

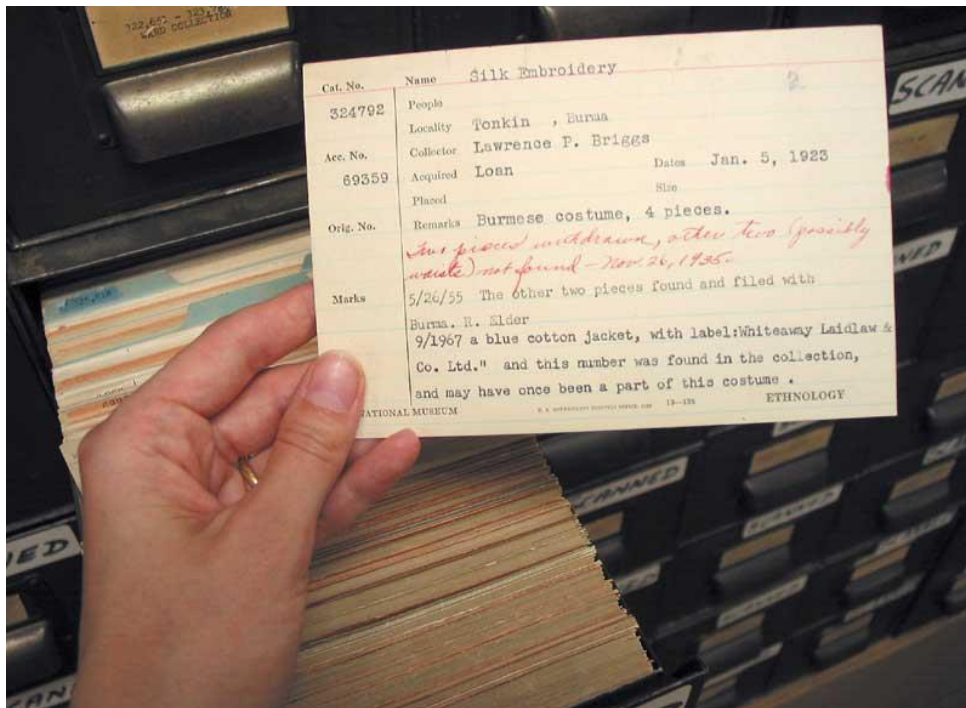
Department of Anthropology

Guide to Collections Records

The research value of the collections is enhanced by a wealth of supporting documentation assembled over 150 years by numerous donors, collectors, and staff. This information is dispersed among several locations and much of it can be accessed only in person. Most Anthropology collections are located at the Museum Support Center (MSC) in Suitland, Maryland, where key records are available in the Collections Records Room. However, some records are kept in other Smithsonian units, including facilities in downtown Washington, DC. This Guide is intended to show researchers what is available and how to access it, so that they can better plan their travel and make appropriate appointments in advance.

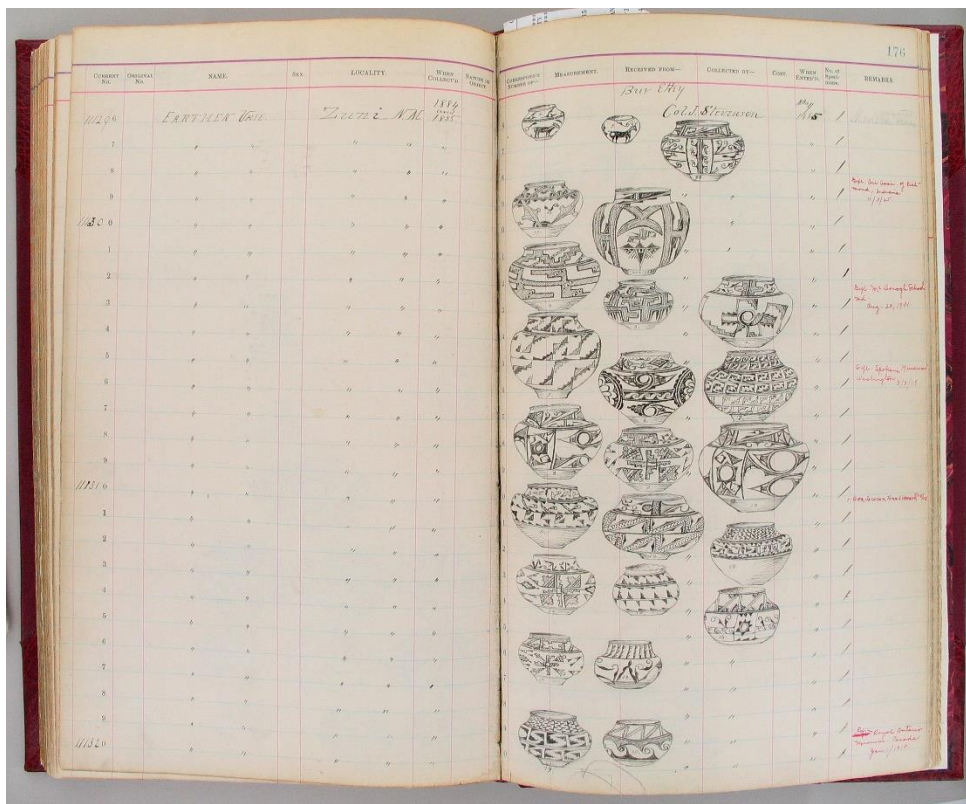
Access to collections and collection records at MSC is [by appointment only](#).





Catalog Records

The catalog is the primary source of information on individual objects in the collection. Information on early collections was originally recorded in **catalog ledger books** before being copied to **catalog cards**. Together, they are the original catalog for early collections and may contain information not recorded elsewhere. Some of the early ledger books even contain small drawings of the artifacts. Collections staff can provide access to the original catalog ledgers and catalog cards in the Collections Records Room during scheduled research visits.



The **collections database** contains information copied from the card catalog, as well as more recent additions and corrections. Not all information on the catalog cards has been copied into the database. However, all cataloged objects are represented in the database with at least a basic catalog record. A printout of any subset of catalog records is available by emailing our [data manager](#).

An [online version of the database](#) provides public access to the most commonly requested fields of information for all active ethnology and archaeology records. It also includes the scanned catalog cards for the ethnology collection, scanned copies of the ledger book pages, and any digital images of the objects that we have on file. More information and images are continually added as they become available.

Accession Records

Accession files, which document a group of material received from a single source at one time, are the primary source of information on how a collection was acquired. Each accession is identified by a unique number, an **accession number**, which is distinct from the individual catalog numbers for the objects contained in the accession. Accession files may include information from donors or collectors that is not recorded in the catalog, such as the collector's original notes or correspondence discussing the history of the collection.

Brief summaries of these files (**accession histories**), as well as biographical information on some donors and collectors, may be included in the main collections database, but are not available in the public online version of the database. It is useful to check for other accessions from the same donor or collector, as each file may contain information about their locations and collecting practices.

Accession files since 1990 are available in the Collections Records Room at MSC. Files for accessions dated 1958-1989 are kept in the Registrar's Office of the National Museum of Natural History, located in downtown Washington, D.C. They are accessible by appointment by calling the Registrar's Office at 202-633-1630.

Copies of accession files prior to 1958 are available on microfilm. Anthropology staff can provide access to the microfilm in the Collections Records Room during scheduled research visits at MSC. Another copy is available in the Registrar's Office.

The microfilm duplicates the original accession files, which are located in the [Smithsonian Institution Archives \(SIA\)](#), as part of Record Unit 305, papers of the United States National Museum (which became the National Museum of Natural History.) The SIA is located in the Capital Gallery Building, near the Mall in downtown Washington, at the L'Enfant Plaza metro stop. Advance appointments are recommended but not required. Contact osiaref@si.edu.



Other Records

The National Anthropological Archives (NAA) may contain manuscripts, photographs, or field notes associated with the object collections. You can search their collections using the [Smithsonian Collections Search Center](#) (or you can search all Smithsonian collections by going to “New search”). The NAA is located in the Museum Support Center, the same building as the object collections. Appointments to use the archives must be made separately from appointments to use the artifact collection.

The [Smithsonian Institution Archives](#) maintains extensive collections relating to the history of the institution, including the papers of some donors and collectors represented in the Anthropology collections. In addition to Record Unit 305 (accession files), RU 192 (USNM Administrative Files, 1877-1975) may be particularly useful. Visit their home page and select "Research and Resources" for a variety of reference tools. The SIA is located in the Capital Gallery Building, near the Mall in downtown Washington. Advance appointments are not required, but recommended. It is best to check in advance on the availability of records, since many are stored off-site. [Contact the archivists of the SIA](#) for assistance.

Published Information

Information on acquisitions was regularly reported in the Annual Reports of the U.S. National Museum, which began publication in 1884. For earlier collections, consult the [Smithsonian Annual Reports](#).

A number of other Smithsonian publication series are available in digital form through the [Biodiversity Heritage Library](#). They include:

- [Bulletins of the U.S. National Museum](#)
- [Bureau of Ethnology Bulletins No. 1 - 24](#)
- [Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletins No. 25 - 200](#)
- [Proceedings of the U.S. National Museum](#)
- [Smithsonian Miscellaneous Collections](#)
- [Smithsonian Contributions to Knowledge](#)
- [Contributions to North American Ethnology](#). Vol. I-VII, IX. [Ed. by J.W. Powell]

The [Smithsonian Contributions to Anthropology](#) is a continuing series started in 1965, and highlights anthropological research at the Smithsonian, including research on the collections.

Much American Indian material was collected by individuals associated with the Smithsonian's Bureau of American Ethnology. The [BAE Annual Reports](#) (available via [Gallica](#)) may include information on their work.

The [Smithsonian Institution Libraries](#), particularly the [Anthropology branch library](#), may be of assistance in locating additional published materials. Advance appointments are recommended but not required for the Anthropology Library. Their phone number is 202-633-1640.

In the Collections

Collecting information is sometimes written directly on objects, and original collector's tags may remain attached to objects. Tags that have been removed are preserved in the Collections Records Room, filed by accession number.

The ethnology collection is organized in storage by region (Africa, Asia, Oceania etc.), culture area or country, and culture. Objects lacking a specific cultural designation may be stored in a general section for a wider region, or they may be placed near similar items to facilitate access. The storage location is a matter of convenience and should not be considered an alternative to consulting catalog data.

The archaeology collection is organized geographically. Within the United States it is stored by state, county and site.

