Section 3
The development and care of the museum’s collections
Types of collections

The history of collecting and the formation and management of collections is a fascinating and complex field of study. Collections have been formed in countries throughout the world for many centuries, and collecting as a human endeavour takes place for many reasons in and outside of museums. It is possible, however, to detect general underlying trends in collecting at different periods, and to analyse collecting in a variety of ways.

Understanding the history and nature of collecting, and change and continuity in attitudes to collections, is an important aspect of museum work. Museum directors should be well versed in the history of collections formation in their own museum, and how in this respect their museum fits into a more general context of collecting. (Past collecting – perhaps during a different political regime or just under outdated ideas – may today seem very wrong. But it is still part of human history, and the museum has a duty to preserve and record past policies.)

Here we examine collections in four ways – by intellectual rationale, by method of acquisition, by discipline and by material categories.

INTELLECTUAL RATIONALE

People have developed and used collections through time and space for many reasons and for personal as well as public benefit. Private collections have been built up for reasons of social or political status, for academic or scientific interest, for commercial benefit and for personal 'hobbyist' interest. In many cases, personal collections that have been developed out of a particular interest are ultimately acquired in whole or in part by museums. In some cases, museums are built specifically to accommodate personal collections and serve as memorials to their collectors.

Collections may be developed in a haphazard way, based on the souvenir or 'curiosity' approach to collecting where items hold personal interest and meaning for the collector. They may be based on a 'fetishist' approach to collecting, where the collector is concerned to acquire many examples of similar artefacts or natural history specimens. They may be 'organised' collections where they are used to demonstrate or illustrate a particular intellectual argument or standpoint. They may be based on 'systematic' collecting in which collections are built up in a comprehensive way based on sound disciplinary approaches.

Whatever intellectual rationale underlies collecting, collecting in its widest sense is a powerful human trait, which has greatly influenced the development and philosophy of museums and their work. Collecting and disposal policies for museums reflect more general attitudes to collecting, and this has been true since museums began to be developed.
Museums acquire material for their collections in a variety of ways, which are described in greater detail in Units 42–8. We describe five main ways here – by donation, by purchase, by field-collecting, by exchange and by loan:

1 Many museum collections have been built up almost exclusively on the basis of donations. Donations take different forms and can vary in scale and importance. Items may be brought into the museum for identification and then offered to the museum, or may be left as bequests. In many cases, major collections have been left to public museums as bequests by private collectors (see Unit 44).

2 Opportunities to purchase items will be constrained by available finance for most museums. Purchase normally takes place to complement existing collections (see Unit 44).

3 Field-collecting as part of a defined research programme allows for a systematic approach to collecting in line with the museum’s overall collecting policy (see Unit 45). It is essentially a proactive approach to collecting, rather than the responsive approach to collecting that characterises donations and purchases.

4 Exchange of items or collections between museums is another method of collections development. Here collections are transferred to or exchanged with museums that can provide appropriate resources and skills to look after them (see Units 44 and 51).

5 Loans are a method of providing the public with an opportunity to see material in public or private collections that may not otherwise be accessible to the museum’s users (see Unit 44).

However, collections are built up over time, the museum has a responsibility to collect in the context of a defined collecting policy. It is the collecting policy that provides the framework within which collections are developed and acquired (see Units 42–3).

Discipline

Collections can also be analysed by subject or discipline. Museum collections have been traditionally divided into a range of disciplines such as archaeology and anthropology, natural sciences, fine art, decorative arts, social history or technology. Such disciplines reflect academic training and approaches to the subject, and structures within higher education.

Collections analysed in this way may restrict opportunities for more interdisciplinary presentation and interpretation in displays and exhibitions. The opportunities to use collections in a variety of ways and to view them from different standpoints can be lost through compartmentalisation. While academic study of collections using techniques appropriate for each discipline is necessary, it should not preclude alternative ways of using and interpreting collections for the public.
Collections can also be analysed in terms of the material of which they are composed, such as stone, wood, feathers, leather, bone, ceramics or metals. All organic and inorganic materials have different requirements in terms of collections management and preventive conservation (see Unit 55). It follows that collections may be housed or stored by material category, even though they may fall within different subject disciplines. They may also be displayed by material category in cross-disciplinary displays or exhibitions.

Understanding the nature of collecting, its historical development and its impact on museum development is an important requirement for museum staff. It provides a context within which to view your museum’s collections and the history of their development. It gives insights into the changing ways in which people have used and presented collections in museums, and above all makes people think about and question the approaches they use in their work. Museums can no longer claim to be the only source of knowledge, meaning or understanding about collections. They do, however, represent a significant body of expertise in the formation and use of collections. They can help users explore collections in many different ways and a good understanding of types of collections and their development is a valuable and necessary basis for their work.

Policies for collecting

Related Units – Units 44–51

What should we collect? That is probably the most important question any museum has to decide; every aspect of the museum’s work will be affected by the museum’s collecting policy.

Every museum should have a written collecting policy formally agreed by its governing body. This written policy will be part of the museum’s collections management policy and its forward plan that sets out the museum’s intentions for all aspects of its work (see Unit 81).

What should be in it? The collecting policy should include the following points:

- **What will the museum collect?** This should describe in some detail the areas in which the museum intends to collect. For a large general museum this will be quite a long, complicated description; it should always be sufficiently detailed to enable a curator to decide whether or not to acquire an object.

- **Where will the museum collect?** A regional museum will probably collect only items relating to its region, and mostly in the region itself. An art gallery,
however, may buy paintings or accept donations from many different countries. A natural history museum may send expeditions to research and collect in biologically interesting parts of the world.

- **How will the museum collect?** Will it collect through fieldwork? Will it purchase objects? Will it actively encourage members of the public to donate or bequeath things to it? Will it accept items on long loan? All these are policy decisions.

- **Why does the museum collect in these fields?** The collecting policy should explain why the museum collects particular groups or collects in particular areas. It should clearly justify the museum’s collecting policy, explaining how it fits into the museum’s overall policy, and describing the historical collections held by the museum.

- **When, or in what circumstances, would the museum consider disposing of items?** It is very important to ensure that no curator ever disposes of anything from the museum collection without strictly following the written procedure approved by the museum’s governing body and set down in its collecting and disposal policy.

The **What** section should set out clearly the restrictions on collecting imposed by both law and ethics. Many of these restrictions will be peculiar to the country or even the museum concerned, but every museum should include in its collecting policy the principles set out in ICOM’s *Code of Ethics for Museums* (see Unit 6). Some of the most important are:

- Objects or specimens will be acquired only if the museum is satisfied it can obtain valid title.

- The museum will not acquire objects where their recovery may have involved the unauthorised, unscientific or intentional destruction or damage of monuments, archaeological or geological sites, or species and natural habitats.

- Collections of human remains and material of sacred significance will be acquired only if they can be housed securely and cared for respectfully.

- The museums will not acquire biological or geological specimens that have been collected, sold or otherwise transferred in contravention of local, national, regional or international law or treaty relating to wildlife protection or natural history conservation.

- Every effort must be made before acquisition to ensure that the object has not been illegally transferred from another country.

The collecting policy may be a quite brief document, or it may be highly detailed; each museum should decide what it needs. Some museums have two documents: a brief policy that is formally approved by the museum’s governing body, and a much more detailed version to be used by the museum staff. The policy should be reviewed on a regular basis in the light of the success of the museum’s collecting programme.
Policies for disposal

Related Units – Units 6, 42

When a museum acquires an object – whether by purchase, donation or fieldwork – it acquires it in order to preserve it forever for the benefit of the public.

Even so, there are reasons why a museum might want to get rid of an object, and some of these are good reasons and some are bad:

- because the object has decayed so badly that it is now quite useless. Are you sure it is useless? There are many examples of important scientific collections being destroyed by people who did not understand their value. Such a decision should never be taken without consulting at least two specialists.

- because it has been discovered to be a fake, or was wrongly identified. But it may still be of interest and importance: many fakes have played an important part in art history, and comparing real and false will help future curators to learn. And if an object can be wrongly identified once, perhaps it can twice. Every museum contains examples of objects whose importance has been realised long after they came to the museum.

- because it does not fit into the museum’s collecting policy. At first sight, this seems a very good reason for disposal, but beware! However hard we try to be rational and to be good planners, the fact is that collecting policies are influenced by fashion. In the 1960s many British museums, which used to try to collect everything, adopted policies of collecting only items of local and regional interest. Now they deeply regret disposing of foreign ethnographical material, which could illuminate the connections of their regions with foreign countries, or illustrate the cultural background of immigrant communities.

- in order to sell it, and buy a better example. This is a very dangerous practice indeed, and is contrary to the principles that govern museums throughout the world; only a few large North American art museums regularly try to build up their collections by selling and buying. The practice is dangerous because it betrays the trust of those members of the public who give objects to museums, and because we can never be sure that our judgement will be approved by our successors. Many of the most treasured objects in museums today were once regarded as worthless.

- in order to make an exchange with another museum. Exchange is full of dangers, for the reasons given above, but at least it ensures that the object remains in a public museum.
• because the museum already has many examples of this object.
This is sometimes a strong argument for disposing of an object, especially where the other examples are in better condition, or have more information associated with them. But it is still open to the criticism that donors may feel betrayed, and the danger that information relating to that object may turn up. Duplicates may, however, be used for different interpretative purposes; for example in handling boxes or loan boxes for School Loan Services.

• because the museum is ordered by state authorities to do so.
There are sadly many examples, from all sorts of regimes, of museums being ordered by state authorities to surrender objects so that they can be given as presents to visiting dignitaries, or (for example) used to decorate a presidential palace. In such a situation there is little the museum can do to resist: really this is not so much disposal as theft.

• in order to return the object to its country or people or region of origin.
Campaigns for cultural restitution have resulted in many museums returning to their country of origin items of special significance to that country. A number of museums, too, have returned human bones or religious items to groups to whom they are deeply significant. This is an area of intense debate (see Unit 51).

There are two aspects to disposal: law and ethics. All museums are of course subject to the law of their countries. In many countries whether a museum can sell, exchange, destroy or give away objects from its collections is controlled by law: either the general law that applies to all public bodies, or specific laws that govern museums or one particular museum. It is the responsibility of every museum manager – curators, administrators and members of governing bodies – to ensure that they are familiar with the laws that apply to their museum, and to ensure that those laws are obeyed.

So far as the ethics of disposal are concerned, there is general agreement among museum workers worldwide that the principal function of a museum is to acquire objects and specimens for the public benefit and to keep them for posterity. There must be a strong presumption against the disposal of any items in the collection of a museum. Very occasionally, however, disposal is the right thing to do. In that case:

• Any object being considered for disposal must be considered by at least two curators, one of whom should be from another museum, and their views should be given to the museum’s governing body. Contact with a second curator may need to be made by post or email.
• Any decision to dispose of an object must be made by the governing body of the museum and the curator, not by either alone.
• Any donor, or anyone who contributed to the purchase of the object, must be – wherever possible – consulted.
• When the decision to dispose has been made, the object should be offered, by gift (preferably), sale or exchange, to other museums. Usually an announcement will be made in whatever journal or newsletter is most widely read in the country’s museums.