



ART MUSEUMS AND THE PRACTICE OF DEACCESSIONING

Art museums develop collections of works of art for the benefit of present and future generations. The conservation, exhibition, study, and documentation of the collection are the heart of a museum's mission and public service. Collection stewardship requires planning, resources, and professional acumen to ensure the maintenance of a dynamic collection that supports the museum's mission, serves its community, and contributes to the appreciation of human creativity.

The process of adding objects to a museum collection is known as *acquisition*. The counterpart of acquisition is *deaccessioning*, the practice by which an art museum formally transfers its ownership of an object to another institution or individual by sale, exchange, or grant, or disposes of an object if its physical condition is so poor that it has no aesthetic or academic value.

Deaccessioning is practiced to refine and enhance the quality, use, and character of an institution's holdings. There are two fundamental principles that are always observed whenever an AAMD member art museum deaccessions an object:

- The decision to deaccession is made solely to improve the quality, scope, and appropriateness of the collection, and to support the mission and long-term goals of the museum;
- Proceeds from a deaccessioned work are used *only* to acquire other works of art—the proceeds are never used as operating funds, to build a general endowment, or for any other expenses.

Funds from deaccessioning can be invested in an acquisitions endowment earmarked to support the long-term growth of a museum's collection.

Both acquisitions and deaccessions follow procedures that are set out in a museum's collections management policy. These define the scope of the institution's collecting goals in both the intermediate and the long-term, and include plans for growing and shaping the collection for the future. The decision to deaccession a work of art must always reflect this collections management policy and should not be made in reaction to the exigencies of a particular moment.

AAMD believes it is also important that a museum's deaccessioning process be publicly transparent. In each instance, there should be consensus about the integrity of the process by which the deaccessioning decision was reached, even though there may be those who disagree with a museum's decision to remove a specific object from its collection. No action pertaining to deaccessioning should be taken that would compromise the integrity and good standing of the institution within its community at large and within the profession.

Art museum directors and curators—in consultation with trustees and staff—weigh the following considerations when determining whether to deaccession an object:

- Is the object of poor quality, either in itself or in comparison to other objects of the same type in the collection? If an item is of modest quality, does it have sufficient value as a study or research object to warrant retention?
- Is the object redundant, or is it a duplicate that has no value as part of a series?
- Has evidence come to light that the work was stolen from another institution or that it was illegally exported or imported in violation of the laws of the jurisdiction in which the museum is located?
- Has the authenticity, attribution, or genuineness of the object been determined to be false or fraudulent?
- Does the object lack sufficient aesthetic merit or art historical importance to warrant retention?
- Is the physical condition of the object so poor that restoration is impossible?
- Is the condition of the object so poor that it no longer has value for research or teaching purposes?

In the matter of the transfer of ownership, the museum also takes into consideration the following questions:

- If the object was donated to the museum, are there conditions or restrictions that the original donor placed on the gift? If the donor is alive, how will the museum notify him or her of the decision to deaccession the work? If the donor is deceased but has heirs, is it appropriate to notify them of the museum's plans?

- If the artist who created the object is alive, is it appropriate to notify the artist of the museum's plans, and to discuss the sale and/or special arrangements such as an exchange of works?
- Does the object have special historical or cultural relevance to the city, state, university, or college in which the museum is located?
- If objects are to be sold, would it be appropriate to explore sale to, or exchange with, another educational or cultural institution to help ensure the object remains in a public collection?
- Is the deaccessioning being conducted in a way that maximizes the benefit to the museum and to the public?

In rare instances, the governing body of a museum may decide it is essential to change the mission of the institution. In these cases, existing works in the collection may no longer be consistent with the museum's new collecting goals and may be considered for deaccession. It is not typical for a museum to alter its mission significantly, and such decisions should be made only after thorough and transparent deliberation and consultation with the museum staff and trustees, other local cultural institutions, and the public.

Each of the 175 institutions represented by the membership of the Association of Art Museum Directors (AAMD) answers these questions according to the unique mandate of its mission and the interests of its community. All museums operate with a system of checks and balances by which museum directors, trustees and staff work together to uphold the highest standards of professional practice. Underlying these operational processes is a set of core values to which the members of AAMD subscribe and which guide all aspects of their work as museum professionals. These core values are:

Mission: The mission of all art museums is to serve the public through art and education. Fulfillment of this mission is the primary goal of every AAMD member and the touchstone by which all decisions are made concerning museum programs and operations.

Individuality: Each museum has a unique identity, and its collections and programs serve the distinctive interests of its community. Museum directors have the responsibility and the freedom to exercise sound professional judgment in ensuring that their museums are responsive to local interests while adhering to the national standards of quality for which AAMD's members are recognized.

Accountability: Museum directors are responsible to their trustees, staff, donors and community for ensuring that museums fulfill their public service mission and reinforce the leadership position of museums as cultural and educational resources.

Integrity: Museum directors are responsible to their trustees, staff, donors and community for ensuring that museums meet the highest standards of curatorial, professional and ethical integrity.

Transparency: Museum directors manage their institutions – and, to the extent possible, the involvement in their museums by outside individuals and organizations – to promote clarity of purpose in action and openness in internal and external communications.

The AAMD promulgates fundamental standards by which art museums should be governed and managed. These principles are found in the publication, *Professional Practices in Art Museums*, which has been revised at ten-year intervals since 1971. The AAMD's commitment to these core values have ensured that America's art museums are among the most trusted and respected public institutions in the world – resources for education and enjoyment that provide lasting benefits to the people of the world.

The Association of Art Museum Directors (AAMD) is a membership organization which represents 175 directors of the major art museums in the United States, Canada and Mexico. The President is Gail Andrews, the R. Hugh Daniel Director of the Birmingham Museum of Art. AAMD's Executive Director is Millicent Hall Gaudieri.