# Best Practices for the Documentation & Digital Data Curation for Textile Collections

The following guidelines have been prepared, first and foremost, with small and medium size museums in mind. Of course, large national museums may also benefit from them, although their needs and resources tend to be quite different.

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# Prioritize access over quality

## Should my database be perfect? Should it? Should I?

This sounds scary for most of us working in the humanities. We love details and feel insecure about providing information that is not in accordance with high academic standards. As explained below, in the current situation, this is more a hindrance than a danger, and we suggest beginning -or continuing- to publish your data as much and as openly as you can.

➢ If you think your database is a mess, you are not alone. Just having your data on an Excel file is much better than the average situation. Things happen along the way, sometimes for good, sometimes not. However, it is better to begin with something imperfect than to wait for the ultimate online catalogue.

➢ Don't wait until all your information looks perfect.
  • Welcome to the boat. This is the permanent situation. **Cataloguing is always a work in progress**.
  • If this is what you have, prioritise making images and a bit of textual information available, even if they are far from perfect.
  • If you can have professionally made photographs, that's great. If you only have old or uneven quality ones, go ahead and publish them, that's better than nothing.

➢ Establish and follow some workflow priorities, for your online catalogue publishing. For instance, publish first what is on show (permanently or in temporary exhibitions); second, loans and new accessions; and last, all the rest… Trying to do all at once will not work.
  • Another common approach is to bear in mind three possible kinds of pieces in your collection: **top-notch**, **second-tier**, and (a huge amount of) **minor pieces**. It makes sense to treat their information in different ways within your database: for instance, providing much more information about the former than the latter. At least, publish all that you exhibit; it will be good enough, usually.

➢ Don't blame yourself about publishing information that you feel insecure about. Since your cataloguing is not perfect, let the users know about it. For instance, with a general disclaimer in the search interface, or with reminders for specific parts of your data. Accept imperfection and ask for understanding. It's better than hiding the collections, nobody knows for how long.
  • Be open to feedback and disagreement from the users. They may provide useful corrections that. Researchers will contact you, asking for help or giving advice. Academia will knock at your door, and that should be fine. Non-experts may want to reach the museum, too, and they have a right to do so; quite often, that heritage belongs to them, as well. Provide simple, specific ways to interact with information on the catalogue. Most times, an email address for comments will be good enough.

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> "*Lists of terms and thesauri are available, and they are regularly updated. It is essential to work with such tools in order to retrieve information conveniently afterwards and to share it with other institutions or researchers*"

➤ Using **accurate language** is necessary, but not everyone is an expert in textiles.

- Lots of people love textiles and fashion but completely ignore its specialized terminology, since it is a very technical field. For non-specialized audiences, provide information that is not just accurate, but conceptually accessible, too. For instance, with illustrations that exemplify a technical term, or with alternative, simpler terms. Be reminded, too, that language and people evolve over time.
- **Terminology standardization** is key, so please try to follow it as much as you can. On the other hand, these resources should reflect the huge diversity of textiles, and their terminology. Be open to synonyms, including local and popular usage.

➤ **Standards** and cataloguing rules exist and are sometimes officially adopted, but then, cataloguers don't always follow them properly! Train your staff and support them, ensuring a proper use. Otherwise, there is no point in adopting any standard.

➤ On the other hand, always bear in mind that all cultural heritage is, by definition, fuzzy and complex. When dealing with information about your objects, embrace ambiguity: polysemic terms, uncertain dates or labels, changing attributions, evolving standards... (This can be hard to accept for ICT collaborators, but there's no way around it.) Cataloguing rules and standards allow to handle this uncertainty, to a small degree. Nevertheless, when exporting and sharing that information, many of those details get lost or become less clearly retrievable.

> "*During the 2016 earthquake when transferring cultural assets, it was very useful to have proper digitized data. Unfortunately, we had very little.*"

➤ Information is worth its weight in gold. Documenting all the pieces in a collection may not be the most exciting aspect of our work, but it is a core part of it, as well as a legal obligation in many cases. It also opens new possibilities for sharing that information across institutions.

- Cataloguing your collection might be a life saver (and a heritage saver), specially in case of natural or human disasters. This task is important enough to have **dedicated staff**. You don't need to have a full-time specialist for your inventory or catalogue, but the responsibility should be clearly incorporated within the museum structure.
- Don't throw away old information. Don't forget that today's cataloguing will also become obsolete. The museum memory is part of its mission. For instance, treasure your paper-based records. Digitize your archival information, too, and make it accessible.
- Not all information is equally useful, so feel free to select what seems more worthy of attention. Describing what anyone can see by themselves does not add much value.

# Manage your data, and everything around them

## Ok, I want to share, but what and how?

➢ Try to keep everything in the **same database** and show the information to different kinds of users in different ways, according to their profiles. It will make much simpler and safer the management of that data.

- Of course, there is no need to open up all your information. Administrative details are nobody's business, outside the museum.

➢ Remember that **some exceptions to open access** should be kept in mind. Not just copyright-protected materials, but also objects from traditional cultures.

- There is a wide range of intellectual property licences available. It's not just either public domain or "all rights reserved". **Creative Commons** licences provide many layered, nuanced variants, fit for most cultural institutions.
- Some copyright holders may not necessarily require economic compensation but at least **recognition** and respect to their cultural identity should be secured and made public.

➢ Understand the way your collection / institution was built. On this issue, museums specialized in textiles and those with broader, more diverse collections, are quite different. The same applies to size: small museums may learn from the biggest players, but you don't need to imitate a different kind of museum. Textile collections are also very diverse, in themselves: some may be focused just on fabrics, others on fashion, others are old factories with historical looms and tools… Catalogue records should respect and record that **diversity**.

*"Our main curator is a perfectionist, sadly."*

➢ Understand that not everyone cares equally about standardization. It makes sense, since many times textile experts are exactly that, specialists. They care about the specific. However, in a **digital world**, each institution should not be a silo. Some degree of information standardization is necessary: terminology, information standards, platforms, mapping between data models… Be ready to advocate for it. Mindset changes take time.

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➢ In many cases, **authorship of records** or metadata is not properly recorded. It's a matter of practice, not of standards, since most of them indicate ways to record that information. We recommend the general publication of this information, which can be done with a layered approach, depending on the provided depth of details.

➢ In our current environment (pandemic, online transition…), the **quantity** is more important than the **quality** of the information. Scaling up, offering more resources, seems to us more of a priority, for the time being. In the future, however, it will be necessary to focus on quality, as a necessary correction.

➢ **Income** from reproduction fees is rarely worth its own costs, in many institutions; let alone a profitable source of funding. Big players among museums are leading a path towards making collections fully open-access, by providing high quality information, free of charge. This will increasingly become the standard for most institutions, be it de facto or by legal requirement. It's better to keep that as a horizon and work towards that framework.

➢ Institutional guardianship, recognition of authorship or any other moral rights, however, must always be respected. Any **rights** associated with the object or its derivative data must be recognized and made visible to users. Again, there are many options available in open-access licenses that should be enough to accommodate the needs of most heritage institutions, including the smaller ones.

➢ For the most part of our historical collections, that predate the 20th century, copyright is not an issue. In a great majority of cases, there is no legal reason to keep the information of our collections hidden.

➢ Peers and colleagues will particularly appreciate it if you **share data** about your holdings. It will also allow you to receive comments, help and proposals from them, in most cases. It's a win-win!

# Open access repositories for cultural heritage data

➢ Sharing digital information with external repositories should not mean extra work for the museum staff. The implementation should be facilitated by the external repository. Other frameworks are unsustainable.

➢ Visibility of the owning institution must always be provided by the repository. If technically possible, a **permanent link** to the same object in the museum online catalogue, should always be available, thus giving users the possibility to see the original record and to contact the institution responsible for its conservation and dissemination.

➢ Be smart with **external collaborations**. Negotiate your conditions. For instance, you can treat profit-making partners differently from non-profits or public authorities. Demand recognition and, where appropriate, financial returns for your work. Returns need not be only monetary: sponsorship, collaborations, technological partnerships, capacity-building, networking, reputation… can also be valuable sources of support for cultural institutions.

➢ Small and medium size museums or collections can benefit greatly from **alliances** with local authorities, universities, and companies, in applying for external funds for their cataloguing, digital data management, implementing open-access repositories and platforms, etc. The EU and other funding bodies are very interested in projects that bridge digital technologies and cultural heritage, and they expect those projects to be multi-actor and interdisciplinary.

➢ Talk to your supervisors and ask them to decide **who** is in charge of the management of digital information within the institution. (It might be a shared assignment.) Again, it is an essential task for any heritage collection, and responsibility over it should be clearly established and supported by decision makers - and budget planners.

# Open access repositories for cultural heritage data

➢ As far as possible, adopt a **structured format** (data model) for your information. Take also into account that the fields in your records will also have to be mapped to those in the destination database.

➢ Use whatever software / platform / repository / collections management system you like or can afford, but please make sure that it can **export** your data to other formats. (A good old .csv file is a suitable starter for most needs.)

➢ Don't panic. There's a growing community supporting open access efforts within the cultural heritage sector.

*"I would love to share my data, but I don't know how!"*

- **OpenGLAM** is an excellent starting point, and a great source of information.

  https://openglam.org/

- If you are interested in contributing data to **Wikimedia Commons** (the repository that feeds many open-access resources, Wikipedia among them), check the GLAMWiki:

  https://outreach.wikimedia.org/wiki/GLAM/en

- **Europeana** is the largest open-access repository for European cultural heritage of all kinds. It does not work directly with data providers (i.e., cultural institutions willing to contribute with their data like, for instance, your museum). Instead, they gather data through national or thematic aggregators. They are the ones you should reach. For more information, check:

  https://pro.europeana.eu/page/aggregators

  https://www.europeana.eu/

- Specifically for fashion, **EFHA** – the European Fashion Heritage Association is a terrific resource.

  https://fashionheritage.eu/

- For historical textiles, mostly those made of silk, but not only, **SILKNOW** is the people to go to (ok, full disclosure, that's us, but you get it).

  http://silknow.eu

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- Museo Diocesano di Cuneo
- Museo Diocesano di Monreale
- Museo Arcidiocesano "G.Boccanera" di Camerino
- Museo Diocesano di Genova
- Museo Basilica San Sebastiano
- Museo Diocesano di Massa Carrara - Pontremoli
- Museo Diocesano di Padova
- Museo Diocesano di Reggio Calabria
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