

## **MUSEUM NOTES**

### **PRACTICAL INFORMATION ON OPERATING A COMMUNITY MUSEUM**

#### **WRITING A COLLECTIONS MANAGEMENT POLICY FOR THE MUSEUM**

A clearly defined Collections Management Policy can help the museum in its all-important task of controlling its collections efficiently. The Collections Management Policy should be developed from the museum's Statement of Purpose and identify what the museum will collect, how it will collect, how it will document and care for the collection, who will collect, how loans will be handled and how decisions will be made about objects that are not suitable for the collection. It serves as a checklist when objects are being considered for collection. It helps the museum in maintaining high standards for its collection.

The Collections Management Policy should be written, circulated and discussed by the museum's governing body and members of staff, so that everyone will understand it. This policy should be prepared by the founding group when the museum is being established, or, if the museum is already in operation, it should be developed as soon as possible by the museum's governing body.

#### **What should the museum collect?**

One of the primary objectives of the Collections Management Policy is to define what the museum will collect. A good Policy should define the historical significance, geographic region, time period, condition of objects, function of objects, use of duplicates, and any other pertinent criteria for accepting or declining objects. The term "historical significance" requires clarification here. The following definition may be useful. *"An historically significant object contributes to a clearer understanding or interpretation of some former custom, activity, episode, or personality. The extent of this contribution depends upon 1) its documented individual history; 2) its physical character and condition; 3) the nature of the historic period or episode with which it is associated."*<sup>1</sup>

The museum must be selective in choosing objects for collection. If the museum cannot properly house and care for artifacts in its custody, it may be better to turn them down. It should always be remembered that the mandate of the museum is to preserve artifacts for future generations. One-of-a-kind oddities should not be collected, because they rarely meet the criterion of historical significance. The Collections Management Policy should contain a statement to the effect that the museum will consider the function of each object to be acquired.

Careful consideration should be given to the feasibility of the museum's collecting duplicates of artifacts already in the museum. There are times when duplicates are useful. Occasionally an artifact being offered is a finer example, or in better condition, or comes with better documentation than a similar artifact already in the collection. Sometimes the museum collects examples of certain objects for research and study. However, the acquisition of too many duplicates should be avoided, because they take up precious space and often cannot be displayed.

#### **How should objects be acquired?**

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<sup>1</sup> Guthe, Carl E. **The Management of Small History Museums**, p. 27.

The Collections Management Policy should clearly define how artifacts will be acquired. The two most common methods of acquisition are donation and purchase. Regardless of which method is used, the museum staff should be sure that the transfer of ownership is accompanied by a legal document.

For purchases, the museum staff should receive a bill of sale, with the name, address and telephone number of the vendor clearly visible. Purchases should be made in the name of the governing body.

For donations, the museum staff should obtain a signed gift form from the donor. It should be stated in the Collections Management Policy — and on all gift forms — that a donation to the museum becomes the property of the museum, that the museum may use the donation as it wishes, and that the museum may dispose of the donation if deemed necessary. This policy should be explained to each donor. If the donor insists on setting his or her own terms, the donation must be politely refused.

Even if the museum has no money for purchasing objects, active collecting is still possible and very desirable in order to round out the collections and tell the community's story as completely as possible. This can be accomplished by keeping the community and the general public fully informed about particular objects the museum wishes to acquire.

The Collections Management Policy should clearly define the museum's position regarding loans. Because of the difficulties that can arise from accepting them, long-term loans should be discouraged. Objects on loan, for which the museum is liable, take up valuable storage space which is needed for the museum's own collection and add to the ever increasing insurance costs. On the other hand, short-term loans are highly recommended if they can be utilized in the changing exhibit program. The usual period for these loans is three to six months. The museum's temporary displays can be greatly enhanced with the addition of objects on loan for specified periods. At the same time, loans from members of the public help to stimulate pride within the community and can increase the number of visitors to the museum.

It is important to remember the museum is liable for any damage which may occur to objects on loan. All objects on loan should be covered by the museum's Fine Arts insurance policy. This will result in an increase of the annual premium, and may substantially increase the premium if the loaned objects are damaged.

The Collections Management Policy should set the terms and conditions for loans to other institutions. For example, the Policy might state that artifacts will be loaned only to other institutions for the purpose of display, research and/or education.

### **Who collects?**

The issue of who collects for the museum must be clearly defined in order to avoid confusion, duplication or error. To ensure controlled collecting, the following steps should be taken whenever donations or artifacts for sale are being considered for the museum:

1. Every artifact offered should first be brought to the attention of the curator.
2. The artifact is then considered by a Collections or Accessions Committee, which has been appointed by the governing body of the museum. The Collections or Accessions Committee is usually made up of the curator and/or director, one or more members of the Board, and knowledgeable members of the public. It is the Committee who makes the decision on whether or not the artifact is to be accepted or refused.

3. At some museums, the Collections Committee makes its recommendations to the Board of Management. The Board of Management then makes the final decision on whether to accept or refuse the artifact.

### **How are artifacts to be removed from the collection?**

Removal of the artifact from the collections is also accomplished by the Collections Committee, when the Committee has found an artifact that does not meet the criteria of the Collections Management Policy. This usually happens when a collection is acquired before the Collections Management Policy has been developed. Artifacts which do not meet the new criteria are sometimes removed from the collection. This is also known as *deaccessioning*.

As much as possible, deaccessioned objects should be kept in the public domain. In order of preference, the methods of disposal are:

1. approach another museum and exchange the artifact for another artifact from their collection
2. donation to another museum or other cultural institution
3. sale to another museum or other cultural institution, with the proceeds going into an acquisition or collection fund
4. sale at public auction, with the proceeds going into an acquisition or collection fund
5. destruction (if artifact not in a condition to be disposed of in any of the other ways identified above)

Because of the conflict of interest, the Collections Management Policy should state that members of the governing body and staff of the museum may not purchase a de-accessioned artifact. If an artifact is in total disrepair, a professional museum conservator should be consulted to determine whether the artifact should be destroyed, and if so, how to do it safely and ethically.

### **How will the museum document and care for the collection?**

Two other subjects the Collections Management Policy should address are the methods of documenting and preserving the collection. A good Policy should outline the manner in which artifacts will be researched. It should spell out how artifacts are to be catalogued, and the kinds of records the museum will maintain for the collection. Because the preservation and conservation of artifacts are important functions of the museum, the Collections Management Policy should address these concerns as well.

### **The final result**

It would be unusual for two museums to have the same Collections Management Policy because every museum is unique. While each museum's governing body should address the issues discussed in this paper, the solutions and policies will differ from museum to museum. ***Guelph Museums' Collections Management Policy***, included with this tip sheet on the OMA website, is a good example of how one museum in Ontario manages its collection.

### **Summary**

Since each museum is unique, the people best suited for setting up a Collections Management Policy are those most directly involved with the operation of the museum. The governing body and staff should work jointly to develop suitable policies. The only type of Collections Management Policy that is successful is one which is written down for all to follow. The Policy must be compatible with the terms outlined in the museum's Statement of Purpose. Because of

the importance of the collection, a framework for collecting is indispensable and no museum should be without one.

**For further reading:**

Alexander, Edward P. **Museums In Motion**. Nashville, Tennessee: American Association for State and Local History, 1979. Chapter 7.

Rebecca A. Buck, Jean Allman Gilmore, **The new museum registration methods** American Association of Museums 1998 - Business & Economics - 427 pages

Burcaw, G. Ellis. **Introduction to Museum Work**. Nashville, Tennessee: American Association for State and Local History, 1975. Chapter 7.

Guthe, Carl E. **The Management of Small History Museums**. Nashville, Tennessee: American Association for State and Local History, 1964.

Kramer, Eugene F. "Collecting Historical Artifacts: An Aid for Small Museums". American Association for State and Local History, Technical Leaflet 6. **History News**, Volume 25, No. 8 (August 1970).

MacBeath, George and S. James Gooding (Eds.) **Basic Museum Management**. Ottawa, Ontario: Canadian Museums Association, 1969. pp. 43-62.

[Daniel B. Reibel](#) Registration Methods for the Small Museum  
AltaMira Press, 2008 - 187 pages

Daniel B Reibel's Registration Methods for the Small Museum has been the definitive guide to registration methodology since 1978. Covering all aspects of the registration of museum collections, it provides practical solutions for any museum professional in a concise, readable manner. The new fourth edition brings the classic handbook up-to-date with the electronic registration techniques that are available for today's museum.

**Note:**

The Ministry of Citizenship, Culture and Recreation would like to thank the Guelph Museums for permission to use their Collections Management Policy.