

Collections Development Policy
Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford

Date approved by Pitt Rivers Museum Executive Board: 21 May 2024

Date approved by Pitt Rivers Museum Board of Visitors: 20 May 2025

Date at which policy is due for review: May 2030

The Museum's statement of purpose is:

As given in the University of Oxford's regulations, the Museum's purpose is 'to assemble, preserve and exhibit the Pitt Rivers Collection and to promote the public understanding of anthropology and world archaeology, and their teaching and research, based on the Museum's collections.' see Council Regulation 4 of 2019 <https://governance.admin.ox.ac.uk/legislation/council-regulations-4-of-2019#collapse1421161>

The Museum's mission statement:

The Pitt Rivers Museum wants to become a welcoming space to all where stories are shared by many voices. Working collaboratively and creatively with staff, volunteers, and communities we will transform how our iconic collections are engaged with, both online and in the Museum. In an increasingly disconnected world, we want to inspire empathy and deepen cross-cultural understanding.

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1. Introduction

The collections development policy guides acquisitions and disposals for the Pitt Rivers Museum.

The Museum will use this policy in conjunction with other policies and procedures relating to collections management to frame the way in which we care for the collections. These policies and procedures include - but are not limited to:

- the Collections Care and Conservation Policy

- the Documentation Policy
- the Destructive Sampling Policy
- the Collections Care and Conservation Plan

We understand care for collections to include cultural care and where possible we will make every effort to work equitably with communities and seek guidance regarding what this 'care' may look like and involve.

1.1 The Museum's Board of Visitors will ensure that both acquisition and disposal are carried out openly and with transparency.

1.2 The Museum has a long-term purpose and holds collections in trust for the benefit of our many publics and communities in relation to its stated objectives. (See <https://governance.admin.ox.ac.uk/legislation/council-regulations-4-of-2019#collapse1421161> and also the deed of gift and declaration published in the Oxford University Gazette No. 489, Vol.XIV on Tuesday, May 13, 1884).

Heads of Collections and members of the Museum's Collections, Teaching and Research Committee who have responsibility for acquisitions and disposals delegated to them by the Museum's Board of Visitors and Executive Board accept the principle that sound curatorial reasons (as outlined under 4 and 5 of this document) must be established before consideration is given to any acquisition to the collection, or the disposal of any items in the Museum's collection.

1.3 Acquisitions outside the current stated policy will only be made in exceptional circumstances.

1.4 The Museum recognises its responsibility, when acquiring additions to its collections, to ensure that care of collections, documentation arrangements and use of collections will meet the requirements of the Museum Accreditation Standard. This includes using Spectrum primary procedures for collections management. It will take into account limitations on collecting imposed by such factors as staffing, storage and care of collection arrangements.

1.5 The Museum will undertake due diligence and make every effort not to acquire, whether by purchase, gift, bequest or exchange, any object or specimen unless the governing body or those delegated by the Board of Visitors are satisfied that the museum can acquire a valid title to the item in question.

1.6 The Museum will not undertake disposal motivated principally by financial reasons.

2. History of the Collection

The Museum was founded and purpose built in 1884 with a donation of approximately 25,000 ethnographic and archaeological objects from the private collection of antiquarian Augustus Henry Lane Fox Pitt-Rivers. The collections have grown significantly over time with material acquired from many different parts of the world, including different parts of the University. The growth of the collections during the British colonial period reflected the growth of the British Empire. As well as material amassed during colonial expansion, the collections include anthropological and scientific fieldwork collections, military and punitive expedition collections as well as objects collected by Christian missionaries. Collections have come to the Museum by gift, purchase and loan. The Museum continues to acquire material via passive and active acquisition including donation, gift, commission and purchase. We acknowledge the colonial context underpinning the foundation of the Pitt Rivers Museum and work to address the often problematic history of parts of the collections

through critical analysis and the implementation of change (<https://www.prm.ox.ac.uk/critical-changes>).

3. An overview of existing collections

The collections of the Pitt Rivers Museum include artefacts from all parts of the world from prehistoric times to the present day, along with unique manuscript, photograph, sound and film collections and a subject-focused library. The collections number over 640,828 items, approximately 1% of which are on loan to the Museum. All collections are Designated as being of national or international significance, reflecting the fact that the Museum has one of the most significant archaeological and ethnographic collections in the world.

The collections are used for research and teaching at the University of Oxford, by scholars and students nationally and internationally, as well as in the Museum's curatorial and research staff and as part of public outreach and educational activities. The Museum's collections are increasingly accessed by Indigenous communities who wish to connect with their cultural heritage held in Oxford. The Museum is committed to making its collections accessible to the widest possible audience. Please see the Museum's Strategy and Access Policy. More information about accessibility to the Museum can be found here <https://www.prm.ox.ac.uk/access>

Displays are open to the general public daily. A more detailed overview of our collections can be found on our website <https://www.prm.ox.ac.uk/collections>

The collections are managed, documented and displayed according to the Museum's Documentation Policy. Documentation and record keeping relating to all acquisitions and disposal is in line with Spectrum Standards (<https://collectionstrust.org.uk/spectrum/>), the Museum's Collections Care and Conservation Policy and Procedural Manual. The Museum's policies are available online at <https://www.prm.ox.ac.uk/about-us>

4. Themes and priorities for future collecting

As agreed by the Museum's Collections Teaching and Research Committee potential acquisitions will be assessed against the following essential criteria:

- Significance of the contribution to strengthen or widen existing collections, especially those identified internally as priority areas;
- Significance of their potential to strengthen our display strategy and learning programmes;
- Significance of their research potential, especially in areas of active museum research;

In addition, the following considerations will also be relevant:

- The Museum seeks to expand its contemporary collections, to provide audiences with insight on current practice and contemporary issues as well as different perspectives on the Museum's historical collections. Contemporary material by artists and makers from communities of origin is of particular interest and the Museum continues to develop programmes to work towards equitable collecting practices;
- The quality of a collection's documentation. Poorly documented material has less obvious research or display value. The Museum will not normally accept material where provenance or contextual information is lacking, making the material of little research or display value, unless there is the demonstrable potential of such;
- Transfer of title. The Museum's policy is to acquire full legal ownership on behalf of the University of Oxford of all donated or purchased material. Material where legal ownership cannot be transferred is unlikely to be accepted, although artistic copyright in artworks is usually respected (unless the work has been commissioned);

- The Museum does not collect unmodified human remains. Cultural objects that consist in part of human material, such as hair, will sometimes be collected in accordance with relevant legal and ethical provisions;
- In the case of collections offered that do not meet the criteria or when requested by the donor/artist, the Museum may, depending on the circumstances, seek to acquire the material for its educational handling collection, suggest another more appropriate institution, or else recommend (and in some circumstances help facilitate) contact with the community of origin;
- The Museum will not normally accept material which is offered on condition that it be on permanent display. Where possible we will comply with specific storage conditions if they relate to cultural care but in all other conditions, we will follow the advice of our Conservation department.

5. Themes and priorities for rationalisation and disposal

5.1 The museum recognises that the principles on which priorities for rationalisation and disposal are determined will be through a formal review process that identifies which collections are included and excluded from the review. The outcome of any review and subsequent rationalisation will not reduce the quality or significance of the collection and will result in a more useable, well managed collection.

5.2 The procedures used will meet professional standards. The process will be documented, open and transparent. There will be clear communication with key stakeholders about the outcomes and the process.

5.3 Areas where the Museum will consider rationalisation and disposal are:

- Where the items are no longer relevant to the Museum's mission and are unlikely to have future potential for display or research;
- If objects are considered more relevant to the collection of another museum or heritage body;
- If the Museum is unable to provide adequate care (including physical or cultural) for the items;
- If the items are too badly damaged or deteriorated to be of any use or future use for the purpose of the Museum;
- If the items pose a health and safety risk, where disposal is required to comply with relevant legislation or to remove the risk to staff from these items;
- If the items are duplicates and after consideration of an item's provenance and research value as well as its physical duplication retention cannot be justified;
- Where it has been agreed by the Council of the University of Oxford that the items should be returned to their community of origin.
- If the item or items were erroneously accessioned as donations and later found to be on loan to the Museum.

6. Legal and ethical frameworks for acquisition and disposal of items

6.1 The Museum recognises its responsibility to work within the parameters of the Museum Association Code of Ethics (2015) when considering acquisition and disposal. The Museum is also committed to work within the ICOM Code of Ethics (2017) and those ethical guidelines produced by Subject Specialist Networks that form the basis of best practice in the sector.

6.2 The Museum was instrumental in developing the Procedures for Claims for the Return of Cultural Objects, approved by the Council of Oxford University in 2020, which sets out the ethical criteria used to assess historically harmful collecting practices and potential returns to communities.

7. Collecting policies of other institutions

7.1 The Museum will take into account the collecting policies of other museums and other organisations collecting in the same or related areas or subject fields. Where reasonable it will consult with these organisations, where conflicts of interest may arise or to define areas of specialism, to avoid unnecessary duplication and waste of resources.

7.2 Specific reference is made to the following institutions:

- The British Museum
- The Horniman Museum
- The Cambridge University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology
- University of Oxford Museums (Ashmolean Museum, History of Science Museum, Museum of Natural History (OUMNH), Bate Collection)
- Museum of English Rural Life, Reading University
- The Museum of Oxford and other Oxfordshire based museums

7.3 Where there is uncertainty over the acquisition, disposal or return of material the Museum may also consult colleagues in relevant national or regional museums internationally, particularly in countries of origin.

8. Archival holdings

8.1 The function of the Museum's archive (manuscript) collections is to acquire and preserve material that has the potential to contribute to the interpretation and understanding of the Museum's collections, the intellectual and political frameworks in which the collections have developed, and the documentation of social and cultural phenomena in keeping with the Museum's scope and areas of interest.

8.2 The Museum normally collects original or unique material, especially the product of fieldwork or otherwise informed and coherent observation, historical (vintage) material that documents historical modes of representation of societies and cultures.

The Museum does not normally add to its collections copy material, pamphlets or mass-produced ephemera, maps, or published material (unless acquired by the Balfour Library), unless such material forms an inseparable part of any collection acquired.

8.3 The Museum does not normally retain administrative records or other internal documentation for archival purposes, which are either retained within the relevant collections management systems for collections or transferred to Oxford University Archives.

9. Acquisition

9.1 The policy for agreeing acquisitions is that all proposals of new acquisitions requiring discussion will be taken to the Museum's Collections Teaching and Research committee for decision. The committee is formed of a group of staff representative of the collections, research and teaching functions of the Museum (see terms of reference for the Collections Teaching and Research committee). If the committee feels that further approval for a decision is required, and in all cases requiring a financial commitment to purchase, a recommendation will be sent to the Museum's Executive Board and ultimately the Director or Board of Visitors is consulted for decision making.

9.2 Approved acquisitions go through registrarial processes within the collections section. The Museum will not acquire any object or specimen unless it is satisfied that the object or specimen has not been acquired in, or exported from, its country of origin (or any intermediate country in which it may have been legally owned) in violation of that country's laws. (For the purposes of this paragraph 'country of origin' includes the United Kingdom).

9.3 In accordance with the provisions of the UNESCO 1970 Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property, which the UK ratified with effect from November 1 2002, and the Dealing in Cultural Objects (Offences) Act 2003, the Museum will reject any items that have been illicitly traded. The Museum will be led by national guidance on the responsible acquisition of cultural property issued by the Collections Trust (<https://collectionstrust.org.uk/cultural-property-advice/acquiring-cultural-property/>) and by the Department of Culture, Media and Sport in 2005. The work of the Museum is underpinned by our belief in principles laid out in the 2007 United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP).

The Museum will undertake due diligence and make every effort not to acquire, whether by purchase, gift, bequest or exchange any object or specimen unless the committee or responsible staff member is satisfied that the Museum can acquire a valid title to the item in question on behalf of the University of Oxford. The Museum will advise potential donors to contact originating communities in instances where material should be returned by them to its place of origin.

The Museum recognises its responsibility, when acquiring additions to its collections, to ensure that care of collections, documentation arrangements and use of collections will meet the requirements of the Museum Accreditation Standard. This includes using SPECTRUM primary procedures for collections management. It will also consider limitations on collecting imposed by such factors of staffing, storage and care of collections arrangements.

10. Ancestral remains

10.1 As the Museum holds or intends to acquire human remains from any period, it will follow the procedures in the 'Guidance for the care of human remains in museums' issued by DCMS in 2005.

10.2 The Museum does not acquire unmodified ancestral remains and works closely with community groups to return ancestors, where this is considered the right course of action by the community. Ancestral remains were removed from display in 2020. Lists of all ancestral remains in the collection (including modified remains and objects containing elements of ancestral remains) are published on our website <https://www.prm.ox.ac.uk/human-remains-pitt-rivers-museum-university-oxford>. We welcome enquiries from communities of origin seeking further information.

11. Biological and geological material

11.1 So far as biological and geological material is concerned, the Museum will not acquire by any direct or indirect means any specimen that has been collected, sold or otherwise transferred in contravention of any national or international wildlife protection or natural history conservation law or treaty of the United Kingdom or any other country, except with the express consent of an appropriate outside authority.

12. Archaeological material

12.1 The Museum will not acquire archaeological material (including excavated ceramics) in any case where the governing body or responsible officer has any suspicion that the circumstances of their recovery involved a failure to follow the appropriate legal procedures.

12.2 In England, Wales and Northern Ireland the procedures include reporting finds to the landowner or occupier of the land and to the proper authorities in the case of possible treasure (i.e. the Coroner for Treasure) as set out in the Treasure Act 1996 (as amended by the Coroners & Justice Act 2009).

12.3 In Scotland, under the laws of bona vacantia including Treasure Trove, the Crown has title to all ownerless objects including antiquities, although such material as human remains and environmental samples are not covered by the law of bona vacantia. Scottish material of chance finds, and excavation assemblages are offered to museums through the treasure trove process and cannot therefore be legally acquired by means other than by allocation to the Pitt Rivers Museum by the Crown. However, where the Crown has chosen to forego its title to a portable antiquity or excavation assemblage, a Curator or other responsible person acting on behalf of the Pitt Rivers Museum Board of Visitors, can establish that valid title to the item in question has been acquired by ensuring that a certificate of 'No Claim' has been issued on behalf of the Crown.

13. Exceptions

13.1 Any exceptions to the above clauses will only be because the Museum is:

- Acting as an externally approved repository of last resort for material of local (UK) origin
- Acting with the permission of authorities with the requisite jurisdiction in the country of origin

In these cases, the Museum will be open and transparent in the way it makes decisions and will act only with the express consent of an appropriate outside authority. The Museum will document when these exceptions occur.

14. Spoliation

14.1 The Museum will use the statement of principles 'Spoliation of Works of Art during the Nazi, Holocaust and World War II period', issued for non-national museums in 1999 by the Museums and Galleries Commission.

15. Repatriation and Restitution of objects and human remains

15.1 The collections under the stewardship of the Pitt Rivers Museum are under the legal ownership of the University of Oxford. The University, acting on the advice of the Museum's Board of Visitors and Gardens Libraries and Museums (GLAM) Board, may take a decision to return human remains (unless covered by the 'Guidance for the care of human remains in museums' issued by DCMS in 2005), objects or specimens to a country or people of origin. The University of Oxford will take such decisions on a case-by-case basis; within its legal position and taking into account all ethical implications and available guidance. This will mean that the procedures described in 16 will be followed but the remaining procedures are not appropriate.

15.2 The disposal of human remains from museums in England, Northern Ireland and Wales will follow the procedures in the 'Guidance for the care of human remains in museums'.

15.3 In the case of proposals or requests for the return of human remains, or artefacts incorporating human remains, claimants will be required to follow the GLAM procedures for the return of Human Remains <https://www.glam.ox.ac.uk/human-remains-policy>

15.4 In the case of proposals or requests for the return of objects of cultural significance claimants will be required to follow the GLAM Procedures for Claims for the Return of Cultural Objects <https://www.glam.ox.ac.uk/procedures-for-return-of-cultural-objects-claims>

15.5 In the first instance potential claimants are advised to contact the Collections Section of the Museum for an informal conversation. Collections Section staff will provide additional information on the process, provenance information available and advise and support the production of a claim with a template that can be followed by a claimant. Please see <https://prm.ox.ac.uk/returns> for further information.

15.6 Once a formal claim has been submitted the claim is put before the Museum's Board of Visitors. Then, if they agree, a dossier is prepared and advertised in the University Gazette for consultation by any interested member of the University. Any comments from members of the University are attached with the claim and put before GLAM Board.

15.7 The final decision will be made by the University Council who will be guided by the recommendation of the Museum's Board of Visitors and GLAM Board. The Museum will be guided by the University as to whether approval will also need to be sought from the Charity Commission for an object to be returned. The Director of the Museum is in regular contact with DCMS and ACE when relevant.

15.8 Once approval has been granted it is the responsibility of the claimant to seek any relevant export permits and licenses. Each party will bear its own costs in relation to the processing of any claim at all stages.

16. Disposal procedures

16.1 All disposals will be undertaken with reference to the Spectrum primary procedures on disposal.

16.2 The governing body will confirm that it is legally free to dispose of an item. Agreements on disposal made with donors will also be taken into account.

16.3 When disposal of a museum object is being considered, the Museum will establish if it was acquired with the aid of an external funding organisation. In such cases, any conditions attached to the original grant will be followed whenever practical. This may include repayment of the original grant and a proportion of the proceeds if the item is disposed of by sale.

16.4 When disposal is motivated by curatorial reasons the procedures outlined below will be followed and the method of disposal may be by gift, sale, exchange or as a last resort – destruction.

16.5 The decision to dispose of material from the collections will be taken by the governing body only after full consideration of the reasons for disposal. Other factors including public benefit, the implications for the Museum's collections and collections held by museums and other organisations collecting the same material or in related fields will be considered. Expert advice will be obtained and the views of stakeholders such as donors, researchers, local and communities of origin and others served by the Museum will also be sought. The Museum will ensure that the disposal process is carried out openly and with transparency, unless there are strong reasons of cultural sensitivity why this should not be the case.

16.6 A decision to dispose of a specimen or object, whether by gift, exchange, sale or destruction (in the case of an item too badly damaged or deteriorated to be of any use for the purposes of the collections or for reasons of health and safety), will be the responsibility of the governing body of the Museum acting on the advice of professional curatorial staff, if any, and not of the curator or manager of the collection acting alone.

16.7 Once a decision to dispose of material in the collection has been taken, priority will be given to retaining it within the public domain. It will therefore be offered in the first instance, by gift or sale, directly to other Accredited Museums likely to be interested in its acquisition. By definition, the Museum has a long-term purpose and holds collections in trust for society in relation to its stated objectives. The governing body therefore accepts the principle that sound curatorial reasons for disposal must be established before consideration is given to the disposal of any items in the Museum's collection.

16.8 If the material is not acquired by any Accredited museum to which it was offered as a gift or for sale, then the museum community at large will be advised of the intention to dispose of the material normally through a notice on the MA's Find an Object web listing service, an announcement in the Museums Association's Museums Journal or in other specialist publications and websites (if appropriate).

16.9 The announcement relating to gift or sale will indicate the number and nature of specimens or objects involved, and the basis on which the material will be transferred to another institution. Preference will be given to expressions of interest from other Accredited museums. A period of at least two months will be allowed for an interest in acquiring the material to be expressed. At the end of this period, if no expressions of interest have been received, the Museum may consider disposing of the material to other interested individuals and organisations giving priority to organisations in the public domain.

16.10 Any monies received by the Museum governing body from the disposal of items will be applied solely and directly for the benefit of the collections. This normally means the purchase of further acquisitions. In exceptional cases, improvements relating to the care of collections in order to meet or exceed Accreditation requirements relating to the risk of damage to and deterioration of the collections may be justifiable. Any monies received in compensation for the damage, loss or destruction of items will be applied in the same way. Advice on those cases where the monies are intended to be used for the care of collections will be sought from the Arts Council England.

16.11 The proceeds of a sale will be allocated so it can be demonstrated that they are spent in a manner compatible with the requirements of the Accreditation standard. Money must be restricted to the long-term sustainability, use and development of the collection.

16.12 Full records will be kept of all decisions on disposals and the items involved and proper arrangements made for the preservation and/or transfer, as appropriate, of the documentation relating to the items concerned, including photographic records where practicable in accordance with Spectrum procedure on deaccession and disposal.

16.13 The nature of disposal by exchange means that the Museum will not necessarily be in a position to exchange the material with another Accredited museum. The governing body will therefore ensure that issues relating to accountability and impartiality are carefully considered to avoid undue influence on its decision-making process.

- a) In cases where the governing body wishes for sound curatorial reasons to exchange material directly with Accredited or non-Accredited museums, with other organisations or with individuals, the procedures in paragraphs 16.1-5 will apply.
- b) If the exchange is proposed to be made with a specific Accredited museum, other Accredited museums which collect in the same or related areas will be directly notified of the proposal and their comments will be requested.

- c) If the exchange is proposed with a non-Accredited museum, with another type of organisation or with an individual, the Museum will place a notice on the MA's Find an Object web listing service, or make an announcement in the Museums Association's Museums Journal or in other specialist publications and websites (if appropriate).
- d) Both the notification and announcement must provide information on the number and nature of the specimens or objects involved both in the Museum's collection and those intended to be acquired in exchange. A period of at least two months must be allowed for comments to be received. At the end of this period, the governing body must consider the comments before a final decision on the exchange is made.

16.14 The Museum will also consider disposal on ethical grounds. In this situation staff will follow guidance set out in the Collections Trust approved 2023 Museums Association toolkit "Off the Shelf a Toolkit for Ethical Transfer, Reuse and Disposal" using the flowchart on page 7.

<https://collectionstrust.org.uk/resource/a-toolkit-for-ethical-transfer-reuse-and-disposal/> This toolkit encourages museums to take an active approach to appropriate disposal, while ensuring safeguards are in place to protect collections and public trust in museums. It was developed in 2023 with a steering group made up of representatives from the MA's Ethics Committee, ACE, MGS, Welsh Government, NIMC, NMDC, Collections Trust, AIM and the NLHF.

16.15 When disposal followed by transfer is approved by the Museum's Board of Visitors on ethical grounds, it may be that the most appropriate organisation or body for transfer to is outside of the UK and does not fall under the UK Accreditation scheme. In this case 16.7-9 do not apply.

16.16 If it is not possible to dispose of an object through transfer or sale, the governing body may decide to destroy it.

16.17 It is acceptable to destroy material of low intrinsic significance (duplicate mass-produced articles or common specimens which lack significant provenance) where no alternative method of disposal can be found.

16.18 Destruction is also an acceptable method of disposal in cases where an object is in extremely poor condition, has high associated health and safety risks or is part of an approved destructive testing request identified in an organisation's research policy.

16.19 Where necessary, specialist advice will be sought to establish the appropriate method of destruction. Health and safety risk assessments will be carried out by trained staff where required.

16.20 The destruction of objects should be witnessed by an appropriate member of the Museum workforce. In circumstances where this is not possible, e.g. the destruction of controlled substances, a police certificate should be obtained and kept in the relevant object history file.

17. Policy Review Procedure

17.1 The Collections Development Policy will be published on the Museum's website and will be reviewed from time to time, at least once every five years.

17.2 Arts Council England will be notified of any changes to the policy, and the implications of any such changes for the future of collections.

17.3 Relevant Museum staff will be made aware of this policy during induction or specific meetings. Curatorial, collections, conservation staff and members of the Collections, Research and Teaching Committee should be familiar with this policy.

