

# Playing Detective - The Museum Inventory Process

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Before I entered the museum realm, I had a completely different definition for the word inventory. An inventory meant simply counting what I had and making sure my items were in its place. For example, I took inventory of my kitchen cabinets before a hurricane came to ensure I had enough food and supplies to weather the storm. I knew that the inventory process was important, but it was simple and not really something that I thought about.

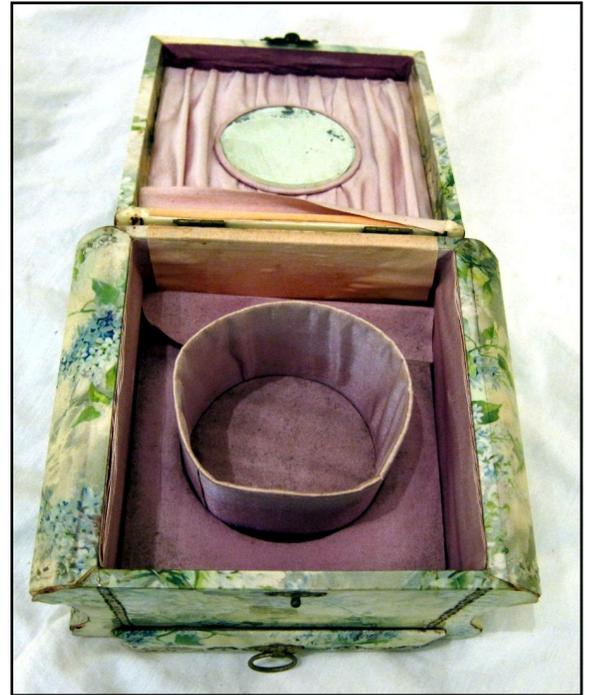
Then I entered the museum world, and my ideas about inventorying were shattered. The museum inventory process is not always simple or straightforward. It does not mean just locating an object and checking it off a list. It can be a long process; one that takes a little detective work.

For the past four months, I have been taking inventory of the artifacts on display here at the North House Museum in Lewisburg. So what exactly does this process entail? First, it means locating an artifact and checking for its object ID, the special number that sets an artifact apart from all the others. If it does not have one, you assign it a proper one and label the artifact with the new number.

Next, you describe the object, not just saying it is blue and made of stone, but really take the time to look at it. Touch it (with gloves).



**Hair Receiver** - Hair receivers were used for practical and stylistic purposes. Victorian women would save their hair to stuff pillows or cushions or to create rats (bags or nets of hair they would place under their natural hair). Our receiver was made in Japan. It is a great way to talk about social and cultural Victorian Era history.



**Collar Box** - This collar box also has a drawer for cuffs. Collar boxes were developed in the 1860s, when men liked starching their collar and their cuffs. In order to keep the shape of the collar and the cuffs, men kept them in boxes like these. Like the receiver, this is a great way to introduce social and cultural history to visitors.

Look for maker's marks or writing. When you think

about it, a good description really does matter. Take a look at an average, everyday item like a water bottle. In the future, water bottles will become obsolete. Now imagine hundreds of years from now people visiting your house museum, and a water bottle is on display. If that visitor has read a good description of a bottle before, he or she will recognize one. If a future curator looked at your description, he or she will know how to spot a water bottle. Good descriptions are vital for future museum professionals and visitors.

Wait a minute. What if you have no clue what the item actually is. You described it, but when it comes to naming the object, you have no idea. What do you do? That's when you act like a detective. Look at the object again for clues. Search online or flip through books and articles. You can ask someone, but when you discover what an object is yourself, you feel accomplished. It's like you pieced together clues to solve an historical puzzle.