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Collection management and public consent: The practice, politics and perception of collections disposal and transfer

Abstract It is taken as axiomatic among museum professionals that curators must actively shape collections through the processes of acquisition, de-accession, disposal, and transfer. However, these processes are not well understood by the public as a whole, by politicians, or by policy-makers.

In 2016 the National Science and Media Museum took the decision to transfer parts of its photographic collections to the Victoria and Albert Museum. While the decision was justified by the museum in terms of professional practice, the subsequent public controversy and political response suggests that these arguments did not convince the public.

Using an analysis of the public and political responses to the decision as a starting point and drawing on other examples of de-accessioning, this paper explores the gap between the public and professionals. It argues that museum professionals can build public consent for their actions and maintain public trust in their institutions.

Keywords de-accessioning, photography, policy, art, science

Museum face a crisis of sustainability. For every object that we dispose of, we acquire another thousand. And, all the while, the financial costs of maintaining collections continue to rise, and the environmental impacts are better understood by the day.

While curators and museum professionals generally accept disposal and transfer of museum collections as legitimate and necessary, for the public it remains highly controversial, particularly then the motivation for disposal is financial. Numerous examples abound: just last year there was controversy over the move by the Berkshire Museum in Pittsfield Massachusetts (Moynihan 2018) to sell 40 Norman Rockwell paintings to boost their endowments, and, in the UK, the National Railway Museum has been criticised for the transfer of a locomotive to another railway museum (Steel 2017).

Most museums are public institutions; even if we don't depend on public funding, we do depend on public consent for our activities. If we are going to address the challenge of creating sustainable museum collections, we need to build public support for disposal. This will involve addressing the large gaps that exist between the public understanding of museums and that of us professionals.

This gap in understanding became particularly clear for me over the last two years, as my own museum, the National Science and Media Museum in Bradford, was criticised for a decision to transfer a large collection to another UK National Museum – the Victoria and Albert or V&A Museum in London. We believed that we were making a brave decision, in the public interest, to rationalise our collections and focus resources on core science and technology collections – in line with a change in the museum's strategy and response to significant funding cuts from the UK government. Our critics – who included politicians, photographers and members of the public – disagreed and thought the decision was flawed and indefensible.

In this short paper I want to explore this experience, and what might be learned from it and so I will be writing mainly about collections and about the processes of disposal and transfer. However, I think there are broader lessons for museums making difficult decisions of all kinds, which require us to understand, and bridge, similar gaps between museums and the public.

The National Science and Media Museum was established in 1983 in Bradford – an industrial city in the north of England. Originally named the National Museum of Photography, Film and Television, the institution acquired the Royal Photographic Society (RPS) when the society, which is the world's oldest organisation dedicated to photography, no longer felt that the

maintenance and management of its historic collections were congruent with their current mission or their financial resources. Put simply, they couldn't afford to keep it anymore. The museum purchased the collection with public funding from several different sources, saving it from either being sold to a private collector or being broken-up into different parts and sold piecemeal. And in 2003 it was moved from the headquarters of the RPS in Bath to Bradford where it became part of much larger collection of photographic materials.

In 2012, and partly in response to significant reductions in funding from the UK government following the election of a conservative-led coalition government in 2010, the Museum embarked on a programme of strategic change that repositioned the museum a primarily interested in science and technology, rather than art and cultural production. These changes included staffing restructures, proposals for new galleries, a change to exhibition and learning programmes, a new brand, and a review of collections. The collection review identified bodies of material where the expected cost of cataloguing and digitisation far exceeded the benefit to the museum of using those collections – generally ones that fell outwith the core focus on science and technology. These included a large collection of television adverts, which were transferred to the British Film Institute, and the RPS collection, which we assessed as more in line with the V&A's approach to photography than ours.

Immediately following the public announcement of the move in January 2016 there was loud, serious and sustained criticism of the move (Jordison 2016; Lowson 2016).

We had anticipated opposition, but were not prepared for the intensity or the scale of the opposition that ensued. The criticism, although not always coherent, centred on two main themes – the charge that we were moving to London cultural collections that belonged in the north, and problem of distinguishing between, to put it crudely, 'art' and 'science' in photographic materials and practices. While we took the criticism seriously, and underwent a full review of the decision, our board decided to proceed with the transfer on the grounds that it was the right one for the museum and for the collection.

Museums rarely come into the public consciousness – they are nice places for a day out, but the average person does not think about museums much at all. As the criticism that we received manifest itself on social media, campaigning petitions, and public statements from a wide range of people, it creates a fascinating snapshot of attitudes towards museums, collections, and disposal (direct quotes from social media users, 2016):

More treasures being packed up and shipped down south.

I am concerned that this national museum outside London is being stripped of its assets.

That the Royal Photography Society's world-renowned photography is to be shipped off to London raises serious concerns that the museum is being downgraded by stealth.

You are nicking all our stuff. Stop down grading the national media centre, we want our stuff back.

Important stuff. Treasures. Assets. Asset-stripping. There are just a few of the expressions and phrases that were used on social media platforms to describe the situation, and they are telling. To think of collections as an asset is to cast a museum as a business, and to think of its value as principally financial. A business is literally defined and valued as a sum of its assets; therefore, the museum is valued for the holding of collections alone. To define a collection's transfer as "asset stripping", implies an act of managerial vandalism that leaves the organisation weaker and less able to function. This section of the public regards museums as repositories for high-value, high-status material culture, which in turn bestow their status on the institution that holds them.

I struggle with this. It feels to me rather like some nineteenth century museums, where the stolen art from subjugated peoples or defeated countries were displayed for the expressed purpose of projecting power, status, and prestige. This is reinforced by another recurring trope in our criticism: that the transfer is indicative of a "downgrading" of the museum.

This concern is particularly illuminating, as it shows clearly that from this standpoint the value of the collection is intrinsic. What the museum may or may not do with it is irrelevant; simply holding it in its stores is a guarantor of the museum's status.

While we should be careful not to over-generalise, and bear in mind that many of these people have never had a conversation with a museum professional in their lives, it feels to me like the kinds of attitude that I heard from the most old-fashioned curators when I started work in museums around 2001, and that persists in more conservative parts of our sector.

Most of us today, however are increasingly thinking of our collections and our institutions in different ways. We understand there is a balance between

the intrinsic value or significance of an object and the opportunities for using it for research or for display. We know that dusty, un-catalogued, un-photographed objects in dark cupboards are not valuable to us, but are actually taking up space that could be used for something more useful. And we also understand collections as complex things, accumulated over time by our all too fallible predecessors.

Even so, curators have traditionally been reluctant to dispose of material, to refine and shape our collections. Nick Merriman, former Director of the Manchester Museum, has argued powerfully that museums must address what he describes as the ‘taboo’ around disposal (Merriman 2008):

If we begin to see museum collections as historically contingent and partial... this frees us up to take our own responsibility for active stewardship of collections rather than feeling that the role of the curator is simply to accept their predecessors’ decisions which have to be preserved intact for an indefinable posterity.

But the legitimacy for curatorial action, in public museums, ultimately stems from the public – we are only as ‘free’ to act as we have public consent to do so.

We can think of there as being various sources of consent for a decision to dispose of a collection. Formally, we seek approval from the governance structure of the museum; as well as from the guardians of professional ethics (in the UK, this role is played by the Museums Association). In other controversial cases of disposal approval has not necessarily been gained from both sources. In 2014, for example, Northampton Museums sold an Egyptian statue from its collections to fund expansion of the museum buildings. While approved by the local authority, the museum lost its accredited status – effectively ostracising it from the professional community (Kendall 2014; Johnston 2014).

However, our recent experience suggests that these two sources are, in and of themselves, inadequate. Our actions in relation to the RPS collection were thoroughly consistent with professional ethics, in line with best practice, authorised (twice) by governance boards at both museums and endorsed by the Secretary of State. And yet it is clear from the reaction to our decision that general consent from the public was absent.

Perhaps this should not surprise us. After all, trust in professional expertise exercised ‘on behalf of’ the public, is under pressure across all fields from

medicine to science to politics. In the UK, in the aftermath of our recent referendum, a senior politician remarked “the people of this country have had enough of experts...saying that they know what is best, and getting it consistently wrong”: a quote that has come to epitomise the new populist mood.

So, therefore, how we seek approval from that third source of legitimacy? How do we bridge the gap in understanding between professional practice and public understanding? Unfortunately, I don’t think there are easy answers here, but there might be ways that we can start to build more constructive conversations around tough decisions.

Firstly, we can think about how we structure all our public and stakeholder communications. Many museums are finding innovative ways to expand and extend their networks of stakeholders and communities, and using consultative or participation methodologies to involve many more people in decision-making than before. This is challenging and can create inconsistencies: I have sat in consultation meetings with community partners who took a fundamentally different political stance than that taken by the board. But, done well, it can create dialogue and mutual understanding about difficult issues.

Secondly, we should think about whether we’re using our communications and interactions with the public to present a real picture of museum practice, or to sustain a fantasy Indiana Jones world of supernaturally knowledgeable curators, and stores brimming with gleaming treasures. Certainly, we very easily allow ourselves to be photographed with white gloves, reverently gazing at a gleaming object in a darkened store. I’ve done this personally around four times this year. What if, rather than confirming prevailing attitudes to collections and to curatorial expertise, we confounded them? What if we were more open about what we don’t know about objects, as what we do know? What if we began to say publicly how much it’s going to cost to catalogue, digitise, repack, and store properly every object in our collections, rather than keep this to ourselves? If we’re open and honest about our challenges, maybe we might find it easier to build the support to address them.

There is an expression in English: laws are like sausages – no one wants to know how they’re made. In democracies, of course, we need to know how our laws are made, and maybe museums are the same. But if we want to ensure that the public carries on supporting museums, particularly when we must make difficult decisions, then perhaps we should be find ways show exactly how, and why, the sausages get made the way that they do.

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