

# Collections Management and Deaccessioning in the United States

by Marie Malaro

*Professor Emerita, George Washington University, U.S.A.*

The U.S. provides fertile ground for debate on the deaccessioning of museum objects, because most of its museums are non-governmental and are part of the “non-profit sector”. This sector is composed of privately-controlled organisations that perform public services, and they are free to set their own operating procedures. U.S. museums therefore have the freedom to develop their own professional standards and they have a history of exercising this freedom with great energy and enthusiasm.

> The route which United States museums use to arrive at some consensus regarding professional standards is through the development and publication of codes of ethics. Many professional museum organisations publish formal codes of ethics that reflect their members’

views on how museums should operate. These codes invariably set a higher standard than that required by the law because the goal is not just to avoid liability but to maintain public confidence. These codes now offer substantial guidance on the topic of deaccessioning.

> Before looking at these standards, the following comment is in order. Most of the museum codes of ethics published in the U.S. have no enforcement provisions, nor provision for censure in case of violation. While many in the profession believe that relying almost exclusively on voluntary compliance is a less than satisfactory approach, codes and standards of practice have demonstrated that they are effective in marshalling public opinion. For example, when the media is able to claim that a museum’s proposed deaccession appears to violate a relevant professional code of ethics, the average museum, especially one dependent on direct citizen support because of its non-profit status, carefully rethinks its position.

> Now, back to the previously-mentioned standards of practice that offer guidance to U.S. museums on the topic of deaccessioning. Briefly, these standards are as follows:

1. Collections management should be a combination of intelligent collecting and thoughtful pruning. Every item in a museum’s collection costs money to maintain, document, and make available to the public. So periodic reevaluation is as important as acquisition, and deaccessioning, properly regulated, can be a means toward true growth.

2. A museum should have clearly articulated, and documented, collecting goals. Without such guidance there is no basis for making creditable decisions about what merits retention in the museum’s collection.

3. Before a museum attempts to deaccession, it should develop and document the process it will follow when considering whether to remove an object. The process should require careful exploration of all relevant issues, a description of who takes part in the decision-making process, and the designation of who is responsible for making the final decision. The process should also require that complete, written records be kept, and maintained, on all deaccession activity.

4. The question of whether an object should be removed from a museum collection is an important one, but of equal importance can be these two additional questions, which should be answered and made a part of the written deaccession record: What is the appropriate method of disposal? and: If disposal will be through sale, how may sale proceeds be used?

> With regard to the method of disposal (exchange, gift, sale, etc.), viewpoints differ among collecting disciplines. Some consider sale quite acceptable, others insist that exchange or even gift to a similar organisation should be the rule. With regard to use of proceeds from sale of deaccessioned objects, there is often passionate disagreement. Art museums tend to insist that sale proceeds be used only to replenish the collection. Other disciplines want to expand permitted use to cover care of the collection as well as replenishment. Most seem to agree that sale proceeds should not be used for new construction or general operating expenses.

> However, cases have arisen where museums that found themselves in severe financial distress were able to argue persuasively that a one-off sale of a designated portion of their collection to meet operating expenses would put them on the road to financial recovery.

> In summary, after much debate and experimentation, U.S. museums have developed detailed practices that demonstrate that deaccessioning can be a most useful tool in prudent collections management.

**Contact:** Marie Malaro

Professor Emerita, George Washington University  
Washington, D.C., U.S.A.

Tel. (+1) 410 758 6563 - Fax (+1) 410 758 3750

Email [jmalaro@intercom.net](mailto:jmalaro@intercom.net)