Why Collect?

A report on museum collecting today

David Cannadine
To flourish, museums need at least one of these: an absolute ruler, government patronage, a society in which encouraging public institutions is a public obligation or means of social advancement, or an exceptionally driven individual.

In eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Britain the first agent was lacking, the second and third only intermittently effective, the fourth rare. For the many foreign visitors who published their views on Britain, the administration of the arts and the limitations of state provision were sources of constant puzzlement.

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Foreword

For the past 115 years Art Fund has been helping museums and other institutions across the UK to build, extend and share their collections of art and artefacts with a wide public. Much of the budget for this programme – of individual grants amounting to a total of some £7m in 2017 – has derived from the subscriptions and donations from its now 139,000 members, supplemented in recent times by the annual support of a number of trusts and foundations, of which the Wolfson Foundation has been the most significant. Since 1955 the Wolfson Foundation has awarded some £1.8bn in real terms to projects and partnerships across the fields of science, health, education and the arts. For both Wolfson and Art Fund this is, to date, our longest standing partnership. Our relationship has, indeed, covered 40 years so far, and we are very proud of the role our grant-giving has played in bringing an extraordinary range of material objects into the national domain, for public benefit.

This report is published to mark an institutional milestone for us both, but it is not intended as an exercise in self-congratulation; rather, it focusses far beyond the instances of our own grant-giving and explores both the wider historical context of public collecting and the dilemmas and challenges of developing museum collections today, and tomorrow. Once, it might not have been considered necessary or useful to ask whether and to what exact purpose a museum should collect objects; ‘importance’ was an adequate criterion. Today, as views about the place of material culture in the global environment change and develop, and the definition of public benefit is itself contested, we cannot remain complacent. This report has been commissioned with the aim of demonstrating the complexity now of the question why collect? and suggesting some fresh ways of considering the answers.

We are very grateful to those museums who have allowed us to use their collecting experiences as examples for our scrutiny. We are also particularly grateful to Professor Sir David Cannadine, President of the British Academy and historian of exceptional international standing with extensive experience of the British cultural scene, for agreeing to take on this project as overall author and editor. His analysis of the state of museum collecting in the UK, and of the case studies which explore various facets of its public impact, provides a new agenda for discussion and will, we hope, be of use and interest to anyone concerned with the prospects of UK museums as the 21st century further unfolds.

Stephen Deuchar
Director, Art Fund

Paul Ramsbottom
Chief Executive, Wolfson Foundation
The establishment of the National Art Collections Fund in 1903, subsequently renamed Art Fund, was an early recognition that British museums and galleries could no longer leave the development of their collections to the working of the art market, because their resources for acquisitions were patently inadequate for making major purchases in the face of rapidly rising prices in the salerooms. In 1889, the National Gallery’s annual grant for such purposes was reduced from £10,000 to £5,000, at which pitifully inadequate level it remained unaltered until 1923. It was, then, only thanks to the campaigning and financial support provided by Art Fund that the gallery was able to acquire Velázquez’s *Rokeby Venus* (1647-51) in 1906 for £45,000, and Hans Holbein the Younger’s portrait of Christina of Denmark, Duchess of Milan (1538), three years later, for £72,000.\(^1\) Both masterpieces would otherwise have gone to buyers from the United States, and for much of the first half century of its existence, Art Fund was solely concerned to ensure that other great works that were similarly at risk might also be secured for the nation. But in the heyday of the transatlantic art market, when many Old Masters and 18th-century English portraits were sold by British aristocrats to American plutocrats, via dealers such as Knoedler and Duveen, Art Fund only ‘saved’ a minority of them; and most of those that were successfully retained were put on public display in London rather than in the regional galleries of the United Kingdom. Since the 1950s, however, Art Fund has become increasingly involved in assisting museums and galleries across the UK with their acquisitions of all kinds, from all periods and across all media; and since the beginning of the new century it has taken a broader and more proactive view of art collecting, supporting innovative programmes to train new curators and increasingly speaking up on behalf of museums and galleries as a whole.\(^2\)

This report was commissioned to mark and to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the collaboration between Art Fund and the Wolfson Foundation, but it is also a further example of Art Fund’s developing strategic interest and involvement in the wider issues of collections and collecting. Today, as in the 1900s, our museums and galleries are facing the problems of inadequate acquisition funding combined with spiralling prices at auction. But this time, the complexity and scale of the challenges are much greater. Contemporary art is now more fashionable than the Impressionists, English portraits or Old Masters (albeit with one significant exception, of which more later), and prices have been inflated to stratospheric levels by the advent of new billionaire purchasers from China, Russia, South Asia and the Middle East. Meanwhile, the museums of the United Kingdom have experienced a decade of diminishing funding, and there are fears
that this austerity will not end any time soon. Unsurprisingly, the morale, the confidence
and the numbers of curatorial staff, who are essential to the management, display and
development of our nation’s public art collections, are widely believed to have been in
serious decline for some time.³ Yet the pressures and expectations placed on museums
and galleries by both national and local government – to make more of their collections
more available to more people, to increase the numbers and diversity of their audiences,
to widen public access and social inclusion, to engage more fully with their local
communities, to improve individual health and general wellbeing, to contribute to what
is described as ‘place-making’ and to help promote the United Kingdom’s interests and
influence overseas – have never been greater, more insistent or more unrelenting than
they have become since 1997.⁴

To be sure, since 1994, the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) has awarded over £220m,
on average £10m a year, to help with the acquisition of ‘portable heritage’ by museums
and galleries, of which art has been much the largest single item. Similarly, since 1980
the National Heritage Memorial Fund (NHMF) has awarded over £125m towards these
types of acquisitions. To put the importance of this investment into context, in this same
period, 1994-2017, Art Fund has supported museums and galleries in the purchase of
works of art with grants totalling over £89m. But welcome though this additional support
for acquisitions undoubtedly is, £10m a year is not a large sum in the face of current sale
prices; and in any case, the HLF has tended to put the majority of its funding towards
major paintings for the national museums, recently among them celebrated works
by Titian, Constable, and Van Dyck (for the National Gallery and National Galleries of
Scotland, Tate and the National Portrait Gallery respectively). But even that strand of the
HLF’s grant-making has recently become attenuated. Last year, the HLF unexpectedly
deprecated support for a major acquisition to acquire a major painting by Bernardo
Bellotto. And there are some disturbing indications that, looking to the future, the HLF may be less interested
in providing funding for such acquisitions than it has been in the past, having recently
announced a reduction to its grant-making budget for 2018/19.⁵

In response to this environment, Art Fund commissioned an inquiry into the impact of
these unprecedented challenges on the current collection practices (or the lack
of them) of our museums and galleries. But Art Fund is not only a sponsor of this
report, for some of its own recent activities perforce form a part of this investigation.
In particular, and in relation to the case studies which are later described here, Art Fund
has been involved in supporting the Ferens Art Gallery in Hull, Glasgow Museums, the
Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology at the University of Cambridge, Birmingham
Museum and Art Gallery, the Ulster Museum, the Creative Foundation in Folkestone and
the Towner Art Gallery in Eastbourne in making acquisitions. I must, however, add that
while the staff of Art Fund have been unfailingly helpful in providing me with materials,
and in answering my many questions, none of them have at any stage sought to influence
what I have written here, and this has also been true of the Fund’s trustees and of

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their chair, Lord Smith of Finsbury. At the same time, I must declare my own interest as a trustee of the Wolfson Foundation, and as chair of its Arts & Humanities Panel, since it is on the advice of the panel that the trustees continue to support Art Fund; and I should add that the Wolfson Foundation, through its joint funding programme with Art Fund, also supported the Ferens Art Gallery and the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery in the successful acquisitions later described in these pages. But at the Wolfson Foundation, as at Art Fund, I have been given complete freedom to form my own judgments and opinions, by the staff, by my fellow trustees and by our chair, Dame Janet Wolfson de Botton. I thank them all, and especially Stephen Deuchar, director of Art Fund, Penny Bull, Art Fund’s senior programmes manager, Paul Ramsbottom, the chief executive of the Wolfson Foundation, and also journalist Marcus Field for his work on the 11 case studies.

With the aim of full disclosure, I must also declare such additional interests, relevant experiences and professional perspectives as I have brought to bear in undertaking this review. I am by training and by trade an historian of modern Britain, and especially of the 19th century, the very period that witnessed the establishment of many of our greatest museums and galleries. I have also been chair of the trustees of the National Portrait Gallery (of which I wrote a brief history to mark its 150th anniversary), I have served as a commissioner of English Heritage, and I am currently deputy chair of Historic Royal Palaces.6 In being thus actively engaged in our cultural sector, I have also had many dealings with the civil servants at the Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport, and I much admire their work, their dedication and their professionalism. And along with my colleagues on the Arts Panel of the Wolfson Foundation, I have received and reviewed many applications from museums and galleries across the whole of the United Kingdom for funding for many projects; and it is impossible not to be impressed, both by the brilliance and importance of many of the proposals, but also by the severe financial constraints under which so many of our museums and galleries operate today, especially beyond the confines of the M25. It is, then, from these varied viewpoints that I offer this report; and I do so, not only in celebration of the remarkable, creative and long-lasting partnership that exists between Art Fund and the Wolfson Foundation, but also as a significant contribution to the current debates on collections and collecting, and to the broader discussions about the funding of our museums and galleries that lie behind them.

David Cannadine
January 2018
Why collect?

In many museums, collecting has stopped and there are no funds for acquisition.

Introduction

It is widely believed that these are difficult and challenging times for museums and galleries, and for their staff and their collections, by comparison with which it is tempting to suppose that there was once a golden age, when things were not only different from how they are now, but were also better: when curators were confident in their cultural authority and contented in their lifetime jobs; when the interpreting and development of collections were what mattered above all else; when funding for acquisitions was ample and when curatorial salaries were generous; when central and local government kept their distance, providing sufficient money but expecting little in return; and when ‘the public’ counted for less, because it visited in far smaller numbers, than it does now. There may be some truth in some of these nostalgic retrospections, but not all that much, one indication of which is that there is no agreement as to when, exactly, this alleged golden age of disinterested curating and inspired and well-financed collecting actually took place. And while many museums and galleries seem stable parts of the perpetual and immutable ordering of things, with their robust buildings and their permanent collections adorning their walls, the reality is that they are for the most part relatively recently established, and throughout their existence they have almost always been in a state of flux. For most of human history, acquiring art was primarily the private hobby of the rich and the powerful; only during the 19th century did collections displayed for public benefit become widespread across the western world; the 20th century witnessed two world wars, and major changes to museums and galleries before, between and after them; the past 40 years have seen unprecedented challenges and opportunities; and as the digital revolution continues to unfold, it seems likely that half a century into the future, museums and galleries may in some ways be very different places from what they are now.

Museums and galleries, collections and collecting are also organisations and activities about which it is exceedingly difficult to generalise. There is, for example, no consensus as to exactly how many museums and galleries there are in the United Kingdom: somewhere between two- and two-and-a-half thousand seems the best guess, depending on how museums and galleries are defined, but the figure may be higher or lower. There is no agreement or precise quantification of the aggregate number of items held in their collections, and the generally accepted estimate of two hundred million items may – or may not – be accurate. Although this report largely confines itself to those museums and galleries that collect, curate and display fine or applied art, or other cultural works, they are themselves very varied, including the national museums and galleries receiving direct support from the government, those museums and galleries that are under the control of local authorities which in fact have no statutory duty to maintain them,
those which are completely independent, and those which are managed and maintained by universities. Moreover, the museums and galleries in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland receive devolved funding from Cardiff, Edinburgh and Belfast, rather than direct funding from the UK government in London. Across the whole of the United Kingdom, our museums and galleries are equally diverse in their size and scale: some employ hundreds of staff, some survive largely on the basis of volunteers, many fall somewhere in between. Their collections are also exceptionally heterogeneous: some aspire to be encyclopaedic and comprehensive, while others may focus on a single subject or topic or theme; some represent the coherent vision of one originating collector, but many more have accumulated their art over a much longer span of time, and they have often done so in reactive and unsystematic ways.

This in turn means that all generalisations on this subject, including those that will be advanced in this report, must be treated with caution, while no statistical survey, however rigorous its methodology and valid its sampling techniques, can ever fully capture these infinite varieties and manifold variations. These difficulties are well illustrated in the case of the Mendoza Review of Museums in England, recently undertaken at the behest of the Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport (DCMS). It notes that half of the adult population of England (the Review’s remit did not include Wales, Scotland or Northern Ireland) has visited a museum or gallery at least once during the last year, on the basis of which it concludes that ‘museums use their collections and knowledge to support society in direct ways’, that they ‘bring people together and promote community cohesion’, and that they have gone a long way to fulfilling the social policies that Labour, Coalition and Conservative governments have all urged on them since 1997. Moreover, the Review continues, museums and galleries offer ‘spaces where we can experience beauty and understand our place in the world’, and ‘above all’, they ‘are responsible for collections – not just for the present but for future generations’. Overall, then, it gives a positive account of what our museums and galleries are doing, of how they are doing it and of why their collections matter. But for all its good intentions and wealth of data and examples, the Review lacks a detailed historical and comparative perspective, it gives relatively limited attention to the problems the sector has been facing for too long and offers little by way of constructive proposals as to what needs to be done to address them.

It is, for example, no doubt the case that ‘England has world-class museums of exceptional reputation’, but that might also be said of Russia, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, France, Spain and the United States, and there is no analysis of how our galleries compare with our ‘world-class competitors’ in terms of the state funding and philanthropic support that is provided for them. It may be true that over 50 per cent of the adult population has visited one museum or gallery in the course of the last year: but what benefits have they derived from doing so, and how and where does this relatively limited activity rank in the broader hierarchy of their leisure preferences and activities?
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Frames conservator and venue technicians at Glasgow Museums with Dalí’s Christ of St John of the Cross, 1951 © SNS Group
Our museums and galleries may be successful agents of social cohesion and vehicles of urban regeneration, but this is not easily demonstrated, and even if it can be shown to have happened, then for how long did or does it last? And as the Review admits, the vexed issue of the funding and management of museum collections brings with it ‘particular challenges’, although it offers little detail as to what exactly they are, or how precisely they could be met. As George Orwell might have said, while all generalisations are fallible, some of them are more fallible than others. This report begins where the Mendoza Review neither began nor left off, which means that instead of giving comfort and reassurance, it expresses anxiety and concern. Moreover, and as the epigraphs to each chapter make plain, in so doing it repeats and reinforces the arguments that have been made across the last decade and a half (and, indeed, long before that) concerning the inadequate funding that is provided for our museums and galleries in general, and for their acquisitions and collections in particular. For too long, these arguments have largely been ignored and disregarded. It is high time they were finally taken notice of. To quote, rather than adapt, Orwell: ‘If liberty means anything at all, it means the right to tell people what they do not want to hear.’ And, he might have added, it ought also to mean that those who do not want to hear should, nevertheless, make some effort and feel some obligation to get the message.
The problem is acute. Museums, with very few exceptions, simply do not have enough resources to make acquisitions on the scale they need to refresh and enrich their collections... I do not believe that the problem will be solved until the core funding of museums and galleries is realistic.

In 1832, Sir Robert Peel addressed his fellow MPs on the beneficent consequences of constructing a new building to house the recently established National Gallery in London. ‘In the present times of political excitement’, he observed, ‘the exacerbation of angry and un-social feelings might be much softened by the effects which the fine arts had ever produced on the minds of men.’ And, Peel added, ‘the erection of the edifice would not only contribute to the cultivation of the arts, but also [to] the cementing of the bonds of union between [the] richer and poorer orders of the state’. The 1830s were indeed a decade of ‘political excitement’ across the United Kingdom, with (among other things) nationwide agitation in support of parliamentary reform, and the first eruption of the Chartist Movement in 1838. Nor would the ‘Hungry Forties’ turn out much better, witnessing, as they did, renewed Chartist protest in 1842 and again in 1848, the creation of the extra-parliamentary Anti-Corn Law League, and the catastrophic potato famine in Ireland. And it was as an antidote to the first worrying signs of popular disaffection and political alienation that Peel urged the construction of the National Gallery, which was duly undertaken on the north side of the recently established Trafalgar Square, to designs by William Wilkins. Significantly, it was located between the (rich) West End and the (poor) East End, in the hope that it might be visited by members of all classes, and thus bring about the very social amelioration that Peel had hoped for. Here, and long before Michel Foucault deplored it, and New Labour embraced it, was an early expression of the idea that museums and galleries were not only places that collected and displayed great art, but were also, and as a result, major agents and instruments of what would later be called social engineering.

Peel was the greatest British prime minister of the first half of the 19th century, possessed of prodigious gifts of head and heart, mind and spirit. He took a double first at Oxford in Classics, and in Mathematics and Physics, he was widely read in all the major contemporary works of fiction, theology, history and political economy, he was a devout and practising Christian, and he had a large social conscience. From one perspective, he was what we would now call a quintessential establishment insider: educated at Harrow and Christ Church, he inherited an estate at Drayton in Staffordshire as well as a baronetcy. Yet Peel’s father was a self-made Lancashire cotton manufacturer, and he himself was always sensitive about his relatively lowly social origins; but this also meant he felt a greater affinity with the middle and working classes than was true of many public men whose elite backgrounds were more venerable than his own. Peel was also a discerning and energetic art collector, especially of the Dutch and Flemish schools, as well as of portraits by Reynolds, by Landseer and by Lawrence (of his two daughters). There were, then, many good reasons why, in advocating the construction
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of a National Gallery, Peel urged that art was not only intrinsically edifying and uplifting, but also that it might do public and social good at a time when the ‘condition of England’ seemed far from healthy or prosperous. Was he right? Beyond any doubt, the 1850s and 1860s were more stable decades in the history of the United Kingdom than the 1830s and 1840s had been, but it is far from clear how much of the credit for this may be attributed to the National Gallery. The Wilkins building did not open until 1838, it was widely criticised for being too small, and its funding would never be sufficient for its purposes. Moreover, it was the opinion of Thomas Uwins, the second keeper (or director), that ‘many persons who come do not come really to see the pictures’ and had no interest in ‘high art’; and for the overwhelming majority of the population of the United Kingdom, visiting galleries and museums would have been an activity with which they were unfamiliar, as very few such places existed at that time.  

During the second half of the 19th century, that ceased to be the case, as museums and galleries proliferated across the length and breadth of the United Kingdom, from Birmingham to Belfast, Gateshead to Glasgow, Dublin to Doncaster, Swansea to Sunderland. Most of them were municipal foundations which also relied on the support of local philanthropists and collectors, and they were established to promote civic pride, to carry out Peel’s agenda of social amelioration and cultural uplift, and to provide education and entertainment for the mass of ordinary people. They were highly popular with the general public (the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery was receiving one million visitors a year by the late 1880s): indeed, in relative terms they were probably more popular than they have been at any time since. But in a country where it was widely believed that public spending must be kept down, they were often underfunded, with ‘derisory or non-existent acquisition budgets’, their collections were haphazard and ill displayed, and by the end of the 19th century, their appeal diminished along with their visitor numbers as they faced growing competition from alternative leisure pursuits ranging from the music hall and the cinema to association football and cycling. From the 1920s to the 1950s, museums and galleries were less central to the life of the nation or their localities, and as a report submitted by Sir Henry Miers to the Carnegie United Kingdom Trustees made plain, their collections were poorly housed, badly displayed and inadequately funded. In the aftermath of the Second World War, there was a gradual improvement: more money became available as British society became more affluent, works of art were relatively cheap and could be acquired by museums of all kinds, art history became a thriving discipline, staff moved easily between museums, and there was a new generation of charismatic museum directors, of whom Sir Roy Strong at the National Portrait Gallery was the most famous.

But this ‘halcyon period’ did not last long, as successive economic crises during the 1970s meant widespread cuts in both central and local funding. Then came Margaret Thatcher, and in her dealings with museums and galleries, as with everything else she touched, her impact was undeniable, even as her legacy remains controversial. As government spending was reined in, public funding for museums and galleries was cut, and those
that were driven to charge for admission saw their visitor numbers fall dramatically. Thatcher also refused to introduce a national lottery as an alternative means of funding, and by 1989 the National Gallery, the British Museum, the Tate Gallery, the Science Museum and the Victoria and Albert Museum were driven to taking the unprecedented step of writing to the prime minister about their financial plight. As a result, many key staff were lost through compulsory redundancy or early retirement, and morale across the sector was low. Yet Thatcher did give museums and galleries more autonomy, as nationals were freed from the arthritic grip of the Property Services Agency and put in charge of their own buildings, while the V&A and Science Museum were taken out of direct government management and provided with their own trustees. The nationals were also allowed to generate their own income from fundraising and trading, and they were encouraged to be more aware of and responsive to ‘the public’ and to become more visitor focussed, and these changes in practice and emphasis gradually spread out into the regions. Thatcher also urged that collections must be properly managed, since they were held on behalf of ‘the public’, but were all too often inaccessible, undocumented and badly stored, while reforms to schools and to the national curriculum meant that museums and galleries could begin to develop their own education departments. Here was the beginning of what would soon become innovative programmes of access and inclusion, outreach and engagement – a return (albeit unknown) to the social agenda originally adumbrated by Peel in the 1830s.

In the aftermath of his unexpected election victory in 1992, John Major created the Department of National Heritage, which further raised the profile of museums and galleries, and strengthened their position vis-à-vis the Treasury; he also introduced the National Lottery, from which unprecedented sums would soon flow for capital improvements, not just to the national museums and galleries, but for many others across the country. The succeeding Blair government abolished admission charges for the national museums, and launched a programme entitled Renaissance in the Regions to make more resources available for museums and galleries beyond London. During the long boom from the mid 1990s to the mid 2000s, money flowed into museums and galleries as never before, from government, from the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) and from foundations and individual donors. New buildings were constructed, blockbuster exhibitions were put on, and more staff were appointed. Underlying this heady expansion was a simple model: national government and local authorities were willing to give increasing amounts of money to museums and galleries in exchange for constantly improving visitor numbers. But this in turn meant that, under New Labour, museums and galleries were not only (or even primarily?) appreciated as repositories of great art and curatorial expertise: rather, they were repurposed as the means of delivering wider policy agendas, such as access and inclusion for those who were marginalised and disempowered because of poverty or ethnicity, and community-building and urban regeneration in those deindustrialised towns and cities where unemployment and deprivation were high. In terms of new buildings, education departments and outreach programmes, these were exciting and transformative years for many museums.
and galleries. But there were also complaints that in terms of resource allocation and personnel, the essential curatorial tasks of conserving, developing and interpreting the collections were being neglected and sidelined in favour of delivering New Labour’s social agenda.

The financial crash of 2007-08 meant this remarkable and unprecedented era of abundant funding for museums and galleries ended abruptly, even as the broader social agendas have been pressed and pushed even harder in terms of widening audiences, greater community involvement, and making stored collections more readily available. Across the last 10 years, government spending has once again been severely cut, which has meant less money for national museums and for those under local authority control. The Renaissance in the Regions programme also came to an end, and although it had given a short-term boost to so-called ‘hub’ museums outside London, there was little lasting sign of any long-term transformation. At the same time, there was less money available for museums and galleries from the HLF, where funding the 2012 Olympics became the highest priority. This in turn has meant that many national museums and galleries, as well as those local authority museums across the United Kingdom, have seen their grants and allocations significantly reduced, and the resulting shortfalls have not been made up by applications to the HLF, by approaches to private foundations or by appeals to wealthy individuals, since none of them are interested in funding recurrent expenditure or giving money to help balance operating budgets that are running a deficit. As a result, staffing levels, which had risen during the late 1990s and early 2000s, have again been reduced, and many jobs that might once have been for life have been replaced by short-term contracts, while there have been continuing pressures to reallocate resources away from curatorial work and towards public engagement and community outreach. Not since the Thatcher years has staff morale in the sector been so low as it is alleged to be now. But as even her critics concede, some of Thatcher’s reforms did later prove beneficial; by contrast, it is too soon to know whether the same will in future be said of the years since 2007.

The most measured verdict that can be given on the years from 1979 to 2017 is that museums and galleries, both national and local, have been on something of a rollercoaster ride: of financial stringency, then abundance, then stringency again; of increased freedom and autonomy coexisting with inexorably growing pressure from government; of great improvements in buildings, outreach, access, audience awareness and cultivation; of growing expectations from the massively increased numbers of visitors; and of serious challenges to, as well as new opportunities for, curators and their collections. But these changes, challenges and opportunities have not only been driven by fluctuations in the business cycle and evolving government agendas: they are also the result of broader developments in the intellectual and cultural climate, and of continuing technological change. The rise of museum studies, much of its output influenced by the writings of Foucault, has undermined the historic claims of museums and galleries to be disinterested and altruistic organisations, purveying objective
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information and authoritative knowledge about their collections to an appropriately admiring and credulous public. Instead, they are now regarded in some quarters as sinister citadels of power where knowledge is deliberately manipulated, so as to present and interpret their collections from one particular perspective, thereby shutting out multiple voices and occluding alternative views. And in our postcolonial world, the comprehensive collections that have been accumulated by self-styled ‘encyclopaedic museums’ are now routinely denounced as unacceptable displays of outmoded imperial acquisitiveness. Meanwhile, art history has increasingly morphed into the study of material culture, which is less interested in high western art, and more concerned with the everyday artefacts of mass global consumption. At the same time, the continuing digital revolution means that entire collections can now be accessed and viewed online, and this has led some to question whether there is any longer any need or justification for the continued assemblage and display of art objects in museums and galleries.

How serious and significant are these developments for current and future strategies of collecting and acquisition? In their most extreme form, they have been taken to mean that the great era of traditional museum collecting is over, which further implies that the great era of traditional museum curatorship is over, as well. Moreover, the very idea that such people were disinterested scholars, committed to lifelong public service, and clad in the sacerdotal raiment of objective knowledge, which they were occasionally willing to impart to a restricted and deferential audience, does not seem as convincing as it once did. Today’s curators are no longer regarded as unchallengeable authorities, their erudition the product of a lifetime of learning, but rather as enablers and as facilitators, mediating between objects and pictures on the one hand (about which there can be many interpretations and opinions), and increasingly diverse and demanding audiences on the other (who bring their own experiences and perspectives to bear, and in so doing reach their own conclusions about the meanings and value of what they are looking at). With their jobs thus redefined, curators are constantly being called upon to extend their skill sets to encompass fundraising and storytelling, outreach and social work, IT and digitisation, and to give attention to collections management and scholarly research. In earlier times, it has been suggested, hermit-like curators worked in museums and galleries to escape from the world; nowadays, by contrast, their entrepreneurial successors are expected to work in museums and galleries so as to engage with the world. What does this imply for collections and collecting, now and in the future?
Acquiring collections, whether historic or contemporary, is the lifeblood of museums… However, museums cannot thrive without serious acquisition funding.

Questions and issues

These changes and developments across the last 40 years – in the relations between museums and galleries and central and local government, in perceptions of what they do and of what they are for, and in the status of curators and the standing of their collections – have generated a great deal of comment and criticism, discussion and debate, about their impact on museums and galleries in general, and on curators and their collections in particular. Leaving aside, for now, the issue of funding, this means that many questions have recently been posed for which different answers have been sought and provided. How and why and on what scale do museums and galleries continue to collect? What are the arguments both for and against the continued augmentation and development of their holdings? Why are collections still being added to when most items are in store rather than on public display? What are the arguments in favour of deaccessioning from collections, and what are the arguments against? Is it possible to manage collections strategically, with proactive rather than reactive policies of acquisition (and of deaccessioning)? How far have museums and galleries succeeded in using their collections in more imaginative and engaged ways to deliver the broader social programmes that have been pushed by successive governments since 1997? Have their curators and collections demonstrably helped promote social inclusion, better health and wellbeing, community identity, regional regeneration and place-making? And does the ever-intensifying impact of the digital revolution mean that the museums and galleries of the future will continue to be buildings housing art collections for the public to visit in person, or will they instead be replaced and superseded by online portals allowing access by anyone from anywhere in the world to limitless displays of virtual images?

The case that public collections must constantly be extended and added to has been made for as long as there have been museums and galleries open to the public, and it is still regularly made today. For museums to remain vibrant and vigorous institutions, so this argument goes, they must always be works in progress, which in turn means they should constantly be making new acquisitions, so that their collections remain dynamic and evolving rather than become inert and lifeless. Even those galleries that aspire to a sort of historic completeness and comprehensiveness have their gaps, and the only way to fill them is by continuing, careful, vigilant, selective acquisition. More specialised museums should also be on the lookout for additional works which would enable them to tell an enhanced story: perhaps the evolution of Bronze Age weaponry in Britain, or the development of 15th-century Italian painting. And many smaller galleries aspire to enlarge their collections. Some areas of western art that are now regarded as important were not collected by earlier generations of curators, which means museums are constantly trying
to catch up with changing tastes, as in the case of Impressionist and Post-Impressionist works, which were virtually ignored by Britain’s public galleries until the 1920s. The art produced by entire cultures, all too often disregarded or marginalised in the past, is now being vigorously sought after, from (for example) Africa or Australasia.\textsuperscript{21} Museums are also eager to acquire ‘discoveries’: perhaps newly found objects from an archaeological dig, or items that have been ‘lost’ in private collections for generations, or already known works given new attributions. For institutions that collect contemporary art, continuing acquisitions are self-evidently essential as there is always more being produced. And all such additions to collections encourage new visitors and repeat visits, they provide material for special displays, and they help stimulate new scholarship.\textsuperscript{22}

These are powerful arguments and, when allied with efforts to prevent great works of art from leaving the United Kingdom, make the strongest case for continually trying to add to the collections in our museums and galleries. ‘A finished museum’, one American observer noted in the late 19th century, ‘is a dead museum, and a dead museum is a useless museum.’ That is still the current conventional wisdom. There are, to be sure, those who dismiss such widely held views as ‘dangerous nonsense’: in part because continued collecting can get in the way of conservation and interpretation; and in part because many works regarded as part of the ‘national heritage’, and which must therefore be ‘saved’ at all cost, were often created by foreign artists in foreign countries, and only reached our shores as a result of purchase or conquest.\textsuperscript{23} Far from being icons of national identity, so this argument goes, such works have always moved around, and they should be allowed to continue to do so. It is also pertinent to ask whether the occasional acquisition of an extra picture or sculpture, either by purchase or by bequest, significantly animates an entire collection that would be dead and lifeless without it. And is the public appeal of collections that can only be added to in truly exceptional circumstances, such as Sir John Soane’s Museum and the Wallace Collection, thereby diminished as a result? It can also be argued that such ‘completed’ collections are far from lacking in dynamism or liveliness, not least because their already accumulated riches provide ample scope for original research from a variety of scholarly perspectives. These counter-arguments certainly carry some weight, although they by no means answer all the points made in favour of continued collecting. But since the 1980s, new arguments have been put for treating the collections of museums and galleries in more active, engaged, discerning and critical ways.

The starting point for such reconsiderations was the undeniable reality that the majority of museums and galleries only display a small fraction of their total holdings, often less than 10 per cent, so why should they be further augmented? What is the point in continuing to enlarge collections that are already too large to be fully shown and comprehensively exhibited? Since these accumulations of art and cultural objects are held in trust on behalf of the nation, then should they not be made more accessible, so that the public, as distinct from curators and occasional scholars, might actually be able to see more of them? These questions were seriously asked for the first time during the
Thatcher years, with the aim of opening up and making available the contents of what were termed stored collections, which were often housed offsite in inhospitable and out of the way buildings to which there was no public access. While Blair was in power, it was further argued that many of the works thus held, which were often and by definition of less artistic merit or cultural significance than those put out on display, might be used to widen public participation and extend outreach. Instead of being ‘hoarded’, so this argument ran, art and artefacts from these stored collections might be shown in schools or hospitals, or other public places, or they might be lent to other museums, with smaller holdings of their own, who would gladly exhibit them. In recent years, these arguments have gained increasing traction, as many museums and galleries have begun to make at least some items from their stored collections publicly available, as exemplified by the establishment of the Glasgow Museum Resource Centre, housing around 1.4 million objects, and open to the public seven days a week. Meanwhile, the V&A is constructing a whole new facility for just such a purpose in East London, where many of the millions of objects it holds will be brought out of storage for the first time, and put to work and made accessible in an area where poverty, social exclusion and community cohesion remain significant challenges, and where urban regeneration is very much a work in progress.

Another way of dealing with such stored collections, which has again been increasingly discussed and embraced in recent years, is by pursuing an active policy of what is termed ‘deaccessioning’. In the United States, this has been part of collections management in many art museums since the 1960s: as a way of ‘trading up’, by selling off an inferior work, and putting the proceeds to the purchase of a better one; as a means of getting more visitors, by selling off art and cultural objects that once appealed but are no longer fashionable, and replacing them with more popular, contemporary works; and, although much more controversially, as a last-ditch effort to raise money to pay off debts, to balance the accounts, or to finance a new building. In the United Kingdom, by contrast, the presumption until the 1990s was that collections were held in public trust in perpetuity, which meant that deaccessioning was almost universally frowned upon. But more recently, there has been a growing recognition that if ‘dynamic’ collections are being added to, they should also be discerningly culled: of works that are not relevant to the main body of the collection, or of duplicates, or of works that are in a very deteriorated state. In the United Kingdom, as in the United States, there are now strict ethical and procedural guidelines for deaccessioning, which urge that museum collections should never be regarded as assets which can be realised simply for financial gain. Yet some museums and galleries that are under local authority control have been pressured into selling works from their collections, with the aim of using the proceeds to alleviate the strain on municipal finances, or for other municipal projects, as at Bury, Buxton and Croydon. The controversial sale of an Egyptian antiquity from the Northampton Museum and Art Gallery, described in the ninth case study, is one such cautionary tale. By contrast, the Imperial War Museum carried out its deaccessioning for more convincing and appropriate reasons, and with significant care and attention to due process, as is recounted in the seventh case study.
These recent debates concerning the wisdom and practicality of continuing to acquire some works of art and cultural objects, and the imperatives and ethics of deciding to deaccession others, have fed into a wider discussion urging the need for collections to be actively ‘managed’, rather than just passively preserved for future generations. To this end, it has been argued, they should be fully and comprehensively catalogued, they should be more ‘dynamic’ and ‘mobile’ in terms of lending and display beyond the bounds of museums and galleries, and they should also be actively and strategically curated in terms of their future development.\textsuperscript{29} Yet all too often, the reality of collections management falls far short of these no-doubt admirable aspirations and goals, and it seems likely that many collections are not really ‘managed’ at all. In many museums and galleries, large parts of their collections remain uncatalogued, while expert curatorial knowledge is irreplaceably lost when long-serving staff retire. Although deaccessioning has ceased to be the taboo subject it largely remained in this country until the end of the 20th century, and has undoubtedly increased since then, most curators would prefer to add to their collections rather than diminish them. It is also still the case that a significant proportion of acquisitions do not represent the deliberate and successful implementation of a carefully worked out and discerning policy, but instead result from the acceptance of what are often random gifts and bequests, or from a patriotic determination to ‘save’ for the nation a great work of art that has suddenly and unexpectedly been sent to auction, and which might be ‘lost’ if sold to a buyer from overseas. And even if greater incentives were offered to private collectors to donate some of their art to museums and galleries during their lifetimes, as was strongly urged in the Goodison Review of 2004, this would not help with the strategic development of managed collections. Despite urgings to the contrary, most acquisitions are now, as they have always been, the result of reactive rather than proactive decisions, and this is only one of several reasons why it has been recently argued that most museums and galleries have not yet brought the management of their collections fully under control.\textsuperscript{30}

Much of the foregoing discussion must seem a long way from the broader political agendas of social amelioration that have increasingly been wished and urged on museums and galleries by successive governments since 1997. These have, unsurprisingly, been responded to and reacted to in a variety of ways, of which two are particularly noteworthy. Some critics have argued that the stress on outreach, access, engagement, diversity and community has meant that attention (and thus resources) has shifted away from what must always be the core purpose and fundamental raison d’être of museums and galleries, which is not to address, let alone try to cure, the ills and problems of contemporary society, but to maintain, develop and curate their collections, which should be ‘at the centre of all that they do’.\textsuperscript{31} It has alternatively been urged that there is in practice no contradiction between these apparently irreconcilable objectives, since one of the consequences of encouraging museums and galleries to work for improved access, social cohesion and community regeneration is that their own collections will as a result become much more widely known, better appreciated and fully understood.\textsuperscript{32} Yet there is also evidence that when the funds were flowing
in before 2007, outreach and education did benefit at the expense of core curatorial functions; while the cuts since 2008 have undoubtedly resulted in reductions in the numbers of permanent curatorial staff and an increase in short-term contracts, and this has been made worse by the continuing pressure to move resources to departments that are more focussed on education and outreach. In response to such concerns, the HLF created its Collecting Cultures programme, giving awards in 2007 and 2014, supporting museums and galleries (and libraries and archives) in developing their collections through strategic acquisitions. For the same reason, the Monument Trust instituted its Fellowship programme (2007-12), to enable recently retired curators, with a lifetime’s knowledge of their collections, to pass it on to new appointees. And hence, too, Art Fund’s New Collecting Awards scheme, begun in 2014, which helps train and develop young curators of high promise and potential, enabling them to embark on innovative research and collecting projects that both develop their own skills and enhance their institutions’ holdings.

Will museums and galleries still exist, in 30 or 40 years’ time, for such people to work in? Or will the middle years of the 21st century witness the dawn of a new and very different world? After all, taking the long view, the display of art in purpose-built museums and galleries for the edification of the public is a relatively recent phenomenon, and architectural history abounds with examples of redundant or refurbished buildings originally constructed for purposes that no longer exist. And the rapid demise of shopping malls and department stores, which are being rendered increasingly irrelevant and unnecessary in the era of online retail, might suggest that museums and galleries will, indeed, go the same way, in what is also an era of unprecedented and still-evolving online access to viewing the varied art collections of the world. So it may, indeed, turn out that recent decades will be looked back on as the last great era of museum-building, with outstanding works created by such architects as Renzo Piano, Frank Gehry, IM Pei, Zaha Hadid and Daniel Libeskind (very little of it, incidentally, in the United Kingdom, and why not?). Yet it seems unlikely that all the art that is at present on public display will be put into permanent storage, and that denuded museums and empty galleries will at some future date be converted into yet more hotels and apartment blocks. For while retail goods can be easily purchased online, viewing a museum object online, and seeing that same object for real, are very different experiences, and they are not so much mutually exclusive as mutually sustaining and reinforcing. The more that we can learn about collections from exploring them online, the more we are likely to want to go to visit them in situ. So while the latest age of museum-building may turn out to be the last, and although the digital revolution still has a long way to go, there seems good cause to suppose that museums and galleries will, indeed, survive – changed, no doubt, in ways that we cannot yet imagine or foresee, but nevertheless still recognisably there. What are the implications of all this for collecting now and going forward?
At the time of writing, the situation seems worse than ever, as local councils, forced to cut budgets, again turn to non-statutory expenditure. While as yet few museums or galleries have actually closed, the future looks black: curatorial expertise dwindles or disappears, opening hours diminish, the fine new buildings and extensions paid for by the Heritage Lottery Fund can be hard-pressed to operate. Museum services are merged, or are placed under joint directorships. The ugly prospect of the sales of works of art by local councils has re-opened… This is a troubling period.

Reflections and perspectives

Such are the issues that have been raised and debated by people who have been watching or working in the museums and galleries sector across the last 40-odd years, as they tried to understand what was happening to their institutions and their collections, or to the sector more broadly, and attempted to see their way forward. It is now time to turn to a very different kind of material, namely the three reports that were commissioned by Art Fund in 2006, 2010 and 2017 into the collecting activities of museums and galleries, key findings from the third of which are published as an appendix to this review. These reports get us as close as we shall ever come to knowing and understanding what museums and galleries have actually been doing with their collections during this period, in terms of budgets, management, acquisitions and deaccessioning. Could they collect? Have they collected? Did they (and do they) collect? How did (and do) they collect? What were (and are) their priorities? What were (and are) their policies? The first two reports were completed either side of the financial downturn of 2007-08, but in fact they make for very similar reading. The third report records how collecting practices and aspirations have evolved during the years of austerity since. The usual caveats apply to each of these surveys, since although they covered all the major types of museums and galleries, they were all based on the restricted numbers of those that replied to questionnaires: 305 of them in 2006, 276 in 2010, and 266 in 2017. Moreover, each report was undertaken by a different agency, using slightly different methodologies and asking slightly different questions, so that the comparisons made between them and the overall conclusions drawn from them need to be treated with caution and care. Nevertheless, some sort of overall picture does emerge.

In 2006 and 2010, most museums reported that displaying and interpreting their collections was their top priority, followed by education and outreach activities and local community engagement, but that conserving and adding to their collections were relatively low priorities – not because that was their wish, but because they lacked the necessary resources. In 2010, half of all the museums and galleries were unable to allocate any income whatsoever to collecting, though even that depressing figure represented an improvement on 2006, when 60 per cent had been unable to set aside any income for that purpose. Even among those museums that did allocate some money for acquisitions, there was widespread frustration that they often failed to obtain the art or the objects they sought, either because they lacked sufficient funds, or because the prices were too high. In 2006, almost 70 per cent of museums and galleries reported that the most common method of developing their collections over the preceding five years had been through donations and bequests; by 2010 that figure had fallen.
to 60 per cent, but it was still the case that most of them were passively receiving art and objects rather than actively or strategically acquiring them. To be sure, there were variations between museums: the nationals were most likely to prioritise adding to their collections, and had the greatest access to funding; local authority museums were the least likely to do so because they lacked the resources. In fact, almost all the museums had been able to make some additions to their collections, although it was generally agreed that inadequate funding and spending cuts represented the greatest obstacle to doing so. This was scarcely a surprise in the aftermath of the financial crisis of 2007-08; more revealing is the fact that funding for collecting had also been inadequate in the boom years before the crash.

The conclusions from the third report are equally clear. Once again, only half of the museums and galleries that replied were able to claim that there was a budget allocation dedicated to collecting, and in most of those cases, it was tiny, rarely more than one per cent of the overall amount that was spent. And while more museums and galleries than not were able to allocate funds from the general budget to acquisitions, the sums involved were still small. Almost all of the respondents had been able to add objects to their collections during the last five years; gifts and purchases were the most frequently used methods, as had previously been the case. In acquiring an object, the scientific or historic or artistic value is rated the most important criterion, while the creation of ‘commercial opportunities’ is considered least important. Over the last 10 years, deaccessioning activity has grown (it was mentioned in the 2010 report, but had not been in 2006), as more museums deaccession, and as more objects are deaccessioned. This is increasingly seen as a ‘standard element in ongoing collections management’, with items deaccessioned because they were irrelevant to the collection, or of insufficient quality, or in too poor a condition to be displayed, or because they were duplicates.

Since the two earlier reports, an increasing number of museums and galleries have devised strategies for the development of their collections, and this may result in a shift from acquisitions which have generally been opportunistic and reactive to collecting which is not only passive (donations and bequests) but also active (there is a policy) as well. In terms of the objects to be acquired in future, most museums and galleries do not see their policy fundamentally changing, but there may be a shift in focus from the ‘intrinsic property of the object’ (artistic merit and significance) to ‘the object’s fit with the themes and narratives presented by the organisation’ (namely the areas and topics already covered by the collection).

Across the period covered by these surveys, there have clearly been some changes, especially as regards the development of collection policies and an increase in deaccessioning. But on the whole, the picture that emerges for 2017 is very little changed from that which was revealed in 2006. As the then director of Art Fund, David Barrie, observed in his foreword to that first report, the findings were indeed ‘shocking’: for while most museums had acquired ‘at least one new object in the last five years’, these had mainly been in the form of gifts. The result, he went on, was that
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‘the majority of UK museums are no longer actively collecting’, because of the ‘universal shortage of funds’ and because of ‘a lack of moral support for collecting in central and local government’. Free admissions to the nationals since 2001, new buildings funded by the HLF, and education and access programmes had transformed museums and galleries in the United Kingdom across the previous decade; but ‘active collecting’, by which he meant the ‘intelligent, creative process of building up collections by seeking out new works to complement existing ones’, appeared to be ‘in steep decline’. That first report also made a persuasive case that collections ‘must be continually renewed to keep our museums vibrant and appealing’, since ‘new objects promote intellectual inquiry, provide material for new displays, and encourage new visitors’.⁴⁹ Yet except in the case of the nationals, collecting, in 2006, in 2010, and in 2017, is for most museums and galleries no more than a marginal and minority activity. But as nine of the following case studies serve to show, the impact of new acquisitions can indeed be transformative, and in many different ways.

In the case of Hull, the purchase of an early Renaissance masterpiece by Lorenzetti significantly raised the profile of the Ferens Art Gallery and, alongside several high-profile national partnership exhibitions, helped to demonstrate increased confidence and ambition during the lead-in to Hull’s bid to become UK City of Culture 2017; while in Birmingham and Stoke-on-Trent the acquisition and display of a locally discovered Anglo-Saxon hoard brought increased visitor numbers and educational and economic benefits to both cities.⁴⁰ In Belfast, the Ulster Museum initiated a project to tell an inclusive and diverse story of the Troubles, and acquired related artefacts for a dedicated gallery, whereas in Manchester the acquisition of a refugee’s life jacket from Greece, as part of a new approach of thematic collecting, formed part of Manchester Museum’s remit to ‘promote understanding between cultures and develop a sustainable world’.⁴¹ Glasgow Museums acquired examples of contemporary Indian art with the intention of engaging the city’s multicultural communities, while at the University of Cambridge, its Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology bought contemporary Australian art with an aim to shed light on, and create discussion around, colonial depictions of Aboriginal culture from the middle of the 19th century. In Folkestone, an independent arts charity, the Creative Foundation, pioneered a new way of collecting and displaying civic art, thereby contributing to the town’s much-needed economic and social regeneration; in Eastbourne, the Towner Art Gallery has raised its profile and attracted new funding by focussing on collecting contemporary film and video work, and Tate Modern has led the way in the collection of performance-based and live-action work. As such, these acquisitions have made precisely the impact that was described in the 2006 report: they ‘shed new light on people, places and times; they enable people to question the way that we look at the world and gain an insight into different cultures’.⁴²

To be sure, these case studies also prompt some important questions, which are specific to each story, but also have broader implications, both about the development of collections and the current agenda of social engagement. Is the Ferens Art Gallery in Hull the most appropriate place to display art of such national and international
significance as Lorenzetti’s great work? Is it really the job of our museums and galleries, as Manchester suggests, ‘to raise awareness of the ongoing refugee crisis in the Mediterranean and the Syrian conflict’? How long will the recent Glasgow initiative last in terms of engaging new museum audiences? Is it the case, as posited by Cambridge, that contemporary art is an effective means of creating debate around colonial depictions of indigenous peoples? Should the display of the Staffordshire Hoard, a collection of national and international significance, have been divided up between different museums in the Midlands, rather than be located in its entirety in one major institution? Is it possible, in Belfast, to present ‘a full and inclusive narrative’ of such a still-divisive episode as the Troubles? Does the public display of art in Folkestone offer a better environment than a traditional gallery setting, and for how long are the benefits it has brought to the town in terms of tourism and the local economy realistically sustainable? While film and video have a significant place in contemporary art, works in these media are expensive to produce and can be complex to exhibit, and last year’s financial crisis at the Towner Art Gallery illustrates the precarious situation of any museum that is heavily reliant on local authority funding. And Tate Modern’s collection of performance and live-action work prompts the question of whether funding bodies that regularly support public galleries will feel comfortable contributing to the purchase of works for which there is no material record, or to which there is limited public access.

These are undoubtedly serious and important questions, which are not only well worth posing, but which can only be asked because these works were successfully acquired in the first place. Moreover, several of these case studies make clear that new acquisitions, appropriately displayed, can significantly enhance existing collections, and can also make a positive impact on the morale and welfare of local communities. Yet it remains to be seen for how long they will continue to do so, and there must always be a danger that tasking museums and galleries with the job of regenerating entire towns, and improving individual health and collective wellbeing, as has been done repeatedly since 1997, is to raise expectations as to what they can realistically achieve much too high, especially if the resources they are given to do so are insufficient. Such historical precedents as there are need to be explored thoroughly and pondered carefully. To be sure, ‘museums must reflect contemporary realities as well as displaying the great works of the past’, and governments rightly want them ‘to respond to the changing needs of the communities they serve’. But ‘to do this they need to have the funds to develop their collections’, because that rightly remains at the heart of what they do, and is the essential precondition for any or all the public benefit that they may be able to deliver. They did not have those resources in 2006, they did not have them in 2010, and they do not have them now. This is still a ‘shocking’ state of affairs.43 That being so, it is time to conclude by taking a second brief look at the Mendoza Review, and in so doing give more attention to an essential subject thus far insufficiently discussed, namely resources, which essentially means money.
In many ways [collecting] could be seen as a low priority at a time of severe constraints in terms of funding and personnel. However, in hard times one has to return to fundamental values. There is no better time to re-assert the vital importance of collecting.

On almost the same day that the Mendoza Review of Museums in England was published, a painting of Jesus Christ, believed to be by Leonardo da Vinci, was sold at auction in New York. The Review noted that in 2016-17, total public funding allocated to museums and galleries in England was £839m (including £211m that came from local, rather than national, government), and it offered a generally upbeat account of the state of the sector, not sufficiently addressing the question, ‘is the sector in crisis?’ Yet at almost the very same time, the Leonardo was sold for the ‘astronomical price’ of more than £333m, which was the highest amount ever paid anywhere in the world for a single work of art. ‘I do not understand sums of money like this’, observed Philippe de Montebello, the former head of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, in disbelief. ‘It is beyond my comprehension.’ To be sure, this was a one-off sale, and the last Leonardo known to have been in private hands fetched a price, perhaps appropriately, that may not be equalled for some time for any other work of art. But it does draw attention, albeit in an exaggerated form, to the fundamental issue that lay behind the commissioning of this report by Art Fund, namely the ever-widening gap between the spiralling prices of works on the international art market on the one hand, and the limited resources for purchasing and acquisition possessed by, or available to, museums and galleries in the United Kingdom on the other – the very same problem, albeit in retrospect on a much smaller scale, that had led to the creation of Art Fund in the first place.

The Mendoza Review followed on from the Culture White Paper, produced by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport (DCMS) in March 2016, and which restated the by-now familiar agenda of putting in place ‘measures to increase participation in culture’; of developing and promoting ‘the contribution of the cultural sectors to improving health and wellbeing’; and of creating ‘new opportunities to promote trade, exports and cultural exchanges’. The White Paper also insisted that ‘we have a successful model of cultural investment in which public funding works alongside earned income, private sector finance and philanthropy’, and that ‘this mixture of income streams provides the basis for a thriving and resilient cultural sector’. ‘The role of government’, it proclaimed, ‘is to enable great culture and creativity to flourish.’ Like the White Paper, the Mendoza Review was generally upbeat, insisting that England’s museums and galleries form ‘a strong, dynamic sector’, that they are ‘of exceptional reputation’, and that overall, there was ‘a positive picture [of] many museums producing wonderful work’. The Review also provided the most robust figures yet for public funding of museums and galleries, noting that it came from 16 different sources, and it calculated that across the last 10 years, successive central governments, regardless of their political identities, together with local authorities, had invested on average £844m each year in the sector. And in the
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light of what it regarded as these apparently encouraging figures, the Review urged that DCMS and its funding agencies, namely Arts Council England, the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) and Historic England, should ‘work closely together to ensure that funds are allocated in a strategic and joined-up way to best benefit the museums sector’.

Yet these views are not easily reconciled with the evidence that has been advanced, and the arguments that have been made in this report; nor, indeed, can they be convincingly aligned with much of the data that is to be found in the Mendoza Review itself. As it concedes, in real terms, public spending on museums and galleries in England has declined by 13 per cent, from £829m in 2007 to £720m 10 years later (and the position may be worse in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland). Throughout that time, central government has contributed approximately three quarters of the funding, with the remainder provided by local authorities, where the reduction has been greatest. These are not big figures, one indication of which is that the £618m that DCMS and other London-based official bodies allocated to England’s museums and galleries in 2016-17 was less than double the sum recently paid for the single Leonardo painting. Put another way, £618m amounts to less than one per cent of total government spending, yet the Review further warns that ‘public funding is ultimately finite’ and that ‘it is unlikely that there will be significant additional money available to the sector in the immediate future’. It additionally remarks that ‘sixteen income streams is a lot’, and that if a funding programme was being devised from scratch, ‘we would reduce the number’. It is also ‘sympathetic to concerns about the imbalance of funding for museums inside and outside London’, and accepts that recent cuts mean many museums have been driven to ‘reducing opening hours, cancelling outreach work, and losing professional expertise, such as replacing permanent posts with short-term roles, or professional posts with unpaid posts’. And it acknowledges that for those employed in museums and galleries, ‘salary levels are 7% lower than the market average in comparable sectors, rising to 25% below market rate for junior roles in collections and curations management’. In addition, the Review refers to the current pressures faced by the HLF through declining National Lottery income.

The Mendoza Review may not accept that this deeply depressing picture amounts to a full-blown crisis in our museums and galleries, but it scarcely describes a flourishing sector, for there are clearly problems aplenty which need addressing. It also bears repeating that this state of affairs has been unsatisfactory since before the financial crash of 2007, and that it has been getting progressively worse in the years since then. Once again, the word ‘shocking’ comes to mind, and if the Review’s findings had been set in a broader, comparative framework, or in a longer historical perspective, the result would have been more ‘shocking’ still. International comparisons are notoriously difficult to make, but the £618m figure the Review gives is certainly consistent with the findings of a recent survey which shows that the UK government spends less on culture, in percentage terms, than Denmark or France – or Hungary or Latvia. Nor, however dismayng these comparisons, should this come as any surprise, for in truth it was ever thus. Across the last 300 years, the British state has been notoriously mean in its support for the arts.
in general, and for museums and galleries in particular. There may have been brief periods when funding improved, but they have invariably been the exceptions that prove the rule. If much of the evidence put forward by the Review, and most of the evidence advanced in this report, is set in the longer-term context of official parsimony, then it is clear that the inadequate funding of the last decade and a half is no new phenomenon, but is merely the most recent episode in a much longer history of insufficient government support. In that sense, little has changed since the 18th and 19th centuries. As Giles Waterfield rightly observed, having investigated those earlier times when state involvement was grudging and inadequate: ‘For those interested in early 21st-century discussions around museums, many of these arguments will seem disturbingly familiar.’

So, indeed, they do; and so, indeed, they are.

Yet the only solution to these problems and challenges that the Mendoza Review comes up with is the proposal to ‘use existing funding in the best way possible’, and to distribute it ‘in a more joined up and strategic fashion’, thereby creating ‘an environment that enables England’s museums to do their best work’. But how can they be expected or feel encouraged to do ‘their best work’ when funding across the sector, by both central and local government, is insufficient and has been diminishing in real terms for the best part of a decade, and when staff morale in many museums and galleries is as understandably low as it currently is as a result? Commissioning yet more DCMS reports, announcing additional policy initiatives, and constantly tinkering with so-called ‘delivery bodies’ are no substitutes for the increased government support for our museums and galleries that is belatedly required and urgently needed, and that other countries undoubtedly provide. Instead of passively acquiescing in a state of affairs that has in truth existed for far too long, the Review could have reiterated the case that additional funding ought to be given to museums and galleries as a matter of immediate urgency and high priority. It may not be expedient to advance such arguments in the uncertain political and financial circumstances in which we presently find ourselves. But the money given to our museums and galleries is only ‘a minute slice of the national budget’, which delivers benefits out of all proportion to the outlay. If ever there was a time to increase investment in their curators and in their collections, then that time is now.
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Notes

Preface


5. Unpublished statistics provided by HLF and NHMF, January 2018; minutes of the NHMF Board meeting held on 27 June 2017; Heritage Lottery Fund, ‘Changes to our grant making’, https://www.hlf.org.uk/about-us/our-strategy/changes-our-grant-making. The works referred to in this passage are: Titian, *Diana and Actaeon* and *Diana and Callisto* acquired by the National Gallery and National Galleries of Scotland in 2009-12 for a total of £95m; John Constable, *Salisbury Cathedral from the Meadows*, acquired by Tate in 2013 for £23.1m, and then shared in partnership with Amgueddda Cymru – National Museum Wales, National Galleries of Scotland, Colchester and Ipswich Museums and Salisbury and South Wiltshire Museum; Self-portrait by Sir Anthony Van Dyck, acquired by the National Portrait Gallery in 2014 for £10m; Bernardo Bellotto, *The Fortress of Königstein from the North*, acquired by the National Gallery in 2017 for £11.67m.


Why collect?


Why Collect?


34. Art Fund, The Collecting Challenge, p. 7; Art Fund, Gathering Challenges, p. 4.

35. Art Fund, The Collecting Challenge, p. 6; Art Fund, Gathering Challenges, pp. 4-5.

36. Art Fund, Gathering Challenges, p. 6; see below appendix, pp. 86-87, 91-95.

37. See below appendix, pp. 86-89.

38. Art Fund, The Collecting Challenge, pp. 3-5.


42. Art Fund, The Collecting Challenge, p. 5.

43. Art Fund, The Collecting Challenge, pp. 3-5.

44. The Mendoza Review, pp. 23, 30.


Case studies

Text by Marcus Field
Case study 1: refugee’s life jacket

Location: Manchester Museum

The acquisition of a refugee’s life jacket from Greece illustrates a shift towards thematic collecting.

In December 2016 Manchester Museum curator of archaeology and deputy head of collections Bryan Sitch travelled to the Greek island of Lesbos in order to acquire a life jacket abandoned by a refugee arriving there. Three months later the life jacket went on display in the museum entrance.

This acquisition reflects a new policy for collecting at Manchester Museum. Termed ‘Collecting Life’, it sees a shift from the traditional approach of systematic and comprehensive collecting towards what the museum’s director, Nick Merriman, has described as ‘collecting as an interpretation of the world’, or ‘thematic collecting’, in line with the museum’s vision to promote understanding between cultures and develop a sustainable world. A Victorian institution containing over 4.5 million objects, Manchester Museum’s original remit was to collect examples of many different things from around the world in an encyclopaedic way – but as Merriman says, this is no longer considered desirable or viable. Instead he advocates a revitalised collecting policy that ‘tells us something about the present, rather than... a systematic gap-filling exercise referring to the past’.

As part of the museum’s new policy the collecting process becomes part of the story, with the recording of images, conversations and thoughts undertaken alongside the acquisition of the object or specimen. This process will continue to be scientifically rigorous and structured, but with an acceptance that collecting can only ever be partial and that the legacy will be selective rather than comprehensive.

The life jacket is an illustration of how this new policy works in practice. Together with the collections team, Sitch identified migration as a contemporary issue that the museum might address and interpret. Lesbos was selected as the focus of the project because of the large numbers of refugees migrating there by sea from Turkey en route to mainland Europe; in summer 2015 several thousand refugees were reported to be arriving on the island’s beaches each day, many of them fleeing the civil war in Syria. A life jacket from this mass movement of people was chosen as an object of current significance – and given that the museum’s collection has always been focused on authentic objects, a photograph of a jacket or a jacket that had not been used in the crisis would clearly be no substitute for the real thing.

Sitch documented every step of his journey to acquire the life jacket and recorded these steps in a blog published on the museum’s website. In Lesbos he met associate professor Evi Sampanikou of the University of the Aegean and interviewed her about the refugee crisis. Sampanikou told him how the life jacket has come to symbolise the crisis and pointed out the subtle differences in life jackets belonging to different refugee groups.

Later Sitch met Marios Andriotis, senior advisor to the mayor of Mytilene, the island’s main town, and filmed him talking about the crisis. The following day, in the town hall, Andriotis handed over the
Why Collect?
A life jacket that had been selected to donate to the museum. A form was signed to complete the transfer of ownership. Sitch later visited a workshop for refugees on Lesbos to see how life jackets are being recycled and made into bags. He also visited the Kara Tepe and Pikpa refugee camps and interviewed aid workers.

In Manchester Museum, the story of the life jacket and what it tells us about the migration crisis is communicated on labels in the display case, and the interviews filmed by Sitch in Lesbos are shown on an adjacent screen. This interpretative material includes photographs taken during the process, and an additional interview with a Syrian refugee now living in Manchester.

The life jacket has become a highly significant acquisition for the museum, not just because of what it represents as an object but because of the revitalised collecting policy it reflects. Due to its location in the museum’s entrance hall, the object has raised awareness of the ongoing refugee crisis in the Mediterranean and the Syrian conflict, and the impact of these events on people and places elsewhere.

As a new way of collecting it shows how a theme like migration can be identified, and then an object selected for acquisition. (The museum’s latest acquisition under this theme is a spider which arrived in Britain from Colombia in a bunch of bananas.) The filming, editing and publication of interviews allows for the development of new curatorial skills and methods, and the additional material is crucial in both providing a lasting record of the collecting process and as an aid for interpretation.

News of this acquisition and Manchester Museum’s new collecting policy has spread – the life jacket has its own Twitter hashtag, #MMLifeJacket – and there is great interest from other organisations. Staff from the American Anthropological Association have been in touch with Sitch about their own migration exhibition, and he has spoken about the life jacket at an archaeology conference in Newcastle and at the 2017 Museums Association conference in Manchester.
The acquisition by a museum or gallery of a rare and valuable work of art is almost certain to attract publicity and increased visitor numbers. However, questions over the appropriate nature of the work, such as how it fits into a collection and its long-term value for the museum, are important considerations too.

The case of *Christ between Saints Paul and Peter* by the Sienese master Pietro Lorenzetti (active from around 1306, died c1340), now in the collection of the Ferens Art Gallery, Hull, illustrates this.

Thought to have been in a private collection in Britain since the mid-19th century, this small work in tempera on wood was identified as a Lorenzetti when it was consigned to auction at Christie’s by its owner in 2012. It sold for £5,081,250 to an overseas buyer, but an export bar recommended by the Reviewing Committee on the Export of Works of Art and Objects of Cultural Interest gave the Ferens time to raise funds for a private treaty purchase.

While the Ferens has a strong collection of European art dating from the 15th century to the present day, including works by Hals, Canaletto, Bridget Riley and Stanley Spencer, art historian Christopher Wright – author of two catalogues of the Ferens’ permanent collection – had identified an early Italian picture on a gold background as a particular gap. With this in mind, Ferens curator Kirsten Simister actively pursued the purchase of the Lorenzetti panel, describing it as ‘a nationally significant artwork’ that would be ‘transformational’ for the gallery – not only in extending the scope of its existing holdings, but also in enhancing the rationale to develop the early and medieval aspects of its collection still further over the long term. Simister also noted that securing the Lorenzetti would have the potential to create opportunities for regional and national partnerships that would stimulate scholarly expertise, research and debate around both the work itself and the gallery’s wider collection. The Ferens began campaigning to raise money for the agreed private treaty price of £1,612,940 in February 2013.

The Ferens’ purchase of the painting was eventually completed in May 2013 with funds raised from a number of sources. The Heritage Lottery Fund gave £758,000 (including £202,162 to fund a public engagement project), £125,000 came from Art Fund with a £75,000 contribution from the Wolfson Foundation, and the remaining £856,602 came from the Ferens’ own purchase fund (the annual interest accrued on an endowment given by the gallery’s founder, Thomas Ferens) and the John Bradshaw Bequest, from a former director of the gallery who died in 2001.

Beyond filling a gap in the Ferens’ collection, the acquisition led to other benefits for both the gallery and Hull. The announcement of the purchase of this work of national importance came as Hull was making its bid to be UK City of Culture 2017; Simister has commented that the purchase, alongside several high-profile national...
partnership exhibitions, helped to demonstrate increased confidence and ambition during the lead-in to the submission of the bid. The painting became the centrepiece of the gallery’s reopening in January 2017 after a £5.2m refurbishment; more than 10,000 people visited the gallery in the following 48 hours, and by the beginning of May 2017 the Ferens had received nearly a quarter of a million visitors compared with a normal annual rate of around 130,000.

A wave of local and national media coverage followed the acquisition in 2013, and in 2017 when it went on display for the first time as part of the wider UK City of Culture celebrations. 39 per cent of visitors asked in a Ferens survey said that they heard about the painting through national media. Of people surveyed, 74 per cent said the Lorenzetti was the reason for their visit. The longer legacy of the purchase both for Hull and the gallery is indicated by the fact that 88 per cent of visitors said they would recommend the Lorenzetti exhibition to others, and 89 per cent of respondents said they agreed or strongly agreed with the statement ‘I will visit the Ferens Art Gallery again’.

The acquisition also strengthened the Ferens’ relationship with the National Gallery, which officially supported the purchase of the Lorenzetti and subsequently carried out conservation work on the painting at no cost. The Ferens was awarded a National Gallery trainee curator, Lucy West, who researched and curated the special opening display, ‘Siena to Hull: A Masterpiece Revealed’, which included a number of contextual loans lent by the National Gallery and others. The Society for Renaissance Studies awarded Simister a bursary towards research on the panel in Italy, and as part of the purchase the Heritage Lottery Fund awarded money for an ambitious public engagement programme focusing on the Lorenzetti, including working with schools, adult learners and families.

These outcomes make clear how the Ferens Art Gallery has benefited from this acquisition. Questions remain, however, over whether the gallery is the best home for a painting of this date and of such national significance. While the Ferens has clearly stated its reasoning behind acquiring a work that predates its collection by 130 years, some may argue that the panel might have been better
displayed in context with other works of this period and school. The most obvious place to do this would have been the National Gallery, which has a number of works attributed to Lorenzetti's studio. But good arguments have also been made for the need for works of this quality in the north of England, where York Art Gallery is strong in gold-background Italian paintings and may also have made a valid home.

Nevertheless what has been demonstrated by this case is that the National Gallery is prepared to lend major support for the acquisition of outstanding paintings, and considered the Ferens to be an appropriate home for the Lorenzetti. Clearly the debate about the wider distribution of such masterpieces across the UK and the best places for them to be housed is open and ongoing.
In 2011 Glasgow Museums was awarded £100,000 by Art Fund’s Renew scheme to develop a new collection of South Asian art. The existing Glasgow collection of South Asian objects was largely made up of around 3,000 industrial items shown at the International Exhibition of Science, Art and Industry at Kelvingrove in 1888 and acquired in an imperial colonial context; the idea was to update this with a capsule collection of contemporary work that, according to Patricia Allan, Glasgow Museums’ curator of world cultures, would in turn help engage local South Asian audiences. Three regions – West Bengal, Punjab and Assam – were selected as places from which to acquire work on the basis that they were the areas where Glasgow Museums’ existing collections of South Asian art originated, and because there is a strong link between Punjab and Bengal and the roots of the South Asian diaspora in Glasgow.

To help with the selection of artists, Glasgow Museums worked in partnership with the New Delhi-based Earth and Grass Workshop. In March 2013 Allan travelled to India to visit and film the artists making the work for Glasgow’s new collection. Some of the new work is by established artists like Ganesh Gohain, who produced the conceptual piece *My Table*, while other works challenge conventional fine art categories. Among the works commissioned for the project are three metal truck backs decorated in the traditional Punjabi style.

Brightly painted trucks from Punjab can be seen across all of northern India, and the town of Sirhind is particularly famous for its truck painting style. This form of vibrant decoration has its roots in the Moghul art from this region found in Glasgow’s existing collections, and therefore the truck backs were identified as an appropriate new addition. Three 300kg truck backs specially painted by Jarnail Singh in Sirhind were eventually acquired at a cost of £935.29.

Since the arrival of the truck backs in Glasgow in 2013 along with the other works, a number of workshops and exhibitions inspired by these objects have been held. The first community outreach project, ‘Keep on Trucking’ – a collaboration between Glasgow Museums, Motherwell College and the family contact unit at Barlinnie prison – saw a group of inmates create a travelling display inspired by truck art and other objects from the South Asian collection.

A series of further community arts projects inspired by the new collection took place at Scotland Street School Museum and Glasgow Central Mosque. One of the three artists leading these workshops was Basharat Khan, whose aim was to encourage participants to look at the truck art and then ‘explore imagery that represents part of their culture, heritage and personal journeys from a Scottish perspective’. His group produced five painted panels inspired by the truck backs, but also

**Case study 3:** three painted truck backs (with panels and signage) in the Punjabi style

**Location:** Glasgow Museums

The acquisition of examples of Punjabi street art has inspired increased public participation.
informed by their own stories. Later, the final community arts event at Scotland Street School Museum was attended by around 360 people mostly from the South Asian community, previously notable for their absence from Glasgow Museums’ audience figures.

While questions can be raised around whether ‘popular’ art like the truck backs will remain as rich for interpretation and display over time, and around the longevity of their impact in terms of engaging new audiences, Patricia Allan and Minhazz Majumdar of the Earth and Grass Workshop see this project as having a significant long-term legacy. Allan says that the project has brought a greater understanding of Indian artistic traditions to Glasgow Museums and that there has been general enthusiasm from Glasgow’s South Asian community, not only about the workshops but also about the truck backs’ inclusion in an exhibition at Tramway in 2016 and the display of the 171 new objects in Glasgow Museums Resource Centre.
Case study 4: Brook Andrew, *The Island I and II* (2008)

Location: Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Cambridge

Contemporary art has helped a university museum to reinterpret ethnographic images in its archive and bring them into public view.

The Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (MAA) in Cambridge tells the story of nearly two million years of human history through objects, art and photography. It was founded in 1884 and its collection spans archaeological, anthropological, photographic, modern and contemporary, and archival material. While archives are viewed by some as static stores for older works, of which many might be considered problematic in tone or in their representation of other cultures, MAA’s acquisition shows that, instead, they offer a rich resource for people to research, respond to and debate.

Among MAA’s objects are around 300 faded photographic prints made in the early 20th century that reflect Aboriginal life in Australia in the mid-19th century, depicting burial mounds, mysterious and monumental forms in the landscape and carved and decorated trees. The story of how new art has been made and acquired as a response to these photographs therefore makes an interesting case study.

Brook Andrew, an Australian artist with Aboriginal roots, works across mediums including performance, photography and installation and is known for his work responding to ethnographic images of Aboriginal people, many of them found in museum archives. It was during a research visit to MAA in 2007 that he came across a curious set of photographs showing scenes of Aboriginal life. Further investigation revealed the pictures to be photos of illustrations for the book *Australien in 142 Photographicinen*, a rare volume (only two are known to exist; one is in the Haddon Library, Cambridge) produced by the German natural historian William Blandowski in the early 1860s. The book was intended as a record of Blandowski’s expedition to the confluence of the Murray and Darling rivers in 1856-57, during which the artist Gerard Krefft made drawings of the Nyeri Nyeri people and their activities and ceremonies. It was these drawings that Blandowski later had reworked and photographed to provide illustrations for his book.

As MAA director Nicholas Thomas has pointed out, many of these reworked and photographed drawings are ‘twice or three times removed from field sketches that were perhaps themselves imaginative, even falsified or fantastic’. Rather than keep such images hidden, however, Andrew’s practice seeks to shine new light on them and make them a focus for debate.

Andrew used six of the illustrations for Blandowski’s book as the basis for his series *The Island*, a set of large canvases in which the images are blown up to enormous scale (250x300cm) and rendered in vivid colour. Among the subjects Andrew chose for *The Island* are a kangaroo hunt and a scene of ritual dance, both of them showing the exaggerated savagery with which Aboriginal people were often depicted.

In 2008 an exhibition was staged at MAA featuring two works from *The Island* alongside other works.
by Andrew and a display of Blandowski’s book and associated prints. *The Island I and II* are scaled-up versions of drawings from the book of Aboriginal burial mounds, depicted in a way Andrew describes as ‘exaggerated utopian and fantastical imaginings of other worlds’. These two mixed-media works were later acquired by MAA for £26,763, with the help of a £10,040 grant from Art Fund.

The whole process of making, exhibiting and acquiring these works has helped to bring historical ethnographic images of Aboriginal culture out of the archives at MAA and into public view. Questions over the authenticity of what the original drawings depict and the romanticisation of indigenous people have, in this way, become a subject for debate. The works also represent a contemporary indigenous artist’s perspective on the source material, as well as being Aboriginal art in their own right.

In addition, MAA’s case for acquiring Andrew’s works argued that they resonate with the museum’s anthropological and Australian collection (MAA holds the first objects known to have been collected in Australia by a European), as well as comment on the endeavours of exploration, fieldwork and archaeological investigation.

MAA identified Aboriginal art as a strategic priority for acquisitions over the period 2008-12, and Andrew is a prominent example of a contemporary artist whose roots clearly inform his work and subject matter.

However, questions raised by this acquisition include whether contemporary art is the most effective means of highlighting historical depictions of indigenous peoples. Could the same issues have been raised by displaying the source material and exploring it through labels and workshops? Arguably, the collection enabled Andrew to produce a series of works which generated considerable debate in Australia and, as well as being acquired by MAA in the UK (these works have since been loaned to exhibitions at Cambridge University, Tate Britain and the Musée d’ethnographie de Genève), were also acquired by a number of Australian state galleries.

Nevertheless, Andrew’s works represent a bold addition to MAA’s collection of work by indigenous people, and their resonance in this context – both nationally and internationally – is clearly greater than it would be in a straightforward art gallery setting.
Case study 5: Staffordshire Hoard

Location: Birmingham and Stoke-on-Trent city councils

The joint acquisition of a remarkable Anglo-Saxon hoard has brought a wealth of benefits to two local authority museums, their partners and surrounding area.

Discovered by a metal detectorist in July 2009 in a field near Lichfield, the Staffordshire Hoard is the largest collection of Anglo-Saxon gold and silver items ever discovered. Its remarkable contents— which eventually totalled over 4,600 pieces, mainly decorated fittings stripped from the hilts of swords and seaxes— are now the joint property of Birmingham and Stoke-on-Trent city councils and their Accredited museums, Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery (BMAG) and the Potteries Museum and Art Gallery (PMAG).

The story of how the Hoard came to be acquired by these councils and displayed at four venues across the West Midlands both reflects current ideas about collecting for the nation and raises questions for the future.

Prior to an inquest in September 2009 that declared the Hoard treasure, debate had already arisen around what should happen to it, with local councils and museums in the region voicing their desire that this unique collection should stay close to the area where it was found— what was, in the Hoard’s time, the ancient kingdom of Mercia. In response to this surge of public interest, the British Museum, which has a right to acquire items declared treasure in England, waived this right and supported attempts to acquire the Hoard for the region’s museums.

Even before valuation it was clear that large amounts of money would be needed to acquire the Hoard, and therefore the two councils, through BMAG and PMAG, agreed to work together to raise the funds. In November 2009 the Hoard was valued by the Treasure Valuation Committee at £3.285m, at that date the largest figure ever for a UK treasure find.

Setting out the argument for joint acquisition by BMAG and PMAG, a forthcoming research publication, The Staffordshire Hoard: an Anglo-Saxon Treasure, states: ‘The Staffordshire Hoard represented a distinctive heritage opportunity with the potential to generate educational, community and economic benefits and to provide a focus for positive regional identity based on renewed interest in a shared historic past.’ The publication also notes how the joint acquisition in 2005 of the Staffordshire Moorlands Pan by the British Museum, PMAG and Tullie House Museum, Carlisle, provided a precedent for this new type of collaboration as well as established the concept of a ‘nationally distributed collection’. Both BMAG and PMAG had strong remits to acquire the Hoard: BMAG is the regional centre of excellence with collections including Anglo-Saxon material from the area as well as metalwork and jewellery (the Hoard features 3,500 cloisonné garnets), while PMAG is the repository for archaeological remains recovered from across Staffordshire and holds collections which are all Designated as pre-eminent by Arts Council England’s Designation Scheme.

A major campaign to raise funds was launched which also sought permission from the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport to exhibit the Hoard in its pre-conservation state, complete with coverings of mud. Three temporary displays were staged, all attracting large numbers of visitors.
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Anglo-Saxon, Staffordshire Hoard, late 6th-8th century, Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery; The Potteries Museum and Art Gallery, Stoke-on-Trent, Art Funded 2010
(40,063 to BMAG in 19 days, 55,000 to PMAG in 23 days), reflecting the high level of public interest in the Hoard even prior to conservation.

Within four months of valuation the funds for the joint purchase had been raised, and the Hoard was formally acquired in June 2010. A public fundraising campaign led by Art Fund raised £900,000, the largest amount ever given by the public to a heritage appeal; a third of donors were from the West Midlands, indicating the regional pride felt for the endeavour. Support also came from the National Heritage Memorial Fund (£1.285m) and Art Fund with the support of the Wolfson Foundation (£300,000), with a further £600,000 from trusts and foundations, £100,000 from Birmingham City Council, £100,000 from Stoke-on-Trent City Council, £80,000 from Staffordshire County Council, £20,000 from Lichfield District Council and £20,000 from Tamworth Borough Council.

In August 2010 the Mercian (now Staffordshire Hoard) Trail Partnership was formed, in which the two owners of the collection worked collaboratively with Tamworth Borough Council, Lichfield District Council, Lichfield Cathedral and Staffordshire County Council to organise a regional touring exhibition, long-term loans of Hoard items, and education and outreach programmes, all enabling the Hoard to reach wider audiences and have a positive impact on the region’s tourism and economy beyond the permanent displays at BMAG and PMAG.

The national and international significance of the Hoard is evident from expert opinion, and from the increased visitor numbers, publicity and funding it has attracted for its host museums. As well as funding for the acquisition, the owners have been able to attract further support and funds to aid conservation, display and interpretation – including, from the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF), £750,000 for BMAG to build a dedicated gallery and £40,000 for a temporary display at PMAG. Dr Kevin Leahy of the Portable Antiquities Scheme has said: ‘The quantity of gold [5kg] is amazing, but more importantly the craftsmanship is consummate. This was the very best the Anglo-Saxon metalworkers could do.’ Leslie Webster, former keeper of the department of Prehistory and Europe at the British Museum, wrote: ‘This is going to alter our perceptions of Anglo-Saxon England in the 7th and 8th centuries as radically, if not more so, as the 1939 Sutton Hoo discoveries did... Absolutely the equivalent of finding a new Lindisfarne Gospels or Book of Kells.’
Overall, an estimated 2.5 million visits have been made to see the Staffordshire Hoard since 2009, with around 90 per cent of those visits made to venues in the West Midlands. The new gallery at BMAG, which opened in 2014, attracted almost 100,000 visitors in its first six months, and the HLF-funded ‘Staffordshire Hoard: Dark Age Discovery’ exhibition at PMAG attracted 98,000 visitors in 2013. A regional tour in 2011 attracted 36,214 visitors, and retail spend increased by 100 per cent at all participating venues. A partnership with National Geographic led to an exhibition in 2011-12 of more than 100 items at the magazine’s gallery in Washington DC, and several television programmes have been made about the Hoard, including BBC and Channel 4 documentaries.

While the positive effect of loans, tours and programmes is clear, debate still occasionally arises over whether the Hoard should be displayed in its complete form. (Since the items have been buried together for around 1,300 years, is it right for them to be separated now?) However, strong arguments can be made in favour of their distribution into themed exhibits of war and battle (Tamworth Castle), conservation and craftsmanship (BMAG) and Mercian context (PMAG), and the ability to reach a large and diverse audience across these venues.

Why Collect?

Anglo-Saxon Staffordshire Hoard, late 6th-early 8th century, Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery; The Potteries Museum and Art Gallery, Stoke-on-Trent, Art Funded 2010
The challenge for Ulster Museum is to tell the story of the Troubles in Northern Ireland in the broadest, most balanced and engaging way.

Karen Logan is the curator leading a project to redevelop the Troubles gallery, a display originally unveiled in 2009 when the whole museum reopened after refurbishment but which was criticised by the public and press for being bland and lacking in original artefacts. A new approach was deemed necessary, and to start the gallery redevelopment process a three-year project called ‘Collecting the Troubles and Beyond’ was set up, funded by £370,000 from the Heritage Lottery Fund through its Collecting Cultures programme. This grant included provision for Logan’s role as project curator and a £200,000 acquisitions budget.

The history of Northern Ireland from the late 1960s onwards has been dominated by the civil and political conflict commonly referred to as ‘the Troubles’. Presenting a balanced story of what happened and collecting artefacts relating to the conflict is an essential part of Ulster Museum’s remit. Logan set out her aims for collecting in a blog post in June 2016. It would involve bridging gaps in the existing collection, she wrote, as well as acquiring items of particular national and international significance, or those which are rare and represent the best examples of their kind.

But Logan also explained a new plan for dynamic collecting in collaboration with the community, in order to support a full and inclusive narrative and reflect the diversity of people’s experiences: ‘As well as material relating directly to political developments and conflict, collecting activity will be focused on wider social, cultural and economic themes. Members of the public will be actively encouraged to come forward with their own objects and memories during themed collecting events held in the Ulster Museum and within community venues.’

Thanks to community collecting events and invitations to contribute (via radio interviews, flyers, social media and other means), more than 1,200 items have now been acquired which fulfil Logan’s aim of adding personal artefacts to the collection and giving broader context to the subject. Among the items donated so far are archives of photographs and material relating to LGBT history during the Troubles, a pistol issued to a member of the Ulster Defence Regiment and an archive of Troubles-related badges, leaflets, letters, coins and photographs. An archive of oral histories is also planned.

Some acquisitions have been purchased, including Spitting Image puppets of Sinn Féin leader Gerry Adams and Peter Mandelson, a former Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. Also recently acquired is an archive of documentary photos taken during the Troubles by Martin Nangle. These pictures, dating from 1973 to 1989, show not

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**Case study 6: artefacts relating to the Troubles**

**Location:** Ulster Museum (National Museums Northern Ireland), Belfast

An initiative to collect in collaboration with the community offers a response to the question of how to represent sensitive histories.
Why Collect?
just the immediate effects of the conflict but also the changing social conditions in the towns and cities of the region. An exhibition of the photographs went on tour in late 2016 as part of Ulster Museum’s outreach programme.

There will be no big relaunch of the Troubles gallery, but a gradual phasing in of new material and displays to reflect the revised approach. Three new cases have already been installed, complete with a selection of items acquired as a result of the community collecting project.

Ulster Museum’s approach to collecting material on the Troubles has attracted attention from both the media and academic circles, and seems to have been well-received by members of the public, with Logan noting the willingness of people to get involved and quoting positive feedback from attendees at a reminiscence event.

In a comment in *Museums Journal*, professor Graham Black of Nottingham Trent University, a member of an academic advisory group set up to give guidance on the project, said that the approach of Ulster Museum to the Troubles ‘is of international significance in that it is tackling the wider question of “how on earth do you respond to contentious histories?”’

Ulster Museum’s aim to present ‘a full and inclusive narrative’ is a bold ambition for any organisation, let alone one dealing with a conflict that provokes such strong partisan feeling. Whether it is possible is debatable. Nevertheless, Ulster Museum’s dynamic approach to collecting, particularly in its engagement with communities on all sides, looks set to provide a range of material that will come as close as possible to fulfilling this mission.
Case study 7: disposal of firearms, films, books, printed material, vehicles and aircraft

Location: Imperial War Museum, London

The disposal of material by a major London museum has enabled it to focus and refine its holdings.

The permanent removal of items from museum collections – whether by transferal to another museum or institution, sale or destruction – can be controversial, with well-rehearsed arguments being that disposal can discourage future donations and funding for acquisitions, as well as adversely affect reputation.

However, there are good arguments for disposal as part of healthy collections management, as the Imperial War Museum (IWM) outlined when it undertook a five-year collections review between 2010 and 2015.

The aim of the review was to make sure that the collections remained focused, with items that were duplicates, or in such poor condition that they were beyond conservation, or did not meet the museum’s purpose or remit, considered for disposal. A rigorous and comprehensive process for disposal is set out in the museum’s policy document ‘Collections Development (Acquisition and Disposal)’. The review was conducted by curators who looked at specific parts of the collection and recommended objects for disposal to IWM’s collections review committee. Once the committee approved the disposal, further internal and external approvals were needed. This included seeking expert advice and opinions from stakeholders such as donors, researchers and communities served by the museum.

Disposal of non-duplicate accessioned material – i.e. material formally accepted into the collection – also required the consent of the Secretary of State for the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, or their designated authorities. The museum clearly sets out in its collections policy that it abides by ‘strict ethical principles, by the specific Imperial War Museum Acts (1920 and 1955) and the Museums and Galleries Act (1992), by museum sector guidance, and by UK law, particularly charity law. We will confirm that it is legally free to dispose of an item, and agreements on disposals made with donors, depositors and transferors will be taken into account’.

These steps were strictly followed during the review process and disposals were duly made. IWM says it safely disposed of 69 firearms that were not significant to its remit; 27,000 films, including VHS tapes where it has retained the master film reels or where IWM owned no rights to use films already preserved by organisations like the BBC; and a number of larger objects, including vehicles, aircraft and aero engines, where they were not significant to the collection or did not meet the museum’s remit. A recent example is an Armstrong Whitworth Meteor Night Fighter. The aircraft, built in 1952 and transferred to IWM in 1974, never flew in conflict and is missing several key parts that limit its potential for interpretation. Seven other Meteor Night Fighters exist in UK museums. The aircraft was disposed of by gift to the Boscombe Down Aircraft Collection, where it fills a relevant gap in the collection and will be restored.
IWM also disposed of around 40,000 unaccessioned books, pamphlets and periodicals. These included duplicate copies, material widely held elsewhere and titles outside the museum’s remit. Unaccessioned items do not require the same level of approval for exit as accessioned items and, apart from some items transferred as gifts, this material was offered at auction.

Adverse publicity can be a hazard of disposal and IWM’s process was the subject of a news article under the headline ‘War museum takes flak over bargain sell-off’ in *The Times* in January 2017. ‘The Imperial War Museum has raised eyebrows by offloading a significant part of its collection from the past century of conflicts at knockdown prices,’ the piece began. A dealer was quoted as having bought a set of journals priced at £2,000 online for just £18.

But the Museums Association (MA) responded with a robust statement in defence of IWM and its disposal process. Alistair Brown, the MA’s policy officer, said ‘we are satisfied that it [IWM] met the criteria of the Code of Ethics and the disposal toolkit’. In response to the issue of prices paid for items at auction, IWM stated that ‘prices were set by the market on the day of the sale’.

While the negative publicity that can be attracted by disposal indicates the continued sensitive nature of the subject, for IWM it has clearly had positive impacts. The sale of aircraft generated £57,000, while books and other items sold at auction raised £39,185. Funds raised from the sale of accessioned items are ringfenced towards new acquisitions, while funds raised from unaccessioned items are ringfenced for improving collections, usually through new acquisitions.

Some aircraft and vehicles that had been on long-term loan were gifted to their hosts, reducing IWM’s liability and staff time. The museum says that streamlining of the film collection has released storage costs of over £20,000 (film is stored in temperature-controlled buildings), and has focused attention on the preservation, digitisation and documentation of unique items.

Overall IWM felt the review process had been positive, with fringe benefits including the identification of subjects for new research projects and curatorial papers. The collections review committee has been retained and renamed the Collections Development Committee, with a remit to continue reviewing disposals and higher-resource acquisitions.
Case study 7

IWM London reopening, press day, 16 July 2014, view from the redeveloped First World War galleries © IWM
Case study 8: 27 public works of art

Location: Folkestone, Creative Foundation

A new way of collecting civic art has contributed to the regeneration of a seaside town as a place to live, work and study.

The seaside town of Folkestone in Kent has become a model for a new way of building a civic art collection outside the confines of a traditional gallery. Through the work of independent arts charity Creative Foundation, 27 public pieces have now been acquired for or loaned to the town.

Founded in 2002, Creative Foundation’s aim is to enable the regeneration of Folkestone through creative activity. Funded largely by the Roger De Haan Charitable Trust, which supports charities and community groups in and around Folkestone, it has developed and now runs five key projects in the town: the Creative Quarter, Folkestone Triennial, Folkestone Book Festival, the Quarterhouse performing arts centre and the Folkestone Artworks collection.

A town-wide visual arts festival taking place every three years, Folkestone Triennial launched in 2008 and has become increasingly high-profile: the 2014 instalment, curated by Lewis Biggs, attracted over 135,000 visitors (up 32,000 on estimated figures for the 2011 event), and the 2017 festival, also curated by Biggs, featured work by artists including Michael Craig-Martin, Antony Gormley and David Shrigley. The 27 permanent works of art now displayed around Folkestone were commissioned for the Triennials and later acquired for the town, some through purchase and others on long-term loan. Given the name Folkestone Artworks, this collection includes work by acclaimed contemporary artists including Pablo Bronstein, Adam Chodzko, Nathan Coley, Tracey Emin, Mark Wallinger and Richard Wilson. Creative Foundation’s intention is that the festival and collection will help develop Folkestone’s reputation as a destination for contemporary art.

Indeed the status of the festival is such that, in 2014, a graffiti painting by guerrilla artist Banksy appeared overnight on the wall of an amusement arcade, with Banksy claiming it as: ‘Part of the Folkestone Triennial. Sort of.’ The painting, titled Art Buff, was later cut out of the wall by the tenant of the building. Following a legal battle, the judge ruled that Creative Foundation owned the work. Art Buff will be displayed in a new setting in 2018.

Among the most prominent works in the Folkestone Artworks collection is The Folkestone Mermaid by Cornelia Parker. Commissioned for the 2011 Triennial, this bronze sculpture is Parker’s reinterpretation of Edvard Eriksen’s famous Little Mermaid in Copenhagen, Denmark. Looking not for ‘a lookalike of the idealised Copenhagen Mermaid, but... a real person, a free spirit’, Parker invited open submissions for local residents to model for the piece; the successful candidate chosen from a shortlist of six was Georgina Baker. Parker’s mermaid is inspired by the novel The Sea Lady by HG Wells, a long-time resident of Folkestone, as well as by The Little Mermaid, the story by Hans Christian Andersen, who visited Folkestone in 1857.

Installed on a granite boulder next to Folkestone Harbour, Parker’s mermaid was intended to engage the local community but also to stand as
an allusion to the threat of rising sea levels as she looks out to the horizon. After the 2011 Triennial the piece was acquired for the collection for £36,000, supported by a £15,000 grant from Art Fund.

Community engagement was also central to the 2017 programme in works such as Minaret by HoyCheong Wong and FOLKESTONE IS AN ART SCHOOL by Bob and Roberta Smith. Wong’s remodeling of the Islamic Community Centre by introducing a temporary façade with minarets and arches aimed to celebrate this otherwise modest industrial building’s presence and make the centre and its community more visible, encouraging conversation and exchange among residents. Meanwhile, FOLKESTONE IS AN ART SCHOOL – a response to the artist’s research into the provision of art education in the town – was a declaration to the community that the skills and knowledge required are already there; they just need to be recognised and appreciated differently. It included a series of pedagogical videos, a ‘directory’ of art-teaching facilities and talents, and a teaching programme and exhibition delivered by a ‘faculty’ of locally based artists and teachers.

According to figures issued by Creative Foundation, the 2014 Folkestone Triennial boosted the Kent seaside economy by £2.7m and had an overall impact of more than £65m. The festival attracted widespread media attention, and further acquisitions for the Artworks Collection from the 2017 event are planned, which will take the number of works close to 40.

Positive aspects of the Artworks Collection are that Folkestone now has a significant number of site-specific works that are on view all year round, free of charge; and their public locations should mean that any barriers to viewing art in a gallery or institutional setting are removed. Visitor figures, including a 49 per cent increase in first-time visitors to the 2014 festival, suggest the collection has become a major attraction for the town with clear benefits for tourism and the local economy.

But while the site-specific nature of the works is central to the festival’s vision – that is, to have an effect beyond the art programme itself, changing the character of the place in which they occur – some may argue that in terms of collection and conservation, a traditional gallery setting could offer a more stable environment.
Case study 8

Ian Hamilton Finlay, Weather is a Third to Place and Time, 2014, Folkestone Artworks. Image courtesy of Creative Foundation
It is not just acquisition that attracts media attention, public interest and professional scrutiny. The rarer activity of deaccessioning (removing an item from a permanent collection) or disposal by sale or destruction can put a museum in the spotlight too – in this case with extremely negative effects.

The controversy surrounding the sale by Northampton Museum and Art Gallery (NMAG) of the ancient Egyptian statue of Sekhemka began in 2012 when Northampton Borough Council (NBC), which owns the museum, announced the proposed disposal of the statue to raise funds for ‘key heritage and museum projects’. At this time NBC said the statue had an estimated sale value of £2m, a figure given by experts during an insurance assessment. After this valuation it was taken off display, reportedly due to security concerns.

In November 2012 NBC launched a public survey to ask local people how they wanted the proceeds from the sale of the statue to be spent. The consultation had 173 responses of which 71 per cent said they wanted the money to be reinvested in the museum and art gallery. The Museums Association (MA) later criticised this survey, commenting, ‘the questionnaire just asks respondents to tick which area of investment the sale proceeds should go to. It does not ask people whether the sale should go ahead, and does not acknowledge the historical importance of the object to the museum’.

Objections to the sale quickly emerged and the Save Sekhemka Action Group began campaigning against the disposal. Arts Council England (ACE) warned that the sale could jeopardise the museum’s Accreditation. In a later statement, Scott Furlong, director of ACE’s Acquisitions Exports and Loans Unit, wrote: ‘Collections review and disposal is an important part of good collections management and there are clear guidelines in place offering an ethical framework while making it clear that there are long-term responsibilities that custodians of our shared inheritance must consider ahead of any decision to sell objects. Those who choose to approach the sale of collections cynically or with little regard for the sectoral standards or their long-term responsibilities will only further alienate both key funders and the public who put their trust in them to care for our shared inheritance.’

Another area of controversy emerged around the ownership of the statue and NBC’s right to sell it. The council claimed the statue was gifted to the museum in 1880 by the fourth Marquess of Northampton. However in 2013 the seventh Marquess, Lord Northampton, took legal advice on whether NBC had the right to sell it after the 1880 deed of gift emerged agreeing that items given by the fourth Marquess, including ‘a collection of Egyptian Antiquities’, would be on public view ‘for ever hereafter’ and that at no time should the council ‘dispose of any part of the collections’. For any default in this agreement, the deed states, ‘said collection shall revert and be restored to the Marquis, his heirs or assigns in as good condition as it was received’.

Case study 9: statue of Sekhemka (c2400-2300 BC)

Location: Northampton Museum and Art Gallery

The disposal of an ancient Egyptian statue by a local authority museum raised funds for a capital project but led to condemnation from the professional art world.
NBC took legal advice on ownership and an arrangement was made with Lord Northampton that he would receive 45 per cent of the final sale figure. The statue was not specifically mentioned in the original deed and no formal document for its acquisition is known to exist.

On 1 July 2014 the Museums Association urged NBC to rethink the proposed sale. Unless the council sought ‘alternative sources of capital funding’, said David Fleming, chair of the MA’s ethics committee, ‘the MA cannot endorse the sale’.

Despite this warning, the statue was consigned to auction at Christie’s in London. In the week before the auction the International Council of Museums’ Committee for Egyptology backed the Egyptian Ministry of Antiquities’ call for NBC to stop the sale on the grounds that ‘the sale of artefacts to pay institutional expenses is strictly against the ethical codes of national and international heritage bodies’. The Egyptian Ministry of Antiquities and Heritage had called for the statue to be returned to Egypt. Meanwhile the Egyptian Ambassador, Ahsraf Elkholy, condemned the proposed sale as ‘an abuse to Egyptian archaeology and the cultural property’.

Nevertheless the statue was sold to an overseas buyer on 10 July 2014 for £15,762,500 (including a buyer’s premium of £1,762,500), a world record for ancient Egyptian art at auction. The guide price was £4m to £6m. In response to a freedom of information request in June 2015, NBC stated it received £15,762,500 from the sale and made no mention of the buyer’s premium, normally taken by the auction house. Of this figure it said it paid £6,741,000 to Lord Northampton (who later donated £1m of his proceeds to Northamptonshire Community Foundation) and £782,500 to Christie’s in sale costs. NBC said it spent £58,048.56 on legal advice over the sale and £900,000 on the purchase of a former gaol building for future museum expansion. Of total proceeds of £8,239,000 it said it received, it had £7,172,629.41 remaining.
A broad sweep of condemnation from funding bodies and museum professionals followed the sale. Art Fund was among the first to respond, noting that, if stripped of its Accreditation, NMAG ‘will no longer be eligible to apply to us and other major funders for funding for acquisitions, capital projects... and artistic or educational programming’.

ACE removed Northampton Museums from its Accreditation scheme until at least 2019, ruling that the sale broke the required standards for museums managing their collections. The negative impact of this was felt in November 2014 when the Heritage Lottery Fund rejected NBC’s bid for a grant of £240,400 towards staging an exhibition of shoes. The Museums Association banned NBC from membership for a minimum of five years.

When the buyer of the statue applied for an export licence, ACE’s Reviewing Committee on the Export of Works of Art and Objects of Cultural Interest recommended an export bar; the Culture Minister, Ed Vaizey, placed an export bar on the statue in March 2015, giving four months for interested parties to raise matching funds to keep the statue in the UK. The deferral of an export licence was extended after interested parties came forward, but the bar was eventually lifted in April 2016 after no UK buyer was able to raise the necessary funds. In October 2016 the BBC reported that the statue was believed to have been exported to the USA by its anonymous buyer.

NBC has consistently argued that the statue did not fit into its collections, which focus largely on the city’s shoe-making heritage, and that the proceeds raised from the sale would make a substantial contribution to its proposed £14m extension of Northampton Museum and Art Gallery. Following the sale in 2014, councillor David Mackintosh, leader of Northampton Borough Council, said: ‘This money will allow us to realise our exciting plans for the future of the Museum Service. Every penny is ringfenced for the Museum Service and we will now make our museum redevelopment plans a reality.’ In February 2017 work began on the refurbishment and extension of NMAG, with the project expected to take two years.

However, serious questions remain over the handling and outcome of the process. The Museums Association’s code of ethics clearly states that disposals to raise funds should only be undertaken as a last resort, and the MA and other critics argue that in this case all other options for raising money for the capital project were not fully explored before the statue was sold. In addition, the sharing of proceeds with Lord Northampton suggests that the legal ownership of the statue was not fully resolved.

Following the auction, the Save Sekhemka Action Group argued that the monetary loss to NMAG after being stripped of its ACE Accreditation was likely to be more than the proceeds raised by the sale. It is possible, the group suggested, that similar or greater sums could have been raised for the extension of the museum through fundraising, and that Northampton (and the nation) would still have had this exceptional artefact as the highlight of its collection.
Film and video have a significant place in contemporary art, but works in these mediums are often expensive to produce and complex to exhibit. This makes them a challenge to collect for many public galleries. Towner Art Gallery in Eastbourne, Sussex, provides an example of how a regional gallery has added film and video works to its collection in a proactive way, with beneficial and striking results.

Founded in 1923, Towner has a renowned collection of almost 5,000 works, including an important holding of modern British art. It is also known for its growing collection of international contemporary art, which features work by Tacita Dean, Olafur Eliasson, Anya Gallaccio and Wolfgang Tillmans. The gallery has been active and successful in attracting funding for its expansion in this area; in 2007 Towner was one of five UK museum and gallery partnerships to receive £1m each from Art Fund as part of a new initiative to help public institutions build collections of international contemporary art, and in 2009 it moved into a new £8.58m purpose-built home, partially funded by a £2m award from the Heritage Lottery Fund.

Towner announced that the focus of its Art Fund-supported collecting activity would be ‘art that reflects upon images of edges’, a theme inspired by the gallery’s coastal setting. These edges, it explained, ‘could be real physical boundaries such as the beach, cliffs, the horizon and the edge of urban development’ or they could be frontiers, conflict zones or lines of migration. In 2012 Towner staged an exhibition of its acquisitions under this initiative with the title ‘The Edge in Landscape’, featuring work by Yael Bartana, Eugenio Dittborn, João Penalva and Mario Garcia Torres. Three of these four works are film installations.

Given that such a significant proportion of its recent collecting activity involved film works, Towner was then in a strong position to build on this development when Art Fund announced its new Moving Image Fund (MIF) in 2015. Conceived in partnership with and supported by Thomas Dane Gallery, the fund was set up with the aim ‘to ensure that the most significant works of contemporary film and video art can be bought for public collections’. Towner and the Whitworth in Manchester were the first two galleries to benefit from this new fund, with awards of £200,000 each over the two-year period 2015-17.

Towner has acquired four works through MIF to date, the first two of which, Ten Thousand Waves (2010) by Turner Prize-nominated artist Isaac Julien and 5,000 Feet is the Best (2011) by Omer Fast, were co-acquisitions. Jointly acquired by Towner and the Whitworth, Julien’s film – inspired by the Morecambe Bay tragedy of 2004 in which more
than 20 Chinese cockle pickers drowned on a flooded sandbank – interlaces contemporary Chinese culture with ancient myths. It became the first work by Julien to be acquired for a UK collection outside London. Fast’s *5,000 Feet is the Best* – jointly acquired with the Imperial War Museum through Art Fund’s New Collecting Awards scheme – weaves together a former drone operator’s account of his life and work with scenes of a suburban family on a car trip entering warlike terrain, bringing the horror of drone strikes closer to home.

This clear and increased focus on collecting film and video work helped Towner attract a further £450,000 award from Arts Council England’s small capital grants programme to build a new ground-floor auditorium. The gallery announced the award in February 2016, saying that the 88-seat facility would allow for a more diverse programme of film and performance work, with the potential to develop a year-round programme to screen its acquisitions and other artists’ films. Eastbourne Arts Circle also contributed £100,000 to the auditorium project.

Towner’s bold advances over the past 10 years in collecting film and video work have raised its profile as a gallery and helped attract significant new funding as well as over 100,000 visitors a year. However, a recent crisis illustrates the precarious situation for galleries relying on local authorities for their core funding. In May 2017, Towner announced that it could lose up to £300,000 a year when Eastbourne Borough Council said it may be forced to halve its annual £600,000 grant to the gallery after its own funding from central government was reduced. Some relief came in June 2017 when Arts Council England announced continued funding of £1,437,400 for Towner for the period 2018-22 – but this fragile situation shows that strong and imaginative collecting is often only half the story for public galleries and museums.

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*Why Collect?*

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Case study 10

Omer Fast, *5,000 Feet is the Best*, 2011, Turner Art Gallery, Eastbourne and Imperial War Museum, London; Art Funded 2016. Courtesy of the artist
Part of the appeal of early performance art was that it was considered uncollectable. For artists like Joseph Beuys, Chris Burden and Bruce Nauman, the aim was often to produce work outside what were considered to be the confines of the gallery and the market. Indeed, some performance works were devised as an attack on these things.

But for museums of modern and contemporary art like Tate, the challenge now is how to collect these transitory works in order to present them as an essential part of the history and ongoing story of art. The history of performance art at the gallery was documented and explored in a recent two-year joint research project between Tate and Exeter University. Tate began to stage and acquire records of performance art in the 1960s and has continued this process to the present day, most notably with the introduction of the Tate Live series in 2003 and the opening in 2012 of the Tanks, galleries partly dedicated to live art, at Tate Modern. However it did not purchase its first live performance work until 2005, when it acquired *Good Feelings in Good Times* (2003) by the Slovak artist Roman Ondák. This work takes the form of a staged queue of eight to 12 people placed in an exhibition environment. The purchase of this work marks the pivotal moment at which Tate formally recognised that live performance could be acquired for the collection. Its staff now includes a senior curator for performance, Catherine Wood.

In the case of works like *Good Feelings in Good Times*, the acquisition usually takes the form of written instructions and the right to perform the piece. Props or costumes are sometimes included. Such works have now become part of the art market, traded by commercial galleries and acquired by public museums, sometimes with the support of funding bodies.

Other works of performance art, however, still pose a challenge to collect. *This is propaganda* (2002), by the British-German artist Tino Sehgal, is a case in point.

In this work an interpreter dressed as a gallery guard sings a set of given words, including ‘This is propaganda, you know, you know; this is propaganda’, to exhibition visitors. The piece concludes with the words ‘Tino Sehgal, This is propaganda, 2002’, serving as an oral form of gallery label. The work is in an edition of four, one of which was acquired by Tate in 2005. While performance works are usually accompanied by a score or script, and accessed, when not ‘live’, via a form of documentation such as film, *This is propaganda* poses further challenges to collecting since part of Sehgal’s practice is to make work that has no material form or trace. As such, it is a requirement that the acquired piece is not documented in conventional ways such as with labels, photographs, films or written contracts. The piece can only be experienced when it is performed.

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**Case study 11: performance art, including *This is propaganda* (Tino Sehgal, 2002)**

**Location:** Tate Modern, London

The acquisition of performance art by a major London gallery represents a bold approach to collecting.
The verbal contract for the acquisition of the work was witnessed by a notary and several members of Tate staff. Notes relating to the purchase were taken, but there exists no written record of the contract in its entirety. Following the purchase Sehgal passed verbal instructions to selected Tate staff so that they in turn are able to pass these instructions to the interpreters who perform the work. In theory this verbal communication will continue over time and the transmission of the instructions will continue into the future.

Clearly this unconventional acquisition, conservation and storage process challenged Tate’s usual procedures. Nevertheless, *This is propaganda* is now listed as reference T12057 in Tate’s collection and exists in the heads of the staff instructed in how it should be performed. The concept is that it is merely dormant when not being performed, present in the minds of these museum staff and in the memory of those who have seen it. By insisting that the work is not documented Sehgal ensures that no material object ever becomes a saleable substitute for the performance itself.

The acquisition of *This is propaganda* illustrates a number of challenges to collecting performance and live-action work. Among the issues it raises is whether funding bodies that regularly support public galleries will feel comfortable contributing to the purchase of works for which there is no material record, or to which there is limited public access. (On the other hand, by acquiring a work that a private collector may not, Tate perhaps demonstrates the potential of the public gallery to assume a bolder, more risk-taking approach to collecting, and to operate outside of the market; something funders may be keen to support.) Another concern is the vulnerable nature of the instructions. If the long-term preservation of the work is dependent on the artist or staff instructed, what assurances can there be that the information will be passed on?

These issues are among the challenges now faced by collectors of what has become a medium integral to contemporary art practice, and which Tate is working to address through sharing its experience in this area, and through leading research initiatives that aim to support both Tate and other museums’ ability to confidently display performance art in the future.
Appendix: museum collecting today

In 2017 Art Fund commissioned BOP Consulting to carry out a national survey to collect quantitative information on the current state of collecting and deaccessioning within the UK museum sector, and produce a report of their findings.

We received 266 responses from an open call for participants. The museums and galleries that responded represented all regions of the UK and a range of governance structures. The respondents also managed a wide variety of collections, from fine, decorative and applied art to archaeology, geology and natural history, and much more in between.

The survey focused on five key areas: current collecting policy and activity; why a museum might add to the collection; deaccessioning activity and drivers; resourcing; and the future of collecting. The survey looked at these longitudinally and aimed to build on the findings from two previous Art Fund surveys, *The Collecting Challenge* (2006) and *Gathering Challenges* (2010), so that we might better understand developments of the past 10 years and the changes that could be expected in the future. The key findings outlined in the BOP report are presented on the following pages.
Current collecting and looking ahead

This section of the survey asked respondents to consider current collecting activity, how the collection is developed, whether this is governed by a formal policy and whether the organisation has the knowledge and skills to collect strategically.

We found that:

- A considerable number of Accredited institutions have a written collections development policy (83%) but increasing numbers of non-Accredited institutions are moving towards a codified collections policy (39% currently, which is expected to rise to 59% in the next five years). This chimes with the additional finding that organisations are moving towards a more active mode of collecting in the next five years (62% in five years, compared to 49% currently).

- The large majority of organisations were able to add to their collection in the past five years. While this number has been broadly stable across the last 15 years there has been a slight drop recorded in 2017. Across all types of organisation, gifts and purchases were the most common methods used to add to the collection.

- Looking ahead, 60% of respondents do not see their collections policy changing in terms of type of objects collected in the next five years. 31% can see the collection focus changing, and the largest proportion feel that this would be because of a desire to develop a more strategic approach to collecting, and to reflect changes in the sector represented by the collection.

- Respondents were also asked to comment on whether the museum selects an object to add to the collection based on the properties of the object, or how well it fits with a specific theme or narrative that a museum wants to present, and there has arguably been a shift towards the latter in the past 10 years.
Ability to collect

Was your organisation able to add any objects to its collection over the last five years (through purchase or donations)?

Method of acquisition

Over the last five years, which of the following methods have you used to add to your collection?

---

**2010**

- Yes: [Bar graph showing percentage]
- No: [Bar graph showing percentage]

**2017**

- Yes: [Bar graph showing percentage]
- No: [Bar graph showing percentage]

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**2010**

- Gift: [Bar graph showing percentage]
- Purchase: [Bar graph showing percentage]
- Bequest: [Bar graph showing percentage]
- Fieldwork (including archaeological digs): [Bar graph showing percentage]
- Loan: [Bar graph showing percentage]
- Other: [Bar graph showing percentage]

**2017**

- Gift: [Bar graph showing percentage]
- Purchase: [Bar graph showing percentage]
- Bequest: [Bar graph showing percentage]
- Fieldwork (including archaeological digs): [Bar graph showing percentage]
- Loan: [Bar graph showing percentage]
- Other: [Bar graph showing percentage]
Existence of collections policies

Does your collection have a specific collections development policy?

5 years ago

- Yes – we have a written collections development policy
- Yes – we take a strategic approach to collecting, but this is implicit rather than explicit
- No – we do not have a strategic approach to collecting

Next 5 years

- Yes – we have a written collections development policy
- Yes – we take a strategic approach to collecting, but this is implicit rather than explicit
- No – we do not have a strategic approach to collecting

Knowledge and skills

How far do you agree that your organisation has the knowledge and skills it needs to collect strategically?

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree or disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree
Looking ahead

Could you briefly explain why you see your organisation’s acquisition policy changing?

*Five main reasons why the acquisition policy at an organisation may change in the next five years*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>No.</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To develop more strategic collecting</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To reflect changes in sector represented by the collection/modernise the collection</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To ensure the collection remains relevant to the local population/community it represents and reflects demand</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To adapt the collection to the changing (interpretative) needs of the organisation</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To adapt to lack of staff/expertise and/or funding cuts</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Changes in the approach to collecting

On the scale below, please indicate where you see your organisation in terms of these two approaches to collecting (i.e. focusing on the properties of the object vs how the object fits with the theme/narrative), based on your current practice, as well as what the organisation’s approach was five and 10 years ago.

1 = focusing entirely on intrinsic properties of object

5 = focusing entirely on how the object fits with the specific theme/narrative we want to present
Managing collections – the motivation behind additions and disposals

In these sections respondents were asked to rate factors that might affect the decision to acquire an object, or deaccession a work or works from the collection.

We found that:

- 95% of respondents indicated that the ‘scientific/artistic/historic value of the collection’ was considered to be ‘very’ or ‘somewhat’ important in the decision to acquire whereas 75% considered acquisition ‘very’ or ‘somewhat unimportant’ to creating commercial opportunities.

- Deaccessioning activity is on the rise and that the number of objects deaccessioned in the past five years has increased – 57% of organisations disposed of items in 2017, up from 34% in our Collecting Challenge research from 2006. The number of objects deaccessioned by organisations in the last five years has also increased – the number of organisations that deaccessioned fewer than 10 objects fell from 55% in 2006 to 37% in 2017 and the number of organisations that disposed of more than 100 objects doubled from 12% to 22% in 2017.

- 42% of respondents believe that deaccessioning will increase in their organisation, 40% believe that it will stay the same and 8% believe that it will decrease. Deaccessioning is seen by most as a standard element of ongoing collections management which is undertaken for curatorially motivated reasons (e.g. items are no longer relevant to the collection, are in too poor condition or are duplicates). The need to generate working capital to fund new accessions was considered by most to be ‘very’ or ‘somewhat’ unimportant.

‘Within the local authority context our role is storytelling rather than object care and collection. If objects don’t help us tell the story our communities want to hear we must have the wrong collection. Collections are not the only way to tell these stories and cannot drive the local narrative.’

Survey respondent
Reasons to acquire

How importantly does your organisation rate the following factors in the decision to acquire new objects for your collection?

Factors rated as ‘very important’ in the decision to acquire

The scientific/artistic/historic value of the collection 77%
To reflect or record history 64%
To create a distinct identity for the institution which establishes it as a special place 59%
To fill a specific ‘gap’ in the collection 59%
Space/storage limitations 53%
To improve visitor experience/feedback 53%
To engage and reflect the institution’s local community 52%
To raise the profile of the museum/house and its collection(s) 50%
To grow (new and existing) local/national/international audience numbers 42%
The price of the object(s) 39%
To provide a focus or catalyst for dialogue and mutual understanding between different people 28%
Legal issues (including intellectual property) 27%
To gain an increased international reputation 25%
To re-examine history/ideology 20%
To help develop curators and create expertise 14%
To provide new impetus/fundraising leverage for capital developments or new activity 13%
To create debate and reaction; be disruptive 11%
To create commercial opportunities (e.g. through merchandising) 5%
Disposal of objects

What was/is your organisation’s general approach to deaccessioning (% who deaccession)?

Approximate number of deaccessioned objects in the last five years.

Survey respondent

‘Deaccessioning is a standard element within informed, professional ongoing collections management, but a rigorous, tight collecting policy should ensure that only relevant objects are collected in the first place.’

Survey respondent
Reasons to deaccession

How important are the following factors as drivers of deaccessioning for your organisation?

Factors rated as ‘very important’ as drivers of deaccessioning

- The role of deaccessioning as an important and standard element within ongoing collections management: 54%
- Pressures on space for new, more relevant items (e.g. to be able to include representation of other communities or histories, etc.): 35%
- The need to release objects that are languishing/being forgotten in storage: 23%
- The high costs of collection care, conservation and storage: 19%
- The desire to redress outdated historical narratives: 7%
- Loss or lack of staff/expertise: 4%
- The need to generate working capital to fund new accessions: 4%
- The need to generate working capital to fund other museum expenses: 2%

‘Deaccessioning does not produce revenue: it is a costly and time-consuming process.’

Survey respondent

‘Deaccessioning is politically sensitive, and could elicit a backlash against the organisation. Being part of a local authority, this would also need the approval /consent of councillors so is a lengthy process.’

Survey respondent
Resourcing

In this section we asked how museums resource the development of the collection, in terms of funding and staffing.

We found that:

- There is a fairly even spread between organisations that have a budget allocation for collecting within the past financial year and those that don’t, which is similar to previous surveys undertaken by Art Fund. 48% of organisations are able to reallocate funds from the general budget to acquisitions; 35% cannot. Of those with a budget allocation, a small proportion of the total budget is allocated to collecting with only 9% holding a budget allocation of 5% or more.

- In the past five years, most organisations (42%) have not seen a change in staff time allocated to collection acquisition. 30% have seen an increase and 23% a decrease.

Annual budget allocation for collecting

Was any of your organisation’s budget allocated specifically to collecting during the last financial year?

![Bar chart showing budget allocation for collecting]

- No
- Yes
- Don’t know
Proportion of budget for collecting

If there was a specific allocation for collecting, what percentage of the organisation’s annual budget was allocated to the financial cost of acquisitions last year (excluding staff time)?

- 0%
- 0-1%
- 1-3%
- 3-5%
- 5%+
- Don’t know
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