

Rethinking the Rembrandt Rule

By James M. Vaughan

Treat every object as if it were a Rembrandt. For decades this simple idea has been taught and accepted as the basis of good museum practice. It is the professional standard for collections care, use, display, storage and deaccessioning at most American museums. But is it the appropriate approach for most historic sites?

This question generated extensive and thoughtful discussion at a conference on "The Stewardship of Historic Sites" last year, hosted by the National Trust for Historic Preservation and the Rockefeller Brothers Fund in partnership with AAM, the American Association for State and Local History and the American Architectural Foundation. The gathering at Kykuit, the John D. Rockefeller estate in Mount Pleasant, N.Y., brought together 32 historic site professionals and representatives of selected associations, foundations and federal agencies to address the sustain-

ability of historic sites for the 21st century. Historic sites, including house museums, constitute the largest segment of America's museums. They are stewards of a significant percentage of the collections held in public trust. Unfortunately, many are struggling to survive, facing declining attendance, deficit budgets, a staggering

backlog of deferred maintenance, erosion of endowment and inadequate funds for collections care and conservation. Continuing with business as usual is not a sustainable option. The Kykuit conference was convened to initiate serious discussion throughout the historic site community about the choices and changes we

must make to improve our stewardship and to assure that our historic sites remain relevant and sustainable for future generations.

A discussion about professional standards and practices quickly focused on what some participants called the "tyranny of collections." Noting that historic

Should we develop a tiered approach to collections and their care?

sites have borrowed many standards and practices from the broader museum community, many attendees argued that strict adherence to these practices often undermines creativity and sustainability. They suggested that new standards of stewardship for historic sites should be modeled to reflect their distinct nature. After 30 years in the field, I have to agree.

To begin with, historic sites operate with different circumstances and objectives than purpose-built museums.

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Purpose-built museums usually display artifacts in galleries that have high standards controlling light, temperature, humidity and security. Visitors interact with individual artifacts or with carefully arranged exhibitions of artifacts; exhibit cases, custom lighting and hi-tech electronics improve visitor access to collections and enhance security at the same time. In these circumstances, perhaps it is not unreasonable to treat every object as a Rembrandt.

Historic sites have a very different set of objectives and usually a much wider variety of artifacts on display, often including historic buildings and landscapes. The goal of most sites is to provide an interpreted experience that exhibits artifacts in their original context. Thousands of artifacts—some rare, some commonplace, some with strong associational value to the place, some acquired as representative examples—are often mixed to create

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period settings. A single period room may have oil paintings of considerable value, mass-produced decorative objects of modest value, furniture owned by the family and furniture purchased at an antique shop to complete the period setting. Can we actually afford to treat every piece as though it were a Rembrandt?

In reality, the very efforts to protect these artifacts frequently detracts from the setting and diminishes the intended visitor experience. Consider the visual impact of the velvet ropes, plastic runners and Plexiglas cases in a restored period room. In our efforts to protect collections, we install intrusive HVAC and sprinkler systems that compromise the original fabric of preserved historic structures—the core historic resource of the site. Over the years, the profession has learned to accept pragmatic compromises with buildings and landscapes to enhance the overall protection of artifacts or the visitor experience,

but collection policies continue to be treated as absolutes. I think it is time for a little more flexibility.

Standards for historic sites must recognize that not every artifact is precious and irreplaceable. Art or science or natural history museums can be selective in adding to their collections. In contrast, benefactors of historic sites often deed over the entire contents of their attic, basement and every drawer and cupboard. It takes money and staff to research all these items, to fill out all the forms, to house them, and few historic sites have the resources to achieve the ideal level of care for every object. Do common manufactured household items like kitchen wares or mass-produced chairs always warrant the same care, security and environmental conditions as a unique work of art? Can the visitor experience sometimes be greatly enhanced by more “relaxed” or more “graduated”

standards? Should we develop a tiered approach to collections and their care that acknowledges these differences?

Like many of the Kykuit conference participants, I am concerned that we allocate too many of our limited resources to accurately creating period rooms with too little consideration of how our visitors will benefit from this effort. Responsible site stewardship must achieve a sustainable balance between the needs of buildings, landscapes, collections and the visiting public. Is there ever a situation in which the public or selected visitors should be permitted, even invited, to touch an object or sit in a period room? Do we need to reclassify more of our collections as “for use”? Do we need a middle category of “limited use”?

The historic sites community must acknowledge that buildings, landscapes and collections are the means, but not

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the ends, of its work. This is not an argument for poorer stewardship but rather for more pragmatic stewardship and for placing as much emphasis on our visitors as we do on our collections. Meticulously preserved buildings, beautifully restored landscapes, carefully researched period rooms and dutifully catalogued collections will not ensure a site's survival if no one visits. In the end, we will fail as stewards of these sites if the public isn't as passionate about their survival as we are.

In addition to new standards for collections care, I believe there is a critical need for simplified deaccessioning procedures. Many historic sites are burdened with hundreds, even thousands, of artifacts that are unrelated to the site's mission and programs and will never be exhibited. Many were transferred as part of the site's "original" collections. Others entered the permanent collection as the result of decades of "indiscriminate accessioning,"

as one participant termed it. Today many of these items are stored in less than ideal conditions (often in basements, attics or unheated buildings). Sites do not have the resources to properly care for all of them. Unfortunately, they do not have the resources to properly deaccession them either. It's a Catch-22, so they do nothing. The profession needs to encourage appropriate deaccessioning by developing simplified procedures that will facilitate rather than inhibit the process.

If they want to survive, historic sites will have to reexamine how they do business. This reexamination must include a serious reconsideration of the way we use and care for our collections. Historic sites should not be afraid to pick and choose what works for them and to develop collections standards and practices that better serve their distinct place in the museum community. ●

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