

Ideally Reality:
Alignment of Deaccession Policy and Emerging Practice in History Museums

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Abstract

Deaccessioning artifacts from museums has become a widely accepted practice as a tool for responsible and sustainable collections management. Standard deaccession policies have been developed to govern the ethical practices, and are valuable tools for accountability. However, there is a lack of research into practical application of deaccession policies in museums.

This study is designed to explore the alignment of current best practices found in policies with the emerging application within history museums. The research relies on the analysis of written policies from museums and discussions regarding their deaccession projects for consistencies, and the prevalent practices as they coincide with the policies. The purpose of this study is to determine which parts of the ideal process of deaccessioning represented by policy are manifest when applied to the wide variety of material found in history museum collections. Nine museums from across the country were selected to participate in the study. Eight submitted a copy of the deaccession policy used in their institution, and staff from each museum participated in a semi-structured interview to discuss their deaccessioning practices.

The results of this research show that although transferring objects is the advocated preference for the majority of museums, in practice the disposal methods chosen rely heavily on the object's physical and historical integrity. While the objects with strong documentation and good physical condition are often transferred, the majority of deaccessioned objects are found lacking in significance and disposed of through sales. This seems to support the need for further understanding of the links between deaccession criteria and disposal method as a valuable area to address accountability.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The "reason that the ideal and the real are so far apart in the museum world is that we assume - incorrectly - that our collections are going to last forever. In claiming to provide preservation in perpetuity we are faced with the problem of defining 'perpetual' (Washburn, 1984, p. 5)." This thesis explores the ideals represented in policy and the emerging practices in history museum deaccessioning. The lens of deaccessioning is used to identify areas of overlap or dissonance in the management of these collections which encompass a wide range of material types and values. Deaccessioning has widely been accepted as a tool for sustainable collections management, and while a considerable amount of research has been done on the ethics of deaccessioning, the actual practice remains somewhat unclear (Merriman, 2008). Research to expand the understanding of deaccession practices is significant because it attempts to fill a hole in the museum field's ability to address emerging deaccession practices as they align with the ideals represented in policies.

The Oxford-English definition of 'deaccession' is "to remove an entry for (an exhibit, book) from the accessions registrar of a museum, library, etc., usu. in order to sell the item concerned (OED Online, 2011)." However, the museum field professionally defines it as "the permanent removal of an object that was once accessioned into a museum collection (Malaro, 2004, p. 331)." The Oxford-English definition reinforces the perception of deaccessioning as a practice associated with selling objects. Although museums and permanence are married in the public consciousness (Miller S. , 2011), collections gathered and maintained in the public's trust must be reviewed periodically to shape and reshape collections in order to best serve the

museum's purpose as a "hallmark of a sound, dynamic and farsighted approach to collections management (Weil S. E., 1997, p. 64)." It is a process which requires objectivity that can be supported through the development of clear policies and assessment tools for the removal of material that is found to have no potential for enjoyment or use is difficult to justify expending resources to maintain (Merriman, 2008). The inclusion of criteria in policies is important to provide assessment of significance, subjective, criteria that can be articulated in a comparative manner (Young, 1999). Finally, these policies must be strong enough to prevent inappropriate deaccession activity, but also contain enough specificity to facilitate effective application (Webb, 2011).

Deaccession policies are important for the demonstrably accountable practice of deaccessioning in all museums. However, policy and professional guidelines that address deaccessioning practices in museums have been rooted in ethical concerns (Byrne, 2000). The policy guidance that has been developed focuses on legal and financial considerations, which neglects the assessment of the artifacts or dealing with disposal in a practical way (Robbins, 2011).

The question is how history museums apply the ideals set forth by policies in collections of varying historical significance and monetary value to determine the areas of overlap and where the two may be incongruent. To accomplish this, policies have been gathered from nine history museums and staff involved in deaccession projects were interviewed about the practices. This research seeks to expand the museum fields understanding of how ideal policy and real practices are managed within history museums collections.

Chapter 2: Review of Literature

A review of literature reveals that while much attention has been paid to policies, ethics and financial considerations of deaccessioning, relatively little has been focused on practices until recently. The 2011 publication *Museums and the Disposals Debate* compiled and edited by Peter Davies includes valuable case studies that illustrate assessment rubrics and disposal strategies. These cases come from Europe, Canada and the United States. Literature about the policies of museum deaccessioning has been gathered from many sources, notably the American Association of Museums (AAM) publication compiled by Stephen E. Weil, *A Deaccession Reader*. This book includes a report on deaccession policies gathered from 79 museums among other essays that discuss the risks and rewards of deaccessioning. Together this literature reflects the attitudes of museum professionals regarding both policy and practice that provide foundational guidance for this research.

The tangible object as the unique territory of museums is described by museum director Steven Miller who writes that “museums exist because of an assumption that physical objects have value...When acquiring an item a museum is saying that for one reason or another the item is worthy of being preserved by and for the general citizenry...central to this scheme is an overall notion that assigns precedence first and foremost to the physical well-being of museum collections (Miller S. H., 1997, p. 51).” Although there are many types of museums, the American Association of Museums (AAM) states that the common denominator across all fields is that these institutions make a “unique contribution to the public by collecting, preserving, and interpreting the things of this world (American Association of Museums, 2000).” The Museum Association (MA), of Great Britain defines museums as institutions that “enable

people to explore collections for inspiration, learning and enjoyment. They are institutions that collect, safeguard and make accessible artefacts and specimens, which they hold in trust for society (Museum Association, 2008).” However, others have proposed that the well-being of the collection is not always best served by permanence; “The object can become a fetish that, if we merely worship it, impedes our understanding of the object itself and its place in our society. And, in the process of being worshiped, it sometimes crumbles in our hands (Washburn, 1984, p. 15).” To alleviate this, Manchester Museum Director Nicholas Merriman advocates the need for greater deaccession activity with the view that to be truly sustainable it is “helpful to think of museum collections as ecosystems or habitats which need managing, developing, sometimes growing and sometimes cutting back to prevent choking. (Merriman, 2008, p. 18).” Steven Weil who at one time likened deaccessioning to the temptation of robbing a cookie jar for funds (Weil S. , 1992), advanced to the perspective that museums which have gathered and maintained artifacts for the public must periodically refine and reshape collections in order to best serve the museum's purpose as a "hallmark of a sound, dynamic and farsighted approach to collections management (Weil S. E., 1997, p. 64).”

It has been noted that deaccessioning from history museums is different than deaccessioning from art museums (Pogrebin, *Museum Sells Pieces of Its Past, Reviving a Debate*, 2010). History collections pose a unique set of challenges for deaccessioning decisions due to the variety of material that they encompassed. “In practice it would seem that the public reacts with greater emotion to the disposal of a painting than of objects from the collections of museums of history or science. The sensitivity is connected principally with the money to be made from these sales (Van De Werdt, 2011, p. 435).” These collections are made up of “the

objects of everyday life, historic events, contemporary culture (ephemera, etc.) collections, instruments that illustrate the history of science and technology, stamps, coins, and even historic sites and buildings. In this field occasional artifacts may be justly regarded as irreplaceable aspects of our heritage, and once sheltered under an umbrella of public institutional protections can never again justifiably pass into private hands." He goes on to state that "the mere mention of removing any item, no matter how neglected, from a museum's collection is the surest way to arouse controversy, anguish and rage (Barr, 1997, p. 103)." Nick Poole, the CEO of the Collections Trust in the UK, has countered that museums maintain these objects not simply to possess them, but to activate them in service of helping "tell the story of key moments in human history and achievement," and that "collecting is not a single, consistent process. It is tumbling, organic, opportunistic. It happens in waves, in fits and starts according to the availability of material, money and enthusiasm (Poole, 2011)." The role of the collection in a museum's mission is promoted by Michael Taylor of the National Museum of Scotland, "a museum is made a museum by its collections, so that its collecting policy, past and present, helps define its very role and identity (Taylor, 1999, p. 120)." Similarly, "when people think of museums it is their collections that come to mind...Most of the collections have been around for a long time and it is assumed that they will continue to be (Miller S. S., *Subtracting Collections: Practice Makes Perfect (Usually)*, 2011, p. 394)." The implication being that "the distinguishing feature of making history in the museum is the act of collecting...historians working in museums must not only work with and through materials...but also take responsibility for its long term survival (Kavanagh, 1999, p. 79)." Although, as Tomislav Sola, a Museology professor points out these objects, "do not make a museum, but merely form a

collection (Sola, 1999, p. 188).” Collections and active collecting for perpetuity have defined the way that the public views museums. The "reason that the ideal and the real are so far apart in the museum world is that we assume - incorrectly - that our collections are going to last forever. In claiming to provide preservation in perpetuity we are faced with the problem of defining 'perpetual' (Washburn, 1984, p. 5).”

Museum professionals have recognized the potential opportunities that deaccessioning affords as "improving collections quality, sharpening its focus and broadening its applications. It can also render a collection more manageable. Deaccessioning can also save on storage space and economize on collections management and energy costs. It can also give objects a second or even third life (Van De Werdt, 2011, p. 454)." The potential benefits of deaccessioning are articulated in policies of the Museum Association (MA), the UK's professional association of museums, as improved care for the object, increased access and enjoyment by the public, more appropriate contextualization, removal of hazardous material, resources that are freed for other parts of the collection, optimization of space that allows future collections growth (Museum Association, 2008, p. 8). When accomplished with transparency and responsibility, better relations with other museums and donors are additional possible side effects cited by Steven Miller, an adjunct professor at New York University who has been the director of several museums (Miller S. S., *Guilt Free Deaccessioning*, 1997). Finally, the freeing up of space allowance for future collections development has been identified as a main motivator and benefit of the deaccession process (Betenia, Conaty, Herr, Lounsberry, & Melemenis, 2011). These benefits are of ever increasing importance to demonstrate responsible management of public resources and justify increased support for museum activities (Bursell, 1999). All of these

benefits are the long term gain after short term pain that deaccessioning could afford a museum (Van De Werdt, 2011).

Many museum professionals in the United States feel that their relationship with donors is paramount due to the fact that museums acquire approximately 90% of their objects as donations (Malaro, 2004). The assumption is that they will remain in the collection and be maintained in perpetuity. Marie Malaro, a legal expert in the museum field, goes on to cite the waning tax incentives for charitable donation in concert with the reliance on donors and the fact that any museum can “survive as long as enough people are willing to support it (Malaro, 2004, p. 336),” to explain the need to deaccession carefully. The sensitive nature of placing a value on heritage has significant implications for the public in whose trust museums use collection objects (Van De Werdt, 2011). Steven Miller expresses his concern, “in my experience, gift offers have gone down and I suspect part of the reason is that potential donors worry that museums may not keep what is given to them (Miller S. S., *Subtracting Collections: Practice Makes Perfect (Usually)*, 2011, p. 401).” Part of the reluctance is the fear of losing the objects that have been donated from public accessibility into private hands (Miller S. H., 1997). In history museums, donated objects often represent personal histories and the lives of individuals (Kavanagh, 1999). These are “objects that are called upon by scholars, researchers, the general public and others who require information of all sorts. Most seek to examine objects in the collections, and to have to say 'No, that item was sold and we don't know where it is' seems to be a contradiction of that function (Miller S. H., 1997, p. 59).”

Many museum professionals seem to believe that public support can be maintained if transparency is upheld as a part of the deaccession process. Mark A. Greene, of the American

Heritage Center at the University of Wyoming, views deaccessioning as a positive practice which substantiates a well-run museum (Greene, 2006). He states that we have “not given our constituents enough credit when we presume that they would be hostile to us in response to any whiff of reappraisal and deaccessions (Greene, 2006).” Similarly, Franz Klingender of the Canadian Agriculture Museum admits that public accountability means that “although we cannot expect them to understand the intricacies of collection development we must expect that they will know enough to ask why we have multiple examples of an artifact that to their eyes all look exactly the same (Klingender, 2011, p. 585).”

Museums have begun to involve the public in deaccession activities. This serves the dual purposes of educating the public about the challenges and implications of caring for objects in perpetuity as well as securing their trust and demonstrating responsibility (Davies, 2011). When the Centraal Museum in the Netherlands deaccessioned 1,470 works of art in 2006, 750 were transferred to other museums, and the works that they were unable to transfer were shown in the exhibit *The Disposal Strategy of the Centraal Museum* for five weeks prior to being publically auctioned (Van De Werdt, 2011, p. 439). In the United Kingdom, the East Grinstead Museum held an exhibit titled *Disposal?* in 2009 at the University College London (Hadfield, 2011). *Disposal?* addressed the challenges of deaccessioning when dealing with history collections. Agatha Christie’s picnic basket, an antique anaesthetic kit, planetary photographs from NASA, soil samples from the Channel Tunnel, and the skull of a hippopotamus were exhibited. Visitors voted to deaccession an object both before and after viewing the exhibit (Das, Passmore, & Dunn, 2011). After the exhibit, 38.3% of visitors changed their vote on which artifact to deaccession, and polling indicated that the majority of visitors felt that their

understanding of deaccessioning increased (Das, Passmore, & Dunn, 2011). The museum reported that the most important consideration was how useful an object was to the mission and if it was actively being used. The next most important criteria for the public were irreplaceability and connection to the community (Das, Passmore, & Dunn, 2011, p. 191). The UCL used the resulting understanding of community priorities when writing their collections policy in order to ensure strategic collections management in the best interest of the community (Das, Passmore, & Dunn, 2011, p. 193).

In the United States, the Indianapolis Museum of Art (IMA) has been actively and transparently deaccessioning objects guided by former director Maxwell Anderson's emphasis on the value of transparency for museum management. This has catalyzed the development of the Dashboard feature on their website, an innovative way to communicate with their stakeholders.

"The IMA website lists objects to be deaccessioned (sold transferred or exchanged), with valuations provided. The public can follow the disposition of deaccessioned works online or search for them, since we post the reasons for deaccessioning, sale date, funds received, and links to works acquired from the proceeds of sales. The steps we are taking toward transparency at the IMA are born of an instinct to rethink how a museum should operate in today's electronic fishbowl culture. The ultimate objective is to raise standards of the profession as we step into uncharted territory (Anderson M. L., 2010)."

The value of making deaccession information publically available is essential to managing the potential backlash (Greene, 2006) that has led to current ethical guidelines that focus heavily

on ethics and the use of funds (Wirka, 2011). Kathleen T. Byrne, a Registrar for the National Park Service acknowledges that the policies have been in an effort to “safeguard against these problems and to achieve objectivity in the deaccession process (Byrne, 2000).” One policy reviewer stated that “Guidelines handle the issue of disposal from a legal point of view without paying attention to the value aspect of the process or dealing with disposal as the ultimate phase of collection management (Robbins, 2011, p. 494).” An analysis of policy by Helen Wirka, the Associate Administrator of the Carlyle House Historic Park, illustrates that, “focusing primarily upon financially motivated disposal to make money will simply detract from the concept that the practice of disposal is good for a collection and can benefit communities and institutions by increasing a museum's sustainability (Wirka, 2011).”

Museums are held accountable by several constraining forces including professional organizations, self-imposed policies and public opinion (Burgess & Shane, 2011). Voluntary application of these policies means that legally, museums are free to dispose of their objects as they see fit (Malaro, 2004). The overarching influence that seems to motivate museum policies and their adherence to them is public opinion (Burgess & Shane, 2011). Since the issue of deaccessioning is self-regulated, self-imposed and self-enforced, Burgess and Shane consider it a policy monopoly that reacts with just enough regulation to satisfactorily manage the public and media threats to the monopoly (Burgess & Shane, 2011, p. 182). The policies represent the minimum considerations to maintain ethical standards (Malaro, 2004).

The American Association of Museums (AAM) is the central accreditation and policy resource for all museums in the United States. They encompass all museum types and share oversight of history museums field specific policy with the American Association for State and

Local History (AASLH). Wirka compares the AAM's addressing of deaccessioning to that of the Museum Association (MA) in the UK, which regulates a similarly diverse body of museums, by critiquing the "lack of specificity" in the language of the AAM's deaccession references. In her policy review, she praises the pro-active research that the MA did prior to revising its policies to understand and "reflect current practice" in museums motivated by disposal in order to reduce expenditure and refine collections rather than to raise funds (Wirka, 2011).

The AASLH to which the AAM refers history museum professionals for history collection policies defines their mission as providing "leadership and support for its members who preserve and interpret state and local history in order to make the past more meaningful to all Americans (American Association for State and Local History, 2005)." Endorsement from the AAM and AASLH demonstrates adherence to the best practices established by these institutions. The National Park Service (NPS) is another resource referenced by museums (Miller S. S., *Guilt Free Deaccessioning*, 1997). The NPS has standardized practices throughout its many facilities. Their *Museum Handbook* guides management of historic collections which "may document individual or community life and social, cultural, political, economic, and technological trends and events. As a whole the diverse assemblages of NPS history collections document continuity and change over time in the nation."

The AAM acknowledges deaccessioning activities by requiring museums to submit their deaccession policies for review in the accreditation process to demonstrate that they provide "standards for exercising good judgment (American Association of Museums, 2004)." In their *Code of Ethics*, last revised in 2000, the AAM references the ethics of deaccessioning in the same bullet point as accessioning and loans stating that "acquisition, disposal and loan activities

conform to its mission and public trust responsibilities,” and goes on to state that “disposal of collections through sales, trade or research activities is solely for the advancement of the museum’s mission. Proceeds from the sale of nonliving collections are to be used consistent with the established standards of the museums discipline, but in no event shall they be used for anything other than the direct care of collections (American Association of Museums, 2000).”

The AAM’s Online *Information Center* provides documents to support members in deaccession practices. The *Ethics of Deaccessioning*, states that “a museum’s governing body must make responsible choices regarding the content of the collections,” including the ability to “remove from the collection material that does not relate to the museums mission, and that the museum does not have the resources to preserve (American Association of Museums, 2005, p. 1).” For further guidance, the AAM recommends that history museums consult the AASLH (American Association of Museums, 2005, p. 2). Additionally, they provide a guide for selling material through online auctions without damaging a museum’s reputation (American Association of Museums, 2004). The AASLH references deaccessioning in one bullet point of their *Code of Ethics* which states that “Collections shall not be deaccessioned or disposed of in order to provide financial support for institutional operations, facilities maintenance, or any reason other than the preservation or acquisition of collections (American Association for State and Local History, 2002).”

These policies focus discussion on potential financial consequences to guard against the idea that, “museums are neither merchandise marts nor esthetic stock exchanges. They are repositories of precious records (Rewald, 1997).” Concern over seemingly subjective deaccessions and sales create concern that has led to the financially focused policies we have

today (Miller S. H., 1997). Sales of monetarily high valued deaccession material are still the most publicized exposure received by deaccessioning, and it makes the news with disturbing frequency.

Publicity of deaccession sales is usually more of a consideration for art museums (Van De Werdt, 2011). However, there have been recent examples of history museums selling high value objects as well. In 2005, the Rhode Island Historical Society planned to sell a Colonial-era desk, the most valuable object in their collection, for an appraised ten million dollars at auction (Edgers, 2005). In February of 2010, the Lynden Pioneer Museum, in Blaine Washington, sold 42 pieces from a collection of Native American material at auction for \$703,000 as part of a strategy to establish an endowment (Relyea, 2010). And in another example, the Museum of Northern Arizona raised \$947,115 through auction sales of twenty-one works of art from its collection that they used for payroll and other operating expenses resulting in loss of AAM accreditation in 2002 (Bruner, 2007).

In research conducted by the MA in 2007, three-quarters of museums polled wanted to increase deaccessioning, but time and resources that are required to deaccession responsibly were the main deterrents (Wirka, 2011). The revised code of ethics and resulting *Disposal Tool Kit* were developed to help facilitate the actual practice and to support museums in deaccession activities with the goal to “make the disposal process more accessible to various types of institutions and to create open lines of communication and learning (Wirka, 2011, p. 351).” The MA code of ethics states that “disposal can improve access to, or the use, care or context of items or collections. Responsible, curatorially-motivated disposals takes place as part of a museums long-term collections policy, in order to increase public benefit derived from

museum collections (Museum Association, 2008)." This ethical standard coupled with the affirmation to "balance the duty of maintaining and enhancing collections for future generations with that of providing appropriate services to today's public (Museum Association, 2008)," supports their belief that "museums need to ensure their collections are well managed, actively used and sustainable," a stance that "encourages museums to take a more active approach to appropriate disposal, whilst ensuring safeguards are in place to protect collections and public trust (Museum Association, 2008)."

The Registrar's Committee of the AAM (RCAAM) compiled a deaccession report in 1997 with information gathered from 79 museums, twenty-two of which were history museums. The majority, thirty, were art museums. The report analyzed the written deaccession policies for the criteria, disposal and ethics that the museums articulated for deaccessioning. The goal of the report was to "provoke thought and discussion, and to encourage an assessment of the readers own procedures," and to "distinguish which types of museums use which elements of the process and which ones use elements of the process most frequently (Gilboe, 1997, p. 205)."

At the time of the report, it was noted that a majority of the responding museums expressed that they were undergoing a review of their deaccession policies, and that they were hoping to further discussion that could help guide their work (Gilboe, 1997, p. 206). It seems, however that none of the information gathered for the task force's report was utilized in the AAM's revised code of ethics in 2000 (Wirka, 2011).

The irrelevance of an object to mission or collection scope was a criteria for 57% of museums overall, and 60% of history museums specifically (Gilboe, 1997, p. 208). Only three (14%) history museums responded with the indication that they consider what the report called

'collections refinement or upgrading' as a reason for deaccessioning (Gilboe, 1997, p. 208). The identification of a more appropriate institution for an artifact was articulated in three history museum policies, but not in any art museum policies (Gilboe, 1997, p. 209). History museums were also more likely to indicate their inability to properly maintain objects, (36% of history museums, 23% of art museums), whereas art museums were more likely to identify the aesthetic merits of the material (43% of art museums, and 4% of history museums) (Gilboe, 1997, p. 209).

The importance of criteria is emphasized by The Glenbow Museum in a deaccession program that began in 1998 and is currently ongoing (Betenia, Conaty, Herr, Lounsberry, & Melemenis, 2011). The cultural history curator has identified that the "major grading challenge was identifying and assessing the historical value of the objects. Only part of the value of the object could be verified by first hand examination; more often than not its value rested in its connections to people and events (Betenia, Conaty, Herr, Lounsberry, & Melemenis, 2011, p. 202)." In history museums this has been a challenge due to the passive collecting that has dominated, when objects have been acquired for their own sake without useful data or associations, which has "neutered the historical record and denied the survival of a tremendous richness of evidence (Kavanagh, 1999, p. 81)." Or, put another way, the "scarcity or non-existence of catalogue records, caused by lack of financial resources, diminishes the value of objects (Vilkuna, Vuorinen, Holma, & Makipelkola, 2011, p. 149)." As explained by Terri Anderson of the National Trust, this can lead to deaccession decisions. "If a mystery mid-20th-century lamp has no documentation in any of our files, shows up on no known inventories, is completely out of character with other known collections, and has a market value of \$10, I am

very comfortable letting such a piece go, after documenting the process as best we can (Anderson T. , 2011)."

There must always be a degree of curatorial judgment, connoisseurship, in the decision making process (Dodd, 2011). While this causes hesitation among some critics of deaccessioning who believe that connoisseurship is a skill lost from collections management and which leads to mistakes in judgment (Grosvenor, 2011). Others take it as a challenge to revive the traditions of connoisseurship within the museum as being capable of "identifying and assessing the importance of artefacts as well as the theoretical models that have been developed or applied to material culture research (Young, 1999, p. 143)." As Stephen Weil points out, when deaccessioning, "it is the same eyes that sell well or poorly as those that buy well or poorly. The director or curator who does not know how to sell properly does not know how to buy (Weil S. E., 1997, p. 69)." The need for a connoisseur who can both weed out and take in is called for as someone who can make collections decisions that are systematic and explicit (Young, 1999). In order to mediate concern for accidental disposal of potentially valuable objects a private art dealer has proposed that one solution may be a standing body of panelists who can help advise museums on a range of materials (Grosvenor, 2011, p. 68). Responses solicited from the public during *Disposal?*, however, indicate that "the majority of visitors trusted museum professionals to make informed decisions, giving the curators confidence to make difficult choices and carry these out (Das, Passmore, & Dunn, 2011, p. 193)."

In the RCAAM report, 36% of history museums cited the inability to responsibly maintain the physical and intellectual integrity of an object as an acceptable reason to

deaccession (Gilboe, 1997, p. 210). The inability to care for objects is exacerbated by the mandate to maintain irrelevant material. "Our backlogs are bloated with stuff we should not keep; our preservation problems are magnified by brittle or moldy stuff we should never have taken. This is the dirty job we have said our profession would do. Let us do it (Greene, 2006, p. 15)." This unfortunate truth is illustrated by the Idaho State Historical Society which risked losing AAM accreditation in 2007 due to their inability to document, manage and maintain a tremendous backlog of 250,000 objects (Miller J. , 2007).

Another 14% of history museums noted specifically that the identification of a more appropriate institution was a valid reason to deaccession (Gilboe, 1997, p. 209). History museums are more concerned with finding proper homes and the final disposal of the object as opposed to potential generation of proceeds than other museums (Malaro, 2004, p. 43). Steven Miller iterates that regardless of other considerations, "If the best interests of all three (institution/collection/public) are served by removing an item from a museum, without endangering the item itself, than deaccessioning is probably being carried out correctly. When commercial considerations reign supreme, the process is grossly polluted (Miller S. H., 1997, p. 61)." When disposing of objects to other museums, however, it is important to keep in mind that "evolution must be done so with sustainability in mind and recognition that the best way to deal with this may well be though the exit of objects that have not proven their worth in their present location but may well be able to elsewhere or may simply not be suitable to a museum collection at all (Hadfield, 2011, p. 95)."

Redundancy was another criteria for more than two thirds of history museum deaccession policies (Gilboe, 1997, p. 210). This is illustrated by the East Grinstead Museum's

challenge of acquiring 3,000 objects from a hospital museum that had closed (Hadfield, 2011). In the face of the imminent limits of storage, the museum made necessary refinement decisions (Hadfield, 2011, p. 260). Searches of the collection database showed that they had a significant amount of redundancy within their collection exemplified by fifteen ginger beer bottles in varying condition and with varying degrees of provenance connecting them to the East Grinstead community (Hadfield, 2011, p. 262). In order to determine which bottles to keep and those to deaccession, the museum developed a rubric for making objective deaccession decisions (Hadfield, 2011) by scoring objects according to condition, uniqueness within the collection as a whole, documentation, and potential for use. The review process identified seven of the fifteen bottles as 'total duplications,' allowing their responsible, reasoned removal. The East Grinstead Museum's deaccessioning project is helping the museum to "become more sustainable by ensuring that information and knowledge about its collection in its entirety is up to date and that each item within the collection is there for a justifiable reason. In this way it can continue to collect and acquire items and thus allow its collection to evolve and be better managed (Hadfield, 2011, p. 274)."

Selling objects publically as a disposition method was noted in 60% of history museum policies as opposed to 83% of art museum policies (Gilboe, 1997, pp. 230-231). This underscores Marie Malaro's observation that history museums put less stress on the matter of what is done with any proceeds that may accrue from the sale of deaccessioned material (Malaro, 2004). The preferred method of disposal for museums is to transfer objects to ensure that they remain in the public domain. "The risk of losing information that might later be deemed as highly valuable taints all other arguments against the disposal of museum

collections (Brown M. , 2011, p. 109)." Steven Miller, cautions that the main danger of selling collections and their loss from the public domain is their separation from history and provenance. By transferring the objects to other museums, records are kept in-tact, the intellectual and physical integrity of the object is protected and the public trust is upheld (Miller S. S., *Guilt Free Deaccessioning*, 1997, p. 96). However, as the Glenbow Museum has noted, sometimes there is very little interest from others in acquiring the material disclosing that of the 12,000 objects offered for transfer, only 2,000 were desired by other museums, and they have had difficulty finding auction houses interested in cultural objects (Betenia, Conaty, Herr, Lounsberry, & Melemenis, 2011).

Fourteen of the policies mention that this is "the manner in the best interest of the museum, the public and the scholarly community (Gilboe, 1997, p. 226)." This can prove to be one of the most time consuming aspects of deaccessioning in history museums. The responsibility to find more appropriate institutions for objects deaccessioned from a collection can create a greater burden on the museum's time and staff than anticipated (Van De Werdt, 2011). Transferring material "is undoubtedly important, but remains in reality a fairly theoretical construct (Van De Werdt, 2011, p. 447)." The responsibility of finding a home for problematic artifacts, which are significant and yet present management challenges can keep deaccessioned objects from actually being disposed causing them to linger on the museums premises (Klingender, 2011, p. 581).

The Glenbow Museum deaccession project illustrated the many steps taken in finding appropriate homes for deaccessioned material, and staff expressed that the governing boards were surprised and frustrated by the length of time that the process took (Betenia, Conaty,

Herr, Lounsberry, & Melemenis, 2011). Despite the challenges, however, the cultural history collections manager at Glenbow stated that “overall, the process was very positive (Betenia, Conaty, Herr, Lounsberry, & Melemenis, 2011, p. 211).”

The long-term positive effects of deaccessioning are described by the East Grinstead Museum as “limiting the need for removal of items from the collection and work towards a clear and long-term collections strategy and thus collecting with a view to long-term sustainability...This will not only make future periodical assessment and collections reviews easier but will also allow future curatorial staff to trace and understand past decisions made over acquisitions (Hadfield, 2011, p. 276).” Nick Merriman uses the World Commission on Environment and Development’s definition of sustainability, “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (Merriman, 2008, p. 18),” to determine the productive and responsible role that deaccessioning plays within a museum collection. To ensure the future of museums and collections, objects must be reassessed “not as possessions, but as opportunities for the creation of relationships. In addition to maintaining objects museums increasingly focus on their use rather than accumulation (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000).”

Professionals who work in museums such as Ellen McAdams at the Glasgow Museum believe it is not realistic, prudent or ethical to expect support for a collection that is not being used and that has no potential for enjoyment or learning. It is then difficult to justify the expenditure of resources to maintain it (Merriman, 2008). However, as the goals of permanence are being challenged and before questions of continued collecting can be addressed, there is a need to assess the state of present museum holdings (Green, 2006).

“Solutions must be found which allow us to accelerate the rate of getting rid of things, but in a way that is accountable, open, practical and efficient...solutions which help make a genuine case for retention of the things we keep and in which we invest so much of our time and effort (Reed, 2011, p. 460).”

Chapter 3: Methodology

Introduction

Data for this research comes from the analysis of deaccession policies and semi-structured interviews collected from nine history museums. Six museums were selected from a pool of volunteers solicited through the RCAAM online forum for professional members. Three additional museums were selected through searches for news media coverage of deaccession activities. The interviews focused on the motivations, resources, criteria, disposals, communication with the public, results, and challenges of a deaccession project identified by the participant. This selection resulted in eight deaccession policies and ten interviews for this research. An introduction to each of the nine museums can be found in Appendix A (page 62). The eight deaccession policies are included in Appendix B (page 67).

Deaccession Policies

Eight of the participating museums (The Danish Immigrant Museum, The Grace Museum, The Hopkinton Historical Society, The National WWII Museum, The Shelburne Museum, The North Carolina Museum of History, and the Southern Oregon Historical Society) provided the portion of their collections management policy that addresses deaccessioning. From these policies six categories of criteria were identified for this research: mission, stability, duplication, hazard, accession and provenance. Mission relevance encompasses criteria of museum mission, collection scope and potential for use. The physical integrity of the object and the museum's ability to maintain this are identified as stability. Duplication refers to the depth of representation within the collection. Hazard indicates that the artifact may pose a risk to other objects in the collection or staff. Acquisition refers to the context through which the artifact initially entered the collection such as the legality of the museum's ownership or the

ethical standards by which an object was obtained. Provenance indicates the documentation and historical record of the artifact. These criteria are used to establish an understanding of how museums are focusing their deaccession efforts.

The three methods of disposal identified for this research are transfer, sale and destruction. Transfer refers to maintenance of the public accessibility of the artifact through placement in another museum or educational institution either through gift or exchange. Sale encompasses both third party auctions and third party brokered sales to private collections. Destruction refers to the physical obliteration of the artifact.

Guidance as to the use of proceeds from deaccessioning are defined in three ways for this research. The first reserves funds in a collections fund to be used for expenses related to collections care, artifact maintenance, or the acquisition of new artifacts. Secondly, funds can be restricted acquisitions of new artifacts only. The third guideline restricts the use of deaccession funds to defray the costs of ongoing operation.

Interviews

Qualitative data from personal experiences was gathered from semi-structured interviews with ten museum professionals representing nine museums. A request for professionals to volunteer their deaccession experience was sent through the RCAAM's professional discussion forum online, see Appendix C (page 102). Participation in this forum is voluntary and the recipients of the message represent a range of museum sizes and fields from across the country. The posting specifically requested responses from staff involved in deaccessions from history museums willing to be interviewed. In addition to museums that volunteered responses, several history museums were identified through internet searches for

media coverage in news reports of deaccessioning. These museums were contacted directly through the staff member(s) cited in the media publication.

The semi-structured interviews lasted thirty minutes to an hour and addressed the scope of a project identified by the museum. The voluntary participants were led through their deaccession experience using a list of seven prompts;

- The instigating motivations or context of the deaccession project
- The resources that were consulted prior to deaccessioning
- The deaccession criteria used in practice
- Disposal methods used in practice
- The museum's practices for communicating with the public about deaccessions
- The results of the deaccessioning activity
- The challenges faced while deaccessioning

The interviews were audio recorded with the permission of the participant. Detailed notes were taken from these recordings. The RCAAM forum post requesting volunteers for this research generated response from twelve museums.

After further explanation of the expected participation in the research one museum chose not to contribute due to concerns for the confidentiality of deaccession information. Two museums replied favorably and began a correspondence, but did not respond to scheduling an interview. Three additional museums responded favorably. However, they were determined to be beyond the scope of this thesis due to the level of volunteers' involvement with the deaccession projects or ability to provide supporting documentation. The remaining six

museums' representatives who responded to the initial request participated in interviews and submitted deaccession policies. They are listed here:

- Angela Stanford, Curator of Collections, Danish Immigrant Museum, IA
- Camille Hunt, Registrar, North Carolina Museum of History, NC
- Heather Coffman, Registrar, Grace Museum, TX
- Katherine Taylor-McBroom, Assistant Registrar, Shelburne Museum, VT
- Shana Hawrylchak, Collections Consultant, Hopkinton Historical Society, NH
- Toni Kiser, Registrar, National WWII Museum, LA

Additionally, four museums' staff were contacted based upon the news media coverage of their deaccession activity. Of these museums, three responded affirmatively to requests for interviews and one museum did not. The three museums that agreed to participate were;

- The Santa Cruz Museum of Natural History
- The Southern Oregon Historical Society
- The Philadelphia History Museum

The Santa Cruz Museum of Natural History (SCMNH) had hired a local historian, Frank Perry, to assess their entire history collection for relevance to their mission as a natural history museum (AZDailySun). In the article published in August of 2011, the museum's director, Dan Harder, explained that the museum had a significant collection of 3,600 historic objects, and that the goal of the project was to eliminate the 5,000 foot off-site storage facility, as well as to "find new homes for items that may be more relevant to other museums or venues. 'We are adding value and access to those items.' (AZDailySun)" Mr. Harder and Mr. Perry were contacted, and both agreed to interviews.

The Philadelphia History Museum (PHM) has been deaccessioning historic and art objects since 2002 when they acquired a large collection from a historical society that closed. In an article it was noted that the museum's preferred method of disposal seemed to be public auction sales, and explained that history museums "resist easy definition and therefore make rigid regulation difficult (Pogrebin, *Museum Sells Pieces of Its Past, Reviving a Debate*, 2010)." The article went on to cite the director of the AAM, Ford W. Bell, as acknowledging that the guidelines for the deaccessioning of historical objects are less clear than those for art (Pogrebin, *Museum Sells Pieces of Its Past, Reviving a Debate*, 2010). The director of the collection, Kristen Froehlich, was contacted and agreed to discuss the museums policies and process in reference to their most recent deaccessioning project to refine the costume collection.

The Southern Oregon Historical Society (SOHS) was identified for deaccessioning and disposals that had been criticized in the media (Mann, 2011). The society also published a list of their deaccessioned artifacts with justifications on their website along with supporting information about the museums policies (Southern Oregon Historical Society, 2012). The Curator of Collections, Tina Reuwsaat, was contacted and agreed to contribute to this research.

Finally, the Historical Society of Olmstead County was contacted due to the appearance of an advertisement in the professional publication *Museum News* inviting museum professionals to view a list of deaccessioned objects available for transfer in a password protected portion of their website (Historical Society of Olmstead County, 2010). However, this museum was unresponsive to three e-mail requests for information and is not included in this research.

In all, data was gathered from ten professionals representing nine museums as follows:

- Angela Stanford, Curator of Collections, Danish Immigrant Museum, IA
- Camille Hunt, Registrar, North Carolina Museum of History, NC
- Dan Harder, Museum Director, Santa Cruz Museum of Natural History, CA
- Frank Perry, Collections Consultant, Santa Cruz Museum of Natural History, CA
- Heather Coffman, Registrar, Grace Museum, TX
- Katherine Taylor-McBroom, Assistant Registrar, Shelburne Museum, VT
- Kristen Froehlich, Director of Collections, Philadelphia History Museum, PA
- Shana Hawrylchak, Collections Consultant, Hopkinton Historical Society, NH
- Tina Reuwsaat, Associate Curator of Collections, Southern Oregon Historical Society, OR
- Toni Kiser, Registrar, National WWII Museum, LA

Chapter 4: Results

Deaccession Policy Analysis

The document analysis includes information from eight deaccession policies; The Danish Immigrant Museum, the Hopkinton Historical Society, the Southern Oregon Historical Society, the Philadelphia History Museum, the North Carolina Museum of History, the National WWII Museum, the Grace Museum and the Shelburne Museum. The Santa Cruz Museum of Natural History was unable to provide a deaccession policy at this time due to their transition from public to private non-profit.

Seven (88%) of the museum policies make an affirmative statement about the use of deaccessioning as a tool for collections management. Although the Southern Oregon Historical Society did not include it within the policy itself, the introduction to the policy posted on their website states that deaccessioning allows them to “better care for the artifacts that are intrinsic

to our mission (Southern Oregon Historical Society).” The Danish Immigrant Museum policy states that the collections were, “never meant to be static,” deaccessioning is a “tool for the thoughtful application of a disciplined process of continual refinement to remove duplicate or damaged artifacts, as well as those that are no longer consistent with the Mission or have insufficient documentation. Such actions make available space, funds, and staff time to devote to the existing collections and new acquisitions (Danish Immigrant Museum, 2011).”