
In this paper, arguments for and against deaccessioning works of art from a collection, are considered. Should deaccessioning be avoided at all costs? Is it, on the other hand, a necessary part of maintaining a developing collection? What are the dangers of a liberal deaccessioning policy? Examining Deaccessioning Policies from international institutions, the paper explores the role of the Collections Manager, in brief while managing the deaccessioning process.

International Council Of Museums defines the term ‘deaccessioning’ as the act of lawfully removing an object from a museum’s collections.¹ Throughout history, deaccessioning has been viewed as an administrative decision sometimes driven by intellectual motives to reformulate a collection.² Regardless of the rationale motivating a museum to adopt the practice, deaccessioning of an item usually undergoes multiple probes for it to prove ethical. Although, none call for completely barring the process.³ It is not common for state or federal laws to have stringent regulations against deaccessioning; it is generally museums that hold authority over the assets they possess.⁴ However, there are prevailing national professional organisations, such as AAM and AAMD in the United States, that lay out a code of ethics to keep in check policies and practices for deaccessioning.⁵

In contemporary times, the process of deaccessioning is widely accepted by art institutions to responsibly manage collections.⁶ For instance, in 2018, the Baltimore Museum of Art (BMA, Maryland) deaccessioned works by Warhol, Robert Rauschenberg, and Franz Kline, three white-male artists, to acquire works by younger contemporary artists of colour, including — Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, Jack Whitten, Wangechi Mutu, Amy Sberald, Njideka Akunyili Crosby, Wang

¹ Guidelines on Deaccessioning of the International Council of Museums

² COLLECTIONS AS COMMUNICATION: DEACCESSIONING POLICIES AND PUBLIC TRUST

³ COLLECTIONS AS COMMUNICATION: DEACCESSIONING POLICIES AND PUBLIC TRUST

⁴ COLLECTIONS AS COMMUNICATION: DEACCESSIONING POLICIES AND PUBLIC TRUST

⁵ COLLECTIONS AS COMMUNICATION: DEACCESSIONING POLICIES AND PUBLIC TRUST

⁶ COLLECTIONS AS COMMUNICATION: DEACCESSIONING POLICIES AND PUBLIC TRUST

Qingsong, Adam Pendleton and Chuck Ramirez.⁷ Christopher Bedford, the director of the museum, believed that this was an essential move. Adding these works to the collection would aid BMA to resonate better with the city of Baltimore, a city that is 64%, Black.⁸ The curator of the Contemporary Art collection, Kristen Hileman, sought to identify particular pieces by Warhol, Rauschenberg and Kline which were rarely exhibited due to their size. The entire board of trustees voted in favour of the deaccession. A total of seven pieces were sold to generate money for a fund, which was to be spent in 3-5 years as well as an endowment of contemporary art, of which the museum would spend 5% each year.⁹ The move would be ‘absolutely transformational’, Bedford declared in an interview.¹⁰

The deaccession aimed at selling off redundant pieces which prove to be a liability to the museum in terms of storage, conservation and coeval significance. BMA, through this sale, welcomed new voices into the museum space to achieve equity. It is also admirable that the museum intended to shed light on under-represented, non-white artists and its attempt to rewrite the post-war canon; but it is also important to criticise the act of diminishing collections, rather than adding to them. Commendable collection management would fetch funds and save to acquire contemporary works rather than vending significant pieces that could leave the country, post-sale. Additionally, the proceeds from the Warhol, sold through Sotheby’s private auction, would be kept aside as a donor-mandated, spend-down fund.¹¹ This immediately leaves, part of the utilisation of the earnings blurred as there is hardly a way to keep track of the \$2-3 million which were estimated to be incurred from the Warhol.¹²

Baltimore-based artist, curator, and writer, Cara Ober, wrote regarding the practice of deaccessioning, *“Once you sell one or two, what’s to stop you from selling more?”*.¹³

⁷ Baltimore Museum of Art Deaccessioning Controversy, Explained – ARTnews.com

⁸ Should a museum dump its Warhols to buy up work by artists of colour?

⁹ ‘It Is an Unusual and Radical Act’: Why the Baltimore Museum Is Selling Blue-Chip Art to Buy Work by Underrepresented Artists

¹⁰ Baltimore Museum of Art Deaccessioning Controversy, Explained – ARTnews.com

¹¹ Amid a Growing Outcry, the Baltimore Museum of Art Withdrew Its Controversial Sale of Three Works Through Sotheby’s

¹² Amid a Growing Outcry, the Baltimore Museum of Art Withdrew Its Controversial Sale of Three Works Through Sotheby’s

¹³ Baltimore Museum of Art Deaccessioning Controversy, Explained – ARTnews.com

Post-COVID, museums experienced immense financial loss, staff layoffs and furloughs. Some institutions resorted to obtaining additional funds by deaccessioning important pieces of artworks from their collections. Before the pandemic, this would be frowned upon or even considered an ethical violation,¹⁴ but in current conditions deaccessioning seems to be growing into common practice taken up by esteemed private and public museums to safeguard their quotidian. The Association of Art Museum Directors' (AAMD) pre-pandemic policy quoted that the process of deaccessioning may only be done to improve the collection and to further the museum's long-term curatorial goals.¹⁵ But as the state of affairs changed, on 15th April 2020 the association temporarily approved the use of deaccessioning proceeds to pay for 'direct care' of the museum.¹⁶ The permission would be effective till April 10, 2022.¹⁷ This policy change instantly resulted in a spike in sales, with certain financially stable museums deaccessioning artworks from their collections, to fulfil a 'mission-driven initiative'.¹⁸

On October 28th 2020, soon after the liberalisation of the national deaccessioning policy, the Baltimore Museums of Art (BMA) yet again initiated the process of deaccessioning. It aimed to accumulate a sum of US\$65 million by auctioning off '3' by Bryce Marden and '1957-G' by Clyfford Still in addition to another Warhol piece resembling Leonardo da Vinci's Last Supper.¹⁹ The museum was far from financially insecure. BMA deemed the sale necessary as the takings would fuel the museum's effort to further activate their mission, which was long 'overdue'.²⁰ It must be recalled that the museum announced the practice as a necessity, within a mere span of two years of their previous deaccession. This was paradoxically much below their estimated time frame, considering their previous sale generated sufficient finances for a fund, and an annually budgeted endowment.²¹

With their 2020 proposal, BMA intended to use \$54.5 million of the sales to raise salaries, \$10 million to acquire works by women and nonwhite artists, \$500,000 was to go towards a Diversity,

¹⁴ Museums and COVID-19: from Deaccessioning to Reopening | Center for Art Law

¹⁵ Museums and COVID-19: from Deaccessioning to Reopening | Center for Art Law

¹⁶ Additional Financial Flexibility to Art Museums During Pandemic Crisis

¹⁷ Additional Financial Flexibility to Art Museums During Pandemic Crisis

¹⁸ US Association of Art Museum Directors sends a warning note to its members on deaccessioning

¹⁹ US Association of Art Museum Directors sends a warning note to its members on deaccessioning

²⁰ Baltimore Museum of Art Deaccessioning Controversy, Explained – ARTnews.com

²¹ 'It Is an Unusual and Radical Act': Why the Baltimore Museum Is Selling Blue-Chip Art to Buy Work by Underrepresented Artists

Equity, and Inclusion plan, while the remaining \$590,000 was to allow for free admissions.²² They called it an ‘Endowment for the Future’.²³ This choice received a sweeping backlash from art critics and the board of AAMD. President of AAMD, Brent Benjamin released a public memo stating, “*I recognise that many of our institutions have long-term needs that could be supported, in part, by taking advantage of these resolutions to sell art. But however serious those long-term needs or meritorious those goals, the current position of AAMD is that the funds for those must not come from the sale of deaccessioned art.*”²⁴ Critics questioned the museum’s decision concerning the particular pieces offered to be sold. While BMA had sufficient Marden works on paper, ‘1957-G’ was selected. It was the only gifted item, which came into the collection, directly from Still. ‘The Last Supper’ was to be auctioned off for a significantly decreased value, again via Sotheby’s private sale rather than a public auction.²⁵ Moreover, since an increase in staff salaries was one of the aims of the sale, critics prompted at the possible internal manipulation of decision for personal gains. The museum director and curators initially defended their pitch, but soon had to withdraw their decision of deaccessioning the three post-war works due to heavy scrutiny from AAMD.²⁶

This example, although limited to a single case of the Baltimore Museum, hints at why deaccessioning works of art from a collection is detrimental and should be avoided at all costs. It also highlights the negative impact of a liberal deaccession policy. The practice of deaccessioning, once precedented tends to reoccur. Deaccessioning reduces the value of cultural material to mere numerical figures, sometimes lowering its potential value. In turn, it is comparatively easier for museums to trade older, temporarily neglected material without realising the long-term impact on the local crowds. Collections must never be equated to liquid assets. They are archives of history, held for the public. A liberal structure of the deaccessioning policy, within museums or by an ‘outsider’ institution such as AAMD allows apertures. These loopholes encourage a capitalist pursuit, leading to the commodification of the works in a collection. For example, The Shelburne Museum (Vermont, United States) is not obliged to contact the donor of the object at disposal, if the artefact has been in the museum premise for more than 20 years.²⁷ In addition, the policy states an

²² Baltimore Museum of Art Deaccessioning Controversy, Explained – ARTnews.com

²³ Amid a Growing Outcry, the Baltimore Museum of Art Withdrew Its Controversial Sale of Three Works Through Sotheby’s

²⁴ Museums and COVID-19: from Deaccessioning to Reopening | Center for Art Law

²⁵ Baltimore Museum of Art Deaccessioning Controversy, Explained – ARTnews.com

²⁶ US Association of Art Museum Directors sends a warning note to its members on deaccessioning

²⁷ Alignment of Deaccession Policy and Emerging Practice in History Museums

object can not be returned to the donor unless they purchase the item at market value.²⁸ This not only alludes to an entrepreneurial temperament exhibited by the museum but also showcases a disregard of sentiments that may be attached to an object of significance, before donation. Besides this, loans may be deaccessioned as abandoned property.²⁹ With this clause, the museum butchers chances of widening its scope, as well as manipulates extrinsic cultural material for profit-making.

Another instance is the liberal deaccessioning policy of the Danish Immigrant Museum (Iowa, United States). The document informs the Permanent and UER Collection to be mobile collections. Therefore prone to deaccessioning.³⁰ The first reason of concern is the temporality of the Permanent Collection, making the foundation of the policy unreliable. The policy aims at constantly refining the collection by removing objects that the museum is unable to care for.³¹ Over time objects are susceptible to damage, especially in the collection of an immigration museum that acquires paper-based artefacts such as photographs or historical documents. The laissez-faire structure of the policy endorses the careless removal of objects when it approves of elimination due to damage. Moreover, there is no mention of consulting the Collections Management, Curatorial or Conservation departments in the decision-making process. The section regarding restrictions on artefacts has no bars on sales via private auctions.³² With the impenetrable mechanism of a private sale, which makes a repeated appearance as the operation of deaccessioning sets in. It is then, difficult to track whether the museum's declared objective coincides with the outcome. Similarly, in the case of the policy drafted by The Grace Museum (Texas, United States), there is an explicit mention of an authorised disposition through third party auction.³³ Once more, allowing for shrouded sales. In the case of The Grace Museum, the authority for the removal of an object is handed to the Chief Curator, Executive Director, Collections Committee and the Board of Trustees.³⁴ Conservationists and Collection Managers are not taken into account while this decision is made. Consequently, neglecting specific professional views on the controversial practice of deaccessioning. The role of the Collections Manager is significant in the process of deaccessioning. A laudable museum policy

²⁸ Alignment of Deaccession Policy and Emerging Practice in History Museums

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³⁰ Alignment of Deaccession Policy and Emerging Practice in History Museums

³¹ Alignment of Deaccession Policy and Emerging Practice in History Museums

³² Alignment of Deaccession Policy and Emerging Practice in History Museums

³³ Alignment of Deaccession Policy and Emerging Practice in History Museums

³⁴ Alignment of Deaccession Policy and Emerging Practice in History Museums

document injects the participation of the Collections Management department while administering the removal of an item in a collection. The manager assesses the risk associated with finance and amplifies reasons of due diligence guided by a code of ethics.³⁵ It is also the duty of the manager to ensure the resolve is an act of public interest, rather than a deliberate stunt for financial gain.³⁶ This can be done by diligently elucidating the process and reasons for deaccessioning, to sustain public and donor trust.³⁷ The manager also is expected to take into consideration facets of the object which are independent of aesthetics; focusing on the purpose of the object, and the function it holds within a collection.³⁸ Museum documents, therefore need to be stringent and actively involve all the three — Collections Management, Curatorial and Conservation departments, while adjudicating deaccessioning.

³⁵ Fosdike, 2018

³⁶ Fosdike, 2018

³⁷ Fosdike, 2018

³⁸ Fosdike, 2018

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