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Treasures in the Basement?

*An Analysis of Collection
Utilization in Art Museums*

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PREFACE

This dissertation examines how art museums utilize their collections and focuses particularly on the very large proportion of museum artworks found in storage. The study explores: Why museums have so much in storage; what options are available to reduce storage levels and/or increase the utilization of stored artworks; what constraints and opportunities are associated with those options; and what policies contribute to current levels of collection storage and utilization, and what policies would encourage change.

The research draws from museum industry statistics and literature, from a case study of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, and from economic and organizational theory. The work involves extensive data collection and analysis, and incorporates an array of interviews with industry practitioners.

This study should be of interest to practitioners in the museum profession, to scholars in museum studies and arts management, to policy makers in the arts and nonprofit fields, to government and private supporters of the arts, and to members of the general public concerned with the role of arts institutions in our society.

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ABSTRACT

Surveys suggest that 72% of U.S. museum artworks reside in museum storerooms. Despite the legitimate reasons for housing artworks in storage, there is recognition within the museum community that much of what resides in museum storerooms is not advancing institutional missions in a meaningful way. Meanwhile, the cost of maintaining artworks in storage is considerable and increasing.

Four questions guide this investigation: 1) What factors explain the large proportion of museum artworks in storage? 2) What are the options for reducing storage and/or increasing the utilization of stored artworks? 3) What are the constraints and opportunities associated with the different options? 4) What policies contribute to current levels of collection storage and utilization, and what policies would encourage change?

The research approach involves a synthesis of museum literature and industry statistics; a conceptual framework for structuring the analysis; a case study for exploring collection utilization decisions in a real-world context; and a policy analysis.

The study explores several strategies for reducing storage levels and/or increasing the utilization of stored artworks: 1) reduce the size of the collection; 2) increase exhibition space for displaying the collection; 3) share the collection with other institutions; and 4) increase access to objects in the collection.

The study identifies six key obstacles to enhancing collection utilization: 1) The museum missions *to preserve* and *to study* (absent priorities) rationalize high storage and low utilization. 2) Museums' organizational procedures and incentives fuel collection growth, rather than regulate collection size. 3) A museum that breaks with inefficient (but accepted) industry practices risks upsetting potential artwork donors and damaging the institution's longer-term prospects. 4) Most strategies for enhancing utilization strain operating budgets in the near-term, even if they provide relief in the long-term. 5) The museum industry's infrastructure is inadequate for cost-effectively engaging in

some strategies for enhancing utilization. 6) Certain strategies that promise broader public benefits are in tension with localized aspects of museum missions and responsibilities.

The study concludes with a discussion of policy issues that the museum industry must confront if it is to improve collection utilization in a meaningful way.

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1. INTRODUCTION

According to the most recent National Museum Survey, in 1988 U.S. art museums counted over 13 million artworks¹, conservatively valued at \$65 billion², in their collections. In the years since the survey was conducted, both the volume and value of these collections have increased significantly. Also in 1988, the nation's art museums produced approximately 14,000 exhibitions, with attendance of almost 76 million.³

A vast number of the artworks held in museum collections, however, went unseen in 1988 - as they do every year. While the National Museum Survey does not report the number of objects in storage, other surveys suggest that, on average, 72-80% of museum artworks reside in storage facilities.⁴ Many of our largest art museums have over 90% of their collections in storage.⁵

Properly caring for artworks in storage is, of course, an important museum obligation, and relates directly to museums' mission to preserve our cultural heritage. Furthermore, making these stored artworks available to scholars advances museums' mission to facilitate study of their collection holdings. Nevertheless, it is reasonable to ask

¹ AAM (1992), p. 91.

² Since art museums are not required to report the value of their collections on their balance sheets, there is no fully reliable estimate of the total value of art museum holdings. Museum scholar Stephen Weil, however, offered \$65 billion as a "modest" estimate of the value of U.S. art museum collections in 1988 (Weil 1995, p. 84). Another estimate, though for only a portion of art museum holdings, comes from economist Richard Rosett. He analyzed 1988 data on the largest 10% of U.S. art museums and estimated the value of those collections at \$32 billion in that year (Rosett 1991, p. 160).

³ AAM (1994), p. 43.

⁴ A 1985 survey of 66 U.S. art museums found that, on average, 72% of collection objects were in storage (AAM 1985, p. 58). A 1989 study of U.K. art museums found that, on average, 80% of collection objects were in storage (Lord et al. 1989, p. 19). Neither survey specified the timeframe over which the storage percentages were measured (e.g., a single point in time, over a period of five years, etc.)

⁵ These percentages most likely reflect a *static* view of collection storage, depicting storage levels at a single point in time. A more meaningful depiction would reflect the *dynamic* nature of collection storage, illustrating how over a period of years, a certain portion of stored artworks "rotate" into galleries for display.

whether current levels of collection storage (and collection utilization) truly reflect museums' goals and purposes. Or, perhaps, are high storage levels an indication that something is amiss: Could museums even better serve their many constituencies and objectives by reducing their storage levels and/or increasing the utilization of their stored artworks?

Art museums' defining assets are their art collections. These are the key resources museums manage as they fulfill their public mandate.⁶ The challenge of managing art museum collections - in the context of competing mission priorities, budget constraints, and conflicting expectations from multiple museum constituencies - is the subject of this dissertation.

The chapters that follow examine how museums utilize their art collections, with a particular focus on the large proportion of museum artworks in storage. Chapter 3 begins the inquiry by identifying the many factors that help explain why museums have so much in storage in the first place. Then, in a purely conceptual manner, Chapter 4 posits several strategies for reducing storage levels and/or increasing the utilization of stored artworks. The next three chapters move on to practical realities by exploring how one museum - The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco - has attempted to reduce its storage level and increase the use of its collection using several strategies outlined in Chapter 4. The case study serves to highlight the many barriers to enhanced collection utilization in the current museum environment: Even for a museum that is committed to reducing its storage level and finding greater uses for its stored artworks, obstacles often preclude success. Chapter 8 draws out the larger lessons from this investigation, and discusses the implications for individual museums, for the museum industry more generally, and for society at large.

First, however, it is important to provide some context for the study, and the rest of this introductory chapter does this by covering

⁶ All museums have a mandate to serve the public, whether the institutions are *public museums* or *private, nonprofit museums*. For public museums, the mandate is explicit; for private, nonprofit museums, the mandate is implicit in their privileged tax status.

three topics: the multiple missions of museums; the cost of collection storage; and some trends in museum collection practices.

COLLECTION UTILIZATION IN THE CONTEXT OF MUSEUM MISSIONS

Museums have five traditional missions: *to collect, to preserve, to study, to exhibit, and to interpret* important objects.⁷ In fulfilling their multiple missions, museums engage in a variety of activities: They acquire objects (either by purchase or donation); they care for their collections by maintaining them in controlled environments (either galleries or storage facilities) and by applying conservation treatments when necessary; they produce art-historical research through the work of in-house curators, or they facilitate such research by making their collections available to visiting scholars; they produce exhibitions, allowing the public to view objects held in their own permanent collections (or objects on loan from other museums or private collections); and they educate the public through interpretive aids such as exhibition catalogues, wall labels, audio tours, lectures, and so on.

The fact that museums serve multiple purposes makes it challenging to assess how well collections are being utilized since there is no single objective against which performance can be gauged. Because each mission is valuable in its own right, it is not - in any clear sense - an "unproductive" use of resources when one mission is pursued at the expense of another. Instead, it is a question of the *relative* value (and cost) of pursuing one objective over another, and like all questions concerning values, different individuals or groups will have their own opinions.

The debate over which museum missions should be primary is as old as museum history, and has been well summarized by several museum scholars (DiMaggio 1991; Harris 1999; Skramstad 1999). In a sense, the

⁷ Dutch museologist Peter van Mensch argues for combining museums' five missions into three: *preservation* (which includes *collecting* as the initial step in preservation process), *study* (which is the same as in the traditional five-part mission), and *communication* (which includes *interpretation* and *exhibition*). For a discussion of the implications of a three-part (as opposed to a five-part) mission, see: Weil (1990), pp. 57-65.

debate can be characterized as whether museums should be more object-focused (by emphasizing acquisition and preservation) or more people-focused (by emphasizing exhibition and education). In other words, is the art museum's highest obligation to the collection itself, or to the people who can benefit from the collection?⁸

Those who believe in the primacy of the objects contend that our material cultural heritage is valuable in its own right and doesn't derive its importance only by current usage - or even by anticipated future usage. Curator Theodore Stebbins speaks for many of this persuasion when he asserts that the collection is "the very heart" of the museum; it is what "gives the museum its identity, establishes its mission, and suggests its future" (Stebbins 1991:13). Because all else that a museum does *depends* on the collection, the argument goes, the collection's preservation is paramount. Conflicts occur when other museum actions threaten the collection's preservation, either because objects are subjected to increased physical risks (e.g., by being displayed too long in gallery settings, or by being loaned too frequently to other institutions), or, in the extreme case, because objects are sold off from the collection. When other activities are pursued at the expense of the preservation mission, what is put at risk is museums' "most important constituency - art itself" (Turrell 1991:15-16).

Others argue that museum collections are valuable only because *people* value them, and making decisions that place object-concerns over people-concerns takes museums away from their humanistic purpose. According to this perspective, museums' "ultimate importance must not

⁸ Different terms are sometimes used to characterize this debate, particularly the use of "educational" to describe the people-orientation of museums. Weil, for example, makes the distinction between museums as "educational institutions" and as "enormous repositories" (Weil 1990, p. 29). Taking more of an organizational cultural perspective, Skramstad contrasts past periods, when museums exhibited more of an outward, public-orientation, with more recent times when museums demonstrate a more internally-focused, professional orientation (Skramstad, 1999, p. 112). A similar "inward-outward" characterization is made by Weil (1999, p. 229). Another way that the debate is framed is by noting that an exhibition emphasis tends to benefit *current* generations while a preservation emphasis tends to benefit *future* generations (Weil, 1983, pp. xiii-xiv).

lie in their ability to acquire and care for objects...but in their ability to take such objects and put them to some worthwhile use" (Weil 1990:29). Thus, if a museum's objects are neither exhibited, nor interpreted, nor studied, their very reason for being in a museum is suspect. The preservation of artworks should not be regarded as an end in itself, but rather as a means to other goals. As former museum director and president Harold Skramstad observes, a museum's objects are not "the mission of the museum's work but powerful tools that enable it" (Skramstad 1999:122).

Advocates of each camp cite the deleterious extreme of the other point of view. On the one hand, some commentators claim museums' object-focus likens them to institutions in the "salvage and warehouse business."⁹ Others, however, contend that museums' people-focus leads them to resemble theme parks, catering to the basic entertainment needs of the public.

In actuality, the debate is really one about emphasis, since neither camp is arguing for the elimination of any one mission. But this also means that even if a museum is clear about its general mission thrust, it still has multiple objectives to balance and many decisions will involve tradeoffs across mission-related objectives. Thus, the philosophical debate about museum purposes ultimately translates to competing operational priorities for the institution. A decision to acquire an additional object, for example, implies future expenses for the object's upkeep - which leaves fewer resources for *other* objects' upkeep or for other museum activities.

What does this debate mean, then, when considering the approximately ten million objects in art museum's storerooms?¹⁰ Some authors argue that high storage levels are an indication that museums

⁹ Barbara Franco, in Weil (1999), p. 229.

¹⁰ The approximation of ten million artworks in storage comes from combining two statistics cited earlier in this chapter: namely, that art museums have a total of 13,051,701 objects in their collections (AAM 1992, p. 91), and that, on average, U.S. art museums have 72% of their artworks in storage (AAM 1985, p. 58). Both of these statistics are from surveys conducted in the mid-1980s. The figure was rounded up to ten million (rather than down to nine million) to simplify calculations in a hypothetical example presented later in this chapter.

are making collection-related decisions without due attention to their institutions' particular mission priorities. Museum scholar Stephen Weil, for example, in a discussion about "deaccessioning" (the museum term for permanently removing objects from a museum's collection), challenges museums to consider forthrightly the link between collection objects and museum missions. He proposes two questions for determining whether objects are contributing sufficiently to institutional goals:

What utility does this particular object have in the museum's pursuit of its purpose?

If it does not have any discernible (or, to apply a more stringent test, substantial) utility, is there any other compelling reason as to why it should be retained?¹¹

Weil goes further to suggest how museums with different mission emphases should differentially apply this "utility" standard. In effect, he asks museums to prioritize among their missions and pay attention to that ranking when assessing an object's mission-relevance. He discusses two examples: a museum for which collection preservation is the primary goal, and a museum for which scholarship is the primary goal. In both these cases, he argues, there is strong mission-justification for retaining objects not on view.

But many art museums, Weil continues, have "public communication" as their primary purpose.¹² For these museums, the collection "is neither intended principally to be an end in itself [i.e., with preservation as the central mission] nor to serve primarily as a subject for research."¹³ For these museums, he contends, it is "more than merely permissible or appropriate" to apply a stricter standard for those objects not on view, and "to rid the collection of objects which,

¹¹ Weil 1997, p. 5. Parentheses are the author's.

¹² As explained in an earlier footnote, the term "communication" is sometimes used as shorthand for the two traditional museum missions, "to exhibit" and "to interpret."

¹³ Weil (1997), p. 64. Parentheses, and text contained therein, are my own.

although relatively useless to its needs, continue to drain the museum of the resources required for their care."¹⁴

To others in the museum world, the "utility" approach described above is more appropriate for a business than a museum. Museum director Michael Conforti, for example, criticizes an accountability system "in which collections not on view are considered of questionable institutional value." By making operational comparisons with profit-making businesses, "[s]torage is often considered 'dead inventory,' visible to few, an institutional asset waiting to be struck from the debit side of the ledger and turned into cash."¹⁵ While not against the notion of accountability for objects in a collection, Conforti offers several reasons why objects in storage today may find greater use within the museum tomorrow. Many art historians, he observes, are expanding their concept of the canon of art, "allowing objects little considered in the past to share cultural and aesthetic reinterpretation with long accepted masterworks." In other cases, museum storerooms "contain collections of quality awaiting future gallery space," and "even fakes or reproductions have educational value in the institutions." Conforti also offers alternative ways to make objects in storage more "accountable," for example, by investing in "open storage" facilities that provide public access to objects normally off limits to museum visitors.¹⁶

The issues raised by Weil and Conforti, as difficult as they are to resolve in a philosophical debate, can be even more challenging to address in the context of an operating museum. In the chapters that follow, these issues (and others that touch on the intersection of collection utilization and museums' missions) will be revisited several times.

¹⁴ Ibid. In practice, many museums do not have such clear-cut mission priorities, and a more nuanced ranking of missions would be required in applying a "utility standard." The lack of clear mission priorities, however, also provides cover against making difficult choices, as will be discussed in later chapters.

¹⁵ Conforti (1997), p. 75.

¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 79-80.

THE COST OF MAINTAINING ARTWORKS IN STORAGE

A second issue that museum commentators raise in their discussions of collection storage and utilization is the long-term cost of maintaining artworks - even those that are not actively utilized by the museum.¹⁷ Former Getty Trust president Harold Williams, for example, cites cost when he challenges art museums' complacency with the sizable number of artworks that reside in "largely dead storage." In his critique, he highlights both the annual operating expense of maintaining works in storage, and the periodic expense of building new or expanded storage facilities (Williams 1991). Cultural economist John O'Hagan makes a related point when he discusses the high "opportunity cost" of art museums' maintaining "overly large" collections (O'Hagan 1998). O'Hagan argues that museums are not sufficiently recognizing that the cost of servicing such large collections operates "to the detriment" of other museum missions, and thus represents foregone opportunities that must be accounted for.

But while many acknowledge, in *general* terms, the high cost of maintaining artworks in storage, little is known about its magnitude.¹⁸ In concept, the cost of maintaining objects in storage involves discrete capital investments (e.g., building or remodeling storage facilities, purchases of climate-control or security systems) and annual operating expenditures (e.g., utilities, insurance, conservation treatments, inventory and record-keeping, security). Since museums typically report their expenses only in broad categories, the challenge in determining the cost of storage is knowing how much of a museum's organization-wide expenditures should be allocated to its storage function.¹⁹

¹⁷ Museums are obligated (by professional ethics) to properly care for *all* objects in their permanent collections, regardless of the objects' importance or usage.

¹⁸ In part, this may be due to the fact that "collection management" has only recently become an acknowledged responsibility within the museum industry. As Weil notes, for example, it was not until 1984 that the American Association of Museums began requiring museums to have written collection management policies as a condition for accreditation (Weil 1997, p. 4).

¹⁹ Those who field museum surveys report that many museums have difficulty allocating expenses into even the broadest of categories. See, for example, AAM (1998), p. 52, and Lord et al. (1989).

While not formal cost studies, two publications from the 1980s offer similar rules of thumb for allocating costs to different museum functions. Lord, Lord, and Nicks, in their 1989 study, *The Cost of Collecting*, surveyed 61 U.K. museums (of all types) about their expenditures in an effort to better understand museum costs. The survey asked museums to report their expenditures in a given set of categories (e.g., administration); the authors then devised an algorithm to determine what percentage of these categorical costs could be attributed to the "collecting function" of museums, broadly defined. Finally, they used square footage data from the surveyed museums to calculate collection-related operating costs per square foot. The authors found that the median annual operating expense associated with the museums' collecting function was about \$30 per square foot (in 1988 dollars).²⁰

Additional figures come from U.S. museum architect, George Hartman. In a 1988 article (Bank 1988), Hartman summarized his method for estimating costs for storing and displaying museum objects. In contrast to Lord et al., who focused solely on operating costs, Hartman included operating and building (i.e., capital) costs in his formulation. For both collection storage and collection display, Hartman calculates costs based on the square footage devoted to each function. For *operating costs*, Hartman simply divides the museum's entire operating budget by the museum's interior square footage, and then applies that rate to the amount of space allocated to collection storage, collection display, and other functions. For *building costs*, Hartman uses his experience in constructing new museum buildings to estimate a cost-per-square-foot; he then converts that one-time expense into an "annual rent equivalent." Using a hypothetical museum as an example, Hartman estimates a total annual cost of \$60 per square foot (in 1988 dollars) for storing and displaying objects (\$30 per square foot for operating costs, and an

²⁰ The survey addressed only operating costs (i.e., not capital costs). Also, the study did not attempt to separate the costs associated with maintaining works in storage from those associated with other collection-related activities, such as exhibition planning or conducting research on collections. See Lord et al. (1989), especially, pp. 61-75, 111.

additional \$30 per square foot in building costs).²¹ For illustration, Hartman also calculates museum costs *per object*, by assuming a stored object occupies two square feet (\$120 per year) and a displayed object occupies 50 square feet (\$3,000 per year).²²

Using Hartman's approach, along with museum statistics from other sources, one can estimate what U.S. art museums spend, as a group, to maintain artworks in storage. The most recent National Museum Survey found that U.S. art museums occupied a total of about 33 million square feet of interior space, and had total operating expenses of about \$1.1 billion in 1988.²³ Thus, in the aggregate, U.S. art museums spent about \$34 per square foot to operate their institutions in 1988. While the Survey did not ask museums to specify what proportion of interior space is devoted to storage, in a related report, the median art museum was found to allocate 15% of its interior square footage to collection storage (AAM 1994). If one assumes that 15% of *all* art museum space is allocated to collection storage, then almost five million square feet are devoted to this purpose. So, applying the \$34 rate to the five million square feet total, U.S. art museums' collection storage can be estimated to cost about \$167 million per year in operating expenses alone (in 1988 dollars). If one then applies Hartman's \$30-per-square-foot rate for annualized building expenses, U.S. art museums would have spent another \$149 million per year as a "rent equivalent" for storage space, for a total annual cost of storage of about \$316 million (in 1988 dollars).

Clearly, this "back of the envelope" calculation is only the roughest of estimates, and museums would be well served by more research

²¹ The "hypothetical museum" has an operating budget of \$3 million and a building of 100,000 square feet. The example did not specify how much space was devoted to collection storage or display.

²² Space allocations vary depending on the type of object. For example, Hartman found that museums devote about ten square feet for the display of each glass object, whereas they devote approximately 75 square feet to the display of each painting (Banks 1988). The article did not provide estimates for the storage space requirements of different types of objects.

²³ More precisely, 1,214 art museums occupied 33,041,118 interior square feet, and had total operating expenses of \$1,113,074,602 in 1988 (AAM 1992, pp. 50, 73, 194).

in this area. But *not* knowing what storage costs is an interesting phenomenon in itself, since it effectively obscures one of the key implications of current collecting practices. The importance of incorporating such information into museums' collection decisions will be discussed again, in the final chapter of this study.

SOME TRENDS IN MUSEUM COLLECTION PRACTICES

Against the backdrop of high storage levels, several developments within the museum industry suggest some movement towards reducing storage and/or increasing the utilization of stored artworks. These developments - and the associated options they offer museums - will be explored more fully in later chapters. For now, however, it is useful to consider them briefly, in the aggregate:

- The museum industry is demonstrating a greater acceptance of deaccessioning - the practice of permanently removing objects from museum collections.
- Industry leaders are calling for more prudent acquisition policies, thus addressing a contributing factor to high storage levels.
- Individual museums are establishing "satellite" facilities to showcase more of their collections.
- Museums are negotiating collection-sharing arrangements that enable "collection-poor" institutions to lease or borrow artworks from "collection-rich" institutions.
- Museums are experimenting with "collection rotation" and "open storage" - strategies for physically exhibiting a greater portion of their collections.
- Advances in digital media allow museums to provide electronic access to artworks that remain in physical storage.

On balance, these developments suggest some exciting possibilities for the museum world. The fact that museums are employing such a range of collection-use strategies suggests a healthy, innovative industry,

offering up its own solutions to self-identified needs.²⁴ The variety of strategies available also means that museums can select collection-use options that reflect their own specific circumstances and the desires of their constituencies. At the same time, however, these developments raise questions. Most fundamentally: If so many options exist for reducing storage levels and/or increasing the utilization of stored artworks, why are there so many artworks in storage receiving such little use? Two basic explanations seem plausible.

The first explanation is that the current level of collection storage (and associated utilization of stored artworks) is *not* a problem. It may well be that stored artworks are, indeed, serving museums' overall mix of missions in an appropriate fashion. It is admittedly easy to regard a passive use of artworks (i.e., preserving them in storage for future generations) as less "productive" than the more active use of artworks on display.²⁵ And making stored artworks available to scholars for study, while not a passive use, is certainly a less visible one. Just because non-display uses of museum collections are more abstract (and difficult to measure) doesn't mean they are not important. Maybe the need isn't to better "utilize" stored artworks, but rather, to better articulate how these artworks are *currently* contributing to museum missions by being maintained in storerooms.²⁶

A second explanation is that, yes, current levels of collection storage and utilization are a problem; however, the alternatives available to museums to reduce storage and/or increase the utilization

²⁴ As a relatively unregulated industry, museums are, for the most part, free to exercise their independence in deciding how to manage their collections. Many museums voluntarily look to their professional associations for guidance on collection policy and other policy matters. For a discussion of museum governance and the role of professional associations in shaping museum policy, see Malaro (1994).

²⁵ And of course, since museums routinely rotate their exhibitions, some of the artworks in storage today will be on display tomorrow (or sometime in the near future).

²⁶ Related to this argument is the possibility that the cost incurred for maintaining current storage levels is considered sufficiently low to justify current practice. This line of reasoning might allow for a lower "mission contribution" of stored artworks, but judge it as acceptable due to the relatively low cost of maintaining these "less productive" artworks.

of stored artworks are not feasible solutions. The alternatives may be attractive in theory - but not in practice. Perhaps they are too costly, too uncertain in their consequences, or are too much at odds with the prevailing professional culture within the industry. Related to this second explanation is the possibility that the forces contributing to high storage levels are simply stronger than the forces compelling change.

While I will explore elements of the first "explanation" in later chapters, this study focuses on the second. On balance, the literature suggests that there is a problem with current levels of collection storage and utilization, as evidenced, in part, by calls for change coming from a range of respected figures from within and outside the museum industry.²⁷ These include museum administrators, who offer day-to-day operational perspectives (Walsh 1991, Skramstad 1999); museum scholars, who are in a position to consider the museum industry and its prospects more generally (Weil 1997, Malaro 1994); and scholars from outside the museum world, whose perspectives are less constrained by traditional practice and the professional norms of the museum industry (Feldstein 1991, O'Hagan 1998).

What is not clear is how *big* a problem there is, and what should be done about it. I hope this study, by offering a systematic look at collection storage and utilization, can help further a reasoned discussion about these issues. In the meantime, however, it is instructive to speculate on the potential size of the problem, and what its implications might be.

Consider an idealized example: What if, say, 20% of the artworks in museum storerooms are not adequately serving the mission of those institutions? Then, *in theory*, two million stored artworks (20% of ten million) could find better uses elsewhere. If better uses *could* be found (a big "if," and one that will be explored in later chapters), how far would two million artworks go? Almost 190 additional art museums of average size could be filled with these artworks, perhaps in areas of

²⁷ Unfortunately, there is no survey or other systematic accounting of opinion on this topic.

the country not currently well served by museums.²⁸ If these "excess" artworks turn out to be less-than-museum quality (an argument that will be examined later), then what could two million artworks do in non-museum venues? If divided into lots of 200 artworks apiece, 10,000 schools, community centers, or office buildings could be filled with original art.²⁹

From a cost perspective, what might maintaining two million excess artworks mean for museums' bottom line? If one assumes these artworks take up space in proportion to their numbers (i.e., 20% of the artworks in storage take up 20% of storage space), then, drawing from the cost calculations summarized earlier in this chapter, maintaining these two million artworks would cost about \$63 million per year (in operating and building costs, in 1988 dollars).³⁰ Sixty-three million dollars represents almost 30% of what government contributed to U.S. art museums in 1988, or over 20% of U.S. art museums' annual earned income that year.³¹ If, indeed, two million artworks are not serving museum purposes, then the annual cost of their maintenance constitutes a significant drain on U.S. museum resources.³²

Any conjecture about transferring artworks from one museum's storerooms to another museum's galleries (or to a school's classrooms) raises important practical issues, such as how to locate appropriate

²⁸ Using data from the most recent National Museum Survey, an "average-sized" museum (as measured by object count) has 10,751 objects in its collection (i.e., 13,051,701 objects spread evenly over 1,214 art museums). Two million objects, then, could fill 186 of these "average-sized" museums. Data are from 1988 (AAM 1992, pp. 50, 91).

²⁹ Again, these calculations are idealized and are intended for illustrative purposes only. A more pragmatic discussion of alternative uses of stored artworks appears in Chapter 7.

³⁰ The calculation is as follows: 33,041,118 sq. ft. (total interior space for U.S. art museums) *times* 15% (assumed percentage of space devoted to collection storage, based on data cited earlier) *times* 20% (percentage of stored artworks deemed "excess" in this example) *times* \$64/sq. ft. (operating and building costs of storage, as per earlier calculation) *equals* \$63,438,947. Data are from AAM 1992 and AAM 1994.

³¹ Based on 1988 data; see: AAM (1992), p. 186.

³² Again, this is only a hypothetical example. The actual number of museum artworks that could be considered "excess" may be more or less than two million, and the cost of their storage may be more or less than \$64 million per year.

partners for such transactions and how to finance transactions when potential partners may not have the funds to do so themselves. In addition to these practical issues, this type of thinking raises questions about the very nature of museums' public obligation: How far should individual museums go in ensuring that their collections serve the public good? It is possible, for example, that the "best" course of action for a particular museum (given its more narrow institutional interests) may differ from what is best for the museum industry more generally - or for society at large. Recognizing these differing perspectives is key to any thoughtful examination of museums' collection practices; it also suggests that increasing cooperation among museums may be an avenue for improving collection utilization more broadly.

ORGANIZATION OF THE DISSERTATION

I hope this introduction has provided motivation for exploring collection storage and utilization in greater depth. The rest of this dissertation is organized as follows. Chapter 2 describes the research approach used in this study, including the specific questions that guide the inquiry, the theoretical perspectives that inform the approach, and the methods used in the analysis.

Chapter 3 addresses the first question raised in this study; namely, why do art museums have so much in storage? Then, Chapter 4 introduces an organizing framework for examining a range of options for reducing storage levels and/or increasing the utilization of stored artworks. While Chapter 4 presents these options in a purely conceptual manner, the case study (which makes up the next three chapters) examines how these "options" fare in the real-world context of a distinguished, operating art museum: The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco.

Chapter 5 introduces the case study by providing background information on the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco and its collection; it then continues with an examination of collection storage at the institution. Chapter 6 presents an in-depth analysis of two options for reducing collection size (and storage levels): decreasing the flow of objects *into* the collection (acquisitions), and increasing the flow of objects *out of* the collection (deaccessions). Chapter 7

explores several additional options that, given the collection's size, can increase the utilization of objects usually found in storage.

Chapter 8 takes a reasoned look at what is preventing more progress in this area. It considers the findings from the earlier chapters, teasing out cross-cutting themes that help explain why museums find it difficult to reduce their storage levels and/or increase the utilization of stored artworks. The chapter concludes by proposing several issues for the art museum industry to address if it is interested in changing the status quo.

2. RESEARCH APPROACH AND METHODS

This study is motivated by one main question: How can art museums best utilize their central resource - their art collections? There are undoubtedly several approaches to exploring this question, each with strengths and weaknesses. In deciding how to structure this study, I took into account the existing research in the field (which is minimal), and identified the type of study I thought could make a strong and basic contribution. Three issues were key in determining this study's scope and approach. First, it seemed important to understand why museums currently hold so much of their collections in storage. While many authors have written about aspects of museum operations that contribute to high storage levels, no research exists that brings together these many factors so that they may be considered in toto, and serve as a foundation for further analysis of collection utilization issues. Second, to the extent there is genuine interest in reducing storage levels and/or increasing the utilization of stored artworks, it is not evident how that might be accomplished. Several developments in the museum industry suggest that there are, indeed, different ways to impact storage and utilization levels. These developments, however, have yet to be examined in a systematic fashion as alternatives to a common problem: underutilized collections. Particularly lacking is an assessment of why such developments have occurred only sporadically throughout the museum industry, having yet to make a sizable impact on collection practices. And third, it seemed important to make explicit how current museum policies contribute to high storage levels and low collection utilization rates. To the extent that underutilized collections are the inadvertent result of policies designed to further other legitimate aims, such policies may warrant new examination. By making the policy connections explicit, decision-makers in the museum world should be better equipped to debate whether and how collection practices should change.

With these issues in mind, four specific research questions guide this inquiry:

- What factors explain the large proportion of museum artworks in storage?
- What are the options for reducing storage and/or increasing the utilization of stored artworks?
- What are the constraints and opportunities associated with the different options?
- What policies contribute to current levels of collection storage and utilization, and what policies would encourage change?

The manner in which this study addresses these questions is the subject of the rest of this chapter. The next section lays out the overall approach for the research. The following section discusses what it means to examine museum operations from a "collection utilization perspective," and then introduces theoretical perspectives that contribute to this research. The next section covers the methods used in the case study, which comprises the empirical focus of the research. The final section of the chapter reviews the limitations of the study.

RESEARCH APPROACH

Four basic research approaches are used in this study: i) a synthesis of the relevant literature; ii) the use of a systems framework to help structure the analysis of options for reducing storage and/or increasing the utilization of stored artworks; iii) a case study to explore collection utilization decisions in a real-world context; and iv) a policy analysis, both as a general approach to examining an important issue, and as a technique for identifying policies that contribute to or might change the status quo. The rest of this section introduces the research approaches in brief. (A more detailed discussion of data and methods appears later in this chapter.) Table 2.1 shows which research approaches were used in addressing each of the research questions in this study.

Table 2.1
Research approaches used in exploring research questions

RESEARCH QUESTION	RESEARCH APPROACH			
	Lit. Review	Systems Framework	Case Study/ Data Analysis	Policy Analysis
What factors explain the large proportion of museum artworks in storage?	√		√	√
What are the options for reducing storage and/or increasing the utilization of stored artworks?	√	√		√
What are the constraints and opportunities associated with the different options?	√	√	√	√
What policies contribute to current levels of collection storage and utilization, and what policies would encourage change?	√		√	√

This study's overall approach follows from the goals: 1) to better understand the complex forces influencing collection storage and utilization practices in art museums; and 2) to relate this improved understanding to assessing different options for change. In this sense, this research falls within the paradigm of policy analysis, a field of applied research into areas of public policy import.

In some ways, the goals of policy analysis are modest. Analysts are not expected to find the "right" answer to a problem. Rather, they are expected to understand and explicate a problem, and show how alternative solutions to the problem relate to an individual's (or group's) values and assumptions (Quade 1989; Stokey and Zeckhauser 1978). This emphasis on understanding, rather than answering, follows from two principles of policy analysis. One is that policy issues tend to involve societal values about which different people and groups will

naturally and justifiably disagree; a policy analysis should allow people with different values to come to different judgments. As analyst Alain Enthoven explains: "Policy analysts...should seek to provide a common intellectual framework in terms of which various parties with divergent views can think through the problem" (Enthoven 1975). A second tenet is that there will always be uncertainties associated with any policy problem. Since uncertainties, by definition, are only "resolved" by making assumptions, potential "solutions" should be clearly related to the assumptions that underlie them. This way, the vulnerability of conclusions to specific assumptions is made explicit, and those who disagree about assumptions can focus their debate in a more targeted fashion.

The "problem" that this study seeks to explicate is the perceived underutilization of a vast proportion of museum artworks. I emphasize the word "perceived," because as noted in the introductory chapter, there is no survey or other systematic accounting of opinion on this topic. While it certainly would be worthwhile for other research to assess the range of opinion regarding collection utilization practices, in this study, the numerous and diverse expressions of dissatisfaction found in the literature (as presented in Chapter 1) are suggestive enough of a "problem" to motivate an inquiry.

To identify "alternative solutions" to museums' high storage levels and low collection utilization rates, I used two approaches. First, I reviewed the museum industry literature looking for various actions taken by museums or museum-related organizations that, by one means or another, resulted in reduced storage and/or increased utilization of stored artworks. Second, I supplemented this literature-based scan by applying "systems thinking" principles, which helped develop a structure around the disparate examples noted in the literature.

"Systems thinking" offers a simple, yet powerful, approach for structuring the analysis of collection utilization alternatives. Peter Checkland, in his book, *Systems Thinking, Systems Practice*, presents a methodology for using systems concepts for problem solving in real-world situations (Checkland 1981). Checkland contrasts "hard" systems thinking (or, systems analysis), which came out of an engineering

discipline, with "soft" systems thinking, which uses some of the same principles, but applies them in analyzing social systems and management problems. Whereas "hard" systems thinking involves solving "goal-oriented" problems where the objective is known, "soft" systems thinking addresses "unstructured" problem situations, in which the designation of objectives is itself problematic.

Checkland's approach involves the initial definition of a "problem situation" (e.g., underutilized museum collections), which in turn, is used to construct a relevant conceptual model. In systems thinking, a "relevant" conceptual model has a purpose distinct from depicting reality. Rather than capturing exactly "how things are," the conceptual model is idealized, with the goal of highlighting those aspects of the system whose change would lead to desired benefits. When this idealized model is compared to reality, the disparities between the two are examined; if the idealized model depicts opportunities that seem feasible and desirable to stakeholders, then with the insights gleaned from the exercise, effective change is more likely. The objective, then, is pragmatic rather than academic: If a depiction of the system enables improvements in the area studied, then it has served its purpose; its success does not preclude an alternative depiction from contributing its own insights and resulting improvements.

For purposes of understanding (and enabling positive change in) collection-use practices, I have chosen to depict a "museum system" that highlights and categorizes a range of options that, in one way or another, would allow individual museums to reduce their storage levels and/or increase the utilization of their stored artworks.³³ This exercise in systems thinking (presented in Chapter 4) yields an organizing framework that guides the case study investigation (in Chapters 5, 6, and 7) and the discussion of policy implications (in Chapter 8).³⁴

³³ While this "system" depicts options available to *individual* museums, it also suggests how the entire museum industry might conceptualize policy choices regarding collection storage and utilization. It should be noted, however, that in some cases the options hold different consequences depending on whether one takes the perspective of a single museum or that of the entire museum industry.

The case study of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco provides a real-world context within which collection utilization issues are examined. While a museum might wish to reduce its storage levels or increase the utilization of its stored artworks, its collection-related decisions are inevitably embedded in a host of operational and strategic imperatives that can easily thwart the best of intentions. The only way to capture this institutional reality is to explore collection utilization decisions within an operating institution. For this reason, the case study offers a valuable check against the literature-based analysis (in Chapter 3) and the conceptual analysis (in Chapter 4). A more detailed discussion of the case study design and methods appears later in this chapter.

EXAMINING MUSEUM OPERATIONS FROM A "COLLECTION UTILIZATION" PERSPECTIVE

The motivation for examining museum operations from a collection utilization perspective is to better understand the relationship between a museum's art resources and its attainment of mission goals. The issue here is not that museum collections are being utilized in ways that are *counter* to mission-related goals, but rather, that portions of the collection may not be serving museum missions as well as they could. (Or, alternatively, that portions of the collection are costing a museum more to maintain than is justifiable, given their contribution to the museum's mission.) By looking at collection utilization in a systematic fashion, problem areas as well as opportunities for improvement are easier to identify.

Unfortunately, a systematic analysis of how a museum utilizes different portions of its collection - and how that utilization furthers the institutional mission - is much easier to contemplate in theory than it is to execute in the field. In theory (and oversimplified, at that), the analysis might proceed as follows.³⁵ It would begin with an

³⁴ This study employs systems thinking primarily to structure the analysis of collection utilization, and not as a strict methodology. For a description of the complete systems thinking methodology, see: Checkland (1981), pp. 149-189.

³⁵ This type of analysis is discussed in great technical detail in *Decisions with Multiple Objectives* (Keeney and Raiffa, 1993).

articulation of the museum's mission, and a characterization of the museum's mission objectives in terms of measurable attributes. Next, some method would be devised to assess how well different portions of the collection are serving different aspects of the museum's mission (again, in terms of measurable attributes). This assessment of *current* attainment of mission goals would then be compared to hypothetical assessments of alternative ways of utilizing the collection. By exploring how alternative uses of the collection score on a "mission-serving" scale, a museum could identify which changes might allow it to better achieve its mission goals. Finally, by examining the costs associated with the alternatives, the museum would be in the position to conduct a type of "cost-benefit" analysis of different ways of utilizing its collection.

In practice, conducting a cost-benefit analysis of collection-use alternatives is more challenging than such an analysis might be for other industries for which benefits and costs are more tangible and easier to measure. Whereas other industries may have a concrete notion, such as "profit," to capture the relative attractiveness of alternatives, the museum sector has no such clarity. In the first place, museums' missions are multifaceted, so that benefits accrue on several dimensions. Each of these dimensions must be included in the assessment of benefits, and the difficulty arises when it comes time to compare the value of benefits along one dimension (say, preservation) to the benefits along another dimension (say, exhibition). This difficulty is compounded by the intangible nature of the benefits themselves. How does one characterize (let alone, measure) the benefits associated with an exhibition, or the benefits of research that increases our appreciation for objects and the cultures they represent?³⁶

³⁶ Museums are not alone in facing such challenges in performance measurement. Universities, for example, also pursue several objectives concurrently: University staff teach students, conduct research, and provide other community services. Medical centers, too, have multiple missions: Their staff treat patients, train doctors, and conduct medical research. In both of these examples, the institutions often choose among alternatives that advance one objective over another. And, like museums, both universities and medical centers face their own

An added complication is that different stakeholder groups of the museum (e.g., the visiting public, curators, conservators, donors, taxpayers, government funders) will inevitably have different valuations of alternatives, due to their different interests and preferences. Thus, even if the technical difficulties of measurement and comparison could be surmounted, museum decision-makers would still have to engage in a process that either implicitly or explicitly weighed the preferences of one group against another's, until a course of action is determined.

Taking a first step

These obstacles are daunting in their own right, but the challenge is heightened by the lack of this kind of work in the museum field.³⁷ In this study, I take a first step in examining collection utilization in relation to museum missions by focusing primarily on museums' exhibition mission. In some ways, this is the easiest step, since it emphasizes the museum mission for which a straightforward (though imperfect) proxy exists (i.e., is the object on display?)³⁸, and for which data are most available.³⁹ While I do address the other museum missions throughout this study - and periodically remind the reader that "collection utilization" is broader than exhibition, alone - the focus in this analysis is clearly on how museum objects are being utilized in pursuit of museums' most public of purposes: exhibition. Taking this simplified approach has its rationale and its shortcomings. The rationale is that virtually all art museums consider their display

difficulties measuring their "benefits": Witness the current debates on assessing student learning, or defining quality of care for patients.

³⁷ In the field of heritage conservation (which concerns cultural monuments and sites, rather than objects in a museum) a growing body of research is using a variety of valuation techniques to incorporate intangible cultural benefits into decision-making processes. For an overview of this topic, see: Klammer and Zuidhof (1998).

³⁸ Whether or not an object is on display is an imperfect proxy for exhibition benefits, in that it does not account for the quality of the visitor experience, the number of visitors, or other aspects that could differentiate the value of one object being on display versus another.

³⁹ Unfortunately, the available data generally only show what is on exhibit *at a single point in time* - rather than how much time different objects are on exhibit *over a period of years*.

mission as central to their purpose - and the reason why many objects were acquired in the first place. The widespread importance of this mission to art museums, in combination with the relatively straightforward way to measure whether objects are being utilized for this mission, make it a good starting point for examining collection utilization more broadly.

On the other hand, a focus on the display mission necessarily downplays museums' other missions, and can leave the faulty impression that works *not* on view are not serving a legitimate purpose. The fact that museums' other missions are more abstract makes the danger even greater, as they are less likely to be held in mind if not made explicit in a particular analysis.⁴⁰ This is a shortcoming of the research, and one that I hope will be rectified by future studies that can refine techniques for measuring the ways that museum collections contribute to other, non-display missions. In the meantime, however, this admittedly partial analysis does serve a purpose: By showing the limited amount of time that certain objects are on view, one is in a better position to consider whether the other (non-display) missions justify the objects' maintenance in a museum's collection.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES USED IN THIS STUDY

The disciplines of microeconomics and organizational behavior contribute the key theoretical underpinnings of this study.⁴¹ These theoretical perspectives are applied in a conceptual sense, rather than in a formal manner. The discussion that follows introduces the theoretical concepts that shaped this inquiry.

⁴⁰ This raises the issue of "existence benefits," a notion that concerns the value people derive from knowing that something exists (e.g., knowing that an artwork is being preserved for future generations), even if they will never personally use it (i.e., never see the artwork). For more on the topic of "existence benefits," including approaches for measuring them, see: *Using Surveys to Value Public Goods: The Contingent Valuation Method* (Mitchell and Carson, 1989).

⁴¹ I am making a distinction here between the more theoretical nature of the mentioned disciplines, and the more applied nature of the research approaches discussed earlier (i.e., systems thinking, case study research, and policy analysis).

Viewing museum artworks as a "resource"

Viewing artworks as art museums' central "resource" is a helpful way to conceptualize the issues surrounding collection storage and utilization. Questions about effective resource use are routinely asked in other contexts (e.g., involving land, energy, labor), and many of the theoretical concepts used to analyze those questions can be applied to an examination of artwork use in museums.

Especially relevant to this study is the concept of efficient resource allocation enabled by exchange (or trade). In demonstrating the advantages of trade, microeconomic theory shows that resources, when allocated to their "highest-valued uses," produce the highest levels of overall societal welfare.⁴² The idea behind "highest-valued uses" is that different individuals (or groups) have distinct preferences, and thus will *personally* value the same product or service differently, according to their own subjective scales. For example, a given amount of resources (e.g., 100 different paintings) could be allocated among several recipients (e.g., ten people) in various combinations. Based on how the ten recipients *personally* valued their "packages" of paintings under the different allocation scenarios, a different amount of *total benefits* (i.e., for the ten people combined) would result. By taking into account such natural variation in preferences, just changing the allocation scheme for a given amount of resources can increase the overall welfare for a population.⁴³ Thus, in the case of museums, economic theory might show, for example, that society as a whole could be better off if stored artworks of little "value" to one museum were traded to another museum that could make better use of them in its institutional activities. This notion - that overall improvements in societal welfare are possible if museums had the means to exercise alternative strategies in managing their art resources - while

⁴² The economic concepts discussed in this section are addressed in any comprehensive microeconomic text; for example, see Pindyck and Rubinfeld, 1992.

⁴³ There are several ways to influence the allocation of goods; for example, through facilitating trade between individuals, by setting up a market auction system, or by authorizing a body to redistribute goods.

admittedly idealized and theoretical, is the underlying motivation of this research.⁴⁴

Identifying where (and how) this "efficient resource use" argument fails to explain current collection utilization practices is key to understanding the nature of the problem and how to achieve any desired change. Economic theory provides some guidance here, too, for while it holds efficient resource use as an ideal, it acknowledges several threats to that ideal, and explores the nature of those threats as well as ways they can be mitigated. One such threat is "imperfect information," a concept that explains how the lack of critical information among interested parties will cause a market system to function inefficiently (that is, in a way that does not maximize societal welfare). For example, in the museum world, the lack of shared information about what each museum has in its collection limits the potential for museums to enter into sales or trades of artworks that might go from a "low-valuing" to a "higher-valuing" museum. This same information about the contents of museums' collections, if made more widely available, also might influence how private collectors choose which institutions to donate their collections to - or even motivate benefactors to finance museum-to-museum exchanges. In these ways, imperfect information about museum collections inhibits the decision-making ability of those who ultimately affect how artworks are distributed across our nation's museums. With better information, more mutually beneficial transactions between museums (or between museums and private collectors) could result, leading to an overall improvement in societal welfare.

Another factor that contributes to museums' high storage levels and low collection utilization rates is the presence of high "transaction

⁴⁴ This simplified discussion ignores the important issues of ownership rights and how exchanges are compensated - both key factors to consider when assessing the viability of increased museum transactions. These issues will be discussed in later chapters. Another relevant issue not addressed here (but to be discussed later) is how economically "efficient" outcomes may not satisfy societal demands for "equity." This tension appears when considering potential museum transactions where the interests of an individual museum may run counter to the broader interests of the museum industry, or of society at large.

costs." This concept addresses how certain actions that might produce benefits *in principle*, are not taken because *in practice*, there are too many complicating factors or costs to make the action worthwhile. The definition of transaction costs is quite broad, including monetary expenditures associated with an action (e.g., transport costs in moving artworks from one location to another) as well as less tangible costs associated with a decision (e.g., the staff time involved in locating a suitable borrower for a collection loan). The reason why transaction costs are important to consider when evaluating how well a sector is functioning is that they suggest a means for making transactions easier (if desired), by identifying those areas in which potentially inhibiting costs could be reduced.⁴⁵ More generally, the presence of high transaction costs may indicate an inadequate infrastructure for museum-to-museum exchanges, which would suggest an industry-wide response may be required.

The presence of "externalities" is another reason that markets sometimes fail to achieve an efficient allocation of resources. The term "externalities" refers to either benefits (*positive externalities*) or costs (*negative externalities*) that aren't compensated for within a transaction. One can find such externalities at play within the museum sector; for example, consider the case of loaning artworks. A museum that lends artworks to another institution typically receives compensation from the borrower for only a portion of the costs the lender incurs in executing the loan. Meanwhile, the benefits of the loan primarily accrue to the publics of the borrowing institution. Thus, while the lending museum generates benefits for the borrowing museum's constituencies, the lender is not compensated for those benefits - and actually *absorbs* costs in the process. Economic theory shows that by "internalizing" externalities into market transactions (i.e., by adjusting "prices" to reflect true costs and benefits) overall societal welfare can be improved.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Of course, many crucial steps lie between identifying transaction costs and implementing effective policies for change, as will be discussed in later chapters.

⁴⁶ Adjusting "prices" does not mean necessarily that museums would have to "pay" more to borrow artworks. Other financing mechanisms -

Finally, game theory offers its own insights into museum practices, particularly in the realm of museum competition for artwork donations from private collectors. Game theory addresses the strategic behavior of two or more parties, with a focus on how each party incorporates the anticipated responses of others in devising its own course of action. Besides illuminating such postures, game theory also shows how cooperative action among players (e.g., museums), in which they agree to certain rules (e.g., not to "over-collect" from private donors)⁴⁷, can result in all museums being better off than if they continued with their uncoordinated, competitive behavior. The problem, of course, comes in assuring cooperation among the parties (i.e., having an enforceable agreement), since there is an incentive for any individual party to go against the rules and capitalize on knowing the others' restrictions.

In the chapters that follow, these and other economic principles provide a basis for examining current collection practices and exploring how collection utilization might be improved. As was mentioned earlier, these principles are not applied in any formal sense in this research, though such an endeavor surely would be worthwhile for other studies.

Viewing museum behavior as a response to "outside" influences

Another helpful way to gain insight into museum collection practices is to consider the influence that other organizations or entities have on museum behavior. Some theories of organizational behavior address such "external" influence by examining the dynamics of relationships between an organization and key outside parties. The thinking behind this focus is that any organization must survive in an environment that extends beyond its institutional boundaries, and thus the relationships that exist between the organization and various key entities in its institutional environment (e.g., donors, accrediting bodies, government funders) will impact how the organization behaves. The ways such outside entities exert their influence are varied, but include providing resources to the organization, establishing rules of

say, a government program or foundation support - could achieve the same result.

⁴⁷ This topic will be discussed in the next section, and in several subsequent chapters.

conduct that the organization must obey (or face consequences), or otherwise shaping the opportunities for (or costs of) different courses of organizational action.

One perspective that is particularly relevant to U.S. art museums is resource dependency theory (Pfeffer 1982). This perspective concentrates on the ways in which a particular organization is dependent on outside sources for key resources. This dependence is judged to be strong if the magnitude of resources involved is large, and/or if there are few alternative sources available to provide those resources. In the case of art museums, their dependence on private art collectors to augment their collections is an example of such "resource dependence." Resource dependency theory suggests that museums will find it necessary to engage in behavior they might not otherwise engage in, just to assure the continued flow of key resources (in this case, artworks). The tacitly acknowledged practice of museums accepting "unwanted" donated artworks from private collectors is an example of this phenomenon (see Chapter 3 for further discussion of this topic). The explanation for this behavior - which may at first seem counter to museums' interest - is that museums are willing to "over-collect" from artwork donors in order to increase their chances of receiving the artworks that they *do* want.⁴⁸

Another way that individual museums are impacted by entities outside their organizational boundaries is through bodies that shape the "rules of the profession."⁴⁹ For the museum world, these bodies include professional museum associations, museum accrediting bodies, and graduate programs (e.g., in art history, art conservation, and museum studies). Institutional theory (Davis and Powell, 1992) addresses the influence of professionalism, focusing on the ways that professional norms perpetuate and legitimize the values and underlying assumptions within a particular field - and in so doing, entrench certain practices by making them "beyond question." Because there is minimal government

⁴⁸ Clearly, the donors themselves are an important part of the museum-donor relationship, as will be discussed in Chapter 8.

⁴⁹ Such "rules of the profession" may be formal, written rules, or informally communicated professional norms, disseminated through universities or professional networks (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983).

involvement in museum policymaking or oversight in the United States, the museum profession's own role in shaping organizational practice is especially pronounced (Malaro 1994).⁵⁰ Such professional norms are apparent, for example, in the area of conservation practices, where highly technical requirements are institutionalized in codes of ethics and accreditation standards. Many commentators have applauded the museum profession's success in self-regulation, noting the progress made over the last several decades in documenting museum collections, in conservation practices, and in other important areas (Skramstad 1999, Weil 1990). For purposes of this study, the strong influence of organized professional institutions in shaping museum behavior is important both for understanding current collection storage and utilization practices, and for identifying the channels through which policy could be changed.⁵¹

CASE STUDY DESIGN AND METHODS

A case study of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco provides the empirical focus of this project.⁵² This section discusses the case study design and selection, the data collection process, how the data were analyzed, and issues regarding the validity and reliability of the

⁵⁰ There is no governmental body that regulates or sets policy for U.S. museums. Federal, state, and local governments do influence museum behavior (e.g., by setting tax policy, or providing funding). Such influence, however, does not extend to specific museum practices regarding core activities such as collection management, preservation, etc.

⁵¹ Of course, there are many additional "outside" influences on museum behavior. One often noted in the museum literature is the strong public demand for traveling "blockbuster" exhibitions, which results in museums directing resources away from other museum activities - particularly those associated with the permanent collection. Other important external influences include the changing funding priorities of governments, foundations, and corporations.

⁵² The plural "Museums" in the institution's name reflects the fact that two formerly separate museums (the M.H. de Young Memorial Museum and the California Palace of the Legion of Honor) are now jointly governed and administered under one board and management team. Because the policies and management of the two museums that make up the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco are identical, they are treated in this study as one museum; hence, the shorthand "Museum" used throughout this document.

case study findings. The case study results are presented in Chapters 5, 6, and 7.

Case study design and selection

The case study is designed to explore a central question: Why is the Museum's storage level so high (and its exhibition rate so low), despite the institution's commitment to enhancing collection utilization? The underlying proposition behind the inquiry is that the options available to museums to reduce storage levels and/or increase the utilization of stored artworks are not, for a variety of reasons, sufficiently attractive in today's museum environment. The case study endeavors to provide support for (or to refute) this proposition. It also seeks to identify and to explicate the key issues that constrain art museums from more effectively utilizing their collections.

The case study is structured around four alternative strategies for reducing storage levels and/or increasing the utilization of stored artworks (the strategies are presented in Chapter 4). The case study findings showcase the Museum's experience with each of these strategies, highlighting what the Museum has done in each area, how those actions have impacted storage and utilization levels, and what prevents the Museum from doing more. Three main questions guide the inquiry into each of the four strategies (areas) examined in the case study:

- How does current practice (in each area) impact the Museum's collection storage and utilization levels?
- What factors does the Museum consider in its decisions (in each area)?
- What changes (in each area) would reduce storage levels and/or increase the utilization of stored artworks?

In selecting a museum for the case study, there were two main considerations. First, it was important to secure a good research opportunity; that is, one which would permit exploration of the often-sensitive issues surrounding collection storage and utilization in art museums. This meant finding a museum willing to be the subject of such

a study, that also had relatively good data on its collection, and was willing to provide access to that data. In addition, the museum needed to demonstrate "the problem" of high storage levels and the related concern of low collection utilization rates. The second main consideration was that the chosen museum be similar enough to other art museums that the research findings would be relevant to the museum industry more broadly. Clearly, there is no "typical" museum, and care must be taken in generalizing a single case study's findings - even if the generalizing is done informally.⁵³ However, the likelihood that other art museums would find relevance in this study would be greatly increased by investigating a museum whose mission was fairly traditional, whose collection was diverse (as opposed to specialized), and which had been in operation for at least a moderate amount of time.

While many museum professionals expressed interest in this research, most were reluctant to volunteer their museums to be the subject of such a study. Of the two museums that did become candidates, only the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco had the data quality and the generally representative institutional characteristics to satisfy the criteria described above. Most important for this project, the Museum's traditional mission and diverse collection holdings make it comparable to the majority of art museums in the United States. (On the other hand, the Museum's large operating budget and its considerable age put it in the minority of museums.) How the Museum compares to other art museums will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 5.

Robert Yin, in his book, *Case Study Research*, cites three rationales for conducting a single-case study (as opposed to a study that includes multiple cases). One of these rationales is the presence of a "revelatory case." According to Yin, a revelatory case exists "when an investigator has an opportunity to observe and analyze a phenomenon previously inaccessible to scientific investigation" (Yin 1989:48). The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco provided me with such

⁵³ Since this study does not involve statistical sampling, I am not referring here to *statistical generalization*, but rather, to *analytic generalization*, a parallel concept used in interpreting case study results (Yin 1989). Analytic generalization will be discussed later in this chapter.

an opportunity. Previously, there had been no empirical investigation of the challenges faced by a museum concerned about its high storage level and low collection utilization rate. This situation, while exceedingly common in the museum world, also had yet to be analyzed from a policy perspective. The Museum agreed to be the subject of such a study, and gave me full access to Museum staff, organizational documents, and other data, including the Museum's computerized collection database.

Data collection

The case study draws on three main sources of information: i) the Museum's computerized collection database; ii) Museum documents and other written materials; and iii) interviews with key Museum staff. Each of these sources is discussed, below.

Collection database

A key source of data for the case study was the Museum's computerized database, which contains information on the almost 113,000 objects in the Museum's collection. The database is a searchable compendium of individual records, one for each object in the collection.⁵⁴ While the extent of information varies record by record, most records include: descriptive information on the object (e.g., age, artist, media, dimensions); the date the object was acquired; how the object was acquired (e.g., by purchase, by bequest); where the object is located (e.g., in storage, in a gallery, on loan); a digital image of the object; and some administrative tracking information. Less frequently, the object records also may include an estimate of monetary value, an exhibition history, the object's provenance, and other information. The particular data fields used in this research, as well as the analysis performed, are discussed later in this chapter.

Museum staff compiled the current database in 1996, in an effort to consolidate what were then separate sources of collection information, some on paper, others electronic. Because the database is a relatively new means of documentation and collection management for the Museum, it is not currently a wholly reliable source of information on the

⁵⁴ The database uses 4th Dimension database software.

collection. Museum staff were quick to acknowledge the gaps, inconsistencies, and inaccuracies throughout the database, and advised me on which data fields were most reliable for analysis purposes.⁵⁵ Museum staff trained me to use the database, after which I was loaned a read-only copy, current as of July, 1999.⁵⁶ My use of the database was restricted to the specific research purposes of this study. In addition, the Museum and I agreed to safeguarding procedures that would protect the private and confidential nature of the data.⁵⁷

Museum documents

Several Museum documents provided critical information for the case study. Some of these were written policies and plans (e.g., collection management policies, strategic plans for collection development); others were of a reporting nature (e.g., minutes from Board meetings); and still others were submissions to outside organizations (e.g., an application for museum reaccreditation). In addition to internally-produced documents, I reviewed other materials about the Museum that were written by outside parties. The most important of these included a series of articles from local newspapers (*The San Francisco Chronicle* and *The San Francisco Examiner*), sections of The San Francisco Administrative Code, and documents produced by the Art Museum Image Consortium, a museum digital image library of which the Museum is a founding member. While particular documents will be cited throughout this dissertation, Table 2.2 lists the internal Museum documents drawn upon most in this study.

⁵⁵ Poor data quality is common throughout the museum sector.

⁵⁶ I am especially grateful to Bob Futernick, the Museum's Chair of Conservation, who generously devoted two days to my training, and provided me with an essential roadmap to the database's custom programming, naming conventions, automated search functions, and other particulars.

⁵⁷ A "Letter of Understanding" formally established the terms of database use and safeguarding.

Table 2.2
Key internal documents used in the case study

Document Title (and Explanatory Notes)	Date
"Guidelines for Collections Management and Acquisition Policies"	1983
"Collection Development Plan" (a strategic plan for developing the permanent collection)	1990
"Collection Development Plan Revision - March 1993"	1993
"A New de Young Museum in Golden Gate Park: Request for Qualifications and Proposal"	1998
"Accreditation Self-Study Guide" (the Museum's application for reaccreditation by the American Association of Museums)	1999
"IMLS Operating Support" (a grant application to the Institute of Museum and Library Services)	1999

Staff interviews

Over the course of four visits to the Museum, I conducted a series of semi-structured interviews with key Museum staff members from several functional areas, including: 1) Administration; 2) Board Relations; 3) Conservation; 4) Curatorial; 5) Development; 6) Education; and 7) Registration.

The interviews served a number of purposes. In the early interviews, staff provided important background information and conveyed their general attitudes regarding collection storage and utilization at the Museum. Subsequent interviews focused on the Museum's experience with various collection-use strategies, and the obstacles faced by the Museum in their implementation. Later discussions allowed me to probe specific points of interest and clarify ambiguities. Most important, the interviews provided a more nuanced context within which the other sources of information (i.e., the collection database and Museum documents) could be more faithfully analyzed.

The interviews generally took one to two hours, and were conducted in the staff members' offices. Most interviews were tape-recorded, with the permission of the interview subject. Typically, prior to the site visit, I e-mailed a brief agenda to each interview subject listing the topics to be covered in the interview. As is the case with "focused interviews" (Judd et al., 1991), the discussion often extended beyond the specific items in the agenda to include other topics relevant to collection storage and utilization at the Museum. To supplement the in-person interviews from the site visits, I had additional conversations with several staff members over the telephone.

During one of my site visits, I also attended a meeting of the Technology Task Force Committee, a working group of the Museum's Board of Trustees. The meeting agenda was set independent of my visit.

Data analysis

All of the data analyses in the case study are based on collection data from two files within the Museum's collection database: the "Registration File" and the "Inactive File."⁵⁸ Table 2.3 lists the data fields from both Files that were used in the data analyses.

Most of the data analyses are descriptive in nature, showcasing magnitudes, time-trends, or categorical distributions. In some cases the analyses explore specific questions, and statistical tests demonstrate whether or not observed differences are more than just chance variation in the data. Specifically, contingency tables are used to determine whether the specified variables are independent of one another, and the Pearson's chi-square test statistic and associated probability are reported in the text (Mansfield 1994).

⁵⁸ The Registration File is the Museum's "active" database, and contains information on each object in the Museum's current collection; the Inactive File contains entries on objects that have been deaccessioned, objects whose status is unclear, and records of miscellaneous administrative actions (e.g., the voiding of a duplicate record).

Table 2.3

Data fields used in the case study analysis; from the Registration and Inactive Files in the Museum's collection database

"Registration File" Data Fields	"Inactive File" Data Fields
Acquisition date	Acquisition date
Acquisition type	Current location
Current location	Department
Department	Disposition
Disposition	Disposition date
Disposition date	Location date
Location date	Location2
Location2	Object status
Object status	Primary class
Primary class	
Value	

Some data analyses combine objects into categories created solely for analysis purposes - either because there is an investigative rationale for considering different portions of the collection separately, or because examining relationships among categories promises to yield insights. For example, many analyses separate the Museum's curatorial departments into two categories: the "display collections" and the "study collections." As will be explained in later chapters, this distinction reflects the differing mission-emphasis of different portions of the collection, and thus is important to consider when conducting analyses that measure utilization for one mission versus another. Other analyses focus on the Museum's collection-related decisions in the 1990s (as opposed to over its 100-plus years of history), with the goal of understanding how *current* practices are affecting collection storage and utilization (independent from the weight of historical decisions). Still other analyses place objects into different value categories (e.g., \$50,000 to \$99,999; \$100,000 to \$249,999) to explore acquisition patterns of interest. When such

categories are created for analysis, the rationale for doing so is indicated in the text.

In some analyses I calculate and compare the exhibition rates for different portions of the Museum's collection to illustrate, roughly, the degree to which such portions are contributing to the Museum's exhibition mission. Given the lack of historical exhibition data in the collection database, I only am able to calculate *static* exhibition rates (i.e., the percentage of the collection on display at a single point in time). A more meaningful characterization of how the Museum's collection is being utilized for exhibition would focus on *dynamic* exhibition rates (e.g., how many months per decade are different objects on display?). Without being able to derive such rates empirically, I address the issue conceptually in Chapter 7.⁵⁹

The study's most extensive data analyses center on the Museum's acquisitions and deaccessions. These analyses required that I first create "data histories" using information found in several places in the Museum's collection database. Appendix 1 describes how such data histories were created and explains how "miscoded" or ambiguously coded objects were treated in the analyses of acquisitions, deaccessions, and loans. Additional data issues concerning missing data (and how such data sometimes were "imputed") also are discussed in Appendix 1.

Museum documents and staff interviews supplement the data analysis, and are cited throughout the case study. Museum documents provided information on the Museum's facilities (and facilities planning), formal collection policies, collection development planning, programs, and finances. Staff interviews provided information on key collection-use efforts, informal policies and decision-making surrounding the Museum's collection, and opinions on collection storage and utilization issues more generally.

⁵⁹ There, I calculate *hypothetical* long-term exhibition rates (over a decade-long period) and discuss how such rates could be used to assess how well different portions of the collection are serving the Museum's exhibition mission.

Case study validity and reliability

This study employs several methods for increasing the validity and reliability of case study findings.⁶⁰ Where possible, multiple sources of evidence are used as checks upon each other. For example, a staff member's statement about acquisition criteria is considered along with the Museum's written acquisition policies, and with an analysis of acquisition data from the Museum's collection database. In this way, the study follows "a process of triangulation," developing converging lines of inquiry to probe a particular phenomenon (Yin 1989; Huberman and Miles, 1994). Another technique is to establish a clear "chain of evidence" in the case study report so that readers can "follow the derivation of any evidence from the initial research questions to the ultimate case study conclusions" (Yin 1989). With this goal in mind, throughout the case study chapters I have attempted to be clear about what is being investigated, how it relates to the underlying research questions, and what sources of evidence are relevant to the argument. Still another approach (this one to increase the reliability of the case study's findings) is to create a carefully documented evidence base (Huberman and Miles, 1994). In this vein, staff interviews (that were tape-recorded) were transcribed for more accurate reference, and database analyses were annotated to facilitate reanalysis, if required.

A final issue concerning the validity of case study findings concerns the way the results are generalized beyond the case study itself. Because case studies, technically, are not "sampling units" from a larger population (i.e., they are not statistical samples which are formally structured to represent larger groups), results should not be generalized directly to a population. Instead, what is appropriate is what Yin calls "analytic generalization," which involves using case study findings to either support or refute theoretical propositions (Yin 1989:44-45). So, for example, while this case study found evidence that the Museum applied different acquisition criteria to artwork donations than it did to artwork purchases, the appropriate generalization concerns the dynamics of the relationship between museums and private

⁶⁰ For a discussion of validity and reliability in the context of case studies, see Yin (1989), especially pp. 40-45.

artwork donors, rather than a claim that other museums that share the Museum's characteristics would exhibit the same behavior. Of course, to the extent that further case studies (or other types of research) provide additional evidence about such donor-museum relations, the underlying proposition is strengthened (or refuted), much the same way as repeated experiments support (or refute) theory.

LIMITATIONS OF STUDY

As was discussed earlier in the chapter, this study does not pretend to capture the fullest measure of "collection utilization" (or collection value). Instead, this research emphasizes the *exhibition* mission in its analysis, and thus necessarily downplays other museum missions (and the value of collections in service of those missions). While I take care in pointing out the importance of other missions in the discussions on utilization throughout this document, it remains a legitimate limitation of this study that much of the utilization analysis focuses on the exhibition mission.⁶¹

I frequently summarize collection data in terms of "object counts" or the "percentage of objects" that fall into distinct categories. Often, these quantitative characterizations include only the most basic qualitative information to help distinguish one set of objects from another. Using "object" as the metric for analysis has some obvious shortcomings: It fails to convey the diversity of the artworks in museum collections, and in so doing, limits how well collection value, collection utilization, and variations in the cost of collection maintenance can be depicted. In the case study, I address these issues to some extent by grouping the Museum's objects into categories that capture some of this diversity; for example, by organizing objects into curatorial departments, collection types (e.g., "display collections" and "study collections"), or monetary value groupings. These

⁶¹ Even the exhibition mission is only imperfectly characterized in this study. Due to the aforementioned data constraints, I present exhibition rates only for a single point in time. Since taking a longer-term view would result in "higher" exhibition rates, care must be taken in interpreting this point-in-time analysis. It is also true that exhibition rates (even long-term ones) do not fully capture the benefits of museum exhibitions.

categories, however, only partially address this loss of important detail, and other studies certainly could offer additional insights by incorporating more collection diversity into quantitative analyses. Despite the limitations, however, using "object" as the metric for analysis offers its own promise: It allows a museum-wide (or industry-wide) picture to be drawn, conveying relationships among large quantities of artworks - relationships that might well be obscured in analyses conducted at a finer level of detail.

The lack of complete and accurate data in the Museum's collection database must be kept in mind when interpreting the quantitative analyses of acquisitions, deaccessions, and loans. While I believe the basic conclusions drawn from the quantitative analyses are justifiable despite the data problems, the precise results are certainly compromised by the poor quality of some of the data, and the assumptions made in imputing missing data. In addition, in some cases, data were simply not available to conduct analyses that otherwise would be included in this study. For example, the lack of data on how frequently (and for how long) different objects in the collection are displayed over a period of time limited this study to a static analysis of exhibition rates. While I address the issue of collection rotation in a conceptual manner in Chapter 7, it clearly would be valuable for future research to establish collection rotation rates empirically.

It also should be noted that the staff interviews that provided much of the context within which the quantitative analyses were situated represent the viewpoints of only a small portion of Museum staff, and may not be representative of institution as a whole. While the staff members were drawn from a wide range of functional areas within the Museum, this diversity in job description does not guarantee a completely balanced set of perspectives.

The storage cost estimates in this study are derived from a formula developed by U.S. museum architect George Hartman (Bank 1988). As Hartman acknowledges, this formula is only a "rule of thumb." Furthermore, there are certain variables not incorporated in the published formula (e.g., the size of the museum; the percentage of space allocated to different functions) which may affect how appropriate the

formula is for estimating storage costs for museums with differing characteristics.

In attempting to draw an industry-wide picture of collection storage and utilization in art museums, this study has drawn from many disparate sources. In several places (especially in Chapters 1 and 3), I piece together data (and educated guesses) from a range of publications in order to estimate certain relationships that I believe are compelling when considering collection utilization issues more broadly. Technically, data from such disparate sources should not be combined, as they were collected in many different ways, during different time periods⁶² - and often on dissimilar types of museums. I chose to do so, however, since there was no good alternative (i.e., no sufficiently comprehensive source of published data) to convey the larger industry-wide implications that I felt were important to include in this study. In the cases where I combine data from disparate sources, I try to make my calculations explicit so that others may incorporate their own data or assumptions to come up with their own estimates.

Finally, because the empirical focus of this research is a single case study, it is important to be cautious in applying the case study findings to other museums. The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco's experience is unique in its particulars, though the larger issues the Museum faces in its collection-related decisions are shared by many art museums throughout the country, as the literature reviewed in Chapters 1 and 3 demonstrate. Nevertheless, it would be helpful for further research to explore some of the same issues examined in this study, so as to strengthen (or refute) any conclusions drawn here.

⁶² Most of the data, however, were collected during the mid- to late-1980s. While this helps in making the data more comparable, it also means that most of the information is outdated.

3. WHY DO MUSEUMS HAVE SO MUCH IN STORAGE?

Museums with high storage levels do not have an explicit policy to fill their storerooms. Rather, high storage levels are an *indirect* result of a series of policies that relate to other museum functions. These policies - some written, others not - cover the acquisition and disposal of objects, preservation standards, space planning and utilization, exhibition philosophy, and donor relations. Rooted in longstanding tradition and professional practice, these policies undoubtedly have contributed to the health of the U.S. museum sector in many ways. Nevertheless, as museums pursue these policies, their storerooms fill.

If high storage levels are deemed to be a "problem," as many inside and outside of the museum world suggest, then understanding the nature of the problem is the foundation for crafting any effective and responsible "solution." The fact that many types of museum decisions contribute to high storage levels suggests that there are many avenues through which change can occur. The multiplicity of options for change also means that individuals in the museum world may well differ in their assessment of what can or should be done.

This chapter draws upon the research and practitioner literature in the museum field (supplemented by industry statistics from a variety of sources), to identify and describe the main factors that contribute to art museums' high storage levels. The following eight factors will be discussed, in turn:

- Collections tend to increase in size over time
- The forces driving acquisitions are strong, and central to museum culture
- Museums tend to "over-collect" from private donors of artwork
- Museums face difficulties removing objects from their collections
- Growth in exhibition space has not kept up with collection growth

- Artwork sensitivities and preservation standards limit the display and handling of objects
- A museum's exhibition and collecting philosophy may justify displaying only a small portion of the collection
- The options for reducing storage levels can be costly, risky, or otherwise seem infeasible

A helpful way to conceptualize the following discussion is to note that some of the factors help explain why museum collections tend to increase in size, while other factors help explain why, given a collection's size, so many museum objects reside in storage.

COLLECTIONS TEND TO INCREASE IN SIZE OVER TIME

To understand why museum storage levels are so high, the first point to address is the steady pace at which museums add objects to their collections. Reliable statistics on collection growth are difficult to come by; however, a few museum surveys provide estimates.⁶³

- A 1989 survey of U.S. museums (of all types) reported annual collection growth rates that averaged 4.3% and 5.4% in the two previous fiscal years.⁶⁴
- A 1984 survey of U.S. art museums found that annual collection growth rates averaged 1.8% over the previous five years.⁶⁵

⁶³ Unfortunately, survey data do not permit the calculation of an implicit collection growth rate for the ten-year period over which two national museum surveys were conducted (1979 and 1989). While the 1989 National Museum Survey (AAM 1992) included questions regarding the number of objects in museum collections, the 1979 Museum Program Survey (Price et al., 1981) did not.

⁶⁴ The median collection growth rate for both years was 2%. Rates are from the *Data Report from the 1989 National Museum Survey* (AAM 1992, p. 113). Stephen Weil (1997, p. 2) found the average annual growth rates of 4.3% and 5.4% to be "remarkably high" and offered as a comparison the Smithsonian Institution's collection growth during a comparable two-year period of .6% and .5% per year. The Smithsonian Institution's enormous collection of 140 million objects means, of course, that the additions to the collection were very large in absolute terms (between 700,000 and 840,000 objects per year). One would expect museums with large collections to have lower collection growth rates than museums with smaller collections.

⁶⁵ The survey included museums of all types, but separated results by discipline; 66 art museums were involved in the survey. The relevant

- A 1989 survey of United Kingdom museums (of all types) reported a median collection growth rate of 1.5% per year.⁶⁶

What do these growth rates mean in terms of the absolute numbers of objects added to museum collections? Assuming an annual 1.5% growth rate for all U.S. art museums, collections would grow from approximately 13 million objects in 1988 (the most recent count), to almost 19 million objects by 2013, and over 27 million objects by the year 2038.⁶⁷

The fact that collections grow over time is not surprising given museums' missions "to collect" and "to preserve" important objects. To most in the museum world, a growing collection is a sign of a healthy, vital museum in dynamic pursuit of its mission: "Collecting for a museum is incontrovertible evidence that it is, in fact, alive. Like an economy seeking continuous growth, museums have taken collection expansion as a sacred obligation."⁶⁸ While a few commentators, such as former Getty Trust President Harold Williams, have challenged museums to learn how to "be great without growing," for the most part, collection growth is seen as a positive outcome (Williams 1991).

On a more practical level, collections grow as museums "develop" their collections to meet institutional collecting goals. This may

survey question asked what the rate of growth of the collection was over the last five years. The 66 art museums in the survey reported an average rate of 18%, which translates to approximately 1.8% compounded annually over five years. See: AAM (1985), p. 58.

⁶⁶ Lord et al. (1989), p. 103.

⁶⁷ This example assumes that all art museums - large and small - experience the same collection growth rate of 1.5%, compounded annually. In reality, museums with larger collections will generally have lower growth rates, and museums with smaller collections will have higher ones. Since the bulk of artworks are held in larger art museums, I chose for this example an annual growth rate of 1.5%, at the low range of the averages reported by the aforementioned surveys. (Note, however, that continued growth in the *number* of U.S. art museums - an established trend - would tend to increase overall collection growth.) Assuming some alternate rates: A 1% annual collection growth rate would result in almost 17 million objects in 2013, and over 21 million in 2038; a 2% annual collection growth rate would result in over 21 million objects in 2013, and over 35 million in 2038. Of course, as mentioned in a prior footnote, if data on object counts were routinely collected, implicit collection growth rates could be calculated.

⁶⁸ Cantor (1991), p. 22.

involve broadening the collection to include a new area (e.g., adding American art to a European art collection), or deepening the collection in existing areas (e.g., acquiring more objects within a specific artistic school). "Collection development" also encompasses the museum practice of upgrading holdings in a particular area - for example, acquiring a finer painting from an artist already in the collection.⁶⁹ These "collection development" activities contribute to higher storage levels because, as objects are added for any of these reasons, generally there is no corresponding removal of objects from the collection - a subject discussed in detail later in this chapter.

THE FORCES DRIVING ART ACQUISITIONS ARE STRONG, AND CENTRAL TO MUSEUM CULTURE

The growth in art museum collections is, by definition, a result of object additions (acquisitions) exceeding object removals (deaccessions) on a regular basis. This section and the next examine the forces driving art acquisitions, with the goal of illuminating why objects are added to museum collections despite the fact that so many in the museum world find high storage levels to be a problem. Then, in the section that follows, the topic of deaccessioning - the permanent removal of objects from a museum collection - is discussed in detail.

The most obvious force driving museum acquisitions is mission: Acquiring objects is the way a museum actively fulfills its mission to *collect*. Even the strongest advocates for more prudent collection management, such as museum scholar Marie Malaro, acknowledge that "[t]he most basic role of the museum, its reason for being, is to collect objects perceived to be worthy of preservation for study now and for generations to come."⁷⁰ But mission is just one, albeit overarching, explanation for the prominence of acquisitions in museum operations. Another factor is the belief that a museum's collection fundamentally determines the institution's reputation. The most revered art museums tend to be those that have the finest collections - not those who excel

⁶⁹ One museum director referred to this tendency as the "masterpiece aspirations" of American museums. See Conforti (1997), p. 77.

⁷⁰ Malaro (1994), p. 82.

in their education or research endeavors (though certain institutions may shine in all respects). Museum director Steven Miller makes the connection directly: "The better the collections the more highly respected the museum, and new acquisitions are the spiritual manna that prove an institution's worth."⁷¹

As Miller's quote suggests, acquisitions can serve a "signaling" function, indicating artistic dynamism on the part of the museum's curators, and a solid vision from management. Curator Theodore E. Stebbins observes that "the collection...is often the most important factor in attracting the attention and allegiance of both its professional staff and its major supporters."⁷² Hence, current acquisitions can bring future rewards to the museum as it seeks to recruit staff, solicit donations, or entice visits among the general public.

Other authors point to larger, organizational imperatives that drive museums to acquire art - imperatives that speak to the long-term survival of museums. Museum scholar Stephen Weil, for example, suggests that museums' focus on the acquisition (and care) of collections is, in some sense, a strategic move on the part of museums to occupy a niche that distinguishes them from other educational institutions who compete for the same charitable or government dollars.⁷³ Museums' drive to build ever-larger collections also has been compared to the tendency of bureaucracies to feed their own growth.⁷⁴ Weil speaks of such forces when he asserts that collection growth is the means to museums' self-perpetuation: "[i]t is collections, not programs, that generally power the growth of museums."⁷⁵ Williams concurs, noting the bureaucratic similarities between museums and the corporate world, where "the bigger you are, the more prestigious, [and] perhaps the better compensated."⁷⁶

⁷¹ Miller (1997), p. 60.

⁷² Stebbins (1991), p. 13.

⁷³ Weil (1990), p. 29.

⁷⁴ For a discussion of growth in bureaucracies, see Niskanen (1971); for additional perspectives on bureaucratic organizations, see Wilson (1989) and Wolf (1993).

⁷⁵ Weil (1990), p. 34.

⁷⁶ Williams (1991), p. 119.

In addition to the *organizational* imperatives to acquire, *individuals* within the museum have their own drives that fuel acquisitions. The trend toward professionalization in the museum industry over the last century has transformed museum workers from "dilettantes or amateurs" into highly educated and trained professionals.⁷⁷ Today's curators are experts with art historical specialties, and are naturally inclined to ply their expertise and appreciation for art through acquisitions. As former Christie's executive Jay Cantor notes, "[c]ollecting is often the reason a director or curator went into the field, a love of objects and the ameliorating influence of retail therapy."⁷⁸ Those in the museum world often refer to the acquisitive nature of directors and curators, and the thrill that accompanies acquisition. Art historian Carole Duncan, citing former Metropolitan Museum director Thomas Hoving's *The Chase, The Capture: Collecting at the Metropolitan*, wryly observes: "There is even a kind of adventure literature in which collectors or curators appear as clever sleuths or dashing heroes who track down and bag their art treasures like hunters or Don Juans."⁷⁹

MUSEUMS TEND TO "OVER-COLLECT" FROM PRIVATE DONORS OF ARTWORK

Beyond a general inclination towards acquisitions, museums have shown a particular tendency to "over-collect" from private individuals who donate works of art to museums. This tendency is driven by two factors: Museums are dependent on private donations of art (rather than museum-funded purchases) to augment their collections, and private individuals have a variety of incentives to donate more objects to museums than museums actually want. The resulting dynamic between private collectors and art museums has led to some degree of indiscriminate collecting on the part of U.S. museums - compounded over decades. Throughout, museum directors have struggled to balance their professional judgment regarding what artworks legitimately belong in the museum's collection, with the belief that private collectors' interests

⁷⁷ Skramstad (1999), p. 116.

⁷⁸ Cantor (1991), p. 22.

⁷⁹ Duncan (1995), p. 1.

must be accommodated (even if unwanted works are acquired in the process) if the museum is to secure desired artworks. The fact that private collectors often donate cash - as well as art - makes them even more important to museums' long-term financial health.

The importance of donated artworks to U.S. museums can be traced back to museums' earliest days, when gifts from wealthy collectors such as J.P. Morgan, Henry Frick, Andrew and Paul Mellon, and many others, built the nation's great museums. Motivated by civic responsibility, prestige, and other factors, private art collectors engaged in a competition of largess as they gave to the country's burgeoning museums. These private donations, while certainly great public gifts, often included artworks that did not meet curatorial standards (Duncan 1995; O'Hagan 1998). Carole Duncan's research on the formation and development of U.S. museums uncovers numerous accounts of private collectors using public museums to leave personal memorials to their taste and generosity.

The more art museums achieved credibility as public spaces, the more attractive they became to collectors seeking personal and family memorials. There were, of course, enlightened donors who helped museums fulfill their public missions by giving unearmarked cash or buying works needed to fill gaps in the collection's art-historical survey. Others, however, took to leaving their hoards to museums on condition that they be displayed in total, in perpetuity, and in rooms reserved exclusively for them. Very quickly, such gifts turned public art museums into a series of separate, jealously guarded terrains, each one crammed with what one critic, speaking of the [Metropolitan Museum of Art], called a "hodge-podge of bric-a-brac" and another, speaking of [the Boston Museum of Fine Arts] described as a cemetery lot.⁸⁰

Today, private donors of artwork are motivated not only by civic responsibility and prestige, but by the considerable tax benefits they gain from their gifts - benefits that did not exist until 1917, when the tax deduction for charitable contributions was enacted.⁸¹ Of particular

⁸⁰ Duncan (1995), p. 60.

⁸¹ The limit on charitable deductions and the top marginal income tax rate have varied considerably over the years. In 1917, the deduction for charitable contributions was limited to 15% of taxable

importance are the special tax benefits accorded to charitable contributions of appreciated property (e.g., artworks that have increased in value since they were purchased). Donors are able to deduct the full market value of the artworks they give to museums, no matter what they originally paid for the works.⁸² This tax benefit can be quite substantial, given the dramatic increase in art prices over the last several decades. (The same increase in art prices, of course, has had a negative effect on the buying power of art museums' acquisition budgets, which only underscores the importance of private collectors in museums' collection development plans.)

While donation practices have changed since the time Duncan described, private collectors continue to be the major source of museum acquisitions. For example, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, even with its large acquisition budget, depended on donations for 85% of the objects it acquired from 1965 to 1975.⁸³ According to Congressional testimony submitted in 1983, except for a small number of museums with large acquisition budgets, art museums relied on gifts and bequests for

income; it increased to 20% of adjusted gross income (AGI) in 1952, reaching the current 50% of AGI in 1969. (Deductions for gifts of property, however, are limited to 30% of AGI.) If donor contributions exceed the deductible limit in any year, the excess may be "carried over" and deducted over the five subsequent years. The top marginal income tax rate also has varied over the decades. For example, in 1917 the top rate was 67%; it dropped to 25% in 1925, increasing to 94% by 1944; by 1981 it was down to 50%, dropping further to 31% by the early 1990s. See Fullerton (1991) for a historical overview of the various taxes (income, estate, etc.) that affect donations to art museums. See also Malaro (1998), pp. 369-383, and Weil (1995), pp. 157-181.

⁸² A full market-value deduction is not allowed, however, if the donated works fall into the "unrelated use" category, per the Internal Revenue Code. The concept of "unrelated use" concerns whether or not donated objects are used directly for the museum's charitable purposes (under IRC § 501). An example of "unrelated use" is if a museum accepts donated artworks with the intention of selling them (rather than using them in its programs). Such a donation would be considered an "unrelated use," even if the sale proceeds were used to acquire other objects for the museum's collection. The donor tax deduction for an "unrelated use" gift is limited to the fair market value of the gift less the amount that would have been a long-term capital gain if the donor had sold the artworks. See Malaro (1998), pp. 372-372, for a discussion of "unrelated use," including how the language of IRS regulations may be interpreted vis-a-vis museum practice.

⁸³ O'Hagan (1998), p. 204.

90% to 95% of their annual acquisitions.⁸⁴ More recently, a survey of 112 large art museums found that from 1986 to 1988, 54% of objects added to museum collections were donated - despite the dampening effect of a temporary tax change discouraging donated artworks.⁸⁵

Museums' dependence on artwork donations, while accepted as "the way things are," is also subject to criticism. Economists writing about this topic point out that the special tax treatment accorded to appreciated property (in this case, artworks) results in museums accumulating more art than they would if donations were received in cash (Clotfelter 1991; O'Hagan 1998). Other authors report statistics on tax abuses by private collectors who inflate the valuation of their art donations in order to claim higher deductions than their gifts warrant (Fullerton 1991; Weil 1995). And finally, while museums' written collection policies generally contain provisions against accepting donated objects that the museum doesn't have a clear use for, with the policies' typically broad guidelines, there is much room for interpretation. In today's environment of high art prices and keen competition among museums to secure collectors' art donations, exceptions to standard policy often prevail (Perry 1991; Cantor 1991; Krens 1991; Miller 1997a). As one commentator put it: "We must, after all, be practical. Beggars, if they cannot be choosers, might at least be pleasers..."⁸⁶

⁸⁴ Testimony delivered by Ralph Colin, then administrative vice-president of the Art Dealers Association of America; as reported in Malaro (1994), p. 176.

⁸⁵ See Rosett (1991), p. 161. The 1986 Tax Reform Act reduced the tax benefits associated with the charitable donation of appreciated property by including the amount of such appreciation in the alternative minimum tax formula. In 1993, the tax code was amended to restore the full market value deduction. For further discussion of these tax changes, see Malaro (1994), p. 59; and Weil (1995), pp. 171-2.

⁸⁶ This comment, by Stephen Weil in his essay, "Toward Greater Museum Integrity," was not an endorsement of such a stance, but a critique of it. The prior sentences make this clear: "In accepting objects for our collections, how often have we been motivated solely by a desire for the proffered object - it was just or nearly what we would buy ourselves if we only had the money - and how often have we yielded to the temptation to accommodate the donor? There are few museums, I suspect, where desire alone has unfailingly prevailed." See Weil (1983), p.67.

MUSEUMS FACE DIFFICULTIES REMOVING OBJECTS FROM THEIR COLLECTIONS

Museum collections increase in size (and storerooms fill) not because of acquisition activity alone, but because this activity is not balanced by corresponding subtractions from the permanent collection (i.e., deaccessions). Deaccessioning has been a controversial practice in the museum world and has generated considerable debate and attention. While the trend over the last few decades has been more accepting, deaccessioning remains a highly circumscribed activity. As a consequence, the number of objects museums deaccession are few, relative to what museums acquire. This section will cover the rationale behind deaccessioning restrictions, the current professional standards on deaccessioning, and the disposal (and destination) of deaccessioned objects. While deaccessioning is a complex topic that many have written about - in fact, a book was recently published on the subject⁸⁷ - the purpose of this discussion is to summarize the most pertinent points as they relate to understanding museums' high storage levels, and to provide background information for the chapters that follow.

The restrictions against deaccessioning are, for the most part, self-imposed by the museum industry. While some legal prohibitions against deaccessioning exist,⁸⁸ these are much less common than they were in the past, and court remedies to relax such restrictions are sometimes possible.⁸⁹ Absent substantial legal restrictions, the museum profession's internally set standards serve as the primary mechanism for shaping current deaccessioning practices. These standards are

⁸⁷ See Stephen E. Weil, ed., *A Deaccession Reader*, Wash., DC: American Association of Museums, 1997.

⁸⁸ Legal restrictions on deaccessioning sometimes appear in the terms of donor gifts or bequests of artwork. Such restrictions, once common, are now discouraged by professional museum associations. In other cases, museums may be prohibited from deaccessioning by their institutional charter or bylaws, though such institutional restrictions are rare. For in-depth discussion of these topics, see Malaro (1998), pp. 216-238 and Weil (1990), pp. 105-118.

⁸⁹ A museum may seek court relief from donor restrictions using either a *cy pres* action or the doctrine of equitable deviation. A description of these legal remedies appears in Malaro (1998), pp. 144-145.

communicated through professional codes of ethics, policy guidelines, graduate education, and other means.

As Marie Malaro points out in her analysis of legal and ethical issues in the museum world, professional codes of ethics are only as influential as the support they receive from those in the profession. Lacking the enforcement mechanisms found in the legal arena, ethical standards are policed by peer pressure and the beliefs of individuals within the profession that the standards are valuable to uphold (Malaro 1994; Malaro 1997). With respect to deaccessioning, there is widespread belief within the museum community that deaccessioning, if not highly constrained in its scope and process, can quickly get out of control and cause irreparable damage to museum collections and to the public's trust in museums, more generally. This stance draws on three main arguments; namely, that deaccessioning restrictions are necessary: (i) to guard against "mistakes" in judgment as to which artworks are expendable; (ii) to prevent artworks from being liquidated to fund museums' operating costs; and (iii) to assure future donations of artwork, funding from governments and foundations, and public trust in museums.

The fear of making "mistakes"

Deaccessioning restrictions are designed to prevent a museum from disposing of objects that, with hindsight, might be better to have kept. The fear of making mistakes is based on some well-known "horror stories" and a general belief that the selection of objects for deaccessioning can be "arbitrary, capricious, and subject either to the vagaries of fashion or to the poorly informed judgment of a board of trustees."⁹⁰ Some authors have noted that if at any given time a museum lacks a curator with expertise in a particular area, artworks from that area are in danger of being undervalued in terms of their quality or importance; this, in turn, makes them more likely to be deaccessioned. "Thus a distinguished modernist director, Andrew Ritchie, sold Yale's great collection of Tiffany glass in the late fifties because the material seemed tasteless and irrelevant to the study of art history."⁹¹ Perhaps

⁹⁰ Weil (1990), p. 109.

⁹¹ Stebbins (1991), p. 14.

the most controversial case of deaccessioning occurred in the 1970s at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, then under the direction of Thomas Hoving. In his commentary, John Rewald, an authority on Impressionist and Post-Impressionist art, criticized the Metropolitan for deaccessioning "outstanding" modern French works, especially because Hoving and his curator did not have "any specific expertise in the field of European art of the [19th and 20th] centuries."⁹²

In response to this deaccessioning controversy, the museum industry's professional associations developed policy guidelines to ensure that future deaccessioning would be subject to more rigorous checks and balances.⁹³ To safeguard against mistakes in artwork valuation, for example, museums now are generally required to obtain one or more outside appraisals for higher-valued objects. But as Weil (1997) notes, while such procedures are effective in preventing mistakes in *current* market valuation, they are less effective in addressing the inherent uncertainty regarding how an artwork's value (either monetary or aesthetic) will change in the future. On this latter point, several commentators (including Weil) argue that if a curator's judgment is

⁹² Rewald (1997), p. 24.

⁹³ While each individual art museum is governed by its own deaccessioning policy, procedures generally endorsed by museum professional associations include: legal research into any restrictions that might limit the object's removal; art historical research into the significance of the object; multiple reviews spread over several months (so that judgments can be reconsidered); multiple layers of oversight (so that curator judgments are checked by the director, and director judgments by the trustees); one or more outside appraisals for high-value objects; initial selection of candidates for deaccessioning by a curator (so as to check the more management-oriented tendencies of a director or trustee who might not appreciate the significance of a work); guidelines on disposal methods (for art museums, most common is sale through auction); and rules for use of deaccessioning proceeds (for art museums, the standard is for proceeds to be used for acquisition of other artworks). Notwithstanding the above, it is important to note that not all museums have written collections policies; and even for those that do, there is no requirement that they adopt policy guidelines recommended by museum associations. See Gilboe (1997) for a report on the deaccessioning policies of 79 museums. See Weil (1997), pp. 145-202, for official statements on deaccessioning from five professional associations, and examples of three museums' deaccessioning policies.

trusted regarding which objects to *acquire*, it follows that the same judgment should be trusted in deciding which objects to deaccession.⁹⁴

While museum professionals generally support procedures designed to minimize deaccessioning "mistakes," some contend that the risk of making such mistakes must be weighed against lost acquisition opportunities (since deaccessioning proceeds fund future acquisitions). So argued Thomas Hoving, in response to the criticism he received for selling works while he was director at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Donald Garfield summarizes Hoving's position in his account of the deaccessioning controversy:

The business of an art museum, [Hoving] argued, is quality, and steps taken to further the overall excellence and balance of the collection conform to museum policy. [Hoving] and his curators recognized 'that connoisseurship means not only taking in, but weeding out.' As for risks, Hoving stated that there were as great a number of risks associated with not buying as in selling objects from the collection. Nothing, he stated, 'is more irrevocable than missing a great work of art.'⁹⁵

Erecting a "firewall," so that artworks are not liquidated to fund operating costs

An important restriction on deaccessioning has to do with the use of proceeds from any sale of objects from the collection. The two professional associations most relevant for art museums have slightly different positions on this topic; for the most part, however, art museums use deaccessioning proceeds only to fund future acquisitions.⁹⁶

⁹⁴ Others respond that a higher responsibility exists for works that are already in the public domain (i.e., part of a museum collection), and to let such works fall into private hands (through deaccessioning) violates museums' preservation duties and threatens the public's trust in museums as an institution. See Miller (1997b), pp. 93-97.

⁹⁵ See Garfield (1997), p. 13. Stephen Weil (1997, pp. 69-70) makes a similar argument: "[T]he number of important artworks that have failed ever to enter a museum's collection because somebody, whether for lack of judgment, opportunity, courage or the necessary funds, failed to buy them in the first place must exceed by many a dozen the number of important artworks that have been removed from such collections because somebody disposed of them in error."

⁹⁶ The code of professional practices for the Association of Art Museum Directors stipulates that deaccessioning proceeds be used only

Most explicitly, proceeds from artwork sales are *not* to be used for general operating costs. The rationale behind this restriction is that a "firewall" must be erected so that the wealth concentrated in the museum collection not be viewed as assets that can be liquidated when operating budgets are tight. As Stephen Weil argues:

[The museum that evidences its willingness to apply deaccessioning proceeds to meet operating expenses may ultimately be perceived, both by its community and its staff, to have made available to itself the functional equivalent of a cash reserve, a reserve equal in amount to the total market value of its collection.⁹⁷

That museums have other, legitimate financial needs - beyond that of acquiring objects - is not disputed by advocates of this restriction on the use of deaccessioning proceeds. Instead, what they argue is that once this firewall is breached, a slippery slope lies ahead and the "cannibalization" of the collection is an inevitable result.⁹⁸ Underlying this protective view is the notion discussed earlier in this chapter: The central, defining role of "the collection" in museum culture. Perhaps implicit in the museum profession's insistence on a firewall is the belief that nonprofessionals may not appreciate the central importance of the museum's collection. Alluding to this possibility, Weil writes:

The argument to be expected - and it would most certainly be an argument conducted in the media - would be one that involved the relative value of people and things. Is the retention of the museum's fourth-best Rembrandt etching really more important than a proposed new program for preschoolers?...More often than not, when a public argument is

for acquisitions (AAMD 1992). The code of ethics for the American Association of Museums (which includes all types of museums, not just art museums) states that deaccessioning proceeds "are to be used consistent with the established standards of the museum's discipline, but in no event shall they be used for anything other than acquisition or direct care of collections" (AAM 1997, pp. 151-152).

⁹⁷ Weil (1997), p. 87.

⁹⁸ Economists would point to a natural plateau of the "slippery slope;" namely, when the marginal benefit of acquiring an additional work outweighs the marginal benefit of some alternative use of the deaccessioning proceeds.

framed in terms of living people against dead things, the living people can be expected to win.⁹⁹

Limiting deaccessioning so as to encourage future institutional support

Some commentators support strict deaccessioning rules because they believe that a more liberal policy toward deaccessioning could threaten museums' financial support from a variety of sources, including governments, foundations, and private individuals who make cash contributions to charity. As Weil suggested in the above quote, financial need - while not the only criterion - is certainly a key consideration when public or charitable dollars are allocated. The perception that museums are "rich," possessing valuable collections that could fund operations, would belie their relatively meager operating budgets.

A more common argument, however, is that deaccessioning could jeopardize a very specialized form of museum support: future donations of artwork - the primary source of museum acquisitions. This concern is based on the belief that donors of art are motivated by the notion of leaving a tangible, identifiable legacy to a particular institution. It is important for them to know that their donated works will remain in their chosen community, to be enjoyed by future generations of the public, with the gift always associated with the donor. In addition, private collectors are naturally proud of the artworks they have assembled; to have their collection accepted (and kept) by a museum is confirmation of their taste and accomplishment in collecting. Hence, the possibility that a given museum will deaccession their works reduces the donor's psychological benefits from his or her gift. A museum whose policy it is *not* to deaccession may be a more attractive option for the donor who cares about such things.

Whether or not potential donors will change their behavior based on a museum's deaccessioning policy is an open question. Some authors offer examples where donors have chosen a recipient museum based on its deaccessioning philosophy. For example, the Mark Rothko Foundation, in giving the bulk of the painter's estate to the National Gallery in

⁹⁹ Weil (1997), pp. 89-90.

Washington D.C., cited the museum's policy against deaccessioning as one of the key reasons behind its decision (Miller 1997a). On the other hand, other museum professionals cite their own anecdotal evidence that deaccessioning - if properly managed - does not dissuade donors from giving to an institution (Ainslie 1997).

Finally, some commentators note that deaccessioning (especially, if not restrained) can damage the public's trust in museums - which, in turn, may jeopardize financial support. These authors describe a certain portion of the public who view museums as "permanent repositories" whose mandate is violated when they sell off part of their collection (Weil 1997a). When objects enter museum collections, according to this perspective, they became part of the "public patrimony," and as such, are to be held in trust indefinitely. To the public, then, deaccessioning may be seen as "diametrically opposed to what museums [stand] for."¹⁰⁰ Whether or not these commentators believe that this perception is valid, they acknowledge the general public's sentiments and recognize that museums are ultimately accountable to public views.¹⁰¹

The disposal and destination of deaccessioned objects: private hands or public domain?

Whether or not museum objects should always remain in the public domain is another wrinkle in the deaccessioning debate. While some believe that museums have an obligation to assure that deaccessioned objects go to other publicly-accessible institutions, others hold that the museum's first responsibility is to its own public, and this means securing the best possible trade or price for deaccessioned objects in order to benefit the institution's own mission. This pitting of two laudable objectives against one another has led museum experts to

¹⁰⁰ Miller (1997a), p. 52.

¹⁰¹ Public outcries against deaccessioning have certainly occurred, most famously in the 1970s when the Metropolitan Museum of Art's deaccessioning led to a fierce debate conducted in *The New York Times* and, ultimately, to hearings before the New York attorney general (Garfield 1997, pp. 11-21). In response to these public outcries, museums now pay greater attention to the public relations of deaccessioning, and have found this helpful in minimizing controversy (Ainslie 1997).

contend that the *method* of object disposal raises more difficult questions than the issue of whether or not an object should be deaccessioned (Malaro 1997; Miller 1997a).

Those that support keeping deaccessioned artworks in the public domain cite concern for the objects' wellbeing, as well as an implied covenant that museum objects were acquired to serve the public indefinitely. (Some also argue that the objects should remain in the geographic region where the deaccessioning museum resides.) According to this view, to let objects slip out of the public domain erodes the museum's stewardship role and, along with it, the public's trust in museums. Miller (1997b), writing on one aspect of this issue, indicts the "commercialization" of deaccessioning activity as he sees museums increasingly using auction houses to receive the highest price for deaccessioned objects. (Given who participates in public auctions, deaccessioning using this avenue means that museum objects most likely will fall into private hands.) Miller asserts that this type of participation in the art market blurs the distinction between mission-oriented organizations and private enterprise, ultimately threatening museums' public support. Interestingly, economist Martin Feldstein offers his own rationale for keeping deaccessioned works in the public domain. He suggests that imposing legal restrictions to keep deaccessioned objects within the museum sector, while reducing sale proceeds, "would allay some of the concerns that museum officials have about their stewardship responsibilities." He goes on to propose that "[s]uch restrictions that protected the care and public availability of deaccessioned works of art might also make museum officials willing to use the funds from such sales for certain types of operating expenses."¹⁰² In this way, Feldstein sees the imposition of one restriction (keeping deaccessioned objects in the public domain) as a way to rationalize the loosening of another (using deaccessioning proceeds only for acquisitions), with the net effect of improving museums' overall institutional health.

¹⁰² Feldstein (1991), pp. 8-9.

Those that believe museums should secure the best price for the objects they deaccession - even if this means the artworks are purchased by private individuals - have their own convincing arguments. Deaccessioning (especially, to the highest bidder) has become the one way that museums can actually *benefit* from the rise in art prices, the other effects of inflation being detrimental (e.g., the loss in buying power of acquisition budgets, an increase in insurance and security costs). And, as legal experts note, museum trustees are bound by a fiduciary duty to their institutions; to *not* secure the best deal for deaccessioned objects could be considered a violation of this obligation (Weil 1990). Finally, once deaccessioning decisions incorporate an obligation to other museums, the question of how to properly dispose of deaccessioned objects becomes complicated: "So long as [museums'] primary duty is to their own museum, the answers seem clear. Once they begin to acquire some vague duty to institutions elsewhere, though, these answers become muddy."¹⁰³

Despite the ongoing debate, most art museums come out on the side of securing the highest price for deaccessioned objects, which generally means going through public auction and allowing former museum objects to be purchased by private collectors. A 1997 survey of museum deaccessioning policies found that art museums lean towards public auction as the preferred method of disposal, though there is often language acknowledging the interests of the larger museum community and for allowing exchanges with other museums (Gilboe 1997). Not surprisingly, other types of museums (e.g., anthropology, natural history) are more predisposed to exchange or outright donation of deaccessioned objects - an easier decision since such objects command lower prices on the public market. On balance, the professional museum associations most relevant to art museums favor public auction as a disposal method for deaccessioned objects, though some associations

¹⁰³ Weil (1990), p. 112. Harold Williams makes a similar point; see Williams (1991).

place greater emphasis on making works available for acquisition by other public institutions.¹⁰⁴

GROWTH IN EXHIBITION SPACE HAS NOT KEPT UP WITH COLLECTION GROWTH

A rather obvious, but nevertheless critical, point in understanding art museum storage levels is the fact that growth in collections has outpaced growth in exhibition space. Again, the lack of comprehensive data reporting in the museum industry makes it difficult to provide precise statistics; however, by pulling together several pieces of information and making some assumptions, a compelling picture emerges.¹⁰⁵ According to the National Museum Survey, over the ten-year period from 1978 to 1988, museums (of all types) added 33.5 million square feet of interior space, representing an increase of almost 18%.¹⁰⁶ If one assumes that art museums increased their interior square footage in proportion to their share of total interior space within the industry, then art museums added almost five million square feet over ten years.¹⁰⁷ If one then assumes that 70% of art museums' added interior space was used for galleries (rather than for offices, collections storage, gift stores, etc.), then art museums added almost

¹⁰⁴ See Malaro (1997, pp. 42-43) for a comparison of the policies of the Association of Art Museum Directors and the American Association of Museums. See Weil (1990, p. 112) for discussion of policies adopted by the College Art Association and the New York State Association of Museums. Five professional museum associations' official statements on deaccessioning are published together in Weil (1997, pp. 145-165).

¹⁰⁵ Appendix 2 supplements this discussion by varying several assumptions made in the text.

¹⁰⁶ More precisely, museums added 33,509,514 sq. ft. of interior space, representing an increase of 17.8% (AAM 1992, pp. 73-77). These exact numbers (rather than rounded numbers) will be used in the calculations that follow. Another study - one based on a survey of 112 of the largest art museums in the U.S. - found that from 1986 to 1988, interior square footage increased by an average of 4.5% over the two-year period (Rosett 1991, p. 158).

¹⁰⁷ Art museums accounted for 14.9% of the interior space of all U.S. museums in 1988 (AAM 1992, p. 73). Thus, the calculation is: 14.9% of 33,509,514 sq. ft. equals 4,992,918 sq. ft. An assumption is necessary because the Data Report from the 1989 National Museum Survey (AAM 1992) does not indicate what proportion of the total increase in interior square footage is attributable to each type of museum (e.g., art museums, natural history museums).

3.5 million square feet of additional exhibition space over ten years.¹⁰⁸

Of course, not *all* exhibition space is used for displaying the permanent collection; a certain portion is usually devoted to traveling exhibitions from other institutions. Stephen Weil conducted his own "very informal survey" of museums of different sizes to determine what proportion of exhibition space museums allocate to their permanent collections. He found that very large museums tend to dedicate over 90% of their exhibition space to the permanent collection, whereas medium-sized museums devote about 50-60% to it.¹⁰⁹ Applying a mid-range (or, slightly conservative) estimate of 85% to the example above, then over a ten-year period, U.S. art museums added just under three million square feet of gallery space for displaying their permanent collections.¹¹⁰

While this ten-year increase in permanent collection exhibition space may appear substantial in absolute terms (and perhaps more so as a rate of growth), it is less so when one considers the display space requirements of the objects added to museum collections over that same period. Museum architect George Hartman, in his study of museum spaces, calculated the average square footage devoted to the display of different types of museum objects. Hartman's figures range from ten square feet per glass object, to 75 square feet per painting.¹¹¹ In

¹⁰⁸ The exact calculation is: 70% of 4,992,918 sq. ft. equals 3,495,043 sq. ft. The 70% assumption is almost certainly high, but serves as a conservative estimate for purposes of this example since the argument is that collection growth has outstripped growth in exhibition space. (See Appendix 2 for alternate assumptions.) Richard Rosett, in his research on large U.S. art museums, found that on average, only 44% of added interior square footage went to exhibition space from 1986 to 1988 (Rosett 1991, p. 158). The Data Report from the 1989 National Museum Survey does not indicate what portion of added space (or existing space) is devoted to museums' exhibition function (AAM 1992). A related document, however, reports that in 1988, the median art museum devoted 15% of its interior square footage to collections storage; thus, 85% of interior space would be left for all other uses (AAM 1994, pp. 43, 75).

¹⁰⁹ Weil (1990), p. 33.

¹¹⁰ The exact calculation is as follows: 85% of 3,495,043 sq. ft. equals 2,970,787 sq. ft.

¹¹¹ Hartman's figures were produced in the mid-1980s. See Bank (1988), p. 74.

special cases, the allocation may be even greater.¹¹² Given these estimates of display space requirements, one now can better evaluate how the growth in exhibition space compares with the growth in collections.

Based on estimates from previous surveys,¹¹³ it is reasonable to assume that art museums added about 1.8 million objects to their collections from 1978 to 1988.¹¹⁴ Compare this to the approximately three million square feet of permanent collection gallery space added during that same ten-year period. Using a straight ratio, approximately 1.6 square feet of exhibition space was added for every object added to art museum collections.¹¹⁵ This means that, assuming a mid-range estimate of average display requirements (30 square feet per object), the additional square footage represents only about 5% of what would be required to display all the additional objects. Put another way, for about every 18 objects entering the collection from 1978 to 1988, there was additional gallery space built to display only one.¹¹⁶ (See Appendix 2 for alternate assumptions.)

It is important to emphasize here that not all museum objects are acquired for display purposes; as was noted in Chapter 1, some museums collect objects primarily for study, and for such objects, exhibition is

¹¹² For example, the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts' newly installed modern and contemporary art galleries average 100 square feet per displayed object. (See: "Noteworthy" in *Museum News*, July/August 2000, Wash. D.C.: American Association of Museums, p. 19.)

¹¹³ See discussion earlier in this chapter, in section titled: "Collections tend to increase in size over time."

¹¹⁴ This number was calculated by "backing into" the 1978 object total as follows. Art museums had 13,051,701 objects in their collections in 1988 (AAM 1992, p. 91). Assuming a 1.5% collection growth rate (compounded annually), museums *would* have had 11,246,223 objects in their collections in 1978. Thus, from 1978 to 1988, art museum collections would have grown by 1,805,478 objects. (If one assumes a lower collection growth rate of 0.5%, 634,992 objects would have been added over the ten-year period; if one assumes a higher collection growth rate of 2.5%, 2,855,733 objects would have been added.)

¹¹⁵ The exact calculation is as follows: 2,970,787 sq. ft. divided by 1,805,478 objects yields 1.645 sq. ft. per object.

¹¹⁶ If one uses a low estimate of average display requirements (15 square feet per object), the ratio decreases to 9 to 1; if one uses a high estimate (45 square feet per object) the ratio increases to 27 to 1.

incidental. Furthermore, not all objects collected with exhibition in mind are meant to be permanently displayed; as will be discussed shortly, certain artworks are sensitive to light and other environmental conditions and are best preserved by spending extended periods in controlled (i.e., storage) environments. However, notwithstanding the above, the amount of exhibition space is clearly a constraint on what can be displayed - even after taking into account that some objects were collected for research purposes and others require limited display time because of material sensitivities. Over time, as the growth of collections has outpaced the growth in exhibition space, increasing numbers of artworks have been relegated to storage.

ARTWORK SENSITIVITIES AND PRESERVATION STANDARDS LIMIT THE DISPLAY AND HANDLING OF OBJECTS

That artworks spend time in storage facilities is, in part, a direct consequence of the preservation mission of art museums. Museums are obligated to ensure that collected objects are passed on to future generations. Museums meet this obligation by regulating their current use of objects in ways believed to lengthen their useful life. Preservation practices are manifest in virtually every aspect of museum operations, governing the conditions under which objects are displayed in galleries, how objects are handled when moved, whether they are loaned to other institutions - and how (and for what lengths of time) objects are kept in museum storerooms.

The preservation justification for keeping objects in storage is, simply, that it extends their lives. This is because objects deteriorate at an accelerated rate when exposed to certain environmental conditions, and these conditions are better controlled in storage facilities than in, say, museum galleries. The specific factors that cause deterioration depend on the object's material (e.g., bronze, ink on paper) and condition; in general, however, they include excessive light, extreme or rapid fluctuations in temperature or relative humidity, dust and other particulate pollutants, molds, and pests (Shelly 1987; Fisher 1998).

Some classes of artwork, because of the materials from which they are formed, are especially prone to deterioration if exposed to ordinary

environments. For example, prints, photographs, and textiles will fade at a much faster rate when exposed to light than will paintings or furniture. For this reason, professional standards promote limited exposure for certain classes of objects, which, by definition, implies longer storage time. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, for example, has published guidelines that state that works on paper, books, and textiles should be exhibited for no more than three months per calendar year at specified light levels.¹¹⁷ Thus, depending on the composition of a museum's collection, a certain level of storage would result from following generally accepted standards of care.¹¹⁸

Many authors have noted that preservation and conservation standards (along with other standards in the museum field) have been on a steady rise for decades (Ashley-Smith 1994; Clotfelter 1991; Weil 1990). To some degree, this is a result of the increasing professionalization of the museum industry, in which museum specialists - in this case, conservators - regularly meet, confer, and adopt new statements of practice. Such practices are further institutionalized through graduate conservation programs and the museum accreditation process. The increase in collection care standards, however, is also a result of advancements in science and technology. Research has produced new knowledge about material sensitivities, led to safer methods of object packing and storage, and resulted in devices that more precisely measure environmental hazards and object damage. While generally these advancements are applauded, some argue that it is the *capability* of technology that is driving preservation standards, rather than a realistic assessment of what is *necessary* to protect museum objects adequately (Ashley-Smith 1995a; Weil 1990). This topic will be discussed further in the concluding chapter.

¹¹⁷ Shelly (1987), pp. 43, 52.

¹¹⁸ Some conservators, such as Jonathan Ashley-Smith, writing as Head of Conservation at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, argue that the rate of display should be a matter of museum discretion. Ashley-Smith proposes that museum professionals take into account the varying rates of object deterioration associated with different levels of exposure, and then make a judgment regarding an appropriate balance between current use and object preservation (Ashley-Smith 1995a, 1995b).

A MUSEUM'S EXHIBITION AND COLLECTING PHILOSOPHY MAY JUSTIFY DISPLAYING ONLY A SMALL PORTION OF THE COLLECTION

Even if unlimited exhibition space were available - and object sensitivities were not at issue - museums still may find reason to display only a small portion of their collections. The display mission of museums provides only the broadest of mandates, and a judgment still must be made regarding *what* to display. Depending on a museum's exhibition philosophy - and its collecting goals - a large percentage of its objects may remain in storage for decades, even taking into account the rotation of exhibits over time.

One justification for displaying only select items from the permanent collection is the museum's role as connoisseur. Traditionally, the general public had looked to museums to designate and showcase quality.¹¹⁹ As Steven Weil puts it, "*The public forms its taste on the basis of what it sees in museums. To the public, museum is not merely a noun, a place; it is also an adjective, meaning 'quality,' meaning 'the best.'*"¹²⁰ Since every museum's collection contains objects ranging in quality, the connoisseurship role requires selectivity in deciding what is exhibited. In fact, a large part of the museum curator's function, according to Alfred H. Barr, Jr., former director of the Museum of Modern Art, is "the conscientious, continuous, resolute distinction of quality from mediocrity."¹²¹ Expressing similar sentiments, Phillippe de Montebello, director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, responded to an interviewer's question asking how much of the museum's collection could be shown at any one time. "I would say 90 percent of what you'd like to see," Montebello answered.¹²² While

¹¹⁹ Museums' authority to designate quality, or "artistic excellence," has been under attack for many years. Some critics, like Pierre Bourdieu, view such authority as a means of conferring status on certain social classes, and thus a tool for class distinction. See Harris (1999) for a brief overview of this and other debates about museum authority and roles.

¹²⁰ Weil (1983), p. 57. (Italics are the author's.)

¹²¹ Quote appeared in Weil (1995), p. 135. Weil, in turn, cited the quote in Richard E. Oldenburg's foreword to: Alfred H. Barr, Jr., *Painting and Sculpture in the Museum of Modern Art*, New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1977, p. ix.

¹²² See: Dobrzynski, Judith H., "Hip vs. Stately: The Tao of Two Museums," *The New York Times*, Feb. 20, 2000.

Montebello's response was certainly off-the-cuff, he makes an important point: The Metropolitan's display mission may be well-served by exhibiting only a small portion of its collection.

A museum's exhibition philosophy goes beyond choosing which items to display from its permanent collection; it also involves deciding how much to reach beyond its own institutional boundaries, by hosting traveling shows compiled from the collections of other museums or private collectors. The general public has shown a tremendous appetite for traveling "blockbuster" exhibitions, and museums have benefited with high attendance and revenues. There is, nevertheless, a corresponding squeeze on the display of the host museum's own collection: The exhibition space, staff time, and other resources devoted to traveling shows are simply not available to showcase the museum's permanent collection. This, of course, leads to more works in storage; not only at a single point in time (because there is less gallery space available to display the permanent collection), but over the longer term, as the museum's curators, registrars, installers, and educators devote time and resources to the traveling shows rather than to creating rotating exhibits from the museum's own collection. While many museum professionals regret the emphasis on traveling shows vis-a-vis the permanent collection, the trend continues as it seems to satisfy public demand, and thereby serve the institution financially (Walsh 1991, Williams 1991).

Finally, in some cases, a museum's mission-related collecting goals may contribute to high storage levels. Museums that emphasize research in their mission will collect objects for their scholarly value, which may or may not translate to display value. Such collections are referred to as "study collections" within the museum world, denoting their primary research purpose. The collecting goals for a study collection are distinct from the goals for assembling a collection primarily for display purposes. For instance, collecting multiple examples of a certain artistic technique can be helpful for scholars interested in-depth comparative examination. Such "deep" collecting in one area, however, when considered for display purposes, may seem repetitive and lacking in general viewing interest. In fact, such a

collection is not assembled for such purposes, despite the occasional exhibit of some pieces. With study collections, critical mass (i.e., the co-location of a large quantity of related objects) is an asset; hence, high storage levels are viewed as consistent with the museum's collecting goals.¹²³

THE OPTIONS FOR REDUCING STORAGE LEVELS CAN BE COSTLY, RISKY, OR OTHERWISE SEEM INFEASIBLE

Logically speaking, another explanation for museums' high storage levels is that the *alternatives* to high storage are simply not attractive. If the options for reducing storage levels are too costly to implement, involve high risks, conflict with prevailing culture, or otherwise seem infeasible, then even a museum that wanted (in concept) to reduce its storage levels, might find it difficult to do so. This thesis is explored in the following chapters, as several alternatives for reducing storage levels and increasing the utilization of stored artworks are examined. The next chapter presents an organizing framework for this inquiry.

¹²³ Some museums with study collections invest in research facilities that make it more convenient for scholars to access works in storage. A few museums have gone further to create so-called "open storage" environments, which allow the general public to view objects that might otherwise be seen only by scholars. For example, the Henry R. Luce Center for the Study of American Art at the Metropolitan Museum has an "open-storage" facility that is accessible to the general public.

4. A FRAMEWORK FOR EXAMINING OPTIONS FOR REDUCING STORAGE LEVELS AND/OR INCREASING THE UTILIZATION OF STORED ARTWORKS

U.S. art museums' 13 million objects represent an enormous cultural asset with aesthetic, historical, and educational value - in addition to monetary worth. But this huge art inventory, despite its multifaceted value, suffers from limited use. While people differ in their views regarding how much and what type of use would be most appropriate, calls for more effective utilization of art museum collections have come from a chorus of commentators (Weil 1997, Walsh 1991, Skramstad 1999, Feldstein 1991, O'Hagan 1998, Malaro 1994). Such calls for change suggest several practical questions. Most basically, can collection utilization be enhanced? If so, how can it be accomplished? And what are the consequences of pursuing different strategies to achieve this objective?

This chapter presents an organizing framework for examining options for reducing storage and/or increasing the utilization of stored artworks. The framework is idealized, in that it presents the options *in concept*, leaving out (for the time being) the complicating factors that a real museum would face in implementing any particular option. It is this same real-world complexity, however, that argues for a simple, conceptual framework as a foundation for further analysis: By starting from what is theoretically possible, the countervailing forces that limit these possibilities are set in relief. This contrast between theoretical possibilities and the status quo provides the motivation - and the blueprint - for a reasoned consideration of options for policy change.¹²⁴

MAKING SENSE OF THE OPTIONS

A survey of the museum landscape over the last several years reveals a range of collection-related initiatives that, while undertaken for a variety of reasons, all share a common result: *museums were able*

¹²⁴ Subsequent chapters use this framework to investigate one museum's collection utilization experience and the larger policy issues that surround this topic.

to reduce their storage levels and/or increase the utilization of their stored artworks. Using this common result as an organizing principle, activities as diverse as collection-sharing, deaccessioning, expanding museum facilities, providing electronic access to collections, and others, can be viewed as *options* for museums that wish to more effectively utilize their collections. With such a diversity of options (eleven will be presented in this chapter) how might one begin to assess their potential and appropriateness?

The conceptual framework developed in this chapter posits four fundamentally distinct strategies for reducing storage levels and/or increasing the utilization of stored artworks. Each of the four general strategies encompasses two or three specific options. The next four sections in this chapter briefly describe these strategies and options. The following section integrates them into an organizing framework. The final section introduces the process of applying the framework to the real world of museums. The four strategies for reducing storage levels and/or increasing the utilization of stored artworks are:

- Reduce the size of the permanent collection;
- Increase the exhibition space for displaying the permanent collection;
- Share the permanent collection with other institutions; and
- Increase public- or researcher-access to objects in the permanent collection.¹²⁵

REDUCE THE SIZE OF THE PERMANENT COLLECTION

A museum can affect its storage level and collection-utilization rate by simply reducing the number of objects in its permanent collection.¹²⁶ All other things being equal (i.e., gallery space, exhibition and loan practices, technology, etc.), a smaller collection means fewer objects in storage and a larger proportion of objects displayed in galleries, loaned to other institutions, or accessed by researchers. At any point in time, the only way a museum can reduce the

¹²⁵ Of course, the four strategies also may be used in combination.

¹²⁶ The "permanent collection" includes all objects formally accepted into the museum's collection, whether or not they are located at the museum facilities.

number of objects in its permanent collection is through deaccessioning. Taking a longer-term view, however, a museum can reduce the size of its collection by restricting its acquisitions. (That is, if annual acquisitions are fewer than annual deaccessions, then collection size will decrease over time.) Together, acquisitions and deaccessions can be thought of as *flows* of objects in and out of the permanent collection. To affect these flows - and thereby impact collection storage and utilization - a museum would have to modify its current acquisition and deaccessioning practices. These "options" are shown in the chart, below.

General Strategy	Specific Options
Reduce the size of the permanent collection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li data-bbox="755 829 1133 856">• Increase deaccessions<li data-bbox="755 888 1133 915">• Decrease acquisitions

INCREASE THE EXHIBITION SPACE FOR DISPLAYING THE PERMANENT COLLECTION

Another approach for affecting the levels of collection storage and utilization is to increase the amount of space available for exhibiting artworks from the permanent collection.¹²⁷ Holding all else equal, if a museum adds gallery space it will have fewer objects in storage and a larger proportion of the permanent collection on display. A museum can increase its exhibition space in several ways. It can expand its current facilities through a capital building program; it can open new sites (sometimes called "satellite" museums) in the local area or elsewhere; or, it can allocate space differently within its existing buildings and devote more square footage to displaying the permanent collection. These three options appear in the following chart.

¹²⁷ Increasing the amount of space devoted to collection research, education - or even conservation - also affects collection utilization, broadly defined.

General Strategy	Specific Options
Increase the exhibition space for displaying the permanent collection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expand current sites • Open new sites • Use space differently within existing sites

SHARE THE PERMANENT COLLECTION WITH OTHER INSTITUTIONS

When a museum loans its objects to other institutions, it reduces its storage levels simply by having fewer objects to physically house at any point in time. "Collection sharing" (a term reserved for long-term, rather than short-term, loans) also may increase the utilization of artworks; however, this utilization occurs outside the loaning museum's buildings. (While outside the museum's buildings, these objects remain "inside" the permanent collection - an important distinction between long-term loans and deaccessioned artworks.) A museum can engage in different types of collection sharing: It can loan objects to other museums; it can loan objects to non-museum institutions (such as schools or municipal offices); or it can loan objects to independent exhibition organizations that develop and manage traveling shows. These options appear in the chart, below.

General Strategy	Specific Options
Share the permanent collection with other institutions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Loan to other museums • Loan to non-museums • Loan to exhibition organizations

INCREASE PUBLIC- OR RESEARCHER-ACCESS TO OBJECTS IN THE PERMANENT COLLECTION

The options in this fourth category are more diverse than those in the other categories, yet they do share a common characteristic: They all promote increased access to objects usually found in storage -

though the *number* of objects in storage remains the same. In some cases this is achieved by enhancing *physical* access to stored objects, either by making stored collections more visible to the public (through "open storage" facilities) or more available to researchers (through "study collection" facilities). Alternatively, a museum may increase the rotation of objects on display, thereby exhibiting a larger number of objects in its collection (though for shorter periods of time). Another option focuses on *electronic* access to objects in the collection, by means of information technologies such as web sites, interactive "kiosks" located in museum galleries, or digital image libraries that cut across museums' institutional boundaries. In this fourth category of options there is no change in the *number* of objects within the museum buildings, but the *utilization* level of those objects changes. The options are listed below.

General Strategy	Specific Options
Increase access to objects in the permanent collection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide "open storage" or "study collection" facilities • Increase collection rotation • Provide electronic access to the collection

INTEGRATING THE OPTIONS INTO ONE ORGANIZING FRAMEWORK

As Table 4.1 summarizes, a museum has several options available if it wishes to reduce its storage level and/or increase the utilization of stored artworks. These options operate in fundamentally distinct ways; hence, the categorization of the eleven options into four strategies. The differences among the four strategies provide a starting point for analyzing the potential and appropriateness of any particular option for a given situation. For example, the options that rely on an increase in exhibition space can raise issues involving capital expenditures or land-use permits - issues that are totally distinct from those relevant to the collection-sharing options, for which finding suitable

institutional partners is a key concern. Each category of options has its own set of factors that are most critical, as will be discussed in later chapters. Depending on how these factors play out, they either facilitate or impede successful implementation of the strategy. For this reason, the context surrounding each strategy is important to understand, for it can reveal how likely theoretical possibilities are to become practical successes. How to begin exploring these contextual factors is the subject of the next section.

Table 4.1

Strategies and options for reducing storage levels and/or increasing the utilization of stored artworks

General Strategy	Specific Options
Reduce the size of the permanent collection	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Increase deaccessions• Decrease acquisitions
Increase the exhibition space for displaying the permanent collection	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Expand current sites• Open new sites• Use space differently within existing sites
Share the permanent collection with other institutions	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Loan to other museums• Loan to non-museums• Loan to exhibition organizations
Increase access to objects in the permanent collection	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Provide "open storage" or "study collection" facilities• Increase collection rotation• Provide electronic access to the collection

APPLYING THE FRAMEWORK TO THE REAL-WORLD OF MUSEUMS

So far, this framework presents a series of theoretical possibilities for a museum interested in reducing its storage levels and/or increasing the utilization of its stored artworks. The value of the conceptual framework is that it highlights what is *possible*. It suggests that there are many avenues for changing the status quo, if such change is desired. For this reason, an idealized model can be useful to provoke thinking about larger issues. At the same time, a purely conceptual treatment of a problem has limited practical value since real-world details inevitably complicate theoretical possibilities. Using the conceptual framework to structure the exploration of an actual museum's collection-utilization experience is a way to harness the power of both theoretical and empirical insights - and in so doing, it is hoped, advance our understanding of how collection utilization might be enhanced.

The case study of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco is a vehicle for bringing real-world details and institutional imperatives into this study's exploration of collection utilization in art museums. The case study will explore the first strategy - reducing the size of the collection - in considerable depth in Chapter 6; the other strategies will be addressed more briefly in Chapter 7. To begin, however, Chapter 5 presents some background on the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, an introduction to its permanent collection, and an overview of collection storage and utilization at the institution.

5. THE FINE ARTS MUSEUMS OF SAN FRANCISCO: THE INSTITUTION, ITS COLLECTION, AND AN EXAMINATION OF ITS COLLECTION STORAGE

This chapter begins the exploration of collection storage and utilization at the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco ("the Museum"). To provide background for the case study, the next section summarizes the Museum's history, governance structure, mission, and key statistics that capture the size and reach of the institution. The following section describes the Museum's permanent collection - its size, scope, strengths, and how different portions of the collection relate to different elements of the Museum's mission. The next section presents a "snapshot" of collection storage and utilization at the Museum, showing what portion of each curatorial department is in storage, on exhibit, on loan, or in conservation labs. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the Museum's high storage level, including comments on its prevalence across departments, an estimate of its cost to the Museum, and some observations from Museum staff on how collection storage relates to mission and morale. (Chapters 6 and 7 continue the case study, examining the Museum's experience with different strategies for reducing storage and/or increasing collection utilization.)

BACKGROUND ON THE FINE ARTS MUSEUMS OF SAN FRANCISCO

The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco is made up of two museums: the M.H. de Young Memorial Museum and the California Palace of the Legion of Honor. The two museums share the same management, governance structure, and funding base, though each is located in a different part of San Francisco.¹²⁸

The older of the two museums is the M.H. de Young Memorial Museum ("the de Young"), which first opened to the public in 1895.¹²⁹ The de

¹²⁸ Because the two museums comprise a single institution, I have chosen to refer to the institution as "Museum" (rather than "Museums"), and use singular (rather than plural) pronouns throughout the document. I use the lowercase "museum" when I am referring to one of the two museums that make up the institution: the de Young or the Legion.

¹²⁹ The information in this section comes from internal Museum documents, primarily FAMSF 1999a.

Young was created as a result of the California Midwinter International Exposition, held in Golden Gate Park in 1894. After the Exposition closed, Michael de Young, publisher of the *San Francisco Chronicle*, spearheaded an effort to convert some of the Exposition's structures into a permanent museum. Still located in Golden Gate Park, the current de Young has been renovated and expanded several times over the last 100 years. Due to severe damage sustained in the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake, the de Young museum soon will be replaced by an entirely new building, with groundbreaking scheduled for 2002.

The de Young began as a general museum, with a collection that included art, historical artifacts, and natural history objects. Starting in the 1930s, the de Young began to focus on its art collection; by 1960, the museum had transformed itself from a general museum to a fine arts museum. Today, the collections housed at the de Young include American art; works from Africa, Oceania, and the Americas; and tribal weavings. (The collections are described in greater detail in the next section.)

The younger of the two museums, the California Palace of the Legion of Honor ("the Legion"), was established in 1924. Located in Lincoln Park, the Legion was built by the Spreckels family, and designed as a scaled-down replica of the *Palais de la Legion d'Honneur* in Paris. The Legion still maintains its original design, though it was renovated and expanded in the mid-1990s. The Legion's initial collections centered around French art; today, the Legion features European art, and prints and drawings from around the world.

In 1972, the de Young and the Legion merged into one organizational entity, resulting in the current Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco. The merger was approved by San Francisco voters and codified in an amendment to the Charter of the City and County of San Francisco. Following the merger approval, the de Young and the Legion combined their staffs and collections.

The Museum's governance structure includes both public (municipal) and private (nonprofit) elements.¹³⁰ The Museum is governed by a Board

¹³⁰ The Museum's governance structure is, perhaps, best described as "hybrid," a category that characterizes an increasing proportion of

of Trustees with 47 members. The Board is a department of the City and County of San Francisco, and oversees the expenditure of municipal funds appropriated to the Museum; in 1998, municipal appropriations covered approximately 25% of the Museum's operating budget. The City and County of San Francisco also hold legal title to the Museum's permanent collection. The Museum has a nonprofit operating entity, the Corporation of the Fine Arts Museums (COFAM), which raises, earns, and spends about 75% of the Museum's operating budget. COFAM has its own board, but the majority of its members also sit on the Museum's Board of Trustees. A third body, the Fine Art Museums Foundation, serves as the investment committee for COFAM and invests the Museum's endowment and restricted acquisition funds. Several affiliate organizations (e.g., Docent Council, Textile Arts Council, Junior Arts Council) support the Museum through fund raising and volunteer efforts. The Museum Director, who reports to the Museum's Board of Trustees, has the final decision-making authority for all artistic matters. The Director also recommends administrative policy to the Board, and implements the Board's policy decisions.

With a 1999 operating budget of \$20.6 million, the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco is among the largest 15% of art museums in the United States.¹³¹ The Museum's precise size-ranking relative to other U.S. art museums cannot be determined using either the 1989 National Museum Survey or the 1997 Museum Financial Information Survey, since only broad ranges, or average or median figures, are published for most variables (AAM 1992, 1994, 1998). Nevertheless, it is reasonable to assume that the Museum ranks among the largest of the "large" U.S. art

U.S. museums, according to research by J. Mark Shuster. Shuster suggests that the "hybrid" designation be used to supplement the two traditional museum governance categories of "public" and "private, nonprofit." See Shuster (1998) for more on this subject.

¹³¹ The American Association of Museums created three museum size categories based on operating expense data reported in the 1989 National Museum Survey. The three size categories - and what proportion of art museums fall into each category - are as follows: "Large" art museums have annual operating expenses of at least \$1 million (15% of art museums); "medium" art museums have operating expenses of \$200,000 to \$1 million (18% of art museums); and "small" art museums have operating expenses of under \$200,000 (67% of art museums). See AAM (1994), p. 43.

museums along most, if not all, key dimensions.¹³² The Museum is accredited by the American Association of Museums, a distinction shared by approximately 9% of U.S. museums.¹³³ Table 5.1 provides a thumbnail sketch of the Museum, using some of the standard items reported in the

Table 5.1
Profile of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco

Sites	M. H. de Young Memorial Museum California Palace of the Legion of Honor
Date of establishment	The de Young: 1895; the Legion: 1924
Collection size	112,564 objects
Operating budget	\$20.6 million
Governance structure	Municipal and private, non-profit
Paid staff	168 full-time; 13 part-time
Unpaid staff	726 volunteers; 47 board members
Attendance	672,100 (FY 1997-98)
Museum members	52,946
Museum facilities	Interior space (total): 257,600 sq. ft. Exterior space (total): 642,000 sq. ft.
Exhibitions produced	24 (1998)

NOTE: Data are from 1999, except where otherwise noted. "Interior space" total excludes off-site rented space in a warehouse (27,500 sq. ft.) and in an office building (10,800 sq. ft.). Source: FAMSF 1999a.

¹³² For example, the Museum's 1999 operating budget of \$20.6 million puts it considerably beyond the median level for "large" art museums, which was \$2.2 million in 1988 (of course, the median figure would be higher in 1999). Similarly, the Museum's attendance of 672,100 (FY 1997-98) is very much higher than the median attendance level for "large" art museums, which was 118,414 in 1988. (Data are from AAM 1992, pp. 129, 198). The 1997 Museum Financial Information Survey does not separately report art museum operating expense or attendance figures by size category. For more statistics, see AAM 1992, 1994, and 1998.

¹³³ In the year 2000, approximately 750 museums (of all types) were accredited by the American Association of Museums (see: <http://www.aam-us.org/accredproginfo.htm>). Large museums are more likely to be accredited than mid-sized or small museums. The 9% figure assumes that there are currently 8,129 U.S. museums (AAM 1994, p. 40).

National Museum Survey publications (AAM 1992, 1994). (For comparison, a statistical profile of all U.S. art museums appears in Appendix 3.)

The Museum's mission encompasses the five traditional missions discussed in Chapter 1: *to collect, to preserve, to study, to exhibit, and to interpret* important objects. (Table 5.2 reproduces the Museum's official mission statement in its entirety.) As is the case with an increasing number of museums, the Museum's mission statement also makes a commitment to developing the local economy and community culture.

Table 5.2

Mission statement of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco

The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco have rendered a century of public service in the arts, and it is our mission to extend that service into the next century. More specifically, our mission encompasses the following goals -- to:

- present a range of exhibitions of high quality which serve, are accessible to, and will draw broad audiences;
- provide extensive and innovative art education programs for people of all ages and interests;
- actively involve a diverse public in all of the Museums' activities;
- conserve the objects in our care;
- collect new objects relevant to the collections through purchase and gift while affording a hospitable place for collectors in the community to donate art to the public with complete confidence;
- research and publicize the collections through scholarly publishing;
- maintain two museums outfitted to deliver exceptional visitor safety, comfort, and access as well as the environmental conditions necessary to preserve and protect art;
- operate within our goals with state-of-the-art efficiency;
- contribute to the economy and culture of San Francisco.

Source: FAMSF 1999a.

The Museum revised its mission statement in 1996 to include or strengthen three elements: A commitment to audience development, a reaffirmation of the importance of education, and an increased focus on

diversifying the collections so that they better reflect the population the Museum serves. One aspect of the statement (the portion that refers to the mission, *to collect*) is notable for its emphasis on private collectors; specifically in "affording a hospitable place for collectors in the community to donate art to the public with complete confidence." Another distinctive feature is the explicit commitment to "operate within our goals with state-of-the-art efficiency."

AN OVERVIEW OF THE MUSEUM'S COLLECTION

The collection of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco is large and diverse. It contains almost 113,000 objects, and represents different time periods, media, and countries of origin. The collection encompasses six curatorial areas: European Art; American Art; Textiles; Prints and Drawings; Africa, Oceania, and the Americas; and Ancient Art. Two of the areas (European Art and American Art) are further divided to reflect two major media classes: Paintings, and Decorative Arts. For management purposes, the Museum organizes objects into ten departments, two of which are no longer actively collecting (History, and Asian Art). Table 5.3 provides an overview of the Museum's collection, showing the ten curatorial departments, the number of objects in each department, and the percentage of objects each department contains, relative to the entire collection.¹³⁴

The Museum's collection, of course, is hardly summarized by object counts alone. A detailed description of each department's holdings, including information on the represented artists or artistic schools, media, subject matter - and many other characteristics - would be

¹³⁴ The numbers in this table, and throughout this document where numbers are presented on the Museum's collection, come from the Museum's collection database (version: July, 1999).

Table 5.3

Number and percentage of objects in each department in the collection

Department	Number of Objects	Percentage of Total Collection
American Painting	1,100	1%
American Decorative Arts	5,627	5%
Textiles	10,877	10%
Prints and Drawings	74,899	67%
European Painting	763	1%
European Decorative Arts	8,123	7%
Africa, Oceania, and the Americas	5,659	5%
Ancient Art	1,374	1%
Asian Art	532	0.5%
History	3,581	3%
TOTAL	112,564	100%

NOTE: Column total for "Number of Objects" includes 29 objects for which no department was listed; for this reason, row figures do not sum exactly to total. Percentages do not sum exactly to 100 because of rounding.

impractical to present here. Instead, Table 5.4, in an admittedly modest stab at conveying the collection's contents, presents excerpts from the Museum's own high-level summaries of each department's holdings.

Beyond the departmental classifications, the Museum makes a distinction between its "display collections" and its "study collections." (The Museum has two study collections: Prints and Drawings, and Textiles; all of the other departments are considered display collections.) Broadly speaking, display collections are acquired with exhibition in mind, while study collections are assembled to contribute to scholarly research. In practice, the distinction between the two is not so absolute: Many of the objects in display collections are studied by scholars, and many objects in study collections are exhibited to the public. Despite the gray areas, however, Museum staff distinguish between these two types of collections

Table 5.4
Selective description of the contents of each department in the collection

Department	Selective Description of Contents
American Painting	A comprehensive survey of American painting from colonial times through the mid-20 th century.
American Decorative Arts	American furniture, silver, pewter, glass, and sculpture from the 17 th through the 20 th century.
Textiles	Near Eastern and Central Asian tribal rugs; medieval and Renaissance tapestries; lace, ecclesiastical and ethnographic textiles.
Prints and Drawings	A representation of the history of printmaking from the 15 th century to the present; old master drawings; modern and contemporary works by American and international artists.
European Painting	French, Dutch, Flemish, Italian, and Spanish paintings from the Middle Ages through the 20 th century.
European Decorative Arts	Sculpture, ceramics, glass, silver, and furniture from the 16 th through the 20 th century, mainly from France, Germany, and England.
Africa, Oceania, and the Americas	African sculptures; Oceanic objects; pre-Columbian figures and pottery; Mexican mural fragments; Native California baskets
Ancient Art	Greek, Egyptian, and Roman antiquities.
Asian Art	Asian sculpture, paintings, and ceramics.
History	Historical artifacts, many of significance to the San Francisco Bay area.

Sources: FAMSF 1990, 1993, 1999a.

and have different expectations for each - most notably in terms of collection use and size. These topics will be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter.

The Museum's departmental collections vary not only in size and contents, but in value - whether defined in aesthetic, historical, or monetary terms (or otherwise). The Museum's own curatorial assessments of its collection reflect these different notions of value, and furthermore, suggest how different types of "collection value" are important in fulfilling the Museum's multifaceted mission. For example, some departmental collections are noted for their aesthetic quality (in

a traditional sense), and when these collections are exhibited, they help the Museum fulfill its connoisseurship function. The American Paintings collection falls into this category; described as "the premiere collection of American Art in the Western United States," its high quality is clearly conveyed through its reputation ranking.¹³⁵ Other departmental collections are touted for their size and comprehensiveness - characteristics important to art scholars (and correspondingly, to the Museum's research mission). Hence, we see the Prints and Drawings collection described by curators as "the largest prints and drawings collection in the West," providing "a systematic representation of the history of printmaking from the 15th century to the present."¹³⁶ In still other cases, departmental collections are noted for their role in serving a geographic area - a value related to the Museum's mission to educate and enlighten the regional community. In this vein, the Museum's American Decorative Arts collection is highlighted as "a growing collection in a geographic area where such collections are rare."¹³⁷ More generally, the Museum's culturally diverse collections are explicitly valued for their role in allowing the Museum "to serve our city and region's diverse communities by providing rich experience in the arts and cultures of many different places and times."¹³⁸

The monetary value of the Museum's collection is difficult to ascertain for a variety of reasons - all of which are industry-wide, rather than particular to the Museum. First, and most important, U.S. museums are not required to include the monetary value of their collections on their balance sheets.¹³⁹ Second, fine art insurance policies do not require museums to estimate the total value of their

¹³⁵ FAMSF 1999a, p. 16.

¹³⁶ Ibid., p. 17.

¹³⁷ Ibid., p. 17.

¹³⁸ Ibid., p. 18.

¹³⁹ There was a proposal in the early 1990s from the Financial Accounting Standards Board to require museums to include a valuation of their collections on their financial statements in order to receive an unqualified audit. After consideration, the proposal was dropped. For comments on the proposal, see Weil (1995), pp. 145-149.

holdings.¹⁴⁰ Without such regulatory or contractual pressures, museums are able to avoid the difficult (and controversial) exercise of periodically estimating the total value of their collections.¹⁴¹ And third, many contend that it would be futile to attempt to place a monetary value on museum collections, due to the unique nature of the high-end art market.¹⁴² (The implications of not assigning monetary values to museum objects will be discussed again in Chapter 8.)

Notwithstanding the above, approximately 12% of the Museum's objects have a monetary valuation noted in the collection database.¹⁴³ Not surprisingly, the most valuable artworks in the collection are those most likely to have a value recorded in the database. For example, the

¹⁴⁰ Fine art insurance policies typically provide coverage up to a certain portion of collection value, as specified by the museum. It is up to a museum's board of trustees to decide how much (if any) insurance to carry on the collection. For more on insuring museum collections, see Malaro (1998), pp. 418-432.

¹⁴¹ The controversy concerns assigning monetary values to museum objects: As was mentioned in the discussion on deaccessioning in Chapter 3, some fear that emphasizing the monetary value of collections will lead others to view artworks as assets that can be liquidated as needs arise.

¹⁴² For example, in his 1991 testimony to the Financial Accounting Standards Board, Stephen Weil argued that art appraisals are "essentially guesswork," and to incorporate such estimates into "an otherwise objectively prepared set of [museum] financial reports would have to be seriously questioned." Weil presented data from sales at two auction houses to support his claim (1990 sales at Sotheby's, and 1991 sales at Christie's). He found that only 37% of the lots at Sotheby's and 33% of the lots at Christie's were sold within the auction houses' pre-sale price-range estimates. (According to Weil, these price-range estimates are quite broad, with the top value of the range usually two-thirds to one-third above the bottom value of the range.) Weil surmised that since museum objects tend to be of even higher quality than the typical art object sold at auction, appraisals of museum collections would be even less reliable than appraisals of auction items. Furthermore, since placing museum collections on the market would clearly affect market prices, the prospect of accurate appraisal is even more remote. After making other points, Weil concluded that museums *should* be accountable for their collections, but this responsibility should be acknowledged in a way other than including a "wrong" estimate of collection value on museums' financial statements. See: Weil (1995), pp. 145-149.

¹⁴³ The valuations in the Museum's database are *curatorial* valuations, used for *curatorial* purposes; they are not related to IRS records or other documentation that may exist on the artworks. Also, many of the valuations in the database are out of date.

two paintings departments, which contain the bulk of high-value works, record valuations for over 95% of the departments' objects. Most other departments show valuations for 15% to 27% of their objects; a few departments - including the very large Prints and Drawings collection - have recorded valuations for less than 10% of the objects. In general, objects that were recently acquired are more likely to show a valuation than are objects acquired many years ago. Objects recently loaned to other institutions also show valuations, reflecting standard insurance requirements for loans.

With the caveats already noted, the Museum's collection has a monetary worth, very conservatively estimated, of over \$797 million.¹⁴⁴ The monetary value of the collection is highly concentrated in a small number of objects: About 90% of the collection's value resides in less than 5% of the collection's objects, using reasonable assumptions.¹⁴⁵ To a large degree, this reflects the fact that certain classes of art (e.g., paintings) tend to have higher market values than other classes of art (e.g., prints). This skewed pattern, however, is also found within individual curatorial departments. This topic will be discussed further in Chapter 6.

A "SNAPSHOT" OF COLLECTION STORAGE AND UTILIZATION: JULY, 1999

To begin the exploration of collection storage and utilization at the Museum, it is useful to ask where the Museum's 113,000 objects are located at a single point in time. A July, 1999 "snapshot" from the

¹⁴⁴ This amount represents the total value of the 13,119 objects that have a value recorded in the collection database. While the other 99,445 objects in the collection, of course, would add to the total value, their addition would not be in proportion to their numbers since the higher-value objects are those that tend to have values recorded in the database.

¹⁴⁵ The 5% figure was calculated as follows: Of the 13,119 objects with valuations in the database, 1,499 have a combined value of about \$718 million (90% of the \$797 million total). These 1,499 objects represent about 11% of the 13,119 objects with valuations, and about 1% of the 112,564 objects that make up the entire collection. Thus, one can reasonably assume that the true percentage lies between 1% and 11%. Since the higher-value objects in the collection tend to have valuations recorded in the database, the true percentage is likely closer to 1% than to 11%; hence, 5% is a reasonable (if somewhat conservative) estimate.

collection database shows that the Museum's objects are found in one of four general locations; specifically, the objects are either: i) in storage; ii) on exhibit in the Museum's galleries; iii) on loan to other institutions; or iv) in conservation labs for restoration treatments. The number of objects in each of the four location categories, by curatorial department, appears in Table 5.5.

Table 5.5
Number of objects in storage, in conservation labs, on loan, and on exhibit (July, 1999)

Department	Total Number of Objects	Number of Objects			
		In Storage	In Conservation Labs	On Loan	On Exhibit
American Painting	1,100	759	13	74	243
American Decorative Arts	5,627	5,160	13	47	402
Textiles	10,877	10,517	258	18	68
Prints and Drawings	74,899	72,944	131	986	441
European Painting	763	532	10	7	202
European Decorative Arts	8,123	7,005	54	107	947
Africa/Oceania/the Americas	5,659	5,283	26	25	286
Ancient Art	1,374	1,174	16	1	183
Asian Art	532	516	1	2	12
History	3,581	3,288	0	287	5
TOTAL	112,564	107,178	522	1,554	2,789
Percentage of collection	(100%)	(95.2%)	(0.5%)	(1.4%)	(2.5%)

NOTE: The column total for "Total Number of Objects" includes 29 objects for which no department was listed; for this reason, row figures do not sum exactly to column total. In addition, 521 objects had ambiguous location entries (e.g., "none"); these 521 objects, however, are included in the column, "Total Number of Objects." Therefore, the rightmost four columns do not always sum exactly to the "Total Number of Objects" column. Percentages do not add to 100 because of rounding.

Initially, it's instructive to note the totals for the overall collection. The Museum counts over 107,000 objects, or about 95% of its collection, in storage at a single point in time. The remaining 5% of the collection is found in the other three locations: approximately 500

objects (0.5%) are in conservation labs for restoration, about 1,600 objects (1.4%) are on loan to other institutions, and approximately 2,800 objects (2.5%) are on exhibit in the Museum's galleries.

This "snapshot" view, of course, fails to capture how objects are utilized over an extended period of time. For example, while the Museum has only 2.5% of its collection on view at any point in time, over a longer period (say, five or ten years), the percentage would be much larger. Unfortunately, the Museum's collection database does not contain sufficient information to estimate the "rotation" rates of different portions of the collection. While this topic will be discussed further in Chapter 7, a few observations on collection rotation are worth noting here. The Museum's two curatorial departments containing materially-sensitive objects (Prints and Drawings, and Textiles) are characterized by relatively high rates of rotation (i.e., objects are on display for no more than several months at a time). For the other curatorial departments, a certain portion of the collection generally remains on "permanent display;" another portion of the collection is drawn from for occasional exhibition; and a final portion of the collection, effectively, is not displayed at all.

Naturally, each department differs in how its objects are distributed across the four location categories. These differences are visually depicted in Figure 5.1, which compares object locations in percentage terms (rather than in absolute numbers, as was done in Table 5.5).¹⁴⁶ In the figure, each curatorial department is represented by a horizontal bar, with the leftmost section of the bar representing the percentage of objects in storage at a single point in time. Moving rightward across the chart, the other bar sections represent the percentage of each department's objects in conservation labs, on loan to

¹⁴⁶ While both absolute numbers (object counts) and percentages are helpful ways of digesting collection information, each emphasizes different aspects of collection utilization. For example, because the Prints and Drawings collection is so large (almost 75,000 objects), it has the lowest *percentage* of objects on exhibit (less than 1%, or 441 objects); in *absolute* terms, however, Prints and Drawings has the second highest *number* of objects on view (after European Decorative Arts).

other institutions, and on exhibit in the Museum's galleries, respectively.

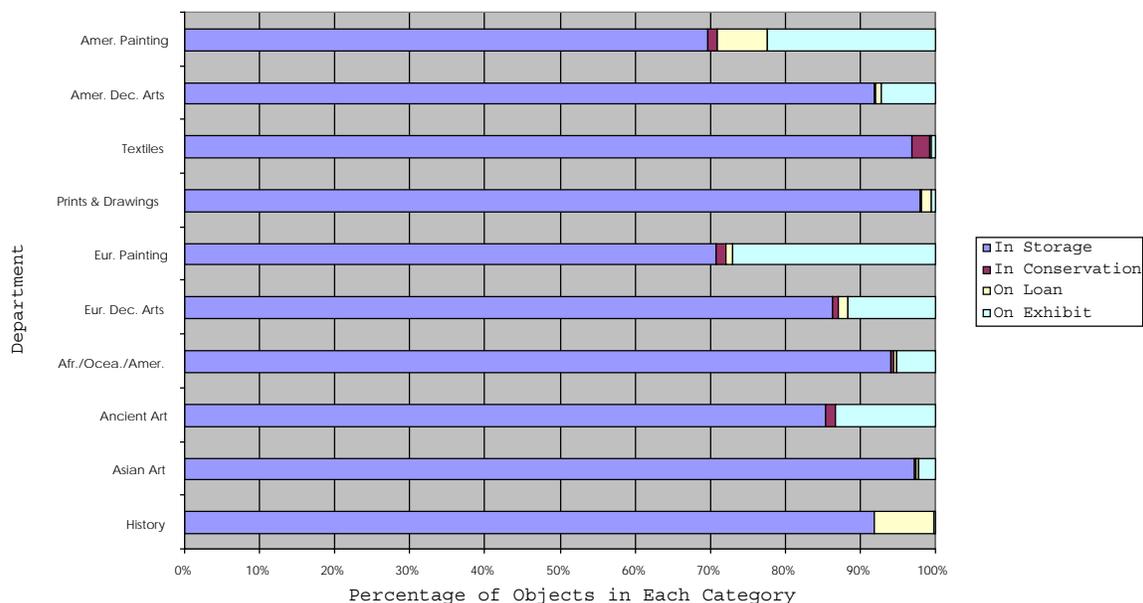


Figure 5.1—Percentage of objects in storage, in conservation labs, on loan, and on exhibit; by department (July, 1999)

The most dominant feature of Figure 5.1 is what the departments share in common: All departments have at least 69%, or over two-thirds, of their objects in storage. That said, there is some notable variation across departments. The two Paintings departments (American and European) are distinguished from the others by their relatively low storage percentages (69% and 70%, respectively) and relatively high exhibition rates (22% and 26%); American Painting also has a relatively high loan rate (7%). At the other end of the spectrum, there are six departments with storage levels over 90% (ranging from 92% to 97%). Of these six departments, only one has a relatively high loan rate (8% for History). The remaining two departments (European Decorative Arts and Ancient Art) have 86% and 85% of their objects in storage, respectively, and 12% and 13% of their objects on exhibit. For all departments, the

percentage of objects in conservation labs is low, ranging from 0% to 2%.

DISCUSSION OF COLLECTION STORAGE AT THE MUSEUM

The statistics cited above highlight a fundamental reality for the Museum: The Museum's high storage level is *not* due to the particular circumstances of one - or even a few - departments. Rather, high rates of storage are characteristic of *all* curatorial departments at the Museum.

This fact is critical because it argues for looking beyond department-specific explanations for high storage levels. Consider, for example, the increased storage that results from retaining objects in the "inactive" departments (History, and Asian Art). Even if the Museum were to rid itself of these approximately 4,100 objects, it would still have about 95% of its remaining collection in storage. Neither is the Museum's overall high storage level explained by the material sensitivities of the objects in its two largest departments (Textiles, and Prints and Drawings), which represent 76% of the objects in the Museum's collection. While textiles and works on paper, indeed, are objects whose long-term preservation requires significant time in the controlled environments of storage facilities, the *amount* of time these objects spend in storage (on average) is way beyond what conservationists recommend.¹⁴⁷ Material sensitivities are even less of an explanation for the high storage levels in other curatorial departments (e.g., Decorative Arts, Paintings), whose objects withstand environmental exposure with much less impact on long-term preservation.

While departmental differences are important (and will be addressed in later chapters), the main point is this: The Museum's high storage levels and low utilization rates are *museum-wide* issues, not *departmental* ones (though particular solutions may be more appropriate for certain departments than for others). Recognizing these issues as museum-wide concerns suggests that there are aspects of collecting

¹⁴⁷ Shelly (1987), pp. 43, 52. As will be discussed in Chapter 6, since these two departments also happen to be the Museum's "study collections," there is an additional, mission-related explanation for their high storage levels.

practices and utilization practices *more generally* - independent of object type - that must be examined in order to understand the status quo.¹⁴⁸ This theme continues in the chapters ahead. The rest of this chapter, however, discusses the implications of the Museum's high storage level as it relates to facilities, budget, mission, and staff morale.

Collection storage facilities

The Museum devotes 23,400 square feet to collection storage, consisting of 18,400 square feet of "on-site" storage at the de Young and the Legion, and 5,000 square feet of "off-site" storage in a rented warehouse.¹⁴⁹ The Museum's storage facilities are environmentally controlled environments designed to protect the artworks from a variety of hazards, such as excessive light, extreme or rapid changes in temperature or humidity, molds, pests, dust, and other pollutants. To afford this protection, the storage facilities are appointed with specialized systems and equipment, as the following description makes clear:

All storage areas have fire suppression and are video-monitored, specially keyed, earthquake-proofed, [have] no natural light and have extensive pest control safeguards. De Young storage is underground with an air circulation system.. to maintain stable temperature and humidity. Legion storage is state of the art since renovations were completed in 1995. Features include computerized climate control, strong yet lightweight mobile roll and screen systems for tapestries and paintings, closed aluminum cabinets with Tyvec furniture covers for dust protection, compact storage that is viewable from both sides, mobile shelving for Solander boxes, and flat file drawers for oversized works on paper. Part of the institution's long-range plan is to match storage conditions at the new de Young to the high level currently maintained at the Legion.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁸ This study does, however, examine two portions of the Museum's collection separately: the display collections and the study collections.

¹⁴⁹ FAMSF (1999a), p. 6. The competing demands for on-site space, and how the Museum allocates space to different functions, are discussed in Chapter 7.

¹⁵⁰ FAMSF (1999a), pp. 27-28.

As the quote indicates, the Museum engages in periodic upgrades of its storerooms - a practice followed by museums more generally - as new research reveals more about the material sensitivities of different types of objects, and as technologies become available that incorporate this knowledge. The "preventive conservation" that objects receive in storage environments is supplemented by more intensive restoration or conservation treatments as needs arise (and resources allow).¹⁵¹ In a more figurative sense, the Museum's stored collections are also "maintained" through administrative processes, such as periodic inventories and computerized record keeping. All collections, including those in store, are financially protected through insurance.¹⁵²

The cost of maintaining artworks in storage

The Museum, clearly, devotes substantial resources to the care of its collections in storage; the cost of this endeavor, however, is unknown. The Museum's accounting and financial reporting systems allocate costs according to broad functional categories (e.g., curatorial, administration, operations); "storage costs," which cut across many of these categories, are not separately tracked. In this way, the Museum mirrors the practices of the larger museum industry.¹⁵³

While it is beyond the scope of this study to systematically estimate the Museum's storage costs, it is possible to get a rough idea of what those costs might be by drawing on the work of other museum cost studies.¹⁵⁴ As was discussed in Chapter 1, in one study, museum architect George Hartman developed a formula for estimating the costs of

¹⁵¹ In most cases, the Museum's own conservators treat the objects in the institution's on-site conservation labs.

¹⁵² The Museum has a fine arts insurance policy covering perils up to a designated level. The City and County of San Francisco, who own the Museum's buildings and collections, are self-insured.

¹⁵³ For example, the 1997 Museum Financial Information Survey asked museums to segment their operating expenses into seven categories, and offered an eighth choice: "other." According to the survey report, many museums in the survey "found it difficult to segment their total expenses into categories - respondents typically report total personnel expenses and 'everything else,' with the latter value assigned to the 'other' category" (AAM 1998, p. 52).

¹⁵⁴ See Chapter 1 for a discussion of two such studies: Lord et al. 1989, and Banks 1988.

storing (and displaying) museum objects, based on the square footage associated with those functions; he included both *operating costs* and *building costs* in his formulation. Hartman found that the annual operating costs associated with storage (e.g., security, maintenance, administration) could be roughly estimated by dividing the museum's operating budget by the percentage of interior square footage allocated to the storage function.

The Museum devotes a relatively small percentage of its interior space to collection storage: about 8%.¹⁵⁵ For comparison, the median U.S. art museum devotes 15% of its interior space to storage, and the average U.K. museum allocates 19%.¹⁵⁶ This range of percentages has significant implications when using a cost-allocation formula based on space usage. Specifically, while Hartman's formula suggests that a typical U.S. art museum spends 15% of its operating budget to maintain its stored artworks, it also suggests that the Museum spends only 8% of its budget for the same function. Whether or not this difference reflects true variations in cost is unknown, and is yet another reason why the museum industry would benefit from more costs studies.¹⁵⁷ For purposes of this study, however, one can use the above figures to offer a range of operating cost estimates for the Museum's storage function. Based on the Museum's 1999 operating budget of \$20.6 million, the Museum's annual operating costs for storage can reasonably be estimated to range from around \$1.6 million per year (8% of the operating budget) to about \$3.1 million per year (15% of the operating budget).

¹⁵⁵ The 8% figure assumes total interior square footage of 295,900 sq. ft. (257,600 sq. ft. at the two museums, plus 38,300 sq. ft. of off-site rented space). Of that total, 23,400 sq. ft. are devoted to collections storage.

¹⁵⁶ The U.S. figure is for art museums (AAM 1994, p. 75), while the U.K. figure is for museums of all types (Lord et al. 1989, p. 110)

¹⁵⁷ It may be that there are certain "economies of scale" that permit large museums to spend proportionately less on storage than mid-sized or small museums do. On the other hand, it also may be that large museums (which tend to have more valuable collections) actually dedicate a larger proportion of their operating budgets to collection care. Certainly, the characteristics (e.g., size, media, condition) of the objects in the collection affect storage costs. Some of these variables (e.g., object condition) are probably more relevant to operating costs, whereas others (e.g., object size) are more relevant to building costs.

Hartman also calculated the *building costs* associated with storage (based on the annual "rent equivalent" of new construction costs for museums), and found such costs amounted to \$30 per square foot in 1988 dollars. Assuming a 3% annual inflation rate, Hartman's figure would increase to about \$41.50 per square foot in 1999 dollars. Applying this rate to the Museum's 23,400 square feet of collections storage, the Museum's "rent equivalent" for storage space can be estimated at almost \$972,000 per year.¹⁵⁸ Adding operating and building costs together, the Museum's total cost for maintaining its collection storage can roughly be estimated at between \$2.6 million and \$4.1 million per year. (Non-monetary "costs" of storage are addressed the next section.)

Is \$2.6 to \$4.1 million per year an appropriate expenditure for the Museum's collection storage? The answer depends on the value (broadly defined) that the stored artworks contribute towards the Museum's mission. This topic is briefly discussed in the next section, and addressed more fully in later chapters.

Collection storage in the context of mission and morale

The fact that the Museum has 95% of its collection in storage at any point in time is not reason, alone, to conclude that it is not

¹⁵⁸ At first, the notion of a "rent equivalent" for building costs may seem irrelevant for the Museum, whose buildings are owned by the City and County of San Francisco and used by the Museum without paying rent. There are, however, several reasons why such annual cost-equivalents are important to include in the total cost of storage. First, the Museum periodically renovates and expands its buildings (including its storage facilities). In 1995, for example, the Museum completed a renovation and expansion of the Legion, at a cost of \$36 million. And in 2002, the Museum will begin a complete rebuilding of the de Young, with an estimated budget of \$135 million. These types of capital projects are exactly what Hartman used to calculate the annual rent-equivalent figures for storage. Second, the Museum *does* pay annual rent of approximately \$300,000 for off-site space (for 10,800 sq. ft. of office space and 27,500 sq. ft. of warehouse space); this off-site space is required because the de Young and the Legion cannot accommodate all Museum operations within their own buildings. And third, from the perspective of the City and County of San Francisco, the highly prized property on which the two museums are located (Golden Gate Park and Lincoln Park) would certainly be used for alternative purposes if the museums were not there. In this sense, attributing an annual cost to occupying the buildings (including the portion devoted to storage) is warranted.

effectively utilizing its art collection. Instead, it is necessary to examine how well stored artworks are serving the Museum's mission, and then ask if their contribution to the mission is substantial enough to justify the annual costs associated with their maintenance. The Museum also would need to consider whether its constituencies might be better served if the resources dedicated to maintaining works in storage were channeled towards other mission-related activities.¹⁵⁹ And from a societal perspective, one might want to compare the value that the stored artworks *currently* contribute at the Museum, to the value they could *alternatively* contribute if they were to be utilized in other settings.

As was discussed in Chapter 2, there is no easy way to determine what is "too much" storage - nor "how much" individual artworks contribute to the Museum's multiple missions. While the next two chapters will begin to explore these questions, first, it is helpful to consider the perceptions of Museum staff on this topic.

Harry Parker, the Museum's Director, expressed his view that the current level of storage (and the limited use of the objects in storage) represents a questionable use of the Museum's collection resources:

At the Fine Arts Museums we display about 2.5% of our collections in galleries. The remaining 97.5% is stored in expensive, well-guarded, seismically competent, temperature controlled basements - where they are safe but of relatively little active value to the public or the museum. That we must find more effective and efficient ways of handling this material is clear.¹⁶⁰

Interviews with other Museum staff revealed similar (though sometimes less sweeping) sentiments that a portion of what resides in

¹⁵⁹ Whereas deaccessioning proceeds may be used only for future acquisitions (according to standard art museum policy), the money saved by *not having to care for* deaccessioned (or loaned) artworks may be used for any purpose.

¹⁶⁰ Personal correspondence to the author, June, 1998. A clarification: In this study I separate the Museum's objects into four categories rather than the two mentioned by the Director. The percentage breakdown in this study is as follows: 2.5% of objects on exhibit in the Museum's galleries; 1.4% on loan to other institutions, 0.5% in conservation labs, and 95.2% in storage.

storage is not advancing the Museum's mission in a substantial way. All interviewed staff (to whom the question was put) believed there was a significant number of objects that did not "belong" in the Museum's collection. (Some staff members used the term, "junk;" others, "dead weight.")¹⁶¹ While staff members disagreed on *how many* and *which* objects were in this category, they concurred that a significant portion of the collection was serving no useful purpose for the Museum and its constituencies.

Where the staff more markedly diverged in opinion was in how to judge the next tier of stored objects: objects that are above the "dead weight" category, but still not considered "display material."¹⁶² Because these objects, sometimes referred to as "secondary material," serve some purpose (e.g., they have "scholarly interest"), the assessment of whether they belong in the Museum is more nuanced. As later chapters explore in more detail, some Museum staff believe these objects "clog the pipeline" without contributing much in return; for them, the Museum would be better served to do some "spring cleaning." Others, however, emphasize the more subtle value of such material, and suggest that the goal be to find better ways to utilize it, rather than to get rid of it. Both groups agreed that different standards regarding what to keep should be applied to different collections at the Museum. For example, study collections are expected to be larger, and have higher storage levels, relative to display collections. Even beyond this general distinction, staff spoke of the rationale for having different "decision points" for different curatorial departments (based on object characteristics such as size, monetary value, reproducibility in electronic media, etc.). All recognized the very subjective nature of such decision points, however, which tend to vary by the individual's

¹⁶¹ These and other quotes in this section come from interview transcripts.

¹⁶² While individual staff members seemed to have their own conceptual categories for different "tiers" of the collection, there was no common language for designating the tiers, nor any expectation that consensus could be reached within the Museum regarding what "belonged" in each tier.

role at the museum (e.g., curator, registrar, director) and by his or her personal views.

Finally, some staff suggested that the Museum's large amount of collection storage, in addition to being costly to maintain, also took a toll on staff morale and performance. The "constipation factor of an overflowing museum," as one individual put it, negatively affects inter-staff relations, the staff's own appreciation of and creativity in using the collection, and their overall attitude towards work. As another staff member observed, with bulging storerooms, "the great things are diminished. You put a [great artwork] in a storeroom full of [junk] and it just looks like all the other junk." Staff may react to new acquisitions, regardless of their importance, with the thoughts, "Oh, no...where am I going to put that?" The sheer magnitude of the Museum's collection (relative to the size of the institution's staff, physical space, and other resources) apparently has a draining influence on the daily work lives of some staff members. (Additional staff comments on collection storage and utilization appear in Chapters 6 and 7.)

Of course, these views about collection storage and utilization are the perceptions of a distinct (albeit, highly relevant) group; as such, they cannot represent the full range of opinion on this topic. It would be interesting to solicit the opinions of a wider group of Museum stakeholders, including the visiting public, the non-visiting public, city and county leaders of San Francisco, donors to the Museum, and others, to see how much agreement there is about what represents "effective collection use." Until such information is available, however, it is instructive to note that those most familiar with the Museum's levels of collection storage and utilization believe that there is considerable need for improvement.

6. UNDERSTANDING THE FORCES BEHIND COLLECTION GROWTH

Perhaps the most basic question underlying museums' high storage levels and low collection utilization rates is: Why don't museums "size" their collections according to their ability to utilize them? The most direct way, it would seem, to enhance collection utilization would be to limit collection growth to that which available resources (e.g., staff, space, and operational funds) can accommodate. This chapter explores this question by examining the Museum's decisions that determine collection size. The discussion begins with an overview of the Museum's collection growth over time. Next, the components of that collection growth - the addition of objects (acquisitions) and the removal of objects (deaccessions) - are examined separately, to understand better the forces that influence object flows in and out of the collection. For both acquisitions and deaccessions, the analysis explores historical trends as well as the Museum's more recent experience in the 1990s. Each section concludes with a discussion of what the Museum's recent experience suggests about future prospects for moderating collection size.

COLLECTION GROWTH OVER TIME

The Museum's collection has grown steadily over its 100-plus years, adding, on average, about 1,100 objects per year. As Figure 6.1 illustrates, while growth has remained fairly consistent over most of the Museum's history, there are a few dramatic departures from the average. Most notable is the jump in collection size in 1963, when over 31,000 works on paper came to Museum in the form of a gift from the Achenbach Foundation for Graphic Arts. Also significant are the years in which the collection actually shrunk in size (such as 1946 and 1996) because object removals exceeded object additions. But despite these exceptional years, the overwhelming trend of the Museum's collecting history is the continuous, steady growth of the collection, resulting in the current total of almost 113,000 objects.

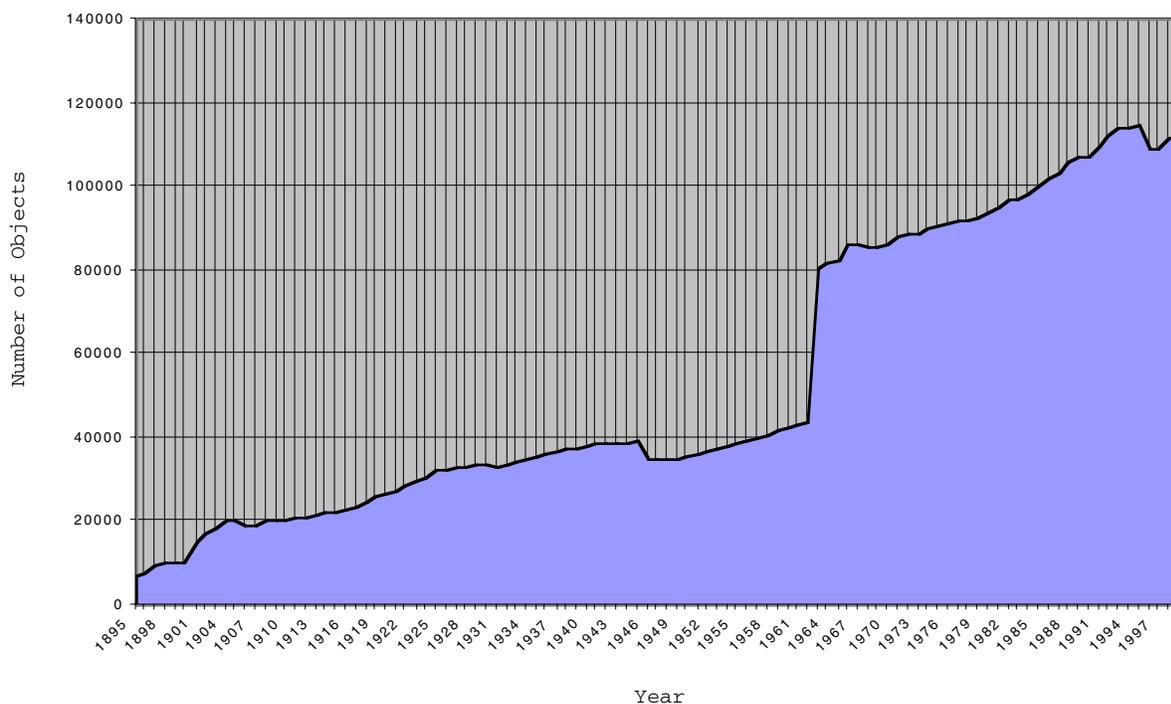


Figure 6.1—Collection size, in number of objects, from 1895 to 1999

It is important to note that Figure 6.1 shows the *net* change in collection size over time. This net change is the result of two separate activities: the *addition* of objects to the permanent collection, and the *removal* of objects from the permanent collection. Table 6.1 breaks out the net change in collection size into its two components: acquisitions and deaccessions.¹⁶³ As the totals at the bottom of the table show, the Museum's current collection size of approximately 113,000 objects is the result of about 143,000 objects acquired and 30,000 objects deaccessioned over the past 100 or so years. The rightmost column in the table relates the number of objects deaccessioned and the number of objects acquired for each decade. Only

¹⁶³ "Acquisitions" include museum purchases as well as objects acquired through gifts, bequests, and extended loans. The collection data in Table 6.1 and throughout this chapter are from the Museum's collection database (version: July, 1999).

Table 6.1

Number of acquisitions, deaccessions, and net change in collection size, decade by decade, 1895-1999

Decade	Number of Objects Acquired	Number of Objects Deaccessioned	Net Object Additions (Reductions)	Deaccessions as a % of Acquisitions
1895-99	10,148	0	10,148	0%
1900-09	12,478	2,229	10,249	18%
1910-19	6,837	1,506	5,331	22%
1920-29	7,771	63	7,708	1%
1930-39	5,582	1,319	4,263	24%
1940-49	4,675	7,058	(2,383)	151%
1950-59	6,538	303	6,235	5%
1960-69	46,700	2,770	43,930	6%
1970-79	8,694	1,584	7,110	18%
1980-89	15,789	1,444	14,345	9%
1990-99	17,335	11,860	5,475	68%
TOTAL (1895-1999)	142,698	30,134	112,564	21%

NOTE: Two rows represent less than a full decade: The first row covers five years (1895-99) and the last row covers nine and one-half years (January 1990 to July 1999). Acquisition dates were imputed for 10,060 Prints and Drawings acquisitions that had no date recorded in the database. Deaccession dates were imputed for 2,491 undated deaccessions from various departments. Dates were imputed in proportion to other acquired or deaccessioned objects in each department. Column total for "Number of Objects Acquired" includes another 150 undated acquisitions not reflected in the rows; for this reason, and because of rounding due to imputation, rows do not sum exactly to totals.

during the decade of the 1940s did deaccessions exceed acquisitions - specifically, by 51%.¹⁶⁴ In all other decades, acquisitions greatly outnumbered deaccessions, though the percentage difference in the 1990s is notably less than for other decades. Over the Museum's history, 21% of the objects acquired were eventually deaccessioned.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶⁴ The large amount of deaccessioning in the 1940s is likely linked to two factors: 1) the Museum's decision to cease being a "general" museum and to focus its collecting in the "fine arts;" and 2) the economic conditions during the war years.

Another way to gain insight into the Museum's collection growth is to look at the "retention rate" of acquired objects. In other words, once an object enters the collection (via purchase, donation, or extended loan), what is the likelihood it will remain in the collection (as opposed to being removed via deaccessioning)? Figure 6.2 depicts

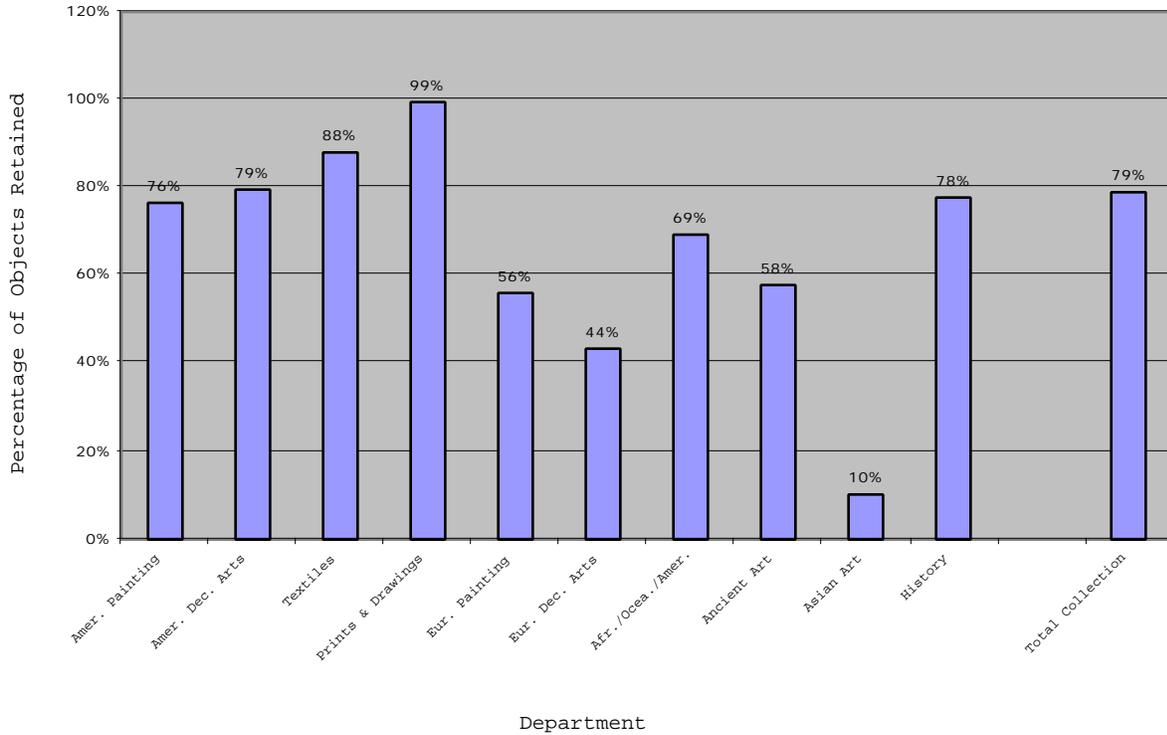


Figure 6.2—Retained objects as a percentage of acquired objects, for each department and for total collection

NOTE: The figure does not show curatorial departments that have been completely eliminated (e.g., Natural History). The 5,841 objects that were in these departments, however, are incorporated in the "Total Collection" bar in the figure.

¹⁶⁵ There are 14,151 ambiguously coded records in an adjunct file of the Museum's collection database, known as the "Inactive" file. It is possible that some of these records represent deaccessions or long-term loans; they also may be duplicate or erroneous records, or something else entirely. Because of their ambiguity, these 14,151 records were not included in any analyses in this study. To the extent that some of them represent actual deaccessions, however, the Museum's total number of deaccessions could be larger than what is shown in Table 6.1. (Of course, the total number of acquisitions would be larger by the same amount.)

such "retention rates" for each curatorial department (including those no longer active) by showing the percentage of acquired objects that remain in the collection today.

The retention rates are highest for the two study collections, Prints and Drawings, and Textiles, which come in at 99% and 88%, respectively. At the other end of the spectrum is Asian Art - one of the "inactive" departments - which has retained only 10% of its acquired objects. The rightmost bar in the figure shows that for the collection as a whole (that is, all departments together), the Museum has a 79% retention rate for acquired objects. This means that for every 100 objects entering the collection, 79 are retained, and 21 are deaccessioned. Over time, with more objects entering the collection than leaving the collection, the size of the collection increases.

ACQUISITIONS

This section examines the Museum's acquisitions, with particular attention to three factors: 1) the type of collection ("display collection" or "study collection"); 2) the acquisition source (purchase or donation); and 3) the time period of acquisition (100-year history or the 1990s). The reasons for this three-part focus are as follows.

As was mentioned in the previous chapter, the Museum's display collections and study collections have distinct (though overlapping) mission emphases. While exhibition is of key importance for the display collections, research is the critical mission for the study collections. The distinct purposes that display collections and study collections serve translate to distinct goals for acquisitions; thus, it is helpful to consider these two types of collections separately.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁶ Another key difference in collection type that must be accounted for is the varying material sensitivity of different types of objects. For those collections made up of light-sensitive objects, one would expect that larger numbers would be acquired (for any given amount of exhibition space), because those objects must be rotated more frequently to avoid excessive deterioration when displayed. Conveniently, the Museum's two collections of materially sensitive objects happen also to be the two study collections: Prints and Drawings, and Textiles.

A second key factor to consider is acquisition source. As Chapter 3 discussed, museums are highly dependent on artwork donations from private collectors, and this dependence may result in acquisitions that are of a lower quality (or greater quantity) than a museum would acquire through its own purchases. To explore this issue, the Museum's acquisitions are analyzed by source (purchase vs. donation) to see if any important differences appear, and to examine what those differences might mean for the Museum's collection storage and utilization rates.

The third issue arguing for a more detailed analysis is history. With a museum over 100 years old, many collection problems (as well as treasures) are inherited from past generations and former museum administrations. While these inherited problems are indeed current realities - and need to be addressed by today's managers and trustees - their weight can mask the effects of current decisions. Current practices, in turn, should be evaluated not only for how they address inherited problems, but for their *own* contribution to institutional health and sustainability. For this reason, this study places a special focus on the recent years - the 1990s - so that current practices may be assessed for their own impact on collection storage and utilization.

The rest of the discussion on acquisitions is organized as follows. The next three sections consider the Museum's acquisitions over its 100-year history. The first of the three summarizes acquisition trends by type of collection; the second identifies the sources of acquisitions; and the third examines how acquisitions from the two major sources (purchases and donations) vary in terms of their rates of exhibition. The next four sections examine 1990s acquisitions in depth. First, 1990s acquisitions are summarized in number, by type of collection, and by source. Then, they are compared to pre-1990 acquisitions in terms of exhibition rates. Next, in a more detailed analysis of recent *display collection* acquisitions, the differences between purchases and donations are explored by looking at exhibition rates and monetary values of recently acquired objects. The examination of acquisitions concludes with a discussion of how current practices are likely to affect the Museum's collection storage and utilization rates in the future.

Following the sections on acquisitions, the chapter continues with an examination of the Museum's deaccessions.

Overview of acquisitions

Starting from the Museum's founding in 1895 and through the 1920s, the Museum acquired objects at a rate of about 10,600 per decade.¹⁶⁷ Most of the objects acquired in these early years were in the departments that make up the Museum's display collections. Then, from the 1930s through the 1950s, acquisitions moderated somewhat, to about 5,600 per decade. During this period, the Museum began to accumulate objects in the two departments now known as the study collections (Prints and Drawings, and Textiles). From this period onward, the majority of acquisitions have been in the study collections.

After the 1950s, the relatively moderate acquisition pace was replaced by more aggressive acquisition activity that has continued, to varying degrees, to the present. While the 1960s level of almost 47,000 new objects was certainly an unusual decade in magnitude, the last 40 years boast three of the four most acquisitive decades in the Museum's history. From the 1960s through the 1990s, the Museum has acquired objects at about 22,400 per decade; the vast majority of these acquisitions were for the study collections, while acquisitions for the display collections remained moderate, on average.

Figure 6.3 summarizes the Museum's acquisition activity from 1895 to 1999, decade by decade. In the figure, the bottom portion of each bar indicates the number of display collection objects acquired during the decade; the top portion indicates the number of study collection objects acquired over that period. The rightmost bar in the figure represents an average decade.

A much more volatile pattern emerges if one views the Museum's acquisition activity in finer detail - that is, year by year (instead of decade by decade) and by individual curatorial department (instead of by just two groupings, display collections and study collections). Figure

¹⁶⁷ The Museum's first "decade" was only five years, from 1895-1899.

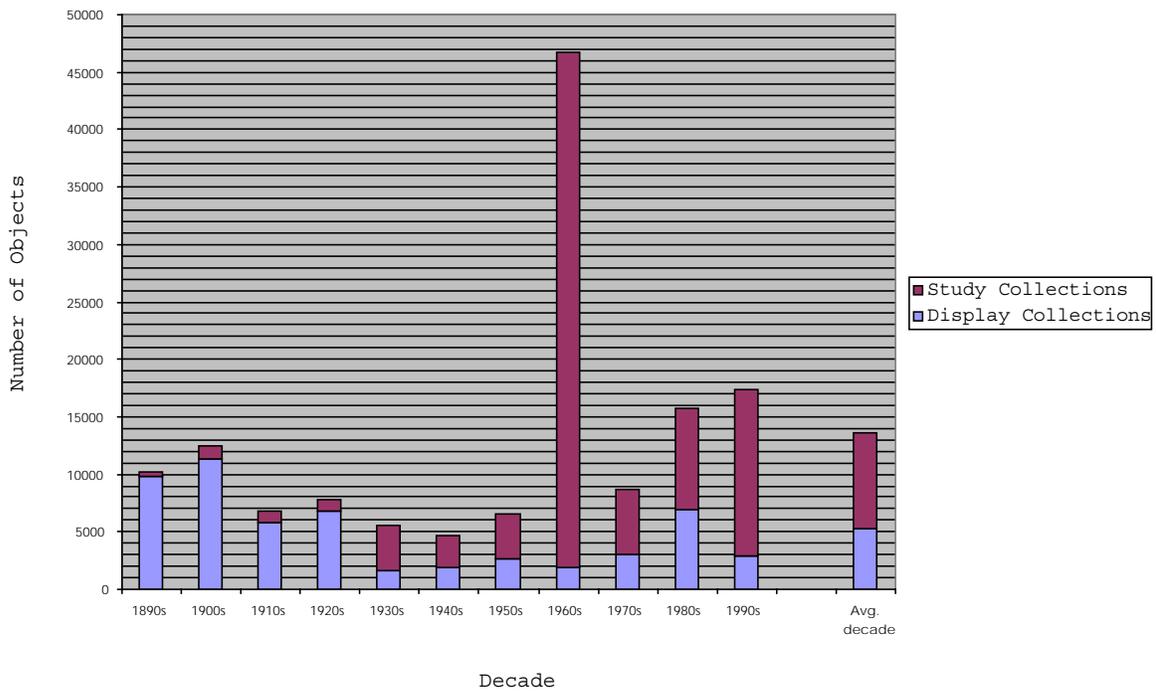


Figure 6.3—Number of objects acquired for display collections and study collections, by decade

NOTE: Two bars in the figure represent less than a full decade: The “1890s” bar covers five years (1895-1899), and the “1990s” bar covers nine and one-half years (January 1990 to July 1999). The “average decade” bar is accordingly adjusted. The figure includes objects from departments that are now discontinued (e.g., Natural History).

6.4, for example, shows annual acquisitions for the Museum’s Africa, Oceania, and the Americas (AOA) department.

As the figure illustrates, acquisitions are highly variable from one year to the next, despite the existence of some broader trends. During the 1990s, for example, while AOA acquisitions averaged about 110 objects per year, this consisted of four years with fewer than 50 objects coming in, and two years where acquisitions exceeded 200 objects.

This highly variable pattern of incoming objects is important for a few reasons. First, it is a window into the pivotal role that private donations play in building the Museum’s collections - a topic to be

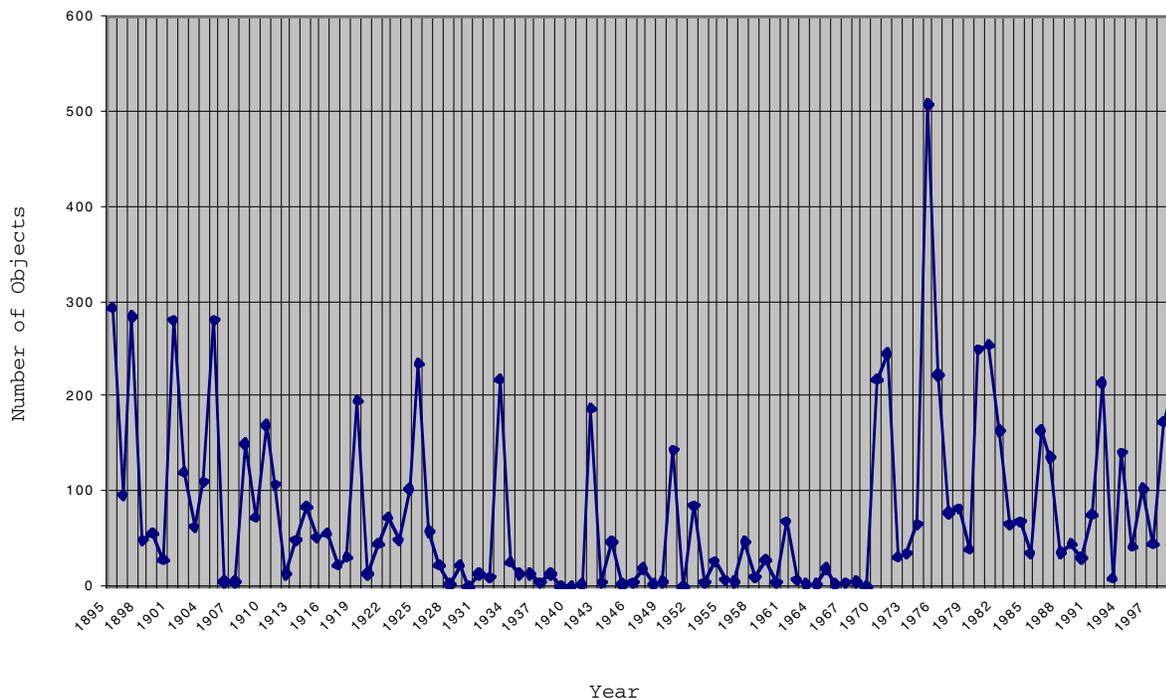


Figure 6.4—Annual acquisitions for the Africa/Oceania/Americas department, from 1895 to 1999

discussed momentarily. Second, with such volatility (and the associated uncertainty of when the next influx might come, and how large it might be), the Museum’s ability to plan for - and manage - collection growth is severely tested. Dramatic swings in acquisitions from one year to the next are characteristic of all departments, though the timing of the swings varies for each. While aggregating the Museum’s several curatorial departments tends to mask this volatility (since one department’s high year may be another department’s low one), this is, perhaps, more of a statistical reality than a management one. It is probably more accurate to see this volatility as being multiplied - rather than smoothed out - by the fact that eight curatorial departments are actively collecting, and subject to their own vagaries in object management.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁸ The Museum has eight “active” and two “inactive” curatorial departments.

The sources of acquisitions

Like other art museums throughout the United States, the Museum's collection has been built by donated artworks.¹⁶⁹ As depicted in Figure 6.5, artwork donations account for 82% of the Museum's objects (79% gifts, 3% bequests). Another 7% of the Museum's objects are long-term loans (about one-third of this amount from private collectors, the other two-thirds from institutional lenders).¹⁷⁰ The Museum's own purchases account for about 7% of the objects in the collection;¹⁷¹ the remaining 4% come from a variety of other sources.¹⁷²

Not only have private collectors been the source of the vast majority of objects in the Museum's collection, but many of the finest and most well-known portions of the collection are donations. For example, the core of the Museum's American Paintings collection, the Museum's prized Rodin sculptures, and a recent addition of exceptional Oceanic objects, all came to the Museum through the gifts of individuals.

Does collection utilization vary by acquisition source?

What is the significance of acquisition source, as it relates to collection storage and utilization? As one would expect, the vast majority of objects in storage - as well as those on exhibit - are

¹⁶⁹ "Donated artworks" consist of "gifts" (made when the donor is living) and "bequests" (activated by the donor's death).

¹⁷⁰ Long-term loans, while often later gifted or bequeathed to the Museum, are not outright donations due to the uncertainty in the outcome. For a discussion of "indefinite," or "permanent," loans, see Malaro (1998, pp. 249-251). Malaro devotes an entire chapter in the same book to the related issue of "unclaimed loans."

¹⁷¹ The Museum makes artwork purchases using acquisition funds that are, in large part, a result of contributions from private donors. These donor contributions, however, are in *dollars* rather than in *objects* (though such contributions may come to the Museum as stocks, real estate, or other non-art property that can be converted to dollars). Some acquisition funds come with donor restrictions on the type of artwork that can be purchased. Other sources of acquisition funds include endowment earnings and deaccessioning proceeds.

¹⁷² The aforementioned percentages are based on the Museum's *retained* acquisitions (i.e., the 112,564 objects that make up the Museum's current collection), rather than the Museum's *total* acquisitions (142,698), some of which (30,134) were later deaccessioned.

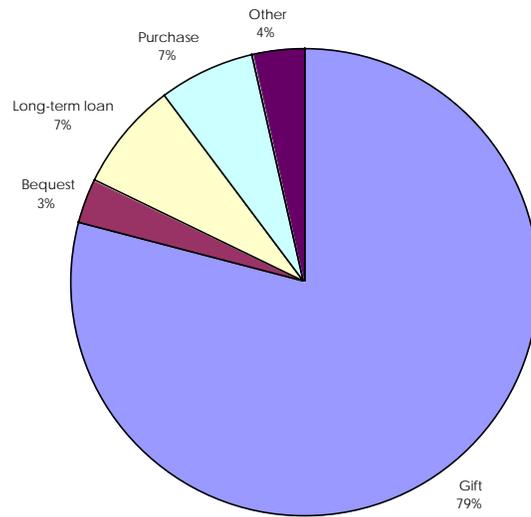


Figure 6.5—Acquisition source of objects in the collection

NOTE: About 7% (7,812) of the Museum’s objects do not have any acquisition source recorded in the collection database; thus, the percentages in the figure are based on the approximately 104,752 objects for which the acquisition source is known. There is no reason to assume that these percentages would significantly change if the sources of all objects were known.

donated works; after all, 82% of the Museum’s objects are donated. However, it is also true that donated artworks are exhibited at a significantly lower rate than their proportion in the collection would suggest. (And conversely, donated artworks are disproportionately found in storage). To illustrate, Figure 6.6 compares the exhibition rate for purchases (the left bar in each of the three sets) and donations (the right bar in each set).¹⁷³

The first set of bars (representing all departments in the collection) shows that 6.6% of purchased objects are on exhibit compared

¹⁷³ These comparisons are based on objects *retained* by the Museum; in other words, any acquisitions that were later deaccessioned are excluded from this analysis.

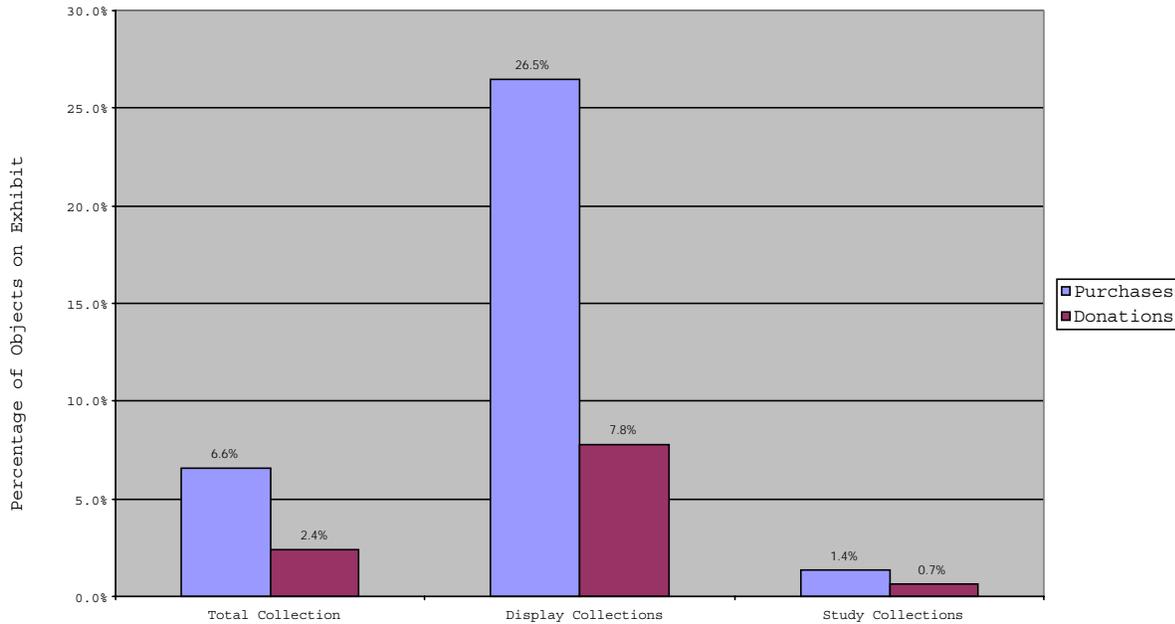


Figure 6.6—Exhibition rates of purchases vs. donations; for total collection, display collections, and study collections

to 2.4% of donated objects.¹⁷⁴ Breaking out the collection into two groupings - display collections and study collections - reveals that the relative gap in exhibition rates varies, depending on the type of collection. Specifically, for the display collections, purchased objects are exhibited at over three times the rate of donated objects (26.5% versus 7.8%)¹⁷⁵, and for the study collections, purchased objects are exhibited at two times the rate of donated objects (1.4% versus 0.7%)^{176, 177}

¹⁷⁴ The difference in percentages is statistically significant (chi2 = 425.47; p = 0.000). All figures are based on exhibition at single point in time: July, 1999.

¹⁷⁵ Difference is statistically significant (chi2 = 588.68; p = 0.000).

¹⁷⁶ Difference is statistically significant (chi2 = 37.17; p = 0.000).

¹⁷⁷ Also evident in Figure 6.6 are the much higher exhibition rates for display collections than for study collections - regardless of the acquisition source. The rationale for such a difference is twofold. First, since display collections and study collections have distinct missions - the former oriented towards exhibition, and the latter towards research - one would expect display collections to have higher exhibition rates than study collections. And second, the Museum's study

It is important to emphasize that lower rates of exhibition do not necessarily mean lower utilization. There are other ways to "utilize" collections besides displaying them; for example, by using them for art historical research. However, for collections of *similar type* (i.e., *display collections* considered separately from *study collections*), there is no obvious reason why purchased and donated objects should have distinct utilization goals. The fact that among display collection objects, purchases are exhibited at over three times the rate as donations, suggests that historically, the Museum has applied looser standards in accepting donated objects than it has in making purchases.¹⁷⁸ The exhibition differential among study collection purchases and donations, while itself difficult to explain, signifies less of a concern because of these collections' non-display mission emphasis.

Overview of 1990s acquisitions

The Museum acquired 17,335 objects during the 1990s, making the decade second only to the 1960s in number of acquisitions.¹⁷⁹ Acquisitions in the 1990s were concentrated in the study collections, which accounted for 83% of the objects acquired over the decade. While 1990s study collection acquisitions were higher than for an "average decade" (14,409 vs. 8,416), 1990s display collection acquisitions were quite low compared to the average decade (2,926 vs. 5,240).

collections (being comprised of the Prints and Drawings and Textiles departments) are made up of materially sensitive objects that must be rotated more frequently for preservation reasons. Because of their increased rotation requirements, these collections tend to be larger in numbers - and larger numbers mathematically result in lower exhibition rates. Thus, the fact that the two types of collections are so different in their exhibition rates is not, in itself, a concern. However, whether or not the two collections are sized properly - as their absolute (rather than relative) exhibition rates are one indication of - is a question that remains, and will be discussed later.

¹⁷⁸ Related to this point is the fact that donations are heavily determined by external "supply" factors (i.e., what the donors offer), whereas purchases are determined, to a greater degree, by internal "demand" factors (i.e., what the Museum wants).

¹⁷⁹ In this discussion, the "decade of the 1990s" includes only nine and one-half years (January 1990 to July 1999).

During the 1990s, artwork donations accounted for about 78% of the objects added to the collection (73% gifts, 5% bequests); this is somewhat lower than the proportion of donations in the entire collection (82%). Long-term loans (10.5%) and purchases (10.5%) made up larger shares of 1990s acquisitions relative to their proportions in the entire collection (7.4% and 6.8%, respectively). The remaining 1% of 1990s acquisitions came from sources other than the main four.

Are 1990s acquisitions utilized at a different rate than pre-1990 acquisitions?

According to one key measure, 1990s acquisitions are being utilized at a higher rate than objects acquired before 1990. Figure 6.7 illustrates this by comparing the exhibition rates of objects acquired before and after 1990.¹⁸⁰ The three sets of bars in the figure depict this comparison for the total collection, the display collections, and the study collections, respectively. In each case, the 1990s acquisitions are exhibited at a higher rate than acquisitions made prior to 1990.

As the leftmost bars illustrate, for the total collection, 1990s acquisitions are exhibited at over three times the rate of pre-1990 acquisitions (6.3% and 1.9%, respectively).¹⁸¹ For the display collections, 1990s acquisitions are exhibited at a rate of 20.2%, compared to 7.2% for earlier-acquired objects.¹⁸² Even for the study collections, for which exhibition is less central to mission, the 1990s acquisitions are displayed at 3.3%, versus 0.1% for the objects acquired before 1990.¹⁸³

There are several factors that may account for the higher exhibition rates of 1990s acquisitions. First, the Museum's acquisition criteria are stricter now than they were in decades past, prompting

¹⁸⁰ The comparison of pre- and post-1990 acquisitions is based on objects *retained* by the Museum; in other words, any acquisitions that were later deaccessioned are excluded from this analysis.

¹⁸¹ Difference is statistically significant (chi2 = 1083.12; p = 0.000).

¹⁸² Difference is statistically significant (chi2 = 541.60; p = 0.000).

¹⁸³ Difference is statistically significant (chi2 = 1783.29; p = 0.000).

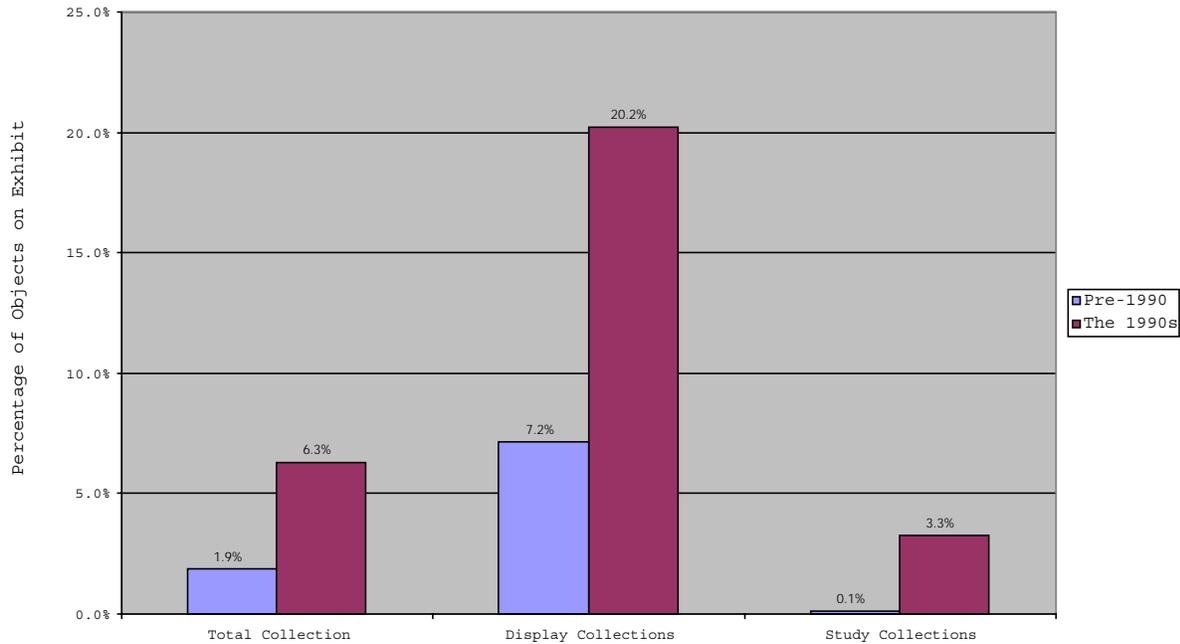


Figure 6.7—Exhibition rates of objects acquired pre- vs. post-1990; for total collection, display collections, and study collections

staff and board members to more carefully assess the appropriateness of new acquisitions for the Museum's collections.¹⁸⁴ Second, the tendency to exhibit 1990s acquisitions at a higher rate may reflect the preferences of today's curators to display the works that *they* had a hand in acquiring (i.e., recent acquisitions). And third, the higher exhibition rate of recent acquisitions may, in part, be due to the practice of "rewarding" recent donors for their gifts by displaying the artworks in the Museum's galleries (rather than placing them in storage).

The 1990s acquisitions are different not only in their relatively higher exhibition rates, but in the narrowing of the gap between the exhibition rates of purchases and donations. As illustrated in the first set of bars in Figure 6.8, 1990s purchases are exhibited at rate of 7.3%, compared to 6.1% for donations.¹⁸⁵ This is a much smaller differential than exists for the entire collection (as was illustrated

¹⁸⁴ Sources: interviews with Museum staff; FAMSF (1983), pp. 7-13.

¹⁸⁵ Difference is statistically significant (chi2 = 3.74; p = 0.053).

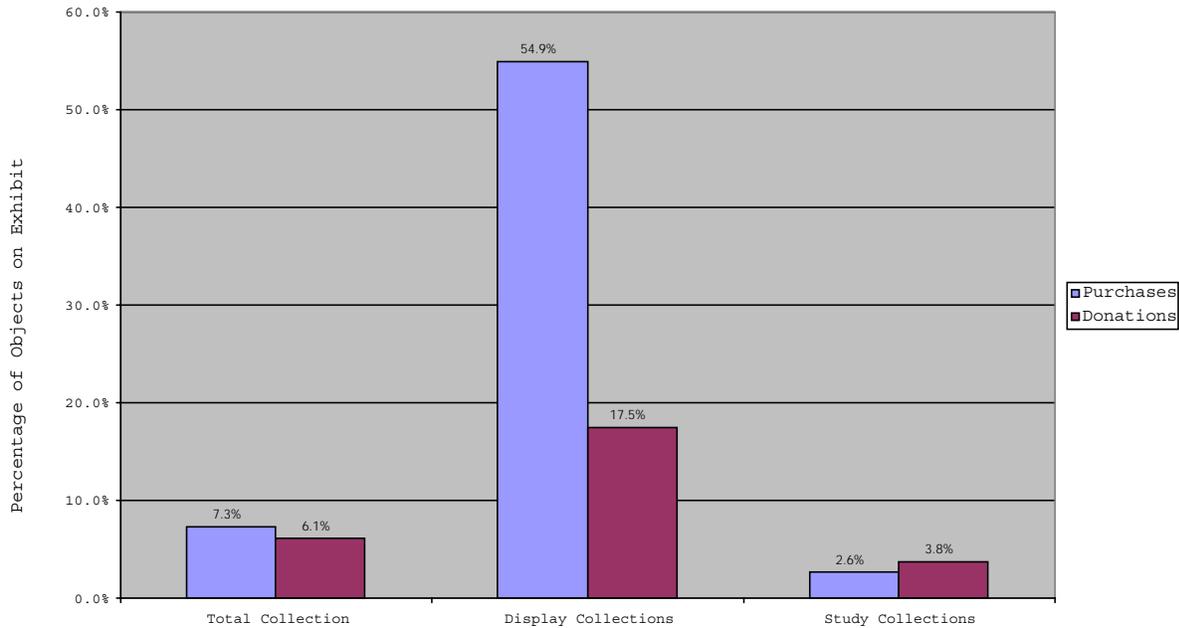


Figure 6.8—Exhibition rates of 1990s purchases vs. 1990s donations; for total collection, display collections, and study collections

in Figure 6.6). This narrower gap, however, is due entirely to the study collection acquisitions, which, contrary to historical patterns, show purchases exhibited at a *lower* rate (2.6%) than donations (3.8%).¹⁸⁶ The display collection acquisitions, in contrast, continue the historical pattern, with 1990s purchases exhibited at over three times the rate of 1990s donations (54.9% and 17.5%, respectively).¹⁸⁷

That display collection purchases continue - in the 1990s - to be exhibited at over three times the rate of display collection donations, suggests that the Museum is still applying looser standards in accepting donated objects than it is in making purchases. To investigate this

¹⁸⁶ Difference is statistically significant (chi2 = 4.68; p = 0.031). The fact that 1990s study collection purchases are *less* likely to be exhibited than donations may reflect an increased emphasis on the study collections' research value (rather than display value). The Museum's decision to build a study facility for its Prints and Drawings collection in the renovated Legion, and its plans to build a similar facility for the Textiles collection in the new de Young, suggest that the research mission may be gaining in importance.

¹⁸⁷ Difference is statistically significant (chi2 = 117.04; p = 0.000).

further, the next sections explore the monetary value of display collection objects that were either purchased or donated over the past decade.

Monetary value of recent acquisitions in the display collections

An examination of recent display collection acquisitions reveals that a great number of objects accepted into the collection were of relatively low monetary value.¹⁸⁸ Figure 6.9 helps illustrate this fact by showing the value distribution of (retained) display collection objects acquired (by purchase or donation) from mid-1990 to mid-1998.¹⁸⁹ Each bar in the figure represents the percentage of recent display collection acquisitions that falls into each value category. For example, the first bar indicates that 17% of the objects were valued at less than \$1,000, and the last bar shows that 0.5% of the objects came in at \$2.5 million or more. The figure is based on 1,138 objects; another 823 objects acquired during this period did not have a value recorded in the collection database.

The most notable feature of Figure 6.9 is the concentration of objects in the low-value ranges. Specifically, almost one-half (47%) of these recently acquired objects are valued at less than \$5,000, and almost two-thirds (64%) are valued at less than \$10,000.¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁸ The analysis in this section is based on object valuations in the Museum's database. As noted in the previous chapter, these monetary estimates are *curatorial* valuations, used for *curatorial* purposes; they are not related to IRS records or other documentation that may exist on the artworks.

¹⁸⁹ This monetary analysis of recent acquisitions covers eight years, rather than the nine and one-half years covered in previous analyses of "1990s acquisitions." This difference is an artifact of my intention to match monetary valuations from the database with a summary document provided me by Museum staff (the document covered eight fiscal years in the 1990s). There is no reason to assume that the results of this analysis would differ significantly if the full nine and one-half years were included, instead of only eight years. For simplicity, in the text I sometimes will refer to the eight-year period as "the 1990s;" however, all tables and figures will specify the actual, eight-year period.

¹⁹⁰ These percentages actually underestimate the proportion of low-value objects. This is because 823 acquisitions had no value recorded in the collection database, and according to Museum staff, objects without recorded valuations tend to be lower-value items.

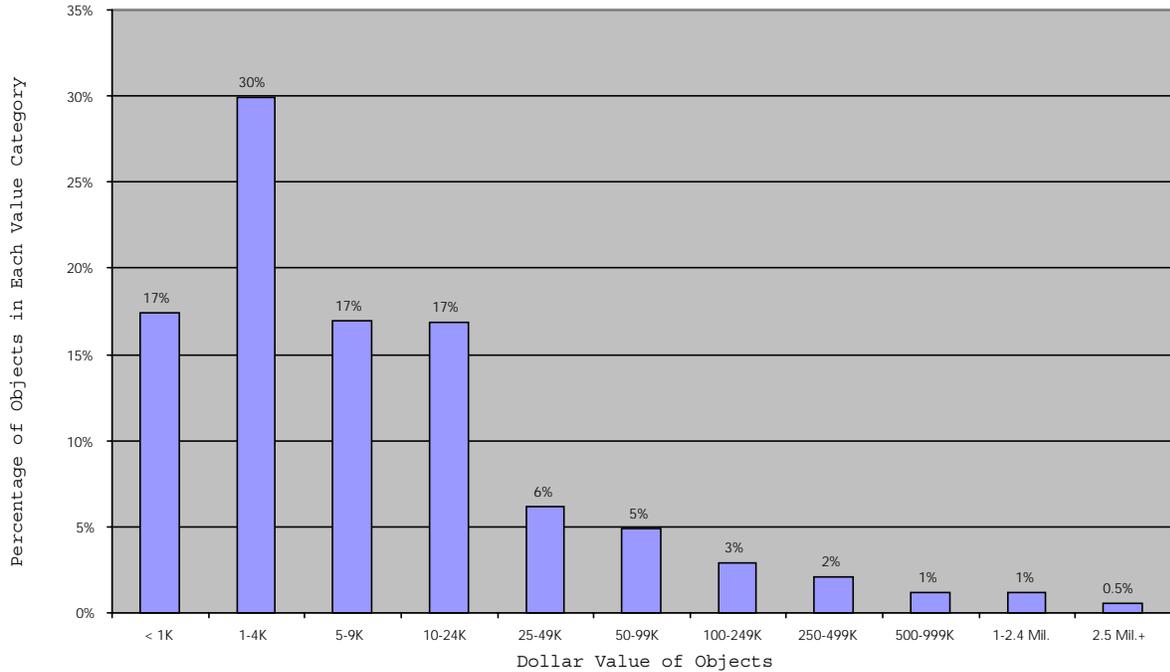


Figure 6.9—Value distribution of objects acquired from mid-1990 to mid-1998, for display collections

NOTE: The horizontal axis is not to scale. Figure is based on 1,138 objects with valuations recorded in the collection database; 823 objects are excluded because they had no recorded valuation.

Does monetary value vary by acquisition source?

A look into acquisition source shows that these lowest-valued objects were supplied almost entirely by donation (rather than by purchase). More important, donations account for a larger percentage of low-value objects than their overall proportion among recent acquisitions would indicate. To illustrate, Table 6.2 presents acquisition source information for the display collection objects depicted in Figure 6.9. For each value category, the table shows the number of objects acquired, and what percentage of them came to the Museum through purchase versus donation. The first row indicates that in the lowest value category of "Less than \$1,000," the Museum acquired 198 objects, 3% of which were purchased, and 97% donated. Going down the chart (up in value), a pattern emerges. As the value category

Table 6.2

Percentage of acquisitions from purchases vs. donations, for each value category; for display collection objects acquired from mid-1990 to mid-1998

Value of Objects	Number of Objects	Percentage from Purchases	Percentage from Donations
Less than \$1,000	198	3%	97%
\$1,000 - 4,999	340	5%	95%
\$5,000 - 9,999	193	7%	93%
\$10,000 - 24,999	192	10%	90%
\$25,000 - 49,999	70	16%	84%
\$50,000 - 99,999	56	29%	71%
\$100,000 - 249,999	33	24%	76%
\$250,000 - 499,999	24	46%	54%
\$500,000 - 999,999	13	46%	54%
\$1,000,000 - 2,499,999	13	31%	69%
\$2,500,000 or more	6	33%	67%
TOTAL	1,138	10%	90%

NOTE: Data are for donations and purchases only. Table excludes 823 objects that have no recorded valuations; 100% of these unvalued objects are donations.

increases, so does the percentage of objects coming from purchases (up to 46%), until an object value of \$1 million is reached. Then, the percentage of objects coming from purchases decreases somewhat (31-33%).

Regarding the lowest-valued objects, donations supplied 97% of objects worth less than \$1,000, 95% of objects worth \$1,000-\$4,999, and 93% of objects worth \$5,000-\$9,999. Summing these three categories together, donations supplied 95% of all objects worth less than \$10,000.¹⁹¹ This percentage (95%) exceeds the overall donation rate of 90% in this analysis.¹⁹² Hence, donations disproportionately account

¹⁹¹ In absolute numbers, donations account for 697 of the 731 objects valued at less than \$10,000.

¹⁹² The difference in percentages is statistically significant (chi2 = 62.06; p = 0.000). The 90% donation rate is based on the 1,138 recent display collection acquisitions that were either donated or

for the Museum's recent, low-value acquisitions for the display collections.¹⁹³

A similar pattern emerges when comparing purchases and donations within the Museum's individual curatorial departments. It is important to look at departments separately when examining (and interpreting) collection values because different types of objects have distinct ranges of value associated with them. For example, while a painting valued at \$100,000 may represent a respectable (though unremarkable) acquisition for the Museum, an Oceanic sculpture valued at the same amount is an important addition to the collection. To address this issue, the following analysis compares the median values of purchased objects versus donated objects, *within each curatorial department*.

Table 6.3 shows, for each active department in the display collections, the median value of purchased objects versus the median value of donated objects acquired over an eight-year period in the 1990s. For example, the median value for American Painting purchases is \$100,000.¹⁹⁴ For American Painting donations, in contrast, the median value is \$15,000. Considering these two median values together, they show that American Painting donations are relatively more concentrated in the lower-end of the value spectrum than are American Painting purchases.

The American Paintings department is not unique in this respect. Rather, in each of the six departments, the median value of purchased objects is considerably higher than the median value of donated

purchased, and that have a value recorded in the database (i.e., it excludes the 823 objects with no recorded valuation); the remaining 10% are purchases.

¹⁹³ The percentage of low-value acquisitions from donations is probably greater than 95%. This is because 823 donated objects had no value recorded in the collection database, and according to Museum staff, objects without a recorded value tend, on average, to be lower-value objects. All purchased objects had recorded values. (The percentages in Table 6.2 are based only on those objects with a recorded value.)

¹⁹⁴ This means that half of the paintings purchased in the 1990s had values greater than \$100,000, and half had values below \$100,000.

Table 6.3

Median value of purchases vs. donations for each department in display collections; for objects acquired from mid-1990 to mid-1998

Department	Number of Objects with Value Recorded in Database	Median Value of Purchases	Median Value of Donations	Ratio of Purchase Median to Donation Median
American Painting	166	\$100,000	\$15,000	6.7
American Decorative Arts	234	\$8,500	\$3,000	2.8
European Painting	31	\$1,500,000	\$32,500	46.2
European Decorative Arts	390	\$18,000	\$4,613	3.9
Africa/Oceania/the Americas	276	\$11,500	\$2,500	4.6
Ancient Art	41	\$32,000	\$750	42.7

NOTE: Table is based on 1,138 objects with valuations recorded in the collection database; 823 objects are excluded because they had no recorded valuation.

objects.¹⁹⁵ The last column in Table 6.3 depicts the size of this differential, in relative terms, by showing the multiple by which the median value of purchased objects exceeds the median value of donated objects.¹⁹⁶ Even for the department with the smallest differential (American Decorative Arts), the median purchase is valued at almost three times the median donation. These differentials are consistent with the pattern noted in Table 6.2.

While monetary value does not fully capture an object's value to the Museum, it is an indicator of quality, especially when relative monetary values are compared for objects of similar type. In fact, the Museum often uses monetary value as a kind of "shorthand" for quality in

¹⁹⁵ The median values for donated objects are likely lower than what shows in the table, for all departments. Again, this is because a substantial percentage (45%) of donated objects had no value recorded in the collection database, and these objects can be assumed to have relatively low values, on average.

¹⁹⁶ The number in this column actually represents the lowest estimate of the differential since, as explained in the previous footnote, the median value for donated objects is artificially high because of missing valuations.

its own planning and decision making (again, considering different types of objects separately).¹⁹⁷

The same monetary value data, however, also demonstrate the critical importance of donations in building the top tier of the Museum's collection. Table 6.4 presents acquisition source information

Table 6.4

Percentage of high-value objects from purchases vs. donations for each department in display collections; for objects acquired from mid-1990 to mid-1998

Department	Number of Objects in the Top 20% of Value (by Department)	Percentage from Purchases	Percentage from Donations
American Painting	37	27%	73%
American Decorative Arts	159	9%	91%
European Painting	6	83%	17%
European Decorative Arts	108	22%	78%
Africa/Oceania/the Americas	81	14%	86%
Ancient Art	10	60%	40%
TOTAL	401	18%	82%

NOTE: Table is based on 1,961 objects, including 823 objects that had no value recorded in the database; those 823 objects were assumed to have values below the top-20% threshold for their respective departments. The 401 objects "in the top 20%" actually constitute 20.4% of 1,961; this is because all objects with the threshold value were included, even if that brought the object total to slightly more than 20%.

for the highest-valued 20% of objects acquired in the 1990s (by purchase or donation) for each department in the display collections. Each row shows the number of objects in the top 20% category, what percentage of them came to the Museum through purchase, and what percentage through donation. For example, 37 American paintings were valued in the top 20%

¹⁹⁷ For example, the Museum sets monetary goals for annual acquisitions in each department as part of its collection development planning. According to Museum staff, monetary value serves as a proxy for quality.

in that department; of those higher-valued paintings, 27% were purchased, and 73% were donated. In four out of six departments, the majority of higher-valued objects were donated, ranging from 73% (American Paintings) to 91% (American Decorative Arts). Interestingly, the two departments for which donations made up less than the majority of higher-valued objects were the two departments that acquired the fewest objects (European Painting and Ancient Art). These two departments had 17% and 40% of the highest-valued objects coming from donations, respectively.

As the bottom totals of the table show, 82% of the Museum's most important acquisitions in the 1990s (as measured by monetary value, department by department) came from donations. While this percentage is lower than the overall proportion of donations in this analysis (94%),¹⁹⁸ it nevertheless demonstrates that from a practical standpoint, the top-tier of the Museum's collection is being built - as it always has been - primarily by the artwork donations of private individuals. Pairing this information with the previous statistics on median values, it becomes clear that artwork donations simultaneously drive the Museum's greatest successes and most severe resource challenges in terms of collection growth. More concretely: While donated objects fill most of the important space in the Museum's galleries, they also disproportionately fill the bottom tier of the Museum's storerooms. This pattern, which characterized the Museum's historical acquisition practices, also describes the Museum's current acquisition practices, despite the stricter acquisition criteria employed in the 1990s.

Discussion on acquisitions

The Museum's recent acquisition activity raises several issues that bear on the Museum's prospects for improved collection storage and utilization in the future. First, consider the display collections, for

¹⁹⁸ The 94% donation rate is based on 1,961 recent display collection acquisitions that were either donated or purchased. (The remaining 6% are purchases.) This percentage calculation includes the 823 objects without recorded valuations, under the assumption that the unvalued objects are not among the "top 20%" in value for each department.

which the Museum acquired (and retained) almost 2,800 objects over the last decade. In terms of quantity, the 1990s level of display collection acquisitions was moderate - lower than for an "average decade." In interviews, staff members emphasized that now, display collection acquisitions are made with an eye toward putting the objects on view; acquiring "secondary material" is not a goal for these collections. This emphasis on intended exhibition represents a stricter standard for acquisitions than existed in the past.

While collectively, these 2,800 display collection objects have an exhibition rate significantly higher than that for objects acquired in prior years, it nevertheless reaches only 20%. A question for the Museum to consider is whether the 20% exhibition rate adequately reflects its criteria for new display collection acquisitions.¹⁹⁹ If the Museum concludes that the 20% exhibition rate is too low, then a key issue to explore is the marked disparity in the utilization of purchased versus donated objects.

Continuing historical trends, objects *purchased* in the 1990s are displayed at over three times the rate of objects *donated* in the 1990s. The most obvious explanation for such a difference is that purchased objects tend to be of a higher quality than donated objects.²⁰⁰ The monetary analysis of recent acquisitions supports this explanation: The median value of purchased objects is substantially higher than the median value of donated objects, in each curatorial department in the display collections. Underlying these differences is the large number of low-value objects acquired through donation. Almost one-half of all display collection acquisitions in the 1990s are valued below \$5,000, and 96% of these objects came to the Museum via donation. Similarly, almost two-thirds of recent display collection acquisitions are valued

¹⁹⁹ Recall, however, that this 20% rate is for a single point in time. The importance of gathering data to assess longer-term utilization patterns (e.g., how many months per decade are different objects on display?) is discussed in Chapters 7 and 8.

²⁰⁰ Another explanation is that purchased objects were selected to fill identified gaps in the collection (or in some other way serve a specified need). This characterization, however, is not inconsistent with the explanation that recent purchases are of higher quality, on average, than are recent donations.

below \$10,000, and 95% of these are donations. While this analysis of exhibition rates and monetary values certainly does not capture all important aspects of collection utilization and value, it is nevertheless a legitimate concern whether many of the Museum's recent acquisitions will be serving the institution's mission in a meaningful way. (These objects, after all, were acquired for the display collections.) And given the annual cost of maintaining stored artworks (as estimated in Chapter 5), the consequences of accepting such objects are not insubstantial.

A probable reason that so many low-value donations were acquired in the 1990s is that the Museum believed that more coveted artworks were somehow linked to the less valuable ones.²⁰¹ Does assuring the inflow of "top-tier" artworks require the acceptance of "bottom-tier" objects? Most likely, the Museum's answer to this question will involve an assessment of what *other* art museums might do under similar circumstances. The norms of the industry, as they relate to donations of artwork, are the context within which the Museum operates. This industry-wide issue will be discussed further in Chapter 8.

Another issue to consider is that the Museum's acquisition planning and benchmarking process, while successful in securing important donations, is not designed to monitor the inflow of low-value objects. The Museum's acquisition planning process sets annual goals for the total monetary value of gifts and purchases for each curatorial department. These monetary goals (which are supposed to serve as a proxy for quality) are the benchmarks against which actual acquisition totals are measured. The problem with this system is that it obscures meaningful measures, such as the median value of objects acquired, or other indicators of the value *distribution* of acquired artworks. By not linking monetary totals with object counts, the Museum's benchmarks cannot flag what might otherwise be noticed as an undesirable influx of low-value objects.

²⁰¹ According to the museum literature reviewed in Chapter 3, this type of calculation has characterized U.S. museum decision-making for over a century.

For the study collections, the issues are different than for the display collections. Study collection acquisitions were higher in the 1990s than for any other decade in the Museum's history, but one. The 1990s continued a four-decade long trend of dramatic growth in the study collections, and the Museum's overall collection growth is being fueled by study collection acquisitions. Given the study collections' research-oriented mission, however, the low exhibition rate of recent acquisitions is not a meaningful indicator of collection utilization - especially since these collections happen to be comprised of materially sensitive classes of objects. But what *is* the right way to gauge acquisition levels for these collections? With study collections' value determined, in part, by the depth and breadth of the collections, what rationale is there to ever limit their size?

In contrast to the criteria for acquisitions in the display collections, acquisitions in the study collections are frequently justified by the "secondary value" that such objects contribute to more central objects in the collection. For example, artworks that provide a meaningful context within which to understand more important artworks serve a legitimate function in a collection compiled for purposes of scholarship. So, too, do artworks that highlight a particular technique, or capture a key transition period in an artist's career. It is undoubtedly more difficult to define a utilization metric for study collections than it is for display collections (for which exhibition rate offers a relevant, if imperfect, measure of use). The notion of "secondary value," however, while broad enough to encompass the range of qualities that are important for study collections, is too vague to serve as a limiting criterion for study collection acquisitions.

The Museum has been able to avoid focusing on the rapid growth of its study collections, in part, because its main study collection (Prints and Drawings) is made up of objects that are relatively easily stored, and lend themselves well to use in electronic media.²⁰²

²⁰² The fact that works on paper are well reproduced in electronic media makes it easier to "utilize" such works, even when they are in storage. The topic of electronic access to collections is discussed further in Chapter 7.

However, as the Museum's other study collection, Textiles, continues its rapid growth, the resource implications for storage are less easily ignored. Textiles are bulky to store; and because textiles are not faithfully represented in electronic media, they are less "useful" when in storage, compared to works on paper. Thus, while the Prints and Drawings collection is by far the largest collection at the Museum, it may be the Textile collection that motivates the reassessment of acquisition practices for the study collections. Historically, the dramatic growth in the Museum's collection size has been driven by study collection acquisitions, and the 1990s have only continued the historical trend. The question of what criteria should apply to study collection acquisitions - while certainly not answered here - is clearly critical for the Museum to address if it wishes to moderate collection growth or reduce the size of its collection.

DEACCESSIONS

To supplement the previous discussion on acquisitions, the rest of the chapter examines the Museum's experience with deaccessioning - the other determinant of collection size. The next section begins by summarizing the Museum's deaccessioning activity, presenting the number of deaccessions decade by decade, and the types of objects deaccessioned. The following section describes the means by which the objects left the Museum (i.e., the "disposal methods" used), and the objects' destinations, when known. The next section focuses on the Museum's recent deaccessioning activity, examining the amount and types of objects deaccessioned in the 1990s, as well as how 1990s deaccessions compare to those of past decades. Then, drawing from staff interviews and further data analysis, the following section explores how much additional deaccessioning might be expected in the near-term. The chapter concludes with a discussion of what the Museum's recent experience with deaccessioning suggests about the Museum's prospects for reducing collection size or moderating collection growth.

Overview of deaccessions

The Museum has deaccessioned approximately 30,000 objects from its collection over the last 100 years.²⁰³ While this translates to an average of almost 3,000 objects per decade, the bulk of deaccessioning occurred during two exceptional decades: the 1940s, when about 7,000 objects were deaccessioned, and the 1990s, when almost 12,000 objects were deaccessioned. Figure 6.10 shows the Museum's deaccessioning levels (in numbers of objects) decade by decade, represented by the bars below the horizontal axis. For comparison, the bars above the

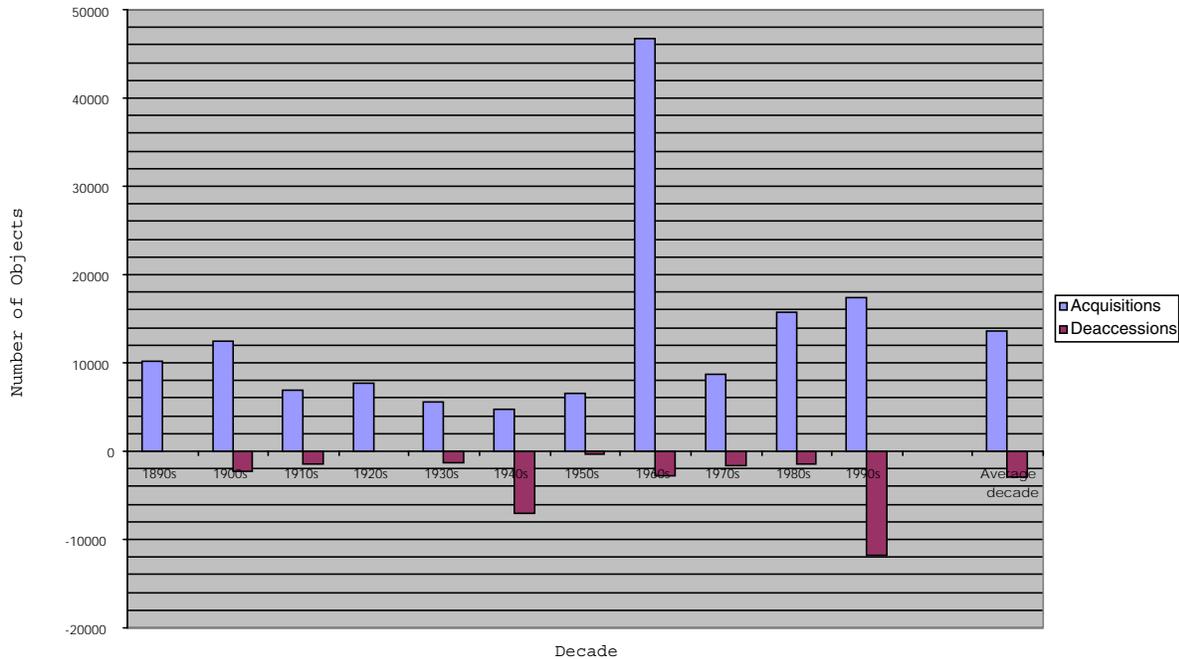


Figure 6.10—Number of objects acquired and deaccessioned, by decade

NOTE: Two bars in the figure represent less than a full decade: The "1890s" bar covers five years (1895-1899), and the "1990s" bar covers nine and one-half years (January 1990 to July 1999). The "average decade" bar is accordingly adjusted. The figure includes objects from departments that are now discontinued (e.g., Natural History). About 8% (2,491) of the deaccessioned objects had no deaccession date recorded in the collection database; their deaccession dates were imputed in proportion to the other deaccessioned objects in their departments.

²⁰³ As was mentioned in an earlier footnote, it is possible that some ambiguously coded records in the Museum's database represent additional deaccessions.

horizontal axis show the number of objects acquired during the same periods. The rightmost pair of bars shows an average decade for both acquisitions (almost 17,000 objects) and deaccessions (almost 3,000 objects).

Qualitatively speaking, the Museum has deaccessioned two broad categories of objects: 1) objects deemed "out of scope" (that is, outside of the Museum's general collecting focus); and 2) objects deemed of low quality relative to other objects in the collection.

About 38% of the Museum's deaccessioned objects clearly fall into the "out of scope" category, coming from curatorial departments now considered "inactive." Most of these objects were zoological specimens, minerals and gems, or historical artifacts that entered the Museum in its earlier days before it focused its collections in the area of fine arts. In addition to these non-art objects, the Museum also discontinued collecting Asian art, in deference to the local Asian Art Museum whose specialty made the Museum's collecting in that area redundant.²⁰⁴

The other 62% of deaccessioned objects are more difficult to categorize (in terms of their reason for being deaccessioned), as these objects belonged to the Museum's active curatorial departments. (One can assume that some were deaccessioned for reasons of low quality, while others were deemed "out of scope," despite being part of the active departments.) The bulk of these deaccessions came from departments in the display collections (55%), with the remaining 7% from the two departments that make up the study collections. Over one-third (35%) of all deaccessions came from one department: European Decorative Arts. Table 6.5 summarizes the Museum's deaccessioning activity by indicating the number of deaccessioned objects from each curatorial department, and the percentage of total deaccessions each department represents.

²⁰⁴ Until very recently, the Asian Art Museum was located adjacent to the de Young.

Table 6.5

Number of objects deaccessioned from each department, and percentage of total deaccessions from each department

Department	Number of Objects Deaccessioned	Percentage of Total Deaccessions
American Painting	340	1%
American Decorative Arts	1,475	5%
Textiles	1,509	5%
Prints and Drawings	659	2%
European Painting	601	2%
European Decorative Arts	10,526	35%
Africa, Oceania, and the Americas	2,552	8%
Ancient Art	1,004	3%
Asian Art*	4,606	15%
History*	1,021	3%
Natural History*	5,175	17%
Other*	666	2%
TOTAL	30,134	100%

NOTE: "Inactive" departments are marked with an asterisk (*). Percentages do not sum exactly to 100 due to rounding.

Most of the objects that the Museum eventually deaccessioned entered the institution during its early days of collecting. Figure 6.11 shows the acquisition year of all objects deaccessioned over the Museum's history.

The figure shows that about one-half of all deaccessioned objects (14,860) were acquired prior to 1907, and approximately 75% of all deaccessioned objects (22,222) were acquired prior to 1925. This pattern is best explained by two factors. First, most of the objects now deemed "out-of-scope" (e.g., natural history specimens, historical artifacts) were acquired in the Museum's early years. And second, many of the lower-quality art objects entered the institution during its first few decades, a time when the Museum was known as "San Francisco's

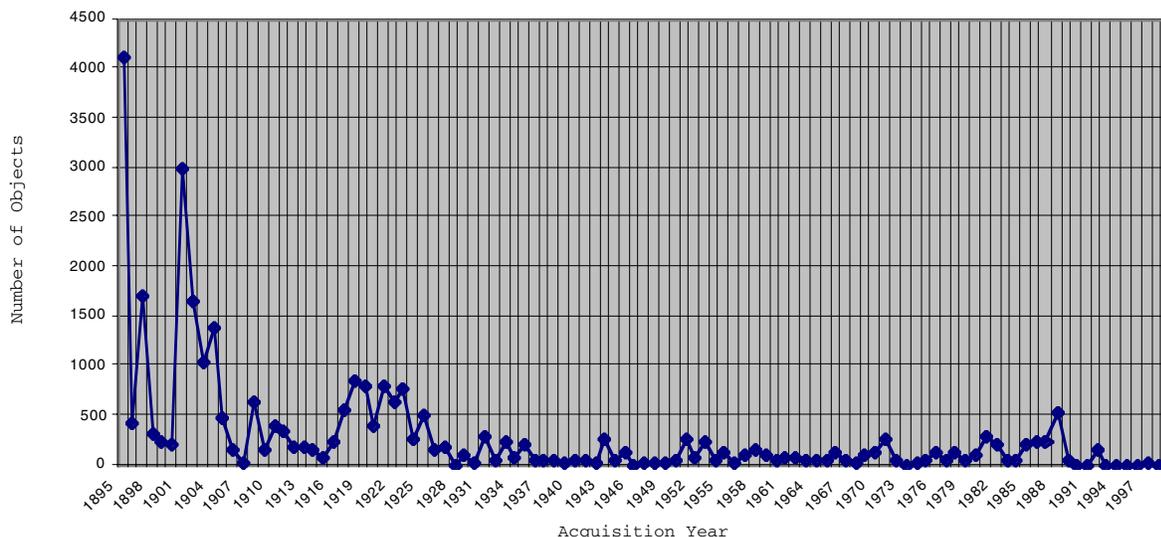


Figure 6.11—Acquisition year of deaccessioned objects

NOTE: Figure is based on 29,466 deaccessioned objects; 668 deaccessioned objects were excluded due to database coding errors (569) or missing acquisition dates (99).

attic," due to its rather indiscriminate acceptance of collections from local citizens.²⁰⁵

The disposal and destination of deaccessioned objects

The Museum physically disposes of deaccessioned objects in one of several ways: sale, transfer, exchange, or destruction.²⁰⁶ If the Museum chooses to sell deaccessioned objects, it must do so through private auction, a requirement under San Francisco's municipal code.²⁰⁷ Over the Museum's history, 67% of deaccessioned objects were sold at auction.²⁰⁸ Another 15% of deaccessioned objects left the Museum via

²⁰⁵ Source: interviews with Museum staff.

²⁰⁶ The act of deaccessioning, technically, is the *administrative* removal of an object from a museum's permanent collection. Once an object has been deaccessioned, it may then be *physically* removed using the disposal methods specified in the institution's policies.

²⁰⁷ San Francisco Administrative Code, Sec. 28.3, 1989.

²⁰⁸ The percentages in this section are based on the 21,264 deaccessioned objects with a disposal method recorded in the collection database. There is no reason to assume that the percentages would significantly change if the disposition of the other 8,870 deaccessioned objects were known.

transfer. Object transfers (i.e., without compensation) are the Museum's chosen disposal method when deaccessioned objects "are of scientific, social, cultural or historic value, but of little monetary value and therefore not appropriate for sale or exchange."²⁰⁹ In these cases, the Museum selects an appropriate public or non-profit institution for the objects' transfer, preferably another San Francisco institution.²¹⁰ Three San Francisco-based museums (the Natural History Museum, the Academy of Sciences, and the Asian Art Museum) together received 91% of the objects that left the Museum via transfer. Another 5% of deaccessioned objects left the Museum as part of an object-exchange with other museums. The remaining deaccessioned objects were either destroyed because of their extremely poor condition (9%), or have other information recorded in the collection database (4%).²¹¹ Figure 6.12 summarizes the means by which deaccessioned objects left the Museum.

How different are deaccessions in the 1990s?

The Museum's deaccessioning practices changed dramatically in the 1990s.²¹² Compared to earlier decades, the 1990s differ in both the amount and type of objects deaccessioned. Whereas earlier decades had relatively low numbers of object removals, deaccessioning in the 1990s reached its highest level, by a considerable margin. The 1990s total of 11,860 deaccessioned objects represents 39% of all objects deaccessioned over the Museum's 100-year history, and over four times the number of objects deaccessioned over the average decade.²¹³ Another departure from past practice is that the Museum now deaccessions predominantly

²⁰⁹ San Francisco Administrative Code, Sec. 28.6, 1989.

²¹⁰ Ibid.

²¹¹ The majority of objects in the "Other" category are recorded as missing.

²¹² The "1990s," in this discussion, encompasses nine and one-half years (January 1990 to July 1999).

²¹³ The numbers in this section include objects with imputed deaccession dates. About 8% (2,491) of deaccessioned objects had no deaccession dates recorded in the collection database; their deaccession dates were imputed in proportion to the other deaccessioned objects in their departments.

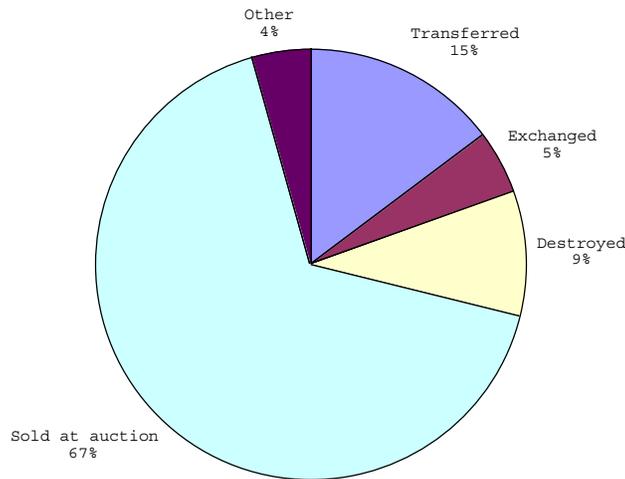


Figure 6.12—Disposal methods for objects deaccessioned from the collection

NOTE: Figure is based on 21,264 deaccessioned objects; 8,870 deaccessioned objects were excluded because no disposal method was recorded in the collection database.

from its active curatorial departments.²¹⁴ In the 1990s, 85% of deaccessioned objects came from the active departments, and only 15% were from the "inactive" collections. These proportions contrast with the pattern prior to 1990, when 47% of deaccessions were from the active departments, and 53% were from the "inactive" collections.

The marked increase in the number of deaccessions - and the Museum's willingness to deaccession from the active departments - distinguish the recent decade from historical trends. Together, these departures from past norms suggest a more accepting posture toward deaccessioning - an attitude confirmed in interviews with Museum staff.

²¹⁴ By "active" departments, I mean the eight curatorial departments (six display collections, two study collections) which the Museum actively develops and curates. These eight departments contrast with the "inactive" departments (mainly, Natural History, History, and Asian Art), which the Museum eliminated from its collecting and curatorial focus.

A closer look into what has been deaccessioned during the 1990s, however, reveals that even *within* the active curatorial departments, about two-thirds of the deaccessioned objects can fairly be characterized as peripheral to the Museum's fine-art focus. This is most clearly seen by looking at the type, or "primary class," of the deaccessioned objects.²¹⁵ Table 6.6 summarizes the most common primary classes of objects deaccessioned from the active collections over the last decade.

Table 6.6
Types of objects deaccessioned in the 1990s from the "active" curatorial departments

Object Type ("Primary Class")	Number of Objects	Percentage of Total
Coins and Medals	6,156	63%
Ceramics	687	7%
Glass	573	6%
Furniture	344	4%
Arms and Armor	288	3%
Sculpture	216	2%
Paintings	212	2%
Prints	184	2%
Costumes	173	2%
Jewelry	166	2%
Other types (combined)	766	8%
TOTAL	9,765	100%

NOTE: The "1990s" covers nine and one-half years (January 1990 to July 1999). Figures exclude 233 deaccessioned objects with no "primary class" recorded in the database, as well as all deaccessioned objects with imputed deaccession dates. Percentages do not add exactly to 100 due to rounding.

²¹⁵ *Primary class* is the term used to classify objects into common types, such as paintings, sculpture, ceramics, lacquer, etc. Most curatorial departments encompass objects of several primary classes.

As Table 6.6 shows, the primary class "Coins and Medals" accounts for 63% of recent deaccessions from the active curatorial departments. Another 3% of deaccessions fall under the primary class "Arms and Armor." (Most of these two classes of objects were from in the Museum's European and American Decorative Arts departments.) Taking these two classes of objects together, 66% of recent deaccessions from the active curatorial departments can arguably be characterized as peripheral to the Museum's current collecting focus.²¹⁶

In total, then, about 71% of the objects deaccessioned in the 1990s may reasonably be deemed "out of scope."²¹⁷ One can assume, therefore, that around 29% (100%-71%) of the 1990s deaccessions were removed from the collection because they were of such low quality (relative to other similar objects in the collection) that they were unlikely to be useful for display, study, or other mission-related purposes. Thus, while the 1990s did boast a higher percentage of deaccessions from the active departments than was typical prior to 1990, this shift does not appear to reflect any marked increase in willingness to deaccession objects for reasons of low quality. This topic will be discussed again, later in this chapter.

How much additional deaccessioning material remains at the Museum?

In interviews with Museum staff, it was difficult to ascertain just how much additional material could be characterized as clear candidates for deaccessioning. (Staff acknowledged that different individuals within the Museum would have very different views on this topic, and it would be difficult to reach a consensus.) An estimate of how many "out of scope" objects remain in the collection, however, follows from the previous discussion. The Museum still holds about 4,100 objects in its

²¹⁶ I say "arguably," since coins, medals, arms, and armor are certainly found in other art museums' decorative arts departments. On the other hand, it is possible that many of the Museum's deaccessioned objects from other primary classes (e.g., Costumes) may also be outside the Museum's current collecting focus.

²¹⁷ The 71% consists of objects from the Museum's "inactive" departments (15%), and objects whose primary class is arguably outside of the Museum's fine-art focus, despite their being part of the active curatorial departments (56%, or 66% times 85%).

"inactive" collections (532 in Asian Art; 3,581 in History).²¹⁸ And there are another approximately 3,800 objects in the Museum's active collections whose primary classes (3,611 Coins or Medals; 183 Arms and Armor) have been dramatically reduced in recent years, suggesting that they may be losing relevance for the Museum.²¹⁹ Museum staff also indicate that there are many additional "out of scope" objects; but since they are found within numerous primary classes, they are not easily distinguishable in a data analysis. Taking all these factors together, it is reasonable to assume that about 6,000 to 9,000 objects fall outside the Museum's current collecting focus, and thus are likely to be deaccessioned in the relatively near term.

It is much more difficult, however, to estimate how many works might be deaccessioned for reasons of low quality, or for a more subtle "lack of relevance" to the collection. It is in this realm that Museum staff differ the most in their assessments. Broadly speaking, there are two main perspectives, voiced by curators and non-curator staff. In general, curators tend to focus on the *potential* uses of objects that are not currently well utilized, and thus see less of a need for deaccessioning. They articulate the importance of "secondary material" in the collection (that is, objects that while not of "display quality," provide context to other artworks, showcase an artist's development, highlight a certain technique, or are otherwise instructive). While the curators acknowledge that large portions of the collection are not being utilized, the more attractive solution in their view is to find ways to increase utilization (say, through collection sharing) than to embark on aggressive deaccessioning. On the other hand, non-curatorial staff tend to focus on the unlikelihood that most underutilized material will ever be utilized by the Museum in a meaningful way. In contrast to curators, other staff rarely speak of the "potential" of underutilized objects, but rather see resource expenditures without a corresponding benefit to the Museum or its public. In their view, there is only so much material

²¹⁸ It is not expected that all objects in these departments will be candidates for deaccessioning.

²¹⁹ These numbers exclude objects that are also in one of the "inactive" departments. And again, it is not expected that all objects from these primary classes will be deaccessioned.

the Museum can make use of, and experience has shown that objects of lower quality simply do not get utilized. Such objects, then, do not belong in the Museum's collection; and if no other viable alternative exists, they should be considered for deaccessioning. Needless to say, these conflicting qualitative statements make it unclear how much deaccessioning will occur in the future.

As was discussed in Chapter 3, the deaccessioning process requires consensus for objects to be removed from the collection. In addition to differing perspectives from Museum staff, members of the Acquisition Committee (who provide recommendations to the Board) and members of the Board (who have the final say on deaccessioning) have their own views on the subject. Deaccessioning is further constrained by the immense amount of staff time and other resources required to comply with the highly rigorous procedures designed to minimize "mistakes." Thus, even where there is agreement on what should be deaccessioned, operating costs present a hurdle that can be difficult to clear. Finally, from a staff member's point of view, it is understandably less exciting to be wading through the storerooms and conducting research on objects about to leave the Museum, than it is to focus on (for example) the next acquisition or exhibition. In addition to being less exciting, deaccessioning is not the type of activity that gets recognized and rewarded as "career building." Rather, for curators, it is the acquisition of artworks or the development of exhibitions that most make one's name in the field. And, in sharp contrast to the goal-setting and benchmarking process the Museum goes through in its acquisition planning (which has the effect of focusing curator attention on such tasks), deaccessioning is conducted without correspondingly specific directives from management or the Board. Without such directives, there is little incentive to spend more time on deaccessioning, especially when so many other demands exist.

Discussion on deaccessions

In recent years the Museum has increased its deaccessioning activity, and if the 1990s prove to be the beginning of a trend (rather than an exception to a century-long pattern), the Museum could see a

moderation of collection size in some departments. There are questions, however, as to whether the deaccessioning level of the 1990s will continue; with most of the "easiest" deaccessions now in the past, the Museum will have to face more difficult decisions if it is to maintain the current deaccessioning pace. That said, it is nevertheless a significant change in practice for the Museum to be moderating collection growth through more aggressive deaccessioning.

Despite the recent trend of deaccessioning more from the "active" curatorial departments, most deaccessioning in the 1990s continued to focus on objects that were clearly "out of scope," or not relevant to the Museum's fine-art focus. The fact that the Museum concentrates its attention on the so-called "low-hanging fruit" is to be expected, and in many ways, represents the most prudent course of action in terms of justifying deaccessions by their mission-relevance.²²⁰ In assessing how likely it is that the current pace of deaccessioning will continue, it becomes relevant to ask two questions: 1) How many more "obvious" deaccessions remain in the collection?; and 2) How likely is it that the next level of objects - those that are less obvious candidates for deaccessioning - will be removed?

That some obvious deaccessions remain is certain; perhaps 6,000 to 9,000 objects fall into this category. The Museum still holds objects from "inactive" departments, collections that the institution has explicitly designated as outside its scope. And there are additional objects, scattered throughout the Museum's active curatorial departments that, similarly, are peripheral to the Museum's current fine-art focus. Not surprisingly, conversations with Museum staff indicate that it will be more difficult to remove objects from the collection, once these more "obvious" deaccessions are processed. Once the issues of "quality" or "relevance" (in a more subtle sense) are broached, the consensus for deaccessioning dissolves; without this consensus, the high hurdles of the deaccessioning process serve to limit the amount of deaccessioning

²²⁰ One could make the argument, however, that other factors should be given consideration as well; for example, the cost of maintaining objects; the objects' likelihood to contribute to *other* institutions' missions; or the revenue potential of objects.

even further. To many in the museum world, this is exactly as it *should* be, and the very reason why deaccessioning procedures are so rigorous. To others, however, such stalemates are evidence that museums' larger collection management goals cannot be attained under the current policy environment.

There are different types of obstacles associated with deaccessioning objects of lesser and greater monetary value. For objects of low monetary value, the expected proceeds from sale at auction may not cover the costs associated with the deaccessioning process - let alone, provide funds for future acquisitions. For some low-value objects, the Museum has avoided this quandary, since its deaccessioning policy allows for the transfer of objects of "little monetary value" to other institutions - a process less cumbersome than deaccessioning through sale. The Museum followed this policy, for example, when it transferred its natural history specimens to local museums. Most of the Museum's non-art objects of nominal value have been deaccessioned already. The bulk of what remains in the "low-value" category are artworks (which may or may not be eligible for transfer, per policy set in the San Francisco Administrative Code).²²¹ While it may well be true that, *over time*, the deaccessioning of low-value objects is indeed cost-effective, in the short-term, staff time and resources are stretched so thin that devoting more time to deaccessioning seems unlikely, absent a new directive.

For objects of greater monetary value, the challenges are different. While the expected proceeds from sale may indeed justify the expense associated with the deaccessioning process, it is much more difficult to convince all interested parties that the more valuable objects do not belong in the collection. On the one hand, curators (who compile the initial list of deaccessioning candidates) are the most likely to find value in artworks in their areas of expertise. Their specialized training enables them to find art historical significance where others cannot, and thus they appreciate the "secondary value" of artworks that may not be suitable for exhibition. Furthermore, the

²²¹ San Francisco Administrative Code, Sec. 28.6, 1989.

possibility of making a "mistake" (i.e., by deaccessioning objects without fully recognizing their value) is a fear that all curators share to some extent. To have curators compile the initial list of deaccessioning candidates, then, is to place the highest hurdle at first leap. Again, this is exactly how deaccessioning procedures are designed to work: It is the industry norm to give curators the first (and therefore, in some cases, final) say as to what merits removal from the permanent collection.

On the other hand, Board members (who review deaccessioning candidates selected by curators) may see in the candidates valuable artworks that are not being utilized. Rather than deaccessioning them, they argue, why not find ways to incorporate them into the Museum's programming? Board members may recognize that certain objects could be popular with the public, even if they are not of high quality from a curatorial perspective. The additional layers of review that the Acquisition Committee and the Board provide are also part of the standard deaccessioning process promoted within the museum industry. The checks and balances of multiple reviews and different perspectives make it less likely that an institution's deaccessions will be regretted in the future. The same checks and balances, of course, also make it less likely that a museum will rid itself of works that it is not utilizing.

Whereas the Museum's 1990s deaccessions were primarily out-of-scope objects, future deaccessioning at the Museum increasingly will have to address questions of quality and more subtle considerations of relevance to the collection. Given the difficulty associated with deaccessioning for reasons of quality, the Museum's 1990s experience may not be the best guide regarding how much deaccessioning might occur in the future.

7. OBSERVATIONS ON ENHANCING COLLECTION UTILIZATION

The organizing framework presented in Chapter 4 described four basic strategies for reducing storage levels and/or increasing the utilization of stored artworks. The first of these strategies - reducing the size of the permanent collection - was explored in depth in the previous chapter. This chapter more briefly examines the other three strategies. These three strategies assume a collection of a given size and modify *other* aspects of museum operations such that the collection sees greater use.

Looking at how existing museum collections can be better utilized - without confronting the sensitive issue of what is the appropriate *size* of those collections - is certainly a less controversial approach to the problem of high storage levels and low utilization rates. As previous chapters have shown, there are deep-rooted cultural and strategic imperatives powering collection growth, and thus changing the status quo in this area would involve a significant shift in museum culture and practice.²²² In addition, some might well contend that it is short sighted to strip the nation's museums of objects, just because they are not being well utilized at the current time. It is arguably part of these institutions' mission to care for these objects until such time that their value can be properly accessed by advancements in technology, institutional cooperation, or by the influx of additional financial resources into the museum sector. Finally, even if a museum *does* reduce the size of its collection to reflect better its capabilities to make use of the objects, there clearly always will be ways to utilize its holdings more (or less) effectively. For these reasons, this study now turns to strategies for enhancing the utilization of a collection of a given size.

Returning to the organizing framework presented earlier, this chapter explores the following three strategies:

²²² There also are economic incentives that fuel collection growth; in particular, the highly favorable tax treatment of donated artworks (see Chapter 3).

- Share the permanent collection with other institutions
- Increase exhibition space for displaying the permanent collection
- Increase public- or researcher-access to objects in the permanent collection, by:
 - increasing the rotation of objects on display
 - providing "open storage" or "study facilities"
 - providing electronic access to the collection

The sections that follow present the Museum's experience with each of the three strategies, along with a discussion of the larger context within which each strategy was pursued. When appropriate, insights from the museum literature also are included. All four strategies for reducing storage and enhancing collection utilization will be discussed again, as a group, in Chapter 8.

SHARE THE PERMANENT COLLECTION WITH OTHER INSTITUTIONS

Approximately 1.4% of the Museum's collection is on loan to other institutions at a single point in time. These loans fall into three main categories: 1) short-term loans to other museums for temporary or travelling exhibitions; 2) short-term loans to government buildings and the offices of San Francisco elected officials; and 3) long-term loans to other institutions (e.g., other museums, schools, government agencies). Short-term loans tend to be for less than two years; long-term loans may extend for over 50 years.

Table 7.1 summarizes the Museum's outgoing loans at a single point in time (July 1999), according to the three categories listed above.²²³ As the numbers in the table indicate, the two short-term loan categories

²²³ The numbers in Table 7.1 and elsewhere in this section are from the Museum's collection database (version: July, 1999). There are 14,151 ambiguously coded records in an adjunct file of the Museum's collection database, known as the "Inactive" file. It is possible that some of these records represent long-term loans or deaccessions; they also may be duplicate or erroneous records, or something else entirely. Because of their ambiguity, these 14,151 records were not included in any analyses in this study. To the extent that some of them represent actual long-term loans, however, the Museum's total number of long-term loans could be much larger than what is shown in Table 7.1.

represent very few objects relative to the total collection (less than one-tenth of one percent), while the long-term loans comprise a larger, yet still small percentage (1.2%).²²⁴ Most of the Museum's objects on loan are of relatively low monetary value; all of the most valuable loans are short-term in duration, and are part of temporary exhibitions.

Table 7.1
Summary of outgoing loan activity (July, 1999)

Loan Category	Duration of Loan	Number of Objects on Loan	Number of Borrowers
Loans for temporary exhibitions	Short-term	86	19
Loans to local government offices	Short-term	39	6
Extended loans to other institutions	Long-term	1,296	31
Other	NA	133	NA
TOTAL		1,554	
Percentage of total collection		1.4%	

NOTE: Most objects in the "Other" category are gifts that temporarily reside at donors' residences. "Short-term" loans tend to be for less than two years; "long-term" loans may be for over 50 years.

Interviews with Museum staff point to three main factors that constrain the use of loans as a means to increase the utilization of the Museum's collection: 1) the cost to the Museum of loaning artworks; 2) the apparent lack of demand from potential borrowers for the objects the Museum would like to loan; and 3) the difficulty the Museum faces in justifying spending scarce resources to serve "publics" outside the Museum's institutional boundaries. Each factor is discussed below.

²²⁴ The small number of short-term loans is, in part, due to the "snapshot" view of loans at one point in time. If viewed over a longer period (say, five or ten years) the number of objects loaned under the "short-term" vs. "long-term" arrangements would begin to converge.

The cost of loaning artworks

The Museum's procedures for loaning artworks are time- and resource-intensive, reflecting industry standards for loans. The process involves a review of the request by a registrar, curator, and conservator; a full reporting of the object's condition prior to loan; a review of the borrower's facilities; arranging insurance; packing the object; arranging transport (sometimes with a courier); and updating administrative records. The procedures are designed to protect artworks from excessive handling, from being exhibited in unsafe venues, from becoming damaged in transport, and in the case where damage occurs, by having contracts and insurance in place.²²⁵

Not surprisingly, the rigorous procedures that serve to minimize risk are costly in terms of staff time, packing materials, shipping expense, and other operating costs. In line with industry practice, the Museum bears a substantial portion of the costs associated with its outgoing loans. While the borrowing institution tends to pay for materials, insurance, shipping costs, and a nominal fee, the Museum absorbs the cost of time spent by curators, registrars, and in some cases, conservators in the processing and preparation of loans. While the Museum has not calculated the exact cost of loaning artworks, staff interviews indicate that cost, nevertheless, is a limiting factor in the Museum's loan decisions. It is simply too costly (given other Museum needs) to contemplate much more collection-sharing than already exists. One staff member, after describing several collection-sharing arrangements the Museum *has* entered into, then turned to the thousands of additional objects that *could*, in theory, be shared with other institutions:

"...[T]here's still the stuff which isn't utilized. And we have come smack up against the wall of institutional costs. We can't service it. Our staff is down to a level where, though we may charge \$150 for a loan fee, it doesn't begin to pay for processing a request. The [artwork] has to be pulled out and photographed, all the registration work...it may have to go to the conservation lab to be examined, get some conservation

²²⁵ For a discussion of museum loan procedures, see: AAM (1998), pp. 177-188; and Malaro (1998), pp. 239-283.

work [done], get some framing repair done - on and on. The curatorial time, the registration time, shipping and receiving time - is massive - for one lousy thing to go out of this building. So the costs, the hidden costs, are tremendous."²²⁶

Lack of demand from potential borrowers

While the Museum receives frequent loan requests for certain "high profile" objects, there is also an apparent lack of interest on the part of potential borrowers for objects that the Museum wants to share with other institutions. One dramatic example is the Museum's Anderson Collection Loan Program, whose purpose is to facilitate sharing of high-quality contemporary prints with smaller museums unable to afford larger traveling exhibitions. The Program lowers the burden to prospective borrowers by streamlining administrative procedures and subsidizing the costs normally borne by the borrower. Despite these accommodations - and the efforts by Museum staff to honor faithfully the mandate of the donor's gift - there has been relatively little interest from potential borrowers. One Museum staff member found it difficult to understand why there is not more demand for such a program:

We've tried to develop a collection-sharing loan network [for the Anderson Collection], we've been pushing this stuff down everybody's throat, and the response has been a mere trickle. [T]o make this happen, we have to spend a lot of time, and practically force this on people. You'd think there would be these little museums out [there], thinking, 'gee, I can get an exhibition of Robert Rauschenberg or Jasper Johns prints' - you'd think that would be a natural. Not happening.²²⁷

In some cases, where the Museum *has* long-term loans in place, the borrowing institution is not actively utilizing the loaned objects. One example is the collection sharing arrangement with the Maryhill Museum in Washington state. Back in 1948, about 50 sculptures, most by the French artist Theodore Riviere, were sent to the Maryhill for an extended loan. Today, Museum staff are concerned that many of these sculptures are in storage at the Maryhill, making the loan of questionable value to the Maryhill - and consequently, difficult to

²²⁶ Source: interviews with Museum staff.

²²⁷ Source: interviews with Museum staff.

justify on the part of the Museum, despite the initial intent. Ironically, because of the high costs associated with a recall of the Maryhill loan (let alone, the cost of finding a new long-term borrower), Museum staff find themselves in the frustrating position of continuing a clearly sub-par arrangement.

In another situation, the Museum found it difficult to find willing borrowers for some of its highest quality objects, made available when the Legion (one of the Museum's two museums) closed for renovation in the mid-1990s. In that case, many works that were normally displayed in the Legion's galleries were packaged into several traveling exhibitions. While a large exhibition was sent to museums in several foreign countries, three smaller shows were targeted for mid-sized California museums. The quality of the smaller shows, according to one Museum curator, was "pretty darn good, with major Rodins in them, major Dutch and Flemish paintings - not Rembrandt, but very important works." Despite the quality of the works - and subsidized borrower fees - it was a challenge to get the smaller exhibitions booked in a sufficient number of California institutions. Only after aggressively marketing the shows to additional museums outside the initial target area ("which is a lot of work, a lot of staff time, a lot of effort") did the smaller shows find enough interested borrowers.

While these examples all point to an apparent lack of demand on the part of borrowers, it is also possible that there *is* demand out there - somewhere - and the Museum just hasn't been able to link up with those institutions that *would* be interested in borrowing. More generally, it may be that the infrastructure is not in place to match interested collection-sharing partners with one another in an efficient manner. The current information infrastructure within the museum industry - as well as the possible lack of demand for collection sharing - will be discussed further in Chapter 8.

Spending scarce resources on "publics" outside the institution's boundaries

Most museums consider their regional community (however geographically defined) to be the primary public served by their institutions. Often this is stated explicitly in museums' mission

statements. Museums also recognize that a large portion of their visitors and a substantial amount of their funding come from the local area. A museum's responsibility to its regional public, while well intentioned and legally grounded,²²⁸ also can serve to limit the institution's willingness to engage in costly collection-related activities that primarily benefit those *outside* its region. When contemplating long-term loans, for example, how does a museum justify absorbing the cost of loaning part of its collection when the benefits of the loan accrue outside its institutional boundaries? Can museums construe their missions broadly enough to encompass "publics" who may never set foot in their museums, or even visit their geographic areas?

One way that the Museum appears to have responded to this tension is by locating most of its long-term loans (and transferred deaccessioned objects) in institutions in San Francisco or other parts of Northern California. Over 90% of the Museum's objects on long-term loan are found in museums or other organizations in Northern California. (And, as was noted in Chapter 6, over 90% of the Museum's deaccessioned objects that were transferred to other institutions went to three museums in San Francisco.) The tendency to share the collection with local institutions, while consistent with the Museum's mission to serve the San Francisco public, also limits the universe of potential partners for collection-sharing arrangements. Clearly, the Museum would more likely find interested borrowers if it were not so regionally focused. On the other hand, given the Museum's cost of loaning artworks, there is a legitimate question whether the expenditure of staff time is appropriate when the beneficiary of the loan is a community outside of the San Francisco area. This topic, too, will be discussed further in Chapter 8.

When several worthy projects compete for the time of Museum staff, the interests of the local community can become the deciding factor. In a conversation about unutilized objects in the Museum's storerooms, staff members were intrigued by the concept of organizing such objects

²²⁸ Museum trustees have a fiduciary obligation to see that the property for which they are responsible serves the public specified in the trust relationship (Malaro 1994, p. 8).

into meaningful long-term loan packages for other institutions ("starter kits," as one staff member put it). But as they contemplated the staff time it would take to assemble and market such "starter kits," the option was deemed unrealistic. Given other, mission-related activities that require time from the Museum's already-overextended curators and registrars, pursuing projects that would primarily benefit other communities could not be justified. One individual poignantly described how dedication to the institution's core mandates (and local public) made other activities, though worthy, out of the question:

The thought that somehow this [unutilized material] could be assembled into a meaningful [package] and [the Director] could...get up and say, 'hey, we did this wonderful thing,' - that has a lot of value to us. That we think beyond our self-interest - that has value to us. But if [the Director] knows, as an administrator, that doing this is totally unfunded, and that's where the curatorial time is going to be spent, the registrars' time, mucking around in this stuff - I think he'd rather [do nothing]. Because what he's giving up is getting that next great acquisition, doing the show that needs to be done, serving the community that he's charged to serve.²²⁹

INCREASE EXHIBITION SPACE FOR THE PERMANENT COLLECTION

The Museum has remodeled and expanded its two museum buildings (the de Young and the Legion) several times over the last 100 years. Despite these expansions, the growth in the Museum's exhibition space has lagged dramatically behind the growth of the Museum's collection. With a complete rebuilding of the de Young scheduled to begin in 2002, an additional 12,500 square feet will be devoted to displaying the permanent collection - an increase of about 19% for Museum overall (i.e., for the de Young and Legion, combined).²³⁰ While the new de Young is greatly anticipated, no one at the Museum believes the additional square footage will close the gap between collection size and exhibition space.

²²⁹ Source: interviews with Museum staff.

²³⁰ The square footage estimate for permanent gallery space in the new de Young is found in FAMSF (1998), Appendix C. Space allocations for the current de Young and the Legion are found in FAMSF (1999b), p. 8.

Staff interviews provide two distinct perspectives on why exhibition space has not increased sufficiently to accommodate collection growth. One explanation centers on the difficulties associated with getting large capital building projects approved; the other suggests that building additional space actually leads to additional collection growth - rather than to an increase in collection utilization. Both of these topics will be addressed below, followed by a discussion of how the Museum allocates and uses existing space within its current sites.

The difficulties associated with expanding current sites

Over a period of several years, the Museum tried repeatedly to gain approval for rebuilding (and expanding) the de Young, and only on the third attempt was it successful. According to press accounts from San Francisco newspapers, a key obstacle to the Museum's plans was the de Young's location in the beloved Golden Gate Park.²³¹ Several well-organized interest groups believed the park's other uses would be diminished by the Museum's proposed development, and they were able to motivate voters to defeat narrowly two successive bond measures that were to finance the project. When the Museum developed alternative plans to build a new museum elsewhere in San Francisco - and allow the existing de Young structure to be used for other purposes - the opposition was just as fierce. Again, members of the public organized; but this time, to keep the de Young in Golden Gate Park. So the Museum devised a third plan, which by foregoing public financing, would avoid the associated need to get a bond measure passed. By raising private funds, and negotiating numerous design elements, the Museum finally obtained approvals for a new de Young in Golden Gate Park.

While the particulars of the Museum's experience are undoubtedly unique, the increasingly powerful role of local interest groups in the development process is a nationwide phenomenon. To expand current sites (or build new ones) inevitably involves political organizing - not to

²³¹ Some of the information in this section comes from several articles from *The San Francisco Chronicle* and *The San Francisco Examiner*, dating from October 1997 through June 1998.

mention fundraising, design negotiations, and land use approvals. These challenges help explain why growth in exhibition space lags behind growth in collections.

Does the collection simply grow to fill any increase in space?

Notwithstanding the genuine difficulties associated with expanding current museum sites, another explanation for the mismatch between collection size and exhibition space is that an anticipated increase in space leads to its own measure of collection growth - in effect, canceling out the opportunity for increased space to enhance collection utilization. While on the one hand, the decision to expand sites is rationalized by the need to alleviate existing space constraints (determined, in large part, by the current collection size), on the other hand, the prospect of additional space is used to justify collection growth.

The following excerpt from an interview with one Museum staff member helps illustrate "the chicken-and-the-egg" relationship between increasing physical space and increasing collection size. The staff member is responding to my question: Will the various departmental collections eventually reach an "equilibrium size" (i.e., where new acquisitions are matched in number by deaccessions), or will they continue to grow indefinitely?

It's partly a factor of the physical plant. At the Legion, we're pretty full: The galleries are full, there's not much dead space on the walls.

[W]ith the new de Young Museum coming on line, however, that would massively increase space for certain parts of the collection, and we would see those collections at the de Young growing very energetically. So American Art (especially, modern art), Textiles, Oceania, etc.

[T]he area at the Legion that probably always will continue to grow strongly is [Prints and Drawings] - probably until we reach a real crisis point. There may be a point out there in the future when we say, 'this has gotten to be such a huge mountain of material - I mean, how much can we really use, realistically?' Or we may say, 'we've got the [new] de Young, and we're going to shift all the American works on paper to the de Young, and that frees up space [at the Legion]. [Then]

both [American and non-American works on paper] would be able to grow at a rapid pace.

It differs from collection to collection. If we had a much bigger Legion, the European Paintings collection still wouldn't grow much, but Decorative Arts - there's an area where people are out there and willing to give us something, and it probably would grow faster if the building were bigger.²³²

The point here is not to question the wisdom of tying higher growth rates for particular collections to the larger space allocations for those collections; but rather, to suggest that increasing space (without changing acquisition or deaccessioning practices) will not necessarily lead to enhanced collection utilization.

Using space differently within current sites

The Museum has experimented with different ways of using the existing space within its sites in an effort to better accommodate its collection and programmatic needs. For example, administrative offices were moved out of the museum buildings and into a leased space in downtown San Francisco. This move freed up space for other museum functions for which co-location with the collection was more essential. The Museum also leases off-site warehouse space where it stores publications, exhibition furniture, and some collection objects.

While these two leases effectively allocate more on-site museum space for functions related to core museum activities (including, but not limited to, the display of the permanent collection), the dispersal of staff, equipment, and other materials among four locations has its costs. Not only are there the obvious rental payments, utilities, insurance, and so forth, but staff spend significant periods of time driving from one location to another. Communication and collaboration among staff members is also challenged because face-to-face meetings are more difficult to arrange.

For the Museum to devote even more space to the display of its permanent collection would mean restricting the amount of space for

²³² Source: interviews with Museum staff.

other functions that have their own convincing rationales for being on-site. Consider, for example, the substantial portion of gallery space set aside for traveling exhibitions. Currently, the Museum allocates 30% of its gallery space to temporary shows, while 70% goes towards displaying the permanent collection.²³³ Traveling shows are key to attracting visitors, and draw in considerable revenues in associated admission fees and other spending. On a related point, the Museum's gift shops and restaurants (which these days, are expected on-site museum amenities) also contribute revenue while they occupy valuable space. Another 18,400 square feet, or approximately 7% of the interior square footage in the two museum buildings, are dedicated to on-site storage.²³⁴ On-site storage has the benefit of facilitating staff access to the collections; and since museums tend to install higher-quality climate control and security systems in their on-site facilities, on-site storage offers enhanced artwork preservation and security. Finally, a certain amount of on-site space must be allocated to building operations, maintenance, and security; and of course, the curatorial, registration, conservation, and education staff all have work space that enables them to be co-located with the objects for which they are responsible.

Another space-usage question concerns how densely objects are displayed within the galleries. Clearly, more of the permanent collection could be exhibited if objects were displayed closer together. Conventions regarding museum display have evolved over time, and among other changes, today's museums tend to exhibit fewer objects per square foot than did museums of past centuries (Duncan 1995). Exhibition design, a relatively new specialty within the museum profession, draws from research into topics such as visual perception and visual communication, and from museum visitor studies. Whether or not there is any support for increasing the density of exhibitions would depend on

²³³ FAMSF (1999b), p. 8.

²³⁴ Another 5,000 square feet of collection storage is located off-site. Plans for the new de Young include an additional 6,300 square feet of collection storage

the input of exhibition designers, curators, museum educators, and others.

In summary, increasing exhibition space for the permanent collection is not a straightforward strategy for enhancing collection utilization. In pursuing such a strategy, the Museum has had to contend with organized opposition against expanding current sites, the tendency of collection growth to increase in response to anticipated museum expansions, several competing demands for on-site museum space, and the trend towards less dense displays in exhibition design. While these obstacles represent real challenges, the Museum would be well served to address a more fundamental issue: How much exhibition space would it ideally want for its permanent collection? In other words, to what extent are current space limitations preventing the Museum from exhibiting what it otherwise would, and to what extent does the Museum believe that works not exhibited today, wouldn't be, whatever the space available?

INCREASE PUBLIC- OR RESEARCHER-ACCESS TO OBJECTS IN THE PERMANENT COLLECTION

This final section explores the Museum's experience with three approaches to increasing public- or researcher-access to objects usually found in storage. The three approaches, to be discussed in turn, are: 1) increase the rotation of objects on display; 2) provide "open storage" or "study facilities"; and 3) provide electronic access to the collection.

Increase the rotation of objects on display

The Museum routinely rotates some of its objects on display. Thus, while the Museum has only 2.5% of its collection on view at any point in time, over a period of many years, the percentage is much larger. Exactly how much of the Museum's collection is exhibited over, say, five, ten, or twenty years, is difficult to determine. The Museum's collection database includes some tracking of object movement; to date, however, this information is neither comprehensive nor reliable.²³⁵

²³⁵ Source: interviews with Museum staff.

Museum staff were, however, able to characterize the institution's collection rotation policy in a more qualitative sense.

Conceptually, it is important to consider two portions of the collection separately. First, there are those objects whose sensitivity to light and other environmental conditions requires that they be displayed for only limited amounts of time. The Museum's most sensitive objects are concentrated in the Textiles, and Prints and Drawings departments; thus, when objects from these departments are exhibited, they remain on display for a period of only months before they are returned to the Museum's storerooms. (As noted in earlier chapters, these two departments happen also to make up the Museum's study collections.)

Second, there are the objects that are not particularly sensitive to environmental conditions, and consequently, do not require frequent rotation to comply with industry preservation standards. These less-sensitive objects are concentrated in the Museum's display collections (i.e., all curatorial departments besides Textiles, and Prints and Drawings).²³⁶ For the display collections, then, the pace of object rotation is governed by other factors. In interviews with Museum staff, two factors seemed most important in determining collection rotation within the display collections: the Museum's "exhibition philosophy," and the cost of mounting (and dismounting) exhibits. Both of these factors, as will be discussed below, effectively limit the amount of object rotation in the display collections.

Exhibition philosophy and collection rotation

By *exhibition philosophy*, I mean the choices a museum makes (and the rationale underlying those choices) when it decides which objects from the permanent collection to display in its galleries. In concept, curators face a continuum of choice in creating a museum's exhibits.²³⁷ At one extreme, curators could select what they felt were the most

²³⁶ I am generalizing here, since some objects in the display collections are fragile (or otherwise compromised) and cannot be exhibited for extended periods.

²³⁷ This discussion refers to the display collections; specifically, objects that may be safely exhibited on an unlimited basis.

important objects from the collection, and place them on permanent display. The rationale of this approach is that visitors should be able to see the best of the collection, whenever they come to the museum.²³⁸ At the other end of the spectrum, the museum's curators could choose to continually rotate the objects on view, emphasizing variety. The rationale, in this case, is that breadth of exposure would provide a more valuable experience than would a narrower focus on fewer (though, higher quality) objects.

While the Museum's actual exhibition philosophy lies between these two extremes, it is perhaps more accurate to consider different segments of the collection separately - each of which might be fairly placed at a different point along the continuum. Conversations with Museum staff indicate that the display collection objects fall into three or four basic groupings, that range from one end of the exhibition continuum to the other. These groupings are summarized below.²³⁹

Not surprisingly, many of the finest objects in the collection are on almost-permanent display. Except when removed for conservation treatments, for exhibition loans to other institutions, or for other specific reasons, these artworks remain on view. Because of their quality, these artworks are never "rotated out" simply to offer variety to the visiting public. There is a second segment of the collection which makes up the pool from which changing exhibits are formed, and from which replacements are drawn when a regularly displayed object is removed. These objects, one might argue, would be more regularly displayed if there were more exhibition space available. Some staff members indicated that there is a third segment of objects that are displayed only on very rare occasions, when the particular theme of a

²³⁸ Of course, this assumes that there is a clear hierarchy of quality - a notion that some dispute, especially as it applies to objects from cultures outside the Western-museum tradition. For essays on exhibitions representing a variety of cultures, see: Karp and Lavine, eds., (1991).

²³⁹ Some staff members spoke of three groups rather than four (combining the second and third into one). In all cases these discussions were conceptual, and did not involve any precise segmentation of the collection into mutually exclusive exhibition groupings.

special exhibit makes the objects especially relevant. Finally, there is a fourth group of objects that are not considered for display at all, usually because their quality is considerably below that of other similar objects in the collection, or because they have primarily "scholarly," rather than "display," value.²⁴⁰ Each of these four groups, then, has a different rate of exhibition (based on its rotation cycle). Together, the varying exhibition rates of the distinct segments of the collection reflect the Museum's general philosophy about the appropriate mix of quality and variety, roughly speaking.²⁴¹

While Museum staff agreed that collection objects fall into distinct groups according to their appropriateness for exhibition, they also emphasized that to achieve a consensus about which objects belong in each group would be next to impossible. Some observed that this tension prevents the Museum from making difficult choices associated with managing its collection. For this very reason, however, it would be worthwhile for the Museum to estimate the size of these different segments (i.e., in numbers of objects), and the exhibition rate of each segment (i.e., based on how frequently - and for how long - objects in each segment are displayed). If the Museum were to have this information, it could begin to evaluate how much different portions of the collection are contributing to the Museum's display mission, under current usage. If the cost of storage (for the same time period) were also included, the Museum would have a starting point for a benefit-cost analysis.²⁴² Table 7.2 illustrates how exhibition rates could be calculated for a hypothetical set of six groups of objects with varying exhibition (rotation) schedules.

²⁴⁰ Objects with "scholarly" value usually provide some type of context for better understanding other objects in the collection. For example, certain objects may help track the development of an artistic trend, or showcase the range of a particular artistic technique.

²⁴¹ In addition to the Museum's decisions regarding the display of its permanent collection, the Museum's exhibition philosophy also involves the choice of which traveling exhibitions to book at the institution.

²⁴² I say "starting point," since there are other aspects of the Museum's mission that should be taken into account, as well.

Table 7.2

Hypothetical calculation of exhibition rates for different portions of the collection

Number of Objects	Average Length of Exhibit	Frequency of Exhibit	Months of Exhibition per Decade	Exhibition Rate per Decade
???	Permanent	Permanent	120	100%
???	12 months	Every 2 years	60	50%
???	6 months	Every 5 years	12	10%
???	6 months	Every 10 years	6	5%
???	6 months	Every 20 years	3	3%
???	None anticipated	None anticipated	0	0%

How much of the Museum's collection the public really *wants* to see, is another issue that staff grapple with as they contemplate how deeply to draw from their storerooms. One staff member observed that special exhibits drawn from the Museum's own permanent collection just haven't generated the same attendance (or revenue) as traveling shows that stop in San Francisco. To some extent, this may be a function of quality; many traveling shows, with huge budgets financed by corporate sponsors and booking fees of several museums, include prized objects from several different museums and private collections, and dedicate considerable resources to accompanying catalogs, audioguides, merchandising, and so forth. But there also seems to be a bit of human nature at play, as objects from the home institution just don't seem as special as those transported in from elsewhere. One Museum staff member referred to a curator's wry complaint, that if two *identical* exhibitions were assembled - one advertised as "Durer from the Permanent Collection," and the other as "Durer from the Queen's Collection," only the Queen's exhibition would be well attended. As the staff member summed up: "That's just the way it is. There's the tyranny of the new, the tyranny of the unknown, the tyranny of the 'just visiting.' It's inescapable."²⁴³

²⁴³ Source: interviews with Museum staff.

The cost of collection rotation

A second major deterrent to increased rotation of displays is the cost associated with the installation and de-installation of exhibits. Driven by the overriding concern to minimize the risk of damaging artworks, the procedures for preparing, moving, and installing artworks are very time-intensive and involve highly-trained staff. The exhibits themselves frequently involve the construction of special cases, mounts, and other fixtures designed to protect the objects while maximizing their visibility in the exhibition. Prints and other works on paper (which are stored in sheet form) must be matted and framed. The gallery lighting must be adjusted to reflect the illumination standards appropriate for the objects, as well as highlight the exhibits. And of course, there are labels and other accompanying exhibit materials to prepare. All of this takes place after the initial investment of curator time into the selection of works for the exhibit, and the writing of accompanying exhibit materials. And to track the whole process, registrars and other personnel update administrative records.

Given these costs, it is not surprising that a substantial number of stored artworks never make it out to the galleries. With a compelling connoisseurship argument for keeping the highest quality objects on view - and public indifference to exhibitions drawn from more obscure corners of the storerooms - the cost of exhibit installation is just one more factor limiting the rotation of objects on display.

Provide "open storage" or "study facilities"

"Open storage" facilities enable the public to view a museum's stored objects by housing them in glassed-in shelves, drawers, or other transparent, yet secured, arrangements. While the Museum does not have such open storage facilities for public viewing, it does have facilities that enable researchers to access stored objects more easily for study purposes. One of the Museum's study collections (Prints and Drawings) has a dedicated facility where scholars can comfortably examine objects for research purposes. The Museum's other study collection (Textiles)

will have its own study facility in a few years, after the new de Young Museum is built.²⁴⁴

The goal of improving researcher access to those collections that were built to further scholarly research, certainly seems like an appropriate alignment of resources with mission. It nevertheless is worth asking, to what extent (and how) does such dedicated space within the museum site actually facilitate research, beyond what might occur under a different arrangement? For example, is the advantage of such facilities that they provide ideal space, lighting, and equipment, for careful examination? Is it the ease with which multiple objects can be viewed at the same time? Is it the proximity to the Museum's curators, conservators, or other professional staff with whom the visiting scholar can interact? Are advances in digital imaging technology making the need for physical examination of objects less important for some research purposes? These questions are important to answer because, after determining what exactly is needed to promote the goal of enhanced research, the Museum can consider if other arrangements might be acceptable - such as creating off-site study facilities - in order to free up scarce space at the public-oriented museum buildings.

Provide electronic access to the collection

The Internet and other computer-based technologies are changing the ways museums operate and deliver services, as is the case throughout our society. While it is beyond the scope of this study to examine the many issues raised by electronic media's penetration into the museum world, what follows are a few observations (drawn from discussions with Museum staff) on how such technology might impact thinking and practice regarding collection storage and utilization.²⁴⁵

The Museum's embrace of digital technology has led to several avenues for enhanced access to the collection. The Museum's web site

²⁴⁴ These study facilities, with their dedicated space and streamlined administrative procedures, go beyond the typical accommodation that museums make for requests by scholars to examine objects in storage.

²⁴⁵ Those interested in this topic can find several references at the American Association of Museums' bookstore, in the "Technology" section, accessible online at: <http://www.aam-us.org>.

features a searchable database containing images and textual information on over 75,000 objects in the permanent collection.²⁴⁶ In addition to its own institutional web site, the Museum makes its collection electronically available through the Art Museum Image Consortium (AMICO), a digital library which pools images and textual information from museum collections throughout North America. Educational institutions, public libraries, and other museums license the AMICO library for use as an educational tool. By combining the collections of several museums, AMICO allows users to search for information without being confined by the institutional boundaries of any one museum's permanent collection.²⁴⁷ Finally, the Museum has installed electronic kiosks in some of its galleries; these kiosks encourage visitors to pull up electronic images of objects not on view, and provide other collection-related information.

In these ways, electronic media has altered the previously sharp distinction between objects on view and objects in storage. Even more than books and catalogues, online technology allows the Museum to overcome the constraints of gallery space in its effort to share its collection more broadly. To the online visitor, the fact that the bulk of the Museum's collection is in storage is inconsequential.

That electronic access to the Museum's collection is a boon for the public and researchers seems beyond dispute. It is more difficult, however, to measure the actual effects of such access on the Museum's constituencies. The Museum tracks visits to its online image database as one measure of its reach. Museum staff also report increased loan inquiries - especially for objects not usually requested - as an indicator that more of the collection is becoming known due to online access. In a collaborative effort, the AMICO digital library consortium (of which the Museum is a founding member) is researching how its image library is being used by colleges, universities, and school libraries

²⁴⁶ The database, known as "The Thinker ImageBase," can be accessed on the web at: <http://www.famsf.org/fam/thinker.html>.

²⁴⁷ For more information about AMICO, including a list of its museum members, see: <http://www.amico.org/>.

throughout the country, with the goal of better serving the educational community in the future.

Nevertheless, the basic questions of exactly what electronic access "supplies" to the public - and what part of the traditional museum experience remains to be supplied by other means - are still unanswered. Like elsewhere in society, museums are incorporating new technologies in their delivery of service, while the state of knowledge about the technologies' effects lags behind. In the meantime, the Museum is embracing electronic media, confident that what it provides is positive, even if not fully understood.

Digital technology is influencing the thinking of Museum staff in several ways beyond measuring public access. Some staff members spoke about the "use value" of objects, which now includes how well their essences are captured by photography and then reproduced on the Internet. The Museum's study collection of Prints and Drawings, for example, has a high "reproducibility ratio," whereas its collection of arrowheads has a lower one. Advances in technology may shrink these differences in the future; but for now, the ability of the Museum to serve its constituencies through digital transmissions is more successful with some portions of the collection than with others.

The staff has begun to grapple with some of the operational implications of improved digital technology. For example, one staff member mused that to the extent an object is well represented by photography, it is easier to justify its location in off-site storage since some of the more routine visual tasks could be handled using the image database. Others noted that curators are now using the collection database to create exhibitions, conducting keyword searches to generate ideas for thematic shows not previously envisioned.

In terms of both coverage and reach, electronic access is a promising option for enhancing collection utilization at the Museum. The Museum already has about 70% of its collection accessible on its web site, and should reach 100% coverage in the near future. The Museum's participation in the AMICO digital library consortium targets another constituency: schools and libraries that offer access to image databases as an educational tool. As more of the world gains Internet

access, increasing numbers of people will be able to enjoy the Museum's collection in a virtual fashion.

Notwithstanding these welcome developments, a central question remains: What should be done with the *physical* objects? The physical objects, despite being available electronically, still reside in the Museum's storerooms, with the attendant costs - and the possibility that they might do more good if physically utilized in an alternative fashion.

8. WHAT KEY ISSUES MUST ART MUSEUMS ADDRESS IF THEY ARE TO IMPROVE COLLECTION UTILIZATION?

The previous two chapters presented the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco's experience with several strategies for reducing storage and/or increasing the utilization of stored artworks. Except in the area of electronic access, the Museum has had only modest success in achieving its own goals of clearing its storerooms of unwanted objects and more effectively utilizing the artworks that it maintains in storage. The discrepancy between the Museum's commitment to enhanced collection utilization and its limited success in achieving that goal, highlights the difficulty associated with changing the status quo. The gap between what is attractive in concept and what is feasible in practice appears to be substantial in today's museum environment. It is this very gap that must be understood if effective policies are to be found to enhance collection utilization.

While previous chapters discussed each of the strategies separately, emphasizing the particular factors that complicate each strategy's implementation, this final chapter raises the discussion to broader themes - and to an industry level: What key issues must art museums address, if they are to utilize their collections more effectively? The rest of this chapter has two sections. The first section presents and discusses six key obstacles to enhancing collection utilization, drawing from the case study, the museum literature, and the theoretical perspectives presented in Chapter 2. In exploring these obstacles, it becomes clear that altering current levels of collection storage and utilization requires fundamental - and in many cases, industry-wide - changes in practice and policy. The second section poses and discusses several questions to help structure further debate about collection utilization in art museums. In both sections, the discussion focuses on industry-level issues; however, I also point out where individual museums (or society at large) may have interests in tension with those of the museum industry as a whole.

KEY OBSTACLES TO ENHANCING COLLECTION UTILIZATION

This study revealed six overarching obstacles that museums face in their efforts to reduce storage levels and/or increase the utilization of stored artworks. These obstacles cut across particular strategies, and range from the very practical (e.g., cost) to the more attitudinal (e.g., professional culture). The following issues will be discussed, in turn:

- The museum missions *to preserve* and *to study* (and the professional norms behind them) help rationalize high storage levels and low collection utilization rates
- Museums' organizational procedures and incentives fuel collection growth, rather than regulate collection size
- A museum that breaks with inefficient (but accepted) industry practices faces the risk of upsetting potential artwork donors and damaging the institution's longer-term prospects
- Most strategies for enhancing collection utilization strain operating budgets in the near-term, even if they provide relief in the long-term
- The museum industry's infrastructure is inadequate for cost-effectively engaging in some strategies for enhancing collection utilization
- Certain strategies that promise broader public benefits are in tension with more localized aspects of museum missions and responsibilities

The museum missions *to preserve* and *to study* (and the professional norms behind them) serve to rationalize high storage levels and low collection utilization rates

With multiple missions, museums are able to pursue a wide variety of activities and justify them as mission-related. Recall the five traditional missions of museums: *to collect, to preserve, to study, to exhibit, and to interpret* important objects. The broad territory covered by these missions makes it difficult to reject courses of action by virtue of them being *not* mission-relevant. This murkiness

contributes, at the highest level, to art museums' tendencies to over-collect, to retain works that are not being utilized, and to accept low collection utilization as a natural result of museum pursuits. In particular, the research and preservation missions serve to rationalize high storage levels and low collection utilization rates.

As the case study showed, "study collections" assembled for research purposes can easily grow to great size. The more inclusive collecting goals associated with study collections justify high rates of acquisitions and low rates of deaccessions. The larger size of research collections is not a problem in and of itself; larger collections offer breadth and depth in a particular area, allowing scholars to study subtle relationships among objects, artists, and time periods. But breadth and depth as collecting goals are, by definition, limitless, and without additional objectives regarding the *utilization* of study collections, such collections will grow until some other, external constraint presents itself. A related point is the need to define better the uses and value of "secondary material" - the term sometimes used to characterize objects whose purpose is not primarily for display.

The research mission also can rationalize the acquisition and retention of objects in "display collections," which are oriented towards museums' exhibition mission. The fact that both the exhibition mission and the research mission apply to the same objects is, of course, wholly justified: Clearly, objects acquired for display are also likely to be important for research purposes; and other objects, *not* acquired for display, can provide valuable context for curators in the creation of exhibitions. Despite these legitimate overlaps, it is easy to see how a rather large number of objects can fall into a "gray area" where the mission justification is not especially compelling. Objects whose retention cannot be justified by the display mission alone, are more easily rationalized when the broader research mission (which can value objects for many different reasons) is considered. Add to this, the fact that the people acquiring the objects (or deciding to retain those already acquired) are primarily curators, who, by training

and disposition, are most likely to see and appreciate the research value of objects.²⁴⁸

The preservation mission offers its own challenges to the museum that wishes to increase its rate of collection utilization. Not only is there the inherent conflict between displaying and preserving objects (i.e., for many objects, the environmental conditions of gallery exhibitions accelerate deterioration), but the *institutionalization* of the preservation mission has resulted in procedures that effectively limit utilization because of the high cost of compliance with such rules. For example, the rotation of objects in a museum's own galleries is limited, in part, by the costs associated with risk-minimizing procedures for moving and installing artworks. Similarly, collection sharing is limited, in part, by the cost of object-preparation and transport procedures designed to minimize the risk to artworks. (The preservation mission limits collection sharing in other ways, too; for example, by excluding potential borrowers because they do not meet the security and environmental standards by which the loaning institution abides.) The risk of damage to artworks is also cited by some as a reason not to deaccession.

Museum accreditation - along with other programs of the museum industry's professional associations - has been key to institutionalizing numerous procedures that have advanced practices from earlier days when objects were inadvertently damaged through excessive exposure or by other means. Ironically, though, the museum industry's success in institutionalizing preservation-oriented procedures has resulted in protocols so rigorous that only a limited number of utilization opportunities are affordable for today's museums. In this way, the philosophical tension between the missions *to exhibit* and *to preserve*, has had a perverse operational incarnation: Most museum objects are displayed far less than even the strictest preservationists would recommend.

²⁴⁸ As was noted in Chapter 6, board members, also, are involved in the deaccessioning process and sometimes prevent the Museum from getting rid of objects the curators feel are not adding sufficiently to the institution's mission.

Museums' organizational procedures and incentives fuel collection growth, rather than monitor collection size

The case study of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco highlighted some of the ways in which organizational incentives conspire to fuel collection growth. While *collection growth* (in terms of number of objects) was not an explicit goal for the Museum, *collection development* (in terms of quality), most certainly was. The problem is, the pursuit of collection development - without having mechanisms in place to limit the size of the collection - results in a collection simultaneously growing in quality *and* quantity (and increasingly residing in storerooms).

Using monetary value as a proxy for quality, the Museum set annual monetary goals for its collection development efforts in each curatorial department.²⁴⁹ Object *quantity* benchmarks, however, were not central to the planning process. For example, object-count benchmarks were not employed to limit the amount of acquisitions, nor as targets for annual deaccessions per department, nor in more subtle (yet revealing) ways, such as whether the median object value is increasing or decreasing with the increase in total collection value (an indicator that could have helped capture the influx of substantial numbers of low-value objects). The point is not that object counts should replace quality measures as the best way to plan for and track collection development, but rather, that without more attention given to object counts, museums are unlikely to limit (or decrease) the size of their collections. Art museums throughout the country conduct their collection development programs in ways similar to the Museum's. If these art museums were to set goals for the ideal *size* of their various departments, and track object counts as part of their benchmarking and monitoring, they would be in a better position to control their collection growth.

Other aspects of the Museum's acquisition and deaccessioning procedures furthered collection growth at the expense of other institutional goals, such as cost containment or increased utilization.

²⁴⁹ The Museum also identified specific types of artworks that would enhance each department's collection; hence, monetary value served as only one metric for "quality."

As is standard in the museum industry, the Museum's criteria for both acquisition and deaccession decisions are mostly related to an object's value and relevance to the collection. While these are central to collection development, there are other criteria, which, if more formally considered, would allow museums to pursue a rate of collection growth more in line with their resources and ability to utilize their objects. For example, the following questions would bring a more practical dimension to acquisition and deaccession decisions:

- How much time is this object likely to be exhibited over the next five, ten, or 20 years?
- How is this object likely to be utilized in other ways (e.g., for research or collection sharing) over the next five, ten, or 20 years?
- What is the maintenance cost associated with this object over the next five, ten, or 20 years?

By including utilization estimates and maintenance costs in decisions on whether to acquire or deaccession objects, museums would be incorporating information that helps refine the question from: Does this object have value for/relevance to the collection?, to: Does this object have *enough* value and relevance to justify its entrance into (or retention within) the collection? To gain more control over collection growth, not only would procedures at the staff level need to incorporate additional budgetary and utilization information, but such matters would need to become the concern of museum boards - particularly of their Acquisition Committees, which oversee acquisitions and deaccessions. Perhaps the label, "Acquisition Committee," should be revised to reflect broader responsibilities.

A museum that breaks with inefficient (but accepted) industry practices faces the risk of upsetting potential artwork donors and damaging the institution's longer-term prospects

The museum world is well aware of inefficiencies in its acquisition and deaccessioning practices. The tendency to over-acquire from private collectors (in order to ensure that a smaller number of truly prized

objects are obtained) is accepted as "a cost of doing business" by those who know how dependent museums are on artwork donations to develop their collections. The thinking is this: A museum that declines to accept all of the objects offered by a private collector, risks losing that key relationship (and any future donations) to other museums who stick with tradition and accept the larger gift. While all museums would be better off if they *collectively* agreed to limit their acquisitions to objects they genuinely intend to utilize, any one museum that initiates this new behavior runs the risk of being worse off if the other "players" do not abide by the "new rules."²⁵⁰

Some of museums' reluctance to deaccession, similarly, is based on not wanting to alienate potential donors of artwork. Museums limit how much they deaccession, in part, out of fear that future donors will be less inclined to give their collections to a museum that aggressively deaccessions. Again, it is how a particular museum compares to others that drives this behavior: If all museums were to abide by more liberal deaccessioning standards, any one museum would not be at a comparative disadvantage.

The idea that museums, collectively, could be better off if their acquisition and deaccession decisions were less geared toward donor accommodation, argues for an industry-wide approach to reform. This topic will be discussed again, later in the chapter.

Most strategies for enhancing collection utilization strain operating budgets in the near-term, even if they provide relief in the long-term

Perhaps the most practical (and pervasive) obstacle to achieving enhanced collection utilization is the short-term cost associated with strategies that promise a longer-term solution. For example, collection sharing requires up-front negotiations, object preparation, packing, transport, and other costly procedures. Deaccessioning, too, is a protracted and meticulous process, demanding considerable time from high-level staff and board members. Collection rotation requires its own specialized staff and equipment to properly shift objects in and out

²⁵⁰ This assumes that private donors would not react by withholding their largess so much as to make *all* museums worse off. Whether or not this is true is an open question.

of storage, and to create the displays for every new exhibition. Electronic access involves up-front expenditures to create digital images of collection objects, and to design web sites or other interfaces.

While there are several types of expenses that make these activities costly, the most constraining element appears to be the time demands on key staff. It comes down to a very basic decision: Does an overworked curator (or registrar, or other staff member) spend his or her time on x, y, or z? If there's time for only one, then the other two - however worthy - fall by the wayside. One might argue that more staff (in certain key positions) would help relieve the bottleneck; or, alternatively, one could argue that current staff should be encouraged to make different choices. For this to happen, it would be necessary to look at the reasons why staff members make the decisions they make, and devise ways to communicate other institutional objectives or create incentives that would make other behaviors more attractive.

Beyond recognizing the general bottleneck of operating costs, several questions are worthy of further consideration. For example: Are some costs easier to minimize than others? Should the museum industry reconsider some of the policies that are driving the costs? Should operating budgets be reallocated (or foundation- or government-support redirected) to reduce the blockages? And, what can be done regarding the problem of timing, where costs tend to be borne up-front, while benefits accrue on a longer-term basis?

The museum industry's infrastructure is inadequate for cost-effectively engaging in some strategies for enhancing collection utilization

A substantial portion of the costs associated with implementing collection utilization strategies is due to the inadequate infrastructure for engaging in certain types of museum transactions. The lack of good information (one aspect of infrastructure) is especially problematic for museums interested in collection sharing or museum-to-museum deaccessioning, because such transactions require matching very specific needs of potential partners, and several factors must be in sync for the arrangement to be mutually attractive. As the case study showed, without adequate infrastructure in place, Museum

staff can spend what seems to them to be excessive time trying to arrange successful transactions, or they simply may not pursue such opportunities, believing that they are not cost-effective.

Museums only recently have begun to computerize their collection records, and many still face backlogs in cataloging their collections. Many museums have objects in their collections for which no records exist, or if they do exist, they often are inaccurate or missing key information. Even museums that *have* computerized collection management systems in place, may not have fully integrated the information into collection-related operations, either because of resistance from some staff members to use the information systems, or because procedures have not yet evolved fully to take advantage of the power of better information.

While museums work to address these collection information issues *within* their institutions, they are only beginning to address ways of providing access to collection information *across* institutions. It is increasingly common for museums to offer some collection information on their web sites, but such images and documentation are geared toward the general public, rather than to other museum professionals who might be interested in long-term loans or a museum-to-museum sale of a deaccession candidate.²⁵¹ Currently, museum web sites do not list which objects the museum would like to deaccession, nor which would be available for collection-sharing.²⁵² And the ability to search the collections of many museums at once - which would greatly increase the efficiency of locating an attractive match - is not an option at the moment.

This lack of infrastructure has been addressed, to some extent, by the programs of the Museum Loan Network, an organization created to

²⁵¹ This is not to say that museum professionals do not sometimes identify objects of interest on other institutions' web sites and initiate a transaction. In the case study, for example, Museum staff noticed a marked increase in loan requests (especially for lesser-known works) after its image database was made available on its web site.

²⁵² An exception is the National Park Service, which operates a deaccessioning web site for the various properties under its jurisdiction. See: <http://www.cr.nps.gov.csd/>.

enhance collection utilization among museums.²⁵³ The Museum Loan Network (MLN) encourages long-term object loans between museums by providing centralized information on objects from dozens of museums, and offering targeted grants to facilitate the implementation of such loans. With a centralized database of objects available for loan, potential borrowers are able to search efficiently for desired objects, and potential lenders simply post their objects in the database, and let interested museums contact them. Other "bottlenecks" in the collection sharing process are ameliorated by MLN's programs of targeted grants which cover travel costs, conservation costs, and other expenses associated with the loan transaction. MLN's inventory grant program addresses another obstacle to collection sharing: the up-front costs faced by collection-rich museums in identifying and inventorying objects from their collections that they would be willing to loan on a long-term basis.

The Museum Loan Network is an excellent model for an information system that can increase the probability of matching suitable partners and reduce the transaction costs associated with collection sharing. To date, however, only a small number of objects are listed on the database (approximately 6,000, as of early 2001)²⁵⁴, representing less than 0.001% of the objects in art museum storerooms at a given time. Until the potential of MLN's information infrastructure is exploited, this particular endeavor cannot be expected to have a large, industry-wide impact. (There is also a question regarding the *demand* for collection sharing, a topic addressed later in the chapter.)

For a variety of reasons, there is currently no counterpart to the Museum Loan Network for potential museum-to-museum deaccessions. First, as was discussed in earlier chapters, deaccessioning is a sensitive topic in the museum world, and the prospect of featuring deaccessioned objects on a web site would likely concern those who feel the public

²⁵³ The Museum Loan Network has been active since the mid-1990s. MLN is sponsored by the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation and the Pew Charitable Trusts, and is operated by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. For more information, see: <http://loanet.mit.edu/index.htm>.

²⁵⁴ See: Appelman, Hilary, "Sharing Buried Treasure Via a Network," *The New York Times*, May 2, 2001.

relations aspect of deaccessioning must be carefully managed. Second, some museums are not permitted to enter into direct sales with other museums (and instead must go through public auction), rendering a site that facilitates museum-to-museum transactions marginally useful for them.²⁵⁵ And third, in many ways, public auction houses *already* offer an infrastructure for museum-to-museum deaccessions.

While these arguments are highly relevant to the feasibility of a "deaccessioning clearinghouse," there are reasons to think there may be advantages to the museum industry in developing such an operation. As Martin Feldstein suggested in *The Economics of Art Museums*, some of the resistance towards deaccessioning could be mitigated by keeping deaccessioned objects *within* the museum community (and thereby addressing the concern with deaccessioned objects exiting the public domain). This issue is discussed further in the next section.

Certain strategies that promise broader public benefits are in tension with more localized aspects of museum missions and responsibilities

With so many underutilized artworks found in museum storerooms, and so many institutions - be they other museums, schools, or community centers - that could surely make greater use of such artworks, museums may appear to be falling short of their mandate to serve a public purpose. Wouldn't the public be better served if more stored artworks were on view - even if not in the owner-museum's own galleries? One way that museums are able to reconcile the fact that large portions of their collections are not generating the same level of benefits that they could if alternatively deployed, is that museums' obligation to serve "the public" is a narrower mandate than the notion of serving "the public good."

While all museums serve a public purpose, there are many different "publics" that can be served. It is up to each museum to define which segments of the larger general public are its key constituencies; in most cases, the museum's public is, to some degree, geographically

²⁵⁵ The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, for example, is required to sell through private auction, and cannot enter into private sales unless auction minimums are not met (San Francisco Administrative Code, Sections 28.3 and 28.4, 1989).

defined. Museums have a special tie to the city or region in which they are located, even though they welcome visitors from throughout the country and abroad. It is not surprising, then, that any individual institution will take action that best serves its more narrowly defined public, even though an alternative action could bring greater public benefits if geographic boundaries were ignored.

In museum decisions regarding collection sharing and deaccessioning, this tension between the broader public good and a narrower public mission are at play. As the case study showed, the Museum's genuine interest in the "idea" of more collection sharing is tempered by an (implicit) cost-benefit analysis that comes up negative: From the Museum's perspective, the problem is that the benefits of collection sharing accrue mostly to the publics of *other* institutions, while the planning and implementation costs associated with collection sharing are borne, in large part, by the Museum. This fact dominates, even though in absolute terms (i.e., looking at the *size* of the benefits and costs, without regard to *who* benefits, and *who* pays the costs), many collection-sharing transactions would boast positive benefit-cost ratios.

Similarly, regarding deaccessioning, museums must confront situations where what is best for an individual museum may differ from what is best for the larger museum community. Once a museum decides to deaccession objects, there is the question of how to dispose of the items. The fundamental issue is whether to sell the work through private auction (which, in concept, will bring the highest price), or whether to sell to another museum (which may involve selling at a discounted price). Here, museum trustees must weigh their fiduciary responsibility to the institution they govern, which argues for selling at the highest price, and a vaguer responsibility to the community of museums (and the associated public trust), which argues for keeping the objects within the public domain. The museum profession's various codes of ethics on deaccessioning acknowledge these dual responsibilities, and generally leave it to individual museums to decide one way or the other.

With respect to both collection sharing and deaccessioning, that an individual museum follows a course of action that most benefits its own

constituencies (sometimes at the expense of the larger general public) is not surprising. This result is directly related to museums' governance mechanisms which promote autonomous (rather than coordinated) action, and to the current economic incentives faced by individual institutions. In the United States, there is no governing authority that considers museum issues from a national perspective;²⁵⁶ thus, an individual art museum, with its focus on an institutional (rather than societal) mandate, will respond to current economic incentives in a way that best promotes institutional objectives. In order to encourage broader, societal objectives, incentives would have to be modified so that what makes sense for the individual institution more clearly mirrors what makes sense for the greater society.

FURTHERING THE DEBATE ON COLLECTION UTILIZATION IN ART MUSEUMS

The issues surrounding art museums' high storage levels and low collection utilization rates are varied, complex, and often deeply rooted in museum culture. As the previous chapters illustrated, while there are many options for reducing storage levels and/or increasing the utilization of stored artworks, there are just as many obstacles that limit their success in today's museum environment. Without any easy fixes to improving collection utilization, if change is desired, several difficult issues must be confronted. This section poses five questions to further the debate on collection utilization in art museums:

- Should museums be held accountable for regulating the size of their collections?
- Is the "over-collecting" of donated artworks an acceptable "cost of doing business" for museums?
- To what extent would an increase in transactions among museums lead to greater societal benefits?

²⁵⁶ The museum industry's professional associations serve this function to some degree, in that they provide national forums for discussion and coordination, and promote national standards through accreditation and other means. Participation in and compliance with such programs, however, is voluntary. And to date, the issue of collection utilization has not been meaningfully addressed by professional museum associations.

- Can museums afford to be uninformed about the costs of key aspects of their operations, and to ignore the connection between costs and benefits?
- Have museums adequately addressed the tradeoffs associated with their multiple missions, and are they confident that current practices adequately reflect their overall goals?

Should museums be held accountable for regulating the size of their collections?

Arguably, museums hold more objects in their collections than is prudent, given museums' financial, human, and space resources. While increasing those resources to better provide for current collection holdings is one way to achieve a better balance, so, too, is a resizing of museum collections to better reflect the institutions' ability to make use of their holdings. Perhaps museums should be required to justify why their collections are the size that they are, why their current storage levels are acceptable, and why it makes sense (given each institution's own mission) that many objects in the collection see such little use (however use is defined).

Such an accounting is not part of current museum management practice, nor is it the subject of board attention, nor the focus of museums' professional associations. In the accreditation process, for example, while museums report the percentage of objects on view and in storage, there is no justification required of those with high storage levels. Similarly, while the accreditation review asks how a museum's collection-related activities further its larger public purpose, it looks for sufficient *affirmative* examples (e.g., exhibitions, loans, scholarly essays on the collection) and not the extent of the *obverse* (i.e., what portions of the collection have *not* been used in exhibitions, loans, or research over the past ten years?).²⁵⁷

²⁵⁷ In discussing museum accountability for collection size, a natural question is: To whom are museums accountable? In a legal sense, museums are accountable to their boards of trustees, who set museum policy and oversee institutional performance. Museum trustees, in turn, are subject to the regulations and case law that apply to charitable nonprofits. Under these legal standards, museum trustees must see that the museum's assets are used in service of the public

But any effort to encourage museums to reduce the size of their collections must also address how such a change could occur. As has been discussed many times in this dissertation, the forces driving acquisitions are strong and embedded in museum culture; so, too, are the forces limiting the amount of deaccessions. Since there are institutional risks for any one museum to "buck the trends" and reform its acquisition and deaccessioning policies, meaningful change would require a broader industry movement. Acquisition and deaccession reform will be discussed further in the sections that follow.

Is the "over-collecting" of donated artworks an acceptable "cost of doing business" for museums?

That collection growth is fueled to a substantial degree by artwork donations from private collectors is not in dispute. As was discussed in Chapter 3, studies show that over half - sometimes over two-thirds - of the value of museums' artwork additions comes from private collectors. (The proportion is even higher if the measure is in number of objects.) The tax incentives associated with such artwork donations, along with our nation's philosophical support of the nonprofit sector, have accomplished their goal: Private individuals are contributing their personal wealth to organizations dedicated to the public good. Museums' good fortune, however, has its downside: Museums have for years accepted more artwork donations than they actually want - and are paying the price in annual operating costs, stuffed storerooms, and arguably, a dilution of mission. Museums continue this practice because they fear that if they don't, they may do even greater harm to the future development of their collections, and, in turn, to the health of

beneficiaries designated in the museum's charter. Museums also are subject to ethical standards, which, as Marie Malaro (1994) notes, present a higher hurdle for museums than legal standards do. Such ethical standards are determined through the self-governing mechanism of professional associations (and the codes of ethics they promulgate). Ultimately, museums are accountable to the public, whose confidence they must maintain. The public "subsidizes" museums' favorable tax treatment, elects officials who allocate government funds, and can rally opinion around an issue when it becomes important enough. For a comprehensive discussion of the legal, ethical, and "public confidence" obligations of museums, see: *Museum Governance: Mission, Ethics, Policy* (Malaro 1994).

their institutions. In short, the continual over-collecting from private individuals is seen as a "cost of doing business."

The unanswered question is whether these inefficiencies constitute an *acceptable* cost of doing business. If current practice is deemed "good enough," then museums are implicitly accepting a future of growing collections, a substantial portion of which will not be utilized. Meanwhile, annual operating costs will continue to rise to maintain the growing collections. If museums wish to alter current practice, there are two broad approaches for change. One, they can adjust their policies "before the fact" (that is, by limiting the number of donated objects they accept), or two, they can modify their policies "after the fact" (that is, by increasing deaccessions and/or long-term loans, so as to limit the number of objects in-house). An "after the fact" approach implies a tacit acceptance that museums are in the "distribution" or "through-put" business; in other words, unwanted artworks cycle through the museum before they arrive at a destination where there is an intent to utilize them.

Of course, private collectors, as a group, are the other party in the donor-museum relationship that is at question here. How prospective donors might react to any individual museum's reforms - or to a larger, industry-wide change in practice - is an important question, and one well worth researching. Will private collectors redirect their artwork donations away from institutions that accept only a portion of the objects offered for donation? And, will private collectors redirect their donations away from institutions that aggressively deaccession? While there are certainly examples of donors who were disaffected by one museum and then forged a relationship with another, it is not known how many - or to what degree - donors would avoid museums who more selectively acquired or more aggressively deaccessioned.

These questions are important, and worthy of future study. Until such time as more is known about art-donor behavior, however, one can suggest alternative policies that could influence that behavior toward more restrained in-kind gifts. These include:

- Providing better information to potential artwork donors regarding the museum's cost of maintaining their gifts, and requesting an endowment for their care.
- Encouraging artwork donors to redirect their gifts to more "needy" institutions - or, at least, to split their gifts so that lower quality objects go to institutions that realistically will use them.²⁵⁸
- Mounting a public relations campaign for donors to be more "responsible" in their artwork giving.
- Changing tax laws (or better enforcing those that exist) so that appreciated property deductions are taken only for gifts that meet a strict standard for being mission-related.²⁵⁹

²⁵⁸ More information sharing among museums (and an improved information infrastructure for identifying the collection needs of museums around the country) would facilitate the placement of donated artworks to those institutions most likely to utilize them. Artwork donors, of course, consider criteria other than "utilization potential" in selecting museums for their donations. For example, some donors may want their collections to reside in a local institution, while others may want to donate only to highly prestigious museums. Nevertheless, there are likely some potential donors who, if given the information, would be motivated to give artworks to museums that have shown an identified need and a willingness to actively utilize the objects in their programs.

²⁵⁹ Under current tax law, individuals who donate artworks to museums may claim a deduction equal to the full market value of the donated objects, without any offset for capital gains on their appreciation. This highly favorable tax treatment, however, is only for objects that the museum intends to use directly for its "charitable purposes" (under IRC § 501). In other words, if museums accept donated artworks only with the intention of selling them - or if they accept works with no real intention of utilizing them directly in their mission-related activities - then only a lesser tax deduction is allowed the donor. While museums are not required to review the tax returns submitted by donors and make sure that they accurately represent their gifts, guidelines for professional practice indicate that museums should let donors know for what use they are accepting objects - and separate out those intended for mission-related and non-mission-related purposes. For more on tax issues regarding museum gifts, see: Malaro (1998) pp. 369-83.

Can museums afford to be uninformed about the costs of key aspects of their operations, and to ignore the connection between costs and benefits?

If museums are to make more nuanced decisions regarding acquisitions and deaccessions, there is a clear need for better information in a number of areas. One such area is costs. For example, what does it cost annually to house a sculpture, a textile, a drawing? Or, what does it cost to install a new exhibit from the permanent collection (and dismantle it when it is over), and how does this vary for paintings, prints, furniture? Once these costs are known, museums would be in a better position to assess whether an object's acquisition (or retention) is justifiable, given the ways it is likely to be utilized.

In assessing utilization, too, there is a problem with imprecise or non-existent information. For example, how many museums have, even roughly, estimated how much time different objects are exhibited over, say, five, ten, or 20 years? While exhibition is only one aspect of museum missions, it is an important one; and as the case study well illustrated, there are many objects whose initial acquisition was for display purposes, but whose current likelihood for display is virtually nil. If museums were to estimate long-term exhibition rates, at least one important contribution to mission could be assessed for different categories of objects. (What is more difficult, but just as important in assessing utilization, is to include indicators that capture how objects serve museums' other, non-display missions.)

Acquisition Committees need this type of information in order to make better decisions. If potential acquisitions (or deaccessions) were presented to an Acquisition Committee with accompanying estimates of the object's annual (or lifetime) maintenance cost, the number of days per decade it would likely be on view, and other projected utilization information, the Committee would have the practical information to weigh against the piece's importance and beauty.

A related issue concerns the financial accounting standards for museums, which do not require them to include the value of their collections on their balance sheets (see Chapter 5 for a discussion of this topic). Notwithstanding the genuine difficulty of assigning

monetary values to unique objects, the absence of such information has the effect of hiding what might otherwise be recognized as unfavorable benefit-cost ratios for acquiring (or retaining) certain objects. While monetary value does not fully represent an object's value to the museum, it is a relevant indicator of quality, especially for objects of the same type. Not placing monetary values on museum objects (particularly, low-value objects) makes it easy to ignore collection-related expenditures that are not advancing a museum's mission substantially.

Such information will not, of course, eliminate controversy. Eventually, the different values of different individuals or groups will come head to head, and the debate will turn to informed competing points of view of what is an acceptable use of resources. Notwithstanding this point, there currently is a tremendous disparity between the level of knowledge regarding objects' art historical importance and the level of knowledge regarding the cost of delivering services relating to these objects, or how such objects are incorporated into museum functions. When museums consider whether objects would add value to the collection, curators' expertise in historical, aesthetic, and other matters is certainly sufficient for them to make an informed decision. In contrast, if the question becomes: Do these objects add sufficient value to justify the cost of their maintenance?, the typical museum is not in a position to make such a judgment.

To what extent would an increase in transactions among museums lead to greater societal benefits?

Different museums have distinct preferences for what they want to collect, and varying standards for what they consider worth exhibiting. These differences offer opportunities for mutually beneficial transactions among museums, either through collection sharing or deaccessioning. Artworks that are relegated to storage, say, at a premier museum, could well qualify as gallery highlights at a fledgling museum elsewhere in the country. If the "universe" of potential transaction partners is expanded to include other (non-museum) institutions such as schools, community centers, or hospitals, the opportunities for underutilized artworks to migrate to higher-use situations are magnified.

The extent to which these theoretical possibilities could be realized depends of several factors. First, there is the unanswered question: Is there *demand* for what lies in museum storerooms? The case study revealed how difficult it can be to find interested borrowers, even for high quality artworks (and with subsidized loan fees). While some of this difficulty could be due to other factors²⁶⁰, one cannot dismiss the possibility that there just may not be much demand for what lies in museum storerooms - at least not where museums are currently expecting to find that demand.

It may be that large-scale collection sharing (i.e., beyond the loan of one or a few pieces) is only of great interest when the collections for loan are highly renowned. Perhaps the collections must come from institutions such as the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Guggenheim Museum, or the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, each of which has been the loaning partner in a large-scale collection-sharing arrangement. On the other hand, maybe those museums with *less* prestigious collections could find partners for collection sharing if they shifted their focus and considered non-museum institutions - such as community centers or schools. This might require a reassessment of policies for loans to non-museum institutions; specifically, a relaxation of the environmental and security standards for borrowing institutions. If museums are able to accept a related policy change - that preservation standards follow a continuum to reflect relative object value - then museums may well be able to justify the change in loan requirements. When one considers that much of what resides in museum storerooms is deemed "less than museum quality" by many in the know, relaxing standards for low-importance objects may facilitate their loan (or transfer via deaccessioning) to more appropriate venues.

Until a better understanding of the *demand* for collection sharing is attained, it is difficult to predict how much this strategy can enhance collection utilization. After assessing this potential demand,

²⁶⁰ These include the lack of a good informational infrastructure to locate interested partners in an efficient manner, and the costs borne by lenders (and/or borrowers) that may make collection sharing cost-prohibitive.

the museum industry would be in a better position to determine how to address the other obstacles (e.g., lack of infrastructure, high costs, policies for loaning to non-museums) that beset this strategy.

Deaccessioning is another type of museum transaction that can reduce storage levels and, conceivably, lead to improved collection utilization.²⁶¹ (Of course, if acquisitions only accelerate in response to new space in museum storerooms, then storage levels would *not* decrease - just the contents would change.) For more deaccessioning to occur, the costs associated with the process would need to be reduced, and the view of what are acceptable candidates for deaccessioning would need to be broadened. As noted in earlier chapters, the expense associated with deaccessioning is directly related to the underlying values that "mistakes" should be avoided at all costs. (In this context, "mistakes" refer only to disposing of items that might be better appreciated at a future date, not to retaining objects that don't get utilized, nor to missing opportunities for future acquisitions, nor to using scarce space or operating funds to store excess artworks.) Any streamlining of the deaccessioning process, then, would necessarily involve a reassessment of such underlying values and a decision that avoiding mistakes is only one, albeit highly legitimate, goal of deaccessioning policy.

The second point - that the notion of acceptable deaccessioning candidates would need to be broadened in order to have a substantial impact on storage levels and utilization rates - also challenges underlying values within museum culture. The current standard for identifying deaccessioning candidates can be paraphrased as: Does this object have value for/relevance to the collection? This question is very difficult to answer in the negative. More meaningful questions

²⁶¹ Utilization can be improved at the deaccessioning museum in that: 1) new acquisitions funded by deaccessioning proceeds will likely be utilized more than the deaccessioned objects were; and 2) the operating funds formerly dedicated to the care of deaccessioned objects will be available for more productive purposes. Regarding the deaccessioned objects themselves, they are likely to be utilized in some fashion by the acquirer; however, some would argue that if a *private* party acquires them, the objects' *public* utilization would be diminished.

might inquire about *relative* value, and in the process, broaden the conception of what may not be worth retaining at a particular institution. A question such as: Is this object contributing enough value to our mission to justify its lifetime cost of maintenance - keeping in mind other opportunities for expending those funds?, would certainly result in more deaccessioning candidates and, arguably, a better use of resources to achieve the institution's own mission.

Collection sharing and deaccessioning are, then, two different types of museum transactions that can reduce storage levels and/or increase collection utilization rates. The most important similarity between these two options is that they both result in the physical relocation of a museum's objects, presumably ones that spent most (if not all) of their time in storage. The crucial difference between the two is that while collection sharing involves only the relocation of objects, deaccessioning involves both relocation and a change in the objects' ownership.

Changing ownership, of course, implies a permanent transaction; and with that permanence, comes the associated cautious attitudes described above. It also colors which options seem most promising to different members of the museum community. As the case study revealed, while there was agreement among all Museum staff members that storerooms were too full and collection utilization was too low, there was disagreement regarding which avenue promised the best solution. Some believed deaccessioning should be greatly increased, and that large segments of the collection which are not *currently* under deaccessioning consideration, *should* be. Others believed that new models for collection sharing were the answer; that, somehow, the vast underutilized collection resources of museums should be made available to those institutions that can make use of them. Those with the preference for collection sharing did, however, acknowledge the economic realities that a museum might sometimes need to face. With deaccessioning's promise of revenues upon sale, items currently on long-term loan might eventually be sold, if and when the opportunity arose. Interestingly, Museum staff who were the strongest proponents of collection sharing suggested that "new models" for such transactions

include features that minimize the current economic disadvantage of collection sharing (which, under its current incarnation, is a money loser) versus deaccessioning.²⁶²

Have museums adequately addressed the tradeoffs associated with their multiple missions, and are they confident that current practices adequately reflect their overall goals?

As discussed throughout this document, art museums have several missions: *to collect, to preserve, to study, to exhibit, and to interpret* important objects. In pursuing these multiple goals, museums inevitably make choices that sometimes favor one mission over another. Whether in deciding how to spend their budgets, allocate staff time across projects, or use their physical space, museums are implicitly making tradeoffs across their missions. To a certain degree, one would expect that such resource allocation decisions reflect the institutions' underlying set of priorities and values. On the other hand, all organizations are subject to a variety of forces that can influence resource allocation decisions in a way that takes the organization out of sync with its mission. Museums, like other multi-missioned institutions, face the challenge of maintaining the proper balance across missions, rather than the more straightforward test of staying "on mission." This balancing act is complicated by the push and pull of different types of forces, including tradition-bound practices that may not reflect the current environment, stakeholder groups that become especially influential, and economic imperatives that overwhelm otherwise attractive alternatives.

With the current levels of museum storage and collection utilization widely acknowledged as problematic, it seems time to probe

²⁶² The Museum Loan Network, which facilitates collection sharing in part, through targeted grants, sees its role as developing an attractive alternative for deaccessioning. Currently, however, the Museum Loan Network does not accommodate large-scale collection sharing transactions, nor do the grants "compensate" loaning museums to a degree that would eliminate the economic advantage of deaccessioning. Since it is not the Museum Loan Network's mission to eliminate this gap, this comment is no indictment of their program, but rather, an observation on its appropriateness as a model for addressing larger-scale storage and collection utilization problems within the industry.

whether current collection practices adequately reflect the mission-related priorities and values of individual museums, the museum industry, and society at large. It is my hope that this dissertation contributes to that process.

APPENDIX 1: ADDITIONAL NOTES ON COLLECTION DATA IN THE CASE STUDY

This appendix supplements the "Data Analysis" section in Chapter 2.

All of the data analyses in the case study are based on collection data from two files within the Museum's collection database: the "Registration File" and the "Inactive File." The Registration File is the Museum's "active" database, and contains information on each object in the Museum's current collection; the Inactive File contains entries on objects that have been deaccessioned, objects whose status is unclear, and records of miscellaneous administrative actions (e.g., the voiding of a duplicate record). Overall, the data in the Registration File are of better quality than the data in the Inactive File, but there are missing data, ambiguous entries, and inaccuracies in both Files.

An initial step in analyzing the Museum's acquisitions and deaccessions was to create "data histories" for each. The Museum's acquisition history was compiled by combining records of retained acquisitions (i.e., objects currently in the collection) with records of formerly acquired objects that were later deaccessioned (found mainly in the Inactive File).

The Museum's deaccessioning history was more difficult to compile because information was entered into the database in many different ways. Most notable were several thousand ambiguously coded objects (in the Inactive File) that could be either deaccessions, long-term loans - or something else entirely. In some cases, I was able to interpret "miscoded" data and include the associated objects in the appropriate analysis.²⁶³ In other cases, however, the data were simply too ambiguous to interpret, and therefore were not included in any analyses. To the extent that some of the excluded data represent actual deaccessions, the analysis underrepresents these figures (along with the associated acquisitions). In addition, it is possible that some objects

²⁶³ For example, many objects in the Inactive File did not have the code for "deaccessioned" in the designated field, but other fields' entries made it clear that the objects had been deaccessioned (e.g., when "sold at auction" appeared in the "Location" field).

deaccessioned decades ago have no record at all in the Museum's collection database, meaning deaccessions may be further underrepresented.²⁶⁴ (Acquisitions, however, would be underrepresented by the same amount, since any additional deaccessions would have to be included in the acquisition analysis.)

The data on long-term loans were drawn from the Registration File. As noted above, it also is possible that some of the ambiguously coded objects in the Inactive File could be actual long-terms loans, in which case long-term loans (and the acquisitions they represent) would be underreported in the analysis.

While in some cases missing data meant that records were excluded from an analysis, in other cases the particular data that were missing (and the nature of the analysis) allowed for the missing data to be estimated. For example, several thousand objects in the Museum's Prints and Drawings department had no recorded acquisition date. In order to include these objects in the acquisition analyses, their acquisition dates were imputed in proportion to the acquisition dates of the other objects in the Prints and Drawings department. The decisions to exclude or include data in particular analyses are indicated in the "Notes" below each Table or Figure in the text, along with an explanation of the assumptions made to include records with missing or ambiguous data.

²⁶⁴ It is common for older museums to have poor (or nonexistent) records on transactions from the institutions' early history. Since deaccessioned objects are no longer the responsibility of a museum after they are deaccessioned, it seems likely that early deaccessions may not have been as faithfully recorded as later ones.

APPENDIX 2: COLLECTION GROWTH VERSUS GROWTH IN EXHIBITION SPACE

This appendix supplements Chapter 3, pages 62-65, by varying several assumptions made in the text.

The tables below draw from the following sources: AAM (1992), pp. 73, 77, 91; AAM (1994), p. 43, 75; Bank (1988), p. 74; Rosett (1991), p. 158; Weil (1990), p. 33.

SCENARIO #1									
Assumes a 2,970,787 sq. ft. increase in permanent collection exhibition space from 1978 to 1988. (4,992,918 sq. ft. increase in total interior space X 70% allocation to exhibitions X 85% allocation to permanent collection.)									
Assumed collection size	years prior to 1988 (i.e., 1978)	Annual collection growth rate	Collection size in 1988	Increase in number of objects from 1978 to 1988	Increase in exhibition space for displaying the permanent collection from 1978 to 1988	Number of objects added per sq. ft. of additional exhibition space for displaying the perm. coll.	Number of objects added per sq. ft. of additional exhibition space for displaying the perm. coll.	Number of objects added per sq. ft. of additional exhibition space for displaying the perm. coll.	Number of objects added per sq. ft. of additional exhibition space for displaying the perm. coll.
					(in sq. ft.)	15	30	45	60
10									
12,416,709		0.5%	13,051,701	634,992	2,970,787	3.21	6.41	9.62	12.82
11,815,535		1.0%	13,051,701	1,236,166	2,970,787	6.24	12.48	18.72	24.97
11,246,223		1.5%	13,051,701	1,805,478	2,970,787	9.12	18.23	27.35	36.46
10,706,941		2.0%	13,051,701	2,344,760	2,970,787	11.84	23.68	35.52	47.36
10,195,968		2.5%	13,051,701	2,855,733	2,970,787	14.42	28.84	43.26	57.68

SCENARIO #2									
Assumes a 2,334,189 sq. ft. increase in permanent collection exhibition space from 1978 to 1988. (4,992,918 sq. ft. increase in total interior space X 55% allocation to exhibitions X 85% allocation to permanent collection.)									
Assumed collection size	years prior to 1988 (i.e., 1978)	Annual collection growth rate	Collection size in 1988	Increase in number of objects from 1978 to 1988	Increase in exhibition space for displaying the permanent collection from 1978 to 1988	Number of objects added per sq. ft. of additional exhibition space for displaying the perm. coll.	Number of objects added per sq. ft. of additional exhibition space for displaying the perm. coll.	Number of objects added per sq. ft. of additional exhibition space for displaying the perm. coll.	Number of objects added per sq. ft. of additional exhibition space for displaying the perm. coll.
					(in sq. ft.)	15	30	45	60
10									
12,416,709		0.5%	13,051,701	634,992	2,334,189	4.08	8.16	12.24	16.32
11,815,535		1.0%	13,051,701	1,236,166	2,334,189	7.94	15.89	23.83	31.78
11,246,223		1.5%	13,051,701	1,805,478	2,334,189	11.60	23.20	34.81	46.41
10,706,941		2.0%	13,051,701	2,344,760	2,334,189	15.07	30.14	45.20	60.27
10,195,968		2.5%	13,051,701	2,855,733	2,334,189	18.35	36.70	55.05	73.41

SCENARIO #3									
Assumes a 1,697,592 sq. ft. increase in permanent collection exhibition space from 1978 to 1988. (4,992,918 sq. ft. increase in total interior space X 40% allocation to exhibitions X 85% allocation to permanent collection.)									
Assumed collection size		Collection size in 1988	Increase in number of objects from 1978 to 1988	Increase in permanent collection to 1988 (in sq. ft.)	Number of objects added per 15 sq. ft. of additional exhibition space for displaying the perm. coll.	Number of objects added per 30 sq. ft. of additional exhibition space for displaying the perm. coll.	Number of objects added per 45 sq. ft. of additional exhibition space for displaying the perm. coll.	Number of objects added per 60 sq. ft. of additional exhibition space for displaying the perm. coll.	Number of objects added per 100 sq. ft. of additional exhibition space for displaying the perm. coll.
years prior to 1988 (i.e., 1978)	Annual collection growth rate								
10									
12,416,709	0.5%	13,051,701	634,992	1,697,592	5.61	11.22	16.83	22.44	
11,815,535	1.0%	13,051,701	1,236,166	1,697,592	10.92	21.85	32.77	43.69	
11,246,223	1.5%	13,051,701	1,805,478	1,697,592	15.95	31.91	47.86	63.81	
10,706,941	2.0%	13,051,701	2,344,760	1,697,592	20.72	41.44	62.16	82.87	
10,195,968	2.5%	13,051,701	2,855,733	1,697,592	25.23	50.47	75.70	100.93	

APPENDIX 3: STATISTICAL PROFILE OF U.S. ART MUSEUMS

This appendix supplements Table 5.1 in Chapter 5.

The 1989 National Museum Survey is the most recent comprehensive published survey on U.S. museums. Many of the industry statistics cited in this document are from two published reports based on the Survey (AAM 1992, 1994). Table A3.1 draws from these reports to provide a profile of U.S. art museums in 1988 (the year the Survey was conducted).

Table A3.1

Art museum statistics from the 1989 National Museum Survey

Number of art museums	1,214
Number of sites	1,693
Distribution by size (in operating expenses)	Large (\$1 million and over): 15% Medium (\$200,000 to \$1 million): 18% Small (under \$200,000): 67%
Distribution by governing authority	Private, non-profit: 69% Public: 31%
Date of establishment	50% established since 1970
Collection size	13,051,701 objects (total)
Operating budget	Total operating income: \$1,184,182,000 Median operating income: \$192,934
Paid staff	Full-time: 20,000 (total); 15 (median) Part-time: 11,000 (total); 8.5 (median)
Unpaid staff	Full-time: 3,400 (total) Part-time: 53,000 (total)
Attendance	75,920,000 (total) 60,000 (median)
Interior square footage	33,041,000 (total) 8,000 (median)
Exhibitions produced	14,000 (total) 9 (median)

Sources: AAM 1992, 1994.

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