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**Deaccession Decision-Making During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Multi-Site Case Study of
Art Museums in the United States**

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the Master of Arts in Museum Professions

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South Orange, NJ 07079

2022

**SETON HALL UNIVERSITY
COLLEGE OF COMMUNICATION AND THE ARTS
GRADUATE STUDIES**

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Master's Candidate, Shannon Hahn, has successfully presented and made the required modifications to the text of the master's project for the [Master of Arts degree during this Spring semester, 2021.

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DEACCESSION DECISION-MAKING DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Abstract

At the beginning of the pandemic, museums were forced to close, resulting in significant losses in earned revenue. To address budgetary shortfalls across the museum field, the Association of Art Museum Directors (AAMD) temporarily relaxed their deaccessioning guidelines to allow museums to sell works of art from their collections and use proceeds to support the direct care of collections. This project utilized a qualitative multi-site case study and textual analysis to examine deaccession decisions of four art museums in the United States that deaccessioned works of art during the pandemic. Textual data was collected from online newspaper articles, press releases, auction house lot information, and collections and deaccession policies on the case museums' websites. Findings demonstrated that museums were taking advantage of the new relaxed guidelines, while also following pre-pandemic best practices for deaccessioning. Recommendations for the museum field are discussed within the conclusion with particular emphasis on transparency and accountability to the public trust.

Keywords: deaccessioning, use of proceeds, direct care of collections, codes of ethics, standards and best practices, public trust, case study

Table of Contents

Chapter 1.....1
Statement of the Problem.....1

Chapter 2.....5
Literature Review.....5
Museums and the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic.....6
Museums, Collections Stewardship, & Deaccessioning..... 8
Summary.....24

Chapter 3.....25
Methods.....25
Method Description & Rationale.....26
Data Collection.....28
Data Analysis.....29
Limitations of the Study.....30
Summary.....31

Chapter 4.....32
Findings.....32
Theme 1: Justification for Deaccession.....33
Theme 2: Use of Proceeds.....41
Theme 3: Who the Museum Sold to.....46
Summary.....49

Chapter 5 51
Conclusion 51
Discussion 52
Recommendations 57
Strengths and Limitations 59
Suggestions for Future Research60
Summary 61

Chapter 1:

Statement of the Problem

Introduction

Collections management is a costly aspect of a museum's budget (Lord, n.d.; Malaro & DeAngelis, 2012c; Weil, 2000/2002). Matassa (2011) condenses the concept of collections management in museums to “[knowing] what you have and where to find it” (p. 3). Broadly, *collections management* involves any activity that allows for museum objects and the information associated with them to be found and utilized (Matassa, 2011; Weber et al., 2021). Collections objects are worth more than the initial costs of acquiring them (Lord, n.d.; Weber et al., 2021). Even gifts to a museum are not free. This is because caring for objects in a museum's collection requires resources (Malaro & DeAngelis, 2012b). Museums must consider the costs associated with collections stewardship prior to acquisitioning objects. The ongoing costs of collections management include “cataloguing; processing and description; preservation and conservation; digitization and reformatting; and storage and maintenance” (Weber et al., 2021, p. 6). In the 1980s, architect George Hartman created formulas to determine the costs of collection care, including the costs of accessioning, cataloguing, and regularly inventorying objects, as well as sustaining accessible, up-to-date records; providing storage space and materials; controlling storage environments and pests; security; conservation treatments; insurance; and other overhead costs. Using Hartman's formula, *Museum News* found that a collection with over 11,000 objects would cost over \$1 million a year to store and care for (Weil, 2000/2002).

Statement of the Problem

At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, in March of 2020, art museums in the United States were forced to close their doors to the public. Not being able to remain open meant

that these museums were losing a significant amount of revenue, especially earned revenue.

Earned revenue includes ticket sales, special events, offerings of onsite art classes, rentals, sales from the gift shop, loans, and other fees (Haimerl, 2021). According to Sotheby's Institute of Art (n.d.), earned income makes up approximately 40% of a museum's generated revenue. Museums in booming tourism areas, like the Guggenheim in New York City, rely on earned income revenue streams like admissions and lost a majority of their budgets when they were forced to shut down during the pandemic (Haimerl, 2021).

According to the American Alliance of Museums (AAM), museums in the U.S. at the beginning of the pandemic lost over \$33 million each day due to COVID-19-related closures (2020a). This loss of revenue created budgetary shortfalls and much of museums' staffs were laid off or furloughed (AAM, 2020c). In AAM's *National Survey of COVID-19 Impact on United States Museums* from June 2020, AAM reports that one-third of the museums that responded to this survey felt they would not be able to remain open for another 16 months without financial support, and 16 percent felt their institutions were at risk of closing entirely (2020b).

AAM also performed a similar survey in 2021, the *National Snapshot of COVID-19 Impact on United States Museums*, which demonstrates the devastation spurred upon American museums by the pandemic, while also reporting some optimistic statistics for the field. According to this survey, 76% of respondent museums lost on average 40% of their operating incomes during closures in 2020. This report states that each respondent museum lost over \$694,000 on average in revenue during the pandemic. One year after AAM's original survey on museums' responses to the pandemic, the percentage of museums at risk of permanent closure decreased from about 33% to 15%. Although the statistic had improved, that 15% is equivalent

to about 5,000 museums in the U.S. (AAM, 2021b). With the pandemic ongoing, it is predicted that it could take years for the profession to rebound (AAM, 2021a).

Such losses in revenue and budgetary shortfalls forced museums to curb expenses across museum functions. According to AAM's 2021 survey, 59% of museum respondents had to impose cutbacks on education and public programming (AAM, 2021b). One costly aspect of a museum's budget is collections care and management. "Arts-focused activities," including collections stewardship, make up the majority of average operating expenses, accounting for 31% of art museums' budgets (AAMD, 2018, p. 4).

Because caring for collections is so costly and museums are struggling, many art museums in the U.S. are deciding to deaccession and sell works from their collections in order to rectify budgetary shortfalls created by the pandemic (Pogrebin, 2020; Small, 2021).

Deaccessioning is the process utilized by museums to remove items from their permanent collections (AAM, 2019). Art museums also chose to deaccession collections objects to take advantage of the American Association of Art Museum Directors' (AAMD) temporary relaxation of deaccessioning guidelines. This change allows member museums to not face sanctions for utilizing proceeds from selling works of art to fund direct care of collections, a practice that was previously prohibited under AAMD's *Code of Ethics* (AAMD, n.d., 2020; Pogrebin, 2020; Small, 2021). Art museums in the U.S. are faced with the decision of whether or not to uphold pre-pandemic standards for deaccessioning or to utilize funds from the sale of artworks to support direct care of collections.

Purpose of the Study

Closures of museums due to the COVID-19 pandemic has created financial stress and significant losses in revenue for art museums in the U.S. The purpose of this study is to

understand how this financial crisis and changing deaccession guidelines has impacted U.S. art museum's decision-making in regards to deaccessioning during the pandemic. The result of this study will aid the museum field in deciding whether or not pre-pandemic standards for deaccessioning should be upheld or if these temporary guidelines should remain and become the new standard. This research is guided by the following research question:

RQ: How have shifting standards and best practices for deaccessioning impacted deaccession decision-making for art museums in the United States during the current pandemic and resulting financial crisis?

This research question is addressed by using a multi-case study of art museums in the U.S. that have chosen to deaccession artworks from their collections during the pandemic.

Summary

This chapter introduced how expensive collections stewardship is and explains the financial crisis that resulted from museums forced to shut down during the pandemic. This financial crisis, supported by changing deaccession guidelines, led to U.S. art museums utilizing deaccessioning to counteract budgetary shortfalls. Chapter 2 provides an analysis of scholarly and professional literature on topics relating to museums in general, who and what governs them, collections stewardship, the history of museums and collecting, deaccessioning, and the pandemic. Then, Chapter 3 explains the methodology, data collection, and analysis utilized to research this multi-case study of art museums in the United States and the research question. Next, Chapter 4 discusses the findings that resulted from the methodology carried out in Chapter 3. Chapter 5 concludes with implications of this study on the museum field, as well as provides recommendations for future research and deaccession decisions.

Chapter 2:

Literature Review

Introduction

In order to investigate deaccessioning decision-making during the current pandemic and resulting financial crisis, a review of the professional and scholarly literature was conducted to assess current accepted standards, best practices, and guidelines for deaccessioning. This chapter begins with an introduction to museums and discusses what and who governs museums. Then, collections stewardship is defined and supplemented with a history of art museums and collecting practices. After that, deaccessioning is explored, along with an explanation of deaccession criteria, why the practice is controversial, and how professional standards and best practices guide this collections management tool. This review of the literature concludes with an exploration into the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the museum field and changing guidelines for deaccessioning. This review is guided by the following research question:

RQ: How have shifting standards and best practices for deaccessioning impacted deaccession decision-making for art museums in the United States during the current pandemic and resulting financial crisis?

The research conducted for this literature review primarily included peer-reviewed scholarly and professional museum resources. Approximately sixty-four percent of the sources were from books and seminal works about the museum field, collections management, and deaccessioning. About twenty percent of the references were survey results, codes of ethics, and guidelines for standards and best practices coming directly from museum professional organizations' websites. The remaining sixteen percent were from journal articles and news articles addressing the more contemporary topics relating directly to the current pandemic.

Museums and the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic

At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, art museums in the U.S. were forced to shutter their doors to the public. Not being able to remain open meant that museums were losing a significant amount of revenue, especially earned income from ticket sales, to memberships, to museum shop sales, to special events and offerings of onsite art classes and programming (Haimerl, 2021). According to a survey of AAM member museums in June 2020, about one-third of the respondent museums were at risk of closing (AAM, 2020b). According to AAM, museums in the U.S. lost over \$33 million each day at the beginning of the pandemic due to COVID-19 related closures (AAM, 2020a). A majority of museums surveyed reported that their institution's operating income decreased by about 40% in 2020 due to these closures that averaged about 28 weeks (AAM, 2021). This loss of revenue created budgetary shortfalls and much of museums' staff were laid off or furloughed (AAM, 2020c, 2021). The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is ongoing and the current president and CEO of AAM, Laura Lott, predicts that "the museum field will take years to recover to pre-pandemic levels of staffing, revenue, and community engagement" (AAM, 2021).

Deaccessioning and the Pandemic

AAMD's Temporary Deaccession Policy Change. One costly aspect of a museum's budget is collections care and management (Weil, 2000/2002). Many museums in the U.S. began utilizing deaccessioning through the sale of works of art to account for the economic burden created by the pandemic (Pogrebin, 2020; Small, 2021). Prior to the pandemic, as previously mentioned, according to AAMD's *Code of Ethics*, it was considered best practice to only use funds from the sale of collections for acquiring new art (AAMD, n.d.). In April 2020, AAMD relaxed their policies to allow museums to use these funds in order to support direct care of

collections, similar to AAM's deaccession policy, without facing sanctions through April 2022 (AAMD, 2020). Frye (2020) is in favor of this easing of guidelines for deaccessioning for the reasons previously mentioned.

Diversity, Equity, Accessibility, and Inclusion (DEAI) Initiatives and Deaccessioning during the Pandemic. During the pandemic, George Floyd was murdered in May 2020 by police officers, sparking protests throughout the U.S. and drawing attention to the Black Lives Matter movement. Many museums in the U.S. responded to these events by stating that they would hold themselves accountable to implementing changes to their institutions to be more diverse, equitable, accessible, and inclusive institutions (Charr, 2020). Such museums are facing controversy and criticism, though, for making statements that were seen as vague and performative rather than taking action to make contributions to the Black Lives Matter movement and combat racism, inequity, and exclusion (Artforum, 2020).

Museums have an ethical obligation as public service institutions to be diverse, equitable, accessible, and inclusive in all their functions in order to best serve their publics and society as a whole (Yerkovich, 2016). DEAI initiatives are not only a moral obligation, but a way for museums to remain relevant to an increasingly diverse population (AAM, 2018b; Yerkovich, 2016). More and more museums today are committing themselves to increasing diversity, equity, accessibility, and inclusion of their institutions (AAM, 2018b).

One way museums are taking action and putting into place DEAI initiatives in the aftermath of Black Lives Matter is in their collecting practices. For example, the Metropolitan Museum of Art expressed that they would make a commitment to diversifying their collections (Dafoe & Goldstein, 2020). Another example of a museum implementing DEAI initiative into their collecting practices, specifically through deaccessioning, is the Baltimore Museum of Art.

In October 2020, the Baltimore Museum of Art announced that it would deaccession and sell works of art by well-known male artists, including Andy Warhol, in order to fund staff salaries and access and equity programming. The museum also planned on selling other famous paintings at private auction to acquire more diverse artworks by women and *BIPOC* (Black, Indigenous, and people of color) artists, as well as to fund DEAI initiatives. The Baltimore Museum of Art planned these initiatives after AAMD lifted their restrictions and sanctions relating to deaccessioning and use of proceeds (Di Liscia, 2020).

Museums, Collections Stewardship, & Deaccessioning

Introduction to Museums

Malaro & DeAngelis define a museum as a nonprofit institution that fulfills an educational and/or aesthetic purpose with a staff that cares for and exhibits tangible objects for the public (Malaro & DeAngelis, 2012a). Miller (2018) defines a museum as “a public service preservation organization that” utilizes their collections objects to explain a variety of topics and subjects (p. 9). Museums have a *fiduciary relationship* with the public, meaning that they have the ethical and legal responsibility to function and hold their collections for the benefit of the public trust (Malaro & DeAngelis, 2012a; Yerkovich, 2016).

What and Who Governs Museums

Mission. Museum *mission* is statement that describes the museum’s purpose for existing, how the museum will achieve that purpose, who the museum serves, and the impact that the museum would like to have (Anderson, 2019; Yerkovich, 2016). The mission statement should highlight the museum’s role in serving the public, as well as its dedication to its collections (AAM, 2018a). Successful and relevant mission statements guide all museum functioning,

including collections stewardship, driving decision-making and actions of staff and museum governance (AAM, 2018a; Anderson, 2019; Gardner & Merritt, 2004; Yerkovich, 2016).

Museum Governance. Most museums in the U.S. are non-profit organizations dedicated to the public trust and not associated with the government. Museums as non-profit institutions are governed by a board made up of trustees or directors. Boards are governed by the law, the museum's bylaws, and the museum's mission, having a moral obligation to uphold ethical standards, as well as ensure that the museum is doing the same. The primary role of museum governance is to ensure that the museum is fulfilling and adhering to its mission in all aspects of the museum's functioning. Museum governance is also tasked with establishing a museum's policies and procedures, and ensuring that these policies and procedures are implemented and followed by museum staff. Although museum governance is not responsible to day-to-day functioning of the museum, for example collections care duties, they are responsible for the museum's assets, including the overall collection (Kuruville, 2015; Yerkovich, 2016). According to AAM's *Code of Ethics*, a museum's governing body "protects and enhances the museum's collections and programs and its physical, human and financial resources" (Yerkovich, 2016, p. 21).

Professional Museum Organizations. Professional museum organizations, like the American Alliance of Museums (AAM), the Association of Art Museum Directors (AAMD), and the International Council of Museums (ICOM), were formed by professionals in the museum field to "unite and inform people who work in the same occupation, help establish and maintain standards, act as a communicative body, and represent shared beliefs about the profession in discussions with other bodies" (Latham & Simmons, 2014, p. 4). Professional museum organizations provide guidance for museums and set standards and best practices for the field

(Latham & Simmons, 2014). Although these professional organizations govern the field, they do not have any policing power over individual museums. The only consequences museum professional organizations can impose is to place sanctions on individual museums or to revoke a member museum's accreditation status (Frye, 2020; Yerkovich, 2016).

Receiving accreditation from professional museum organizations is beneficial to individual museums. Being accredited enhances a museum's credibility, accountability, and reputation. Because accreditation is a peer-review process, it provides accredited museums with validation from other professionals in the field that a museum is fulfilling its mission and purpose in its public service role. Such validation can improve a museum's public image and deem the museum worthy of public support and trust. Receiving this validation, credibility, and a positive reputation can garner community and financial support (AAM, n.d.-b, n.d.-c). Therefore, it is significant when a museum loses its accreditation, as it can negatively affect its reputation, which can lead to decreased visitorship and potential funding opportunities (Yerkovich, 2016).

Professional Codes of Ethics. *Codes of ethics* are created by professional museum organizations to establish behaviors to maintain the integrity of the museum field (Malaro, 1991/1997). When codes of ethics are properly applied, they ensure “the best possible outcomes for the largest number of people possible” (AAM, 2013). Codes of ethics set forth a higher standard than what is required by the law (AAM, 2013; Kuruvilla, 2015; Malaro, 1991/1997). There is an important distinction between legal and ethical standards. *Legal standards* specify “what [an institution] can and cannot do,” meanwhile *ethical standards* detail “what [an institution] should or should not do” (Malaro, 1991/1997, p. 40). Codes of ethics are not enforceable like the law, requiring accountability and commitment of individuals, as well as peer pressure, to be effective (Malaro, 1991/1997). This means that in order for codes of ethics to be

effective, individuals must voluntarily hold themselves accountable to following the set standards of the field or otherwise face consequences from their peers. Such peer pressure is typically applied by professional museum organizations (Kuruvilla, 2015; Yerkovich, 2016). Kuruvilla (2015) notes that there is only so much a professional museum organization can do as they do not hold influence over institutions that are not members of their organization. Marstine (2011) acknowledges the restrictive nature of codes of ethics and argues that 21st-century museum ethics should be able to change as the needs of the field evolve over time.

Professional museum organizations like AAM, AAMD, and ICOM have their own codes of ethics that create guidelines for member museums of these organizations to follow in regards to various ethical situations (Yerkovich, 2016). Although professional organizations have no real power to police and enforce their set standards and codes of ethics, they do have the means to impose sanctions or revoke accreditation from member museums as a consequence for not upholding their ethical obligations (Kuruvilla, 2015; Yerkovich, 2016).

AAM's *Code of Ethics for Museums* places an emphasis on loyalty to mission and principles that serve the public trust while also addressing ethics relating to museum governance, collections, and programs (AAM, n.d.-a). AAMD's *Code of Ethics* focuses on trust and integrity in serving the public, setting standards against art museum directors utilizing their influence for personal gain, and avoiding conflicts of interest. This code has a primary focus on collecting practices (AAMD, n.d.). ICOM's *Code of Ethics for Museums* places an emphasis on ethical standards in order to protect and promote cultural heritage and, similarly to AAM and AAMD, focuses on mission, serving the public trust, and following professional standards in museum operations (ICOM, 2017). For the purposes of this paper, the sections of these codes of ethics on collections stewardship and disposal of collections objects will be examined later.

Collections Stewardship

Most museums are collecting institutions. A collection can include a wide variety of objects from art to historical artifacts, to plants and animals, to science experiments, to teaching tools (Walhimer, 2015). Edson & Dean (1996) argue that caring for collections is the primary responsibility of museums. It is the responsibility of a museum to care for and protect its collections so that they may be perpetually enjoyed by and educate current visitors and future generations (Walhimer, 2015; Yerkovich, 2020).

Collections stewardship involves carefully and responsibly managing the objects and collections within a museum's care (AAM, n.d.-3). This stewardship includes museums ensuring proper collections storage, management, and care. Stewardship also means having the proper documentation and legal title. Successful collections stewardship assures that objects entrusted to a museum's care will be perpetually "available and accessible... to [the current] and future generations" (AAM, n.d.-e). Such stewardship is important to adhering to and furthering the museum's mission, as well as to serve the public trust (AAM, n.d.-e).

Museums care for collections objects from the minute that they enter a museum for acquisition or a loan (Miller, 2018; Simmons, 2020). For example, a collections manager or registrar should properly document all incoming objects: what they are, who donated or loaned the objects, and the reason they came to the museum (Malaro & DeAngelis, 2012; Simmons, 2020). Collections stewardship and management of objects only ends when objects permanently leave the museum's collection through deaccession or when a loan period ends (Miller, 2018; Simmons). Even after an object is deaccessioned or returned to the lender, though, the documentation of the object should be retained by the museum (Simmons, 2020).

History of Art Museums and Collections Stewardship

The first art museums were temples in ancient Greece and Rome dedicated to the Muses in which visitors could view beautiful objects and engage in thoughtful conversations with other visitors (Alexander et al., 2017). These temples contained votives, statues, statuettes, and paintings. During the Middle Ages, in Europe, “churches, cathedrals, and monasteries,” were repositories of religious relics, art, illuminated manuscripts, and tapestries (Alexander et al., 2017, pp. 3-4). In the 16th century, early museums were *cabinets of curiosity* or private collections held by wealthy people, typically royalty, noblemen, high clergymen, rich merchants, or bankers who bought or commissioned works of art and other useful objects (Alexander et al., 2017; Simmons, 2020). Little is known about who cared for these cabinets of curiosity and how they were cared for, but lists and inventories exist for some of these private collections (Matassa, 2011; Simmons, 2020). In the late 16th century, some wealthy private collectors published their collection catalogues as a means of boasting their collections and status (Matassa, 2011, p. 6).

According to Duncan F. Cameron, because museums were created by the wealthy educated elite, they became temples that “enshrined” important, exceptional, and valuable objects (Cameron, 1971/2012). This means that only one perspective is being given, reflecting “aristocratic culture,” excluding the everyday visitor (Cameron, 1971/2012, p. 53). In “The Museum, a Temple or the Forum,” Cameron argues that successful museums today function more as a forum rather than a temple. Museums of today are more aware of audience needs, providing adequate interpretation for their publics (Cameron, 1971/2012). In contrast, museums of the past exclusively presented curators’ perspectives as the only interpretation. Today, museums provide more interpretation to greater appeal to the public through increased inclusivity and representation (Anderson, 2012).

It was not until the 19th century that the modern idea of museums and the collections care profession emerged (Alexander et al., 2017; Matassa, 2011; Simmons, 2020). In the late 1800s, the first museum professional with the title of registrar was hired by the Smithsonian Institution to keep written records on collections objects. *Registrars* create and maintain documentation of collections objects (Simmons, 2020). Concurrent with the title of registrar being added to the museum field, museums began to collect, organize and group art, artifacts, and specimens according to specializations, for example art, science, etc. (Alexander et al., 2017; Simmons, 2020).

Registrars were not common in museums in America until the mid-20th century (Matassa, 2011; Simmons, 2020). The position of collections manager was first introduced in the U.S. in the mid-1970s. *Collections managers* are specialists trained in how to properly care for collections objects (Simmons, 2020). Prior to the introduction of the registrar and collections manager to the museum field, curators, with minimal training, cared for collection objects (Matassa 2011; Simmons, 2020). As the importance of collections expanded, the need for collections specialists, like registrars and collections managers, to properly document and care for collections increased (Simmons, 2020). Eventually, the titles of registrar and collections manager became synonyms for someone who manages object records, handles objects, arranges for their packaging and shipping, storage, loans, and insurance (Schlatter, 2012; Simmons, 2020).

During the post-war period, after 1945, the museum field began to grow tremendously with many new institutions being established all over the world with the support of government assistance. Then, following the 1970s, museums began to decline again, as the amount of governmental support was unbalanced and unable to keep up with the growing number of these

institutions (Alexander et al., 2017; Weil, 1999/2002). Museums quickly needed to shift their focus to drawing in the public (Weil, 1999/2002). Museums could no longer rely only on support from the government and wealthy donors; they would also need to garner “a substantial measure of public support” if they wished to be successful and remain open (Weil, 1999/2002, loc. 610). In “From Being about Something to Being for Somebody,” (1999/2002), Weil discusses how museums have become less collections-based, in favor of becoming more interpretive and educationally-focused in order to better serve the public. Museums of the past held their responsibility to preserving and displaying its objects rather than to serving its visitors. Due to the fact that museums are becoming more focused on public service, they are becoming increasingly focused on outcomes and measuring success based on public programming and enacting positive change on their publics (Weil, 1999/2002). This new emphasis on public service and making collections useful to the public aligns with Dana’s vision for museums (Dana, 1917; Weil, 1999/2002). Dana’s vision for museums, discussed in “The Gloom of the Museum,” focuses on the paradigmatic shift from serving only the educated elite to being welcoming spaces for everyone. Dana argues that in focusing less on unique, rare, and high-priced objects, museums better serve a wider public when they focus more attention on collections their communities recognize, find useful, and interesting (Dana, 1917). Dana also notes that interpretation of collections should also be provided in terms that the wider community can understand for the museum to best serve the public (Alexander et al., 2017; Dana, 1917).

Weil also discusses the shift from being collections-focused to focusing on serving the public in “Collecting then, collecting today: What’s the difference?” (2000/2002). In order to better serve the public and manage museum resources, museums have become more purposive and deliberate in their collecting practices over time (Weil, 2000/2002). Historically, museums

were not as disciplined in their collecting practices, acquiring objects that may no longer meet today's criteria for acquisition (Moser, 2020). Many museums accepted almost everything they were offered in terms of gifts and donations (Malaro & DeAngelis, 2012b). Museum collections began to grow exponentially due to such unrestricted collecting practices. Such conventions are as caring for and managing each object in a collection is costly, utilizing vital museum resources, including funds, staff, and storage space, which creates an economic burden (Weil, 1990, 2002; Brown, 2011). For this reason, it is important to keep museum collections finite (Moser, 2020).

Deaccessioning

Deaccessioning is a method utilized by museums, as a tool for collections stewardship, to keep their collections finite. Deaccessioning is the process utilized by museums to remove objects from their permanent collections (Malaro & DeAngelis, 2012c). Deaccessioning is a controversial, but necessary procedure in collections management (Moser, 2020; Simmons, 2017). Deaccessioning can be used “to correct collecting mistakes of the past and to respond to collecting needs of the present” (Moser, 2020, p. 118). In the past, museums were not as disciplined in their collecting practices. Over time, the scope of a museum's collection can change and objects accessioned long ago may not fit in or serve the museum's updated mission (Malaro & DeAngelis, 2012c; Moser, 2020; Simmons, 2017). The process of deaccessioning can allow a museum to “[thoughtfully] prune” objects from their collections to devote further resources to the objects entrusted to their care that provide a greater service to the public (Malaro & DeAngelis, 2012, p. 539; Moser, 2020).

Deaccession Criteria. There are a variety of reasons a museum may choose to deaccession an object from its collection. A museum may choose to deaccession an object when it no longer fits within the scope of the museum's collection or mission. Over time, the scope of

a museum's collection can change and objects accessioned long ago may not fit in or serve the museum's updated mission (Malaro & DeAngelis, 2012; Miller, 2000a, 2018; Moser, 2020; Simmons, 2017). Deaccessioning may correct past collecting mistakes (Moser, 2020).

Objects may be deaccessioned if they are not likely to be useful to the museum or if they are of poor quality (Miller, 2000a; Moser, 2020). An institution might choose to deaccession an object if it no longer has the means to properly care for the object in terms of resources and space (Miller, 2000 a & b, 2018; Simmons, 2017). It is necessary to deaccession objects for this reason as using valuable museum resources to care for and preserve inappropriate objects betrays the public trust. According to the AAM's *Code of Ethics for Museums*, collections and decisions to deaccession should support the mission of the museum and favor the public trust (AAM, n.d. -a; Simmons, 2017; Yerkovich, 2020).

Museums may deaccession an object when they realize that they do not legally own an object or it is dangerous to the safety of people or the rest of the objects in the collection (Miller, 2000b; Moser, 2020). Other criteria for deaccessioning an object may be that it is a duplicate or a forgery, that it has extensive deterioration that conservation is unable to solve, is discovered to be more useful to another collecting institution, or falls under the legislation of collection object-specific mandates, like the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) (Miller, 2000b; Moser, 2020).

Deaccessioning & Controversy. It was not until the early 1970s that it became widespread public knowledge in the U.S. that museums were deaccessioning and disposing of objects from their collections (Gammon, 2018; Miller, 2000b). A series of critical articles in the *New York Times* exposed the Metropolitan Museum of Art's plans to sell of works of art from their collection (Gammon, 2018; Miller, 2000b). This created significant public outcry from

those who thought that this practice directly contrasted with museums' purposes of holding and preserving their collections in perpetuity (Gammon, 2018; Miller, 2000b, 2020; Simmons, 2017).

In a chapter from *Deaccessioning and Its Discontents*, Gammon (2018) describes some of the reasoning as to why people disagree with the practice of deaccessioning. Some believe that if the end-goal of a work of art is to be in a museum's collection, then deaccessioning violates the purpose of that object. Deaccessioning also implies that the decisions of past curators that accessioned these objects in the first place are fallible. Critics of deaccessions do not think that objects should leave the museum's collection simply because tastes change over time and that if past curators thought the object had enough cultural value to be accessioned that it should remain in the collection (Gammon, 2018).

Some against deaccessioning also subscribe to the belief that if museums do not take care in the due diligence of deaccessions, that it is similar to theft, as museums hold their collections in the public trust for the benefit of their publics (Gammon, 2018; Malaro & DeAngelis, 2012; Moser, 2020). This is why public sale of collections objects is controversial. The opportunity arises for an object to leave the public sphere and be permanently lost if it were to be sold to a private collector (Gammon, 2018, p. 235; Moser, 2020; Weil, 1990). An open market sale may also put the object in danger from a preservation standpoint. Not only could these objects deteriorate from not being cared for up to museum standards, but they also risk being separated from their provenance and context (Miller, 2000a). This is also known as *dissociation*, an agent of deterioration in which an object is separated from key data about its intellectual or cultural importance (Simmons, 2017).

Public sale is also controversial because this means that the museum is monetizing their collections, which can be seen as a betrayal to caring for objects in the public trust (Moser,

2020). Despite objects having a monetary value, that value is of secondary importance after being acquired for a museum's permanent collection. The object's primary value and significance should come from the object's ability to reinforce cultural understanding. In other words, collections objects shift from being financial assets to cultural assets that benefit the public trust when they are acquired by a museum (AAM, 2019).

In "The Deaccession Cookie Jar," Weil notes that betraying the public trust through capitalizing on collections may result in a museum losing future public support and possibly even government funding. This is because capitalizing upon collections is viewed negatively, therefore doing so would create a negative public perception of the museum. Weil argues that the public would not be inclined to make donations to a museum that is perceived to be using its collections as a reserve of assets to be sold whenever they please (Weil, 1992/1997). Some fear that deaccessioning will create a "slippery slope" of museums deaccessioning haphazardly (Gammon, 2018, p. 235).

Often, "inter-museum deaccessioning" or donation of deaccessioned objects to other institutions' collections is the preferred option for avoiding controversy as this keeps these objects in the public trust (Miller, 2000a, p. 95; Moser 2020). Miller argues that donation to other museums is the only way to truly deaccession collections objects "guilt free" (Miller, 2000a, p. 95).

Although deaccessioning may be controversial, Brown (2011) argues that thoughtful, educated deaccession decisions have the possibility of outweighing the risks associated with deaccessioning. If these decisions are made with the best interest of the museum, its mission, the collections, and the public in mind, deaccessioning can be a necessary tool for good collections management. Deaccessioning can provide the museum with the opportunity to grow and change

as the needs of their community and publics evolve (Brown, 2011). Public disclosure, honesty, and transparency regarding the practice of deaccessioning is necessary to help museums avoid controversy and public scrutiny, allowing for museums to continue to successfully utilize deaccessioning as a collections management tool (Brown, 2011; Miller, 2000b). Being transparent in press releases, policies, and procedures for both “deaccessioning and disposal can help museums mitigate the risk of ethical controversy” (Moser, 2020, p. 118). Transparency as an ethical standard allows a museum to maintain their integrity (Moser, 2020). Simmons argues that the museum best serves the public when they are being transparent (Simmons, 2017). This is because transparency builds trust that a museum is acting ethically and fulfilling their purpose of benefitting the public (Marstine, 2013).

Deaccessioning & Professional Codes of Ethics, Standards, & Best Practices.

Standards are core documents that define commonly held principles, expectations, and obligations of the museum field (AAM, 2013; Yerkovich, 2016). They also present a mechanism for the museum field to communicate and enhance accountability. *Best practices* or *professional practices* in museums are actions taken or techniques that apply standards to problem solve and achieve a specific result (AAM, n.d.-e, 2013). Best practices are an ideal or goal that museums can strive for if the actions are appropriate to an individual museum’s circumstances in specific situations (AAM, 2013). Certain professional practices may not apply to all types of museums. Best practices can vary by museum discipline and budget (AAM, n.d.-e). There is not a singular method of achieving best practices; instead these outcomes can be accomplished in a variety of ways (AAM, n.d.-e, 2013). Standards and best practices are applied to all areas of museum functions, including collections stewardship and deaccessioning.

Deaccessioning in the U.S. is legal with very few laws enforcing the process. Therefore, it is necessary for professional codes of ethics to define standards and best practices for deaccessioning. As nonprofit organizations with governing boards, museums are able to dispose of collections objects with approval from their museum's governance (Malaro, 1991/1997). Unless it is directly stated within the charter of the institution, a legally binding document, a nonprofit museum is able to deaccession any object from its collection (Malaro, 1991/1997; Yerkovich, 2016). Therefore, it is up to individual museums to decide whether or not they will deaccession collection objects and how they will do so (Malaro, 1991/1997).

Professional codes of ethics, such as that of AAM, AAMD, and ICOM, provide guidelines for the practice of deaccessioning. According to AAM's *Code of Ethics for Museums*, disposal activities must support protecting and preserving natural and cultural resources, while also dissuading the illegal trade of those resources (AAM, n.d.-a). Disposal activities should also fulfill the museum's mission and responsibility to the public trust. This code of ethics describes how proceeds from the sale of collections objects are to be used, as well (AAM, n.d.-a). ICOM states that proceeds from deaccessioning are only to be used for means that benefit the collections or for acquisitions. ICOM's *Code of Ethics* also warns that deaccessioning can lead to a decrease in the public's trust in a museum. (ICOM, 2017; Yerkovich, 2020). It is important not to violate the public trust or be perceived of violating the public trust as it can be difficult to mitigate such damage to the museum's reputation (Miller, 2000a).

Use of Proceeds. Use of proceeds from the sale of deaccessioned objects is another controversial aspect of deaccessions. Certain professional museum organizations allow only for these proceeds to be used for future acquisitions, while others allow for these funds to be utilized for direct care of collections (Malaro & DeAngelis, 2012c; Moser, 2020; Simmons, 2017).

According to AAMD's *Code of Ethics*, museum directors should not deaccession works of art to generate funds for any purpose other than for new acquisitions (AAMD, n.d.). As stated in AAM's *Code of Ethics*, proceeds from the sale of collections objects may only be utilized for acquisition or direct care of collections (AAM, n.d.-a). These funds should "never be used as substituted for fiscal responsibility" (AAM, 2019, p. 6). This means that museums should not use deaccessioning simply as a means of garnering income to cover budgetary shortfalls due to financial irresponsibility of museum governance (Miller, 2000a; Simmons, 2017; Yerkovich, 2020). Although there may be immediate benefits of monetizing collections, it is important that museums avoid this allure as the risks associated, i.e. long-term loss of public trust, can sometimes far outweigh the brief relief of this type of income stream (Miller, 2000a). Miller (2000a) argues that the most important of the museum's assets is its reputation. Without a positive reputation, a museum cannot be successful and properly care for and preserve objects in its collections (Miller, 2000a).

According to AAM, *direct care* refers to any action that involves investing in the museum's collections in order to enhance and prolong their "usefulness or quality" so that they may perpetually be utilized to serve the public (AAM, 2019, p. 7). The specific actions defined as direct care of collections varies by museum discipline. It is important that each museum defines what direct care means to their institution within their collections management policy (AAM, 2019; Miller, 2020). According to AAMD, each museums' board-approved definition of what expenses are considered direct care of collections should be publicly available, for example, on the museum's website (AAMD, 2020). For the purposes of this paper, the provided definition will be only related to direct care of collections in art museums. Direct care of collections can include conservation; collections management technology and databases;

reference materials; storage materials; climate control; off-site storage; consultants; collections staff, including registrars and collections managers, salaries; and staff training and development (Simmons, 2017; Yerkovich, 2016). The distinction of direct care does not include operating costs (Yerkovich, 2016).

Although controversial, unethical, and may result in disciplinary actions by professional museum organizations, a museum may have no other option than to capitalize on its collection to address budgetary shortfalls or be in danger of closure (Moser, 2020). Frye (2020) argues against the rules and guidelines placed on deaccessioning. He claims that museums should not be forced into closure because they simply do not want to violate the rules or act unethically. Frye claims that deaccessioning rules do not allow museum directors and boards to make decisions in the best interest of the institution and keep the museum open in some cases (Frye 2020).

A museum may argue that using proceeds from the sale of deaccessioned objects to stay open may benefit the public trust more than if the museum were to close. In this case, the museum should be prepared to face public scrutiny and be ready to justify the necessity for selling deaccessioned objects. The museum should be prepared to clarify the inevitability of such a crisis despite due diligence, as well as explain how proceeds could be utilized to successfully keep the museum operating for future generations (Malaro & DeAngelis, 2012).

In “Ethical, Entrepreneurial or Inappropriate?” Gardner argues that no matter the financial situation, unethical actions are never appropriate as museums function for the public trust. Museums cannot simply use the excuse of protecting collections to justify unethical behaviors. Gardner’s argument hinges upon the idea that if a museum violates its mission and the public trust, then there is no point to saving that museum from closing as those are reasons for a museum’s existence (Gardner, 2011).

Summary

This literature review was developed in order to identify any gaps in the literature relating to the research question:

RQ: How have shifting standards and best practices for deaccessioning impacted deaccession decision-making for art museums in the United States during the current pandemic and resulting financial crisis?

Deaccessioning is an important collections management tool for museums to keep collections finite and in line with the institution's mission and dedication to the public trust. With changing guidelines for the practice of deaccessioning, museums were left with the decision of whether or not to uphold old deaccession standards and best practices or use these funds from deaccessions in order to support direct care of collections in the challenging, both financially and socially, following the current pandemic, Black Lives Matter movement, and financial crisis. After completing this research, it was concluded that there is a gap in the scholarly and professional literature about deaccessioning during the pandemic, as it still is such a contemporary issue as the pandemic is ongoing. The proceeding chapter will further research and explore the topic of deaccessioning and changing guidelines for the practice during the pandemic.

Chapter 3:

Methods

Introduction

This research project sought to determine whether art museums in the U.S. should uphold pre-pandemic best practices for deaccessioning or utilize proceeds from the sale of works of art to support direct care of collections to account for budgetary shortfalls stemming from the financial crisis created by the current pandemic. At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, museums could not remain open, leading to significant losses in earned revenue and layoffs across the museum field (AAM, 2020a/c; Haimerl, 2021). This financial distress provoked the American Association of Museum Directors (AAMD), to relax their guidelines on deaccessioning through April 2022 to allow member museums to not face sanctions for utilizing proceeds from selling collections to fund direct care of collections. Such a practice was previously prohibited under AAMD's *Code of Ethics* (AAMD, n.d./2020; Pogrebin, 2020; Small, 2021). To determine the impact of shifting standards and best practices on deaccessioning decisions being made by U.S. art museums during the pandemic, four American art museums: the Brooklyn Museum, the Everson Museum of Art, the Newark Museum of Art, and the Palm Springs Art Museum, were selected as part of a multi-site case study supported through textual analysis. The following research question guiding this investigation was:

RQ: How have shifting standards and best practices for deaccessioning impacted deaccession decision-making for art museums in the United States during the current pandemic and resulting financial crisis?

This chapter provides a description and rationale for the method chosen, as well as data collection and analysis, and explains the limitations of this specific study.

Method Description & Rationale

For this study, a qualitative research method was chosen. Denzin & Lincoln (2011) in the *SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research* define *qualitative research* as an activity that uses interpretive practices for observers to study phenomena and their meanings in their natural environment (as cited by Creswell & Poth, 2018). Qualitative research allows investigators to study the processes that lead to phenomena rather than simply the significance of the phenomena (Gillham, 2000). There are five approaches to qualitative research identified by Creswell & Poth (2018): narrative research, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, and case study.

Case study was chosen as the method of inquiry to conduct this study. According to Creswell & Poth (2018), “*case study research* is... a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a real-life, contemporary bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time” (p. 96). Yin (2008) states that the goal of case study is to gain an “in-depth understanding of something – a program, an event, a place, a person, an organization” (as cited by Bernard & Ryan, 2010, p. 43).

More specifically, a multi-site, instrumental case study was chosen. An *instrumental case* seeks to understand a specific issue, which in this case is deaccession decision-making (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Stake, 1995). A *multisite* case study examines and analyzes multiple cases (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Case studies must have identified boundaries (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Gerring, 2007; Yin, 2018). Bounding may be spatial and temporal, providing the context for the time and place of each case (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Gerring, 2007). Temporal boundaries are especially important when dealing with specific events (Gerring, 2007).

Case study is the best approach to answering this project's specific research question because the research problem relates to contemporary events (e.g. the current pandemic) (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2018). The research question also implies a bounded system, making case study the best approach to inquiry (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Gerring, 2007; Yin, 2018). This case study is temporally bounded by the dates of the pandemic, March 2020 through 2022. This research is also bounded by the fact that it focuses on discrete events (i.e. U.S. art museums deaccessioning works of art during the pandemic) (Gerring, 2007). Schramm (1971) notes that case studies have the tendency to describe and explain decision-making, as well as the results of those decisions (as cited by Yin, 2018). This aligns with this project's research goal of identifying how the pandemic and shifting guidelines have impacted deaccession decision-making. Yin (2018) also notes that "how" and "why" are operative words in research questions that hint at case study being appropriate as a method of inquiry.

Bounded by the research question, four U.S. art museums were selected because of their relevancy to the phenomenon being researched, which in this study is deaccessioning during the pandemic (Stake, 2006). Each of the four museums chosen deaccessioned works of art to take advantage of AAMD's temporary change in deaccession guidelines to account for budgetary shortfalls during the pandemic. The four art museums selected were the Brooklyn Museum, the Everson Museum of Art, the Newark Museum of Art and the Palm Springs Art Museum. These U.S. art museums represent various different sizes (small, medium, and large) and budgets of museums. Choosing museums of differing sizes and budgets was important in order provide distinctions and uniqueness between each case (Stake, 2006). After the case museums were selected, the researcher was able to collect data on each of the cases.

Data Collection

Data in qualitative research “document[s] human experiences about others and/or one’s self in social action and reflexive states” (Saldaña, 2011, p. 4). According to Bernard & Ryan (2010), *qualitative data* is derived from reducing human “thoughts, behaviors, emotions, artifacts, and environments to sounds, words, or pictures” (p. 5). There are five kinds of qualitative data: objects, images, sounds, video, and documents (Bernard & Ryan, 2010). Creswell & Poth (2018) combine images, sounds, and video in the category of audiovisual materials and adds interviews as a type of qualitative data. For case study specifically, data can include interviews, observations, and texts or documents (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Texts constitute data in this project. Texts provide messaging and information about how people communicate life experiences (Allen, 2017). Texts can be written documents like journals, letters, emails, blogs, newspaper articles, and reports, or even sounds, images, and videos (Creswell & Poth, 2013; Lee, 2012). In this research, texts collected and analyzed were taken from scholarly and professional museum literature on deaccession standards, ethics, and best practices, as well as from newspaper articles, press releases, and other media, including auction house lot information, from both the press and the websites of the case museums being studied. Multiple types of texts were collected as a form of *triangulation*, as case studies “[rely] on multiple sources of evidence” (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018, p. 15). Triangulation enhances the validity and credibility of the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). It is also important to have a variety of sources of evidence or data for the purpose of representation and having multiple perspectives to avoid bias (Gillham, 2000).

According to Lee (2012), the research question dictates the types of documents to be used as data. For this study, texts were selected based upon their relation to the bounded system in the

research question and the case art museums that made the decision to deaccession works of art during the pandemic. Compiled texts were about how and why these deaccession decisions were made by those art museums. Texts also related to the temporary policy changes on deaccessioning. At least three pieces of textual evidence for each case museum was the minimum for triangulating this research project.

Data collection for this research project was conducted online utilizing online texts from museum websites, online newspaper articles, and auction house websites. Online research was chosen due to the fact that many museums post their deaccession decisions, usually through press releases, on their websites as a means of being transparent with their publics. Media posts on the topic of deaccession are also typically posted online. This data was found by looking at museum websites, online media articles, and publications found from scholarly online database searches.

Data Analysis

After the data was collected, texts were printed out and analyzed using textual analysis, coding, and cross-case analysis. First the researcher *pre-coded* the texts by highlighting significant quotes in the texts and *memoing* notes and ideas in the margins (Bernard & Ryan, 2010; Saldaña, 2016). *Coding* refers to a technique utilized in analyzing textual data in which a researcher creates “a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data” (Saldana, 2016). Codes allow a researcher to identify patterns and begin to categorize information that can then be used to develop themes connecting the data (Saldaña, 2016). Bernard & Ryan (2010) describe a five-step process of textual analysis that involves (1) locating

codes, (2) describing these codes, (3) creating a codebook, (4) applying these codes to specific areas of the actual texts, and (5) linking codes and themes to theory.

After pre-coding and memoing, codes were identified in the texts and added to an Excel spreadsheet that functioned as a codebook. This spreadsheet lists codes, identifies the texts that mention or relate to these codes, and quotes from the texts that apply to these codes. The first level of coding identifies the case museum's reasoning and/or justification for deaccessioning and selling works of art: budgetary shortfalls; diversity, equity, accessibility, and inclusion initiatives. The second level of coding identifies how museums decided to use proceeds from selling the deaccessioned works of art: either to support the direct care of collections or to fund new acquisitions. The third level of coding identifies who the museum ended up selling the deaccessioned works of art to (if it is known): if the museum sold it to a private collector or another museum.

After applying these codes to the data, a cross-case analysis was completed to identify patterns and determine if museums are making similar decisions in regards to deaccessioning through the sale of works of art. Chapter 4 reports the findings of this data analysis, which will aid the museum field in deciding whether or not pre-pandemic standards and best practices for deaccessioning should be upheld or if these temporary guidelines should remain and become the new standard.

Limitations of the Study

There are limitations to case study in general and also in this specific case study. One limitation of case study is the fact that they take a large amount of effort, requiring a great amount of time to generate a rigorous and in-depth analysis of a phenomena. That effort is increased by completing a study with multiple cases (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2018).

Another limitation is that researchers cannot typically be utilized to generalize results about a phenomenon (Yin, 2018). This specific case study is limited by its bounding. It only applies to art museum in the U.S. that are deaccessioning works of art through sale, therefore, it does not address deaccessioning and disposal through other means and potentially excludes other factors that may affect deaccession decision-making. Also because of the case study's bounding, the researcher's choices in cases are limited to museums that have deaccessioned during the pandemic. The researcher was also limited to museums that have made deaccession decisions that were well-documented in the media and on museum websites.

Summary

This study sought to examine U.S. art museums' decision-making in regards to deaccessioning during the pandemic and resulting financial crisis. This was done to determine whether or not pre-pandemic best practices for deaccession should remain or if standards for this practice should evolve to meet the needs of the ever-changing museum field. The methodology of a qualitative multi-case study with textual and cross-case analysis was chosen after weighing the appropriateness and limitations of such a study. It was determined such a case study was the appropriate method of inquiry for the following research question:

RQ: How have shifting standards and best practices for deaccessioning impacted deaccession decision-making for art museums in the United States during the current pandemic and resulting financial crisis?

The findings of the textual and cross-case analysis are presented in Chapter 4 and Chapter 5 concludes with the implications of these findings on the museum field, as well as provides recommendations for future deaccession decisions.

Chapter 4:

Findings

Introduction

This study sought to determine whether art museums in the U.S. should uphold pre-pandemic best practices for deaccessioning or utilize proceeds from the sale of works of art to support the direct care of collections to account for budgetary shortfalls spurred by the financial crisis created by the current pandemic. Through a qualitative multisite case study with textual and cross-case analysis, as well as data from case museum websites and the media, this study's findings were informed by the following research question:

RQ: How have shifting standards and best practices for deaccessioning impacted deaccession decision-making for art museums in the United States during the current pandemic and resulting financial crisis?

Four case museums were selected to answer this question: the Brooklyn Museum in Brooklyn, New York, the Everson Museum of Art in Syracuse, New York, the Newark Museum of Art in Newark, New Jersey, and the Palm Springs Art Museum in Palm Springs, California. These art museums in the U.S. were selected as they each deaccessioned and sold works of art from their permanent collections during the COVID-19 pandemic, which began in March 2020 and continues today in March 2022.

Texts relating to deaccession decisions made by these case museums within the stated timeframe were examined. Triangulated textual material included case museums' collections management and deaccession policies, press releases, online newspaper articles, and auction house lot results. This textual data was collected, analyzed, and classified according to similar codes and themes identified across the four cases. Data analysis, supported by coding, was

conducted utilizing a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. After reading these texts and memoing, codes were identified and color-coded by theme to allow the researcher to note similarities and differences in deaccession decisions across cases. The codes or themes identified include case museums' 1) *Justification for Deaccessioning*, 2) *Use of Proceeds*, and 3) *Who the Museum Sold To*. Table 1, displayed below, provides definitions for each of these coding categories or themes. This chapter provides detailed descriptions of each case museum through the identified codes, themes, and subthemes, which were then analyzed based on the study's research question.

Table 1 - Coding Categories/Themes

Coding Categories/Themes	Definition
<i>Justification for Deaccessioning</i>	This category includes information on each case museum's reasoning for why they are selling deaccessioned works of art from their collections through public sale. Justifications can include addressing budgetary shortfalls; an evolving institutional mission and/or scope of collections; and diversity, equity, accessibility, and inclusion (DEAI) initiatives.
<i>Use of Proceeds</i>	Use of proceeds refers to how the museum will use funds generated by the sale of deaccessioned works of art. Museums may choose to utilize these funds for new acquisitions and/or to support the direct care of collections.
<i>Who the Museum Sold To</i>	This category includes information on the buyer of the deaccessioned works of art, whether it is unknown or not public knowledge, a private collector, or another institution like a museum or library.

Note. Table 1 identifies and defines the codes or themes to be explored throughout this chapter.

Theme 1: Justification for Deaccession

The first theme is *Justification for Deaccession*. In the coding process, two subthemes as justification for deaccession decisions emerged. These subthemes or reasons for those decisions

include *Budgetary Shortfalls* and to support *Diversity, Equity, Accessibility and Inclusion Initiatives*.

Subtheme 1: Budgetary Shortfalls

At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, art museums across the United States were forced to close their doors to the public (Haimerl, 2021). Many of these museums lost a significant amount of earned revenue due to state-mandated closures, capacity limitations, and “almost nonexistent tourism” (Pogrebin, 2020). Such losses in earned revenue created budgetary shortfalls and led to layoffs across the field (AAM, 2020c, 2021).

The Brooklyn Museum. The Brooklyn Museum has struggled financially for years and years prior to the pandemic. In addition to these prior financial struggles, the Brooklyn Museum cited budgetary shortfalls stemming from the pandemic as justification for their deaccession decisions (Pogrebin, 2020). During fall 2020, the Brooklyn Museum announced that it would be deaccessioning and selling works of art from its collection at a public auction at the auction house Christie’s. The Brooklyn Museum was the first museum to announce it would deaccession works of art through sale and take advantage of the Association of Art Museum Director’s (AAMD) new temporary guidelines during the pandemic. These works of art were Old Master’s paintings, including art by Lucas Cranach the Elder (Packard, 2020a; Pogrebin, 2020; Smee, 2021). One painting by Lucas Cranach the Elder, entitled *Lucretia*, sold by the museum for \$5,070,000 in October 2020 (Christie’s, 2020a).

The Brooklyn Museum also later sold more works of art in a public auction at the auction house Sotheby’s in spring 2021. One of these works was a painting by famous American Impressionist painter Mary Cassatt. The painting *Baby Charles Looking Over His Mother's Shoulder (No. 3)* was sold for \$1,593,000 (Small, 2021; Smee, 2021; Sotheby’s, 2021b). Both

works of art, *Lucretia* and *Baby Charles Looking Over His Mother's Shoulder (No. 3)*, were sold to support the direct care of collections “amid financial strain exacerbated by the pandemic shutdown” (Christie’s, 2020a; Packard, 2020a; Small, 2021; Smee, 2021; Sotheby’s, 2021).

The Everson Museum of Art. The Everson Museum of Art did not specifically cite budgetary shortfalls as justification for their decision to deaccession a painting by Jackson Pollock in September 2020. The museum’s press release instead focused on diversity, equity, accessibility, and inclusion (DEAI) initiatives, which will be further discussed in in *Subtheme 2* (Everson Museum of..., 2020).

The Newark Museum of Art. The Newark Museum of Art announced it would be deaccessioning works from its collection in spring 2021 (Di Liscia, 2021). The museum deaccessioned 19 works from its collection and sold them at public auction at Sotheby’s (Newark Museum of..., 2021; Sotheby’s, 2021a; Smee, 2021). One of the most notable works was a painting by American painter Thomas Cole, entitled *The Arch of Nero*. The painting sold for \$988,000 (Sotheby’s, 2021a; Small, 2021).

Similar to other museums in the U.S., the Newark Museum of Art was forced to remain closed for over a year due to pandemic shutdowns (Solomon, 2021; Sheldon, 2021). According to Linda C. Harrison, director and CEO of the Newark Museum of Art, the museum “lost \$6 million in revenue during the pandemic, saw reduced donations and admissions were greatly impacted” (Sheldon, 2021). A spokesperson of the museum, Ben Martin, justified the Newark Museum of Art’s decision to deaccession these works through sale, saying that the funds would “offset the economic impact of the pandemic” and support the museum’s existing collections (Di Liscia, 2021; Sotheby’s, 2021a).

The Palm Springs Art Museum. In fall 2020, the Palm Springs Art Museum announced that it would be deaccessioning works of art from its collection through public sale (Angeleti, 2020; Palm Springs Art..., n.d.; Villa, 2020). One major work the museum decided to deaccession and sell was a painting entitled *Carousel* (1979) by the famous “Abstract Expressionist painter Helen Frankenthaler” (Angeleti, 2020; Villa, 2020). The museum sold the work at public auction at Sotheby’s for \$4,739,000 in late October 2020 (Angeleti, 2020; Sotheby’s, 2020).

One reason the Palm Springs Art Museum decided to deaccession works of art from its collection through sale was to account for budgetary shortfalls spurred by the pandemic and being unable to remain open under California state guidelines. The executive director and CEO of the museum, Louis Grachos, explained this justification, stating, “We have no way of earning income through admissions, through facility rentals, activities of the Annenberg Theater, the store and the restaurant” (Bluesky, 2020).

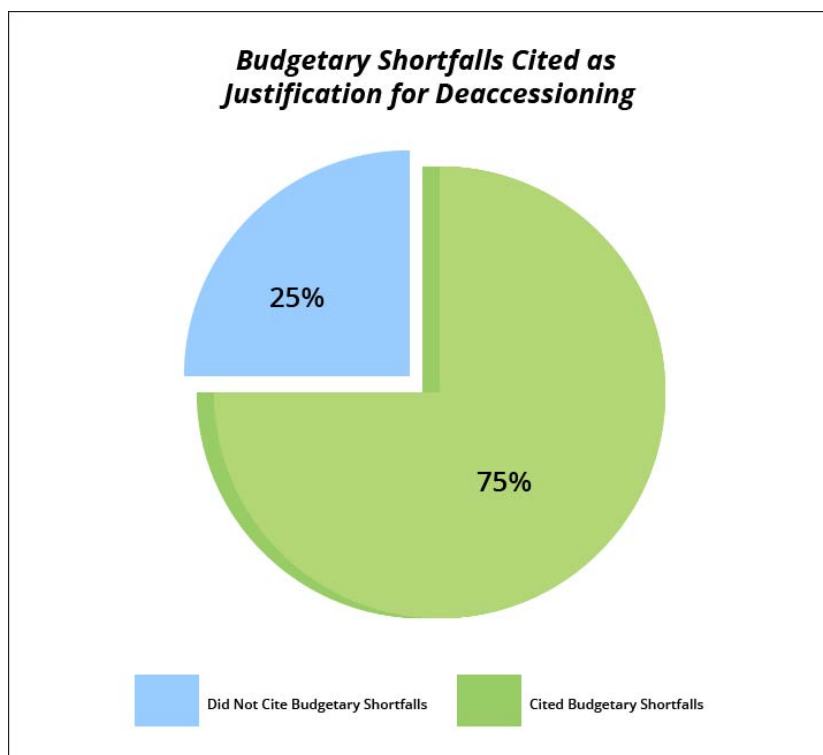
California and Los Angeles guidelines were particularly strict throughout the pandemic, forcing California museums to remain closed for over a year. New York museums were able to reopen in late August of 2020 (Pogrebin, 2021). In comparison, the Palm Springs Art Museum was unable to reopen until April 2021 and could only be open at 25% capacity, “as mandated by the law” (Bluesky, 2021). The pandemic closures significantly impacted the Palm Springs Art Museum. Grachos reported that the Palm Springs Art Museum’s operating budget had reduced “from \$11.5 million to \$7 million – for 2021” (Bluesky, 2021).

Analysis

Seventy-five percent of the case museums (the Brooklyn Museum, the Newark Museum of Art, and the Palm Springs Art Museum) cited budgetary shortfalls due to the pandemic and

resulting financial crisis as justification for their decisions to deaccession works of art through sale, as depicted in the pie chart in Figure 1. The Everson Museum of Art is the one outlier, as it did not specifically cite budgetary shortfalls as justification for their deaccession decisions. Although the Everson did not mention budgetary shortfalls specifically, each of these case museums in the United States were unable to generate earned revenue when they were forced to remain closed during the pandemic. The three cases of the Brooklyn Museum, the Newark Museum of Art, and the Palm Springs Art Museum, demonstrate how dire the financial strain on museums was during the pandemic, influencing their decision-making and leading to deaccessions through public auctions.

Figure 1 – Budgetary Shortfalls Cited as Justification for Deaccessioning



Note. Figure 1 illustrates how many of the case museums cited budgetary shortfalls as justification for their deaccession decisions.

Subtheme 2: Diversity, Equity, Accessibility, and Inclusion Initiatives

Museums in the U.S., especially in the aftermath of Black Lives Matter in May 2020, have made commitments toward putting into place and improving their diversity, equity, accessibility, and inclusion (DEAI) initiatives (Dafoe & Goldstein, 2020; Di Liscia, 2020). One way museums are taking action is by implementing these initiatives in their collecting practices. Increasingly, art museums are accomplishing this by acquiring works of art by women and *BIPOC* (Black, Indigenous, and people of color) artists with the goal of diversifying their collections.

The Brooklyn Museum. The Brooklyn Museum did not specifically mention that its deaccession decisions were made in order to support DEAI initiatives. Although the Brooklyn Museum did not cite DEAI specifically as justification for their deaccession decisions, the museum values diversity, equity, accessibility, and inclusion. According to the Brooklyn Museum's "About" page on its website, the museum values access and inclusion of diverse perspectives through its exhibitions, collections, programming, educational offerings, and interactions with their "communities, both inside and outside the museum's walls" (Brooklyn Museum, n.d.-a).

The Everson Museum of Art. In September 2020, the Everson Museum of Art announced through a press release that it would be deaccessioning and selling a painting by famous, white artist Jackson Pollock from its collection "in order to refine, diversify, and build its collection for the future" (Everson Museum of..., 2020). The painting, called *Red Composition, 1946*, was sold at public auction at Christies in October 2020 for \$13 million (Christies, 2020b; Packard, 2020).

In the museum's press release, the museum staff mentions that the Everson is intensifying its DEAI efforts by taking action to diversify their collections during this "critical time in the nation's history" (Everson Museum of..., 2020). Director of the Everson, Elizabeth Dunbar stated,

The murder of George Floyd and a string of senseless killings of Black lives have propelled us into urgent discussions surrounding the Museum's role and responsibility in fighting racism inside and outside our walls... Now is the time for action. By deaccessioning a single artwork, we can make enormous strides in building a collection that reflects the amazing diversity of our community and ensure that it remains accessible to all for generations to come (Everson Museum of..., 2020).

Dunbar also said that by refining the collection and deaccessioning this work by Pollock, "it signifies to communities of color and to women artists that the myth of the white male genius is under scrutiny" (Russeth, 2021).

Selling the Pollock painting will also allow the museum to "address historical gaps in its holdings" (Villa, 2021). President of the Everson's board of trustees, Jessica Arb Danial, further justified the museum's deaccession decision by mentioning that the proceeds from the sale of this artwork will allow the museum to break away from the historical status quo and address contemporary issues by diversifying the museum's collections (Danial, 2020).

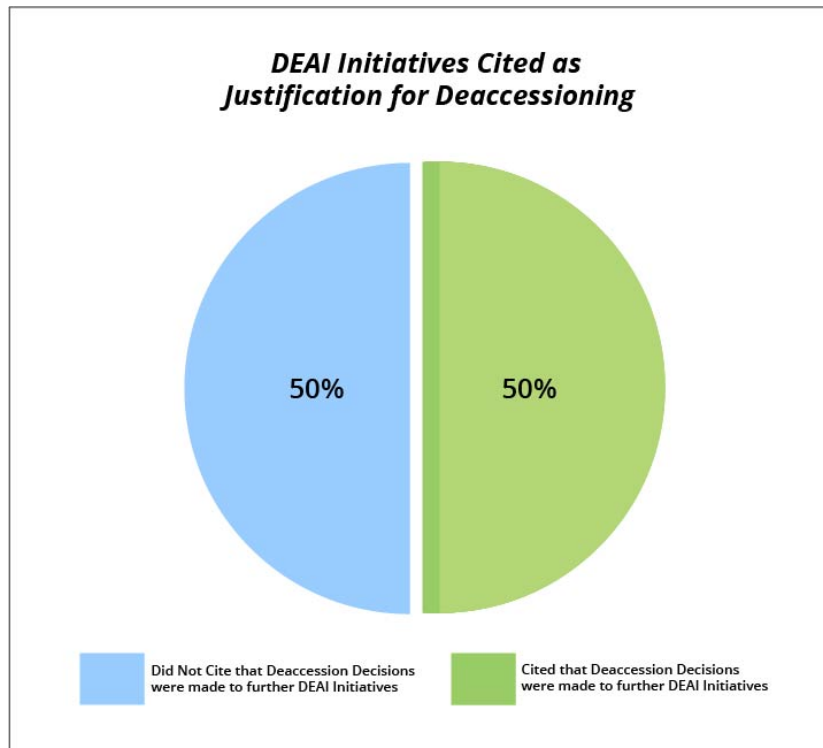
The Newark Museum of Art. The Newark Museum of Art, like the Brooklyn Museum, did not specifically mention that its deaccession decisions were made in order to support DEAI initiatives. Although DEAI was not cited as justification for the Newark Museum of Art's deaccession decisions, the museum is dedicated to diversity, equity, accessibility, and inclusion, "embedding the principles of... DEAI in all aspects of its work and organizational culture," from

its exhibitions, to its programming, facilities, collections, publications, communications with the public, etc. (Newark Museum of..., n.d.).

The Palm Springs Art Museum. In addition to budgetary shortfalls, the Palm Springs Art Museum also justified its decision to deaccession and sell a work of art by white artist Helen Frankenthaler by stating that this decision will support “a years-long [DEAI] initiative to diversify and expand [the museum’s] holdings” (Angeleti, 2020; Villa, 2020). A spokesperson said, “Collection planning including consideration of future acquisitions is underway and will reflect the diversity of our community and the art of our times with a goal of greater inclusivity” (Angeleti, 2020).

Analysis

These four case studies demonstrate the growing importance of DEAI initiatives in museums. Although only 50% of the case museums, the Everson Museum of Art and the Palm Springs Art Museum, cite DEAI initiatives as justification for deaccessioning decisions, each of the four case museums is dedicated to advancing diversity, equity, accessibility, and inclusion. As demonstrated in Figure 2, DEAI initiatives do have an impact on deaccession decisions. More and more museums are seeking to diversify their collections by including more works by women and BIPOC artists. The way museums, including these two case museums, are raising the funds to acquire more diverse works is by deaccessioning and selling works from their collections by white artists in order to generate proceeds dedicated to new and more diverse acquisitions.

Figure 2 – DEAI Initiatives Cited as Justification for Deaccessioning

Note. Figure 2 illustrates how many of the case museums cited DEAI Initiatives as justification for deaccession decisions.

Theme 2: Use of Proceeds

The second theme is *Use of Proceeds*. In the coding process, two subthemes emerged as uses of proceeds from the sale of deaccessioned works of art. These subthemes include *Support for Direct Care of Collections* and to fund *New Acquisitions*.

Subtheme 1: Support for Direct Care of Collections.

According to the American Alliance of Museums (AAM), direct care of collections is defined as any action that “is an investment that enhances the life, usefulness or quality of a museum’s collection” (2019). Direct care of collections varies from museum to museum. It is up to each individual institution to decide how their museum will define direct care of collections, as well as how proceeds from the sale of deaccessioned objects will be utilized (AAM, 2019).

Table 2 depicts the similarities and differences between the researched case museums' definitions of direct care and institution-approved uses of proceeds in regard to direct care. Each of the three case museums included in this chart's direct care policies mention that the activities constituting direct care are not limited to the activities stated (Brooklyn Museum, n.d.-b; Newark Museum of..., 2020; Palm Springs Art..., 2020). The Everson Museum of Art was not included in Table 2 as the museum's Direct Care of Collections Policy is not public information on the museum's website. The researcher was also unable to reach the staff at the Everson to acquire its definition of direct care of collections.

Table 2 – Museums' Definitions of Direct Care of Collections

Museums' Definitions of Direct Care of Collections Includes:	Brooklyn Museum	Newark Museum of Art	Palm Springs Art Museum
Mounting and framing	x	x	x
Documentation of collections, i.e. research, inventory, condition reports, and photography, etc.	x	x	x
Materials and systems associated with documentation, including hardware and software for databases	x	x	x
Preservation, i.e. supplies, storage materials, technology for monitoring and regulating climate	x	x	x
Conservation treatments and associated materials	x	x	x
Packing and transportation	x	x	
Staff salaries, including registrars, collections managers, conservators, consultants, and contractors	x	x	x
Evaluation, expert analysis, and sales fees	x	x	x
Staff training and development		x	

Note. Table 2 demonstrates the similarities and differences between the case museums'

definitions of direct care of collections and institution approved uses of proceeds in regards to direct care of collections (Brooklyn Museum, n.d.; Newark Museum of..., 2020; Palm Springs Art..., 2020).

The Brooklyn Museum. The Brooklyn Museum deaccessioned and sold works of art from its permanent collection to support the direct care of its existing collections (Christie's,

2020a; Packard, 2020a; Pogrebin, 2020; Small, 2021; Sotheby's, 2021b). The Brooklyn Museum's director, Anne Pasternak, stated that the cost of supporting the direct care of collections at the museum has increased significantly during the pandemic (Smee, 2021). Packard (2020a) reported that proceeds from the sale of the deaccessioned works will specifically cover direct care costs relating to storage, conservation, framing, and staff salaries. An extended list of the Brooklyn Museum's approved list of direct care costs can be seen in Table 2. Pasternak justified the challenging and controversial decision of using proceeds to fund direct care of collections as it will benefit the museum to preserve the longevity of the museum's collections (Packard, 2020a).

The Everson Museum of Art. According to a press release on the Everson Museum of Art's website, as well as on Christie's auction webpage, the Pollock painting was deaccessioned and sold to generate funds to support the direct care of collections (Christie's, 2020b; Everson Museum of..., 2020). Within the press release, the museum also specifically mentions how some of the funds will be utilized in regards to the direct care of collections. For example, the press release states that proceeds will be utilized to conserve a sculpture that has been in front of the museum since it opened, as well as to improve on-site storage (Everson Museum of..., n.d.-a).

The Palm Springs Art Museum. The Palm Springs Art Museum deaccessioned and sold Frankenthaler's *Carousel* to support the direct care of collections with proceeds going towards the maintenance and conservation of its collections (Angeleti, 2020; Sotheby's, 2020; Villa, 2020). According to the museum's deaccession policy, the Palm Springs Art Museum, through April 2022, is permitted to utilize funds from the sale of deaccessioned works to support the direct care of collections (Palm Springs Art..., 2020). The Palm Springs Art Museum's approved uses of proceeds in regards to the direct care can be viewed in Table 2.

The Newark Museum of Art. In spring 2021, the Newark Museum of Art deaccessioned and sold works of art from its permanent collection to support the direct care of its collections (Sotheby's, 2021a; Pogrebin & Small, 2021). According to the Newark Museum of Art's collections management policy, proceeds from the sale of deaccessioned works may support the direct care of collections (Newark Museum of..., 2020). The Newark Museum of Art's authorized uses of proceeds in relation to direct care can be seen in Table 2.

Analysis

All four of the case museums deaccessioned and sold works of art to generate funds to support the direct care of collections. This demonstrates that museums are taking advantage of AAMD's temporary guideline change on deaccessions. This is significant because it shows that shifting guidelines did, in fact, have an impact on museum's deaccession decision-making. Although it may have been a controversial decision, each of the four case museums made decisions to deaccession works according to the new guidelines, justified by the fact that proceeds would benefit the preservation of current collections for present and future generations.

Subtheme 2: New Acquisitions

Various professional museum organizations' codes of ethics allow for proceeds from the sale of deaccessioned works of art to be utilized for acquisitions. AAM, AAMD, and the International Council of Museums (ICOM) codes of ethics each allow for these proceeds to be used to fund new acquisitions. Prior to the pandemic and the temporary guidelines change in April 2020, AAMD's *Code of Ethics* only allowed proceeds from the sale of deaccessioned works of art to be utilized for the purpose of future acquisitions (AAMD, n.d.).

The Brooklyn Museum. The Brooklyn Museum did not specifically state that it would be using proceeds from the sale of deaccessioned works to acquire new works of art for its collections.

The Everson Museum of Art. In addition to utilizing proceeds to support the direct care of collections, the Everson Museum of Art also stated that it would be utilizing proceeds from the sale of deaccessioned works to create a fund dedicated to buying and acquiring new works of art by “artists of color, women, and other under-represented contemporary and mid-career artists” (Danial, 2020; Villa, 2021; Everson Museum of..., 2020).

In fact, the Everson was not only successful in selling the deaccessioned works, the museum was also able to successfully buy and acquire new works for its collection by diverse and emerging artists. In January 2021, the Everson announced that it acquisitioned seven works for its permanent collection “by emerging and mid-career artists” (Everson Museum of..., 2021; Villa, 2021). The Everson’s director and CEO, Elizabeth Dunbar, notes that

this new group of purchases – the first of many more to come – signals an institutional commitment to building a collection that not only reflects the rich diversity of our community, but embodies the potential for exploring new and multiple narratives within the trajectory of art past, present, and future (Everson Museum of..., 2021).

The Newark Museum of Art. The Newark Museum of Art did not directly state that it would be utilizing proceeds from the sale of deaccessioned works to acquire new works of art for its collections. Although the museum did not specifically mention this use of proceeds for its pandemic deaccession decisions, the Newark Museum of Art allows for proceeds to be utilized for acquisitions, as stated in its collections management policy (Newark Museum of..., 2020).

The Palm Springs Art Museum. In addition to using proceeds to benefit the direct care, the Palm Springs Art Museum also stated that it would be utilizing proceeds from the sale of deaccessioned works of art to acquire works of art for its permanent collection. More specifically, proceeds generated would be allocated to the Steve Chase Fund for Acquisitions with the goal diversifying the museum's collections (Sotheby's, 2020; Villa, 2020). The Palm Springs Museum of Art has yet to announce any new acquisitions since the sale of *Carousel*.

Analysis

Two of the museums, in addition to using funds to support direct care of collections, mentioned that they would use the proceeds generated from the public sale of deaccessioned works to acquire new works of art. The Palm Springs Art Museum and the Everson Museum of Art both declared that they would be using these funds to acquire works of art by emerging and diverse artists. These two cases demonstrate that museums today are not just taking advantage of new deaccession guidelines, but also following pre-pandemic guidelines for deaccessioning and using proceeds for acquisitions.

Theme 3: Who the Museum Sold To

The final theme is *Who the Museum Sold To*. From the coding process, two subthemes emerged as to whom the case museums sold their deaccessioned works of art. These subthemes include an *Unknown or Anonymous Buyer* and a *Private Collector*.

The method of disposal for the deaccessioned works of art for each of the four case museums was through public sale. Public sales of deaccessioned collections objects is controversial. This is because the opportunity arises for deaccessioned works of art to leave the public sphere and be permanently lost when they are sold to private collectors (Gammon, 2018; Moser, 2020; Weil, 1990). The ideal method of disposal for deaccessioned works of art is

donation to another institution. This disposal method helps museums avoid public scrutiny because it keeps the deaccessioned works of art in the public trust (Miller, 2000a; Moser, 2020).

Subtheme 1: Unknown or Anonymous Buyer

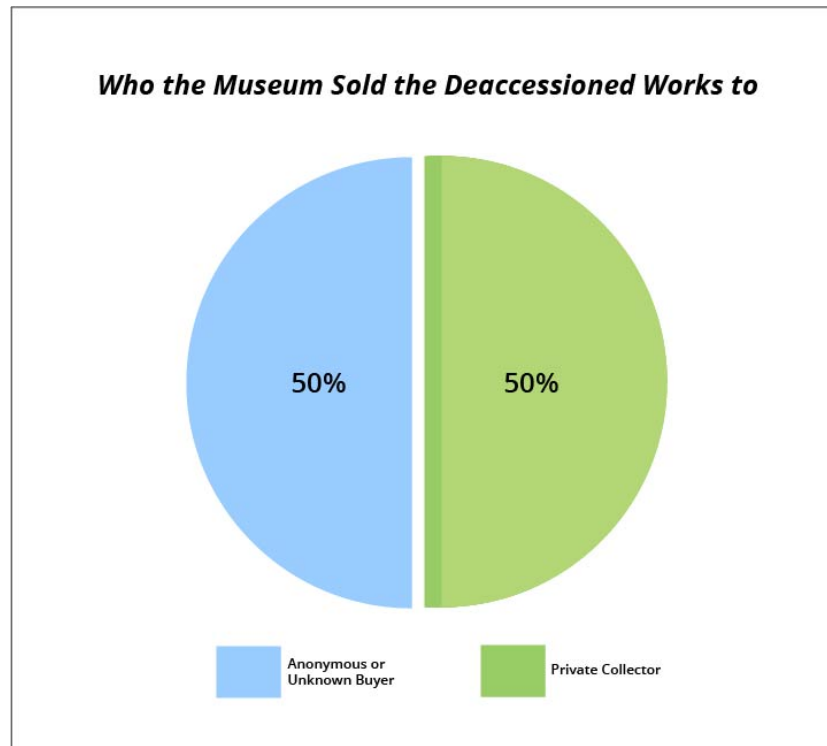
In the art market, buyers of expensive works of art may prefer to remain anonymous. Anonymity protects buyers and sellers of art from potential thefts (Amineddolleh & Associates..., 2017). This means that museums that sell deaccessioned works at auction may not know who bought these works at public auction if the buyer prefers to remain anonymous.

The Everson Museum of Art. According to Villa (2021), the Pollock painting that was deaccessioned by the Everson Museum of Art and sold at auction at Christie's was sold to an anonymous buyer.

The Palm Springs Art Museum. According to an article written by *The Desert Sun*, the Palm Springs Art Museum does not know who bought the painting *Carousel* by Helen Frankenthaler (Blueskye, 2020).

Analysis

Fifty percent of the case museums, as demonstrated by Figure 3, do not know who bought their deaccessioned works of art at the public auctions (Blueskye, 2020; Villa, 2021). Museums are often criticized for putting works of art up for public auction because there is the possibility that these works could be sold to a private collector, leaving the public sphere, perhaps indefinitely. There is the potential that these objects may never be on public view again, which is controversial as museums are dedicated to serving the public (Russeth, 2021).

Figure 3 – Who the Museum Sold the Deaccessioned Works to

Note. Figure 3 illustrates how many of the case museums sold their deaccessioned works to an anonymous or unknown buyer versus a private collector.

Subtheme 2: Private Collector

The Brooklyn Museum. The painting by artist Mary Cassatt that the Brooklyn Museum sold at public auction was purchased by a private collector. This private collector was the Thomas H. and Diane DeMell Jacobsen PhD Foundation (Philadelphia Museum of..., 2021; Small, 2021). It is the mission of this foundation “to carefully research and obtain American masterpieces, provide restoration, if necessary, and facilitate long-term loans to accredited major museums and traveling exhibitions” (Philadelphia Museum of..., 2021). During the summer of 2021, the Jacobsen Foundation loaned the Brooklyn Museum’s deaccessioned Mary Cassatt painting to the Mint Museum in Charlotte, North Carolina for an exhibition (Philadelphia Museum of..., 2021).

The Newark Museum of Art. *The Arch of Nero* painting by Thomas Cole that was deaccessioned by the Newark Museum of Art and sold at public auction was also purchased by the Thomas H. and Diane DeMell Jacobsen PhD Foundation. The deaccessioned painting is currently on long-term loan to the Philadelphia Museum of Art (Philadelphia Museum of..., 2021; Small, 2021; Solomon, 2021).

Analysis

Fifty percent of the case museum's deaccessioned works were sold private collectors, as demonstrated in Figure 3. With the case of the Brooklyn Museum and the Newark Museum of Art's deaccessioned works being sold to the same private collecting foundation to be loaned to other institutions: this is the ideal. It is ideal for deaccessioned works to be bought by a collector that collaborates with museums and other public institutions for the purposes of long-term loans because the works of art are being kept in the public domain to be accessed and enjoyed by everyone. These works were bought specifically by this foundation to be loaned to public institutions, rather than to be held in a private collection to maybe never be seen by the public again.

Summary

This chapter presented findings from a qualitative multi-site case study with textual and cross-case analysis of four museums in the U.S. that deaccessioned works of art from their permanent collections through public sale during the pandemic. The four studied case museums included the Brooklyn Museum, the Everson Museum of Art, the Newark Museum of Art, and the Palm Springs Art Museum. The findings from this examination of the cases sought to explore the research question:

RQ: How have shifting standards and best practices for deaccessioning impacted deaccession decision-making for art museums in the United States during the current pandemic and resulting financial crisis?

From this case study three main themes emerged: 1) *Justification for Deaccessioning*, 2) *Use of Proceeds*, and 3) *Who the Museum Sold To*. Within each of these themes, subthemes were examined to further investigate case museum's deaccession decisions. Cross-case analysis was utilized to identify similarities and differences in the deaccession decision-making amongst the four case studies. The following chapter, Chapter 5: Discussion, further discusses the findings of this chapter, making connections to Chapter 2: Literature Review, to provide recommendations for the museum field in regards to best practices for deaccessioning in an ever-evolving profession.

Chapter 5:

Conclusion

Introduction

Chapter 1 explained the consequences of pandemic-related closures on museums, from creating significant losses in revenue, to layoffs across the profession, and a major financial crisis. The result of this financial crisis led to museums needing to curb expenses across museum functioning, including collections care and management. Multiple museums across the U.S. made the decision to deaccession and sell works of art from their permanent collections to rectify budgetary shortfalls created by the pandemic, taking advantage of the American Association of Art Museum Director's (AAMD) temporary relaxation of their deaccessioning guidelines. Art museums in the United States were faced with the decision of whether or not to uphold pre-pandemic standards for deaccessioning or to utilize funds from the sale of artworks to support the direct care of collections.

Chapter 2 reviewed the scholarly and professional literature on deaccessioning and decision-making in regards to deaccessions in the United States. The literature focused on deaccessioning during the pandemic; who and what governs museums; the history of museums and collections stewardship; controversy surrounding deaccessioning; and professional standards and best practices for deaccessioning. A gap in the literature was identified in regard to deaccessioning during the pandemic, as it is still a contemporary topic because the pandemic is ongoing to this day.

Due to this gap in the literature, a qualitative, multi-site case study was conducted utilizing textual and cross-case analysis of textual data, including case museum's collections

management and deaccession policies, press releases, online newspaper articles and auction house lot results, to investigate the following research question:

RQ: How have shifting standards and best practices for deaccessioning impacted deaccession decision-making for art museums in the United States during the current pandemic and resulting financial crisis?

Four case museums in the U.S. that deaccessioned and sold works of art from their collections during the pandemic and after AAMD's guidelines changed were selected, including the Brooklyn Museum in Brooklyn, New York, the Everson Museum of Art in Syracuse, New York, the Newark Museum of Art in Newark, New Jersey, and the Palm Springs Art Museum in Palm Springs, California.

After textual materials were collected, they were then read and coded into themes and subthemes utilizing a coding sheet. The major themes that emerged included: 1) *Justification for Deaccessioning*, 2) *Use of Proceeds*, and 3) *Who the Museum Sold To*. The next section of this chapter describes the general findings of this study, followed by recommendations for the field in regards to deaccession decision-making and best practices, strengths and limitations of the study, suggestions for future research, concluding, finally with a summary.

Discussion

Justification for Deaccession

In the textual analysis process, described in Chapters 3 and 4, the theme of *Justification for Deaccessioning* emerged. *Justification for Deaccessioning* is defined as the case museums' reasoning for why they are making the decision to deaccession and sell works of art from their collections by way of public auction. Each of the four case museums were transparent in their justifications for deaccessioning and the deaccessioning and disposal process. The case museums

disclosed information to the public about their deaccession decisions through publishing their collections management and/or deaccession policies and press releases online, as well as through public auction house lot results and articles written by the media. This aligns with literature on deaccessioning best practices. According to Malaro & DeAngelis (2012c), museums using proceeds from the sale of deaccessioned objects to pay for the direct care of collections and to cover budgetary shortfalls,

At a minimum, ... should be prepared to explain to the public why such a step is necessary...; why the crisis could not have been avoided with the exercise of reasonable diligence; and how the proposed use of deaccessioned proceeds will enable the museum to continue to operate effectively for the indefinite future (pp. 566-567).

From this theme, two sub-themes were identified as reasoning for such deaccession decisions, including *Budgetary Shortfalls* and *Diversity, Equity, Accessibility, and Inclusion (DEAI) Initiatives*.

Budgetary Shortfalls. Although controversial, a majority of the case museums cited budgetary shortfalls as justification for their deaccession decisions. Deaccessioning and selling works of art to compensate for budgetary shortfalls is a controversial practice (Gammon, 2018; Moser, 2020; Weil, 1992/1997). According to the scholarly and professional literature, museums should never use deaccessioning to garner income to cover budgetary shortfalls due to financial irresponsibility of museum governance (AAM, 2019; Miller, 2000a; Simmons, 2017; Yerkovich, 2020). The three cases demonstrate how dire the financial strain on museums was during pandemic-related closures, influencing their decision-making and leading to deaccessions through public auctions (Pogrebin, 2020; Small, 2021).

Diversity, Equity, Accessibility, and Inclusion (DEAI) Initiatives. In addition to budgetary shortfalls, two out of the four case museums, the Everson Museum of Art and the Palm Springs Art Museum, cited DEAI initiatives as justification for deaccession decisions (Angeleti, 2020; Everson Museum of..., 2020; Villa, 2020, 2021). Although only 50% of the case museums cited DEAI initiatives as justification, each of the four case museums is dedicated to advancing diversity, equity, accessibility, and inclusion. These case museums' commitments to DEAI initiatives aligns with the scholarly and professional literature on DEAI becoming progressively important within the museum field (AAM, 2018b; Janes & Sandell, 2019; Yerkovich, 2016). Since the early 1990s, with the publishing of the report *Excellence and Equity* by AAM, the museum field has made the commitment to striving toward reaching more inclusive audiences and devoting their institutions to education and "sharing knowledge with the public" (AAM, 1992 as cited by Yerkovich, 2016, p. 143). Increasingly, museums have taken on further social responsibilities and have made efforts to greater include their diverse audiences throughout their functions, from collections to programming to exhibitions (Janes & Sandell, 2019; Yerkovich, 2016). Expanding diversity, equity, accessibility, and inclusion of museums, allows them to remain relevant to increasingly diverse publics (AAM, 2018b; Janes & Sandell, 2019; Yerkovich, 2016).

Use of Proceeds

The second theme that emerged from the textual analysis process is *Use of Proceeds*. *Use of Proceeds* refers to how the museum will utilize funds generated from the sale of deaccessioned works of art. In this project, two sub-themes emerged as uses of proceeds by the four case museums: *Support for the Direct Care of Collections* and *New Acquisitions*.

Support for Direct Care of Collections. Due to the financial burden stemming from the pandemic, circumstances and deaccession guidelines were temporarily changed to allow museums to sell works of art from their permanent collections to support the direct care of collections without facing sanctions (AAMD, 2020; Pogrebin, 2020; Small, 2021). Each of the four case museums took advantage of these new guidelines, deaccessioning works of art through sale to generate funds to support the direct care of collections, demonstrating the impact of AAMD's new guidelines on deaccession decision-making. Only three out of the four museums' definitions of direct care of collections were publicly accessible information on their websites. According to AAMD, both the institutions' definitions of direct care of collections and their deaccession policies should be publicly accessible (AAMD, 2020). The American Alliance of Museums' (AAM) white paper on defining direct care of collections highlights the idea of transparency in regard to the direct care of collections, noting that definitions and policies should be accessible and easily explainable to museums' stakeholders (AAM, 2019).

New Acquisitions. Although each case museum took advantage of the change in deaccession guidelines, half of the case museums mentioned that they would additionally use generated proceeds to fund new acquisitions. This is significant because it is evidence that museums today are also following pre-pandemic standards and best practices for deaccessioning and use of proceeds, as well (AAMD, n.d., 2011). Prior to the pandemic, AAMD's deaccession guidelines only allowed for proceeds generated from the sale of deaccessioned works of art to fund new acquisitions (AAMD, n.d.). This is the set standard for use of proceeds because it makes it less tempting for museums to sell off their collections which are held in the public trust in order to address budgetary shortfalls. Instead, it allows museums to focus on enhancing its collections (Malaro & DeAngelis, 2012c).

Who the Museum Sold To

The final theme was *Who the Museum Sold To*. From the textual analysis and coding process, two subthemes emerged as to whom the case museums sold their deaccessioned works of art to. These subthemes include an *Unknown or Anonymous Buyer* and a *Private Collector*.

Unknown or Anonymous Buyer. Fifty percent of the case museums did not know who bought their deaccessioned works of art at the public auctions (Blueskye, 2020; Villa, 2021). Museums, like the Everson Museum of Art and the Palm Springs Art Museum, are often criticized for putting works of art up for public auction because there is the possibility that these works of art could be sold to a private collector, leaving the public sphere, perhaps forever (Gammon, 2018; Moser, 2020; Russeth, 2021; Weil, 1990).

Private Collector. Fifty percent of the case museums sold their deaccessioned works of art to private collectors. With the cases of the Brooklyn Museum and the Newark Museum of Art, the deaccessioned works of art were bought by a public foundation with the goal of loaning those works to public institutions (Philadelphia Museum of..., 2021; Small, 2021). This is most similar to “inter-museum deaccessioning” (Miller, 2000a, p. 95), which refers to donating deaccessioned collections objects to other museums. This is the ideal because it helps museums avoid controversy as it keeps the deaccessioned objects in the public trust (Miller, 2000a, p. 95). It is ideal for deaccessioned works to be bought by a collector that collaborates with museums and other public institutions for the purposes of long-term loans because the works of art are being kept within the public domain to be accessed and enjoyed by everyone (Miller, 2000a; Moser, 2020). These deaccessioned works were bought specifically by the private foundation to be loaned to public institutions, rather than to be held in a private collection to maybe never be seen by the public again (Philadelphia Museum of..., 2021; Small, 2021).

Recommendations

Supported by this research project's findings and the scholarly and professional literature, the following recommendations are provided as considerations for museum professionals deaccessioning works of art from their collections through sale, as well as for aiding in future deaccession decision-making.

Justification for Deaccessioning

It is important for museums to be transparent and disclose to the public their justifications for deaccessioning works of art from their permanent collections. Because museums hold their collections in the benefit of the public trust, museums have the ethical obligation to be transparent about deaccession decisions (AAMD, 2011; Malaro & DeAngelis, 2012a; Moser, 2020; Yerkovich, 2016). Disclosure of all information relating to the deaccession and disposal processes aids museums in avoiding controversy and public scrutiny (AAMD, 2011; Brown, 2011; Miller 2000b; Yerkovich, 2016). By being transparent in their rationale for deaccessioning, as well as their deaccession policies and procedures, museums are able to build and maintain the public's trust that these institutions are acting ethically and fulfilling their purpose of serving the public (Moser, 2020; Marstine, 2013). It is imperative for museums to maintain their ethical integrity as it can be difficult to mitigate damage to an institution's reputation if they are perceived to have violated the public's trust. Having a positive reputation allows museums to be successful and properly care for and preserve objects in their collections for the benefit of the public and future generations (Miller, 2000a).

Use of Proceeds

According to AAM a museum's collection management policy should include a statement about the institution's approved use of proceeds from the sale of deaccessioned works

of art. This policy should indicate that funds are limited to being utilized for “new acquisitions and/or the direct care of collections” (AAM, n.d.-d). AAM suggests that individual museums also explicitly define what direct care of collections means to their institution within their collections management policy (AAM, 2019; Miller, 2020). Because definitions of direct care of collections varies from museum to museum, it is important that each institution is clear about how proceeds from the sale of deaccessioned works of art will be utilized to benefit their collections held in the public trust (AAM, 2019; Miller 2020). According to AAMD, this definition of direct care of collections and information in regards to approved uses of proceeds should be publicly available, for example on the museum’s website (AAMD, 2020).

Who the Museum Sells To

To best avoid controversy, it is recommended that museums donate or sell deaccessioned works of art to other public museums and institutions (Miller, 2000a; Moser, 2020). The preferred method of disposal for deaccessioned works of art is for those works to go to another museum or public institution rather than to a private collector. This is the ideal as it keeps these deaccessioned works of art in the public domain rather than possibly never being seen again by the public (Miller, 2000a; Moser, 2020).

Selling or donating deaccessioned works of art to another museum or public institution is also preferred because an open market sale may put the object in danger from a preservation standpoint. These objects may deteriorate from not being cared for up to museum preservation standards and best practices, as well as be at risk of being separated from their provenance and context, also known as dissociation (Miller, 2000a; Simmons, 2017). The concluding sections of this paper describe the research project’s strength and limitations, suggestions for future research, and a summary of the entire project.

Strengths and Limitations

Strengths

One of the strengths of this research is the fact that it was grounded and supported by an in-depth review of the scholarly and professional literature of the museum field. Upon completing the literature review, the researcher noted a significant gap in research on the contemporary topic of deaccession decision-making during the pandemic and resulting financial crisis. This gap informed the research methodology selected for this study. A qualitative, multi-site case study with textual and cross-case analysis allowed for the researcher to gain an in-depth understanding of deaccession decision-making by examining four case study art museums in the U.S. Data collection and analysis were rigorous as the research triangulated a variety of texts. Such triangulation increased the validity of the study's data collection, analysis, and findings.

Limitations

Additionally, this qualitative research project has its limitations. One of the limitations is due to the fact that case studies, textual analysis, and cross-case analysis each are time-consuming, presenting the challenge of time constraints and the researcher only being able to collect and analyze a limited amount of textual data.

This project was also limited to deaccession decisions made during the COVID-19 pandemic. With the short time-frame of two years of the pandemic, it was difficult to identify case museum that had deaccessioned works of art from their collections and taken advantage of the new temporary guidelines so publicly. In addition, the research was also limited to public information online on museum websites and in the media. For example, the researcher was unable to locate the Brooklyn Museum's collection management policy and the Everson

Museum of Art's definition of direct care of collections as publicly available information on their websites.

Another limitation of this study is the researcher's bias. Textual analysis is subjective and can be influenced by the researcher's bias in the interpretation process. Interpretations and findings are subject to bias based on the researcher's background.

Suggestions for Future Research

The aim of this research project was to investigate case museums to identify how shifting standards and best practices for deaccessioning impacted deaccession decision-making for art museums in the U.S. during the current pandemic and resulting financial crisis. The museum field is currently lacking research on how the pandemic has impacted deaccession decision-making. With the deadline for the AAMD's temporary deaccession guidelines approaching, it is up to the museum field to decide whether or not pre-pandemic guidelines should be maintained or if it is time for a change to best practices for deaccessioning.

The museum field would benefit from research on whether or not these case museums that decided to take advantage of the temporary deaccessioning guideline changes actually benefitted those museums in the long term. For example, future researchers could examine if selling these deaccessioned works of art did actually offset budgetary shortfalls. Future researchers could examine whether or not museums were able to diversify their collections with the proceeds from these deaccessioned works of art, as well. It would benefit the museum field to know the impacts of these pandemic deaccession decisions in order to make the decision of whether or not the temporary guidelines should remain or revert back to pre-pandemic standards and best practices for deaccessioning.

Summary

Closures relating to the COVID-19 pandemic created a financial crisis for art museums across the United States. Not being able to remain open meant that these museums lost a significant amount of earned revenue, creating budgetary shortfalls and lead to layoffs across the museum field. The financial crisis stemming from the pandemic prompted AAMD to temporarily relax their guidelines on deaccessioning. This research sought to develop an understanding of shifting guidelines and its impact on deaccession decision-making during the pandemic. As a response to gaps within the scholarly and professional literature, the following research question was explored:

RQ: How have shifting standards and best practices for deaccessioning impacted deaccession decision-making for art museums in the United States during the current pandemic and resulting financial crisis?

This question was investigated through a qualitative multi-site case study conducted to compare deaccession decisions made by the Brooklyn Museum, the Everson Museum of Art, the Newark Museum of Art, and the Palm Springs Art Museum via textual and cross-case analyses. Textual material was triangulated from case museums' collections management and deaccession policies, press releases, online newspaper articles, and auction house lot results. Three themes emerged from the collected and analyzed data: 1) *Justification for Deaccessioning*, 2) *Use of Proceeds*, and 3) *Who the Museum Sold To*. These three themes and the associated findings are discussed in relation to the literature review to present recommendations to aid museum professionals in making deaccession decisions aligning with best practices.

Overall, the goal of this research project was to address gaps in the literature and develop a greater understanding of the impact of shifting standards and best practices for deaccession on

deaccession decision-making for art museums in the U.S. during the pandemic. With the deadline for AAMD's temporary deaccession guidelines quickly approaching, it is up to the museum field and professional museum organizations to decide whether or not pre-pandemic deaccession standards and best practices should remain or permanently change to meet the needs of the ever-changing field. This research project demonstrates the impact of those guidelines on deaccession decisions during the pandemic, strengthening the literature on deaccessioning standards and best practices to aid the field in making such a decision during the ongoing and unpredictable pandemic.

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