

DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
DEPARTMENTAL MANUAL

Museum Property Handbook
(411 DM, Volume I)

Chapter 1 Introduction to Museum Property Management

A. INTRODUCTION

Museum property comes in many forms, all with characteristics that make the property worthy of long-term preservation and management. Archeological collections may provide the only record of extinct cultures or provide proof of the changes leading to extant cultures, including our own. Natural history specimens document scientific research and represent variation and distribution, geographically and through time. Social history and cultural evolution are recorded in the design and style of historic objects, documents, and art. Objects such as these are often selected for designation as museum property either because they are unique or because they are representative of what was once typical. Categories of museum property and the Departmental standards for its management are defined in Appendix A.

Museum property management is a process, not a product. The process begins with the acquisition or designation of an object for a museum property collection. Museum property is recognized as distinct from other categories of personal property because it possesses attributes that warrant its preservation in perpetuity. These attributes may be scientific, historic, or artistic, but share in common the potential to enrich human experience in ways that property intended for routine use normally does not.

Because museum property is intended for long-term preservation, its management requirements are necessarily different from the requirements of property that can be replaced with a purchase order to a manufacturer or supplier. Detailed documentation is essential to ensure that unique attributes and the accurate context of the property are retained through time. Documentation may also verify the history of an object, prove legal possession of both the object and its copyright, and provide a record of condition, deterioration, or conservation treatments through time.

Long-term preservation and future availability of museum property requires that factors that tend to shorten an object's life must be minimized. Access to museum property and associated records must be controlled. Special storage and handling guidelines are required. Environmental

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variables such as light, temperature, and relative humidity should be monitored and maintained within recommended ranges. Use of the property should be restricted to those uses consistent with ensuring that the property will be available for use by future generations.

Management of museum property requires long-term vision, accountability, high ethical standards, access to subject-matter experts, sensitivity to diverse perspectives (i.e., the ability to anticipate potential future needs for access to and use of the property), and a commitment to professional standards.

B. DEPARTMENTAL MANUAL

Museum property possesses attributes that dictate management standards and procedures that differ from other types of personal property. The Departmental Manual (DM), Chapter 411, "Museum Property Management", establishes organizational responsibilities, policies, and standards for the preservation, protection, and documentation of museum property, and for developing plans to implement these policies and standards. The Chapter also defines the types of museum property, and identifies mandatory procedures, reports, and data. Where applicable, the Chapter is cross-referenced to Chapter 410, "Personal Property Management."

The Departmental Museum Property Handbook is a reference handbook for Chapter 411 of the Departmental Manual. The Handbook provides advice and information to assist the bureaus in establishing a program to achieve the museum property management standards that are required by the Departmental Manual.

C. MUSEUM PROPERTY HANDBOOK

The Departmental Museum Property Handbook covers a wide variety of topics to guide staff in managing the museum property controlled by bureaus.

Throughout this Handbook the term "curatorial staff" is used

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in a generic sense to refer to persons in each bureau who have the responsibility for museum property management. Museum property management may be carried out by museum curators, museum specialists, and museum technicians, or it may be carried out by property management specialists,

rangers, archeologists, historians, resource management specialists, and interpreters as a collateral duty.

Volume I of the Handbook addresses the scope of collections, and preservation and protection concerns common to all managers of museum property. Topics discussed include preservation, storage, shipping, handling, conservation, security, and planning for proper curation of museum property. Volume II discusses the role of documentation in establishing and maintaining accountability over museum property. Accessioning, cataloging, inventorying, lending, and deaccessioning are introduced. In both parts, detailed appendices provide reference materials to support the work of frontline museum property managers in the field units of bureaus.

Appendices A through C of Volume I provide the legal foundations and professional resources for managing museum property within the Department of the Interior. Appendices D through J describe specific procedures and materials needed to establish a sound preservation and protection program for museum property. Volume II appendices provide detailed reference materials to assist catalogers of museum property.

Successful management of museum property is a broadly interdisciplinary activity that requires access to diverse professional resources. No single handbook, including this one, can provide the answers needed for all circumstances. Museum property managers rely on the judgements of curatorial staff, discipline experts, and conservators as the most essential ingredients for effective preservation and protection of museum property. While the Departmental Museum Property Handbook identifies issues and introduces solutions, managers should draw on their own knowledge and that of specialists to find the best solutions for their specific needs. Liberal reference to the publications listed in this Handbook, and active participation in some of the

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professional organizations listed in Appendix B provides the network from which to request advice or technical assistance when it is needed. Diligent use of this Handbook and other suggested sources provides the foundation for reasoned decision-making by trained staff. Such diligence should ensure that Department of the Interior collections are preserved and maintained in good condition for the use and enjoyment of future generations.

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