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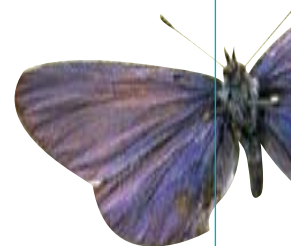
EFFECTIVE
COLLECTIONS

Making collections effective

Effective Collections:
an introduction

Collections for the Future:
two years on

supported by
Esmée Fairbairn Foundation



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24 Calvin Street
London
E1 6NW

T: 020 7426 6970

E: info@museumsassociation.org

[www.museumsassociation.org/
collections](http://www.museumsassociation.org/collections)

Report authors

Effective Collections:

Sally Cross, Collections Coordinator

Collections for the Future update:

Helen Wilkinson, Policy Officer

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Abbreviations

AHRC Arts and Humanities
Research Council
(formerly Arts and Humanities
Research Board – AHRB)

DCMS – Department of Culture,
Media and Sport

HLF – Heritage Lottery Fund

MA – Museums Association

MLA – Museums, Libraries and
Archives Council

NEMO – Network of European
Museum Organisations

SMC – Scottish Museums Council

SSN – Subject Specialist Network

UKRG – UK Registrars Group

Making collections effective

This report launches the Effective Collections programme from the Museums Association and provides an update on Collections for the Future, two years after its publication.

Supported by Esmée Fairbairn Foundation
Museums Association 2007

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two years on

Summary

This report launches the Effective Collections programme from the Museums Association (MA) and provides an update on Collections for the Future, two years after its publication.

Published in 2005, Collections for the Future was the report of an MA inquiry which aimed to encourage debate about the role of

collections in the 21st-century museum. The MA hoped that the report would ultimately lead to collections being used more effectively and developed with more energy and vision. As this report demonstrates, there have been very encouraging developments in both these areas in the two years since 2005. Significant

challenges remain, but new initiatives in collecting, research and the use of stored collections are beginning to map out a way forward for museums and their users.

Effective Collections, a new programme from the Museums Association, emerges from the central theme of Collections for the Future –

Effective Collections action points

1

The MA will work to increase the value placed on lending and borrowing by museums. As part of this, the MA will establish a Collections Strategy Group to sustain change in the culture of lending.

2

The MA will develop a brokering service to matchmake loans and build trust between borrowers and lenders.

3

The MA will support reviews of stored collections to find material that merits use in displays, either on long loan, through redisplay at the home museum or by permanent transfer. The reviews may also identify candidates for museums to consider for other forms of disposal.

4

To simplify and demystify lending the MA will produce a best-practice guide to loans administration, including a model loan form.

5

The MA will offer training in essential skills around lending and borrowing, with the aim of encouraging a more pragmatic approach by lenders.

6

The MA will propose changes to its guiding principles on disposal to its Annual General Meeting in 2007.

7

The MA will publish a toolkit and provide associated online materials to support museums undertaking disposal.

8

The MA will develop an Effective Collections web resource to contain information and guidance about loans, disposals and reviews of collections. This will include a way for museums to register their interest in lending, disposing or receiving objects under the Effective Collections programme.

that too many museum collections are underused. Supported by Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, the programme aims to change the culture of museums in order to get more of their stored collections into use through long loans to other museums. It also aims to support permanent transfers of objects and

other appropriate forms of disposal. The programme is currently part way through a two-year pilot phase and the first section of this report details what is happening and how museums can get involved.

In preparing this report, the MA has revisited the recommendations of Collections for the

Future. Some have largely been implemented already; others require further work. This report sets out a new programme of actions for the MA, both as part of the Effective Collections programme and more broadly for other areas of its work.

Other action points revised and updated from Collections for the Future

9

The MA will continue to support University College London's Collections for People research project, which aims to investigate the way that stored collections are used, and will help to advocate its findings when they are known. We will make a judgement about what further action might be needed following completion of this study and in the meantime will continue to support initiatives that aim to explore new ways of increasing engagement with collections.

10

It remains the MA's view that a more strategic approach to digitisation and electronic knowledge management is needed. The MA has advocated to both the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) and Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA) that this should be addressed through the Understanding the Future action plan. This remains an urgent priority.

11

The MA also continues to believe that the sector needs new approaches to documentation and knowledge management. The MA will continue to address this issue through its work on research and collections-related knowledge.

12

The MA believes that there is a need for more coherent leadership in specialist subject areas to address gaps in provision and bring support to underused collections. National museums, university museums, museums with Designated collections, the regional museum hubs and SSNs (Specialist Subject Networks) all have a role to play. The MA will continue to press the DCMS and MLA to address this issue, in the first instance through the Understanding the Future action plan.

13

The MA will undertake more work around knowledge and expertise. We will explore measures to improve links between museums and higher education, to increase the curatorial support available for collections and to ensure a higher profile for research and knowledge development. The Monument Fellowships programme will be at the heart of this and we will investigate seeking funding for a further major initiative in this area.

14

The MA will support the development of initiatives to promote a more strategic approach to acquisitions. The MA will consider the impact of these programmes over the next few years and when the outcomes are known will judge what further action may be required to promote an active culture of collecting in all the UK's museums.

15

There is much still to be done to improve the range of temporary exhibitions available for visitors across the UK. The MA will continue to advocate the need for better funding for infrastructure and for programming.

16

Over the next few years, the MA will work towards developing a strategy for its international work, one element of which will cover issues related to the Collections for the Future agenda, in particular collections mobility and opportunities for sharing knowledge and expertise internationally.

Introductions

From the president of the Museums Association

I am delighted to be introducing this report as Museums Association (MA) president, particularly because it gives me the chance to look back at considerable past achievements and forward to even more encouraging new developments.

Collections for the Future aspired to generate new debate about the use of collections and their place in the museum of the 21st century. In producing it, the MA hoped to have some impact on the way that collections were developed, cared for and used. Reports like Collections for the Future so often excite brief interest and go on to gather dust on the shelves of countless offices. So it is very satisfying indeed to read the summary in this report of the developments that have taken place since the publication of Collections for the Future. In his foreword to the original

report, my predecessor as MA president, Charles Saumarez Smith wrote, 'the time is right for substantial change in the way museums think about their collections'. It is evident from this report that that change has begun to happen.

Of course, the MA cannot claim credit for all the developments that are recorded in this report. Nor would we wish to. One of the strengths of Collections for the Future was that it represented an emerging consensus and reflected thinking and changes to practice that were starting to come forward from a whole range of other organisations across the UK. The developments recorded here are not the achievement of the MA but of the whole museum community. It is this sense of shared endeavour that has given the sector a real impetus for change.

So change has begun to happen. We have not yet seen progress in all the areas in which Collections for the Future made recommendations and even in the areas,

such as acquisitions, where there has been the most substantial change, there is much still to be done. This report commits the MA to a new programme of work arising from the Collections for the Future report.

By far the most significant commitment for the MA itself is the new Effective Collections programme, a major strand of Collections for the Future, which this report launches and celebrates. The MA – and indeed the museum sector as a whole – is extremely grateful to Esmée Fairbairn Foundation for its support of this initiative. Their funding of over £1m represents a substantial investment in a new way of working. It is a bold and visionary package of funding and the MA is determined to work with colleagues from across the sector to ensure that we capitalise on the investment to the benefit of all museum users for many years to come.

Virginia Tandy
President, Museums Association

From the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation

The Esmée Fairbairn Foundation is delighted to be supporting the Museum Association's (MA) Effective Collections programme. As a Foundation we want to improve the quality of life for people in the UK and believe that this extends beyond economic wellbeing and encompasses our culture, heritage and education. Museums and galleries have the capacity to enrich all our lives and their collections lie at the heart of this aim.

While some of our grants address the needs of the particular, we also respond to sector-wide issues and in so doing we hope to help strengthen the sectors that we support. Our museum funding has been focusing on one such issue – how to make the most of the extraordinary richness that can be found in the UK's collections.

This grant (at over £1 million) is the largest we have made under our arts and heritage

umbrella. It follows on from our more modest contribution to the MA's excellent Collections for the Future report, which of course has acted as a precursor for this development. We have also undertaken a Regional Museums Initiative that has demonstrated how a relatively small increase in investment in exhibitions can build local audiences; drawing out the best of local collections and providing regional museums with the opportunity to capitalise on new audience groups whilst exploring new interpretations of their collections. Finally, our support for the Art Fund's Enriching Regions recognises the vital role acquisition plays in regenerating and shaping collections.

The collections of the UK represent an extraordinary national asset without which our aspirations for culture to be treasured and valued would be all the harder to realise and our lives all the poorer. Recognising this great wealth and diversity, the Foundation is delighted to be able to support the MA in the next stage of its pioneering work to strengthen approaches to collections management. There are many hidden

treasures in over-stretched storerooms across the country, but currently they may not always be most appropriately placed for study, care, or interpretation. There may also be arguments for limited divestment of individual objects to enable the re-shaping or balancing of a collection.

A national network that recognises that institutional ownership is no barrier to wider enjoyment and enables the public and museum professionals alike to enjoy greater access to our collective collections, whilst focusing resource and expertise in the best possible way, seems a fitting ambition for the project and a call to action for the sector as a whole.

We hope that Effective Collections will lead to the development of a shared collections network where curators, conservators and other museum professionals can collaborate across institutions in managing, displaying and studying the objects in their care.

Dawn Austwick
Director, Esmée Fairbairn Foundation



Effective Collections:

making better use
of stored collections

Introduction

Effective Collections is a programme of work emerging from the central theme of the original Collections for the Future report – that too many museum collections are underused. The museum collections of the UK are a huge public resource that should be available for everyone, and Effective Collections aims to develop the culture and the processes for museums to share them better. With a grant of just over £1million from Esmée Fairbairn Foundation to spend over five years, the main strand of work enables increased numbers of long loans. In addition, Effective Collections encourages an active approach to disposal.

Effective Collections is a programme to enrich displays across UK museums, and to give museums that currently do not lend and borrow the skills and confidence that they need. It is a source of expertise, advice and funding that will encourage uses of collections that would not be possible for museums working on their own.

The Museums Association (MA) and Esmée Fairbairn Foundation chose to focus on long loans (i.e. three-five year agreements) so that the effort of lending is sustained in displays and in long-term relationships between museums. The Effective Collections programme also includes disposal, the result of which is often a permanent transfer to another museum, which has much in common with a long loan. And as discussed below, the programme encompasses other, more difficult types of disposal.

Effective Collections will encourage museums to come up with projects allied to their existing aims and plans. It will try to be flexible to meet the needs of museums, recognising the commitment that will be needed from participants. In addition, fitting in with museums' existing plans will deepen the impact of Effective Collections and aid its sustainability.

The Effective Collections programme is part way through a two-year pilot phase to develop processes for easier lending and to implement guidance on appropriate disposal.



Over this time a small number of pilot projects in museums of different types across the UK are undertaking trials of these processes. In its full phase from autumn 2008, the programme will have a number of different elements. Museums will be able to formally apply for practical support in some part of the programme outlined below, or get involved informally by using some of the best-practice resources and training offered. A key goal of Effective Collections is to change the culture of museums with the aim of increasing the amount of long lending as well as encouraging active approaches towards disposal.

So far, Effective Collections is finding support from museums already working hard on long loans and disposals. The challenge now is to make the programme good enough, and accessible enough, to appeal to many more museums. In the remainder of the pilot phase, Effective Collections needs to develop with the advice and input of the museums sector. It is open to more offers of pilot projects and is keen to hear from museums that can contribute to the programme's development. Contact details and up to date information can be found on the MA website: www.museumsassociation.org/collections



Lending

The culture of lending

Sharing collections is part of a museum's duty. Yet, some museums are much more active lenders and borrowers than others, and some museums lack the capacity to lend or borrow at all. As the second half of this report demonstrates, there is a consensus in the sector about the need to make better use of collections. This consensus is the foundation of a lasting change in the culture of sharing and developing collections. If a culture of lending is to spread to include more museums, a change in the approach to sharing collections is needed at a strategic level. One element of this will need to consider the way museums are recognised for their lending activities.

The MA will therefore promote Effective Collections to the museums community, and seek its involvement in a Collections Strategy Group to advocate the aims of Effective Collections in its institutions and to the wider sector. We will also investigate opportunities to factor long loans into standards and grant criteria – for example, it might be appropriate to require a commitment to lending as part of a funding agreement to build a museum store.

Improved performance measures for national and local government museums would help them to justify more lending, or even to make a case to governing bodies to begin lending. Loan fees and cost recovery by lenders are hurdles to museums borrowing more, and can create a sense of haves and have-nots in terms of sharing collections. Though lots of museums do not pass on the full cost of lending, as an informal survey of loan costs by Alec Coles on behalf of the National Museum Directors' Conference (NMDC) has shown, the perception of insurmountable costs to the borrower remains widespread and prevents activity.

Greater encouragement for lending will, in turn, persuade museums to take the most practical approaches to ways of reducing costs associated with loans. The MA will encourage the pooling of resources – for example, sharing a store of packing cases or display cases across a region, or sharing couriers to a single borrowing venue. This approach is cost-effective, and also builds trust on a more equal partnership basis for lending and borrowing.

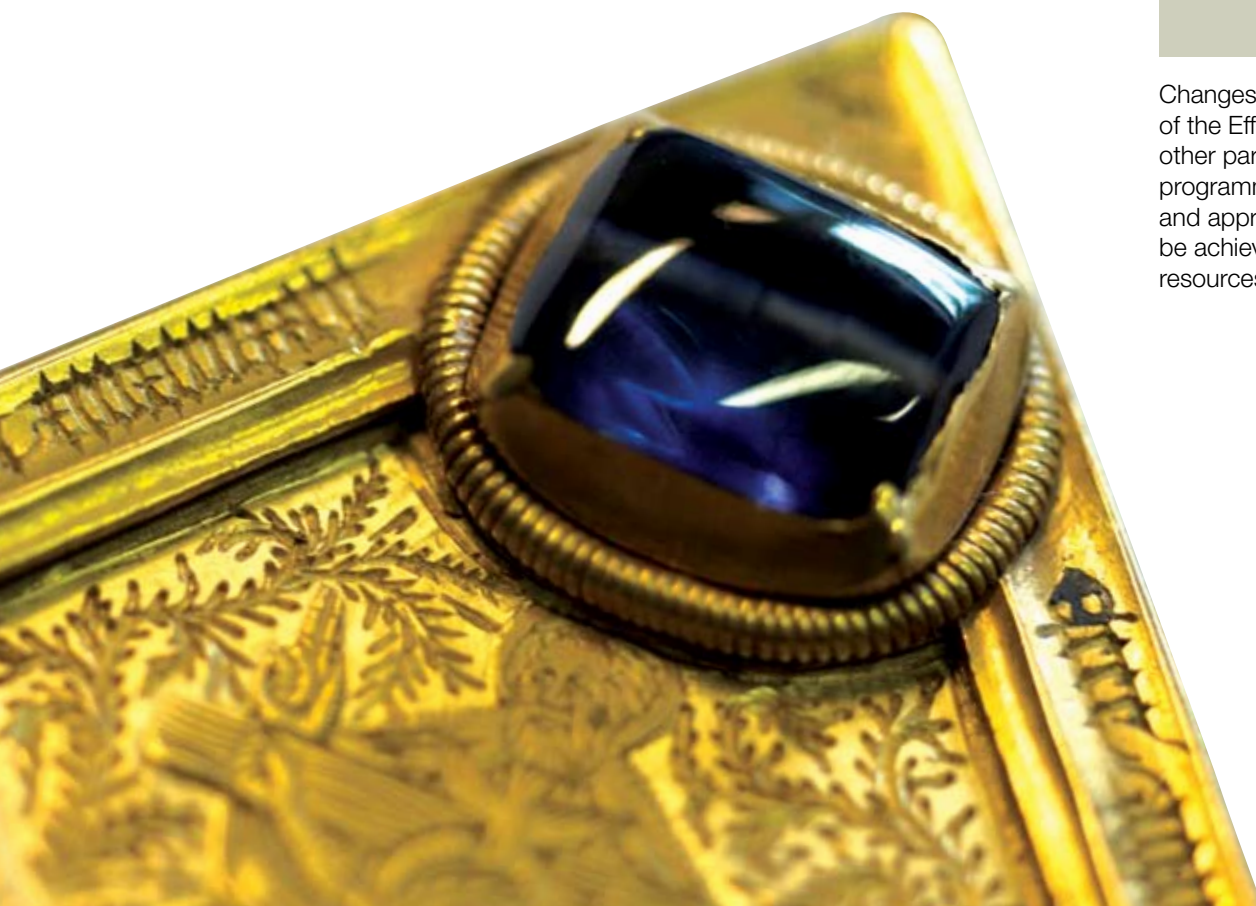
Professional trust is a point we come back to several times in the following pages, and it is key to lasting change in the culture of lending. The work of the Effective Collections programme so far and research by other bodies, such as the Touring Exhibitions Group (TEG) for their report Mapping the Touring Landscape, has found that gaps in skills in some museums are a barrier to lending and borrowing. In the longer term of the Effective Collections programme, the MA will promote training for the skills needed to lend, borrow and care for objects, and investigate ways that this training can be endorsed or accredited by the sector, perhaps via National Vocational Qualifications.

Looking ahead

1

The MA will work to increase the value placed on lending and borrowing by museums. As part of this the MA will establish a Collections Strategy Group to sustain change in the culture of lending.

Changes to the culture of lending are one part of the Effective Collections programme. In its other parts Effective Collections is a practical programme of work to help make long loans and appropriate disposal happen. This will be achieved by developing services and resources in a number of areas.



Brokering service

Successful loans are dependent on both partners in the transaction. Loans and transfers of objects involve complex handovers of responsibility for objects, for administration and for care so the relationship between lender and borrower is of great importance. Effective Collections will invest significant funds in brokering relationships between museums to facilitate trusting lending relationships. The programme has recruited an initial group of people to act as brokers working with lenders and borrowers, and to foster good working relationships between professionals in different institutions.

Effective Collections brokers have in-depth knowledge of the challenges facing museums when they lend, borrow or transfer objects, and are experienced networkers with knowledge of different types and disciplines of museum work. It is important that brokers facilitate successful loans in the interests of both parties, so they are valued for their interpersonal skills and for their ability to solve problems while fairly representing multiple stakeholders. Brokers are not necessarily subject specialists; instead their role is designed to make the most of existing knowledge of a collection.

At the moment brokers are working with lenders in pilot projects and finding borrowers



to receive objects (see Tate's pilot project overleaf), but as the Effective Collections programme grows, so will the flexibility of brokers to work and network with a variety of partner museums. Over time, the role of the broker will be less about the challenge of finding a borrower or a lender, and more about the challenge of matchmaking the most suitable loans.

An important means of building this flexibility will come from registering different museums' interests in lending and borrowing. This will ensure that the MA can take account of all the museums that want to take part in Effective Collections, and that a structure is in place to manage growing interest in the project. The database developed will list museums seeking to lend, borrow, dispose or acquire and forms the basis of a service that will be developed for online use, initially to advertise disposal objects (see the disposal section below), and as a tool to help brokers to matchmake loans.

Looking ahead

2

The MA will develop a brokering service to matchmake loans and build trust between borrowers and lenders.



Pilot project: Tate

‘The long-term loan of paintings and sculptures that have not been requested for loan in the past 20 years’

Tate’s collection consists of over 65,000 works of art encompassing the national collection of British art from 1500 and the national collection of international modern art. At any one time, around 130 works are on long-term loan and each year up to 800 more are lent to temporary exhibitions in the UK and abroad. Tate considers each loan request individually on the basis of the importance and relevance of the proposal to its loan policy and will also consider any loan venue with public access that can meet Government Indemnity standards of security and has appropriate environmental controls. Despite this flexibility and an increasingly high demand to borrow, many loan requests relate to similar areas of the collection and the same individual works, which are often already committed to exhibitions and displays either at Tate or elsewhere.

Extending the range of loans from Tate to maximise the use of works across the breadth of the collection, this pilot project for Effective Collections seeks to facilitate the long-term loan of paintings and sculptures from Tate’s collection that have not been requested for loan in the past 20 years. Working with Tate to identify works in this category which are in a suitable condition for loan, Effective Collections brokers will match objects from Tate with borrowers who have engaging ideas for use of the objects, considering at this stage three borrowing

organisations receiving five to ten works each. This pilot project has presented the first opportunity for the Effective Collections programme to recruit and work with brokers in the freelance model of future projects: following a recent advertisement in Museums Journal, brokers will trial the role over the second half of 2007.

An appealing part of this pilot project is the challenge for brokers to find innovative new homes for objects, where the context for the borrowed objects adds value to the loan; for example in providing opportunities to see the collection at the borrowing venue in a new light, or for the Tate collection to reach audiences it might not normally attract. This will be a challenge for brokers, partly because they are led by availability of objects rather than demand from museums. However, piloting loans in 2007/8 will test how well this process works and just how much the anticipated demand for objects will grow.

While Effective Collections is providing brokers to coordinate activity, this pilot project also involves significant investment from Tate in terms of staff time to identify objects, conservation and art handling teams to prepare objects for loan, and the addition of this pilot project to the caseload of the loans registrars who will administer these loans for their duration.

Tate has encouragingly chosen to commit existing resources to this process for the period of the pilot project, but there is a risk that without better recognition of the benefits of sharing collections by funders and governing bodies other museums may find it difficult to follow suit.





Pilot project: MLA South East

‘A series of long loans to serve as best-practice models for future work in the region’

In this pilot, Effective Collections is working with MLA South East to develop the Sharing Collections Project for the Berkshire, Oxfordshire, Buckinghamshire (BOB) sub-region. The work is being jointly funded by the Renaissance SE Museum Development Fund, Effective Collections and Culture MK and will be delivered over a year-long period, focusing on increasing loans throughout and beyond BOB museums. The project will be closely linked to the BOB Museum Development Service.

A Sharing Collections advisor has recently been appointed to manage the project, which has a set of broad outcomes that build on the aims of Effective Collections and Renaissance. The advisor's wider remit includes foundation work to increase the potential and capacity for long and short-term loans within the BOB sub-region and between BOB and external museums, as well as the rationalisation of stored collections. Whilst it is hoped the benefits will be felt in museums across the three counties, some of the work will be focused in Milton Keynes, reflecting the funding contribution of Culture MK.

The advisor will facilitate the upgrading of exhibition space in BOB museums (and related premises) to increase the ability of organisations to receive objects and exhibitions on loan, and work to address gaps in skills, knowledge and resources across the BOB sub-region, which may previously have been a barrier to lending

and borrowing. Using the upgraded space and skills, the advisor will broker, in the role outlined above, a series of pilot long loans as part of Effective Collections to serve as best-practice models for future work in the region.

Through their work with staff and venues across BOB, the Sharing Collections advisor is well placed to find interesting opportunities for loans between museums within the region. As part of their ongoing work the advisor is building networks to develop future lending opportunities, and focusing their brokering role within the year on arranging at least two or three long loans between museums in the region and a further two or three with museums beyond BOB. While the pilot phase of Effective Collections is necessarily opportunist in trialling processes, the ongoing work of the advisor reflects our longer-term need to consider museums across the whole sector to spread Effective Collections resources across the board.

The Effective Collections programme will also provide support to review two stored collections in the region. In each case, curators will work with a reviewer and a small collection of objects for a short period to gain confidence in the review process ready to continue independently. The Sharing Collections advisor will coordinate this process and assist museums by brokering resultant loans and guiding museums through considering appropriate disposal using the MA's Disposal Toolkit.

On an ambitious scale, this pilot project trials many of the different aspects of the anticipated Effective Collections programme. On a practical level, museums will use the programme's collections review guidance, model loan forms and disposal toolkit and then offer valuable feedback. We hope this pilot project will result in a number of long loans and transfers of objects around the country, and also demonstrate that a shift in approaches to lending is worthwhile.

Reviewing stored collections

Not all museums can easily identify material to lend, and in these cases the Effective Collections programme offers stored collection reviews. The reviews are intended to find material in store that merits use in displays, either on long loan, through redisplay at the home museum, or through permanent transfer. As a secondary priority, the review may also identify candidates for the museum to consider for other forms of disposal.

The review element is proving to be a popular concept for museums approaching the MA with ideas for pilot projects. It seems there are many motivations for large-scale reviews of collections. Some reasons given for review are that museums want to get a better understanding of what they have, to tackle issues around ownership and provenance, to assess condition and improve collections care, or to consider retention and rationalisation. Stored collection reviews provided through Effective Collections can only meet some of these demands and cannot offer catch-all solutions that remove the burden of research or decision-making from museums.

Stored collection reviews will work on two basic models where reviewers spend anything from a day to a fortnight at a museum, dependent on need. In the first model, a subject-specialist will visit a museum to assess a discrete part of the collection where those specialist skills are not available from the in-house curators; for example a small group of Egyptian objects held within a social history museum's collection. In this case the reviewer will audit all of the objects within their specialist area of the collection to assess their relevance and relative importance. The reviewer will then provide a report to the museum recommending what to do with the objects: stating the prime candidates for loan, perhaps ideas for redisplay of objects to make the most of them at the home museum, and maybe objects to consider for permanent transfer to another museum or for an alternative form of



disposal. In accepting a stored collection review a museum will be expected to commit to pursuing at least some part of the report's recommendations and taking responsibility for any necessary research into provenance or legal issues surrounding individual objects. The piloting stage will be particularly valuable to find ways to support museums in getting from a review of a collection to actual loans, transfers or redisplay.

In the second model, rather than providing knowledge about a specialist area of a collection, a reviewer will be provided to advise staff on the process of reviewing their collection as a whole. In these cases the reviewer will spend their time at the museum being shadowed by curators; for example reviewing a portion of the stored collection ready for curators to continue the process independently. Again, the reviewer will provide a report making recommendations about future uses of objects and the museum will pursue these options with support from the Effective Collections programme to broker loans or consider disposal.

Reviewing collections is an expensive process. To get the most from this work the web resource developed as part of Effective Collections (see online support below) will contain an online record of the reviews undertaken and other information about collection reviews.

Looking ahead

3

The MA will support reviews of stored collections to find material that merits use in displays, either on long loan, through redisplay at the home museum or by permanent transfer. The reviews may also identify candidates for museums to consider for other forms of disposal.



Standard loans administration resources

Complex forms and requirements that vary from museum to museum make lending harder than it needs to be. The Effective Collections programme aims to simplify and demystify loans administration by bringing together the terminology, the forms, the facilities reports and standards used by museums across the UK to find the common ground. The UK Registrars Group (UKRG) has led this work in recent years with the development of their Standard Facilities Report, and other groups have contributed useful resources such as the Network of European Museum Organisations' (NEMO) standard loan form, which has art works travelling around Europe in mind. It would not be sensible to duplicate effort in reproducing what has already been completed. Rather, an Effective Collections loans glossary and model form will bring together and build on these resources.

A single standard loan form with terms and conditions covering all types of object, museum and display venue would be an unintelligible document with only small parts relevant to any one loan. Instead, the Effective Collections loan form will have a core of information about the loan, a basic set of conditions that should be contained in any agreement and then optional supplementary terms under different subjects, for example insurance or security. The form will be available for use as the basis of a loan agreement for lenders and borrowers to add to and amend as their particular situation requires.

The MA will collate the examples of loans administration resources provided by other museums and groups for comparison, and address potential difficulties on issues such as Government Indemnity standards. Together this information will form a best-practice guide that any museum can use, whether or not they are formally taking part in the Effective Collections programme. These standard loans administration resources will be launched at the Museums Association's conference Share Options in October 2007 and then be available on the Effective Collections web resource.

Looking ahead

4

To simplify and demystify lending the MA will produce a best-practice guide to loans administration, including a model loan form.

Care of objects

In taking part in Effective Collections, borrowing museums are committing to caring for loan objects for extended periods of time and lenders need to be confident that standards of care will be maintained. Through the pilot phase of the programme, the MA will work on ways of helping museums with the skills and the lasting networks to enable loans and long-term lending relationships to continue into the future.

If lenders become more confident that borrowers have the skills to care for objects, this would reduce the need for supervision by the lender and also increase a sense of partnership and trust between museums. As part of Effective Collections the MA is developing training in different aspects of collections care that will draw on the skills of staff in prominent lending museums to create and deliver practical sessions. There is further potential in working with other sector groups to endorse or accredit training so that it has a real impact on reducing the hurdles to borrowing.

In some situations it will always be desirable for someone independent of the borrowing institution to assess an object, perhaps at the end of a loan period when a renewal of the loan agreement is being considered. The spirit of the Effective Collections programme is that the relationship between lender and

borrower should be pragmatic enough to allow for a local conservator to be used; ensuring standards are maintained, but that the cost passed on to the borrower can be lower than for a member of the lender's staff to travel. Such a pragmatic relationship will be dependent on regular contact between the lender and borrower over the course of long loans. Effective Collections will also encourage lenders to take a pragmatic approach to balancing the inevitable risks of lending against its public benefits.



Looking ahead

5

The MA will offer training in essential skills around lending and borrowing, with the aim of encouraging a more pragmatic approach by lenders.

Disposal



The culture of disposal

Transfer within the public domain is an accepted means of improving use of an object, though Collections for the Future found that even this form of disposal does not happen as much as it could. The inquiry also revisited the issue of disposal of objects from museum collections out of the public domain. Disposal is obviously more controversial when it results in sale or transfer to a private owner, or in destruction, but there is a need for museums to review their collections regularly, to identify objects that are no longer relevant to the collection concerned and to use disposal as part of a responsible collections management strategy. Museums cannot keep spending public resources caring for objects that will never be enjoyed or used.

One of the impediments to active disposal was that the MA's guidance was perceived as standing in the way. As a result, the MA committed to a review of its guiding principles on disposal. The review had two related aims: to encourage more appropriate disposal, while discouraging inappropriate disposal.

The MA's Code of Ethics agreed in 2002 stated: 'There is a strong presumption against disposal out of the public domain. Disposal should be undertaken only within the strategic framework of a long-term collections management policy, as a means of returning an item to its rightful owner, or improving care, access or context.' However, within the sector, the common perception has been that the guidance simply stated that there is a 'strong presumption against disposal'. It is this more restrictive interpretation that was perhaps unhelpful. A consultation with the sector set out to discover whether there was an appetite for changing this guiding principle.

By a small majority there was support among respondents for revising the guiding principle to make it less restrictive, and an acknowledgement that a more open approach to disposal was called for. In light of this finding, and further consideration by the MA's advisory committees and governing body,

the MA proposes to change the wording of the guiding principle. A strong presumption against disposal may be replaced with a new principle, which acknowledges the role that disposal can play in ensuring collections are well managed and sustainable: 'Museums meet their responsibility to future generations by ensuring that collections are well managed and sustainable. There is a strong presumption for the retention of items within the public domain. Sometimes transfer within the public domain, or another form of disposal, can improve access to, or the care and context of, items or collections. Responsible disposal takes place as part of a museum's long-term collections policy, for sound curatorial reasons and in order to increase public benefit.'

Possibly more controversially, the MA will also propose a small change to the current prohibition on financially motivated disposal. The proposal is to allow sale in strictly limited cases and when specific conditions are met: the item falls outside the museum's core collection; the income generated will enable significant long-term improvements to the collection; and other sources of possible funding for the desired significant long-term improvements have been explored. Specific cases considered recently by the Museums Association Ethics Committee suggest strongly that there are some very exceptional cases in which the public interest may be best served by limited financially motivated disposal (sale) of a very small number of high-value items.

The cases considered by the Ethics Committee all concern independent charitable trust museums, in which the trustees are proposing to follow the requirements of charity law in making best use of their assets to support the aims of the museum. Even though they are intended to serve the interests of the collection, these disposals are prohibited under the current Code.

The proposed changes are subject to approval by MA members at the annual general meeting in October 2007. MLA has been closely involved with the review, and will review guidance given in Accreditation in the light of any changes that are approved by the MA. The MA believes that the sector's views on disposal have changed in recent years, and that the proposed changes reflect this cultural shift.

Looking ahead

6

The MA will propose changes to its guiding principles on disposal to its Annual General Meeting in 2007.

An active approach to disposal

Once the MA's review of the guiding principles of disposal is finalised at the AGM, the Effective Collections programme will publish a toolkit to support museums considering disposal and guide them through the process of removing objects from their collections. Further supporting materials and a listing service for disposal objects will be developed on the web resource.

The Disposal Toolkit will interpret the guiding principles of the MA's Code of Ethics as a set of procedures to help museums through the complicated task of undertaking disposal. It will encourage museums to think about disposal in terms of positive outcomes for the benefit of the object and the public, and the best means of achieving those outcomes. The main body of the toolkit will deal with steps that museums should go through for any disposal and advise what to consider at each stage, for example consulting donors and other stakeholders, or when to investigate charity law. It will have appendices with more detailed information for different stages in the process and for different situations or types of collection.

The toolkit will also include information on communicating disposal decisions to the public. A piece of public attitude research commissioned as part of Effective Collections, and with support from MLA, found that disposal is generally poorly understood by the public. Three focus groups were used to explore public perceptions and understanding of disposal. The researchers found that public attitudes to disposal are generally negative, but can be changed if the museum provides context and highlights the benefits of disposal. The opinions of participants in focus groups were affected by the information given, rather than existing perceptions and, perhaps unsurprisingly, terminology such as the word 'disposal' provoked stronger reactions than the facts of any of the case studies used. This research fed into revisions of the MA's guiding

principles on disposal and will inform guidance in the toolkit, including draft press releases.

The main toolkit will be printed, but supplementary materials will be available online in the Effective Collections web resource. This will allow continuing additions of advice on specialist aspects of disposal and a range of case studies. A key part of the web resource will be a listing service for museums to advertise disposal objects. Museums will be able to complete a simple form online to post information about disposal objects, giving museums control over what information they offer, including the potential to add images. Summary information from each listing will be visible to anyone viewing the site, but users will have to log in to access full details and contact information.

The toolkit and web resource will be published at the end of 2007, subject to acceptance of the guiding principles at the MA annual general meeting, at which time the MA will trial the listing service, but continue to publish information in the noticeboard pages of the Museums Journal. To complement the launch of such a range of disposal resources, the Effective Collections programme will provide training to assist museums throughout the UK to get to grips with the changes and to promote use of the new guidance.

Looking ahead

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The MA will publish a toolkit and provide associated online materials to support museums undertaking disposal.

Online support

All of the best-practice guidance, advice, case studies, and details of training developed as part of the Effective Collections programme will be added to a web resource. This can be found at www.museumsassociation.org/collections and will grow over the course of the pilot phase. Procedures for applying to formally take part in the programme will also be added in time for the launch of the full phase in autumn 2008.

Each different area of the programme's work, as detailed above, will have a section of the web resource. Highlights will include a model loan form as part of the standard loans administration resources; the MA's disposal toolkit; case studies of stored collection reviews; and a web listing service to advertise disposal objects, later to be expanded to include objects available on loan.

As mentioned earlier, museums will post information about disposal objects using online forms. This will be a valuable first stage in investigating how a system of registering museums' interest in disposing, acquiring, lending and borrowing can work. Developing the ability to do this will be important to manage the growth of the Effective Collections programme and for brokers to matchmake good relationships between museums.

Looking ahead

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The MA will develop an Effective Collections web resource to contain information and guidance about loans, disposals and reviews of collections. This will include a way for museums to register their interest in lending, disposing or receiving objects under the Effective Collections programme.



MRS MORRISON,
of Haddo.
- BY -
ALLAN RAMSAY.

Collections for the Future: two years on

When it was published in 2005, *Collections for the Future* aimed to reinvigorate the debate about museum collections and to move it further up the policy agenda. It set out suggestions and recommendations for ways that museums could improve engagement with museum collections and the ideas associated with them: how they could make their collections more dynamic by revisiting approaches to acquisitions, disposal and collections mobility; and how they could work together to share knowledge and develop museum professionals for the future.

Here we summarise the thinking in the original report, give selected examples of developments that have taken place since *Collections for the Future* was published, and set out new recommendations and commitments from the Museums Association (MA) for the next few years.

The original report had three sections. Here we have condensed these into two:

- Engagement
- The dynamic collection

Engagement

One of the key aims of *Collections for the Future* was to increase engagement with museum collections and the ideas associated with them. In producing the report, the MA aspired to bring more of the UK's museum collections into active public use.

The report recognised that museums have a duty to preserve material for the future, but its conclusion was that preservation on its own is not enough. Museums must take steps to ensure that more of their collections are used. This might be through display, online access to objects or associated

knowledge, publications, scholarship, loans to other museums or to non-museum venues, open storage or study tours and handling sessions. The report added that even those collections intended primarily as a resource for specialist researchers may need more active promotion, to ensure they reach a wide range of specialists.

Collections for the Future argued that it is becoming increasingly difficult to justify spending public money caring for public resources whose potential is never seen to be realised. Increasing debate about the long-term sustainability of museums

(now the subject of a new inquiry by the MA) increases the urgency of this issue. Museums must put much greater emphasis on putting their collections into a variety of appropriate uses if they are to continue to argue for public support, and to remain sustainable for the longer term.

Engaging with things

Through the Effective Collections programme, the MA aims to help museums display some of their important hidden collections. Its focus is on those collections which are eminently suitable for display, but which have not been seen for many years. However, *Collections for the Future* recognised that displaying objects is only one way of putting them into use and that it is not the appropriate solution for all museum collections. Many museum objects are not suitable for – or intended for – display. Most museums would quickly become impractically large and horribly indigestible for visitors if they were to display their entire collections.

Nevertheless, the report noted that museums have yet to agree on satisfactory alternatives to display. In recent years, museums have made growing use of open storage, digitisation and displays in non-museum premises as means of getting large numbers of objects and specimens out and accessible to the public. But there is little consensus as to how effective, or cost-effective, these approaches are. *Collections for the Future* argued that further research was needed into ways of making stored collections more available.

Since the publication of *Collections for the Future*:



- Suzanne Keene, reader in museum studies at University College London, has begun a significant research project that aims to provide more information about the nature of museums' stored collections and the ways that they are used, entitled Collections for People. With the support of the MA, MLA and the MDA (formerly the Museum Documentation Association), Collections for People will investigate how much collections are used, by whom and for what purposes. It will assess what makes for effective use of stored collections, and will consider the implications of extending access to them. The research project will culminate in a conference in July 2008. For more information, see www.ucl.ac.uk/storedcollections
- Museums are continuing to invest in publicly accessible storage as a way of opening up shared collections. For example, Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, one of the largest regional museum services, opened its

Museum Collections Centre in 2006, housing 80% of the museums' stored collections, and providing public access through open days. On a much smaller scale, Wrexham County Borough Museum also opened a Collections Centre in 2006, open three afternoons a week and by appointment.

- Through Renaissance, there have been a number of initiatives aimed at making better use of stored collections. In the North West of England, for example, the regional museum hub has established a Collections for the Future steering group to oversee implementation of some of the report's recommendations. One of its initiatives is a Collections for the Future Challenge Fund, providing small grants for projects that aim to make imaginative and innovative use of stored collections.

Looking ahead

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The MA will continue to support University College London's Collections for People research project, which aims to investigate the way that stored collections are used, and will help to advocate its findings when they are known. We will make a judgement about what further action might be needed following completion of this study and in the meantime will continue to support initiatives that aim to explore new ways of increasing engagement with collections.

Engaging with ideas and knowledge

Collections for the Future argued that museum collections have enormous creative potential, as sources of knowledge and catalysts for ideas. But the report suggested that this potential is often under-exploited. Museums need to invest more in research and do more to make the knowledge associated with their collections available.

Links with higher education, the development of staff and collaboration within the sector are a crucial part of this. In the original report, these issues were covered in the final section on Strengthening the Sector. Here, we have concentrated all the ideas associated with research, knowledge generation and knowledge management in this section, since together these will be a major focus for the MA over the next few years.

Knowledge management and new media

Collections for the Future noted that many museums feel that they lack adequate information about their collections. However, the report recommended a new approach to knowledge management and documentation, driven more by the needs of users and less by an ambition to document every item in every collection to object level. It suggested that capturing some of the richer stories and more detailed knowledge about key objects might be a more pressing need than



Research

Collections for the Future argued that, as well as capturing and communicating information related to collections, museums must ensure that their stock of knowledge is regularly replenished. Research is widely seen as a luxury by museums, but it is an essential part of their role, whether carried out internally or externally. The intellectual climate in which museums operate is constantly developing and they must ensure that their collections are always open to reappraisal.

Collections for the Future noted that new research has as much potential as new collecting to expand the possibilities of museum collections. It highlighted examples of the 'hidden histories' approach, pioneered by some museums to look at the histories of groups who had been largely written out of mainstream histories, such as disabled people or people from ethnic minorities. The idea of taking an entirely new intellectual approach of course need not be limited to the histories of marginalised groups. It can be equally refreshing and challenging to look at a collection from the perspective of a different discipline or theme.

Since the publication of Collections for the Future:

- As part of the Renaissance Programme, MLA launched a new round of Designation Challenge Funding in 2006. This round offered support to projects that aimed to take a new intellectual approach to all or part of a museum's collections. The projects run from 2006/7 to 2007/8. With this funding, Northampton Museum and Art Gallery is recording the stories of former workers from Northampton's shoe-making industry to enrich the collections with records of personal experiences previously missing from their holdings. The Wordsworth Trust has been exploring the lives of the women

whose experiences are related in the books, letters, journals and art that forms the Trust's holdings, an aspect of the collection that had previously not been the focus of research or displays. Brighton and Hove Museums Service is developing a project on the theme of courtship and the rules of attraction. Audiences will be invited to look at its decorative art, world art and natural history collections in an entirely new way by considering the role of objects in the processes of wooing and animal courtship.

- The University of Leicester has continued its work on the hidden histories of disability,

completing the documentation of entire collections at object level.

Collections for the Future noted that, since such a shift would represent something of a departure from the current practice for many museums, there is a need for a proper national debate about the strategic purpose of documentation to determine the way ahead. The MDA has echoed Collections for the Future's findings in some of its recent work, notably *Revisiting Collections* (see below, under Research), and has launched an advocacy campaign, *Collections for All*, with the aim of underlining the links between

effective management of information and the user's experience.

Collections for the Future also considered the future of digitisation, noting that some digitisation projects have offered a relatively poor-quality experience for a relatively high cost. Nevertheless, it concluded that digitisation of museum collections and the information that accompanies them, would serve as building blocks for future projects that might not yet be fully envisaged. For example, electronic storage of information and images will make it possible for museums to offer all visitors multi-layered and personalised approaches to interpretation.

Looking ahead

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It remains the MA's view that a more strategic approach to digitisation and electronic knowledge management is needed. The MA has advocated to both DCMS and MLA that this should be addressed through the *Understanding the Future* action plan. This remains an urgent priority.

Looking ahead

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The MA also continues to believe that the sector needs new approaches to documentation and knowledge management. The MA will continue to address this issue through its work on research and collections related knowledge.



leading a partnership project on *Rethinking Disability Representation in Museums and Galleries*. The project is funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) and National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts (NESTA). It runs from May 2006 to May 2008 and brings together nine museums and galleries to work with a team of disabled and non-disabled professionals to develop a range of displays and other public programmes to engage audiences with ideas linked to disability and to the lives of disabled people. Mark Taylor, Director of the MA, is a member of the project's steering group.

- MDA and MLA London have worked together to develop the *Revisiting Collections* programme. The programme provides tools to encourage museums to look again at their collections to reveal the diverse histories they contain. The programme was first piloted with a number of London museums, and is now being rolled out in Scotland, with the support of the Scottish Museums Council. *Revisiting Collections* also puts into practice some of the ideas outlined above about a new approach to documentation, by encouraging museums to focus on audiences as well as on accountability in improving documentation.
- The MA has encouraged people who work in museums to reassess their approach to research and knowledge development. It held a one-day conference on research in December 2006, accompanied by a special focus on research in *Museum Practice*, issue 36. The MA's annual conference in 2007 includes a strand devoted to collections-related knowledge.

Expertise and knowledge

If museums are to reaffirm their role in communicating and generating ideas, the question of how museums can access the expertise and knowledge they need becomes increasingly crucial. Collections for the Future argued for a mixed economy, combining developing in-house expertise, more collaboration between museums, and better engagement with external sources of knowledge and ideas, particularly in higher education.

In-house expertise

Collections for the Future acknowledged that there is a widespread perception of a decline in curatorship. It carefully avoided false nostalgia, arguing that there was probably never a time when every collection had a specialist curating it and noting that, even when there were more curators working in museums, many lacked the kind of communication skills that modern audiences demand. The report argued that museums and their users have benefited enormously from changes that have seen educators, and other interpretation staff, play a key part in planning exhibitions and displays. Nevertheless, it concluded that there was a need for more specialist support for collections and for measures to reinvigorate curatorship.

Since the publication of Collections for the Future:

Collaboration

Collections for the Future stressed the importance of collaboration between museums and argued that there would be considerable benefits if existing networks and partnerships were extended. The report championed the establishment of Subject Specialist Networks (SSNs), proposed by the Renaissance in the Regions report.

Since the publication of Collections for the Future:

- MLA has supported SSNs with over £500,000 of funding from the Renaissance programme. The MA welcomes the support that MLA has given to SSNs, and has been pleased to be involved in developing the criteria for funding and in assessing applications.

There have been two kinds of MLA funding for SSNs: small exploratory grants to enable potential groups to discuss the possibility of collaboration and more significant implementation grants to enable established groups to undertake projects such as training, exhibitions, collections research and education work.

There have been 21 implementation grants altogether. For example, in the first round, the Theatre Information Group was funded to produce a database to share information about all theatrical performances listed in each member's records, as a vital tool for anyone with an interest in the history of the theatre. The Ceramics Network was

Specialist support

Collections for the Future argued that the potential of some collections had never been realised because of a lack of specialist support.

Since the publication of Collections for the Future:



- The Renaissance programme has done much to strengthen curatorship in participating museums. Through Renaissance, 188 new curatorial posts have been funded in regional museums and altogether an estimated £31m of Renaissance funding will have been invested in collections by 2008.
- One important issue identified by Collections for the Future was a lack of rigour in the approach of museums to succession planning, which resulted in the loss of expertise when people retired. An encouraging development since the report was published has been the establishment of the Monument Fellowships from the MA. With support from the Monument Trust, the MA has established a pilot programme of post-retirement fellowships, aimed at capturing the unrecorded knowledge of retiring specialists. There will be two rounds of applications, with the first Fellows expected to start work in autumn 2007.

The MA hopes that this practice will eventually become mainstream, as part of a more thoughtful approach to succession planning.

- A comprehensive overview of training and development issues was beyond the scope of the Collections for the Future inquiry and the report made some initial recommendations in a limited number of areas. Since publication of the report, the MA has begun a major piece of work looking at entry to the museum profession and how new museum professionals are trained and supported, and secure their first job. In 2006/7, Maurice Davies, Deputy Director of the MA, was a visiting fellow at the University of East Anglia and researched this issue. His report has now been published and the MA is in the process of discussing an appropriate response to his findings with colleagues from across the sector. The MA's work will address Davies' key findings: that there is a need for better entry routes into the profession, and

for improved training in the first few years of new entrants' careers.

- Collections for the Future noted that some in the sector believe that the new-style AMA fails to support the development of subject-specific expertise. The MA has now begun a review of the AMA, ten years after the first candidates completed the new AMA programme. The review will explore this issue, among other questions.
- Creative and Cultural Skills, the sector skills council with responsibility for museums, began work in June 2005. While little of their work has so far been relevant to the Collections for the Future agenda, the MA hopes to continue to work with them in future on initiatives that might include looking at the use of foundation degrees, with the potential to open up curatorial careers in museums to a wider range of people.

supported in a project to encourage use of ceramics collections by school groups, with a particular focus on developing resources for Design and Technology teaching at Key Stage 3 and 4. In the second round, the Dress and Textiles Specialists network has been funded to run a series of masterclasses to help non-specialist curators identify textiles in their collections, and the network for Friendly and Fraternal Societies and Associations is running a programme to help curators interpret collections associated with this poorly understood area.

There will be significant benefits from this funding, but this approach to collaboration has its limitations. The Renaissance funding for SSNs has so far delivered projects only in limited areas. The impact of SSNs has been more restricted than envisaged in Collections for the Future. The MA believes that there are still unresolved questions

about the leadership of subject areas and where responsibility lies for this. National museums, university museums, museums with Designated collections and the regional museum hubs all have a role to play, as well as the SSNs. This is something the Understanding the Future action plan has the opportunity to address.

- In Scotland, the Regional Development Challenge Fund (RDCF) was established in 2003 to promote partnership working between museums. The programme is funded by the Scottish Executive and administered by the Scottish Museums Council. Several projects have come to fruition in recent years, with an emphasis on collections-related collaboration. For example, the Scotland and Medicine project, led by the Royal College of Surgeons in Edinburgh, aims to promote medical and health collections in Scotland's museums. It has produced

an exhibition touring to six venues across Scotland in 2006 and 2007, a programme of events and a website: www.scotlandandmedicine.com.

- The Effective Collections programme has committed to piloting a programme of reviews of stored collections. The programme aims to target those collections whose potential is not realised because they have never been properly assessed by a specialist. The first of the pilots will be carried out as part of the programme being developed with MLA South East and described earlier in the report.
- Within the Renaissance programme, there have been a number of initiatives aimed at bringing additional support to underused collections. For example, Renaissance West Midlands has included a strand in its 2006/8 business plan

designed to improve access to collections, by improving museums' stewardship of them. The project has supported regional subject specialist networks and created a register of specialist expertise available in the region. Two specialist trainee posts are being created, with the trainee spending time in different museums around the region, working with underused collections, with the support of a mentor. Museums have also been able to apply for grant funding to employ specialists to document, research and disseminate significant collections which have suffered from a lack of professional expertise.

Looking ahead

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The MA believes that there is a need for more coherent leadership in specialist subject areas to address gaps in provision and bring support to underused collections. National museums, university museums, museums with Designated collections, the regional museum hubs and SSNs (Specialist Subject Networks) all have a role to play. The MA will continue to press the DCMS and MLA to address this issue, in the first instance through the Understanding the Future action plan.

External expertise

Collections for the Future emphasised the importance of working with external sources of expertise and drawing on the knowledge and views of others, including users.

As a starting point, Collections for the Future explored a question of principle: to what extent should museums open up their processes of

interpretation and inquiry to others? Its conclusion was that museums should be open to offering multiple perspectives on their collections and should be transparent about how they arrive at the information and opinions they present, while still retaining their status as reliable sources of knowledge and information. This was summed up in the aspiration that museums should find ways to be authoritative without being authoritarian.

Since the publication of Collections for the Future:

- Understanding the Future, DCMS's consultation document on the future of the museum sector in England saw links with higher education as a priority. The MA hopes that this will be reflected in the forthcoming action plan.
- The Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) has extended its support for research in museums and galleries. Several national museums have been successful in gaining accreditation as Independent Research Organisations (IROs). This means that they can apply for funding directly, as well as in partnership with a higher

education institution. For other museums, there have been two rounds of funding for research workshops, designed to encourage collaboration on research projects between museums and universities. Some projects have focused on museum practice, and others on collections related knowledge. For example, in the 2007 round, researchers from the school of education, University of Leeds, have been funded to work with a group of museums on developing a new approach to involving children and young people in the design of museum and gallery spaces. In another project, researchers from

The dynamic collection

Collections for the Future promoted the idea of the dynamic collection: that is, a collection which is physically mobile and which also changes over time to reflect changing ideas and to meet the changing needs of audiences. Under this heading, the report explored issues relating to acquisition, disposal and collections mobility.

Growing the collection

Collections for the Future was partly prompted by a concern that collecting was in decline in many UK museums, and had come to be seen as a luxury by some. The problems the report identified largely persist: the issue is not that collections are not growing at all, but that collecting in some areas is too conservative and reactive. Raising funding for acquisitions can be so time-consuming that

Since the publication of Collections for the Future:

- In April 2007, the Art Fund launched Art Fund International, a £5m scheme to develop the collections of international contemporary art in UK regional museums and galleries. Art Fund International has its origins in the Art Fund's centenary exhibition and conference in 2003, which identified the historic failure of UK museums in the 20th-century to acquire contemporary art being produced by non-British artists like Picasso, Kandinsky and Hopper. The scheme aims to ensure that the same mistakes are not made in the 21st-century. It will run alongside the fund's regular grant-giving programme for five years, following an application process in 2007. The scheme is open to applications from partnerships comprising an accredited museum or gallery from outside London or Edinburgh, and at least one other organisation with expertise in contemporary art – such as a contemporary exhibition space or independent commissioning agency. Applicants will be asked to set out

a strategy for the formation of a collection of international contemporary art.

- The Heritage Lottery Fund has launched a new initiative, Collecting Cultures, with funding of £3m over five years to support programmes of acquisitions. Collecting Cultures aims to respond to concerns about a lack of active collecting in many museums and galleries by promoting a planned, long-term approach to collections development. There is a single round of applications in 2007 and museums can apply individually or as part of consortia. Grants will range from £50,000 to £200,000 and successful applicants will have to spend at least 50% of their award on purchases. The remainder of the funding will be used for all the activities essential to the process of developing the collection and engaging the public with it, such as research, training and development, storage equipment, conservation, exhibitions, publications,

Potential sources of expertise for museums include volunteers and specialists from other sectors, including industry. The higher education sector clearly has a particularly important role to play. Collections for the Future noted that, although there are some excellent examples of mutually beneficial partnerships, in general links between museums and higher education are far less well developed than they might be. With an increasing emphasis in the higher

education sector on knowledge transfer, there are under-exploited opportunities for museums to act as the 'shop windows' for universities' research activities, as well as to collaborate with them on the generation of knowledge.

Cardiff University and museum professionals from the Victoria and Albert Museum have been funded to explore aspects of literary illustration.

- The MA has maintained close links with AHRC, recognising it as an crucial partner in developing a better approach to research in museums. Members of MA staff have served on AHRC committees and assessment panels.
- In Scotland, a project led by the University of St Andrews and funded by the Scottish Funding Council is exploring the feasibility

of setting up a brokering service, to encourage links between museums with collections that need research and researchers in universities looking for research projects. The project is also investigating what barriers stand in the way of research collaboration between museums and universities and its findings (due in late 2007) should have significance for museums across the UK.

Looking ahead

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The MA will undertake more work around knowledge and expertise. We will explore measures to improve links between museums and higher education, to increase the curatorial support available for collections and to ensure a higher profile for research and knowledge development. The Monument Fellowships programme will be at the heart of this and we will investigate seeking funding for a further major initiative in this area.

some museums are forced to focus resources on high-effort attempts to buy single objects, rather than planning collecting in a more measured, long-term way.

Prohibitive costs remain a key issue in parts of the art world. Reduced funding for the HLF will exacerbate the problem, and the government has shown great reluctance to engage with the issue. The problem is now so serious that, without direct government

intervention through funding and tax incentives, it seems intractable.

However since the publication of the report, there have been extremely positive developments from both the Art Fund and the HLF, which offer museums the opportunity to develop their collections with renewed vigour (see below). Both initiatives encourage museums to take a more strategic approach to acquisitions,

as Collections for the Future recommended, and have a particularly welcome emphasis on skills and development. The MA hopes that these new approaches will encourage a more concerted and proactive approach to collecting by museums themselves, as well as by other funders, although some museums may need more support than these schemes can provide in order to rebuild their collecting activity.

events and evaluation. It is this emphasis on supporting the wider range of activities that underpin successful collecting that makes the scheme so valuable and the MA hopes that museums will seize this opportunity to reinvigorate their collecting practice.

- Collections for the Future highlighted the success of the Contemporary Art Society's Special Collection Scheme in England and its National Collecting Scheme in Scotland, both supported with Lottery Funding through Arts Council England and the Scottish Arts Council (SAC). It is disappointing that there has not been a successor to the scheme in England. But in Scotland, SAC has announced a new programme of support for the museums in the scheme for 2007/8. Funding will be available for purchase of contemporary works and SAC will support training and development of curators. A one-year post based in the history of art department at the University of Glasgow

and jointly funded by SAC and the University will focus on disseminating knowledge about contemporary collecting and promoting networking, as well as contributing to the university's research programme.

- Another initiative by the Art Fund, Enriching Regions, aims to encourage collecting in the three regions identified in the Art Fund's 2006 survey of collecting as being the poorest in terms of their ability to add to their collections: the East Midlands, the East of England and the West Midlands. Supported by Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, £130,000 is available for purchases by local authority and independent museums between November 2006 and November 2007.

Looking ahead

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The MA will support the development of these and similar initiatives. The MA will consider the impact of these programmes over the next few years and when the outcomes are known will judge what further action may be required to promote an active culture of collecting in all the UK's museums.



Collections mobility

Collections for the Future aimed to encourage museums to share collections more widely, both within the UK and internationally.

The report began by considering the idea of the distributed national collection. This phrase has been in use for at least two decades in the context of proposals to define what the most important collections are in any one subject area, or to apply more centralised control to the management of museum collections. Collections for the Future concluded that there was no

appetite in the sector for greater centralisation of collections management. It noted that attempts to produce shared catalogues of collections across UK museums might be appropriate for some areas, but would never be appropriate for all subject disciplines. For all these reasons, Collections for the Future suggested that the 'distributed national collection' was perhaps no longer a useful phrase to describe a dynamic approach to collections management. But the report argued very strongly that it is in the public interest that museum collections are treated as a single resource, on which all museums should be able to draw.

Since the publication of Collections for the Future:

- The Touring Exhibition Group's research has now been published. It concludes that greater investment in infrastructure is indeed required to enable more museums to be in a position to accept touring exhibitions. It finds that small museums need assistance in skills development, particularly around installation and handling. However, it also notes that the sector needs to develop new models for touring, including exhibitions developed in partnership between originating venue and host, to take account of local needs and to reflect the expertise of regional museums. It suggests that there

International working

Collections for the Future also aspired to help more museums engage in international partnerships, including international loans. There has been some progress since publication of the report on a European Union project to make lending easier within Europe (see below). The MA's focus has been on encouraging collaboration and lending within the UK, but finding ways of enabling more museums, especially non-nationals, to participate in international projects remains important. Collections

for the Future also acknowledged the UK museum sector's responsibility to museums in the developing world, particularly in those countries with which the UK had colonial links. This is likely to be an increasingly important issue for UK museums.

Greater mobility of collections has been the focus of much of the MA's effort since the publication of *Collections for the Future*. The MA's starting point is that museums, as guardians of public collections, have an ethical responsibility to make their collections as widely available as possible. The Effective Collections programme's work on long loans directly reflects the concern of the *Collections for the Future* report with improving collections mobility, through long loans.

Collections for the Future also argued that there are currently too few opportunities to see important temporary exhibitions in the

UK outside the capital cities and considered that this aspect of collections mobility needed to be addressed. When *Collections for the Future* was published, the Touring Exhibitions Group (TEG) had just begun a programme of research into the state of touring activity in the UK, also supported by Esmée Fairbairn Foundation. *Collections for the Future* advocated the need for investment in buildings and infrastructure, if more regional museums are to be in a position to accept major touring exhibitions, but held back from making additional recommendations until TEG's findings were available.

is a good level of provision in contemporary visual art, but that there is a lack of touring exhibitions in other areas, including world cultures, the built environment and social history, as well as child-centred exhibitions.

- The Regional Museum Initiative, also supported by Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, has continued to fund groups of museums to produce and tour exhibitions of fine and decorative art. Projects continue into 2008 when an evaluation will be published. The evaluation seems likely to suggest that, with a reasonable budget and training support, many museums can generate

engaging and worthwhile touring exhibitions. This may suggest that, especially for larger museums, a lack of money for ongoing programming may be the main barrier in the way of better temporary exhibitions.

Looking ahead

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There is much still to be done to improve the range of temporary exhibitions available for visitors across the UK. The MA will continue to advocate the need for better funding for infrastructure, and for programming.

Since the publication of *Collections for the Future*:

- Since 2004, successive European Union presidencies have taken forward an initiative designed to improve collections mobility within Europe. The MA organised an international conference as part of the UK presidency in late 2005. An action plan was approved in 2006, and several working groups are now looking at particular practical issues, such as standardising documentation and fees for loans. They will finish their work by the end of 2007.

Looking ahead

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Over the next few years, the MA will work towards developing a strategy for its international work, one element of which will cover issues related to the *Collections for the Future* agenda, in particular collections mobility and opportunities for sharing knowledge and expertise internationally.

New approaches to disposal

One of the key findings of the Collections for the Future inquiry was that a new attitude was starting to emerge in the sector towards the movement of objects out of museum collections. The inquiry explored a number of aspects of this, including relationships with private owners, transfers to other public institutions and disposal out of the sector.

The MA's inquiry had set out to test whether there was an appetite for closer relationships with private owners and collectors, including the possibility of transfer of unwanted collections to individuals and groups such as collectors' clubs, particularly those who might make the objects publicly available. The inquiry concluded that there was no real enthusiasm for this. However, the report emphasised the importance of museums' role in bringing private collections into the public domain, for example, through loans for display, providing storage facilities for important collections belonging to local groups, or by helping to record and provide access to objects and records in private ownership, through digitisation.

The transfer of objects between museums, or from museums to other public institutions, has long been an accepted part of good collections management. Collections for the Future concluded that there was considerable resistance to the idea of any deliberate concentration of collections in centres of excellence, with anxiety that this might adversely affect smaller museums. Nevertheless, the inquiry restated the ethical imperative for museums to increase the use of their collections as well as to maximise the care they are offered. It reiterated that museums have a responsibility to consider the transfer of collections to another institution as part of this. The MA committed to looking at ways to provide practical support to encourage this, and this has become an important strand of the Effective Collections programme, as described earlier in the report.

The report acknowledged that disposal is costly and time consuming if it is to be carried out appropriately. But it argued that responsible museums cannot keep spending public resources caring for objects that will never be enjoyed or used. Nor can they continue to expand their collections indefinitely. Resources are limited, and if museums are to be able to continue to collect, while remaining sustainable, they

must consider disposal. This position has been underlined by research carried out by Nick Merriman, director of Manchester Museum, in 2006 for his Clore Leadership Fellowship (see below).

Approached in this way, disposal is unlikely to be carried out solely by transfer to other museums so it is important to face up to the issue, however unpalatable, of disposal out of the public domain.

Collections for the Future acknowledged that museums tend to be discouraged from disposing of objects by mistakes from the past. However, the report concluded that while disposing of an object always constitutes some kind of lost opportunity for future generations, so does its retention. The burden of caring for unwanted and unusable collections will tie our successors' hands, just as much as the loss of something they might have valued. Disposal is full of risks, but retention is not the risk-free option.

Collections for the Future concluded that one significant barrier to appropriate disposal was what it saw as a disproportionate anxiety among some museum professionals. Many respondents believed that, by showing a willingness to dispose of any items, they would open the floodgates to a rush of inappropriate

Since the publication of Collections for the Future:

- Nick Merriman carried out a survey into rates of collecting and disposal in a sample of seven museum services, as the basis of his inquiry into the sustainability of museums' collections management practices. The survey demonstrated that museums are continuing to collect at a significant rate, and that disposal is not being used as a collections management tool except in a few individual museums. Over a 14-year period from 1990 to 2004, in five out of the seven institutions, over 500 objects were acquired for every item disposed of. Only one institution had a concerted approach

to disposal which kept acquisitions and disposals in something like balance. However, the survey also showed that the relative annual growth of collections in museums, as a percentage of their overall collections, is very small. Merriman's conclusion was that, although museums are currently unsustainable institutions, which pass on their expanded collections in a way that increases the resource implications for future generations, they are only unsustainable because they have not brought the management of their collections under control. He argued that it would be possible

disposals. This fear was particularly acute for some people working in the local government sector, who feared being forced to sell high-value items to raise funds for their authority. Collections for the Future concluded that the risk of this actually happening was low. However, in 2006, Bury Metropolitan Borough Council pursued just such a course of action, selling a valuable work by LS Lowry from its museum collection to raise revenue funding to help the council deal with a budgetary shortfall. The council was disciplined by the MA and the museum service lost its Accredited status, with adverse impact on its ability to raise funds. It is clear that further work is needed to discourage other governing bodies from pursuing this kind of approach in future. The MA is working towards producing a joint statement with local government bodies to help increase the pressure on other local authorities not to undertake similar sales in future.

In the meantime, as part of Effective Collections, the MA is undertaking extensive work aimed at helping museums to carry out more disposals more easily, where it is appropriate for them to do so.



to manage collections growth in a sustainable way by adopting a fully strategic approach to collections management, which includes programmes of community engagement, documentation, storage improvement, acquisition, and disposal.

- A number of museums have begun large-scale collections reviews, addressing some of the issues raised by Collections for the Future, and in some cases directly in response to the report. For example, University College London Museums and Collections are in the first stage of a detailed review of all of their collections. The review

aims to map and assess the collection to review storage, use and retention, as well as to produce a new, unified acquisitions and disposal policy and promote greater use of the collection. The organisation has developed an assessment methodology, which it is currently piloting with one area of its collections and which it is keen to share with other museums considering reviews.

- Following the publication of the report, it was clear that a review was needed of the MA's guidelines on disposal. The guidelines were perceived in the sector – whether fairly or not – as standing in the way of appropriate

disposal. The review took the form of an extensive consultation with the museum sector, guided by a steering group and broader discussion forum, with over 90 submissions from individual museums and organisations; and a piece of research to gauge public attitudes towards disposal from museum collections. MLA was closely involved in the review.

- Alongside this review of principles, the MA has also been working on new practical guidance which will be published in late 2007. More details are given in the Effective Collections section of this report.



Other initiatives

Underpinning the specific recommendations of Collections for the Future was an ambition to raise the profile of collections-related issues, to put collections back on the policy agenda and to encourage museums to think

in new ways about the importance of their collections as assets. There has certainly been considerable progress in this area over the last two years, not just through the work of the MA, but also through independent initiatives from a whole range of organisations that share many of the MA's ambitions.

Since the publication of Collections for the Future:

- In Scotland, the Scottish Museums Council (SMC) launched a National Collections Development Strategy for Scotland's Museums in October 2006. The strategy shares much of the vision of Collections for the Future. Its goals are to promote the potential of Scotland's museum collections as community and cultural resources, to support museum staff in developing and sustaining collections and to encourage museums to provide increased opportunities for users to engage with collections. Over the next three years, the strategy aims to encourage museums to review their collections, with an emphasis placed on promoting innovative approaches to engage visitors.

- The MA and SMC have jointly created a new two-year post to take forward the two organisations' priorities relating to collections and workforce development in Scotland. Fiona Wilson took up the post of MA/SMC development officer and is working to implement SMC's Collections Development Strategy, as well as to ensure that Scotland's museums participate fully in Effective Collections, and other initiatives related to Collections for the Future.
- The MA has also appointed a development officer for Wales, in partnership with the Federation of Museums and Galleries in Wales and with funding from the Welsh Assembly Government, through CyMAL. John Marjoram took up his two-year post in September 2006 and part of his role is to help promote Collections for the Future and Effective Collections in Wales.
- In October 2006, the Scottish Executive launched the new Significance Scheme, managed by SMC. The Scheme aims to recognise collections of national significance held by Scotland's non-national museums and galleries. Funding of £1m from the Executive will be available over two years for recognised museums.
- Participants in the Collections for the Future inquiry frequently identified a lack of specialist advice as a barrier to making better use of their collections. In May 2006, MDA launched Collections Link,

with funding from the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA), through Renaissance. Collections Link aims to provide a national collections management advisory service, addressing one part of the perceived information gap. It brings together sources of information, advice and training on a website.

- In England, there has been considerable additional investment in museum development officers (MDOs) through the Renaissance programme. There are currently 50 MDOs who are either funded or part-funded by Renaissance, with a brief to provide advice, support and funding for small and medium-sized museums, delivering against the needs identified by regional agencies. In the North West, for example, the hub has appointed three development officers, each with a remit to concentrate on one of the areas of the original Collections for the Future report. One, based at MLA North West, aims to address the recommendations outlined in the Strengthening the Sector section, by focusing on workforce development. The second is focused on Roman heritage, one of the North West's strengths in terms of collections and curatorial expertise, to promote engagement. The third will focus on improving opportunities for engagement with collections by strengthening expertise in collections care.

The Museums Association is heartened by the progress that has been made since the publication of Collections for the Future and particularly pleased that so many other organisations have launched initiatives that reflect the report's recommendations. The launch of Effective Collections is a key

milestone for the MA, representing a significant commitment of time and resources by Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, the MA and all of our partners. Alongside Effective Collections, the MA will focus on the new commitments made in this document, and summarised on pages 6–7 over the next few years. At the same

time, we will continue to work with colleagues across the sector to ensure that major funding streams reflect the Collections for the Future agenda. In particular, we will be looking to influence the Understanding the Future action plan, future rounds of Renaissance funding, and the national museums' plans.

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York Museums Trust
Photographer: Joel Chester Fildes



Museums Association
24 Calvin Street
London E1 6NW

T: 020 7426 6955
F: 020 7426 6961
www.museumsassociation.org

