

# Disposal consultation

The background of the entire page is a teal-tinted photograph of scattered metal letters, possibly from a typewriter or a similar mechanical device. The letters are out of focus, creating a textured, abstract pattern. The teal color is a deep, slightly dark greenish-blue.

**MUSEUMS  
ASSOCIATION**

# Introduction

In response to the findings of the Museums Association's (MA's) Collections for the Future report the association is reviewing its advice and guidance on museum disposal.

This advice should give museums the confidence to engage more actively with disposal and encourage more museums to consider disposal as an integral part of collections development.

The MA's role is to provide sound ethical advice on disposal, reflecting both the sector's opinions and current practice. Ethical advice represents the views of a particular time, and requires regular review to ensure that it is an accurate reflection of the consensus of the museum sector. It has been over ten years since the MA's Ethical Guidelines on Disposal were produced and an update is now necessary.

## **Toolkit**

In response to the sector's need, the MA will produce a toolkit that will bring together practical and ethical advice on disposal, and guide museums through each stage of the process.

The printed toolkit will be supported by an online resource providing illustrative case studies and additional information relating to disposal.

## **Purpose of the consultation**

To ensure that all ethical advice reflects the views of the museum community it is essential that we seek the sector's opinions on a range of issues related to disposal. The views expressed by respondents to the consultation will help define the final advice offered in the toolkit.

# How to contribute

The consultation process will run until 31 October 2006. You can contribute by responding to the questions raised. You can also contribute your views at this year's MA conference.

For additional information, to download a response form or to download guidance on running your own consultation meeting visit the MA website:

[www.museumsassociation.org](http://www.museumsassociation.org)

Please send your responses to:

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24 Calvin Street

London E1 6NW

[caitlin@museumsassociation.org](mailto:caitlin@museumsassociation.org)

The MA is interested in hearing from museums that are willing to contribute interesting examples of disposals that can be used as illustrative case studies.

## MUSEUMS ASSOCIATION

Images courtesy of the Museum of Science and Industry in Manchester and Manchester Museum  
Photographer:  
Joel Chester Fildes



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# Questions to consider



## Guiding principle

The MA's ethical advice has always been guided by a 'strong presumption against disposal' however there is evidence to suggest that this has acted as a deterrent to many museums when considering responsible disposal.

- 1 Should the current 'strong presumption against disposal' be retained, or should the MA adopt a less restrictive principle such as 'disposal should only be undertaken when it clearly serves the strategic aims and overall mission of the museum'?

## Involvement of stakeholders and donors

The continued success and development of museums is dependent on the maintenance of public trust in these institutions. The act of disposing of items from collections affects public trust in museums and risks alienating future donors and others. Greater involvement, and improved communication about disposal, could help to ensure continued public trust in museums.

- 2 Who's views should be considered during the decision-making process?
- 3 Is it appropriate to involve donors or their descendents in the disposal process?

If so, at what stage?

- as part of making the decision
- as a courtesy to the donor once the decision to dispose has been made
- other.

- 4 Is it ever appropriate to return items to donors or their descendents? If so, in what circumstances?

## Retention within the museum sector and public domain

In recognition of the fact that acquisitions and donations are made on the expectation that items will be retained within museums, current guidance supports disposal that ensures retention within the museum sector or wider public domain.

- 5 What do you understand to be the public domain?
- 6 Should retention within the public domain be the overriding priority when disposing?
- 7 If a new location for an item can not be found in a museum or elsewhere in the public domain, in what circumstances might it be appropriate for the disposing museum to:
  - retain the item
  - sell at auction or privately
  - destroy the item.



## Disposal through sale

The MA's ethical advice gives preference to disposal through free gift or transfer, recommending sale only once it has been established no other museum is able to take the items. This advice is designed to protect public trust, to make it more likely that collections remain within the museum sector and in recognition that it is preferable that decisions to dispose are not influenced by financial considerations. However some museums are giving more consideration to disposing of items through sale.

- 8 In what circumstances is sale (rather than free transfer) to other museums or elsewhere within the public domain acceptable?
- 9 Are there instances when it is acceptable for museums to sell collections primarily to generate funds? If so, in what circumstances?
  - in order to buy other items to improve the collection
  - in order to provide improved care for collections
  - other.
- 10 Should the type of museum (eg independent/local authority/national/university etc) or the method of acquisition (eg purchased with funds or donated) influence decisions about whether to sell items or offer them as a free transfer?

## International disposal

(other than in the case of restitution or repatriation)

There are a few examples of museums disposing of items overseas but this is a relatively rare practice. However as there is now growing co-operation and partnership working with museums internationally, opportunities to dispose of items overseas could increase.

- 11 Should museums give more consideration to disposing of items to museums abroad?

## Assessment of the public benefit of collections

- 12 The MA is thinking of developing a framework to help museums assess the potential public benefit, both now and in the future, of items in their collection. This will assist museums making decisions to dispose. What should be included in this framework?

We are aware that the issue of disposal raises many questions, however it is not within the scope of this consultation to cover them all. Please raise any additional issues you would like the MA to consider in your response.

### Additional questions

It would be helpful if your institution would also answer the following questions:

- 13** Does your museum actively dispose of items in the collection?
- 14** How many items has your museum disposed of in the past five years?
- 15** Has your museum ever reversed a decision to dispose – if so why?
- 16** Does your museum have any constitutional or legislative conditions concerning disposals or affecting your disposal policy and procedures?
- 17** Do you know of any examples where creative and imaginative new uses have been found for items being disposed (such as items being used by artists)?
- 18** Has your museum disposed of items into the wider public domain, and if so where and what factors influenced your decision?
- 19** Has your museum disposed of items outside of the public domain, and if so what factors did you consider?
- 20** Has your museum ever involved stakeholders, such as through a panel or peer review, to contribute to the decision-making process?

