

# **A CODE OF ETHICS FOR CURATORS**

**American Association of Museums  
Curators Committee  
2009**

## PREFACE

The Curators Committee of the American Association of Museums (CurCom) first developed *A Code of Ethics for Curators* in 1983 and revised the document in 1996. Recognizing that museums and museum work change over time and regularly present new concerns and challenges, CurCom established a work group in 2006 to review and update the *Code of Ethics*.

To establish standards and best practices for professional curatorial conduct and for the many curatorial functions at museums, the work group reviewed standards generally understood and accepted by museum associations and professional organizations throughout the world, including the Accreditation Commission and other AAM bodies. In addition, the work group invited national and regional museum associations and individuals currently engaged in curatorial work to comment on early drafts of the code.

Members of that work group and the authors of this document are: John Mayer, chair and curator, Maine Historical Society; James Burns, curator of history, Tempe Historical Museum; Stephanie Gaub, collections manager, Orange County Regional History Center; Brian H. Peterson, senior curator, James A. Michener Art Museum; and John Russick, senior curator, Chicago History Museum.

The Executive Committee of CurCom approved the final version of the *Code of Ethics for Curators* at the AAM Annual Meeting in 2009.

## INTRODUCTION

The *Code of Ethics for Curators* describes the fundamental principles, core beliefs, and critical responsibilities that define curatorial work and provides guidelines for ethical conduct. Although intended specifically for museum curators, the *Code of Ethics for Curators* will benefit others in the museum field who may have different titles but perform functions similar or related to those of a curator.

CurCom recognizes that every museum operates with a unique set of resources. It encourages an open, balanced, and direct assessment of any area of conflict between an institution's practices and the principles described in this code.

[Note: For the purposes of this document, the word *object* is used consistently throughout to represent the full range of materials that may be part of any museum's collection, including but not limited to works of art, photographs, biological and geological specimens, anthropological artifacts, digital collections, oral histories, and archives and manuscript collections.]

## **I. ABOUT CURATORIAL WORK**

Curatorial work is multifaceted. Depending on the institution, curators can be highly specialized experts with responsibilities in a particular collection area, or they can be generalists who control a broad range of materials and perform duties ranging from exhibition development to facility maintenance and usage.

Regardless of their situation, curators have distinctive responsibilities that focus upon: 1) the interpretation, study, care, and development of the collection, and 2) the materials, concepts, exhibitions, and other programs central to the identity of their museum. Because of their direct responsibilities for the collection and their role in the development of interpretive material, curators are ambassadors who represent their institution in the public sphere.

Curators understand not only their role within the museum but also the responsibilities of the governing board, administration, and other staff; and they respect the hierarchy of authority at their institution. They are responsible for providing leadership and expertise in a variety of areas within their museum and the larger museum community.

Curators fulfill a vital role in the ongoing process of improving and strengthening the practices of their museum. They advocate and participate in the development of institutional policies that reflect the principles contained in this *Code of Ethics*, and they work to resolve differences between existing institutional practices and established professional standards.

Public trust is earned and granted to museums by the people they serve, and is based on the idea that museums exist to serve the public and will act in the public's best interest. Curators recognize that meeting these obligations is essential to a museum's health and well-being. Therefore, curators do not limit themselves to following the letter of the law but also adopt and follow professional standards that reach beyond the law, including those outlined in this *Code of Ethics*. In doing so, they foster trust in the integrity of the curatorial profession and benefit their own museum, the community it serves, and museums in general.

## **II. DEFINITION OF A CURATOR**

Curators are highly knowledgeable, experienced, or educated in a discipline relevant to the museum's purpose or mission. Curatorial roles and responsibilities vary widely within the museum community and within the museum itself, and may also be fulfilled by staff members with other titles.

Depending on their job duties, museum curators may do some or all of the following:

- Remain current in the scholarly developments within their field(s); conduct original research and develop new scholarship that contributes to the advancement of the body of knowledge within their field(s) and within the museum profession as a whole.

- Make recommendations for acquiring and deaccessioning objects in the museum collection.
- Assume responsibility for the overall care and development of the collection, which may include artifacts, fine art, specimens, historic structures, and intellectual property.
- Advocate for and participate in the formulation of institutional policies and procedures for the care of the collection that are based on accepted professional standards and best practices as defined by AAM, CurCom, and other relevant professional organizations.
- Perform research to identify materials in the collection and to document their history.
- Interpret the objects belonging or loaned to the museum.
- Develop and organize exhibitions.
- Contribute to programs and educational materials.
- Advocate and provide for public use of the collection.
- Develop or contribute to monographs, essays, research papers, and other products of original thought.
- Represent their institution in the media, at public gatherings, and at professional conferences and seminars.
- Remain current on all state, national, and international laws as they pertain to objects in the museum collection.

### **III. A CURATOR'S VALUES**

Curatorial work is guided by the following values:

- **To serve the public good** by contributing to and promoting learning, inquiry, and dialogue, and by making the depth and breadth of human knowledge available to the public.
- **To serve the institution** by responsible stewardship of financial, material, and intellectual resources; by pursuit of the goals and mission of the institution with respect for the diversity of ideas, cultures, and beliefs; and by integrity of scholarly research.
- **To serve the museum profession** by promoting and practicing excellence, honesty, and transparency in all professional activities.

## **IV. CURATORIAL RESPONSIBILITIES**

### **A. Research, Scholarship, and Integrity**

Curators ensure the integrity and objectivity of their scholarship and research projects by compiling reference materials and supporting documentation, keeping abreast of current scholarship, and unfailingly acknowledging the scholarly and artistic contributions of others.

More specifically, curators must establish intellectual control of the collection under their care. They ensure that a record of each object in the collection is prepared at the time of acquisition and that the record and the object are systematically organized and retrievable. They conduct research on and record the provenance of all objects in or offered to the collection, and they are responsible for the accuracy of the documentation, whether prepared by themselves or others. Curators must be aware of all applicable national and international laws and never knowingly acquire stolen, illegally exported, or improperly collected objects.

### **B. Interpretation**

Curators must commit themselves to developing the museum collection and interpretation of its objects with a respect for the needs of all potential patrons and in compliance with, but not restricted to, the standards for accessibility set forth in the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Curators are responsible for ensuring that all verbal and written interpretation is accurate and accessible, physically and cognitively, whether prepared by themselves or their subordinates.

When preparing interpretive material, curators have a responsibility to an object's creator(s) and culture of origin. When possible and appropriate, they accurately and respectfully represent the creator's perspective, the object's historical and cultural context, and the object's history of use.

### **C. Acquisition, Care, and Disposal**

Curators at collecting institutions should be guided by codes of ethics relating to their individual discipline and by international, national, and local laws affecting aspects of their responsibilities, including the acquisition and disposal of objects.

Curators develop the collection under their care in conjunction with the museum's stated mission and other institutional policies, procedures, and documents. They identify deficiencies in the collection, review potential acquisitions, and provide compelling reasons for adding objects to the collection in accordance with the acquisition policy of their institution. They thoroughly document new acquisitions and advocate the care of the collection according to accepted professional standards in their area of expertise.

Curators periodically review collection objects to assess the continued relevance of each object to the museum's mission. They refine the collection through judicious disposal of objects in accordance with the deaccession policy of their institution.

Deaccessioning is undertaken solely for the advancement of the museum's mission. Curators offer professional guidance and expertise to their museum's board of trustees or other governing authority to ensure that the museum does not suffer in any way as a result of the deaccessioning process. Deaccessioned objects are preferably offered for transfer to another cultural institution or for sale at a well-publicized public auction. Proceeds from the sale of collections may not be used for anything other than acquisition or direct care of collections. Any other use may create the appearance that the collection, which is held in public trust, is being sold to finance the operations of the museum.

In some cases, deaccessioned objects may be destroyed if the objects have deteriorated to the point that their research, interpretive, historical, or other value is compromised beyond reclamation; if they are slated for deaccessioning and no other repositories wish to acquire them; or if they contain toxins or other volatile components that place patrons, staff, or other collection objects at risk.

#### **D. Collection Access and Use**

Curators advocate and provide for public access to and use of the collection. Whenever possible, curators encourage and facilitate research inquiries, requests to examine objects, the use of objects in interpretive programs and exhibitions, and loans to other organizations—all in keeping with the institution's obligation of holding the collection in the public trust.

Curators recognize that the balance between preservation and use of collection objects is delicate. They discourage uses of the collection that may unnecessarily hasten the degradation or deterioration of any object.

When dealing with objects of cultural patrimony, including but not limited to human remains, sacred objects, and funerary objects, curators should consult with descendant communities regarding handling, storing, and exhibiting materials with consideration and respect for cultural traditions. When dealing with Native American collections, curators should ensure that their institution is in compliance with all Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) rules and regulations.

Awareness of and respect for donor restrictions and confidentiality, and respect for the object's creator(s) and cultural context, are paramount when considering requests for loans, access to objects, collection information, and any other use.

Curators offer professional guidance and expertise to their museum's board of trustees or other governing authority to ensure that the museum does not suffer in any way as the result of a loan of objects from the collection. Object loans should further interpretation and scholarship. Any other purpose may create the appearance that collection objects are

being used for commercial or personal gain. Loans from the collection are granted following institutional policy.

Curators ensure that objects loaned to and from the museum receive at least the same care and protection as the objects under their care.

#### **E. Replication of Objects in the Collection**

Curators evaluate and support only those proposals to produce copies of collection objects for commercial or other purposes that guarantee the safety of an object and ensure that every copy will be accurate and that each use is in compliance with institutional policy. Any replication should be marked as a copy in a permanent manner and developed according to institutional policy. The replication of an object should in no way alter or devalue the original collection item.

### **V. CONFLICTS OF INTEREST**

Museum staff and trustees regularly make decisions about what to collect, exhibit, study, and promote. The well-being of any museum depends on the public's confidence that its decision making is driven by the greater interests of the community it serves and is not unduly influenced by the potential for personal gain or the needs and practices of the marketplace. Curators respect the public purpose of museums and conduct themselves in a manner intended to protect both their institution and profession by putting the public interest first.

Often, when a conflict arises within an institution, it is the individual curator who is first aware of its existence and first to bring it to the attention of the museum's leadership. As curators and museums search for legitimate ways to resolve an ethical dilemma, it is essential that all parties work together for the benefit of the institution and the public it serves. The relationship between curators and institutions must be based on mutual trust and sound judgment.

#### **A. General Statements**

Curators are committed to the mission, goals, and policies of their institution, and they avoid conflicts of interest and the appearance of conflicts of interest. The perception of conflict of interest can be as damaging as an actual conflict; the public's trust of the entire museum profession is violated when the curatorial decision-making process is perceived to be influenced by a conflict of interest.

Curators often benefit personally and professionally from their association with a museum, enriching or advancing their careers through good work and through associations and contacts that are the normal result of curatorial activities. However, if curators use or appear to use their position with a museum purely for personal advantage or profit rather than in service of their institution and the public good, that behavior constitutes a conflict of interest.

Critical areas for potential conflicts of interest include personal collecting, dealing, gifts, outside employment, and consulting. In all pertinent areas, curators should assert leadership and advocate the creation of policies that define institutional expectations and standards of conduct. Written policies, which should be made available to all staff, help the museum establish and employ a consistent, evenhanded approach in all situations that involve a potential conflict of interest. If written policies do not exist, curators seek the advice and consent of their supervisor until a policy is adopted.

**B. Disclosure**

Ethical decision making is rarely a matter of simply following preordained guidelines. Real-world situations are often complex; a thorough process of study and consideration typically precedes a decision about ethics. Openness and transparency are prudent, effective means of avoiding conflicts of interest and are essential conditions for the decision-making process.

Curators and guest curators disclose potential conflicts of interest to their immediate supervisors in writing or by following established institutional policy.

**C. Personal Collecting and Dealing**

Curators often make or influence important decisions about the content of their institution's collection and exhibitions. The public good, not individual gain, is the primary concern in their decisions. Curators must not develop a personal collection that in any way compromises or is in conflict with the credibility or interests of their institution.

When curators build and maintain a personal collection in any area of interest that overlaps with their museum's identity and mission, a serious potential for an ethical conflict exists. For this reason, many institutions prohibit personal collecting by staff within the museum's mission; others allow it within closely prescribed guidelines.

Curators or guest curators may not be active dealers in the museum's areas of interest. Active dealers are individuals who have a registered business with commercial tax status or, more broadly, are actively engaged in the buying and selling of objects for personal or commercial profit. Guest curators are expected to operate within the same institutional guidelines that govern the behavior of staff curators in the areas of personal collecting and dealing.

**D. Appraisals and Authentication**

Curators who become involved in establishing the monetary value of objects or authenticating objects expose themselves and their institution to conflicts of interest and legal risks. Therefore, curators must not prepare appraisals for any reason. Curators should refer all interested parties directly to professional appraisers' societies or qualified appraisers. All referrals should be made without endorsement.

Curators may estimate insurance values for loans or other internal uses and should document the sources for these estimates.

Some museums may allow curators to provide authentications under carefully controlled conditions per institutional policy.

### **E. Outside Employment**

Outside employment includes situations in which curators who are principally employed by a museum also engage in work for an organization, an individual, or themselves on their own time and receive compensation for this activity. Some institutions prohibit outside employment; others allow it within closely prescribed guidelines.

Curators should conform to their museum's policy concerning outside employment and disclose any activity to their supervisor before accepting such responsibilities. In addition, curators must follow their institution's policies regarding lecture fees, royalties, and ownership of scholarly materials and copyrights. Curators, especially those who are also artists, need to be sensitive to the ethical issues that may arise in relationships with galleries, dealers, and professional colleagues.

### **F. Relationships with Vendors, Gifts**

Personal relationships with vendors and other types of contributors may lead to or cause the appearance of favoritism and have legal and ethical ramifications. For this reason, gifts from vendors, collectors, or other parties who may be seeking influence or business with the museum may not be accepted. To avoid undue influence, curators and guest curators who have prior relationships with such parties should disclose those relationships to their supervisors.

As a result of their professional duties, curators may develop a personal relationship with a colleague, donor, associate, or artist. In such instances, personal gifts may be permissible in accordance with institutional policy.

Many institutions prohibit staff from accepting personal gifts; others allow it within closely prescribed guidelines. Gifts to the institution may be accepted by curators for their institution. If there is any question about appropriateness, curators should discuss the circumstances with their supervisor before accepting the gift.

## AFTERWORD

This *Code of Ethics* is intended to be a living document – one that is regularly considered and continually improved. To that end, CurCom established a Standing Committee on Ethics with responsibility to review and update this *Code of Ethics* on a regular and ongoing schedule and to serve as a general resource for matters relating to curatorial ethics. CurCom’s Standing Committee on Ethics is available to the curatorial field as a resource for information, discussion, and advice on ethical issues. Members of this committee can be contacted through [www.CurCom.org](http://www.CurCom.org).

## SOURCES

The following documents were used as source material by the CurCom work group:

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