

Who dares speak its name?

The deaccessioning of museum collections is unavoidable

The news that an undercover reporter from the Sunday Times succeeded in persuading a string of London museums to consider giving gallery space to an amateur painting in return for a donation of £1 million has again focused attention on the desperate state of museum underfunding. Elsewhere the British Museum – in debt to the tune of £6 million – was reported to be considering an exchange with the Greek government to repatriate the Parthenon Marbles in return for a potentially lucrative series of exhibitions of Greek antiquities. Clearly it is now time for our national museums to reconsider the question of deaccessioning those parts of their collections that are no longer relevant.

Museum entrance fees have been abolished and debts are rising by the month and yet a staggering 95 per cent of national collections remains in storage. Much of this stored material has never been exhibited since its acquisition, some of it remains the subject of restitution claims, but all of it costs money to store and maintain. Resource – the inappropriately named government quango charged with overseeing the future of our national museums, archives and libraries – should be delivering solutions to these problems. Instead it has shown itself to be singularly bereft of ideas and leadership. Above all, it ought to be fostering deep structural change in the attitudes and commercial philosophy of national museum management. The thorny question of deaccessioning would be a good place to start.

Deaccessioning is a dirty word in polite museum circles, arguably even more taboo than that other unspeakable museological term – restitution. But no matter how much costs rise and revenues fall, no matter that museums cannot afford to heat their buildings, repair their roofs or maintain a half-coherent acquisitions policy, no matter how disastrous the economic state of the museum sector, few if any museum professionals are prepared even to contemplate, let alone discuss, the option of selling off parts of their collections. The fact that most museums are by definition committed to a continuing collecting strategy, even though many can neither show nor conserve what they already own, merely magnifies the parlous state in which many museums now find themselves.

This might not seem so scandalous were two things not irrefutably true about the current state of our national museums. In the first instance, museums are in debt and facing shrinking revenues now that entrance fees have been abolished; and, second, because most museums other than the most prestigious are grotesquely undercapitalised, they struggle to attract the sort of commercial talent necessary for their revitalisation. This Catch-22 situation will continue until the government – or Resource – grasps the nettle and has the courage to push

through radical and probably initially very unpopular root-and-branch change to the museum sector.

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The question of deaccessioning, and indeed of restituting objects, should be at the top of any reforming agenda. If it is true that we live in a 'global' world, in which decentralisation and the return of power to the periphery are the catchwords of future cultural progress, then why do we balk at the idea of selected objects being dispersed to more relevant locations? This might mean dispersing parts of London or metropolitan collections to other regions in the UK, but it could also mean returning objects to their countries of origin. Liberated from the oblivion of a darkened store room, their greater cultural significance to local communities could ensure a better future for both the objects and their new custodians.

If we really believe that museum collections can revitalise our own inner cities and foster social and cultural regeneration at home, then we should also believe that those same objects can enrich the cultural and economic life of developing nations, particularly those nations that originally created them.

Modern museums struggle not only to balance their books, but also to balance two conflicting internal cultures, that of the need for scholarly curatorial research on the one hand, and of the imperatives towards commercial creativity on the other. Our more dynamic, charismatic museum directors have no difficulty in persuading wealthy benefactors to fund dazzling new postmodern extensions to their museums – even though the existing buildings are often crying out for immediate and expensive maintenance or renovation. Winning money for less glamorous projects is altogether more difficult, however. No Renaissance prince ever basked in the reflected glory of having funded a new roof or secured his place in heaven after sponsoring a central-heating system. But while soaring architectural extensions may generate media attention and draw crowds, they do not solve more long-term problems.

The conservative keepers of the status quo will argue that deaccessioning is essentially philistine and always ill-advised. They will tell you that deaccessioning discourages bequests, and they will cite instances of unfashionable objects being sold off, only to reappear on the market decades later with an inaccessibly expensive price tag. But no one is recommending the wholesale auctioning off of the national patrimony and many donors would be more likely

to bequeath if they knew that their objects were entering a well-managed institution and were unlikely to be consigned to storage, which sadly is the fate of so much material. Equally, no museum curator can reasonably argue that all objects in storage are of comparable importance. More to the point, few curators are familiar with the entire contents of their store cupboards.

Museums are treasure houses of invaluable educational content. Museum professionals must find the means to digitise their stored collections by forging more creative commercial links with education authorities and digital-television networks. This would not only give schools and private individuals greater access to the objects via new communications technology, it would also raise much-needed revenue. The challenge is not just to bring more people to the collections; it is to take more of the collections to the people. That will never happen unless the government breaks the dependency culture and demands a thorough audit on national collections as part of a more deep-seated strategy of reform.

The selective deaccessioning that would logically follow such an audit is inevitable and unavoidable and should be confronted as a matter of urgency. The alternative is to stand by year after year watching our museum directors wipe egg off their faces.

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