

## PROBABLY NOT A GOOD IDEA, PART I

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Two fundamental precepts should be at the core of every action taken by a museum. The first is constant adherence to the museum's educational purpose in all activities. The second is the preservation of the museum's collection for the longest time possible. Museums frequently are drawn into activities that seem appropriate on the surface but violate these principles. When this happens, they run the risk of causing irreparable harm to the organization and to the collection. This technical insert will examine some practices that are frequently encountered and will describe why they are not recommended.

A local museum is generally operated by people who care about their community and who want to make a lasting contribution to its cultural life. However, two well-intended motivations that often come into play may do more harm than good. One is the desire to please — to be well thought of by donors, members, and visitors. The second is the stimulus to seek needed income sources to keep the museum financially sound.

Common activities of some museums that should be avoided include:

1. Allowing board members to serve indefinitely
2. Accepting all donations offered
3. Accepting "permanent" loans
4. Wearing items from the clothing collection
5. "Repairing" items in the collection
6. Exhibiting all of the collection
7. Selling deaccessioned artifacts in the museum store
8. Selling the collection
9. Renting out the museum

### Allowing Board Members to Serve Indefinitely

Many museums either do not enforce a policy of board rotation or do not have one. Allowing board members to serve indefinitely may be viewed as a means of continuing the services of especially talented, knowledgeable, or dedicated trustees, or the practice may stem from a reluctance to hurt the feelings of long-time supporters. One hesitates to urge change if a custom seems to be working well for the

institution — "if it's not broken, don't fix it." Yet, most standard works on trusteeship recommend against this practice, and with excellent reasons. The major factor to keep in mind is that the well-being of the organization should take precedence over considerations about individuals, no matter how important they have been to its development. Olan Hendrix points out in an article in *Fund Raising Management*, "It is a truism that a board of trustees can make or break an institution." He observes that people falsely assume that "because someone is able to contribute today, that person will also be able to contribute tomorrow."<sup>1</sup> A written policy that establishes tenure allows a museum board to bring in people with new ideas and to provide a system for rotating board members off after a specified term of service. This may also relieve a board member who wants to go on to other pursuits but doesn't want to appear disloyal. A board that has rotating terms also sends a signal to the membership and to the community that it is not governed by a private club but by an evolving group that represents the whole. New board members can challenge the status quo, a healthy process for growth. *The Non-Profit's Guide to Creating an Effective Governing Board* points out that organizations with established tenure may attract community leaders who would prefer to serve as board members for a specified time.<sup>2</sup>

### Accepting All Donations

There are museums that have never refused gifts to their collections. The rationale is usually that a refusal might offend someone, and if the word gets around that the museum is choosy, donations will cease. Another reason may be that the donor is prominent in the community (or active in the museum). Hope springs eternal that more appropriate donations (and perhaps funds) will be contributed later if the current offer is accepted.

This is wrong thinking. First of all, a museum must think through its purpose — its reason for being. This requires formulating a mission that includes defining the scope of the collection. In her book *A*

*Legal Primer on Managing Museum Collections*, Marie Malero devotes a chapter to outlining the considerations to be taken in preparing a collection management policy, including defining the collection's scope. Once a museum identifies what is appropriate for its collection, it should follow written guidelines. Accepting inappropriate items will not increase the museum's stature in the community; on the contrary, over time it will give the museum the reputation of housing "Grandma's attic." Such a museum wastes time and money on the care of artifacts that are outside of its collection scope, and it uses valuable space to store and exhibit objects that do not permit it to fulfill its purpose. People who care about the protection, care, and interpretation of their treasured objects will soon look elsewhere to make donations.

Accepting a donation because of some attribute of the donor does not fulfill the museum's purpose and does not serve the community. As a tactic to encourage later gifts it is seldom successful. While there may be occasional exceptions, all gifts should be evaluated on a case-by-case basis and measured against the museum's mission. Carl E. Guthe in *The Management of Small History Museums*, a standard museum reference book, says, "A museum is judged by its collections. Their possession accounts for its existence; their character determines its worth."<sup>3</sup> Holding a collection of significant and valuable objects in trust for the public sets a museum apart from other nonprofit organizations.

### Accepting "Permanent" Loans

Museums are often drawn into this practice. There are times when it may be to a museum's advantage to enter into such an arrangement, but frequently it leads to trouble. As attorney Marie Malero points out in *A Legal Primer on Managing Museum Collections*, even the term "permanent" is vague and subject to misinterpretation.<sup>4</sup>

One of the most common situations occurs when the museum desires to acquire an object, but the owner is unwilling to part with it. The museum may expect that ultimately the loan will become

a gift. Frequently this does not happen. Instead, the museum assumes responsibility for security (perhaps insurance costs) and care (perhaps conservation) for artifacts it does not own. It expends funds and uses space and staff time for objects it does not own. In effect, it is storing the objects for the owner. The owner may decide at any time that the object should be returned. This could occur at an inconvenient time for the museum. It may also happen that the condition of the object is not as pristine as the owner remembers. This can put the museum in an awkward position. On the other hand, the museum may ultimately conclude that it would be best to return the object, but it can be difficult to reverse the loan process. Sometimes it's even difficult to locate the current legal owner of an object. Again, the museum may be drawn into expenditures of funds and staff time over an object it does not own. These activities are competing for funds and for time to care for the collection, the museum's primary responsibility. Unlike several other states, Illinois does not have legal recourse to convert unclaimed loaned materials to acquisitions, so loaned materials may drift into a limbo from which there is no easy way out. [Editor's note: Like Illinois, Oklahoma does not have such recourse.] The best course is almost always to create loan documents with a specified loan period, and some mechanism for renewal where the situation indicates.

### **Wearing Items from the Clothing Collection**

Once started, this is a most difficult practice to halt. The temptation is strong. The precedent is there. A compelling reason can always be found to rationalize it "just this once." A fashion show with models wearing historic costumes is often seen as a good source of earned income and an educational activity. Having volunteers for a museum event dress in authentic period clothing from the museum's collection is sometimes viewed as a way of making the collection come to life. People love to dress up and to see others dressed up in "old clothes." They frequently have pieces of historic clothing of their own that they wear on special occasions, so it is difficult for them to see a difference in wearing the museum's clothing collection.

A museum that allows this practice is putting its collection at risk. There is no more serious responsibility for the board

of a nonprofit organization than the protection of its assets, and for a museum, the collection is the core of its tangible assets. To wear the clothing collection for whatever reason sends a message that collection care is not a high priority. It also implies that clothing artifacts are either less important or more sturdy than others. Quite the reverse is true. Clothing artifacts are important to the understanding of our culture and they have a special appeal because people can relate them to their own experience. They are also extremely fragile and have a limited life span. Wearing them even once shortens their life. Not only are people built differently today than in earlier times, the fabrics and other materials used to make the clothing have frequently become weaker and more subject to strain. There is also the potential of transferring soil to the clothing from body oils or from makeup, which none of the "models" ever seem willing to completely forgo. Karyn Jean Harris in her excellent book *Costume Display Techniques* says that wearing a piece of historical clothing is probably the worst possible treatment it could receive.<sup>5</sup>

### **"Repairing" Items in the Collection**

Museum staff who are tempted to alter historical objects so they look brand new should think about the possible irreversible effects of such actions. The historical record of the life of a museum object is part of its life story. As in architecture, the degree of historical integrity that is retained is a measure of its significance. Gerald George and Cindy Sherrell-Leo point out in their book *Starting Right: A Basic Guide to Museum Planning* that "there is only one principle of museum organization and operation — respect for the real thing."<sup>6</sup>

In his practical and useful book *Furniture Care and Conservation*, author Robert F. McGiffin, Jr. has this advice for well-meaning restorers: "Scholars have long been aware that each artifact is unique. When an artifact, or any part of it, is destroyed, a part of history is lost and can never be recovered. . . Furniture, created for utilitarian purposes in a living environment, predictably undergoes strains, dents, burns, and assorted abrasions, and each such occurrence is a record of the object's use. . . I believe that sanding or scraping away such dents and burns destroys forever an important part of any wooden artifact."<sup>7</sup>

*Part II of this technical bulletin, to be published in the Spring 1996 issue of MUSE-NEWS, will cover points 6 through 9 of the common activities that museum should avoid. Part II will also include a bibliography of resources for further reading.*

### **Notes**

This insert has described why some activities of museums are not recommended practices. In addition to sources cited in the endnotes, further references that document the problem activities are listed in the bibliography. [Editor's note: bibliography to follow in Part II.]

<sup>1</sup> Olan Hendrix, "The Board of Trustees: Bane or Blessing?" *Fund Raising Management* (Nov. 1981):32.

<sup>2</sup> Jennings, Hood and Associates, *The Non-Profits's Guide to Creating an Effective Governing Board* (Richmond, VA: Jennings, Hood and Associates, 1985), p. 24.

<sup>3</sup> Carl E. Guthe, *The Management of Small History Museums*,\* 2d ed. (Nashville, TN: AASLH, 1964), p. 21. See also pp. 22-26 (about accepting all donations), pp. 14, 45-46 (exhibiting everything), pp. 29, 49 ("repairing" the collection), and p. 34-35 ("permanent" loans).

<sup>4</sup> Marie C. Malero, *A Legal Primer on Managing Museum Collections*,\* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1985), pp. 165-67. See also pp. 43-46 (collections policy), 48, 138-51 (deaccessioning), 161-67 (loan policy).

<sup>5</sup> Karyn Jean Harris, *Costume Display Techniques*\* (Nashville, TN: AASLH, 1977), p. 17.

<sup>6</sup> Gerald George and Cindy Sherrell-Leo, *Starting Right: A Basic Guide to Museum Planning*\* (Nashville, TN: AASLH, 1986), p. 33. See also pp. 66-68, 89-93 (accepting all donations) and p. 126 (board tenure).

<sup>7</sup> Robert F. McGiffin, Jr., *Furniture Care and Conservation*\* (Nashville, TN: AASLH, 1983), pp. 4-11 (repairing artifacts). See also pp. 45-46 and 84-85 (cleaning artifacts), 85-87 (repairing artifacts), 96-97 (cleaning and repairing artifacts), 110 (restoring artifacts).

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