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Original article

Deaccessioning of museum collections: What do we know and where do we stand in Europe?

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ABSTRACT

Deaccessioning – as practice entailing a physical relocation of an item with the consequence of making the item less accessible to its previous audience – is among the most controversial aspects of museum management. The disposal of items has traditionally been considered a violation of the museum's commitment to preservation and display, but a number of arguments have been advanced to point out its contribution to sustainability, efficiency, and even visitor welfare. As a result, deaccessioning has enjoyed increasing recognition both in academia and the professional world. Nevertheless, the consequences of abusing deaccessioning policies seem dire. Excessively liberal disposal policies may cause the dispersion of cultural heritage as well as managerial misconduct due to moral hazard. We review the arguments typically advanced in support and against deaccessioning and argue that, while considerable damage may result from its abuse, the benefits are compelling and regulations may be effectively employed to prevent pitfalls. In addition, we address the current situation of deaccessioning in Europe and argue that, while the subsidiary principle prevents the European Union from ruling in matters of national heritage, considerable interest exists among academics and professionals, resulting in a growing body of guidelines from national museal associations that present a degree of conformity to each other, and to the international codes of ethics.

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1. Research aims

The practice of deaccessioning presents substantial benefits for museums. Its abuse, however, threatens to irreversibly disperse cultural heritage and decrease public trust in museal institutions. With the present article, we aim to provide a comprehensive review of the reasons why deaccessioning policies may be powerful contributors to visitor welfare, and what are the boundaries they should not be allowed to cross. Furthermore, we intend to describe the state of the art of deaccessioning in Europe, indicating the principles that prevent the establishment of a supranational governing body, as well as the possibility to circumvent these obstacles through the adherence of individual museums to international codes of ethics. Our objective is to help reorganizing the academic debate and lay the foundations for future and better-informed research.

2. Introduction

Due to the economic recession, Europe is presently enduring efficiency and self-reliance is ever-increasing priorities for museal organisations. The pursuit of education, conservation, exhibition and research objectives has become a balancing act because of thinning resources [1]. In this scenario, the practice of deaccessioning is a particularly controversial issue for museum administrators [2–5], because deaccessioning policies are often considered undesirable, if not outright distasteful [6–8]. As a result, deaccessioning is often treated like the illegitimate daughter-practice of museum management theory, born from an affair with ordinary business administration: curators, directors and museum boards may be well aware of its existence, but they may sweep it under the carpet hoping the public does not notice.

Among such widespread furtivity, whenever a passing journalist or critic happens to detect something odd, e.g. in a museum's financial records, and asks questions to museum executives, the unconditioned response is to dissimulate as much as possible and gear up for the mediatic onslaught. An engaging example of this behavior is the 1972 Metropolitan Museum vs The New York Times controversy over the museum director's decision to deaccession

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several paintings, including a Redon, a Gauguin, a Manet, a Cezanne and an early Picasso [9]. As the audience is typically misinformed about deaccessioning issues, after mediatic storms, the public may be left with a sense of betrayal due to the impression that the primary responsibility of museums, the conservation of heritage, was violated [10]. This leaves an enduring scar in museums' reputation that is especially unfair because, as we will argue, deaccessioning may be unromantic and undemocratic, but it is necessary and it can be legally acceptable [11,12]. Indeed, museum directors were once obliged to cover up their disposals, e.g. by striking the deaccessioned items from museum records as if they had never been owned [13], but today, the propriety of deaccessioning policies as a legitimate and vital concern for museums is well established [14]. The accusatory attitude by the media may thus be unjustified, but on one hand, it may be grounded in the ambiguity of museum professionals themselves, who implicitly acknowledge the obscurity of their dealings when they choose to act furtively [15]. On the other hand, this attitude can also be imputed to a regrettable negligence of scholarly literature: while academia has sufficiently explained why deaccessioning exists [3,8,16] and presented some convincing case studies of it, contributing to organizational goals [6], it never clarified whether deaccessioning can be a solution to museums' long-documented problem of resource optimization [17]. Based on case studies, we may find deaccessioning successful as an ad hoc treatment, but it does not follow that it should be practiced regularly and extensively, as this can bear dire consequences. For example, it may unintentionally encourage museum administrators to view their depots as disposable reserves, or increase their liability to moral hazard and corruption, to the detriment of the entire museum world [18].

The objective of the present article is two-fold. First, we intend to recap state of the art knowledge of deaccessioning, including the reasons in support of the practice, its possible implications, the reservations commonly proposed against it, as well as objective difficulties in its systematic application. For this purpose, we draw from scholarly literature and practical experience and attempt a comprehensive framing of the issue through an accurate analysis of advantages and threats. As a second objective, we intend to review the current situation for deaccessioning in Europe. In doing so, we explain what can and cannot be done on a transnational level due to the subsidiarity principle, and we point out how the growing interest of the scholarly and professional worlds has partially compensated for the absence of legislative efforts. Our purpose is to ascertain whether deaccessioning is still an exotic danger for European museums or rather a phenomenon that is already present, at least in some countries, may benefit from Union-level regulation.

It is worth noting that our analysis assumes items subject to deaccessioning policies to present some degree of exclusivity. Specifically, for our present intents, deaccessioning entails a physical relocation of the item that makes it less accessible to its previous audience. As such, we address museums of tangible cultural heritage, such as art, science and material culture. This does not mean that deaccessioning is irrelevant for museums of intangible cultural heritage, e.g. ethno-anthropological museums, or that intangible heritage may not be subject to deaccessioning, but the arguments and analysis would need to be different. This limitation should be kept in mind while reading most of the argument we present.

The article is structured in six sections. After this introduction, we provide a brief explanation of what is deaccessioning through definitions and examples. Throughout the following two sections, we explore the arguments commonly advanced in support or against deaccessioning practices. Afterwards, we proceed to reviewing European policies towards deaccessioning and assess relevant international guidelines. Finally, we recap our main arguments, summarize our conclusions and propose avenues for further enquiry.

3. The need for a definition

As it is often the case for professional neologisms, with respect to deaccessioning, there is a surplus of "official" definitions. To navigate among them effectively, it is best to refer to the etymology of the word. In principle, the term "deaccessioning" describes the opposite of accessioning operations. These refer to the inscription of new items into the collection inventory. Therefore, deaccessioning originally refers to any removal of entries from said inventory. Because of this, it applies not only to sales but also to involuntary losses, such as thefts or misplacements, and accidental or deliberate destructions [19,20]. There is also a subtler kind of deaccessioning, knowledge of which rarely spreads beyond museum walls, whereby the items are removed from the register but never actually leave museum premises, as they are recycled as props for exhibitions, illustrative material for teaching programmes, or experimental material for conservators [10]. Given the manifold aspects of deaccessioning and the lack of a shared definition, scholars and professionals have occasionally opted to forge their own. For example, Byrne describes deaccessioning as the permanent removal of items from a museum's ownership and custody [21], thus, excluding disposals operated by non-museal institutions that may be in possession of museum-quality items, like city halls or universities. Crivellaro, instead, frames it as the permanent disposal of public property to the private sector [12], thereby, excluding sales or exchanges among public collections. These competing definitions contribute to the conceptual blurriness and make it difficult to dispel.

In addition to being an objective compass, the etymological roots of "deaccessioning" help us explore the considerable psychological undertones carried by the term. As noted by Mairesse, "accession" indicates the transfer of an item from one category to another [8]. Specifically, it constitutes an elevation from the mundane to the collection-worthy. This implies a net gain of status for the item. Accessioned objects enjoy a dignity that may be perceived as superior because they are effectively removed from the cycle of ordinary exploitation and invested with symbolic content, henceforth becoming vessels for higher meanings [22,23]. This process is distinctive of artwork in general, but within the museal context, it is further enriched with an institutional dimension. From an institutional viewpoint, accessioning works is an official mark of semiotic acknowledgement, infused with almost heroic ethos [3,24]. It is thus evident that deaccessioning can be viewed as the unceremonious revocation of previously conferred higher status. The word itself applies a negative prefix to a positive action, and thus bears undertones of degradation [3,8]. The choice to deaccession may suggest that an item is no longer worthy of display, at least in its current context, and is therefore returned to daily life exploitation, or converted to its monetary worth [25].

To aggravate this bias, it must be noted that the word "deaccessioning" is of English origin and does not easily translate into certain idioms, such as French, Spanish or Italian, despite ancient traditions of museology in these countries. The synonym "alienation" is often employed instead, which derives from Latin "alienatio". This is originally a legal term signifying the cession of property or interest to someone else, but it also happens to indicate psychic dissociation, an estrangement of mind, and withdrawal of a person's affection from a subject of former attachment. Unsurprisingly, some of the countries where this language impediment exists are also those where cultural heritage is most fiercely defended as public property [26,27], and thus inalienable by definition.

This resistance to deaccessioning is typical of Southern European museums, as they belong to a distinctively conservative museological tradition. Indeed, a divide exists in Europe between the Anglo-Saxon and the Southern European, or Napoleonic, museum models. This is one of the aspects of the more fundamental

split between common and civil law countries, and the different stances they take with respect to the alienability of cultural heritage from the public domain. The Anglo-Saxon is generally visitor-oriented, with a focus on exhibition and display, whereas the Southern European model is more item-oriented, and the functions of care and conservation take prominence [28]. As such, the proposal of selling items in order to improve visitor experience sounds particularly abrasive to Southern European museums. Nevertheless, an interesting process is currently taking place whereby even museums belonging to the Napoleonic tradition are paying more attention to their audiences, as reflected by e.g. increased frequency of “blockbuster” exhibitions. In fact, growth in collections and visitor flow are rarely followed by proportional increases in public subsidization: on the contrary, public subsidies are consistently decreasing, encouraging museums to consider alternative sources of income. These include higher admission fees, ancillary commercial activities and non-governmental sponsorships [1]. They may also include deaccessioning, which precisely for this reason has spawned a rising number of advocates [12,29], whose proposals are generally met with mixed feelings, although they may be grounded on convincing financial, practical, and ethical arguments, as we review in the following section.

4. Why is deaccessioning necessary?

Supporters of deaccessioning are mainly driven by pragmatism and financial concerns. Some of their points were formulated long before deaccessioning became a widespread and controversial practice [30,31]. Among the primary arguments is that perpetual growth is not sustainable. Typically, museums increase the size of their collection by 1–2% per year from the moment of their creation [32], a rate that is far superior to that of item disposal [33]. The reason for this is that the material production of our society grows exponentially. Therefore, so does the number of items deemed worthy of collection status. The gap between the quantity of potential museum objects and those that are actually musealized will continue to increase as creative human beings continue to work [3]. In this sense, deaccessioning becomes closely related to, and inseparable from, broader policies of collection optimization [16] and may even contribute to collections mobility and the international sharing of cultural heritage, which is considered by the European Union as one of the five most important tasks for European museums today [34]. As a practical example, we may refer to Czech Republic, where we may calculate that, if museums continue to acquire new items at the current rate without being given the possibility to deaccession, the total amount of objects will be over one billion in just 130 years [7]. This, of course, is far more than national depots may hope to accommodate. As academics, we are compelled to heed these warning signs or the problem will resurface with greater urgency [8]. As we have gone so far as picturing a de-growth economy, it may be helpful to consider de-growth for museums as well [35]. Indeed, sustainability means being able to meet the needs of the present without preventing future generations from meeting their own [36]. While it is true that deaccessioning may make items unavailable to future generations, it is also true that mismanaging collections is not a way to cater for the needs of the present. Moreover, if museums collapse financially it will be outright impossible to serve future generations, and this may cause the dispersion of all items under its care, including those that would not be deaccessioned [37]. In addition to being unsustainable, an ever-growing collection is also impossible to manage. According to Hudson's law, there is an inversely proportional relationship between the size of a collection and the quality of its management [38], due to the scarcity of resources, such as conservation funds, exhibition or storage space, and curatorial attention. For this reason, it may be logical

for museums to be allowed to remove as much as they take in [2,7]. From this perspective, disposal may be an ethical choice because it prevents object bulimia [20]. This is a particularly important consideration, because ethics have traditionally belonged to the arsenal employed against the practice.

If, on one hand, deaccessioning may be viewed as a capitulation of culture before economic or pragmatic demands, on the other, it may also be justified by the commitment to collections improvement. If the very purpose of museums is to maintain (selected) cultural goods and make them available to future generations, the preservation of less important items is hardly preferable over the acquisition of valuable ones that would otherwise be passed on for scarcity of resources [3]. This is consistent with the notion, well established in academia, that cultural heritage is characterised by the fact that its preservation is as much a sacrifice for society as its loss [28,39]. The question thus boils down to what sacrifice society can really afford to make. Deaccessioning is instrumental in making more items accessible in three important ways: it allows items that are never exhibited to be exhibited somewhere else, it helps the preservation of other items through the optimization of museum resources, and it allows the museum to improve the quality of its offer through more focused acquisitions. From this perspective, deaccessioning directly and substantially contributes to the welfare of visitors, who are consumers of the “museum service”.

As we are treading the ground of economics, it is fitting to explore the less “noble” domain of museum financing, which remains at the core of motivation for deaccessioning practices. With increasing frequency and conviction, policy-makers adhere to the “Yale model” of museum governance, which emphasises economic viability and indicates branding, marketing and financing as primary functions for museum administrators [12]. This is a rather controversial standpoint, because museums seem to be by nature opposed to market forces [17] and irreversible processes, such as the sale of artwork are usually approached from a strongly risk-averse position [36]. Nevertheless, in recent times, museums have increasingly pursued self-reliance in order to offset the decrease in public funding. The American experience is ripe with lessons in this regard, because lesser government involvement always forced museums to be more inclined to economic sustainability. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, for example, reacted to budget cuts by dismissing employees, limiting exhibitions and narrowing operating hours, while the Art Institute of Chicago chose to double its entrance fees [12]. We would not normally wish museums to adopt such measures, if at all possible, because they decrease consumer welfare.

For our intents and purposes, it must be noted that, because they adhere to the American Alliance of Museums, both the Art Institute of Chicago and the Metropolitan Museum of Art were, and still are, forbidden from deaccessioning part of their collections for any other purpose than new acquisitions [40,41]. Nevertheless, the question arises of whether deaccessions may have been less detrimental to consumer welfare than fewer opening hours or higher admission fees. In the case of the Art Institute of Chicago, for example, the sale of less than 1% of the collection may have sufficed to grant long-lasting free entry [12]. Now, if we take into account that museums may exhibit as low as 10% of their possessions [1,37,42], with the figure dropping to less than 1% in science museums [32], we might be tempted to question the fairness of the American Alliance's restriction. We may be further spurred to do so by the consideration that this 10% does not even necessarily rotate between depot and gallery space. On the contrary, such reasons as the elevation of museum standards over time may confine certain items to the depot forever, including items that are of minor interest within their current contexts but may be of greater interest elsewhere, e.g. a local museum in the artist's hometown [43]. If an item is never on display, the

argument that deaccessioning prevents public accessibility is illogical. Non-exhibited objects are only available to a limited few who have clearance to enter the depot anyway. Despite their legal status of public property, their condition is comparable to that of privately-owned goods, with the added disadvantage that the cost of their upkeep is borne by the public, and a great deal of resources are required that could otherwise be more productively employed by museums [7,44]. In fact, direct and indirect costs associated with collections account for two-thirds of the total expenditures in museums [32]. Together with the costs of new acquisitions, the sum climbs to almost 70% [37]. What is more, these “invisible” costs are difficult to subsidize because outsiders may be oblivious to them and public gratitude tends to be weak [35]. It is hence understandable how new means of income are receiving increasing attention, and why deaccessioning claims the lion’s share.

5. Why is deaccessioning controversial?

The financial argument in support of deaccessioning has a double edge, as there may be a lurking temptation to cover outstanding deficits with deaccessioning proceeds. In fact, museums typically strive to reconcile the demands of an increasingly exacting public with the constraints of government funding [45]. Therefore, there is a risk that items may be sold for the benefit of the operating budget rather than the collections [12,46]. As already mentioned, American museums reduce this risk through the stringent parameter that deaccessioning proceeds should be used only for the acquisition of new items [19,41,43]. In doing so, they trace a divide between the improvement of collections on one hand, which is acceptable, and everything else on the other. However, “everything else” may include e.g. building upgrades, new services for the audience, lower admission fees, restoration projects, and other purposes that, while not related to the operating budget, do not fall under collections improvement either, but as a result of the divide they are regrettably overlooked.

The introduction of deaccessioning policies presents one more obstacle: the resistance of museum managers towards the systematic valuation of their collections. The tendency of museum curators to keep hoarding without ever being required to place a capital value on their items is aggravated by endemic inefficiencies of museal institutions. A systematic appraisal of musealized items is challenging because, to begin with, an item’s market value is different from its insurance value and can only be determined at the moment of the actual sale, by means of bidding, or through expensive and poorly generalizable contingent valuation studies [47]. Therefore, it is difficult to determine the worth of entire collections without actually putting every item on the market. In addition, museums often do not even have a reliable account of all items in their possession [48]. This is the reason for the fundamental paradox suffered by museums: they are simultaneously very rich, because of the remarkable holdings they possess, and very poor, because these holdings are illiquid and do not figure in balance sheets [49]. Typically, museum registrars do not even mention that accessioned items are of any value, though the collections of most European museums are likely to be worth several million euros [50]. Museum directors, for their part, are discouraged from considering collections as true financial assets. Adding to the difficulty, museum curators often directly oppose systematic valuation as they may consider it a thwart to their curatorial mission, hence, the traditional assumption that deaccessioning would be unethical. In particular, the possibility exists that museums may deaccession items that are presently of little interest, while they may become of substantial interest later, e.g. because an artwork of dubious attribution is finally revealed to be authentic. In the end, however, every museum deaccessions [15]: it is only a question of how furtively.

Museum managers may in fact draw considerable benefits from a state of ambiguity, because the monetization of physical assets could encourage interference by trustees and politicians. If systematic valuations were the norm, they may find their independence undermined as they are pressured for specific deaccessions, or suffer impositions, such as caps and quotas for sales. They may even make their job performance easier to evaluate for governmental authorities [51]. In contrast, haziness allows greater scope for them to manage museums according to their own preferences or those of a professional elite. Hence, by evading measurement, they are effectively decreasing accountability. From this perspective, their resistance towards methodical valuation becomes a survival strategy [50].

On a final note, we must report that aversion to deaccessioning is not confined to the professional field but extends to academia as well. An economic line of opposition stems from game theory, where ongoing research [18] suggests that museum managers called to make deaccessioning decisions would be drawn to misconduct. This occurs because they belong in a position of asymmetric information with respect to their principals (museum directors, but also the public), and their insulation from risk may allow them to behave differently than otherwise [10]. As such, they are liable to moral hazard. Traditional economic literature documents this danger with respect to both profit and non-profit organisations [52,53]. At the root, there would be a problem of free cash flow [54,55], due to which incentives for non-optimal management may arise when managers are granted excessive discretion.

The arguments against deaccessioning hereby presented are not unreasonable. However, it may be possible for individual museums to avoid the pitfalls by enacting balanced and well-informed policies on item disposal. With respect to the curators’ liability to moral hazard, for instance, effective policies may establish that the decision to deaccession should never be left entirely to individual museums but may also involve the participation of national museum associations. In Europe, however, these safeguards are relatively difficult to create, for reasons we explore in the following section.

6. Deaccessioning policies in Europe

The stance of policy-makers with respect to deaccessioning in Europe is very diverse. A transnational governing body for museal institutions does not exist: while there are committees for specific categories, e.g. open-air or science museums, no association exists that may resemble the American Alliance in either scope or endowment. On the contrary, the European Union officially adopts the subsidiary principle in matters of cultural policy, believing that heritage management is best pursued at a national or regional level by individual member states [56]. As a result, governance is in the hands of national associations that often predate the European Union, such as the Deutscher Museumsbund, founded in 1917, the Nederlandse Museumvereniging, 1926, and, most notably, the Museums Association in the United Kingdom, dating to 1889. While nothing prevents international homogeneity in principle, these associations emanate guidelines independently and are in no way required to conform to each other. Hence, their attitude towards particularly controversial issues, and their resulting policies, vary wildly. Deaccessioning is thus officially encouraged in e.g. the UK [37,44], under development in the Netherlands [57] and Germany [58], timidly advocated in Portugal, and severely forbidden in Italy [59].

There is relative conformity among European policies, however, insofar as all major museal associations adhere to the International Council of Museums, which presents itself as a leading force in ethical matters. The Council thereby enforces its own Code of Ethics;

this refers to deaccessioning under the section *Removing Collections*, articles 2.12 through 2.17 [60]. The Code obliges museums that hold legal powers to deaccession to comply with all legal requirements and procedures, including extraordinary provisions, if applicable, unless doing so is documentably impossible or detrimental. Furthermore, it binds museums to carry out deaccessioning operations with full understanding of the significance, uniqueness and legal standing of the item, and warns managers about the loss of public trust that might result from deaccessioning choices. While the responsibility for the decision to deaccession ultimately belongs to the museal governing body, jointly with the museum director and the curator of the collection concerned, the Code encourages individual museums to develop their own deaccessioning guidelines, establishing standard procedures for donations, transfers, exchanges, sales, repatriations and destructions. The Code makes it mandatory to keep comprehensive records of all disposal decisions, and strongly suggests that other museums should be granted pre-emption rights in case of sales. The matter of proceeds allocation is addressed specifically by article 2.16, stating that museum collections cannot be treated as realizable assets, and all compensation from deaccessioning of collections should be used for their own improvement, possibly through new acquisitions. Finally, in order to prevent conflicts of interest and discourage abuse, it is suggested that museum personnel, members of the museal governing body, or their families or associates, should be prevented from purchasing items deaccessioned from collections under their responsibility. Beyond these fundamental provisions, comprehensive deaccessioning policies are left in the hands of national associations, who may choose whether or not to develop them.

We may observe that ICOM guidelines are based on the principles and address the same issues highlighted by academic literature. However, the Council does not and may not go so far as to determine whether museums hold the legal power to deaccession in the first place, because this depends on national governing bodies and legislations concerning cultural heritage. The absence of overarching governance, however, is once again due to the subsidiary principle and should not be attributed to lack of interest in the topic. Among the most notable attempts at monitoring the situation of deaccessioning cross-nationally was the portal *Daccessioning.eu*, initiated in 2006 and discontinued in 2012, which intended to gather information on deaccessioning procedures in different countries [61]. Today, *The Deaccessioning Blog* provides many resources on the topic and is an excellent source of case studies [62]. The debate is also alive within the Network of European Museum Organisations, established two decades ago with the intention to promote policies that help museums fulfilling their mission as cultural agents and keepers of cultural heritage, including deaccessioning. In this regard, the Network insists that museum professionals should always keep impeccable records about collections and their cultural value, and advocates for well-informed guidelines for item disposal. Bergevoet [61] expresses a firm belief that it is possible to add value to an object by removing it from its collection and giving it a fresh purpose, while adding to the value of the collection itself by removing its non-functioning parts. Furthermore, he observes that the increasing digitisation of museal collections through platforms like *Europeana*, an EU-funded database now featuring millions of items from European museums, libraries and archives, may lead over time to a full account of cases of duplication or overlap, which may in turn trigger discussions about fine-tuning, rearrangement, mergers and disposal, even on an international scale.

Among key recommendations for the European Union from the scholarly world was the establishment of a committee of member states experts on the mobility of collections, with the purpose of monitoring deaccessioning practices and keeping information up to date. This was partially addressed through the establishment of

a dedicated working group [34]. However, a number of other suggestions remain unanswered: among them, the establishment of an exchange program for museum professionals directly involved in collections mobility, such as registrars, and the introduction of standardized forms and valuation procedures for individual member states [63].

7. Conclusions and further research

In the present article, we have attempted to recap the state of the art on deaccessioning knowledge and insights. We departed from a definition of deaccessioning and moved to a review of the main arguments commonly advanced either in support or against the practice. The reasons why deaccessioning is deemed necessary can be summarized in:

- practical considerations, because the endless hoarding of items in depot is not sustainable for long-lasting institutions, such as museums;
- ethical considerations, because deaccessioning substantially contributes to consumer welfare;
- financial considerations, as the proceeds from deaccessioning can be used to improve the collections and, to a limited extent, help museums navigate through difficult economic times.

At the other end of the spectrum, the arguments against deaccessioning boil down to the difficulty of systematic valuation, and the curators' liability to moral hazard.

We find the reasons for deaccessioning compelling, but the reservations are not unjustified. In order to avoid the pitfalls, it is useful to allow an overarching governing body to regulate and oversee deaccessioning practices at an international level. We have pointed out that this is difficult to achieve in the European Union due to the adoption of the subsidiarity principle. However, the lack of legislative commitment about deaccessioning has been counterbalanced by abundant scholarly and professional interest. This generates a growing number of tools, resources and recommendations for policy-makers, some of which have been successfully heeded by the European Commission. Furthermore, while the European Union chooses not to regulate matters of national cultural heritage preservation, European museums may still choose to adhere to the International Council of Museum, which enforces its own code of ethics and provides a "soft" regulation for deaccessioning policies in the form of guidelines.

Many aspects of the deaccessioning problem in Europe remain regrettably unaddressed. We have attempted to review the current situation at an international level, but despite the International Council, there is still high variability in the attitudes of individual member states and museal associations towards item disposal. Therefore, no research endeavour will be complete without a comprehensive, country-by-country account of deaccessioning policies and experiences. The authors have already taken steps towards this objective, but there are limitations insofar as the relevant legislation may not be easily accessible for some countries, and even where there may not be documented cases of deaccessioning being put to practice.

Another unresolved issue is the impossibility for most European museums to reliably place a capital value on every item in their possession, despite the likely enormous worth of their collections, due to both the expensiveness of contingent valuations and the resistance from museum executives. This difficulty does not prevent the adoption of deaccessioning policies in itself, but it prevents them from being applied unambiguously and without risk of slanderous media coverage. The solution for this problem may not be straightforward. Additional research is required to advance

the international debate, and more efforts must be taken to bring its conclusions to the public. We may look with optimism at the growing number of conferences and publications, but direct information from museums to their visitors about the benefits of deaccessioning would also be desirable.

Note: The theoretical framework of this article is mainly based on cultural economic and museological literature with references to the law literature to contextualise the deaccessioning phenomenon all around Europe.

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