

MA Statement  
12 April 2010

## **Museums Association's Advice to the Royal Cornwall Museum**

**The Museums Association's (MA) Ethics Committee has responded to the Royal Cornwall Museum's request for advice on the proposed sale of works of art from its collection. The Committee noted the museum's commitment to following the MA's Code of Ethics and has advised that the proposed course of action would meet the requirements of the Code for financially motivated disposals.**

**The committee recognised that this is an exceptional circumstance and that the sale may be necessary to ensure the long-term financial stability of the collections. The committee recognised that this action is being taken with deep regret and only as a last resort.**

The Royal Cornwall Museum is proposing the sale of two works of art from its collection to create an endowment fund for the care of the museum's collections.

The Ethics Committee is satisfied that the Royal Cornwall Museum's proposals are made solely with the aim of ensuring the long-term financial security of the collections for public benefit, and that all monies raised will be ring-fenced in an endowment to be used exclusively for their care and development.

The comments here are all based on Royal Cornwall Museum's plans as of 26<sup>th</sup> March 2010 and on the information provided to the Ethics Committee on that date. Any changes to the proposals could alter the committee's view.

On the specific requirements of the MA's Code of Ethics the committee noted:

**6.13 Refuse to undertake disposal principally for financial reasons, except in exceptional circumstances as defined in 6.14. Financially motivated disposal risks damaging public confidence in museums and the principle that collections should not normally be regarded as financially negotiable assets.**

The Museums Association strongly advocates that disposals do not take place principally for financial reasons. However we accept that this is an exceptional circumstance, which is being taken to secure the long-term financial stability of the Royal Cornwall Museum's collections.

In such cases it is important that there is clarity, transparency and accountability in the reason for, selection and manner of disposal of works from the art collection. We are content that Royal Cornwall Museum has demonstrated openness and transparency in this matter. The museum has ensured the public and its members have been consulted and kept informed about the plans to sell items from its collection. The Royal Cornwall Museum has also consulted with the descendents of the original donors of the paintings and has secured their support for the sale; we feel this action will

further help to ensure that public confidence in museums is not damaged by the sale. The Committee recommends that the Royal Cornwall Museum continues to adopt a transparent and proactive approach to communicating any sales that might take place and the outcomes they will bring.

The committee is reassured by the Royal Cornwall Museum's commitment that this will be a one-off sale and additional items from the collection will not be sold.

**6.14 Consider financially motivated disposal only in exceptional circumstances and when it can be demonstrated that:**

**i) It will significantly improve the long-term public benefit derived from the remaining collection**

We agree that the proposals will significantly improve the long-term public benefit derived from the Royal Cornwall Museum's collections. We recognise that without the sale of these items the service that the museum can offer would be limited and the public benefit derived from the museum and its collections would be significantly reduced.

**ii) It is not to generate short-term revenue (for example to meet a budget deficit)**

We agree that the proposed sale is not to generate short-term revenue. We recognise that this sale is part of the long-term restructuring of the museum's funding. We acknowledge that this is particularly important for the Royal Cornwall Museum as an independent charitable trust.

**iii) It is as a last resort after other sources of funding have been thoroughly explored**

We accept that Royal Cornwall Museum has thoroughly explored all sources of funding available at this time for the long-term care and development of the collections and this sale is as a last resort. We note that the Royal Cornwall Museum has been actively fundraising for an endowment since launching a campaign in 2008 and will continue to do so. However monies raised if the sale goes ahead will be ring-fenced in a separate endowment fund for the care and development of the collections.

**iv) Extensive prior consultation with sector bodies has been undertaken**

We agree that there has been extensive consultation with sector bodies.

**v) The item under consideration lies outside the museum's established core collection as defined in the collections policy.**

We are satisfied that the items under consideration lie outside the museum's established core collection. The museum has made this decision based on an established collections policy with due regard to the historic formation and development of the collection.

However, we strongly advise the museum to seek further independent professional advice on the items proposed for sale so that it can take fuller account of a range of views of the cultural significance of the two artworks in its decision-making.

**6.15 Ring-fence any money raised as a result of disposal through sale, if this exceptional circumstance arises, solely and directly for the benefit of the museum's collection. Money raised must be restricted to the long-term sustainability, use and development of the collection. If in doubt about the proposed use of such restricted funds consult sector bodies.**

We are satisfied that any money raised from the sale of any items from the collection will be ring-fenced and used solely and directly for the benefit of the museum collection and for the long-term sustainability, use and development of the collection. The Committee would like to see the terms of any endowment set up as a result of a sale going ahead.

### **Additional advice**

To help ensure continued clarity, transparency and public understanding in this course of action, the MA's Ethics Committee would like to recommend to the Royal Cornwall Museum that it develops a statement that it can share with the public and other stakeholders. The statement should outline:

- The detailed reasons for seeking the sale of the works of art
- The purpose of the endowment it will create should the sale go ahead and how it will be used
- How the items were selected in relation to the museum's collecting policy

### **Background**

The Museums Association (MA) revised its ethical advice on disposal in 2007. The revisions included the provision for financially motivated disposal in exceptional circumstances. Ethical advice is set out in the Museums Association Code of Ethics. To be eligible to dispose of items in these circumstances a museum would need to be able to demonstrate that they have considered and have met the following:

**6.13** Refuse to undertake disposal principally for financial reasons, except in exceptional circumstances as defined in 6.14. Financially motivated disposal risks damaging public confidence in museums and the principle that collections should not normally be regarded as financially negotiable assets.

**6.14** Consider financially motivated disposal only in exceptional circumstances and when it can be demonstrated that:

- i) It will significantly improve the long-term public benefit derived from the remaining collection
- ii) It is not to generate short-term revenue (for example to meet a budget deficit)
- iii) It is as a last resort after other sources of funding have been thoroughly explored
- iv) Extensive prior consultation with sector bodies has been undertaken
- v) The item under consideration lies outside the museum's established core collection as defined in the collections policy.

**6.15** Ring-fence any money raised as a result of disposal through sale, if this exceptional circumstance arises, solely and directly for the benefit of the museum's collection. Money raised must be restricted to the long-term sustainability, use and development of the collection. If in doubt about the proposed use of such restricted funds consult sector bodies.