

TIP SHEET

Acquisition Evaluation (2014)

Acquisition Evaluation

Collections are at the heart of all museums. Unfortunately, without proper evaluation, museum artifacts don't always lend themselves to the museum's mission and use up scarce resources for the care and storage of artifacts that better reflect the museum's mission and mandate. Evaluating potential acquisitions is a low-cost and effective way to build a functional collection that will allow a museum to achieve its mission.

Acquisition Policy and Procedure

Formal acquisition of an object means transferring its legal title from the previous owner to the museum. Museums can acquire objects through purchase, field collecting, and donations, including bequests. No matter how an object is acquired, the museum must complete a thorough pre-acquisition review of the object before accepting it into the permanent collection.

To ensure that acquisition decisions are made legally and ethically, museums develop and implement policies and procedures to guide their process. A collections management policy is used to establish the museum's collection activities, such as acquisitions, deaccessions, and loans. It provides a framework for making collection decisions. Collection procedures provide clear steps needed to implement policy, and acquisition procedures are a key component of them.

A museum's acquisition procedures should include:

- Accepted forms of acquisition – How may the museum acquire objects?
- Documentation needed with each method of acquisition – What records must be kept?

- A list of the criteria used to select acquisitions – How will you decide which objects to collect?
- Steps involved in making the decision to either accept or decline an object, including how to document the decision
- Steps for handling objects that are approved for acquisition
- Steps for handling objects that are declined for acquisition

What is a Pre-acquisition Checklist?

A form created in-house for those deciding on potential acquisitions to use for streamlining the decision making process.

The form should include a brief summary of provenance and how the item came to the museum (i.e. Donation from Mr. Smith). The rest of the form consists of a number of questions pertaining to each criteria being used to assess the object for acquisition (i.e. How does the item complement the museum's mission statement? Does the donor have clear title?)

Acquisition Criteria

With the exception of obvious health and safety concerns, establishing that items adhere to the museum's mission statement should be the first concern when reviewing potential acquisitions. If an object cannot be linked with the museum's mission it should not be accepted. If a link with mission is confirmed, the acquisition process can move forward with other criteria. These criteria may include:

Significance

This criterion is closely linked with an object's relevance to the museum's mission statement, and refers to its history of use and provenance. It is the unique attribute of that particular object that makes it relevant to the museum's mission. The Museums Association of Saskatchewan's "Tip Sheet #1: Provenance" is a great source of information to guide you through this topic.

Acquisition Evaluation

Condition

An assessment of an item's condition should be made before accepting it into the permanent collection. Consider factors such as whether an object requires specialized care; if it is broken, mouldy, rusted, incomplete; the costs of conservation treatment or preservation; or whether it was made from materials that are prone to rapid deterioration.

Duplicates

Duplicate artifacts take storage space and resources away from artifacts already in the permanent collection, as well as from other potential acquisitions that could better support the museum's mission. It could be beneficial to have duplicates for certain items, but common sense should prevail in considering this category.

Use

Ethically, a museum's adherence to public trust requires that it only acquire objects that allow it to properly advance knowledge and understanding through exhibits, programming, and research.

Resources

Before accepting anything in a permanent collection, a museum must weigh the costs, both in terms of manpower and finances, needed to properly store, care, or exhibit an object, and whether or not they have access to these resources.

Legal Status

Museums must be aware of the legal status of all objects that are being considered for acquisition. Do not acquire items that have been illegally or unethically obtained. Archaeological and palaeontological materials, some biological specimens like endangered species and migratory birds, firearms, medications and other items are subject to regulation, and the museum is responsible for ensuring it abides by the law. It is illegal to buy, sell, trade, or dispose of many of these materials without government approval.

Health and Safety Concerns

Knowing the material composition and history of items being considered for acquisition can be important in knowing what safety issues they could



Cellulose nitrate is a chemical that can be found in photographic material and moulded plastics like toys and eyeglass frames. Over time it can degrade and produce harmful gases and, in extreme cases, can even spontaneously combust.

cause for staff, volunteers, and artifacts already in the permanent collection. Chemicals like cellulose nitrate in photographs and plastics or harmful inhalants like mould spores can lead to serious health concerns to people or material they come in contact with.

Donor Restrictions

Museums should not accept any items that come with restrictions from the donors. These can include requiring credit lines while on display, ensuring that the item will always be on permanent display, that it not be displayed until after the donor's death, or that the museum never de-accessions the artifact.



Mould can grow on a number of organic materials including woven textiles, baskets, and leather. If left unchecked, it can spread to other artifacts in the collection and also cause significant health issues for people that come in contact with the contaminated items.

Donors need to understand that donating to a museum means signing over legal title of the item, and that for the museum's protection it cannot accept restrictions.

Once the museum decides on its acquisition criteria, it should create a pre-acquisition review form to help evaluate objects. Based on the museum's needs and collection state, decide if some criteria should be prioritized. The museum must then decide if objects must pass all criteria listed, a certain key group or combination, or a percentage of the total. Make sure to include passing requirements in the museum's acquisition procedures.

Final Decisions and the Museum's Community Relations

Collection committees help ensure that final acquisition outcomes are properly supported and justified. It is easier to show that due process was followed when a committee majority decides and its work is well documented. A record of all decisions made by committee members, along with their supporting rationale, should be kept in the Master File or Declined File depending on whether objects are retained or returned. Committees should be chosen from the museum's board, but it may help if staff provide briefings, paperwork and research to-date.



Objects should only be collected if the museum can ensure that they will be used to fulfill its duty to public trust. This can be done by collecting items that will be used in programs or exhibitions.

If necessary, a manager or director can make decisions independently, but acquisition procedures should state the circumstances under which they should approach the board for guidance, such as purchases requiring a large expenditure or donations from board members.

A pre-acquisition checklist will make the decision making process more straightforward because an object either passes the criteria listed or it does not. However, it must include a method for dealing with conflicting scores or results (i.e. majority rules). Also include the requirements needed for objects to pass review in the museum's acquisition procedures.

Talking and interviewing with donors is an integral part of learning an object's history of use and provenance, but donors should not be involved in the final acquisition decision process. Explain to donors that signing a Receipt for Temporary Deposit does not mean their object has been accepted into the permanent collection and must still pass the pre-acquisition checklist and committee review before it is formally acquired by the museum. Make sure they understand this point, otherwise finding out their offering has been declined could be disappointing.

The donor's absence from the acquisition review helps ensure that an honest evaluation of the object can be undertaken and that final decisions can be made with less fear of hurt feelings. If a donor does not agree with a decision, the museum can use the completed pre-acquisition forms, relevant sections of policy and procedure, and meeting records to demonstrate the museum's choice to either accept or decline the object.

Conclusion

Developing good acquisition procedures, will help ensure the museum is acquiring relevant and useful artifacts for its collection. Following the procedures and explaining them to donors will help maintain positive relationships with the museum's community, and demonstrate that the museum is an open and ethical repository for high quality artifacts that assist the institution in fulfilling its mission.

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