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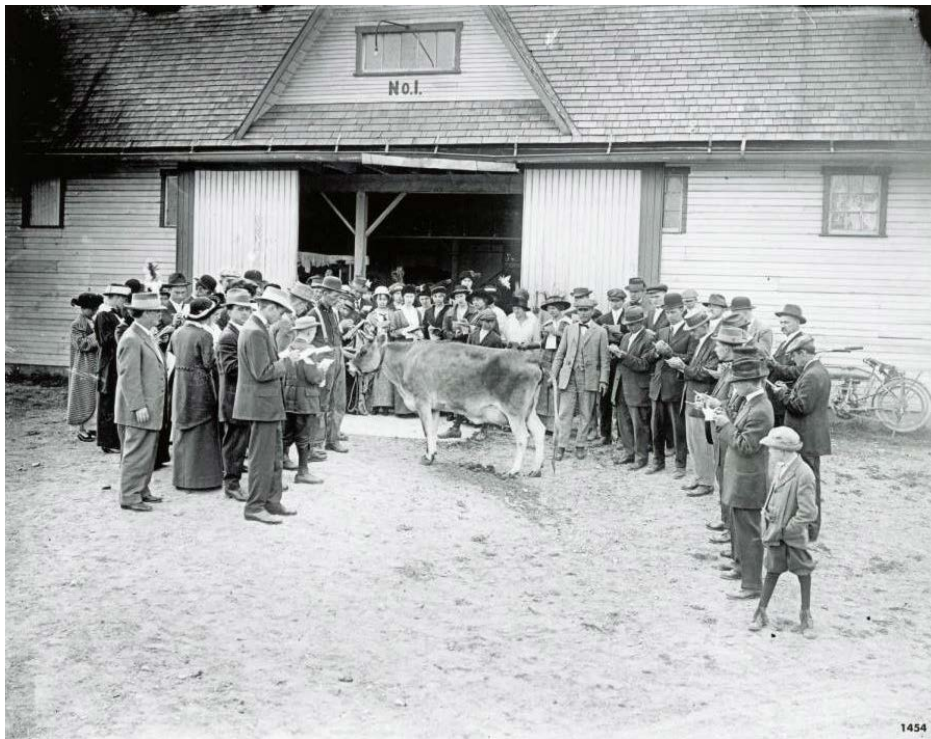
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WORKING WITH AUCTION HOUSES

By Jessica D. Jenkins, Director of Collections, Minnetrista

We all know the feeling, right? Over the past few months you've skillfully navigated the winding roads of deaccessioning an object (or ten!) from your museum collection. The items weren't the right fit for your institution or your collection, but none-the-less they were accepted many years ago. While the journey was long, after clearing title of ownership, doing extra research on the object's provenance and history, and making sure all of your "I"s and "T"s were dotted and crossed, the board finally approved the items for removal.



[Cattle Auction.](#) (Indiana Historical Society)

Sure, the first step is finally over. And boy, was it a big step. But now the next phase of deaccessioning begins - the task of actually getting the items out of the museum! In some instances you may transfer the artifacts to another collecting institution. At other times, broken items may have to be disposed of. And then there are the objects that can be sold, and the proceeds funneled back into an acquisition and collections- care fund. While there are many options for selling deaccessioned items, the most important thing to remember is that it needs to be done at a public sale. This ensures transparency and removes the museum from a conflict of interest.

One popular way of selling deaccessioned materials is through an auction house. These professionals are just that - professional. Selling is their business, so why not utilize their

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expertise? Most have regular sales calendars and can easily slot your items into their schedule - taking the burden of logistics off your plate. A reputable auction house is also well versed in the laws surrounding the sale and purchase of certain types of antiques, like those including feathers or ivory, and can help the museum navigate those situations. Additionally, auction houses often have dedicated clientele. These customers already trust the auction house, know how their sales work, and because of this, they often return from sale to sale to make purchases. So, why not utilize an auction house to get the buyers to your items?



[Hill & Company Auction House](#). (Bass Photo Co Collection, Indiana Historical Society)

The real trick is finding the auction house that's right for you. Although it may be tempting to just send your items to the closest one, consider if it is the best fit for the items you wish to sell. For instance, if you are needing to sell artwork, it might be best to find an auction house that specializes in that. If you have furniture, look for someone who is known for selling furniture. And if you have a mix of materials, there are plenty of places that are known for that as well. As you begin finding out what those options are, you'll also need to weigh variables like fees and transportation costs against the potential financial return of selling an item at an auction house with the right clientele and expertise.



[Cromwell Furniture and Auction Company Baseball Team](#). (Martin Collection, Indiana Historical Society)

As you begin exploring your options ask the following questions. These will help you gather the information you'll need to find the best partner for selling your deaccessioned materials. And with some luck, you'll also put together a great resource list of auction houses you may be able to engage in the future.

1. What is your sales commission? What percentage of the sale does the auction house keep?
2. Do you have a reduced commission for museums or non-profits?
3. Do you have a specialty? What are your customers usually looking for at your auctions?
4. Are you willing to take these items? What is your process for determining if you will take these items? (Itemized list? Pictures? In-Person inspection? At auction house vs. at my museum?)
5. How will the items get to the auction house? (Will you pick up? Drop off? Should I bring the items myself? Can I have them shipped there?) If dropping off, do you have help for unloading or do we provide all moving assistance?
6. Can I set a reserve price (or minimum sale price) on a specific item? What are the terms associated with doing so?
7. What if the item does not sell? Can it be stored and slated for a future auction? Are there any fees associated with that?
8. What type of auction will the item be in? (Cataloged vs. discovery sale. Online vs. in-person)
9. How many auctions do you host a year? How frequently?
10. What is the turn-around between the sale of items and when you issue a check to the seller?
11. Will items at the auction house be covered under your insurance or ours?
12. How are items from museums listed in your cataloged sales? Will you note that is has been deaccessioned from a museum collection? Will you list the name of the museum selling the item? Can I choose how it appears?

While this may seem like a lot of questions to ask, and a lot of information to gather, the work will pay off in the long run. Armed with the answers you can confidently move forward with taking that final step or moving your deaccessioned items out of the museum and into the hands of people who will continue to love them.

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