

General considerations for museum security

Günther Dembski

Chairperson of ICMS,
Security advisor of Austrian
federal museums, Vienna, Austria

Résumé

La sécurité dans les musées ne consiste pas seulement en dépenses coûteuses, elle englobe des mesures très simples, telles que l'évaluation des risques et des dangers à l'extérieur et à l'intérieur d'un bâtiment ou d'une zone spécifique, le contrôle du bâtiment, de son environnement, des espaces d'exposition et des réserves. Outre ces contrôles externes, il importe d'effectuer des contrôles internes, tels que la surveillance des accès du personnel et des visiteurs aux espaces privés du musée. Il faut également toujours garder à l'esprit qu'*être confiant c'est bien mais garder le contrôle c'est mieux*. Ce sont les principales considérations et questions qu'il faut respecter avant de penser aux équipements électroniques, tels que les alarmes automatiques ou les systèmes de vidéo-surveillance...

The good news is: security is not expensive when you take the time to analyze risks and to think about security. When discussing security in museums, the first question is nearly always how to install an electronic alarm and fire detection system, and what special type to get. But these electronic systems only detect, alarm and announce that something happened or is happening: they don't actually protect or prevent a crime or a disaster on their own. A security survey is the first step when evaluating the protection of collections in a museum. Here, we have to think about protection and discover how best to implement it – to analyze or survey it personally, and when possible, professionally. Protection that is self-sufficient and most effective requires the thinking and cooperation of everyone. Every staff member should be expected to provide every cultural object with at least a minimum level of conservation and protection care. Museum security and protection are closely linked with conservation, registration, facilities operation, exhibition, and public programs. Basic risk management and protection management analyze risks and dangers to the institution in order to evaluate risks and dangers to: the area surrounding the building and its perimeter grounds; physical security barriers, such as for the perimeter of the building, the exhibition and the storage rooms; management and handling; and staff and visitors.

We should evaluate the security risks and dangers of, or to:

The area surrounding the building and its perimeter grounds:

Is it isolated or located together or near other houses? On a busy or a quiet street? Near taller structures or places that people frequent after hours? Is it known for vandalism and other crimes? (The location of a museum determines much of the level of security required.)

- The perimeter grounds of the museum: Is the edge of the property protected completely by a fence or high wall? Do trees or other small buildings nearby compromise the barrier? How strong are the perimeter doors or gates? How effective is the control of people and objects through that door or gate? Are there internal compartments? Open-air museum structures covering a large area are museum objects similar to buildings and open-air exhibits on a large property. (We remember that perimeters are only as strong as their weakest points. For example, when there are large, thick walls and a tiny door, we cannot forget to evaluate the security strength of the walls.)

And don't forget that any perimeter is only as strong as the weakest point. Because all exterior openings are risks, it is cheaper and better security to have as few as possible. Every gate, door, window, utility space, ventilation duct, chimney and skylight should be closed to entry permanently, or locked. Exterior walls and fences must be free of vegetation for climbing, and overhanging trees or wires, which should be checked regularly. Every fence or wall should have a height of at least 2.5 meters or 8 feet. Exterior wall and fence security can be improved aesthetically with glass on the top of walls and lighting that can attract a passerby to notice someone who does not belong, and in unseen, more dangerous places, with barbed or razor wire.

Exterior property lines that are clear of other activities should carry signs declaring no entry during closed hours, and can be equipped with microwave detection exterior lights that turn on only when something approaches.

- The physical strength of the building exterior on all sides and top: Is



Ruins by Leopold Robert (1825), Thorvaldsen Museum, Copenhagen, Denmark.

it a strong, solid construction? Are doors, windows, and other openings, including above and below, closed, locked, and checked or equipped with an alarm? Are the openings and walls of similar strength? How effective is the control of people and objects through doors and gates? (Almost any opening can be weakened, enlarged, and penetrated by a small person.)

In many areas, every opening in a wall, roof or basement larger than 620 sq cm or 96 sq in, with at least 15cm or 6 in on one side, is considered vulnerable to entry. Exterior doors, gates and entry drives should be easily watched from a distance and clearly indicate that they are closed and locked. Doors, windows, gates and hatches in areas that are not easily seen require higher security. Some fire brigades permit an electronic delay unlock on emergency exit doors so that a guard can inspect before the door opens. Window openings require locked closure everywhere they can be reached by climbing. Opening windows can be closed and locked with key-controlled plungers, turn screws, or a simple pin or screw. Wood or glass shutters require bars or grilles of steel inside the opening. Windows not easily seen should be reinforced with steel bars or alarms. The greatest security problem for windows is that staff forget to close and lock them. Museums must have control of all keys used

there: every extra key not known about or accounted for is a hole in the museum's security perimeter. The most important exterior door key belongs only to the director, the person who opens each morning, and sometimes the police or fire brigade. Any keys not signed to staff should be accounted for and kept in a keybox that is locked and controlled by the museum protection officer. High security keys such as storage room keys should be locked in the museum keybox each night and signed out each day by an authorized staff member only.

Investigate local physical security barrier standards and prepare to comply with them for your building when making repairs, carrying out restoration, renovation or new construction.

The exhibition area:

Are all exhibit objects under personal guard, under glass cover, or out of reach (39 in\1 m) by rope, railing, no-step sub surface area, platform or elevation? Are all work or construction areas separated from the public? Are all exhibit areas patrolled regularly and thoroughly during public times? Are there instructions and requirements for immediate response to exhibit alarms? Is there control of the maximum number of visitors to each area? (Innovative physical separation of objects from reach by plants, collection tables and chairs, or decorative construction can reduce security glass requirements to almost nothing.) Security alarm system checks are reviewed in an article by Serge Leroux, so here we will only discuss how everyone must be a security guard in one way or another. We, the directors, scientists and other museum staff generally think more about presenting exhibition items to the public in the most aesthetic and interesting form and combination possible, with a popular catalogue. We seldom fully consider the full product that the museum visitor experiences, nor do we fully prepare the staff to serve them: the docents, volunteers, guards, and shop staff. Museums can give twice as much of a positive impression if their service staff, including guards, are prepared to represent the museum as competent, well dressed, informed and friendly people. But we must accept and compensate for the fact that service

staff, who include guards, are human beings whom we generally pay the least in the museum. We pay the guard the least to do the most varied and critical things, from giving first aid, evacuating people from the building, saving paintings or other objects during emergencies, extinguishing fires, and risking personal life to stop violence and theft.

Some large museums and a few consultants have developed "customer service" training programs and manuals for guard staff. ICMS is encouraging these to serve more institutions and is promoting the development of a guard training program on CD-ROM with our French colleagues for the guards of Direction des Musées de France. Some museums employ their own security staff and some museums trust a security company for guard staff, often for economical reasons. Good security from either one requires that the museum controls who works, that everyone who works there has been investigated first, and that guard staff services provide good security and represent the museum very well. Security company services require more precise definition, legal responsibility, and supervision. Security staff are more effective when they consider themselves appreciated and accepted by all staff. An effective security staff with low pay and much responsibility requires a motivating compensation other than money: including them in museum meetings, plans, and benefits; respecting their duties and responsibilities to check staff and visitors; and treating security staff as the loyal stewards of museums that we want them to be.

Collection storage and other high value area perimeters:

Are these perimeters complete on the sides, top and bottom with barriers, locks and alarms? Are collection storage and other high value areas devoid of water and sewer pipes? Are these areas away from exterior walls? Are locks, keys and personal entry restricted to the fewest persons? Are "other visitors" required to have an escort at all times? Are the high security keys kept in the museum at all times under control? Are records maintained of keys, personal entries, and object removals? (Accurate, regular collection inventory and inventory

checks are the most effective prevention of internal theft.) As almost everybody might guess, the risks to a museum and a collection increase along with the threats. There is a relationship between the risk of burglary and the value of an object: it naturally depends on different points of view. In low income countries, a higher risk will be taken for a lower value than in countries where people earn more money. A smaller and more expensive specimen will be stolen more quickly and easily than a larger, cheaper one. A local expensive object is a better target for a thief than a well publicised and well-known one¹.

Nell Hoare's 1990 British booklet *Security for Museums*, is fundamentally sound risk management. It is as strong as it is simple, supported by the Area Museums Council and sponsored by local insurance sources, suggesting that we should "think like a thief".

1. Are the collections worth stealing?
2. How would I enter the building at night - what are the weak points [of the structure]?
3. Will anyone hear/see me?
4. How long will it take?
5. Are the objects I want easy to remove?
6. How easily can I escape?
7. Can I overcome any alarm system (if there is one); how quick is the police response [if I set off an alarm]?
8. Is it easier to steal items by day or by night?

"Think like a burglar"

Control of entries and exits is one part of perimeter security, with barrier protection and checking by guards and alarms.

It is important when we open all protection doors each day, and struggle to make objects on show as open and accessible to every visitor as possible. "Open to the public" must involve controlled access, measured carefully by the museum security officer.

1. Do you have control of persons at the entries and exits, legally and physically? Where can one check bags and other luggage for visitors? How or who checks objects leaving through each entry? (Anyone can, and somebody eventually will,

attempt to bring into your building every possible thing from weapons to explosives to criminal theft and vandalism tools.)

2. Do you take special measures to protect high value exhibits which are physically unprotected and small enough to be carried out easily, such as small statues not fixed by screws to walls or pedestals; paintings fixed only by normal hooks; coins or gems shown in unprotected showcases or those with very old locks which are easy to open? (Any small object that can be hidden on a person should be fixed firmly to walls or pedestals, or put into well closed, protected showcases.)

3. Are exhibitions sufficiently protected from touch and removal: Are uncovered objects out of reach? Do showcases prevent a person from entering with a wire to remove objects? Are showcases strongly built, locked and without vulnerable hinges or sliding doors? Does the showcase glass prevent smashing for theft removal? Are keys controlled and their issue recorded on paper? (Any professional thief can identify your exhibition case lock by its appearance and return with keys or devices to open it.)

4. For outside exhibitions in sculpture gardens, open-air museums and parks:

Are there adequate alarm and guard checks in all areas of concern? Are visitors guided by psychological barriers such as doors, walls, and glass, and controlled by physical barriers such as ropes, railings and landscape that discourages walking? Can vandalism and fire be discovered quickly? (Psychological barriers that keep an object beyond the reach of a hand, when reinforced by other security measures, are much more pleasing to visitors than glass. Examples include flower-beds, water without a simple or clear bottom, historically recreated fences, less valuable objects in front at a lower level, even simply mud)².

Thinking like a burglar or thief, you could ask yourself:

1. Are there exhibits in dark corners or rooms without guard control?
2. Are they easy to pick up and remove?

3. Would they fit into a small bag or under my coat?
4. Where is there an unsupervised, quick exit?
5. Is there an inconsistent security check at the exit?

These questions by burglars or thieves are also questions for museum protection managers and different members of museum staff to ask, answer, and correct, in order to make security everybody's business in as economical a way as possible for every museum. Internal theft is one of the saddest facts that we have to face up to and address: this is theft by curators, other staff, researchers, volunteers and even by directors and trusted board members. Statistics and analysis show that there is more risk from trusted staff than from strangers.

It is totally impossible to have all staff consciously and unconsciously 100 % honest at all times, without their being fooled into dishonesty or deceived into defrauding. Nearly every museum in the world has had experiences in this matter. It can happen in large as well as in small museums.

A saying in German, *Vertrauen ist gut, Kontrolle ist besser*, which means *Being confident is good, but being in control is better*, lends itself well to museum security interests. Even when there is no suspicion of internal loss, unannounced controls in storage rooms should be started. Storage room entrances should be restricted to the least number of persons. Regular museum goods and activities do not belong in storage.

There should be a voluntary signature register book next to the door, preferably next to a closed-circuit television (CCTV) camera which is monitored and recorded in color. It is better to discover irregularities early, before they grow, than to regret loss or crime later.

As a personal example, it came as a big surprise to the staff of a well known European coin collection about fifty years ago when their director died suddenly and they found out that some of the coins had been reported stolen years before. The police had carried out investigations without success. Some of the coins were found in the director's desk, and others were traced to his dealings from time to

time on the black market. It should not surprise the reader that this also happens today, in many places in the world. When this happens in a museum where the only cultural heritage of the country is stored in the same place as its documentation, then both the objects and the documentation will be lost, fundamentally, forever. Sometimes personal influence and political instability increase the risk to this danger, where museums are affected by those looking for financial influence or money itself.

Volunteers and scientists can be as devastating to collections as staff. While volunteers do not have much museum responsibility where they are working or helping, they know the places where museum valuables are stored, and the circumstances governing them. They know the common practices of the staff, and they can find out very easily where the keys are kept, what cabinets are not locked, and which pieces are not inventoried or recorded.

All researchers or scientists who are given access to work with collection materials should have their credentials checked before they arrive. Some "collecting" thieves establish their own titles, offices and credentials.

A trusted staffer should telephone, fax or email several of the references given rather than only the last one, or what seems to be the most important one. Many thefts by researchers and scientists from study collections in museums, libraries and archives are not discovered for years because of a failure to check at the start. Years ago the Vienna Coin Collection was visited by a so-called "researcher" who introduced himself as a specialist on early coins from Belgium and the Netherlands, declaring that he wanted to publish a new book about this period. When he arrived, the staff learned through discussions about the material that he was actually a numismatist specializing in this material. Little did the staff know that he was also a specialist in exchanging coins. After his visit, we found that unique and very rare coins in our collection had been replaced by well-known coins of the region. At that time our security practices were in their infancy, with a simple signature register, where we found the same name as the one he had given in his letters. We

informed the local the police because the researcher had already returned to his home country. But we informed the police about specific stolen objects, as well as details of the theft and the thief himself. We learned through the police that he had also stolen from coin collections in Denmark and Germany. He was caught, tried in a Viennese court and was condemned to two years prison, but the coins were never found again.

Since then, we only allow researchers and others to work with our material after completing a questionnaire and showing their passports. Then they are only allowed to work at a special table, where they are not allowed to bring bags or other belongings, and where they are recorded by CCTV camera with tape recordings.

¹ Further perimeter evaluations and integrated security applications can be found in the 1993 ICMS text on "Thinking like a thief", *Museum Security and Protection - A Handbook for Cultural Heritage Institutions* from Routledge Publishing, an ICOM publication.

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