



Trevor Jones

activecollections.org

Active Collections

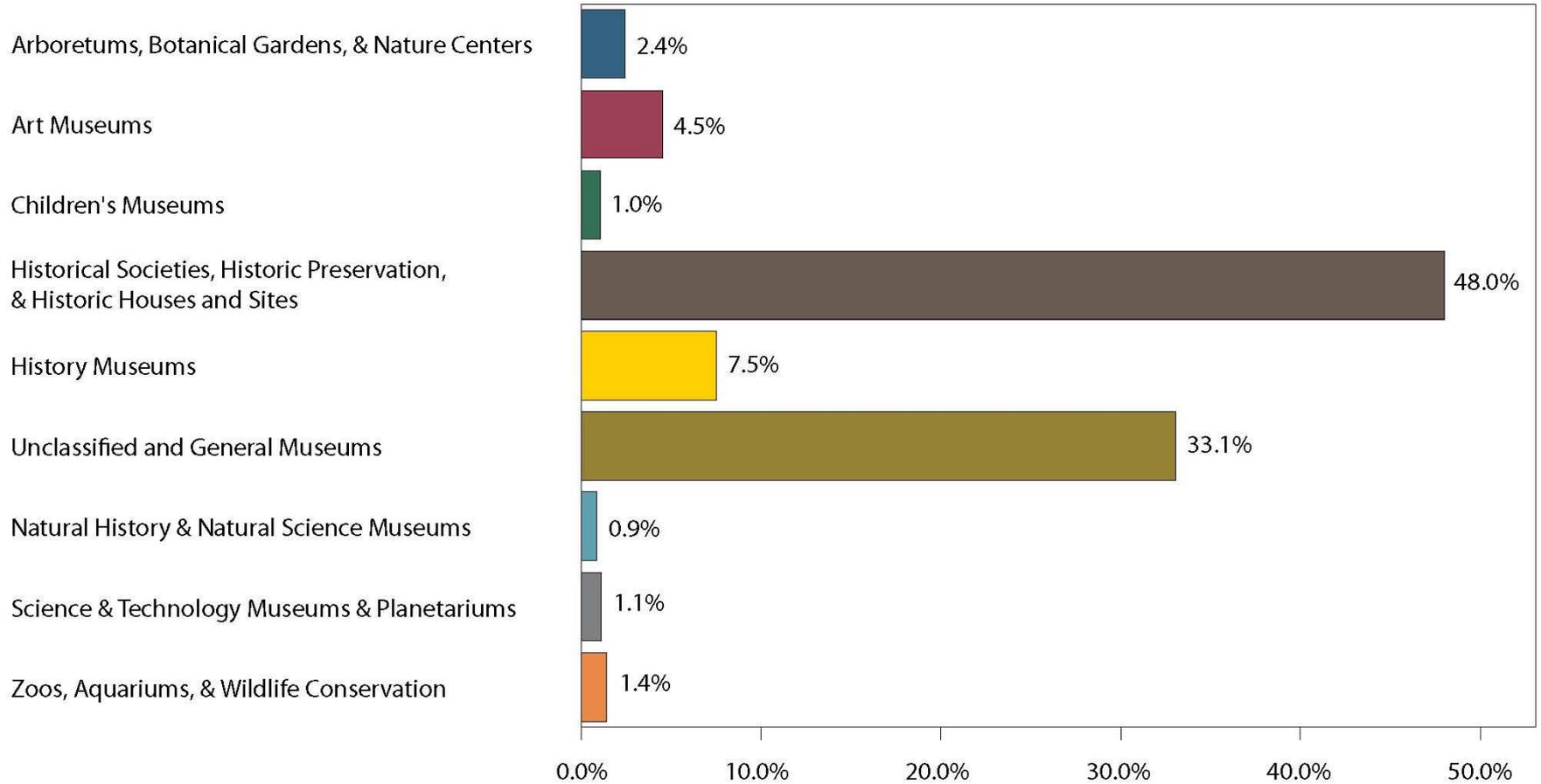
Rethinking the Role of Museum Collections

Nebraska Museums Association Conference

April 4, 2017



Distribution of Museums by Discipline, FY 2014



Source: Museum Universe Data File, FY 2014 Q3, Institute of Museum and Library Services



American museums, libraries, archives, historical societies, and scientific research organizations are visited **2.5 billion times a year.**

Their collections teach and inspire and are vital to sustaining a well-educated and connected citizenry, a thriving tourist industry, and a wealth of knowledge to enrich and enlighten our civilization. **They are a public trust that must be protected for future generations.**

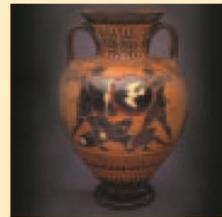
The **Heritage Health Index** found that artifacts in America's collections are at risk and require immediate attention and care, including: **4.7 million works of art**

13.5 million historic objects—
from flags and quilts to
Presidential china and
Pueblo pottery

153 million photographs

189 million natural
science specimens

270 million rare and unique
books, periodicals,
and scrapbooks.



Providing a safe environment and **proper care** for **collections** is a **fundamental responsibility** of all institutions and individuals who care about our heritage.

These collections can survive the twenty-first century and continue to enrich the lives of Americans if action is taken now:

- Institutions must give priority to providing **safe conditions** for the collections they hold in trust.
- Every collecting institution must develop an **emergency plan** to protect its collections.
- Every institution must **assign responsibility** for caring for collections to members of its staff.
- Individuals at all levels of government and in the private sector must assume responsibility for **providing the support** that will allow these collections to survive.

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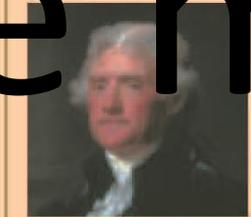
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Ignore me!





**DROWNING IN THE SEA
OF YOUR CHAOTIC
COLLECTION?**

WE CAN...

HELP!



www.activecollections.org

Active Collections



Rainey Tisdale



Elee Wood



Trevor Jones

A MANIFESTO FOR ACTIVE HISTORY MUSEUM COLLECTIONS by Trevor Jones and Rainey Tisdale

Millions of artifacts in museum collections across the country are not actively supporting the institutions that steward them. Museums of all types are experiencing this problem, but it is particularly entrenched in history museums. Most history museums possess thousands of poorly maintained, inadequately cataloged, and underutilized artifacts. Instead of being active assets, these lazy artifacts drain vital

Collections: Our Curse AND Our Blessing

By Rick Beard

This is the fourth in a series of essays commemorating the seventy-fifth anniversary of AASLH.

“If we do not have the right objects to tell meaningful human stories, we should clear out our storerooms and start again or abandon artifact-based interpretation entirely.”¹

— TREVOR JONES
Kentucky Historical Society

(1846), the Minnesota Historical Society (1849), the Chicago Historical Society (1856), the Missouri Historical Society (1866), and The Filson Club (1884) were among the earliest members of the Association. The mere suggestion that they divest themselves of anything that had found its way to their storerooms would have been anathema.

Second, few if any of these founders would have grasped what Jones meant when invoking “artifact-based interpretation” as an institutional goal. Library and archival materials constituted the core of most of their collections, but artifacts had also found their way into these institutions, usually in a rather haphazard fashion. To the extent that their institutions exhibited three-dimensional materials at all, they did so in case-bound displays that were, in the words of one astute observer, “an odd mixture of artifacts, each claiming to be the first this and the earliest that, or the particular thing used by some famous personage in some famous exploit.” Historical societies, he continued, “offered not so much a historical experience . . . as an escape from history altogether by leaping into oddity so bizarre that it denied interpretation of any sort.”²

While first efforts at artifact-intensive interpretive exhibi-



ACTIVE COLLECTIONS

FIELD-WIDE SURVEY

WWW.ACTIVECOLLECTIONS.ORG





CLEVELAND AVE

2857

2857

MINIATURE WORLD

Nebraska State Historical Society

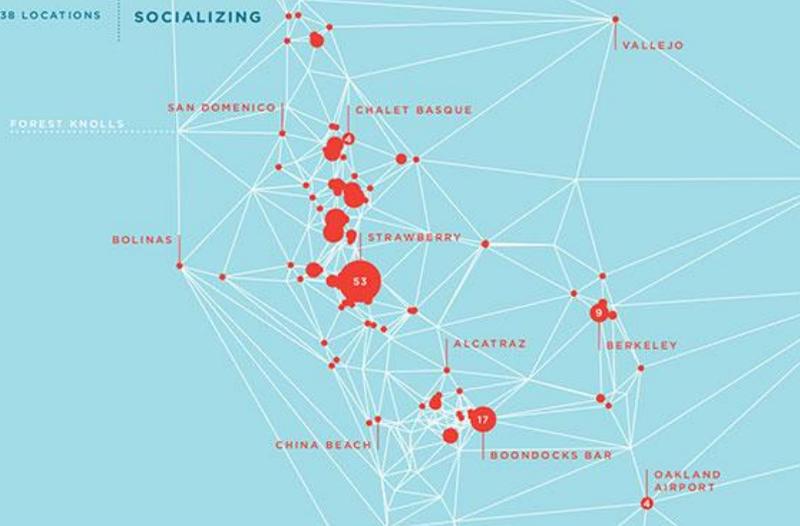


2000-2010
SAN RAFAEL

THE 21ST CENTURY

138 LOCATIONS

SOCIALIZING



JAN 5, 2001
71 YEARS,
6 MONTHS
AND 1 DAY



PERSON SEEN
THE MOST

MARINA
117 TIMES

BLACK
PANTHERS
MET

ONE
BOBBY SEALE

WALKS
RECORDED

THIRTY-FIVE
AND 1 HIKE

2009-2010
GOLDEN GATE
TOLL BOOTH
PREFERENCE

LANE **6** 14 VISITS

ENTERTAINMENT

123 MOVIES

45 MUSIC

38 LECTURES

29 DANCES

29 POKER

22 PLAYS

19 TELEVISION

8 SLIDE SHOWS

5 ACROBATS

3 MIMES

MOST
WATCHED
TV SHOW

THE OSCARS
8 TIMES

LAST DAY

SEP 12, 2010
81 YEARS, 2 MONTHS
AND 8 DAYS OLD

WEATHER
SEP 12, 2010
3:20 PM

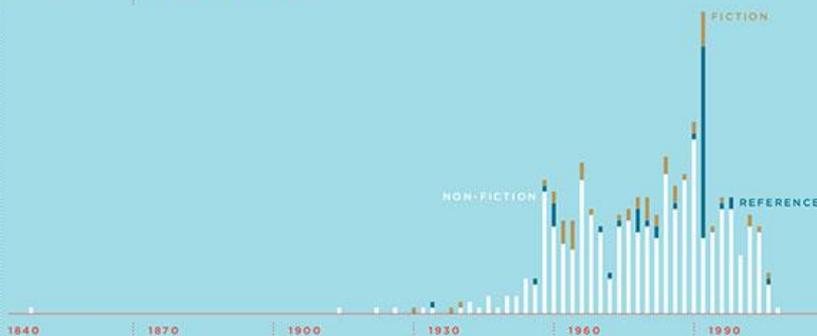
49.8° F AND OVERCAST
LARKSPUR, CALIFORNIA

1848-2009

BOOKS

536 BOOKS

DATE PUBLISHED



BOOKS

561

SPANNING 161 YEARS

MEDIAN
PUBLISHING
DATE

1983

11 BOOKS

REGION
WITH MOST
TRAVEL BOOKS

RUSSIA

6 BOOKS

TRAVEL
BOOKS FOR
UNVISITED
PLACES

SIX

AUSTRALIA, ICELAND, GREENLAND,
IRAN, PAKISTAN AND VENEZUELA

OLDEST
BOOK

THE COMMUNIST MANIFESTO

PUBLISHED 1848

TYPES OF
BOOKS

88 TRAVEL

77 HISTORY

42 MACHINES

37 GEOGRAPHY

32 ENCYCLOPEDIA

26 RELIGION

23 HEALTH

23 NOVEL

22 SCIENCE

17 HOW-TO

MOST
REPRESENTED
AUTHOR

SIR MARTIN GILBERT

5 BOOKS

WAR-RELATED
BOOKS

51

35 BOOKS
ABOUT
WORLD WAR 2

ELEVATOR
BOOKS

TWELVE

1941-1991

HOW-TO
TOPICS

FOURTEEN

BICYCLES, CLEANING, CROSS
COUNTRY SKIING, DOING
EVERYTHING RIGHT, HANDICRAFT,
HOME REPAIR, PEST CONTROL,
PHOTOGRAPHY, PREVENTING
AND SURVIVING FIRES, SAILING,
SURVIVAL AND TAI CHI

BIOGRAPHIES

8

FROM LANCE
ARMSTRONG
TO JOSEPH
STALIN



\$190 to acquire

\$16.50/sq. ft. to store

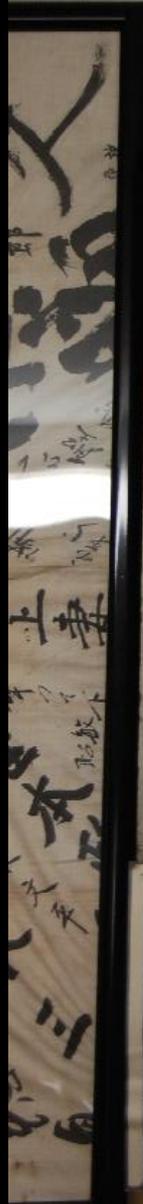


Are your artifacts lazy?





Tier 1	Tier 2	Tier 3	Tier 4	Tier 5
Significant to Kentucky AND nationally or internationally significant	Significant historical value to Kentucky; strong provenance	Historical value to a location in Kentucky; limited provenance	Historical value to other locations; no Kentucky connection	Limited or no historical value; limited or no provenance
Few, if any, duplicates in this or other collections and/or of high monetary value	Few similar examples in this or other collections	Similar examples are held in this or other collections	Common in this or other collections	Not applicable
Rare, likely irreplaceable	Uncommon and difficult to replace	Moderately difficult to replace	Not applicable	Not applicable
Could be used to tell multiple powerful stories about Kentucky and its place in the nation	Could be used to tell multiple powerful stories about the state	Plays a supporting role in telling stories about the state	May play a supporting role or illustrate a concept, but is not the focus	Plays a minor role
<i>Example:</i> Portraits of Dennis and Diademia Doram	<i>Example:</i> The coat Governor William Goebel was wearing when he was fatally shot	<i>Example:</i> Copper still	<i>Example:</i> Flapper dress	<i>Example:</i> Woodworking planes



The photo above depicts a building which was in the corner of Pine and Court Streets where the City House formerly stood. The building was destroyed by fire in 1862 and the site was used for many years. The photo was taken about 1860. One of the men in the picture is H. D. Wilson, the father of James B. Wilson. To the left of the sign is a man in the foreground of the building. According to the caption, the building was built during the 1850s and was destroyed by fire in 1862.





**KEEP
CALM
AND
STOP
BLEEDING**



500: 1

48-Star Flag Images
Proposed Deaccession
7.21.15



1987.81.140 (KMHM)



1987.81.186 (KMHM)



1987.81.218 (unknown)



1987.81.230 (unknown) 1987.81.250 (KMHM)

1987.81.258 (KMHM)







Misleading

Ugly

Superseded

Trivial

Irrelevant

Elsewhere

Collections should be held in perpetuity

“ Acquisitions are made in the expectation that they will be preserved in perpetuity. Museum governing bodies must act as guardians of the long-term public interest in the collection.”

Ethical Guidelines -- Museums Association, UK

What if there were planned expiration dates for most collections?





FREQUENCY OF DX

45%

HAVE NEVER DEACCESSIONED OR ONLY CONDUCT EVERY FEW YEARS



TYPE OF INVENTORY CONDUCTED IN THE LAST FIVE YEARS



WHAT MATTERS?



- MAY NEED OBJECT IN THE FUTURE
- MAY FIND IT WAS IMPORTANT LATER ON



- DON'T KNOW THE COLLECTION
- CAN'T BEAR TO DO X
- UPSET SOMEONE



- UPSET SOMEONE
- DO SOMETHING UNETHICAL
- DON'T KNOW THE COLLECTION

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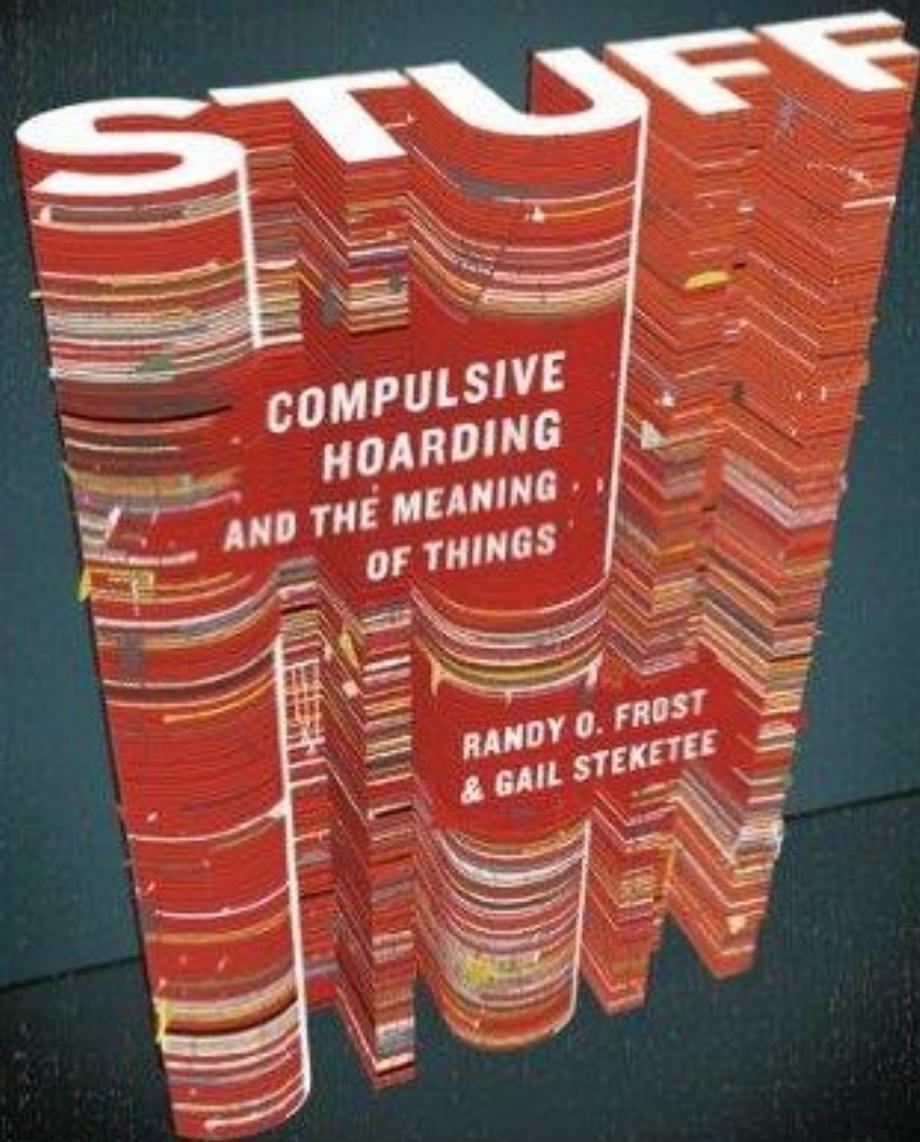
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- DON'T KNOW THE COLLECTION



"[Stuff] is intensely, not to say compulsively, readable." —TRACEY KIDDER





Hoarders and Museum Workers

Table 4: Parallels between People who Hoard and Museum Workers

- Both think every object is special and cannot pass up free objects, even if not needed.
- Both are unconcerned about having too many objects and share a goal of no loss of items.
- Objects induce positive emotions similar to the experience of an emotional high in both.
- Both experience emotional distress about object loss and experience impairment because of this. The distress stops museums from engaging in other activities because the overly large collection requires too much attention.
- Both believe “We might need it some day” and see opportunities in objects, sometimes with creative ideas about possible uses.
- Both assign meaning and identity to objects, varying only in individual identity vs museum mission. Both have stories about everything they own.
- **Both underestimate their memory capacity. People who hoard fear they can’t remember without seeing the triggering object. Museum staff believe their collections represent society’s collective memory, fearing that without them, society would forget the history.**
- Both believe objects stand in for people as if objects are permanent whereas people are not.
- Both people who hoard and museum staff seek to avoid waste, wanting to keep their objects out of the landfill.
- Both have limited awareness (insight) of their situation, believing their behavior is normal and reasonable, despite the distress and impairment.
- Both experience fear of making mistakes, of being irresponsible, and a desire for completeness of their accumulated items.
- Both avoid letting go of their stuff, making excuses to retain items.
- Both try to exert control over objects – “This stuff is mine, don’t touch it!”.

Nine Effective Practices For Building Audiences





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