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ACTIVE COLLECTIONS: RE-VISITING OUR COLLECTION FOR MORE AND BETTER USE

We are going through a period of change in the way that we use our cultural collections. Museums are no longer static depositories for objects, as they now focus on outreach, access, and learning. Audiences, often regarded as passive participants, now look for interaction and seek to participate in new ways and to have greater access to stored objects. Online and interactive access has created new opportunities for museums to reach out and discover new audiences. At the same time, many museums are finding ways to show their collections outside the museum and to embark on fresh ways of enticing visitors inside.

The desire for sustainability and the need to reduce costs have come together to allow us to question whether the high-cost blockbuster exhibition is still the most effective way of sharing our cultural collections. In our national and regional museums and in our storerooms are thousands of unique objects with a story to tell, which can enrich the lives of those who see them. Museum professionals should see the new emphasis on sustainability and on sharing resources as an opportunity to contribute to the cultural life of our citizens. This chapter will suggest that there has never been a better time to revisit our collections, to view them in a new way, and to use them actively for the education and enjoyment of all who wish to have access to our cultural heritage.

POLICIES

Remit and mission statement

This is a good time to revisit the museum's policy, founding document, or mission statement. It could be that no such document exists, or that it was produced many decades ago. If a museum had as its objective to care for and preserve a collection, it may now wish to look again at the uses of the collection and to create a more dynamic policy with an emphasis on access and activities. The surrounding community in which the museum was built may have changed beyond all recognition while the museum itself is still rooted in the past. It is no longer enough to care for and preserve, we also have a duty to share the objects in our care and to make sure the widest possible audience has the benefit of learning from and enjoying them. A museum policy is a good way for staff to reassess what the collection is for, why it is unique, and how to use it.

Museums need to develop a long-term strategy on the uses of their collections and have regular reviews of the policies to make sure that they are still relevant to the museum's purpose. There also needs to be follow-ups and regular assessments to make sure that we are best serving the needs of our audiences and of our collections.

Structure – why are things done as they are now?

The structures of many museums have grown up over time and often without planning. Organisation is usually in departments divided by periods, schools, or classifications, e.g. a natural history museum may have departments of botany, entomology, mineralogy, palaeontology, and zoology. Was there any reason as to why the museum was structured in this way, and is this structure still effective? It may be a good idea to take a fresh look at the structure of the museum to see if this is still working well today. If curators are separated into departments without frequent communication, valuable opportunities for discussion may be lost. In an art gallery, asking a curator of contemporary art to change places with an expert in renaissance art for a year or for a day, may reveal new ways of looking at art. Inviting curators from different periods or schools to collaborate on a project may lead to new and exciting displays.

In the same way, having a collections department separate from the exhibition department is common in many museum structures. The exhibition organisers often look outside the museum to borrow objects rather than getting to know what they already have within their own walls. Apart from the obvious embarrassment of staff in the same museum not knowing what they are lending and borrowing, close co-operation between collections and exhibition teams is vital for both communication and the cross-fertilisation of new ideas. Restructuring to have exhibition and collections teams work together may not only make better use of resources but may also lead to more vibrant displays.

As well as looking at structure, it is important to make sure attitudes and behaviours keep pace with changes in the museum. Museum staff members have a wealth of skills and experience and should be encouraged to think creatively and cross-departmentally. Curators and educators could consider their role. What exactly is in their job description and is it still relevant to the purposes of the museum? If it is to research or to educate, could there be a combination of the two? The benefits of devoting all one's time to one area of activity or a single research field could be assessed and brought closer in line with the museum's aims.

Making connections outside your own field can lead to new ways of seeing and of using collections. Changing the museum's structure can change attitudes and behaviours and refocus energy onto the collection.

Acquisition policy

The acquisition policy is the basis of any collection and good collections are based on good acquisition policies. Acquisition and collection policies should be revisited regularly to see exactly what the museum is collecting and why and what it is that makes this collection unique. It could be that neither the staff nor public is aware of exactly what the collection stands for and what is and is not within its collecting remit.

An acquisition policy should be flexible enough to meet the changing needs of the museum in the twenty-first century. A museum that has in its acquisition policy 'decorative arts but not ceramics or glass' may want to begin to question this if a collection of glass is offered. It could be used to enhance the collection and widen the opportunities for creating comprehensive exhibitions. A fine art collection may want to reconsider the remit to collect original works of art and begin collecting photographs as fine art, if it has not done so before, in order to bring a historic collection up to date.

As well as a basic acquisitions policy, it may be a good idea to consider a collections development policy, suggesting areas into which the collection might want to go. It could also suggest ways of adding to the collection. These could include:

1. commissioning new items
2. advertising that you are looking for donations of a specific type
3. contacting local businesses or industries to ask for examples of their products

4. cultivating local collectors or dealers who may donate an item
5. sourcing cheaply, for example through online auctions.

For fine art museums that believe that purchasing new items is beyond their financial means, it is not impossible to begin to establish a fund and to publicise the intent to do so. The New Art Gallery (Walsall, UK) set out from the start to commit to the purchase of new contemporary art as its basic remit and has shown remarkable creativity in devising new ways of attracting the funds to build up a collection.

It is important to make sure that your acquisition policy and collections development policy are up to date and that they define the types of objects that you need now for your collection. It is also vital that your policies look forward to the future so that they can continue to be flexible and adapt to changes in the museum, audience, demographic, and financial conditions. The acquisition policy should work alongside other policies such as collections, programmes, and strategic planning so that all the sections of the organisation understand the purpose of the collection and can work together. The main thing is to be very clear about what you want and to communicate that wish. The means to achieve it will inevitably follow.

Deaccession and disposal policy

A good disposal policy is the other half of a good acquisition policy. Well-managed collections also depend on a realistic attitude to retention.

Disposal is an emotive subject and many museums are forbidden in their statutes from disposing of objects. Most national museums are barred from disposing of items belonging to the nation. These rules were established with the best intentions to prevent the destruction of our great national collections. In the case of local authority or trust–status collections, such rules were designed to prevent managing bodies from selling cultural property in order to fund other parts of the organisation.

That being said, many collections are now in a position where they have many objects that they no longer feel are useful to the remit and purpose of the museum, which are never researched or displayed or that the museum can no longer care for (see *Too Much Stuff* 2003). It could be that there are objects that bear no relation at all to the museum's purpose and that they would be better placed in another museum. A portrait, for example, with little aesthetic merit and of a sitter unknown to the gallery, may be of relevance to the local museum in the artist's hometown. Research into the background of such an object could reveal useful information that could lead to its transfer from a collection where it is not valued, to one where it is of intrinsic worth.

Any disposal must be undertaken according to ethical standards, taking account of any state law regarding deaccession and of the museum's own statutes. There must be a thorough understanding of the issues around disposal before embarking on releasing objects from the collection. Any object under consideration for deaccession must be researched to discover its full provenance, paying particular attention to donors or their families and taking into account the wishes of the artist/maker or his/her descendants.

The museum should:

1. understand any legal or ethical codes relevant to deaccession
2. follow the museum's own policy and procedure
3. research the terms and conditions of the acquisition
4. fully research the provenance of the object
5. establish links with the donor or the artist/maker or their descendants
6. contact any funding bodies that contributed to the acquisition
7. be transparent in all discussions
8. keep records, even if the decision is not to dispose.

Once the research has been undertaken and the decision is made to dispose, there is a recognised step-by-step process towards final disposal:

1. approach other museums who may wish to have the object, e.g. a museum with distinct links to the artist/sitter or in a region where the object was created or manufactured
2. give or sell the object back to the donor/vendor
3. advertise the object on museum websites or in trade journals, art newspapers, and other publications read by museum professionals
4. if all the above reveal no recipients, sale at auction or by private treaty, but only if the museum has a clear title and is legally able to do so
5. document all decisions and procedures.

According to most codes of ethics, any proceeds from deaccession and disposal should be put back into the collection in order to further strengthen and develop it. In this way, disposal can play an active part in collections development. On no account should the money raised from sales go towards any other area of the organisation.

Many museums now have an active disposals policy as part of their overall collections development plan. The National Maritime Museum in London has been undertaking a thorough investigation of its collection with a dedicated team and has identified objects that no longer fit with the remit of the museum. This Collections Reform Project has been undertaken in a professional and transparent way and is a good example of how to deaccession with clear thought and openness for the benefit of the museum and its future (see The National Maritime Museum 2005).

There is no point in hiding your collection in store or in unattractive galleries.

There are many examples of objects or collections moving to homes that are more suitable. For example, a group of audio recordings from the Berliner Lautarchiv was recently transferred to the British Library. These were the oldest known recordings of English dialect speech with nothing similar existing in the UK. The two collecting institutions agreed that recordings in English would be better placed in London than in Berlin and the transfer was made.

There are many guidelines on responsible disposal such as the UK Museums Association Disposal Toolkit (Museums Association 2008) and The Netherlands Museums Association disposal guidelines (see www.museumvereniging.nl).

Unclaimed loans and unwanted gifts

As well as deaccessioning objects from the collection, most museums have works that they have not accessioned and have come into the museum in a variety of ways, many now unclear. They may be the result of over-active acquisition in the past, objects left by donors for research or valuation and never retrieved, or loans that were never returned at the end of the exhibition.

As part of a planned collections development programme, it is a good idea to look at these unaccessioned objects before considering deaccessioning from the permanent collection. Most of these objects will have information somewhere in the museum, perhaps on the object itself, or in the museum archive, or even in the head of a former curator. Items left for inspection, valuation, or consideration may still have the owner's details attached to the object. Research can be undertaken to find the owner or his/her descendants and to see if the object can be returned.

The steps outlined above can be used to go through a process of returning unwanted objects to their legal owners. The procedure is the same although in this case the works have never formed part of the collection and do not have to be formally deaccessioned. It is usually, therefore, easier ethically and legally to dispose of these works, but a clear and transparent procedure must still be followed, and all the decisions documented.

Museums must go through the process of:

1. researching the ownership of the object
2. publicising the object and requesting the owner to come forward
3. if no-one comes forward, consider transfering to another public collection
4. selling as a last resort, with the proceeds going back into the collection.

In the case of unwanted gifts, the best plan is never to have accepted anything in the first place that was outside the museum's collecting remit. As we know, however, museums in the past were less professional in procedures than we are today and, in addition, they did not have our storage problems.

Sustainability

Sustainability is of major concern to museums today. The rigid guidelines of the past, the sealed box with energy-dependent heating systems, and the rigid rules of 18–24 degrees and 45–55% RH are being relaxed in attempts to be more realistic and to save energy. There are several initiatives, such as the EGOR Project, which is aimed at looking at how best to be flexible over the climate conditions in which we store and display our cultural collections.

Better insulation in our storerooms and the use of recycled energy is one way of reducing our carbon footprint. However, museums can also be creative in recycling display and storage materials or in sharing resources. Shared storage or collaborations over touring exhibitions are good ways of conserving resources.

Better use of collections can contribute to this movement. New and imaginative ways of using collections can make a major contribution to sustainability. Collections-based displays conserve energy in a way that more and larger temporary exhibitions cannot. Allowing visitors into our storerooms rather than always moving the objects to the visitor will increase energy efficiency and we can be more flexible in determining the conditions for storage and display.

Programming

Museums should look carefully at their programming to make sure that the collection and its better use, is at the forefront of any strategic plan. If there is an overemphasis placed on borrowing objects rather than using items from the collection, it should be questioned as to whether it makes the best use of resources. It is fundamental that a museum knows and exploits its own collections before borrowing those of others.

If there are more temporary exhibitions of borrowed objects, this could be balanced with more collections-based displays, or displays grouped around a single significant object. A museum that mounts a new exhibition every three months could consider reducing this to one every year, with the remaining exhibition space for collections displays. If well publicised, this refocus could attract equal numbers of visitors and would have the added benefit of leading to research and exposure of collection objects that otherwise would not be seen.

For many museums, the emphasis and most of the funding, is placed on temporary exhibitions of borrowed objects. There are enormous amounts of energy put into organising temporary exhibitions that are on view only for a few months. This energy and resource could be channelled instead into exploring what the museum already has and in celebrating it. It could discover those items that are not being used well and treat them with the same excitement and publicity as borrowed objects. As well as revealing new objects, the money saved from borrowing for a temporary exhibition could be redirected into more collections research or to a key new acquisition.

Marketing and publicity

It is fundamental to know what you have and where to find it. It is just as important to let everyone know how great your collection truly is. There is no point in hiding your collection in store or in unattractive galleries. In the same way, you should not keep quiet about what you have but should seek maximum publicity for everything you have and everything you do.

It is important to communicate with your audiences to see what their interests are and how best to serve them. Contact local groups that may have an interest in what you have in your collection. It is also important to have a good relationship with your local press or radio station. Invite them in and keep them up to date with new developments. Get them to have a regular spot about your collection, e.g. object of the month and to publicise any event. There may be an upcoming event or anniversary in which your collection can play an important part. You may have objects in store that relate to this event. Any news about the event can also include information on your collection.

It is not just new exhibitions and displays that can gain good publicity. Make the most of a new acquisition or a newly conserved work in a special display. Anything can make a good story, even a refurbishment or moving a major piece can give interesting behind-the-scenes information for your audiences. When the Rijksmuseum moved *The Night Watch* during major building work, instead of maximising security and moving the painting as inconspicuously as possible, they put a life-sized image on the outside of the crate, invited a film crew and announced the move to the public. The resulting publicity attracted maximum attention to the painting, and to the collection. In the same way, the oversized French tapestries in the Burrell Collection in Glasgow could not be worked on in the conservation studio so it was decided to put them in the exhibition galleries where the public could watch the work being done. This delighted visitors and was a great success for the museum.

STORES – INVITING IN

Re-visiting storage

Stored collections are a great, underused resource. Many museums do not encourage access or recognise their collections as public resources, whether in person or online. However, there is a great public misconception that we are hiding thousands of objects away in our stores and they are never used. A study undertaken by University College London *Collections for People*, found that only 13% of stored collections in England and Wales actively promoted public access. Geology and ethnography collections were hardly ever visited and yet there is a huge interest in fossils and a growing appetite for ancient history.

The survey found that 52% of museums reported an increasing demand for access to collections but that there was no united approach to delivering this demand. Interestingly, the collections with the greatest access to stores said this was because staff and management actively wanted the public to visit and did a lot to make this possible, rather than factors such as time and money. We need to create the idea that museum collections are just as much a public resource for research purposes as our libraries and archives.

The first step in making better use of stored collections is to create the optimum conditions for both objects and visitors. Objects should be easily accessible and visible if possible. For example, covering objects with melinex or plastic rather than storing in crates and boxes allows them to be both protected and easily seen. Storerooms should be light and attractive places to work for staff and visitors, bearing in mind, of course, the need to keep certain objects from the light for conservation reasons. There should be a logic about what to place where, and to not be dependent on where there is space. It is a good idea to have a rolling programme of reviewing storage as the collection grows or moves around so that access, design, and usage are always serving the museum staff and making their job easier. A collections review should be undertaken regularly. Objects should be revisited in order to ensure that they are at the forefront of consideration for research and display.

Inventory

Better use of collections depends on knowing what you have and where to find it. It is fundamental to have a good, comprehensive, and up to date inventory of the collection. If no recent, in-depth inventory exists, make it a priority to create one. This does not need to be onerous or expensive. For a store survey, a simple template can be created listing the basic information and inventorying can be undertaken by volunteers or interns given the correct training in object handling and working under the supervision of museum staff. Sample forms can be obtained from a variety of sources such as Collections Link and could contain the following fields:

1. artist or maker
2. title
3. inventory number
4. description
5. dimensions of object
6. dimensions of frame/stand/base
7. type of stand or base
8. materials
9. condition

This is the minimum of information you have to record, but is sufficient for a basic survey. Your museum will know if you need more specific information that is relevant to your collection or if you are concentrating on a particular aspect. If you want to know what percentage of your collection is up to display standard, you may wish to add more fields on condition. If you are looking for objects of a particular period or specific materials, you could concentrate on those questions.

For more ambitious projects, funding for in-depth or large-scale surveys can often be available to help museums improve their knowledge of their own collections. This will enable them to use their collections more frequently and improve collections management.

A comprehensive record of the objects in your care and an idea of their condition is a necessary starting point for anything you want to do with the collection. You cannot make better use of your collections without knowing exactly what they are and you cannot begin to make plans in programming or in conservation without knowing which objects are up to exhibition standard and which ones require conservation work. In order to plan or to raise funds for display, it is necessary to know the extent of the work that you have to do and how much it will cost.

If you know what you have and what it is worth, you can then make informed decisions on what to spend money on and what to save money on.

Depending on your collection and on your strategic plan, the inventory can have a particular focus. For example, it could concentrate on the most significant works so that time and funds can be allocated specifically to them. Alternatively, it could focus on condition in order to begin a conservation programme. In any case, the inventory will inform future decisions. You may even discover objects that you were unaware of that could lead to new research or a new display, or may discover parts of objects that could be brought back together again and used to create a key feature in the museum, and a good story for visitors.

Open storage

Although most objects are kept in dark and silent storerooms, there is no reason why they should be invisible. Most museums have the capacity to display only a tiny percentage of their collection at any time; to open the stores to visitors is a good way to increase this access.

Not all types of collections are easily accessible to visitors. For example, custodians of high value collections, particularly of fine art, must take security into consideration when opening the stores, both for visitors and in publicising where high-value items are located. It is easier to open a social history or industrial collection where, if a display is well done, visitors can move around and see a huge variety of objects that are not on display in the museum.

Curators, registrars, and conservators have to be able to work unencumbered in storerooms so that any visit by the public must be carefully regulated. Many museums have set aside specific hours for public visits that take place as guided tours outside the hours when staff need to work on the collection. Such guided tours can be a part of the museum tour, a separate function after hours, or an in-depth study day or weekend. Whichever way the museum wishes to open its stores, the public inevitably enjoys the behind-the-scenes glimpses of objects and activities and is intrigued by the unseen workings of the museum.

Open storage and tours of storerooms fulfil our remit of giving maximum access to our visitors and increased use of our collections. It can also be an income generator. Access gives scope to education curators in devising new ways of interpreting objects that are not exhibition led. In general, the exhibition is organised first and then the education department plans its activities around the exhibition. In a reverse of the normal order, an open store can allow the education team to be pro-active in creating meaningful education programmes for its constituency in attracting new audiences and sparking off new research. There may be a group of objects with no plans for display that a curator wishes to make it the subject of a study day or tour. In this way, there is far more scope for the use of unseen collections than waiting for a suitable opportunity to come up in the display galleries. Moreover, some visitors prefer the un-curated experience and scholars can benefit from greater access to the objects without the usual interpretation.

Open stores can be as various as the types of collection they house. For example, the store of National Galleries of Scotland has guided visits to the building with many less fragile and lower-value objects on display in corridors and public rooms. The rooms housing the paintings collection are viewed through glass, thus allowing the public to see the collection without any environmental or security risks. The Museum of Science and Industry in Manchester, UK, has a special visitor suite for items not on display. Visitors can open drawers to view stored objects. Each drawer is topped with a sheet of glass so that the objects can be clearly seen without being touched or removed. In other parts of the store, industrial objects are packed close together in storage, but again behind glass, allowing close inspection without endangering the object. Upplandsmuseet, a regional museum storage facility in Uppsala, Sweden, allows visits from the public to its store and also has a digital museum where viewers can see objects online and plan their visit to view the actual items.

Access to stored collections should be publicised by the museum and advertised on its website. Visitors need to be able to find out easily as to how to access objects that are not on display. Museum staff should be creative in ways of opening their stored collections to visitors and offer a range of means of access from the group tour to individual appointments for researchers. Many museums have created the post of collections access officer. This allows one dedicated member of the staff to act as a liaison with potential and actual visitors to stored collections and ensures the best experience for visitors to stored objects.

Engaging the local community

Your local community is as wide as you want it to be. Find out what your constituents expect from their museum and invite them in. If there are any artists that you know, consider asking them to create work inspired by the objects that you have in your store, or to curate a display of their own work alongside the museum objects. This will reveal a new perspective on the objects that you may not have considered before.

If you have schools or colleges nearby, establish firm links for them to hold classes in your store and to use your collections. Local schools can make use of handling collections in their lessons. University students can be encouraged to study objects in more depth and can even learn by volunteering or work-study options.

Inviting your community in will enable them to tell stories and to engage with objects in a non-curated way. Make friends with local businesses, sports clubs, other arts organisations, old people's homes, and day-care centres. Each of them can have a specific input to your collection and has something to contribute to your knowledge, experience, or just enjoyment. By encouraging visitors to your stores, they will come to see your collection as a resource. They may have knowledge of the objects or of the local area that you do not. Ask them for ideas, memories, and contributions. Start recording oral history. The museum should be seen as a fundamental part of any community and as a centre not just for storing objects but for generating activities and ideas.

Different types of collections

Using stored collections can be very different depending on the type of collection. Fine-art collections may be less accessible due to their high value and the need for good climate conditions, but there are still ways of inviting in the public if visits and tours are managed well and security is good. Decorative art collections are always of interest to local collectors. A museum with a decorative arts collection could cultivate local collectors and dealers and invite them into the stores, either as a part of a long-term friends programme or for special events. Local collectors often have in-depth local knowledge and the museum can draw on this.

For archaeology, there are often many similar items in the collection with little scope for putting them on display. In this case, duplicate items can be used easily in storage for telling stories or re-creating the past. There is a large constituency of the public interested in found objects with many amateur archaeologists and metal detectors. These 'finders' can be cultivated and invited in to look or perhaps to contribute something of their own to add to your collection. If the area of your museum is particularly rich in history, this could be exploited by your museum by focussing on the surrounding area, what has been found there, and what is still to be discovered.

Natural history collections are also under-displayed in the museum and have many duplicate samples. They often rely on visits from researchers for scientific purposes rather than from the general public. Although these collections often require the expertise of the curator to explain them, this can be used as an advantage as visitors enjoy meeting an expert and asking them questions. The expert need not necessarily be one of the museum curators. Local celebrities or tutors from a local college or university may enjoy having access to your store and will be happy to talk to the public. Learning outside the classroom and lifelong learning are both huge growth areas.

Local groups such as ornithologists may also enjoy access to stored collections and may even be able to help with cataloguing or basic collection care on a volunteer basis.

Social history has been the great growth area in past thirty years. It was the first of the museum disciplines to be a ground-up movement rather than the traditional top-down field such as art history. Although museums have always collected local and vernacular objects, there has been a huge increase in people seeing their local museum as the repository for their own personal history and that of their friends and families. Social history museums depend on the input and memories of the local community and require donations from local people who know that their object will be valued and used by generations to come. There is a real sense of ownership and local pride in these museums and they must cultivate strong links with their constituents in order to keep those connections alive and to constantly refresh the collection with new objects.

Social history collections can be easily accessible as there are often duplicates and large numbers of similar mass-produced objects. There is usually less need for the preservation of such objects and they can be more robust. These collections can be used by a variety of visiting groups as handling collections, or even sent outside the museum into schools, colleges, or community groups. All of this is important for encouraging close local participation.

The museum has to be rich in the quality of its objects and make sure that all aspects of local life and history are well represented. Any local museum must ensure it reflects the local community in both its history and in its current interests, activities, employment, and ethnic mix. The collection must keep up to date with any changes in the local community. Ethnographic objects in the collection could benefit from the knowledge of local people who may come from those countries and may have an understanding or experience of certain objects. Many objects in ethnographic collections have little information. An object labelled African may be interpreted by a local visitor who can shed light on its provenance or could help research the history of the object in the museum archives or ledgers. Such collections can be used to build bridges.

For science and technology collections, local knowledge is again paramount and is likely to be from local industry. Many scientific, technological, and industrial collections have little information on what was the purpose of the objects and how they worked. The curator in charge may be a historian with no first-hand experience of the industry. There may be a pool of retired local workers with expert knowledge of machinery, tools, or scientific equipment. These experts should be cultivated by the museum so that their knowledge of the industrial world is documented and passed on to post-industrial generations, otherwise it will be lost. Many scientific and technical objects need to be interpreted and this can be done by guest curators, local experts, or by a series of talks or lectures. For example, the Thackray Medical Museum in Leeds, UK, holds a lecture series on the history of medicine as well as on current medical ethics issues. In this way, a collection of scientific instruments, which may appear mysterious or difficult to interpret, has become the focus for history and learning.

Local schools, churches, or community groups often have links to other parts of the world or can be twinned with a city in a developing country. The local museum collection can be active in forging these links and in developing collections to reflect both cities. Local groups can be invited into the stores and encouraged to use them in their exploration of the world. Museums can actively promote their collections as opportunities for learning beyond the classroom and could form the centre of this movement.

EXHIBITIONS AND DISPLAYS – REACHING OUT

There have been huge changes in the way that we display our collections. We are much more aware of interpretation, lighting, signage, and making our collection galleries attractive places. We have moved a long way from objects crowded together in glass cases with little information. There is, however, *Many museums say*

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All museums

need to establish

a research programme.

still a long way to go to make our collections displays the very best they can be and to look at the future of displays. Our visitors are more demanding and expect interaction and activities around our displays. We must find better and more imaginative ways of interpreting our collections and of showing them, either in our own galleries, or in other suitable non-museum spaces.

Long-term loans

Long-term loans are a good use of collections that may otherwise stay in storage. No museum can display all of its objects at any one time and we should be looking at new ways to expose what we have. Objects not on display for whatever reason, may be of exceptional interest to another museum or venue. The *Long-term loans best practices report* by the Collections Mobility Working Group 2008–10 (Jyrkkiö 2009) lists many of the advantages of long-term loans and gives examples of loans that have worked well throughout Europe.

The UK Museums Association's *Effective Collections* programme has set up a scheme to allow major collections to identify works that have not been on display for some time and then to seek suitable recipients to take them on long loan. There is a 'find an object' database as well as funding to support collection surveys and long loans.

Programmes such as this reveal countless objects that have not been seen by the public for many years and investigation into underused parts of the collection contributes to research. A long-term loan can reunite an object with its original partners; it can combine with others of the same type to complete a display or show a variety of the same item; it can be returned to its original setting, site, or home; it can add to scholarship or understanding of a different culture; it can complete an unfinished story or fill in a missing link. Long-term loans often act as a centrepiece for a display in the borrowing museum and attract much attention to the borrower's own collection. As well as all these benefits, long-term loans can free up space for the lender and all of this is more cost-effective than short-term exhibition loans.

There are huge benefits to both lender and borrower in long-term loans:

For the lender:

1. an object that was unseen or seldom seen is given exposure
2. a duplicate object can be used by another museum
3. an object is released from storage and frees up storage space
4. the object can be seen from a new perspective
5. it may be used for scientific research by the borrower
6. it may be conserved by the borrower

7. new information can be gathered
8. the lender does not lose any rights of ownership
9. the lender generally does not have to cover costs
10. the loan gives the lender the chance to rotate displays.

For the borrower:

1. the object can enhance the profile and significance of the existing collection
2. a star piece can be the centrepiece of a collection-based display
3. new audiences can be attracted
4. there can be scholarship and new research
5. events or educational programmes can be built around the loan
6. the work involved in the loan has long-term effects
7. a long-term loan is more economical than a short-term loan or an acquisition
8. new techniques of care of handling can be learned
9. a long-term loan can be an alternative to restitution
10. a long-term loan may be a chance to upgrade conditions in the gallery.

Moreover, for both the lender and borrower:

1. the work involved has long-term benefits
2. the object is seen in a new context
3. fresh research may be undertaken by the borrower
4. new publications and programmes are created
5. knowledge and trust between the parties are built up
6. common forms, standards, and procedures can be created
7. links can be established that lead to new projects and more loans
8. resources are shared
9. long-term loans are more energy efficient
10. long-term loans can be a practical alternative to restitution.

Any long-term loan must be of mutual benefit. Any long-term loan should be agreed after discussion between the parties and have a written contract. A long-term loan must have the same standards of care and shared responsibilities as a short-term loan. The fundamental difference is that although title remains with the lender, the loaned object becomes a part of the borrower's collection for the length of the loan period and to all intents and purposes, is treated as a part of that respective collection. This allows borrowers the freedom to use the objects as they wish without frequent discussions or negotiations. Lenders are relieved from continual monitoring in the knowledge that the loan is the responsibility of the borrowing institution and that it will be treated as well as any object in the borrower's own collection.

A long-term loan contract is usually for a period of three to five years, and is renewable if both parties agree (see Collections Mobility Long Term Loans and Loan Fees work group). As well as costs, long-term loans make better use of resources and staff time as the benefits continue over a greater period of time and are, therefore, more cost-effective.

One of the major barriers to long-term loans is the cost of insurance. Lenders and borrowers can reduce or dispense with insurance costs by using a state indemnity scheme if it exists, rather than commercial insurance. For states where there is no indemnity scheme, museums should encourage their department of culture to consider introducing one. In the same way, states that have indemnity schemes only for exhibition loans should be encouraged by museums to extend this to long-term loans. As cultural objects are at greatest risk when on the move, a long-term loan represents a far lower insurance risk than an exhibition loan. If there is no alternative to commercial insurance, a realistic valuation should be agreed between lender and borrower. If appropriate, coverage may even be waived during the time that the object is on the borrower's care and only used during transit, if both parties agree.

As mentioned, examples of long-term loans are listed in the *Long-term loans and best practices* report, and loans can be made across state boundaries. Museums should actively pursue a long-term loans programme. Museums who wish to forge connections with other states should be bold in offering objects on a long-term basis and those who know of objects that are relevant to their own collection should make moves to approach the current owner for a long-term loan. Museums could think outside their own state or even outside Europe. Organisations such as the Asia-Europe Museum Network (see www.asemus.org) facilitate shared knowledge and collections of Asian objects. In this way, we can have the long-term enjoyment of our cultural collections rather than only short-term exposure.

Loans to non-museum spaces

Lending objects to non-museum spaces is a good way to create maximum exposure and to encourage visitors to the museum. The Rijksmuseum's gallery at Schipol Airport has huge exposure to the millions of passengers passing through the airport every day, many of whom will follow up with a visit to the museum.

> Schiphol Airport, Amsterdam, is the first airport in the world to host a museum. The joint collaboration with the Rijksmuseum allows passengers to enjoy a moment of calm during their travel schedule and has proven extremely popular. For the museum, there is exposure of some of their finest works of art and valuable publicity to a far larger audience. The museum, opened in 2002, benefits from airport security and climate control and has a small shop selling museum quality merchandise.

The airport is an ideal exhibition venue as it has high security and full climate controlled conditions. However, other non-museum spaces can be equally valid for exhibits that are robust and do not pose particular security or condition-sensitive problems.

Apart from the particularly sensitive objects that we are very aware of, many of our objects do not need special conditions. Archaeological or social history collections can be placed in secure cabinets in a variety of public places. The Museum of London has a series of found objects placed all over the city in colleges, public buildings, and even underground stations, which show the spot where these objects were found. These objects such as Roman pots or tiles, are not light or temperature sensitive and are not unique and are, therefore, highly suitable to lend to non-museum spaces. This venture, though low-risk, is highly successful in allowing people to see where the objects were found, to encourage them to learn about their history, and to visit the museum.

We are developing ways of no longer being overcautious about our cultural objects and of taking some of them, after careful consideration, outside their former strict environmental parameters. This freedom allows us to be imaginative in the spaces where we can place samples from our collections. Public spaces such as government buildings, cultural organisations, or universities and colleges benefit from vast numbers of visitors and generally have a high profile and good security. They can serve as attractive areas to place display cases or stands. Objects need to be carefully selected and any loan must be carefully thought through, but many of our objects are robust enough to lend to such spaces.

Museums should think boldly about how to get their collections out of the museum and into public spaces. Many cities have 'art in hospitals' programmes with amazing results for patients. There have been loans from the Danish National Museum to various cultural centres in Barcelona and to a monastery in Santiago. The Crafts Council (UK) actively promotes short-term loans from its collection to healthcare and corporate venues and long loans to galleries, museums and universities, which enhance the interpretation and display of permanent craft collections or inspire new areas of craft collecting.

Any public space with good security, good lighting, and relatively stable conditions can be considered and can lead to long-term relationships with the owners of the venue. The social benefit of such exhibitions can be great.

Many museums also have lease schemes to local businesses where objects are placed, for a fee, in the public areas of the company. These can work very well as a means of releasing the object from store, exposing it in the public spaces of the company, and thereby raise funds for the museum.

Collections-based exhibitions

The best way to raise the awareness of your collection is to put on a brilliant display. Many museums focus on temporary exhibitions of loaned-in works to the detriment of their own collection. However, having a collection of its own is the main thing that lends the greatest credibility to a museum.

The best way to make the most of your collection is to have a planned programme of what to put on display and how to display it. You can make the most of new events, of course, such as a recently conserved object or a new acquisition, but these should be planned into a strategic programme of collection-based displays. Otherwise, such displays become reactions and can take staff unawares, may put the plan out of sequence, or take up more budget than was intended.

Continuously refreshed displays keep visitors coming back as there is always something new to see. Curators should be encouraged to reimagine collection displays and put more focus on them. Displays can be rotated more frequently to keep the museum always in the public eye.

Three criteria can be kept in mind: cost-effectiveness, sustainability, and flexibility. Even with limited budgets, displays can be interesting and stimulating. Displays, signage, and display furniture can be reused to minimise the effect of wasting valuable resources

Make the most of key pieces. There could be a much-loved and well-known piece that attracts the most audiences. This should be made the most of and highlighted in different ways. It could be used over and over again in a variety of new displays exploring different aspects.

Many famous artists have been inspired by a particular painting or object in their local museum, which they visited repeatedly. Just because they are familiar, you should not take these works for granted as they can have a far-reaching influence that you possibly cannot imagine.

If you wish to borrow works to enhance your collection or to complete a display, choose them sparingly and select one or two pieces carefully that will make the most of your own objects, rather than resorting to borrowing-in everything. In this way, you will emphasise the highlights of your own collection and show it to the best advantage. A collections-based display can be enhanced with one careful loan rather than mounting an entire exhibition.

Touring exhibitions

Touring exhibitions are a good way to get your cultural objects seen and to increase the awareness of your collection. If you have the time and funds to put together a collections-based display in your own museum, it might be a good idea to consider touring it around similar galleries. This is a cost-effective way of mounting exhibitions for the creator, as the costs can be spread over the number of participants. The borrowing institution has no start-up costs, can share not only the objects but also the accompanying materials, and only has to cover the packing and transport costs.

As well as shared costs, a touring exhibition is an opportunity to find out what is in other collections and may lead to long-term loans, more touring exhibitions, and a variety of other shared projects. It is worthwhile to conduct some research into which other museums have objects that might complement your own. Tour partners can build up trust with shared knowledge and ways of working that will have far-reaching benefits. If connections are established with similar museums, then a shared vocabulary and standards can be quickly put in place that will save repeating terms or conditions every time a loan goes ahead.

Some of the considerations for touring are:

1. dates
2. title
3. content
4. key personnel
5. responsibilities
6. sponsorship/advertising
7. catalogue/list
8. gallery requirements
9. transport packing
10. insurance/indemnity
11. costs/budget
12. educations events
13. evaluation

Exhibitions for touring should come in a variety of shapes, sizes, and themes and be flexible in format to have the greatest number of potential receiving institutions. Educational programmes, supplementary materials, exhibition furniture, and signage can all be shared on a tour, in turn making a large impact across a number of venues for the minimum outlay.

COLLABORATIONS

Joint purchase and ownership

Due to the significant cost of fine art and high-value objects, many museums now find acquisitions out of their reach. Shared purchase and co-ownership is a good way for museums to acquire objects and to ensure that they stay in the public domain. If an important object is for sale, it is quite common for two or three museums who are all interested in acquiring the object to get together and make a joint purchase. None of the museums would have been able to purchase the object by themselves and it would inevitably have been lost into the private sector, or to one of a handful of world museums with huge purchasing power.

The museums in question are usually of a similar type, e.g. fine art museums for purchasing a work of art, or history museums for purchasing antiquities.

> The British Museum, the Potteries Museum and Art Gallery (Stoke-on-Trent) and Tullie House Museum and Art Gallery (Carlisle) collaborated in 2008 to purchase The Staffordshire Moorlands Pan, a 2nd Century AD Roman vessel found near Hadrians Wall in the North of England.

If an object is discovered in the ground and is of crucial importance to the area, several local museums could join forces to make a joint purchase, thus ensuring that the object stays near the place it was found and keeping it in the local and historical context. A locally found object is always a key piece in the collection and can be used to build up local stories.

For fine-art purchases, such as the collaboration between the Centre Pompidou, Tate, and the Whitney Museum of American Art (New York), high-value key works of art can be secured for the public domain.

> Tate (London), Centre Pompidou (Paris), and the Whitney Museum of American Art (New York) collaborated in 2002 to purchase *Five Angels for the Millennium*, which is a video installation by Bill Viola.

Each of the museums in the partnership benefits from having the object in their collection (or at least, part of the object) and can display it in rotation, planning in advance the best method and time of display. The public benefits from having the object more or less permanently on show in a variety of places. It can be seen in each of the participating museums and can be viewed in a different way in each of them.

Any potential joint purchase must be carefully considered to ensure best value for all the participating museums. They should decide as to what all the parties want to achieve and have clear aims and objectives from the start. Purchasing any work can be a permanent investment and partners in co-ownership must take a long view. It is important that not just the price of the object is taken into account in the negotiations. The parties must also consider any packing, transport, and storage costs as well as any conservation required. They must be able to look into the future and envisage the long-term use and ongoing responsibilities of this new item and no area should be left without discussion. It is, therefore, important to have an agreement between the parties that contains all or some of the following:

1. agreed purchase price
2. share of price for each participant
3. costs of transport and packing and division of costs
4. any conservation/cleaning/framing and mounting – costs and responsibilities
5. any related materials or information
6. value, insurance/indemnity
7. long-term storage and packaging
8. period of loan at each venue
8. how to move between venues – costs and arrangements
9. credit line
10. copyright details
11. how to deal with loan requests

Successful co-ownerships are based on sound agreements where there are no surprises later. If the partnership works well, it could be turned into something more permanent such as a consortium to make joint purchases in future. In any case, a joint purchase is a clever way of securing important objects permanently for our collections.

Partnerships

Many larger museums have set up partnerships with a series of regional museums. This allows major collections to be enjoyed by audiences at some distance from the home museum and is particularly valuable for national collections. These partnerships are highly successful but must be established with a clear view to benefit both parties and not just be seen as the national museum delivering a ready-made display to the regional.

The aim should be to collaborate and share ideas and resources and for objects to go in both directions. In addition to objects, the major museum can advise on the standards and procedures that will have long-lasting effects on the smaller museum. Many of our national museums have partnerships with four or five regional museums, which enable collections to be viewed outside the capital city. These partnerships usually take a few years to establish and to start working smoothly. Therefore, they should be entered into for the long-term.

There can also be partnerships with groups of museums, all acting equally to share collections and resources. No museum can expect to have all the expertise that it requires under one roof. Partnerships can pool resources and can share training, publicity, education programmes, and departments handling and technical skills.

These partnerships can be grouped around a collection with a similar theme, e.g. natural history museums in different parts of the country showing local objects could share with different regions; local history museums in one county or region that could build up an enhanced portrait of what is unique about that region; matching governance or history such as university museums; urban museums can band together to promote city culture in all its varieties; or museums of the former homes of famous people in one particular area could share resources. These groups are stronger than individual museums, as they can act as consortiums to attract greater attention with shared publicity and lobbying power.

Some of these museums could have been seen as rivals in the past, competing for visitors or for local funding. By joining forces, they both win, as a collaboration makes the best use of resources as well as adds more impact to funding, publicity, shared websites, or shared events.

Any partnership should have a signed agreement to make it clear as to what each party has committed to and what are the benefits for all. Decisions must be agreed and documented so that there is no doubt as to who should pay for something or who should do the work. It is not necessary for everything to be divided equally. For example, if one of the partners has a conservation studio and another does not, then it should be documented that all conservation takes place in the studio with agreements on how this is done, and how the costs are divided. Written records must be kept on what is done and what is decided and copies of all decisions must be circulated. It is important to agree on who does what, who keeps what at their own premises, and whether the responsibility is placed on one museum or equally on all. If a database or publicity brochure is shared, there must be agreement on who provides content and who produces the publication. If joint training sessions occur, costs and content should be a part of any overarching contract. If agreements are drawn up at the outset, then the details of displays, content, transport, display furniture, publications, publicity, etc. will be easily solved.

Shared storage facilities or services are increasingly common with several museums banding together in one building. This is the most usual for a group of national or regional museums with one governing or funding body. However, museums are increasingly seeing the benefit of shared storage premises. There is a move from expensive inner-city storage to newly constructed facilities on the outskirts. When planning and building such a facility, it pays to make maximum use of the new space by inviting a number of museums to share the store. As well as storage space, there can also be shared activities such as conservation and photography studios, fumigation chambers, or technical workshops. For example, the National Museum of Denmark shares storage with Rosenborg Museum and the regional store at Vejle incorporates, as well as object storage, conservation studios, photography, a cold store, and a packing workshop.

Partnerships and collaborations not only make better use of resources, by sharing knowledge and expertise, they also enable participants to take on more ambitious and imaginative projects that they would not be able to manage alone and to use their collections better.

Collaborations outside the museum

Many museums work well with local businesses, industries, or other arts organisations. This use of partnerships outside the sector can increase the exposure of our collections in imaginative ways with more knowledge and greater access. Museums should regard the local constituency as vital to its goals and should invite in groups from local industries, clubs, societies, and organisations. If their buildings are suitable and objects are available, local organisations could be invited to choose something from the collection to display on their premises. In addition to getting objects out of storerooms, this increases enjoyment and encourages people to visit the museum. They may not have thought much about their local museum as a resource but will now see it in a different way. If the objects that they particularly want are too fragile to show outside the museum, invite them to help with a museum display and organise visits, events, or lectures around that display. This will give them ownership of the local collection. Time and resources can be contributed from the museum and local organisation with benefit to both. Local industries may become long-term benefactors.

Relationships can be forged with other arts groups such as theatre, opera, or music groups. These work well as the museum has the space and the other arts organisations have the people who can mount a theatre, dance, or music event. It is possible to commission or inspire a new performance using objects or stories from the collection. In this way, everyone wins with new art forms, greater use of the collection, shared costs, more publicity, and an event for the local audience.

These relationships can be long or short-term. Organisations could get together for a local festival or for a single performance or could establish long-term relationships over a period of time to work collaboratively across all the arts.

Collections knowledge

Collections are the bedrock of our museums and having knowledge of the objects in our care is fundamental to what we do. Many museums say the single greatest barrier to the better use of collections is insufficient knowledge of what they have. All museums need to establish a research programme, no matter how small, in order to have credibility. This can be done in a variety of ways, on a part-time basis or in collaboration with a local college or university. Having a researcher on board adds weight to your institution. It is important that we continue to investigate our collections and to publish what we find out about them. No matter how much information we have on our collections, there is always more to find out and more connections to make with other objects and other collections. You need to have an in-depth knowledge of your collection before you can move forward with other projects such as conservation or fundraising. A benefactor will want to know about the collection before anything else.

It is important to take the time to investigate the collection more deeply, even if you think you know it well. Why is the Napoleon Cup called the Napoleon Cup? Is there a direct link with Napoleon or is it just a myth? Who is the lady in Portrait of a Lady? These are fundamental questions that need to be answered. Ask yourself if you have all the information that you need on your collection and where all the gaps are. Draw on local knowledge or subject specialist networks to help investigate works and uncover mysteries. Capitalise on key works by discovering different aspects, or investigate the underused parts of the collection and publish the findings. Objects you thought were copies may turn out to be originals.

We put a great deal of focus on our audiences and rightly so, but we cannot serve our audiences if we do not first discover all that we need to know about what we have and to exploit this as much as possible. If public programmes and events are based on the knowledge that was collected decades ago, they become rather thin. Visitors now expect a greater richness in the museum experience and more information on the objects. It is up to the museum to manage the right balance between providing in-depth information and the experience of engaging with the object. New technology, such as hand-held gallery guides, can provide more information to visitors in the way they want to receive it.

All other programmes depend on the research programme. If you do not investigate your collection, it is less likely that anyone else will. In addition, if you do not see your collection as a wonderful resource to be continually investigated and full of potential, then you may be in the wrong job. Your museum will be taken more seriously if you have more in-depth knowledge of your collection.

Shared purchase and co-ownership is a good way for museums to acquire objects.

Publishing collections knowledge

In many museums, the only publications for sale are exhibition catalogues. For the visitor however, learning about what makes the collection unique is fundamental to their experience of the visit. It is important that they can take home a book on the collection with illustrated highlights. If you do not publish what is in your collection, it is unlikely that anyone else will. Collection publications gain publicity for the museum as well as attract more visitors and potential funding. Any potential donor will need a publication on the museum in order to consider their support.

It is important to make the best use of images from your collection, both for publicity purposes and to make sure you keep ownership of the image. Protecting the reproduction of images can also help you generate income by selling images for a variety of uses. You need to be sure of copyright law and have licensing agreements for any usage of your images. That being said, a well-placed image can make a huge difference on the impact of your collection.

Publishing, either in print or on the Internet, is the most far-reaching way to show off your collection. If you have audio guides for your temporary exhibitions and none for your permanent collection, this sends a message that your collection is of secondary importance and your museum is dependent on loans to make it worthwhile. Publications are a lasting legacy from your museum.

CONCLUSION

Better uses of our collections are an exciting invitation to discover what we already know and to expand our knowledge for the benefit of the public. By revisiting how and why we do the things that we do, and looking again at the wonderful objects in our care, we can make a difference in terms of social benefit, memory and identity, and learning. By actively encouraging access to stored collections, we open up new possibilities for research, education, and creativity for our audiences and ourselves for now and in the future.

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