

## AAM GUIDELINES ON EXHIBITING BORROWED OBJECTS

*From the American Association of Museums, July 2000*

### Introduction

Over time, human societies have increasingly turned to their museums to provide a special place, a "sacred precinct," for the display of significant objects, and ideas created by human civilization. Since no single museum contains, or could contain, all objects worthy of admiration and understanding, museums have traditionally exhibited not only objects from their own collections but also objects borrowed from other museums and from private individuals and organizations. Borrowing objects allows museums to provide more comprehensive exhibits and to make objects accessible that would otherwise be seen only by a few.

As society has come to rely more on museums for education about, as well as preservation of, its cultural heritage, it has also come to expect more of its museums—more accountability, more transparency of action, and more leadership in the community. The American museum community and the American Association of Museums (AAM) are committed, on a continuing basis, to identifying and implementing the highest standard of ethical practices. To this end, AAM has long had a Code of Ethics for Museums.

Recognizing that concerns, both inside and outside the museum community, had arisen over time about what constituted ethical activity in exhibiting borrowed objects, the AAM Board of Directors created a task force on this topic. The Board charged the task force with preparing a document for consideration by the Board which would provide the museum community with more detailed guidance on the development of institutional policies and standards for exhibiting borrowed objects, consistent with and following from the AAM Code of Ethics.

Several principles informed the task force's work. They included:

- *Adhering to an ethical standard that exceeds legal minimums.* AAM's Code

takes as given that museums comply with all applicable local, state and federal laws and international conventions. The Code also makes clear that museums must abide by ethical standards that frequently exceed legal minimums because the purpose of the Code is to foster conduct that merits the confidence of the public. Without public confidence, museums cannot effectively carry out their missions.

- *Acting in a way that is consistent with the museum's mission, and documenting activities.* As a publicly accountable institution, any museum that is operating according to current standards and best practices has a formally stated mission and organizes its governing authority, financial and human resources, collections, public programs, and activities to meet its stated mission. To ensure accountability and informed decision-making, individual museums develop written and approved policies and procedures to protect their assets and reputation and to guide institutional actions consistent with their mission. Thus actions related to borrowing objects for exhibition should be consistent with that mission and with the policies and procedures that flow from that mission. In addition, museums have an obligation to record and maintain documentation of important activities, including the process of borrowing for exhibitions.
- *Adhering to an ideal of transparency.* Museums, as publicly accountable institutions, should take reasonable steps to make their actions visible and understandable to the public, especially where lack of visibility could reasonably lead to appearances of conflict of interest.
- *Maintaining control over museum activities.* The museum's governing structure must maintain the intellectual integrity of, and the museum's control over, all activities, including exhibitions.

On July 13, 2000, the AAM Board adopted the following guidelines:

### Guidelines

Before considering exhibiting borrowed objects, a museum should have in place a written policy, approved by its governing authority and publicly accessible on request, that addresses the following issues:

#### I. Borrowing Objects

The policy will contain provisions:

- A. Ensuring that the museum determines that there is a clear connection between the exhibition of the object(s) and the museum's mission, and that the inclusion of the object(s) is consistent with the intellectual integrity of the exhibition.
- B. Requiring the museum to examine the lender's relationship to the institution to determine if there are potential conflicts of interest, or an appearance of a conflict, such as in cases where the lender has a formal or informal connection to museum decision making (for example, as a board member, staff member or donor).
- C. Including guidelines and procedures to address such conflicts or the appearance of conflicts or influence. Such guidelines and procedures may require withdrawal from the decision-making process of those with a real or perceived conflict, extra vigilance by decision-makers, disclosure of the conflict or declining the loan.
- D. Prohibiting the museum from accepting any commission or fee from the sale of objects borrowed for exhibition. This prohibition does not apply to displays of objects explicitly organized for the sale of those objects, for example craft shows.

#### II. Lender Involvement

The policy should assure that the museum will maintain intellectual integrity and institutional control over the exhibition. In following its policy, the museum:

- A. Should retain full decision making authority over the content and presentation of the exhibition.
- B. May, while retaining the full decision making authority, consult with a potential lender on objects to be selected from the lender's collection and the significance to be given to those objects in the exhibition.
- C. Should make public the source of funding where the lender is also a funder of the exhibition. If a museum receives a request for anonymity, the museum should avoid such anonymity where it would conceal a conflict of interest (real or perceived) or raise other ethical issues.

### Commitment of AAM

As part of its commitment to identifying and disseminating best practices, AAM will allocate resources:

1. to disseminate these guidelines widely and frequently along with other references that exist on the topics;
2. to collect and disseminate examples of best practices and policies from the museum community on exhibiting borrowed objects;
3. to make the above information available to the museum community through reports, conference sessions, and other appropriate mechanisms; and

4. to provide electronic links from AAM's website to resources in these areas.

### More Information

The American Association of Museums is the national service organization representing the American museum community. AAM provides identification and dissemination of standards and best practices, direct services, leadership on museum issues, and representation in the area of government and public affairs. Since its founding in 1906, AAM has grown to more than 16,400 members. Contact the American Association of Museums at 1575 Eye Street, NW, Suite 400, Washington, DC 20005; telephone 202.289.1818; <[www.aam-us.org](http://www.aam-us.org)>.

## Don't Stall—Apply for CAP This Fall!

The Conservation Assessment Program (CAP) provides smaller museums with the expertise of conservation professionals. These consultations are an important first step in helping your institution improve collections care, long-range planning, and fund-raising for conservation. Don't put it off any longer—apply for CAP this fall!

The CAP application process is straightforward and funds are awarded to eligible applicants on a non-competitive, first-come, first-served basis. The 2001 CAP applications will be mailed on Friday, October 6, 2000 and will also be available on Heritage Preservation's Web site at <[www.heritagepreservation.org](http://www.heritagepreservation.org)>. There has never been a better time to apply for CAP, but remember that applications will be accepted on a first-come, first-served basis until the postmark deadline of December 1, 2000.

CAP is funded by the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) and administered by Heritage Preservation. The grant and a minimal match by the grantee cover the costs for a general conservation assessment of the museum's collections, environmental conditions, and sites. CAP assessors spend two days on-site and three days writing a report that identifies the museum's conservation priorities. Since its beginning in 1990, CAP has helped more than 1,700 museums, including fifteen museums in Oklahoma, better care for their collections and buildings.

CAP recipients are awarded funds for a conservator to assess their collections. Museums located in historic structures—buildings more than 50 years old—are also awarded funds to hire a preservation architect. Zoos, aquariums, nature centers, botanical gardens, and arboreta may have a specialist assess their living collections. Museums may have a maximum of two assessors funded through CAP.

CAP assessments are limited to a two-day site visit, so museums with small to mid-sized collections are most appropriate for this program. Larger institutions are encouraged to contact IMLS about the Conservation Project Support (CP) program. CP awards matching grants of up to \$50,000 to help museums identify conservation needs and priorities and perform activities to ensure the safekeeping of their collec-

tions. The 2001 CP deadline is October 15, 2000. For more information, consult the IMLS Web site at <[www.imls.gov](http://www.imls.gov)>, Program Officer, Steven Schwartzman (sshwartzman@imls.gov or 202-606-4641), or Program Specialist, Noelle Giguere (ngiguere@imls.gov or 202-606-8550).

To be added to Heritage Preservation's CAP application mailing list, contact Kelsey Scouten at Heritage Preservation, 1730 K Street, NW, Suite 566, Washington, DC 20006, 202-634-1422, 202-634-1434 (fax), or <[kscouten@heritagepreservation.org](mailto:kscouten@heritagepreservation.org)>. It is recommended that potential applicants request a sample application to review the eligibility requirements and prepare for the application process. More information and the sample application are also available at <[www.heritagepreservation.org/programs/capover.htm](http://www.heritagepreservation.org/programs/capover.htm)>.

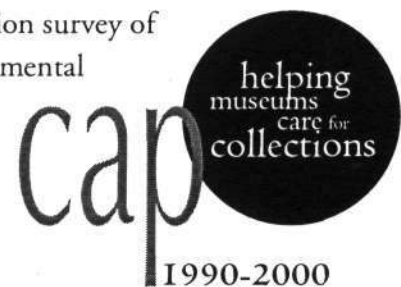
### It has never been easier to apply for CAP!

The **Conservation Assessment Program (CAP)** provides grants to small museums for a general conservation survey of living or non-living **collections**, environmental **conditions**, and museum **buildings**.

CAP is the **vital first step** to preserving your collections and sites.

Heritage Preservation

For more information, call 202-634-1422 or 888-388-6789, or visit our Web site at [www.heritagepreservation.org](http://www.heritagepreservation.org)



Funded by the Institute of Museum and Library Services and administered by Heritage Preservation