

Ethics and Best Practices in Museums

Introduction

For hundreds of years, museums have held objects in the public trust. Today, American museums preserve and protect more than a billion objects. Sometimes they face questions related to: historic artifacts; ownership; Nazi-era assets; sacred objects; human remains; the loan, sale or donation of objects; or their diligence in probing the history of such objects. The museum field takes these concerns very seriously. Since 1925, the museum field has been actively working to ensure that museums adhere to rigorous ethical standards. The American museum community is committed to continually identifying and achieving the highest standard of legal and ethical policies and practices. In October of 2022, AAM announced a multi-year initiative to transform the standards that guide best practices and accreditation for museums. New requirements will focus on including diversity, equity, accessibility, and inclusion (DEAI) practices that are critical for the future vitality and sustainability of the museum field and essential to meet the evolving needs of the public, and a revised AAM Code of Ethics.

These current standards, best practices, and ethics from the field include:

- The American Alliance of Museums’
 - Code of Ethics for Museums,
 - Core Standards for Museums, and
 - Accreditation Program Requirements, as well as
- each museum’s Institutional Code of Ethics,
- each museum’s Institutional Mission, and
- standards and guidelines established by the International Council of Museums and discipline-specific organizations such as the American Association for State and Local History, the Association of Zoos and Aquariums, Association of Science-Technology Centers, the Association of Art Museum Directors, the Association of Children’s Museums, the American Association for Museum Volunteers, and many more.

Talking Points:

- Museums in the United States are grounded in the tradition of public service. Members of their governing authority, employees, and volunteers are firmly committed to responsible collections stewardship, programming, and conduct.
- There have been examples of museums considering the sale of works from their collections in order to raise operating funds, either for the museum itself or for a governing body such as a city, a state, or a university. It should be clearly understood that such a sale violates the standards and ethics of the museum field.
- Selling works from a museum’s collection purely for the purpose of raising money can also have a chilling effect on the potential for a museum to acquire new works and may lead to a revocation of the museum’s national accreditation.
- We support efforts at the state and local level to ensure adherence to these policies.

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The Alliance's Code of Ethics for Museums:

- affirms that museums must act ethically—usually far exceeding the minimum legal standard—to maintain their public integrity,
- states that the “stewardship of collections entails the highest public trust and carries with it the presumption of rightful ownership, permanence, care, documentation, accessibility, and responsible disposal,” and
- requires that museums ensure that “acquisition, disposal, and loan activities are conducted in a manner that respects the protection and preservation of natural and cultural resources and discourages illicit trade in such materials.”

The Alliance's Core Standards for Museums require that a museum:

- is a good steward of its resources held in the public trust,
- has “a formally approved, separate and distinct institutional code of ethics,”
- is “committed to public accountability and is transparent in its mission and operations,” and
- will “legally, ethically and responsibly acquire, manage, and dispose of collection items as well as know what collections are in its ownership/custody, where they came from, why it has them, and their current condition and location.”

The Alliance has developed best practices for museums specifically related to certain issues, including:

- archeological materials and ancient art,
- unlawful appropriation of objects during the Nazi-era,
- loaning collections to non-museum entities, and
- exhibiting borrowed objects.

Please visit the Alliance's website at aam-us.org or call (202) 289-1818 for more information about any of these guidelines.