

# TIP SHEET

## Deaccessioning from Collections (2016)

### Deaccessioning from Collections

When museums acquire artefacts, they **must** adhere to essential institutional documents like their mission statement and collections management policy with the intent to hold them in **public trust** for perpetuity. This helps ensure that museum collections have proper historical and/or contextual significance, are in good condition, and fill a specific need or gap within the current holdings.

However, many museum collections do not maintain this standard and risk losing precious resources as a result. For example, the practice of collecting an object simply because “it’s old” can be commonplace when acquisition standards are not well-defined. Duplication of artefacts with little or no provenance is also characteristic of many collections.

The process of **deaccessioning** and **disposing** of artefacts can help alleviate these issues and allow resources, such as storage space, to be allocated to artefacts that better fit within the museum’s collecting mandate. This resource redistribution can allow for more refined, upgraded, and

focused collections (i), and ultimately strengthens the overall museum operation. It is important to remember that because museums are founded on public trust, and their collections are specifically built to serve the public, sites must adopt and adhere to professional and ethical standards and institutional policy regarding deaccessions.

### Policy and Procedures for Deaccessioning

It is essential that institutions either include these topics as part of their collections management policy or create a separate deaccession policy. In these policies, the museum must establish who has the authorization to formally deaccession and dispose of artefacts. Typically, this authority comes from either the board of directors or a special committee (i.e. collections committee). The decision should never be left up to one individual; it must be a collective decision. In addition to authorization, the deaccession policy should also include:

**Deaccessioning** is the act of permanently removing an accessioned artefact from a museum’s collection. Once an artefact has been deaccessioned, it must be physically removed from the collection. This step is referred to as **disposal**.

- Circumstances where deaccessions are permitted
- Methods of disposal that are permitted
- Types of collection-related activities the proceeds from deaccessions may be used for (N1)
- Documentation that must be completed or updated throughout the deaccession process
- Minimum period of time artefacts will be kept in the collection before they can be considered for deaccessioning (generally at least two years). (ii)

Museums should also implement procedures for deaccessioning, which provide a step-by-step explanation how and when museums go about completing deaccessions and disposals.

## When to Deaccession

A museum can only deaccession an artefact when it holds legal title, with proper supporting documentation regarding its ownership. If there is any question regarding ownership, the museum should not follow through on its decision to deaccession. This also applies to artefacts that have been loaned to the museum – including those on “permanent” or “indefinite” loan. (N2)

Once the museum’s legal title has been established and formal authorization been received, specific deaccession criteria can be considered. These will be described in detail in the museum’s deaccession policy, but generally include:

- Ethical Concerns
  - i.e. indigenous materials, human remains
- Relevance/Significance
  - i.e. artefact does not fit within the museum’s collecting mandate, has a lack of provenance, is not complete or representative, or was accessioned by mistake (such as wrongly accessioned office equipment and supplies)
- Condition/Health and Safety
  - i.e. artefact is beyond conservation treatment or poses risk to people or other artefacts
- Future Use
  - i.e. artefact will never be used by the museum or its public in research, exhibitions etc. (iii)



### 3 Strikes?

*This object might be deaccessioned because of possible health risks (pesticides), its poor representation of the real thing, and because few Canadian museums’ collecting mandate would include African mammals.*

Once legal title has been established and a criteria for deaccessioning has been determined, the museum must receive permission from the collection's authorized body to formally proceed with the deaccession and disposal.

Lastly, be sure to follow all applicable laws (N3) for the museum, the collection, and the artefacts being deaccessioned throughout the process. (iv)

## How To Dispose

If an artefact meets the museum's deaccessioning criteria and formal approval has been received, procedures for disposal can begin. Always keep in mind that museum collections are held in trust on behalf of the public, and keeping deaccessioned artefacts in the public domain (i.e. within other museum collections) should be the priority.

Criteria for disposal will be described in the museum's deaccession policy, but generally include:

- (1) Transfer of title via gifting or trading to another public institution
- (2) Sale (N1, N4)
- (3) Destruction (N5)

**Deaccessioned artefacts can not be returned to their original donors (even if no tax receipt was originally issued) because of Canadian Revenue Agency regulations.** However, museums may choose to alert the public, and donors,

regarding decisions deaccession artefacts (including rationale, method etc.) to maintain openness (v). Original donors may be allowed to purchase deaccessioned objects at fair market value if they wish.

## Records Managements

Throughout the deaccession process it is imperative that museums update their documentation. Meeting minutes, notes, and correspondence regarding the rationale and decisions resulting from the deaccession should be kept with artefact files. All records associated with the artefacts chosen for



*Duplication wastes precious museum resources. Few museums would have reason to have such an extensive collection of irons.*

deaccession should be flagged and dated. Before disposal all deaccession numbers should be removed from the objects.

Once disposal has occurred, all files should once again be updated accordingly. This includes listing the method of disposal, any associated individuals or organizations, and updating the artefact's location.

A thorough record of all funds garnered through disposal should also be maintained, along with details any projects or purchases completed with this money.

## Conclusion

Deaccessioning can be a key component within a museum's collection management activities and can lead to better resource allocation and stronger museum operations. However, due to the trust placed in museums and their management of collections, it is **essential** to develop and adhere to proper deaccession policies and procedures while maintaining high ethical standards throughout the process.

## References

- (i, ii) John E. Simmonds, *Things Great and Small: Collections Management Policies*, (American Associations of Museums, 2006)
- (iii, iv) Richard Gerrard, *An Introduction to the Deaccession and Disposal of Collections* (Ontario Museum Association Learning Lab Summer Series, 2013)
- (v) National Park Service, *NPS Museum Handbook, Part II: Museum Records*, Chapter 6 "Deaccessioning" (<http://www.nps.gov/museum/publications/MHII/mh2ch6.pdf>) (2000)

## Notes

**N1** Funds gained from the sale of deaccessioned artefacts should not be used for capital or operating expenses. These funds should be used for activities that directly support the collection (i.e. storage materials, new acquisitions).

**N2** In these instances, the museum must attempt the process of returning the unwanted objects to their owner or their heirs.

**N3** Always adhere to all applicable laws. Many museum and collection reference materials are printed outside of Canada, so be sure to double-check the laws that affect the museum's specific region.

**N4** The sale of deaccessioned artefacts should always be completed through unbiased third-parties. This helps prevent conflicts of interest and ensure openness in the eyes of the public.

**N5** Destruction should be considered a last resort. Only destroy objects that pose a health and safety risk, are severely deteriorated, or are unwanted through transfer or sale.

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Written by: Chris Selman

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For more information or additional copies, contact:

Museums Association of Saskatchewan  
424 McDonald Street  
Regina, SK  
S4N6E1

Phone: 306-780-9279  
Toll Free SK: 1-866-568-7386  
Fax: 306-780-9463  
[mas@saskmuseums.org](mailto:mas@saskmuseums.org)  
[www.saskmuseums.org](http://www.saskmuseums.org)