Sample Lesson 2: Understanding Museum Records

Overview:
Objects gain much of their research value from associated information found in museum records. Over time museums have developed a series of information management systems – catalogs, accession records, inventories, and databases - to serve various purposes. Successfully extracting information for research use requires an understanding of the purposes, premises, and particular histories of these systems.

Goals:
- gain familiarity with the basic units of museum recording and their general purposes
- understand how museum information is connected with intellectual perspectives
- understand the distinction between documentation and attribution
- gain skill in tracing the provenance of information and of objects
- understand the need to assess the reliability of documentation

Session outline:
Presentation on the elements of museum records systems
Group exercise examining sample records
Discussion of the characteristics of various record types and which can best contribute to various types of research questions

Presentation on concepts of provenance, documentation, and attribution
Group exercises examining sample records:
- tracing the provenance of objects and information
- assessing what information is based on documentation and what on attribution
- assessing the reliability of various sources

Summary discussion of the assumptions about objects and cultures evident in various records.