

# Museum Theft Offers Security Lessons

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In August, a board member from the Clinton County Historical Association in Plattsburgh, NY was arrested after stealing numerous artifacts from the collection and attempting to sell them on eBay®. The theft and the response by the Historical Association offer some important lessons for all organizations when thinking about improving the security of their collections.

## **Know Your Collections**

The Historical Association was able to discover and respond to these thefts by being aware of what was in their collections. They were then able to assist the police and discover more missing items by completing an inventory and comparing results to previous lists. The value of proper collections records cannot be underestimated-- from paperwork that establishes ownership, to catalog descriptions & photographs that identify individual artifacts, to a shelf/location list. If you don't know what you have, you won't know what's missing.

If you do not have a proper inventory or list of your collections- make one today. Plan to periodically (once a year if possible) recheck your inventory, and don't forget to update it when objects are moved, acquired, or deaccessioned.

It's also important to know which artifacts might have a higher monetary value (which might not be the artifacts that are most "valuable" to your organization). Items stolen in this case were military/firearm artifacts- which represent a very hot market. Some objects might have an obvious monetary value, i.e.- items made from gold or silver. Determining other values may take knowledge of collectors markets- such as skyrocketing prices for modern art. If you know what items potential thieves might be most interested in stealing, you can move to protect them better.

## **Vet Board Members, Staff and Volunteers**

It's difficult to think that a board member could do this to an organization they supposedly support. Unfortunately, as in the case in Clinton County, approximately 90% of theft in museums comes from internal sources (1). To help limit internal threats, consider conducting some type of background check for everyone with access to collections. You might also think of asking certain questions that can highlight conflicts or potential problems: Why are they interested in working with your organization? Are they a collector of the type of objects you have? Are there unstable financial circumstances that might make them vulnerable?

It is also appropriate to remove the opportunity for any one person to have too much solitary control over the collections. This can include a basic system of checks and balances for who has access to keys, as well as collections areas-sign in/out sheets. You might also consider "ethics" instruction as part of any volunteer/staff training programs

## **Educate Board Members (and Public)**

In statements to the police, the offending board member claimed that there were "internal problems with the museum where they are in debt..." and that he took the items to "raise money

by selling some items that didn't have North Country ties." He also cited another area museum that had sold some items from its collection as his "inspiration."

These claims (if true) represent a troubling lack of understanding of the role of museum collections and of board members responsibilities. Collections are not liquid assets, and should not be treated as such. Educate members and the general public about your accessioning and deaccessioning policies & procedures. Also make sure that these policies follow the best practices as outlined by organizations such as the American Association of Museums (AAM) or American Association for State and Local History (AASLH).

### **Be Proactive About Security**

You might think that security is just another on a whole list of things you can't cover when you're just trying to "keep the doors open". Our position as non-profit cultural institutions, however, means we serve as repositories for the public trust. Our donors and communities rely on us to take proper care of our historic and artistic legacy. In addition to the measures outlined above, think about taking these proactive and preventive steps to help minimize some of your security risks:

1. Ask a local law enforcement officer to help identify your biggest security vulnerabilities, and make sure to keep abreast of any criminal activity in your area.
2. Secure items on open display utilizing simple measures such as security screws, monofilament line, or "museum wax". While they won't deter a serious thief, they will prevent opportunistic pilfering.
3. Monitor researchers who are given access to collections. This includes asking for identification, using registration forms/ledgers, and never leaving them alone with collections.
4. Create detailed entry and lock-up procedures. This should include a "walk-through" of all rooms, as well as checking phone lines, lights, windows/doors, and alarm systems.
5. Maintain a guest register and keep tour groups manageable. Don't forget to count visitors when they arrive and when they leave. Consider having bag-checks or installing monitoring systems if visitors are allowed unaccompanied access to rooms.

(1) *A Cultural Property Protection Primer*. David Liston 2000