

Museum security fact sheet

Museum thefts occur all too frequently, yet are rarely spoken about. The majority of large thefts occur when the museum is closed, but the theft of smaller objects such as jewellery, coins and medals, can easily occur during opening hours.

Some thefts are targeted and well planned, possibly by a collector or dealer; others are more opportunistic.

The risk of targeted theft increases significantly if the museum is in a remote location or remains unstaffed for several days at a time.

Thefts can also occur after a disaster or a special event such as open days and festivals where the normal procedures and routines around opening, closing and displays has been disrupted and staff have other priorities on their minds.

Museums with industrial collections such as blacksmithing tools and display items, bronze sculptures and historic houses with copper or bronze downpipes, guttering and cast iron decorative work are particular targets for thieves. Theft of metal for scrap has become lucrative as the price of metal soars.

Tips for reducing susceptibility to burglary or theft:

- Ensure that entrances, perimeters, sight lines, lighting, or CCTV are not obscured by trees, hedges or shrubs.
- Ensure that all doors, windows and any other openings are secure with proper locks.
- Install external screens, bars or grilles where necessary, including over skylights.
- Ensure that access points are minimised and well monitored.
- Establish a key register and nominate someone to oversee and follow up on unreturned keys.
- Install security systems such as movement detectors, alarms or CCTV.
- Ensure and maintain clear sight lines from the reception desk to the display areas.
- Ensure visible staff presence in display areas, particularly those where vulnerable objects are displayed. If this is not possible ensure staff rotations are random and cover all areas of the museum in different patterns. This helps avoid predictability and opportunistic stealing.
- Ensure that all staff are trained in security awareness.
- Ensure that all staff are aware of objects that may be targeted by thieves. These are not always the same as the museums A-list objects.



You might also like ...

How do we protect the museum and its collection from theft or damage?

Western Australian Museum, 2007

www.museum.wa.gov.au

Security in Museums, Archives and Libraries: A Practical Guide

The Council for Museums, Archives and Libraries, 2003

www.collectionslink.org.uk

- Ensure that objects on open display are secured so they cannot be moved.
- Ensure that display cases are robust to prevent removal and delay entry.
- Ensure display cases are locked with a secure lock system.
- Select display cases that use shatter resistant glass.
- Undertake regular inspections of the displays using an itemised checklist.
- Undertake regular inventories of collections on display and in storage.

In cases where security of rare and highly sought after objects can't be ensured, it may be worth storing original material in a safe and displaying high quality replicas. For example, many natural history museums around the world have replaced displays of rhinoceros horns and related objects with resin replicas as a result of high black market prices. This is a widely accepted practice and also applies to objects that are too fragile or sensitive to display.

Collection management

Having a well-documented collection assists with identification of stolen objects. It can also impact the police investigation because having firm evidence about a stolen object means they are more likely to be able to investigate, identify the object and prosecute.

- Each item in the collection should be described in detail and accompanied by photographs.
- Photographs should capture all identifying marks, accession numbers and be taken from several angles to ensure all objects are fully documented.
- It is important to photograph all paintings and framed artworks including signatures, areas of damage and any significant details.
- It is important to photograph the verso, or the back of all paintings and framed artworks. This includes their frames including any stamps or labels on the frame.
- If it is easy to remove the painting from the frame without damage, photographing the back of the painting or drawing itself is critically important. This ensures that if the piece has been removed from the original frame for reselling or passing on it can still be identified.

Volunteer managed museums can apply for VIM grants to assist in improving museum security. This may include initiatives such as the installation of security screens and cameras.

Online resources available

Security in museums and galleries: threats to museum collections

Arts Council England, 2013

www.collectionslink.org.uk

Security in museums and galleries: advice to architects and planners

National Security Advisor, 2013

www.collectionslink.org.uk

Collections Link - Security

www.collectionslink.org.uk

Museum Security Network

www.museum-security.org