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NINA ROBBINS, PHD

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Museum collection disposal: the role of museological value discussions in collection management

NINA ROBBINS, PHD
Helsinki University

Keywords museology; disposal; collection management; tacit knowledge; museological value discussion; Finland

Abstract This paper presents the results of a doctoral dissertation, *Museum Collection Disposal*, completed at the University of Jyväskylä (Finland) in 2016. The research focused on collection management, particularly the issue of disposal in Finnish art museums. A survey conducted in 2012 forms the core of the study. The survey collected museum professionals' opinions on the topic of disposal, and examined their concrete actions surrounding disposals. The study sought to determine whether a collective view of disposal could be established and shared by most art museum professionals throughout Finland. The study showed that disposal is a very broad subject, and a lot of information surrounding disposals in Finnish art museums is still tacit. The disposal process itself can be time consuming because all theoretical and logistical decisions must be established before any concrete outcomes become possible. Furthermore, the issue of disposal must be addressed as early as in an object's acquisition phase. Preliminary assumptions indicate that disposal has been widely discussed in Finnish art museums, but that concrete actions have been rare. The study demonstrated that the role of museological value discussions is significant when decisions about museums' core collections are made.

About the Author Nina Robbins completed her PhD in museology, an MA in art conservation, and an MA in art history. She has worked in the field of cultural heritage since the mid-1980s, specializing in collection management. Her PhD focused on disposals in Finnish art museums. In her research, tacit knowledge appeared to be a critical issue. Nina currently works as a lecturer at Helsinki University, and has worked as a private conservator and collection management consultant for various museums and foundations in Helsinki and southern Finland for many years. Through her work as a consultant and conservator, Nina has developed a broad perspective in the field of cultural heritage, and places great importance in passing along not only theoretical knowledge, but its corresponding practical knowledge to her university students. She believes the field of museology offers enduring bridges between the various fields of heritage management. Beneficially integrating the forces from those different fields will become ever more important in a world where financial resources are increasingly scrutinized.

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The issue of disposal has been discussed in Western museums since the 1970s,¹ although the act of disposal itself had been taking place long before then.² Most disposals have been done in cultural history collections, but more often disposals in art collections that have attracted the most media attention.³ Disposal has been seen largely from a legal point of view.⁴ In addition, issues such as how to deal with

human remains or illegally obtained objects, have been discussed.⁵ In the 1990s, Leicester University (UK) published a series of studies in the field of museology (*Leicester Readers in Museum Studies*). The focus of the series was to look at the museum profession at large, but the first volume, *Care of Collections* (1994) edited by Simon Knell, dealt specifically with issues of disposal. *The Deaccession Reader* (1997), edited by professor Stephen Weil, gave a comprehensive perspective to the disposal discussion in the late 1990s, and *Museums and the Disposal Debate – a collection of essays* edited by Peter Davies, updated that information in 2011. Since the turn of the century, guidelines and practical instructions about disposals have been published. In England, *Disposal Toolkit* (2008, 2014) and *Disposal Digest* (2008), and in Holland, the *Netherlands Guidelines for Deaccessioning of Museum Objects* (2006) have provided guidelines for Western museums. In Finland, such guidelines as *Kokoelmapoistojen hyvät käytännöt*⁶ and *Kokoelmapoistojen yhteiset käytännöt*⁷ have collected similar information from Finnish museums.

The previous studies and publications have offered a good background for the 2016 study from which this article is drawn. The concrete guidelines, in particular, provide information as to how the issue of disposal is handled in other Western museums. Previous research has also shown that the issue of disposal has not been dealt with systematically on a theoretical level. Mainly due to the character of different collections, the various legal aspects that affect collection practices, and the diverse everyday perspectives about collection management, the issue of disposal has become subject to somewhat inconsistent applied methods. This information became the catalyst for finding practical answers to disposal issues.

Acts of acquisition and disposal include deeply philosophical elements, which are nonetheless very practical in nature; decisions involving the two ultimately have very definite outcomes. This creates a bridge from the start of collection management to its end procedures, at which point the disposal of an item is a possibility. In this study, it was essential that collection management be viewed as a unified chain of operations, starting from acquisition and ending in disposal. Therefore, collection management was divided into seven areas: acquisition, inventory, condition assessment, value assessment, conservation, upkeep, and disposal. This made it possible to review collection management within a unified theoretical framework, where the possibility of disposal forced one to view different steps of collection management using the same criteria.

In the process of disposal, both theory and practice meet with irreversible outcomes. Therefore, there are many questions to consider. Is the character of disposal active or passive? How can disposal be justified in a heritologically sound way, meaning having a comprehensive view toward our culturally meaningful objects and surroundings. What will physically happen to the museum object on a disposal list? How substantial is the element of error?⁸ The aspect of doubt in any disposal process is brought into focus by these questions, which include not only ethical, legal or media-sexy aspects, but also some very time-consuming and extremely practical factors.

To find answers to these questions, a questionnaire regarding disposal, which included fifty questions about collection content, disposal, and collection management values, was sent to fifty-six Finnish art museums in 2012. This questionnaire served as the framework of the dissertation study, and its response rate (66%) gave grounds for generalized and legitimate conclusions. The questionnaire sought to attain knowledge regarding collection management, applied values, and disposals in Finnish art museums. The aim was to gather information about overall attitudes toward disposals, ascertain any possible hindrances in the disposal process, and ultimately determine if there is a collective view regarding disposal that could be recognized among art museum professionals in Finland.

To analyze the research material, the legitimacy of art museums in making collection management decisions had to be established. For this, George Dickie's "institutional art theory" was chosen.⁹ Briefly, Dickie's theory states that there are institutional constructions and know-how in a given society that determine our interest toward those objects that we might consider art. These objects might gain our shared appreciation and be selected for inclusion in art collections. The relevant know-how required to value works of art is gained early on in the assessment process. It exists not just inside institutions, but can appear among various groups of people in a given society, such as in galleries, schools, museums, and across audiences, as well as among artists and critics. According to institutional art theory, museums, among other groups operating in the art world, are such institutions of know-how where art appreciation occurs. Institutional art theory offers a philosophical background and starting point for decision making involving works of art and their values. The theory established an historical background for museums, creating a basis from which decisions can be made defining what is art, thus legitimizing museums in making decisions in this area. This theory proved to be useful in determining any obstacles that might lie behind disposal processes.

Despite its philosophical legitimacy, the core perspective of the research was in the field of museology, in which museography played a significant role.¹⁰ Museography was seen from a collection-oriented point of view, meaning from the practical methods with which museum items have been handled throughout history. It was also viewed as an integral part of museology, taking the discussion of old and new museology into account.¹¹ Museology functioned in this study as a science, bridging theory and practice. It was meaningful to place collection management into the greater context of a long museographical tradition, dating back to cabinets of curiosities and their caretakers. The presentation of museographical history gave a perspective as to the impact value of museum items; with this connection, it was possible to see the long-lasting impact that museum collections have had, century after century.

The role of tacit knowledge

The 2012 questionnaire and its 66% response rate showed the existence of tacit knowledge in the field of collection management in Finnish art museums. The presence of this tacit knowledge became one of the key factors involved in the issue of disposal. Putting this information in a written form proved to be a fruitful step.

The questionnaire was composed in such a manner that it allowed room for any tacit knowledge to surface.¹² Space was provided for museum professionals to freely give their opinions and comments. This way it was possible to gather information that is not official or written policy, but nonetheless rooted in the everyday practices of art museums. Space was intentionally left open on the questionnaire for the flow of opinions to come forth, thus exposing any potential tacit knowledge.

The questionnaire answers demonstrated that general information within collection management often remains “tacit.” The diverse educational backgrounds of the survey respondents demonstrate one tacit element captured by the survey. In Finland, there are three official educational levels for museum staff: universities, polytechnics and trade courses. The unification of a staff’s collective know-how takes place within a given museum during its day-to-day museum practices, making this collective know-how greater than the sum of its parts. This process of unification influences collection management and the wellbeing of museum items, but it has not been systematically recorded or researched. With the help of the questionnaire answers, it was possible to ascertain critical issues and gut-feelings regarding our collective collection management know-how. For example, every collection has works of art that will remain in the margins, never getting selected for inclusion in exhibitions. There has been no need to officially record this kind of information, but it has been common knowledge to museum staff. Thus, it can be said that such knowledge has remained tacit.

Another example of tacit knowledge is the general opinion regarding disposal. Official documents, such as collection policies, tend to state a rather negative attitude toward disposal. One of the key findings of the research was that this attitude is changing in Finnish art museums, as 73% of the respondents regarded disposal as a useful, though underutilized tool. This know-how has not been analyzed in any previous discussions, studies or presentations concerning disposals in Finnish art museums. Given that disposal is considered a useful tool indicates its very practical character. It is one tool, among others, that should be integrated into everyday museum practice.

This information will unify the discussion about collection management, and will offer tools for a discussion framed by museological values. To bring such areas of tacit knowledge to light allows us to get closer to the character of the collection and its identity. Thus, the role of museum objects as information bearers may change. To bring forth tacit knowledge within the field of collection management can help eliminate uncertainties from the actual disposal processes, by offering a link between theory and practice. It also offers communication bridges among the different educational backgrounds within the collection management field.

Despite a museum’s readiness for disposal, the research revealed hindrances that can potentially obstruct the disposal process. One of the main hindrances in Finnish art museums is that museum professionals do not collectively approve of disposal. Current official documents reflect a somewhat reluctant attitude towards active disposal policies. Furthermore, disposal is a vast area; it includes legal, ethical, and

very concrete issues, all of which must be dealt with before disposal can succeed. Taking all these issues into account, it is evident why disposal is time consuming and requires logistical expertise. One must know what to dispose of and why, where these items are and what their legal status is as part of the collection. How to best present disposal to the public must also be considered. During the cumbersome disposal process, it must be determined that the benefits of disposal will ease the work of the following generations of museum employees, and not our own because we are addressing the issue now. One glaring hindrance is the somewhat problematic link between theory and practice. How can we overcome any uncertainties involved in a disposal decision? How are we to make sound decisions that will extend to and benefit coming generations? The element of error has been seen as too overbearing. A stronger focus on each of these above-mentioned issues, as well as an acknowledgement of tacit knowledge, will both help to diminish disposal uncertainties and will help instigate a more museologically-oriented collection discussion.

Museological value assessment

One of the areas of tacit knowledge that appeared in the study involved the discussion about values in Finnish art museums. These discussions form a theme that allows us to reach a better understanding of disposal. Values are an essential part of any museum practice, and give the needed support for proper disposal decisions. The need for a discussed framed by museological values becomes evident when evaluating the identity of one's collection.

Our world values various objects from multiple perspectives: philosophical, aesthetic, morally bound, ethical, economic, etc. It is possible to emphasize a philosophical and/or aesthetic perspective regarding museum values and values in art.¹³ Alternatively, one can also start from the collection-oriented and practical points of view.¹⁴ These latter points of view are used as a guideline for this article.

The value assessment of a collection is a natural companion to collection management. It sets a concrete foundation for determining which artworks are of critical importance to a museum and its identity. Per the questionnaire, 49% of Finnish art museums have discussed value assessment, but in only 13% of them has it actually been implemented in some way. The questionnaire answers indicate that value assessments in Finnish art museums can be divided into three areas: art historical, pragmatic, and museological.

Artistic and art historical assessments are naturally important and have their background in disciplines such as history and philosophy. As an example of more pragmatic value assessments, one can point out rescue plans or insurance values of any given artwork. The problem with art historical and pragmatic value assessments is that they do not necessarily cover the entire collection, and are to some extent determined by external factors and players. They are of course important, but are not considered comprehensive from a collection management point of view.

When value assessment is museological in nature, it recognizes a wider range of issues crucial to sustainable heritology. Museological value assessment comprehensively takes the entire span of collection management into account, from acquisition to disposal, when determining any long-term decisions affecting a museum's collection. However, a museological value assessment also addresses the need to take both philosophical and practical approaches into consideration. It functions as a bridge between philosophical issues such as good vs. bad art, and more pragmatic issues such as monetary-oriented values of art.

Museological value assessment will leave an indelible mark on a collection's history. According to the survey results, this is the reason why it has been difficult to include such an assessment comprehensively as part of daily museum practice in Finland. This is evident in the following survey answer:

One of the difficulties is that a work of art in a collection will remain art, even if we do not possess the needed tools for a specific definition of art. Even the relevant legislation does not give us any accurate definition as to when an artwork threshold is reached, not to mention all the needed quality requirements of art. From a copyright point of view, bad art will also always remain art. The difficulties appear when one must determine between good and bad art. In the process of value assessment, one has to acknowledge one's own subjectivity and historicity.

It is precisely to this question of selection that collection-oriented museological value assessment is seeking answers.

A clear example of a museological value assessment taking place in Finnish art museums was found in the survey answers, where museum personnel were provided an opportunity to freely choose values that best fit their museum and its collection. The following five values emerged from the material as the most important ones in Finnish art museums: artistic, aesthetic, museum value, research value, and value related to locality. These values are also congruent with ideas presented in the official collection policies regarding Finnish art museums, and can be used to define their overall collective values. These five values are an integral part of the Finnish art museum value network, and can be utilized to help museums clarify their focus.

The questionnaire also asked to what degree museum professionals engage with value assessments in their day-to-day work. The answers included various actions, such as acquisitions, disposals, prioritizing functions within collection management, art historical evaluations, research and publication projects, work with visitors and preservation plans within the community – the list is long and comprehensive. The research showed that museum professionals have a lot of information, knowledge and know-how regarding value assessments, especially assessments based on museological values.

In addition to the role of tacit knowledge and values, the research highlighted other issues that must be resolved in order to improve the focus of collection management, and that also need to be resolved before the act of disposal becomes a possibility. Museographical know-how is important to be able to successfully integrate our current actions into the long line of museum practices, which has existed since the cabinets of curiosities. These are theoretical endeavors that will offer us guidelines in order to write sound and accessible disposal policies as part of collection policies. In these policies, disposal has to be regarded as part of acquisition. This means that the issue of possible disposal has to be considered in the acquisition phase of an object. This will help unify the above-mentioned seven individual facets of collection management. To find answers to the relevant theoretical questions, the paths of tacit knowledge within the museums have to be studied. What do various professionals bring to the table regarding their knowledge of collection management? How are objects handled and how are they utilized? How do we determine such utilization? Once we establish or clarify the identity of our own collection we will be able to see its greater impact value.

The impact of museological value assessment

The research aimed to show that museum collections are an essential and enduring part of society. It is important to understand that there have been institutional structures showing heritological interest towards meaningful objects century after century. All this is strong evidence of museum collections' impact value, at a time when the concept of impact value is seen as quite relevant in society.

In general, the concept of an impact factor is a key element when studying meaningfulness in society, either from the economic or from more intangible points of view. What do people consider meaningful in their own environment, and why?¹⁵ One example of such an impact is the ability of museums to function as safe havens in society. This means that a museum is a public institution where all groups are given an equal possibility to gather and exchange opinions in a relaxed and non-threatening environment.

The study at hand was specifically interested in the concept of an impact factor in the areas of collection management and museological value assessment. For this concept to work in the field of heritology, one cannot only include the impact of our own time, but must also apply this concept to both the past and future. This approach will intensify the role of museum professionals as mediators. It is essential that museum professionals understand and see their role as mediators within the heritological sector of society, and not merely as contemporary consumers. To see one's role as a mediator is to see collection management as something that will outlive one's own career. This implies being a safe-keeper, in order to help insure that any short-term fluctuations will not disturb the more important long-term continuum. Professor of museology, Janne Vilkkuna, from the University of Jyväskylä (Finland), states the following: "Their (the younger generation of museum professionals) research and preservation-related expertise will determine what kind of past our future will have."¹⁶

One can ultimately address this issue through the following question: To what extent has a museum succeeded in its work as a mediator? One way to measure such success is to look at the impact factor of heritologically meaningful objects in society. Very few institutions possess museum collections and their heritological value. This reality should not be disregarded in time and place, where one's own impact is indeed a factor. The fact that there are societies in the world that consider museum collections to be important is a straightforward indicator that an impact factor is truly present in the field of collection management. The continued existence of museum objects throughout the centuries is very strong evidence of this.

Conclusion

The aim of this research was to present a very practical point of view towards collection management, particularly disposal. The objective was to ultimately start a theory-based but collection-oriented disposal discussion in art museums. It is clear that any disposal process is a time-intensive endeavor, which consumes resources before any calculable benefits become evident. When seeking solutions, museums should retain their autonomy as they determine the limits of their own collections or terms of preservation.

Museum professionals have a thorough understanding of both their collections and their responsibilities as caretakers. They are also aware of their responsibility to pass on these duties to the next generation. By ascertaining the importance of tacit knowledge, the research was able to get a more comprehensive view of Finnish art museum professionals vis-à-vis values and disposal.

The research summarized the difficulties surrounding the issue of disposal and pointed out the importance of a museological value discussion in addressing such difficulties. Furthermore, the study revealed the tacit character inherent in disposal within Finnish art museums. Engaging in a museological value discussion and studying the movements of tacit knowledge in museum practices will both provide museum professionals practical tools, helping them to focus on their own goals within the greater field of collection management. This will help disposal decisions become thorough, both on a theoretical level and in individual cases. With the help of these tools, museum professionals can progress from the discussion phase, and become more actively engaged in actual disposal processes.

Notes

¹ Weil 1990, *Rethinking the Museum and Other Mediations*; Weil 1997, *A Deaccession Reader*; Weil 2002, *Making Museums Matter*; Davies 2011, *Museums and the Disposal Debate. A Collection of Essays*; Conn 2010, *Do Museums Still Need Objects?*; *Museums 2020 Discussion Paper*.

² Knell 1994, *Care of Collections*; Knell 2004, *Museums and the Future of Collecting*; Pettersson & Kinanen 2010, *Suomen museohistoria*; Werdt 2011, "Deaccessioning in Perspective", 432–455.

³ Impey and MacGregor 2001, *The Origins of Museums*; Ainslie 2004,

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- “Deaccessioning as a Collection Management Tool”, 235–249; Weil 1997, *A Deaccession Reader; Too Much Stuff? Disposal from Museums* 2003; Vilkuna 2010, “The Deaccession of Cultural and Natural Heritage in the Traditional Museum and the ‘Great Museum’ – A Finnish View”, 73–78; Vilkuna et al. 2011, “Disposals in Built Heritage: Destruction or Rational Action?”; Davies 2011, *Museums and the Disposal Debate. A Collection of Essays*.
- ⁴ Fahy 1995, *Collections Management*; Davies 2011, *Museums and the Disposal Debate. A Collection of Essays*.
- ⁵ Desvallées and Nash 2010, *Deaccession and Return of Cultural Heritage: A New Global Ethics*.
- ⁶ Västi 2015, *Kokoelmapoistojen hyvät käytännöt –hanke*.
- ⁷ Västi and Sarantola-Weiss 2016, *Kokoelmapoistojen yhteiset käytännöt*.
- ⁸ Burg 1996, *The Deltaplan, The Way it Worked*; Weil 1997, *A Deaccession Reader; Too Much Stuff? Disposal from Museums*, 2003; *Disposal Toolkit*, 2008; Davies 2011 *Museums and the Disposal Debate. A Collection of Essays*.
- ⁹ Dickie 1971, *Aesthetics: An Introduction*; Dickie 1974, *Art and Aesthetics: An Institutional Analysis*; Dickie 2001, *Art and Value*.
- ¹⁰ Vilkuna 2009, “Yhteinen kulttuuriperintömme”, 12–41; Vilkuna 2010, “Suomen museolan organisoituminen 1945–2009”, 27–46.
- ¹¹ Vilkuna 2010. “Museologia ja Suomen museot”, 332–346.
- ¹² Polányi 1966, *The Tacit Dimension*; Polányi 1970, *Science, Faith and Society*; Koivunen 1997, *Hiljainen tieto*; Linturi 2004, *Tiedon hiljainen maailma*.
- ¹³ Danto 1964, “The Artworld”, 571–584; Dickie 2001, *Art and Value*; Wollheim 1980, *Art and Its Objects*; Haapala 2010, “Arvot, arvostukset ja taidekokoelmien kartuttaminen”, 65–79.
- ¹⁴ Pearce 1990, *Objects of Knowledge*; Pearce 1992, *Museums, Objects and Collections. A Cultural Study*; Weil 2002, *Making Museums Matter*; Appelbaum 2007, *Conservation Treatment Methodology*.
- ¹⁵ Weil 2002, *Making Museums Matter*; Holden 2006, *Cultural Value and the Crisis of Legitimacy*; Scott 2013, *Museums and Public Value*; Conn 2010, *Do Museums Still Need Objects?*; Davies 2011, *Museums and the Disposal Debate. A Collection of Essays*; Pettersson 2013, “Kokoelma-ajattelun pitää muuttua”, 14–16; Piekkola 2013, *Museoiden taloudellinen vaikuttavuus*.
- ¹⁶ Vilkuna 2003, *Täytetyn tiikerin äärellä. Museologia, mitä se on?*, 10.

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