



Collections Care Training

Examples of Incorrect Object Labelling

Summary

Almost all museums have examples of poor object labelling in their collections. In this guidance document you will find some historic examples from the collections of National Museums Scotland, with suggestions on how these can be removed and replaced with best practice techniques where possible.

**Important to consider while you read this guidance
WHEN CONSIDERING REMOVING HISTORIC OBJECT LABELLING, ALWAYS
CONSULT A CONSERVATOR**

Examples of incorrect object labelling

Below are various examples of object labelling that is inappropriate for the object.

SIZE OF LABEL

These two objects demonstrate when a number, although well written, can distract from the interpretation simply because it is too large.



This mummified woman had a number that measured a least 3cm tall. It has since been removed and placed more subtly, providing more respect.



This tool has a number that extends up the shaft and distracts from the actual tool itself.

The images below are examples of where consideration of the object's size and use can be detrimental when labelling. These are both large objects and someone has chosen to label them accordingly. Just because an object is large does not mean the label needs to be as well.



It would be better to place the label at the bottom in a subtle spot that is easily readable and smaller than it is here.



The machine above is not only large but being an industrial object, it lacks some typical opinions of what looks good. It is important to remember that just

because an object is potentially less aesthetically pleasing doesn't mean it's label should also look as such.

LABELLING AN UNEVEN SURFACE



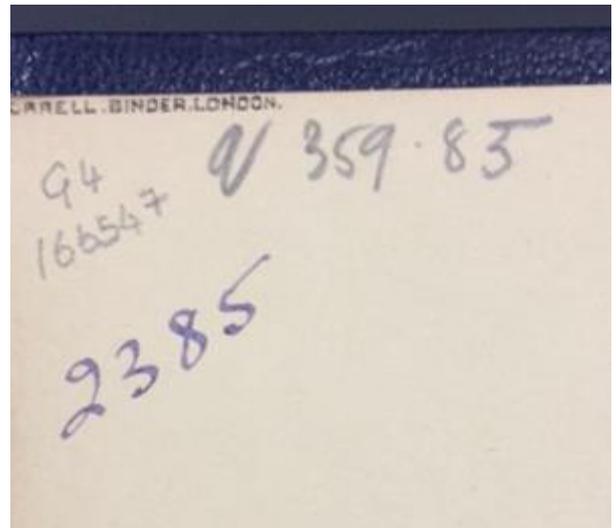
This model is a great example of when you apply a number/label on a surface that is not level and the confusion that results when trying to interpret it. The first and last numbers are illegible and overall it distracts from the object.

UNCLEAR APPLICATION

It's important to remember that just because it's clear to you doesn't mean it will be to another person.



After a bit of detective work, it was found the last number on this label was an 8, not two 0s.



This book has clearly been in several collections and thus unavoidably has been given many numbers over time. It's vital to make clear which number is relevant to your collection.

INCOMPLETE NUMBER APPLICATION

A common issue for many museum collections is the application of an incomplete number.



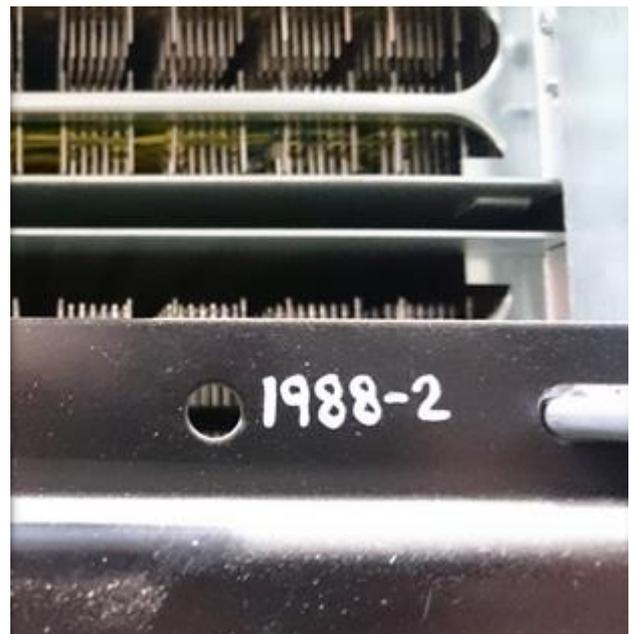
This object was accessioned in 1907. Prior to entering the 21st century, this number wouldn't have been an issue but now, not writing the whole number could lead to lost or misidentified objects.



Not taking the time to put the complete number is detrimental to any collections management. This metal object simply read 'Part 8' – but part 8 of what? The label is also written on masking tape which is damaging to the object.

LABELLING WITH DAMAGING MATERIALS

Every museum is bound to have objects where a now obsolete method of labelling was used and has since shown to be damaging to an object. Thankfully technology continues to progress and we learn what works better and safer for an object all the time.



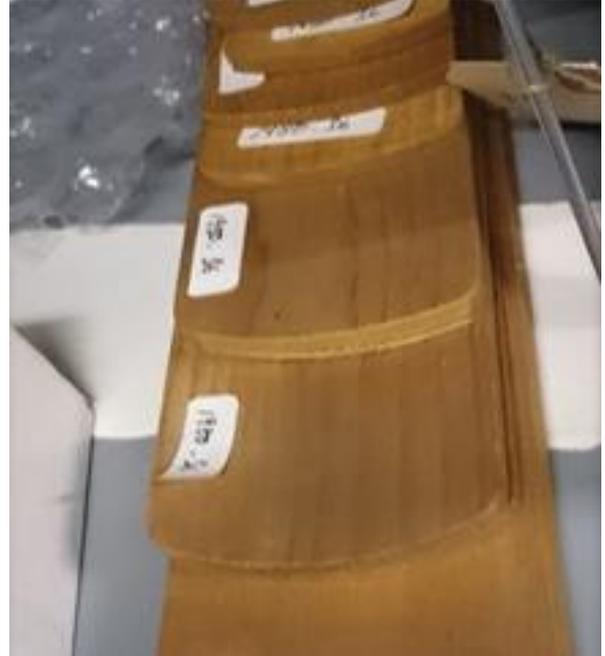
This is a classic example of an old method of labelling – ticker tape. Although very easy to read, it as been proven to be both hard to remove as well as very aesthetically displeasing for display.

This processor has been labelled with correction fluid. This type of labelling can flake off and react with the surface of the object causing irreversible damage.

The images below are examples of where consideration of the object's size and use can be detrimental when labelling. These are both large objects and someone has chosen to label them accordingly. Just because an object is large does not mean the label needs to be as well.



Sometimes the choice of instrument to label may be fine, but due to the nature of the object's surface it is a bad choice. This image is of a rifle box labelled with pencil. Whilst pencil is fine for labelling paper collections, we can see here that the pencil has acted like an engraving tool and thus caused irreversible damage to the soft wood surface of the box. Always ensure the chosen labelling method is suitable for your object.



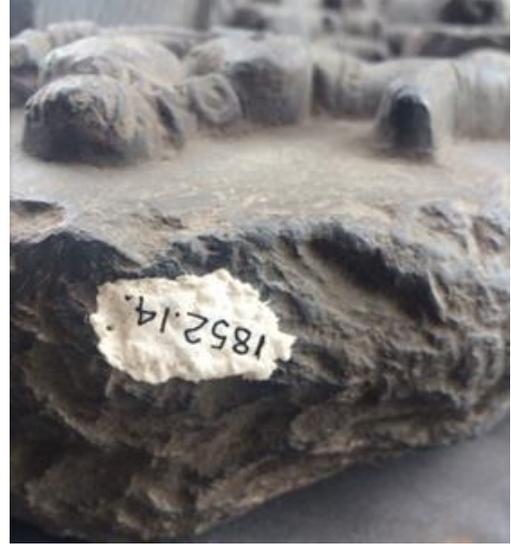
Some patented labelling products are unsuitable. Just because it might be a labelling product, doesn't mean it's a good labelling method for museum objects. In this image we can see how sticky labels have used on varnished propellers. Not only are they not sticking properly to the varnished surface (and thus the numbers and identification will eventually be lost) but where they are sticking the glue will cause irreversible damage,

BADLY PLACED NUMBERS

As mentioned above, historic label placement is an issue for most museum collections and often cannot be removed or hidden as the methods are irreversible. It is important to keep in mind though that attempting to disguise these old labels can be even more distracting. Although you want to prevent number confusion, it's best to consider each object individually when deciding to cross out a number.



In this image the chair had been labelled quite obviously on the front distracting from it's look. This has been made worse by a large white stroke through the number.



Occasionally you need to label something that has a dark surface and it makes any labelling options hard to read. Discreetness is still crucial in these cases. For this object, the use of white ink in a discreet spot would be more appropriate and subtle than applying black ink on a very distracting white blotch.

OBJECT CONSIDERATION

Many objects are kept in a container that would also be placed on display. Be sure to always place the number discreetly on objects, including containers, as you never know when it may be used for display.



This box containing a lock of Bonnie Prince Charlie's hair is labelled beautifully, but it's location on this box is distracting for display.

ALWAYS CHECK YOU OBJECT'S RECORD BEFORE LABELLING!

Remember to check the object's use and description prior to labelling. Not only is it good to confirm you have the number correct, but it can also save you from make a labelling error.



This object was presumed to be a bowl when labelled, but is in fact a hat. Unfortunately the label is obvious and has been applied in an irreversible pigment as well, so there is no easing of the impact of this label if it were to go on display.

This guidance has been coordinated the **Department of National & International Partnerships at National Museums Scotland** with specific input from Kelly Rennie, Collections Technician, National Museums Scotland.

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