1. PROPER CITATION AND ETHICS

"Referencing is not a neutral act. Citations are a form of scientific currency, actively conferring or denying value."¹

The Chicago Manual of Style does not provide standards on how to cite museum labels and signs. By not properly citing a museum object while following strict citation guidelines for books and articles, researchers may unintentionally place more value on certain types of research. In addition to creating frustration and more work for the readers, this sends the message that a cited museum object or label is not a legitimate source.

Just because museum collections information is available online does not mean that it can be used without citation. Someone put the time in writing that label and object information. Even if the curator’s or researcher’s name is not on the label or object page itself, citing the label or object page will acknowledge that this is not your own words, yet a legitimate source. Moreover, a label reflects the author’s interpretations, positionality, and biases. By citing the label, we can acknowledge a museum’s efforts in creating better labels and hold them responsible for creating labels that include racist and sexist language.

In some cases, museums encourage the proper citation of their objects. The following is from the Walters Art Museum’s policy page:

“The information necessary for the proper citation of the Walters’ works can be found on the object records of our online catalog. Properly citing works from the Walters collection and providing an image credit to ‘The Walters Art Museum,’ when using images of the collection helps to steward the collection by connecting the museum with images of the works it maintains.” In some rarer cases, the museum also provides information on how to cite an object in their collection, as it was done by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

Studying museum collections fulfills an ethical responsibility: Many ancient and historical museum objects are out of their context because of the art market, looting, improper excavation, or incomplete documentation. By studying them further, we can re-contextualize or at least provide more information on their functions and meanings. However, if we do not cite these museum objects and explicitly say which museum they are located in today, we may be contributing to the de-contextualization of this object and ignoring its colonial acquisition.

To avoid such pitfalls, please make sure to provide the following information when citing museum objects:

1. **Name/title of the artwork (in italics):** The most appropriate way to cite the name or title of a museum object is to use the name given by its artist or maker. A European painting may have such a title or a name known to us. However, not all ancient objects have a name, a title, or even an inscription of the owner or maker. In those cases, some museums have used “Unknown Artist” and described the object as the title.²

If there is an inscription on an object, this would be an appropriate name for it. For example, when naming ancient Egyptian coffins, museums often use the mummified individual’s name if it is found on the coffin. In cases where there is no such information, or if you are not an expert in the area of the cited object, copying the name/title given by the museum provided on the object page is the safest way to cite it. Consistency will help other searchers find the object in the collection or in online searches.

This, however, does not mean that museums always name objects in the most ethical way. Everyone reading this will know what the “Rosetta Stone”³ is because we all use this name to refer to it. The inscription was found in Rosetta, which is the westernized name of a place in the Egyptian Delta called Rašīd (رشيد). You may wonder why it is not called the Rašīd Stone/Inscription. Westernizing names is another remnant of colonialism in museums.

Please only use western or westernized names when it refers to that specific context. This may sound obvious. However, certain art historical terms are still utilized out of context as it was done with this object at the Met.⁴ In this example, using the Luba or Hemba peoples’ word for this kind of stool as the title would have been more ethical and accurate than using “caryatid,” an ancient Greco-Roman term. In short, while citing the name of an ancient or historical object (or naming it), keep in mind ethics and convenience while prioritizing the former.

Colleagues in Classics departments and working in museums with Classical collections have recently been re-evaluating the terms used in the Beazley Archive databases. Do not replicate derogatory terms used in the name of a museum object, even if such databases use it. As long as the accession number is linked to your object citation, searchers can find this object. In this case, ethics should override convenience.

Make sure to use the correct spelling of terms, names, locations in their original or local language. There are standardized vocabulary guides. But conduct some research on the place names used locally. For example, if Turkish speakers and researchers are using a

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specific spelling for “Acemhöyük,” do not create your own spelling by adding or removing special characters (“Açemhuyuk”). Special characters were perhaps not available to scholars using typewriters a century ago. However, today we have no excuse to skip the special characters. Differing spellings makes replicating online searches more difficult for others. And it looks lazy. You can always ask a native speaker to look over your spellings.

Databases and tools (such as GIS platforms) may not allow for using special characters. In those cases, researchers should fix the spelling in their written text while using the version without special characters in these databases.

b. **Museum and/or Collection name**: Don’t assume knowledge when citing museum objects. Be explicit about where it is from (if known), where it is housed or displayed. If you are citing an object in connection to an exhibit but the object is on loan from another museum, it is better to cite it with its own museum/collection name and also provide the exhibition title and name of the museum where the object is temporarily housed.

One of the most commonly cited ancient museum objects for Assyriology and ancient Western Asian Studies is cuneiform tablets or inscribed objects. Scholars in these fields cite these objects using designations and the Cuneiform Digital Library Initiative (CDLI) numbers. For example, the object page of the “Saluting Protective Spirit,” from Nimrud, now in the Cleveland Museum of Art, 1943.246, provides the CDLI number under “citations.” If your research is not specifically geared towards a specialized Assyriology audience, spelling out the museum and collection name (designation) will help your readers.

For ancient objects, adding “Now in the X Museum” can highlight the fact that this object is far away from its original findspot. If the original findspot is known, this should be added as well. By calling something “Babylonian,” when we know it is from Babylon/Iraq, we may be distancing ourselves in time and space, thus from the fact that this object was taken away from its original context. Acknowledging the modern name of the original findspot may be confrontational and uncomfortable (in some cases even not possible due to modern borders). Still, it is a good reminder to ourselves as researchers and to our readers that we are researching other peoples’ and cultures’ objects. It is a reminder to make our research available in local, indigenous, or source languages so that our research is not just extractive.

There are, of course, issues with the museum name becoming part of the object’s citation. However, the goal here is to identify the physical location of an object. On the other hand, when citing a museum object, avoid using the collector’s name in the citation unless the museum requires such a credit line. Many collectors acquired ancient objects through legally questionable actions and have contributed to the demand for the illegal trade of antiquities. My Greek friends and colleagues intentionally call “the Parthenon Marbles” in the British Museum not “Elgin Marbles,” as this gives ownership to Lord Elgin and justifies, deliberately or unintentionally, the fact that they have not been returned. Similarly, do not
refer to the “Queen of the Night relief” as the “Burney Relief.” Ethically, ancient objects don’t belong to their collectors (nor to their excavators), even if their legal “ownership” is given to individuals or institutions. Legal does not always mean ethical.

c. **Accession (reference/ID) number:** Every object and artwork in the museum has an acquisition or reference number. This unique number can be found on the object labels in the gallery and on the object page online. It is crucial to provide this unique identifier when citing a museum object because one can search for the accession number directly in an online museum collection database. In our previous blog post, I discussed how difficult it is to decide on search terms while searching museum collections online. Think of accession number as a DOI (Digital Object Identifier) number, a unique number assigned to a digital object that will not change over time.

There is no standardized system, such as a DOI or ISBN identifier system, used to identify objects across different museum collections. However, museums may have internal numbering systems. Egyptologists have complained to me about the fact that sometimes the museum number, registration number, and publication number for the same papyrus can be different. Museums are responsible for providing all the designated numbers and researchers are responsible for citing them all. Some accession numbers may contain the year when the museum acquired the object or they may have number codes for specific collections. But this knowledge is often not communicated and only lives in the institutional memory. This is to say, do not assume that the accession number information is easy to find for your reader.

d. **Stable/persistent URL:** Similarly, providing a stable URL, a link that won’t go 404 Error on you in a year, is crucial in citing museum information, particularly in digital publications. Especially now that most of the research is happening online or digitally, your readers may want to know more about the museum object than what you have cited. If the page you linked does not exist anymore, you did not do your citation properly.

I am guilty of copying and pasting the URL in the address bar to link museum objects and their online object page in past publications (let me know if you find any unstable URLs in my previous blog posts!). I learned that this is not always a persistent link. A persistent link means that the internet addresses will remain constant over time.

Again, academic publishers provide stable URLs for articles, books, and other media. When we want to link a JSTOR article in a digital publication, we can copy the Stable URL provided on the article page (Fig. 2).

Some museums make things easier for us by providing a stable link. For example, Harvard Art Museums has a “copy link” button on their object pages (Fig. 3). Similarly, the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin’s SMB Online Collection object pages include a “Bookmarkable URL,” which are stable links.

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In some cases, stable links exist, but are not explicitly indicated. For instance, on the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s object pages, one can find the “Share” button below the image, enabling one to share the image on social media or in an email. One can also use the “copy link” option and directly copy the link for sharing. This link is a stable URL. You will notice that in this case, the stable URL is the same as the link in your address bar. But one should not assume this in every case.

If there is no stable URL provided or you are not sure if the link is permanent, you may need to create one:

- **perma.cc**: This is more commonly used in legal contexts to secure URLs as evidence, and it can easily be used to secure your citation as well. Read here how to set up a perma account and create a permanent link.

- **archive.org**: Internet Archive enables pages to be cited and shared even after the original webpage changes or is removed. There are several ways to save pages so that they appear in the Wayback Machine, a tool that allows for searching archived pages. Read here how to use the “save page now” and Wayback Machine.
TL, DR: A proper museum object citation should look like this:
Artist/maker (if known), "Name/title of the artwork," other information if necessary (date, material, exhibit name/place), originally from Geographic Location (if known). Museum and/or Collection Name (Credit Line if required), Accession Number. Image License (if an image is being used). Stable URL.


Further Resources on Citing Works of Art, Exhibition Catalogs, Images, Primary Sources (Archival Objects) and Labels:

• “How to cite an object in a private or public collection” in the American Journal of Archaeology. Accessed on March 10, 2021.
• Citation guideline for Cuneiform Commentaries Project. Accessed on March 9, 2021.
• “MLA Citation Style 8th Edition: Physical object (artworks including photographs or artifacts)” by Skyline College. Accessed on March 9, 2021.

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6 If it is a digital publication, you can link the stable URL to the accession number. If it is a printed publication, it is best to provide the extended stable URL after the image license.
2. IMAGES, LICENSES, AND ETHICS (written with Eric Kansa)

High-resolution museum images are useful in illustrating academic publications, research deliverables (like conference papers), or teaching materials. These images are also now commonly used by social media content creators and digital artists, especially when they are made “public domain.”

What does this mean, really? The relationship between museums and copyright can at times be complicated and requires high levels of knowledge and understanding. So let us start with the basics. Why is it easier for researchers or content creators to use public domain images than images in a book or academic article? This has to do with licenses.

License: Essentially a contract between a copyright owner and someone wanting to use a copyrighted work. This contract specifies what uses are permitted, under what circumstances, and under what conditions (like payment, or attribution, etc.)

When museums make their images public domain, they waive any copyright they might have. Copyright: A type of intellectual property right. By default, all “expressive” works have copyright in the US. One does not have to file or claim copyright, it is granted automatically. Copyright laws differ around the world. Here is a short guide for Copyright Term and the Public Domain in the United States.

Public Domain: Works that do not have copyright or whose copyright expired fall under public domain. Public domain works are legally available for any use without permission, restrictions, and image license fees. This makes it easier and cheaper to publish museum images in academic publications. Similarly, if the image is public domain, an artist could reuse or remix the image and may even sell a product with this image (if the license allows for commercial use).

An ancient object may be public domain due to its age, but a museum can claim copyright ownership of the images and 3D models of that artwork if it is in their collection. Since museums can also restrict photography (especially flash photography or close-ups), in many cases they own the only images available of an artwork. This creates an ethical dilemma: As researchers we may want museums to make their images public domain, so we do not have to pay for the license and use rights (“how many books haven’t been written because of the cost of the licenses?”). On the other hand, in a way, by making ancient object images public domain, museums claim rights of the ownership of objects that may not belong to them ethically. Therefore, in my opinion, charging researchers for the use of the images of ancient objects (that the museum ethically does not own in the first place) is also problematic.

It is not a secret that museums put resources and time in getting their objects photographed. It is therefore ethical, even when it is not required, to properly cite museum information, whether it is a label or an object image. Especially in cases where the museum did put extra effort in making images available in public domain, one can acknowledge the efforts of the museum and these ethical issues surrounding the production and use of images.
Copyright in the US only applies to “expressive works.” Factual data (even if gathered at great cost, like the number of amphora in an ancient shipwreck that required a submarine to investigate) are legally in the “public domain.” Nobody can own a fact like the height of Mt. Everest. Research communities have strong social norms and ethics for citation of even non-copyrightable factual data. If someone reported somewhere that they counted 4500 beads cached in a Chalcolithic jar, it is an ethical obligation to cite that person as the source of that fact, even though that “fact” (a Chalcolithic jar had 4500 beads) is not protected by copyright. The same should be valid for museum information. Even though many museum labels contain factual information, labels are written by someone or multiple people who did the work.

A work (or even “factual” data describing something important to a community, like genetics, landscapes, biogeography, etc. see https://www.gida-global.org/care) from an Indigenous nation may be in the public domain according to the American legal system, but in an Indigenous or other legal, ethical, or cultural system, the image of this object may be restricted, sacred, private, or proprietary. For example, in Australia, Aboriginal cultural items and documentations of intangible heritage (songs, traditions) may be considered “secret and sacred,” and therefore, access to objects and their documentation, whether written or visual, is regulated and limited. Read more about the management of restricted Aboriginal objects by the National Museum of Australia here.

In other parts of the world, governments or governmental bodies may have ownership of the images of ancient objects. For example, in Turkey, national archaeological museums do not have their collections or images online. Researchers need to apply for a permit from the Ministry of Culture and Tourism and/or the museum itself to be able to study and publish the images of museum objects and archival collections.

This potentially creates another ethical dilemma: It may be easier and faster to use public domain museum images than applying for an official permit. As a result, researchers may opt to using images that are available online. This, however, may create an imbalanced representation of museum objects that are housed in western museums or in museums with resources that can take high-resolution photographs of their collections and make them available online. Another issue is that many western museums have objects that are out of context, whereas the above-mentioned national archaeological museums in Turkey, whose collections come from archaeological excavations, have secure information on the context of the objects. In short, as researchers we may have to make a decision between what is ethical and convenient, again prioritizing the former. Otherwise, academic books and articles will over-represent objects in western museums and create a misleading “canon.”

**Fair use:** “Fair use” encompasses legally allowed uses of copyrighted works that don’t require permission of the copyright owner (fair use applies even if there’s no license agreement). Sampling (very short clips) and thumbnail size images are often considered fair use. Educational and non-commercial uses such as classroom instruction usually also fall under “fair use.”
Because “fair use” is ambiguous, it is best to seek advice from experts about the applicability of fair use. This guide by the Penn Libraries is a good starting point to understand what fair use is and this is a great resource for checking if a use would qualify as a fair use.

**Creative Commons licenses:** Part of the intent of these licenses is to allow copyright owners to share content with very clear, standardized, permissions and requirements. The standardization and clarity of Creative Commons licenses make them preferred and powerful tools, especially for sharing research and educational content.

There are several different Creative Commons licenses. Creative Commons created the “CC-Zero” dedication, which explicitly dedicates an otherwise copyrightable work into the public domain. On the other hand, CC Attribution licenses require the attribution/citation of the owner of the image. For example, museum images uploaded by ASOR members on the ASOR Photo Collection are under Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0) license, which requires attribution (the image’s “owner” needs to be credited).

When using a museum image, check to see if the museum or image hosting platform has specific guidelines on their image licenses and use. Here are some examples:

- In 2017, The Metropolitan Museum of Art implemented a new policy known as Open Access, which makes images of artworks it believes to be in the public domain widely and freely available for unrestricted use, and at no cost, in accordance with the Creative Commons Zero (CC0) designation and the Terms and Conditions of this website.

- The British Museum uses Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) license.

- Getty Museum’s Open Content Program makes available, without charge, all available digital images to which the Getty holds the rights or that are in the public domain to be used for any purpose. No permission is required.

- You may need to contact a museum directly to learn about their licensing. For example, the Guggenheim licenses images of art from its collections, including installation views of exhibitions, architectural views of buildings, and historical material.” You need to email licensing@guggenheim.org for more information or fill their image request forms.

When using these images, especially in digital publications, make sure to provide captions and alternative text describing the image to make them accessible and user friendly.

**Further Resources on Licenses and Images:**

You can follow the “Guidelines for the Use of Copyrighted Materials and Works of Art” by the Association of Art Museum Directors here.


Resources on Finding Public Domain Images and Multimedia:

Watch our video resource on finding public domain museum images [here](#).

“Finding Open Access Images: Public Domain Images” by the Penn Libraries provides non-museum resources for finding images. For example, the National Park Service has a [Multimedia Search](#).

Open Images is an open media platform that offers online access to audiovisual archive material to stimulate creative reuse. Footage from audiovisual collections can be downloaded and remixed into new works. Access to the material on Open Images is provided under the [Creative Commons](#) licensing model. Creative Commons gives authors, artists, scientists and teachers the freedom to approach their copyright in a more flexible manner and make their work available in a way they can choose themselves.

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World History Encyclopedia has a [Media Library](#). Every entry in the library has specific license requirements and guidelines at the end of the page.

3. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

No research happens in isolation. It takes a village and the knowledge of a village to produce good research. So does putting together museum information and making this information available online. Citation is one way to acknowledge this work. Acknowledgments is another way. If you used a museum’s object information or if a digital tool enabled your research, acknowledge it. Museum curators, digital departments, and collections managers who bring this information to the public and researchers are often “behind the scenes” and rarely get any recognition.

Similarly, if the museum object was excavated, acknowledge the people involved in this excavation. Scholars are often very good at acknowledging other scholars and archaeologists who directed excavations, but not so good at acknowledging the excavators and workers who worked at archaeological projects, sometimes for decades. Even if the excavation happened a long time ago and the names of these workers are not documented, their labor can be acknowledged.
Who else doesn’t get any recognition? Ancient makers, artists, and people. Again, we may not know their names, but we can nevertheless acknowledge them. Here is an example of an acknowledgement I have used in different versions in my writings that include museum objects:

“I want to acknowledge the makers of the ancient objects that inspired this research/teaching activity. I hope the research/teaching activity will provide some context to these ancient objects (especially those in museums that have lost their contexts due to looting and illegal trade), and some agency to the ancient peoples who created, owned, used, traded, discarded, and buried them. I am humbled and inspired by the skill, knowledge, creativity, and craftsmanship that went into making these objects. I honor the stories and memories that ancient individuals experienced through these objects.”

The acknowledgement section can also be a good place to acknowledge the injustices connected to your research material:

“Many museums, including X Museum I have cited in this research, have collections acquired through questionable, unethical, or violent means. Many museums have benefited from the mistreatment, abuse, and looting of indigenous cultures. Museums are trying to do better. As museum educators/researchers we need to push our institutions for change and hold our administration and decision-makers accountable.”

Dan Hicks, in his book “The Brutish Museums: The Benin Bronzes, Colonial Violence, and Cultural Restitution,” argues that creating and using images are an act of taking. This is one of the reasons why as researchers we need to prioritize the ethical use of both museum objects and their images and aim to serve the people whose cultural heritage we benefit from for our own research purposes.

As many Indigenous activists, scholars, and museum professionals have argued, acknowledgements can be performative and meaningless if they are not followed by actions. You can read the “Guide for Land Acknowledgements” by Lorén Spears, the Executive Director of Tomaquag Museum here. Actions and acknowledgements may look different depending on your area of study. They need to be customized and made more specific according to the nature, scope, or goals of your research. The following could be used for a research on ancient western Asian objects in colonial museums:

“I recognize my privilege to be able to study these objects, when people whose ancient heritage was taken away from them do not have access to these objects today. I hope for the return of the X object to its place of origin in the future. In the meantime, I pledge to make this research available in the local Y language for the Z peoples whose heritage I have benefited from for my own research purposes.”

We hope you find these suggestions helpful and integrate them in your museum-based research and work.

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