

Should science museums dispose of their collections?

Science museums wrestle with whether they should keep their collections in perpetuity. Below, and opposite, **Peter Davies** and **Tiffany Jenkins** argue each side of the case.



Disposal is right and just, maintains **Peter Davies**

For at least the last 40 years museums have developed national and individual responses to the dilemma of disposal. Some, such as Spain, have decided that the principle of the museum as a repository for a nation's heritage is too important to be affected by short-term needs or curatorial passions, and so for all intents and purposes, disposal of any museum object there is illegal. Others, such as the UK's Museums Association, the ethical body and sector voice, has consulted and refreshed its advice based on contemporary needs and assessments. Its current advice encourages museums to take a more active approach to appropriate disposal. Many other museums and nations fit somewhere in-between.

Important for science

I would guess that many readers of *People & Science* have had some contact with an object, a collection or a reference library held or lent by a science museum. For some researchers, museum collections are a constant source of information or inspiration. Likewise the relationship can be reversed for the museum, with a scientist or science institution. Modern dating techniques, conservation methods, and experimentation has shed new light on formerly ordinary objects which for the museum could be the difference between an original and a replica, a hidden gem or some fool's gold.

The issue being discussed here though, is about whether disposal of museum collections is fundamentally just and right, rather than the ifs and buts.

My personal opinion is that it is - regardless of whether the disposal (which can mean one of several actual end processes from sale to destruction) could potentially mean the removal of a piece or object that in years to come may prove more valuable in whatever manner than was previously thought.

Little material lost

Museums have a duty of care for the heritage and collections of the community, area, people and/or nation they serve in, and any museum that does not regularly review what it holds against an agreed and sanctioned policy of collecting, is not acting in the best interests of those groups for which it exists.

No doubt this has meant the loss of some material that may have been of more importance or value than was previously believed, but in reality, very little material is actually ever lost forever. Where something may be moved from one place to another, or from the public to the private spheres of collecting, the object generally continues to exist, and sometimes, that movement is the catalyst for the new owner to better understand, and possibly exploit, their new collection.

Space is finite

It is important, however, for museums to be transparent about the process and the objects in question, and this is an area that museums really struggle with. Too open and honest, and the media and press can have a field day; too cloak-and-dagger, and the ethical bodies get concerned. The middle ground, as ever, is the best way forward.

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As a science practitioner or as a museum visitor, you're probably not aware of the amount of inter-museum transfers and collection disposals that happen; but from trains to fossils, this is now part of the daily routine of the average museum collections manager. It should continue, increase and become more public if museums are to be able to fulfil their other purpose: collecting and representing the recent history and heritage of our communities, people and nations as it happens.

Keeping collections in perpetuity will be increasingly difficult as the space, specialisms and finances to keep an ever-growing collection are in themselves finite. Having to worry about the amount of space or collections-officer time their growing quarry of society's ephemera will occupy, is not a burden museums should have to bear.



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Don't discard, argues **Tiffany Jenkins**

A recent trip to the Science Museum in London has convinced me of the importance of old objects. The kids accompanying me were unimpressed with the displays that came with the latest gadgets and interactive devices, for these have dated and their own computer games are far more impressive. What they wanted was the stuff they couldn't get elsewhere; the strange, intricate and dusty artefacts that were once cutting edge. The scientific instruments, medical specimens and even test tubes, which open our eyes to the lives and ideas of past people.

Commentators get worked up about the sale of artwork from galleries, and rightly so. But we should also be cautious about selling off scientific collections. There needs to be a presumption against doing so, to protect the institution from the pressures of politics, fashion and finance. Museums are not here to make a profit, or bend to the wishes of the powerful. Their purpose is to conserve, research and exhibit artefacts for future generations; to care for the past in perpetuity for the public.

Economic pressures

There is a real danger today that the pressure of the economic climate could force institutions to sell off their collections in order to raise funds. This will leave their wares decimated; an empty shell with just a shop and cafe attached. Selling off objects for financial gain will turn objects into items with a price tag. Their value as rich research material, or beautiful things, will diminish.

Today, when it is difficult to find money for new acquisitions, institutions should be especially careful with what they already have. Much of what is on the walls and in the stores comes from private owners. Individuals donate to a specific organisation because they appreciate the work they have done and want to be a part of it. That could rapidly change if there is no guarantee the museum would care for their donation. A sale could put off a future donor.

The long view

One of the main arguments put forward for disposal is that certain artefacts are not in 'use' and are not serving any purpose. But this is a narrow and unimaginative view of what objects can do. It is true that many are forgotten and go unseen for decades. But millions have been and will be again. Those who complain fail to see the long-term picture: that an item unloved now could illustrate an important story that we cannot yet imagine, ten or twenty years from now.

Display is not the only purpose of a collection. Under scrutiny they are also depositories of information that, with research, reveal insights about the past. They show how an idea developed, the interaction between invention and application, and its social impact. Most successful exhibits and education programmes make use of this scholarship that takes place behind the scenes.

Potential of stored material

Any good museum collection is too large to be exhibited in its entirety, and doing so would be an evasion of curatorship. Of course,

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institutions can always do more with their stores, and there are already many good examples of how they might do so. The Darwin Centre at London's Natural History Museum is one, providing behind-the-scenes access for visitors, showing the potential for using material that is usually out of sight.

Science museums and their artefacts can show the exciting development of knowledge that has made major breakthroughs and amazing changes to people's lives. It is vital that institutions don't discard these precious objects and their stories for the short-term sake of a few pounds in difficult times, or else they will look like shoddy salesmen who have lost sight of the true value of these artefacts.



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