

# SMG Collection Development Strategy

This Policy is part of the Science Museum Group's Collections Management Policy framework, which consists of:

- SMG Collection Development Strategy
- SMG Collection Information and Access Policy
- SMG Conservation Policy

## 1. Context

- 1.1 The museums in the Science Museum Group<sup>1</sup> share a mission to engage people in a dialogue about the history, present and future of human ingenuity in the fields of science, technology, medicine, transport and media.
- 1.2 The National Heritage Act 1983 requires us to: preserve, care for and add to the collections;  
to exhibit them to the public and make them available for study and research; and to promote the public's enjoyment and understanding of science and technology, and of the development of those subjects.
- 1.3 SMG's strategic priorities set out our vision to be internationally recognised for our creative exploration of how innovation, science, technology, medicine, transport, media, and industry created and sustain modern society. Our SMG Collection ("the Collection") provides a basis with which to achieve several of our strategic aims:
  - Aspire to the highest international museum standards in the care and preservation of collections, scholarship, programming, learning and advocacy for our subject areas;
  - Strengthen our core narratives and deliver dynamic gallery displays and public spaces;
  - Implement clear audience strategies that focus on providing life-enhancing experiences;
  - Extend our reach nationally and internationally.
- 1.4 Whilst each Museum has its own distinct history, identity and ambitions, we recognise the opportunities we have as a Group and our capacity to be greater than the sum of our parts. The strength of the overall Collection is central to realising these opportunities.
- 1.5 SMG holds the English national collections in science, technology, industry, medicine, civil transport, and media. All new collecting is conducted with reference to these often definitive holdings.

## 2. Vision

- 2.1 The SMG Collection will consistently provide the nation with the world's best material and visual record of science and technology and its impacts, including industry, medicine, transport and the media.

1 Science Museum, London; Museum of Science and Industry, Manchester; National Media Museum, Bradford; National Railway Museum, York and Shildon

2 Icons are defined as highly significant objects that are either unique (Stephenson's Rocket, for example) or representatives of highly significant classes (Model T Ford, for example).

3 Icon vs everyday is a key distinction, in which icons often stand for inventions and discovery, where everyday items stand for use and impact.

### 3. **Scope and Content**

- 3.1 As a national museum group, SMG must hold a collection of national and international significance. The SMG Collection will contain:
- Icons<sup>2</sup> of continuing scientific, technological and industrial change, with particular emphasis on those developments in which Britain has played a leading role;
  - Objects that represent working lives and the everyday practice<sup>3</sup> and products of science, technology and industry, especially in Britain;
  - Artefacts and records representing the impact of science and technology on people and on the planet;
  - Records and archives of individuals and organisations in science and industry.
- 3.2 Material that does not meet any of these criteria will not be acquired for the permanent SMG Collection.

### 4. **Modes of collecting**

- 4.1 SMG museums will experiment with and develop creative collecting techniques with the aim of making the Collection more suited to immediate and future use for display, loan and research, including but not limited to:
- Actively consulting with learned bodies, external specialists and stakeholders to gain inspiration for our collecting;
  - Development of relationships with the research and industrial sectors by both curatorial and contemporary science teams in our museums;
  - Representing subjects using other methods, including digital techniques such as 3D scanning, when the acquisition of physical material is not possible or practicable;
  - ‘Co-collecting’, a participatory form of acquisition that mobilises the expertise of external groups and individuals, increasing the likelihood of acquiring items drawn from a broad sweep of society and culture, and relating to people currently under-represented in our Collection.

### 5. **Collecting Strategy**

- 5.1 SMG museums will target areas of known weakness in the Collection (‘active collecting’) whilst also taking selective advantage of the hundreds of unsolicited offers SMG receives each year (‘reactive collecting’).
- 5.2 In line with trends in the study of science, technology and medicine and their histories, collecting will move beyond the taxonomic to include also items that acknowledge and represent the contextual.
- 5.3 In making acquisitions to the Collection SMG will:
- Seek to acquire material that will inspire our audiences both now and in the future;
  - Give a high priority to acquisitions that support museum Masterplan projects and exhibitions and public programmes;
  - Acquire items that have compelling stories, connections with people and strong research or display potential;
  - Acquire contextual material in support of specific acquisitions, including two-dimensional and three-dimensional original material and art works;
  - Acquire digital material (software, imagery, oral and video histories);
  - Represent recent and contemporary developments in our subject areas, scanning the horizons to ensure that the Collection remains relevant for the future as well as today;
  - Continue to develop existing comprehensive type collections in a limited number of defined subject areas where such collections have research potential;

- 5.4 SMG's maintenance of the English national museum collections of technology, industry, medicine, civil transport, and media sits alongside the work of other British organisations: Accredited museums, archives, and other relevant specialist organisations constituted in the public domain such as heritage railways. In making acquisitions SMG will consult with other relevant organisations to avoid excessive duplication and ensure that access to, use, care or context of the material maximises public benefit.

## 6. **Framework for Collecting**

- 6.1 SMG's museums have separate collecting policy statements that are congruent with each other and form a suite of statements which take into account those specific differences in the subjects that SMG represents.

## 7. **Auxiliary material**

- 7.1 Where appropriate, SMG will hold items for purposes including, but not limited to, being demonstrated and handled, or used as props in exhibitions. Such items will be documented and managed in line with minimum SMG collections management procedures, but will not be afforded the same levels of care as the permanent Collection. Such items will ultimately be reviewed and evaluated for retention, and will be either proposed for accession or disposed of when life-expired or surplus to requirements. Currently accessioned items may be proposed for transfer to auxiliary material if they meet suitable criteria.

## 8. **Limitations on collecting**

- 8.1 SMG recognises its responsibility to ensure that conservation, care, documentation arrangements and use of the Collection are sustainable and ethical. It will take into account limitations on collecting imposed by factors such as the size of the purchase fund, staffing, storage and care of collection arrangements. Digital collecting will only take place where skills and resources exist to ensure long term preservation. Due diligence will be exercised by staff when making acquisitions.

## 9. **Disposals**

- 9.1 SMG will actively manage its Collection in order to ensure its long-term sustainability, significance and safety. The Group's museums have a long term purpose, and except for sound curatorial (including collections management) reasons, there is a strong presumption against the disposal of any item in the Collection. However, the breadth of the Collection, and the ways in which it has been developed, mean that SMG is currently holding material that is duplicate, unsuitable, or unusable.
- 9.2 Disposals will be guided by the National Heritage Act 1983 (as amended) and the Museums Association's Code of Ethics (as amended). SMG will dispose of material that is unsuitable for retention in the Collection and can be disposed of without detriment to the interests of students or other members of the public<sup>4</sup>.

9.3 Material may be unsuitable for retention if:

- It is a *duplicate*<sup>5</sup> of another accessioned item in the Collection, beyond the number of similar items that would reasonably be of interest and future use;
- It is more suitable for *transfer* to the collection of another National Museum, other Accredited museum, or other organisation in the public domain that can improve access to, or the use, care or context of the material;
- It is otherwise *unsuitable* for the Collection, because it falls outside the scope and content of the Collection;
- It is *useless* for the purposes of the Collection because it is in poor or hazardous condition by reason of damage, physical deterioration, or infestation by destructive organisms. All material that is in such poor condition as to render it unusable will be destroyed to remove the risk of contamination or infestation.

9.4 In making disposals SMG will give priority to transferring items, preferably by gift to Accredited museums. It will consider donating items to other public institutions if it is not possible for another museum to accept them. Wherever possible it will not transfer items out of the public domain. Where a home within the public domain cannot be found, objects will be offered for sale on the open market. If a sale cannot be achieved then alternative options will be considered including recycling and destruction.

9.5 Disposals will take into account any special conditions agreed at the time of acquisition. The Railway Heritage Designation Advisory Board will be consulted with regard to designated items. Items disposed of will be recorded in appropriate detail.

10. **Financially motivated disposal**

10.1 SMG recognises that financially motivated disposal risks damaging public confidence in museums and the principle that collections should not normally be regarded as financially negotiable assets.

10.2 SMG accepts the principle that sound curatorial reasons for disposal must be established before consideration is given to the disposal of any item in the Collection. SMG will not undertake disposal principally for financial reasons, except in exceptional circumstances, when it can be demonstrated that:

- It will significantly improve the long term public benefit derived from the remaining Collection.
- It is not to generate short term revenue (for example to meet a budget deficit).
- It is as a last resort after other sources of funding have been thoroughly explored.
- Extensive prior consultation with sector bodies has been undertaken.
- The material under consideration lies outside the museum's established core Collection.

10.3 The proceeds of disposal through sale, if this exceptional circumstance arises, will be applied solely and directly for the benefit of the museum's Collection. Money raised will be restricted to the long term sustainability, use and development of the Collection.

<sup>5</sup> In the context of SMG's Collection, a duplicate is an item that is substantially similar to another accessioned item, ignoring minor differences, e.g. insignificant technical distinctions, or variations in serial number, date or provenance that are not consequential to the purposes the item fulfils in the collection.