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**The Association of Academic Museums & Galleries (AAMG)**  
**Statement Against Monetizing the Collections of Academic Museums & Galleries**  
**FINAL 18 June 2021**

*Debates within the museum profession, fueled and sometimes distorted by the media, have created confusion about deaccessioning. AAMG recognizes the ethical guidelines on deaccessioning promulgated by major museum associations, including the American Alliance of Museums (AAM) and the International Council of Museums (ICOM). AAMG also understands that college and university museum collections represent diverse disciplines (including but not limited to art, anthropology, history, and natural history) whose ethical guidelines may differ in modest ways, as articulated in the standards of discipline-specific museum associations (including AAMD, AASLH and others). In recognition of the unique attributes and missions of academic museums, AAMG published its own Professional Practices for Academic Museums & Galleries [link] in 2017. Recognizing that individual museums remain subject to the guidelines and ethics of their appropriate professional associations, the AAMG Board of Directors endorses the principles below, which are intended to clarify and reinforce AAMG's existing guidelines to address the challenges facing museums in these unprecedented times.*

*AAMG reasserts its condemnation of the monetization of collections. Proceeds from the sale of deaccessioned works should never be utilized to fund the operations of the museum or its parent institution, including exhibition and programming costs, capital improvement or related expenses, the servicing or repayment of debt, or the establishment of endowments dedicated to any of these purposes. This prohibition also extends to staff salaries and endowments for the general support of staff or faculty.*

*AAMG endorses active deaccessioning to improve collections. AAMG recognizes that the permanent removal of objects that are duplicative; degraded beyond repair; forged; fake; inappropriately sourced, collected, conveyed, or acquired; or no longer in alignment with the museum's stated mission is an important tool for strengthening the academic museum and its capacity to serve its many audiences. AAMG also acknowledges that the due diligence necessary for the legal, ethical and strategic implementation of deaccessioning requires a significant investment of time and money. Accordingly, museums may reimburse themselves for the direct costs required to deaccession collection objects from the proceeds earned through the sale of such objects.*

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*Applying restrictions to “net” instead of “gross” proceeds provides necessary resources for museum research on provenance and deed of gift restrictions, determining viable means of sale, access to consultants, or other activities that may be required for responsible deaccessioning.*

*AAMG maintains its position that proceeds from sale of deaccessioned collection objects must be reinvested in the collection. This investment may take a variety of forms:*

- ◆ *Proceeds may be used to acquire other works that diversify collections, benefit underrepresented groups, and/or combat institutional racism -- all being viable means to advance the relevance, integrity, and social responsibility of museum collections.*
- ◆ *Acceptable uses of deaccessioning proceeds for acquisition may extend beyond purchase price to include all costs of acquisition, whether by purchase or gift, including packing, shipping, and processing as required for intake into the collection.*
- ◆ *In the case of damaged or disfigured objects already owned by the museum, proceeds may fund the direct costs of conservation necessary to make collection objects suitable for display or study, in accordance with AAM’s concept of “direct care.”*
- ◆ *Because integrity is a central value for museums and universities alike, deaccession proceeds may also be used to fund the direct costs associated with the deaccession and subsequent repatriation or restitution of collection objects to their rightful owners.*

*AAMG sponsors the Task Force for the Protection of University Collections [link] to assist museums whose parent institutions may be tempted to monetize collections in times of crisis. The Task Force is a collaboration among general and discipline-specific museum associations dedicated to preserving the integrity of museum collections and advancing engagement of collections by the academic community and public at large. The Samuel H. Kress Foundation generously supports these efforts. The AAMG website offers more information on the Task Force and its members, as well as resources on deaccessioning provided by its “Deaccessioning Tool Kit” [link].*

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## AAMG Statement Against Monetizing the Collections of Academic Museums & Galleries: Q & A

18 June 2021

**Q:** *Why issue this Statement?*

**A:** *Recent debates about deaccessioning and the use of proceeds have generated confusion that could undermine AAMG's opposition to the monetization of collection objects for operational expenses. This statement reaffirms and strengthens AAMG's commitment to the protection of university collections, as well as its endorsement of responsible deaccessioning.*

**Q:** *Why AAMG?*

**A:** *AAMG already sponsors the Task Force for the Protection of University Collections [link] to assist colleges and university museums that may face the threat of monetizing collections. In 2017, it published Professional Practices for Academic Museums & Galleries. These guidelines build upon these existing commitments.*

**Q:** *Are there other sources that influence this Statement?*

**A:** *Yes. The basic principle that proceeds from the sale of museum collections must be reinvested in the collection is longstanding and field-wide. For an accessible explanation, see Stephen Weil's foundational article, "The Deaccession Cookie Jar." As for professional practices, the statement draws from the highest standards for deaccessioning articulated in AAMD's Professional Practices in Art Museums (2011). It merely interprets "proceeds" from deaccessioning as "net" rather than "gross," and recognizes that there are more ways to enhance museum collections than through purchase.*

**Q:** *Does this Statement attempt to define AAM's concept of "Direct Care of Collections"?*

**A:** *No, but we believe that the Statement's principles fit comfortably within the spirit of "Direct Care of Collections."*

*The Direct Costs of Deaccessioning Are Recognized by Applying Restrictions to Net Proceeds*

**Q:** *What kinds of direct costs might a museum incur in deaccessioning?*

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*A: Primarily the due diligence necessary for deaccessioning and disposal: research on provenance, donor restrictions, conservation assessment, potential means of disposal, 3rd party expert advice, appraisals, and other activities required for the responsible, ethical, and mission-related deaccessioning of collection objects.*

*Q: Why differentiate between “gross” and “net” proceeds when restricting the use of deaccessioning proceeds?*

*A: Traditionally, museums have restricted the entire earnings from the sale of deaccessioned works, meaning “gross” proceeds. This makes it easy to track and clear to justify. The problem is that this requires the museum to subsidize the work required for deaccessioning through its operating budget – money that might otherwise be spent on exhibitions or educational programs. Identifying “net” proceeds as the restricted amount allows museums to reimburse themselves the direct costs of deaccessioning for the active management of collections rather than simply warehousing underutilized collection objects due to a lack of funds.*

*Q: How do you track these expenses?*

*A: The same way that museums account for labor in grants: museum personnel need only track the time they spend on deaccessioning, then multiply that time by an hourly or daily rate (normally salary plus benefits), as appropriate. Expenses for outside consultants or services can be documented with invoices.*

*Q: If museums reimburse themselves for the direct costs for deaccessioning, particularly for staff salaries, are they using those funds for operations?*

*A No. Such expenses are required for the exceptional work necessary to improve collections. They are different from the ongoing annual costs of exhibitions, educational programs, administration, facilities, and everything else it takes to operate a museum. Instead, such reimbursement removes the current disincentive that museums with minimal staff and budgets face in investing the time and money necessary to deaccession works that no longer contribute meaningfully to their missions. Prudent deaccessioning constitutes an investment in improving the collection.*

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### Use of Proceeds to Fund Acquisitions

*Q: What are some examples of “acquisition costs.”*

*A: Think of “acquisition costs” as the “wall-to-wall” costs of bringing an object into the collection (or “pedestal-to-pedestal,” “case-to-case,” etc.). So, beyond purchase price and any commissions, such acquisition costs may include packing, shipping, and any other costs required to deliver the object to the museum. It can also include processing costs, such as record intake, photography and any special preparation necessary for the work to be accessible for study or display (“wall-to-wall”).*

*Q: Can a museum incur “acquisition costs” for works that are gifted?*

*A: Yes, in the same manner as “wall-to-wall” costs might be calculated for a purchased object, simply without the purchase price and commission.*

*Q: Can we consider the costs for exhibiting an object, such as matting and framing, as “acquisition costs”?*

*A: It depends. When a work is brought into the collection in a condition unfit for display, such one-time costs seem reasonable. However, taking presentable works from storage and merely preparing them for display are exhibition costs that relate to routine museum operations, not the acquisition of work to improve the collection.*

### Conservation

*Q: Might the costs of object conservation constitute a valid use of deaccessioning proceeds?*

*A: In many cases, yes. Imagine that the museum has an object that cannot be studied because it is too fragile to be handled safely, or an object whose appearance has been altered due to physical damage or the stains and accretions of time.*

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*A continued: Holding such objects without treatment is simply warehousing objects. Conservation readmits them to the active, mission-contributing function of the collection. The resources required to render such works as usable for study or display contribute directly to the museum's collection because such objects cannot be utilized otherwise.*

*Q: What conservation costs would be considered acceptable?*

*A: The direct costs of preparing the work for study or display, such as conservation materials and the time required by conservators to treat the work. Museums that outsource such conservation can consider the entire bill as "direct cost." For those that operate their own conservation laboratory, the lab would calculate their hours worked on the piece, multiplied by salary and benefits of those who do the work, plus materials, etc.*

*Q: Does all conservation qualify?*

*A: No. Overhead costs such as the expenses of operating a conservation laboratory, general salaries, HVAC, storage equipment, etc., would be considered "indirect" costs and therefore ineligible because they are ongoing expenses common to the normal operation of the museum – not the exceptional work of enhancing the collection.*

### *"Progressive Deaccessioning"*

*Q: Is it acceptable to sell collection objects to generate the funds necessary to acquire works that appeal to underserved communities, advance causes of social justice, or combat institutional racism?*

*A: From the perspective of deaccessioning ethics, yes it is, provided that such deaccessioning conforms to the criteria, policies and procedures of the institution's Collections Management Policy. Museums may shape their collections for the near and long-term to benefit their communities according to their missions.*

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*Q: What is the rationale for allowing the proceeds from deaccessioned objects to be used to deaccession other objects for repatriation or return to rightful owners?*

*A: Two main reasons. First, an ethical collection is a better collection. Returning works to rightful owners elevates the remaining collection, as it does the reputation of the museum itself. Second, this work requires resources: research into provenance and rightful ownership, identification of potential claimants and communication with them, even legal advice – all requiring staff time and possibly outside expertise. Expenses may also extend to the shipping and handling required to return objects to their rightful owners (and in some instances, federal permits, licensing, or other fees as may be required).*

### *Monetizing Collections*

*Q: Why shouldn't we sell our best work to fund fair staff salaries?*

*A: The museum's responsibility is to preserve its collections for present and future generations. Staff members are in a conflict of interest in recommending monetizing collections for salaries, as they themselves, or others at their universities or colleges, would be the beneficiaries of such actions, at the expense of the present and future audiences they serve. Museum and university boards are also in conflict, as their burden of fund-raising would be relieved by the collections they are committed to hold in fiduciary trust.*

*Q: What if we just use deaccessioning proceeds for endowments? We could preserve the principle for future acquisitions and only spend the investment earnings on programs or other mission-related work.*

*A: Because you would incentivize selling collections for operations. Museum boards and university administrations would see that they could easily meet future funding needs by selling prized objects to create endowments that generate annual cash. Since endowments tend to contribute about 5% of their earnings each year, administrators would be incentivized to sell objects valued at about 20 times their annual needs. For many museums, that would place a monetary target on their most valuable works, and quite possibly their very mission.*

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*Q: Where do you draw the line about what is or is not “monetizing” collections.*

*A: The difference is between the objects a museum “has” and what it “does” to present, interpret and engage audiences with them. The duty of stewardship requires that museums preserve their collections for present and future generations. Proceeds from the sale of deaccessioned objects must be reinvested back into the collection, rendering the entire process one of refinement, improvement and/or enhancement of what the museum preserves. The activities that museums “do” – programs, exhibitions, and community service of many kinds – are vitally important, but fundamentally different because they constitute operational activities. Monetization threatens to advance the good deeds of “doing” at the expense of the collections that museums are entrusted to preserve.*

#### *Accreditation and Authority*

*Q. How does AAMG’s statement relate to AAM or its Accreditation Commission?*

*A. AAMG highly recommends that college and university museums and galleries seek and maintain AAM accreditation as their commitment to the “best practices” of our museum profession. AAMG’s own Professional Practices for Academic Museums & Galleries (2017) and this statement on deaccessioning respond to the unique needs of college and university museums, particularly as embedded entities subject to the governance of their academic institutions. AAMG’s position is not unlike that of discipline-specific associations, and should guide individual museum decisions accordingly. AAM’s Accreditation Commission reviews its standards and best practices regularly.*

*Q. If my museum is an AAMG member, am I expected to abide by these guidelines?*

*A. Yes.*

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## Additional Resources

*Task Force for the Protection of University Collections “Deaccessioning Tool Kit”* [link]

*\*Note: the Tool Kit includes links to museum association deaccessioning policies, as well as to relevant statutes and protocols.*

*AAMG, Professional Practices for Academic Museums & Galleries, 2017* [link]

*Stephen Weil, The Deaccession Cookie Jar,” in Cabinet of Curiosities, Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995.*

### AAMG Statement Against Monetizing the Collections of Academic Museums & Galleries

Talking Points, for internal use only, 18 June 2021

*The statement addresses two concerns:*

- 1. Confusion and disagreement in the museum field about deaccessioning have placed university museum collections at risk of being sold to fund operations.*
- 2. Traditional restrictions on deaccessioning proceeds have been so tightly interpreted as to limit museums’ abilities to refine their own collections.*

*The statement does not change existing guidelines or ethics on deaccessioning. It merely interprets them in common-sense ways to afford museums access to the funding necessary to refine their collections, while simultaneously reestablishing the firewall between collections and funding museum operations.*

*First, the statement affirms and strengthens the longstanding principle that assets from museum collections must remain in collections by condemning the “monetization” of museum collections to pay for or endow museum operations (such as exhibitions, programs, staff salaries, building costs, or reduction of debt), as well as for general university expenses.*

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*Second, it sanctions access to proceeds earned from the sale of deaccessioned objects for museums to improve their collections in three primary ways:*

*Encourage responsible pruning of collections: permits reimbursement for the direct costs required to deaccession collection objects (research on provenance, deed of gift restrictions, viable means of sale or gift, engaging consultants, and other activities required for responsible deaccessioning), as well as any other out-of-pocket expenses necessary to deaccession and dispose of collection objects.*

*Support other means of “acquisition” beyond purchase: includes conserving otherwise unusable collection objects to a condition necessary for study or display; additionally allows for reimbursement of direct costs that may be necessary to acquire a collection object whether purchased or donated.*

*Recognize restitution as a means of improving collections, while also abiding by governing laws and, in some instances, advancing equity, anti-racism and social justice: allows deaccessioning proceeds to be used for the necessary research and outside expertise, as well as packing and shipping expenses, that may be required for deaccessioning and subsequent restitution or repatriation of collection objects to their rightful owners.*

*AAMG is the leading educational and professional organization for academic museums, galleries, and collections. It publishes *Professional Practices for Academic Museums & Galleries* and sponsors *The Task Force for the Protection of University Collections*. The Task Force condemns the monetization of collections assets while also affirming its support of legitimate deaccessioning practices, conducted according to the highest standards of best professional practice.*

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