

Taking Stock: Deaccessioning in the Netherlands

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Discussion in the Netherlands on the deaccessioning of museum objects gained momentum in the late 1990s. Confronted with considerable backlogs in maintenance and registration, and difficulties in providing public access to collections, more and more museum professionals realised that it was necessary to question the unlimited growth of museum collections and to advocate smaller ones of a higher quality. Additionally, policymakers and stakeholders in the museum industry became increasingly aware of the huge costs involved in the upkeep of museum collections, while a number of controversial affairs relating to the sale of top works of art from museums focused even more attention on deaccessioning. At the request of the Dutch Ministry of Culture, the Netherlands Institute for Cultural Heritage (ICN) undertook to develop guidelines for the disposal of museum objects. The *Guide to the Deaccessioning of Museum Objects* was presented to the Dutch Museums at a symposium in 1999 and was universally accepted on that occasion.

> The *Guide to the Deaccessioning of Museum Objects* is basically a questionnaire divided into several parts: ethics, competence, knowledge of the collection, collection policies, legal matters, provision of information, procedure and documentation. The questionnaire guides museums through the deaccessioning process, so that decision-making relating to deaccessioning should be clearly recorded, and so that the procedure may be reconstructed in the future; after all, museums are public institutions, answerable to the public realm for their actions.

> Recently, the guidelines were used in dismantling an entire museum: the Museum of Weights and Measures in Delft. The operation produced a large amount of data which shed new light on deaccessioning. It became clear, for example, that transferring objects to other museums without charge is exceedingly time-consuming and expensive. In the case of the Museum of Weights and Measures, the collection was divided among more than 50 different museums and archives. While this meant that 70% of the collection (originally consisting of 7,500 objects) was kept in the public domain, it also entailed an expenditure of more than € 80,000.

> The realisation of the costs involved, in both time and money, has raised the question – as cynical as it is fundamental – of whether it is not sometimes cheaper to keep superfluous objects than to get rid of them. Should we in some cases lock the door of the museum storeroom, throw away the key, and lovingly (since they are preserved in a museum storeroom) neglect the objects concerned?

> It also seems advisable to reconsider whether donating objects to other museums is as noble as it is thought to be. From a commercial point of view it does not seem a good idea, since it involves high expenditure. In addition, there is evidence that in the short term museums take better care of objects they have purchased than of those they have been given for free by other museums.

> Another point that arose during the dismantling of the Museum of Weights and Measures was that there is actually no standard as regards the effort a museum should make to deaccession objects. How much effort can be reasonably expected? Is it reasonable to spend 1,000 hours on disposing of 7,000 objects, or is this too much, or too little?

> Finally, income resulting from the auction of objects led to problems. After an auction at Sotheby's of 140 objects from the museum's collection

had yielded several tens of thousands of euros, it suddenly emerged that some of the parties involved had widely differing opinions as to what this sum should be spent on.

> On the grounds of our experience with the Museum of Weights and Measures, the *Guide* has recently been improved on a large number of points. Hopefully, new cases will lead to further improvements in the future.

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