

## Deaccessioning and Disposal of Collections Overview

This document has been developed to provide an overview for museums and other collection holding institutions on the process of deaccessioning and disposing of collections and to highlight the various questions that should be considered when undertaking a deaccessioning process. The procedures below are in alignment with the Alberta Museums Association's *Standard Practices Handbook for Museums, 3rd Edition*, Canadian Museums Association's *Ethics Guidelines*, and Alberta Culture, Heritage Division's *Collections Management Policy*, Section 3.1, Policy on Deaccession and Disposition.<sup>1</sup>

### Definitions

1. **Deaccession:** The process, formally approved by the museum's governing authority, of permanently removing an object from the museum's collections. All deaccessions must be documented in the collection records.<sup>2</sup>
2. **Disposal:** The means by which an object is physically removed from a museum.

### Deaccessioning

All museums must have a valid deaccessioning policy in place. The policy should state:

- Under what circumstances deaccessioning is permitted.
- What the acceptable methods of disposition are.
- To what use [new acquisitions or care of existing collections] any proceeds can be put.
- The authority required to approve any proposed deaccession.
- The records which must be maintained.<sup>3</sup>

The policy must be signed by the museum's governing authority and the date the policy was approved should be indicated.

When considering the deaccessioning of an object(s), an institution should consult its own deaccessioning policy, the Government of Alberta's *Policy on Disposition of Museum Collections and Objects*, and section 3.1.9 of the *Standard Practices Handbook for Museums, 2nd Edition* to confirm deaccessioning is the most appropriate course of action. Any questions regarding this process can be directed to the Alberta Museums Association.

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<sup>1</sup> Alberta Culture, Heritage Division's Collections Management Policy (2014). Retrieved from: <http://culture.alberta.ca/paa/about/policies/docs/CollectionsPolicy.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Crystal Willie, Ed., *Standard Practices Handbook for Museums, 3rd ed.* (Edmonton: Alberta Museums Association, 2014), 380

<sup>3</sup>15. *Ibid.*, 199.

The following questions must be addressed and discussed by the appropriate authorities within the museum's governance structure prior to deaccessioning an object(s):

- What object(s) is to be deaccessioned?
- Why is the object(s) to be deaccessioned? (e.g., no longer relevant to the museum's collection policy, mission statement, or mandate; an emergency situation or natural disaster damaged the object(s) beyond repair.)
- How can the deaccessioning process be conducted to ensure it is clear and transparent to the public?
- What are the best means of disposing of the object(s)?

### **Options for Disposal – Objects in Good Condition**

- Objects are offered as a gift, transfer, exchange, or sale to an appropriate public collecting institution (e.g., museums, art galleries, heritage centres, archives).
- When considering institutions to give deaccessioned objects to, determine whether the receiving institution:
  - Is a public institution (e.g. registered non-profit)
  - Has a collections mandate that includes the type of objects being deaccessioned
- Should another appropriate institution be willing and able to accept the objects into their collection, the proper deaccessioning procedure must be followed to complete the process.
- If no appropriate public institution is able to accept the objects, they may be disposed of through public sale following these guidelines:
  - The sale must be public, usually a publicly advertised auction, and private sales are to be avoided.
  - Under no circumstances may a trustee or an employee of the institution or their family members / close associates purchase the objects at the public sale.
  - It is permissible for the original donor to purchase the objects at fair market value.
- Under no circumstances may objects be gifted back to the original donor.
- All proceeds from the disposal of objects must be allocated towards enhancing the collection or services directly related to curatorial care of the remaining collections.
- The proceeds of the disposal of collections may not be used towards museum operations, capital costs, or the settling of outstanding bills or debts.

## Options for Disposal – Damaged Objects

- If an object is deaccessioned because of damage or deterioration beyond repair, it should be 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.
- The remains of the object should be disposed of in such a way that no one could retrieve and restore the object.<sup>4</sup>

## Deaccessioning Procedure

When any object is permanently removed from a collection (by transfer to another institution, sale, or disposal) the following steps must be taken to ensure proper deaccessioning:

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, etc.).
2. Identify the object entry in the accession ledger.
3. Strike the object from the accession ledger noting the date and reason for deaccessioning.
4. Identify the object in the collections catalogue.
5. Make note in the catalogue record that the object has been deaccessioned along with the date and reason for deaccessioning.
6. Update all other object files and documentation that may exist to clearly indicate that the object has been deaccessioned along with the date and reason for deaccessioning.
7. Dispose of object in appropriate manner as decided by the institution's governing authority.
8. If the object was 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.
9. If object is transferred to another institution, ensure that legal title of the object is transferred to the receiving institution.
10. Under no circumstances should any registration or catalogue records of deaccessioned material be destroyed or deleted, nor should the Accession Number(s) be re-used, as this may cause confusion in the future.

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 200.