



## **Flexible Cataloging for Enormous Collections**

### **Thirty-minute session presented by Laura Lipp and Jennifer Miller of the Henry Ford Museum**

In 2017 the Henry Ford Museum of American Innovation, received approximately 4,000 objects and supporting documentation from the American Textile History Museum. Balancing their usual responsibilities, session presenters Laura Lipp and Jennifer Miller, concentrated on processing the textile portion of the transfer and worked collaboratively with a team of curators, conservators, collection managers, registrars, and other staff on the project.

The American Textile History Museum (ATHM) located in Lowell, Massachusetts focused on the art, science, and history of the American textile industry. Founded in 1960 and closed in June 2016 due to financial challenges, ATHM began with a collection of spinning wheels, hand looms, mechanized textile equipment, and fabrics from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. ATHM continued to grow after its founding, adding costumes, as well as an artist's textile screen print studio to the collection. When tasked to dissolve the museum, ATHM transferred costumes, quilts, fabrics, trade catalogs, and machinery collections, including the artist's studio to the Henry Ford Museum. While other collections were disseminated to a multitude of museums and institutions in the United States.

The Henry Ford Museum -- a large history museum complex and National Historic Landmark near Detroit in Dearborn, Michigan -- includes famous items such as Thomas Edison's laboratory, the Rosa Parks bus, and the Wright Brothers bicycle shop to name a few. A curator from the Henry Ford reviewed ATHM storage facilities and exhibits to select objects for transfer. Once developed, the list of objects was compared against the Henry Ford collection to identify any object duplicates or gaps. ATHM held authentic historic artifacts and reproductions that were of interest to the Henry Ford. Many items, like the spinning wheels and textile manufacturing equipment, were of higher quality with complete provenance than those at the Henry Ford. As a result, the Henry Ford deaccession several lesser examples with condition issues and/or those without strong provenance.

Soon after the transfer began, the Henry Ford's temporary processing area was overrun with objects while more were on the way. In response to unexpected circumstances, the Henry Ford team had to quickly adapted with tweaks to timelines and workflow. The team scrapped the yellow legal pad, opting instead to record only essential information about each object using the web-based Google Docs Spreadsheet application. Information from the object tags were recorded into the document. To save time, measurements were not taken, though any measurements provided in ATHM's object documentation were incorporated. By gathering only essential information from the inventory tags and through object observation, the presenters were able to process approximately one pallet of material each day. Though progress did vary depending on the pallet contents. For instance, stockings took much longer to process than a larger single object. Further, like-items cataloged together under one lot number saved time whereas idiosyncratic objects required more attention and therefore more time.

The essential information collected included: Location, ATHM Number, Henry Ford Number, Description, Number of Pieces, Donor, Date, Measurements, Need Tag?, and Need Photo? As objects arrived, the original ATHM number was noted and a new Ford catalog number assigned. Ford numbers were directly labeled onto the existing ATHM object labels, thus saving time and



resources. Each accession file and database record include these dual numbers. Public facing object information at the Henry Ford cite only the new number (accession root 2017.84) with a credit to ATHM and the original donor. ATHM provenance is retained through the use of sub-numbers to recognize donors in the collection management system.

On paper what appeared to be a straightforward project – accessioning another museum's collection – presented the Henry Ford with unforeseen issues and delays, including pest problems; rehousing and conservation concerns; delays in data transfer; unlisted or found in collection (FIC) objects; and the eventual loss of the temporary workspace. When the occasional dead pests were found, the team paused cataloging to document the items and transfer them to conservation for investigation. Other objects with chemical off-gassing from decaying plastics and a swimsuit that stank of chlorine were given to conservation. Field mapping data into the Henry Ford collection management system from ATHM provided challenging within the short timeframe and resulted in time consuming manual entry. FIC items also presented a further slowdown in the workflow. In one case, a box was discovered with upwards of one hundred FIC objects there within! This box was counted and cataloged as a single lot. In the future, sub-records can be created in the database when individual objects are pulled from the lot for exhibition or loan. And finally, the loss of workspace put an abrupt halt to the cataloging workflow as now objects are distributed throughout several storage areas.

Approaching the two-and-a-half-year mark, the Henry Ford continues to catalog the ATHM objects as time allows or as objects are used for projects. The transfer of 42,000 digital images are still being reviewed individually for quality. Acceptable images are resized to remove the ATHM accession number then linked to the object record. In addition to the image review, donor interviews are taking place to gather stories about the ATHM garments. Alas, as we all can relate, registration work never slows down and resources are perpetually scarce. The presenters feel that as a result of the enormous collection transfer, a solid foundation was established for anyone to build upon. The data gathering methods they developed continue to be invaluable in tackling general registration backlogs as well. Despite the loss of a great museum, the legacy of the American Textile History Museum lives on, preserved at the Henry Ford Museum, as well as many other institutions around the country who hold ATHM collections for posterity.

*Submitted by Linda Waterfield, Head of Registration, Phoebe A. Hearst Museum of Anthropology*