

## The Burrell Collection Lending and Borrowing (Scotland) Bill

### Statement by Neil MacGregor, Director of the British Museum

1. I have been invited to comment on the application to vary the terms of the Will of Sir William Burrell in order to allow objects from the Burrell Collection to be lent for exhibition outside the United Kingdom. I am sorry that I was unable to attend the committee's earlier meeting.
2. I note that in the proceedings of the committee of 9<sup>th</sup> September 2013, column 33, the Convener asserts that I "said on the record in the past that [I] was against changing the will" I fear the Convener is mistaken. In previous discussions of the topic, in 1997, I explicitly state that my position was one of neutrality. That is clearly recorded in the formal precognition dated 15<sup>th</sup> August 1997 and the report of proceedings at the public enquiry page 1272 section A dated 14<sup>th</sup> October 1997. My position was accurately and unequivocally reported in the Glasgow Herald of 15<sup>th</sup> October 1997.
3. I have no idea why Tom Dalyell in his obituary of Colin Donald wrongly suggested that I was opposed to a change in the Will – I was not; nor do I know why David Lister (Independent, 13<sup>th</sup> October), writing before I had spoken to the commission on 15<sup>th</sup> October, mistakenly assumed that I would argue that the wishes of benefactors should always be paramount.
4. As I pointed out in the evidence that I gave in 1997, the legislation governing the National Gallery in London recognises the need to respect donors' wishes, but imposes a time limit (50 years) on the power of the dead to constrain the freedom of the living. The similar 1985 legislation governing the Scottish National Collections allows donors' considerations to be set aside after 25 years. That seems to me an entirely reasonable position: the living are more likely than the dead to be able to take changing circumstances into account. We cannot know how the dead might have changed their mind.
5. It was suggested by the Convener on 9<sup>th</sup> September (column 33) that as the British Museum might be involved in helping organise the logistics of a possible loan, and as works from the Burrell Collection might be shown at the British Museum, I might find myself in a position of conflict of interest. I think I can assure the Convener that this is not so. The British Museum would not profit financially from either aspect of such co-operation with our Glasgow colleagues. This is a kind of partnership which the British Museum has with a number of institutions across the U.K., which has involved museums across Scotland and from which it derives no financial benefit. If I do have an interest it is a personal one. I grew up close to the site of the Burrell Collection and have spent many hours in it. I would want it to be better known, even better shown, and in every way enabled to flourish. It is, I believe, an aspect of Scotland's engagement with the wider world which deserves to be much better known.

6. Among the changes which have unquestionably occurred since the death of Sir William Burrell is the greatly increased role of art collections in the economic and civic life of cities, and indeed nations. Across the world, governments have invested in and promoted their great collections, improving and extending buildings, and publicising the works in their care. Glasgow has been a leader in this field, widely admired and widely imitated. But a glance across Europe (to look no further) will show how many competitors in this area Scotland now has and how energetically and successfully those competitors are working to attract visitors and income.
7. One of the most effective – and widely practised – ways of promoting any knowledge of a city’s art collections is by lending them abroad. One of the great draws to any city is temporary exhibitions; and to borrow great things to make attractive exhibitions, you need to be able to lend them.
8. I therefore endorse unreservedly the argument that a power to lend objects from the Burrell Collection abroad would be of real public benefit, likely to attract both visitors and works of art to Glasgow. This was not the case when Sir William Burrell made his Will, or indeed when he died.
9. It is sometimes argued that a change to a donor’s conditions, even after many decades, will discourage future benefactors. I believe rather that benefactors would hope future generations would make whatever adjustments were reasonably necessary to maximise the public benefit which they sought to confer. There is no evidence that I know of to suggest that the legislation, currently allowing national collections in Scotland and England to change conditions after some decades, has in any way discouraged benefactors.
10. The question of the risk of damage to objects lent is a very important one, and has been much discussed. I attach an appendix to this statement detailing the procedures followed by the British Museum to minimise such risk. Clearly there are some objects which are not fit to travel. But the best argument on this point seems to me to be the practice of all the world’s great museums. They are all committed to the safety of their collections. All lend valuable and fragile objects, because they believe there is an overall public benefit in doing so. To cite but one example: the works of Leonardo da Vinci are among the most precious and vulnerable objects in all European art. The National Gallery in London in 2011 invited museums abroad to lend their Leonardos for a temporary exhibition – and they did. And in return, the National Gallery lent the supremely fragile Leonardo Cartoon to the Louvre, confident that it could responsibly move it, exhibit it there, and then bring it safely home.
11. The distinction between lending in the U.K. and lending abroad was perhaps a material one when overseas loans travelled by sea – with the hazards and complexities of loading and unloading at docks. It makes no sense today, when loans travel by road and air, in conditions unimaginable forty years ago (see Appendix). This is one of the most

material changes of circumstance since Sir William Burrell's death. During Sir William Burrell's life he was an active lender within the U.K. having lent to 13 institutions by the outbreak of the War and of course, significant loans to the 1901 Great Exhibition at Kelvingrove.

12. Of course there is some risk in any showing of any work to the public. It is the duty of those responsible for collections to strike the reasonable balance between public benefit and the likely danger of damage. In the field of loans, this balance has, thanks to advances in transport and conservation, changed greatly in the last 40 years.
13. I can speak with confidence only of the experience of the British Museum. Between 2003 and 2013, the Trustees of the British Museum have lent around 30,000 objects (many very fragile) to venues within the U.K. and abroad. In those ten years, there have been eight recorded instances of damage – in all cases minor, and repaired by the Museum's conservation team. While deploring and regretting these eight cases of damage, the Trustees believe the balance of public benefit has been overwhelmingly positive. I think that the recipients of those loans, among them museums across Scotland, would agree.

Neil MacGregor  
Director, British Museum  
18 September 2013

## Appendix

### Briefing on Loans – Burrell Collection

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#### **Process of lending – managing the physical risks to objects**

Museums are now lending more of their collections – objects of all types, shapes and sizes – than at any other point in the history, enabling audiences across the world to engage with the past and learn more about the diversity of cultures. The logistics behind transporting fragile objects requires careful planning and risk management, and almost all museums undertake these activities in a similar way, in keeping with modern collections care practice and international standards for collection loans.

#### *Conservation*

Before a loan is agreed, objects are assessed by expert conservation staff to ensure they are stable enough to travel – there are items within most collections that are never lent due to their fragility. Conservators will also undertake any conservation work necessary to prepare the objects for loan, most often a light clean and occasionally some consolidation, will advise on appropriate environmental conditions for the object, and will inform technicians about any weaknesses within the object that must be taken account of when making display mounts and packing for transport. A detailed photographic and written record is made of each object before it travels so that its physical condition can be carefully checked at each stage of its journey.

#### *Packing*

Preparing objects for transportation is almost entirely done by hand by specialist museum technicians who have significant experience and training in object handling and care. Packing for loan must take into account each object's individual requirements; no two objects are alike, not even if they are of the same type, one ancient Greek vase will have repairs in areas where another has none.

Packing materials are selected to best suit the object. Objects on loan travel packed in foam in heavy duty crates, but the appropriate grade or density foam varies dependent on the object: it must be soft enough to cushion the object, but firm enough to give it support. The foam then needs to be cut and shaped around the object, avoiding contact with delicate or protruding areas where such close contact could cause damage, yet sufficiently bedding the object in so that it won't shift during transport. The factors to be considered and the techniques used are often as varied and unique as the objects themselves; necessarily it is a painstaking task. Large and heavy sculptures are often mounted on specially constructed modules for increased safety in both handling and display. While the foam provides a buffer to climate conditions, occasionally certain kinds of objects – for instance items made from ivory – will

require special conservation materials to be included in order to maintain steady environmental conditions whilst in transit. All objects are wrapped in protective inert materials.

### *Transportation*

Loans are escorted at all stages of their journey by staff of the lending institution and it is the role of this “courier” to supervise the loading and unloading, ensure the safe handling of the loan crates at all times, and to unpack, condition check and install/de-install at the venue. Transportation arrangements for loans are handled through specialist art shipping agents, who assist the courier and cargo throughout their journey, ensure that consignments from museums receive special handling at the airport and that couriers are allowed access to cargo sheds to supervise palletisation. These shipping agents also provide the high security, GPS tracked, conditioned and air suspension vehicles for ground transportation. There are qualified, registered, highly dependable fine art shipping agents operating in all parts of the world, able to provide the high standard of service required by UK museums.

### *Borrowing venues*

Information about borrowing venues is gathered by a lender through Facilities and Security Reports which must be completed by every borrower; in addition, a borrower will provide detailed floor plans and design drawings of the display and agree these with the lender as part of preparations for the loan. A lending institution will have accumulated detailed knowledge about all aspects of security, display and access at the borrowing venue before the loan travels.

### **Risk of damage or loss**

It is generally recognised – by those who administer the UK Government Indemnity Scheme; by commercial art insurers; by fine art transport agents; and, by lenders/borrowers themselves – that risk for objects on loan from public collections is extremely well managed. Claims against indemnity schemes and commercial insurance policies from UK public institutions are very rare, in large part due to the risk management measures described in the narrative above.

It should also be noted that UK institutions arguably are the most effective in the world at risk management for loans due to the clear benchmark provided by the transportation and display guidelines laid down in the Government Indemnity Scheme. These guidelines help ensure that, regardless of a museum’s lending ambitions, standards of risk management are maintained and not reduced.

Department for Transport Known Consignor regulations introduced in 2006 controlling the shipment of air cargo has required lending museums and fine art shipping agents to manage security arrangements connected with air cargo

much more stringently, thus contributing to the better overall management of risk of terrorist and similar attack.

### **Loans from the British Museum**

During 2012/13 the British Museum had 4,502 objects on loan to venues throughout the UK and the world. The BM is one of the most generous museum lenders worldwide, and operates an active programme of touring exhibitions that is an important income stream, but also provides an opportunity for the Museum to share its collections with a wide international audience. A hallmark of the BM's loans programme over the past ten years has been to deliver higher risk loans to places that have not previously had the opportunity to borrow from significant international collections – venues in places such as China, Kenya, India, Mexico, Korea.

From 2003 to 2013, the BM has successfully lent over 16,300 objects to venues worldwide (and an additional 17,700 within the UK). The Museum adopts the same approach to managing the physical risks to its objects on loan as other UK lending institutions, as described in the narrative above. Despite the significant amounts of material it has sent on loan since 2003, the Museum recorded only seven instances of damage as a result of international loans (a further four instances for UK loans). In four of these cases, damage was along historic, previously repaired breaks; in all cases, the damage was minor and repaired by the Museum's conservation team.

Jill Maggs

16 September 2013

### **Loans of textiles**

The British Museum is currently preparing a loan to the exhibition *Made in Oceania* at the Rautenstrauch Joest Museum in Cologne. The loan includes two pieces of very fragile barkcloth, and a tunic (19 century) with long fringes. Another loan, to *Inca* at Linden-Museum in Stuttgart, consists of two Colonial tapestries, a miniature cloak and cloak pins and a bag all fragile in different ways and very early pieces.

There are a number of different methods for ensuring that textiles travel safely. Textiles such as tunics need to be packed flat – the Museum has lent a the Tunisian wedding dress that was very heavily decorated with metal thread, so needed a padded board inside and a Correx box made to fit so it could not move in the crate. Some textiles are fixed to a backboard for travel and display on loan, e.g. the quipu from Peru.

Large flat textiles can be easier to transport because they can be rolled, such as the recent loan of an Ethiopian altar cloth to Design Without End at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

## **Loans of pastels**

The BM has historically not collected pure pastels and does not have any of the classic pastel artists such as Liotard or Perroneau in the collection. There are some small framed pastels in the BM such as the Gainsborough which are kept in their frames. For 19th and 20th century pastels the fixatives and the medium itself differ from historic examples so they adhere better to the paper so lending is not an issue.

Within the last 10 years the BM has lent 12 works, including ones by Pissaro, Delacroix and Gainsborough, which to a greater or lesser extent are drawn in a pastel medium. Five of them have been lent internationally to venues in Karlsruhe, New York, San Francisco, Tokyo, Nagoya, Paris and Montpellier.