



The collections that museums care for, display, interpret and hold in trust for future generations form the basis of all the work a museum does. Without collections museums could not exist.

In recent years the importance of strategic collections management has come to the forefront of debates about the future of museums. It is clear that museums cannot afford to keep acquiring objects when stores are full, and when the collections they already hold are not being used effectively. Without difficult decisions being made about rationalisation, the situation is unsustainable. However, with this renewed focus, the work museums are doing with their collections is becoming more and more exciting as new ways are devised to ensure the reach of collections becomes ever broader.

Museums collections are now being given the priority they deserve. It is no longer acceptable to see strategic collections management as peripheral or solely administrative. Examples include partnership working, long-term loans, loans boxes to schools, large-scale rationalisation and disposal programmes, innovative outreach projects and the professional sharing of collections knowledge.

The effective use of collections makes museums relevant, inspiring and enjoyable for all.

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*The scale of the collections held in UK museums:*

- There are 2500 museums in the UK, holding at least 200 million objects, with approximately 130 million of these objects in the national museums.<sup>1</sup> Recent research has suggested that this is now a conservative estimate.<sup>2</sup>
- 25% of museums have 1,001-5,000 objects  
15% hold 5,001-10,000  
25% hold 10,001-50,000  
15% hold 50,001-500,000 and a few hold significantly more.<sup>3</sup>
- The Natural History Museum has 70 million specimens, the Imperial War Museum has 6 million photographs and 120 million feet of film, the British Museum has 4 million prints and drawings, the V&A has one million prints and drawings and 80,000 textiles.<sup>4</sup>

*Museums are still acquiring, with many acquisitions a result of taking on donated material:*

- For example the National Museum Wales' collection has been growing at a rate of 40,000 objects a year.<sup>5</sup>
- During 2008, 132,000 objects were acquired by 183 museums in the West Midlands.<sup>6</sup>

*Looking after these items is not cost free:*

- Glasgow Museum recently identified that it costs around £1,000 per square metre to build additional storage space for new material.<sup>7</sup>
- In the West Midlands a total of 6000 staff and volunteers look after over 6 million objects, giving each member of staff or volunteer responsibility for an average of 1000 objects.<sup>8</sup>

*However, it is not only the size of a collection that matters, it is the quality:*

- There are 104 organisations in England with 132 designated collections. A Designated collection is a 'pre-eminent collection of national and international importance held in England's non-national museums, libraries and archives, identified on their quality and significance'.<sup>9</sup>
- Every English region contains an organisation holding a Designated collection.<sup>10</sup> In Scotland, there are over 12 million items held in museums. 78% of Scottish organisations have collections that are in whole or in part nationally significant.<sup>11</sup>
- In the South West 45% of approximately 14.5 million objects are considered to be of national significance.<sup>12</sup>

*Public demand for engagement with collections is increasing; museums are putting measures in place to increase access in imaginative and innovative ways:*

- Approx 90% of museum collections are in storage<sup>13</sup>, meaning that we have barely begun to unlock the vast potential of the collections UK museums hold. 74% of museums felt that their collections could be better used,<sup>14</sup> with 52% reporting increasing public demand for access to the collections they hold.<sup>15</sup>
- Just some of the ways collections can and are being used include the following: for research, education, social benefit, the garnering of social identity, sheer enjoyment, and other creative uses.<sup>16</sup>
- Provision for access to collections is increasing in response to increased public demand: a recent large scale study of UK museums found that open stores, group tours, learning programmes and events, voluntary projects (in collaboration with external specialist organisations) and long term loans are all ways in which collections are being opened up to the many, not just the privileged few.<sup>17</sup>
- In 2008-09, 16 national museums and art galleries were involved in over 1600 UK-wide partnership projects focused on sharing collections<sup>18</sup>. In 2007-08, the V&A loaned to 136 overseas institutions, with the Tate loaning to 110. In each case this was more than the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.<sup>19</sup>
- In 2009 the ARTIST ROOMS project, making use of the large public collection of post-war and contemporary art jointly owned by National Galleries of Scotland and Tate, reached over 630,000 people across the UK (outside London and Edinburgh) travelling to 12 cities and towns across the country.<sup>20</sup>
- Hub museums loaned to 1347 venues across England during 2008-09.<sup>21</sup> 38 museums in the South East operate a loans box service in some form.<sup>22</sup> Just one Loans Box service, at Reading, has lent 7010 loans boxes to schools since 2005. With an average of 10-20 objects

included in each box, this means 70,000-140,000 objects have been accessed outside the museum.<sup>23</sup>

*The benefits of learning from interaction with 'real' objects cannot be underestimated:*

- When teachers ordering loans boxes were asked about their reasons for doing so, 100% said the importance of learning from primary sources was their number one motivation.<sup>24</sup>

*The public care about Collections and are prepared to fight to keep them in the public realm:*

- Since 1903 the Art Fund has helped to save over 860,000 works of art for the UK public through donations and private membership subscriptions.<sup>25</sup> In 2008, £50million was raised in just four months to stop the private sale of the Titian masterpiece 'Diana and Actaeon', with £8million of that total raised from individual members of the public and the Art Fund.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Digest of Museum Statistics (1999) and Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA / accessed July 2010): [http://www.mla.gov.uk/about/work\\_with/mla/museums](http://www.mla.gov.uk/about/work_with/mla/museums)

<sup>2</sup> Keene, S. 'Collections for People' (2008), p.7: <http://eprints.ucl.ac.uk/13886/1/13886.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> National Museum Directors Conference (NMDC), 'Too Much Stuff? Disposal from Museums' (2003): [http://www.nationalmuseums.org.uk/media/documents/publications/too\\_much\\_stuff.pdf](http://www.nationalmuseums.org.uk/media/documents/publications/too_much_stuff.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Merriman, N. 'Museum Collections and Sustainability' (2004), p.6: [http://www.cloleadership.org/cms/user\\_files/fellow\\_fellowship\\_research\\_projects\\_download\\_report/54/Clore%20research%20final%20version.doc](http://www.cloleadership.org/cms/user_files/fellow_fellowship_research_projects_download_report/54/Clore%20research%20final%20version.doc)

<sup>6</sup> Renaissance West Midlands, 'Fast Forward 2008', (2008): [http://www.mla.gov.uk/what/programmes/renaissance/regions/west\\_mids/what\\_we\\_do/~media/West\\_Mids/Files/2010/PDF/Fast\\_Forward\\_2008\\_The\\_Analysis.ashx](http://www.mla.gov.uk/what/programmes/renaissance/regions/west_mids/what_we_do/~media/West_Mids/Files/2010/PDF/Fast_Forward_2008_The_Analysis.ashx)

<sup>7</sup> Merriman, N. 'Museum Collections and Sustainability' (2004), p.24: [http://www.cloleadership.org/cms/user\\_files/fellow\\_fellowship\\_research\\_projects\\_download\\_report/54/Clore%20research%20final%20version.doc](http://www.cloleadership.org/cms/user_files/fellow_fellowship_research_projects_download_report/54/Clore%20research%20final%20version.doc)

<sup>8</sup> Renaissance West Midlands, 'Fast Forward 2008', (2008). [http://www.mla.gov.uk/what/programmes/renaissance/regions/west\\_mids/what\\_we\\_do/~media/West\\_Mids/Files/2010/PDF/Fast\\_Forward\\_2008\\_The\\_Analysis.ashx](http://www.mla.gov.uk/what/programmes/renaissance/regions/west_mids/what_we_do/~media/West_Mids/Files/2010/PDF/Fast_Forward_2008_The_Analysis.ashx)

<sup>9</sup> MLA (2010): [http://www.mla.gov.uk/what/raising\\_standards/designation](http://www.mla.gov.uk/what/raising_standards/designation)

<sup>10</sup> Murray, S., 'Statistical Report - Designation: February 2010 Scheme Update', (2010): <http://research.mla.gov.uk/evidence/view-publication.php?dm=nrm&pubid=995>

<sup>11</sup> Scottish Museums Council, 'A Collective Insight: Scotland National Audit of Scotland's Museums and Galleries', (2001): <http://www.museumsgalleriescotland.org.uk/publications/publication/42/national-audit-full-report>

<sup>12</sup> South West Museums Council, 'Mapping Trends in South West Museums', (2002) p.19.

<sup>13</sup> Keene, 'Collections for People', (2008): <http://eprints.ucl.ac.uk/13886/1/13886.pdf>

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> NMDC, 'Museums Deliver', (2010):

[http://www.nationalmuseums.org.uk/media/documents/what\\_we\\_do\\_documents/museums\\_deliver\\_full.pdf](http://www.nationalmuseums.org.uk/media/documents/what_we_do_documents/museums_deliver_full.pdf)

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> MLA, (2010), p.56:

<http://research.mla.gov.uk/evidence/documents/Renaissance%20Data%20Collection%20Annual%20Report%202008-09.pdf>

<sup>22</sup> MLA, (2010):

[http://www.museumse.org.uk/ABC\\_working\\_with\\_schools/designing\\_resources\\_for\\_schools/Loan\\_Boxes.html](http://www.museumse.org.uk/ABC_working_with_schools/designing_resources_for_schools/Loan_Boxes.html)

<sup>23</sup> Museum of Reading, (2010)

<sup>24</sup> GEM, (2001). <http://www.readingmuseum.org.uk/handson/learningandloans/art-gemnews.htm>

<sup>25</sup> Art Fund, (2010). <http://www.artfund.org/about/>

<sup>26</sup> The Guardian, (2009). <http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2009/feb/02/titian-diana-actaeon-saved>