

PROBABLY NOT A GOOD IDEA, PART II

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[Editor's note: This technical bulletin continues Miller's discussion of nine common activities of some museums that should be avoided. Part I covered the first five activities and was published in the Winter 1996 issue of MUSENEWS.]

Exhibiting All of the Collection

Here is a place where it is crucial to think through priorities. A very common rationale for exhibiting everything is that donors expect it and may not give objects (or funds) to a museum unless their artifacts are always on exhibit. But a museum's priority must be to protect the collection, not to please donors or potential donors. Continuous exhibition of objects shortens their life span.

In *Introduction to Museum Work*, G. Ellis Burcaw describes this practice as a mark of nonprofessional museum management: "Because of an overemphasis on exhibits, the amateur will put all or nearly all of the collection on display. This results in poor exhibits, too little space for the storage of collections as they grow, and poor management of the stored collections."⁸ It should be noted that "nonprofessional" does not equal "unpaid." It means untrained and unformed. There are ample sources of information for staff members of all-volunteer organizations to learn how to operate a museum professionally.

There are other compelling reasons why exhibiting everything in the collection is not a good idea. The practice usually results in poor interpretation. An exhibit organizer may use the objects as a starting point instead of beginning with a theme or story to tell and selecting objects that help to bring the story to life. Under these circumstances it becomes a challenge to arrange them in some meaningful pattern. Invariably some objects don't fit, and the interpretation is unclear. History museums, in particular, have the reputation of displaying the same old stuff in the same old way, without any changes. Often, people who have seen such exhibits once feel they would not see anything different on a repeat visit. Even "permanent" exhibits should have objects rotated in and out of them. This can provide an opportunity to shift the emphasis in the exhibit, create new interest,

and prolong the life of the artifacts. Setting aside some space for temporary exhibits also allows the museum to combine artifacts in different ways to bring out other aspects of the area's cultural history.

Selling Deaccessioned Artifacts in the Museum Store

The term "museum store" is preferred to "gift shop" because it carries with it the recognition of the store as part of a museum's total operation. It implies an adherence to professional standards of museum store operation.

The Museum Store Association (MSA), a standing professional committee of the American Association of Museums, states in its *Code of Ethics*, "The sale of any deaccessioned materials in the museum store is unacceptable. Even though the item may have been properly deaccessioned, the public may perceive the transaction as the museum store participating in the liquidation of the museum's collection."⁹

A related problem may arise if the museum sells antiques or original artifacts that are similar to those in the collection. It's easy for the public to get the idea that these artifacts came from the collection. A museum that acquires the reputation of selling off collection pieces in the museum store may find the public's perception very difficult to alter.

The MSA code also addresses the sale of replicas and reproductions, noting that "their sale in museum stores must be carefully regulated because of the ease with which they may be misperceived by the public."¹⁰ Replicas and reproductions (each has a specific definition) can be good sources of museum store income and can meet the test of relatedness to the museum's purpose. The key is to identify them clearly as such and to build on their educational potential.

Selling the Collection

Although it is a commonly understood tenet that museums should hold clear title to all collection objects, thereby having the legal right to dispose of any of them, the deaccession of any part of a collection is also an area of great sensitivity. In theory, a museum should only acquire objects that fulfill

its mission: Therefore, legitimate reasons to permanently remove objects from the collection are limited. As Daniel B. Reibel points out in his indispensable little book, *Registration Methods for the Small Museum*, "Although the museum board should reserve the right to dispose of the collection in any way it sees fit, in actual practice the museum will be rated on how much it keeps and keeps well; and it will be criticized when it gets rid of anything for any reason."¹¹

The decision to deaccession any collection object should be based on several considerations. Assuming that the museum has clear legal ownership, with no restrictions, the collection policy should list all acceptable reasons for disposal. These might include a shift in focus of the museum's mission, the inappropriateness of an object in relation to the collection scope, or the deteriorated condition of an object. If one of these conditions is met and a decision is made to deaccession an object, the means of disposal then becomes important. Certain procedures are recommended. One course may be to move the item to a study collection or education collection where it may be useful for research or educational programs.

If an item is to be sold, a number of other considerations come into play. Museum staff must consider how, where, and to whom the object will be sold. Holding a "garage" sale on the museum property and auctioning off some of the collection is probably the worst choice a museum could make to dispose of inappropriate objects. Giving the donor any preference in reclaiming or repurchasing an object is not only unadvisable, it's illegal. Once a donor transfers legal title to an object to a public entity, he or she has no more right to it than any other person.

Public notice and public sale are other means of deaccessioning. Some museums prefer to sell quietly in some other location in order to avoid creating the perception that selling collection items is a common practice. Other museums meet the issue head-on and use the opportunity to educate the public about why a sale is considered necessary. Individual circumstances dictate the appropriate action here.

A further consideration concerns how proceeds from the sale of collection objects should be spent. The preferred approach is to use such funds to purchase appropriate collection objects to replace those that have been deaccessioned. Indeed, there is some feeling in the museum profession that funds realized from the sale of collection items should be used only to purchase collection items. The rationale is that once an item crosses the threshold from the private sector to the public, it (or a replacement) becomes a permanent part of the collection, to be protected for as long as the organization is viable. However, this requirement does not address the needs of some museums where objects acquired in the past may actually be inappropriate items that should be eliminated. Such a museum may need to narrow its focus and reduce the size of its collections.

Some museums use sale funds to "enhance" the collection or to conserve the collection, but others object that such vague intentions invite abuses. Museums have been known to use these funds to build additions or for other capital expenses. Their boards may argue that their priority is to eliminate any objects that don't belong in their collection, to make sure that objects that are left fulfill their mission, and then to take the best possible care of them. It may be that by disposing of inappropriate items, the museum will be better able to care for objects that should be in the collection. There are strongly divided opinions within the profession about this issue. Museums that have a clear mission and a written collections policy that guides their acquisitions will be in the best position to deal with future deaccessions.

Renting Out the Museum

In their efforts to develop earned income to support operations and educational programs, museums sometimes host income-producing programs in their facilities. The desire to be perceived as providing community service is also a motivation. In "Using Historic Sites for Generating Revenue: A Case For Restraint," an article in the Regional Council of Historical Agencies newsletter, Anne W. Ackerson notes that pressures for these activities can come from boards of trustees facing budget deficits or from museum volunteer groups who don't understand the museum's preservation responsibilities.¹²

When making decisions about using the museum for special events it is important to consider the sponsor, the purpose, and the location of such events. For museums housed in historic structures, protection of

the building is an important prerequisite for activities. All programs sponsored by any museum should be compatible with its educational mission. There is also a distinction between outside groups using the building for programs that serve the community and are related to the museum's purpose, and individuals using the museum for private functions. Allowing the museum to be rented for private affairs such as weddings and receptions may put the collections as well as the structure at risk. Another factor to consider is that income generated from sources unrelated to the organization's purpose may be subject to unrelated business income tax (UBIT). Rentals require an investment of staff time, increased security, and additional maintenance, factors that may offset the income produced. An important consequence that may not be immediately apparent is that the museum may acquire a reputation as primarily a place for parties. In time the public perception of the museum as an educational institution may be altered.

Conclusion

Service on the staff or board of trustees of a museum is a responsibility not to be taken lightly. The need to maintain good public relations with donors, volunteers, members, and the public, and the necessity to provide a sound financial base for the institution should never be allowed to interfere with the two most important charges: stewardship of the collections and fulfillment of the educational mission of the museum. Keeping these factors in mind and thinking through the consequences of programs and activities will help to avoid irreversible mistakes.

Notes

⁸ G. Ellis Burcaw, *Introduction to Museum Work*, * 2d ed., rev. (Nashville, TN: AASLH, 1983), p.94. See also pp. 48-49, 55-62 (accepting all donations), pp. 93-95 (exhibiting everything), pp. 50-51 ("permanent" loans), pp. 95-97 ("repairing" the collection).

⁹ Museum Store Association Code of Ethics.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Daniel B. Reibel, *Registration Methods for the Small Museum*, * (Nashville, TN: AASLH, 1978), pp. 76-77. See also pp. 21-22 (collection policy) and p. 111 ("permanent" loans).

¹² Anne W. Ackerson, "Using Historic Sites for Generating Revenue: A Case for Restraint," *Regional Council of Historical Agencies* 19, no. 2 (Spring, 1990):2.

For Further Reading

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Washington, DC: American Association of Museums, 1990. See especially pp. 3-5 regarding the practice of accepting objects indiscriminately.

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