



Collections for the Future

Report of a
Museums
Association
Inquiry

**MUSEUMS
ASSOCIATION**

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Acknowledgments and abbreviations



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Abbreviations

AHRC Arts and Humanities Research Council
(Formerly Arts and Humanities Research Board – AHRB)
CAS Contemporary Art Society
DCMS Department for Culture Media and Sport
HLF Heritage Lottery Fund
LGA Local Government Association
MA Museums Association
MLA Museums Libraries and Archives Council
SSC Sector Skills Council
UMG University Museums Group



Foreword



As president of the Museums Association (MA), I am delighted to introduce Collections for the Future, the report of an inquiry carried out over the past 18 months by the MA, with input from over 500 organisations and individuals.

The inquiry investigates how museum and gallery collections can best serve the needs of museum users in the future. It was prompted by a sense that collections have been relatively neglected in policy terms in recent years, and that it was time to attempt to resolve some of the debates about collections, which resurface from time to time.

It is important to stress that, in focusing on collections, the inquiry emphatically does not represent a rejection of the current emphasis on the needs of museum users. On the contrary,

the inquiry aims to ensure that everyone has the right not just to enjoy museums, but also to engage with the collections that are at their heart.

This report embraces all museums across the UK, whatever their governance, size or subject area; some of its themes will have resonance more widely. It shows that all museums can make better use of their collections, and enrich them. The inquiry concludes that the UK's museums are in a relatively strong position, with all benefiting from new thinking and many benefiting from new funding.

New thinking includes, in Scotland, the national audit of collections and forthcoming significance recognition scheme; in Northern Ireland an audit of museum collections is underway, together with a

debate centred on collections outside museums; in England the consultation document recently published by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, Understanding the Future, addresses many of the issues that are at the centre of this report. In Wales, and indeed in the English regions, the formation of cross-sectoral bodies for museums, libraries and archives is leading to reappraisal of the needs of the sector, and new opportunities for collaboration. And Renaissance in the Regions was of course the most thorough consideration of issues facing English non-national museums in a generation.

In addition to Renaissance in the Regions, new funding that is helping to realise the potential of museum collections includes the unprecedented contribution of the Heritage Lottery Fund, the Designation Challenge Fund in England and the Strategic Change Fund in Scotland.

We want museums across the UK to capitalise on the opportunities currently offered by new investment and new ideas. The time is right for substantial change in the way museums think about their collections.

This report not only offers a challenge to museums but also to funders and policy makers. It also sets out an ambitious agenda for the MA. I look forward to working with colleagues from across the museum sector as the MA takes forward the ideas in the report in the coming years.

Charles Saumarez Smith
President
Museums Association



Executive summary

Museum and gallery collections transform and inspire people. Collections can be exotic, intriguing, affirming, pleasurable and challenging. They stir emotions and stimulate ideas.

Collections for the Future makes proposals that will ensure that more people have more opportunities to engage with museum collections, and that those collections are as rich, diverse and inspiring as they can possibly be.

Museums have already taken significant steps forward in realising the power of their collections. But more could be done. Too many museum collections are underused – not displayed, published, used for research or even understood by the institutions that care for them.

Museums must reassert the place of their collections at the heart of the public realm, and find new ways to ensure that they really are for everyone.

If people are entitled to access to museums, then they have to be entitled to engage fully with collections. A stronger emphasis on collections is not just

compatible with increasing access and learning in museums: it is vital to it.

Collections for the Future is the conclusion of an inquiry led by the Museums Association (MA) that lasted for 18 months, with many people contributing their views. The inquiry was overseen by a steering group, chaired by Jane Glaister, president of the MA from 2002 to 2004. Two working groups looked at particular issues in more detail and, based on the discussions of these two groups, the MA published a consultation paper in summer 2004, which was widely debated across the sector. International representation on the steering group gave the inquiry a broader perspective, and an appendix also looks at the systems for supporting collections in other European countries.

The report begins with an essay on the power and potential of collections, and the challenges facing museums and their funders. The main body of the report explores this in more detail and reflects the range of views expressed during the inquiry. It also begins to plot a course for the way ahead.

Key findings

The report groups the inquiry's findings under three headings: Engagement, The dynamic collection and Strengthening the museum sector.

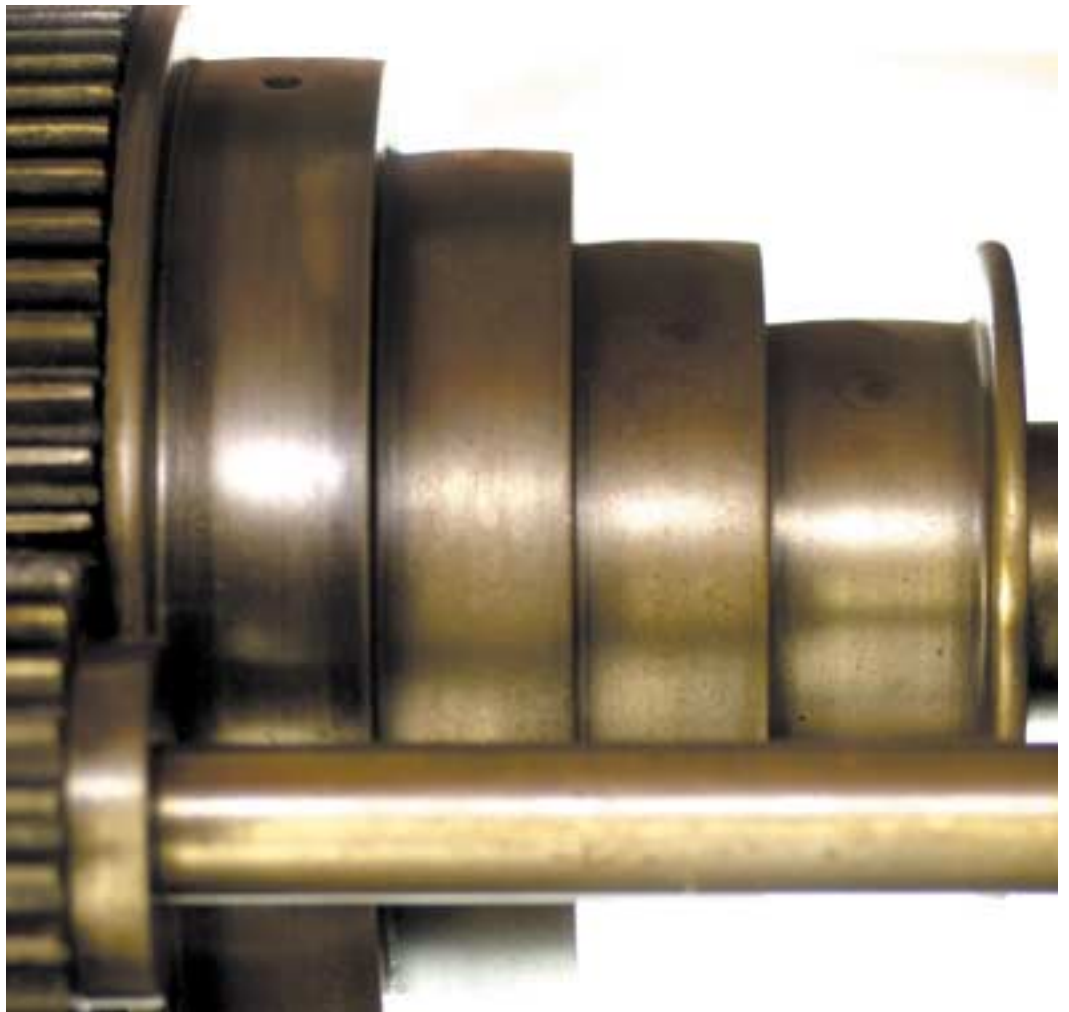
A Engagement

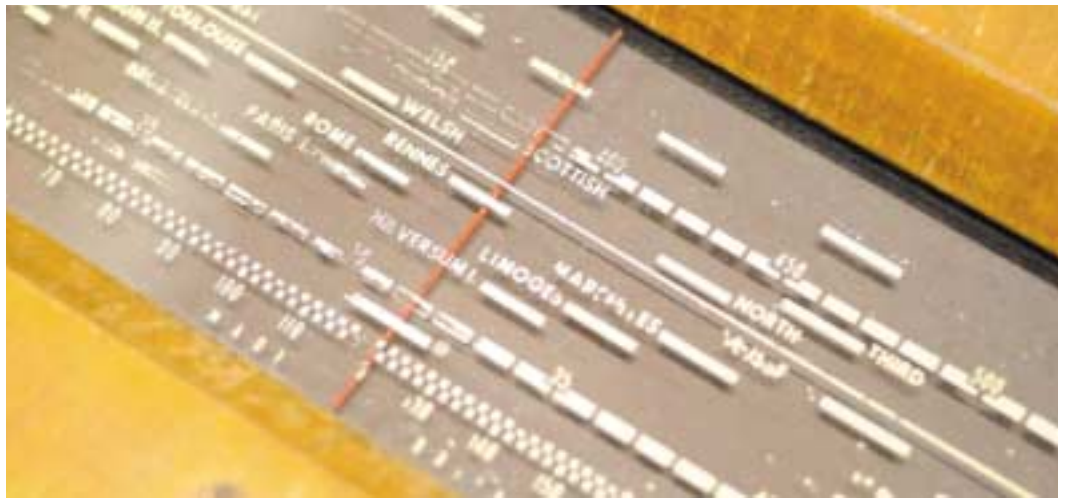
Museums should do more to expand the opportunities open to people to engage with collections. More collections should be in active use and museums should improve the way they manage collections-related knowledge.

While preservation is an essential part of the role of museums, it is not on its own sufficient: museums must take steps to ensure that more of their collections are used (paragraph 9)

By getting more collections out of store, museums can extend the possibility of people encountering objects. It is the responsibility of museums to open up collections in this way if they are to be properly available as part of the public realm. (17)

Many museums feel that they lack adequate information about their collections. This is one of the most





significant barriers preventing them from achieving their potential (21)

Museums need better information resources, including better documentation. But they also need to be realistic about the availability of resources and to take a new, more targeted approach to documentation and knowledge management. (23)

The extent to which museums can or should share control over the meaning of objects with others remains a highly contentious issue. Museums need to engage more actively with this debate and work out its implications for the way that their collections are presented. (30-33)

Continued investment in digitisation is vital. There will be uses of digitised collections that cannot be imagined yet. (35)

Actions

The MA will continue to encourage debate about how wider engagement can be encouraged. The MA will encourage relevant bodies to undertake research to assess the impact of initiatives designed to make collections more available, such as open storage, loan schemes and displays on non-museum premises. (14)

The MA will work with the mda (formerly the Museum Documentation Association), the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA) and others to develop clear and realistic recommendations about the future direction of documentation and knowledge management. (25)

The MA considers the hidden histories approach to be an important way forward, and will look for ways to support and encourage it. (29)

The MA will encourage the MLA and others to find ways of encouraging and supporting more digitisation of collections, and adding value to existing digital resources. (36)

B The dynamic collection

Museums should actively develop their collections, with a renewed commitment to acquisition as a key part of their role, and new strategic and funding approaches. Disposal should be seen as an integral part of collections development. Collections should be more mobile, seen in more venues both within the UK and internationally.

Museums are no longer developing their collections with the vibrancy and rigour needed to ensure that they serve the needs of current and future audiences. (40)

The inquiry uncovered a great deal of resistance among museums to an over-centralised approach to collecting. A judicious approach is needed that leaves room for personal vision, is discriminating and selective, and encourages museums to work together when appropriate, without imposing a rigid centralised approach. But above all, all museums must enter into the debate about how collections can best be developed for the future, and reinstate active collecting as a crucial part of their activities. (47-48)

The idea of defining a comprehensive 'distributed national collection', covering all disciplines, is unrealistic. Nevertheless, it is in the public interest that museum collections are treated as a single resource, on which all museums should be able to draw. All users would benefit if museums shared their collections more widely, as well as collaborating on collections management and collecting. (56)

There are too few significant loans, and too few opportunities to see important temporary exhibitions in the UK outside the capital cities. (58)

Private collections have a public value and it is museums' responsibility to help realise that value in appropriate ways. (69)

There is an ethical imperative for museums to increase the use of their collections as well as to maximise their care. Museums have a responsibility to consider the appropriate transfer of collections to another institution as part of this. (71)

Museums cannot keep spending public resources caring for objects that will never be enjoyed or used. Making decisions about disposal is part of a museum's professional and ethical responsibility. Disposal is not risk free, but neither is unthinking retention. (74-80)

Actions

The MA will work with the Art Fund and other appropriate bodies, to explore the potential for strengthening museums' capacity to make acquisitions and for developing more strategic approaches to acquisition. (44)



The MA will encourage the Heritage Lottery Fund, and other funders, to fund the long-term development of collections in addition to single acquisitions. (50)

The MA will continue to advocate the need for more funding for temporary exhibitions and investment in facilities that can host major temporary exhibitions. (62)

The MA will explore the potential for securing funding for a project to encourage loans, based on the Museum Loan Network model. (64)

The MA will work with the International Council of Museums to encourage bodies such as the Department for Culture Media and Sport (DCMS) and the MLA to support more UK museums in building mutually beneficial international links. (68)

The MA will investigate ways of supporting museums in transferring collections to more appropriate institutions, including the provision of better information and training. (71)

The MA will seek ways to work in partnership with the Local Government Association, to find ways to increase confidence that all local authorities can be responsible stewards of their collections. (78)

The MA will work with MLA to find ways to streamline museums' disposal procedures, while improving the safeguards offered. (79)



C Strengthening the museum sector

The museum sector needs to be strengthened. Increased collaboration and more investment in training, development and succession planning will be needed. In particular, museums need to renew their sources of expertise, both internally and externally.

There are not enough staff in museums with a focus on developing collections' potential and many museums do not have access to the expertise they need. (83)

Museums need excellent communicators as well as access to excellent scholarship. (84)

It is not desirable – let alone practical – for a museum to have all the expertise it requires in house. Individual museums can work together to share expertise across the sector. It will be equally if not more important to build closer links with external sources of knowledge and expertise. (88)

Links between museums and higher education are far less well developed than they might be. (91)

There are no structured pathways through a museum career and there is a lack of succession planning. There are too few training posts which offer the chance for junior staff to work alongside more experienced staff to build their expertise. (100)

Many museum staff are trapped in roles that do not draw on their skills and potential. Much talent is wasted and energetic and committed people leave the sector. Low pay remains a serious issue. (100)

Museums will need to work together to make an entitlement to collections a reality for everyone. It makes sense for them to pool their resources by working across institutional



boundaries, to begin to address the shortfall of expertise and to find ways of making better use of under-exploited collections. They would then also be well placed to draw in external expertise. (103-104)

Brokers are often needed to build relationships and encourage joint working. With one individual able to act as a catalyst, it becomes possible to bring in external funding and achieve results far in excess of what the partners might achieve individually. (106)

Actions

The MA will seek ways to promote and take forward the debate and research into expertise. (86)

The MA will work with the Arts and Humanities Research Council, the University Museums Group and other relevant bodies to explore how links between museums and the higher education sector might be strengthened. (92)

The MA will explore the possibility of raising funding for a pilot programme of providing additional curatorial support for underused collections. (95)



The MA will work with its recognised museum studies course to review the way that the courses prepare people for museum careers. The MA will also consider whether a review of the AMA is needed. (98)

The MA will work with the sector skills council and with MLA, DCMS and other relevant bodies on issues associated with workforce development as a matter of priority. (102)

The MA will look for ways to encourage continued investment in subject-based networks, as well as exploring other possible models of collaboration. (106)

Moving forward

It is important to stress that most of the ideas explored in this report are not entirely novel or especially radical. Indeed some of them have been debated many times over many years. The report seeks to help museums move from discussion to action. The MA hopes that the report will begin to make a real difference to museums' practice and to the approaches taken by funders and policy makers.

Some findings and action points have specific relevance to particular parts of the sector. But the report is for the whole of the UK museum sector. Many of the ideas require further development or testing, and the MA hopes to secure funding to run a number of pilot projects.

The MA has already begun discussions with colleagues in organisations across the sector, and with policy makers and funders, about how the report can be taken forward. Close liaison with the government departments and the agencies responsible for museums across the UK will be essential to ensure that the report's thinking is reflected in future policy development.



The power and potential of collections

Jane Glaister



The ability of works of art, historical objects and natural science specimens to inspire us is evidenced all over the world. Museum and gallery collections can be exotic, intriguing, affirming, pleasurable and challenging – they can stir emotions, inspire connections and stimulate ideas.

I am sure that we can all bring to mind an object or a collection that transformed us in some way. In my case it was a collection of Roman cloak pins which were displayed in the archaeology museum in Hull, where I grew up. For an anguished adolescent Hull's museums and galleries provided a free, safe and relatively hassle-free environment for a few hours' languishing. In an effort to delay being thrown out of the museum I studied the labels which told me that the pins had probably been worn, and even made, by women; some had been buried in the graves of women found in East Yorkshire. I began to wonder about these women and their lives – what their ambitions and hopes had been, whether they had been realised – and this made me consider my own life and what I could contribute and what I would leave behind. I determined that I would, at least,

contribute something as useful and beautiful as their cloak pins!

The power of collections should never be underestimated, but it does need to be far better understood. And understanding comes from knowledge, intelligent decision making and confidence. Museum and gallery collections give people pleasure and can evoke wonder and awe. They enable people to explore the world, and make other people, other experiences and other places real and tangible. They provide evidence and offer opportunities for research and learning. They can give status to ideas, people or communities, serve as memorials and validate groups' or individuals' experiences. They have a considerable economic impact, stimulating contemporary science, creativity and industry. They give people a powerful sense of place, identity and belonging, anchored in a fuller understanding of the past. The purpose of the Museums Association's inquiry has been to investigate what support museums need in order to harness the power of collections fully.

Museums have already taken significant steps forward. In doing so, they benefit from the vision and commitment of many staff and

volunteers, often working in a difficult climate, who want to ensure that museums and their collections are for everyone to enjoy.

In recent years, many museums have developed a greater understanding of the needs of their visitors. They are more welcoming and offer increasingly imaginative forms of display and other experiences, which draw out previously neglected aspects of collections. Museums have also begun to adopt more open approaches to what they collect, taking steps to ensure that their collections reflect many different cultures and experiences. And they are starting to harness new technologies and the huge potential they have to reach new audiences, and change the way collections can be used.

But more could be done. Too many museum collections are underused – not displayed, published, used for research or even understood by the institutions that care for them. Many museum staff find the notion that collections can be underused problematic. It conflicts with their sense that museums have a duty to preserve material for future generations. But if an object sits in a store for ten years, without anyone looking



at it, and if it is not published or made available on the internet, can that museum be realising its responsibilities towards the object and towards the public? If we, as a profession, are merely acting as caretakers and not as collection activists then we are not fulfilling our obligations.

I believe that we must be more honest about this issue. Collections are potentially museums' most precious asset – but what business would allow up to 80 per cent of its assets to go unused, while continuing to consume significant resources? The cost of maintaining unused, stored collections must be taken into account and weighed against the benefits those 'assets' could realise for the museum and its users. It is easy to become frustrated with politicians and funders who may have a simplistic approach to stored collections, and who may make unreasonable demands to 'display it or get rid of it'. But this attitude stems from a real problem – too much unused stuff, draining resources. And unless museums start actively addressing this problem, they are going to have unwelcome solutions imposed on them – they must seize the initiative.

The problem is not simply one of undisplayed collections – it is also about under-researched and poorly understood collections. In response to the consultation that informed this report, many museums said that they could not begin to make better use of their collections until they had a better understanding of what they had. Knowledge management has been too low a priority and collections without knowledge are of very limited use. Collection activists must use their knowledge and apply intelligent decision making to sustain energetic and imaginative collecting. The problems associated with existing collections constrain new collecting, and must be addressed.

The challenge for museums is to realise more of the fantastic potential of their collections:

- by giving more people more opportunities to engage with collections
- by releasing information and generating knowledge
- by using the internet, and increasing virtual access to collections.

Some believe that the underuse of collections stems simply from a shortage of resources. Museums do need more resources, and

more could be achieved with a generous injection of funding. But we have to face up to the reality that resources for culture will always be limited. In this climate, museums have a responsibility to use their collections as intelligently as they can. If they cannot realise the potential of an asset, they have a responsibility to find someone else who can.

I believe that museums also have to face up to disposal – intelligent stewardship does not mean clinging on to everything unthinkingly. And rather than looking to funders to rescue them with more money, museums need to make an intelligent appraisal of their own assets and resources and do more with what they have. They need to work together more effectively to make the most of scarce resources – both financial and in terms of human capital.

If museums seize the initiative themselves they are more likely to win the increased support they so much deserve.

Jane Glaister

Chairwoman, collections inquiry steering group
President, Museums Association,
2002-2004

Collections for the Future

¹ Museums are public institutions, with public collections. The past 25 years have seen dramatic shifts in attitudes towards the public sector in the UK, with much debate about the nature of public service. In this context, museums have sometimes seemed on the defensive. The time has come for museums to reassert the place of their collections at the heart of the public realm, and to find new ways to ensure that those collections really are for everyone.

² The concept of the 'public realm' has been gaining prominence. It is a key idea, for example, in recent work by Demos and in this year's discussion document on the future of museums from the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), *Understanding the Future*. The public realm encompasses all the resources and institutions that a society holds in common and that benefit all members of society, whether run by government or by charities and other organisations.

³ Museums exemplify many of the characteristics of the public realm. They have always been driven by a mission to make the best of science, history, art and culture available for everyone. They are not all run by government, but all are defined by their mission to serve the public good. Museums and their collections are part of the collective wealth of society and ownership of them is part of what it means to be a member of that society. For these reasons, museums are well placed to capitalise on a re-emerging awareness of the importance of the institutions and experiences that bind communities together.

⁴ The Museums Association's (MA's) inquiry set out to reinvigorate the debate about museum collections, and to put them higher up the policy agenda. It aims to demonstrate that a stronger emphasis on collections is not just compatible with increasing access and learning in museums: it is vital to it. Collections are at the heart of museums. If people are entitled to access to museums, then they have to be entitled to engage fully with museum collections.

⁵ The concept of cultural entitlement is another relevant strand of recent thinking. It encapsulates a belief that everyone has a right to a certain level of cultural provision. In the UK, we are familiar with the concept of entitlement to other public services – education and health, for example. Thinking about culture in these terms is more challenging. But it is central to the thinking behind this report that museum collections are something that everyone is entitled to enjoy, in whatever ways suit them best.

⁶ This report starts from the premise that museums are in a position of strength, but that they could do more to ensure that more of their collections are actively used; that they are energetically developed and seen in more contexts; and that the sector builds its strength and makes the best use of existing resources. Current policy developments give museums an opportunity to reassert the value of their collections and to give them new roles. This report aims to help them seize that opportunity.

⁷ **Commitments by the MA for further work are highlighted in bold throughout the text.**



A Engagement

Engaging with things

⁸This section explores how museums can make cultural entitlement to collections a reality, by offering more opportunities for people to engage with those collections and the ideas and knowledge associated with them.* One of the aims of the inquiry has been to see a greater proportion of the UK's museum collections actively used and enjoyed by the public: a necessity if museum collections are to realise their potential as part of the public realm.

⁹In response to the inquiry, some museum staff argued that it was a mistake to assume that collections should necessarily be in active use. Museums do indeed have a duty to preserve material for the future, and some people see the potential for future use as sufficient justification for museums to hold items in their collection. However, the inquiry has concluded that, while preservation is an essential part of the role of museums, it is not on its own sufficient: museums must take steps to ensure that more of their collection is used.

¹⁰What does it mean for a collection to be in active use? Throughout the inquiry, our assumption has been that for a collection to be in use, people must have appropriate opportunities to engage with the objects or specimens it contains, or with ideas and knowledge generated from them, either directly, or indirectly. This might be through display, online access to objects or associated knowledge, publications, scholarship, loans to other museums or to non-museum venues, open storage or study tours and handling sessions. There are many possibilities. But a collection cannot be said to be in use if it simply sits in store for years at a time. Of course, some collections are intended primarily as a resource for specialist researchers; but even research collections have to be promoted, if they are to reach a wide range of specialists.

¹¹It is becoming increasingly difficult to justify spending public money caring for public resources whose potential is never seen to be realised. Museums must be seen to put much greater emphasis on putting their collections into a variety of appropriate uses if they are to continue to argue for public support.

* This report uses the term 'engagement' in preference to 'access', implying the opportunity to enjoy collections, understand them and be inspired by them. Museum collections serve many different purposes and the public's right to engagement need not always involve physical access to actual objects.

¹²The size of many museum collections now means that most of the things they contain can never be displayed. Museum staff are often exasperated by demands from funders and politicians that more of their collections should be put on display. They rightly argue that many collections are not suitable for – or intended for – display. They might add that most museums would quickly become impractically large and horribly indigestible for visitors, if they were to attempt to display their entire collections.

¹³It is clear that displays are no longer the most relevant way of presenting all museum collections, or adequate to encompass the sheer volume of material that museums hold. And yet, permanent or temporary displays are still the primary form of engagement with collections in most museums. Some museums do offer other ways for people to enjoy collections and there have been increasing efforts to extend these opportunities to ensure that a greater proportion are made available. This section explores alternatives to display, including open storage and loans to schools and other venues, designed to put collections into the community. It builds in part on ideas developed by the Campaign for Learning through Museums and Galleries, for whom increasing use of museum collections has been a key theme. (Loans to other museum venues and touring exhibitions are explored as part of the discussion of the dynamic collection in the next section.)

¹⁴**More research is needed to assess the impact of initiatives designed to make collections more available, such as open storage, loan schemes and displays on**

non-museum premises. The MA will encourage relevant bodies to undertake such research with the aim of making definitive judgements about the most effective way to invest resources in future. The MA will continue to encourage debate about how wider engagement can be encouraged. This section offers some preliminary observations.

Opening up museum stores

¹⁵Open storage, it seems fair to conclude, is not on its own a solution to the problem of underused collections. Visitors certainly relish the chance that open storage offers to see behind the scenes, and to get a sense of the scale and nature of museums' collections, beyond their displays. But the numbers of visitors using open stores are typically small, in comparison with attendances to



1 Open storage

Open storage can mean very different things. For example, Glasgow Museums Resource Centre is an open store by virtue of the interpretation offered, rather than the building itself. It is a stand-alone building in an outer suburb of Glasgow, funded by Glasgow City Council, and initially developed as part of the refurbishment of Kelvingrove Museum, where storage spaces are being redeveloped as public spaces. The building contains few features that are specific to public access: in general it is simply designed as a high-quality functional store. Public access is by guided tours and considerable investment has been made in learning and interpretation support,

with a team dedicated to providing the tours to the public and booked groups.

The Warehouse at the National Railway Museum in York offers a contrasting example. Opened in 1998, it leads straight off a gallery at the main site and visitors can walk around at will. Visually, it is more like a dense display than a store. There are two guided tours a day, but written interpretation is based on printouts of the collections database, rather than anything developed specifically for visitors.

www.glasgowmuseums.com
www.nrm.org.uk



museums themselves. For certain collections, open storage can differ little from a dense display, but other objects and specimens require interpretation, if they are to be meaningful. In such cases, the experiences that visitors have of objects in open storage is largely determined by the nature of the interpretation offered, rather than by anything intrinsic to the store itself. The Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) has recently started to evaluate open storage projects that it has funded, and this should highlight the strengths and weaknesses of the different models.*

New environments and new experiences

¹⁶Reading's work with school loans, described in case study 2, is now well known and other museum services across the country support similar projects. Many museums also regularly send their collections to nursing homes, community groups, prisons and colleges. Staff from Portsmouth Museums and Records Service recently took items from the natural history collection to community playgrounds to encourage young people who were unlikely to visit museums to take an interest in the wildlife of their area. Oxfordshire Museums have used HLF funding to support a Culture Bus, which takes collections to people living some distance from its museum sites and to those who would be unlikely to visit.

¹⁷An increasing number of museums offer loans of display material to non-museum venues and it would be possible to cite dozens of similar projects. However, some museums are hesitant about promoting this approach. If objects are not accompanied by someone who can interpret them, the value of the experiences they offer may

appear less obvious. Displays of museum objects in train stations or in offices can easily become mere wallpaper. Museums do need to be realistic about the way that objects might be appreciated in external displays – moments of life-changing revelation are probably fairly thin on the ground. But this is not a reason not to do it. Even within a museum, visitors may ignore the interpretation offered, however carefully planned. The point is that, by getting more collections out of storage, museums can extend the *possibility* of people encountering objects. It is museums' responsibility to open up collections as part of the public realm.

¹⁸The range of possible ways for people to encounter objects can also be extended within museums, for example through formal and informal learning activities. Many museums are developing more integrated approaches to learning, embedding it in all aspects of their practice. The Museums Libraries and Archives Council (MLA) has done much to further this development, particularly through Inspiring Learning for All. Sadly, in some museums learning is still seen as something of an add-on, the province of the education department. The consequence can be that museums do not realise the full potential of their collections for learning. There are still museums where educators do not have access to the collections, to use them in their work. Educators are still finding it necessary to develop separate collections, often acquiring material that duplicates unused objects in the main collection. It will be to everyone's benefit if learning and collections are seen as inextricably linked within museums.

¹⁹It follows from this that the practice of developing separate collections for education or handling is not helpful. This does not mean that all objects in collections need to be cared for to the same standards, with a one-size-fits-all approach. Indeed a number of museums have begun to differentiate their collection into different categories, which indicate what purpose each group of objects or specimens serves. Norfolk Museums and Archaeological Service, for example, recently undertook such a review. One advantage of this is that it allows resources to be targeted more appropriately and allows museums to develop a more nuanced approach to risk management. If collections are to be used more in a whole range of ways, they will inevitably be exposed to greater risk of damage or deterioration. Museums already make judgements about the degree of risk to which different categories of material can be exposed, depending on what makes them significant. For example, in acquiring the Flying Scotsman, the National Railway Museum made the decision that it was appropriate for it to continue to work as a locomotive because what was significant about it was not anything intrinsic to its physical structure, which had in any case been subject to constant repair and change, but its status as an icon of steam history. While the exercise of assessing and categorising an entire collection may not be appropriate for all museums, many could do more to identify kinds of material that are less likely to incur excessive damage through handling and loans to non-museum venues, as a way of promoting those uses. This approach will also help museums to keep the costs associated with loans and learning activities such as handling at an acceptable level.

2

Collections out of the museum

Many museums offer loans to schools. Reading Museum is one of the longest established services, in operation for over 90 years. It currently offers over 1,500 themed boxes from ancient history to biology. A recent grant from the HLF of almost £1m will enable Reading to extend and improve the service over the next four years, in partnership with 18 museums, art galleries, heritage centres and archives in Berkshire and Buckinghamshire.

Evaluation of the Reading service in 2000-2002, funded by the Department for Education and Skills, showed that teachers had found it easy to

integrate loans into their lessons, and reported that they provided a powerful catalyst for their teaching. Each loan was used by an average of 140 students in 11 lessons over a two to three week loan period and the lessons covered almost every area of the national curriculum.

www.readingmuseum.org.uk

*The boom in open storage has partly been driven by the fact that it is increasingly difficult to secure investment in 'straight' collections management. In principle, we agree with funders such as the HLF that funding for collections management projects should be clearly linked to public outcomes. However, there are some categories of material with particular storage needs – either because of their environmental requirements or because of their scale. Archaeological archives are a case in point. These problems might best be addressed by more museums coming together to share storage facilities, which might not necessarily be linked to public access.

Engaging with ideas and knowledge

3 Collections level descriptions: the Natural History Museum

The Natural History Museum collections are a vast and internationally recognised resource. The museum has taken a pragmatic approach to documentation, in order to provide access to the full range of specimens, library collections and archive holdings, as well as educational, electronic and exhibition resources. In developing a new web resource, Collections Navigator, the museum has documented its holdings as groups of items rather than item by item. Individual descriptions might encompass material of a similar kind, or material related to a specific collector such as Sloane, Banks or Darwin. By

documenting the collections at this level, users get a single point of access and links across the full breadth of the collections. These high-level records also help the museum to prioritise item-level cataloguing.

www.nhm.ac.uk/navigator/

²⁰ A number of respondents to the consultation noted that archives are rarely criticised for having large stored collections, because funders and the public understand that archives serve a research function. The extent to which museum collections fulfil an archive-like research function is much less widely understood by those outside the sector. Museums need to make a stronger case for their collections as powerhouses of knowledge and ideas. To achieve this they need to invest more in research and do more to make the knowledge associated with collections available.

Knowledge management

²¹ As the inquiry has progressed, one thing to emerge consistently from discussions is that many museums feel that they lack adequate information about their collections. This is one of the most significant barriers preventing museums from achieving their potential.

²² The most basic need is for museums to be clear about what their collections contain. And yet, the task of completing a catalogue of every object in the UK's museums seems potentially endless. It is particularly salutary to note, as one slightly exasperated respondent to the consultation did, that the need for a complete catalogue of UK museum collections was considered a priority at the time the MA was founded in the 1880s.

²³ Museums need better information resources, including better documentation. But they also need to be realistic about their capacity and the availability of resources and to take a new, more targeted approach to documentation. Current approaches grew out of a drive to ensure

museums were publicly accountable for the public assets they held. A new approach needs to be driven by users' needs and interests. It may be that capturing some of the richer stories and more detailed knowledge about key objects is a more pressing need than completing the documentation of entire collections at object level. As the experience of the Natural History Museum suggests, the use of collections-level descriptions may be a useful tool; see case study 3.

²⁴ Given that such changes would represent something of a departure from the current practice for many museums, there is a need for a proper national debate about the strategic purpose of documentation to determine the way ahead. Documentation is, unfortunately, widely seen by funders as something that consumes resources without offering significant benefits. A recent report by the South East Museum, Library & Archive Council on documentation backlogs noted 'governing bodies do not appreciate that investment in good documentation is essential to meet effectively the needs of the access and learning agenda'.* To change this perception, and to make a stronger case for funding, museums need to develop new approaches and to be clearer about the benefits that good knowledge management offers.

²⁵ **The MA will work with the mda (formerly the Museum Documentation Association), the MLA and others to develop clear and realistic recommendations about the future direction of documentation and knowledge management.**

²⁶ As well as capturing and communicating information related to collections, museums must ensure that their stock of knowledge is regularly replenished. Research is widely seen as a luxury by museums, but it is an essential part of their role, whether carried out internally or externally. The intellectual climate in which museums operate is constantly developing and they must ensure that their collections are always open to reappraisal.

²⁷ Enhancing the research culture in museums requires a hybrid solution. Museums need to promote their collections to potential researchers, and arguably this is a role that has been less well developed in museums than in libraries and archives. Museums could do more to establish stronger links with the higher education sector (this is discussed in detail in the report's final section). Museums should also be recognised as places where many different kinds of users can carry out research at different levels. Many museums could do more to extend research opportunities to the public in a range of ways, from disseminating more information about the potential of their collections to providing space for visitors to work.

²⁸ But museums themselves also need to generate knowledge if they are to retain their authority and play their full part in the intellectual life of the country. New research has as much potential as new collecting to expand the possibilities of museum collections. For example, some recent initiatives have sought to uncover 'hidden histories' in collections and case studies 4 and 5 describe two of these.



* Documentation Backlogs: South-East Cross Domain Study, Robert Taylor for SEMLAC, October 2004, p5

4

Hidden histories: Buried in the Footnotes

In September 2004, the research centre for museums and galleries at Leicester University published *Buried in the Footnotes*, the findings of a one-year research project looking at the representation of disabled people in museum and gallery collections. Funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Board's innovations awards, the project investigated the extent of evidence within UK museum and gallery collections that relates to the lives of disabled people, both today and in the past. The project then looked at how this material is displayed, interpreted, and made accessible to the public.

The research uncovered a rich seam of objects relating to people who were disabled, but whose stories had never been told from that perspective. The research is now being taken forward through a project, entitled *Rethinking Disability Representation in Museums and Galleries*, that aims to develop museums' capacity to understand what disability has meant to society in the past and could mean in the future.

<http://www.le.ac.uk/museumstudies>

5

Hidden histories: Birmingham

Birmingham is one of a number of museum services to have taken the view that its approach to cultural diversity must begin with its collections. The service undertook a mapping project to assess whether or not it had the collections needed to reflect minority histories. Initially, curators searched the history collections for material relevant to black and South Asian histories. A second phase assessed the fine and applied art collections, looking for material for the same two ethnic groups. The third phase has looked across the collections for material of relevance to East and South East Asian ethnic groups.

Birmingham intends to roll out the project to look for material representing disability, gender and sexual orientation. The first phases have highlighted gaps in the collections, informed a new collecting policy and future exhibition planning. They have provided the basis for learning projects and stimulated thought and discussion among curators about their knowledge of their collections. Staff have recognised that others outside the museum may hold knowledge that they should be accessing in order to enhance their own and the museum's knowledge base.

www.bmag.org.uk

²⁹ The MA considers the hidden histories approach to be an important way forward, and will look for ways to support and encourage it.

³⁰ New intellectual approaches like these invigorate collections, and museums have a responsibility to be open to all alternative perspectives. And yet it has become clear from the inquiry that the extent to which museums can or should share control over the meaning of objects remains a highly contentious issue, although the debate around the question is still oddly under-developed.

³¹ On one hand, it is an established intellectual orthodoxy that audiences always play an active role in making meaning; meaning is not determined by the author or producer. Furthermore, today's museum users are not used to passively accepting advice and information from experts; they expect to have their opinions and experiences valued and taken seriously. They may also expect that services will be tailored to their individual needs and interests. Accordingly, some respondents to the consultation advocated a radical abdication of power by museums in this area. If collections are public, they argue, so should be their interpretation; museums need to stand back and stop being overly protective of their intellectual territory.

³² Other respondents were keen to stress that museums are valued and trusted as authoritative sources of information, and that they should not risk compromising this by taking overly post-modern approaches or ducking out of offering information and opinion altogether. Visitors may in fact increasingly value the kind of authoritative information that museums can provide, precisely because we live in a world where there is such a proliferation of information. Museums also need to be clear that they are not ideologically neutral spaces; visitors may value clear advocacy of points of view – a danger of 'balanced' interpretation is that museums shy away from criticism, challenge and provocation, which should be part of their role.

³³ Museums need to engage actively with this debate and work out its implications for the way that their collections are presented. They should find ways to be authoritative without being authoritarian. Perhaps one way to do this is to be more open about the role of museum professionals as mediators. It is still the case that the vast majority of their work is hidden behind the scenes, in spite of the fact that when museums open their own processes up to visitors, the results

can be very rewarding. Conservators have offered a lead here, with many trying to find ways to let visitors see and understand their work. Museums could do more to open up the work of curators and researchers, so that visitors see where the information and opinions that museums present are coming from.

³⁴ Museums can also utilise new technologies that make it easier to offer more than one perspective on an object or collection. Electronic storage of information and images will help to make these multi-layered approaches possible, and indeed has the potential to transform all experiences of museum collections. Many museums have already begun to explore the potential of interpretation using handheld electronic devices. As the technology becomes cheaper and more accessible, all museums should be able to offer visitors a variety of pathways through ideas and information about their collections.

³⁵ Beyond the museum, the internet offers remote access to many collections and, crucially, to a wealth of information about them. However, the inquiry shows that some museum staff are sceptical about the benefits of investing in digitisation, believing that online access to collections offers a relatively poor-quality experience for a relatively high cost. But this is to underestimate its future potential. Digitisation is not an end in itself so much as a means to an end. It does not offer quick-wins but rather represents a long-term investment. Moreover, the potential of digitisation is not limited to collections themselves. In a digital environment, the ideas and research around collections are just as valuable a resource.

Museums must continue to digitise their collections and the information that accompanies them, as building blocks. There will be uses of digitised collections that cannot be imagined yet. Museums of the future will use the digital resources created today for their own ends, just as museums today use the buildings and collections established in the past for their own purposes. Continued investment in digitisation is vital, and should not be held back by scepticism about the quality of some of the products that currently use digitised collections.

³⁶ The MA will encourage the MLA and others to find ways of encouraging and supporting more digitisation of collections, and adding value to existing digital resources.

³⁷ Engagement with collections will mean something different in museums of the future. Museums must face up to this and ensure that their collections are fully part of the public realm, and a part of everyone's cultural entitlement.



B The dynamic collection

³⁸ The public realm is not static and unchanging. It is modified by each generation according to its own priorities and aspirations; nevertheless, there is an underlying continuity. This is a helpful way of thinking about museum collections. They are established for the long term and each generation has a responsibility of stewardship for the next. At the same time, it is imperative that they are used and developed in response to the needs of today's society.

³⁹ Collections inevitably change over time. They also need to be physically mobile to fulfil their public role. This section explores the ideal of the dynamic collection. It looks at how museums can ensure that their collections are constantly developed and reviewed and seen in different contexts.*

Growing the collection

⁴⁰ One of the starting points for the inquiry was a belief that collecting is in decline in many UK museums, and had come to be seen as a luxury by some. Museums are no longer developing their collections with the vibrancy and rigour needed to ensure that they serve the needs of current and future audiences. While extensive quantitative research would be needed to establish an accurate picture of collecting patterns across the UK, the inquiry has confirmed that museums are indeed faced with serious challenges in collecting.

⁴¹ The difficulties for museums caused by high art prices have been well documented. The Art Fund's 2003 conference underlined the point that collecting at the top end of the price scale is almost exclusively reactive, driven by the need to save works that come on to the market and are sold

to overseas purchasers. The Goodison Review, commissioned by the Treasury and published in 2004, made helpful recommendations in this area. Some of these have already been implemented, but there remains scope for the government to take forward others, including suggestions for changes to the tax regime.

⁴² But while the public debate has largely focused on art acquisitions, other areas may face even greater difficulties. In natural history, for example, there are few sources of funding available at all. And the availability of funding is not always the main problem. Museums lack the time to make applications for funds; as discussed in case study 6, at least one fund to support acquisitions was recently significantly undersubscribed. Inadequate storage space may also be an issue: the problem of archaeological archives is particularly pressing. Other disciplines, such as the biosciences and technology are faced with the challenge of collecting in entirely new areas.

⁴³ Of course, many UK museums are actively working to improve their collecting, and the range of material collected is already vastly broader and more imaginative than in the past. This brings its own challenges, with the pool of potential acquisitions seemingly limitless.

⁴⁴ **The MA will work with the Art Fund, and other appropriate bodies, to explore the potential for strengthening museums' capacity to make acquisitions and for developing more strategic approaches to acquisition.**

6 Acquisitions: Headley Trust funding for treasure

Lack of funding might seem to be the key reason why museums do not purchase items for their collections more regularly. But other factors may be equally significant. The Headley Trust, one of the Sainsbury Family Charitable Trusts, has set aside funds to enable regional museums to buy artefacts classified as treasure under the Treasure Act 1996. The scheme runs alongside the MLAV&A Purchase Grant Fund which gives up to 50 per cent of the purchase price. A small element of local funding is required, with the remaining balance considered by the Headley Trust. (The MLAV&A Purchase Grant Fund must

have already offered a grant before an approach is made to the Headley Trust.) In its first year, the fund was undersubscribed, suggesting that a lack of time and skills may be as great a problem as a lack of resources. Notwithstanding the poor response, the trustees renewed the scheme for a second year, and applications increased.

www.headleytreasures.org.uk

*In promoting an ideal of dynamic collections, it is of course necessary to acknowledge that there are a few collections with legally binding restrictions on acquisition, disposal or lending. But these are the exception, not the norm.



7

CAS special collection scheme

From 1998 to 2004, the Contemporary Art Society (CAS) ran a scheme to enable 15 English museums to develop challenging collections of contemporary art and craft. With £2.5m from the Arts Council lottery, the support of the Crafts Council and partnership funding from museums, the special collection scheme took a long-term approach to the development of collections. The CAS recognised that many museums lacked not only the resources but also the skills necessary to buy contemporary art, so skills' development was a key part of the programme. The CAS acted as general advisers to the museums involved and organised visits to studios, exhibitions, collections

and events. Museum education and interpretation staff were also involved in making purchases, participating in research visits alongside curators.

The museums shared ideas and information about their existing collections and new purchases, so that they could avoid duplication and coordinate their approach. Each museum contributed 25 per cent partnership funding towards a total annual purchasing budget of £30,000 per museum. In addition museums set aside funds for research and travel to develop their knowledge and expertise on contemporary art practice within the UK and abroad.

The current round of funding in England has now come to an end and the scheme is being evaluated. A parallel scheme involving six Scottish museums will run until 2006 with Scottish Arts Council lottery funding.

www.contempart.org.uk

8

Acquisitions: Omai

Joint purchases of fine art are usually primarily motivated by financial considerations, as it can be easier for a group of museums to raise sufficient funding to secure high-value objects. But they can have important secondary benefits. In 2003, the National Portrait Gallery (NPG), the Captain Cook Memorial Museum in Whitby, and the National Museums and Galleries of Wales (NMGW) jointly acquired William Parry's group portrait of Sir Joseph Banks, Dr Daniel Solander and Omai, following a successful fundraising campaign.

The joint purchase means that the painting can be understood as a great historical portrait in the context of the NPG's collections, that it can be seen alongside other works by Parry at the NMGW, and that it can be seen in Whitby in the context of the history of Cook's voyages. After brief spells in Cardiff and London, the painting will be on display at the Captain Cook Memorial Museum for several years.

www.cookmuseumwhitby.co.uk

⁴⁵ It is clear that some museums are inhibited in their collecting because of a skills shortage. They lack curators with adequate knowledge of their subject area, and the know-how to purchase in the market place. The question of subject knowledge is discussed in detail in the next section. In terms of the practical skills required to collect, the Contemporary Art Society's (CAS's) special collection scheme has successfully sought to address this issue for the contemporary arts (see case study 7) and there is clearly potential for this approach to be extended to other areas.

⁴⁶ The recent examples of joint acquisitions to share costs suggest one possible response to the difficulties museums face in collecting high-value objects (see case study 8). Extending collaborative acquisitions, not necessarily through joint purchase, but through a closely coordinated approach to collecting is another option. Indeed a number of groups of museums already have agreements about collecting priorities and some subject networks are working towards agreeing joint collecting strategies. It is clear that museums will need to collaborate more extensively in future in a whole range of areas, and this is discussed in detail at the end of the report. This will certainly include collaborative approaches to collecting. In some fields, this might extend beyond the sector, with museums acting as the focus for collecting strategies that could include other organisations such as preservation societies.

⁴⁷ However, the inquiry uncovered a great deal of resistance to an over-centralised approach to collecting. There is a strong sense that collecting has to remain responsive to local needs. Moreover, it is undoubtedly the case that what gives the UK's museum collections much of their richness and depth is precisely the fact that they have not been centrally planned, but are, in large part, the result of visionary and often idiosyncratic collecting by highly motivated individuals. Nevertheless, we must acknowledge that collections are also marred by excessive and unconstrained collecting from the past, and that there are serious omissions.

⁴⁸ This is clearly a conundrum. The inquiry's conclusion is that a judicious approach is needed that leaves room for personal vision, is discriminating and selective, and encourages museums to work together when appropriate, without imposing a rigid centralised approach. But above all, all museums must enter into the debate about how collections can best be developed for



the future, and reinstate active collecting as a crucial part of their activities.

⁴⁹ To achieve this, museums will need support to rebuild their capacity for collecting. The CAS scheme emphasises the long-term development of collections, rather than funding for one-off purchases. Other funders should be encouraged to take this approach.

⁵⁰ The MA will encourage the HLF, and other funders, to fund the long-term development of collections in addition to single acquisitions.

⁵¹ A number of museums have adopted project-driven approaches to collecting, focusing on one particular area for a defined length of time, perhaps connected to an exhibition or event. This allows them to develop strength and depth in limited areas. For example, the scope of the Women's Library's museum collection is potentially vast. To give the collection focus it links it closely to exhibition themes for limited periods. This approach may not suit others, but one advantage is that it explicitly rejects any notion that collections should aim for comprehensiveness. Museum collections – either singly or collectively – can never reflect all aspects of society, the natural world and culture. Museums should be realistic about this, as well as aiming to ensure that they paint a rich and diverse picture with their collections. The practice of community involvement in decision-making about collecting is well established in some fields and there is room to extend it, particularly in ensuring that collections adequately reflect the complexity and cultural diversity of contemporary society. For example, Tyne and Wear Museums

(TWM) have used Renaissance in the Regions funding to create a new post of keeper of contemporary collecting. Working with other partners in the hub, she will build on the work carried out by the TWM as part of its Making History project, during which staff worked with 220 local people to create a collection of over 1,000 items of significance to their lives.

⁵² The previous section highlighted the increasing importance of the information and knowledge that animates collections. With this in mind, museums must ensure that they place as high a priority on collecting associated information as on collecting objects. The inquiry explored the question of whether new approaches were needed to ensure that this happened, but the consensus was that this should be a part of established good practice. Museums simply need to ensure that this is given the priority it deserves.



A distributed national collection?

⁵³ As part of the public realm, museum collections are a national resource. In exploring what this might mean, the inquiry revisited the idea of the distributed national collection. This term has had currency for some 20 years, but there has never been consensus about what it means, let alone agreement as to how it might be made a reality. At its simplest, it can be understood as meaning that objects of national importance are distributed in museums across the country. The Designation scheme in England underlined this view, by recognising collections of particular significance, and a similar scheme is being developed in Scotland. However, the idea of the distributed national collection can also be interpreted to mean a giant bureaucracy that would centrally manage all UK museum collections. Somewhere between

those two extremes is the idea of defining what objects or specimens constitute the most significant parts of collections held by all UK museums (and perhaps by others) in a given area.

⁵⁴ The question of how museums should approach the distributed national collection has been the subject of a long-standing debate, but one that has yet to be resolved. The inquiry aimed to develop consensus in this area. It explored, for example, whether there was any enthusiasm for establishing a national framework of reference collections in particular areas, or structures that would allow more decisions about collecting to be taken centrally rather than by individual museums. It also examined the approaches to a national collection taken in a number of other European countries, which have more formal mechanisms for collaboration or greater centralised control. These are summarised in the appendix.

⁵⁵ As case studies 9 and 10 demonstrate, some parts of the UK museum sector have begun to take steps to define the national collection in their subject area, even without formal structures in place. Other similar initiatives cover ships, boats, railway and mining heritage and aircraft; and some of these extend to cover objects in private ownership, as well as those held in museums. Taxonomic practice in natural science of course offers a ready-made designation of significance.

⁵⁶ However, such exercises are clearly not appropriate for all disciplines. Most of the subject areas where this approach has been taken have collections consisting of relatively few large or high-value objects. They also relate to areas where

significance can be helpfully defined at a national level, rather than at a local or regional level. The idea of defining a comprehensive distributed national collection, covering all disciplines, is clearly unrealistic. Moreover, it has become clear through the inquiry process that there is no appetite for greater centralisation among the profession, or apparent demand for it from the public. People are also nervous about the potential to create costly and distracting bureaucracy. For all these reasons, the phrase 'the distributed national collection' may no longer be helpful. Nevertheless, it is in the public interest that museum collections are treated as a single resource, on which all museums should be able to draw. All users would benefit if museums shared their collections more widely and collaborated on collections management and collecting.

⁵⁷ Collaboration is discussed in detail in the report's final section. Greater mobility of collections is a vital first step and it is appropriate to consider this issue here, in the context of the dynamic collection.

9

Distributed national collection: the Rural Museums Network

One of the motivations for setting up the Rural Museums Network was a sense that rural museum collections did not reflect the full diversity of current and past rural life. The network commissioned an initial report into the national collection of agricultural heritage, which was followed by more detailed work on tractors and combine harvesters. The detailed surveys identified which museums held which objects, and graded each object for social and technological significance. They aimed to establish which objects constituted the key elements of the national collection, and to identify

important examples that were not yet represented in museum collections, and so would be priorities for future collecting. The survey used a process of peer review to identify important objects, drawing on the expertise of external experts, as well as curators. The final judgements of significance were often markedly different to the curators' own assessments, some objects proving more important than initially thought and some less so. In particular, one machine in poor condition and stored outside was identified as being of considerable historic importance as the earliest surviving combine to have entered the UK.

The surveys also revealed significant gaps in museums' overall collecting. No UK museums hold any large farming machinery from the past 30 years, underlining the urgency of developing new approaches to recording agricultural heritage.

www.ruralmuseumsnetwork.org.uk

10

Distributed national collection: oil paintings

Two initiatives have set out to establish a complete catalogue of oil paintings in UK public collections and raise the profile of regional collections nationally and internationally. Although the projects were initially developed separately, they are now aligned and are working towards the preparation of a joint database. The National Inventory of European Painting 1200-1900 is an initiative from the National Gallery, in collaboration with Glasgow University, Birkbeck College, the University of London and museums throughout the country. The project is intended to address two issues: the decline in collection research in UK museums, and the lack of publicly accessible

information about collections, especially in regional museums. The Public Catalogue Foundation was prompted by similar concerns about the lack of information. It aims to publish illustrated county-by-county catalogues of oil paintings in public ownership, and the national inventory research programme will act as its research arm.

The national inventory research project is funded by grants from the Getty Grant Program, the Arts and Humanities Research Board and the Kress Foundation. The research programme will run from 2004 to 2007, with a team of researchers based in regional museums.

www.pcf.org.uk

www.nationalgallery.org.uk/collection/inventory.htm

Collections mobility: UK

⁵⁸ Collections are traditionally seen out of their 'home' museum through short or long-term loans and touring exhibitions. There are clearly too few significant loans, and too few opportunities to see important temporary exhibitions in the UK outside the capital cities.

⁵⁹ In response to proposals to increase the mobility of collections, some local museums expressed the view that they were funded by local people, for local people, and that there was resistance from politicians and the public to collections being lent more widely. It is easy to understand how this view arises, but it is misguided and should be countered. Museums should make it clear that if the treasures of a town's museum are seen and appreciated widely, this is good for the town's status and reputation. It can also result in reciprocal

loans from other museums. Beyond these benefits, museums have an ethical responsibility to serve a wider public: it is part of what it means to be a public museum. As case study 11 demonstrates, the UK's national museums have strengthened their commitment to collections mobility in recent years, increasing the opportunities people have to see important collections outside the capital cities, through their regional partnerships. Nevertheless, more remains to be done.

⁶⁰ While it is clear that there are few opportunities to see major touring exhibitions outside London, Edinburgh and Cardiff, there is currently no reliable data about how many museums and galleries are involved in touring exhibitions, and what the scale of their activity is. The Touring Exhibitions Group ► 21

11

Collections mobility: national/regional partnerships

National museums throughout the UK have strengthened and formalised their links with regional museums in recent years, and this has helped to give people more opportunities to see the national museums' collections outside the capital cities. In Wales, for example, the Cyfoeth Cymru Gyfan - Sharing Treasures scheme was established in May 2002, funded by the Welsh Assembly Government. It now links the National Museums and Galleries of Wales (NMGW) to ten regional museums and galleries, giving them opportunities to draw on its collections. For example, in 2003, an exhibition in Anglesey

displayed Viking finds from the island from the NMGW collection, many of which were being seen there for the first time.

The Tate Partnership Scheme, funded by the HLF, has run for five years and has aimed to bring the Tate collection to a wider audience, through 26 exhibitions at five regional partner venues. 540 works have been loaned out and a total of 650,000 people have gained access to the collection, without travelling to London. The British Museum has launched a programme of touring iconic single objects as part of its Partnerships UK Scheme.

In 2005, linked to the Africa 05 programme, the museum is touring the Throne of Weapons, made by a Mozambican artist from decommissioned AK47 rifles. Public events around the display in each venue aim to make the object a catalyst for debate. It should be stressed that not all of this activity is new: the National Portrait Gallery, for example, has three long-standing partnerships, which mean that its collections can be seen in regional venues.

<http://www.nationalmuseums.org.uk/>





12 Touring exhibitions: the regional museums initiative

The Esmée Fairbairn Foundation is currently encouraging the development of more touring fine art exhibitions in regional museums, through its regional museums initiative. The projects it supports draw on research into underused collections, and involve partnerships between a number of museums.

For example, Gallery Oldham has led a project with the Harris Museum & Art Gallery, Preston, Bolton Museum & Art Gallery and Touchstones Rochdale to create a major new collections-based collaborative exhibition, *Creative Tension*:

British Art 1900-1950. The exhibition, which will tour to all four partner museums and a London venue in 2005 and 2006, brings together over 130 paintings, sculptures and ceramics from the collections of all four galleries, along with loans from other galleries in north west England. The municipal galleries in the major textile-producing centres of the north west are well known for their outstanding collections of Victorian art, built on extensive bequests left by wealthy industrialists. But less well known is the fact that Lancashire's galleries, with the benefit of endowment funds, vied with each other to build significant collections

of work by living artists during the first half of the 20th century. The exhibition will raise the profile of these relatively little known collections.

www.esmeefairbairn.org.uk

www.galleryoldham.org.uk

13 Collections mobility: the Museum Loan Network

The Museum Loan Network in the USA exists to promote long-term loans between museums, with the aim of getting stored collections on display. It is supported by two charitable foundations and, with a budget of \$5.5m over ten years, it has brought about the long-term loan of 4,500 objects and the cataloguing of 200,000. The network supports loans through implementation grants, and also gives two kinds of development funding: travel grants to museums interested in borrowing, and research grants to museums that might be willing to lend. The research grants offer an incentive for potential

lenders, particularly larger museums, to get involved, enabling museums to survey and catalogue undocumented parts of their collection.

The network acts as a broker, persuading museums to take part and fostering relationships between institutions, and this has been key to its success. Before it was established there was funding available for loans between US museums through the National Endowment for the Arts, but few museums took advantage of it.

loanet.mit.edu



14 Collections mobility: the French Regional & American Museums Exchange (FRAME)

In the UK, relatively few regional museums lend or borrow on a significant scale internationally. A partnership between regional French and American art museums aims to promote regular loans and touring exhibitions and share skills. FRAME is funded by charitable foundations and also has government funding in France. FRAME has organised two or three major touring exhibitions every year since 2001 and now has 24 member museums, all committed to long-term collaboration.

www.on-frame.com

Collections mobility: international

(TEG) has received funding from the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation to enable it to research the current state of touring activity in the UK, in both quantitative and qualitative terms. The research will also identify what might be done to improve and extend both the quality and number of touring exhibitions. Alongside this research, the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation's regional museums initiative is beginning to have an impact in terms of increasing the scale and quality of temporary exhibitions. Although it is currently limited to fine and decorative art, it has the potential to provide a model that could be more widely adopted. Its particular strength is that, as well as funding innovative and high-quality exhibitions, it also encourages collaboration between museums and fosters original research into collections; see case study 12.

⁶¹With these initiatives, the prospects for touring exhibitions in regional museums look brighter than for some years. It would not be timely for the inquiry to make detailed recommendations relating to touring exhibitions until the outcome of the TEG's work is known. However, it is clear that there is an ongoing need for investment in buildings and infrastructure, if more regional museums are to be in a position to accept major touring exhibitions.

⁶²**The MA will continue to advocate the need for more funding for temporary exhibitions and investment in facilities that can host major temporary exhibitions.**

⁶³Loans of single items or of small groups of objects give museums the opportunity to shed new light on their collections, or to meet public demand in areas where their own collections are weak. A thriving culture of such loans is an indicator of a vibrant museum sector. But many major institutions are effectively at capacity in terms of loans, with their registrars, conservators and technicians fully committed. It is clear that museums cannot simply step up their activity on the current model. What is needed is a combination of extending the culture of lending and borrowing to institutions that currently lend and borrow little, supporting longer-term loans, which might give greater impact for the same effort; and finding new, less labour-intensive approaches. The Museum Loan Network in the USA offers one possible model, with its emphasis on long-term loans, and on involving museums that might not otherwise have the opportunity to borrow (case study 13). The British Museum's programme of touring single objects is high profile and linked to a programme of events. Consequently, it achieves much greater impact than some traditional loans, which might involve more objects – and demand significantly more administrative and technical support – but go unnoticed.

⁶⁴**The MA will explore the potential for securing funding for a project to encourage loans, based on the Museum Loan Network model.**

⁶⁵If relatively few non-national museums are engaged in active and ambitious programmes of loans and temporary exhibitions within the UK, even fewer are in a position to lend or borrow internationally. The need for increased budgets and investment in museum buildings will be particularly pressing if more non-national museums are to have the opportunity to share collections with other museums internationally. There may also be a need for other forms of support, such as that offered by the FRAME project which encourages collections' exchange between French and American non-national art museums; see case study 14.

⁶⁶The European Union (EU) is currently exploring how to promote collections mobility across Europe. The DCMS will be taking the lead on this issue as part of the UK's presidency of the EU during the second half of 2005. The MA has been working with the DCMS and others to explore how greater Europe-wide mobility of collections might be encouraged in practice. A new, common approach to conditions of loan is one likely pragmatic outcome. It is likely that collections mobility will be a key element of the EU's new funding programme for culture, starting in 2007, but regional museums may need support if they are to apply for funding.

⁶⁷It was suggested during the inquiry that UK museums currently do too little to realise the potential benefits of links with museums in the rest of the world, particularly in those countries linked to the UK by past colonial ties. Too often discussion of these relationships focuses on contested repatriation claims. These are critically important, but can overshadow the many examples of constructive, collaborative working.

The project by the Asia-Europe Museum Network outlined in case study 15 demonstrates how international links can benefit both sides. Some UK museums already have long-standing links with museums and other organisations in the countries that provided some of their collections, but more can be done.

⁶⁸The MA will work with the International Council of Museums to encourage bodies such as the DCMS and the MLA to support more UK museums in building mutually beneficial international links.

⁶⁹The inquiry explored the role that museums might play in working with collections and collectors outside the public domain. Many respondents were cautious about devoting

Working with private owners and other organisations

resources to supporting private collections, given that museums' resources are limited and that the potential needs of public collections are so great. What is clear, however, is that collections in private ownership have a public value and that it is the responsibility of museums to help realise that public value in appropriate ways. Museums of course regularly display material lent from private collections, although this is more common in some subject areas than others, and could be extended. There may also be scope to provide support for the long-term preservation of private collections, provided that it draws them closer to the public realm. The heritage cubes initiative by Beamish and Tyne and Wear provides an example of how museums can offer protection to collections in non-museum ownership (case study 16). Others, including groups of museums, libraries and archives in County Durham and in Stroud, have sought to record and provide access to records and objects in private ownership, through digitisation.

15 Collections mobility: the Asia-Europe Museum Network

The Asia-Europe Museum Network promotes cooperation between European and Asian museums and has over 70 members. One current project is increasing collections mobility and the sharing of knowledge between museums in Europe and the Philippines. Some European museums hold very significant Philippine material that has never been seen by Philippine audiences, and much of it lacks proper documentation. Unearthing Philippine Past European Museums is a four-year programme (2003-2006), which will improve the information that European museums have about their Philippine collections, while also giving source communities in

the Philippines the opportunity to see the collections at first hand. Philippine objects from several European museums, including the British Museum, will be loaned to the Philippines. Following an exhibition in the Philippine National Museum, groups of objects will then tour to their places of origin, where source communities will be invited to contribute information about them. The project will also draw on the expertise of scholars in the Philippines and the objects will be returned to Europe accompanied by much richer information resources.

www.aseumus.org

16 Working with private owners and other organisations: heritage cubes

Under the first round of Designation Challenge Funding, Beamish and Tyne and Wear museums built a joint store for their large object collections known as the regional museums store. The partnership was so successful that they are now building a new store for medium-size objects to add to the regional resource centre at Beamish. The project also includes an innovative proposal for the storage of collections owned by community and local heritage groups. Known as heritage cubes, these spaces will offer secure storage for significant collections and will help to ensure that they survive to benefit future

generations, but without ownership passing from the community into the museum. A collections study room will also be available for use by these groups.

www.beamish.org.uk



Transfer

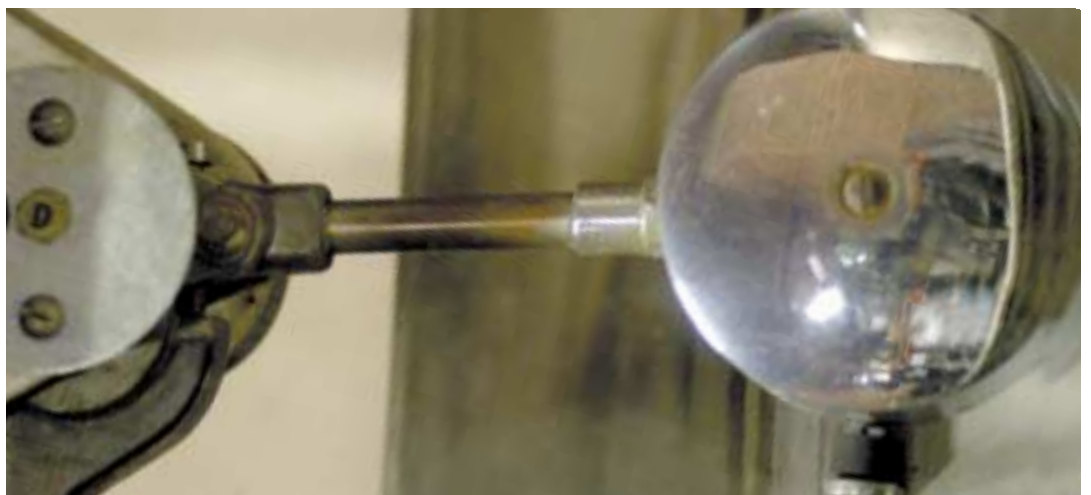
⁷⁰The transfer of objects between museums, or from museums to other public institutions, is an accepted part of good collections management. The inquiry considered whether transfer should be given a higher priority, with more collections being transferred to museums and other public institutions with greater capacity to offer opportunities to engage with, care for and research them. It is clear that there is considerable resistance to any suggestion that collections should be concentrated in centres of excellence. Many respondents were anxious that this might

leave smaller and less well-resourced museums depleted, damaging their status with their communities and undermining the support of donors. A more positive approach might focus on bringing additional curatorial support to underused collections, rather than trying to take the collections nearer to where the support is. The question of how to strengthen expertise and knowledge is discussed in detail in the final section.

⁷¹Nevertheless, there is an ethical imperative for museums to increase the use of their collections as well as to maximise the care they are able to offer them. They have a responsibility to consider the appropriate transfer of collections to another institution as part of this. **In taking forward the inquiry, the MA will investigate ways of supporting museums in transferring collections to more appropriate institutions, including the provision of better information and training.** For example, it may be beneficial for the MA to provide an online listing of collections available for transfer, instead of the rather brief listings currently provided in *Museums Journal*. And better information about the holdings of museums, through online listing and collaborative approaches, may make it possible for museums to adopt a more proactive approach, requesting things they would positively like, rather than passively reacting to proposed disposals.

Disposal from museum collections

⁷²Disposal should be a part of a responsible collections management strategy. Most museums carry out occasional disposals and a few have taken a more concerted approach. The National Maritime Museum is currently engaged in a review of its collections, which is expected to lead to the disposal of about 4,500 objects. Newark Museums Service, a small local authority service, has also adopted a proactive approach to disposal, which involves consultation with a panel of community representatives. The inquiry has concluded that more museums should take active



approaches to disposal. These suggestions build on the work recently carried out by the National Museum Directors' Conference and published in its report, *Too Much Stuff?* (2002).

⁷³Some objects will find an appropriate home in other museum collections; but some will need to be disposed of outside the sector. This report discusses transfer and disposal outside the sector separately, since the issues concerned are significantly different. Transfer between museums, where an object or collection remains within the public realm is relatively uncontroversial. It should always be a museum's first choice when undertaking disposal. However, it is important to be clear that there are collections that are unused in their present institution and that would not find a home in another museum, were they to be offered for transfer. Some would be of interest to collectors and enthusiasts, and the option of transfer to voluntary sector bodies is sometimes an attractive one, particularly for industrial and transport museums. However, in any large-scale collection review, it is likely that some objects will be disposed of that are not of interest even to collectors and enthusiasts. The experience of the BT Connected Earth project offers a valuable lesson (case study 17). After all other avenues had been exhausted, and after the most thorough disposal process, a significant number of objects were simply thrown away. This is, for most museums, an unpalatable solution.

⁷⁴Disposal is costly and time consuming if it is to be carried out appropriately. Some respondents have argued that it is a distraction and an entirely negative use of time and energy, and so it should

simply be avoided. But that is to ignore the problem. Responsible museums cannot keep spending public resources caring for objects that will never be enjoyed or used. Nor can they continue to expand their collections indefinitely. Resources are limited, and if museums are to be able to continue to collect, while remaining sustainable, they must consider disposal.

⁷⁵Museums tend to be discouraged from disposing of objects by mistakes from the past. However, while disposing of an object always constitutes some kind of lost opportunity for future generations, so does its retention. The burden of caring for unwanted and unusable collections will tie our successors' hands, just as much as the loss of something they might have valued.

⁷⁶There are ways of minimising mistakes. Disposal should be prioritised towards the kinds of objects and specimens that will never be useful, usually because they are unprovenanced and uncontextualised, or simply in irreversible physical decline. Objects represented in large quantities must be another category for consideration. Many respondents were keen to stress that some apparent duplication can easily be justified (two identical objects are not necessarily duplicates – in social history, they may have different stories that make them unique; in biosciences, a specimen's DNA gives it a unique value). However, there must still be reasonable limits to how many objects are needed: a museum can easily justify holding two, or even ten, flat irons if they have interesting stories attached to them or will be used for loans or handling, but it will surely not find use for 100. The question of duplication in biosciences is perhaps

more complex and may need collaborative approaches.

⁷⁷The inquiry found that there are obstacles that prevent museums from disposing of more objects, even when it is ethical and appropriate to do so. The first and perhaps most significant is a disproportionate anxiety among some museum professionals. Many respondents believed that, by showing a willingness to dispose of any items, they would open the floodgates to a rush of inappropriate disposals. They were concerned that if disposal were understood to be even a possibility, they would be required by unsympathetic governing bodies to sell parts of the collection for purely financial reasons. But there have been no recent cases of this happening; and the last case caused such widespread indignation that it should be clear that this is not a risk-free course of action for a governing body. The perception of this problem is most acute in local authorities.

⁷⁸**The MA will seek ways to work in partnership with the Local Government Association, to find ways to increase confidence so that all local authorities can be responsible stewards of their collections.**

⁷⁹Some practical changes to disposal procedures would encourage more museums to dispose of objects appropriately. **The MA will work with the MLA to find ways to streamline museums' disposal procedures, while improving the safeguards offered.** For example, it may be helpful to establish a sign-off procedure for planned disposals, so that museums could be

17 Disposal: Connected Earth

When BT was privatised in 1984, its assets included over 40,000 historic artefacts. A dedicated BT Museum closed in 1997, with BT feeling that a standalone museum was no longer the best way of providing public access to the collections. Instead, the company created a museum on the internet, and has distributed the best of its physical collections to a network of new galleries within established UK museums. The Connected Earth museum went live in 2002 and partner galleries have opened displays since, each concentrating on a particular aspect of the history and science of telecommunications.

The BT collections included telephones, switchboards, telegraphs, and associated equipment; large items such as telephone kiosks, and even a historic vehicle collection. It also held huge numbers of components and spares as well as tens of thousands of items of ephemera.

Much was dispersed to the partner museums, depending on the themes of the displays planned. BT then followed a thorough and ethically-appropriate programme of disposal, offering the remainder of the material to registered museums, and then to collectors and enthusiasts. But even after this lengthy process,

a considerable amount of material remained for which no home could be found and was simply thrown away.

www.connected-earth.com





C Strengthening the museum sector

Expertise and knowledge

certain that everything was being carried out appropriately. While disposal by transfer to another museum must remain the ideal, there will be occasions when this is not practical. It may be appropriate to establish an approach that offers greater safeguards when other methods are used.

⁸⁰ Above all, museums need to be clear that making decisions about disposal is part of their professional and ethical responsibility. If museum staff are comfortable with the idea that they need to exercise professional judgement when making acquisitions, they should extend the same approach to disposal.

⁸¹ If museums are to realise the potential of their collections then the sector needs to be strengthened in certain areas. This section looks at the question of specialist expertise and knowledge, as well as at more general issues about training and collaboration.

⁸² Without people with the skills and knowledge to bring their collections to life, museums are just repositories. However, museums face ever greater challenges in ensuring they have people with the right skills and knowledge to develop collections-related knowledge.

⁸³ It has become clear that there are too few museum staff with a focus on developing collections' potential, and that many museums do not have access to the expertise they need to develop their collections. Renaissance in the Regions has begun to have an impact in England, with some regional museum hubs appointing new collections staff at a senior level, but the need across the sector remains great. This is not simply a plea for more curators, collection management specialists and conservators, though these are needed.





⁸⁴To say that museums need access to more knowledge about their collections should not be to indulge in false nostalgia. It is tempting to hark back to a notional golden age perhaps 30 or 50 years ago when museums were well staffed by scholar-curators who knew their collections and their subject areas authoritatively and intimately. In reality, it is far from clear that there was ever this kind of comprehensive coverage, with every collection benefiting from the care of a specialist. And it is even less clear that the service provided met the needs of a wide audience. Museums need excellent communicators as well as access to excellent scholarship, especially in the face of increased demands from visitors who have higher expectations and are often better informed and more demanding. The way that museums communicate has improved, and, in many respects, they are meeting the needs of their visitors better than ever before. They recognise that they cannot speak about their collections in a language that only specialists can understand. Museums and their users have benefited enormously from changes that have seen educators, and other interpretation staff, play a key part in planning exhibitions and displays.

⁸⁵Museums have also had to adapt because the subjects they now deal with are bigger and more complex than they used to be. The social history of a medium-sized town today might include the stories of people who have come to Britain from every continent and whose patterns of work and life experiences are unimaginably complex and varied. Science and industry collections have to encompass biotechnology, as well as the

development of steam power. Museum collections contain objects and specimens in more media, and the histories and experiences that were previously hidden demand a presence. These changes have made museums infinitely richer, but have also meant that they need access to more specialist knowledge.

⁸⁶For the longer term, more research into the extent of relevant expertise in museums and other institutions across the UK is needed. Some is already being undertaken at a regional level in England by regional museum hubs and regional agencies, and by the relevant agencies in the devolved administrations and this needs to be brought together. Proper debate about what kinds of expertise museums need is also required: in particular, how much expertise should be in-house and how much can be brought in from outside?

The MA will seek ways to promote and take forward the debate and research into expertise.

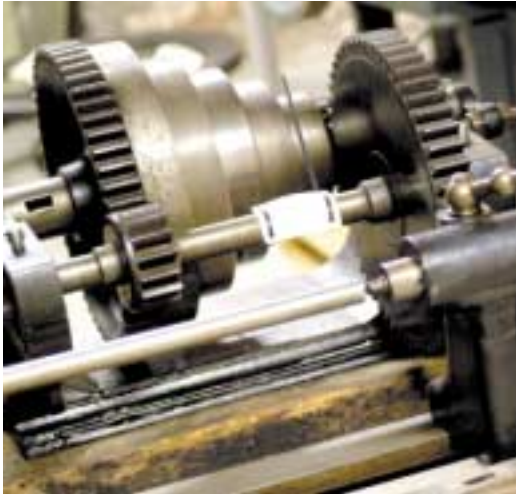
⁸⁷Some immediate conclusions can be drawn. Museums need to reassert the development of knowledge and research as a key role. Educators, curators, conservators and those working in audience development and strategic marketing all have a part to play in encouraging the development of knowledge about the collection and disseminating it widely.

⁸⁸Museums also need to recognise that it is not desirable, let alone practical, for them to have all the expertise they require in house. Museums can work together to share expertise across the sector and this is discussed in more detail below. But it will be

equally if not more important for museums to build closer links with external sources of knowledge and expertise. For example, Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery has an advisory panel for its science and industry collections, established as a response to a lack of in-house expertise. The panel includes academics, curators from the National Museum of Science and Industry, and a representative from the Science & Industry Collections Group, the subject-specialist organisation in this area. Similarly, the natural science department at North Lincolnshire Museum, recognising that its staff represent only a tiny proportion of the expertise available locally, has established a working group to allow them to develop links with both amateurs and professionals.

⁸⁹Volunteers and enthusiasts also represent a valuable source of knowledge, and some museums have worked hard to harness this. Many natural science departments work with volunteers recording wildlife sightings, as part of local biodiversity action plans. Volunteers with relevant skills from their working lives are vital in many transport and industrial museums. There may be scope to develop this further, with more museums actively recruiting volunteers for their specialist knowledge.

⁹⁰A number of museums have developed exemplary partnerships with higher education institutions, and of course university museums exist at the point of interface between museums and higher education. The Victoria and Albert Museum has a range of long-established partnerships with universities, some of which offer museum staff the opportunity to teach, as well as



18 The Petrie project

The Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology at University College London recently led a project to reactivate underused collections in regional museums, through the injection of specialist expertise. Material excavated by Flinders Petrie is widely distributed in museums across the UK. The Petrie worked with four of these museums: Bexhill Museum, Buckinghamshire County Museum, Ipswich Museum and Brighton Museum and Art Gallery.

The Designation Challenge Fund enabled a specialist Egyptologist to spend 20 months with the four museums, researching, cataloguing, and

photographing ancient Egyptian items. When the project began, most of these items were in store and poorly documented, with no plans to put them on display: the museums had never had access to specialist support.

The original aim of the project was to research and document the collections. However, once the museums knew the potential of the material they held, they were able to plan temporary exhibitions and redisplay of their galleries, based on the material. Potentially popular collections had remained underused because the museums did not have access to the expertise and knowledge to make them meaningful to visitors.

www.petrie.ucl.ac.uk



draw on specialist academic expertise to inform exhibitions and publications. The opportunity to form links with higher education institutions is not restricted to large museums: the Wilberforce House Museum in Hull has only two members of staff, but is working closely with the University of Hull on the Wilberforce Institute for the Study of Slavery and Emancipation research centre and archive. Other museums have recognised the potential for universities to make use of their collections: Portsmouth City Museums and Records Service's entire geology collection is on long-term loan to the school of earth and environmental sciences at the University of Portsmouth where it is actively used as a teaching resource. In return, university staff provide expert advice on, and access to, the collection and deal with public enquiries.

⁹¹ In general, links between museums and higher education are far less well developed than they might be. There are reasons for this: the approach taken to particular subjects by museums and by universities may differ significantly. Research carried out in museums and presented in the form of exhibitions and catalogues may have been undervalued by universities' performance management regime, thereby discouraging them from investing resources in museum projects. Nevertheless, the higher education sector has such significant resources at its disposal that it must be worth pursuing possibilities. Higher education can also be a significant source of funding for museum projects, as a number of the case studies demonstrate. The inquiry concludes that it is not just university museums that have a

role to play in making the intellectual resources of higher education more widely available. University museums have an established role as the 'shop windows' of their institutions, but this is a role that could also be extended to other museums.

⁹² The MA will work with the Arts and Humanities Research Council, the University Museums Group and other relevant bodies to explore how links between museums and higher education might be strengthened.

⁹³ It is clear that museums could do more to ensure that they draw on external sources of knowledge and make it publicly available. Respondents were divided as to the extent to which museums also need in-house expertise. Some argued that people who work in museums simply need basic subject knowledge, with access to specialist expertise. And indeed some museums do function well without in-house specialist knowledge of their collections, and bring objects to life for visitors. However, there is a danger that they are trading on the work undertaken by previous generations of curators, and that both their collections and interpretation will eventually become stale. Without good knowledge of their collections, museums will find it hard to collect actively and seriously, let alone to take appropriate decisions about disposal. They could also miss out on opportunities for collaboration with external bodies since, without any internal expertise, it may be difficult to spot opportunities and to forge appropriate links. Museums' in-house expertise could perhaps best be seen as a catalyst, vital to set off wider reactions.

⁹⁴ There is a clear need for investment in training and development to enhance subject expertise, and this is discussed below. Recent projects also demonstrate the benefits of bringing specialist curatorial expertise in to underused collections, including the Petrie Museum's work, funded by the Designation Challenge Fund; see case study 18.

⁹⁵ As part of its action plan for taking forward this report, the MA will explore the possibility of raising funding for a pilot programme of providing additional curatorial support for underused collections.



Development and training

⁹⁶ A comprehensive overview of training and development issues was beyond the scope of the inquiry. However, it considered some specific training and development issues related to the skills needed to care for collections and to bring them to life.

⁹⁷ The increased prevalence of museum studies qualifications and the Associateship of the Museums Association (AMA) programme, with its commitment to continuing professional development, have helped to raise general standards in the sector. However, while museum studies courses have fostered greater professionalism, the inquiry has revealed some concern about how well they prepare graduates for museum careers, especially in that they offer little scope for developing subject-related expertise. Some respondents suggested that the now almost universal requirement to have a museum studies qualification before securing a first job in many areas of museum work limits the pool of potential applicants in a damaging way. Excluding people with relevant skills gained in archives, libraries or higher education is one example. The new-style AMA is designed to be accessible to people working in or for museums in any capacity, and it has done much to raise standards and instil a sense of professionalism. But some responses suggested that its generic approach might have had some unhelpful consequences, in that it has reduced the emphasis placed on the development of collections-related expertise. While the MA remains committed to a professional qualification that is open to everyone who works in museums, it may

be appropriate to explore the issue of the AMA's relation to subject specialisms in more detail.

⁹⁸ The MA will work with its recognised museum studies courses to review the way that the courses prepare people for museum careers. The MA will also consider whether a review of the AMA is needed.

⁹⁹ Conservators have separate training and development programmes and the inquiry also pointed to some concerns about these. In particular, conservation courses offer increasingly little hands-on experience, and conservators have to develop this post-entry, although there are relatively few posts which offer properly structured training opportunities. This is something that the new Institute of Conservation is likely to seek to address, and the MA would be keen to work with the institute in whatever ways might be appropriate.

¹⁰⁰ The lack of training and development posts is common to almost all museum roles. Specialist skills and expertise have traditionally been learned on the job, but there are now few posts which offer the chance for junior staff to work alongside more experienced staff, building their skills in a structured way. There is a clear lack of succession planning, and no structured pathways through a museum career. The problems associated with recruiting people to leadership roles have been well rehearsed and a number of initiatives are now beginning to address this problem. But problems are not limited to senior roles. Almost every stage of career progression presents its own problems. There is considerable anecdotal evidence to

suggest that many staff are trapped in roles that do not draw on their skills and potential. Talent is wasted and energetic and committed people leave the sector. Low pay remains a serious issue and may discourage suitable applicants from pursuing a museum career. The MA's Diversify scheme has brought new talent into museums and is increasing the cultural diversity of the profession, but much remains to be done. There is also a dearth of smaller-scale training opportunities in some areas: for example, a number of respondents commented on the lack of affordable object-based short training courses offering hands-on experience.

¹⁰¹ These problems are now widely recognised and it is welcome that they are given prominence in the DCMS consultation document, *Understanding the Future*. The establishment of the new Sector Skills Council (SSC) for the cultural and creative industries offers an exceptional opportunity and the MLA is well placed to take a strong lead on workforce issues.

¹⁰² The MA will work with the SSC and with the MLA, the DCMS and other relevant bodies on issues associated with workforce development as a matter of priority.



Collaboration

¹⁰³ Museums will need to work together to make an entitlement to museum collections a reality for everyone. Museums already cooperate in many areas. There would be considerable benefits if existing relationships were formalised and extended. The inquiry has investigated the feasibility of establishing a series of networks, that would enable museums to cooperate more closely. This was a key theme of the consultation paper, published during an earlier stage of the inquiry. There was a similar proposal for collaboration on a subject-by-subject basis in the Renaissance in the Regions report, which envisaged that subject-based networks could complement the joint working of the regional museum hubs. As this report is published, the MLA is providing some funding for subject-based networks, and the MA hopes that this will be extended and supplemented, depending on the outcomes from this pilot round.

¹⁰⁴ The thinking behind the two proposals was similar. In order to make effective use of their collections, museums need people who can bring them to life: people who have expert knowledge and who can also communicate that knowledge with verve and enthusiasm. There is anecdotal evidence of potentially very rich collections in UK museums, which have never been properly curated and so never made properly available to anyone. It makes sense for museums to pool their resources by working across institutional boundaries, to begin to address the shortfall of expertise and to find ways of making better use of under-exploited collections. Groups of museums working together would also be well placed to

draw in external expertise, from higher education, industry and enthusiasts' groups. Without prejudging the outcomes of the pilot round of the MLA funding for specialist networks, it is already clear that there is considerable potential for joint working on collecting and disposal, sharing knowledge, as well as on public-facing projects such as exhibitions and publications.

¹⁰⁵ It is important to emphasise that there is a considerable number of existing subject-based groups in the museum sector, promoting collaboration in a whole range of areas. Most have individual members and are primarily concerned with professional development and promoting good practice in their area. A number of groups, mostly established more recently, have institutional members and aim to develop collaboration between museums, leading to more immediate public outcomes such as exhibitions. During the inquiry, as part of a programme of research funded by the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, the MA set out to establish an overview of existing subject-related collaboration and to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the existing groups and this survey is available in full on the MA website. The aim of any additional funding must be to strengthen and complement the work of these existing groups.

¹⁰⁶ **In taking forward this report, the MA will look for ways to encourage continued investment in subject-based networks, as well as exploring other possible models of collaboration.**

Specialist networks may work most successfully in fairly small specialist areas: for example, it is hard to see how the rural history model might be applied to archaeology. It will also be important to encourage



museums not to retreat to traditional museological divisions, but to take cross-cutting, interdisciplinary approaches to collections. Cooperation between museums in the regional museum hubs in England, as well as the projects funded by the Regional Development Challenge Fund in Scotland offer some valuable examples of how joint working can be fostered and encouraged. One lesson to emerge from the inquiry has been the value of brokers, whose role it is to build relationships and encourage joint working. Without this kind of dedicated staff time and energy, many potential partnerships never get off the ground. With one individual able to act as a catalyst, it becomes possible to bring in external funding and achieve results far in excess of what the partners might achieve individually. Investing in such brokers may offer a way of encouraging partnerships for areas where the subject network-based approach might not be appropriate.

¹⁰⁷ Further work is needed to determine the appropriate nature of collaborative approaches. However, what is clear is that greater collaboration is both a practical necessity and a philosophical imperative if museums are to realise the potential of their collections as a key part of the public realm.



Moving forward



¹⁰⁸ This report shows that there are many ways to increase people's engagement with museum collections and to make collections, and knowledge and ideas about them, as rich, diverse and inspiring as possible.

¹⁰⁹ The MA hopes that the report marks the start of a sustained process of change. If this is to happen it will need support from government, policy makers and funders, as well as action by individual museums and galleries.

¹¹⁰ The MA will encourage discussion and implementation of the report's ideas and argue for changes in policy, funding and practice. Many of the report's suggestions are based on existing practice in the museum sector and can be put into practice now.

¹¹¹ Other ideas in the report need further development. The MA hopes to continue working with policy makers and the widest range of museums to work these ideas up in more detail. It also hopes to secure funding to run a number of pilot projects to explore some of the report's proposals.

Individual museums

¹¹² Many of the report's findings and action points are in the form of suggestions for changes to museum practice and individual museums will have to decide how to respond to these suggestions.

¹¹³ To encourage an active debate about the proposals, the MA will produce guidance (perhaps in the form of a toolkit for discussion meetings) to help museums think through the implications of this report for their own work.

Government, policy makers and funders

¹¹⁴ Starting immediately, the MA will work with a wide range of organisations to discuss the how the findings of the inquiry might influence their work and, where appropriate, jointly plan implementation strategies. The specific action points summarised below commit the MA to working with a number of organisations, notably the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, the Art Fund and the Heritage Lottery Fund. There are also specific proposals for the MA to work with the Arts and Humanities Research Council, the University Museums Group, the International Council of Museums, the Local Government Association, the new sector skills council and the mda.



¹¹⁵To ensure that collections-related work is properly valued, and properly resourced, it will be essential that it is reflected by museums' performance management regimes. The MA will work with the appropriate bodies, including government departments and the Audit Commission, to take this forward.

¹¹⁶The MA also hopes to work constructively with other organisations that share an interest in taking forward ideas in this report, including: national museum councils and government departments, regional agencies, specialist groups, the National Museum Directors' Conference, the Association of Independent Museums, the Group for Larger Local Authority Museums, organisations representing other parts of the sector, the arts councils, the Big Lottery Fund and charitable trusts active in museums.

Engagement

More research is needed to assess the impact of initiatives designed to make collections more available, such as open storage, loan schemes and displays on non-museum premises. The MA will encourage relevant bodies to undertake such research with the aim of making definitive judgements about the most effective way to invest resources in future. The MA will continue to encourage debate about how wider engagement can be encouraged. (14)

The MA will work with the mda (formerly the Museum Documentation Association), the MLA and others to develop clear and realistic recommendations about the future direction of documentation and knowledge management. (25)

The MA considers the hidden histories approach to be an important way forward, and will look for ways to support and encourage it. (29)

The MA will encourage the MLA and others to find ways of encouraging and supporting more digitisation of collections, and adding value to existing digital resources. (36)

The dynamic collection

The MA will work with the Art Fund, and other appropriate bodies, to explore the potential for strengthening museums' capacity to make acquisitions and for developing more strategic approaches to acquisition. (44)

The MA will encourage the HLF, and other funders, to fund the long-term development of collections in addition to single acquisitions. (50)

The MA will continue to advocate the need for more funding for temporary exhibitions and investment in facilities that can host major temporary exhibitions. (62)

The MA will explore the potential for securing funding for a project to encourage loans, based on the Museum Loan Network model. (64)

The MA will work with the International Council of Museums to encourage bodies such as the DCMS and the MLA to support more UK museums in building mutually beneficial international links. (68)

The MA will investigate ways of supporting museums in transferring collections to more appropriate institutions, including the provision of better information and training. (71)

The MA will seek ways to work in partnership with the Local Government Association, to find ways to increase confidence so that all local authorities can be responsible stewards of their collections. (78)

The MA will work with the MLA to find ways to streamline museums' disposal procedures, while improving the safeguards offered. (79)

Strengthening the museum sector

The MA will seek ways to promote and take forward the debate and research into expertise. (86)

The MA will work with the Arts and Humanities Research Council, the University Museums Group and other relevant bodies to explore how links between museums and the higher education sector might be strengthened. (92)

The MA will explore the possibility of raising funding for a pilot programme of providing additional curatorial support for underused collections. (95)

The MA will work with its recognised museum studies courses to review the way that the courses prepare people for museum careers. The MA will also consider whether a review of the AMA is needed. (98)

The MA will work with the SSC and with the MLA, the DCMS and other relevant bodies on issues associated with workforce development as a matter of priority. (102)

The MA will look for ways to encourage continued investment in subject-based networks, as well as exploring other possible models of collaboration. (106)



Appendix

How others do it

Throughout the inquiry, we have looked abroad for possible models. One of the things we have considered is whether changes to the way that museums and their collections are managed might help to achieve the improvements that we hope for. In general, the inquiry has concluded that large-scale structural change is not required, so much as changes to individual museums' practice and a much greater commitment to collaboration within existing structures. Nevertheless, a number of people have commented that it would be useful to know more about the structures in place in other European countries, to inform the debate about how to develop the sector in the UK.

This section provides information about the structures and mechanisms in place for managing museums and their collections in four different European countries. The Netherlands, Denmark, Sweden and France have been chosen because, in some respects, all take a more centralised or structured collaborative approach to managing museums and their collections than is currently the case in the UK.

Research by Julie Nightingale

The Netherlands

Most museums in the Netherlands are run by national, provincial or local government. National museums come under the arm's-length control of the Department of Culture but are all independent foundations with their own boards and have operated in this 'privatised' way since the mid-1990s.

It is government policy to foster the notion of a single national collection, but one held in various museums across the country. There are measures in place to encourage mobility between collections. For example, the rules on insurance have been relaxed to persuade more nationals to lend to local authority museums and there are arrangements between central government and key local authorities so that long-term and exhibition loans can move freely.

Following the shift to greater independence for museums, a number of agencies are now involved in maintaining museums' collections and in creating dialogue between the government and museums. Chief among them is the Instituut Collectie Nederland (Institute for Netherlands Collections, ICN).



The ICN is government-funded to advise ministers on issues to do with museums and collections. It carries out a number of collections management functions which were previously shared out among different bodies, and has four core tasks: advising on the preservation and management of collections, research, training conservators and managing the ICN collection of more than 100,000 works of art, half of which are on loan to other institutions

The ICN's advice is also available to the museums and other individuals and organisations that hold collections, including libraries and archives, as well as private collectors.

www.icn.nl

Denmark

Denmark has more than 300 museums or related institutions, about half of which are state-subsidised to some degree. The state owns and entirely funds seven national museums. Other museums are owned and run by local authorities and by regional councils. Some museums receive funding from all three tiers of government.

Despite the reliance on state funding, it is a devolved system and museums are largely autonomous with their own boards of directors, though the creation of the National Cultural Heritage Agency (NCHA), see below, has handed more control back to the centre.

In terms of the collection, anything in a public-owned museum is considered part of national heritage. It is a national collection in spirit, though local authorities officially hold the rights of ownership to their collections (unlike in France).



The most significant recent development for museums in Denmark has been the Danish Museums Act, which covers all public-funded museums irrespective of size or type. It sets out the purpose of museums, obligations in return for public funding, rules covering research (mainly archaeological investigations), treasure trove and natural history finds.

Cooperation between museums at different levels is taken for granted; museum people talk about 'the network of museums' in Denmark. The Act has codified these partnerships and emphasises museums' duty to work together on research or exhibitions and to exchange objects freely. In addition, the three nationals specialising in cultural history, art and natural history are required to share their expertise with local museums.

The NCHA was created when the Act came into force in 2001, replacing the National Council of Museums. The agency advises the minister and sets a number of regulations for museums, as well as giving guidance on collections management and overseeing 'quality control' of museums work.

A key innovation under the Act has been the creation of two central registers, one for art, and one for other collections. The Act creates an obligation for state museums and state-supported museums to enter everything in their collections on to the registers. Access to all the information (except personal information and details of about storage) is free for the public as well as professionals.

www.kum.dk/sw4497.asp – explanation of the Danish Museum Act 2001 (in English)



Sweden

There are almost 200 museums in Sweden and the majority are public-funded. They fall into three main groups: national, county/regional (with state subsidy) and those run by other local authorities. There is no central accreditation scheme as there is in the UK, and, unlike Denmark, Swedish museums are not covered by a single parliamentary act.

The key government body for museums is the National Heritage Board, the central authority for all matters concerning the historic landscape and cultural heritage. The board oversees all national museums and also works with the regional and local authority-funded museums. One of its main tasks is to allocate government grants to regional museums and to award project funding to national museums. (See www.raa.se).

Most of the county/regional museums and some of the national museums are owned by foundations. This, theoretically, gives them a high degree of autonomy. In practice, all are dependent on public funding, and their grants are often allied to government/local authority objectives. (They are not independent in the same sense as independent museums in the UK because opportunities for alternative funding streams, such as sponsorship, are thin on the ground and there is no tradition of an entrepreneurial approach to raising revenue.)

In terms of their collections, Swedish museums operate autonomously – the concept of a united, nationwide, national collection does not apply. Archaeological material is protected by law and kept in dedicated museums, which have a legal obligation to care for archaeological archives. Otherwise, every museum is responsible for its own collection and decides independently what to acquire.

That said, many museums participate in the Samdok initiative, which has had a profound impact on their collecting policies. Samdok, which has been running since 1977, began as a strategy to build cooperation between cultural history museums around contemporary research, documentation and collecting. It was originally funded by the government but is now supported by the Nordiska Museet (the national museum of cultural history in Stockholm) and more than 80 museums are involved. At its core, is the principle that museums can research contemporary society and culture more effectively by collaborating and applying a common philosophy. Its objective is to

deepen knowledge and understanding of Swedish society by creating a reliable record of its people, conditions and phenomena. It takes a holistic approach to the recording of information and it draws on a range of techniques – oral testimony, film, photography, and documentation – to ensure a broad perspective. It covers eight subject areas and participating museums choose to focus on one of these. Though each museum directs and funds its own research, they discuss the content and scope of their programmes with colleagues from other museums working on the same topic. It has its own decision-making body, the Samdok council.

www.nordiskamuseet.se/Publication.asp?publicationid=4213

France

Of the four countries we refer to, France has the most clear-cut definition of where the national collection ends and others begin: the nation owns the lot. Since 1791 all collections, national or local, have been the inalienable property of the French people. The relevant ministries and individual museums are simply custodians of the collection, and all senior museum staff are civil servants. All collections and registered monuments are listed on the National Inventory. Even though museums are now shifting to a more decentralised structure (see below), this change is highly unlikely to overturn more than 200 years of tradition and fragment the national collection.

There is no single legislative framework covering museums. Around two dozen come under the Culture Ministry but many others, including the Museum d'Histoire Naturelle and others with a science focus, come under the Higher Education and Research Ministry. Others fall to defence, transport and foreign affairs. National museums may be funded by a single sponsoring ministry or by a combination of ministries.

Regional and local museums receive their grants from the relevant tier of local or regional government, but many also receive additional funding from central government. For example, the director and deputy of all important local government museums are appointed and paid for by the state.

The other significant body for museums is La Réunion des Musées Nationaux. One of its key functions is to pool income earned by museums, including that from reproduction rights and



admissions to special exhibitions, to help fund major temporary exhibitions and purchase grants.

The state is relaxing its historically tight grip on the management of its cultural heritage and is moving to a more devolved model of governance. Many national museums now have a structure comparable to UK nationals, with boards of trustees. New administrative laws cover the running of public museums and set out the relationships between them and a number of government and regional support agencies.

Since the end of the 1980s, around 16,000 staff (half the workforce) have been switched from Culture Ministry employment to these new governing bodies, and more will follow in line with the national policy of decentralising France overall. For example, around 85 per cent of all the 450 or so national monuments and sites are to be transferred from direct government management and handed to regional or local bodies or autonomous trusts. Technically, this means employees will cease to be civil servants, but senior staff at least are likely to remain under the ministry.

<http://www.rmn.fr/>

MUSEUMS ASSOCIATION

Images courtesy of the Museum of
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