

# New Report: Prioritization in Museum Collections – A Part of War and Disaster Preparedness

Susanna Carlsten 

Due to the changed security situation following the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Swedish museums have had to focus on preparedness issues more than in a long while. Since last year, a report from the Swedish National Heritage Board (Carlsten 2023) provides support for value assessments and prioritizing what objects to evacuate in the event of war or disaster. Because how do you select a few objects out of thousands in a collection? The report aims to highlight literature, research and experiences that can support museums in prioritizing. It includes a literature review, suggestions for valuation methods and descriptions of hands-on experiences from three museums that manage varied collections; cultural-historical and archaeological objects as well as art and archives.

Collections priority lists can be used for preventive and emergency evacuation as well as salvaging. War and disaster are wide terms and include many types of risks and scenarios, from flooding and fire to vandalism (Ashley-Smith 1999; McWilliams 2024). The report assumes that values are neither static nor inherent, that they change over time and depend on who is doing the valuation (Génétay & Lindberg 2014). The process of prioritizing is usually divided into three steps. The first step is to identify the different values of objects, and then their significance (to put it simply: the sum of all values). Prioritization normally follows these two steps of evaluation and often considers more than values, such as risk and material conditions. Some methods use risk and the material conditions of the

---

Department of Art History, Uppsala University, Sweden  
susanna.carlsten@konstvet.uu.se

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons 4.0 International licence (CC BY 4.0) (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

object (for example material sensitivity, portability) as assessment criteria for valuation and prioritization. Others argue that the value of an object is the same regardless of risk or conditions and that these aspects should therefore only be addressed *after* the valuation.

## Experiences from three Swedish museums

The Vasa Museum and the Naval Museum began assessing their exhibited objects, reasoning that they are probably most valuable and vulnerable in the event of an armed conflict. A limited time schedule made it impossible to study every single object in detail. Instead, the team started by looking at larger categories to be able to narrow it down. The assessment criteria, based on ISO 21110:2019, were used to support discussions and weighting. The museum's focus and collection policy have also been important for the assessment.

Helsingborg Museum started prioritization of stored objects with the help of the *Significance 2.0* assessment guide (Russel & Winkworth 2019). They experimented and gradually simplified the method as well as the assessment criteria. The work became more efficient as the museum worked its way through the collections. Today, the first step, if possible, is to establish the provenance of the objects. Experience has shown that this is one of the most important factors in determining the significance, together with the objects regional connection – which is linked to the museum's focus and collection policy.

## Dealing with archaeological objects

The presented methods are used for various collections, including archaeological ones. In terms of assessment criteria, some methods can be adapted according to the type of collection. Museum of Helsingborg's and the Naval museum collections contain many ancient artefacts and maritime archaeological objects. In the case of the Vasa Museum, basically the entire collection, including the ship itself, is a maritime find.

A general recommendation is to collaborate with different specialists in the prioritization process. At the Naval Museum, the selection was discussed with marine archaeologists. At the Vasa Museum, researchers studying maritime archaeological textile finds were given the opportunity to comment and make suggestions. Both museums included ethical aspects as an assessment criterion, involving considerations regarding human remains, repatriation et cetera. Sometimes it can be important to prioritize an inter-

related group of objects, for example depot finds or skeleton parts. Museum of Helsingborg chose not to set a fixed numeric limit. Since they pack most of the prioritized objects on evacuation trolleys, they let the size of objects decide if there is space to add more to the list.

Depending on the assessment method and criteria used, more or less importance can be given to risk aspects and material properties of the object (for example Brokerhof et al. 2017). Organic materials such as paper, wood and textiles are obviously sensitive to water and fire. On the other hand, inorganic materials, especially gold, silver and gemstones can be particularly vulnerable in war scenarios where theft and looting are likely to occur.

## Better some than none

Value assessment should be seen as an integral part of collection management. The work is demanding but can be adjusted according to resources and time. One way to motivate and get additional benefits of the work is to take the opportunity to simultaneously digitize and update database information. The report stresses the importance of a known provenance, thus a suggestion is to spend time on researching the history of the object, where possible. Perhaps the museum's archives can provide information on who donated the object or whether it is linked to a particular geographical location? The list should not be seen as static, but rather as adjustable. Last but not least, it is better to have selected a few objects to the priority list than none at all. Otherwise, the selection may have to be done urgently, in worst case by emergency workers with no prior knowledge of the collections.

## References

- Ashley-Smith, J. 1999. *Risk Assessment for Object Conservation*. Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann.
- Brokerhof, A., Kemp, J. & Bülow, A.E. 2017. *Value Management Scan: Setting Priorities in Management and Care of Collections*. ICOM Committee for Conservation 18th Triennial Meeting Copenhagen Denmark 4–8 September 2017. Pulido & Nunes: ICOM Committee for Conservation.
- Carlsten, S. 2023. *Prioriteringar i föremålssamlingar: Beredskap inför krig och katastrof*. Visby: Riksantikvarieämbetet.
- Génétay, C. & Lindberg, U. 2014. *Plattform kulturbistorisk värdering och urval: Grundläggande förhållningssätt för arbete med att definiera, värdera, prioritera och utveckla kulturarvet*. Stockholm: Riksantikvarieämbetet.
- Swedish Institute for Standards 2019. *Information and Documentation: Emergency Preparedness and Response* (ISO 21110:2019, IDT), SIS/TK 546, <https://www.sis.se/en/produkter/domestic-and-commercial-equipment-entertainment-sports/items-of-art>

and-handicrafts-cultural-property-and-heritage/ss-iso-211102019/ [Accessed 9 December 2024].

Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences n.d. <https://www.slu.se/en/departments/> [Accessed 9 December 2024]

McWilliams, A. 2024. Hoten mot kulturarven: En analys av aktörsdrivna hot mot kulturarv i Sverige. FOI-R--5490--SE. Totalförsvarets forskningsinstitut.

Russel, R. & Winkworth, K. 2019. *Significance 2.0: A Guide to Assessing the Significance of Collections*. Collections Council of Australia Ltd.