Understanding Collection Digitisation: ten pointers and some valuable sources to help guide digitisation for small to medium sized museums

If your museum is thinking about undertaking collection digitisation here are ten pointers, along with links to quality resources, that will help you decide how to tackle your project.

1. **Digitisation in a museum setting:**

   Digitisation is the creation of a digital record of any item/s held in a museum collection – using photography, (2D) scanning, video and audio recording, or 3D scanning methods. Digitisation can also include making a record of 'intangible cultural heritage', such as oral histories, dance or craft skills.

   Many small to medium sized museums typically use scanning and photographic methods to digitise 2D (or flat) collection items, as well as 3D objects.

   The objects you digitise can range from small to ample sized items, such as letters, documents, photos, posters, maps and brochures; or teapots, framed photographic portraits, tools, clothing and farm equipment etc.

2. **Equipped to digitise:**

   Many museums in Australia are undertaking digitisation. But to do it well, digitisation involves assembling the right equipment, having or acquiring knowledge about how to best digitise museum objects and the equipment used to do it, including computer software.

   If your museum does not have the people or skills needed to undertake digitisation, one option is to work with others who do.

   Given the time and effort it takes to do digitisation well, and what your museum can gain from having a quality digital record of your collection, allocating funds, or

sourcing external funds to digitise, will be worth it.

So, if your organisation needs help to plan or undertake digitisation you may wish to locate consultants in QLD, or over the border in NSW.

Among the reasons museums digitise their collections is to reduce the risk of damage to fragile or vulnerable museum items, as digitisation can minimise handling objects.

3. **Reasons for digitising:**

   Typically, museums digitise their collections for any or all the following reasons:

   a. **Preservation & conservation:** Having a digital 'copy' of a record or object from your collection means less demand is placed on the physical item – as a digital record of the item can be used in place of handling the 'real thing'. In turn this means reducing the risk of damage to collection items, due to accidents or repeated handling, when used for purposes such as research.

   b. **Cataloguing:** When cataloguing collections, using a computer-based system or database, many museums use digital images to illustrate collection items. A digital image makes understanding collection items easier, as it adds a visual record to the written catalogue entry.

   Searching for items using a computer catalogue is easier when the item is seen, rather than simply described.

   c. **Promotion:** The promotion of museum collections is important to realising the aims of keeping collections in the first instance – to see or use the items within them, and to gain and foster greater understanding of the places and peoples that make up our communities.

   Many museums use websites and social media to promote their collections, along with other advertising media such as brochures, posters and newsletters.

   When a collection is digitised a 'digital asset' is created that can be used for many purposes. Quality images of items from your collection will indeed be a great asset to use when advertising or promoting your collection, or the experience your museum can provide to researchers and visitors.

   d. **Accessibility:** The vast majority of Australians, and people throughout the world, use the internet, mobile phones, tablets and computers, daily.

   Many museums are choosing to digitise and make available 'online'

images and information about the objects or collections they care for. Ultimately, this information can be accessed by anyone who uses the internet.

Putting your collection online will make it accessible to more people, and who will benefit from it – whether it be to do a school or university assignment, research a family tree, or understand the community from which someone originates or belongs to etc.

Promoting your collection online can also attract more visitors to your museum or research facility.

e. **Natural disaster recovery:** In recent years record breaking bushfires and floods have demonstrated the devastating impact that these events can have on a community. Digitisation is a valuable tool used to minimise the negative impact of natural disasters on the preservation of historic information.

A digital record of a collection never replaces an actual physical record or object, given the unique characteristics a tangible or touchable record or object entails, or makes available to those who see or use it. But a digital record of important historic items and objects is better than not having these at all.

4. **You can start small:**

To undertake digitisation does not mean you need to digitise everything or use all the digitisation methods available. You can start small by using the simplest digitisation method, and task, of scanning documents and photographs. And it is these items that are often most handled and / or most vulnerable to handling, so scanning is an effective way to begin digitisation.

Beginning with a simple task approach will also help your museum better understand some of the important steps involved in digitisation, such as digitisation planning, establishing a 'workflow', or determining the image capture standards you will use, as well as how you will name and save your digital files – that is, the digital pictures of the records and objects you digitise.

If you want to start small by scanning paper documents and photographs see [Information for Community Groups on How to Digitise Photographs and Paper Records.](#)

An effective way for small museums to begin digitisation is by scanning photos and documents.

5. **Plan your digitisation project:**

   Planning your digitisation project includes considering its scope. This means determining what to digitise, the method/s you will use, the equipment you need, who will be involved, and the time and space required to digitise. Planning the steps involved in digitisation will ensure your digitisation project is successful.

   To help you consider how to scope out what to digitise, or break down the steps needed to complete your digitisation task, see [Planning Your Digitisation Project](#) or the section on workflows in [Navigating Crystal Clear](#).

6. **Digitisation and First Nations peoples and communities:**

   Many museums hold records and objects relating to First Nations communities. Digitising records and objects that originate from or relate to First Nations peoples, families or communities, should always be done in consultation and collaboration with the individuals or groups they originate from or relate to.

   To find out who your museum should consult in your area, start by searching the QLD Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural heritage bodies database [here](#).

7. **Assembling your digitisation toolkit:**

Digitisation, regardless of which method you use, requires equipment and computer software to undertake digitisation and save the files you create.

As noted above, planning your digitisation project will enable you to determine the right equipment needed to undertake the type of digitisation you decide on. Whether this is starting small, or planning to engage someone to help with digitising your collection, [Crystal Clear](#) and [Navigating Crystal Clear](#) has a detailed list of the equipment you may need to scan or photograph collection items.

And use these links for advice on the [right audio equipment](#) for undertaking oral histories and how to get the most from [doing oral history](#).

Using a digital camera is one of the key methods used to digitise museum collections – no matter how big or how small your museum or collection is.

8. **Using good image capture standards and saving digital files:**

   There is a lot of advice online about how to achieve the best quality images when scanning, taking

photographs, and saving or resizing digital files.

Ultimately when you undertake digitisation you want to create the best record possible of your collection, so that it looks good online and is of most value to those who use it.

Doing digitisation, and processing and saving the image files created from the digitisation process, is time consuming. Given the enormous commitment that digitisation requires, both in terms of affording equipment and the time it takes, digitisation practitioners have coined the phrase 'do it once, do it well'. It is a good principle to remember and recall when planning and doing digitisation.

To help you decide on the capture standards you will use, and how and where you will save your collection's digital assets, see the relevant sections on good image capture approaches when using a camera or scanner, and saving your digital files, in Crystal Clear.

9. **Using digital assets:**

    As mentioned above, once you have created good digital images of your collection you have these 'assets' to use for various purposes – including your website, social media, cataloguing, displays or exhibitions and making available for others to use online.

10. **Digitise with colleagues:**

The volume of information available online about digitisation can make considering digitisation confusing. Digitisation can also be difficult to navigate because it involves learning new knowledge. And much of the information you will need to understand is technical and may change in a short space of time – due to changes or updates in digital knowledge or technology.

So, to help make the digitisation journey as smooth and enjoyable as possible, it is highly recommended that your museum talk to others who have already embarked on digitisation or may also be considering it. This will allow your museum to gain from the direct experience of other museums and talk through the decisions that are before you.

And when you have moved on to 'doing digitisation' it is highly recommended that you tackle it with a helper. Having assistance is valuable on a practical level, as well as mentally. The most challenging decisions are shared, and better thought through, when you have a helper to lean on. Many hands, and eyes, will make your digitisation work lighter!