

# Researching Museum Collections

## Step 1. Researching Objects at the Museum: Collections Database

The Collections webpage includes a searchable online database of the objects in the Penn Museum's collection. Every object has a unique ID number assigned by the Museum (Object Number) and is presented individually with general information that the Museum has on record for each piece, such as date made, materials, and dimensions.

Other important fields to note are:

- Location: indicates whether an item is on display and can be seen via a visit to the galleries or in collections storage and can only be seen via a scheduled appointment. Any earlier exhibits that the object may have been in at the Penn Museum will be listed in another section called, "Current and Past Exhibitions".
- Credit Line: indicates how the object came to be in the Museum's collection. Examples include gift, purchase, donation, exchange, or expedition. Expeditions refer to Museum-sponsored research and should have additional documentation that can be found via the Museum Archives. Clicking on the linked Credit Line information will show all other items that were acquired at the same time via the same source.
- Other Number: for some objects, other numbers are associated with it, such as site report numbers, collector or dealer's numbers, or an object's collection number from its previous institution (e.g., museum exchange). These are useful when completing research to find an object in other publications.
- Description: summary, explanation, description, or interpretation of the object. The quality and quantity of information in this field can vary widely, as most are direct imports of original notes about the object from when it was acquired and have not been edited for content, inclusive language, or current research. Therefore, they may include information or language that is outdated, offensive, or incorrect. They are also based on past collecting practices and interpretations, which may not reflect the current views of the Penn Museum.
- Bibliography: any known publications of the specific object. This does not include material that may be in the Museum Archives.

## Step 2. Researching Objects at the Museum: Library

Building on the information learned in the object's record, you can research information related to your piece more generally (culture, material, purpose, etc.) in the library.

The Museum has its own library, which is part of the University of Pennsylvania library system, with specialized research guides and materials that focus on archaeology and anthropology.

- Penn Library System: <https://www.library.upenn.edu/>
- Museum Library: <https://www.library.upenn.edu/spaces/museum>

A great place to start are the Library Guides (see below). They'll point out materials that will give an introduction to a topic, as well as more specific in-depth resources.

- [Anthropology](#)
  - Subsections of the guide are split up by subdivisions in the field ([Anthropological Archaeology](#), [Biological Anthropology](#), [Cultural and Linguistic Anthropology](#), [Medical and Global Health Anthropology](#), [Environmental Anthropology](#))
- [Archaeology](#)
  - Subsections of the guide are split up geographically corresponding to the Museum's curatorial section ([Africa](#), [Americas](#), [Asia](#), [Egypt](#), [Europe](#), [Mediterranean](#), [Near East](#), [Oceania](#))

For more research guides, see here: <https://guides.library.upenn.edu/hometabs/researchguides>

### [Step 3. Researching Objects at the Museum: Archives and Records Room](#)

The Museum Records Room and Museum Archives often contain additional information that might be helpful in researching an object at the Museum. Both offices are located within the Museum and open by advance appointment only.

- The Museum Archives contains administrative and collections history records, as well as material related to the Museum's hundreds of expeditions.
  - Visits to Archives may be helpful for those interested in learning more about a specific Penn Museum expedition, Penn Museum history, or a specific collector or researcher.
  - Archival material is only available in-person, although you can browse [finding aids](#) and [collections lists](#) online. Material is organized by individual/project/type of record (not by object).
  - For more information about Museum Archives, please see here: <https://www.penn.museum/about-collections/museum-archives>
  - To contact the Museum Archives, please email [archives@pennmuseum.org](mailto:archives@pennmuseum.org)
- The Records Room houses object-specific information including acquisition history in paper catalogue card format.
  - Visits to the Records Office may be helpful for those interested in learning more about an object's provenance and acquisition (for objects collected not through expeditions).
  - The amount and type of information the Records Office might have about any given object will vary. Please specify an object's number when making an appointment
  - For more information about visiting the Records Office, please see the *Objects Records* section of this site: <https://www.penn.museum/about-collections/registrars-office>
  - To contact the Records Room, please email [registrar@pennmuseum.org](mailto:registrar@pennmuseum.org)