

## Storage, Conservation and documentation Policy

### 1. Introduction

- 1.1 The British Museum holds in trust for the nation a collection of objects and has a statutory obligation to make these available for inspection by members of the public on such conditions as the Museum thinks fit to impose for preserving the safety of the collections and ensuring the proper administration of the Museum. It flows from this obligation that the Museum has a duty to ensure that the objects in the collection are stored safely, conserved so that they are safe to handle, preserved for future generations and documented so that the Museum knows what it has and can find it when required.
- 1.2 In addition the Museum should aim to be a centre of excellence in terms of its collection storage and conservation.
- 1.3 This policy defines the principles and minimum standards which will apply to the storage, conservation, and documentation of the collection and objects held by the Museum on loan.
- 1.4 This policy should be read alongside *The British Museum Policy on Loans* and *The British Museum Policy on Display* and *The British Museum Policy on Acquisitions* and *The Standards for Storage Areas in The British Museum*.

### 2. Principles

- 2.1 Every object in the collection must be described either singly or as a group in an inventory or register, and be assigned a unique number which is written on, stamped on, or physically associated with it. The description of the object should be sufficiently accurate to permit identification in case of theft or loss of the identification number.
- 2.2 As well as being registered, the collection will be documented in the form which offers the most effective access to public and staff. This will change in line with technological developments.
- 2.3 The collection will be stored and exhibited in conditions which meet current nationally and internationally accepted best practice and which minimise the factors which cause, or accelerate, deterioration.
- 2.4 The collection will be stored so that the objects can be found readily. Objects will be made accessible to the visiting public and academic researchers, although the speed and ease of access will be adjusted to the frequency of requests for inspection. Due weight will be given to the frequency of requests for inspection.
- 2.5 The collection will be conserved to internationally recognised standards using both passive and interventive techniques.

- 2.6 Objects held by the Museum on loan will be stored and conserved in conformity with the standards prescribed in the loan agreement or to the standards set by the Museum for comparable objects within the collections (whichever is the higher).

### 3. Guidelines and Rules

#### 3.1 Defining the collection (this section is based on the 1991 report of the Collections Documentation Committee)

3.1.1 The British Museum Act does not define the collection. Although everything in the British Museum belongs to the Trustees, many things (such as furniture, storage materials, computers, reference books etc.) have properly never been thought to form part of the collection. Historically the collection has been defined by what has been entered in the registers drawn up by the curatorial departments. These paper registers are the basis for the new Magus/Merlin computer inventory, which when complete will become the definitive record of the collection of the British Museum, and supersede in this function the old paper registers.

##### 3.1.2 Objects should be registered only when:

- the intent subject to which they were vested in the Museum was that they should form part of the collections
- registration would not amount to a breach of the Acquisitions Policy; and
- when their long-term value to the collections is established.

Unregistered objects may be of a kind similar to registered objects but they will have no long term value to the collections because they are for instance lesser examples or duplicates of registered objects. The unregistered objects may include objects in the handling collections, illustrated books or historic photographs and suchlike. Such items will be regarded as reference resources, and, subject to the restrictions within the British Museum Act, can be disposed of whenever it is necessary or expedient to do so.

3.1.3 A particular problem is posed by some classes of objects that were registered in the old paper registers, but (by modern criteria) wrongly so. These include reference books and photomechanical reproductions. Such items will not be recorded on the Magus/Merlin database, and thereby will cease to be classified as of long term value to the collection. Nevertheless, in view of the fact that they were once regarded as forming part of the collection, such objects can only be disposed of in accordance with the terms of the British Museum Act.

#### 3.2 Information on objects

3.2.1 For object registration, the minimum requirement is for a number indelibly written or stamped on the object or, where this is not possible, physically associated with it; a physical description with a note of where it was made or who made it; and a record of the source of acquisition and the price paid. There should also be a record of the current storage location. All objects destined for registration will be registered within twelve months of acquisition, with the exception of large groups acquired en bloc, for which a specified timescale of completion must be determined.

- 3.2.2 The computer registration entry will be expanded over time to provide fuller documentation. This can be for an individual object or a group of objects, whichever makes best sense. The description will be accurate and will reflect the current state of knowledge. It will be indexed so that it can be retrieved under each of the various aspects that may be of interest.
- 3.2.3 Cataloguing is a stage beyond documentation and implies further research and study. There is no requirement that all objects in the Museum are catalogued.
- 3.2.4 A record photograph of objects in the collection must exist in a Department file before it can be put on display or lent outside the British Museum. Where a negative exists, it must be recorded in such a way that it is associated with the object and forms part of the documentation.

### 3.3 Storage (or passive conservation)

- 3.3.1 Storage will be restricted to rooms or buildings which meet the security requirements, are structurally sound, and where suitable environmental conditions can be maintained for the objects in question.
- 3.3.2 The environmental conditions will normally reflect those to which the objects have been exposed since they were collected. Their stability will be monitored. The cause of any change in stability will be investigated and the environmental conditions modified accordingly.
- 3.3.3 For these purposes public display space shall be regarded as storage.
- 3.3.4 Storage systems and materials will be chosen to provide appropriate protection.
- 3.3.5 Non collection material will, so far as is possible, be stored separately from the collections.
- 3.3.6 The objects shall be arranged in the store to facilitate the required level of access and understanding of the collection.

### 3.4 Interventive (or active) Conservation

- 3.4.1 Conservation of objects will take place with reference to the standards and guidelines published in the relevant literature.
- 3.4.2 Conservation treatment will be carried out by staff with the appropriate qualification and/or expertise, or by trainee conservators under supervision.
- 3.4.3 All conservation treatments carried out on objects shall be documented as part of the object documentation record.
- 3.4.4 The Museum will not research or carry out work on conservation on any object without:
- obtaining the confirmation of the current holder of the object that he owns it from encumbrances; and
  - reasonable cause to believe that the current holder is legitimately entitled to retain the object or that the object was not stolen, illegally excavated, illegally exported or illegally imported.

## 4. Responsibilities

- 4.1 Keepers of collections are responsible for judging whether an object should be registered and then for ensuring that the quality of registration and documentation of the collections under their care meets the standards required under 3.2.
- 4.2 Keepers of collections are responsible for assessing the requirements for access to the objects in storage.
- 4.3 Keepers of collections are responsible for the proper storage of the collections and loaned objects in their care.
- 4.4 The Keeper of Conservation is responsible for advising on the appropriate environmental conditions in any storage or display space, the technical investigation of deterioration and the appropriate conservation treatment of any object. The Keeper of collections decides whether to proceed and is accountable for any deterioration in the collection resulting from a decision not to proceed.
- 4.5 The Keeper of Conservation is responsible for ensuring that the Department of Conservation maintains the necessary world class skills and expertise. The Keeper of Conservation is also responsible for contracting in outside expertise if it is not available in-house.
- 4.6 Each collection department is responsible for seeking the advice of Conservation and of Building Development and Planning and ensuring that all staff are trained in the handling of objects to Museum standards.

## 5. Assurance

That the above principles and guidelines are being applied will be demonstrated by:

- regular audits to confirm that the objects are present and properly registered.
- regular condition surveys of objects carried out by curatorial and/or conservation staff.
- regular monitoring of environmental conditions by curatorial and/or conservation staff.
- reporting incidents of loss or damage.
- periodic peer review of storage and conservation.

The Keeper of Conservation will prepare an annual report for the Director and Managing Director on the state of care of the collection using the above reports as input.