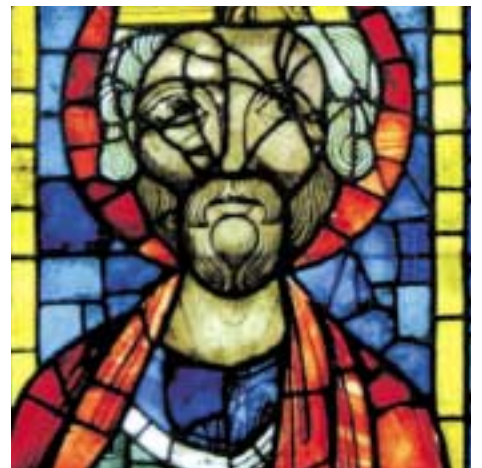


Museums Association Collections for the future



MUSEUMS ASSOCIATION

▲
Images courtesy of
the Museum of East Asian Art, Bath
the American Museum, Bath
the Building of Bath Museum
the Geffrye Museum, London
Astley Cheetham Art Collection, Stalybridge
the Stained Glass Museum, Ely
Lancaster City Museum
Lancaster Maritime Museum



This consultation paper has suggestions for significant changes to museum practice. If implemented, they could make lasting improvements to users' experience of museums.

The MA's key suggestion is that museums should find ways to collaborate more closely, and that there should be more coherent national frameworks for collecting and collections.

This would lead to:

- better interpreted collections, with more exhibitions and more publications
- better managed collections
- a more active and more ambitious programme of collecting
- better resourced reference collections that were used more extensively
- more extensive expertise about museum collections
- better relationships between museums and others who hold important collections.

The MA wants to know whether you agree with our diagnosis and with the proposed solutions. The consultation paper contains a series of questions for debate, summarised on p9-10.

Your chance to contribute

This year, the Museums Association (MA) is undertaking a major inquiry into the future of the UK's museum and gallery collections. It wants to make sure 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.

Collections have not been at the top of museums' agenda in recent years. In fact, work to enhance collections through research, acquisition, new displays or publications often seems like a luxury, rather than core activity. This inquiry started from a belief that it was time for museums and galleries to channel more energy into collections and collecting.

The inquiry has been guided by a steering group including some of the leading thinkers on museums and collections from the UK and overseas. Two working groups have been meeting to explore particular issues in more depth. The MA now wants as many people as possible to contribute their views to the process. This consultation paper summarises the discussions that have taken place so far and suggests changes to current practice. It is only a preliminary summary, therefore it also contains a series of questions about areas where further guidance is needed. Please take this opportunity to let the MA know what you think.

Other organisations are also working on these issues. The Department for Culture, Media and Sport is drafting a consultation on the future of museums, which will feature collections-related issues as an important strand. The National Art Collections Fund explored important aspects of collecting at its centenary conference in 2003. Renaissance in the Regions is changing the way that regional museums operate in many areas of their practice and could have important implications for collections. The MA is confident that it could take forward its recommendations in the context of these important developments.

This consultation process will run until 1 October 2004 and the conclusions will be published early in 2005.

However, this process is not intended to end with a report. The report may make some recommendations that require detailed research or further work and the MA hopes that it will promote ongoing discussion and debate. It will also be doing more to seek the views of museum users and governing bodies before its recommendations are finalised.

How you can contribute

Collections for the future is one of the major themes of this year's Museums Association conference in Edinburgh from 13-15 September. There will be sessions on this inquiry and a whole range of collections-related issues.

The MA is planning consultation meetings to allow members to contribute their views. It also wants to encourage a wide range of groups to contribute to the debate by holding their own meetings to discuss the ideas in this consultation paper. The MA has produced a toolkit for anyone who would like to run a consultation meeting. Both the toolkit and details of the planned consultation meetings are available on the MA website, or from Helen Wilkinson, tel: 020 7426 6950, helenw@museumsassociation.org.

If you would like to know more about the thinking that has gone into producing this consultation paper you can read the interim reports of the two working groups, as well as some short essays and commentaries prepared by members of the groups on the MA website, www.museumsassociation.org

Collections for everyone

Collections are central to everything that museums do and all that they might achieve. 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 MA believes that collections will remain at the heart of the museum experience. This inquiry is about helping museums and galleries to harness the power of their collections more effectively in future. It started from the perspective that radical change is needed to the way museums collect, and to the way they use their collections.

Current collecting by museums is seriously underpowered. While a shortage of resources is undeniably a constraint, individual museums need to collect with more ambition and focus. The museum community as a whole needs to find ways of increasing the scope and effectiveness of its collecting. People do not currently have enough opportunities to engage with the full range of existing UK museum collections. Too many collections are unused or are effectively unusable at the present time: not displayed, researched or documented in accessible ways, and not understood. Unless museums take urgent steps to change this situation, too much of the huge and growing body of UK museum collections will be a burden, not an asset, for museums of the future, draining resources without feeding the imaginations of museum users.

The focus of this inquiry is on collections, but it has wider implications. Present museum provision is uneven, the product of chance rather than planning. The opportunities that people have to engage with museum collections depend too much on where they live and how mobile they are. The MA believes that people are entitled to opportunities to enjoy museum collections and that the government needs to take this idea of entitlement seriously in planning investment. Museums should develop clearer ideas about what this might mean for the sector as a whole. Meanwhile, individual museums should rethink their own practice, starting from the principle that everyone is entitled to the opportunity to engage as fully as possible with the collections in their care. Four key areas for change are explored in the rest of this consultation paper.

1

Collaboration: developing new networks

Museums will need to work together more closely to make an entitlement to museum collections a reality for everyone. Museums already co-operate in many areas. The MA suggests that there would be considerable benefits if existing relationships were formalised and extended.

It proposes a series of networks, each dealing with a particular subject area. All kinds of museums, including the national museums, would have the opportunity to be part of the networks. They would bring together museums with related collections to share resources, pool expertise and help to make the idea of a distributed national collection a practical reality.

People who work in museums often refer to the idea of the distributed national collection. However, there is no consensus about what this means. At its simplest, it means that objects of national importance are distributed in museums across the country. It can also suggest a giant bureaucracy that would centrally manage all UK museum collections. The networks proposed would bring some formal structure to the UK's dispersed collections, but would aim to be flexible and light on their feet. Funding options have not been explored in any detail at this stage, but it is important to be clear that there would be costs associated with these proposals.

The networks would focus particularly on: promoting engagement, collecting, collections management and sharing of expertise. All the proposals would depend on museums committing to an open and collaborative approach to their collections, regarding them not as their own, but as a common resource. The kind of collaborative approach proposed would be based on a balance of rights and responsibilities. There would be considerable benefits for individual museums, but these would sit alongside the responsibility to share collections and resources freely with other museums and their users.

Collaborating to promote engagement

Closer collaboration between museums should mean that as many people as possible have the chance to engage with the most exciting museum collections. There should be much greater mobility of collections, so that objects are seen in different contexts. An aspect of this would be to make sure that collections that everyone knows to be important were seen outside their usual homes. But it would also be about rediscovering important but little known collections.

As well as taking steps to increase the number of loans between museums, the MA also proposes that the networks should develop a programme of collaborative exhibitions and publications. Anyone who has ever worked in a museum knows that a major new exhibition, redisplay or publication is the most powerful prompt to a reassessment of collections. Preparing new books and displays gives curators the impetus to explore collections afresh and discover previously neglected objects, to undertake research, and to collaborate with colleagues in institutions with related collections. The MA suggests that a series of funded, thematic exhibitions or publications organised collaboratively would be the best way to get collaboration started and would help galvanise the subject networks into action and give a very public focus to their work. It could also bring the kind of internationally important temporary exhibitions that are rare outside the national museums to the regions.

Collaborating to collect

Museum collections are a very limited and partial reflection of the world. While museums cannot aim to make their collections comprehensive, they could make them richer and more varied than they are. Practical difficulties are at the root of some of the omissions from museum collections. Museums find it difficult to collect very large objects; so many aspects of science and industry go uncollected.

Although they are beginning to recognise the importance of intangible heritage, museums still record very little that is intangible. This applies to new media and scientific developments as much as to oral history and traditional culture. Museums have also failed to develop strategies for collecting and preserving objects made from materials which degrade. More fundamentally, museums are too constrained in their collecting by what was considered 'museum worthy' in the past. They tend to favour the unique, the beautiful, the costly and the hand-made, rather than the typical and the everyday. In art, museums tend to concentrate on certain kinds of works that are easily suited to the museum context.

Museums need to work together to strengthen and broaden their collections. Subject networks could take a strategic approach, so that what was included in museum collections and what was left out was less a matter of chance. They would gradually need to build a picture of collections in their subject area across the UK and, where appropriate, internationally. There are already some very positive examples of subject specialist groups mapping collections in their area and the networks could build on this. Curators could then jointly agree priorities for acquisition, so that individual museums' acquisitions would be fully informed by knowledge not just of what was in their own collections but of what was in the broader public domain. Since museum users are increasingly mobile and enjoy collections through temporary exhibitions, books, television and the internet, there is much less justification for museums having 'one of everything'. However, we are not proposing restrictive controls on individual museums' scope to collect: collecting is a powerful prompt to some of the most creative things museums do and the quirkiness of individual collections is one of the sector's most appealing characteristics.

Several groups of museums have recently made joint acquisitions. These have been largely prompted by financial necessity, with museums able to pool resources and attract funders by taking this approach. There are other advantages: shared acquisitions help to establish links between institutions and encourage closer collaboration in other areas – sharing of expertise, joint exhibition planning and publications. However, the process is complex to administer and tends to lack flexibility. The MA takes the view that joint acquisitions may occasionally be a practical necessity, the only way of securing an object. However, in principle, all the advantages they offer could be achieved by straightforward collaboration. Museums should not need joint ownership to prompt them to share their expertise with others, and to lend collections extensively.

Collaborating to manage collections

Conservation and collections care present a serious challenge for many museums. Few museums now have in-house conservation expertise, and many need serious investment in new storage and documentation. Subject networks could help address these problems, by providing support and advice and access to conservation and specialist collections care.

Subject networks should make it a priority to ensure there was a single, authoritative source of information about UK museum collections in their area. Although museums have been investing in documentation and attempting to deal with backlogs for many years, the ideal of a single comprehensive catalogue of the UK's museum collections remains a distant goal. The MA suggests that the subject networks would initially need to take a more pragmatic approach to cataloguing collections. For example, some collections could be described at a collection level, rather than at an object level, borrowing from archives' practice. The most important thing would be to ensure that all documentation projects shared a clear sense of strategic purpose.

The MA is not advocating the relocation of collections for its own sake: with better information about what is held where, there would be no need to centralise collections in order to promote wider access to them. However, some shared storage may be helpful, where objects have particular environmental requirements, if they are very large or if it will significantly improve access for users. Some subject specialisms may have a particularly pressing need to share storage. For example, museum archaeologists are already beginning to explore the idea of regional centres that could pool resources to process and care for material from excavations more effectively. Other subject areas may have similar needs that could be met through collaboration

The kind of large-scale exhibitions and publications that are being proposed would prompt research, documentation, conservation and storage improvements. Projects like these would provide a helpful initial focus for collaborative collections management improvements.

Collaborating to share expertise

The MA is concerned that there is now a serious shortage of expertise in museums. There are fewer specialist curators than there were, and the specialists that there are tend to have to take on a wide range of other roles, leaving little time for research and knowledge development. A wider role for curators must not be at the expense of investment in knowledge.

Museums bring together collections, knowledge and ideas, and people. They cannot do without any one of these. Museums need to take their responsibility to care for information and develop knowledge as seriously as their responsibility to care for their collections. Governing bodies and funders need to recognise the importance of knowledge development and research. Museums already share knowledge, through professional networks and networks outside the profession.

With the imminent retirement of an earlier generation of experts, museums need to make knowledge-sharing a higher priority. Subject networks would have a crucial role to play here. They could identify areas of weakness and take steps to strengthen expertise in their subject areas, organising programmes of masterclasses and secondments.

Subject networks could also act as brokers, helping museums to draw on external sources of expertise, such as enthusiasts and collectors, academics, or people working in industry. Museums cannot be the source of all knowledge about objects in their collections. It is important that they take a pluralistic approach to interpreting them. However, museums should be more than a simple clearing house for ideas. They should have the confidence to be authoritative, while recognising different views. People look to museums as a source of expertise and they should not be hesitant about embracing this role.

Establishing the networks

The networks could, in many cases, be based on existing subject specialist groups. They might be led by museums with designated collections or by national museums. However, they would require dedicated staff, including a national champion who could make sure the collaboration worked effectively and act as an advocate.

There are similar specialist networks in other fields, including academic libraries and higher education. If there is enthusiasm for the idea of establishing such networks, models from elsewhere could be drawn on in developing more detailed proposals.

The MA suggests that the first subject networks should be based on existing museum disciplines and there are already some networks which could serve as a model for a larger-scale scheme. For example, the Rural Museums Network has begun to put into place some aspects of the kind of collaboration being advocated. Once networks covering more traditional museum specialisms

had been established, the programme could be extended to develop the kind of thematic approaches which are often neglected by museums. Networks could deal with subjects such as black history, crosscutting themes such as landscape, or matters of current public concern such as global terrorism.

Subject networks would build on the achievements both of Designation and of Renaissance in the Regions. Many regional museum hubs and regional agencies are starting to take a collaborative approach to collections on a regional basis. The networks would be able to develop this on a national basis and, since the original report recommended that subject networks be strengthened, there is an excellent fit with Renaissance in the Regions.

The networks and their champions would also be able to develop better international links. Most curators rarely have opportunities to travel and are often unfamiliar with the best international practice and best international collections. Museums also have a duty to serve international audiences. The networks would be able to help museums meet their international obligations, and enable them to learn from good practice being developed elsewhere. They could also help museums to collaborate more effectively with other relevant bodies outside the sector, developing better links with higher education and industry, for example.

Questions for discussion 1.1-1.9

2

Clarifying the use of museum collections

Questions for discussion 2.1-2.3

1.1
Do you agree that it would be helpful to establish a framework of subject networks?

1.2
If so, what areas would be the priorities for them to address?

1.3
Which subject areas should be the priority for pilots, if funding could be secured?

1.4
What should be the balance between centrally-determined priorities and museums' own priorities? How much autonomy should individual museums retain?

1.5
What kind of information resource do we need to support collaborative working?

1.6
What should be the strategic aim of a programme of documentation?

1.7
Do you agree that there is a serious expertise deficit in museums? How should this be addressed? How can museums share expertise more effectively?

1.8
Do people who work in museums need different kinds of expertise? How can these be developed?

1.9
How can museums ensure that they have better access to external expertise?

The MA believes that museums need to be much clearer about what their collections are for and how they will be used. Too many collections are not put to any real use and are undisplayed, unresearched and unpublished. It is not enough to say that stored collections are used for reference. They can serve this function, but a stored collection is not automatically a reference collection. Reference collections are either resources for specialists to draw on now or archives, preserving evidence for the future, which might not be of immediate interest to users. There is a limit to how much material is needed for reference. The MA suggests that there should be a proper national framework of reference collections, defined by subject networks for their areas.

Establishing this kind of framework would help museums and funding bodies to prioritise scarce resources. Reference collections need not be concentrated in a single institution: in many cases they could remain dispersed in different organisations, provided there was good information about what was held where. Some reference collections will have a local or regional significance. In other cases, it might be appropriate to take an international approach: for example, a reference collection of French furniture in Paris is easily accessible to specialists based in Britain. Museums will need to debate the best use of limited public resources for supporting reference collections.

When this framework of reference collections is established, museums that have stored collections which are not part of the national reference collection, and which they do not plan to display or publish themselves in the near future, should think seriously about whether they would be better used elsewhere, perhaps in another museum or outside the museum sector. Better information about the holdings of all the UK's museums will help museums to transfer underused collections to increase public benefit.

Many museums have attempted to face up to the problem of underused stored collections by investing in open storage, to bring people into the stores, or digitisation, to make objects accessible wherever users are. Open storage and digitisation are potentially worthwhile initiatives, but both are expensive. The MA suggests that proper evaluation of the large-scale digitisation projects that have been undertaken to date, and of the use made of open stores, is essential.

2.1
Do you agree that it would be helpful to have a nationally-recognised network of reference collections, linked to the subject networks, which all museums could draw on?

2.2
Do you agree that museums should make it a higher priority to transfer underused parts of their collections to other owners?

2.3
Do you agree that the benefits of initiatives such as open storage and digitisation have yet to be proven? Are there any other innovative ways of using collections that should be considered in the final report?

3

More ambitious and better targeted collecting

Collaboration will bring much greater focus to collecting. However, The MA suggests that other changes to museums' practice are also needed.

Museums need to be more systematic about collecting the information that enriches objects. Some objects are extremely eloquent in themselves. But most objects are more powerful if they are accompanied by contextual information about how they were made, who owned them and how they were used. This may seem a statement of the obvious, but museums have often been startlingly bad at collecting this kind of associated information. Museums should develop better strategies for collecting supporting information, and bodies funding acquisitions should make this an essential requirement.

The MA also believes that it is vital for museums to find ways to take more risks in making acquisitions. It has explored a number of options and believes that there is some merit in the idea of encouraging individual museums, or perhaps subject networks, to establish holding collections. This would allow them to take in some objects temporarily before deciding whether to accession them into permanent collections. Objects would be acquired on the clear understanding that this would enable museums to dispose of them if, in a given number of years (perhaps three to five), they have not justified their place in the collection. This approach might be appropriate both for art and for mass-produced items. In the case of art, it would enable museums to buy adventurous work by untried artists at a time when such work was relatively affordable. In the case of mass produced items, it would allow groups of museums to amass relatively large quantities to sift later.

Questions for discussion

3.1-3.4

Finally, the MA has come to the conclusion that if there is to be real change to the way museums collect, they will need to make changes to their decision-making procedures. Museum boards will need to engage with collecting strategy: too often boards' roles are limited to approving the purchase of high-value objects, rather than taking a strategic overview.

3.1

Do you believe that there would be merit in developing more systematic programmes for recording contemporary life? There are international models we could adapt, most famously SAMDOK in Sweden. But will this kind of collection really excite future museum users?

3.2

How can museums get better at recording contextual information associated with objects?

3.3

Is the idea of a holding collection helpful? What conditions would be necessary to ensure that donors' trust was not undermined?

3.4

Who should decide what museums collect? Are we right to suggest that boards and governing bodies should take a more strategic role?

4

Beyond the museum

Museums should remember that they hold only a fraction of people's heritage. Much of what is important to people now, and much of what will be important to future generations, remains in the world beyond museums, still in use or preserved by others. Museums will never hold all the world's significant material culture or record every aspect of its intangible heritage. Given that this is the case, museums need to find ways of working more effectively with the people and organisations that own the rest of the world's heritage.

One way forward would be for museums to develop ways of recording and preserving material culture outside the museum. Some kinds of material could be preserved in the community, without needing to be formally accessioned into a museum. More work would be needed to explore how this might be achieved without it being excessively bureaucratic, but possible measures could include establishing access agreements in return for tax incentives and grants. The listing of historic buildings and conditional exemption provide some pointers as to how this might operate. The key would be to ensure that there were clear public benefits from any system of recognition or support for private owners of significant collections.

Closer relationships between museums and private owners may foster future donations. But they could also bring more immediate advantages, with museums able to borrow items for exhibitions and advise owners on how to preserve the heritage in their care. Museums might naturally think of strengthening relationships with wealthy collectors of fine art but there are many other potential partners, including people who would never think of a museum as having an interest in objects in their care, or who might be openly hostile to museums. If museums were more open to working with many different kinds of private owner, they could greatly enrich the experience of their users.

Questions for discussion

4.1-4.3

The MA also wants to suggest that museums should be much more willing to consider redistributing collections beyond museums, when that might serve the public interest. In considering disposal, museums should always have as their priority the aim of providing the greatest possible range and quality of opportunities for people to engage with the collections in question. Subject networks would encourage museums to transfer some objects to other museums, if this gave them more appropriate homes. However, some objects might have a better and more productive life outside the museum world. Museums might loan more material to schools or other organisations, display some of their collections in public spaces, or return some objects to their original donors. But should museums go further? Some materials that are relatively neglected in a museum context might be cared for and widely displayed if they were transferred to private owners, such as members of local societies or enthusiasts' groups.

This is clearly a sensitive area and one in which the MA will need to proceed with caution. It is keen to gauge the views of the public and the museum profession on this issue. However, just as archaeologists' relationship with metal detectorists has started to move from one characterised by mutual suspicion and hostility to a more collaborative and positive one, thanks to the Portable Antiquities Scheme, so museums need to find ways to shift their relationship with private collectors to a more positive footing.

Equally contentious, but equally important is the issue of repatriation. The MA believes that museums should continue to examine all requests for the return of objects carefully and sensitively, again guided by the principle of aiming to increase the quantity and quality of people's engagement with objects.

4.1

Do museums have a role to play in preserving material culture outside museums?

4.2

How can museums work more productively with collections held by private owners?

4.3

Do you agree that museums should consider transferring objects to owners in the private sector if this increases public access and improves their care? In what circumstances might this be an option?

Questions for discussion

General

1

Collaboration

For convenience, we have summarised the questions that appear throughout the consultation document here. The MA would also like your views on additional general questions.

Please feel free to comment on as many or as few of these as you like. Send your responses to Helen Wilkinson at the Museums Association, 24 Calvin Street, London, E1 6NW tel: 020 7426 6950, helenw@museumsassociation.org

A: Are we right in thinking that radical change is needed, if we are to realise the potential of the UK's museum collections?

B: If so, is our vision radical enough? Are there more ambitious solutions that we have overlooked?

C: Are there any projects or initiatives that offer possible models of good practice and might be included as case studies in the final report?

D: How can the MA ensure that museums will be sustainable for the future? Do they need to rethink aspects of their practice to ensure their long-term viability?

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What should be the strategic focus aim of a programme of documentation?

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Do you agree that there is a serious expertise deficit in museums? How should this be addressed? How can museums share expertise more effectively?

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How can museums ensure that they have better access to external expertise?

2

Clarifying the use of museum collections

2.1

Do you agree that it would be helpful to have a nationally-recognised network of reference collections, linked to the subject networks, which all museums could draw on?

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Do you agree that the benefits of initiatives such as open storage and digitisation have yet to be proven? Are there any other innovative ways of using collections that should be considered in the final report?

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More ambitious and better targeted collecting

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