



## Association of Art Museum Directors

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### **THE ASSOCIATION OF ART MUSEUM DIRECTORS RELEASES REPORT ON THE STEWARDSHIP AND ACQUISITION OF SACRED OBJECTS**

#### **Report is Part of AAMD's Mission to Provide Leadership in Museum Field And Ensure the Highest Standards in Collection Stewardship**

New York, August 9, 2006 – As part of its ongoing commitment to provide its member museums with guidance on professional standards and best practice, the Association of Art Museum Directors (AAMD) published its “Report of the AAMD Subcommittee on the Acquisition and Stewardship of Sacred Objects,” which was endorsed at its Annual Meeting in Portland, Oregon in June 2006.

The AAMD believes it is important to uphold the highest stewardship and interpretive practices for all works – including sacred objects of contemporary cultures. The new Report provides guidance regarding the acquisition, loan, handling, treatment, and interpretation of this special category of works. The Report on Sacred Objects follows that of the AAMD Task Force on the Acquisition of Archaeological Materials and Ancient Art, published in June 2004, and the Report of the AAMD Subcommittee on Incoming Loans of Archaeological Material and Ancient Art, published in February 2006.

AAMD believes in the power of art and the responsibility of art museums to serve and educate the public through collection, research, preservation, exhibition, and the advancement of knowledge about works of art. Just as certain works of art in a collection may require special treatment due to their physical properties, there are works of art that may require special care because of their meaning, significance, and function as sacred objects.

In general, sacred works of art are venerated objects created for use in ritual or ceremonial practice of a traditional religion. They are distinct from religious works of art, which serve to express religious ideas, values, or feelings. As secular institutions, art museums are not in a position to identify sacred objects. Therefore, the Report emphasizes the importance of consultation and collaborative discussion with indigenous cultural and traditional religious leaders regarding questions surrounding sacred objects.

AAMD members must comply with the laws of their countries, which in the United States include the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA). However, the Report encourages museums to consider cases where it may be important to go beyond the law and adopt special stewardship or interpretive responsibilities for sacred objects that are not covered by NAGPRA and are not subject to specific national or international laws or treaties. Such works include those of non-federally recognized tribes, First Nation cultures in Canada, indigenous Mexican cultures, as well as other groups worldwide.

Careful consideration should also be used when considering the potential acquisition of sacred objects. AAMD members believe in supporting the ongoing existence and vitality of indigenous societies and cultures around the world. Because sacred objects can be integral to the continuance of religious practice, museums should use special sensitivity when considering the acquisition of objects that may be sacred. Whenever possible, museums should consult with cultural and religious leaders of indigenous societies to

ensure that an object can be collected or removed from its context without damaging a society's central religious beliefs or practices.

The Report also encourages AAMD members to employ special sensitivity and professional judgment regarding the interpretation of sacred objects. Interpretation should be developed, if possible, in consultation with appropriate traditional religious leaders. In all cases, art museums should strive to represent and interpret all religious and sacred objects with respect and equity.

The care of sacred objects can take many forms, as the following examples illustrate:

- Some sacred objects of the native peoples of the western United States should be stored with sage to ensure their spiritual well-being. Museum conservators faced with the issue that fresh sage could cause conservation problems, such as the introduction of pests. The problem was addressed by placing freeze-dried sage with these objects, thereby meeting both conservation and cultural needs.
- In some indigenous cultures, special ceremonies should be conducted or offerings made for sacred objects. Museums have worked with native peoples to make arrangements for such rituals, balancing religious practices with a museum's obligation for the conservation of its collections.
- Other solutions include storing objects such as sacred stone lamps of the Alutiiq people upside down, to keep their spirits from departing, or not housing certain sacred objects in proximity to other works.
- Museums can also work directly with artists as well as religious leaders of indigenous cultures. In one example, a Tibetan artist was provided an artist-in-residency in order to replace a Buddhist altar originally constructed by an American artist. The Tibetan artist worked with museum staff and Tibetan consultants in the design and creation of the new altar, which was consecrated by the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama after its completion.

#### **About AAMD**

The Association of Art Museum Directors, representing 172 art museum directors in the US, Canada and Mexico, aids its members in establishing and maintaining the highest professional standards for themselves and the museums they represent. It serves as a forum for the exchange of information and the exploration of ideas, and as a voice with which museum directors may express their joint concerns and those of their institutions. AAMD's members are committed to the highest ethical and professional standards in their development and stewardship of the art collections they hold in trust for the public, and are dedicated to protecting, interpreting and exhibiting the world's shared artistic heritage.

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## Report of the AAMD Task Force on the Acquisition and Stewardship of Sacred Objects

Religion has inspired the creation of art throughout human history. Most religious works of art are not considered to be sacred objects. Instead, these works serve to express religious ideas, values or feelings. Some works of art are, however, considered sacred objects. While art museums are secular institutions, the acquisition, handling, treatment, and interpretation of works of art deemed to be sacred objects may warrant special consideration since these works possess multiple purposes as works of art and sacred objects.

Today, perhaps the most common examples of works of art considered to be sacred objects derive from indigenous cultures. Within the United States of America, Federal law mandates that sacred objects associated with federally recognized Native American tribes or Native Hawaiian groups be given special consideration in accordance with the provisions of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) of 1990. Works of art associated with non-federally recognized tribes, First Nation cultures in Canada, indigenous Mexican cultures, or other groups may also be sacred objects although very few national or international laws dictate special consideration for such works. The following principles therefore serve to provide guidance to art museums considering issues related to acquisition, loan, handling, treatment, or interpretation of works of art that have been identified as sacred objects.

- *In general, sacred works of art are venerated objects created for use in ritual or ceremonial practice of a traditional religion.*

Some individuals and groups consider a wide range of works of art to be sacred objects. Also, adherents of a religion may differ in their identification of works of art considered to be sacred objects. A broad definition of “sacred object,” if combined with the expectation that museums provide special treatment or consideration for such works, would create immensely difficult problems for art museums as secular institutions. Their mission is defined in terms of acquisition, preservation and interpretation of works of art for the benefit of the general public. As a result of these and other considerations, Federal law in the United States of America concerning Native

American or Native Hawaiian sacred objects recognizes that the definition of “sacred object” must be limited to a comparatively small class of objects.

### Acquisition

AAMD encourages the sustainability of indigenous societies and cultures, and urges its members and other museums to use the greatest sensitivity when collecting sacred objects from indigenous societies worldwide.

Consultation with leaders of indigenous societies is encouraged wherever possible to ensure that the object can be collected or removed from its context without damaging the society’s central religious beliefs.

### Existing Collections

Art museums cannot be expected to singularly determine if a work of art is a sacred object. Instead, art museums should respond to inquiries or claims regarding sacred objects submitted by religious leaders or groups who have standing within a traditional religion with which an object is associated.

- *An inquiry or claim, once submitted by a religious leader or group deemed to have standing by the museum, should provide the framework for a dialogue between the museum and representatives of the religion regarding special treatment of the work of art.*

Dialogue should be conducted in good faith and respect by both parties.

- *Decisions may be reached regarding the adoption of special stewardship responsibilities for sacred objects.*

In the absence of applicable legal requirements, these decisions ultimately rest entirely with the museum. In making decisions regarding sacred objects, art museums should demonstrate genuine

sensitivity to religious beliefs while upholding their own secular institutional mission and purpose.

*Beyond consideration of possible special treatment for sacred objects, art museums should strive to accord equal treatment and respect to all religions in the interpretation of religious works of art.*

For example, it is inappropriate to categorize the beliefs of some religions as “myths” or “legends” while categorizing the beliefs of other religions in very different ways (e.g., “history”).

These principles serve as a guide to decision-making. Art museums should make decisions regarding sacred objects on a case-by-case basis and should share their decisions with the individuals and group(s) with whom they have engaged in dialogue.

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#### Resources

Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, 25 U.S.C. 3001 et seq. [Nov. 16, 1990]  
[http://www.cr.nps.gov/local-law/FHPL\\_NAGPRA.pdf](http://www.cr.nps.gov/local-law/FHPL_NAGPRA.pdf)

1994/45. Draft United Nations declaration on the rights of indigenous peoples,  
[http://193.194.138.190/huridocda/huridoca.nsf/\(Symbol\)/E.CN.4.SUB.2.RES.1994.45.En?OpenDocument](http://193.194.138.190/huridocda/huridoca.nsf/(Symbol)/E.CN.4.SUB.2.RES.1994.45.En?OpenDocument)

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