

Museum Collections Management

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Freda Matassa



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To my father, William Johnston,
who taught me well

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Preface

Collections management is a relatively new term in museums and cultural heritage. It has grown from the need to develop professional practice in looking after culturally significant objects and their associated information. It covers a range of activities, including documentation, care, storage, movement and loan and applies to organizations ranging from national galleries to small local museums.

Caring for cultural collections today requires knowledge of legal and ethical considerations. Recent developments in the areas of sustainability, security and economics are also part of day-to-day collections administration. These areas, as well as the practical aspects of collections care, are covered in this book with samples of actual documents, step-by-step procedures and suggestions on where to go for further reading and advice.

It is hoped that this book, intended primarily for museum staff and museum studies students, will be of use to anyone with responsibility for caring for items of cultural significance. The information is based on fine art museum collections but represents guidelines rather than rules and can be adapted to a wide variety of collection types.

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Part 1

Collections management:
overview and principles

1

What is collections management?

Fundamentals

Caring for our cultural history is both a delight and a privilege. Whether we are owners of historic objects, curators in major museums or volunteers in heritage sites, we have in our care precious and unique objects which describe the history of the world. With this trust comes the responsibility to manage our collections to the best of our ability and to care for the objects so as to ensure their preservation.

Collections management is fundamental to any collection of cultural objects. As well as basic inventory, it encompasses information, preservation, movement, documentation, exhibitions and access. These areas of activity should be addressed for every collection, whether large or small, public or private. Collections management can be summed up as: know what you have and where to find it. This knowledge provides owners and managers of cultural collections with the information they need in order to locate and care for the objects entrusted to them and to plan strategically for the future.

Know what you have and where to find it

Any collector of art must have some knowledge of what he has acquired and where it is. This can be as simple as recollections of where things came from, or the most detailed record keeping. The collector may simply have notes on the artists and the titles or cultural classifications of the objects he has collected, or he may keep detailed records of dates, places, invoices and other information. As to location, most collectors know where their objects are, even if they are distributed around one or several buildings, while, at the other end of the scale, the precise location of a museum object is usually noted and re-documented each time it is moved.

Any method of keeping records of a collection of cultural objects can be

called a collections management system. It usually has two parts, containing information on:

1. What is in the collection – what was purchased; received as a gift, donation or bequest; or acquired in some other way.
2. Where the objects are now – their present locations; or a record if they have left the collection through sale, donation, transfer, loss or destruction.

These two basic items of information form the foundation of collections management, which is the organization of a collection of cultural objects so as to ensure that everything is accounted for and can be located. This fundamental can include as much or as little information as is required. In the case of what has been acquired, the records can include details such as dimensions, purchase price, a description of each object and its insurance value. For locations, there may be a system for making sure that the whereabouts of each object is logged in one central place or register and that each time an object is moved, whether it be a permanent or temporary move, the date of the move and the new location are recorded. In this way, the history of an object can be built up and added to with every move. The most sophisticated records systems allow collectors to generate a huge range of information on their collections as well as to manage and document object movements down to such detail as condition, weight, packing information and journey times.

The reasons for having such a system are obvious. Any collection of objects has a history or collecting perspective and it is useful to know what that history or ethos is in order to shape, define and add to the collection. Knowing what you have is fundamental to owning anything, and there is a particular necessity for information about cultural objects or works of art and their history. Not only do cultural objects often have high monetary value, but they also have intrinsic value on account of their history, context or aesthetic qualities. As such, they deserve to be respected and treated with care. They are also, in no small sense, part of the cultural history of their nation, region or family, and in this way can be regarded as being in the possession of their owners only for a time, then being passed on to posterity. It can therefore be said that owners of cultural objects have a responsibility to look after the artefacts in their care and to pass them on to the next generation in good condition. This means not only taking care of them but also keeping records and holding and adding to the information.

On a more practical level, knowing what you have is essential, should there be any reason to divulge information about the collection. This could be for insurance purposes, where the insurer requires a detailed description and a value in order to provide cover. For insurance of highly valuable objects, a photograph and a professional valuation may be required. In cases of loss or theft both the insurance agent and the police will require as much information as possible and any chance of recovery will be greatly improved if these details are available. If an estate has to be disposed of, property will need to be listed or inventoried in order to calculate the value and this will be far easier if records have been kept and information is available on the objects in question.

For museum collections, custodians have a duty to record and hold information on the objects in their care. Record keeping is part of the professional management of a collecting institution and is a sign of good practice. Collections management is essential to researching, conserving, displaying, lending and exhibiting cultural objects.

Knowing what you have and where it is can be seen to be fundamental to any collection of cultural goods. It simplifies all the processes of purchasing, managing, moving or insuring precious objects. It also adds greatly to the enjoyment of collecting and exhibiting if the history or context of the object is known, recorded and understood.

A brief history

There have been collectors and collections for as long as there have been houses and buildings. In the early third century BC, the Library at Alexandria had, in addition to its 'biblion' a 'museion'. The ancient Romans kept 'treasures': Julius Caesar dedicated six of his cabinets of gems to the Temple of Venus, and we know that Roman shrines contained many precious objects. The early Christian church was also a collector of precious stones and plate, as well as of relics of saints. Armies took home all manner of war booty, which could find its way into the church, a private collection or the collections of a local municipality.

Private collections of 'curiosities' were well known in Europe by the 16th century¹ and consisted of objects from the natural world, such as shells, precious stones, exotic birds and fossils, works of art and artefacts of particular skill. Although they were usually the pastime of the wealthy, there are records of such collections being created by people from all levels of

society from the Holy Roman Emperor to scholars and priests.² The earliest record of such a collection in England is of that of Sir Walter Cope, mentioned in 1599, which states that he brought back many curiosities from his travels. The next collection of note is that of John Tradescant (d.1638), the Museum Tradescantianum, which formed the basis of the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford.

Some private collections of precious objects and fine art could be viewed by members of the public on application and would be displayed either in a picture gallery or in a 'cabinet of curiosities': a special room designed to display the objects together. The earliest printed collection catalogue in England was the *Description of the Earl of Pembroke's Pictures*, written by Carlo Gambarini in 1731 and illustrated by George Vertue. Some collectors wrote their own catalogues, such as *A Description of the Villa of Horace Walpole*, with an additional list of the 'Principal Curiosities' written by Walpole to describe the contents of his villa at Strawberry Hill, near London.

There was no such thing as 'collections management' in those days, but there are lists and inventories as well as illustrated descriptions of these collections, some of them annotated with locations and classifications. Published catalogues of private collections began to appear in the late sixteenth century, as collectors were keen to display their possessions as a sign of social standing. These published catalogues demonstrate the importance of lists, descriptions, classification and location.

Inventory would certainly have been an aspect of household management. The inventory of the estate of Henry VIII, for example, undertaken at his death in 1547, lists, among 17,810 moveable goods, works or art including paintings, maps and furniture. The Museum Tradescantianum, mentioned above, published a catalogue of its collection in 1656, classified under 15 headings according to the type of object.

The earliest example of a collection open to the public is thought to be the Amerbach Cabinet, a private collection bought by the University of Basel and opened to the public in 1671. In the United Kingdom, the Ashmolean Museum is generally regarded as the first public museum. Elias Ashmole, a collector in his own right who had also acquired the collections of John Tradescant, left the collections to Oxford University in 1691. The museum was founded for academic purposes but could also be visited by any member of the public on payment of a fee.

Travel across Europe increased in the 18th century and many works of art were brought home from the Grand Tour. Significant collections of paintings

and sculpture grew up in country and town houses, often accompanied by catalogues and classifications. Books on how to collect and consider art were produced. The auction houses of Sotheby's and Christie's date from the second half of the 18th century and indicate the growth of art acquisition.

Most public museums were founded from private collections. The Medici Collection became the property of the state of Tuscany in 1737; the Saxon Royal Family Collection was opened to the public in Dresden in 1768; and the Louvre, housing the collections of the former French monarchy, was opened in 1793 after the French Revolution. In the UK, the situation was different: the British Museum was founded in 1753 and opened in 1759; the foundation of the National Gallery, 60 years later, was largely the result of a significant private collection becoming available.³

The earliest museums would have had inventory systems, usually a hand-written list or a card index based on library systems. Curators, responsible for keeping information, gradually developed from being amateur experts into professionals in their own right. Information at this time would have been minimal: for objects usually a brief description; for paintings, usually the name of the artist, the title and medium. Generally there would be no provenance details, dimensions or location. Often a value would be listed only on purchase or when an inventory was drawn up for probate purposes.

By the 19th century, new museums were keeping records of objects, and accession registers became common. These registers, still of crucial importance today, generally list only the object's date of entry, artist, title and medium. On rare occasions, provenance information, measurements and value are also recorded.

Once an object had been accessioned into the collection, the information would be transferred to an index card, kept by the curator. This might or might not have listed additional details. For a large museum with several departments, this individual approach could lead to a variety of indexing systems, each under the control of a different curator, with no unified system of cataloguing. Today some large museums have inherited the problem of a variety of different cataloguing systems maintained according to the history of each collection and the methodology of individual curators.

Collections information and management was very much the domain of the curator until the mid 20th century, when large American museums began to systematize record keeping and created the position of museum registrar. The role of registrar was familiar in other institutions, such as universities and hospitals, where they were the record keepers and custodians of

regulations and information. Museum Registration Methods was first published in 1958.⁴ The profession of museum registrar was formally established with the founding of the Registrars Committee of the American Association of Museums in 1977.

In Europe, the first association of museum registrars was the United Kingdom Registrars Group, formally constituted in 1991, although collection administrators had been meeting unofficially since the late 1970s. Since then, the profession of registrar has grown in Europe, with many countries establishing registrars' societies and others having informal gatherings of those concerned with the care and management of cultural collections.

The Australian Registrars Committee was founded in November 1990 to promote the profession of museum registrar and to encourage professional museum registration practices. In 2007 the name was changed to the Australasian Registrars Committee, so as to include New Zealand.

The term 'collections management' has grown from this need to organize, classify and control and now covers all aspects of dealing with cultural objects. The increase in the movement of museum objects and a growth in the number of international exhibitions are giving rise to the creation of national and international standards for collections management.

In 2009 the British Standards Institution published a code of practice for collections management, thus defining the variety of areas covered by collections management and establishing a framework for policies and processes.⁵

An international perspective

Collections management is an internationally recognized term in museums and cultural collections. There are many international organizations with an oversight of museums that set internationally accepted standards for the care and management of cultural goods.

There is a general understanding of shared values and standards, so that works on loan from one institution to another will be cared for in a similar way and handled and moved under the same care and conditions. While not all collections participate in international touring exhibitions or significant exchanges of cultural objects, all understand this duty of care and preservation.

The International Council of Museums (ICOM) has a branch in most countries and a number of standing committees which address areas such as

collections care and documentation, e.g. the International Documentation Committee (CIDOC). Membership is open to all museum professionals. In addition to fostering greater connections between countries, ICOM acts as monitor of correct museum practice and has produced a Code of Ethics which sets out the principles of caring for collections of cultural objects.⁶

ICOM also maintains the ICOM Red List, which gives details of countries or regions particularly at risk of looting or illegal export of cultural artefacts.

There are many international organizations for museum professionals, such as the International Group of Organisers of Exhibitions (Bizot Group), which addresses issues of lending and borrowing cultural goods for exhibitions.

Most countries have a museums association which draws its membership from national, regional and independent bodies. In the UK this is the Museums Association.⁷ In Europe, the Network of Museum Organisations (NEMO), links these various organizations for purposes of information exchange and standardization.⁸

The European Committee for Standardization (CEN) produces pan-European guidelines on the conservation, storage, environment and transport of cultural goods.⁹

Summary

Collections management is about knowing what you have and where to find it and covers a range of activities relating to documenting, moving, storing and displaying objects of cultural significance. From the beginnings of keeping 'treasures', collectors have had the desire to list, inventory and classify. The concept of collections management has grown out of the profession of curator and is now recognized internationally as applying to the range of skills and functions required to look after cultural collections.

References

1. MacGregor, A., *Curiosity and Enlightenment*, Yale University Press, 2007.
2. Hubertus Golz (1526–83) visited some 970 collections of curiosities all across Europe and described them in detail.
3. The nucleus of the collection is pictures from the collection of John Julius Angerstein, which the British government purchased on his death.
4. Dudley, D. and Wilkinson, I., *Museum Registration Methods*, American

PART 1 COLLECTIONS MANAGEMENT: OVERVIEW AND PRINCIPLES

Association of Museums, 1958. Fifth edition (2010) by R. A. Buck and J. A. Gilmore (see Bibliography).

5. British Standards Institution, PAS 197:2009 *Code of Practice for Cultural Collections Management* (sponsored by the Collections Trust).
6. International Council of Museums, <http://icom.museum/>.
7. Museums Association, www.museumsassociation.org.
8. Network of European Museum Organisations, www.ne-mo.org.
9. European Committee for Standardisation, www.cen.eu.

2

Legal requirements

Fundamentals

Museums have to abide by local, national and international laws pertaining to business, charities and trusts and, in particular, to the care and preservation of cultural objects. This section outlines the main laws and conventions, along with artists' rights and copyright considerations. The following sections will cover customs and excise, including import and export, CITES (Convention on the International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Flora and Fauna), taxation and immunity from seizure legislation.

Most countries have laws relating specifically to the establishment of museums, particularly national museums. In the UK, the Museums and Galleries Act, 1992 applies to all museums which receive some government funding and sets out the establishment and functions of boards of trustees, as well as regulations for acquisition and disposal, lending and borrowing, transfers, gifts, indemnities and financial obligations. Museums covered by the Act are required by law to operate in accordance with the Act, to maintain, exhibit and grant access to collections, to promote public understanding and enjoyment of the collections and to submit an annual report and accounts to the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS).

There are separate Acts pertaining to local authority museums and there are also separate Scotland and Northern Ireland Acts.

International conventions and regulations

The *UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property, 1970* was ratified by the UK in 2002.¹ It is the main international convention relating to the movement and acquisition of cultural goods and was designed to prevent the illegal excavation, import or export of cultural objects.

The *UNIDROIT Convention on Stolen or Illegally Exported Cultural Objects, 1995* covers regulations for the restitution and return of illegally obtained cultural goods, including stolen objects.²

The *Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora, 1963 (CITES)* was ratified in the UK in 1976.³ It is the main international convention relating to natural history materials and to art objects comprised of such materials. CITES has been implemented throughout the European Union (EU) by EC Regulations, and in the UK through the Control of Trade in Endangered Species (Regulations), 1997 (COTES).

The *European Convention on the Protection of Archaeological Heritage (Revised), 1992* delimits and protects sites and areas of archaeological interest. Its purpose is to prevent illicit excavations and ensure that excavations are conducted only by qualified persons and that the results are controlled and observed. The Convention also requires museums to avoid acquiring material from illicit excavations or obtained unlawfully from official excavations.

There are laws pertaining to archaeological objects found in the ground, with advice on what to do with them. In many countries the national law says that any archaeological objects found in the ground are the property of the state. For example, Egyptian law states that ‘all antiquities are considered to be public property’ (Law on the Protection of Antiquities, art. 117, 1983). The law pertaining to each individual country should be researched if there is any question of acquiring such objects.

UK legislation and regulations

The *Treasure Act, 1996* pertains to precious historic or archaeological objects discovered in the ground either as part of an archaeological dig or by private individuals. The Act was drafted in order to define what ‘treasure’ is and sets out the procedures to be followed when treasure is found. Registered finds are considered by the Restitution Panel, which awards appropriate compensation to the finder so that the object(s) can be placed in a museum. The Act covers ownership, the duty to inform the coroner, the procedure for the inquest, the rights and duties of the finder and the landowner, rewards and codes of practice. The *Criminal Justice Act, 2009* added an amendment (s.8a) to the Act which requires any dealer or person into whose hands the treasure comes to inform the coroner.

The *Human Tissue Act, 2004* governs the use of human remains in

museum and university collections. It gives powers to certain listed museums to release human remains if they wish to return them to native communities. See the DCMS *Guidance for the Care of Human Remains in Museums* (2005),⁴ and The Manchester Museum, 'Policy on Human Remains' (2010).⁵ Human remains in collections may also be subject to the *Human Rights Act, 1998*, which makes it unlawful for museums to act in a way incompatible with a human right. This can affect claims for restitution and repatriation.

The *Dealing in Cultural Objects (Offences) Act, 2003* followed the 2002 ratification of the 1970 UNESCO Convention (see above) and makes it an offence to deal in any illicitly obtained cultural artefacts from anywhere in the world. The Act makes it illegal to remove or excavate an object known or believed to be so tainted and proscribes acquisition, borrowing, selling, accepting, giving or lending of such an object.

The *Return of Cultural Objects Regulations, 1994* implemented the UK's obligations under EC Council Directive 93/7/EEC of 1993 on the return of cultural objects unlawfully removed from the territory of a member state of the EU.

The *Iraq (United Nations Sanction Order), 2003* prohibits the illegal export or import of any Iraqi cultural property which was removed after 6 August 1990.

The *Immunity from Seizure, Tribunals Courts and Enforcement Bill, 2008* – see section below on 'Immunity from seizure'.

The *Holocaust (Stolen Art) Restitution Act, 2009* was drafted in response to the fact that national museums are not permitted to deaccession objects from their collections. In some cases, a museum knew that a specific object had been obtained illegally or stolen, but was barred from returning it to its rightful owner. The Act allows museums to deaccession and return objects which they know to have been looted, stolen or removed under duress in Europe during the period 1933–45. It has a ten-year life span during which requests for restitution can be made. Claims are considered by the Spoliation Advisory Panel, which makes recommendation to the Secretary of State for Culture on the case of the claimant and whether the object should be returned.

Many museums have charitable or trust status and are therefore governed by the *Charities Act, 2006*, with amendments in 2009. It defines charities, their objectives, function and duties, the role of trustees, the 'public benefit' requirement and accounting procedures.

There is also legislation which, while not designed specifically for museums, affects the day-to-day operation of collections.

The *Freedom of Information Act, 2000* governs access to information held by public authorities. It lists the rights of the public to obtain access and the duties of public authorities in relation to requests for information, time frames for responding to requests, and complaints procedures. Exemptions are also listed; for example, security or financial information may be withheld.

The *Disability Discrimination Act, 1995*, with amendments in 2005, ensures equal access to goods, services and premises for disabled persons.

The *Endangered Species (Import and Export) Act, 1976* requires a licence for the import or export of endangered species and applies to natural history collections and to objects containing organic materials on the endangered list, such as ivory, tortoiseshell or feathers.

The *Firearms Acts (Firearms Act, 1968; Firearms (Amendment) Bill, 1988)*. Certificates are required for collections of guns or for temporary displays of firearms.

For tax law, VAT, customs, import and export legislation, see the sections below on 'Customs and Excise' and 'Cultural Goods and Taxation'.

There are also legal considerations relating to artists' rights and copyright law, which are covered in the next two sections.

Artists' resale rights

Artists' resale rights or *droit de suite* are the rights of a visual artist to a percentage share of the proceeds of any resale of their work. The right does not apply to the first sale of the work and excludes sales between private individuals. The right is enshrined in the *Berne Convention of 1948* (article 14b), but this states that implementation of the right is a matter of individual state legislation. At present over 60 countries have an artists' rights law, and rights differ from country to country. The right generally lasts for 70 years after the artist's death and is similar to copyright benefits, with royalties going to the artist or their heirs.

Museums buying or selling works at auction or through galleries or dealers should check carefully on the law regarding artists' resale rights in their own country and, in particular, find out which of the parties involved is liable to pay the royalty. In many countries there is an official organization that represents artists and collects payment on their behalf. In the UK this is DACS, the Design and Artists Copyright Society, which represents over 53,000 artists and collects royalties on their behalf on sales over €1,000.⁶