

Hans Lochmann

Deaccessioning of Museum Collections – a Taboo?

What would we be talking about?

Deaccessioning – Disposal – Exchange
(*Aussonderung – Abgabe – Austausch*)

I'll try a point of view from Germany

Since January 2012 we have the manual "*Nachhaltiges Sammeln – Ein Leitfaden zum Sammeln und Abgeben von Museumsgut*" (sustainable collecting – an introduction for collecting and disposal of museum collections) edited by the German Museum Association (Deutscher Museumsbund)

Many museums have excessive collections

A collections concept has rarely been established

In my opinion:

- **Policy** and the **criteria** by which a item may be included in a collection must be established
- A museum must establish a **collections policy** and review it regularly
- Policy must clarify issues of disposal and dispersal

Collection criteria (what, why, for whom, etc) must be considered carefully

- Selection criteria are rarely transparent
- Too little consideration is given to the question of which criteria should hold:
 - o the age of an object perhaps?
 - o or its beauty?
 - o its rarity?
 - o its symbolic significance?
- Evaluation criteria are subject to change

Museums have *Lady Luck* to thank for many of their acquisitions – along the lines of '*the tides of history wash stuff up at the door*'.

- Many museum professionals love this element of chance
- planned acquisitions are the exception

But: Do such collections represent our history and today's society?

Reasons for the lack of a collections policy and acquisitions strategy

- Unwillingness to commit oneself
- Awe of one's predecessors' concepts
- Lack of vision regarding collection development
- Lack of funding
- Constraints of consulting other museums in one's region and reaching consensus with other Museums

Fundamental positions within the museums field seem irreconcilable (don't fit together)

- Concepts are perpetuated *ad infinitum*
- Fixation with maintaining the collection
- User-led activity in the here and now
- Museum executives' independent authority

Museums' collections policy is rarely called into question. Museums' authority is implicit: it is assumed they will have selected the relevant items

Debate about how museums acquire and dispose of items is long overdue – and has now coincided with the financial crisis

- State subsidies are being cut
- As collections grow, museums need more and more storage space – buildings require maintenance and heating >> which all costs money
- Prices on the art market continue to rise – museums are increasingly unable to keep pace
- the state increasingly has its eye on museums' commercial potential

Four examples of real-life practice

Example 1: the art museum in a largish city: 'skeletons in the closet'

- *The scope of the collection barely differs from that of other art museums*
- *All major art movements are exhibited: a little of everything*
- *Entire legacies of local artists whose work will never hold its own with the rest of the collection are kept in store – most of them will never be put on display*

Example 2: a small town museum: no active acquisitions policy

- *Founded a century ago*
- *Has accumulated domestic items from middle-class households*
- *Characteristic objects: furniture, wall hangings/ paintings, clothing etc.*
- *Selection criteria was the items' beauty/ aesthetic value*
- *The acquisitions policy ceased to be active fifty years ago; the more modern era is not represented (is 'not old enough?')*

Example 3: a small local history museum: collect and exhibit

- *A village's community venue*
- *A place to hoard things one cannot bear to part with (mementoes)*
- *Characteristic objects: spinning wheels, weaving looms, irons, agricultural machinery, etc. (Selection criteria was mostly the items' age, beauty or symbolic value)*
- *The museum is not allowed to say 'No!' or donors will be offended and never come back*
- *Simple objects of everyday life are absent*
- *Everything is on display*
- *When donors' heirs reclaim an object, it is handed over to them*

Example 4: the museum of industry: 'just accept everything'

- *The museum becomes a place of commemoration for a town's one or several former industrial plant(s): 'a living grave'*
- *Anything and everything on the theme is collected, from coffee cups to heavy machinery*
- *Collection items are often 'rescued from the jaws of oblivion' or from destruction at the very last minute*
- *Items are often stored only provisionally, in large factory hangars*
- *The dimensions and weight of objects makes it difficult to (re-)arrange them*
- *When the costs for storage finally break the budget, items are mostly disposed of in haste, without being documented*

The history of a collection – how it came into existence – is rarely the subject of scientific research

- Knowledge of personalities in the collections realm (directors, staff, volunteers) is important: what were their intentions, their vision?
- The significance of special aspects or parts of a collection must be clarified
- *Provenienzforschung* is at the beginning

The state of debate in Germany

National: *Deutscher Museumsbund* (German Museums Association)

- First paper on disposal policy 2004
- '*Standards fuer Museen*' (Best practice' guidelines for museums) published together with ICOM Germany 2006
- First manual 'Collections & Disposal' (published May 2010 online)
- Manual 2011

Federal: some regional museum advisors (*Laender*) have reservations about a general directive on disposal, and even about disposal per se

- Hardly any museums have a collections concept
- Dispersal (i.e. giving collection items to other museums) is rare practice
- Concern about decisions that reflect nothing more than current trends
- Fear of irreversible decisions
- Fear of political malpractice

Regional initiatives:

Pilot project „**SAMMELN!**“ ('COLLECT') in **East Friesland** (2005-07)

- Role model „afstoten” Instituut Collectie Nederland (ICN) in The Netherlands
- 15 museums' collections have been assessed
- Objects were exchanged with other Museums
- Objects were disposed of

Programme giving seminars and writing collection concepts in **Brandenburg** (Brandenburg Museum Association)

The '**Museums' Registration**' project in **Lower Saxony** is simultaneously fostering the development of collections concepts (since 2006)

- Collections policy is being collated
- The loans issue is being addressed

(<http://www.museumsregistrierung.de>)

Prospects

- The main function of museums has been and remains to collect
- The collection are in better condition and the things have more users
- Museums know about their collections' genesis and background
- Museums are participating in 'collection management' training schemes
- Collections policy will be mandatory in the future
- Redefining museums' goals has created new opportunities for young graduates in various fields (natural and social sciences, education, etc)
- We are going to witness some new and surprising insights
- The result will be collections that deserve to be called 'cultural heritage'

A number of 'Curiosity Cabinets' that say more about their collectors than about our history will continue to exist nonetheless.

Statement held in NEMO annual meeting 2012 Dublin, National Galery of Ireland