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Statement on barring Northampton Museums Service from Museums Association membership

The Museums Association (MA) has barred Northampton Museums Service from membership of the MA for a minimum period of five years for breaching the MA's Code of Ethics by selling an ancient Egyptian statue from the collection of Northampton Museum and Art Gallery.

The statue of Sekhemka was sold at auction at Christie's in London in July for over £15m. Northampton Borough Council, which runs Northampton Museums Service, said that it intends to share the proceeds with Lord Northampton, whose ancestors donated the statue to the museum. The council has also indicated that its share of proceeds from the sale will go towards a £14m extension of Northampton Museum and Art Gallery.

The MA's Ethics Committee found that Northampton Borough Council had not demonstrated that the sale of Sekhemka was funding of last resort in relation to the development plans for the museum site. In addition, its plan to share the proceeds of the sale indicated that legal title of the object was not resolved.

David Fleming, chairman of the MA's Ethics Committee, said: "We do appreciate the huge financial pressure that many local authority museums are under at the present time, but the MA's Code of Ethics provides for such a sale only as a last resort after other sources of funding have been thoroughly explored. At a time when public finances are pressured it is all the more important that museum authorities behave in an ethical fashion in order to safeguard the long-term public interest. Museums have a duty to hold their collections in trust for society. They should not treat their collections as assets to be monetised for short-term gain."

Sharon Heal, the MA's acting head of policy, said that the association had decided to bar the museums service from membership after careful consideration.

"Northampton Borough Council has clearly breached the MA's Code of Ethics by selling the statues from its collection. Its actions are a clear violation of public trust at a local, national and international level."

"The MA is convening a summit of funding bodies later in the year to agree on a new range of sanctions and deterrents for governing bodies considering this course of action."

Background

The MA is an independent membership organisation representing museums and galleries in the UK and people who work for them. It has over 6,000 individual members and 600 institutional members. It was formed in 1889 and is a not-for-profit charity that seeks to inform, represent and develop museums and people who work for them in order that they may provide a better service to society and the public.

The MA's Code of Ethics allows for financially motivated disposal in exceptional circumstances. To be eligible to dispose of items in these circumstances a museum would need to be able to demonstrate that they have considered and have met the following:

6.13 Refuse to undertake disposal principally for financial reasons, except in exceptional circumstances as defined in 6.14. Financially motivated disposal risks damaging public confidence in museums and the principle that collections should not normally be regarded as financially negotiable assets.

6.14 Consider financially motivated disposal only in exceptional circumstances and when it can be demonstrated that: i) It will significantly improve the long-term public benefit derived from the remaining collection ii) It is not to generate short-term revenue (for example to meet a budget deficit) iii) It is as a last resort after other sources of funding have been thoroughly explored iv) Extensive prior consultation with sector bodies has been undertaken v) The item under consideration lies outside the museum's established core collection as defined in the collections policy.

6.15 Ringfence any money raised as a result of disposal through sale, if this exceptional circumstance arises, solely and directly for the benefit of the museum's collection. Money raised must be restricted to the long-term sustainability, use and development of the collection. If in doubt about the proposed use of such restricted funds consult sector bodies.

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