Deaccessioning and Disposal of Collections Overview

Deaccessioning is an important component of collections management that is necessary to support healthy collections. Deaccessioning projects should be approached with careful consideration and planning. This document was developed to assist Alberta museums in understanding, planning, and undertaking deaccessioning activities. The information below aligns with the Alberta Museums Association’s *Standard Practices Handbook for Museums*, 3rd Edition, the Canadian Museums Association’s *Ethics Guidelines*,¹ and the Canadian Museums Association’s *Deaccessioning Guidelines.*²

What is deaccessioning?

Deaccessioning is the process of permanently removing an object from a museum’s collection. The process used must be formally approved by the museum’s governing authority, and all deaccessions must be documented in the collections records. Once an object is deaccessioned from the collection, it must be disposed of by appropriate means. These means include gifting, selling, trading, or transferring an object to another museum or public institution; selling it on the open market; or destroying it.³

Any deaccessioning project needs a clear plan of action that outlines the purpose of the project, provides a clear rationale and method for deaccessioning and disposal, and ensures proper documentation. Deaccessioning can focus on a single object or area of the collection, or it can be a multi-year project connected to a collections review.

Regardless of the size and scope of a deaccessioning project, it is important to ensure best practice standards are followed throughout and that all relevant legal and ethical considerations are addressed.

Why do museums deaccession objects?

Deaccessioning is important to maintaining a healthy collection. It helps ensure the objects cared for in perpetuity support the museum’s mission and collections mandate. Deaccessioning is also part of the regular review of collections holdings to ensure relevance, and it aids in addressing storage constraints often caused by duplication of holdings. As collections are held in public trust, deaccessioning ensures that objects are disposed of in a method that acknowledges the vested interest of the collection’s stakeholders.

There are many reasons why a museum would need to deaccession objects in their permanent collection. The most common reasons are:

- **Redundancy**: the collection includes multiple versions of an item;
- **Inherent vice**: the object presents an inherent threat to the safety of the rest of the collection, staff, volunteers, or visitors;
- **Relevance**: the object does not fit the collections mandate, or the collections mandate has changed since the object was acquired;
- **Damage**: the object suffers direct or indirect physical damage by agents of deterioration (see the Canadian Conservation Institute (CCI) Notes for details), or suffers deterioration through accident, disaster, or vandalism;
- **Ethics**: an object is determined to be wrongfully in the collection, such as if it was stolen, taken during a time of conflict, illicitly exported or traded, or if the identity of the rightful owner(s) is in question. This determination should be made using an objective ethical standard based upon “underlying values of honesty, fairness, respect, excellence, and accountability,” and not influenced by individual preference.
- **Repatriation**: whether by request or as instigated by the institution, the object is being repatriated; or
- **Closure**: the dissolution of the institution requires the collection to be deaccessioned.

**When is it inappropriate for a museum to deaccession an object?**

There are legal and ethical restrictions on deaccessioning that museums must be aware of when developing a deaccessioning policy and undertaking any deaccessioning activities. There are two main instances when deaccessioning is not appropriate:

1. **To raise money:**
   - Museums hold their collections in public trust, and these public trust responsibilities underpin all museum activities. As part of museum ethics, objects cannot be deaccessioned for the purpose of sale to raise funds for capital or operating expenses. To sell a deaccessioned object to raise money goes against international sector ethics and conflicts with best practice for accounting. See the AMA’s Membership Advisory for Accounting Standards for Non-Profits. See below for guidelines for the ethical disposal of a deaccessioned object by sale.

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2. The donor (or their heirs) asks for an object back:
   - As part of the legal regulations of the Canada Revenue Agency (CRA), museums that are registered charities with the CRA cannot return objects to original donors or their heirs, even if an official tax receipt was not issued. Failure to adhere to this legal requirement can result in the CRA revoking a museum's charitable status.

What happens after an object is deaccessioned?

After an object is deaccessioned from a museum's collection, the museum must dispose of it appropriately.

Appropriate methods of disposal include:
   - Gift, sale, trade, or transfer to another non-profit-making museum or public institution;
   - Sale at public auction for fair market value;
   - Repatriation to the Indigenous group or originating community the object belongs to; or
   - Destruction.

Methods of disposal that are not appropriate include:
   - Return of the object to the donor;
   - Sale to a museum staff member or volunteer, or their family member or close associate; or
   - Private sale to a for-profit museum.

See below for guidelines for determining the appropriate means of disposal.

Questions to Consider When Deaccessioning

The following questions must be addressed and discussed by the appropriate authorities within the museum’s governance structure prior to deaccessioning an object:
   - What object or objects are to be deaccessioned?
   - Why is each object to be deaccessioned (e.g., redundancy, inherent vice, relevance, damage, ethical considerations, repatriation, closure, etc.)?
   - How can the deaccessioning process be conducted to ensure it is clear and transparent to the public?
   - What is the best means of disposing of each object?
   - What are the resources (time, funds, space, etc.) required to undertake this deaccessioning?

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Developing a Deaccessioning Policy

All museums must have a valid deaccessioning policy in place. It can be a stand-alone policy, or part of the larger collections management policy. For a deaccessioning policy to meet best practice standards, it should address the following:

- Under what circumstances deaccessioning is and is not permitted.
  - The rationale for deaccessioning must be clearly stated and must align with ethical and legal considerations.

- Who has the authority to approve any proposed deaccession.
  - Usually the executive director, board, or collections committee would review and approve any deaccessions.

- What the acceptable methods of disposal are.
  - See the section on disposal below for more details.

- How the proceeds from the sale of deaccessioned objects can be used.
  - All proceeds from the disposal of deaccessioned objects must be allocated towards enhancing the collections or services directly related to curatorial care of the remaining collections.
  - The proceeds from the disposal of deaccessioned objects may not be used towards museum operations, capital costs, or the settling of outstanding bills or debts.

- How public inquiries regarding deaccessioned objects will be handled.
  - This includes notifying the donor or donor’s heirs, handling questions from the community and media, and developing clear messaging around deaccessioning.

- What records must be maintained.\(^\text{10}\)
  - All deaccessioned objects must be documented and formally removed from the collection. See the section on deaccessioning procedure below for more details.

The deaccessioning policy must be approved by the museum’s governing authority, and the date the policy was approved and signed should be indicated. When considering the deaccessioning of an object, an institution should consult their own deaccessioning policy to confirm deaccessioning is the most appropriate course of action.

Recommended resources for managing the deaccessioning of an object include Section 3.9 of the Standard Practices Handbook for Museums, 3rd Edition; the Canadian Museums Association’s Deaccessioning Guidelines; and this document. Any questions regarding developing a deaccessioning policy can be directed to the Alberta Museums Association’s Advisory Services at advisory@museums.ab.ca.

Determining the Appropriate Means of Disposal

There are several means of disposal for deaccessioned objects depending on whether an object is in good or poor condition. Regardless of which method of disposal is used, the museum must carefully document the reason for deaccessioning and disposal, including photographs of the object to add to the object's collection record.

1. Disposal of Objects in Good Condition

When disposing of a deaccessioned object in good condition, the primary objective is to maintain public access to the object as part of the museum's public trust responsibilities. This often means seeking out other museums or public institutions that are better suited to care for, interpret, and display the object.

The first option for disposal of an object in good condition is to offer the object as a gift, sale, trade, or transfer to an appropriate public collecting institution (e.g., a museum, art gallery, heritage centre, or archive).

When considering institutions to give deaccessioned objects to, determine whether the receiving institution:

- Is a public institution (e.g., a registered non-profit, operated by a government department, operated by a post-secondary institution, etc.); and
- Has a collections mandate that includes the type of object being deaccessioned.

If another museum or public institution is able to accept deaccessioned objects into their collection, the proper deaccessioning procedure must be followed to complete the process.

If another museum or public institution is unable to accept the objects, they may be disposed of through public sale. When offering deaccessioned objects for sale, follow these guidelines:

- The sale must be public, and is usually a publicly advertised auction. Private sales are to be avoided.
- Under no circumstances may a trustee or an employee of the institution, or their family member or close associate, purchase deaccessioned objects at the public sale.
- Under no circumstances may objects be gifted back to the original donor or their heirs. This conflicts with CRA regulations for non-profit institutions as well as sector ethics. However, if the deaccessioned object is not disposed of by gift, sale, trade, or transfer to another institution, it is permissible for the original donor or their heirs to purchase the object at fair market value at a public auction or sale.
2. Disposal of Damaged Objects or Objects in Poor Condition

When disposing of a deaccessioned object that is damaged or in poor condition, the health and safety of museum staff and volunteers must be considered when selecting the disposal method. Seek the advice of experts when necessary, and use the following guidelines:

- If an object is deaccessioned because the museum does not have the capacity to undertake the conservation work required to repair the damage, it can be offered to other museums or public institutions in the same way as an object in good condition.
- An object can be disassembled for parts that can be used in programming or towards the preservation of other objects.
- If an object is deaccessioned because of damage or deterioration beyond repair, it should be destroyed and disposed of in front of witnesses.
  - If the object contains dangerous or hazardous materials, it should be handed over to a qualified individual to dispose of the object safely, in a manner that considers the health and safety of waste handlers and that complies with local legislation and regulations.\(^\text{11}\)
  - Any remains of the object after it is destroyed should be disposed of in such a way that no one could retrieve and restore the object.\(^\text{12}\)

Deaccessioning and Disposal after an Emergency or Disaster

Deaccessioning and disposal is also an important part of the salvage and recovery stages following an emergency or disaster. Deciding which damaged objects can and cannot be salvaged and recovered is difficult, and these decisions should not be made too early in the salvage process.

Once the museum has determined which objects it can and cannot salvage, all deaccessioning and disposal should follow the process outlined in the museum’s deaccessioning and disposal policy, including the following options for disposal:

- If the damage is not too severe, the object(s) can be offered to other museums or public institutions, or offered for public sale.
- The object(s) can be disassembled for parts that can be used in programming or towards the preservation of other objects.

If the object presents a health and safety risk or is damaged beyond repair, it must be destroyed in a manner that considers the health and safety of waste handlers and that complies with local legislation and regulations.\(^\text{13}\)

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\(^\text{13}\) Willie, *HELP!*, 315.
Deaccessioning Procedure

The following steps should be included in a deaccessioning procedure. Adapting these steps to align with the museum’s practices will ensure the deaccessioning process is properly documented, follows sector ethics, and is transparent to museum staff and the public.

1. Create formal documentation to indicate the reason the deaccessioning is occurring, when it was approved, and by whom it was approved. Add this to the object file, which should include the original deed of gift and other documentation.

2. Identify the object entry in the accession ledger.

3. Strike the object from the accession ledger, noting the date and reason for deaccessioning, as well as the mode of disposal.

4. Identify the object in the collections catalogue.

5. Indicate in the catalogue record that the object has been deaccessioned, noting the date and reason for deaccessioning, as well as the mode of disposal.

6. Update all other object files and documentation that may exist to clearly indicate that the object has been deaccessioned, noting the date and reason for deaccessioning, as well as the mode of disposal.

7. Dispose of the object in the appropriate manner as decided by the institution’s governing authority.

8. If the object is being transferred to another institution or repatriated to an Indigenous group or originating community, ensure that legal title of the object is transferred to the receiving institution, group, or community.

9. If the object is sold, ensure that all proceeds from the sale of the deaccessioned object are fully documented and used only for enhancing or caring for the institution’s collection.

10. To prevent any confusion in the future, under no circumstances should any registration or catalogue records of deaccessioned material be destroyed or deleted, nor should the accession number(s) be reused.