



COLLECTION MANAGERS COMMITTEE

FALL 1990 NEWSLETTER

### AN OPEN LETTER FROM THE CHAIRMAN

I want to thank everyone who attended the CMC workshop on deaccessioning, held in Fort Worth on August 25. The presentations by Rick Casagrande, Rebecca Martin, and Lisa Rebori were outstanding, and the representatives from professional auction houses were most helpful and friendly. Guest speaker E. A. Carmean gave his perspective on the Fort Worth Museum of Modern Art's decision to deaccession Eakins' "The Swimming Hole." Terry Grose managed the logistics in her usual organized and professional way. The speakers played to a full house of TAM-CMC professionals, and TAM executive director Margaret Blagg took time from her busy schedule to attend.

The whole issue of deaccessioning is just one example of the legal and ethical problems that are affecting collections professionals today. Increasingly, the value of a well-written museum collections policy, code of ethics, and handbook of procedures becomes apparent. Not having any of these guiding documents is an unacceptable oversight; not following established policies may become a legal nightmare. The workshop speakers repeatedly stressed the need for a good, legally and ethically acceptable, and binding collections policy as the basis for all decisions affecting collections acquisitions, use, and deaccessioning.

If you are not sure what your collections policy states (or if you are not sure that you have one--if not, you're not alone), take some time to read it thoroughly. A good collections policy and a good procedures manual are not the same thing. As Rick Casagrande pointed out, policies are high-level guidelines that must be approved by the governing or advisory body of the museum; therefore, a policy is an inflexible statement that shapes the museum procedures. Procedures are staff-generated documents detailing the handling of regular collections activities; they are flexible and situational. Your collections policy should give you the exact information you need on the scope and limits of acceptable acquisitions, the documentation and level of approval required for collections acceptance, use, staff and board members who are involved in collections decisions. It should also include a code of ethics specifying acceptable and unacceptable collections-related activities for staff and board members.

All of the speakers at the deaccessioning workshop mentioned the use of a good collections policy as a guide to making ethical, legal, and acceptable decisions when the need for deaccessioning was perceived. If you are not sure that your institutional policy will back up your collections decisions, then you owe it to yourself and your institution to take a long hard look at both the policy and the decisions, and to initiate any necessary changes.

Sally Shelton

## RECAP OF CMC DEACCESSION WORKSHOP, AUGUST 25, 1990

Richard Casagrande, Consultant on Deaccessioning to the San Antonio Museum Association, opened his talk with some personal observations concerning the practice of deaccessioning: if museum staff encounter trouble, be up-front and professional; always have an answer; he was skeptical of the good intentions of the press. Casagrande stressed that every museum should have a copy of Marie C. Malaro's book, A Legal Primer on Managing Museum Collections.

Casagrande continued with a straightforward presentation of the pros and cons of deaccessioning. The positive aspects include: to create storage space; the opportunity of good public relations (putting objects back into public view); "getting rid of junk;" cleaning up the books; and raising money. Among the negative aspects, the misperception of the public concerning the practice; the chance of alienating donors; the staff time involved; and the chance of the museum disposing of objects that may be important at some point in the future; and last, but not least, the museum may be sued.

Casagrande outlined the deaccessioning procedure followed by SAMA. He noted that the association long-range plan included a comprehensive look at the strengths and weaknesses of the collections, and included a deaccession plan (the term employed, "selectively culled"). Among the points presented: the use of a structured policy of staff initialization and approval of the deaccession action, combined with formal committee review and approval ("we" sounds better than "I"); also, the importance of a written record/steps of deaccessioning. The reasons for deaccessioning: not appropriate to the collections, fake/forgery, inferior quality, near duplication, infrequent exhibition, poor condition, express donor permission (to deaccession).

The one exception to the formal procedure: objects with inherent vice/vermin or that pose a danger (such as a mount treated with arsenic): in these instances, photographs are taken and a written report submitted, with the object immediately disposed of. Objects must have been in the collection for at least two years (five years is preferable). As part of the procedure, the registration department checks for legal claim to the object(s), as well as legal encumbrances. If an object is valued in excess of \$5,000, or if a collection of objects is being deaccessioned, two outside appraisals are required.

After a formal vote on the deaccession, SAMA advertises in the legal section of the newspaper for two consecutive weeks, thereby allowing for "legitimate claims" to be made. SAMA has determined that public auction is the best method of disposal. Regarding the monies realized from the deaccession: Casagrande noted that legally, there are no restrictions on its use; however, ethically, monies are generally placed in a restricted acquisitions fund, with the original intent of the donor kept if possible (SAMA: the original donor is credited if the deaccession is in excess of \$1,000). He noted that some museums place the proceeds in conservation funds.

By Jennifer Staffard, Curator, Biblical Arts Center, Dallas



Rebecca Martin, Registrar, Old Cow Town Museum, Wichita, Kansas began her program by telling the audience that, as a new registrar at the Old Cow Town Museum, she was faced with the overwhelming task of deaccessioning 500 objects from the museum's collections.

The Old Cow Town Museum had had 25 years of indiscriminate collecting. In 1970, the Board of Trustees of the museum decided that accreditation would be a major goal. They realized that they needed an organizational framework which would include mission and purpose statements. The board decided the focal point of the museum would be a recreation of the 1865-1880 time period in Wichita. The board drew up a long-range plan which focused on this fifteen year period. This meant that they would have to get rid of 25 years of non-period objects.

There was little or no paperwork on many of the objects. Because of the urgent need to get things in order, they sought out a consultant. Their first step was to have the Curator separate essential items from nonessential items. The museum contacted the city about finding an off-site area to house items that would have to be deaccessioned. Before they could do that, however, they had to write a collection policy including a deaccession policy.

The deaccession policy would list reasons why objects had to be disposed, and how they would do it. Rebecca stressed the importance of keeping permanent records and getting legal opinions when necessary. The policy would include the rationale and need for deaccessioning material from the collection. Then the staff determined the status of the collection, i.e.; was it loaned or donated?; was there information on the donor or lender? Other questions had to be answered such as; What is the proper method of disposal? Does the object fall within the scope of the collection? Is the object damaged beyond repair? Is the object a duplicate of better or more representative pieces?

Rebecca stated that, if status of the object indicated that it should be deaccessioned, this information would be presented to the Director. If the Director agreed, a recommendation for deaccessioning would be presented to the Curatorial/Acquisition Committee along with documents and records.

One of the problems that the Old Cow Town ran into was that of the legality of disposing of abandoned property. They found out that Kansas did not have such a law.

The museum community in Kansas got together to lobby for such a law. They talked to the Attorney General and testified before the State Committee. Kansas finally passed such a law. Abandoned property would be returned to the owner if known, but the burden of proof of ownership would be on the claimant.

Rebecca Martin then went on to discuss the method taken by the Registrar's Department to properly document the museum's disposal of objects. Some of the steps described were setting up a procedure manual and individual folders for deaccessioning. The folders would be filed by date and would include the request and minutes from the Curatorial/Acquisition Committee meeting, conditions and dates of transaction, photographs and measurements of each object. All catalog cards would also have such information.

Ms. Martin concluded her program by encouraging all persons present to urge their museums to implement a long-range plan and deaccession policy.

By Shirley Leftwich, Director, Scurry County Museum, Snyder

Lisa Rebori, Manager of Collections for the Houston Museum of Natural Science, discussed the procedures involved in deaccessioning natural history collections. She explained that natural history museums have many similar collections issues as other kinds of museums. All museums must decide what to collect, what to keep and what to deaccession. Natural history museums, however, have the additional burden of following guidelines established by international, federal, and state laws governing the collecting and disposal of natural objects.

Ms. Rebori noted that, in addition to dealing with strict laws governing collecting, natural history museums collect objects for a larger audience than most general museums. They collect directly for the general, academic, and scientific communities. Although a specimen/artifact in a natural history museum is of utmost importance, the specimens' information is as important. Even if a specimen is removed from the collection because of damage or decay, the specimen's information must be retained for future reference and comparison.

Natural history specimens also have special needs due to the size, construction, and number of objects collected. Full-sized animals, ranging from insects to dinosaurs, create multiple storage headaches. Fur, feathers, minerals and shells easily suffer from insect and natural decay problems. Multiple specimens of like creatures, collected for comparison, create storage and catalog nightmares. All of these factors play a part in the need for and the decision to deaccession natural history specimens.

In 1985 the Houston Museum of Natural Science reviewed and revised its collections policy (a policy the meeting speakers encouraged all museums to have and to follow). It grew from a one page document to a 25 page document. The revisions served to refocus the responsibilities of all departments. The decision was made to deaccession the historical materials contained in the museum's collections and some natural history specimens. The museum did, however, decide to keep those objects that pertained to the history of the museum proper or those that were given by the collectors who helped start the museum. The actual removal process began in 1989.

The museum's curators identified objects for deaccession consideration. The collections manager made recommendations to the collections committee. Many of the objects were sold following the museum guidelines for deaccessioning and the funds placed in an acquisitions account. The value for the natural history objects sold was obtained from hobby/trade shows since no auction houses handle this material. Zoological specimens which, by law cannot be sold, were traded or transferred to other museums. Those historical objects with provenance records were placed in museums in the counties of origin. Some objects in poorest condition were destroyed.

The Houston Museum of Natural Science used the deaccessioning process to refine its collection by removing unnecessary or damaged material and to enhance the collection through trades and monies earned by the sale of some items.

By Kevin Conley, Curator of Collections, Fort Bend Museum, Richmond



The August 25th workshop was a well-planned, information-based seminar that supplied practical advice on a variety of issues facing today's museums. The program was especially helpful, of course, to those institutions about to go through the deaccessioning process. Attending the seminar were representatives from three major auction houses: Scott J. Schaefer from Sotheby's, Carolyn Foxworth of Christies, and Suzanne C. Staley from Butterfield & Butterfield. All three were very friendly and ready to answer any questions that the seminar participants had.

My first reaction, upon hearing that the three auction house representatives would be in attendance was "Why are they coming?". I soon found out. They were there, naturally, to advertise some of their many services, not the least of which is to facilitate the buying and selling of art. Much of the recent publicity, regarding the astronomical sums of mostly foreign money being spent on French Impressionist paintings, has been condemning. That art has been lowered to the level of commodity is one of the criticisms I have encountered. Many paint the auction houses as being the culprits. This is unfortunate and untrue.

As members of the museum profession, we must remember that the world of the auction house is a very different place from the one we are used to dealing in. In our world the worn overalls of a migrant field worker may be invaluable to our collections. The same item would not interest an auction house in the least. Art sells, worn overalls do not. Art is king and it will probably stay on its throne for some time to come. The people most likely to be disappointed by this are curators of regional history and natural history museums. Railroad spikes, plant specimens, and dirt samples do not bring much at auction because there is no large market for these types of collections. Finding a market for deaccessioned art of regional importance and non-art items can be difficult, but the large auction houses can and do provide guidance for the museum seeking a buyer. I was very impressed by the representatives at the workshop in their familiarity with local art markets and their recommendations on how to find markets for non-art items.

The real "culprit" when it comes to the controversy over the sale at auction of deaccessioned items is most often the museum itself. Museums without well written collection management policies are certain to make embarrassing and often harmful mistakes. Auction houses can be exceedingly useful to the museum that is trying to refine and improve its collections, but these museums must be careful that their actions are not perceived as being "money-grubbing" or unethical. Museums should have thoughtful, community minded policies but must also be willing to defend or even revise them when the time comes.

By Greg Tipton, Curator of Exhibitions and Collections, Museums of Abilene

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#### NEW INSTITUTE OF TEXAN CULTURES CURATOR OF COLLECTIONS ANNOUNCED

On September 4, 1990, Leah Lewis Gentry succeeded Phyllis McKenzie as Curator of Collections at the Institute of Texan Cultures in San Antonio. Phyllis has moved into the position of Researcher at the Institute. Leah was Registrar for Exhibitions and Loans at the San Antonio Museum Association from 1981 to 1988. In the last two years she has been working on an MBA at UTSA and selling books at the Viva Bookstore in San Antonio. As a welcome gift to its new collections manager the Institute will be participating in a MAP II survey at the end of October.

**MATERIALS FOR CONSERVATION**  
**REPORT ON A SUMMER COURSE AT THE INSTITUTE OF ARCHAEOLOGY, LONDON**

In July 1990, I attended a short course at the Institute of Archaeology, University College, London. The course, "Materials for Conservation", was taught by Velson Horie of the University of Manchester. It was organized to reflect the material contained in Horie's book of the same title (published by Butterworth), and was as challenging and interesting a course as could possibly be squeezed into five full days.

The "materials" referred to are the polymers used in conservation work: the consolidants, adhesives, and plastics which are in common use in museums. Almost all the products so used are designed for some other purpose (usually industrial) and may have undesirable long-term or secondary effects on museum objects. Horie's course focused on the chemical structure of some common polymers, their changes over time, and the laboratory assessment of their properties.

This course was tremendously beneficial to the participants (who represented a wide range of professional backgrounds and national alliances, including Texas). Horie's book is also a valuable source of information on this subject. The use of polymeric materials is widespread; the knowledge of their potential effects is not. Too often, the application has been made and the damage is irreversible before anyone thinks to check the nature of the polymer.

As was repeatedly mentioned in the course lectures, museum professionals are essentially using materials which were never designed to be used on museum objects. The purposes for which many polymers were designed may be at odds with the purposes of preserving museum objects. It is best to know what you are using and why, to use the reversible rather than the irreversible if at all possible, and to document both the chemical makeup and the current proprietary name of the material used. For human health and safety concerns, it is necessary to obtain and read a Materials Safety Data Sheet on any substance used on museum objects, and to arrange for adequate worker protection if a potentially dangerous polymer must be used.

At the beginning of the course, I regretted not having paid more attention in undergraduate chemistry; at the end, and now, I wanted to know more about what we are using on objects and why. We are paying dearly for the indiscriminate use of all sorts of polymeric materials on all sorts of museum objects and specimens. Anyone who has ever lost a collection of cellulose nitrate film stock, or watched a "clear" coating turn dark, yellow, or tried to remove old unidentified adhesives which have pulled an object apart as they shrank, needs to read Horie's book carefully. It's the next best thing to being there.

Sally Shelton, Materials Conservation Lab, Texas Memorial Museum



IMS-GOS WORKSHOP  
SEPTEMBER 21, 1990  
LAGUNA GLORIA MUSEUM, AUSTIN, TEXAS

TAM sponsored a workshop on writing better and more competitive IMS-GOS grant applications on Friday, September 21, 1990. The workshop attracted participants from around the state and featured Daphne Wood Murray, director of IMS as a panelist for opening and closing remarks.

The TAM members who discussed specific areas of the application in detail were Gary Smith, director of the McFaddin-Ward House, Beaumont; Jane Jerry, director of the Children's Museum, Houston; Howard Taylor, director of the San Angelo Museum of Fine Arts; Joe Kagle, director of The Art Center, Waco; and Don Markham, director of the Carson County Square House Museum. Each panelist described personal approaches to grant-writing and gave generous suggestions for improving grant applications.

Some suggestions were universal. They include the following:

- \* The mission statement is the most important part of the application, not the least. Everything else you write should connect to, and reinforce, this statement. Take some time to make sure that this is clearly focused; it is the driving force of the application.

- \* Assume no previous knowledge of your institution on the part of the reviewer. Your application is supposed to paint the total word picture of your museum.

- \* Read the question. Read the application guidelines and tips at the end of the booklet. If you do not answer the question, your effort is wasted.

- \* Write for a human reader. A boring or uninteresting application is going to escape the attention of the reviewer, who has many to go through. Avoid jargon and hyperbole. You are writing for your peers, not the general public.

- \* Write in the active voice and keep the tone of the application positive. Focus on your accomplishments and your specific plans for the future. Quote anything positive that has been written about your museum (examples included quotes from MAP, accreditation or survey reports, as well as newspaper and magazine articles).

- \* Prove that you know who your audience is and that you know how you are actually reaching it.

- \* Don't start 3 weeks before the deadline. This should be a long process of gathering data from all sources.

- \* Have only one final editor, even if several staff members do the writing. The final draft should be consistent in tone, voice, and information content. This should be reviewed by an objective board member or volunteer and changed or corrected before submission. All the sections should fit together well. Make sure that there are no typos!

- \* Unsuccessful grants dwell on the past, not the present or future. Get competitive, get accredited; submit everything for any possible award or recognition, and make everything a professional statement.

\* Long-range conservation plans are becoming more necessary; reviewers' knowledge and expectations are rising. Show that you have some awareness of general conservation standards and that you have a long-range plan for dealing with existing conditions.

Best quote: "You don't get a grant because you need it. You get a grant because you're doing a great job fulfilling your mission statement within your resources, and you could do even more with some help."

By Sally Shelton, Materials Conservation Lab, Texas Memorial Museum

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#### IMS-CONSERVATION PROJECT AWARDS, 1990

The following Texas institutions received IMS-CP awards in the 1990 cycle:

Dallas Museum of Natural History \$5,800

For a general conservation survey and the development of a long-range conservation plan for collections of southwest regional focus.

Fort Worth Zoological Park \$25,000

To study the reproductive endocrinology and gamete physiology of the male Asiatic elephants, Elephas maximus.

Gladys Porter Zoo, Brownsville \$19,550

To use DNA fingerprinting and mitochondrial DNA analysis of tortoises to identify unknown animals to subspecies and to identify parents of animals bred in captivity.

Museum of Fine Arts, Houston \$13,500

For a general conservation survey of the collections and facilities.

Panhandle-Plains Historical Museum, Canyon \$8,321

To conduct a general survey of the collections and environment and to develop a long-range conservation plan.

Rosenberg Library/Museum Division, Galveston \$3,506

For a general conservation survey of collections.

Texas Memorial Museum, Austin \$21,647

To assess the present condition of collections in storage and to develop a long-range conservation plan.

--from the Mountain-Plains Museum Association Newsgram

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## PBMI WORKSHOP ON TEXTILE CONSERVATION PLANNED

The Permian Basin Museums Institute will hold its fall meeting at the Scurry County Museum in Snyder on Saturday, October 27. The program will cover textile conservation by Mary Frederickson of Art Care Conservation and Collection Care Services of Canyon. A long-time museum person and recognized authority on conservation, Mary will be offering a full overview of the issues and practices of textile study and care.

This workshop will have both demonstration/lecture segments and "hands-on" opportunities for working with textiles. Participants are encouraged to bring their "problem textile" for examination and discussion.

Topics to be covered include:

1. What is conservation?
2. Factors of deterioration
3. Condition photography
4. Condition reporting
5. Examination and documentation of textiles
6. Cleaning and mending of textiles
7. Norms for storage and exhibit
8. Protective exhibit and storage measures

The day will begin with a coffee/social from 9:15 to 9:45 am. The morning session will run from 9:45 am to 12 noon; the afternoon session runs from 1 to 4 pm. Lunch will be "on your own" at the nearby college cafeteria. Pre-registration is essential as there is both a minimum and maximum number the workshop can accomodate. The fee will be \$12 for PBMI and Northwest Texas Museum Association members and \$15 for non-members. \*PBMI has kindly offered CMC members the \$12 fee rate.

Send your check to Shirley Leftwich, Scurry County Museum, P.O. Box 696, Snyder, Texas 79549. Please make the check payable to PBMI.

Any questions? Contact Mary Frederickson at Art Care at (806) 655-1362 or 655-2602.

Workshop participants need to bring the following items with them:

sewing needles of various sizes, including some small, curved surgical needles.

large and small scissors

thimble

pure cotton thread -- white (not heavy)

stainless steel pins

sewing weights

thread counter

magnifying glass

notebook and pencil

1 small textile item to discuss and work with in class

straight edge

cloth tape measure

ruler

Exacto knife and a utility cutting knife

plastic triangles

pointed tweezers

teaspoon



## FUTURE CMC WORKSHOPS PLANNED

The executive committee of CMC has been busy working to plan next year's CMC workshops. Watch for announcements of the dates and information on the following topics in the near future.

Conservation workshop in San Antonio at the Institute of Texan Cultures, planned by Susan Harwell and Sally Shelton. Feb. - S.A.

Pest control workshop in Houston at the Houston Museum of Natural Science, planned by Lisa Rebori.

Disaster planning workshop in Austin, planned by Mary Candee.

Forms workshop in Dallas or Fort Worth, planned by Kim Peel.

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