



Visitor attitudes toward deaccessioning in Italian public museums: An econometric analysis



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ABSTRACT

Deaccessioning is a largely controversial practice involving the sale or disposal of objects from a museum's collection. Although it has received increasing attention in the past few decades as a solution to museums' financial concerns, its implications on museum management have rarely been researched in academia. Previous research suggests that visitors' responses may vary depending on factors like the proposed use of income generated by deaccessioning operations and the public's perception of the museum collection as a public good. We examine the validity of these claims by collecting visitors' responses from two Italian sites of art-historical interest and analyse visitors' attitude to deaccessioning in Italian public museums in general. We hypothesise that the public cultural identity of the collection and the purpose of the income generated by deaccessioning strongly affect visitors' attitudes toward this practice. Using structural equation modelling (SEM), we estimate several important determinants of visitors' responses. We also show that attitudes toward deaccessioning do not influence respondents' decision to visit a museum. Implications for museum governance and for the literature on deaccessioning in cultural economics are discussed.

1. Introduction

Museums are ubiquitous in the social and cultural landscape of Western societies. They are flexible and diverse institutions, varying greatly in ownership patterns, financial models, size, and reputation. A cultural, historical, and geographical divide exists between museums based on the Anglo-Saxon model and those based on the Napoleonic tradition (Mossetto & Vecco, 2001). Museums in the Anglo-Saxon model are visitor-oriented, with a focus on exhibition and visitor engagement, whereas those in the Napoleonic tradition are more collection-oriented, and focus on items' care and restoration. This difference has been fading in the past few decades as visitors' experience became increasingly important for the Napoleonic tradition, as attested by the increase in 'blockbuster' exhibitions. Partly, this is because museal institutions rely on public funding, but collection and museum facilities growth is rarely matched by a proportionate increase in subsidies. This encouraged museum managers to compensate through different means, e.g. higher admission fees, remunerative ancillary activities, and private sponsorship (Johnson, 2003). As a result, museums' survival has become increasingly dependent on the public's satisfaction with their services, and managers have devoted more and more attention to visitors' experience to reduce the likelihood of failure (Crivellaro, 2011; Trione, 2012).

The inefficiencies caused by museum growth are greater in societies where cultural governance is based on the inalienability principle, which prevents cultural goods owned by the state or any of its administrative sub-divisions from being sold in most of the

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civil law countries of continental Europe (Cannon-Brookes, 1996).¹ Continuously accumulating objects without being allowed to discard some of them creates a problem of resource allocation (Chen, 2009; Dolák, 2010; Mairesse, 2010; Vilkuņa, 2010; Weil, 1997): because of this “cumulative” approach, museums can display only a fraction of their holdings at any given time, an inefficiency commonly referred to as the ‘Prado effect’ (Peacock, 1994). It is reasonable to question whether museums can effectively accomplish their mission vis-à-vis the public by collecting objects that cannot be displayed. Deaccessioning, i.e., the removal of objects from a museum’s collection, is one of the most sensitive topics in the professional and scholarly literature on museum management. In some contexts, objects cannot be deaccessioned due to legal agreements, resistance by managers, and national laws on cultural heritage. Nevertheless, economic urges and ethical considerations may cause deaccessioning to be viewed as inevitable. Restrictions on object disposal lead to ‘ossification’ in the museum field (Johnson, 2003) by impeding the reallocation of collections over time. The legal standing of museums further complicates the issue: for private institutions, deaccessioning is more readily allowed, but for public museums this practice is highly problematic, although some guidelines already exist (e.g. ICOM code of ethics for Museums, 2013). Furthermore, the boundary between the public and the private sphere tends to be fuzzy in many cases: public museums are seldom entirely publicly-funded, and hybrid configurations are relatively common (Severini, 2003) and encouraged. In contexts where there is no strong tradition of individual sponsorship or corporate giving, and when private institutions tend to be viewed by the public as market-driven, deaccessioning can look like a capitulation of culture before economic demands (Acidini Luchinat, 1999; Settis, 2003, 2004, 2007). Indeed, museums are by nature opposed to market forces (Grampp, 1989), managers are very risk-averse (Throsby, 2003), and the protection of elitist interests is often paramount (O’Hagan, 1998).

Although academic research on deaccessioning is notably scarce, the adoption of deaccessioning policies by public institutions represents an interesting economic issue. Most previous studies examine this problem from ethical (Fayet, 2010), microeconomic (Di Gaetano and Mazza, 2016; Srakar, 2014), or legal perspectives (Chen, 2009), but few of these take the public into account as a primary stakeholder (e.g., Whiting-Looze, 2010). Moreover, extant literature tends to assume that museum visitors oppose deaccessioning; however, research suggests that such practice does not necessarily harm the public’s interests and may even lead to benefits (Ackers Cirigliana, 2010). For this reason, an empirical analysis of visitors’ attitude towards deaccessioning appears urgent and germane. This is precisely the aim of our study. Contesting the dominant view that deaccessioning practices in public institutions harm public trust, we theorize that visitors’ attitudes depend on context-specific considerations, including the characteristics of objects to be deaccessioned, the conditions of the sale, and the allocation of proceeds. As to our best knowledge no empirical study exists on this topic, we performed a quantitative analysis to provide more generalizable results. Our predictions are tested using a dataset of 310 questionnaires administered to randomly-selected Italian visitors at archaeological and art-historical sites in the city of Rome. Responses are analysed via structural equation modelling (SEM) and regression analysis, with the objective to identify conditions under which deaccessioning can be acceptable in Italian public museums.

Our study is structured as follows. In the next section, we provide a review of relevant literature on deaccessioning and introduce Italian public museums as our chosen empirical setting. We then describe our data and the methodology employed to test our hypotheses. After presenting our results, we conclude with a discussion of our findings and their implications for museum governance and economic research.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Deaccessioning as a “permanent loss”

The practice of deaccessioning may be obscure to non-museum professionals. It is defined as ‘the permanent removal or disposal of an object from the collection of the museum by virtue of its sale, exchange, donation, or transfer by any means to any person’ (McKinney, 2000, cited in Range, 2004). It has received growing attention in museum management literature – as well as public media² – since the ground-breaking work of Montias (1973). The term itself is of relatively recent origin and represents the opposite of ‘accessioning’, which designates the addition of objects to the museum’s register. It is used to refer to sales and disposals, but also to involuntary losses such as thefts, misplacements and destructions (Merryman, Elsen, & Urice, 2007; Vilkuņa, 2010), and other kinds of repurposing (Maranda, 2010); if accessioning indicates the elevation of an item from the mundane to the collection-worthy, however, deaccessioning represents the unceremonious revocation of such status. Far from being an ordinary management operation, the choice to deaccession an item can be understood to suggest that the item is no longer worthy of being displayed, at least in its current context, and should thus move to a different context or be returned to daily life values. Through deaccessioning, it is implied that the object no longer contributes to the museum’s mission and thus undermines its identity (Harris, 2010; Tam, 2012). The word itself consists of a negative prefix applied to a positive action, thereby carrying negative psychological undertones (Vecco & Piazzai, 2015). This is especially true for museums in the Napoleonic as opposed to the Anglo-Saxon tradition (Mossetto & Vecco, 2001), as there tends to be greater emphasis on conservation and restoration. These two perspectives coexist in Europe due to the European Union’s adoption of the subsidiarity principle, which implies that heritage management is best pursued at a sub-national level by individual member-states (Barnett, 2001), but as a result they engender contrasting views towards deaccessioning.

Opponents of this practice appeal to ethical and legal arguments related to the protective role of the State and deaccessioning’s impact on the public accessibility of cultural goods (Acidini Luchinat, 1999; Besterman, 1991). From an ethical perspective,

¹ For example, Italian public museum collections are inalienable in their nature (*Codice dei beni culturali e del paesaggio*, d.lgs 42/2004, artt. 53-59).

² See the debate around the Detroit Institute of Arts in 2013, or the international discussion started on the Financial New York Times on April 4, 2015.

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