

# Art Museum Deaccession

2020 vision // Harry Fisher-Jones, Consultant, AEA Consulting

Deaccessioning and the disposal of objects from an art museum's collection have been a source of controversy and debate for decades. The intensity of dispute is broadly based on two factors: how the sale proceeds are intended to be used and where the event takes place.

When Tate Modern in London announced the intended sale of Juan Muñoz's *Staffcase #2*, planned in consultation with his estate, it was made clear that the proceeds would be used on a new work by the artist. Similarly, the Lehmbuck Museum's sale of Giacometti's *La Jambée* was considered generally benign as the proceeds were used to buy more work by the artist. But, in 2006, when the Albright-Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo, New York decided to sell more than 200 antiquities and pre-Modern works to raise funds for

more contemporary art, it faced fierce criticism—largely because of the volume and quality of the objects on offer which included former "collection highlights". Given that the proceeds supported the acquisition of works more in line with the institution's mission, however, the sale was approved by the State Supreme Court and the American Association of Art Museum Directors, bringing in a total of \$67.2m.

Shortly after the events in Buffalo, the financial crash brought deaccessioning back into high relief as museums tried to shore up their finances. These cases, where sale proceeds are intended to cover general operating expenses, tend to be the most contested on the premise that they undermine public confidence in museums, can be used to effectively conceal mismanagement, and encourage others to

view collections as financially negotiable assets. In 2009, Brandeis University trustees voted unanimously to close the Rose Art Museum and sell its collection to tackle a mounting deficit compounded by the contraction of its endowment from \$712m to \$540m. The decision was met with public and professional outcry. A lawsuit was filed by supporters of the museum to prevent its closure and in 2011, the year of the museum's 50th anniversary, the suit was settled. The museum and its collection remain intact—at least for now.

In Detroit, another major sell-off was avoided after the city filed for municipal bankruptcy and creditors called for the sale of the Detroit Institute of Art's multi-billion-dollar collection, then owned by the city. In a spectacular show of philanthropic support now known as the "grand bargain", \$816m

was raised from foundations, donors and the State of Michigan to help settle the city's pension obligations on the condition that the collection be transferred to an independent non-profit.

In England, attempts to prevent the sale of the Sekhemka statue by Northampton council were less successful. In July 2014, the sculpture was sold to an anonymous foreign buyer for £15.8m—a record for an Egyptian antiquity at auction. As a result, the Northampton Museum's accreditation was removed by the Museums Association and Arts Council England, making it ineligible for future funding. It has since been revealed that the sale took place in spite of efforts to keep the sculpture in the UK and accessible to the public. Not only did the marquis of Northampton make an unsuccessful bid, the Egyptian Ambassador

to the UK suggested a loan scheme between the British Museum and the Cairo Museum, and the company that initially valued the work reportedly attempted to build a consortium of UK museums to acquire it but they could not raise the necessary funds. The new Northampton Museum and Art Gallery, paid for in part by the proceeds of the sale, is due to open in early 2021.

In France, there is a long-held tradition of the inalienability of museum objects. If an institution wishes to deaccession an object, it must be approved by the Commission Scientifique Nationale de Collections and, since its formation in 2010, there has yet to be a single request. But even here, things are changing. Last month, the Senate voted unanimously to suspend the "essential principle of inalienability" in order to retribute 27 objects to Senegal and Benin.



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proceeds the proceeds by Giacometti with the by

Wen Wei Po Art & Culture

'office, state attorney general's office, New York