

Museums, sales and valuation events

A statement from the Museums Association

March 2004

Museums sometimes want to hold events on their premises in collaboration with auctioneers and dealers. These include events where visitors bring in objects for valuation and exhibitions of historic works of art that are, or are about to be, for sale.

In recent years there have been an increasing number of enquiries to the Museums Association's ethical advice service about such events. In response to this demand for advice earlier this year the Museums Association's Ethics Committee invited comment on a consultation draft of a set of guidelines.

There were 42 responses from a wide range of individual and institutional members. Bodies such as the Association of Independent Museums also took a view. The Museums Association thanks all respondents.

As a result of this consultation the following advice can now be offered, which the Museums Association believes reflects the views of respondents and that of the Ethics Committee.

1. Museums promote interest in collections, attract visitors and manage and generate funds to support these purposes. One way they may achieve their goals is by collaborating with dealers and auctioneers, and involving them in events held on museum premises.
2. There is a fundamental difference between the purpose of a museum, which is to use public money to collect, safeguard and make accessible items for the benefit of society, and a dealer or auctioneer, whose aim is to buy and sell items for profit.

There are advantages and disadvantages for a museum in collaborating with dealers and auctioneers, but museums should be aware that dealers' and auctioneers' agendas may not coincide with that of the museum.

Collaborative events should therefore be approached with caution. Museums wishing to hold such events are advised to go through a formal process to ensure that events are consistent with the aims of the museum and, where possible, enhance the quality of the service.

In such cases it would be inappropriate for a dealer or auctioneer to use the occasion to promote their commercial activities.

3. Pros and cons that may need to be considered include:

- possibly misleading some members of the public as to the museum's purposes and activities
- associating the museum too closely with financial rather than cultural values
- whether the collaboration will be an effective use of the museum's time and resources
- the extent of the educational potential of the event
- to what extent the event will attract new audiences
- whether an association with a dealer or auctioneer will attract expertise in new areas to the museum
- whether holding such events will build helpful relationships with dealers
- how the event will be perceived by the media
- whether a salesroom might misuse or misrepresent its association with the museum

4. Following consultation, the Museums Association believes there is consensus that the following practices are to be avoided:

- holding on museum premises shows or auction previews promoted by a dealer or auctioneer without compelling educational or cultural reasons for doing so
- holding a public event at a museum where auctioneers or dealers are invited to give valuations of items in museum collections
- allowing auctioneers or dealers to promote their own commercial activities as part of a public museum event
- museum staff giving valuations of objects brought in by members of the public.

5. Museums sometimes hold events where visitors can bring in items for identification or for advice on how to care for them. Visitors to such events should be encouraged to learn as much as they can about what they bring in, for example by being directed to sources that help establish provenance, or enable cultural or scientific research.

When visitors enquire about what price an item might fetch and no reliable expertise is available at the event (see paragraph 2 above) they should be directed impartially to listings of dealers, for example in a telephone directory.

Enquirers should be advised to seek a range of opinions and that the quality of the advice they get cannot be guaranteed by the museum or its staff.

Back in December 2002 the Museums Association's ethics committee first brought the issue of holding valuation events in museums. In an article in the Museums Journal the ethics committee expressed the view that valuation events should not take place in museums.

The reasons against holding such events included a misconception by the public of the role of a museum and the whether it was selling off its collections; an emphasis on the financial, not cultural value of the object and an implied endorsement of a particular valuation.

In February 2003 the committee published a draft statement on sales and valuation events and invited people to respond.