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Deaccession roulette

by [Hilton Kramer](#)

On an unfortunate art world practice.

The word *deaccession* is one of those bureaucratic coinages whose chief purpose is verbal obfuscation. If a museum director tells you he has “deaccessioned” eighteen Cézannes, you think for a second, “Oh, that’s nice” while you wonder exactly how to conjugate the verb “to deaccess.” What would happen if museum directors were more direct? Suppose, for example, that instead of saying “I have deaccessioned eighteen Cézannes” he spoke in plain English and said: “I have looted my collection of eighteen Cézannes in order to sell them and raise money to cover the budget shortfall I created by imprudent management.” It sounds rather different, doesn’t it?

As far as I have been able to discover, we have no reliable figures on the number of paintings and other types of cultural property that have been lost to the public as a result of “deaccessing” works. The practice is not illegal, but it is often suspect or even shady, especially when the transaction relies—as it often does—on a high degree of secrecy and speed in order to lower the risk of public intervention.

Of course, there are sometimes legitimate grounds for an institution’s disposing of the property which it was entrusted to preserve. A bequest that clearly fell outside an institution’s scholarly or aesthetic purview, for instance, might rightly be sold. But the issue is not those marginal cases—in the nature of things, they are infrequent—but rather the habit of treating the collection over which one presides as a sort of financial larder to be raided whenever times are tough. After all, museums, libraries, and other such cultural institutions are tax-exempt entities because they serve the public. Their collections are held in trust for posterity.

The practice of reckless deaccessioning seems to have gotten a big boost in the 1970s when Thomas Hoving, then director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, routinely sold important works in order to finance his habits of acquisition. Douanier Rousseau’s important painting *Tropics*, for example, was just one of the Met’s treasures that Hoving, with great secrecy, sold in order to acquire a couple of expensive paintings.

The Met was not alone. In 1990, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum auctioned a cartload of works by Kandinsky, Modigliani, and other modern masters in order to buy ... the Panza di Biuma collection of minimal and conceptual art. In 2000, the Museum of Modern Art, desperate to raise money for one of its interminable expansions, sold Picasso’s *Man with Guitar* (1913) to Samuel I. Newhouse for \$10 million. Mr. Newhouse had to leave MOMA’s board after that transaction, but he got the painting, MOMA got some money to squander, and the public got ... what? The Los Angeles County Museum used to have a triad of bronze sculptures of women by Alberto Giacometti in its “permanent” collection. Now it has two, because one is with Sotheby’s pending a sale.

As I write, a Gilbert Stuart portrait of George Washington in the collection of the New York Public Library—the painting known as the “Constable-Hamilton Portrait”—is expected to be sold in a Sotheby’s auction. Another of the Library’s American paintings—Asher Durand’s *Kindred Spirits*—has already been sold in a sealed-bid auction, but for the moment it is on loan to the National Gallery of Art in Washington and is scheduled to be featured in a touring Durand exhibition opening at the Brooklyn Museum in April 2007. In the era of Deaccession Roulette the only certainty is that *Kindred Spirits* will be lost to the New York Public Library.

The issue here is one of public trust and stewardship. We look to our cultural institutions to protect and preserve the cultural artifacts with which they are endowed. When we learn about an institution’s permanent collection, we have a right to expect that the word “permanent” will mean what it says. We have a right, in other words, to expect that what was included in the collection last year will be there tomorrow and won’t have been sacrificed to a passing fad—to Count Panza’s collection of minimalist doodles, for example—or to the maw of economic exigency. Start down that road and, as one wit recently observed, “it won’t be long before pragmatic museum trustees sell a Degas *Toilette* to pay for the toilets.” Especially to be deplored is the practice of extracting works from public collections in order to auction them to the highest bidder. Institutions that receive the benisons of tax-exemption should not be allowed to exempt themselves from their responsibility to the public. A work that is in effect owned by the public should, if it is no longer relevant to the collection of one institution, pass to another public institution, not into private hands.

There is an enormous amount of chicanery and bad faith surrounding the game of Deaccession Roulette. There certainly are beneficiaries of the wager, but neither the institutions that play the game nor the public that supports it is among their number.

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