

Julia Pagel – project manager at the NEMO office – has asked me, today, to give you a general European viewpoint on deaccessioning. She approached me partly because, in 2006, I set up a website that provides an overview of laws, rules and procedures relating to the disposal of museum objects in European countries. The website can be found at: www.deaccessioning.eu. The site is still online, but unfortunately it hasn't been updated for the last five years. I've been working on other issues. (Perhaps we can breathe new life into the website through NEMO.)

In actual fact, all of you here in the room should be helping *me* to catch up with the deaccessioning situation in your countries. But perhaps we can do that later and I can use my time now to share a few general ideas with you.

I'll start with a general observation. Then I'll share some rather more personal views of disposal with you. I'll finish with my view of a number of relevant developments within the sector and give you a glimpse of the future.

What I've observed is that the financial crisis has brought discussion of disposal to the forefront in a number of European countries. These are, of course, countries where museum legislation permits disposal.

Museums are under increasing financial pressure. I see subsidies shrinking everywhere. And the owners of collections – often local authorities – regularly ask themselves whether the disposal of museum objects can help to relieve the authorities' financial problems. That thought is not outlandish or despicable since the money available – or the lack of it – often determines society's actions. And I can see nothing wrong with the pressure of shrinking resources making us take a critical look at our collections. What makes the question raised by local officials awkward is the fact that they're constantly returning to it.

Legislators and local officials change more quickly than museum staff. And the new officials don't usually have a collective memory – or rather, a level of knowledge passed on from the old official to the new one on how to deal with museum collections.

This is why we always have to explain once again how we manage our collections and what we think of the easy-to-ask question “whether there aren't a few objects that could be sold to plug the financial gaps”.

When the legislator with dollar signs in his eyes looks at the collection, we have to make it clear to him that, long before

he took up his post, we as museum professionals had considered how to make responsible choices as regards the collection. And that, if there have to be disposals, then that will happen in the way we say it will. We're like a football coach, deciding what will happen on the pitch. And, just as in football, anyone can have an opinion, but we make the decisions.

Let me take the analogy of the football coach even further to make it clear what we, as professionals, require in order to make decisions on disposal. In my view, there are three areas:

- 1.) Just as the football coach knows his team, we have to know our collections. Our record-keeping and documentation must be up to scratch.
- 2.) We must have a tool to indicate the cultural value of the collections or subcollections. In football there are statistics that express the importance of players to a team or to a country. We should have a framework that assigns value in order to put a cultural value on our collections.
- 3.) There must be generally accepted rules of the game on the basis of which we can play the "game" – in the one case football, in the other "disposal" – otherwise it's a shambles. It is essential to have a tried and tested

guideline for the deaccessioning of museum objects. Various countries have already implemented such guidelines. Examples are the Netherlands, the UK, Germany, Denmark and Ireland.

I think that in all these areas we can still succeed in saving the best of our collections. And that also means that sometimes we cooperate in the transfer and sale of players to other clubs, if you see what I mean.

I consider that disposal is part of careful collection management. And this is where my own ideas come through rather more clearly. It is my firm belief that you can add value to an object by removing it from a museum collection and giving it new purpose, while adding to the value of the remaining collection by removing its non-functioning parts. The best outcome is of course when both the value of the object removed and that of the remaining collection are enhanced or increased by disposal.

I see a collection as an amoeba , constantly changing shape as bulges appear and disappear. And I see museums as solitary, greedy creatures, still in development. In the past, they filled themselves up with objects, but now they should take pleasure for once in just working away or passing things

on in order to keep the digestion healthy. Their etiquette and their image tend to get in the way here. I think that a great deal of what is lying in our storerooms is not really very good for us and even lies heavily on the stomach. We should want to free ourselves from it, but it feels so messy if we break it up.

That solitude is in any case a caricature. At this point in time, you can survive as a museum only if you work together. And not just on the question of exhibitions, but specifically also in the area of collections management. It is precisely on the flip side of the museum operation – collections management – that there is still a great deal to be gained. I'm thinking of the fine-tuning and exchange of collections, greater themed access and common storage. Cooperation can bring new momentum in the area of disposal.

In my view there are four basic forms of deaccessioning: donation, exchange, sale and destruction. Lending does not belong here since the ownership situation does not change, and restitution also does not fit in. Donation and exchange are reasonably uncontroversial as forms of disposal. That does not necessarily mean that they are used frequently. The fuss is always over sale and destruction, and in particular the sale or destruction of art or archaeological finds. No one has any problem with the destruction or sale of agricultural tools,

historic computers or stuffed birds. I've always found that hypocritical.

To return to the general trends. Which are important in the light of the disposal debate? I can name a few.

First: I am convinced that, under pressure from the crisis, we are obliged to hold existing regulations, codes and rules of conduct up to the light again to see whether they can withstand the increasing pressure. This crisis will be the big test for the codes. Where there are no rules of conduct, they must be developed.

Secondly, I think that, as a result of external pressure, the ethical conduct of museums in the area of disposal will be further codified. I see a tendency, as regards disposal, to organise ourselves more and more like professional associations of doctors, lawyers or notaries, where ethical considerations have always informed their actions. Within these groups, there is total acceptance of written procedures, centralised reporting of difficult or dubious matters, peer group review or ethics committees and sanctions on deviations from procedures. I think these are being adopted within the museum sector when it comes to disposal.

Thirdly, the crisis means that people and resources must be used more efficiently and also that procedures must not be unnecessarily long and complex. We will be obliged to make even clearer choices and to develop efficient procedures. To take an example: where there are objects you want to dispose of that are clearly of low cultural value, you don't want to go through a complex deaccessioning process.

Fourthly, the fact that, increasingly, our collections are accessible online (for instance Europeana) will influence collections management – and hence disposal. Our search engines, thesauri and semantic links are getting better. We know more and more about each other's collections and we can better identify where the duplications and overlaps lie. We will have to ask ourselves whether we have to keep x examples of the same objects in four different museums. Which will be followed by discussions on fine-tuning, rearrangement, amalgamation and disposal. Even internationally. This won't happen tomorrow, but within 10 years it will.

By way of example, let me show you a search result on the website of the Netherlands Digital Museum Collection, let's call it NDMC. This site now lets us access centrally some 3.5 million objects from over 50 Dutch museums. The website functions as a national aggregator for Europeana. I did an

NDMC search for “staartklok” (grandfather clock) and here we have the result : 36 hits in seven different collections. This is just a small example that shows clearly how we can fine-tune our collections better to each other and ensure that we only keep those things that are genuinely important.

In the area of digitisation and online applications, I would also expect some momentum from something like the Netherlands relocation database . Museums that want to dispose of objects in the Netherlands are obliged, under our deaccessioning guidelines, to offer surplus objects to other museums first . They do this by making the objects accessible to anyone online, on the relocation database. (In the Netherlands, this is one criterion for following a transparent deaccessioning procedure.) Anyone (even you and I) can look at the objects on the website, but only museums can express an interest. In this way, over 10 000 objects have been offered in the Netherlands over a six-year period and 1000 have changed ownership. And now that resources are shrinking, museums will also have to make more astute acquisitions. The relocation database can help with this.

Finally, museums increasingly have to demonstrate their social relevance. State why they are important, highlighting their contribution to a society where nothing can now be

taken for granted. Next they will also have to produce figures and statistics. And then they will have to apply benchmarks. At that point – which I think will be sooner rather than later – knowledge of the collection and a good framework for assigning value that can demonstrate the importance of the collection are of crucial importance. Otherwise museums will fall prey to local officials who want to make money out of the collections.

I'm now going to show you a provisional overview of all the war and army museums in the Netherlands, and I can tell you that we in the Netherlands are working on the construction of a large, new, national Army Museum .You can decide for yourselves whether you think that, in future, disposal in the war and army museums sector will at some point come up for discussion.

Thank you very much.