

Standards on Accessioning of the International Council of Museums

INTRODUCTION

The following guidelines elaborate upon the principles expressed in the ICOM Code of Ethics for Museums concerning the acquisition and accessioning of objects for museum collections.

ETHICAL PRINCIPLES

“Museums have the duty to acquire, preserve and promote their collections as a contribution to safeguarding the natural, cultural and scientific heritage. Their collections are a significant public inheritance, have a special position in law and are protected by international legislation. Inherent in this public trust is the notion of stewardship that includes rightful ownership, provenance, permanence, documentation, accessibility and responsible disposal”.¹

ASSESSMENT

The decision to acquire an object (whether it is offered for purchase, donation, gift, loan, bequest, exchange, or as a result of return or restitution) and accession it into a museum’s collection should be made thoughtfully, considering the nature of the object and its provenance; the object’s cultural, aesthetic, historical, and/or scientific significance for exhibition, educational, or study purposes; the museum’s mission;² and the resources that will be required to care for, display, research, and provide access to the object. These terms should be defined in the museum’s collections policy.

Consideration of the acquisition of an object originating from Indigenous Peoples should be in accordance with national and international provisions, including the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.³ Museums must be satisfied that the acquisition of objects, in particular ceremonial objects, does not infringe on the rights of affected Indigenous Peoples practicing their cultural traditions and customs. Museums should make every effort to consult with Indigenous Peoples and/or the respective authorities in charge with regard to such objects prior to acquisition. Museums should not

¹ International Council of Museums, *ICOM Code of Ethics for Museums*, Article 2.

² *Ibid.* Article 1.2

³ United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, Articles 11 and 12.

acquire human remains of Indigenous Peoples, except for the purpose of repatriation or to provide a safe location to hold such remains, in accordance with the respective Indigenous Peoples.

Museums should consider also whether the prospective object has any special requirements for preservation or storage that would make its maintenance difficult or impracticable for the museum in the future. A museum should consider whether it would have the resources necessary to care for the object well into the future and make it available in a professional and appropriate manner for exhibition and research.

When acquiring an object, whether by purchase or donation or any other way, museums should exercise due diligence in verifying the object's history and provenance.⁴ If a museum is acquiring an object, the museum must verify whether the object was lawfully obtained, lawfully exported and/or imported, and that no other legal provisions are violated.⁵ In cases of both purchase and donation, museums should consider the trustworthiness of the seller or donor and examine:

- 1) available documents, including purchase contracts, insurance documents and documentation of prior ownership beyond the current owner;
- 2) related customs documents including export and/or import licenses, declarations of import or export; and
- 3) references in auction catalogues, inventories, or correspondence.

The object itself should be examined for evidence of damage that might have resulted from illegal excavation, theft, looting, or suspicious restoration. In addition, objects should be examined for previous inventory numbers or markings that may indicate that the object originates from another collection or provides information about its provenance.

Databases, including but not limited to the following, can assist in determining whether an object has been stolen, illegally exported, or otherwise may be a problematic acquisition:

- <http://icom.museum/en/resources/red-lists/>
- www.interpol.int/Crime-areas/Works-of-art/Works-of-art
- www.lootedartcommission.com
- www.lootedart.com
- www.artloss.com/en
- www.ifar.org
- www.speciesplus.net
- www.lostart.de

⁴ International Council of Museums, *ICOM Code of Ethics for Museums*, Article 2.3.

⁵ *Ibid.*, Article 7.1.

Museums must verify also if the object falls under specific national or international legal protection. Those protections include, for example:

- 1954 Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict and its two Protocols of 1954 and 1999;
- 1970 UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibition and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export, and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property;
- 1973 Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES);
- 1995 UNIDROIT Convention on Stolen or Illegally Exported Cultural Objects;
- 2001 Convention on the Protection of the Underwater Cultural Heritage.

Objects with incomplete provenance should be acquired only when they are of exceptional rarity and when it is reasonably certain that their origin, context, and provenance can be established through research.

INTERNAL POLICIES REGARDING THE ACQUISITION OF COLLECTIONS

Museums should have a policy that thoroughly defines the acquisition process and addresses legal and ethical principles and professional responsibilities.⁶ This policy should be published, in print and digital format, online, and regularly be updated. Clear terms should be defined regarding acquisition. Objects acquired should be in accord with the museum's mission as defined in the museum's scope of collections statement or collections profile,

- a) reflect the museum's collecting objectives,
- b) fit in with prioritized focus areas where these exist, and
- c) have good title and provenance.

A museum's collections policy should define the internal decision-making process for assessment and acquisition. It should specify the personnel that need to be involved and should include permanent employees of the museum with relevant experience. The director of the museum shall be responsible for the application and implementation of the policy. Outside consultants might be engaged if the museum does not have the requisite expertise in-house. Both personnel who have the authority to recommend items for the collection and those who must approve the acquisition should be identified. If possible, it is desirable to involve multiple perspectives (e.g., curatorial, legal, educational, audience development) in this process in order to ensure the quality of the collection. This process needs to be documented and preserved in the museum's archive and the museum should keep all documents involved in the acquisition process including a record of the decision-making process and the individuals involved.

⁶ Ibid, Article 7.1

The policy should address potential conflicts of interest in acquiring or accepting donations of objects, even and particularly when these are donated by or purchased from individuals closely associated with the museum. In cases of acquisitions from governing body members or museum staff or their family or close associates, it is especially important to demonstrate that all relevant acquisition policies and procedures of the museum have been followed strictly.

ACCESSIONING

Once a museum decides to acquire an object, it must be recorded in a museum's permanent collection through the formal process of **Accessioning**. At this time, it officially becomes the property of the museum or its governing authority and is recorded as an object in a museum's permanent collection. It should enter the museum's data base with a photograph and its description and should be published as a new acquisition in the annual report. The data base should contain information regarding its need of restoration, shape, size, material, age, provenance etc. All accompanying documentation related to the object should be stored and preserved by the museum.

Guidelines developed by ETHCOM and approved by the Executive Board in December 2020. If you have questions and study cases related to the topic of this document please write to: ethics@icom.museum