



Security in museums and galleries: access to collections

The design of exhibition areas and the routes by which people are able to move around while inside the museum building make an important contribution to the protection of the collection, particularly from theft and damage. Thought needs to be given to access to collections in both public and non-public areas, and to the procedures and systems in place which control movement within the museum. A Risk Assessment will help to identify threats.

Internal Layouts and Visitor Flows

The layout of exhibitions and circulation routes should be designed to provide the best security without limiting the display of the collection. Particular attention must be given to sightlines, to ensure that invigilators have the best possible view and that hidden corners are not created where a criminal acts can occur. In the interests of public safety, these layouts must be able to deal with the flow of all visitors (having regard to access issues) in both normal and abnormal conditions.

Much of the building's physical and electronic protection cannot operate during open hours when members of the public are admitted. Security will then depend very heavily on the institution's staff. While it is important to separate public areas from those used solely by staff, routing staff through galleries can increase security. Their very presence will act as a deterrent – the more pairs of watchful eyes the better.

Objects on open display

It is important to display material in such a way as to prevent easy removal by opportunist or determined thieves. Many premises have displays or room settings where exhibits are directly accessible to visitors. Wherever possible, paintings, drawings and similar objects should be secured to the walls by mirror plates and security screws, or similar approved methods. Objects that can be easily lifted and carried away should not be displayed close to doors and should be weighted or anchored in some way. Highly valuable pictures, especially smaller ones, may be further protected by security alarms.

Objects in display cases

These are the last line of defence for exhibits, but they are often also needed to provide a controlled micro-environment. Varying degrees of protection can be provided, from that designed to reduce the risk of accidental damage through to protection for small, attractive or fragile objects that need to be housed in strong, attack-resistant cases. Sufficiently strong cases can often compensate for limitations in other security elements e.g. the availability of attendants.

The four main display case considerations are:

- *locks* – need to be of a good standard and resistant to picking and direct physical attack. Ideally they should be hidden from view
- *hinges* – need to be of a similar standard, being well secured to the case
- *glazing* – the most vulnerable part of the case, glazing needs to be laminated and set well into the frame. A high proportion of existing cases incorporate glass that has little resistance to physical attack, although it can still be adequate to prevent casual handling and to assist in maintaining appropriate environmental conditions. Where there is a high risk of theft, 'anti-bandit' materials may have to be considered
- *framing* – construction of the frame should be such that an attack will not affect the overall integrity of the case. The most common types of material used for display case framing traditionally are wood. Ideally steel or aluminium extrusions can be acceptable. Without a frame, the case's resistance to attack is increased as edges of glazed sections are vulnerable to attack and the resisting qualities are undermined. Aluminium extrusions are common, but aluminium is a soft metal that can be easily distorted. Steel is the strongest metal – it is highly resistant to attack from anything other than specialist cutting equipment and is recommended for exhibits of very high value. When selecting display case materials that will be exposed to the interior of the case, take care to assess their chemical stability from a conservation point of view

The use of barrier rails or ropes

Although it is recognised that the barrier rails and ropes cannot prevent a determined attempt to steal or damage objects, their use does have important benefits. They define a sterile area in front of the displayed objects which gives the attendant the opportunity to respond to any intrusion into that area. These are now commonly supported by the use of beam or curtain alarms. Their use gives a clear indication to genuine visitors that they should not get closer to the object. Experience shows that not only are visitors successfully discouraged from touching the displayed material but accidental contact is also prevented which is particularly important in a crowded gallery.

Access to collections in non-public areas

Care needs to be taken over access to collections in non-public areas. Visitors, researchers and workers coming into such areas should be met and accompanied. Institutions should provide a badge or sticker to identify visitors, which is particularly useful in the larger institutions. Unaccompanied researchers and students should also be required to identify themselves and make an entry in the visitors' book and be briefed regarding Fire and other emergency procedures.

Providing cloakroom facilities where visitors can leave coats and large bags reduces the potential for objects being concealed and carried out of the building. Separating the specimens or objects required for study from the remainder of the collection, physically denying further access, constant supervision and a process for the checking and return of objects, reduces the possibility of loss. Such routines give a clear message to those who go 'behind the scenes' that the institution has good security management.

Many venues offer facilities for private and commercial functions, either during or after normal public opening times, and put on their own receptions for the launch of special exhibitions. It is important these events are carefully planned and supervised, following a full Risk Assessment.