# A Simple Guide to Labelling Museum Objects

### Introduction

Each museum object is individually numbered to identify and distinguish it from all other objects in a collection. All the information relating to an object is filed and accessed using this unique number.

Writing a number directly on an object is the most secure method of labelling but it is not always the most suitable. A record photograph of each object, including its correct registration number, provides additional security.

This guide has been prepared to assist you with labelling museum collection objects. Six alternative methods of labelling are outlined and a range of suitable materials are identified.

### Basics

There are a few basic things to consider when labelling objects. These are:-

- When objects are made from a number of different materials, always label the most durable or stable material. If all of the materials are fragile, use a tie –on label.

- Use a standard and easily accessible location for the position of the number. For example, we suggest the reverse (back), bottom right corner, or on the hem at the left side seam. This will minimise handling and possible damage when finding the number.

- Consider and select the best numbering location, material and application for each object because removing numbers will cause damage to the object. This decision will become easier with experience. With many objects you will be deciding between the Tissue or Paraloid Methods. If you are unsure which method is most suitable, please use the Tissue Method as there is less risk of causing damage to the object.

- Practice each labelling method until you feel confident before you apply it to an object.

- Ensure that numbers are legible. Breaking the number up into components may improve clarity eg: write 8 as 2 circles. Numbering should be small and neat. Use 2-5mm numbers on small to medium objects and 10mm on larger objects.
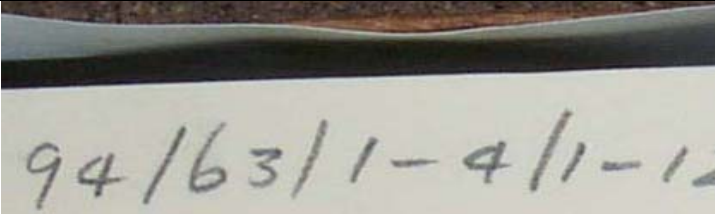
**Materials**

The following materials have been tested and are recommended for labelling objects. This recommendation is based on a series of test evaluations based on standards for fading, solubility and adhesion.[1]

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|---|---|
| Artline drawing system pen (black) | Woven cotton tag or ribbon |
| Artline 444XF paint marker (white) | Tyvek numbered label |
| Pentel hybrid gel (white) K.118-LW | Petroleum spirits |
| Schwan Stabilo 8046 wax pencil | Acetone |
| Schwan Stabilo All pencil 8008 (black and white) | Graphite pencils HB (firm) and 2B (softer) |
| Schwan Stabilo 8052 wax pencil | Mylar sheet |
| Paraloid B-67(15% in petroleum spirits) | Japanese tissue. Use well matted and smooth tissue, approx. 22 gsm |
| Paraloid B-72 (20% in acetone) | Distilled water |
| Paraloid B-72 in (20% in ethanol ) | |
| Plextol B500 20%  in distilled water | |

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[1] Tests were carried out by Sue Gatenby, Conservation Scientist, Preservation and Heritage Management, Powerhouse Museum. As the formulation of products may be changed by the manufacturer and this may alter the performance of the product, it is important that you remain observant and evaluate recommended materials as suitable for your own specific conditions and use.

## Labelling Methods

Six different methods of labelling are recommended in the table below. Each method of application is recommended for a specific range of materials and objects.

| METHOD | APPLICATION | SUITABLE FOR | EXAMPLE |
|--------|-------------|--------------|---------|
| **1**<br>**PENCIL** | • Clean surface by brushing with a clean soft brush.<br>• Select a graphite pencil to match the paper surface (for a soft surface select a soft pencil and use a harder pencil for firmer paper).<br>• Using as little pressure as possible, write the number onto the object.<br>• Check that the number is correct. | Paper and paper products albums, books, posters, prints | <br>This pencil number is easy to read. With complex numbers it is important to check that you have written them correctly. |
| **2**<br>**WAX**<br>**PENCIL** | • As method 1 but use a wax pencil instead of a graphite pencil.<br>• Use a Schwan stabile 8046 wax pencil or Schwan Stabilo 8052-wax pencil. | Coated papers, board, photographs and waxed boxes | |

| METHOD | APPLICATION | SUITABLE FOR | EXAMPLE |
|---|---|---|---|
| **3**<br>**TISSUE** | • Clean object surface with soft brush.<br>• Cut or tear a strip of Japanese tissue to size. Place tissue onto Mylar sheet.<br>• Apply a base coat of 20% Paraloid B-72 in acetone to the strip of Japanese tissue. Leave edges of label uncoated. Allow to dry.<br>• Write number on label using an Artline drawing system pen or Artline 444KF paint marker. Allow to dry.<br>• Apply top coat of 15% Paraloid B-67 in petroleum spirits. Allow to dry then remove label from Mylar sheet.<br>• Apply 20% Plextol B500 in distilled water to underside of label and position on object. Press firmly and evenly to ensure adhesion. | Firm surfaces eg: wood, leather, unglazed ceramics, furniture. | <br><br>A Japanese tissue label is less secure than a number directly applied to the object but it is easier and safer to apply to objects that do not have a hard surface.<br><br> |

| METHOD | APPLICATION | SUITABLE FOR | EXAMPLE |
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| **4**<br>**PARALOID** | • Clean surface using a soft brush.<br><br>• In an inconspicuous location, gently touch the surface with two cottons swabs, one very slightly moistened with acetone and the other with petroleum spirits. If either solvent appears to have damaged the surface or the swab removes colour from the object, choose the Tissue Method or Tie on a Label instead.<br><br>• Apply a base coat of 20% Paraloid B-72 in acetone to object surface. Allow 30 minutes to dry.<br><br>• Then write number on top of base coat using an Artline drawing system pen or Artline 444KF paint marker. Allow to dry.<br><br>• Apply top coat of 15% Paraloid B-67 in petroleum spirit in one stroke to prevent smearing. | Hard surfaces eg:<br><br>ceramics, metals, glass. | <br><br>This number is located at the base of the object and is clearly visible because of the ink colour used. It is a good size in relation to the object.<br><br>**Special note for metals**<br>For uncoated and unfinished metals use a base coat of 20% Paraloid B-72 in acetone with a top of 15% Paraloid B-67 in petroleum spirits<br>For coated/painted/patinated metals use a base coat of 15% Paraloid B67 in petroleum spirits and a top coat of 15% Paraloid B-67 in petroleum spirit. |

| METHOD | APPLICATION | SUITABLE FOR | EXAMPLE |
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| **5**<br>**CLOTH** | • Pre wash cloth labels or ribbon and rinse well in distilled water. Dry.<br>• Write number on the label using an Artline drawing system pen or Artline 444KF paint marker. Allow to dry.<br>• Turn in any raw edges, then sew label onto fabric using small running stitches on one short edge Hold the needle at right angles to the object surface and pass needle back and forth through the spaces in the weave of the object to avoid breaking threads. When possible choose thread to match the background colour of the fabric. Choose a soft cotton thread. | Textiles, costumes, fans, hats, felt, lace, rugs, tapestries, upholstery and basketry | <br>This label was prepared before being sewn into place. This means that the object is not likely to be accidentally stained by the ink or pen used to write the number.<br><br>Cloth labels are especially useful when the object has an open weave and is in sound condition. |

| METHOD | APPLICATION | SUITABLE FOR | EXAMPLE |
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| **6**<br>**TIE ON**<br>**LABEL** | • Use a tyvek label attached to the object with a cotton tape or ribbon tie.<br>• Either mark tyvek directly using a graphite pencil<br>• Or use a base coat of Paraloid B-72 in ethanol. Allow to dry. Then write number on label using an Artline drawing system pen or Artline 444KF paint marker | Most objects, may be the only suitable method for plastic, vinyl or rubber objects and objects with surfaces that are unsuitable for Paraloid method. |  |