



British Columbia
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Best Practices module

COLLECTIONS MANAGEMENT

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Introduction: The Need for a Policy

Collections are the foundation for the museum's activities. Collections are the artifacts, objects and specimens held in trust by the museum, to study, preserve, interpret and exhibit. Because the museum holds its collections in the public trust, the buildings that house them and the methods with which they are cared for are special. Museum buildings must be environmentally controlled and have space specifically designated for the exhibit and storage of their collections.

The museum is responsible for protecting the collection from the damage that can result from contact with people, time and the environment, for the legal management of the collection and for the compilation and organization of related stories and information. The museum collects objects and their stories, sharing them with its community through exhibitions and programming and by making collections records, thematic research, local history and historical documents, held in the museum's collection, available to the public.

Under provisions of the Personal Information and Privacy Act (2004)

http://www.privcom.gc.ca/legislation/02_06_01_e.asp, personal information is protected and may not be divulged without the written consent of the donor. It is, therefore, advisable to obtain expressed permission from the donor at the time of donation to collect and disclose personal information. An appropriate clause should be added to the gift form. It is also recommended that the museum develop a personal privacy policy to outline how personal information will be used. Similarly, there are issues of copyright and museum personnel must be careful to ensure that the use of objects is consistent with copyright law. This applies to material that has been created for the museum including exhibit components. The copyright can be purchased from the creator of the object or artwork.

A Collections Management Policy assists the museum in its important task of controlling its collection. One of the primary objectives for the policy is to define what the museum will collect. A good policy defines the historical significance, geographic region (collecting area), time period, and condition of objects, function of objects, use of duplicates and any other criteria for accepting or rejecting objects.

All objects have significance, but in deciding whether to accept or reject an object, the documented history, condition, contribution that the object makes towards understanding a custom, activity, event or person, and the ability to properly care for the object for future generations, become significant factors in decisions to accept or reject the object.

The policy should be developed by the group's founders or, if already in existence, as soon as possible by the governing body. All staff and members of the institution must be aware of the policy.

It is essential that the Collections Management Policy be reviewed on a regular basis to ensure that changes in the museum's community are recognized and reflected.



The Public Trust

The public trust is the guiding principle of all public museums regardless of their size, type or operating budget. The museum's community is the public it serves and can be geographic, identity or interest based. The museum relies on its community to visit, to donate and to volunteer. There is a generally held expectation that a museum will be a lasting institution. Developing a collections management policy that is based on the notion of public trust is a necessity. A policy ensures a high quality collection and helps the museum make informed legal and ethical decisions about the collections.

Legal and Ethical Considerations

The museum has the obligation to ensure that all objects in the collection have been obtained legally and ethically. It is incumbent on the museum to ensure that the donor is the legal owner or legally represents the donor. With First Nation objects, the ownership issues are more complex and advice from an acknowledged authority should be sought. This requires that all collections activities shall be in accordance with provincial, federal and international laws.

Culturally Sensitive Objects

Museums should not knowingly collect culturally sensitive objects without first consulting with the appropriate cultural group. To the fullest extent possible, the museum should confer with the living cultural groups regarding ownership, consent and treatment before deciding whether to acquire sensitive material related to those groups.

Culturally sensitive materials are artifacts, specimens or materials whose treatment or use is a matter of profound concern to living people. They may include, but are not limited to, human remains and associated funerary objects and specimens, and sacred artifacts and specimens that are used by present day traditional leaders and adherents for the practice of ongoing religious or healing ceremonies.

Tip:

Review the module dealing with First Nations relationships. While the module is specific to First Nations people, the same ethical, and in some cases legal, standards apply when collecting culturally sensitive material from other cultures.



Accessioning

Passive and Active Collecting

For the most part, museums collect objects passively. Donors bring objects that they believe belong in the museum. These objects often determine the character of collections and may be influenced by the museums founders. The collection, however, may not be the type of collection that represents the broader community.

Active collecting means identifying subjects such as people, cultural groups, businesses, industries, organizations and governments that may be driving forces behind the development of a community. Active collecting is researched based and means acquiring specific knowledge about the history of the researched topic. With this knowledge, lists of objects suitable for the collection can then be developed. The result of active collecting is a more representative collection that better reflects the history of a community. Both methods of collecting are acceptable.

Procedures

Temporary Acceptance Form

Before an object is accepted into the collection, the collections committee may require some time to consider the advisability of accepting an object. A temporary acceptance form must be signed by the potential donor and the museum. The form should state the following:

The name, address and method for contacting the donor.

A specified loan period. This period should allow for a reasonable amount of time for the museum to expeditiously consider and decide on the suitability of the object for the permanent collection. There must be a clause that states what will happen to the object if, after notification has been sent to the lender, the object is not picked up within a specified time period. It may be advisable to seek advice from a lawyer should the lender not return to pick up the object.

Descriptions and conditions of objects.

The signature of the lender, acknowledging the conditions of the loan, and the museum representative, must be placed on the form.

The temporary acceptance form should state who assumes liability for the loss, theft or damage of objects left in the care of the museum. Consultations with the museum's insurers will determine the answers to these questions. Generally, the museum assumes responsibility for objects left in its care and agrees to care for objects as if they were their own. This should be stated on the form.

Gift Forms

Objects are generally collected through donation or purchase. Regardless of the method of collecting, the museum should ensure that the gift form states that a transfer of ownership has taken place.



Accessioning cont'd...

Objects should not be accepted if the donor attaches conditions, such as the objects be placed on permanent or long term display or that restrict the museum's capacity to research, display, loan or dispose of the object.

Tip:

Gift forms will contain a statement that legally transfers the ownership of an object to the museum. For example, the form will contain a statement such as:

It is understood that upon signing this form the above articles are gifts to and become the property of the _____ museum.

Without limiting the generality of the following, permission to display, copy, transcribe, publish or broadcast the intellectual or artistic content of the articles, including ownership of copyright, is absolutely assigned to the _____ museum. The _____ museum reserves the right to dispose of objects that may pose a risk to the rest of the collection or may be deaccessioned for practical or legal reasons.

The undersigned donor hereby declares that he/she is lawfully entitled to give the aforesaid property to the _____ museum.

Modes of Collecting

Generally, museum collections grow through the acquisition by donation, purchase and transfer from another institution or bequest. Whatever methods of acquisition are used, it is important to remember that the museum controls the collecting process. Bequests must be negotiated prior to the death of the donor. However, there may be occasions when the museum learns of a gift after the death of a donor. The museum is under no obligation to accept gifts from bequests that do not conform to its collecting mandate.

Trading objects with other institutions or individuals is not an acceptable method for building the collection and must be avoided. Instead, the transfer of objects to other approved institutions, without expectations of return, is acceptable. Trades or transfers to individuals are not acceptable under any circumstances.

Appraisals

As a general rule, museums should be federally registered non-profit societies. Exceptions are museums that may be part of a municipal, provincial or federal department. However, all museums should be empowered to issue tax receipts for the fair market value of the donated object. If an object is valued at more than \$1,000.00, it is necessary to obtain an outside appraisal of the fair market value of the object. The Canadian Revenue and Customs Agency <http://www.cra-arc.gc.ca/menu-e.html>, should be consulted if there is any doubt about the need for appraisals. The cost for the appraisal is normally born by the donor.



Accessioning cont'd...

Responsibilities

The Collections Management Policy must clearly state who will make collecting decisions. In smaller organizations, a collections or acquisitions committee may be formed and takes the responsibility for deciding what objects enter the permanent collection. If a museum has staff, the decision to collect an object may be delegated to the Curator or Director.

In any event, it is important that the collecting policy be in place to act as a guide for decision-making. All staff, volunteers and trustees must be aware of the policy.



Documentation

Collections management involves documenting and recording information about artifacts in the collection. The complete history of the object including its historical context, conservation treatment, loan or use for exhibition, scientific sampling and publication are examples of information that needs to be documented.

There are a number of records that form part of the object's documentation. An accession register records the name of the object, donor, date of acquisition and a unique catalogue number that is assigned to the object. This is simply a chronological listing of objects that have been accepted into the collection. Whether the accession register is in hard copy or electronic form, a copy must be stored off-site in a fire-proof container. The accession register also becomes the inventory list of the museum's collection and if a catastrophe occurs may be the museum's only record of the objects in its collection.

Skeletal Records

The minimum information needs required for an object entering the collection includes the following:

- Donor's name, address and phone number.
- Brief description of the object
- The circumstances surrounding the object's discovery and acquisition (where, when and by whom)
- The original owner and manufacturer and information about any subsequent owners
- The objects use
- Chronological history
- Any other pertinent facts

All information about an object should be verifiable.

Tip:

It is strongly advised that Museum's purchase a copy of "The Revised Nomenclature for Museum Cataloguing; A Revised and Expanded Version" of Robert G. Chenhall's System for Classifying Man-Made Objects by James R. Blackaby, Patricia Greeno and the Nomenclature Committee. American Association for State and Local History Press. Second Printing, 1989.

When time and circumstances permit, additional information about the object can be added to accession records. Examples of additional information can include biographical information about the original or any subsequent owners of the object, detailed descriptions and photographs.



Documentation cont'd...

Accession Numbers

Each object must be assigned an accession number that is unique to that object, based on the standard method for numbering artifacts e.g. 2005.001.001 (Year of Donation – Donor Number – Item in Collection). This number should be applied in a uniform way and in consistent locations for all objects. For example, permanent numbers can be added to the underside of cups, but not on edges that may wear. The accession numbers should be large enough to be read easily, but not so large that it detracts from the object or obscures information. Numbers must be applied, so that anytime in the future they can be removed without causing damage to the artifact.

Tip:

It is recommended that before accession numbers are added to objects that visits to other museum sites be made to see how other institutions mark objects. Artifact numbers must be applied using accepted conservation methods and materials. Not all objects can be marked in the same way.

Document Files

Whether in digital or manual form, each object should have a master file that records all of the information collected about the object. This includes any research papers, trivia, articles, manufacturer's data, biographical information about the users or donors or any other information that helps the museum understand the object and its place in the community's history. The file should also contain a photograph of the object.



Copyright

The Canadian Copyright Act <http://laws.justice.gc.ca/en/C-42/> defines and protects the rights of ownership in the creation of works of art and intellectual property. The law defines economic rights related to the right of reproduction and the right of exhibition and, therefore, affects museums that mount exhibits and produce images for use on web sites, or publications.

While copyright to an object can be assigned to the museum, the moral rights to the object cannot. This means that the museum cannot alter, or otherwise change the object, without the written permission of the creator. These moral rights must be recognized when exhibiting, handling or conserving objects.

Tip:

When replicating objects, it is important to know if the museum has this legal right. Facsimiles of objects may not require the same degree of legal scrutiny as replicas.

It is recommended that the museum obtain a copy of the Canadian Copyright Act and consult with an intellectual property rights lawyer should there be any doubts about how objects can be used from the collection.



Care and Conservation

Storage

It is the museum's responsibility to fulfill the public trust by preserving their collections in perpetuity. This has a number of implications for museums. Ideally, objects entering the collection are processed then stored or exhibited. Exhibit galleries and storage areas should be heated to 20° plus or minus 2°. Relative humidity should be 50% plus or minus 4%. If these conditions cannot be met, then an HVAC (heating, ventilating and air conditioning) expert should be consulted. Rapid changes or fluctuations in temperature and humidity can cause damage to objects, particularly objects made from organic materials. Storage areas should not be used for any other purposes. Adequate shelving should be in place for the safe storage of objects. Fire protection is a necessity for museum storage areas. The storage area is not a public area and should be secured to prevent the public from directly accessing the collection. No flammable materials or hazardous chemicals should be placed in a storage area.

Handling

Objects should be handled as little as possible. When handled, clean hands and, where necessary, white gloves should be used. Trolleys, dollies and other safety equipment should be used when moving objects.

Tip:

Visit the Canadian Conservation Institute website at http://www.cci-icc.gc.ca/main_e.shtml for further information about handling and caring for objects. They have a number of modestly priced notes and pamphlets that should be read before objects are handled.

Use

Museums collect objects for a variety of reasons. Research, exhibit, education and community use collections serve different needs and should be considered when developing a collections management policy. Education, and sometimes research collections, are considered to be non-permanent collections and may be subject to damage or destruction through use. These collections may lack historical context, may be duplicates of objects already in the collection or replicas of objects from the permanent collection. Nevertheless, the same standards of care apply to these collections that apply to permanent collections. Documenting the use, condition and location of objects in these collections is essential.



Care and Conservation cont'd...

Loans

The collections management policy must clearly define the museum's position regarding loans. Long term loans from private individuals can be problematic and must be discouraged. Short term (not exceeding six months) loans are acceptable, if they can be used for changing exhibits or for specified research activities.

Research

Museums conduct research related to their collections for use by the public and curatorial staff. The results of internal research activities must be available to the public. Museums may also allow access to the collections by outside researchers. Research collections can include single objects, groups of objects, or specimens.

Education

Most museums offer public programming activities. Objects are used to provide participants with enriching experiences. If an object is donated to the museum and is not accepted into the permanent collection, it can be acquired for an education collection. The donor, however, must be made aware that the object will eventually be destroyed through use. Some museums include a separate box on a gift form that indicates the disposition of the object.



Deaccessioning

Museum collections are held in trust for the broader community. The museum has a responsibility to its donors and to the community to maintain the collection in the best condition and in perpetuity.

However, there may be occasions when permanent removal of objects is desirable. Objects may be considered for removal when they are irreparably damaged, redundant, irrelevant, given to another museum or non-profit society or claimed by the original owner or heirs and successors and the claim is validated through legal avenues.

Museum gift agreements state that the gifts become the absolute property of the museum. It is, therefore, not the intent of the museum to acquire objects for the purpose of deaccessioning. Deaccessioning should only take place after careful consideration by the curator, director, collections committee and the board of directors.

Conditions for Deaccessioning

If a donor or heirs/successors request the return of an object, it can be returned only if the museum's records contain evidence that the object is not the property of the museum and all legal requirements establishing ownership are satisfied.

The museum will deaccession objects for the purpose of repatriation when it is demonstrated that other institutions, bodies or governments have a right to the objects. Only when assurances are made that the collections will receive care in accordance with normal professional museum practices is the deaccession considered.

Objects are considered for deaccessioning if one or more of the following conditions apply:

- The object does not pertain to the history, ethnology, natural history or archaeology of the community.
- The object has deteriorated to such an extent that it has no value for exhibit, research or study and cannot be preserved, given the resources available to the museum.
- A duplicate or similar object is acquired that is in better condition and is more fully documented.
- Another non-profit institution is interested in acquiring the object and the transfer would benefit the receiving organization more than the original institution.
- With First Nation objects there are reasons related to cultural renewal or repatriation that may be reason for deaccessioning.



Conditions for Deaccessioning cont'd...

Before deaccessioning, the following procedures should be followed:

- All records should be searched thoroughly for indications of historical context. All records associated with the object will be retained and annotated to indicate the date of deaccessioning, reasons for deaccessioning, final disposition and the name of the person responsible for the deaccessioning.
- Objects to be deaccessioned will be offered first to another museum that endeavors to retain its collection in perpetuity. Secondly, objects will be offered to other public institutions such as libraries, schools or other charities.
- Objects that cannot be disposed of to other non-profits will be offered for sale at an auction held at arms length to the museum and notice of the auction is published in the local newspapers. All proceeds from an auction will accrue to an acquisitions/collections care fund and may not be used for any other purpose.
- If the object has no value and cannot be deaccessioned through transfer or auction, then staff may destroy the object.
- Members and friends of the museum should be notified of the intent to dispose of objects.
- Under no circumstances will deaccessioned objects be acquired by members of the museums governing body, staff or their families, agents or friends of the members of the governing body. The final decision for deaccessioning an object rests with the museums governing body
- Accession numbers must be removed from the object prior to disposal.

Tip:

Legal advice should be obtained prior to deaccessioning, as it is an enormously complex matter. Canada Customs and Revenue Agency (CCRA) and the B.C. Provincial Heritage Conservation Act (1996) must be consulted prior to deaccessioning. The CCRA published a pamphlet called Registered Charities and the Income Tax Act. The pamphlet states "in most cases a registered charity cannot return a donor's gift. At law, a gift transfers ownership of the money or other gifted property from the donor to the charity. Once the transfer is made, the charity's governing documents oblige it to use the gift in carrying out its charitable purposes."



Resources:

1. Anne Hayward, "Standard Practices Handbook for Museums", Second Edition (Edmonton: Museums Alberta, 2001).
2. Gail Dexter Lord and Barry Lord, "The Manual of Museum Planning", 2nd ed. (Walnut Creek, California: Altamira Press, 1999)
3. Ontario Ministry of Culture, Museum Notes on Line, Museum Note #3, "Writing a Collections Management Policy for the Museum".
4. "The Official Directory of Canadian Museums and Related Institutions" is available from the Canadian Museums Association, <http://www.museums.ca/>
5. Canadian Museums Association: <http://www.museums.ca/>
6. The International Council of Museums: <http://www.icom.museum/>
7. Canadian Heritage Information Network: <http://www.chin.gc.ca/>
8. Canadian Conservation Institute: <http://www.cci-icc.gc.ca/>
9. B.C Museums Association: <http://www.museumsassn.bc.ca/>
10. Heritage Branch, Ministry of Community, Aboriginal and Women's Services: http://www.mcaws.gov.bc.ca/heritage_branch/index.htm
11. Heritage Society of British Columbia: <http://www.museumsassn.bc.ca/>
12. Canada Customs and Revenue Agency: <http://www.ccr-aadrc.gc.ca/>
13. Personal Information and Privacy Act: http://www.qp.gov.bc.ca/statreg/stat/P/03063_01.htm.
14. Museums Alberta, "Standard Practices Handbook for Museums", Second Edition, 2003.
15. Heritage Conservation Act, 1996: http://www.qp.gov.bc.ca/statreg/stat/H/96187_01.htm
16. Canadian Museums Association: Statement of Ethics for museum professionals and guidelines for Trustees. <http://www.museums.ca/>
17. Cultural Property Export and Import Act: <http://www.pch.gc.ca/pc-ch/mindep/acts/culture.htm>
18. Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species: <http://www.cites.org/>
http://www.unesco.org/culture/laws/1970/html_eng/page1.shtml
20. Department of Canadian Heritage has an excellent web page called "Developing Intellectual Property Policies: A How-To Guide for Museums". This on-line publication details the process for developing policies governing the use of the collection.
http://www.chin.gc.ca/English/Intellectual_Property/Developing_Policies/relevant.html
21. Copyright Board of Canada, Copyright Act, <http://www.cb-cda.gc.ca/info/act-e.html>. Some relevant pages are 34-38.
22. Visit the Archives Association of British Columbia website for information about collecting for archives, <http://aabc.bc.ca/aabc/>, and check the Toolkit section.

