

NATIONAL COLLECTIONS



The Smithsonian is often referred to as “the nation’s museum,” although it encompasses many diverse collecting units.

Is there a coherent framework for defining what “national” collecting units and collections are? What, if anything, distinguishes Smithsonian collecting units from external ones that consider themselves “national?” Are Smithsonian collections “national” simply by virtue of being held in a federally-supported institution, or is there a narrower definition? Do all Smithsonian collecting units share a core national purpose that guides collecting and other programmatic activities, or do they have individual national purposes?¹

This chapter reviews literature and discussions on the meaning of the term “national,” as applied to museums or collections. It also explores how proposed descriptions and typologies for “national collections” can inform interpretation of the core national purposes of Smithsonian collecting units.

FINDINGS

defining national museums

museums established and supported by nations

The first recognizably “national” museums appeared in the 18th century.² In Europe, the British Museum opened in 1759 and the Louvre in 1793. These

¹ There are both governmental and private museums that have “national” in their name, as well as museums considered national in stature. For example, AAM President and Chief Executive Officer Ed Abel was quoted as saying with respect to Indianapolis’s 10-year museum expansion program, “Your city is blessed with a great number of museums of national standing (Dunkin 2003).”

² Most of this section is drawn from the detailed history of museums in *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (2002).

institutions were motivated by the Enlightenment, the encyclopedic spirit, world exploration and trade, and developing industrialization. The model they originated spread throughout the world in the 19th century and led to the development of national museums (or what became national museums) in countries as far flung as Indonesia, India, Argentina, Brazil, Canada, South Africa, Egypt, and Australia.

These museums were “national” in two senses. First, they were created and funded by a central government, and often were administered as part of a nationwide system of museums under a ministry of culture. Second, they often represented the history, features, patrimony, or heritage of the nation, and had educational and political aims, especially the buttressing of national consciousness. Many were art museums, but other types of national museums founded in the 19th century included national archaeological museums in Russia, Denmark, France, Sweden, and Greece; museums that celebrated a nation’s achievements in science, technology, and industrial design, such as the Science Museum in London and the Technical Museum of Industry and Trade in Vienna; museums of decorative arts, such as the Musée des Arts Decoratif in Paris; and museums dedicated to ethnography, such as the Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde in Leiden. As these examples indicate, national museums were often distinguished by academic subject matter or theme.

Throughout the 20th century, governments established another type of museum-like entity akin to a national shrine: sites of historic or scientific significance, sometimes under national park services. The intent was to preserve and interpret these sites, and in this context, historic buildings and natural landscapes were analogous to collection objects. For example, the government of the Republic of Sénégal, in partnership with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage, has designated the island of Gorée, the small island that was a major port of entry in the Atlantic slave trade, as a historic site.

what constitutes a national museum? United Kingdom guidelines

Guideline 1.2 of the Registration Scheme for Museums and Galleries in the United Kingdom — Use of the Title 'National' Museum — states:

Some museums are “national” by virtue of a status conferred through legislation, and are directly funded by Government. Other museums not so constituted or funded may choose to style themselves “national” in order to reflect a pre-eminent role to which they aspire in the interpretation of a particular subject. . . . The MGC [Museums & Galleries Commission] believes that the public has the right to expect more than minimum standards of a museum making the claim to be “national.” To be eligible for Registration therefore, a museum wishing to use the word “national” or equivalent in its title should . . . meet the following criteria:

- ☞ The policy and practice of the museum should be to collect a range of objects of national scope and importance and associated information in its particular fields, and these collections should be subject to appropriate standards of care.
- ☞ It should already have a substantial collection in relation to its stated objectives and the museum display policy should reflect the full range of its collections.
- ☞ It should be able to provide professional and authoritative expertise and advice over its whole field to the public, to other museums, and to national and local government.
- ☞ It should provide study and research facilities for the public.
- ☞ It should offer visitor services of a quality appropriate to a museum purporting to provide a national facility.

Source: Re:Source [formerly Museums and Galleries Commission] (1995).

New types of museums continue to be developed. The mid-20th century saw the emergence of what the OP&A study team calls the “consumable” museum. Emphasizing “touch” or “haptic” experiences (from the Greek), the consumable museum promotes direct contact with the museum contents and does not expect its collections to be held indefinitely. Most children’s museums, folk festivals, and science and technology centers fall into this category. Although many national museums now have “hands-on” rooms or galleries, few are dedicated to this approach.³

a shortcut to national status

Researchers from the Field Museum in Chicago visited the mountains and high-altitude wetlands of northern Peru in August 2000, where they found a “staggering diversity of habitat types” and 28 new species. Rather than follow the academic tradition of years of painstaking study reported in a scholarly journal, the scientists joined with local conservation groups to appeal to the Peruvian Government to declare the tract, comparable in size to the state of Connecticut, a national park. In May 2001, President Valentín Paniagua issued a decree creating the park, one of the largest in the world.

Source: Kinzer (2002).

³ An exception will be the new National Children’s Museum in Washington, DC, thus designated by the Congress on September 26, 2003. Building on the roots of the Capitol Children’s Museum, the new organization aims to be “recognized nationally and internationally as a leader in child-centered, interactive, learn-by-doing experiences.” Another example is the Smithsonian’s annual Folklife Festival on the National Mall.

types of national museums

Wilson (1984, 54-58) takes a typological approach to describing what makes a museum “national” that emphasizes function and scope, rather than funding or governance. Wilson’s typology is very similar to one that was recently suggested by the British National Museum Directors’ Conference (NMDC), described in the following section (National Museum Directors’ Conference, 2002).

Wilson identifies three types of national museums: monolithic museums, state museums of national culture, and specialist national institutions.

- **Monolithic museums** are the great public collections that were created as or became national museums, with the intent of presenting a universal view of humanity’s achievements and knowledge. Their stature is due not only to their rich and varied collections but also to the vast reservoir of scholarship and expertise they offer. Examples of monoliths are the British Museum, State Hermitage Museum, and Louvre.

- The mission of **state museums of national culture** is to present the histories and aspirations of their countries. National culture museums are important vehicles in building or reconstructing national identity, particularly in emerging nations. Sometimes they have served as rallying points in times of war and political upheaval, as illustrated by the Hungarian National Museum, National Museum of Helsinki, and National Museum of Ireland. In another example, after Franco’s death in 1975, Spain’s transitional government recognized that the country’s museums could be powerful vehicles in reinforcing a new democracy that celebrated, rather than suppressed, regional and ethnic diversity, and it granted them unprecedented financial support (Holo 1999).

- The functions and philosophies of **specialist national institutions** are often suggested by their names, for example, the Greek National Archaeological Museum in Athens. An important function of specialist national museums is to provide high-level academic and technical support for scholarship that serves both national and international audiences. As an example, the National Gallery in London, which possesses one of the world's premier collections of European painting, "is expected to show the highest level to which human skill and inspiration can attain in one particular medium . . . [Its national role] is clearly seen in its scientific department, a leader in its field and available for consultation to all who need it (Greenaway 1983, 9)."

features of national museums

British national museums

In an article on national museums in the United Kingdom, Greenaway (1983) observes that, while no two of the UK's national museums are alike in structure or administration, nevertheless they share several common features:

- The government allocates funds, wholly or essentially, and a Board of Trustees appointed wholly or substantially by the government oversees their operations.
- A sense of permanence — of the institution and its collections — is the touchstone of national status.

- The pay and conditions of service of the staff are comparable to those of the Civil Service.
- The trustees and directors decide what is acquired and how it is displayed.
- All developed around large and important collections, and are intended to serve the public in a manner beyond the capacity of most individuals or private organizations.
- Governments see the museums as serving public purposes that merit some ongoing basic level of support.
- By virtue of their funding with public monies, national museums are more vulnerable to criticism over such matters as curatorial judgment with respect to sensitive or controversial subjects, and even exhibition design.

Most of Britain's national museums operate in an international context, with only a few (for example, its National Portrait Gallery) that are primarily national in scope (National Museum Directors' Conference 2002, 6).

Another feature of museums, as well as archives and libraries, that are directly under the national government in Great Britain is that its Department for Culture, Media, and Sport (DCMS) establishes standards for operations, including collections management, and oversees performance. The DCMS also exerts significant influence over museum programming or desired levels of performance through its control of the purse strings.

A recent NMDC report, *International Dimensions*, categorized Britain's national museums in a way that echoes Wilson's typology, described in the previous section. It divides the museums into three types based on their levels of international exposure (from greatest to least):

Britain's designation scheme

In 1997 the United Kingdom initiated The Designation Scheme, a program aimed at “identifying and celebrating the pre-eminent collections of national and international importance held in England’s non-national registered museums.” The scheme was subsequently extended to archives and libraries. Designated status acknowledges the importance, in national terms, of a collection, and confers eligibility to apply for funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund.

In 2001, the British Government undertook a comprehensive review of the scheme and issued somewhat revised criteria for comment. According to a draft of the scheme, to be designated “national” a collection must be of “pre-eminent quality and significance” and meet standards of collections management and public service. With respect to quality, “[a] Designated collection must be outstanding in terms of its evidential and/or informational, aesthetic, scientific, historical, cultural, literary or economic importance. It must demonstrate richness and variety.” The definition of significance reads, in part: “[a] Designated collection must also be of outstanding significance for contemporary national life, and/or culture, for the study of history, humanities, learning, economics, science or technology. The collection must be shown to be central to the study, understanding and appreciation of a particular subject area in an international context.”

Source: Re:Source (2003a).

- The “encyclopedic” collections, which are fundamentally *universal* in their mission. These include the earliest and largest institutions: the British Museum, British Library and Natural History Museum (both initially part of the British Museum), and the Royal Botanical Gardens, for which both collecting and research activities have always been global in scope.

- Museums devoted to subjects which, while not necessarily global in scope, extend beyond national boundaries. These belong to an international peer group of institutions — for instance, art museums, museums of decorative art, libraries and archives, science museums, and museums of military history or architecture. An example of this type of museum is the Victoria and Albert.

- Institutions created in the context of the British Empire with strong historical links to countries of the Commonwealth; for example, the Imperial War Museum (National Museum Directors' Conference 2002, 6).

US national museums

What constitutes a national museum or national collection is somewhat arbitrary and complicated in the United States. The US government directly supports a number of museums, libraries, archives, and arts and culture organizations — including the Smithsonian, Library of Congress, National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), National Gallery of Art (NGA), Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, and US Holocaust Memorial Museum — as well as other agencies that hold collections. The combined bureaus of the US Department of the Interior (DOI), in particular the National Park Service (NPS), hold natural and cultural history collections consisting of over 144 million items in trust for the US public. The US Department of Agriculture (USDA) also has very significant holdings. All these institutions and their collections are considered “national” in the sense that they are federally supported. However, they do not, as in many other countries, fall under a single federal department or ministry that establishes policy, sets standards, provides funding, and oversees performance.⁴ Instead, the federal collecting units are either

⁴ The UNESCO website has links to ministries of culture in 194 countries.

independent trust instrumentalities, or fall under a federal department or entity with a broader mission and functions.

Alongside the government-supported institutions, there are very active private nonprofit museum, library, and archival sectors in the United States. (There are also a small number of for-profit organizations that operate as museums.) A number of these nonprofit collecting units consider themselves to be — and are seen by the public as — national institutions, because their missions, collections, and audiences are national or international in scope. Examples are the Metropolitan Museum of Art, American Museum of Natural History, and The Henry Ford.⁵ Some that include “national” in their name are the National Museum of Women in the Arts, National D-Day Museum, and Japanese American National Museum. These museums receive no direct federal funding, but like most US museums, they are eligible for grants from four independent federal government agencies — National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), and National Science Foundation (NSF). In addition, insofar as they are funded through contributions that are tax-deductible, the nation is investing in these museums by forgoing tax revenue.

Some state-funded (including state university) museums hold “federally associated” collections and collections that extend beyond regional interest. For example, the University of Nebraska State Museum’s website states that its scarab collections “are the fourth largest in the world. Databases built from these collections are a unique research resource for the University, state, nation, and world (University of Nebraska State Museum website, <http://www.museum.unl.edu/mission>).”⁶

⁵ NMNH’s collections total about 126 million objects/specimens and lots compared with the American Museum of Natural History’s permanent collections of more than 30 million specimens and cultural artifacts. The collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, with over 2 million works of art, far exceed the combined holdings of the Smithsonian’s art museums (C-HNDM, FSG, HMSG, NPG, SAAM, and NMAfA), which total about 313,000 works of art.

⁶ In 1999, NMNH transferred its collection of scarab beetles to the University of Nebraska State Museum at Lincoln for 10 years as part of its Offsite Enhancement Program.

In the absence of an overarching federal arts or culture department, US federal collecting units are subject to a range of federal laws and regulations governing collections — addressing, for example, collections taken from federal lands, cultural patrimony (the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, NAGPRA), and program performance and accountability (the Government Performance and Results Act, GPRA) — as well as their own agency collections policies. Offices of the inspector general may audit an agency to determine whether it is in control of its artwork and artifacts. As a trust instrumentality that receives approximately 70 percent of its funding from the federal government, the Smithsonian complies with all federal collections laws and regulations.

As noted in the Introduction, public and private collecting units in the United States also follow the guidance on ethical and operational standards issued by national and international professional associations, as well as practitioner groups such as the Interagency Federal Collections Alliance and Natural Science Collections Alliance, both of which serve as mechanisms for sharing information and best practices on collections. There are also a number of shared databases, for example, the National Biological Information Infrastructure (NBII). All these organizations promote sound collections management and ethical behavior, in part by emphasizing collecting units' public trust responsibility to steward collections wisely.

the meaning of “national” at the Smithsonian

The OP&A study team reviewed central Smithsonian and unit-level collections policies and guidance to determine what they state about the distinct role of the Smithsonian and its collecting units, given their status as predominately federally funded national organizations.

French denationalization

As part of a move toward decentralizing control of its cultural sites, the French government is currently debating a report that calls for the Ministry of Culture to transfer ownership of many of the national monuments in its possession to regional authorities. The report, commissioned by Minister of Culture Jean-Jacques Aillagon, uses two criteria to determine state holdings that cannot be transferred to the regions: symbolic importance and conservation status. Of 298 sites reviewed, the report concluded that 136 should remain state property, and 162 should be handed over to regional governments. Of those, 78 were deemed “desirable” transfers, and 84 as “possible” transfers. As part of the denationalization, the central government will provide extra funding for the maintenance of each monument and will stipulate good practice for upkeep.

Because of the clear national symbolic value of battlefields and military cemeteries, these sites were judged to be inalienable. By contrast, the homes of great writers and artists were generally considered to have local symbolic value, and in most cases will be devolved to regional government. Sites of European significance that will remain under the national government’s control include archaeological sites such as La Gravette, a Neolithic site that dates from 30,000-20,000 BC. Former royal residences, such as Versailles and the Palais Royale, as well as the 87 cathedrals owned by the Ministry of Culture (including Notre Dame, Chartres, and Rheims), will remain state property because of their national symbolic significance.

Source: Bensard (n.d.).

As described in Appendix A on the history of Smithsonian collections, Smithson did not stipulate in his bequest how his designated goals — the “increase and diffusion of knowledge among men” — were to be achieved. The 1846 legislation establishing the Smithsonian did not elaborate on the use of the bequest, and the Smithsonian’s focus changed, as noted, according to the different interests of the early Secretaries. The first Secretary, Joseph Henry, tried to divest of the national collections

(consisting of collections donated to or collected by the US government, and transferred to the Smithsonian in the enabling legislation), and favored a scholarly focus for the Institution that would embrace only those collections used for research. While not against a national museum *in principle*, he did not want the Smithsonian to serve this function, and resisted accepting materials collected on government-sponsored science expeditions because they would require congressional funding to maintain, thus subjecting the Institution to congressional oversight.

The second Secretary, Spencer Fullerton Baird, was more collections-minded and envisioned a national collection that included examples of all the natural resources of the United States. His assistant, George Brown Goode, is credited with re-interpreting the role of the national collections. Having visited the major European museums, Goode pressed for a more “democratic” approach whereby the US National Museum (USNM), which opened to the public in 1881 in what is now the Arts and Industries Building (A&I), would “teach and uplift the citizens of a democracy, not merely amuse or entertain (SIA website, <http://www.si.edu/archives/ihd/arts/usnm.htm>). His comprehensive classification system was intended to convey the place of each object in a great world order.

Notwithstanding early philosophies with respect to national collections, Smithsonian collections policies have not explicitly articulated how, if at all, Smithsonian collections should differ from those of other American collecting units — that is, what should be unique or distinctive about Smithsonian collections. Most recently, the Smithsonian’s FY2004 appropriations bill authorizes expenses for the “development, preservation, and documentation of the National Collections” but does not elaborate on what responsibility, if any, the designation “national” implies.

advisory group viewpoints

From time to time the Smithsonian has assembled advisory groups to comment on and recommend future directions. The Committee on Future Policies for the Institution, convened by the Regents in 1946, spoke about three aspects of the Smithsonian: the National Museum, the National Zoo, and the art museums. The committee saw USNM's proper role as being a reference collection analogous to the Library of Congress, with display as a secondary function. It recommended a gallery of modern art to complement the classic art of the National Gallery. The committee only peripherally referenced the meaning of "national" in its assessment of NZP; the Zoo's role was seen primarily as recreational and, to some extent, instructional. The committee suggested that to develop NZP into a truly "national . . . scientific institution would require far greater funds than it now has (Smithsonian Institution 1947)."

The Commission on the Future of the Smithsonian Institution, established by the Board of Regents in 1993 to examine the Smithsonian's mandate and roles, provided its thoughts on the meaning of the Smithsonian's national status. The commission, composed of a group of prominent citizens, wrote in its report that as "*the nation's* cultural institution" the Smithsonian was distinct from the thousands of other public and private museums (Commission on the Future of the Smithsonian Institution 1995). The commission asserted that the Institution must "reflect our aspirations as a nation and even help shape and define a common interest (*ibid.*, 2)." In furthering that role, Smithsonian collections "should be inclusive, reflecting the changing diversity of the population (*ibid.*, 8)." Because of the Smithsonian's vast collections — among the best anywhere in many fields — the commission concluded that the Institution "has transcended its role as a national center to become a cultural and scientific institution for the world . . . When cultural issues arise internationally, other countries engage the Smithsonian as the representative of the United States (*ibid.*, 3)."

For the commission, being national was interpreted primarily as an educational role: “The Smithsonian is unique among our cultural organizations because it belongs to the nation itself. Its essential purpose remains that of educating Americans for their roles as citizens of our country and people of our planet (*ibid.*, iv).” Further, the commission advised the Institution to “reach beyond Washington, DC and make its presence felt throughout the country if it is to fulfill its role as a *national* institution (*ibid.*, 17).” These views were in line with an acknowledged shift, over the course of a generation, in how museums view their central purpose — from being inwardly focused on their collections and research to being outwardly focused on providing services to their audiences.⁷

Several reports by external groups have likewise suggested that the sheer size and scope of Smithsonian collections, as well as the Institution’s national status, require that the Smithsonian be more proactive in shaping how America’s cultural heritage is recorded and preserved. For example, the report of the Conference on a Common Agenda for History Museums, held at the Smithsonian in 1987, recommended that the Smithsonian seek funding to convene a national task force to explore a common database of US history museum holdings (Taylor 1987). The Smithsonian Institution Council that met in 1996 recommended that the Institution “assume a leadership role among US history museums in building consensus regarding the future acquisition of objects and collections that is necessary to reflect the nation’s history, heritage, and diversity (Smithsonian Institution Council 1997).” The SIC again addressed the subject of Smithsonian collections at its fall 2003 meeting, reiterating that as the national museum, the Smithsonian has a responsibility to join the community of US museums and explore integrative means of collecting and exhibiting. Despite such recommendations, the Smithsonian has not undertaken a national coordinating role among museums. One interviewee sounded a cautionary note with respect to the Smithsonian assuming such a role, noting that the museum community is sensitive to the prospect of “big brother” or the “thousand-pound gorilla” retaining control in Washington. While there have been times when the US

⁷ For further discussion of this topic, see Smithsonian Institution, Office of Policy and Analysis (2002).

government has led national coordinating efforts in the cultural field, today this would have to be done collaboratively and carefully.⁸

internal viewpoints

The OP&A study team queried a number of senior Smithsonian staff members about how they defined “national collections.” Generally, managers saw national collections as embodying a responsibility to serve the public interest, but they differed on the fine points of who comprises the public and what is in the best interest of that public. Some equated national status with the provision of federal funds: “[The Smithsonian] is federally financed and secured. . . . What makes us national is our charter as supported by Congress and our mission.” One person observed that the Smithsonian is national

. . . because of public perceptions and expectations. The Smithsonian is national because of its history. From the very beginning, the Institution strategically and systematically established its role of bringing American science to the world and evidence of the world to America.⁹ Other museums have had a relationship with the Smithsonian for 50, 75, 100 years. The Smithsonian thinks and acts nationally due to its international role and its size and scope. It is inescapable.

Several broad themes relating to the national character of the Institution’s collections emerged from the interviews. Interviewees variously believed that the primary role of the national collections is (1) to represent the face of America; (2) to present the finest examples of particular types of artifacts to the nation; and/or (3) to serve as a primary source of information for the world. A subtheme was that with public

⁸ For example, from 1935 to 1941, the Federal Art Project (FAP), part of the Works Project Administration (WPA) of President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal, sponsored the Index of American Design, where thousands of artists from around the country documented America’s decorative arts.

⁹ The International Exchange Service, established by Joseph Henry in 1849 for the exchange of publications in the biological and physical sciences, ethnology, archaeology, and paleontology, was a fundamental Smithsonian enterprise for more than a century (SIA website, <http://www.si.edu/archives/ihd/papers01.htm>).

funding comes the obligation to make national collections available to the taxpayer. As one person observed, collections and research tools donated to the Smithsonian “are seen as a national asset, not just a curatorial by-your-leave.” Another described the dilemma inherent in that responsibility. People making a pilgrimage to the Smithsonian expect to find certain things. Yet “we need to get fundamental objects out into the country. Are there other ways to be national besides through the immediate object, such as via the Web? Our notion is that the real things have a resonance, but we also need to reach out.”

The first of those broad themes — representing the face of America — is found predominantly in cultural history and some art museums, whose national collections are to be representative of all Americans and to show the nation at all socioeconomic levels. In discussing this theme, one interviewee described national collections as

. . . the one great record of what people cared about and considered important; what was significant. . . . It is a stable lasting record of what we’re all about. It shifts and changes. The dynamic in the way it was brought in gives it significance . . . [The collection] represents a democracy, not a monarchy — it tells us most about who we are.

Another person conjectured, “why here and not in Iowa? It goes back to the experts — having highly talented people who know the material culture in their area of expertise and what impact it has on society. [They recognize] what is iconic or transcendent, that is, what has a broader value.”

Another interviewee talked about the role of collections in defining national identity and using collections and programs to demonstrate American values such as progress, opportunity, justice, and security. In this role, the symbolic value of collections outweighs their aesthetic value, and more diffusion of collections through public programs is desirable to reach a broader constituency and touch more people.

The second role — to present the finest — is prevalent in art and other more specialized museums, which see themselves as holding premier collections on behalf

of the nation. “National” in this sense does not equate just with things American, but may have an international dimension or even an international focus. Under this theme there is greater emphasis on aesthetics, quality, and selectivity, and on collections being “distinctive” and “carefully chosen.” One interviewee, for example, referred to the National Gallery of Art’s collections as “masterworks — the national canon of blue chip masters.”

The third broad theme — to serve as a primary source of information for the world — is found most prevalently, but not exclusively, in the natural history area: providing national collections to a global audience, in particular for research. For example, an interviewee described what distinguishes NMNH from other natural history museums and makes its collections a critical resource to scientists worldwide: “[NMNH is] the national repository of type specimens. [It has] 250,000 type specimens. There are 1.4 million species classified worldwide. That means just about every fifth specimen is housed here at NMNH. They are priceless.”¹⁰ In another example, one unit was described as an “international resource for holdings in special areas, such as the Dibner [Library of the History of Science and Technology] and the collection of 19th and 20th century trade catalogs, which is the largest in the world.” Under the third theme, the value of the information contained in the object outweighs its aesthetic or symbolic value.

A major subtheme of this third internal definition of national collections is the Smithsonian’s role in providing leadership and infrastructure in the wider natural history research/reference community. In particular, a matter of growing concern to the museum world in recent years is the question of the Smithsonian’s responsibility for orphaned collections of national significance. Faced with declining state support and serious budget shortfalls, a number of state universities have closed academic departments and museum divisions. Particularly affected are a number of natural history collections, whose current fate is uncertain. For example, in 2003, among those affected by budget shortfalls that resulted in downsizing of staff and

¹⁰ Type specimens are the first specimen used to describe a species; as the original reference, they are crucial to classification.

elimination of collections programs are the University of Nebraska State Museum, Herbarium of the University of Iowa, Virginia Museum of Natural History, and Scripps Institution of Oceanography at the University of California, San Diego (Natural Science Collections Alliance 2003). Some interviewees argued that the Smithsonian, as a national organization, has an obligation to rescue these collections if no other solution is forthcoming, “because things are disappearing fast.” One Smithsonian interviewee stated that, “even if we can’t fully document something for many years, if it fits the collections we would take it because the choice is a loss of knowledge to the world. . . . There is a burden on NMNH as a larger organization with more holdings and more expertise to take these collections in.”

preserving America’s natural history collections

AAM issued a position statement in November 2003 on university natural history museums and collections. AAM noted that financial cutbacks, dispersal of collections, and outright closure of America’s natural history museums and university collections have placed at risk “irreplaceable objects” that are held in public trust and “constitute critically important resources for new knowledge.” AAM urged university administrators, trustees, state legislators, and alumni to do everything they could to protect and preserve university museums and their natural and cultural history collections, and strongly urged universities, museums, government agencies, foundations, and others to begin a national dialogue on providing long-term stability for these irreplaceable collections.

Source: American Association of Museums (2003f).

National Collections Working Group's viewpoint

As part of its exploration of national collections and the Smithsonian's national role, the OP&A study team conducted a discussion with representatives from several Smithsonian collecting units, as well as from outside museums. Among the topics on the agenda was the definition of a "national collection," whether there should be a collecting plan for the nation, who should own or hold national collections, and what the Smithsonian's national collecting role should be.

While some participants maintained that national status is tied to federal funding, the majority thought that the role of collecting **for the nation** defined a national museum, whether or not it is federally funded. For example, the National Museum of Women in the Arts reflects the interests of all women in the country, and The Henry Ford's focus is on the national dimensions of technology and inventiveness. As one person summed up, "national is about the institution and who we're doing it for."

The characterization of national collections put forth by the working group tended to align most closely with the first of the three themes mentioned above. Participants spoke of a national museum's responsibility to be inclusive and representative of "the national face of America." At the same time, they acknowledged that no single institution can have a comprehensive collection, and that all must borrow from other institutions in order to represent a subject area as broadly as possible.

This point raised the question of the extent to which being part of a national collection validates a social group's place in the evolution of the country: "If you don't have my group in your museum, are you saying something about the experience and its significance to the nation?" One participant raised the related issue of how the diversity of museum staff affects the content of national collections:

“Trust is essential to any kind of collecting . . . [and is compromised] if people don’t see people who basically look something like them or can speak their language.” A further related issue was **who** is involved in deciding what reflects the country and what themes or topics should be addressed. Participants gave examples of organizations, such as CFCH and NMAI, which routinely engage communities at the starting point. However, it was noted that these organizations tend to be tied to relatively small, well-defined communities, whereas other museums have “the nation” as their community. In such cases, mechanisms like the state committees of the National Museum of Women in the Arts’ and the regional nodes of AAA were offered as models for gaining broader perspectives on collecting. Still, as one person asked, “how do you make sure that everybody is at the table for those discussions?”

Implicit in the working group’s responses was adherence to the norm of individual planning and ownership by collecting units. The concept of a national collecting plan that defines what material evidence should be preserved on behalf of the nation elicited little attention, as did shared collecting. Frustration was voiced that, unlike other countries that have ministries of culture whose official job is to support the preservation of nationally significant material culture in a systematic way, here there is no formal political mandate to clarify the Smithsonian’s role and provide an appropriate resource structure. On the other hand, as one person noted, “we are not making a case to the public, to Congress, that collections have some inherent, intrinsic value to who this nation is, what we are going to become, who we are as individuals, and who we are as a nation.”

CONCLUSIONS

A national collecting unit’s core national purpose — why it exists to serve the nation — is the starting point for how it conducts its business. During the research, three dominant themes for national collections surfaced. Such collections were variously considered to be “for the nation” (with an emphasis on the objects’ aesthetic and/or

rarity value); “inclusive and representative” (with an emphasis on the objects’ symbolic value); and “universal and serving a global audience” (with an emphasis on the size and informational value of the collections). These three distinct collecting roles correspond respectively to the three types of national museums found in the typologies of Wilson and the NMDC: subject specialist, national identity, and encyclopedic.

The OP&A study team suggests that many of the Smithsonian’s collecting units tend to align with one of the three national museum types — although they may have lesser elements of the other two, and some come close to being hybrids. (For example, NASM has a subject specialist collection — “the largest and most complete collection in aeronautics” — but it might also be considered a national identity museum, because it acquires its artifacts on the basis of the stories they tell about the impact of air and space travel on American society.) Notwithstanding the possibility of cross-types, the study team believes that each collecting unit predominantly represents one of the three types of national collecting units (Table 3).

As described in Chapter 3, there are four principal uses of collections: display and exhibition; research and reference; education and interaction; and symbolism. Most Smithsonian units use collections in all these ways. However, a particular use predominates in each of the national museum types because it *best* supports the related national purpose (Table 4).¹¹

¹¹ The “consumable” category is included here for the sake of completeness, although no Smithsonian units are predominantly of the consumable type, with the exception of CFCH’s annual Folklife Festival.

Table 3. Smithsonian Collecting Units Classified by Type

Encyclopedic	National identity	Subject specialist
Smithsonian Institution	AM/CAAHC	AAA
NMNH	NMAH	C-HNDM
NZP	NMAI	FSG
SIL	NPG	HMSG
	SAAM	NASM
		NMAfA
		NPM
		SIA

Source: Office of Policy and Analysis study team analysis.

Table 4. Collecting Unit Type and Predominant Use of Collections

National collecting unit type	Primary collection value	Predominant use
<i>Encyclopedic</i>	Size and information	Research and reference
<i>National identity</i>	Representativeness	Symbolism
<i>Subject specialist</i>	Aesthetic quality and rarity	Display and exhibition
<i>Consumable</i>	Temporary, instructive	Education and interaction

Source: Office of Policy and Analysis study team.

starting points for collections management

Identifying and understanding a collecting unit's core national purpose are important starting points for collections management. They can help guide management in the tasks of planning, prioritizing, allocating resources, and making decisions on essential collections-related activities. For example, awareness of the implications of a core national purpose for the use of collections can help units assess the appropriateness of current holdings and guide future collecting.

encyclopedic collecting units

Most natural history collections — including those at NMNH — are primarily for research; their primary users are curators and scientists, many of whom at the Smithsonian are engaged in taxonomic and systematics work. This argues for collections that contain significant redundancy. As one staff person pointed out: “Judicious culling should be encouraged, but taxonomic and geographic redundancy is an important collections strength.”

national identity collecting units

In this type of national collecting unit, the predominant use for collections is symbolism. As the SIC observed in its 1997 report, “collections in their totality are constructs that make potent political and cultural statements . . . collections should ideally be inclusive enough to allow all Americans to tell their own stories with Smithsonian objects (Smithsonian Institution Council 1997, 7).” For national identity collecting units, aesthetic quality is not the most important criterion for acquisition. Objects are sought that have the most contextual information and that

can best enrich the national tableaux. As one interviewee noted, the objective is not the definitive collection, but one that is “representative and resonant.” It is not necessary to hold typological collections of every type of a particular object made, but rather to select examples of objects that illustrate a story about US society and culture — for example, there is no need to collect a selection of 1970s compact automobiles to symbolize the energy crisis of that decade; a single Honda can illustrate the story.

subject specialist collecting units

For this type of national collecting unit, the aim is to acquire examples of the finest materials in a specialized subject area, and to share them with the nation through display and scholarly research. These purposes argue against holding collections that are not directly related to the specialist subject matter, are redundant, or are of inferior quality. In its 1997 report, the SIC recognized that “specialized museums promote quality scholarship and deeper public understanding (Smithsonian Institution Council 1997, 6).” As the “nation’s collection,” the Council wrote, “[acquisitions] should be guided by a search for quality . . . the quest is not for representativeness, but for ‘impactness’ (ibid.).”

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This framework is not intended to constrain Smithsonian collecting units but to guide collecting units in developing collecting plans, managing collections, understanding audiences, and prioritizing uses. While some Smithsonian collecting units appear to have a thorough understanding of their core national purpose and manage their collections accordingly, the evidence suggests that others follow a less clear path, whether because they are uncertain as to their primary role or because they are under pressure by stakeholders to move in multiple directions.

The breadth and depth of Smithsonian collections in their entirety make the Institution one of the great encyclopedic national collecting units in the world. The notion of the Institution as a **system** is very important. As a system, the Smithsonian is the foremost holder of the nation's patrimony and offers the nation a multifaceted collecting presence. As part of the system, the individual collecting units share in the benefits of the Smithsonian's venerable reputation, including heightened stature and attractiveness to donors. However, each collecting unit still needs to define its individual core national purpose. The diversity of the individual collecting units within the system needs to be recognized, and those collecting units must understand and articulate their own core national purpose within the larger system.

differing perceptions of encyclopedic museums

A November 27, 2003 article in *The Guardian* on a recent conference at the British Museum reported that the directors of several great encyclopedic museums each defined the purpose of those institutions differently. According to its director, Philippe de Montebello, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York represents the whole world. Mikhail Piotrovsky, director of the Hermitage in St. Petersburg, acknowledged the ideological purposes the museum served as a tool of mass education and internationalism by the Soviets. Today, however, by forging partnerships with entrepreneurs like the Guggenheim, the Hermitage is “a thrusting player in the market economy.” According to the director of the National Gallery Berlin, the gallery is for aesthetic education and moving oneself toward self-perfection. Is the Louvre purposeless? Director Henri Loyrette lamented that “most of our displays mean nothing to people.” And Neil MacGregor, director of the British Museum, described museums as political acts — they present citizens with a range of evidence about the world and allow them to hold up a mirror to their own beliefs: they “show us how strange we are” and thus promote tolerance.

Source: Higgins (2003).

ongoing uncertainty

The OP&A study team's quest for the meaning and implications of holding national collections yielded more uncertainty than answers. The definitions of national museums propounded by theorists and Smithsonian staff are an important starting point for linking the concept of a national museum to collections within those museums. However, with respect to decision making and setting managerial priorities, they are too anecdotal and discursively descriptive. One useful approach might be to rephrase the question — can we say that any Smithsonian collections are “not” national? Some Smithsonian collecting units have moved beyond the starting point to elaborate more practical guidance with respect to the national purpose of their collections. For others, the gap between the concepts of national museums and national collections has not been closed and needs to be addressed.