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BOARD OF TRUSTEES

Paper to: Science Museum Advisory Committee

From: Tim Boon, Chief Curator

Science Museum Collecting Policy Statement

Executive Summary

This is a brief statement of why and how the Science Museum adds new items to its object and archive collections; our MLA-Accreditation Acquisition and Disposal Policy gives full details (including the collections' history, governing legislation, limitations and procedures). The Science Museum's Collecting Board will normally review this statement along with the longer document on a five year cycle, in collaboration with NMSI Collections Group and in consultation with the Museum's Advisory Committee. The NMSI Board of Trustees and MLA Council will be notified of any significant changes to policy or procedure.

Collecting is a core responsibility of subject curators, is supervised by the Collecting Board, and involves staff from Corporate & Collections Information and Conservation & Collections Care in its practical implementation.

Recommendation

Advisory Committee members are asked to note for information
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Policy

The Science Museum's mission is to make sense of the science that shapes our lives. Collecting is the activity that embodies this mission in our continuing core asset, the collections. The Science Museum already holds the national collections in science, medicine, technology and engineering. All new collecting is conducted with reference to these often definitive holdings. Curators and the Archivist propose new items – both 'icons' and supporting or more everyday items – for the collections because:

- New acquisitions represent key new scientific work or significant new products;
- Enhanced understanding of history or current practice persuades us that we need to tell new types of stories that the existing collections are unable to support.
- Our audiences look to us to represent new narratives (for example, we may wish better to represent non-western science and technology).

The Museum collects in four main subject areas: Medicine; Science; Information and Communications Technologies; and Engineering Technologies. We place a particular stress on items that reveal the significance of design and enterprise in science and technology. Collecting is governed by narratives (rather than gap-filling), and its broad direction is given by key themes that are periodically reviewed (see appendix 1). The Museum also collects contemporary art in relation to all of these fields.

We collect actively and reactively. We are moving to an active mode of collecting, which is achieved through: acquisition projects; collecting for major exhibition projects; collecting with Antenna (our contemporary exhibition strand); collecting by agent; collecting and communicating with publics; and commissioning. Reactive collecting, by contrast, takes selective advantage of the hundreds of unsolicited offers we receive each year.

We collect both for use within the planned projects of our Masterplan and for posterity. Accordingly, in the period covered by this edition of the policy, we will be especially concerned to broaden the collections' coverage of: the sciences, their application and social impacts (towards *Making of Modern Science*); telecommunications and electronics technologies (towards *Making of Modern Communications*); climate change (towards relevant gallery interventions); cosmology (towards *Sky Space*); and medicine (towards new medical galleries). Where we collect without specifying use, the Collecting Board weighs potential future use; collecting for posterity guarantees the collections' continuing national and international significance and value.

Appendix: Outline Key Themes

Curatorial subject areas and collecting rationale

Curatorial expertise falls into four main subject areas: Science, Medicine, Information & Communication Technologies, and Engineering. We place a particular stress on narratives about design and enterprise. Although the subject areas differ, curators in each subject area collect both to support the development of existing and new narratives and to safeguard our technological, scientific and medical heritage for the future.

In broad terms, we collect objects and related material that allow us to explore the creation and construction of scientific, medical and technological knowledge; their varied infrastructures and applications; and their impacts on and interactions with our world. The following brief statement of our key themes outlines the guidance that curators of all grades use to help select new acquisitions, especially those that are reactive to unsolicited offers:

Science: We collect objects that illustrate how scientific knowledge is created, how science is applied in other fields, and the impact of science on modern global society. Innovation and design – ranging from the development of scientific instruments, through industrial R&D to innovative scientific solutions to environmental problems – are key aspects of our collecting.

Medicine: We collect objects illustrating changing understandings of health and disease, and innovations in science and technology with the potential to transform our experience of them. We also seek out objects that inform reflection about the practices of modern medicine, including its tools and its settings, and those that illuminate how people make sense of suffering.

Information and Communication Technologies: We collect objects that reflect the development of ICTs (including all electronic technologies); the manner of their inception; their application and contexts; and the social meanings attached to them by users.

Engineering: We collect the material culture of human constructive activity, exploring: the development of engineering as a process – from designing and testing to manufacturing, embodying both traditional techniques as well as new insights; the expression and application of creativity in engineering and technology over time, place and space including highly refined (science-based) engineering and design as well as craft-based activities; the impact of engineering and technology on the human and physical environment and its ability to respond to global challenges.

Appendix 2: Governing Principles

The following is a list of legislation, guidelines and standards which the NMSI must adhere to when dispensing its core functions and activities, and which govern or influence the policy set down in this document. Further, specific information about the scope and relevance of this legislation may be found on-line:

- National Heritage Act (1983)
- Museum's Association Code of Ethics (2007)
- MLA Accreditation Standard
- Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property (UNESCO, 1970)
- Dealing in Cultural Objects (Offences) Act 2003
- Treasure Act 1996
- Guidance for the Care of Human Remains in Museums (DCMS, 2005)
- Spoliation of Works of Art during the Holocaust and World War II period: Statement of Principles and Proposed Actions (NMDC, 1998)
- Code of Practice on Archives for Museums and Galleries in the United Kingdom (3rd ed., 2002)
- Health & Safety at Work Act (1974)
- Control of Asbestos at Work Regulations (2006)
- Control of Substances Hazardous to Health Regulations (2002)