

Curators Code of Ethics (1996) – CurCom.org

This is an updated version of the Curator's Code of Ethics that appeared in Museum News in March 1983.

Throughout this document, the need for awareness of the law; adherence to written museum policies; knowledge of and concern for the collections and sensitivity to the public's interest in them; propriety in all one's dealings; and open and frank disclosure of private holdings and transactions have been stressed.

An ethics code for curators is difficult to formulate because curators in one discipline may be called on to perform duties that curators in another discipline would find, at worse, unethical, or at best, inappropriate. Like the American Association of Museums' Code of Ethics for Museums, this code offers a set of guidelines. Curators are also urged to familiarize themselves with the Code of Ethics for Museums, to consult codes of ethics that deal specifically with their own disciplines, and to adhere to policies of their institutions. Disciplinary action will not result from any violation of this code. Rather, it is intended as a support document for curators. In light of this, an ad-hoc committee, appointed by the Board of the Curators Committee of the AAM, will be available for guidance.

A curator is a person who is knowledgeable about and trained in a field related to the collection in his or her care and is responsible for maintaining the overall well-being and scope of that collection. A curator initiates proposals for acquisition and disposal, supports preservation, grants access to the greatest extent possible, provides information for interpretation and display, produces exhibitions, conducts research and publishes findings, and contributes to the educational mission of his or her institution. This code of ethics endorses the 1994 Code of Ethics for Museums.

I. THE CURATOR AND THE MUSEUM

Curators must operate within the institutional framework and carry out their assigned duties and functions according to the guidelines stated by the director and the museum's mission. They work in cooperation with the registrar, collections manager, conservator, educator, and other staff.

II. CURATORIAL ROLES

Curators are the staff advocates for the collection. As caretakers, curators ensure that the collections, including loans, and related documentation are well maintained and that a collections management policy is in effect. As interpreters, they provide the scholarly and philosophical foundation for the collection. As connoisseurs, they use their experiences and trained eye to make informed decisions about objects in or related to the collections. Given this multifaceted role, curators must work with all other museum departments.

III. RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE COLLECTION

A. ACQUISITION AND DISPOSAL

The formal process of acquisition and disposal begins with the curator. He/she must provide compelling reasons for both acquisition and disposal. Curators are responsible for developing their collection in conjunction with the museum's stated mission. Curators should review the objects in their collection periodically to assess the collection's continued relevance to the museum's purposes. Curators identify and fill deficiencies in the collection and further refine its scope through collecting or disposal.

Curators must adhere to the acquisition and disposal policies of their institution. If written policies do not exist, curators should urge that such documents be developed.

Curators should not offer deaccessioned objects for private sale and should consider their transfer of another institution or their sale at a well-publicized public auction as the most ethical methods of disposal.

Although the authority and final decision for deaccessioning always rests with the board of trustees or other governing authority, curators must offer professional guidance and expertise in order that the institution not suffer legally, financially, scientifically, or aesthetically through disposal of objects from the collection. Collections must not be used as financial assets or collateral for an institution.

The Curators Code of Ethics endorses AAM's Code of Ethics for Museums regarding the use of funds from the sale of deaccessioned collections objects: "use of the proceeds from the sale of collection materials is restricted to the acquisition of collections or the physical care of existing collections."

Curators should be familiar with codes of ethics related to their own disciplines and must be cognizant of all laws (international, national, local) affecting the acquisition or disposal of objects in their area of responsibility. Curators must avoid acquiring stolen, illegally exported, or improperly collected specimens. They must consult documents such as the UNESCO Convention, the Archaeological Resources Protection Act, the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA), state and federal wildlife laws and regulations, and the guidelines of their professional societies. The provenance of all objects should be researched and recorded to the fullest extent possible.

B. APPRAISALS

Curators may estimate insurance values for loans and internal use, and for other non-profit institutions (with the permission of their museum), but they must not

prepare appraisals for gifts, objects to be deaccessioned, private purchase and sale, or any other reason.

C. REPLICATION

In collaboration with the conservator, curators should evaluate and support only those proposals for commercial replication that guarantee the safety of an object, ensure that the copy will be accurate, and the use appropriate. The extent possible, any object should be marked as a copy in as permanent a manner as possible.

D. ACCESS TO COLLECTIONS

A delicate balance may exist between object preservation and object access. Curators and conservators should confer to determine the needs and allowable access for each object.

Whenever possible, legitimate requests for information and/or examination of objects must be granted. This access shall include loans to responsible institutions as well as use within the owner institution. When granting access to objects or information, curators must also consider the cultural sensitivities of the object's creators.

E. LOANS

Loans from the collections are granted following the institutional policy. The Curator must ensure proper documentation and, collaborate with other departments to ensure the overall well being of the collections for the duration of the loan. Curators must never lend museum collections for personal gain. Curators must ensure that loans to the collection be offered the same care and protection as the collections under their care.

F. USE OF COLLECTIONS

As the advocate for the collections, the curator must make every effort to discourage the handling of collections that can unnecessarily hasten their degradation or deterioration.

G. DOCUMENTATION AND INTERPRETATION

Curators are responsible for the accuracy of their research, analysis, interpretation, and for the content of written description and documentation of the collections under their jurisdiction, whether prepared by themselves or others.

They must be aware of current scholarship and appropriately acknowledge the scholarly or artistic efforts of others.

Curators also have responsibility to an object's creators and should make an effort to incorporate accurately and sensitively the creator's perspective and the object's cultural context.

H. HUMAN REMAINS AND SACRED OBJECTS

While issues related to Native American human remains and sacred objects are being addressed through NAGPRA, curators must extend the same respect to the human remains and sacred objects of all cultures.

Curators, in consultation with the director, trustees, and other departments, must be willing to exchange ideas with cultural representatives concerning the acquisition, exhibition, storage, interpretation, and physical care or possible return of culturally sensitive objects.

IV. CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The relationship between curator and institution must be based on mutual trust and sound judgment. Curators must be committed to the mission, goals, and policies of their institution and avoid conflict of interest or even the appearance of conflict of interest with their institution. Critical areas for potential conflict of interest include personal collecting, dealing, gifts, and outside employment and consulting. In all such areas, the open and frank disclosure by the curator of all private holdings and transactions is essential.

A. PERSONAL COLLECTING

Curators are strongly discouraged from collecting in the same field (the same types of objects) that they collect for their institution. They must never compete with their museum for an object. Curators who do collect privately in the same field that they curate for their institution must adhere to the following guidelines:

- They must follow the personal collecting policies adopted by their institution. If a written document does not exist, curators should urge that a policy be developed.
- They must give their institution first option to acquire an object that they have purchased for themselves, at the same price, before adding it to their personal collection.
- They must never purchase objects deaccessioned from their own institution or trade objects from their personal collection for objects from the museum's collections.
- They should not store personal collections on museum property or do research on or have their personal collections conserved on museum time without the permission of their institution.
- If curators lend objects for an exhibition in their museum, they should do so anonymously. Similarly, illustrations of works in a curator's collection should be credited anonymously in the museum's publications.

- If curators decide to dispose of part or all of their personal collection, they should offer it first to their museum at fair market value or as a gift. If their museum chooses not to acquire the collection, curators should first consider sale at public auction rather than to a dealer. All such transactions should be documented.
- They should not negotiate personally with a dealer whom the museum also does business. Neither friends nor relatives should engage in a transaction on behalf of the curator that is not in compliance with the above stated principles.

B. DEALING

There is a distinct difference between dealing (buying and selling for personal profit) and occasional sales to upgrade a personal collection. To avoid conflict of interest or the appearance of such, curators must not become involved in dealing.

C. GIFTS, FAVORS AND DISCOUNTS

Curators should accept gifts only for their institution. The curator should not accept a gift relevant to the museum's collection for personal use. However, when a close personal relationship exists, regardless of a professional one, and a colleague, donor, associate, or anyone else wishes to offer a curator a personal gift, they may accept the gift provided it is in accordance with their institution's policy, even if the gift is in the curator's own area of responsibility. Curators may not accept personal discounts from a dealer if their museum also does business with that dealer. Curators who are artists must not use their position to advance their own work.

D. OUTSIDE EMPLOYMENT CONSULTING

- Outside employment includes any situation where curators work for an organization, an individual, or themselves on their own time and are privately paid.
- Curators should conform to their museum's personnel policy concerning outside employment.
- Curators should not allow outside employment to interfere with the full and conscientious performance of their museum duties.
- Curators should conform to their institution's conflict of interest guidelines when undertaking outside employment.
- Curators should not draw on any of the institution's resources when involved in outside employment, except with the institution's approval.
- Teaching, lecturing, writing, and professional consulting have the potential to increase a curator's knowledge and abilities and contribute to public understanding of their institution or field. Before engaging in any of these activities, however, full-time curators should obtain clearance from their supervisor.
- Curators should urge their institution to prepare a written policy that deals directly with the disposition of lecture fees, royalties, and the ownership of scholarly material and copyrights.

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