NATIONAL STANDARDS & BEST PRACTICES for U.S. MUSEUMS

The American Association of Museums

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AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF MUSEUMS

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IV. Collections Stewardship

STANDARDS REGARDING COLLECTIONS STEWARDSHIP

Characteristics of Excellence Related to Collections Stewardship

- The museum owns, exhibits or uses collections that are appropriate to its mission.
- The museum legally, ethically and effectively manages, documents, cares for and uses the collections.
- The museum conducts collections-related research according to appropriate scholarly standards.
- The museum strategically plans for the use and development of its collections.
- The museum, guided by its mission, provides public access to its collections while ensuring their preservation.
- The museum allocates its space and uses its facilities to meet the needs of the collections, audience and staff.
- The museum has appropriate measures in place to ensure the safety and security of people, its collections and/or objects, and the facilities it owns or uses.
- The museum takes appropriate measures to protect itself against potential risk and loss.

PURPOSE AND IMPORTANCE

Stewardship is the careful, sound and responsible management of that which is entrusted to a museum's care. Possession of collections incurs legal, social and ethical obligations to provide proper physical storage, management and care for the collections and associated documentation, as well as proper intellectual control. Collections are held in trust for the public and made accessible for the public's benefit. Effective collections stewardship ensures that the objects the museum owns, borrows, holds in its custody and/or uses are available and accessible to present and future generations. A museum's collections are an important means of advancing its mission and serving the public.

IMPLEMENTATION

Museums are expected to: plan strategically and act ethically with respect to collections stewardship matters; legally, ethically and responsibly acquire, manage and dispose of collection items as well as know what collections are in its ownership/custody, where they came from, why it has them and their current condition and location; and provide regular and reasonable access to, and use of, the collections/objects in its custody.

Achieving this standard requires thorough understanding of collections stewardship issues to ensure thoughtful and responsible planning and decision making. With this in mind, national standards emphasize systematic development and regular review of policies, procedures, practices and plans for the goals, activities and needs of the collections.

HOW DOES A MUSEUM ASSESS WHETHER ITS COLLECTIONS AND/OR OBJECTS ARE APPROPRIATE FOR ITS MISSION?

This is determined by comparing the institution's mission—how it formally defines its unique identity and purpose, and its understanding of its role and responsibility to the public—to two things: (1) the collections used by the institution; and (2) its policies, procedures and practices regarding the development and use of collections (see also the Standards Regarding Institutional Mission Statements).

A review of a museum's collections stewardship practices examines: whether the mission statement or collections documents (e.g., collections management policy, collections plan, etc.) are clear enough to guide collections stewardship decisions; whether the collections owned by the museum, and objects loaned and exhibited at the museum, fall within the scope of the stated mission and collections documents; and whether the mission and other collections stewardship-related documents are in alignment and guide the museum's practices.

ASSESSING COLLECTIONS STEWARDSHIP

There are different ways to manage, house, secure, document and conserve collections, depending on their media and use, and the museum's own discipline, size, physical facilities, geographic location and financial and human resources. Therefore, one must consider many facets of an institution's operations that, taken together, demonstrate the effectiveness of its collections stewardship policies, procedures and practices, and assess them in light of varying factors. For instance, museums may have diverse types of collections categorized by different levels of purpose and use—permanent, educational, archival, research and study, to name a few—that may have different management and care needs. These distinctions should be articulated in collections stewardship-related policies and procedures. In addition, different museum disciplines may have different collections stewardship practices, issues and needs related to their specific field. Museums are expected to follow the standards and best practices appropriate to their respective discipline and/or museum type as applicable.

The standards require that:

- A current, approved, comprehensive collections management policy is in effect and actively used to guide the museum's stewardship of its collections.
- The human resources are sufficient, and the staff have the appropriate education, training and experience to fulfill the museum's stewardship responsibilities and the needs of the collections.
- Staff are delegated responsibility to carry out the collections management policy.
- A system of documentation, records management and inventory is in effect to describe each object and its acquisition (permanent or temporary), current condition and location and movement into, out of and within the museum.
- The museum regularly monitors environmental conditions and takes proactive measures to mitigate the effects of ultraviolet light, fluctuations in temperature and humidity, air pollution, damage, pests and natural disasters on collections.

- An appropriate method for identifying needs and determining priorities for conservation/care is in place.
- Safety and security procedures and plans for collections in the museum's custody are documented, practiced and addressed in the museum's emergency/disaster preparedness plan.
- Regular assessment of, and planning for, collection needs (development, conservation, risk management, etc.) takes place and sufficient financial and human resources are allocated for collections stewardship.
- Collections care policies and procedures for collections on exhibition, in storage, on loan and during travel are appropriate, adequate and documented.
- The scope of a museum's collections stewardship extends to both the physical and intellectual control of its property.
- Ethical considerations of collections stewardship are incorporated into the appropriate museum policies and procedures.
- Considerations regarding future collecting activities are incorporated into institutional plans and other appropriate policy documents.

Commentary

COLLECTIONS STEWARDSHIP: THE BIG PICTURE, AND THEN THE DETAILS . . .

No other area of museum standards is backed up by more technical literature, interpreting every nuance to the nth degree. Perversely enough, this can make it more difficult, not less, to adapt the standards to the museum's mission, goals and circumstances, as specified by the "Two Core Questions." Reams of research have been published on the effects of temperature and humidity on a variety of materials. The pros and cons of wet pipe versus dry pipe (not to mention pre-action) fire suppression systems have been endlessly debated. None of this helps a small, local historical society clearly answer the question: "What climate control (if any) or fire suppression (ditto) should we install in our historic, one-room schoolhouse?" Because it is all too easy to become bogged down in a morass of detail, for this area of the standards it is particularly useful to start with the big picture, as baldly stated in the Characteristics of Excellence in Translation:

Know what stuff you have.
Know what stuff you need.
Know where it is.
Take good care of it.
Make sure someone gets some good out of it . . .
Especially people you care about . . .
And your neighbors.

This big-picture view keeps you focused on outcomes rather than methods. The museum staff can then thoughtfully choose benchmarks for the desired results, and work backwards from that to the appropriate details of implementation, factoring in the museum's resources, both human and financial.

For example, "Know what stuff you have" refers to records-keeping and inventory, of course. The museum needs records (paper and/or electronic) of what it owns, its origin, significance, history of use, location and condition. Before you leap into an online debate with your colleagues on Museum-L about the relative merits of cataloguing software, stop and assess the scope of your collection and what you are doing with it. Is your museum a small, all-volunteer historic house with 200 objects that does not loan or borrow material? Maybe it is enough for you to make a duplicate copy of your physical card catalogue (on archival card stock, of course) to keep off-site. On the other hand, if you have a paleontology collection with a few hundred thousand specimens, and its primary users are international researchers, you may need a first-class relational database capable of publishing catalogue data to the Web in a searchable format, compatible with any relevant data standards. If you curate an art museum, you may need digital visual documentation of every work of art, of a quality suitable both for scholarly use and insurance purposes. As with all areas of collections care, the appropriate solution can only be assessed relative to the collections, their needs, their users and the museum's mission and resources.

CLIMATE CONTROL

Climate control is a particularly contentious issue, both because the associated mechanical systems can soak up a seemingly endless supply of funds to design, build, adjust and maintain, and because there is no absolute standard for "correct" climate control. For one thing, museums usually store and display more than one kind of collection, and different materials (pottery, fabric, painted wooden panels, furniture, taxidermy specimens, minerals, fluid specimens) have different optimal conditions for temperature and relative humidity. It is rarely practical for museums to have a storage room with separately adjustable climate controls for each and every material type. Even if you can afford a climate-control system that can maintain precisely whatever climate you choose, the settings are a compromise between the needs of these different collections.

For another thing, climate control is a classic example of "the perfect is the enemy of the good." Climate-control systems are expensive, and complex systems are notoriously finicky and difficult to maintain. Many museums might be better off installing a serviceable, resilient system that does a pretty good job of maintaining a set point with acceptable fluctuations, and putting the money they did not spend on a "state of the art" system into materials and labor to create microclimates (cases, plastic bags, desiccants) or provide quality pest management or security. "Taking good care of it" is the cumulative

effect of a balanced approach to all these actions.

For museums that exist in, or primarily are, historic houses or sites, climate-control systems can actually be destructive, not only to the historic integrity but also to the actual fabric of the house. While the historic house community is currently working to formulate standards on this issue, there is already consensus that minimal climate control is often the appropriate approach for certain historic structures. Opening and closing the windows at the right times of the year, thus using the "passive control" systems a house was designed to exploit, may be both historically appropriate and the most effective way to conserve some buildings. What about the furnishings, costumes, archives and other materials that may be housed in such a structure? It might be more responsible for the organization to make strategic choices about displaying replicas or storing and displaying certain works in a separate, climate-controlled modern building.

Even in buildings that are merely functional rather than intrinsically historic in value, theoretical "best temperature and humidity" may be neither practical nor desirable. In climates with naturally very low humidity, trying to maintain 55 percent RH in the museum could be disastrous to the museum's energy bill and to the building. A brick building can literally pull itself to pieces in such conditions, as the interior moisture migrates through the walls to the outer, drier environment.

COLLECTIONS PLANNING

The good news about collections stewardship is that most of the problems museums encounter (overcrowded storage, need for climate control, staff for records-keeping, care, cleaning and pest control, etc.) can be solved simply with money. Not that money is necessarily easy to get, but at least the right solution is pretty straightforward once you consult the literature, confer with colleagues and make some rational choices. This is unlike some areas of performance such as governance, for which the problems tend to be interpersonal and political—and much harder to solve! (For example, a founding board that is unwilling to step aside for the new generation or adapt to the museum's changing needs—that one is not going to get fixed by something as simple as money.)

There is one big, thorny problem, however, in collections stewardship that money, per se, can't solve: "Know what stuff you need." Many museums (perhaps the majority) spend part of their precious resources taking care of materials that do not advance their mission, serve their audiences or support the exhibits, educational or research plans. This comes about for entirely understandable reasons. Many museums have legacy collections dating back to the founder, whose original vision for the museum may be far different from the role it plays now. Many museums built their collections over decades by accepting what was offered, often with no guiding template other than: "It fits our (very broad) mission, and it is neat stuff." With infinite resources, such materials would not be a problem. It might even (to paraphrase a frequent justification for keeping it) "be of

some use someday." But no museum (not even the Smithsonian or the Getty) has infinite resources—there is always a limit to the time, space and money a museum has to care for collections and make them accessible, and all collections it cares for compete for these resources.

Collections planning is the process of making conscious, proactive choices about what belongs in the collections in light of the museum's mission, purposes and audiences. It actively shapes the collections to support the stories the museum intends to tell or the questions its users ask. While national standards do not yet call for all museums to have a collections plan, there is a growing consensus that it is a core document that helps the museum make wise choices and assures key supporters that the museum is making thoughtful use of the resources they contribute. Within the next decade, a collections plan will probably be as de rigueur as a collections management policy.

BEST PRACTICES REGARDING LOANING COLLECTIONS TO NON-MUSEUM ENTITIES

Museums hold collections in trust for the public. As stewards, museums fulfill their fiduciary and ethical responsibilities by preserving, caring for and providing access to collection objects for the benefit of the public. AAM recognizes that some museums loan objects from their collection to non-museum entities and encourages museums that do so to consider best practices for collections care and accessibility, and public accountability.

In some instances, loaning objects from the collection to non-museum entities may jeopardize the level of care provided for the items. This may constitute a breach of a museum's public trust responsibility and be perceived as an inappropriate or unethical use of objects held and maintained for the benefit of the public. Further, loaning objects from the collection to non-museum entities may result in inappropriate or inadequate practices in collections documentation and limit public access to the items.

If a museum engages in the practice of loaning objects from the collection to organizations other than museums, such a practice should be considered for its appropriateness to the museum's mission; be thoughtfully managed with the utmost care and in compliance with the most prudent practices in collections stewardship, ensuring that loaned objects receive the level of care, documentation and control at least equal to that given to the objects that remain on the museum premises; and be governed by clearly defined and approved institutional policies and procedures, including a collections management policy and code of ethics.

Commentary

Museums are often pressured by key supporters to lend to non-museum entities. This could be another nonprofit (schools, universities, hospitals, foundations), a for-profit business or a government entity. For example, a local bank that is a major donor to the museum may request a loan of art to hang in its corporate headquarters. A municipal

museum may be expected to loan fine or decorative art to the mayor's office or official residence. While some people wish museums could agree that this is wrong, which would enable staff to cite national standards when they deny such requests, it isn't that simple. In some cases these loans may advance the museum's mission by reaching key audiences and expanding their opportunities to exhibit collections. In some cases it is political reality that such loans will take place. Responsible practices call for the museum to distinguish between acceptable uses (for example, displays in a climate-controlled, secure public space of a school, business or government building) that serve the public, and uses that may benefit individuals or private companies at the expense of the public good.

STANDARDS AND BEST PRACTICES REGARDING THE UNLAWFUL APPROPRIATION OF OBJECTS DURING THE NAZI ERA

This area of collections stewardship is of such sensitivity and high importance that it has separate standards and best-practice statements regarding a museum's obligations. These statements have been promulgated by the field to provide guidance to museums in fulfilling their public trust responsibilities.

Standards Regarding the Unlawful Appropriation of Objects During the Nazi Era

The reader is directed to the AAM website (www.aam-us.org) for a text of the standards that includes an introduction and history of how they were formulated, as well as AAM's commitment to supporting implementation.

General Principles

The American Association of Museums (AAM), the U.S. National Committee of the International Council of Museums (ICOM-US), and the American museum community are committed to continually identifying and achieving the highest standard of legal and ethical collections stewardship practices. The AAM Code of Ethics for Museums states that the "stewardship of collections entails the highest public trust and carries with it the presumption of rightful ownership, permanence, care, documentation, accessibility, and responsible disposal."

When faced with the possibility that an object in a museum's custody might have been unlawfully appropriated as part of the abhorrent practices of the Nazi regime, the museum's responsibility to practice ethical stewardship is paramount. Museums should develop and implement policies and practices that address this issue in accordance with these guidelines.

These guidelines are intended to assist museums in addressing issues relating to objects that may have been unlawfully appropriated during the Nazi era (1933–1945) as a result of actions in furtherance of the Holocaust or that were taken by the Nazis or their collaborators. For the purposes of these guidelines, objects that were acquired through theft, confiscation, coercive transfer or other methods of wrongful expropriation may be considered to have been unlawfully appropriated, depending on the specific circumstances.