

Security Standards for Temporary Exhibitions*

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Résumé

Les normes de sécurité doivent être tout particulièrement respectées lors de l'organisation d'expositions temporaires. Les objets, dont beaucoup sont prêtés, doivent être protégés du feu, de l'orage, des inondations, des actes de vandalisme et de toute action altérant la valeur des objets, telle que le dysfonctionnement des équipements de sécurité, mais également la violation des droits de reproduction des œuvres... Lors de l'organisation d'une exposition temporaire, deux points de vue divergeants se rencontrent: celui du prêteur qui souhaite récupérer son œuvre dans l'état où il l'a prêtée et l'emprunteur qui doit souvent se battre avec des petits budgets couvrant difficilement les dépenses nécessaires à la bonne protection des objets exposés.

Publication by the Museums & Galleries Commission, in the United Kingdom, of its *Standards for Touring Exhibitions*¹ has been motivated by the wholly laudable desire to make widely available an authoritative code of practice for the benefit of both the organisers of temporary exhibitions and the lenders to them². Unfortunately, the priorities, and indeed frames of reference, of the two groups are very different, and it is difficult to draft a series of compromises acceptable to both which can be described as independent guidelines based on best "industry practice", let alone "standards". A strong argument can be put forward to support the view that meaningful standards can only be set from the viewpoint of the lenders, and confirmed by the insurers or issuers of indemnities intended to protect exhibition organisers from the liabilities incurred in obtaining loans.

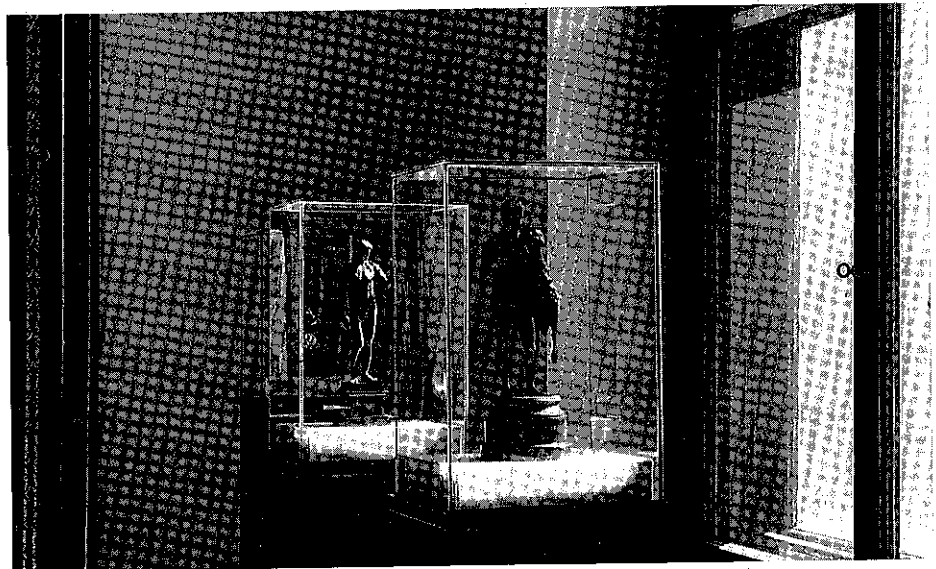
Security, in this context, must embrace all the mechanisms which can result in a pecuniary loss being suffered by the lender, and thus, apart from the familiar risks of theft

of objects and of damage to them from fire, storm, flood and the actions of malcontents, the whole range of more insidious environmental hazards and criminal interventions resulting in losses of value, such as malfunctions of plant and the theft of property rights through unauthorised capture of images, have to be taken into consideration. The organiser of temporary exhibitions, if he is responsible and wishes to stay in business as such, will pay close attention to the expressed concerns of lenders, but budgets are limited and the allocations able to be made to any security heads of account are finite. Consequently this is the art of the possible, mounting as effective an exhibition as can be achieved within the overall limits of the resources made available, and purchasing appropriate insurance, or the equivalent, to cover those risks which are exceptional but insurable. In the calculations of the exhibition organiser insurable exceptional risks are accepted as such, and the future financial survival of the institution is thereby secured, but the future of the object per se does not feature in them.

On the other hand, the lender is, in general, relatively little interested in being compensated financially for any damage sustained by the object, or its loss, except as a necessary evil, and wishes only his loan to be returned in precisely the same physical state as that in which it was handed over in the first place. Museum lenders do not speak with the same voices as museum borrowers, even within the single institution which plays both roles on a

concurrent basis and negotiates trade-offs with other institutions similarly inclined, thereby effectively narrowing the differences between the two sets of expectations. Loans which in isolation would have been quite unacceptable on a variety of grounds, have a habit of being suddenly approved within the context of interlinked loan negotiations and the promise of mutual financial benefit when the economic agendas driving the temporary exhibition programmes are in the ascendant. Such concerns are of little interest to the lender who is not a regular borrower and whose judgement tends to be less clouded by outside considerations.

Today it is generally recognised that objects cannot be transported and exhibited in different environments without accelerating the rate of decay to which they are already subject. The most sophisticated packing and environmental controls will reduce that acceleration but not obviate it, and the inherent conflict between the use of an object in displays and its minimal, is aggravated by any additional wear and tear suffered in consequence of the loan, accidental damage and the impact on the object of any exceptional hazards, and although the rate of decay may be slowed by the conservator and the deterioration may be disguised by the restorer, the loss of information value is progressive and irreversible. The exhibition organiser is naturally more concerned with promoting enjoyment, and hopefully greater understanding, while maximising attendance, than with those costs which do not feature on the balance sheet. All too



Show-case. Photo: Dembski.

many institutions which choose to identify themselves as museums rely increasingly on the cash flow generated by their temporary exhibition programmes, and thus the assessment of risk and the definitions adopted by them as borrowers can never be the same as those of lenders who derive no pecuniary benefit, only the dubious privilege of shouldering the responsibility for an uninsurable accelerated rate of deterioration with which to contend in the future.

Dr. Jonathan Ashley-Smith, Head of the Department of Conservation at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, is currently (1995) researching "risk assessment" in the museum environment and its quantification, and the systematic application of quantified risk assessment has inter alia wide reaching implications for the processes leading to the establishment of security standards for temporary exhibitions, as against guidelines based on best "industry" practice. At present, through judgement based on accumulated experience, the potential lender can make an empirical assessment of the acceleration in rates of decay and of the specific hazards likely to be encountered, and thereby formulate a view as to whether the positive gains likely to be made from the inclusion of the object in a specific temporary exhibition are commensurate with the proportion of the object's effective life-span which is to be consumed in the process. Few today will challenge the view that major objects should not be lent to essentially frivolous exhibitions, even if the resources are available to transport and display it to the highest standards and to ensure that the specific hazards able to be covered by insurance / indemnity are controlled adequately.

The guidelines and notes which provide, in each section of the Museums & Galleries Commission *Standards for Travelling Exhibitions*, advice as to how each "Standard" may be implemented, offer a wide range of practical information directly related to the operation of temporary exhibition facilities and the Standards for security, for the exhibition environment, for protection against pests, for protection against fire, for protection against flooding and for planning for emergencies are particularly relevant to the central

concerns of ICMS, as well as those in respect of handling, packing, storage, carriers and agents, and couriers. However, the security element today increasingly interpenetrates with those activities traditionally seen as the spheres of activity of conservation, design, registration and other specialist disciplines, so that there are few components of the temporary exhibition which do not need to be assessed from the security viewpoint, with subsequent cooperation as the exhibition is organised and administered on a day-to-day basis. The interdisciplinary role of ICMS is at an early stage of development, but therein will reside much of its future effectiveness within the body of ICOM, and joint meetings with other international committees of ICOM to address specific areas of common professional concern are an important part of the way forward.

¹ *Standards for Touring Exhibitions*, Museums & Galleries Commission, London, 1995.

² *ICMS Conference Proceedings*, 1993 Conference, Helsinki, Finland, pp. 327-328.

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