



CODE OF ETHICS FOR MUSEUMS

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Introduction

In 1987 the Council of the American Association of Museums (AAM) determined to revise the association's 1978 statement on ethics. The impetus for revision was recognition throughout the American museum community that the statement needed to be refined and strengthened in light of the expanded role of museums in society and a heightened awareness that the collection, preservation, and interpretation of natural and cultural heritages involve issues of significant concern to the American people.

Following a series of group discussions and commentary by members of the AAM Council, the Accreditation Commission, and museum leaders throughout the country, the president of the AAM appointed an Ethics Task Force to prepare a code of ethics. Drafts were shared with the AAM Executive Committee and Council, then twice referred to the field for comment. Hundreds of individuals and representatives of professional organizations and museums of all types and sizes submitted thoughtful critiques that were instrumental in shaping the final document. The Code of Ethics for Museums was adopted by the AAM Board of Directors (formerly the AAM Council) on May 18, 1991.

In its work, the Ethics Task Force was committed to codifying the common understanding of ethics in the museum profession and to establishing a framework within which each institution could develop its own code. For guidance, the task force looked to the tradition of museum ethics and drew inspiration from the AAM's first code of ethics, published in 1925 as *Code of Ethics for Museum Workers*, which states in its preface:

Museums, in the broadest sense, are institutions which hold their possessions in trust for mankind and for the future welfare of the [human] race. Their value is in direct proportion to the service they render the emotional and intellectual life of the people. The life of a museum worker . . . is essentially one of service.

This commitment to service derived from nineteenth-century notions of the advancement and dissemination of knowledge that inform the founding documents of America's museums. George Brown Goode, a noted zoologist and first head of the United States National Museum, declared in 1889:

The museums of the future in this democratic land should be adapted to the needs of the mechanic, the factory operator, the day laborer, the salesman, and the clerk, as much as to those of the professional man and the man of leisure. . . . In short, the public museum is, first of all, for the benefit of the public.

John Cotton Dana, an early twentieth-century museum leader and director of the Newark Museum, promoted the concept of museum work as public service in essays with titles such as "Increasing the Usefulness of Museums" and "A Museum of Service." Dana believed that museums did not exist solely to gather and preserve collections. For him, they were important centers of enlightenment.

By the 1940s, Theodore Low, a strong proponent of museum education, detected a new concentration in the museum profession on scholarship and methodology. These concerns are reflected in *Museum Ethics*, published by the AAM in 1978, which elaborated on relationships among staff, management, and governing authority.

During the 1980s, Americans grew increasingly sensitive to the nation's cultural pluralism, concerned about the global environment, and vigilant regarding public institutions. Rapid technological change, new public policies relating to nonprofit corporations, a troubled educational system, shifting patterns of private and public wealth, and increased financial pressures all called for a sharper delineation of museums' ethical responsibilities. In 1984 the AAM's Commission on Museums for a New Century placed renewed emphasis on public service and education, and in 1986 the code of ethics adopted by the International Council of Museums (ICOM) put service to society at the center of museum responsi-

bilities. ICOM defines museums as institutions “in the service of society and of its development” and holds that “employment by a museum, whether publicly or privately supported, is a public trust involving great responsibility.”

The Code of Ethics for Museums that follows confirms the commitment to professional standards of the 1978 statement on ethics by placing it in the context of the traditional values that have always guided America’s museums and were so eloquently expressed in the 1925 code. This new code is informed by a renewed emphasis on the historic American concepts of museums as public trusts and museum work as service to society.

This code also marks a significant departure, however. For the first time in the history of the American Association of Museums, it includes provisions for implementation. In initiating implementation, the AAM recognizes that a code of ethics cannot be meaningful or effective without adequate means of encouraging adherence. It is also recognized that, while the AAM cannot directly regulate the ethical behavior of individuals, it can encourage member museums to do so. This code provides a framework. Elaborating that framework is a task best assumed by individual museums.

Thus, as of January 1, 1992, each nonprofit museum member of the American Association of Museums must, as a condition of membership, subscribe to the AAM Code of Ethics for Museums. Subsequently, these museums must set about framing their own institutional codes of ethics, which are to be in conformance with the AAM code and to expand on it through the elaboration of specific practices. This requirement is placed on these member institutions in the belief that engaging the governing authority, staff, and volunteers in applying the AAM code to institutional settings will stimulate the development and maintenance of sound policies and procedures necessary to understanding and ensuring ethical behavior by institutions and by all who work for them or on their behalf.

On January 1, 1992, an Ethics Commission will begin operation. Nominated by the president and confirmed by the AAM Board of Directors, it will have as its first responsibility the development of informational and educational programs about ethics, to assist museums in elaborating their own institutional codes. The Ethics Commission's second task will be the development of procedures for implementation, to be brought to the Board of Directors for approval.

No later than January 1, 1997 (the exact date to be determined by the AAM Board of Directors on recommendation of the Ethics Commission), each nonprofit museum member of the AAM must, as a condition of membership, have its institutional code of ethics in place. On or before that date, the Ethics Commission, operating under Board-approved policies, will begin reviewing allegations of violations of the Code of Ethics for Museums by those museums that have subscribed to it. The commission may recommend to the AAM Executive Committee that the membership of institutions in clear violation of the code be withdrawn.

With these steps, the American museum community expands its continuing effort to advance museum work through self-regulation. Formal implementation promotes higher and more consistent ethical standards and assures that the Code of Ethics for Museums serves the interests of museums, their constituencies, and society. The primary goal of the AAM is to encourage institutions to regulate the ethical behavior of members of their governing authority, employees, and volunteers. To this end, the Ethics Task Force envisions an array of workshops, model codes, and publications. These and other forms of technical assistance will stimulate a dialogue about ethics throughout the museum community and provide guidance to museums in developing their institutional codes.

Ethical codes evolve from traditional, commonly held values. Museums in the United States were created to serve a democratic society. Although that

society grows increasingly complex, museums today continue to find profound guiding values in the ethic of service. With the adoption of this Code of Ethics for Museums, nonprofit institutional members of the American Association of Museums affirm the ethic of public service as the foundation of their actions and their contributions to society, present and future.



CODE OF ETHICS FOR MUSEUMS

Museums make their unique contribution to the public by collecting, preserving, and interpreting the things of this world. Historically, they have owned and used natural objects, living and nonliving, and all manner of human artifacts to advance knowledge and nourish the human spirit. Today the range of their special interests reflects the scope of human vision. Their missions include collecting and preserving as well as exhibiting and educating with materials not only owned but also borrowed and fabricated for these ends. Their numbers include both governmental and private museums of anthropology, art, history, and natural history, aquariums, arboreta, art centers, botanical gardens, children's museums, historic sites, nature centers, planetariums, science and technology centers, and zoos. The museum universe in the United States includes both collecting and noncollecting institutions. Although diverse in their missions, they have in common their nonprofit form of organization and a commitment of service to the public. Their collections and/or the objects they borrow or fabricate are the basis for research, exhibits, and programs that invite public participation.

Taken as a whole, museum collections and exhibition materials represent the world's natu-

ral and cultural common wealth. As stewards of that wealth, museums are compelled to advance an understanding of all natural forms and of the human experience. It is incumbent on museums to be resources for humankind and in all their activities to foster an informed appreciation of the rich and diverse world we have inherited. It is also incumbent upon them to preserve that inheritance for posterity.

Museums in the United States are grounded in the tradition of public service. They are organized as public trusts, holding their collections and information as a benefit for those they were established to serve. Members of their governing authority, employees, and volunteers are committed to the interests of these beneficiaries.

The law provides the basic framework for museum operations. As nonprofit institutions, museums comply with applicable local, state, and federal laws and international conventions, as well as with the specific legal standards governing trust responsibilities, and this Code of Ethics for Museums takes that compliance as given. But legal standards are a minimum. Museums and those responsible for them must do more than avoid legal liability. They must take affirmative steps to maintain their integrity so as to warrant public confidence. They must act not only legally but also ethically. This Code of Ethics for Museums therefore outlines ethical standards that frequently exceed legal minimums.

Loyalty to the mission of the museum and to the public it serves is the essence of museum work, whether volunteer or paid. Where con-

flicts of interest arise — actual, potential, or perceived — the duty of loyalty must never be compromised. No individual may use his or her position in a museum for personal gain or to benefit another at the expense of the museum, its mission, its reputation, and the society it serves.

For museums, public service is paramount. To affirm that ethic and to elaborate its application to their governance, collections, and programs, the American Association of Museums promulgates this Code of Ethics for Museums. In subscribing to this code, museums assume responsibility for the actions of members of their governing authority, employees, and volunteers in the performance of museum-related duties. Museums thereby affirm their chartered purpose, ensure the prudent application of their resources, enhance their effectiveness, and maintain public confidence. This collective endeavor strengthens museum work and the contributions of museums to society, present and future.

GOVERNANCE ❖

Museum governance, in its various forms, is a public trust responsible for the institution's service to society. The governing authority protects and enhances the museum's collections and programs and its physical, human, and financial resources. It ensures that all these resources support the museum's mission, respond to the pluralism of society, and respect the diversity of the natural and cultural common wealth.

Thus the governing authority ensures that:

- ◆ all those who work for or on behalf of the museum understand and support its mission and public trust responsibilities
- ◆ its members understand and fulfill their trusteeship and act corporately, not as individuals
- ◆ the museum's collections and programs and its physical, human, and financial resources are protected, maintained, and developed in support of the museum's mission
- ◆ it is responsive to and represents the interests of society
- ◆ it maintains a relationship with staff in which shared roles are recognized and separate responsibilities respected

- ◆ working relationships among trustees, employees, and volunteers are based in equity and mutual respect
- ◆ professional standards and practices inform and guide museum operations
- ◆ policies are articulated and prudent oversight is practiced
- ◆ governance promotes the public good rather than individual financial gain.

COLLECTIONS ❖

The distinctive character of museum ethics derives from the ownership, care, and use of objects, specimens, and living collections representing the world's natural and cultural common wealth. This stewardship of collections entails the highest public trust and carries with it the presumption of rightful ownership, permanence, care, documentation, accessibility, and responsible disposal.

Thus the museum ensures that:

- ◆ collections in its custody support its mission and public trust responsibilities
- ◆ collections in its custody are protected, secure, unencumbered, cared for, and preserved
- ◆ collections in its custody are accounted for and documented
- ◆ access to the collections and related information is permitted and regulated
- ◆ acquisition, disposal, and loan activities are conducted in a manner that respects the protection and preservation of natural and cultural resources and discourages illicit trade in such materials
- ◆ acquisition, disposal, and loan activities conform to its mission and public trust responsibilities

- ◆ disposal of collections through sale, trade, or research activities is solely for the advancement of the museum's mission, and use of proceeds from the sale of collection materials is restricted to the acquisition of collections
- ◆ the unique and special nature of human remains and funerary and sacred objects is recognized as the basis of all decisions concerning such collections
- ◆ collections-related activities promote the public good rather than individual financial gain.

PROGRAMS ❖

Museums serve society by advancing an understanding and appreciation of the natural and cultural common wealth through exhibitions, research, scholarship, publications, and educational activities. These programs further the museum's mission and are responsive to the concerns, interests, and needs of society.

Thus the museum ensures that:

- ◆ programs support its mission and public trust responsibilities
- ◆ programs are founded on scholarship and marked by intellectual integrity
- ◆ programs are accessible and encourage participation of the widest possible audience consistent with its mission and resources
- ◆ programs respect pluralistic values, traditions, and concerns
- ◆ revenue-producing activities and activities that involve relationships with external entities are compatible with the museum's mission and support its public trust responsibilities
- ◆ programs promote the public good rather than individual financial gain.

Implementation

This Code of Ethics for Museums was adopted by the Board of Directors of the American Association of Museums on May 18, 1991. Beginning January 1, 1992, each nonprofit museum shall, upon joining the AAM or renewing its membership, subscribe to the code as a condition of membership. No later than January 1, 1997 (the exact date to be determined by the AAM Board of Directors on recommendation of the Ethics Commission), each nonprofit museum member of the American Association of Museums shall also affirm, as a condition of membership, that it has adopted and promulgated its separate code of ethics, applying the Code of Ethics for Museums to its own institutional setting.

An Ethics Commission, nominated by the president of the AAM and confirmed by the Board of Directors, will be charged with three responsibilities:

- ❖ establishing programs of information, education, and assistance to guide museums in developing their own codes of ethics
- ❖ reviewing the Code of Ethics for Museums and periodically recommending refinements and revisions to the Board of Directors
- ❖ reviewing alleged violations of the Code of Ethics for Museums under procedures approved by the Board of Directors and recommending to the Executive Committee of the AAM that membership of institutions in violation be withdrawn. Final determination in such matters shall be made by the Executive Committee.

The memberships of museums that choose not to subscribe to the Code of Ethics for Museums after January 1, 1992, shall be withheld or withdrawn. Memberships of museums that are without institutional codes of ethics after January 1, 1997, shall be withheld or withdrawn.

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