



Gallery Oldham, Norwyn

# What's in Store?

**Collections review  
in the North West**

**RENAISSANCE  
NORTH WEST  
museums for  
changing lives**



# Foreword

Over the last two years the Museums Association (MA) has developed Effective Collections as a UK-wide programme to improve the use of stored collections through loans and disposal. We have published guidance, such as the Disposal Toolkit, to help museums undertake responsible disposal and piloted a number of reviews of stored collections, brokering loans and permanent transfers of material as a result. The collections reviews in this publication are some of the first to actively use models set out in Effective Collections and guidance in the Disposal Toolkit, and so I've watched the Collections Review Project in the North West with great interest.

Reviewing collections is vital for any museum considering the long term development of its collection. As well as enabling responsible disposal decisions, the case studies in this publication reveal the extra benefits that a collections review can yield – from the creativity that comes from increased collections knowledge, to the support that comes from developing relationships with other museums.

Putting the resources and ideas we've all been working on into practice is the start of a significant culture change in museums. I hope that more museums take these ideas on board and can use this report to inform reviews of their collections.

**Sally Cross**  
Collections Coordinator  
Museums Association

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# Introduction

The last two years have been a watershed for the museums profession in terms of collections management and, more particularly, ethical disposals.

The Museums Association published 'Making Collections Effective' which explored ways of making underused collections more accessible and a revised Code of Ethics was agreed at the MA's Annual General Meeting in 2007. By 2008 the MA's Disposals Toolkit was launched, the Code of Ethics was published and the Accreditation Standard included an amended model Acquisition & Disposals Policy.

In the North West, the Collections for the Future Steering Group convened a Disposals Symposium for the region's leading museums, national and regional bodies, libraries and archives. The aim of the gathering was to interrogate the sectoral challenges around rationalisation and disposal that have an immediacy in the North West and identify practical measures to help museums navigate through this changing landscape.

Two practical measures followed. Renaissance North West, through the Collections for the Future Steering Group, coordinated the Dynamic Rationalisation workshop – a day of sharing practice across the region. Following on from the workshop, the group prioritised Effective Collections and commissioned a research study, which included action research through two collections review pilot projects. The results from these pilots feature in this publication.

This report highlights the excellent and innovative work that is being undertaken by Renaissance North West via the Collections for the Future Steering Group. This steering group comprises members drawn from across the museums sector in the regional and is led by Piotr Bienkowski, Deputy Director at The Manchester Museum and Jennifer Harris, Deputy Director at The Whitworth Art Gallery. I am grateful to them for their work which is supporting the development of curatorial practice across the region.

**Virginia Tandy**

Director of Culture: Manchester City Council & North West Hub Lead

# Background to the collections review project in the North West

Paul Fraser Webb, Collections Review Consultant, Renaissance North West

By late 2006 the debate about collections and collections management was becoming increasingly important to museums. Attitudes were changing, as exemplified by the proposed changes to the MA's Code of Ethics and assumptions were challenged through high profile proposals to dispose of items from collections.

Aware that the backdrop to collections management was changing, the Collections for the Future Steering Group convened a Disposals Symposium. The debate was intense and wide-ranging and the following points were made:

- There needs to be increased confidence in museum policy
- Active disposal must be encouraged in collections management strategies
- There needs to be a broader definition of 'benefit' from disposals, including benefit to communities and the larger organisation
- Case studies are required to show the benefits of taking a structured, long term approach to disposals
- There needs to be a long term 'promotion' of the concept of disposals
- The language of disposals needs to accurately reflect the purpose of the task
- There needs to be a greater understanding of the purpose of disposals. It is about diversity and development, the ability to adjust the service to meet the needs of the museum's communities
- Communication with communities about ways to engage with disposals has to increase
- Financial benefits must always be seen as 'additional' to the primary purpose of disposals

## A set of objectives for a Collections Review Project was developed to:

- Promote peer reviews of collections in the region to help museums focus on their core collections and develop a curatorial overview of collection strengths
- Promote responsible disposal from museum collections, establish a 'safe environment' for the discussion of specific museum disposals and establish a practice of professional peer review
- Develop a regional infrastructure for peer reviews through a greater understanding of and support for regional expertise and research provision



Dynamic Rationalisation workshop, Alan Seabright



- Establish a Collections Review Board to oversee the Collections Reviews Project in the North West. The remit of this group will focus on promoting responsible disposals and peer reviews of collections. The group will also be able to support the activities of museums undertaking collections rationalisation, effectively acting as a Subject Specialist Network for disposals
- Liaise with the MA and support the development of the Effective Collections programme and the Disposals Toolkit
- Assess the requirements for legal advice in relation to ownership and transfer of title of collections; and how to manage copyright and income generation for objects that have been transferred to other collections.

A Collections Review Consultant was commissioned to deliver the above objectives and two pilot projects were commissioned.

During the development of the methodology, it became necessary to reassess the objective of the collections review process. Whilst disposal was the starting point for the project, it was realised that approaching the task from that point of view was presupposing the outcomes. Undertaking the research necessary to justify any disposal decisions can reveal that the collection under review is significant and has considerable untapped use for the museum.

Salford Museum & Art Gallery and Gallery Oldham were selected for the pilot studies because they had clear Acquisitions & Disposal policies and Forward Plans as well as strong leadership. They also had very different collections that could be reviewed. Egyptology collections are the most common collections in museums in the North West and fine art collections are at the controversial end of disposals because of their perceived value in the market place. Both were chosen because the collection review results would be most useful for the region.

### **Pilot 1: The Egyptology collection at Salford Museum & Art Gallery**

Salford Museum & Art Gallery was given funding and supported by the Collections Review Consultant to review its Egyptology collection. The review was undertaken by a number of external experts who examined the collection from a number of aspects:

- Margaret Serpico provided a curatorial opinion and researched the use and significance of the collection
- Kaye Tetlow from Renaissance North West assessed aspects of collections care
- Paul Fraser Webb looked at the museum context
- Caroline Mean, Salford Museum & Art Gallery's Heritage Development Officer researched the potential for educational use of the collection

### **Pilot 2: The Print Loan Collection at Gallery Oldham**

Gallery Oldham's Print Loan Collection was reviewed by Rebecca Hill, a freelance curator and Dinah Winch, Gallery Oldham's Senior Curator. The conclusions of this 'internal' review process were reviewed by David Morris, Head of Collections at The Whitworth Art Gallery.

This publication examines particular aspects of the review process and the two reviews that took place in the North West. The project was informed by the research of the Collections Review Consultant and through consultation with museums and galleries throughout the region. Each chapter is authored to provide a range of views based on the experiences of individuals involved in the project.

# What is a collections review?

Paul Fraser Webb

**The following section describes the benefits of the collections review process and how to go about it. The Appendix at the end of this publication gives detailed guidance on how to carry out a review.**

## Why would my museum want a Collections Review?

Many museums have objects or collections that are underused, or not used at all. This could be for a variety of reasons. For example:

- Some objects may have been collected in the past by an over-enthusiastic curator
- Some objects may have been collected for a display or exhibition that never happened or which has now passed
- The purpose (or 'Mission') of the museum has changed and objects that were responsibly collected in the past are no longer relevant
- Staff no longer know enough about the collection, or part of its story has been lost.

A review will help you make informed and responsible decisions about underused or 'unknown' parts of your collection.

## How will a collections review help my museum?

- A collections review can benefit the entire museum collection by re-establishing the status of the objects in your museum and improving their use
- A collections review can benefit the museum through the disposal, transfer or loan of the collection to an appropriate alternative location. The museum will be improved by the freeing up of resources (such as storage space, staff time and collections management tasks) that can be reinvested to manage and improve the museum's core collections
- The disposal, transfer or loan of your collection to an appropriate alternative location can enhance local, regional and national museum collections.



Lancaster Maritime Museum, Alan Fletcher



### **So, what does a collections review provide?**

At the end of the review, you will have greater knowledge of the collection and how it can help or hinder your museum in meeting its objectives.

### **Who will carry out the review?**

External opinions are a very important part of any review. Several museums in the North West will help other museums in their region look at their collections. Alternatively, if you have a specialist collection for review, you could contact the relevant Subject Specialist Network. You could ask an external specialist to undertake the review for you, or you can do it yourself and have an external specialist look through your conclusions. In this publication, we refer to these external specialists as “peer reviewers”.

### **What will the peer reviewer do?**

Think of them as an expert witness at a trial. They will provide you with their professional opinion based on their specialism.

If they undertake the review for you they will provide you with their opinions on how the collection can be used and how the museum could be improved. If they have been brought in to look through a report you have produced yourself, then they can add their comments, provide additional information and suggest some actions.

They will NOT make a final decision for you. Final decisions must be made by the museum itself, including the governing body where necessary.

### **So how do we make a final decision?**

You should set up a small staff working group to consider the recommendations, work towards a conclusion and develop a plan of action. If your reports, conclusion and plan of action involve disposal then it is recommended (but not mandatory) that you present the plan to the Collections Review Board for their input or recommendation.

### **What is the Collections Review Board?**

The Collections Review Board is made up of a group of museum professionals from the North West. For this project, they oversaw the work of the Collections Review Consultant but they have a legacy beyond the project. The Board acts as a ‘critical friend’ to museums in the North West who are looking at disposal issues. They can advise you during your decision making process, so that you feel more confident about the process.



Lancashire Conservation Studios, Claire Wood

### **If the Board is happy with the proposed action, can we then dispose of the collection?**

No. The purpose of a collections review is to enable you to construct a sound reason for taking an action and develop clear intended outcomes for the action, but does not actually take you through the process of disposal. It is from this point that your Acquisition & Disposals Policy and the MA's Disposals Toolkit take over, and you should follow the process laid out in these publications.

You should also consult the MA's Code of Ethics and 'Spectrum – The UK Museum Documentation Standard'.

### **So that is the process, but what does the collections review assess?**

The review should assess five areas:

1. Curatorial
2. Use
3. Significance
4. Collections care
5. Museum context

'Curatorial' provides a general curatorial opinion on the objects. This includes an indication of the quality of the objects. It summarises the objects and their history. It also looks at any potential legal or ethical issues and the context of the object not only within the museum but also within the wider context.

'Use' looks at the history of how the objects have been used at the museum up to the present. It also considers any potential uses for the objects, links with new audiences, links with formal or informal educational opportunities and other ways in which the use of the collection could be increased, both within your museum and at other venues.

'Significance' examines the relationship objects have with the museum, to local and other communities, and the wider environment. It is based on the publication 'A Guide to Assessing the Significance of Cultural Heritage Objects and Collections' published by the Heritage Collections Council (Australia).

'Collections care' looks at how well the objects are cared for at your museum, how the collections care standards could or should be improved, and whether collections care could be enhanced by other means.

'Museum context' looks at how well the objects fit into the museum's plans and policies. If your museum is part of a larger institution (such as a local authority) then those wider plans and policies will also be considered. For this reason your museum must have a good Acquisition & Disposals Policy, Forward Plan and Purpose (or Mission Statement) so it can be determined how well the objects can help you meet your purpose.



# Why would a museum want a peer review?

Stephen Whittle, Museum Manager, Gallery Oldham

**Peer review is an accepted part of working practice across the academic community. It is used routinely in scientific circles to test the validity of new ideas, to open up debate and to share knowledge among subject specialists.**

In very recent years local authorities have embraced the idea of peer review as a way of way taking an objective and rigorous look at the efficiency and relevance of a range of public services. A good example is the Department of Culture, Media and Sport's Regional Commentaries programme which is being used to promote sector led improvements in cultural and leisure services. As a manager of a local authority funded museum service then, inviting external assessment of our work, especially our remit to hold and to continue to build permanent collections of objects, is seen within the authority as a positive step.

Given that museums have an academic function, many of them containing important scientific and research collections, it is perhaps surprising that we have made very little use of peer review in the past. Why don't museums talk to each other or act as 'critical friends' when it comes to establishing the significance or usefulness of their collections? There has certainly been a tendency in regional museums to feel that we are each working in isolation. We may have Acquisition & Disposal policies, and those policies may take account of our neighbours' collecting habits, but very rarely do our policies include provision for a thorough external assessment of the collections we hold in trust.

## **Why don't we routinely invite our peers to comment on our collections?**

The simplest answer is a lack of time and resources. A peer review is not necessarily a quick or uncomplicated process and museum staff can be hard pressed to meet their existing commitments without looking for more work. In addition, there is a tendency to think that, as curators, we know our own collections better than anyone else.

There are, however, significant advantages in engaging with the wider museum community and actively seeking the informed opinion of our peers. Like many museum

workers I was dismayed by the recent sale of Bury Art Gallery's Lowry painting recently and particularly disappointed that the Gallery's curators were not allowed to express their opinion on the importance of the painting within the broader context of Bury's historic collection of British 20th century paintings. Instead, non-curatorial staff within the local authority and local councillors put forward the inaccurate idea that the painting was an isolated example of 20th century painting and that it had been bought as an investment 'for a rainy day'.

Within a local authority there might well be a strong suspicion that local curators have a personal bias in favour of their own collections and may not be the most impartial judges of their broader significance or local relevance. One advantage of a peer review is that acknowledged and independent experts in a particular field can



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express a well informed and disinterested opinion on an object or a collection of objects which clearly establishes their significance within the context of the full collection.

If there is pressure on a museum to dispose of objects for purely financial motives, it could be very useful to have an established mechanism such as peer review to determine the precise significance of that object within the overall context of the museum and the local area that it serves. If that mechanism has the backing of the museum sector as a whole then we can at least hope that decisions about disposal are made on sound curatorial grounds rather than purely financial ones. It might reasonably be argued that such is the purpose of an Acquisition & Disposals Policy to which a museum's governing body will have signed up. The peer review process, however, has the advantage of providing a level of external validation or censure and can make available a body of impartial and accurate information about a collection or an object within a collection to anyone with a legitimate interest.

### Gallery Oldham's experience

The peer review at Gallery Oldham, focusing on a print loan collection amassed in the 1960s and '70s, has been very rewarding. In practice it was perhaps the easiest part of the collections review process, most of our time and effort being spent in defining the collection under review and documenting it thoroughly, work which we could not have prioritised without funding from Renaissance North West.

Once that work was completed, we assessed the collection ourselves in terms of its condition, its quality and potential use. Our findings were checked by two peer reviewers, Kaye Tetlow, Renaissance's Collections Liaison Officer who looked at the condition of the collection and how it is stored, and David Morris, Head of Collections at The Whitworth Art Gallery in Manchester and a noted authority on print making, who helped us to establish the significance and potential usefulness of the collection. We now have the information needed to make informed decisions about the future of the collection.

The process of peer review has given us practical information about the care of the collection, how it could be better stored and accessed by both visitors and researchers. Very early on in our discussions with David Morris it became clear that it was a more important collection than we had thought. Though we were familiar with many of the better known artists, David was able to provide a greater breadth of information. Surprisingly he was also able to fill in some of the gaps about the origins of the collection which has links to other collections in the North West and finally he suggested how it might be used in future. He was also able to confirm most of our initial findings on the suitability of a number of works for disposal or transfer to the education handling collection.

It is not often that curators have a significant amount of time to simply discuss and compare related collections.



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Subject Specialist Networks and regional groups like the Greater Manchester Museums Forum and the Fine Art Forum are beginning to have an influence in this area but a peer review can also make a significant contribution to information sharing.

Knowing more about our collections and where to go for further information and support can give curators the confidence to tackle collections that may have lain dormant for many years. Ultimately that can mean making more and better use of collections, freeing up valuable storage space and getting information out into the public realm. Gallery Oldham's print collection has not been completely overlooked in the past but it has been poorly defined and underused. The collection review, underpinned by the peer review process, will contribute directly to our exhibition and education programmes as well as helping to secure the long term future of the collection.

# Review of the Egyptology collection at Salford Museum & Art Gallery

Margaret Serpico, Egyptologist

It is currently estimated that there are over 200 ancient Egyptian collections in the UK. However only about a dozen of these are curated by a subject specialist and most, like the collection at Salford Museum & Art Gallery, have had little or no specialist attention.

The scope for reactivating these collections is considerable. A recent survey has suggested that as many as 40% of UK museums with ancient Egyptian collections do not display these objects. Similarly, only half of the museums with ancient Egyptian collections have related educational resources.

The Egyptology collection at Salford Museum & Art Gallery contains a mixture of donated and excavated objects. A significant proportion of ancient Egyptian collections in the UK are part of an intertwined web of excavated objects. Typically, there is rarely archaeological documentation supporting these objects and they go completely unrecognised in a collection. Excavated material presents the greatest challenge when considering object retention, loan or transfer and it is only through specialist research that they can be identified.

## Aims and objectives of the review

The purpose of a specialist review is to help non-specialist curators better understand the content and significance of their collections.

The objectives for the review of Salford's Egyptology collection were to:

- Establish the scope for future research
- To provide information on the importance of the collection within the community by identifying well-known local or national figures connected to it

- Identify the potential for displaying the collection
- Assess the wider public use through liaising with education and outreach staff
- Develop a better understanding of the relationship between this collection and other collections at the museum
- Establish, where possible, the wider regional, national and international relevance of the collection
- Offer unbiased options for the future of the collection including a summary of advantages and disadvantages of transfer, loan or retention of the collection

## Collections review methodology

Archive information for the collection was collated by the Museum curator in advance of the project. The reviewer was given a list of the objects exported from the museum's collection database and a dedicated workspace in the store near the objects. A digital camera was used through the project to record objects in need of further research.



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The review was undertaken in two stages. The first took place over three days and included the following:

- Inspection of the collection to gauge how long the review might take and identify objects that required more detailed study
- Review of the archival material relating to the collection
- Discussions with the curator on the general history of the Museum and the known history of the collection
- Meetings with the curator and other relevant staff to explore the collection's potential for use in-house, transfer or loan to other institutions
- Initiation of a more detailed examination of key objects

A break in the visits meant research on key and excavated objects could take place before returning to complete the review. Relevant resources and publications, particularly excavation reports, were brought to the follow-up visits, which took place over two more days.

During the visits, some help was also needed to access and move larger objects for study. Follow-up archival assistance from the curator was also necessary but, overall, the review progressed as anticipated.

### Collections review report

Much of the report was structured around a series of questions, such as:

- Which are the key pieces in the collection?
- Is the collection in itself of sufficient breadth and importance to be suitable for display in its current location?
- What is the research potential of the collection?

While the answers to these questions were specific to the collection at Salford, they were designed to be as generic as possible in the hope that they might be applicable to other collections reviews.

The report recommended that Subject Specialist Networks can also play a role in the collections review process. While a single reviewer can present options for the potential use of a collection, museums may want to seek a professional consensus view on the report, on the options presented by the reviewer, and on any decisions the museum might take regarding the future of the collection. Nevertheless, the final decision regarding the future of the collection rests with the museum.

### Review findings

It has been known for some years that Salford Museum & Art Gallery holds an ancient Egyptian object of exceptional significance. It is a wood panel painted with a portrait of a man that would have been placed over the face of his wrapped mummy. It is from the Roman period (c.150AD) and was found at Hawara in 1888 by pioneering Egyptologist W.M. Flinders Petrie.

The review demonstrated that there are exciting discoveries to be made in smaller Egyptology collections. As much as 70% of the roughly 375 objects in the collection come from archaeological excavations, nearly all undertaken by the Liverpool-based Egyptologist, John Garstang. Objects from his excavations were dispersed to collections throughout the UK, and although these distributions were usually documented, the material sent to Salford seems to have fallen through the cracks of this system and as a result, subject specialists have had no knowledge whatsoever of its existence until now.

By working with the original excavation marks on the objects and linking these back to the excavation reports, it has been possible to trace this material to at least four different important cemetery sites excavated by Garstang: Abydos, Hierakonpolis, Esna, and Beni Hasan. In fact, amongst the objects attributed to Abydos were some two dozen pottery jars from one tomb, surely one of the largest groups of single-contexted material found in a small museum collection.

Further research has shown that many of the other graves represented in the Salford collection can be linked to neighbouring museums such as Bolton Museum & Archive Service and The Manchester Museum. The bulk of Garstang material is currently at the Garstang Museum at the University of Liverpool which houses his archive including photographs relating to his work at these sites. This raises the exciting potential for a great deal of future research on these objects.



Salford Museum & Art Gallery, Norwyn

### **A view to the future**

A recent mapping project and survey by The Association for Curators of Collections from Egypt and Sudan (ACCES) has revealed that those collections in Greater Manchester, including Salford Museum & Art Gallery, present a very specific challenge. The enthusiasm for collecting by wealthy industrialists means that this area has the highest concentration of Egyptology collections outside London.

The size, scope and significance of the Salford collection in relation to other regional and national collections raises a number of wider questions:

- To what extent are the ancient Egyptian collections in this region being used and, given their density, is there a demand for further displays and resources?
- Would it be better to transfer or loan collections to other less well resourced areas or to keep them within the same general area?
- To what extent are the collections in this region interrelated either by content or by collection history?

Decisions made about the collection in Salford can provide the first steps towards a more cohesive strategy for looking at individual and regional Egyptology collections.

### **Margaret Serpico undertook the Egyptology collection review at Salford Museum & Art Gallery**

# Reviewing the collection in the museum context

Paul Fraser Webb

**Collections need to be reviewed within the context of the museum's overall aims and objectives. These are normally stated in various policy documents.**

In the Accreditation Standard for Museums in the UK, a museum's Forward Plan (or Business Plan) and its Acquisition & Disposals Policy occupy something of a special place. Between them they articulate the ethos and practice of the museum:

- What the museum will (and will not) collect
- The museum's ethical stance with regard to its collections
- How the museum will manage its collections
- How the museum will use its collections
- Other facets of the museum's development, sustainability and objectives

The importance attributed to these documents is demonstrated by the fact that for the purposes of Accreditation both documents need to be signed off by the governing body themselves or under powers delegated by the governing body.

Both documents should also contain the museum's statement of purpose, or mission statement. All too often, a great deal of work has been put into the development of these statements, only for them to sit ignored and often unloved on a shelf. But they should be used to remind the museum about its purpose, its values, its responsibilities and its objectives.

Together, these three documents (Forward Plan, Acquisition & Disposals Policy and Statement of Purpose) should encompass the spirit of the museum. By reading them it may not be possible to actually visualise the museum's physical form, but the reader should have a very clear impression of what the museums is about, what it wants to do and who its audiences are.

It is impossible to ignore these three documents when undertaking a collections review. One of the fundamentals of the collections review process is to identify whether an underused collection can be used to deliver the museum's objectives. If it can, then proposals need to be made to get the collection out of store. If it cannot, then alternative proposals need to be considered, such as transfer, loan or disposal.

In the case of Salford Museum & Art Gallery, there were wider considerations. The museum service is only one part of a much larger local authority which has its own objectives and business plan. Salford Council's plans include pledges relating to "educational attainment", "visits to museums", "celebrating and supporting our cultural diversity" and the image of Salford as a tourist destination and a place to live and invest, all of which the use of an underused collection could help attain.



Salford Museum & Art Gallery





It was necessary to consider a number of long term factors. The Forward Plan and the Acquisition & Disposals Policy are not only subject to the reviews that are necessary to keep them current, but can also be subject to changes for other reasons. In a local authority, the composition of the council can change following an election. The staff working at a museum will also change over time. Despite our attempts at academic objectivity, our opinions can be swayed by changes in fashion. There may also be changes to the National Curriculum (itself a relatively recent innovation) which can cause collections to fall in and out of favour.

Salford Museum & Art Gallery was selected for the pilot study because it has a clear and rigorous planning and policy procedure. The future direction of the museum is succinctly expressed in John Sculley's contribution, and Salford Council has a clear set of objectives and pledges against which the relevance, use and significance of the collection could be assessed.

The conclusions in the report state the following options:

- Retain the Egyptology collection in its entirety, with alternative interpretation and education strategies
- Retain a small number of suitable items to complement a collection of reproduction handling items to be used for an educational package, with the bulk of the collection offered for transfer to an alternative museum or museums, either permanently or on long term loan
- Complete transfer of the collection to an alternative museum (or museums)
- Develop the museum as a cross disciplinary museum in which the Egyptology collection could be displayed.

The collections review report was presented to the museum's working group along with the other reviews undertaken for this project.

# Next steps for Salford's Egyptology collection

John Sculley, Museum Manager, Salford Museum & Art Gallery

**How do we achieve the right decisions, informed by expert recommendations, to ensure the best outcomes for museum collections? It sounds easy. Sadly, as with all well researched, balanced and comprehensive reports, Salford's ancient Egyptology collections review seems to offer more difficult questions than easy answers.**

Together with collections care and access, good governance is a main tenant of today's museums. This review provides Salford Museum with the opportunity to enable its governing body, through its lead member, to decide the future of what we now know is the sixth largest Egyptology collection held by public institutions in the region. The principal consideration for local authority museums – and Salford is a big one – is simple, 'officers inform, members decide'.

The review confirms Salford's Egyptology collection is well documented in terms of the objects themselves as



Salford Museum & Art Gallery, Claire Wood

well as its links with other collections in the region (including Garstang, Bolton and Manchester). The review concludes by offering a series of options ranging from, 'retention' to transferring the entire collection to another museum. The preferred option makes best sense of the report's findings and recommends a separating out of objects prior to transferring them to the most appropriate museum:

- Transfer of the Garstang pottery to the Garstang Museum.
- Transfer of the remainder of the collection to Bolton Museum & Archive Service with the exception of the mummy portrait.
- The mummy portrait to be offered to Manchester Museum as the mummy itself was transferred from Salford in the 1979.

This would reunite the portrait and mummy and fulfill one of the reports main ethical considerations, **"Efforts should always be made to identify the provenance of any excavated material within a collection and to explore whether and to what extent it is possible to reunite dispersed excavated objects."** (Serpico report)

More specifically, it would satisfy point 1 of the report's final recommendations

**"Ethical considerations are a factor here and efforts should be made to try to reunite the mummy portrait with the mummy if at all possible."** (Serpico report)

The first step in moving the report forward was to convene an internal staff meeting which included the collections, learning and heritage development teams.

This group aimed to draw out the report's principles and introduce any wider implications outside of the report's remit, such as, museum considerations and council expectations. For example, given Salford's ambitions for the Museum's future, which intends to focus on social history from 1750, is there any likelihood of the collection ever being put to better public use here? Potentially there is the story of 19th century collectors to consider. However, this will need to be told in its wider context and include examples from other 19th century collections. There is, however, cause to consider keeping a small selection of items for future display as part of the City's and the Museum's, social history story. This could be achieved by retaining the relevant objects outside of any transfer or incorporating into any transfer agreement that these items would remain on loan to Salford Museum & Art Gallery.

The best cared for collections are those that enjoy expert support and are put to good use. In reality, Salford lacks appropriate expertise, the collection is unlikely to be displayed in its entirety and the collection is not suitable for handling so it would be difficult to keep as an educational resource. It seems then, that Salford holds a large collection in store that cannot contribute, relative to its size, to any council agendas – education, economic development, tourism and so on.

The professional case for disposal is strong. However, as a local authority facility, Salford Museum also has a duty to consider the views of the City's residents and stakeholders. The report offers a real opportunity to engage with local people to raise understanding and appreciation of collections and involve them in the decision making process.

**“Greater effort should be made to liaise with local community groups to determine whether and to what extent there is an interest in retaining the collection. As the recent events regarding the decision by Manchester Museum to cover their mummies shows, the public can take a very negative view on decisions made without proper consultation.”** (Serpico report)

Manchester Museum's community consultation has taken the debate to its wider public and in so doing has used its collection to introduce ethical considerations, previously known only to museum professionals. It seems sensible for Salford to follow this lead and build on its own reputation for community engagement. The Friends of Salford Museums have been instrumental in substantial fundraising; there are eight local history societies dotted throughout the City brought together via the Museum's local history forum and a bank of stakeholder academics exist only next door at Salford University. It may be that members suggest an even wider consultation. If so, it will be done within a timeframe that allows Salford to conclude this business as soon as possible.

The next step is to produce a lead member report that will encompass all the above and offer a range of options for consideration. At present, the preferred options are:

- Engage in a community consultation targeting Salford's established local history groups and academics
- Transfer the Garstang pottery to the Garstang Museum with the exception of two notable pieces. More research is needed to identify all Garstang material
- The mummy portrait to be offered to Manchester Museum
- Offer the remainder of the collection to Bolton Museum & Archive Service with the exception of ten pieces which shall be retained or loaned back as part of a condition within the transfer agreement.

# Using the review to increase use of the collections

Rebecca Hill, Freelance Curator, Gallery Oldham

Like many galleries at the time, in the mid-1960s Oldham Museum & Art Gallery (as it was then known) began to acquire works for its Picture Loan Scheme. The purpose of the loan scheme was to make contemporary art more widely available to people in the borough, with the additional bonus of creating some revenue for the Gallery. A broad selection of prints was purchased from a number of sources. Works were acquired for the scheme until the beginning of the 1980s, after which time it appears to have tailed off.

The documentation of this particular collection was not in a state where it was useful to curatorial staff. As is often the case, time pressures meant that there was little opportunity to investigate the breadth and depth of the print collection. While curatorial staff were of the opinion that the collection contained some good examples of mid to late 20th century print making they were very keen for further research to be done. It was known that there were a number of prints by significant artists – Lowry, Hockney, Kitaj and Frink, to name a few.

My brief to undertake the curatorial review was to evaluate the print loan collection and to make recommendations for its future. The options considered at the outset ranged from the relaunch of the loan scheme to the disposal of the whole collection, with the most likely outcome being that some prints would be deaccessioned and some would be retained in the main collection.

The combination of curatorial staff's existing knowledge, my further research and the in-put from colleagues who took part in the peer review meant that we were able to establish a number of useful points:

- The range of works in the collection is good
- There are a variety of techniques, styles and artists represented



Gallery Oldham, Norwryn



- The collection is comparable to others in the region
- Many of the same artists are represented in collections across the region
- The print collection adds much greater breadth to Gallery Oldham's small but very high quality collection of 1960s paintings including examples by Patrick Heron, Frank Auerbach and Terry Frost)
- Gallery Oldham owns 'Interior' by Richard Hamilton, a key print from the 1960s
- The collections care review established that the collection is in good condition.

The peer review by a collections care specialist has meant that staff are more aware of the condition of the collection as a whole. There are no major issues which need addressing urgently, but staff are keen to start work on improving the storage. The preventative conservation advice has led curatorial staff to submit a further grant application for improving the storage of the collection.

### **What next for the Print Loan Collection?**

Curatorial staff are now developing an exhibition of 20th century print making. There are enough prints by 'big name artists' to assemble a modest exhibition of high quality. Staff have a better understanding of other neighbouring galleries that have work by similar artists, thus increasing the potential for collaboration with regional colleagues.

Gallery Oldham regularly produce inter-disciplinary exhibitions where the art, social history and natural history curators collaborate. Selected prints from the art collection have been used in shows by the natural history and social history curators. It is envisaged that there will be wider use of the print collection in this way in the future.

Depending on the outcome of the deaccessioning process, some of the prints may be transferred to the Gallery Oldham education department for handling by workshop participants. While curatorial and education staff are keen to use the high quality prints retained within the main collection, it is felt that there may be some advantages to setting aside some prints which are examples of different print-making techniques and styles. Staff believe that there are benefits for being able to touch the surface of the print for example, to understand the print-making process.

The deaccessioning process is relatively straightforward in that all the prints we are considering for disposal have been purchased by the Gallery. My report has been forwarded to the Collections Review Board for consideration. If their feedback supports our view that these items are suitable for disposal it will go to the council committee for approval, and then the prints will be offered in the Museums Journal as per MA guidelines.

We have found this to be a rigorous and interesting process to undergo. The curatorial staff have been sufficiently pleased with the process that they intend to write similar reviews into the Gallery's Forward Plan. The process has had very clear outcomes and has resulted in identifying a coherent collection, with which staff are far more familiar. This is a long way from the starting point, when we were unclear whether any part of the collection ought to be retained. Deeper understanding of the collection means it will be utilized more, both in terms of exhibitions and education. We are now working with Renaissance North West to look at increasing display (both within and outside the Gallery) and creating an educational offer associated with the Print Loan Collection.

**“Directors need to engage with curators to ensure that the hearts and minds work is done. Curators are closest to collections and should not be put in a position of making decisions alone. Strategic thinking and aims of disposal must recognise the real life work that is undertaken with objects.”**

Disposals Symposium

**“We need this information; there are virtually no cases studies out there on disposals. It is kept quiet, we are not sharing.”**

Disposals Symposium

**“[When disposals are being considered] curatorial opinion could be seen as subjective and there may be benefits in getting opinions objectively scrutinised. There needs to be external evidence that professional guidance and ethics are being followed...[There is a] need to show that decisions are for the good of the museum and collection and not down to the curator’s personal taste. External scrutiny needs to review Policy, Process and Decision”**

Curator in a North West Museum.

**“One of the pilots referred to the process as ‘the systematisation of an intuitive process’. In other words, it is seen as a logical and obvious approach but not one which had been spelt out before. ”**

Myna Trustram, Collections Review Process Evaluation

# Actions & outcomes

The Collections Review Project has been evaluated and the findings are being used to support its development. Due to the success of the Collections Review Project, Renaissance North West has committed further funding for a second phase.

Phase two was launched in June 2008 as part of the Unleash the Power of Your Collections grants. The successful applicants and projects include:

- Museum of the Manchester Regiment is reviewing a collection of memorial plaques
- National Waterways Museum at Ellesmere Port is reviewing an archive
- Setantii, part of Tameside Museums Service, is reviewing a discreet Roman collection
- Lancashire County Museums Service is working with Tullie House Museum & Art Gallery to review its ornithological collection
- Wigan Leisure and Culture Trust is reviewing its Egyptology collection
- Gallery Oldham are using the funding to deliver the outcomes presented in this publication.

# Appendix

**Every museum and each collection has unique requirements that need to be considered throughout a collections review, so it is impossible to develop a standard guidance for all reviews. The guidance below is written for a collections level assessment, whereas some projects may require an object by object assessment. However, the general structure and the elements here are common for all reviews.**

These fictional guidelines are for a numismatic collection in a local authority museum (Greenacre Museum).

The collection was build up between 1894 and 1911 through purchases from dealers and there are letters and receipts to support this. The coins are all of UK origin. Each object has been accessioned and an inventory of the collection was undertaken in 2001. The collection also includes a small number of trade tokens of local origin.

The museum has a current Forward Plan and Acquisition & Disposals Policy. The museum intends to focus the displays on the story of the local textile trade from 1850. There are no plans to display the coins in the new development so the collection is being considered for disposal.

## Aims and objectives

- Enhancing the entire museum collection by re-establishing the position of the numismatic collection within the museum's collections and improving its use

or

- Enhancing the entire museum collection by the disposal, transfer or loan of the numismatic collection to an appropriate alternative location. The museum collection will be improved through the freeing up of resources (such as storage space, staff time and collections management) that would have been devoted to this collection
- Enhancing local, regional and national museum collections through the improved use of the numismatic collection at Greenacre Museum or through the disposal, transfer or loan of the numismatic collection to an appropriate alternative location.

## Methodology

In the review of its numismatic collections, Greenacre Museum should follow all relevant legal ethical requirements and should also consider the relevant museum standards. Of particular relevance is:

- The Museums Association's (MA) Code of Ethics
- The Accreditation Standard
- Spectrum: The UK Museum Documentation Standard
- Greenacre Museum's Acquisition & Disposal Policy, its collecting policy and the museum's statement of purpose, key aims and specific objectives.

Greenacre Museum's policies and procedures must be fully up to date and complete. The benefits of developing a Disposals Policy and Procedure should be considered.

During the collections review process the museum should complete the following stages

### Stage 1

Greenacre Museum should establish the following:

- Timescale
- Budget
- Staff roles and reporting structure
- Function of external specialists who will act as peer reviewers.

Greenacre Museum should also outline the anticipated outcomes of the project. These speculative outcomes should not be interpreted as being preferred options, but should be seen as articulating the museum's current plans.

### Stage 2

The collection should be thoroughly researched and reviewed in order to establish how the use of the collection could be improved or any benefits arising from disposal. The review should cover all five of the elements below and reports on each of the elements should be produced. The elements may be produced in-house or commissioned from external sources. One person could produce all five reports, or you could have a number of people contributing a number of viewpoints. The reviewers should be mindful of the intended public benefit of actions resulting from their reviews. Consideration should be given to the primary and incidental outcomes of disposals as stated in the MA's Disposals Toolkit.



This review is looking at the numismatic collection in its entirety, therefore all of the reviews should be done at collections level. Any anomalous, interesting or significant objects should be reviewed separately.

### **Element 1: Curatorial Review**

This element looks at the collection from a curatorial and connoisseur's point of view. It should contain:

- A general curatorial opinion on the collection
- A factual summary of the collection, including quantitative and qualitative information and details of any anomalous or notable objects
- The breadth of the collection in terms of the range and quality of individual items
- A summary of similar local, regional and national collections and an opinion of how this collection compares
- An opinion on whether any similar collections could be enhanced by the transfer of this collection into them
- Recommended museums that could provide a more appropriate home for the collection
- Suggested recommendations for the long term future for the collection
- Acquisition information, including provenance and why the objects were collected by the museum
- Whether there are any overlaps between the numismatic collection and other collections at Greenacre Museum or other museums
- Any legal or ethical considerations
- Any contextual information held within the museum or elsewhere (support materials, archives etc)
- Assessment of the completeness of the documentation
- Any information on the use of the collection at Greenacre Museum, including display, research, handling, or loan to other institutions
- Any information on transfers from or into this collection from other museums
- A project risk assessment (should consider any possible negative outcomes resulting from the collections review, such as bad publicity following a disposal, loss of an educational resource etc. The assessment should propose ways to avoid or mitigate any risks, or consider whether the overall benefits outweigh the risks).

If the documentation is not complete and current, this should be completed and updated.

### **Element 2: Use**

This element should be completed by a professional with experience in the use of museum collections, such as displays, exhibitions, outreach and other educational offers. It should establish:

- Any current or recent use of the collections
- Current displays (if any) and when and how it was last displayed
- Which objects in the collection are most likely and least likely to be displayed
- Any potential uses for the collection and the resources required
- Whether the geographical location of the collection affects its research potential
- Any potential audiences for the collection, whether currently exploited or not, including local communities and visitors
- Any links with formal or informal educational needs
- Whether the collection could be used to develop or strengthen links with local education providers and groups
- Whether the use of the collection would be more effectively used in an alternative institution.

### **Element 3: Significance**

Using the publication "A Guide to Assessing the Significance of Cultural Heritage Objects and Collections" published by the Heritage Collections Council (Australia) the significance of the collection should be established.

If the Curatorial Review identified other museums that could be enhanced by the transfer of the collection, then the enhanced significance should also be considered.

Where there are anomalous or notable items within the collection then individual consideration should be given to the significance of these items within the context of the collection and the museum.

## Element 4: Collections Care

This element should be undertaken by a collections care specialist or conservator. It should establish:

- The current level of collections care
- The ability of the museum to care for the collection appropriately
- Any measures that would bring the collection care to an appropriate standard
- The ability of other museums to care for the collection
- Any treatments or conservation that would be necessary before the collection could be transferred to another museum
- Any storage issues.

'Benchmarks for Collections Care' should be considered to assess these areas.

## Element 5: Museum Context

The Museum Context examines how well the collection fits into the museum's and governing body's plans and policies. Analysis of the Acquisition & Disposals Policy, Forward Plans and Statement of Purpose will reveal how the objects can help deliver the museum's mission. It should establish:

- Whether the collection can help deliver the objectives of the museum and its governing body
- Whether the collection can be reinterpreted to deliver the objectives of the museum and its governing body
- Whether the museums objectives need re-considering in the light of any information uncovered about the collection
- Whether the collection fits into the museum's current collecting policy
- Whether there are previously un-researched stories associated with the collection that make it relevant to the museum's collecting policy
- Which museums need to be consulted in any disposal issues, including preferred destinations for disposal items
- Whether the museum is actually able to dispose of items

## Stage 3

If stage 2 has been compiled by Greendale Museum's own staff then the resulting reports should be subject to external scrutiny by a suitable peer reviewer. The reviewer should be a collections specialist who has (or can quickly develop) a familiarity with the collection, its contents and its history.

The combined reports should be considered and discussed by a working group at Greenacre Museum. They should be compared to the anticipated outcomes described under stage 1. An action plan resulting from the findings of the review should be produced.

It is recommended that the reports and action plan be submitted to Collections Review Board for their information and comment. Other views, such as those of a relevant Subject Specialist Network, may also be sought.

## Stage 4

If the proposed outcome is the disposal of the collection then the MA's Disposals Toolkit and Greenacre Museum's Acquisition & Disposal Policy should be followed from hereon.

If another outcome is proposed, then the plan of action established under stage 3 should be delivered.

## Stage 5

It is recommended that the museum produces a report outlining the outcomes and distributes it to Collections Review Board for their information and comment.

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## Museums for changing lives

Renaissance is the Museums, Libraries and Archives (MLA) Council's £150 million programme to transform England's regional museums. For the first time ever, investment from central government is helping regional museums across the country to raise their standards and deliver real results in support of education, learning, community development and economic regeneration. A network of 'Hubs' has been set up in each English region to act as flagship museums and help promote good practice. Alongside the Hubs, the regional Renaissance teams and Museum Development Officers are providing advice and support, Subject Specialist Networks have been set up, and national museums are sharing their skills and collections to ensure Renaissance benefits the entire museums sector. Renaissance is helping museums to meet people's changing needs and to change people's lives.

For more information, further copies of this booklet, copies of the project evaluation report or to contact the Collections Review Board, please contact the Renaissance North West team on 0161 235 8825.

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