

# Exhibiting borrowed objects

## New AAM guidelines help shape policy

No single museum can contain every object worthy of study. So museums have traditionally exhibited not only objects from their own collections but also objects borrowed from other museums and from private individuals and organizations. Borrowing objects allows museums to create more comprehensive exhibits and to make objects accessible that would otherwise be seen by only a few.

To guide this practice of borrowing objects, the American Association of Museums (AAM) has issued a set of standards that you can use to develop your own institutional policies. These standards grew out of the AAM's Code of Ethics for Museums, designed to set the highest standard of ethical practices for the nation's museums. The standards for borrowing objects, developed by an AAM task force, are based on the following underlying principles:

- To foster public confidence, museums must adhere to an ethical standard that exceeds legal minimums.
- To ensure accountability, museums must have a formally stated mission and written policies and procedures that guide their actions.
- As publicly accountable institutions, museums must make their actions visible and understandable to the public, especially where lack of visibility could lead to the appearance of conflict of interest.

### AAM guidelines on exhibiting borrowed objects

Before exhibiting borrowed objects, your museum should have in place a written policy, approved by your governing authority and publicly accessible on request, that addresses the following issues:

#### I. Borrowing objects

Your policy should:

1. Ensure that you have determined a clear connection between the display of the object and your museum's mission and that the inclusion of the object is consistent with the intellectual integrity of the exhibition.
2. Require that you examine the lender's relationship to your institution to determine if there are potential conflicts of interest, or an appearance of a conflict, such as in cases where the lender has a formal or informal connection to museum decision-making. For example, is the lender a board member, staff member or donor?
3. Include guidelines and procedures to address such conflicts. For example, you may require withdrawal from the decision-making process of those with a real or perceived conflict, you may disclose the conflict or you may decline the loan.
4. Prohibit the museum from accepting any commission or fee from the sale of objects borrowed for exhibition. This prohibition does not apply to such displays as craft shows, where objects are explicitly gathered for sale.

#### II. Lender involvement

To ensure that your museum maintains intellectual integrity and institutional control over the exhibition, the museum:

1. Should retain full decision-making authority over the content and presentation of the exhibition.
2. May, while retaining that authority, consult with a potential lender on objects to be selected from the lender's collection and the significance to be given those objects in the exhibition.
3. Should make public the source of funding if the lender is also a funder of the exhibition. You should avoid requests for anonymity from a lender or funder where anonymity would conceal a conflict of interest (real or perceived) or raise other ethical issues.

As our society has come to rely on museums for education about, as well as preservation of, its cultural heritage, it has also come to expect more of its museums – more accountability, more transparency of action and more leadership in the community. Developing policies and ethical standards for your own museum, such as these on exhibiting borrowed objects, is an important part of earning – and keeping – the public's trust and confidence in your mission to collect, preserve and interpret your community's history.

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