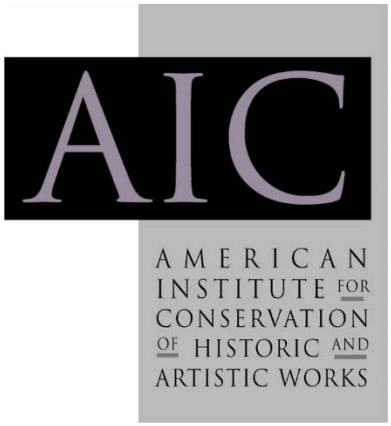

Article: Responsibilities, realities and ranking: How a collections tiering policy aids conservators in ethical decision making and judicious resource allocation at the Henry Ford Museum and Deerfield Village
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Source: *Objects Specialty Group Postprints, Volume Eight, 2001*
Pages: 97-105
Compilers: Virginia Greene and Lisa Bruno
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RESPONSIBILITIES, REALITIES AND RANKING: HOW A COLLECTIONS TIRING POLICY AIDS CONSERVATORS IN ETHICAL DECISION MAKING AND JUDICIOUS RESOURCE ALLOCATION AT THE HENRY FORD MUSEUM AND DEERFIELD VILLAGE

Mary Fahey and Clara Deck

Henry Ford Museum & Greenfield Village

Automobile mogul Henry Ford founded Henry Ford Museum & Greenfield Village in 1929. Starting with Ford's personal collection, his agents amassed huge collections of artifacts for his museum with an emphasis on transportation, agriculture and manufacturing. Collections of familiar objects set in historic houses in the village were intended to appeal to all. Some collections came to be used to support the curriculum of the elementary school that resided in Greenfield Village. Ford was a strong advocate of a curriculum of "learning by doing" and he viewed all of the collections as tools that were to be used for educational purposes.

Over the past 70 years, the large collections that were established by Ford have grown to an estimated 26 million archival documents and one million objects. The collections, which highlight American innovations, inventors and the ordinary people whose daily lives were affected by advances in technology include; furniture, paintings, decorative arts, home arts, industrial equipment, automobiles, airplanes, locomotives and agricultural equipment. Approximately 20% of the collections are currently on display; the remainder are housed in 50 different storage areas.

Henry Ford Museum presents 12 acres of traditional museum exhibitions that include "The Automobile in American Life", which highlights the influence of automobile technology on every day life; "Clockwork", a chronology of clock making in America; "Made in America", which presents an overview of the industrial era in the United States and "Your Place in Time", which documents change, progress and popular culture in America during the last century. A variety of older displays that date to the 1970's have been slated for replacement in the near future include home arts, lighting, communication and flight.

In Greenfield Village, Henry Ford assembled buildings associated with several of his American heroes, including the Wright brother's home and bicycle shop, Thomas Edison's Menlo Park Complex and the home of Noah Webster. To this day, visitors to Greenfield Village can view operating historic artifacts as they make their way through the 80-acre village. Among the attractions are an operating 1914 era machine shop and an 1880's working farm. Visitors are invited to take a ride on a 1913 Hershell Spillman Carousel, an authentic steam locomotive and thirteen operational antique vehicles. Approximately one half of Greenfield village's 78 historic structures are furnished with original collection artifacts.

The Current Trend in Exhibitions at Henry Ford Museum & Greenfield Village

In recent years administrators and exhibit planners at Henry Ford Museum & Greenfield village have moved towards the creation of new highly engaging interactive exhibits that are intended to capture the attention and imagination of visitors. In general these exhibits include an increased number of "hands-on" activities. In January 2001 the president of the museum announced to staff that they would be entering "a new era of simultaneity" in exhibit production. He explained his interest in producing more exhibits, with smaller budgets and shorter "turn around times". In an article that appeared in the November/ December 2000 issue of Museum News, Ron Chew wrote, "why can't a museum change its exhibitions as swiftly and as often as a department store changes its floor displays?" (Chew 2000:47). He identified an awakening among many museums to their potential "to become more than simply repositories for cultural and scientific artifacts". He looked towards libraries and universities as examples of how museums could produce exhibits in a timely manner responding to current events. It was evident that Henry Ford Museum & Greenfield Village was not alone in its desire to produce more updated exhibitions at a faster and more responsive pace. To the conservation staff whose yearly workload included an average of two new exhibitions, ten major loans, the care of over 45 operational collection items, two annual collection condition surveys, an average of six temporary exhibits and the routine treatment of hundreds of artifacts, this presented a point of concern.

The Need for a System of Prioritization

The idea of tiering collections at Henry Ford Museum & Greenfield Village first arose during an effort to conserve thousands of artifacts in preparation for the "Automobile in American Life" exhibit which opened in 1987. Many of the paper artifacts that were included in this exhibit were considered to be ephemera by curatorial and archives staff. According to the curators and archivists who were assigned to work on this project, there was a real push by administrators to display "the real thing" rather than reproductions. Minoo Larson, who was then a part-time paper conservator, knew that there was insufficient time to conserve all of the artifacts and that the internally illuminated exhibit display cases, which had already been constructed, would prove to be detrimental to the collections. In order to address this problem she requested that the archivists and curators provide information to her concerning the relative value of each artifact. She saw the need for a system that could inform conservators about the collection artifacts and serve as a guide in determining extent of treatment and mode of display. Working in conjunction with curators and archivists she began to use an informal shorthand system for planning her work.

Testing the Tiering System

In 1992 museum curators, conservators and registrarial staff drafted the first version of a formal tiering policy that was to be tested and debated for the next seven years. The tiering or "ranking policy" as it came to be called required that curators and archivists assign a numerical rank,

ranging from 1 to 4, to all newly acquired artifacts and to items that required examination or treatment by a conservator. Historically significant artifacts were to be assigned a code of 1 whereas common items that could be easily and inexpensively acquired would be assigned a rank 4. Rank 2 and 3 would follow criteria that placed them somewhere in between. In the first draft of the policy, the criteria for rank included: historical significance or rarity, monetary value, preservation sensitivity, and an assessment of the degree to which the educational value of artifact might be enhanced by hands-on use. Later drafts incorporated exhibit, handling, treatment and documentation guidelines. The chair in which Abraham Lincoln was sitting when he was assassinated was assigned a rank 1 based upon historical significance, fragile nature and irreplaceability. Rank 4 artifacts were first identified as items that could be easily replaced, and that were appropriate for hands-on use in living history sites. These included tools or kitchen utensils that were readily available for purchase at local antique shops. Artifacts that have been heavily restored or altered might also be included in this category.

During this time various interpretations of the policy were tested in new exhibits and existing programs. Museum staff engaged in intense discussions about the practical application of the policy. Although there was general agreement that rank would be based upon the historical significance of individual artifacts, the questions that posed the greatest obstacles to policy ratification included: Would rank determine the appropriateness of an artifact for hands-on use or operation? Could the policy be applied consistently to a wide variety of collections? Was it appropriate to include monetary value in the ranking criteria? Since it was proposed that rank 4 items would be viewed as dispensable who would maintain them? Was it appropriate to ask curators to assign rank based upon the "preservation sensitivity" which was being used to designate fragile artifacts?

The Operation and Hands-on Use of Artifacts

As the ranking policy developed, attempts were made to correlate rank with the appropriateness of an artifact for hands-on use. In an attempt to insure that valuable artifacts would be protected from damage during use or operation, conservators put forth the proposal that rank 1 or 2 artifacts not be used for hands-on programs. Practically speaking not all requests for hands-on collections fell into the rank 3 or 4 category. Periodic requests to use rare and historically significant artifacts such as musical instruments, clocks and automobiles were cited. This became a point of particular concern to conservators. Qualms arose when it became evident that the pressure to use artifacts in programs might necessitate that they be given a low rank despite their historical significance. In the end conservators and curators were forced to admit the dichotomy that rare artifacts might occasionally be used or operated thus jeopardizing their long-term preservation. Therefore, in the interest of ensuring the best compromise conservators considered whether rank could designate who ought to be authorized to handle or operate artifacts and under what circumstances.

The acquisition of the 1906 Locomobile race car in 1997 intensified the urgency to finalize the

policy. The automobile, which is unique, original and of national historical importance, was purchased by the museum and immediately assigned a rank 1 by the curator. The significance of the car is enhanced by the fact that it has been maintained in operational condition but never fully restored or repainted since 1906. Not only was the car expected to be run at least yearly in the village, it was to become the focal point of a new prominently placed exhibit that would include a documentary film. The highlight of the film would be footage of the automobile being driven by actor Paul Newman.

Shortly after the filming the criteria that referred to the appropriateness of artifacts for use was removed from the policy. While ostensibly allowing for the potential consumptive use of an irreplaceable artifact, this decision proved fruitful because it clarified key issues and moved ratification of the policy forward. It affirmed the concept that curators ought to objectively assess the historical value of artifacts independent of the desire to use them. It acknowledged that all potential uses of items could not be dictated and would require assessment on an individual basis. An agreement was made with the Collections Committee that all rank 1 items that were to be considered for "hands-on" use or operation would be brought to a vote of the Collections Committee that includes curators, administrators and program developers. The Committee would determine the appropriate number of times the item could be used and details concerning duration based upon recommendations from the appropriate curator and conservator. This agreement was incorporated into the institutional preservation policy.

Fragile Artifacts

The creation of a systematic method for designating an artifact as appropriate for hands-on use became complicated when the inherently fragile nature of some artifacts was considered. Conservators and curators shared the concern that the same criteria that applied to objects did not suit fragile materials such as paper and textiles. Whereas regular operation of cast iron machinery seemed reasonable, neither could envision a situation where extended hands-on use of textile or paper materials could be employed on a regular basis. Even rare books were used only periodically under staff supervision.

The ranking policy debate raised issue with the criteria that linked historical significance and preservation sensitivity. Why might artifacts of low historical significance be given a high rank merely because they are fragile? One suggestion included the creation of a separate ranking system for archival collections. The creation of separate systems was abandoned in the interest of the creating of one simple inclusive policy that was applicable to all collections. Conservators had reservations about the inclusion of "preservation sensitivity" as a value judgment that curators would need to make. Ultimately the reference was removed in order to allow curators to focus on significance rather than how the item would be cared for or displayed.

Consistent Application of Ranking to a Wide Variety of Collections

Whether the ranking criteria could be applied consistently to a copious variety of collections was the subject of much debate. The stewardship of agricultural implements is rationalized using different qualifying factors from decorative arts. In most cases Henry Ford Museum & Greenfield Village bears the legacy of 75 years of collecting ethnographic, technological, archival and personal artifacts both antique and modern. With a desire to collect 20th century artifacts just as Ford had collected the artifacts of his era, museum staff began to recognize the difficulty of assigning rank to contemporary collections. Certainly a recently acquired collection of McDonalds's "Happy Meals" would not be ranked 1 but the question still concerned staff who foresaw the possibility that today's rank 4 artifacts could in time become a rank 3 or 2. For conservators the realization that some artifacts that are currently receiving a minimal level of care could one day require their attention was disconcerting. Ultimately the decision was made to rank artifacts relative to current mission and collecting plan accepting that the rank may change in the future.

Monetary Value

The inclusion of monetary value in discussions regarding museum collections seemed inappropriate to some museum staff members. However a few specific items such as a collection of Stradivarius and Guinari violins and a Bugatti Royale automobile warranted consideration even though they do not fit the museum's mission nor collecting plan. The decision was made by members of senior museum management to retain monetary value in the ranking guidelines.

The Care of Rank 4 Artifacts

Since it had been proposed that rank 4 items should be viewed as dispensable, would their care be beyond the scope of conservators' responsibilities? The desire to develop a policy that could aid conservators in determining the best use of their limited time and expertise posed the question: Should museum conservators only care for the elite rank 1 and 2 collections or should they remain essential participants in the care of all collections? An early draft of the ranking policy proposed that conservators would not be involved in the treatment or care of ranked 4 artifacts. This raised alarms among program staff who knew they did not have the resources or the expertise to maintain artifacts themselves. Curators pointed out that many of the artifacts that were chosen for programs were indeed integral to the story being told and that none were truly disposable in the program sense. The notion that rank 4 collections could be minimally cared for or "used up" represented both a practical and ethical quandary. Whereas conservators might delegate the tasks required to care for artifacts in use, it became apparent that conservators could not and should not relinquish their responsibility to any collection artifact. Carl Schlichting addressed this issue in his talk at the Association for Living History and Farm

Museums annual meeting in 1989. He advocated the need for planned maintenance programs and good training for program staff that would be handling artifacts. He noted plainly: "One can not actively use a collection artifact and expect to keep its historical integrity" (Schlichting 1989:209). Within the context of the AIC code of ethics, the conservators' obligation to reduce damage to artifacts constitutes a real challenge when artifacts are being actively used. The decision was made that conservators would remain involved in the care of all collections. While the extent of active involvement by conservators in the treatment of low ranked artifacts might be reduced to documentation, the examination report or treatment proposal would include a record of the decision- making process whereby the determination to use the artifacts was made. Museum conservators would be increasingly involved in the management of staff and volunteers who maintain operational collections. They also would develop training programs for program staff who operate artifacts such as machine tools, cars and automobiles.

Ranking in Practice

In the spring of 2001 the ranking policy was finally approved by the leadership of Henry Ford Museum & Greenfield Village (Fig. 1). Management guidelines (Fig. 2) were separated from the ranking policy itself. This conduces curators to weigh the historical significance of the individual artifact most heavily in the determination of its rank. Additional criteria considered whether similar artifacts are preserved in other collections enhances the ethical underpinning of the policy. The management guidelines were developed to aid conservators in setting priorities based upon rank. Both the ranking policy and management guidelines have been appended to the institutions preservation policy.

Conservation work requests that are received from curators through a computerized collections management system include recent ranking information. The daily application of the policy facilitates the dialogue between curators and conservators by allowing conservators to assess the workload develop schedules and determine the appropriate level of documentation and treatment for many items. It also serves as a guide during exhibit development when limited financial resources require that choices must be made concerning the exhibit case construction and methods of display. Yearly conservation surveys utilize ranking to aid in setting long term storage and treatment priorities for individual collections of artifacts. Ultimately the plan may be expanded to aid in the planning of storage upgrades.

Conclusion

The raking policy that was recently adopted by HFM&GV attempts to address the judicious allocation of resources by providing a framework for both ethical and practical decision making. The professional staff throughout the institution including curators, conservators, exhibit developers and program personnel generally consider ranking to be a provocative series of guidelines that assist them in thinking about what the museum collects, why it collects and how

the collections ought to be cared for and employed. Although most recognize that there cannot be an orthodox consistency in how it is applied across incredibly varied collection types, they generally see it as a valuable communication tool. While it must be recognized that a formal policy cannot be applicable to all situations it can provide a forum for discussions that benefit both decision making and preservation concerns. The policy recognizes the longstanding tradition of the institution to employ artifacts in innovative ways for educational purposes while giving this tradition a new ethical foundation.

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- All new acquisitions are ranked.
- All artifacts requested for conservation treatment should be ranked.
- All artifacts processed for documentation projects should be ranked.

Criteria for Ranking Artifacts:

Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4
Nationally or internationally significant	Significant historical value	Historical value	Historical value
Few, if any duplicates in this or other collections	Few similar examples in this or other collections	Similar examples are held in this or other collections	Common in this or other collections
Rare, likely irreplaceable	Uncommon and difficult to replace	Moderately difficult to replace	Can be easily replaced
And/or of high monetary value			

Figure 1. Collections Ranking

	Storage and Display	Documentation	Treatment	Handing and Operation
Rank 1	Every effort will be made to store and display artifacts in an environmentally controlled and secured area	Complete curatorial and conservation documentation, including research and photographic records will be maintained	-Original materials will be preserved -Treatment will be carried out or strictly supervised by conservator -Stable materials and reversible treatments will be employed	-Formal exhibition only. -Requests to use or operate must be brought to collection committee for approval -Must be handled and moved by historical resources staff with approval of collection manager
Rank 2	Reasonable effort will be made to store and display artifacts in an environmentally controlled and secured area	Complete curatorial and conservation documentation, including research and photographic records will be maintained	-Original materials will be preserved -Treatment will be carried out or strictly supervised by conservator -Stable materials and reversible treatments will be employed	-Formal exhibition only. -Requests to use or operate must be brought to collection operations team for approval -Must be handled and moved by historical resources staff with approval of collection manager
Rank 3	Reasonable effort will be made to store and display artifacts in a secure area out of direct access of the public	Curatorial and conservation documentation, research and photographic records will be maintained. Complete maintenance records of all modifications and repairs will be kept.	-Conservation or Restoration treatment will be carried out under the guidance of a conservator. -Original materials will be preserved whenever possible	-May be used for exhibits and/or interpreted operational use by properly trained staff. -May be handled by trained Historical Resources staff or other authorized program staff- -Moves within a program site may be carried out by trained program staff -Moves beyond the authorized program areas must be coordinated by Collections manager
Rank 4	Reasonable effort will be made to store and display the artifacts in a careful manner that will not accelerate deterioration unduly.	Minimal curatorial and conservation artifact record will be created. Minimal documentation, research and photographic records of modifications and repairs will be maintained at the discretion of the use team.	-Conservation or Restoration treatment will be carried out under the guidance of a conservator or appropriate historical resources staff -Maintenance programs will be carried out under the direction of a conservator or appropriate Historical resources staff -Original materials will be preserved, when practical or appropriate	-May be used for exhibits and/or interpreted operational use by adequately trained staff. -May be used for hands-on activities with visitors --May be handled by trained Historical Resources staff or other authorized program staff -Moves within a program site may be carried out by trained program staff -Moves beyond the authorized program areas must be coordinated by Collections manager

Figure 2: Management Guidelines for Ranked Collections