

Introduction

The Collection Policy guides the decision making process for shaping the collections of the museum. It is essentially a set of principles that guides collecting, loans, deaccessioning, collection care and access.

The importance of having a collection policy

Collection policies are essential for all collecting agencies. Although writing a collection policy takes time, clearly defined policies demonstrate to funding bodies and potential sponsors that a logical and strategic approach to collection development has been implemented.

Working with neighbouring and related organisations to develop strategic collections policies is essential to diversify collection themes. This results in the development of complementary collections across regions and allows each collection to brand and promote their material uniquely. It reduces the waste of resources and avoids duplication that occurs when two or more organisations attempt to compete with each other in a small community.

Collection policies are invaluable in situations where well-meaning donors want to give objects to a museum which do not fit the organisation's aims. Handling such offers requires tact and diplomacy and having a written policy provides clarity for donors without offence.

Collection policies should be publicly accessible. Consider displaying a summary of it at reception, providing a copy for visitors to browse or publishing in the local newspaper.

This document is written for small to medium museums, but contains information pertinent to public art galleries and Aboriginal keeping places.

Collection policy components

A collection policy specifically addresses:

- The purpose or mission of the organisation
- What the organisation collects
- How, from whom, and under what circumstances the organisation collects
- How it documents its acquisitions
- How it cares for the collection
- How it deals with removing objects from the collection
- What kind of loans it will enter into and what conditions will apply
- How the collection and records are made accessible to researchers and members of the general public
- How often the policy is reviewed

Statement of purpose

The statement of purpose or mission statement defines the organisation's goals, explaining what it does and how. It ensures that the objectives of the museum are clear and understood by all involved.

What the organisation collects

This outlines the parameters of the organisation's collecting activities. These may be thematic, chronological, geographic, media related or a combination of these.

Consider the following categories as you define your collection areas:

Key themes of the collection

Identify the major themes and stories of your collection. What themes are unique to your organisation?

Explain what makes it unique in relation to collections in museums around Australia. Do parts of the collection relate to important people, businesses or events?

Consider whether the building or site relate to the key themes of the collection.

Time period

Define the time period your collection covers, e.g. from 1850 to present. A house museum may define a tighter time range to reflect a particular family's residence, e.g. between 1850 and 1885.

Geographic area

Define the region that your collection covers, e.g. Lockhart and District.

Type of objects to be collected

List the types of items collected; documents, books, paintings, sculpture, prints or three dimensional objects etc.

Define any restrictions on the kinds of material collected; in terms of media, condition, size, weight etc. This will depend on the size of storage area and the environmental conditions provided by your building.

Include a list of items which are not collected, e.g. if you do not have the facilities to store large agricultural material, state this in the collection policy.

How the organisation collects

Define how the museum acquires material considering:

Method of acquisition

Common methods of acquisition include donation, bequest, purchase or transfer. It's advisable for museums to avoid donations with specific conditions attached to the object as these can restrict museum activities or draw on scarce resources. You can include a policy statement to define this e.g. The Museum will not accept conditional donations.

Acquisition Committee

Collection or acquisition committees meet to decide if a donation will be accepted or declined. These committees make decision-making easier and typically include the curator and 2-3 members.

Ensure the governance of the committee is clear – is the committee's decision final or does their recommendation require approval from an executive? Recommendations made by the committee should be documented and retained by the museum.

Acquisition criteria

Define which criteria will guide the collection policy and the decision making process.

Consider the following:

- **Relevance:** does the acquisition fit the museum's purpose and key collecting areas?
- **Significance:** priority should be given to objects that are significant for their historic, aesthetic, scientific, research or social, spiritual value.
- **Provenance and documentation:** what is known about the history of the object? Who made it, owned it and, or used it? Without a story to tell, an object is just another object. Priority should be given to objects where the history is known and supporting documentation can be provided.
- **Rarity and representativeness:** priority should be given to rare or excellent representative examples of a particular type of object.

- **Condition:** is the object in good condition? If it requires professional conservation treatment, is it affordable?
- **Storage:** can the object be adequately cared for? For e.g. if it is large and needs cover, can that be provided?
- **Display:** can the object be used for display or is there something that prevents this, such as fragility? Most objects should not be on permanent display.
- **Duplications:** do examples of the item already exist in the collection? If an item has better provenance and clearer history than one already in the collection, consider deaccessioning the existing one to make way for the better example.
- **Legal title:** does the donor have legal ownership of the item and therefore the right to donate it? All donors should sign a Deed of Gift which clarifies that the object has been gifted and not loaned.

Collection care

Define the documentation processes and how objects will be stored and conserved.

Documentation

- Outline the steps that will be taken when considering an item for acquisition.
- On receipt of an object:
- A receipt is issued and the details recorded
- Object is tagged
- Acquisitions committee considers the item on acceptance of the object the Deed of Gift is signed
- Item registered, numbered and catalogued,
- Significance assessment conducted
- If the object is not acquired, the item is returned with a letter of thanks and explanation.
- If the object is not claimed within 90 days it becomes the property of the organisation and is disposed of as seen fit.

Storage and conservation

Describe how you will care for the collection.

- Items shall be stored and, or displayed in an appropriate manner so as to ensure access and ongoing preservation.
- The condition of the collection on display and in storage will be regularly checked and monitored.
- Advice from a trained conservator will be sought before commencing conservation work.
- Restorative work and conservation treatments will be photographed and documented and recorded in the object file along with the outline of the proposed treatment and people involved in work.
- Archival quality materials will be used for all significant materials.

Deaccession and disposal

Deaccessioning is the process of removing an object from the collection. Careful assessment to objects recommended for deaccessioning and disposal should be made by the acquisitions committee rather than an individual.

The collection policy should include criteria for deaccessioning, such as:

- Object doesn't comply with the current acquisition policy.
- Conservation and storage costs are beyond the means of the museum.
- Object is damaged beyond repair.
- Object is a lesser quality duplicate of an object the museum already owns and is not required for changeover, education or other purpose.
- Object lacks provenance and or supporting documentation to establish its relevance.
- Object has disputed ownership – a substantiated request for return of the object to its original owner is received.

Methods of disposal

Methods of disposal are commonly listed in the following order:

- Returned to donor or family.
- Transfer to another organisation or exchange.
- Use as a educative tool.
- Sale at public auction.
- Destruction, if the objects is damaged beyond repair. If the object is not claimed within 90 days it becomes the property of the organisation and is disposed of as seen fit.

Loans

Explain what kind of loans the museum will enter into and specify any conditions that apply to lending or borrowing. Clearly state if the museum will participate in loans programs and under which conditions, if any, long term loans and conditional loans will be considered.

Access

Describe how the collection and the collection policy is accessible to the general public and to those with specific interest such as researchers, historians etc. Include the actions and activities undertaken to achieve this; whether the collection records are available by appointment, open access, display or through curator talks etc.

Policy review

A collection policy is a living document and requires regular review every 3 to 5 years. Ensure the date of the current version appears on the front page of the document and state when it will be reviewed.

You might also like:

Fact sheet: Deaccessioning & disposal and Deaccessioning & disposal flowchart
Museums & Galleries of NSW

<http://mgnsw.org.au/sector/resources/online-resources/collection-management/deaccessioning-and-disposal/>

Collection Policy Template

Association of Museums and Galleries
Australia (Victoria)

<https://magsq.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Collection-Policy-Template-Museums-Australia-VIC-2014.doc>

Tweed River Regional Museum Collection Policy, 2007

<https://museum.tweed.nsw.gov.au/files/assets/museum/v/2/documents/about/tweed-regional-museum-collection-policy.pdf>

Willoughby Museum Historical Society, 2011

https://abc17603.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/wdhs-collection-policy_v4.pdf

Significance 2.0

Roslyn Russell and Kylie Winkworth

<https://www.arts.gov.au/what-we-do/museums-libraries-and-galleries/significance-20>

The Illustrated Burra Charter: good practice for heritage places

Meredith Walker and Peter Marquis-Kyle,

ICOMOS

<http://australia.icomos.org/publications/burra-charter-practice-notes/illustrated-burra-charter/>