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# INDIANA HISTORICAL SOCIETY COLLECTIONS ADVISOR

A RESOURCE FROM IHS LOCAL HISTORY SERVICES

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## ACCEPT OR DECLINE: MAKING COLLECTIONS DECISIONS

By Tamara Hemmerlein, director, IHS Local History Services

Last month we looked at creating a process for what happens when a potential donation walks in the door. But deciding whether to accept or decline it is an entirely different process all together. In museums, we're all about telling stories. The representations of those stories come in all kinds of formats - physical documents, 3D artifacts, and even digital files. No matter the story or the format, we have to choose what to collect and that involves learning how to make hard decisions about what to accept and what to decline. The most important step is to have clear ideas about why we collect and what we base our "accept or decline" decisions on.



We collect representative objects for a variety of reasons. We use them in exhibits and in educational programs. They give us something to build our stories around and our audiences something to connect with. People come to us not only to learn, but also because they are looking for the connection those objects offer. We collect objects and information to

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share with researchers so they can share information to both broader and more specific audiences than we can often reach. And we collect objects and stories because there are some things that would be lost if museums did not preserve them.

All that being said, we cannot and should not accept everything we are offered. When our institutions chose to become collecting institutions, we took on the ethical responsibility to care appropriately for the objects we accession into our permanent collections. Everything we collect takes up space and uses resources. Good collections stewardship means that we are constantly prioritizing and balancing the needs of different objects. If we say "Yes!" to everything, then, in the end, we will be doing our collections and the communities whose stories they tell a disservice because it's impossible to provide good stewardship for all the things all the time.



When you begin the discussion about accepting or declining an offered object, it's important to collect with your institution in mind. Remember your institutional mission and refer to your Collections Management Policy and Scope of Collections. Those should always guide your decision making.

An often-overlooked reason for collecting objects is nostalgia. This can drive personal desires versus an organizational need to accept an object and can be one of the most difficult things to combat when collecting with the institution in mind.

Beyond your mission and collections policies and plans, there are other questions to consider as you are deciding whether to say "yes."

- Will the object tell a story that you haven't told before? Will it help build a more inclusive collection so you can tell a fuller story of your community?
- Does it fill a gap in your collections?
- Does the object have significant historical value? What does the object mean to your community?
- What is the provenance? Who made the object? Who owned it? Who used it? How and why did it come to your community?



Just like understanding why you may say “yes”, it is important to consider reasons you might say “no.”

- Do you have the resources to properly care for the object? Will you have to shift resources away from more significant objects in your collection?
- Is it ethical for your institution to hold the object?
- Is the object hazardous? Does it contain harmful materials? Will it off-gas and create environmental problems?
- Do you have the space needed to appropriately house the object?
- Does the object require specialized storage? Do you have the ability to provide that storage?
- What is the condition of the object? Does it have the physical integrity to hold together? And if not, is it worth the money for conservation?
- Is there a pest or mold problem? If there is, do you have the means to get rid of the pests or mitigate the mold?

There are also things that go beyond “yes” or “no” questions that you might need to consider when making determinations about accepting or declining certain objects.

- Are there any ownership or title issues?
- Are there any copyright issues? Do you need special permission to use the object?
- Are there any international, federal, state, or local laws and restrictions that you need to take into account? Are there NAGPRA or looted art considerations?
- Are there donor requests and restrictions?

Inevitably, you will have to decline some object donations. Saying “no” gracefully is an important part of good collections stewardship. Declining an object donation can be difficult and feel stressful especially if your institution has had a habit of taking everything. It’s beneficial to talk ahead of time about saying “no” and think about some ways to do it well.





Remember that, for the potential donor, coming to you with their object may have been an emotional decision. Be respectful. Try to say something positive about the object. Acknowledge the sentimental attachment to the obviously beloved teddy bear. Say that the watercolor that doesn't fit your scope of collections is very nice.

It can be helpful to tell the potential donor when the object is first offered to you that your institution can't accept everything it's offered and explain why. Take this opportunity to teach people a bit about museums and the "life" of an object. Talk about your ethical responsibilities and the field's standards and best practices. Be transparent. Share the pertinent information from your collections management policy. Give some insight on how you make "accept or decline" decisions. You might be surprised to realize how many donors do not expect you to take everything.

Understanding why we collect, why we say "yes" and why we can and should say "no" is key to making good decisions about our collections and will help us to improve our collections stewardship and be better collecting institutions.

(In June, LHS is providing a webinar on this very process. Keep an eye out on our [webinar page](#) for registration information!)

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