

Ethics and Best Practices in Museums

Introduction

For hundreds of years, museums have held objects in the public trust. Today, American museums preserve and protect more than a billion objects. Sometimes they face questions related to historic artifacts, ownership, Nazi-era assets, sacred objects, human remains, the loan, sale, or donation of objects, or their diligence in probing the history of such objects.

The museum field takes these concerns very seriously. Since 1925, the museum field has been actively working to ensure that museums adhere to rigorous ethical standards. The American museum community is committed to continually identifying and achieving the highest standard of legal and ethical policies and practices.

These current standards, best practices, and ethics from the field include:

- » The American Alliance of Museums Code of Ethics for Museums
- » Alliance’s Standards and Best Practices for U.S. Museums
- » Alliance’s Accreditation Program Requirements
- » Each museum’s Institutional Code of Ethics
- » Each museum’s Institutional Mission
- » Guidelines established by organizations such as the American Association for State and Local History, the Association of Zoos and Aquariums, and the Association of Art Museum Directors

Talking Points

- » Museums in the United States are grounded in the tradition of public service. Members of their governing authority, employees, and volunteers are firmly committed to responsible collections stewardship, programming and conduct.
- » The Alliance lists all of its standards and ethics on its website and provides many opportunities for the museum field to learn more about them and how to adopt them within their own institutions. We offer an online library of resources, an Information Center for our members, numerous titles in our bookstore, and numerous professional development opportunities—both in person and online—for the entire museum field.

Alliance’s Code of Ethics for Museums:

- » Affirms that museums must act ethically—usually far exceeding the minimum legal standard—to maintain their public integrity
- » States that the “stewardship of collections entails the highest public trust and carries with it the presumption of rightful ownership, permanence, care, documentation, accessibility, and responsible disposal”

- » Requires that museums ensure that “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”

Alliance’s Standards and Best Practices for U.S. Museums require that a museum:

- » Is a good steward of its resources held in the public trust
- » Has “a formally approved, separate, and distinct institutional code of ethics”
- » Is “committed to public accountability and is transparent in its mission and operations”
- » Will “legally, ethically, and responsibly acquire, manage, and dispose of collection items as well as know what collections are in its ownership/custody, where they came from, why it has them, and their current condition and location”

The Alliance has developed best practices for museums specifically related to certain issues, including:

- » Archaeological Materials and Ancient Art
- » Unlawful Appropriation of Objects During the Nazi Era
- » Loaning Collections to Non-Museum Entities
- » Exhibiting Borrowed Objects

These best practices can be accessed on the Alliance website: <http://aam-us.org/resources/ethics-standards-and-best-practices/characteristics-of-excellence-for-u-s-museums/collections-stewardship>.

Please visit the Alliance’s website at www.aam-us.org or call 202-289-1818 for more information about any of these guidelines.