

## The Deaccessioning Dilemma: Laws, Ethics, and Actions

### Sources for Information on Deaccessioning

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## Deaccessioning Procedures

Because deaccessioning is such a serious and potentially controversial step, this is one area where collections management policies sometimes mandate procedures. For example, the policy may require that staff:

1. Review the museum's deaccession criteria.
2. Ascertain that the museum has the authority to dispose of the object by reviewing the documentation, conferring with legal staff, and confirming the museum's ownership.
3. Organize facts and figures, both pro and con, concerning the deaccession and consider the mission of the museum and its public trust responsibility.
4. Obtain a written appraisal by one or more qualified and disinterested third parties for objects with estimated values over a set limit.
5. Obtain authorization for the deaccession decision from the appropriate authority.
6. Document the deaccession process.
7. Create a written statement for the permanent record explaining the reason for the deaccessioning decision and how it supports the museum's collections goals.
8. Remove any accession numbers or other marks that identify the object as museum property as appropriate.
9. Notify the donor, if appropriate.
10. After the deaccession decision-making process has been completed, determine the appropriate method for disposal of the object.
11. Create a permanent record of the disposition

*From:* Simmons, J.E. 2006. **Things Great and Small: Collections Management Policies.** American Alliance of Museums, Washington, D.C.

**Methods of disposal of deaccessioned collection objects  
generally considered to be appropriate**

<b>Method</b>	<b>Comment and potential concerns</b>
Destruction	Sometimes appropriate for severely deteriorated objects or specimens, fakes, forgeries, or hazardous material. Destruction should be witnessed by an impartial observer.
Exchange	Objects may be exchanged with a dealer or a nonprofit institution.
Repatriation	Objects or specimens may be deaccessioned for return to the appropriate national government, tribal entity or cultural group.
Return to donor	Some museums may wish to return certain deaccessioned objects to the donor or the donor's heirs.
Return to living artist	Some museums may wish to donate, sell, or exchange deaccessioned works of art to the artist.
Sale at public auction	Sale must be handled by a disinterested third party to avoid conflict-of-interest or the appearance of conflict-of-interest.
Sale through a reputable dealer	Less desirable than sale at a public auction; avoid conflict-of-interest and the appearance of conflict-of-interest.
Transfer	Objects may be transferred to another department within the institution, or donated to another nonprofit institution.

**Methods of disposal of deaccessioned collection elements  
generally considered to be inappropriate**

<b>Method</b>	<b>Comments</b>
Sale in the museum shop	This is contrary to professional standards and may be viewed negatively by the press and the public.
Sale to a staff member or a member of the governing authority	This is generally considered to be a bad idea, and may be viewed negatively by the press and the public. Some museums allow staff or board members to purchase material at public auction, as long as they have no special knowledge or advantage.
Transfer to a staff member or a member of the governing authority	This should not be done because it raises issues of actual or perceived conflict of interest.

*From:* Simmons, J.E. 2006. **Things Great and Small: Collections Management Policies.** American Alliance of Museums, Washington, D.C.