Assistance with writing a collection plan

(Handreiking voor het schrijven van een collectieplan)

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Preface

In 1998, the Handreiking voor het schrijven van een collectieplan (Assistance with writing a collection plan) appeared, a joint publication of the Netherlands Institute for Cultural Heritage (Instituut Collectie Nederland, ICN) and the Stichting Landelijk Contact van Museumconsulenten (LCM = Foundation for National Contact between Museum Consultants). This brochure was in line with the major attention for systematic collection management that had resulted from the Deltaplan voor Cultuurbehoud (Delta Plan for Cultural Preservation). The preface of the 1998 brochure describes that general guidelines are not easy to word due to the diversity of museums and collections. This diversity has only increased in the last few years. In addition, it has become apparent that not only museums, but also churches, libraries and archives have a need for guidelines when drawing up a collection plan. This was a reason for the ICN and LCM to publish this revised version of the Assistance with writing a collection plan, which incorporates the latest developments and insights in the area of collection management. This publication has again been possible thanks to a contribution from the Mondriaan Stichting (Mondriaan Foundation). We hope that this renewed assistance is a good guideline for realizing a collection plan.

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Why this assistance?

The professional management of a collection entails many things, such as a good store room, an adequate collection registration system and ... a collection plan. A collection plan is a vital tool for collection management. It offers insight into the collection and provides structure and clarity for the development of the collection policy. The diversity of collections and institutions they manage is large. We differentiate between large, medium large and small museums, art history, natural history, cultural history, anthropological museums and museums of technology. Not just museums, but also archives, libraries, businesses, foundations, municipalities and religious communities manage collections. The way in which collections are managed also differs considerably. All these differences can be expressed
in a collection plan. It is not the intention of this assistance to provide one general applicable piece of advice, but to offer starting points and structure for writing a collection plan. You as a collection custodian can interpret this as you see fit. Should you have questions after reading this, do not hesitate to contact your provincial museum consultant or the Consultancy department of the Netherlands Institute for Cultural Heritage.

What is a collection plan?

The collection plan concept made its entry in the Netherlands at the start of the Delta Plan for Cultural Preservation in 1990. In this brochure, we use the following concept description: a collection plan is a document that provides insight into:

- the composition and significance of the collection
- the collection policy the implementation of the collection policy

A good collection plan is consequently more than just a description of the collection. It provides insight into what the institution wants with the collection: the collection policy. The collection plan is part of the general policy plan. A policy plan discusses facets of the institution such as finance, safety, accommodation, human resources, and it touches on the collection. In the collection plan, the collection is central. It focuses on subjects such as collection history, collecting and de-accessioning, and preservation and management. In this assistance, we focus on the various subjects discussed in a collection plan.

A collection plan …

- incites reflection of the museum’s mission
- provides insight into the composition and significance of the collection
- can lead to accentuation of the collection profile
- is an aid for setting priorities in the collection policy
- provides starting points for harmonization with fellow institutions
- maps backlogs in collection management and incites to action
- may serve as a basis for drawing up subplans, such as a registration plan, a preservation plan or a collecting plan

Aim and target group.

The aim of the collection plan is to provide an overview of the scope and composition of the collection, to describe the policy with regard to the collection and to elaborate this policy in concrete plans. A collection plan can be written for both internal and external target groups. These may include not only the institution's own staff, but also administrators, people requesting loans, testators, donors, financers and fellow institutions. To the outside world, a balanced, well-presented collection plan can function as the institution's frontpiece: it inspires confidence and radiates professionalism. Governments and subsidizers attach importance to applicants having a collection plan.

What is in a collection plan?

Although the information in a collection can be arranged in different ways, the topics dealt with are more or less fixed: collection description, collection forming, preservation and management and use. The categorization in this brochure is intended as a suggestion; of course you can alter it as you see fit.

We have employed the following categorization in this brochure: after the introduction, explaining the aim of writing the collection plan and for whom it was written, there is a general chapter in which the mission and positioning are discussed. Subsequently, the collection as a whole and the collection policy are
described. Finally, there is an elaboration of this information at subcollection level. The categorization of the collection plan is as follows:

- 1 General
  - 1.1 Mission
  - 1.2 Positioning
- 2 The main features of the collection
  - 2.1 Collection description
  - 2.2 Collection forming
  - 2.3 Preservation and management
  - 2.4 Registration and documentation
  - 2.5 Use of the collection
- 3 The main features at subcollection level
  - 3.1 Categorization into subcollections
  - 3.2 Data per subcollection
- 4 Conclusion

Each chapter can be subdivided into different paragraphs and subparagraphs. The topics discussed depend on the specific situation in your institution and for your collection. It can be useful to elaborate in subplans on topics that require a lot of attention, such as a registration plan, a preservation plan or a collecting plan. Discussing too many details in the collection plan can obscure the main lines.

1 General

1.1 Mission

The description of the institution’s mission forms a good starting point for the collection plan. Writing a collection plan can be a reason for (re)contemplation of the mission. Perhaps the mission has not been formulated before or the old mission appears to no longer be valid. The ICOM definition of a museum can serve as a starting point for a museum mission: *A museum is a permanent institution serving society and its development, not focused on making a profit, which acquires testimonies made by man and his environment, registers, documents and carries out scientific research, preserves and presents for study, education and pleasure.* An example of a museum mission is that of the Stichting Koninklijk Militair-historisch Museum (Royal Military History Museum Foundation) in Delft: *Using its unique national collection, the Koninklijk Militair-historisch Museum wants to arouse wide public interest in the significance of armed forces for our country, through the centuries. This determines the collection’s additional forming and manner of presentation.* Another example is the mission of the Stichting Stadsmuseum Zoetermeer (Zoetermeer City Museum Foundation): *The Stichting Stadsmuseum Zoetermeer exists to preserve the (im)material heritage of Zoetermeer. In other words: the museum focuses on the history (or the roots) and the identity of Zoetermeer for the city residents and, secondly, for the general public beyond. This actually means that the foundation is involved in preserving, managing, collecting and researching the collection; presenting exhibitions and exercising the commercial duties of the museum.*

In general, a museum’s or other collection-managing institute’s mission contains, as the examples above show, two elements:

1. A description of the institution’s collecting area. The area of collecting means the theme, the geographic area or the period on which the collection has a bearing. There is often more than one theme, area or period. In which case it is better to base the description of the area of collection on the core of the collection: the part of the collection that is vital for the institution’s image.

2. A description of the institution’s (collection related) activities. Terms such as collecting, storing, exhibiting, preserving, managing, researching and informing are in almost every museum’s mission. Justifiably, because these are a museum’s core tasks. For other collection-managing institutions – for example a religious community or a university – the management of a collection is often not a primary
task. Libraries and archives often manage both ‘museum’ collections and borrowing collections. Even if
the museum management of a collection is not a main task, it is worthwhile spending time on a collection
plan and the question of why the collection is kept, for what purpose and for whom.

1.2 Positioning

By positioning we mean the position the institution and collection takes with regard to other, comparable
institutions and collections. A clear positioning is taken to mean that the institution is aware of its own
strengths and weaknesses and utilizes its strong points as far as possible. Aspects that play a role at
institution level are the scale on which the institution operates (number of staff, number of visitors,
budget, size of the collection, etc.), and the environment in which the institution operates (who are the
important financiers, partners, competitors, customers).

The positioning of the collection with regard to other collections is also relevant.

- How does the collection compare to other collections?
- What are the differences and similarities in size, composition, cultural-historical value and use?
- Which differences and overlaps are there in the collection policy?

2 The main features of the collection

2.1 Collection description

Collection history

A collection plan should contain a brief explanation of a collection’s history. How was the collection
formed, when and by whom? How was it managed in the past?
The question why the collection was assembled, is also an interesting one. Some collections came
about more or less accidentally, others were consciously compiled. In many cases, the intentions of the
original collectors will be different from the current custodians’. Knowledge of the collecting history can
provide better insight into the collection and, in doing so, contribute towards improved collection
management. An example: an object that really no longer matches the collection profile can still be worth
keeping, because it is part of a historically grown ensemble. Cultural-historical value. It is fitting to give
an indication of the cultural-historical value of the collection in the chapter about collection description.
‘Cultural-historical value’ is relative. How the cultural-historical value of an object or collection is
assessed, depends on the available knowledge, the prevalent views, perspective used and taste. It
cannot be measured objectively. Still, when assessing the cultural-historical value, it is important to strive
for as high a level of ‘objectivity’ as possible.

A way to achieve this is by comparing collections within the scope of the ‘Netherlands Collection’. The
Netherlands Collection concept means that all objects belonging to public museum collections in the
Netherlands are considered as one entity. If there are no comparable collections in the Netherlands, a
comparison at international level can sometimes be the solution. Using fixed assessment criteria helps
with as objective as possible a cultural-historical valuation.

Within the scope of the Deltaplan voor Cultuurbehoud (Delta Plan for Cultural Preservation), criteria
have been developed for establishing the cultural-historical value. This is expressed with the letters A, B,
C or D, which refer to four categories. Category A refers to the top of the Netherlands cultural heritage,
objects that are irreplaceable and indispensable. Category B contains objects that are not of paramount
cultural-historical value, but do have a great attraction or presentation value. The C-category contains
objects that belong to the institution’s collecting area, but that do not represent a great cultural-historical
value. Finally, in category D are objects that fall outside a museum’s collection profile and are eligible for
de-accessioning. The A-B-C-D categorization is used intensively and simplifies the comparison of
subcollections. Different heritage sectors have developed their own criteria by analogy with the Delta
Plan, for example industrial heritage, photographs, natural history and maritime collections.

The MUSeum Inventarisatie Project (MUSIP = Museum Inventory Project), in which an inventory for
each province is made of collections at subcollection level, uses a categorization derived from the Delta
Plan.
The MUSIP categories are defined as follows:
1. top of the collection, the showpieces
2. core collection, active presentation and collection policy
3. store room collection, but may not be de-accessioned
4. items for de-accessioning, which do not match the objectives of the museum’s core collection. In brief, the core collection is that part of the collection that is vital for the institution’s image.

In determining the core collection, the following questions are important:

- Which (parts of the) subcollections are indispensable or of great importance in realizing the mission?
- Which (parts of the) subcollections best match the collection profile?
- Which (parts of the) subcollections are on permanent show?

Together, the institution’s mission and the cultural-historical value of the subcollections determine what the core collection is. Once the mission and the cultural-historical value have been decided, establishing the core collection is usually quite simple. It seldom happens that an entire collection overlaps the core collection. Although this does not mean that objects or subcollections that fall outside the core collection are not important for the institution. They can, for example, serve as a study or reference collection or support the core collection intrinsically.

2.2 Collection formation

Collecting

Collection forming does not just refer to the policy in the area of collecting, but also to selecting and de-accessioning. These three aspects of collection policy are closely linked. Most museum collections constantly see movement: they grow through acquisitions, but also shrink because objects are de-accessioned. Collection custodians are less likely to create ‘complete’ collections than in the past and are more careful with the expensive storage space. Space and means are always limited and only a few can afford the luxury of allowing a collection unlimited growth. It is consequently important to make conscious choices about which objects to collect and preserve, and why. Setting priorities in the collecting policy results in a clear collection profile. This benefits both the intrinsic coherence and the management of the collection. The institution’s mission often indicates the collecting area in general terms. This aspect is elaborated on in the collection plan’s chapter about collection forming.

Collecting can take place both actively and passively. Active collecting is when the institution goes in search of objects that fall within the collection policy and attempts to accession them. Passive collecting is when the institution accession objects without any effort on its part, for example through donations or legacies. These days, most museums do not accept all donations. Prior to a donation being accepted, it is assessed to see if it corresponds with the collection profile and if a duplicate already exists in the collection. The transfer of ownership is often recorded in writing, so that the receiving party has free disposition over the object. This can also mean that the object is de-accessioned in the course of time.

Selecting and de-accessioning

In the past, collecting was often liberal. These days, custodians are more critical and collection-managing institutions increasingly tune their collecting policies to each other. This does not alter the fact that almost every collection contains objects of which it is considered that they actually do not belong in the collection (any longer). Drafting a collection plan can be good preparation for reorganizing a collection. Selection can take place based on the collection profile, once it has been clearly described in the collection plan. When it is clear what the institution wants to collect and preserve, it automatically becomes clear what does not belong in the collection.

The collection plan should describe the institution’s policy in the area of selecting and de-accessioning and how the policy is interpreted. A responsible selection takes place on the grounds of clear selection criteria. Criteria that can play a role in the selection are the degree to which an object matches the
collection profile, its cultural-historical value, its physical state, the space in the storage room and the 
availability of comparable objects already in the collection or elsewhere. After a selection has been made 
of objects for de-accessioning, the objects need to be assessed for the most appropriate form of de-
accessioning: donation, exchange, sale or destruction. When de-accessioning, it is advisable to make 
use of the Leidraad voor het afstoten van museale collecties (Guide to the De-accessioning of Museum 
Objects) from the Nederlandse Museumvereniging (Netherlands Museum Association).

2.3 Preservation and management

Preventive conservation

Fitting for the chapter preservation and management is a description of the conservation circumstances 
for the collection. The building, the storage rooms and the exhibition spaces are discussed. Is 
maintenance overdue?

What are the climatic conditions in the various spaces?

In addition, attention can be paid to safety assurance and to the manner in which objects are stored in 
the storage room. Possible sticking points and solutions should be indicated. All activities and 
procedures to guarantee the preservation of the collection, without treating the object itself, fall under 
preventive conservation. Preventive conservation is aimed at creating as good as possible an 
environment for the storage and exhibition of objects. For example, cleaning, monitoring (periodic 
checks), maintenance of climate equipment, rules for handling objects, access to the store room and 
staff refresher courses in the area of preservation. In addition, it should be indicated how and within what 
time scale the current situation can be improved. The topics conservation circumstances and care of the 
collection can be elaborated on in a preservation plan. When a museum has such a plan or is to draft 
one, it is sufficient to deal with the main features in the collection plan.

Remedial conservation and restoration

The collection plan chapter about preservation and management should also include a paragraph about 
remedial conservation and restoration. Remedial conservation encompasses all the measures and 
actions that are aimed at the consolidation of the object’s state, combat of established deterioration or 
prevention of imminent deterioration. Restoration is the entire treatment and the prior research involved 
in returning an object that has been damaged or partly lost to a predefined state. The extent to which 
remedial conservation and restoration are necessary depends on the condition of the collection, its use 
and the environmental factors. The necessary conservation or restoration care differs from object to 
object. In the general part of the collection plan, the policy with regard to remedial conservation and 
restoration can be described; this aspect can be elaborated on in the discussion of the collection at 
subcollection level. It is advisable to call on the services of an experienced restorer to determine the 
condition of the subcollections.

2.4 Registration and documentation

The success or failure of every form of collection policy and management depends on knowledge of the 
collection. For as long as it is unknown what is present in-house, a coherent policy cannot be developed. 
Good collection registration and documentation are consequently the basis for every collection plan. The 
paragraph about registration and documentation describes which collection registration system the 
institution employs and which data are systematically recorded for each object. As a minimum, the 
inventory number, description of the object, data about its acquisition (if available) and location must be 
systematically recorded on an inventory card, an inventory list or in a computerized file. Inventory 
numbers should be visible on the objects. Collection documentation is all the information about the 
collection that is more detailed than the basic data from the collection registration system. This includes 
catalogues and other printed publications, archive material, restoration reports and photographic 
material. An overview should be included in the collection plan describing the degree to which the 
collection is documented and the type of documentation the institution has. The collection 
documentation is of great importance for determining the cultural-historical value of an object or 
subcollection. This, in turn, is important for setting priorities in the collection policy.

In addition to the description of the current situation, it is important to indicate in the collection plan which
plans the institution has in the area of registration and documentation. If the institution has a registration backlog, for instance, it must be indicated how this backlog will be caught up with: which subcollections first?
Which data are registered and how?
If it is a sizeable backlog, it might be preferable to elaborate on the plans in a separate registration plan.
The collection plan then only contains the main features, with references to the more detailed plan.

2.5 Use of the collection

Research and education

Use of the collection for different objectives has been defined in the previously mentioned ICOM definition of a museum: study, education and pleasure. Sometimes, a distinction can be made in a collection between subcollections with a museum, research or educational function. Some museums have objects that have been ‘written off’, which they use for all sorts of purposes, for example as décor for exhibitions, as educational demonstration material or for rental. These objects are usually not officially counted as parts of the collection, but are considered and treated as stage props. A clear physical and administrative separation between objects with a museum and non-museum status prevents misunderstandings.

Presentation and exploitation

Presentation and exploitation are also forms of using a collection. Traveling in a steam train or sailing a ship that is part of a museum collection can be regarded as use. The use of objects has consequences for their preservation. For working objects, periodic maintenance and part replacement will be necessary. Objects that are exhibited or loaned frequently require more care and are usually given a higher conservation priority than objects that hardly ever leave the store room. The type of material also makes demands: works on paper, for example, can only be exhibited for a limited period due to their light sensitiveness. All these factors play a role in collection policy and therefore deserve a place in the collection plan.

Loan traffic

Loaning objects is another form of use. Loan traffic involves a lot of activities, such as administration, conservation, restoration and transport. These activities, in turn, have consequences for the collection preservation and management. The collection plan states the policy with regard to loans and how this works in practice.

- What is the procedure?
- Which demands are made of borrowers?
- How many loan applications does the institution get on average per year and for how many objects?
- Which objects are loaned (frequently), which never?
- Is a fee charged?
- Are the loans checked periodically?

Some institutions have accommodated part of their collection with other museum or non-museum institutions permanently or for a longer period. When objects are loaned for a long time, they sometimes are in danger of being lost sight of. It is advisable, however, to consider that outstanding loans officially remain part of the lender agent’s collection and therefore belong in the collection plan. Not only outgoing, but also incoming loan traffic may not be forgotten in the collection plan. Although objects or subcollections that an institution has on permanent or long-term loan do not officially belong to their own collection, the borrower does have to provide the daily care for these objects. It is therefore logical to deal with these loans in the collection plan.
3. The collection at subcollection level

3.1 Categorization into subcollections

After the general part of the collection plan, in which the collection as a whole is discussed, there is a part in which the information from the first part is detailed at subcollection level. By a subcollection is meant a cluster of objects within a collection that is coherent in some way, for example with regard to theme, chronology, geography, material type or origin. The categorization chosen depends on what is most logical and workable within the institution.

The categorization into subcollections revolves around which group of objects within the museum forms a logical entity. A collection can, for example, be categorized based on period, place or theme. Chronology may be a distinguishing criterion, for example for a historical museum devoted to the history of a particular place. The collection can then be divided into prehistory, Middle Ages and the new times. A thematic approach may also be taken: for example craft and industry, ecclesiastical life, administration, social care, etc. Anthropology museums often choose a geographic categorization according to country, region or continent. Art museums usually categorize their collection according to art form: paintings, works on paper, applied arts, sculpture, etc. Different categorization criteria can play a role simultaneously, for example a subcollection of 18th century Asian porcelain.

Practice will have to show which categorization is most practical and manageable. General cultural-historical museums that have not defined subcollections yet, but do make use of the Dutch translation of the Art & Architecture Thesaurus (AAT) for assigning object headwords, could take the top terms from that thesaurus as starting points for a categorization into subcollections. In addition, it is advisable to compare the categorization into subcollections in the collection plan to and harmonize it with the categorization that institutions with similar collections are using. This simplifies the exchange of collection information within the ‘Netherlands Collection’.

3.2 Data per subcollection

The data for each subcollection can be represented in a table (see below). The advantage of this is a concise and well-organized display. The disadvantage, however, is that there is no room for an explanation, so that the necessary differentiations could get lost. A combination of running tekst and tables is also a possibility. How many and which data can be included in a table varies. It is advisable, however, to include at least the following columns in a table:

- Size: the number of objects in a subcollection. If the exact number is not known, an as accurate an estimate as possible may be given.
- Cultural-historical value: an indication of the cultural-historical value (for example according to the Delta Plan criteria in A, B, C or D) and the criteria on the basis of which this value has been assigned.
- Registration level: the percentage of objects in a subcollection of which the basic data have been recorded in the registration system.
- Condition: a rough indication of the condition as good/average/bad or an indication of the conservation priority (not urgent/urgent/very urgent).
- Storage conditions: an indication of where and how the subcollection is kept and what the backlog is.
- Origin and property: what is the origin of the subcollection and who is the legal owner?

The data may be relevant to know to what extent an institution is authorized to loan, exhibit, move, conserve or de-accession objects.

- Collecting policy: is the subcollection being collected actively or passively?
- Or are objects eligible for de-accessioning?
- Use: how and how intensively is the subcollection used for research, education, presentation, exploitation or loan?
4 Conclusion

The conclusion is an abstract of the most important observations from the collection plan. Based on this, priorities are set and corresponding actions for the coming period are formulated. As stated before, subjects from the collection plan can be elaborated on in subplans, such as a registration plan or a preservation plan. An advantage of such subplans is that you can pursue the particular subject further than in the collection plan. Of course, all plans must be geared to each other. As museums and their collections constantly see movement and the collection policy is subject to periodical change, it is advisable to update the collection plan every four to five years. Once the basis for the plan has been laid, this probably will not take that much time.

Literature

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Syllabus bij de basiscursus preventieve conservering (Syllabus for the basic course preventive conservation), Stichting Landelijk Contact van Museumconsulenten (LCM = Foundation for National Contact between Museum Consultants), Amsterdam 2002

Syllabus bij de basiscursus registratie en documentatie (Syllabus for the basic course registration and documentation), Stichting Landelijk Contact van Museumconsulenten (LCM = Foundation for National Contact between Museum Consultants), Amsterdam 2002
Checklist

This checklist can serve as a reminder when drawing up a collection plan.

- What is the general policy?
- What is the institution’s mission?
- What is the aim of the collection plan?
- For which target group(s) is the collection plan intended?
- Who writes the collection plan?
- When should the collection plan be finished?
- Which subjects should be discussed in the collection plan?
- Who should be involved in writing the collection plan?
- (internally and externally) Which literature is available and which experts must be consulted?
- When should the collection plan be finished?
- What is the institution’s position with regard to related institutions?
- When and how was the collection assembled and by whom?
- What is the collection’s value?
- What is the core collection?
- What is the size of the collection?
- What is the policy with regard to collecting/de-accessioning?
- What are the storage conditions?
- What is the collection’s condition?
- How is the collection being cared for?
- How much of the collection has been registered and in what manner?
- Which data are included in the collection registration system for each object?
- To what extent has the collection been documented?
- How is the collection being used?
- Which categorization into subcollections is used?
- Which data are included in the collection plan for each subcollection?
- What are the most important conclusions from the collection plan?
- Which priorities are set?
- Which actions result from the priorities?
- How often is the collection plan updated?