



Security in museums and galleries: threats to museum collections

Theft from museum collections

Value as pieces of art

Objects may be stolen from museums because of their intrinsic financial value or as pieces of desirable art. When assessing the vulnerability of your collection it is important to see the object, not only from its historical perspective, but to consider why it might be of interest to a criminal. Decorative and fine art can fetch high prices on the open market, and even though this type of object may be recognisable and difficult to sell on, rarity or renown does not protect objects from theft.

In recent cases of thefts in the UK, it has become clear that some thefts are carried out by organised networks who employ locally based criminals to carry out crimes. Stolen objects in this category are possibly stolen to order, or sold on the black market.

- Chinese decorative art is currently in high demand on the international market, which has raised values and led to several thefts of objects from museums in the UK and Europe

Value in object material

Museum objects may also be stolen because of their component material. Collections often contain objects which have an historical significance for the museum, but which in themselves are not of a high financial value. However, objects may be made up of materials which are of high financial value, when ground or melted down.

- rhino horn is in high demand in the Far East and Asia where it is valued as a traditional medicine. It now reaches £60,000 per kilogram, which is twice the value of gold. There have been approximately 20 rhino horn thefts in Europe over the last two years, and several in the UK
- thieves may view gold objects for their material composition, rather than as objects. It is possible that in recent thefts of gold and silver objects, the objects may have been melted down after they were stolen

- objects in industrial collections are also at risk because of their metal value, and the risk to these kinds of objects is often increased because they are displayed out of doors. In the case of industrial collections, thieves may just steal parts of an object
- sculpture is also at risk. The last 10 years has seen a series of thefts of bronze objects from the grounds of public venues and private houses, and it is believed that they have been stolen for their metal value albeit many sculpture works are made of a metal that cannot be refined and is of very low resale value

Damage to collections on display

In recent years the use of sponsors to support exhibitions of collections has grown, as has the number of protest groups and demonstrators willing to challenge sponsors for environmental or political reasons. Extremists have occupied buildings and several individuals have made marks on works on public display.

It is important to ensure when entering into any sponsorship, that associated activism may present a risk to your collections, and you will need to mitigate and manage these risks.

Damage to collections from fire

Fire is perhaps the greatest threat, as it can easily destroy or damage a whole collection or entire building, whereas thieves are usually limited in their activity by the time available or by physical security measures. Although arson is a steadily increasing threat in the UK, most fires happen as the result of carelessness. Contractors' negligence in Hot Works or the overloading of electrical sockets with multiple devices are just two examples.

Sometimes the collections themselves contain hazards which pose a fire threat, for example in the case of collections which contain nitrate film.

Damage to collections from flood

Water damage is perhaps the second most common type of damage to museum collections after fire. Water damage can be as a result of storms and flash floods, but can also be as a result of internal structural faults such as leaking pipes, roofs, and skylights.

See [Security Case Studies on Collections Link](#) for cases studies of threats to collections from theft, fire and flood.