



To do or not to do?

Risk management in the context of collection management

Heritage collection managers are guided by the goal to pass on to the next generation heritage which was entrusted to them, with optimal cultural value and accessibility. They are required to make well-argued decisions regarding the distribution of resources so as to optimise the value and accessibility of a collection. This can be done by investing in an increase of value (through research, restoration or acquisition) or by limiting the loss of value (through maintenance, improved storage conditions and security). At the same time, income needs to be generated from the value of the collection for further investments (such an exhibition or its availability for study).

Whether using, preserving or developing the value of a collection, all three processes require accessibility to it. And whether in use or in store, a heritage collection and its value are constantly threatened by different external and internal risks. An example of such occurred on 16 January 2018, when a fire spread through a seventeenth century Dutch colonial building in Jakarta (Indonesia). Today, this building houses the Museum Bahari (Maritime Museum), which, due to the fire, suffered extensive damage to its historical collections. Among the loss was the destruction of models of Dutch East India Company ships, traditional Indonesian vessels, and damage to parts of the building itself¹.

Risk management helps to reduce the loss of a collections' value as much as possible and therefore, it is an essential part of collection management. Over the years, more and more museums, historical buildings, archives and other heritage organisations have made use of some form of risk management. It is part of a decision-making process that tries to make the uncertainties of the future explicit and controllable by listing the consequences and assessing their likelihood and effect.

Why is it important?

Preservation and responsible use of heritage objects and collections involve a continuous fight against threats. Risk assessment



Fire in Schutterijmuseum at Steyl, Limburg, the Netherlands (photo: Heinz Helf)

and risk management take into consideration all the threats to which objects and collections are exposed – both events (such as fire or flooding) and processes (such as fading caused by light or cracks due to dehydration). It is an essential and complex process which enables professionals to set priorities and provide arguments for decisions about adequate and affordable measures to manage and preserve cultural assets. The risk management process helps answer questions such as: *How do you exhibit objects responsibly? What are the priorities of a preservation strategy? What are the adequate climatic conditions? Have appropriate security measures been taken?* Heritage collection managers, curators and conservators face questions such as these on a regular basis.

¹At the time of writing the current article, the exact causes for the fire had not yet been identified.

The added value of carrying out a risk assessment is that it is conducted by a group of people. Everyone's knowledge comes together, creating a shared awareness of the importance of the cultural assets that are managed *together* and a common understanding of risks to its preservation. Joint input delivers shared output, creating wide support for the outcomes and decisions that follow from the risk assessment.



Leakage in an exhibition space

The Risk Management for Collections instrument

To make expertise and information about risk assessment and management easily accessible, the Cultural Heritage Agency of the Netherlands (RCE) recently published *Risk Management for Collections* (2017). This publication, accessible on the RCE's website, provides the knowledge and the methods that are required to analyse and manage risks to collections. It is therefore an instrument which aims to support the work of collection managers, curators and conservators, by equipping these professionals with the tools to make suitable choices, set priorities and implement appropriate measures to reduce loss of value.

The updated English and Dutch publications were produced within the [Shared Cultural Heritage programme](#) (SCH) of the RCE. This instrument was originally created in a different format, by experts Agnes Brokerhof, Bart Ankersmit and Frank Ligterink, within the [Collection Risk Management programme](#) of the RCE. Its content and the methods described were developed by the RCE in collaboration with the Canadian Conservation Institute (CCI), the International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property in Rome (ICCROM), the British Museum and other heritage organisations. Furthermore, the SCH programme of the RCE has organised several workshops on topics



A visitor walked into an object causing it to fall and break

included in this publication, often in cooperation with other national or international heritage institutes. An example of which took place during a [2015 seminar](#) in Russia, one of the Programme's partner countries.

The 2017 publication explains the risk management process in a detailed and structured way, by going through its different phases step by step. There are several ways to carry out a risk assessment, and to structure, evaluate and visualise the outcome. This instrument, for instance, uses lists and maps, more specifically, the ABC approach (an example of a list approach) and the QuiskScan method (a variation on the map approach). What is important is that whichever method is used to determine the magnitude of risk, they all follow a similar process, which is described in the international guideline ISO 31000: *Risk Management – Principles and guidelines* (ISO, 2009). This is a cycle of five steps, accompanied simultaneously by two continuous processes. The steps correspond to: determining the context and the value of the collection; identifying risks; analysing the risks; evaluating the risks; and reducing the risks. The two accompanying processes are communication and consultation, and monitor and review.

The final step of the risk management process deals with the control of risks identified through the ABC and the QuiskScan methods. Many different strategies can be chosen – from reducing the likelihood of an event, to ensuring a fast response when an



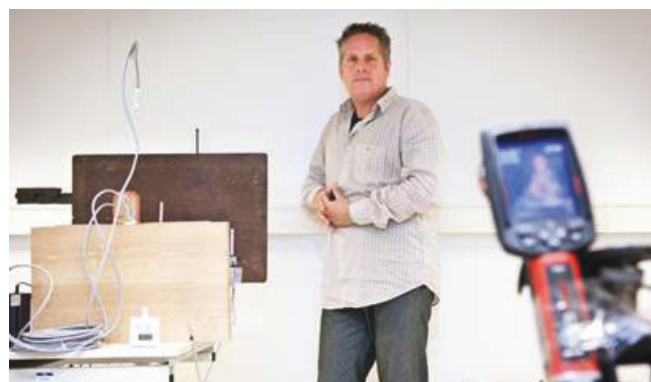
Front cover of the publication *Risk management for collections*

event does take place. However, all strategies have in common the consideration for the relation between its effectiveness and its costs. Generally, high effectiveness is preferred over low cost, however in practice, costs are usually the limiting or driving force, as many collection managers are well aware of.

Risk Management for Collections includes further ten sections, each of which expands on a specific agent of deterioration, and provides a scenario scheme for each. These correspond to physical forces; water; fire; thieves and vandals; pests and plants; light, ultraviolet and infrared radiation; contaminants; incorrect indoor climate; dissociation; and other potential agents of deterioration. All sections of this publication end with relevant references and suggestions for further reading, and the appendix includes useful forms for the completion of the different steps. Throughout the document, experts within the field provide their own experience with risk management for collections, for example, to describe methods used or challenges encountered.

About the experts

Agnes Brokerhof studied Chemistry and Art History at Leiden University (the Netherlands). From 1989 to 1991 she worked at the Australian Museum in Sydney and was a research fellow at CSIRO in Canberra (Australia). After taking the ICCROM course 'Scientific Principles of Conservation' in Rome (1992) she joined the Central Research Laboratory for Objects of Art and Science in Amsterdam (now the RCE) as conservation scientist. Subsequently she worked at *Instituut Collectie Nederland* (ICN) as programme manager of 'Collection Risk Management'. Since the merger of ICN into the RCE in 2011 she has been a senior conservation scientist in its Conservation & Restoration Department based in Amsterdam. Currently her activities focus on teaching, coaching and applying the developed models for value and risk assessment in collection management.



With a PhD in Inorganic Chemistry, Bart Ankersmit started working at what is now the RCE in 1996. His interests later shifted to collection risk management and for the past years, he has been developing a risk management tool. Together with ICCROM and the CCI, a risk management method was developed in several workshops. Bart has applied the risk management approach to the risks caused by indoor climate. In 2009 he published the new climate guidelines for Dutch museums, in which a decision-making process is presented that combines the value of the building and the objects with climate risks to find an optimum mitigation strategy. Together with Marc Stappers, an updated translation of these guidelines was made – *Managing Indoor Climate Risks in Museums* (2016). Bart and Marc have successfully organised several workshops on the theme of managing the indoor climate in museums, both in the Netherlands and in the SCH partner countries.

Frank Ligterink studied book and paper conservation at the *Opleiding Restauratoren* in Amsterdam (Training Program for Conservators) from 1985-1989. He later obtained a Master's degree in Theoretical Physics from the *Vrije Universiteit* in Amsterdam. He has been working since 1996 as a research scientist at the RCE, and as a science teacher at the ICN and UVA training program for conservators. His



research includes a wide range of multidisciplinary research projects, aimed at bridging the worlds of physics, conservation and art history. Major topics include: foxing and related issues of discoloration of paper, cellulose acetate storage, microclimates in enclosures, light and colour, risk management, ink corrosion prognosis and conservation decision analysis. His current (PhD) research aims to develop open source software visualisation tools for the interdisciplinary scientific exploration and explanation of the making and ageing of historic ink drawings by Rembrandt and Van Gogh.

Questions?

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Images: Cultural Heritage Agency, unless noted otherwise.

January 2018

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Through knowledge and consultancy, the Cultural Heritage Agency of the Netherlands offers the future a past.