

A MANIFESTO FOR ACTIVE HISTORY MUSEUM COLLECTIONS

Millions of artifacts in museum collections across the country are not actively supporting the institutions that steward them. Museums of all types are experiencing this problem, but it is particularly entrenched in history museums. Most history museums possess thousands of poorly maintained, inadequately cataloged, and underutilized artifacts. Instead of being active assets, these lazy artifacts drain vital resources. Multiple studies have assessed the problem of collections preservation, and each has proposed providing museums more money to process and preserve artifacts. But there's little point in preserving collections if they don't actively support the mission. **We believe collections must either advance the mission or they must go.**

Collections are expensive. The time and money required to catalog and store objects ties up valuable resources that could be used elsewhere. Fortunately, museum professionals are recognizing that significant portions of their collections aren't pulling their weight, and attitudes are changing. But in the absence of a coherent philosophy or way forward, changing opinions have not yet led to changes in practice. Therefore the problem continues to get worse with each passing year. In addition, professional standards, funding models, and museum training programs still primarily support the idea that all collections are equally important, and that owning collections is as important as effectively using them. **We believe a new model for thinking about collections is needed.**

Collections are important to history museums. Artifacts are a deeply powerful way to connect with what it means to be human and to understand the past, present and future. In his compelling book *A History of the World in 100 Objects* Neil MacGregor, Director of the British Museum, argues that “telling history through things is what museums are for.” Museums are uniquely positioned to use things to tell meaningful stories—but to do so they need to collect the right artifacts and make good use of them. **We believe that artifacts can be powerful tools—touchstones filled with meaning and connection—but only when used effectively.**

If museums existed simply to preserve things, the best way to save them would be to put the entire collection in an enormous freezer and never take anything out. But museums don't just preserve things; they also use them to inspire, enlighten, and connect. Every day museums balance the twin needs of preservation and access. Every time a piece is used by a researcher or is exhibited, the decision has been made to shorten its lifespan. We weigh these decisions against the rarity of the piece, its condition, and how important it is to the institution. How is it that we distinguish degrees of significance when we deal with individual objects and yet we are paralyzed into inaction when we look at an entire collection? Major conservation surveys and statewide risk assessments assume that all collections are equally valuable and are worthy of the same standard of care. **We believe some objects support the mission better than others—not based on monetary value or rarity, but based on the stories they tell and the ideas they illuminate. The ones that provide the most public value should get the largest share of our time and resources.**

As museums have professionalized, we've touted care standards to donors and created the expectation all artifacts will be treated equally and be kept forever. Advancing the idea that all collections are equal and will always be cared for has become both a crutch to support an antiquated idea (museums exist to preserve things) and a stick to beat those who want to use artifacts in innovative ways (doing that would violate best practices!). The needs of the communities we serve shift over time, so why should museums care equally for artifacts that no longer meet the needs of our current

audience? In our concern to preserve everything because we don't know what people in the future will find useful, we are diverting attention and care from objects that are useful right now to the people right in front of us. Museum professionals must change the conversation with boards, donors and stakeholders about why and how artifacts help the institution meet its goals. Words matter, and we need new ones to talk about collections. **We believe we need to change the conversation from caring for artifacts to caring about people.**

We cannot continue to function in this manner. We live an era of hyper consumption and production. Material goods are produced at a rate that was unimaginable when American museums first started collecting. We've got to change how and what we collect or we'll drown in consumer goods. Many history museums have chosen (whether consciously or not) to ignore the problem of collecting contemporary artifacts because of the high volume, but simply avoiding the problem is not a solution. If museums are to be more than hoarders, we need to deal with this issue. Museums are fond of telling donors about the size of the collection, equating size with quality. We leave them with the idea that by simply getting more stuff, that makes us more relevant. **We believe we need to stop touting the size of museum collections and start talking about impact.**

A Path toward Change

What if museums had smaller, more focused collections, where each object truly pulled its weight? Help the field move forward! Join us in finding out.

- 1. Make Collections Everyone's Issue.** Discuss collections at the board level. Take your board into collections storage. Calculate what it costs to collect, preserve and maintain your collections. Know the financial and personnel costs. Assess if your collections are active or lazy in supporting your mission.
- 2. Initiate Smarter Sharing.** How many times has your institution acquired an object, not because it's unique or has an amazing story, but because it's a generic example that you might need someday for an exhibition? Wouldn't it be great if museums addressed this tendency (which fills countless storage rooms with lazy objects) by functioning like interlibrary loan? What if the museums in your region agreed to collect different artifacts, so that only one institution needed to have a few spinning wheels, for example, and everyone else was released from collecting them? If such a system existed, museums could focus on artifacts that tell important stories or their communities and borrow pieces easily from other institutions if they needed to. Start that conversation with museums in your area.
- 3. Create a Tiered System for your Collections.** Go ahead and rank your collections! What pieces best support the mission? What are the ones that are just ok? What really has NOTHING to do with what you're trying to accomplish? Establish a triage system for your artifacts and spend your time, effort and money on the compelling ones.
- 4. Change the Conversation.** Stop advertising the number of artifacts you have and start talking about their impact. Stop touting your role in preserving artifacts and instead talk about how you use them. Stop promising donors that you'll treasure their items forever. Start talking about a "useful life" for artifacts. Push funders and museum associations to stop tying funding and accolades to the number of artifacts preserved or cataloged. Instead ask to be assessed on

how your collections are being used.

5. Get Rid of What You Don't Need. We need to make it easier for museums to deaccession their collections while preserving the public's trust. This is a complex and controversial issue, but it must be addressed or we will continue to misplace our priorities and hamstring efforts to provide public value. Current policies are too cumbersome and slow. Museums with collections that do not support their mission cannot be expected to jump through so many hoops that deaccessioning becomes a non starter. We need streamlined, basic guidelines for mass deaccessions.

6. Stop the Bleeding. Do not accept artifacts you do not need. Start today. Get boards to understand that taking things you don't need drains resources from other areas. Make sure your collections committee and collecting plan are as careful with new acquisitions as they are with deaccessions. Reject more than you take. "We might need it some day" is not a valid acquisition justification; it just leads you to death by a thousand cuts.

7. Make the Good Stuff Sing. Chances are you have artifacts that could tell incredible stories. Let them. Don't shoehorn them into an existing narrative and rob them of their power or bury them among hundreds of others. Pick a story and tell it. Be bold. All artifacts can be interpreted in many ways. Acknowledge this and choose one, the most compelling one. Don't water it down.

8. Share Ideas. Be part of a new breed of museum advocates who demand more from museum collections. Share these ideas and add your own. Put them into practice and tell others what works and what doesn't. Visit activecollections.org to share your experiences, tools, case studies, and additional resources.

Originally written by Trevor Jones, Rainey Tisdale, and Elee Wood in 2012. Shared with permission.