) deal with the minutiae of the documentation process. This is indeed the crux of the matter in the search to find solutions to the problem at present experienced by the

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<sup>96</sup> E. Grobler, "Die Staatsmuseum van die Zuid-Afrikaanse Republiek en sy historiese en etnografiese versamelings" (unpublished M.A. dissertation, University of Pretoria, 1994).

<sup>97</sup> Transvaal Museum Committee minutes, meeting 11 December 1913.



collections management department of the National Cultural History Museum. To conclude, an assessment of the collections management practices at the Transvaal Museum is made (chapter VII).

For the most part, the illustrations from the documentation systems form an integral part of the research as they support and elucidate issues mentioned in the text.