

Deaccessioning

Deaccessioning and the *ICOM Code of Ethics for Museums*

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> Any consideration of deaccessioning highlights the nature of museum collections. Museums collect cultural property. Cultural property is no ordinary property. In the words of the 1970 Unesco Convention, it “constitutes one of the basic elements of civilization and national culture”. This conception of cultural property is also enshrined in the legislation of many nations and in the law governing some museums. There is therefore a strong presumption against disposal of museum collections, since they are considered to be held in public trust.

> In order to reinforce this, and particularly to support museums in those countries without protective legislation, the *ICOM Code of Ethics for Museums* treats the matter fully (particularly in paragraphs 4.1–4.3). These paragraphs make it clear that “any form of disposal... requires a high order of curatorial judgement and should be approved by the governing body only after considering this and any appropriate legal advice.” The *Code* also advises that such material should be offered first to other museums by exchange, gift or private treaty sale before any public sale by auction or other means is considered.

> There are, however, some exceptions to the assumption that material held by museums has such permanence. Certain kinds of specialised institution, such as “living” or “working” museums and some teaching and other educational museums hold objects and specimens specifically to further the aims of this type of museum, which means that objects within them will probably have a finite life. Other museums and institutions display living specimens, such as botanical and zoological material, and they will regard at least part of their collections as replaceable or renewable.

> The *ICOM Code* also comments on the manner of deaccessioning. This should reflect the ethical and legal responsibilities of the museum, the character of its collections (whether renewable or non-renewable) and the public trust it fulfils in preserving its collections. Complete records should be kept of all decisions to deaccession and proper arrangements made for the preservation and transfer, as appropriate, of the documentation relating to the material concerned.

> Other ethical issues arise with the deaccessioning or disposal of material from museum collections. Where items have been acquired with financial assistance from an outside source (e.g. public or private grants or

benefaction) the consent of all parties to the original purchase should be obtained, before disposal can take place. Where the original acquisition was subject to any legally binding trusts or conditions, these must be observed, unless adherence to such restrictions is “impossible or substantially detrimental to the institution”. Even in such circumstances, “the museum may only be relieved from such restrictions through appropriate legal procedures”.

> Museum collections are held in public trust and may not be treated as a realisable asset. Where money or compensation is received from the de-accessioning and disposal of objects and specimens this should be used “solely for the benefit of the museum collection and normally for acquisitions to that collection”. Members of the museum staff, the governing body, their families or close associates should never benefit from the deaccessioning of an item. Museums preserve part of a nation’s cultural heritage however localised the collection may be. It is particularly important that museum staff be seen to be acting in a

responsible and professional manner.

> The *ICOM Code of Ethics for Museums* provides a set of minimum standards, for use on a global basis. Many national and specialist groups use the *Code* as it stands, while others build on it to meet their particular requirements. One current issue relating to deaccessioning from collections is the physical and cost implications that arise with the bulk storage of material from large-scale archaeological excavation. Is there a case for selective deaccessioning from existing collections or, for that matter, only selective accessioning of newly excavated material? These are issues requiring considerable specialist, professional judgement. The ICOM Ethics Committee is always pleased to receive information about developments, as part of its work of reviewing the *Code*, which aims to establish the foundational principles on which the museum and all whom it serves depend.

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Deaccessioning - the permanent removal of an object from a museum collection - appears to contradict a basic museum duty, which is to hold collections in perpetuity. There are cases, however, where deaccessioning seems desirable. The conditions under which this may be possible, and the procedures to follow, are the object of ongoing debate.

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