

Case Study #1

The Case of the Silver Spoons

(Processing a Standard Donation)



Ephraim Cobb, teaspoon, 1951.0001.001, Winterthur Museum.

As registrar at the recently-established Mid-Atlantic Foodways Museum, you are working with colleagues to grow and document an object collection to use in portraying dining habits in years past. Gwendolyn Greenleaf, a collector of domestic wares who is involved in the organization, has offered to donate three spoons to your collection, two of which are of an age and style that would be useful to curators in preparing upcoming exhibitions on formal dining. The third, however, seems quite modern and outside of the current collecting focus of your museum. Ms. Greenleaf is quite insistent that these collection items remain together—she expects you either take all three of the items, or none of them.

You sense that the curatorial staff are enthusiastic about building the collection, but you worry about establishing an “anything goes” precedent, in terms of catering to potential donors’ whims. Decide if you should accept Ms. Greenleaf’s donation—and how you will share your opinion with your colleagues. Assuming you can sense a way forward, what paperwork would you expect Greenleaf to complete, in order to formalize the gift?

Case Study #2

Finding Fine China

(Managing a Doorstep Donation)



Courtesy of the Winterthur Museum.

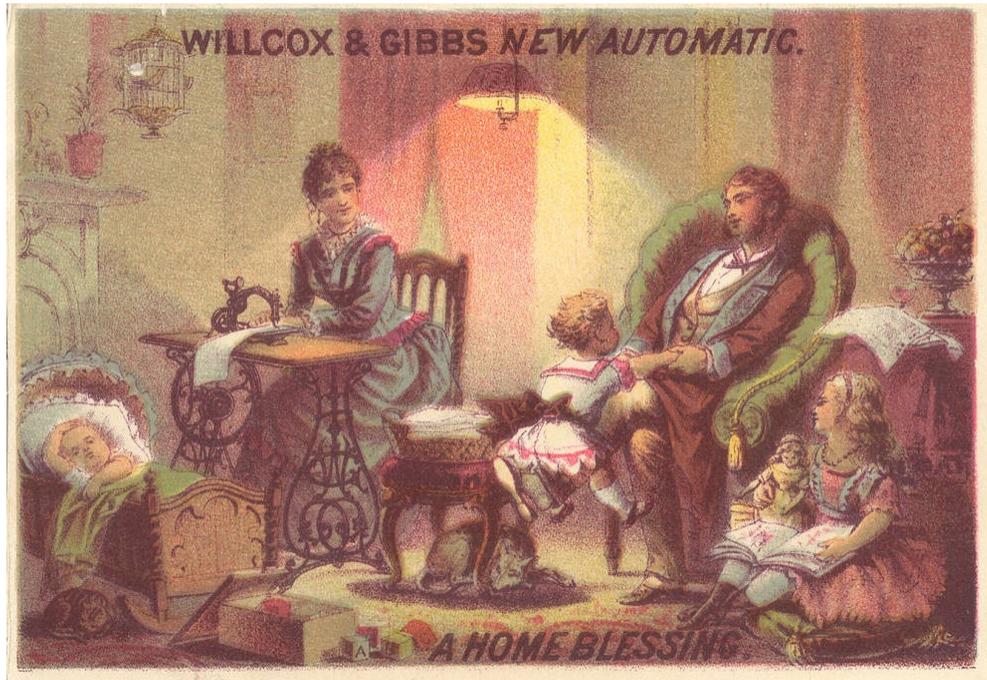
When arriving at work at the Mid-Delaware Ceramics Museum, you find a small cardboard box sitting outside the front door of the institution. A handwritten note on the top of the box reads "For the Curator." Inside, you discover a ceramic creamer by an English maker who is not represented in your permanent collection. A letter you find inside the box reads: "While in town to clean out my deceased great-aunt's house, I found this item and thought you might like it. -Dave."

Do you decide to keep or dispose of this item? What factors enter into your decision-making? What legal and paperwork procedures do you follow in order to manage Dave's generous but incomplete donation?

Case Study #3

The Anonymous Object

(Making Decisions about a Found-in-Collection Item)



Trade card, 68x164.648 (ill), Downs Collection of Manuscripts and Printed Ephemera, Winterthur Library.

You are the new curator at the Museum of Nineteenth and Twentieth-Century Domestic Arts. This monkey-themed tape measure, which you found sitting without documentation on a shelf in the collection storage facility, fits conceptually within the parameters of your collecting policy, but a close study of the object suggests that it was almost certainly made in the early-to-mid 2000's.

Do you opt to keep this item in the collection? How do you balance its conceptual fit with the museum's collection policy with its likely date? Whether you decide to keep or dispose of the item, describe how you go about executing your decision. What paperwork would either option require?

Case Study #4

The Aristocrats

(Managing Donor Relations)



Col1914_76x086-001, Downs Collection of Manuscripts and Printed Ephemera, Winterthur Library.

The wealthy and well-known Van Hoosen family, who have lived in your community and led local high society for generations, have just donated to your organization, the Hoosen County History Museum, four items salvaged from the dilapidated family seat, Van Hoosen Hall: a family portrait, a cigar box, pantaloons, and a mink stole. Augustus Van Hoosen, the scion of the family, views the Society as something of a repository for family artifacts. When dropping off the four items, he mentions that he possesses many more boxes of family materials that he's sure you'll be happy to accession into the collection. "They are in my garage," he says. "Perhaps you can come over to take a look."

The four items he brought you certainly fit in the collection's scope, but unfortunately the mink stole is in terrible condition, is shedding considerably, and would require significant conservation work to preserve. You have already opted to house it separately from the other donated items in light of its poor condition. What is more, in your costume collection, you already possess several mink stoles, including one that had been worn by nineteenth-century prima donna Matilda Van Hoosen on her way to a legendary operatic performance at Carnegie Hall.

What do you tell Augustus Van Hoosen about your willingness to accept these donations? What paperwork do you complete in order to make the final donation official? How do you plan to handle future conversations with this generous, if imperious, donor?

Case Study #5

Miss Rehoboth's Legacy

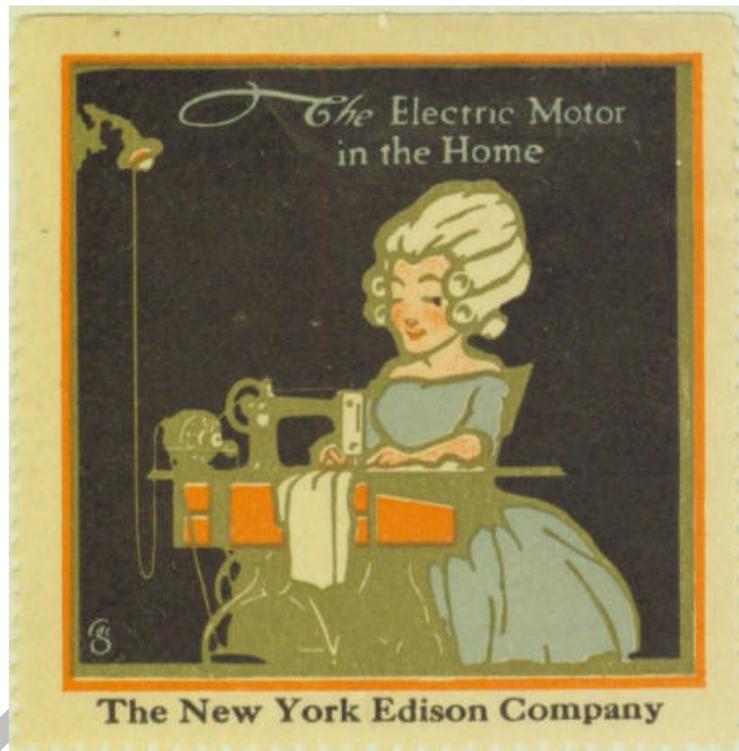
(Resolving a Former Permanent Loan)



In 1995, Brenda Bixler, the 1972 Miss Rehoboth, put her pageant tiara on permanent loan to the Rehoboth Beach Beauty Pageant Museum. She has since died. As the newly-hired Executive Director of the Beauty Pageant Museum, you have recently persuaded your Board to adopt a policy whereby long-term and permanent loans to the collection are not accepted. Ms. Bixler's children now live on the West Coast. You have found their addresses, but no one currently involved with the Museum has any personal relationship with the heirs.

How do you move forward in securing the tiara as a formal accession into your museum's collection? What paperwork will you need to fill out, and what legal procedures do you need to follow? Imagine several different scenarios as to how this situation will play itself out, and be prepared to report on the scenarios to the rest of the groups once we reconvene.

Case Study #6

The Curator's Dilemma*(Managing Community Relationships)*

Collection 408, 04x146.66, Downs Collection of Manuscripts and Printed Ephemera, Winterthur Library.

As Curator of the Shady County Historical Society, you have grown accustomed to turning away potential donors who offer you materials not germane to your current collecting priorities. You are moved one day, however, when Henry Kerchner comes to your office with a quilt made by his late wife Anna, who had been a longtime volunteer docent at your institution. "I'm wondering if you could make this a part of the collection," Henry says. "I know it would make Anna happy to have some of her work in the collection." While you wish to honor Henry's heartfelt request, the quilt does not fit within your current collecting scope. However, your institution's educational staff do offer programs centered on sewing, needlework, and the domestic arts that involve hands-on components.

How can you honor Henry's kindhearted potential donation while following your own collecting guidelines? How could your policies and procedures aid you in redirecting Henry's gift? Think about the possibilities and be prepared to report to the group.

Case Study #7

Mystery Box

(Inventorying Undocumented Items)



Doc1577_08x083-008, Downs Collection of Manuscripts and Printed Ephemera, Winterthur Library.

You have recently been appointed Chair of the Education Committee by the Friends of the O'Neill Inn Historic House Museum, which operates a museum inside of an historic structure that a local woman named Susanna O'Neill had run as a boarding house in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. O'Neill's boarders included many colorful characters, such as local seamstress Daisy de Wenter, who occupied the building in the mid-nineteenth century and made dresses for local society ladies; and the itinerant Prussian historian and diplomat Fritz Gottlieb Heyer, who passed through these parts on an adventure across America. As committee chair, it will be your job to organize and run educational programs for both children and adults. You are taking over for Ernest J. Falk, who just stepped down after ten years in the role. You grow concerned about the state of collections management as you start encountering boxes labeled "EJF" around the building's numerous, disorganized storage spaces. You suspect the boxes contain items that Ernest had used in his programs but never unpacked. What's worse, you grow concerned that, inside each box, Ernest and other educators had mixed museum artifacts with props brought in from the outside to use in hands-on teaching. None of these materials are documented, a matter made far worse by the fact that, in recent years, museum volunteers have been actively acquiring objects relating to the life of some of O'Neill's better-known boarders to be accessioned into the museum collection.

Unpack this box and think about what your first steps will be in determining what these materials are, if they should figure in the museum collection, and how to dispose of them. Think about how you would advise the Friends group to deal with Ernest's boxes, and sorting out collections items.