

ACQUISITION AND DISPOSAL OF COLLECTIONS



The goal of collections development is to shape collections whose composition supports a collecting unit's mission and programs. The main tools of collections development are acquisitions and disposals. This chapter discusses these tools.

Collections are acquired through various methods, such as donation, field collection, transfer from another organization, and purchase. “Disposal” means termination of ownership and physical removal of accession collection items.¹ In the United States, “deaccessioning” and “disposal” are often used interchangeably, but technically the former term refers only to the first step in disposal — the removal of an item from the catalogue of accession collections.²

The first section of this chapter addresses acquisitions, with particular emphasis on how collecting units have built their collections, the policy framework related to acquisitions, and how collecting units are responding to a changed collecting environment. It also examines how collecting units make acquisition decisions, and considers alternatives to traditional collection methods. The second section addresses deaccessioning and disposal. It discusses the reasons units dispose of items, and the obstacles to disposal. The role of organizational and professional culture in collections development is discussed. Also discussed briefly is the issue of duplication and overlap of collections at the Smithsonian. The chapter closes with conclusions.

FINDINGS

acquisitions

Collecting appears to be an innate human propensity. Archaeological excavations indicate, for example, that 80,000 years ago Neanderthals assembled collections of small stones (Neal 1980, 24). Norman Rosenthal, exhibitions secretary at the Royal

¹ Collecting units also dispose of non-accessioned items, but that is not the focus here.

² Collecting units may not dispose of all deaccessioned items; for example, they may transfer some to non-accession collections, such as those intended for education programs.

Academy in London, describes the allure of collecting art: “[It] is like a drug. It is both intensely pleasurable and highly addictive” (quoted in Ruiz 2003). One Smithsonian interviewee expressed a common attitude in asserting that it would be the death of a museum not to collect.

How do collecting units determine what to acquire? Who makes the decisions, and how are they made? How much can the Smithsonian’s collecting units reasonably expect to collect? Is the way in which the Smithsonian has been collecting still appropriate in the 21st century? What should be distinctive about Smithsonian collections?

Several themes stood out in the OP&A study team’s review of acquisitions:

- The dominance of collecting among the Smithsonian’s public trust responsibilities
- The role of policy and other guidance
- The effect of tightening resources
- The limited attention typically paid to the long-term (life-cycle) costs of acquisitions
- Questions about how best to approach the collecting of contemporary materials
- The limited use of nontraditional collecting practices
- The role of organizational culture.

The findings pointed to both expected differences among collecting units at the Smithsonian, and to commonalities. Art museums, for example, generally acquire

fewer items than cultural history museums, because art works tend to be more expensive. But both struggle with the question of which contemporary materials to collect.

a bygone collecting era

Many collecting units got their start through donations of the often eclectic holdings of private collectors, which then formed the foundation for continued acquisitions.

(Natural history collections, which were typically assembled through field expeditions funded by wealthy patrons and governments, tended to be more focused.)

Collections often evolved according to the agendas of the wealthy individuals who bequeathed or donated the collections, and the curators or scientists who worked with substantial autonomy. The materials such collectors gathered tended to reflect the perspectives of well-educated and economically comfortable elites. At the same time, however, common people gave to museums the results of their collecting efforts in a wide range of areas, for example, dolls, fossils, butterflies, and sheet music.

Until fairly recently, there were few concerns about the size of collections or the practical aspects of holding them. To get a few items of value, collecting units often accepted collections that contained many unwanted items. The prevailing assumption appears to have been that governments and philanthropy would always provide the necessary resources, and that collections could be culled later.

Throughout the 20th century, many museums tried to acquire as much as possible in their subject areas. The collections that evolved were often large and lacking in cohesion, and sometimes contained materials that were not of museum quality.

Before the 1960s, few museums had specific written collecting policies to guide acquisitions, and codified professional standards did not yet exist. Instead, internal memoranda based on current professional practices were used to guide collecting.

The movement toward a more systematic approach in the United States only began in earnest in the 1960s, when AAM issued formal collections management guidance for member museums.

the evolution of Smithsonian collections

The Smithsonian's collections got their start with the transfer of diverse materials from other federal agencies. (A more detailed history of Smithsonian collections appears in Appendix A.) The collections grew principally through continued transfers of materials collected on scientific expeditions, and donations from individuals and foreign governments. Internally generated acquisitions also played a role — sometimes a significant one, as in the case of materials from the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia in 1876. On occasion, acquisitions have been influenced by the Congress. For example, in January 2002, the Congress made NMAH the official repository for artifacts relating to the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon. Similarly, since the late 19th century NMNH has been the designated repository for natural history specimens collected by other federal agencies. Indeed, the Congress has in some cases legislated the acceptance of major acquisitions that the Smithsonian itself opposed; the Freer collection is an example.³ (See the discussion in Appendix A.)

For most of the Smithsonian's history, practical criteria such as storage and availability of resources to process and care for collections were less important in acquisitions decisions than factors such as quality, significance, and the imperative to preserve material evidence for future generations. Although Secretaries and senior staff sometimes voiced concerns that collections would grow too large for the Institution's resources, these concerns were not sufficient to act as a brake.

³ Although such mandates were often accompanied by funds for new buildings, funding for the continuing care of such collections was typically not provided.

In recent decades, however, strains have become evident. A 1977 report on an internal Smithsonian study of collections management spoke of a “reluctant acknowledgment . . . of the need to temper [the Smithsonian’s] laissez-faire collecting policy with management controls” (Smithsonian Institution 1977a, 4-11). Another report concluded that the existing collections policies of Smithsonian collecting units

. . . [Do] not provide adequate support for a program of planned collections growth. At least three elements appear to be either missing or insufficiently covered: collecting objectives, a periodic review of the status of collections and the impact they have on space allocation and staffing, and, lastly, Institutional coordination (Smithsonian Institution 1977c, 37).

In response to such concerns, in 1980 the Smithsonian issued Office Memorandum 808 (OM 808), Collections Management Policies. This required that all collecting units have written policies on collections management, including a section on acquisitions and disposals. The collecting units subsequently established broad acquisition guidelines that set criteria for subject matter, time period, geographic coverage, and other characteristics, and provided for systematic review of proposed acquisitions. However, this early guidance was not generally considered effective. Not only was the language often broad enough to justify almost any acquisition, but the oversight of implementation was limited.

coping with a constricted collecting environment

Starting in the last quarter of the 20th century, collecting units have become more concerned with the practical consequences of traditional collecting practices. This concern has accelerated since the 1990s. As a result, museums, archives, and

libraries have begun to explore how they might change their approach to acquisitions.

One important factor underlying this shift has been economic. The periodic declines in the flow of philanthropic and government funds associated with economic downturns have begun to pinch harder in recent years, as the competition for these funds has increased — a result of the burgeoning numbers of cultural organizations — and as costs within collecting units have grown rapidly. A second factor has been the specter of overcrowded storage facilities. This issue was raised in the 1993 report from another internal Smithsonian study, which stated that “pressures on current storage space are so acute that some museums are turning down acquisitions for lack of it (Suchanic 1993, 3).” A third factor has been the inability of many museums and archives to address backlogs in processing legacy collections, let alone keep up with new acquisitions, because of fewer resources being stretched over more activities. A fourth factor is a general shift in priorities away from collecting for its own sake, and toward exhibitions and public programming, which increasingly requires acquisitions to be undertaken with an eye to use in these areas.

NMNH has faced two additional challenges. One of these is how to respond to the rapid rate of species disappearance around the world, at a time when the unit’s storage space is already overcrowded and some is in deplorable condition. The second is the issue of whether NMNH should be the collector of last resort for orphaned natural history collections of national significance — such as those at state universities where financial pressures have forced the closure of museums or academic departments. (There is a precedent for NMNH taking in such collections: in 1992 it accepted paleobiology collections that Princeton University could no longer house.)

Not a new problem, but one that has assumed greater prominence since federal appropriations for acquisitions have largely dried up, is the inadequacy of dedicated acquisition funds at Smithsonian collecting units. While most units have some endowment income for acquisitions, it tends to be minimal and fluctuates with the

stock market. Units are increasingly dependent on gifts, the purchase of low-cost items, and grants to support field collecting. This situation has limited proactive collecting and, according to several Smithsonian interviewees, has contributed to the discontinuity in collections. As one interviewee said, “Unless you have real money to apply in filling the gaps, acquisitions tend to happen opportunistically.”

Finally, cultural history and art collecting units continue to struggle with questions about the acquisition of contemporary materials. One nettlesome issue for cultural history units is the sheer volume of potential acquisitions in a world of mass-produced, disposable, and constantly changing consumer items. This issue was highlighted in the report on the Common Agenda for History Museums conference, sponsored by AASLH and the Smithsonian Institution in 1987, which brought together representatives of 70 history museums around the country. The report noted that collecting choices “are made even more difficult by today’s rapidly changing culture and technologies (Taylor 1987, 3).” A second issue in contemporary collecting is the impossibility of predicting what will be of interest to future generations, as well as the difficulty of determining what artifacts best tell the story of the present. To address this issue, Mayo (1981) suggests “Museums must develop a flexible accessioning and holding policy for current collecting, so that they have the ability to review collections at 25- or 50-year intervals. Such a review of material ‘currently collected’ would allow for reflective re-examination (1981, 11).” However, others question both the practicality of such an approach, and whether the passage of time in fact produces better decisions. Indeed, some observers hold that too much importance can be attached to future generations. As one interviewee noted, “If you choose your objects carefully after discussions, interviews, [and developing] a clear motivation for why you want to acquire objects, that is the best we can do for the future, because we get what we regard as important in our time and why we think about it.” Two Swedish museum experts involved in the Samdok project (discussed below and in Appendix F) expressed a similar opinion:

Perhaps it is more fruitful to see the collection of contemporary objects as an identity project for our own times than to view it as a selfless action intended to meet future needs. . . . By collection, documentation, and research, the museums try to show how our age is, how it should be — and how it should be regarded by the future (Björklund and Silvén-Garnert 1996, 166).

Most collecting units, including the Smithsonian's, have made efforts to address the realities of this changed collecting environment. Their responses fall into two major categories, discussed below: (1) greater selectivity and more rigorous guidelines for collecting; and (2) rethinking collecting philosophies and approaches. A few museums, including some at the Smithsonian, have also turned to alternative approaches to collecting.

greater selectivity and more rigorous guidelines

A review of NCP data on Smithsonian acquisitions over the period FY1987 through FY2001 shows an overall downward trend, punctuated by occasional upward spikes (the results of the addition of a new museum to the Smithsonian, or of acquisitions involving large numbers of natural history specimens) (Smithsonian Institution, Smithsonian Institution Archives, National Collections Program 2003c, 18).

The data also show a decrease in the items acquired through donation or bequest (ibid., 22). Although the OP&A study team does not have definitive data on whether collecting units are turning down more gifts than before, a number of interviewees believed this to be the case. According to one, "We shouldn't take just anything in, and in fact we are refusing more than we have in the past." Another stated that his collecting unit takes in about 1 percent of what is offered, versus 10 percent in earlier times. A common theme was the rejection of donated collections that contained unsuitable material the donor would not allow the unit to divest.

Moreover, many Smithsonian interviewees indicated their collecting units were now increasingly applying practical criteria in assessing proposed acquisitions. For example, one interviewee mentioned the rejection of a 3,000-object collection because the museum lacked the staff to process it. Another collecting unit has a policy of not taking in large items except in exceptional circumstances, while still another, according to an interviewee, accepts large objects only if the unit makes a long-term loan or disposes of something of comparable size. Interviewees also noted that resource constraints led NMAH to accept only a small percentage of proffered September 11 artifacts.

setting collecting priorities

The report on the 1996 SIC meeting, which focused on collections, recommended that Smithsonian units set more rigorous criteria to guide acquisition choices (Smithsonian Institution Council 1997, 1). Its recommendations embodied the concept of significance assessment, although it did not use that term:

- For cultural artifacts, priority was to be accorded to items that “a) are in danger of being irreparably lost; b) represent and record important historical events; c) have multiple meanings for different segments of U.S. society; d) are judged to have unusually high quality; e) fill important gaps in existing collections; and f) illustrate important expressions of human creativity (ibid., 4).”

- For natural history objects, priority was to be given to those that “a) are in danger of being irreparably lost; b) fill in evolutionary lineages not yet represented in SI collections; and c) generate material for new kinds of analyses and understandings (ibid.).”

A number of museums, including some at the Smithsonian, have begun to use significance assessments to inform decision making on proposed acquisitions. For example, Hallett (2003, 3) recommends use of the following significance criteria in assessing science acquisitions: “significance in the development of science and technology, importance as innovation, association with social groups or individuals, impact on society, economic influence, relevance nationally and locally, representativeness, rarity, iconic value, and pedagogic value.”

The Natural History Museum in London requires researchers to complete a collections impact statement before bringing new specimens from field work back to the museum. Among the information the statement must contain is the estimated volume of what will be collected; storage and processing space requirements; and required staff time and supplies for curation and storage. The Department of Systematic Biology–Entomology at NMNH also uses impact statements. One interviewee cautioned, however, that impact statements are ineffective if not reviewed rigorously by those with approval authority.

Another way to limit acquisitions is explicitly to avoid collecting in areas where other organizations maintain have strong collections. Attention to the holdings of other units and organizations was a common criterion listed in the acquisition policies of Smithsonian units, although how much of a role it has played in decisions was not clear. A number of Smithsonian interviewees, especially from the natural history field, said they did consider the strengths and holdings of non-Smithsonian collecting units when deciding whether to acquire something. As one commented, “There is informal collaboration with sister institutions. We understand each other’s collections and direct collections to each other to build the common good.”

Despite evidence of greater selectivity, some Smithsonian interviewees suggested that proposed acquisitions still needed more diligent vetting. One commented, “The museum is good at giving guidance and making suggestions, but seldom says no.” An interviewee from another Smithsonian unit noted, “Since 1979 the [collections]

committee has never refused a collection. 'That doesn't say that we have things we shouldn't, but it also doesn't say whether the committee works well or not.'

Potter's plight — an acquisition conundrum

In April 2003, Charles Potter, an NMNH collection manager for marine mammals, received a call from a colleague in North Carolina. A 45-foot whale, an apparent victim of commercial fishing, had washed up on a beach. Did NMNH want it? Potter was hesitant. NMNH's marine mammal collection, the largest in the world and an invaluable source of information for conservation efforts and management of whale populations, was extremely pressed for space, and some of what it had was susceptible to flooding. Still, according to the caller, this was a sei whale, among the least understood.

Before deciding, Potter asked for a photograph, and what he saw surprised him. The specimen looked more like a brydes whale — even rarer than the sei. He talked with his North Carolina colleague, but despite their extensive experience, they could not identify it. Potter investigated further, sending DNA samples to scientists in La Jolla, California. The results indicated that the specimen was neither a sei nor a Caribbean or Pacific brydes whale. They did, however, match a sample from a whale stranded on a South Carolina beach in 1992 and unknown elsewhere. This new specimen could provide the only known skeleton of this type of whale in the world. Who could predict how important this might be to investigators? Still, a whale is large, storage was full, and there was no place to put it...

Collection policies and plans can be helpful, but they cannot make decisions for you. Faced with Potter's plight, what would you do?*

*NMNH accepted the whale, which provided a nearly complete skeleton and set of baleen. To date, scientists still have not been able to determine if the whale is a brydes or similar but distinct taxon.

Some interviewees sounded a note of caution about the trend toward more rigorous approaches to collecting. Discussing impact statements, one commented, “You can get too caught up in the process and fail to pay enough attention to the product.” Another worried that acquisitions decisions were being influenced more by resources than intellectual content: “When storage is the starting point, you choose something small and simple. . . . [Instead, you] must start with the significant objects, then have discussions, and then deal with the storage issue.” Yet another wondered, “Is the effect of organized collections committees a good thing, or are we missing out on the brilliant collections . . . [brought in by curators] who don’t serve the party line — the ‘run wild’ type?” Finally, some interviewees questioned whether significance assessments really provide better guidance than existing collecting policies and plans, as the language in assessment criteria can be equally broad and vague.

rethinking collecting philosophies and approaches

Some museums inside and outside the Smithsonian are also rethinking their strategic approaches to collecting. Many have shifted, for example, from encyclopedic to representative and interpretive collecting, and some are developing intellectual frameworks to assess potential acquisitions. (The exception is natural history museums, which have continued to develop the comprehensive collections they need for taxonomic work and for preserving evidence of rapidly vanishing species. Nevertheless, one Smithsonian interviewee noted greater judiciousness even in these museums.)

representative and interpretive collecting. Representative collecting involves identifying objects that can stand for a larger universe of items of which they are a part. One Smithsonian interviewee said, “We don’t want huge numbers, so we try to collect the major [developments] in the field. We try to collect prototypes.” Another stated, “I’m not pushing to collect quantity. Quantity doesn’t add up to success, as some of my predecessors thought.”

Interpretive collecting is found mainly in museums of history and culture, and involves looking for objects that tell stories. For example, in discussing the acquisition of artifacts to illustrate the story of the corporate accounting scandals that hit the US economy at the turn of the century, a spokesperson for NMAH noted, “We look at what an object tells about the story. Would it be the [Enron] sign that tells the story, or would there be other objects that could better do that (quoted in Hull 2002)?” Similarly, a guiding principle at the Henry Ford Museum is “The artifacts we maintain need to tell a story and the story we are telling is one of change through time (Henry Ford Museum & Greenfield Village 1999, 6).” The transition from typological to interpretive collections was also one of the issues addressed by the Common Agenda for History Museums conference.

intellectual frameworks. To support more focused acquisitions, some museums have turned to intellectual frameworks. At a November 2002 AAM-NMAH collections planning colloquium on the development of intellectual frameworks for collecting, participants agreed that such a framework should be

Built around the needs of the end users. . . .

A starting point for the museum’s strategic plan in all areas of activity . . .

Often organized around interpretive themes that may guide exhibits and programming as well as collecting . . .

Firm enough to guide decision making. . . .

Helpful in determining when there is “enough” in a given category . . .

At some point, reconciled with available resources. (American Association of Museums 2003d)

The Henry Ford has had considerable experience with intellectual frameworks, having used them to guide all its programming for a number of years. For example, the museum’s Collections 21 Task Force identified the museum’s core collection

areas and strengths within each area, as well as areas in which the museum would no longer collect. The resulting framework is a useful point of reference when the museum's collections committee considers acquisitions, particularly when opinions are divided. Further, it appears staff do their own assessments against the framework before sending proposals to the committee, and have been presenting fewer unsuitable proposals (see also Appendix F).

Development of an intellectual framework that succeeds in providing concrete guidance for acquisitions can be difficult, as the observations of participants at the AAM-NMAH colloquium and the arduous experience of NMAH⁴ attest. Among the common obstacles mentioned by colloquium participants were the difficulty of defining an intellectual framework in the absence of a clear mission, vision, or institutional plan; shortages of time and resources; incomplete knowledge about holdings; and lack of specialized staff. Participants also listed a number of factors necessary for the implementation of a successful framework, such as a commitment from top leadership — including putting development of a framework into strategic plans and making adequate resources available. They noted the benefits of a good framework (such as deflecting unwanted acquisitions) and the costs of not having one (including an inability to control collecting) (American Association of Museums 2003b). Nevertheless, some interviewees were skeptical about the possibility of writing intellectual frameworks that provide better guidance than current collecting plans.

decision-making Information. Good information — about the holdings of other collecting units, the resources available to maintain new acquisitions, the significance level of proposed acquisitions, and other such matters — is crucial for sound acquisition decisions. Particularly critical, of course, is complete and detailed information on what a unit already has in its collections. Troublingly, both the OP&A survey results and the comments of interviewees indicated that a number of

⁴ The Intellectual Framework Group of the NMAH Collections Planning Initiative issued its report in October 2003. The framework took many months to complete. It was, for example, hard to identify and get consensus on themes.

the Minnesota Method

In the mid-1990s, the Minnesota Historical Society (MHS) developed what it called the Minnesota Method to guide decisions on what business records to collect. A pragmatic approach, the Minnesota Method provides a structured process of prioritization to support systematic decision making. Key elements are:

- ∞ Detailed knowledge of MHS's existing holdings
- ∞ A “macroappraisal” of businesses in Minnesota and of the holdings of other archives, to define the universe from which to make selections and to avoid duplication
- ∞ Organization of the businesses into sectors, and prioritization of those sectors based on set criteria. (MHS does not generally collect records of businesses in the lowest priority tier, and makes clear that it is not the collector of last resort.)
- ∞ Four levels of documentation with respect to subject-matter categories of records (such as marketing and strategic planning) and the number of categories from which records will be selected (from collecting records in each category to no collecting)
- ∞ Prioritization of firms in each sector, using a set of common criteria
- ∞ Review of priority businesses in each category, using a decision tree to determine if MHS should collect their records and at what level of documentation. (For example, if the records of a certain firm are collected by the firm itself or by another archive, MHS will generally not collect them.)

Although the system is highly structured, MHS views its application as more art than science. The process does not produce a score that determines decisions, and it allows for justifiable exceptions. An originator of the system, Mark Greene, believes it is applicable to other areas of collecting beyond business records. A few US organizations, as well as some in Canada, Denmark, Australia, and Ireland, have employed the method.

Source: Greene and Daniels-Howell (1997), Greene (2000), and interviews.

Smithsonian units lack complete inventories of their holdings, let alone more in-depth catalogue-level information.

expanding the voices in collecting

In recent years, there has been considerable discussion within the museum community about the representation of diverse national populations in collections, and about whether the people who typically make acquisition decisions adequately speak for society. Three factors have prompted this interest: the desire to increase visitorship by drawing in groups that have tended to stay away from museums in the past; concerns that collections do not adequately reflect all socioeconomic and ethnic groups; and the desire of minorities to have a place in collections. Such representation is particularly an issue for publicly funded national institutions. The Blue Ribbon Commission set up in 2001 to study NMAH expressed concern, for example, that the museum's national collections did not represent minorities adequately. (The NMAH draft intellectual framework, however, places considerable emphasis on the representation of minorities in future collecting.)

The OP&A discussion group on national collections addressed the issue of a national museum's responsibility to be inclusive — or, as one participant put it, to represent “the national face of America.” One Smithsonian participant acknowledged the limited representation of minorities in his unit's holdings, but suggested that such representation could best be handled through public programming rather than collections. Participants also raised the question of *who* should make collecting decisions. Some pointed to organizations, such as the Smithsonian's CFCH and NMAI, that base decisions on ongoing consultations with particular communities. However, others noted that such institutions typically have narrow, well-defined constituencies, and their approach is not easy to apply to museums with a broader focus. Outside the Smithsonian, the National Museum of Women in the Arts uses state committees to advise it and to identify artists for

exhibitions at its Washington facility. Still, as one participant asked, “how do you make sure that everybody is at the table for those discussions?”

alternatives to traditional collecting

The OP&A study team was interested in exploring alternatives to traditional collecting. (As used here, “traditional collecting” refers to a collecting unit making acquisitions on its own, primarily along divisional lines, and retaining sole ownership.) Such nontraditional approaches include coordinated collecting, joint acquisitions, community-based collecting, sharing collections, and shifting away from collection of three-dimensional objects toward other methods of preserving a material record of the present. These alternatives are discussed below.

coordinated collecting

A recurrent theme in the recent collections-related literature is the need for different units to coordinate their collecting, in order to deal with resource constraints and ensure that critical scientific and cultural evidence is collected and preserved somewhere. As Knell (1999b) puts it “A thousand museums pursuing their own policies (regardless of how much notice they take of their direct neighbours) remain anarchic (6).” One recommendation of the Common Agenda conference was that “Museums and professional organizations should develop programs that will underscore the importance of collecting collaboratives and, at the same time, will reduce impractical duplication and overlap in collections (Taylor 1987, 9).” Similarly, Mayo (1981, 11) proposed

. . . the creation of collection consortia of museums, historical societies and universities set up along topical or subject lines, linked by a computerized data-retrieval network of objects and descriptions. . . . Within this consortia [sic], planning

conferences should determine which institution will collect which aspect of the topic. This would permit a topic or genre to be well documented, with each institution collecting only materials within the set guidelines.

“renting” art

The San José Museum of Art (SJMA) and the City of San José were looking to boost their cultural institutions and approached the Whitney Museum in New York. As it happened, the Whitney was looking for a venue to house some of its collections. The SJMA Redevelopment Agency agreed to pay the Whitney \$3 million in return for four exhibitions of works from the Whitney’s permanent collection. Each exhibition would be on display for 12-18 months in the SJMA’s new wing. The agreement would last six years, ending in 2000. To promote intellectual access to the exhibitions, the museums decided to curate the exhibitions jointly, so that the project combined the Whitney’s knowledge of its collections with SJMA’s knowledge of its audience. In this way, the exhibitions differed from a typical traveling exhibition.

Both parties were satisfied with the arrangement, but they did not renew the lease. The SJMA thought that the Whitney project had “run its course,” because in the interim SJMA had had time to build its own collections, enhance its education programs, and hire a renowned curator. SJMA has not participated in similar exchanges since, but interviewees there indicated it would consider doing so if the timing were right.

Source: Interviews with Whitney Museum and SJMA staff.

The 1997 SIC report contains two conclusions along these lines. The first is that the Smithsonian should establish partnerships with other institutions, including the “establishment of regional centers of expertise with nationally distributed collections and shared curatorial support (Smithsonian Institution Council 1997, 1).” The

report emphasizes that, although different museums have different emphases, together they can preserve the nation's heritage, building their partnerships around sets of overarching themes.⁵ The second is that the Smithsonian should “assume a leadership role among US history museums in building consensus regarding the future acquisition of objects and collections that is necessary to reflect the nation's history, heritage, and diversity (Smithsonian Institution Council 1997, 1).” Ten years earlier, participants at the Common Agenda conference made a similar point: “History museums, their constituencies, and other institutions should collaborate to ensure that nationally our museum collections fully document and reflect the depth and breadth of life in the United States (Taylor 1987, 12).”

Coordinated collecting appears to be more common in countries that have a national ministry of culture, or where government funding is the main source of support for a system of public museums. Neither of those conditions pertains in the United States, and the responses of participants at the OP&A-sponsored discussion group on national collections suggested a strong norm of acquisition by individual units. Neither the concept of a national collecting plan nor the idea of shared collecting elicited much interest at this forum.

Nevertheless, collaboration is common among natural history museums, even in the United States. The NMNH response to the OP&A survey noted, “[We] are not an isolated entity, but rather a hub of a network of private, state, and federal museums that together hold collections and data of immense value to the nation.” For example, agencies such as USGS, ARS/USDA, and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Agency of the US Department of Commerce have transferred collections to NMNH and maintain onsite staff there.

⁵ In a similar vein, the Collections Development Framework for the National Museum of Australia (1996) states “The development of collections in areas that are well-established in other museums . . . should be avoided (4),” although the National Museum reserves the right to collect minimally in such areas to support other collections and programs. Sweden's Samdok offers a fine example of a national collecting-and-documenting partnership between museums and universities (see also Appendix F).

joint acquisitions

Instances of joint acquisitions, in which two or more collecting units together purchase an item or collection that would have been too expensive for either of them alone, are rare. One Smithsonian interviewee explained some of the obstacles: “Most of the acquisition money comes from donors [to particular museums], and someone would have to store and care for [the collection]. And how do you divide a single object, which is what most [art] acquisitions are?” However, as a recent *New York Times* article explained, “Museums that were keen competitors are bonding in ways they never have before, driven by the rising cost of acquisitions, escalating operating expenses and a kind of bottom-line common sense vital in today’s rocky economy (Vogel 2002).” One joint acquisition cited was Bill Viola’s “Five Angels for the Millennium,” for whose purchase the Whitney Museum in New York City, the Tate Modern in London, and the Georges Pompidou Center in Paris teamed up, with the help of donors. At the Smithsonian, NPG jointly owns a set of portraits by Gilbert Stuart with the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; they rotate the works between them every three years.

community-based collecting

One goal of community-based collecting is to promote preservation and documentation of artifacts by community members, organizations, and businesses, which reduce the burden on collecting units to gather “everything” of interest themselves. For example, the City Museum of Washington, DC worked with local businesses to ensure they maintained their archives according to established standards. The Smithsonian’s AM-CAACH conducted programs to teach community members how to preserve material evidence of their lives. The Wing Luke Asian Museum in Seattle did not actively acquire collections at all, but instead borrowed artifacts from the community. Its system involved establishing a database to track the collections held in the community; conducting oral histories that could be digitized; and training the community on how to preserve artifacts.

a joint acquisition at NMAfA and NMNH

Alastor and Venus Lamb wanted to sell the Smithsonian an important collection of West African textiles they had compiled during trips to Africa in the 1950s and 1960s. The collection consisted of 1,500 pieces of textiles, weaving implements, loom parts, and yarn, plus a notebook of slides of the 1,500 pieces. In 1982, NMAfA and NMNH, each of which lacked the funds to buy the collection individually, decided to do so together. Once acquired, NMNH stored the collection, which remained unused until 1987, when 36 textiles were included in the NMAfA exhibition *Patterns of Life: West African Strip-Weaving Traditions*. After that exhibition closed, NMAfA stored these pieces in a space created specifically for textiles. The remaining items were moved to NMNH's facilities at the MSC in Suitland, Maryland, where a lack of space resulted in poor storage conditions. Years later, NMAfA conservation staff unpacked and cleaned the textiles, and rolled them in acid-free tubes.

This example illustrates several problems with joint ownership. First, while information on the bulk of the collection was in NMNH's KE EMu CIS, information on the 36 pieces managed by NMAfA were in the latter's TMS CIS. Thus, NMAfA did not have, for example, the locations of the items stored by NMNH at the MSC. (NMNH expected that once its CIS system was fully operational, NMAfA would have improved access; NMAfA's goal was to have the entire collection in its database.) Second, a joint committee handled access issues, but it had to have signatures from both NMAfA and NMNH to provide access. This system was inconvenient for researchers interested in studying the collection. Finally, other procedural problems sometimes arose as a result of joint management. For example, when some textiles came back from a traveling exhibition, they were mistakenly stored in the wrong place.

sharing collections

Another option that has been around for awhile but that is not used as much as it might be is to supplement unit-owned collections with long-term loans, or even to rely entirely on loaned objects. The Museum Loan Network (MLN), which has managed a system of long-term lending since it opened in October 1995, promotes the former.⁶ As “matchmaker to the art world,” MLN encourages large museums like the Metropolitan Museum in New York and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston to lend their stored artworks and expertise to smaller museums. MLN lists more than 10,000 items available for loan, including art works and cultural artifacts, from over 200 museums. Among natural history museums, long-term lending of collections for research is a well-established practice.

online collections exchange center

In the fall of 2003 the AAM launched its new Online Collections Exchange Center (American Association of Museums 2003a). The Exchange Center is “a secure online forum through which [AAM’s] nearly 3,000 institutional member museums can buy, sell, trade, or donate deaccessioned objects with one another.” AAM’s director, Edward Able, described the Exchange Center as “a unique opportunity for our members both to keep donated objects in the public domain, as donors intended, and to develop mutually advantageous exchanges and collaborations with their fellow institutions.”

⁶ This information on MLN is drawn from Blumenstyk (1999) and the MLN website, <http://loanet.mit.edu>.

alternatives to three-dimensional collections

Several sources discussed alternatives to the traditional focus on collecting three-dimensional objects. For example, Sola (1999) states that collecting objects is only one part of a much broader process of recording and interpreting history through the use of different media. Likewise, Kavanagh (1999, 82) writes “Collecting is at its most useful only when part of a documentary process which values as much the oral testimony and photographic record.”

Such ideas are filtering into the practice of many collecting units. For example, the Common Agenda conference report voiced support for exploring alternatives to collecting artifacts, such as image storing technologies (Taylor 1987, 9). One strategy at Scienceworks, a museum of science and technology in Australia, is to “collect a variety of sources in addition to objects to show the whole picture. These include photographs, videos, laboratory and industrial records, trade literature, personal statements by participants, and more (Hallett 2003, 4).”

The most frequently cited example of the use of extensive documentation in conjunction with only limited collection of objects is Samdok, a consortium of Swedish museums established in the 1970s to systematically preserve evidence of contemporary society in nine specific areas, such as domestic life, leisure, natural resources, and manufacturing. Initially, Samdok emphasized object collecting, but after a few years it shifted to comprehensive documentation, including extensive interviewing and visual imaging, complemented by the collection of a few objects that illustrate the themes that emerge in the documentation. (See Appendix F for further details.)

Nevertheless, significant disagreement over the merits of alternatives to three-dimensional collecting remains. Scientists in the natural history field, for example, emphasize the need to acquire and retain specimens themselves, as new technologies are constantly emerging that permit new types of analyses. More generally, one Smithsonian staff member commented, “When collections are systematically

the Kryptonite bike lock

The head of the family-owned Kryptonite Bike Lock Company bought the original clunky concept model of the lock from a young bicycle mechanic in Massachusetts. His vision was to produce a super-strong lock capable of withstanding urban crime, but one whose design was also elegant, even artistic. The company made good on that plan. It even convinced the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York to sell the lock in MoMA's store as an art object; in fact, the lock is now in MoMA's permanent collection.

To tell the stories of entrepreneurship, small business, the patent system, changes in urban lifestyles as a result of crime, and evolving perceptions of art and design that are all embodied in the Kryptonite lock story, the NMAH Archives decided it needed more than just paper records. It has therefore conducted oral history interviews with the company's staff and owners, and has collaborated with NMAH's History of Technology Division to collect a number of artifacts that illustrate key aspects of the Kryptonite Bike Lock story, such as the original concept model and its more fashionable successors.

Source: National Museum of American History.

acquired and properly documented, each generation can develop interpretations that are relevant to its own day. But the collections need to be there for that interpretive work to occur.” This person pointed out that the use of documentary formats was tried with the huge microfilming projects of the 1960s, and “People now regret the loss of the originals for many reasons, including their absence for exhibition use.”

are objects necessary?

In 1968, Wilcomb Washburn, a scholar and administrator at the Smithsonian's National Museum of History and Technology (now NMAH), questioned whether "The object, removed from its context, distorted by the ravages of time and environment, can, conceivably, be a less accurate statement of itself than a description accurately recorded and readily available (1968, 9)." He also asked, "If information, rather than preservation or display of the specimens, is the primary purpose of the museum, need one save objects at all (10)?" While Washburn believed that this was possible in theory, he recognized that some objects are needed as a basis for checking information.

disposals

This section reviews findings relating to the deaccessioning and disposal of collecting unit holdings. One point that stands out is the continued discomfort with disposals in much of the museum and archival worlds. This appears to be principally because of how individuals within these communities perceive their public trust obligation, and because of a longstanding tradition of retention. It is also in part because disposal is typically expensive and time-consuming. (Art museums are an exception here, as an established tradition of collections refinement through disposal exists in that community.)

There is evidence that the difficult collections management environment of recent years is leading some collecting units to reappraise their stance on disposal, albeit reluctantly. Barnard (2002) writes of a conference on disposals held in 2002 in the

United Kingdom: “What the conference seems to illustrate is that everyone wants the issue of disposal raised, but no one wants to say anything — publicly at least (14).” Malaro (1997) notes, “Because of the heightened concern for quality storage and conservation, museums are questioning the validity of retaining objects that are not clearly furthering the goals of their museums (1997, 45).” Ainslie (1997) argues that “Deaccessioning is about making difficult but realistic decisions in the interests of the museum and its community. Stewardship means being entrusted with the management of another’s property and preserving that inheritance. It does not mean keeping everything in a collection for all time (140).” The director of the Mitchell Museum of the American Indian in Illinois, Janice Klein, observes, “More and more museums will need to answer the question of whether their collections support what the museum is doing or are a drain on the museum’s resources. That is not to say that these collections are not valuable and should not be in a museum, only that it may not be that particular museum that they should be in (e-mail to Museum-L listserv, February 25, 2003).” The latest revision of SD 600 does not use the term “permanent” collections, referring instead to collections to be held for “an indefinite period (Smithsonian Institution 2001, 10).” And increasingly, collecting units at the Smithsonian and elsewhere are including provisions in donor agreements affirming the unit’s right to dispose of donated items.

the starting point: public trust

A review of the disposal policies of 79 organizations, carried out for the Deaccessioning Task Force of the Registrars Committee of AAM, found that most policies began by emphasizing the role that public trust, including donor confidence, plays in disposal decisions (Gilboe 1997). Public trust has both legal and ethical dimensions. Under US law, nonprofit and government collecting units are public trust entities (the Smithsonian is a trust instrumentality of the federal government), with an obligation to administer their collections for the benefit of the public. By law, their fiduciary responsibilities include

- ≈ **Care** — the preservation of collections for present and future generations
- ≈ **Loyalty** — putting the interests of the unit ahead of the staff's personal interests
- ≈ **Obedience** — adherence to the mission of the unit.

However, to maintain public confidence, collecting units are expected to adhere to a higher standard than the minimal standard defined by the law. This is particularly the case for government collecting units, whose collections are owned by the public. Thus, ethical codes that have evolved alongside the legal framework exercise an influence that is at least as strong as the law itself. In fact, legal proceedings often reference codes of ethics issued by professional collecting unit associations.

The concept of public trust embodies certain expectations. Above all, units must not treat their collections as marketable assets, and disposal solely to raise revenue is unacceptable. Further, units are expected to make every effort to keep disposed items in the public domain.

deaccessioning and disposal policy

American collecting units typically have based their disposal policies on guidelines issued by the AAM, AASLH, AAMD, and other professional associations; those guidelines have been evolving over the last several decades.⁷ These guidelines advise collecting units to establish clear policies regarding deaccessions and disposals.

Archives and libraries are subject to the policy guidance developed by their

⁷ Collecting units in other countries are generally subject to similar policy guidelines developed by their governments and by national and international professional museum associations, such as the United Nations and ICOM. International guidance, and that of many governments in Europe, contain a strong presumption against disposal.

professional associations, which stress many of the same provisions as their museum counterparts.

The guidance issued by professional associations recognizes deaccessioning and disposal as legitimate tools for collections management; so do the collecting unit policies reviewed by the OP&A study team. The language in these documents is quite uniform; for example, the Smithsonian's SD 600 states:

Deaccessioning and disposal are a legitimate part of responsible collections management. Prudent collections management includes a judicious consideration of appropriate deaccessioning and disposal. The periodic review, evaluation, deaccessioning, and disposal of existing collections is intended to refine and improve the quality and relevance of the collections with respect to the Smithsonian's mission and purpose (Smithsonian Institution 2001, 12).

Echoing the professional association guidelines and collecting units' policies, a 1990 article asserts "Museologists agree: Deaccessioning represents merely one of a number of collection management tools to help shape an institution's holdings and guarantee judicious use of resources, both human and financial (Garfield 1990, 52)."

Nevertheless, disposal remains a very sensitive subject in much of the collecting community, and the practice of some units still contains a strong presumption against it. For example, an interviewee at one non-Smithsonian museum admitted, "While on rare occasions some items have been deaccessioned, we really don't consider deaccessioning to be an option. . . . Once an item comes into the collection, it basically stays in the collection." The Freer Gallery of Art may not, according to the terms of the Freer bequest, deaccession or dispose of items from the collection.

To prevent improprieties and protect the public interest, policies universally maintain that items should not be divested except under stringently defined circumstances, and subject to rigorous procedures. Key considerations are the acceptable reasons

for disposals, principles governing the disposal process, and permissible uses of proceeds from sales.

acceptable reasons for disposal

Acceptable reasons for deaccessioning and disposal cited in professional guidance and collecting unit policies include (in no particular order):

- **Lack of relevance to the collecting unit's mission.** Some collections may lose their relevance to a collecting unit when that unit's mission changes. Most units also acknowledge having items that were acquired in error and do not fit their missions.
- **Deterioration.** Collecting units may dispose of items whose condition no longer justifies retention. Deterioration may be inevitable in some materials (for example, the rubber used in the spacesuits of US astronauts), may be associated with use (libraries regularly dispose of and replace popular books worn out by use), or may result from inadequate care.
- **Collections refinement.** Collecting units may choose to remove items for reasons such as quality incompatible with museum standards (inferior workmanship, absence of adequate documentation, lack of authenticity, and so on); availability of a better example of an existing object; and redundancy. When an object is clearly not of museum quality or is a duplicate, disposal is usually uncontroversial.
- **Required return or repatriation.** US law, international agreements, and professional association guidance define certain conditions under which units should return materials to an original owner or government. For example, the amended National Museum of the American Indian Act requires the return, under certain circumstances, of Native American and

Native Hawaiian human remains and objects classified as funerary, sacred, or cultural patrimony. The AAM Guidelines Concerning the Unlawful Appropriation of Objects During the Nazi Era, to which the Smithsonian adheres, specify that museums holding objects that may have been unlawfully appropriated should undertake efforts to resolve the matter, which may include returning objects to claimants (American Association of Museums 2001b).

- **Inability to provide care.** Units may dispose of items on the grounds of high care costs, special care requirements, undue size, or inability to provide access (Gilboe 1997, 211). Such reasons appeared in the policies of 25 of the 79 institutions covered in the Deaccessioning Task Force review. For example, NMNH’s collections management policy suggests that an item might be divested if it is “occupying space and using valuable resources that could better be used to improve or strengthen another area of the collections (Smithsonian Institution, National Museum of Natural History 1984, 11).” However, the OP&A study team found few examples where an inability to care for an object actually led to disposal.

- **Hazardous conditions.** Some items may pose a danger to staff and the public, and may be disposed of on those grounds.

A more controversial and less common criterion for divestiture is lack of use. Six of the 79 organizations surveyed in the Deaccessioning Task Force policy review mentioned reasons such as “doubtful potential for utilization in the foreseeable future (Gilboe 1997, 208).” The merit of this criterion for disposal generates considerable disagreement. A number of interviewees and literature sources noted that it is impossible to predict future use accurately, pointing out that fashions change and that some collections’ importance may not be realized until the future, when new research tools are available or scholars have a better historical perspective. An interviewee from a non-Smithsonian museum said, for example, that his museum had been considering disposing of a collection that had lain untouched for years.

Soon after the matter was raised, two outside researchers asked to see the collection and found it to be a gold mine for their work. The interviewee concluded, “Now the department is more judicious in what it is willing to ship off, and we err on the side of caution.” Similarly, a Smithsonian interviewee conceded that his collecting unit had some “lousy” collections, but added, “We never know what is going to be valuable.” Natural history museums often retain specimens in anticipation of new analytic technologies.

Policy guidelines of professional museum associations and individual collecting units are consistent on what are unacceptable reasons for disposing of objects. Above all, it is not acceptable to dispose of collections to generate revenue for general operating or capital costs, such as utilities, facilities maintenance, administration, and new construction. This stricture applies even if a unit is facing bankruptcy. For example, AAMD states “Deaccessioning should be related to policy rather than to the exigencies of the moment (Association of Art Museum Directors 2001a, paragraph 27).” A collecting unit in dire financial circumstances is expected either to find another way to stay afloat, or to close and disperse its collections to other public trust organizations. AAM and AAMD policy guidance also addresses the gray area of “taste,” stating that museums should not dispose of items that appear to have fallen out of fashion.

Several interviewees commented on the need in today’s difficult financial climate to be more careful than ever when disposing of objects. A particular concern was that museum boards now have more members with a business orientation, who might tend to view collections as assets that can be sold to address financial problems. Further, one commentator suggests that requiring executive staff approval for deaccessions is not a sufficient safeguard against this risk, because senior staff are rarely independent of the board (Rewald 1997, 25).

processes

Policy guidance on disposal processes defines a system of checks and balances intended to prevent mistakes and reassure the public. Proposed disposals typically originate with the curatorial or scientific staff, and sometimes the director. Weil (1997b) notes that some policies actually require this, to minimize the use of rationales other than the betterment of collections (66). Moreover, the scholarship of these staff is needed to evaluate proposed deaccessions and disposals.

The process of disposal typically involves providing a detailed justification for the proposed disposal, with subsequent review and approval. How high this review goes depends on such factors as the value of the materials, the potential to generate controversy, and unusual circumstances. Almost all deaccessions and disposals must go through the collections committee, which consists largely of curatorial staff. Other major players whose approval is often needed are the unit department head, the legal department, senior management, and often the board of directors. At the Smithsonian, the Under Secretaries, and sometimes the Secretary and Board of Regents, must approve disposals, and they generally seek advice from the coordinator of NCP. (See Appendix B for more information on the organizational structure of collections management).

A number of interviewees, as well as the literature reviewed, spoke of the need for an effective framework to guide the content of a unit's collections against which to assess proposed deaccessions and disposals. Also necessary is knowing exactly what is in the unit's collections. As Malero (1997) puts it, "In order to justify deaccessioning, you must first be able to demonstrate that the museum has control over its collections (48)." For example, in 1997, the Glenbow Museum had its curators begin an assessment of its collections based on four categories: core collections; community collections available for loans; hands-on collections; and potential deaccessions. According to Glenbow, this framework offered a defensible and systematic approach to deaccessioning.

some questions for assessing possible disposals

One Smithsonian interviewee shared the following questions used by her museum when considering a disposal:

- Why are we disposing of this item?
- What are the legal conditions and restrictions on disposal?
- What is this item's possible future relevance?
- Is it worth the time and resources it will take to document it and get collections committee approval?
- Is the disposal consistent with the public responsibility of keeping the national collection?
- What is the likely public response if the museum is seen as "selling off its collection?"

methods of disposal

The method chosen for disposing of items can be the most controversial aspect of divestiture.⁸ According to Barr (1997, 99), "Once you get beyond the tough deaccessioning decision, simply getting rid of the object is not as simple as it may seem."

⁸ This discussion refers to usable objects, not to those that have deteriorated beyond use.

Several principles embodied in the policy guidance on disposals are worth noting. One is the importance of employing a transparent process so that the collecting unit can be held accountable and the public — defined broadly to include donors and funding entities, as well as the general public and stakeholders within a unit — can understand what is happening and why. One reason the Metropolitan Museum of Art disposals of the 1960s under then-Director Thomas Hoving caused such acrimony was the perception that they were conducted in secret and that the Met was not accountable to the public. One interviewee emphasized the importance of fully documenting deaccessions and disposals. A second principle is that the materials should, if possible, go to another organization that has a public service mission.

While transfers to other public trust organizations may be the preferred method of disposal, objects of significant value are typically sold. Commercial disposal, however, raises many additional concerns. Given sensitivities about whether making money off disposals is “the right thing to do,” many collecting units make a practice of first offering to sell such items to other public collecting units. For example, Glenbow established as a principle in its recent disposal project that other Canadian public institutions would have “a reasonable opportunity to purchase objects, at a fair market price (Ainslie 1999, 175).”

When a unit disposes of items through the private marketplace, the preferred method of sale is an auction, because the process is transparent and the public is better assured that the unit will receive the best price. However, sales at auction typically do not keep items in the public domain, as most public trust organizations cannot compete in that venue.

A further factor that collecting units must take into account is the impact of disposals on the value of private collections. For example, releasing large numbers of certain types of objects into the marketplace can greatly devalue private collections of similar objects. NPM has recently had to confront this issue, as its

planned mass disposal of revenue stamps had the potential to devalue the collections of private individuals.

some objections to disposal by sale

Many of the objections to disposal by sale — even at auction — emerged at a meeting of the Smithsonian Congress of Scholars in 2003. Among the key objections were:

- Collections should not be allowed to pass into private hands; the public interest can only be served by keeping items in the public domain.
- Disposal by sale may generate a negative public response — particularly if generating revenue is perceived to be the reason for disposal. Critics might even accuse the unit of manipulating the market to generate the highest possible price.
- Any negative response might spill over onto other Smithsonian museums, which may find that donors will shun them.

use of proceeds from sales

The question of how the proceeds from disposals may be used has taken on greater importance in recent years, as collecting units have struggled to cope with tight funds for collections care. Further, disposal itself is a high-cost activity. Some collecting units are therefore interested in using sales proceeds not only to acquire new collections, but also to support such activities as processing legacy collections and implementing disposals.

Canadian Museums Association Ethical Guidelines

E. 4.3 Use of Funds Generated by Disposals*

Museum collections are part of the fixed capital assets of a public institution; funds which are generated by disposals replace the collections themselves, and may be used only for further capital acquisitions, that is, for additions to the collections and for repairs to the collections which are directly necessary to maintain them.

Therefore, it is clearly unethical for museums to dispose of collections in order to provide funds for purposes other than for the acquisition of, or direct care of, museum collections.

Nevertheless, the proceeds generated by disposals may remain in a capital fund, suitably protected against inflation (such as an endowment), which generates income for the museum; such income is not subject to the same restrictions as the capital fund itself.

* Excerpted from Canadian Museums Association (1999).

The professional museum associations agree that proceeds may be used for acquisitions. AAMD has the strictest policy and permits proceeds only to be used for the actual purchase price of acquisitions, and not for expenses related to the purchase (Association of Art Museum Directors 2001a). There are no exceptions to this policy, which members confirmed in a vote in 2001. (An interviewee stated that this vote reflected the previously discussed concern that museum staff would not be able to stand up to increasingly business-minded boards.) Some individual art museums policies even go a step further, stipulating that acquisitions purchased with sales proceeds should be in the same area as the disposed item — for example, the same artist, period, or school of art.

AAM and AASLH policies permit proceeds to be used for expenses related to acquisitions, as well as for collections care activities. However, the boundaries of the latter category of activities are not precisely delineated. The AAM Code of Ethics states, for example, “In no event shall [proceeds] be used for anything other than acquisition or direct care of collections (American Association of Museums 2000),” with “direct care” left undefined.⁹

The Smithsonian’s policy allows the use of sales proceeds for acquisitions and for expenses related to acquisitions and disposals, but not for general collections care. The Smithsonian’s draft SD 600 Implementation Manual states that:

Proceeds . . . must be designated for additional collection acquisitions. Proceeds may be used for costs directly associated with the acquisition of additional collection items, including appraisals, shipping, and commissions. Similarly, proceeds may be used for costs directly associated with the deaccession and disposal of collection items, including: appraisal, culling or processing, shipping, and commissions (Smithsonian Institution, Smithsonian Institution Archives, National Collections Program 2003b, 94).

Recently, the Board of Regents agreed that part of the proceeds from the sale of NPM’s revenue stamps may be used for costs directly associated with continued disposal of that collection, but the proceeds may not be used for general collections management costs (Smithsonian Institution 2004).

The Smithsonian’s policy is partly a reflection of Financial Accounting Standards Board (FASB) rules, which govern the Institution’s financial reporting (see also Appendix F). FASB requires that collecting units either capitalize their holdings as assets or declare them to be collections, the treatment of which is subject to certain

⁹ The policy guidance issued by ICOM, and examples of policy in Canada and the United Kingdom that the OP&A study team reviewed, suggest that in other countries, the use of proceeds is also restricted to collections-related functions, principally acquisitions. However, once again the language does not always provide clear guidance. ICOM’s code of ethics says, for example, that proceeds “should be used solely for the benefit of the collection and normally for acquisitions to that collection (International Council of Museums 2001, 8).”

specific rules. One of those rules is that proceeds from sales of collections may be used only for acquisitions and costs directly related to the acquisition (Financial Accounting Standards Board 1993a). This use of proceeds of sales to cover costs directly associated with deaccessions and disposals is consistent with FASB accounting standards. Most US collecting units, including those within the Smithsonian, have chosen not to capitalize their collections.

Some museums, such as the Henry Ford Museum and the New-York Historical Society, have put revenues from collections sales into funds from which the interest, but not the principal, is available for general collections care expenses. However, according to the accounting firm KPMG, which conducts Smithsonian audits, the principal and interest in such a fund should be treated the same way — which appears to preclude the Smithsonian from pursuing a similar arrangement.

the consequences of disposal policy breaches

In 2002 the Museum of Northern Arizona (MNA) sold a number of valuable Native American ceramic pots to a private collector in order to meet its payroll. This produced an outpouring of negative publicity and outraged the donor of the pots. Shortly after the sale, the entire board of directors and museum director resigned. AAM is currently investigating the actions of MNA. A finding that it violated AAM's professional standards could result in expulsion from the association. MNA may also find other museums reluctant to deal with it — for example, by refusing to lend objects to it.

In another case, this time in the United Kingdom, the Derbyshire County Council in 1991 forced the Buxton Museum and Art Gallery, which comes under the Council, to auction 19 pictures to generate funds for the council's general budget (Besterman 1991 and Carrington 1996). The Council was subsequently expelled from the UK Museums Association and deregistered by the Museums and Galleries Commission.

an overview of collections disposal activity

US museums generally have carried out more deaccessions and disposals as a routine part of collections management than is the case in other countries (Conforti 1997; Malaro 1997). Typically, however, the number of objects involved has been small, except in the case of natural history museums. For the most part, as long as the disposals have followed established policy and been conducted openly, they have generated little controversy.

Smithsonian disposals

According to NCP data, from FY1987 through FY2002, 15 Smithsonian museums deaccessioned an average of 62,266 objects and specimens per year (Table 7). NMNH accounted for the bulk of these deaccessions — 56,784 items per year. Cultural history museums deaccessioned an annual average of 2,458 items, and art museums 449 items.

Of the Smithsonian units responding to the OP&A collections survey, nine reported that they had disposed of all items they had deaccessioned in FY2000, while five said they had not.¹⁰ A Smithsonian interviewee said the unit had deaccessioned as many as 500 objects in FY2000, but had not disposed of any, because of “a general reluctance to throw objects out or destroy them, continued attempts to find a recipient to take them, and original donors that want them back but can’t take possession at this time.”

¹⁰ One unit did not answer the question on disposals. The rate of disposals in a given year is typically lower than that of deaccessions, because disposal may take place in a later year (for example, it requires time to arrange) and because some deaccessioned items may be transferred to non-accession collections. The discussion does not refer to the latter items.

Table 7. Smithsonian Deaccessions by Type of Museum, FY1987-2002
(15 museums)

Museum type	Art	Cultural history	Natural history
Annual average number of objects/ specimens deaccessioned	449	2,458	59,358
Average deaccessions as percent of average combined collections	0.16	0.01	0.05

Source: National Collections Program data.

The units that responded to the OP&A survey listed the following reasons for deaccessioning in FY2000:

- Research (80 percent)
- Collections refinement (13 percent)
- Deterioration beyond use (0.3 percent)
- Other (6.7 percent).

The most common methods of disposal reported for FY2000 were:

- Transfer/donation to another Smithsonian unit, government agency, or nonprofit organization (93.0 percent). (Of all transfers, 0.06 percent went to another Smithsonian unit.)
- Exchange (1.0 percent)
- Destruction (0.6 percent)

- Public sale (0.6 percent)
- Return to donor/owner (0.4 percent)
- Other (4.4 percent).

All Smithsonian collecting units responding to the OP&A survey stated that they had some materials that were suitable for deaccessioning and disposal, but the numbers were small. However, one Smithsonian interviewee said that up to 35 percent of a particular collection could be deaccessioned, and another spoke of a “whole component of European things” that did not fit the museum’s mission. Another interviewee wondered why some inappropriate materials that had been loaned to another museum had not simply been transferred.

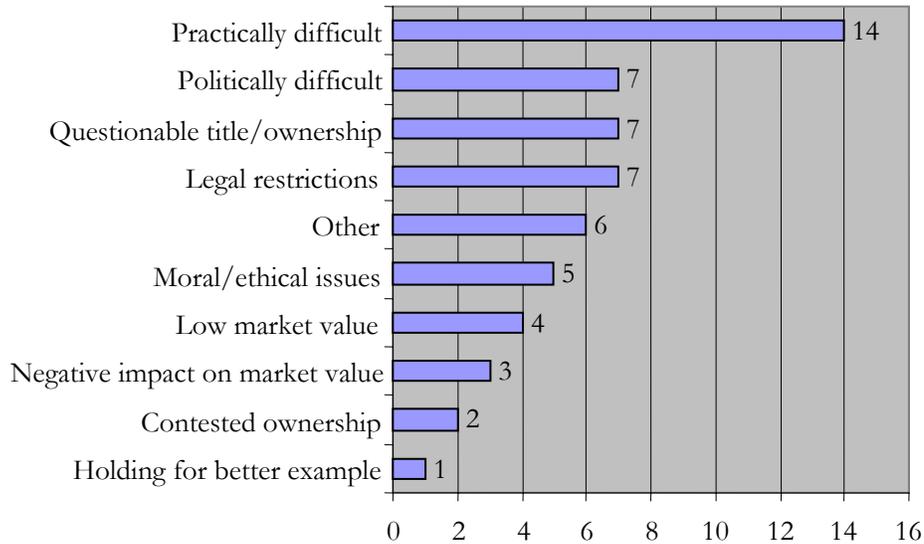
The OP&A survey also queried the collecting units about the main obstacles to disposal. Fourteen units mentioned practical difficulties. One response — that “the deaccession and disposal process is both labor-intensive and time-consuming” — reflected a common attitude. Other obstacles mentioned with some frequency were political difficulties (seven collecting units); problems with questionable title or ownership (seven); and legal restrictions (seven) (Figure 5).¹¹

the costs and benefits of disposal

The high cost and practical difficulties of disposal were recurring themes in both the interviews and literature. Many interviewees expressed the belief that the costs of disposal exceeded the gains, for example, “The cost of storing [unwanted items] is cheaper than the time it would take to deaccession [them].” Another interviewee

¹¹ Each unit could select more than one barrier.

Figure 5. Barriers to Disposal, FY2000
(16 collecting units)



Source: OP&A FY2000 survey data.

Note: Some units completed both the archives/library and museum surveys.

noted that the cost of disposing of biological specimens preserved in hazardous materials is virtually prohibitive.

Staffing issues also impeded disposals. For example, staff with the knowledge to assess proposed disposals in detail were typically required to provide information others needed to reach a decision. A common problem listed in the survey responses and confirmed by interviewees was that qualified staff such as curators and scientists were often fully occupied with exhibitions and research, and had no time to work on disposals. In some cases, the required expertise was not even available in-house, and the unit lacked money to hire a consultant. Further, the time required for disposal could be significant, especially if collections were not well-documented. One Smithsonian interviewee said that if the department focused on disposals, it could not carry out its other responsibilities. Both interviewees and the literature

also noted that in itself, a single disposal typically has little impact. Rather, units struggling with tight resources need a “critical mass” of disposals that has a noticeable effect, such as freeing up a significant amount of storage space.

The overwhelming consensus was that the costly, time-consuming procedures associated with disposals were necessary, given the seriousness of the matter. As one interviewee explained, “The process of deaccessioning can’t be expedited. It is lengthy and requires more care and diligence than acquisitions.” Interviews with Smithsonian staff and management did not reveal any disposals from Smithsonian collections that failed to meet professional standards.

One interviewee concluded, “We could do more deaccessions if they weren’t so labor intensive. We just can’t afford to deaccession things when we’re not sure what they are. [But] if we haven’t reached it yet, we’re rapidly reaching a crisis point where we will have to make deaccession decisions without knowing what we’re getting rid of.” Borg (1991, 31) foresaw a time when disposals would be essential to continued collecting and suggested that museums plan for that eventuality: “[A] museum that does not collect is a dead museum, and I would rather make realistic and creative decisions about disposals than forgo the possibility of future acquisitions.”

Ideally, disposal decisions would involve weighing the costs of disposal against the benefits of removing undesirable materials from the collection, and proceeding only with those disposals for which the net benefits appeared to be positive.

Unfortunately, this is rarely possible in practice. Even the tangible costs and benefits of disposals — such as the labor costs incurred in the disposal process and the net proceeds from sales — are hard to estimate in advance, both because they can shift unpredictably (consider, for example, the increased legal and public relations costs incurred when a donor’s family unexpectedly challenges a disposal that is underway) and because, historically, collecting units have not tracked these costs. Indeed, it is unclear whether certain disposal-related activities that are also part of routine collections management, such as assessing collections to identify potential disposals, should be counted as costs of disposal. In any case, tracking staff time and

expenditures at the level of detail necessary to determine the precise costs of caring for unwanted collections is extremely difficult in practice.¹²

Many of the relevant costs and benefits of disposal are intangible. Consider, for example, one intangible cost that is widely feared: a negative reaction by important stakeholders. One Smithsonian interviewee commented that if the museum sought to dispose of particular items, “certain constituent elements would be howling.” Two other Smithsonian interviewees talked about “destroying the donor base” and damaging their unit’s ability to collect in the future. For the Smithsonian, the responses of the Congress, public, and national media are of particular concern, given its status as the taxpayer-funded keeper of national collections. For example, in January 1996, prior to the disposal at auction of items from the Jackson collection of military artifacts that did not fit NMAH’s mission, the auctioneer, Butterfield and Butterfield, sent a fax to NMAH with a list of hostile questions the museum could expect from the media. They included, “Doesn’t this property belong to the people of the United States?” “Shouldn’t this property be returned to the country of its origin?” and “How can you justify giving away property that was given in good faith?”

Miller (1997, 57) summed up the issue succinctly: “More than most human endeavors, museums survive on goodwill.” But it is very difficult to place a reliable dollar figure on the costs associated with the loss of goodwill. It is not even certain that such costs will come to pass, as donors and other stakeholders may well view careful, responsible disposals as evidence of good management. Weil (1997b, 68) notes, for example, “The anecdotal evidence to date would tend to indicate that a well-mannered programme of deaccessioning, one that is clear, purposeful and conducted with integrity, is just as likely to make a museum attractive to donors as otherwise.”

¹² The comprehensive studies of collections management costs done by Lord, Lord, and Nicks (1989) and George Hartmann (Bank 1988) are outdated and do not specifically address cost-benefit analysis. It is also hard to generalize on the basis of their figures, since each disposal is unique.

cost considerations in disposals

Intangible costs include

- Opportunity costs of unwanted collections, such as
 - ✘ An inability to acquire more suitable collections
 - ✘ Inefficiencies in use and access — for example, because of overcrowding*

Tangible costs include

- Collections management staff time required to carry out such tasks as
 - ✘ Researching items to be divested
 - ✘ Implementing required reviews (including legal review)
 - ✘ Carrying out needed conservation
 - ✘ Selecting a disposal method and making arrangements for actual disposal

- Direct costs of such items as
 - ✘ Handling of hazardous materials
 - ✘ Appraisal fees
 - ✘ Transfer and travel costs (packing, shipping, insurance, etc.)
 - ✘ Contracts with dealers or auction houses

- Management and public relations staff time devoted to informing the media, donors, the general public, and other stakeholders, and to fielding queries.

*One Smithsonian unit literally cannot get to a collection it wants to cull because the collections of another unit are in the way. “It is buried so deep,” said an interviewee, “[the other unit] will not even estimate when it can provide access.”

On the other side, there are potentially large intangible benefits from disposals, especially the elimination of the opportunity costs of holding undesirable materials. Opportunity costs are the *implicit* costs — the opportunities forgone — because of a particular decision or course of action. In the case of acquiring and holding unsuitable materials, the opportunity costs refer primarily to what a collecting unit *cannot* do because it devotes resources such as funds, storage space, and staff time to those materials. It may, for example, find itself unable to properly store more important collections objects because unsuitable materials are crowding storage facilities. But these intangible benefits also defy quantification. In any case, the OP&A study team did not see evidence that consideration of opportunity costs was common in deliberations on proposed disposals (or acquisitions) at the Smithsonian.

major disposals

As noted, in general most disposals involve small numbers of items. However, several museums have undertaken or are undertaking more extensive disposal initiatives, as described below.

Glenbow Museum. In 1992, the Glenbow Museum in Calgary, Canada, realized that if it continued at its current rate of operating expenditures, it would be bankrupt by 1997, with a deficit of \$7.7 million (Janes 1995, 27). One of the six strategies adopted to deal with the situation was disposal of some international collections that were not relevant to Glenbow's mission. Among the objectives of the disposal project were refining the collections to better reflect the museum's mission; reducing the cost of collections management; creating a collections endowment fund whose income could be used for acquisitions and collections care; and freeing up space for acquisitions (Ainslie 1997, 130).

Glenbow had a tradition of active disposals, but most had previously involved low value items. This time, the items in question, while clearly outside Glenbow's mission, were of museum quality and had considerable financial value, and their

disposal could be controversial. Glenbow undertook a carefully planned, transparent disposal program that lasted about a year. The museum consulted extensively with stakeholders (including the government, the public, donors, and the museum community) about the reasons for disposal, methods to be used, and use of proceeds from sales. Although there had been some concern about the reaction of donors, most were supportive. For example, one said he would keep donating to Glenbow because he wanted to see his collections go to a museum that was properly managed.

By 1997, Glenbow sold some 3,000 objects through auction houses and dealers, for a net yield of \$5 million (income less the cost of the sales). With these revenues, the museum set up a collections endowment fund whose income was to be allocated for the care and documentation of collections.¹³ (See Appendix F for more details.)

Henry Ford Museum. As noted, the Henry Ford Museum has long had an active collections refinement program. In 2000, it began a Collections Evaluations Initiative (CEI) to assess the fit of its collections with its new intellectual framework. From 2000 to 2002, it processed 40 collections and disposed of over 28,500 items out of its total collection of over 1 million objects and 26 million-plus documents. The proceeds were deposited in an endowment account, the interest from which was to be used for acquisitions and collections care (Henry Ford Museum & Greenfield Village 2001). (See Appendix F for more details.)

Walker Art Center. In the 1940s the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, Minnesota changed its focus to contemporary art. Through several auctions over a number of decades, the Walker disposed of its 19th century art. The final disposal took place in 1989, when the sale of the last of the 19th century works yielded \$11.5 million. With the funds raised from these sales, the Walker was able to begin serious collecting of contemporary art. The disposals garnered a great deal of press attention, most of it positive, and led some other museums to begin examining their own collections for

¹³ The endowment's income was originally set at 8 percent of the principal (indexed against inflation), but in light of economic conditions, the museum is slowly decreasing this to 5 percent. The professional guidance and rules governing the use of proceeds in Canada differ from those in the United States, although they, too, preclude the use of proceeds for general operating expenses.

items to sell — a response that some critics saw as a perfect illustration of the slippery slope that comes with commercial disposals.

Texas Memorial Museum. In August 2001, the new director of the Texas Memorial Museum (part of the University of Texas in Austin) declared the museum's intention to dispose of its anthropology collections, which were focused on Texas history. One reason was that even though the museum's natural history collections were its real strength, its far smaller anthropology collections dominated its display space, and their higher visibility detracted from the museum's natural history thrust. In addition, a new Texas history museum had opened nearby that covered some of the same areas as the Texas Memorial Museum's anthropology collections, and the Memorial Museum did not wish to, or believe it could, compete.

The proposed disposal received significant media attention because several staff claimed the director had acted unilaterally, with no input from the museum or university board. The director refuted these claims, arguing that he was making the change in the interest of sound management and was following all required procedures. The museum is proceeding with the disposals.

cultural traditions

Another impediment to the wider use of disposal as a tool of collections development arises from the organizational and professional culture that prevails in many collecting units, both at the Smithsonian and elsewhere.

norms for collecting

Participants at the 2002 AAM-NMAH planning colloquium identified several cultural obstacles to more rigorous collecting plans that exist at most museums, including resistance to change and lack of cooperation across departments. By contrast, the Glenbow states that its culture of openness, communication, and collaboration has been crucial to effecting its collections refinement initiative and other changes in collection management. For example, senior management at Glenbow made a concerted effort to win over curators, taking the time to explain the changes and work through staff concerns.

In the course of this study (as well as others it has undertaken), the OP&A study team often heard interviewees describe the Smithsonian's organizational culture as insular and wedded to traditional practices that limit adaptability. Both collecting units as a whole and the curatorial/scientific divisions within them are seen as operating largely independently of one another, much like departments at universities. One visiting Smithsonian fellow went so far as to suggest, "At the heart of some of the current issues at the Smithsonian is the question of whether one institution can be or should be both museum and university (Butts n.d. [2001], 1)."

Some steps are now being made to address the issue of insularity at the Smithsonian. For example, one of the working groups developing NMAH's intellectual framework for collecting was specifically tasked with the promotion of cross-divisional collecting. In part, recognition of the need for this approach arose from NMAH's experience with the collecting done for September 11, which began with the usual collecting by divisions until it became clear that a cross-divisional team was required. Similarly, C-HNDM lists "maintaining inter-relationships between the departmental collections" as a strategic goal (Smithsonian Institution, Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum 2001).

norms for disposal

The role of culture arose frequently with respect to attitudes toward disposal. Despite the acceptance of disposal in professional association guidance and unit policies, many Smithsonian interviewees clearly viewed it as a necessary evil at best. Stone (2002) pointed out that little professional reward attaches to deaccessioning and disposal. Disposals are not considered to be career-advancing, and working on them does not arouse much interest among staff. “Who would want to be remembered as the person who got rid of such and such a collection?” is how one interviewee put it.

Perspectives of staff toward disposal tend to vary based on their jobs. Most importantly, curators and scientists, who traditionally have exerted great influence over deaccessioning and disposal decisions, often regard the preservation of collections items in perpetuity as a public trust obligation, the exception being art museums, as noted. Pearce (1992, 15-35) describes the psychology underlying this culture by suggesting that, for museum staff who appreciate the significance of their collections, divesting of collections materials feels like a denigration of their value. Stone (2002) comments,

In general, curators tend to focus on the *potential* uses of objects that are not currently well utilized, and thus see less of a need for deaccessioning. . . . In contrast to curators, other staff rarely speak of the ‘potential’ of underutilized objects, but rather see resource expenditures without a corresponding benefit to the museum or its public (136).

Stone also notes that staff tend to fixate on avoiding the mistake of disposing of items that might be better appreciated in the future, while ignoring other mistakes such as “retaining objects that don’t get utilized . . . missing opportunities for future acquisitions . . . [or] using scarce space or operating funds to store excess artworks (183).” Similarly, others have pointed out that acquisition decisions also carry the potential for mistakes, but these mistakes are not viewed as negatively as those

associated with disposal. Weil (1997b), for example, says, “In theory, it should make no difference to the ultimate shape of a museum’s collection if an important work of art was never purchased at all or if, having once been purchased, it was thereafter sold through poor judgment. Either way, the museum is without it (69).”

Participants at the OP&A discussion group on national collections spoke of the special status conferred upon objects at the Smithsonian, and how this affects disposal decisions. In the minds of the public, inclusion in the Smithsonian’s collection imbues an item with an aura of importance and authenticity. This aura accounts in part for the political dimension of disposals from the national collections — which often overrides practical considerations like lack of relevance to a unit’s mission or lack of resources to adequately care for an item. One Smithsonian interviewee commented that if his museum were to try to dispose of a certain type of item, “The . . . collection club will come after us and go straight to the Hill.” Another observed, “at national museums, the spotlight is harsher.”

duplication and overlap in Smithsonian collections

One question the OP&A study team was explicitly asked to address in this study was the extent of duplication within and across the collections of Smithsonian units. The question arose because of a perceived overlap in the collections at some units — such as the Native American collections at NMNH, NMAI, and, to a lesser extent, NMAH — and the concern that such duplication wastes scarce resources. As the study team looked into this issue, it became apparent that the discussion of duplication required more precise terminology, as there are at least three distinct ways that different collections can resemble one another:

- True duplication, meaning exact copies of certain items in different collections — for example, postage stamps, mass-produced items, or books.
- Similar materials, meaning variations of the same item — as in examples of tomahawks from different Native American tribes. The range of similarity might be narrow (such as different editions of the same book) or broad (such as objects linked only by material and function, such as bamboo baskets).
- Topical overlap, meaning objects in different collections that address the same subject matter — including but not limited to the true duplicates and similar materials discussed above.

Interviewees commented that all three types of overlap existed within the Smithsonian. In some instances, such overlap was seen as desirable. The draft SD 600 Implementation Manual concurs — “Some overlap in collecting is inevitable and desirable” — but competition among Smithsonian units to acquire an item is not. The display of certain light-sensitive documents may be possible only because duplicates or similar materials are available; taxonomic studies require numerous examples of the same and similar species; and small variations across similar materials can impart important insights about different artisans, tribes, or cultures. Overlap may also be necessary because units have different missions that place different research and programmatic demands on their collections. For example, there is undoubtedly overlap between NMNH anthropology and NMAI collections, but NMNH conducts physical anthropology research that sometimes requires destructive analysis, whereas NMAI focuses on social anthropology and does not permit destructive analysis. Likewise, NMAH and FSG both have collections of Asian materials, but NMAH emphasizes material evidence that illustrates social history, while FSG emphasizes aesthetic works of value almost exclusively. There is overlap in the artists collected by some museums and archives, such as HMSG, SAAM, and AAA, but interviewees found this appropriate because the items meet

the specific needs of these respective collections. For example, art museums often want a number of pieces reflecting different periods in an artist's career, to track the path of his or her work.

On the other hand, interviewees also cited examples where overlap served no reasonable purpose. In some cases, the traditional approach to collecting described above had resulted in collections with significant unnecessary redundancy. In other cases, a unit had taken in collections known to contain duplicative or similar materials that, for a variety of reasons, it had been unable to divest. Overlap has also been an unintended consequence of adding new units that came with collections that paralleled those of existing Smithsonian units.

Overall, it did not appear to the OP&A study team that the extent of duplication, similarity, and overlap across Smithsonian collections was excessive. Further, it was unclear what benefits would accrue from rigorously eliminating it. However, the study team had neither the expertise nor the time to conduct an in-depth study of precisely how much redundancy existed and whether, from the programmatic, political, and cost-saving perspectives, it would be worthwhile consolidating like collections under one unit.

CONCLUSIONS

The OP&A study team concurs with the common perception that collecting is a fundamental mandate of the Smithsonian and remains essential. However, the environment for collecting has changed dramatically from the days when the Smithsonian received its first collections. In response, many units have undertaken commendable efforts to approach collections development in a more systematic and focused manner. Nevertheless, there is room for a more concerted response to today's realities.

The size of collections at a number of units already exceeds their capacity for providing responsible stewardship and adequate access, and this imbalance is likely to worsen with the continued expansion of collections, even at a low rate of growth. As a baseline proposition, the OP&A study team emphasizes that responsible collections development must be dictated, at least in part, by practical considerations of the minimum level of resources required to implement a unit's stewardship and access obligations, however it defines them.

Further, collections at a number of Smithsonian units are not well configured to support these units' missions and programs. Although most collections management policies call for integration of collections with other programs, in practice this imperative has not always been accorded due weight in collections development decisions. As a result, some collections within a single unit appear to be linked only through common ownership, or subject matter, at the broadest level. Indeed, it appears that some staff simply do not see a need to link collections to other programs.

the cultural underpinning

Problems have been compounded by the culture that underpins collections development at the Smithsonian. Two elements of this culture warrant specific mention.

First, academic insularity is evident in many Smithsonian departments and divisions. This has created a tendency to collect based on individual, departmental, and divisional agendas, inhibited the integration of collections with other programs, and hindered both cross-disciplinary collections development and collaboration on collecting with other departments, units, and external organizations. To some

extent, this insularity is reinforced by the failure of work or position descriptions to emphasize collaboration or integration of collections with other programs.

Second, at many units, there remains a perception that disposal is to be avoided. Further, disposal is not traditionally an activity for which resources have been allocated or staff rewarded. As a result, the development of collections has occurred largely through acquisitions and not disposals; collections have been expanded, but not shaped. Refinement to accommodate changed missions and priorities, to redress past collecting mistakes, to meet the needs of users, and to even to address pressing resource realities has been limited.

Additionally, the Smithsonian culture embodies certain beliefs that have evolved over decades but whose appropriateness is questionable when viewed in light of today's realities. Two of the more important of these beliefs might be paraphrased as follows:

- ≈ **“It is important that we collect as much as possible and retain it in perpetuity, both to preserve a comprehensive material record, and because it is impossible to predict what future generations will find interesting.”** This belief raises several important points. First, selection is inherent to collecting. While this axiom is increasingly accepted when it comes to acquisitions, it is often still resisted when it comes to disposals. Second, Smithsonian collections already exceed the Institution's capacity to use and care for them, and the Smithsonian will always continue to collect; it is therefore reasonable to ask whether it makes sense to hold unwanted or neglected items when higher priority needs may be going unmet. Third, disposed materials are not lost to the public forever. In most instances, they are transferred to other organizations that afford public access. In fact, the public will benefit from such transfers, if the receiving organizations are better able to provide care and access.

≈ **“The public and donors will lose faith in us if we dispose of collections.”** When disposals are transparent and undertaken for good reasons, the public response has typically been neutral or even positive. Most donors value good museum management, and understand that this may require thoughtful disposals. Often the opposition comes only from a small interest group, but that opposition is used as rationale for categorically avoiding disposals at the cost of the interests of the broader public and the collecting unit itself.

the need for a different approach

Conditions at many collecting units argue for a new approach to collections development. The OP&A study team identified two main areas in which changes might strengthen collections development: better collections development guidance and use of a carefully structured decision-making framework. At the same time, the considerable diversity of Smithsonian collecting units means that a one-size-fits-all approach is not appropriate. Each unit must be able to fashion guidance that suits its circumstances, within a broad Smithsonian framework.

collections development guidance

At present, strategic guidance at both the Institutional and unit levels is inadequate to support focused collections development. At the central level, policy does not address such key issues as what constitutes a “national collection,” or the criteria for defining materials of “national significance.” Further, sound collections management at the Institutional level may require the identification of collecting priorities across the Institution, and perhaps temporary resource shifts to areas where

needs are most pressing. There is, for example, global concern about the need to collect natural history specimens extensively and rapidly in the face of the increasing destruction of biodiversity. Does this perhaps argue for a temporary shift of resources to permit NMNH to collect more aggressively? As another example, NMAH, one of the Smithsonian's most popular museums, is falling behind on the monumental task of cataloguing its collections and implementing a central CIS, both of which are prerequisites to implementing more focused, systematic plans for collections development. Left to its own resources, it is difficult to see how NMAH can complete these fundamental tasks in a reasonable timeframe. Does this argue for a temporary shift of Institutional resources to NMAH until these jobs are done? There has been, to OP&A's knowledge, no formal discussion of these types of issues in recent years. Collections development at the Smithsonian would benefit from such policy deliberations.

One particularly noteworthy central-level concern arises from the Smithsonian's role as a congressionally-designated repository for federal natural history collections. In the current circumstances, the Smithsonian cannot realistically accommodate significant increases in the size of these collections. The OP&A study team therefore believes the policy on federal repositories needs review. If the Congress wants the Smithsonian to continue to be the steward of federal natural history collections, it needs to provide more explicit guidance on natural history collecting by federal agencies, and to ensure adequate funding for the care and study of such collections — particularly where there is a direct relationship to national interests such as security and the economy. (Alternatively, the Smithsonian could simply refuse to take in new natural history repository collections. But that does not really address the problem of inadequate resources for these collections; it simply shifts it to the originating agency.)

There is a similar inadequacy in guidance at the unit level. Current unit collections development policies tend to be either impractically broad brush, or narrowly focused on detailed operational procedures for acquisitions and disposals. For example, they typically call for collections to be linked to a unit's mission, but offer

little guidance on what this means in practice. They call for setting priorities, but do not define them.

The recently issued draft of the SD 600 Implementation Manual provides a more cohesive and operational approach. It specifies many of the elements that the OP&A study team regards as essential to effective collections development planning, such as elaborating how collections should be integrated with other programs, reviewing opportunities for collaboration with other collecting organizations, and calling for regular reviews and updates of plans. Other key elements of unit-level collections development planning include:

- Clarifying a unit's predominant museum type and the role of its collections, to provide context for decision making
- Identifying a viable size and composition of collections, relative to resources
- Identifying the collections that are core to a unit's mission and goals, as well as those that are less relevant or suitable and might be divested
- Reviewing the holdings of other Smithsonian and external collecting units to avoid duplication and identify opportunities for collaboration
- Considering alternatives to traditional collecting, such as long-term loans and shared ownership
- Setting priorities and targets for acquisitions and disposals, and creating performance measures to gauge progress
- Including implementation of a unit's collections development plan in the performance plans and reviews of both management and relevant staff

Finally, there is enough merit to the concerns about who makes acquisition decisions to justify policy-level discussion of this issue by senior management. To be sure, it is appropriate that experts make decisions about specific acquisitions. However, at the strategic planning level, some units might benefit from broadening the voices that participate in the process.

a decision-making framework

Smithsonian collecting units have made noteworthy efforts to establish more rigorous processes for acquisitions decision making. However, there is room for further improvement, particularly in the following areas:

- **Decision-making information.** The need for a complete inventory of collections must once again be stressed: thorough knowledge of a unit's current holdings is a necessary foundation for good collections development decisions. Development of unit-specific significance assessment criteria is also a priority.
- **Integration of collections with other programs.** This entails careful consideration of the current and expected uses of collections, particularly in research and exhibitions.
- **Alignment of collections with available resources.** After assessing a potential acquisition or disposal on its own merits, units need realistically to consider whether their resources are adequate to the task.
- **Analysis of the benefits and costs of proposed acquisitions and disposals.** Although such calculations can never be completely precise, units can nonetheless work toward in-depth calculation of the life-cycle costs (including the opportunity costs) of acquiring new items and

holding unwanted items, and consider whether the same resources could be better spent on other aspects of collections management.

- **Consideration of alternative approaches.** One key question here is whether Smithsonian units must actually *own* a particular item themselves, or whether their missions can be equally well served by arrangements such as loans, collections sharing, or use of other forms of documentation, such as oral histories.

collections refinement

One positive trend at the Smithsonian in recent years has been the more rigorous approach to acquisitions, and the resulting decline in their rate. More focused collecting frameworks should reinforce those trends. Nevertheless, there will always be some need for deaccessioning and disposal. The OP&A study team believes collecting units would benefit from viewing disposal as a useful tool for collections management, and becoming more active in refining their collections to avoid the accumulation of unsuitable materials.

As noted, there is already an imbalance at some Smithsonian units between collections and the resources available for care and access. A complete inventory and significance assessment of collections are necessary to determine the extent of this imbalance. Experience at other collecting units that have undertaken detailed assessments of their collections suggests that at least some Smithsonian units would probably find significant holdings that are no longer suitable to their missions and needs — particularly if collections are assessed against a more focused development framework. For example, some interviewees acknowledged that their units have collections in storage whose content is largely unknown, and in which, since their entry into the collections, no one (either internal or external) has expressed much interest.

At some units, a major effort to bring existing collections into alignment with current missions, priorities, programs, collecting frameworks, collections management needs, and resource realities should be a priority. A number of factors point to the merits of such a one-time collections alignment effort:

- Some units, most notably NMAH, have undergone significant changes in their mission and focus without a corresponding review of collections. Others are in the process of assessing their mission and direction.
- The opportunity costs of holding inappropriate objects can be large. The resources devoted to storing and maintaining unsuitable collections might be better spent on future acquisitions or on core unit functions — both collections-related and noncollections-related.
- Some units are currently establishing a more focused framework for future acquisitions. The OP&A study team applauds this, and notes that there is equal merit in applying such a focus retrospectively to existing collections.
- “Use” has always been a controversial criterion for disposals. It should be noted, however, that use is a common criterion in collections *stewardship* decisions — for example, objects in demand receive more care, and objects that are never used receive less — and this is widely seen to make sense. The OP&A study team therefore suggests that collections refinement decisions be based in part on a clear-headed assessment of what best promotes the mission of the Smithsonian and its units, and not on traditional taboos.
- Most important, collecting units have a responsibility to engage in sound collections management and to exercise fiduciary care. The size and scope of collections at some units preclude these units from carrying out those responsibilities. It is quite common for commercial organizations to promote their institutional well-being by retrenching and refocusing on

their areas of strength, and there may well be a lesson here for the public sector.

The conclusion that there is considerable merit in the idea of a one-time disposal effort, intended to bring collections accumulated piecemeal over 175 years into line with current resource realities and missions, will likely generate controversy. Some critics will point to the *significant cost implications* of such a disposal effort, as well as the potential impact on other unit activities during implementation. There is no question that such an effort would be costly and time-consuming. However, continuing to defer action will only further increase the costs down the road.

Some critics will also argue that such a divestiture amounts to an *abrogation of the public trust* that will greatly damage the Smithsonian's reputation. At issue is the basic premise that Smithsonian collections should be held in perpetuity by the Institution for the public, and that it is therefore irresponsible to divest of them. However, the experiences of other museums that have undertaken major disposals indicate that if there is a legitimate rationale for such disposals, if they are conducted openly and according to professional standards, and if efforts are made to transfer divested materials to other organizations that offer public access, even large-scale disposals are unlikely to generate excessive controversy or opposition. To the contrary, thoughtful, transparent disposals that enhance the Smithsonian's ability to fulfill its basic mission and care for its core collections are likely to be judged by the Institution's key constituencies as evidence of sound management. Indeed, it can be argued that it is an abrogation of the public trust to hold unsuitable collections that do not serve the Institution's mission, may not be adequately cared for, and may be inaccessible to users, particularly when other public-trust organizations are willing to take them.

Another common argument against disposals is that they *ignore the needs of future generations*. As noted, the disposal of a item from Smithsonian collections does not mean it is lost to the public in the future, if it is transferred to another organization that offers public access.

toward alignment

A full inventory of collections is the necessary starting point for a major collections alignment effort. Following the inventory, units will need to conduct a cost-benefit analysis of potential disposals. Because these processes take time, alignment of collections may have to be carried out in phases, as elements of the inventory are completed. Further, if the costs of disposal appear to outweigh reasonable expectations for gains in certain cases, consideration will have to be given to other options — such as relocating unsuitable items to remote, inexpensive, but adequate storage facilities. When anticipated gains do appear to justify the costs of disposal, collecting units will need to develop detailed plans for the disposal process, with realistic end-dates and milestones. They will also need to find additional resources, as the costs of a major disposal effort will be significant.

At some units, the OP&A study team believes that collections alignment is important enough to justify a one-time appropriation, as has been provided for facilities maintenance. It is unclear whether private donors can be found to support this effort, but efforts to raise private funds should be made. If adequate private funds are not forthcoming, resources will have to be generated internally, which is likely to mean their temporary reallocation from other functions and activities. For example, a unit might focus additional resources on the collections alignment effort on a rolling department-by-department basis — with the understanding that for a temporary period, collections management staff in the target department will allocate the bulk of their time to the alignment project, rather than treating it as a collateral duty.

Putting the alignment effort in Smithsonian and unit strategic plans will lend greater weight to the effort. And strong, long-term commitment from Institutional and unit leadership, and a willingness to make tough choices, will be essential to success.