

GUIDELINES ON EXHIBITING BORROWED OBJECTS

Approved, July 2000, AAM Board of Directors

Introduction

Over time, human societies have increasingly turned to their museums to provide a special place, a “sacred precinct,” for the display of significant objects, and ideas created by human civilization. Since no single museum contains, or could contain, all objects worthy of admiration and understanding, museums have traditionally exhibited not only objects from their own collections but also objects borrowed from other museums and from private individuals and organizations. Borrowing objects allows museums to provide more comprehensive exhibits and to make objects accessible that would otherwise be seen only by a few.

As society has come to rely more on museums for education about, as well as preservation of, its cultural heritage, it has also come to expect more of its museums—more accountability, more transparency of action, and more leadership in the community. The American museum community and the American Association of Museums (AAM) are committed, on a continuing basis, to identifying and implementing the highest standard of ethical practices. To this end, AAM has long had a *Code of Ethics for Museums*.

Recognizing that concerns, both inside and outside the museum community, had arisen over time about what constituted ethical activity in exhibiting borrowed objects, the AAM Board of Directors created a task force on this topic. The Board charged the task force with preparing a document for consideration by the Board which would provide the museum community with more detailed guidance on the development of institutional policies and standards for exhibiting borrowed objects, consistent with and following from the *AAM Code of Ethics*.

Several principles informed the task force’s work. They included:

- *Adhering to an ethical standard that exceeds legal minimums.* AAM’s *Code* takes as given that museums comply with all applicable local, state and federal laws and international conventions. The *Code* also makes clear that museums must abide by ethical standards that frequently exceed legal minimums because the purpose of the *Code* is to foster conduct that merits the confidence of the public. Without public confidence, museums cannot effectively carry out their missions.
- *Acting in a way that is consistent with the museum’s mission, and documenting activities.* As a publicly accountable institution, any museum

that is operating according to current standards and best practices has a formally stated mission and organizes its governing authority, financial and human resources, collections, public programs, and activities to meet its stated mission. To ensure accountability and informed decision-making, individual museums develop written and approved policies and procedures to protect their assets and reputation and to guide institutional actions consistent with their mission. Thus actions related to borrowing objects for exhibition should be consistent with that mission and with the policies and procedures that flow from that mission. In addition, museums have an obligation to record and maintain documentation of important activities, including the process of borrowing for exhibitions.

- *Adhering to an ideal of transparency.* Museums, as publicly accountable institutions, should take reasonable steps to make their actions visible and understandable to the public, especially where lack of visibility could reasonably lead to appearances of conflict of interest.
- *Maintaining control over museum activities.* The museum's governing structure must maintain the intellectual integrity of, and the museum's control over, all activities, including exhibitions.

On July 13, 2000, the AAM Board adopted the following guidelines:

Guidelines

Before considering exhibiting borrowed objects, a museum should have in place a written policy, approved by its governing authority and publicly accessible on request, that addresses the following issues:

- I. Borrowing Objects. The policy will contain provisions:
 - A. Ensuring that the museum determines that there is a clear connection between the exhibition of the object(s) and the museum's mission, and that the inclusion of the object(s) is consistent with the intellectual integrity of the exhibition.
 - B. Requiring the museum to examine the lender's relationship to the institution to determine if there are potential conflicts of interest, or an appearance of a conflict, such as in cases where the lender has a formal or informal connection to museum decision making (for example, as a board member, staff member or donor).
 - C. Including guidelines and procedures to address such conflicts or the appearance of conflicts or influence. Such guidelines and procedures may require withdrawal from the decision-making process of those with a real

or perceived conflict, extra vigilance by decision-makers, disclosure of the conflict or declining the loan.

- D. Prohibiting the museum from accepting any commission or fee from the sale of objects borrowed for exhibition. This prohibition does not apply to displays of objects explicitly organized for the sale of those objects, for example craft shows.

II. Lender Involvement. The policy should assure that the museum will maintain intellectual integrity and institutional control over the exhibition. In following its policy, the museum:

- A. Should retain full decision making authority over the content and presentation of the exhibition.
- B. May, while retaining the full decision making authority, consult with a potential lender on objects to be selected from the lender's collection and the significance to be given to those objects in the exhibition.
- C. Should make public the source of funding where the lender is also a funder of the exhibition. If a museum receives a request for anonymity, the museum should avoid such anonymity where it would conceal a conflict of interest (real or perceived) or raise other ethical issues.

Commitment of AAM

As part of its commitment to identifying and disseminating best practices, AAM will allocate resources:

- I. to disseminate these guidelines widely and frequently along with other references that exist on the topics;
- II. to collect and disseminate examples of best practices and policies from the museum community on exhibiting borrowed objects;
- III. to make the above information available to the museum community through reports, conference sessions, and other appropriate mechanisms; and
- IV. to provide electronic links from AAM's website to resources in these areas.

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