

Government Art Collection

Collections Development Policy

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Department
for Culture,
Media & Sport

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1. Role of the Government Art Collection

The Government Art Collection (GAC) promotes British art, culture and creativity through displays in UK Government buildings worldwide. It is the most widely distributed collection of British art, with displays in over 125 countries, and makes an important contribution to the UK's cultural diplomacy, being seen by thousands of visitors to these buildings each year. The Collection is accessible to the public through loans to exhibitions, our public engagement programme, tours, and digitally through our website and social media channels.

Dating from 1899, the Collection has expanded over the years and now contains almost 15,000 works of art from the 16th century to the present day by mainly British artists in a broad range of media.

2. Acquisition and Disposal Policy

This policy refers to works acquired for the Primary Collection only. See 2.3 for a breakdown of the Primary, Secondary and Tertiary Collections.

2.1. Glossary

Accession - the process of adding a work to the Collection by cataloguing it on the Collections Management System and assigning a unique inventory number to it.

Acquisition - gaining legal title to an object, either by transfer of payment or transfer of title without payment.

The Collection - accessioned works of art wholly and permanently owned by the Government Art Collection and forming part of the Collection.

Collections Management System - a database of works that a museum has responsibility for, now or in the past. Containing information about the physical work, its history and how it has been used whilst in the care of the museum.

De-accession - the process of removing a work from the Collection and updating its legal status on the Collections Management System.

Disposal - when legal title in a work is passed to a third party or the work ceases to exist.

2.2. Governing Body

The Government Art Collection is part of the Department for Culture, Media & Sport (DCMS).

2.3. Collections within the Government Art Collection

2.3.1. Primary Collection

These c.12,800 works form the core Collection and are recorded as DCMS assets.

- Works acquired by the Collection's current governing body, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport and by preceding governing bodies.
- Works donated or bequeathed to the Collection either individually or in groups.
- Works transferred to the Collection from other Government departments.

2.3.2. Secondary Collection

Refers to c.1,700 works for which the Government Art Collection does not have formal title but for a variety of reasons provides an advisory role in the care, display, interpretation of and access to works owned by other Government departments.

- Works absorbed into the Collection having been inherited with a particular building acquired by the Government.
- Works purchased through the agency of the Government Art Collection with dedicated funds by other Government departments, separate from the DCMS or its precursors, for display in a particular building.
- Works acquired by other Government departments and later accessioned by the Government Art Collection for tracking purposes (based on the quality of the work of art).
- Works, the exact provenance of which is unknown, already located in Government buildings and accessioned by the Government Art Collection. These items are cared for and used by the GAC until/unless a third party who can prove title to the work is known.
- State Portraits (copies of official royal portraits commissioned by the Government in the 19th and 20th centuries) for display in Government buildings.

2.3.3. Tertiary Collection

- Photographically produced reproductions, not counted in Government Art Collection statistics.

2.3.4. Archive Collection

- Materials associated with works in the Collection, for example maquettes.

2.4. How works are acquired

2.4.1. Advisory Committee

The role of the Advisory Committee is to approve the acquisition, both gifts and purchases, and commissioning of works of art, and advise on the policy and stewardship of the Collection. The Committee meets three times a year, and members are not remunerated. Minutes of the Advisory Committee will be made available via the Government Art Collection website. The quorum for any meeting shall be five members.

The Committee consists of:

- (a) Five ex officio members (the Directors of the National Gallery, National Portrait Gallery and Tate Britain), the Director of the Government Art Collection and the Director of the relevant section within DCMS.
- (b) Five independent members (one of whom should be a practising artist whose work is held in the Government Art Collection, and two of whom should be based outside London).
- (c) Two youth members (aged 18-30, one of whom should be based outside London).
- (d) The Secretary shall be a member of the GAC staff.

All independent Committee Members, including the Chair, serve a term of four years following their appointment. They are eligible for re-appointment to the Committee for not more than a total service of ten years. New member applicants representative of the demographic diversity across the UK will be encouraged as part of the Collection's commitment to addressing representation.

The governance of the Advisory Committee is outlined in the 'Constitution of the Advisory Committee on the Government Art Collection'.

2.5. Collecting Policy

2.5.1. Guiding Principles

When considering new acquisitions, the Government Art Collection will adhere to the following principles:

- The Government Art Collection will exercise due diligence and make every effort not to acquire, whether by purchase, gift, transfer, exchange, commission or bequest, any object unless the DCMS Accounting Officer (Permanent Secretary) and the Advisory Committee on the Government Art Collection is satisfied that the Government Art Collection can acquire a valid title to the item.
- The Government Art Collection will take into account the collecting policies of other museums and other organisations that collect works of the same or related subjects. It will consult with these organisations where conflicts of interest may arise, or to define specialisms, in order to avoid unnecessary duplication. Specifically, but not limited, to the following museums: Tate, National Portrait Gallery, British Council Collection and Arts Council Collection.
- The Government Art Collection will only acquire an object if it is satisfied that it has not been acquired or exported from its country of origin (or any intermediate country in which it may have been legally owned) in violation of that country's laws and/or those of the United Kingdom.
- In accordance with the provisions of the UNESCO 1970 Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property, which the UK ratified with effect from 1 November 2002, and the Dealing in Cultural Objects (Offences) Act 2003, the Government Art Collection will reject any items that have been illicitly traded.
- In terms of biological and geological material, the Government Art Collection will not acquire by any direct or indirect means, any specimen that has been collected, sold or otherwise transferred in contravention of any national or international wildlife protection or natural history conservation

law or treaty of the United Kingdom or any other country – CITES (the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora).

- The Government Art Collection will not acquire archaeological antiquities (including excavated ceramics) in any case where there is any suspicion that the circumstances of their recovery involved a failure to follow the appropriate legal procedures.
- The Government Art Collection will adhere to the statement of principles *Spoilation of Works of Art during the Holocaust and World War II Period* issued by the National Museum Director's Council in 1998.
- The Government Art Collection will comply with the Museums Association Code of Ethics to: :
 - maintain and develop collections for current and future generations
 - acquire, care for, exhibit and loan collections with transparency and competency in order to generate knowledge and engage the public with collections
 - treat museum collections as cultural, scientific or historic assets, not financial assets

To note: because of the way the Collection has developed over time, some items in the Collection do not meet the current Collection Policy. See Appendix A for a brief history of the development of the Government Art Collection.

2.5.2. Acquisition Criteria

The Government Art Collection acquires works of art that are:

- By an artist with a strong connection to the UK. This includes artists of any period who were born or have lived or are living in the UK. Works by artists who do not fall into this criterion are occasionally considered if the subject matter has a relevant British connection
- Of good artistic quality
- Of a subject appropriate for display in Government buildings around the world

Where an object is expected to have a permanent presence, it should be:

- Suitable for display in non-museum /gallery, domestic and office environments;
- Of a scale enabling it to be transported around the world;
- Displayed without constant upkeep and monitoring;
- Of minimal risk to staff and visitors;
- Not subject to rapid decay or instability;

The Government Art Collection actively seeks works by artists who are:

- representative of the demographic diversity across the UK,
- not already represented in the Collection or are under-represented in the Collection.

2.5.3. Acquisition Methods

The Government Art Collection will acquire works through the following methods:

- Purchase
- Gift
- Bequest

- Commission
- Transfer from another Government Department

2.5.4. Acquisitions not covered by this policy

Acquisitions outside the current stated policy are made in exceptional circumstances, and then only after proper consideration by the governing body of the Government Art Collection (the DCMS Accounting Officer / Permanent Secretary) and the Advisory Committee on the Government Art Collection as well as considering the interests of other museums.

2.6. Disposal Policy

2.6.1. Principles

- The DCMS Accounting Officer (Permanent Secretary) and the Advisory Committee on the Government Art Collection will ensure that the disposal process is carried out openly and with transparency.
- By definition, the Government Art Collection has a long-term purpose and holds the Collection in trust for the nation. Disposal takes place as given below, in line with the Museums Association Disposals Toolkit, updated in 2023.
- The Government Art Collection will confirm that it is legally free to dispose of an item and agreements on disposal made with donors will be taken into account.
- When disposal of an object from the Collection is being considered, the Government Art Collection will establish if it was acquired with the aid of an external funding organisation. In such cases, any conditions attached to the original monies will be followed. This may include repayment of the original monies.
- The Government Art Collection will not undertake disposal motivated principally by financial reasons.
- Any proceeds from the disposal of items will be applied for the benefit of the Collection in the form of acquisitions. In exceptional circumstances, proceeds may be used for the care of the Collection. In such cases, permission will be sought from Arts Council England or its successor body.

2.6.2. Disposal Criteria

The Government Art Collection may consider a work for disposal if it meets one or more of the following criteria:

Curatorial

- does not fall within the core collection as defined by the Government Art Collection's Collecting Policy (Section 2.5) or;

- is of limited specialist interest to the Government Art Collection which might be better placed in another public collection or;
- is an underused item with no likelihood of the Government Art Collection finding a use in the future.

Condition

Government Art Collection Head of Collection Care, in consultation with a specialist conservator, determines that a work meets one or more of the following criteria:

- damaged beyond the possibility of repair or;
- damaged beyond economic repair or;
- in such a damaged state to pose a danger to the rest of the Collection or;
- in such a damaged state to pose a danger to the health and safety of Government Art Collection staff, and/or members of staff in other Government departments and/or members of the public.

Valid Third Party Claim

DCMS Accounting Officer (Permanent Secretary) and the Advisory Committee on the Government Art Collection following relevant legal advice, agree that a third party has superior title to a work of art for one of the following reasons:

- a third party has proof of title to the work;
- the work is subject to a successful Spoliation claim (see 2.5.1);
- the work is subject to a successful claim for Repatriation or Restitution by a country or people of origin.

Uncontextualised or Unprovenanced Items

Due to past methods, management or recording of acquisitions, the Government Art Collection may possess items that lack documentation and recorded provenance. In these cases a risk assessment should be undertaken before considering disposal.

2.6.3. Decision-Making Process

All documentation should be checked to ensure that the Government Art Collection has legal title to dispose of an item and that there are no conditions attached that might prevent the Collection from following this course of action. Where formal title cannot be established, a risk assessment should be undertaken.

The decision to dispose of material from the Collection will be taken by the DCMS Accounting Officer (Permanent Secretary) and the Advisory Committee on the Government Art Collection acting on the advice of the Collection's specialist workforce, only after full consideration of the reasons for disposal.

External expert advice will be sought where relevant and the views of stakeholders such as donors, researchers, local and source communities and others served by the Government Art Collection will also be sought.

2.6.4. Methods of Disposal

The following will be of key consideration when selecting a method of disposal:

- Keeping the the object in the public domain
- Prioritising free gift or transfer to other Accredited Museums
- Ensuring that any action will continue public trust in museums

Transfer to Accredited Museum or Organisation in the Public Domain

A work will be offered first by transfer directly to other UK Accredited Museums. Thereafter the work can be offered to any other institution or organisation in the public domain. This will be done through the Museum Association's Find an Object web listing service other professional journals or directly to relevant organisations where appropriate. A period of at least two months will be allowed for an interest in acquiring the material to be expressed. If there is any uncertainty to the provenance of the work then the transfer organisation will be made aware and given a copy of the risk assessment.

Return to Donor

If it is not possible to keep the object in the public domain, a work will be offered for return to the donor, where relevant. This does not include the descendants of donors.

Sale

If no public domain institution is interested in acquiring the work, it may be offered for sale. This will only be considered in the most exceptional of circumstances and only undertaken in consultation with the Museum Association and Sector Bodies. Any money raised will be applied solely and directly for the benefit of the collection.

Recycling - Gift to Charity

If a new owner cannot be found for the object and other methods are not appropriate, the Government Art Collection may consider recycling the object as a gift to charity.

Destruction

a) actively, under the instruction of the Government Art Collection, because they are in poor condition: the Government Art Collection will completely destroy the work to the point that it could not be displayed or sold by a third party.

b) due to action by a third party (e.g. an accident, malicious damage, terrorist or action associated with war): The Government Art Collection will, where possible, seek proof of destruction either through photographic evidence or through a statement by Government Art Collection staff or other Government official present at the event or the aftermath of the event.

Site specific works

There are a small number of site-specific works of art commissioned for or inherited with Government buildings that, due to their medium, provenance or for legal reasons, cannot be physically removed from those buildings (e.g. wall paintings, manifestations). As a result, these works of art may have to be deaccessioned when such buildings are taken over by third parties.

2.6.5. Documenting Disposal

Full records will be kept of all decisions on disposals and the objects involved, in accordance with the most recent SPECTRUM Standard (UK Museum Documentation guidelines). A de-accession activity will be created on the Collection's database.

Proper arrangements will be made for the preservation and/or transfer of related documentation, including photographic records.

In the case of works destroyed for conservation or health and safety reasons, the disposal process will be documented photographically to prevent the work being re-made for illicit purposes.

Appendix A - History of the development of the Government Art Collection

From its informal foundation by ministerial memo back in 1899, the Government Art Collection, known under this name since 1981, has sought to acquire works of art for display in Government buildings, today showcasing the UK's commitment to culture in the context of diplomacy.

Before 1899, works of art were acquired on an ad-hoc basis by Government departments as bequests, purchases, gifts or as loans from national collections. Responsibility for the furnishings of government buildings was transferred from the Office of the Lord Chamberlain to the Office of Works in 1828, and works of art generally came to be included in this arrangement, although this varied between departments:

Department of the Environment (1970)

Office of Arts and Libraries (1979)

Department of National Heritage (1992)

Department of Culture, Media and Sport (1997)

Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (2016)

Department for Culture, Media and Sport (2023)

The Foreign Office's recognition of the benefits of displaying works of art in diplomatic posts abroad to promote Britain led to the Treasury, in 1935, allocating an annual sum of £250 for acquisitions of works of art. This initiative led to the establishment of the first 'Overseas Picture Committee' who advised on acquisitions and encouraged the purchase of historical works primarily.

There was no strategic collecting policy until 1945, when the Collection's first curator was appointed and a new Picture Committee was set up, represented by the directors of the national galleries. It was during this time that the Collection's acquisition policy was developed and funds were allocated for purchasing modern works of art. This direction continued over the years, enriching the Collection with works by living artists and leading to a strategy of commissioning site-specific works for British embassies from 1949.

Today, the Collection is the most widely dispersed collection of British art. As an accredited Museum since 2010, it continues to grow, capturing the talent and interests of each generation. Adapting and reflecting the world around it, the ambition of the Collection is to continue to challenge and acknowledge its historical roots while acquiring new works that reflect contemporary British society. This is in line with commitments made in its Representation of the People Project 2018–28. The Government Art Collection seeks to broaden public engagement, with a particular focus on young people, through its digital platforms, loans and innovative partnership projects.