

Challenges Requiring New Thinking in Museum Security

Collections: A Journal for Museum
and Archives Professionals
1–8
© The Author(s) 2024
Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: 10.1177/15501906241233814
journals.sagepub.com/home/cjx



Francis Demes¹ , Jaime Juarez²,
and James H. Clark³

Abstract

Our goal is to provide guidance to those responsible for security involving the protection of cultural property. It's important to note that the authors here are speaking from positions as practitioners. Our experience in operations, security design, as well as careers in cultural property protection that provided knowledge through trial and error over time as well as working with colleagues in the development of industry best practices as a result of those trials, were instrumental in helping us form the opinions contained in the article. Hence the absence of research and academic references in this article.

Keywords

security, protection, video, monitoring, access control, protesters, climate protesters, visitor management, metal detectors, art, museum, type, collections

Introduction

It's important to note that the ownership of the collection and the responsibility for all aspects of securing and protecting the collection is a team sport. In order to effectively protect collections we all must play an active role in this effort. To reinforce this, you will see our frequent use of terms that show collective ownership, as it takes all members of the village to play a role in safety and security of our assets, including our members and guests (Figure 1).

With increased access to our collections comes increased vulnerabilities and risks. As part of an effort to support access to a museum's collections and exhibits, we must look at those associated risks to both the collection and the people enjoying it and implement policies and practices to address them. Holistically, as part of this process,

¹Independent Consultant, Chagrin Falls, OH, USA

²Director of Protection Services and Safety, Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland, OH, USA

³Independent Consultant, Rocky River, OH, USA

Corresponding Author:

Francis Demes, Independent Consultant, 26 Bellview St, Chagrin Falls, OH 44022, USA.

Email: demes009@yahoo.com



Figure 1. Public art on a college campus, Tony Smith's "Spitball" 1961, photo by Francis Demes, October 2017.

this should involve all individuals who are charged with making the collection available to patrons. For example, every department in the institution should contribute to the security plan and every staff member should have security responsibilities within the context of their duties. The involvement of every employee in contributing to the security of the collection and exhibits is critical to success.

We know what we need to protect: our permanent collections, items that we loan, and on loan, traveling shows and exhibits, as well as our public art, which is accessible 24/7. We also need to be ever mindful of our need to protect our staff and guests, as well as the integrity of the institutions we serve. All staff have responsibilities for protecting their workplace and keeping themselves safe. This article will touch on some of the key elements integral in providing a safe and welcoming environment for learning.

Access Controls

The usual activities include access controls appropriate to our unique institution, our collections, special collections, exhibits, ticketed events, and tours. Controlling access



Figure 2. *She-Goat* by Pablo Picasso, 1950, Bronze, with signage at Museum of Modern Art Sculpture Garden, New York. Photo by Francis Demes, October 2023.

begins with our choice of days and hours of operation for both regular visitors and those who visit ticketed events and exhibits. This of course must be balanced with the needs of conservators, special needs of traveling exhibits, and collection maintenance.

Restricting access is a delicate balance of offering a welcoming environment for the enjoyment of our guests, along with an understanding that this is a controlled environment designed to safely move visitors through the permanent collection, direct exhibit visitors to exhibit space and to the extent possible, keeping them separate. Some refer to this as the EPCOT model, where Disney goes to great lengths to keep visitors moving with appropriate queues, soft or mood music, preview posters, digital media, and signage that engages the guest while they wait for the main event. In the museum world this process begins with a well-articulated and informative website. In addition to the marketing aspects of the site, it should also share information about security protocols, guest responsibilities, and the rules. These rules are published and or posted guidelines and the like, that regulate behavior on your property. This can be supported by visible and informative signage including digital signage and voice messaging (Figure 2).

Front of House staff should be well-informed and trained, so they can provide adequate information and protocols to visitors. Front of House staff refers to anyone who has contact with visitors to your facility, including but not limited to, visitor services staff, docents, gallery attendants, security officers, and volunteers.

Parcel Control

Parcel control is an essential element to any museum security program. It should include bag and coat checks, in some instances, guest pay lockers, which allow them to self-check their own coats and parcels. Some institutions place these locker kiosks within an anteroom or vestibule area while others place them outside under a canopy. In either case, lockers should be separated from collection and exhibit areas, be under overt video surveillance, and should be attended. Security officers or other staff should also be checking what is carried into the protected spaces.

Firearms Control

The control of firearms within museums is an ongoing challenge with concealed carry opportunities in many states. The ongoing active shooter events in public spaces and within buildings has heightened this concern. Consequently, there has been a growing increase in the use of metal detectors in larger institutions. Whether metal detectors are deployed or not, every institution should have a well-defined written policy on how they will treat firearms and other weapons. When prohibiting weapons, clear policy, appropriate signage, and well-trained staff are essential in redirecting those who indicate or are observed to have weapons. Many institutions have trained their security staff to inform patrons that weapons are prohibited and encourage them to leave their weapons in their vehicles or take them home before entering the museum (Figure 3).

If a decision is made to deploy metal detectors, it will require a commitment of two to three staff members manning the device and observing guests, appropriate training on how to manage a patron who is found to have a weapon or other prohibitive device, and specific training in how to render a weapon safe. Talking points should be provided to Front of House staff so they can respond appropriately, within the same guidelines and content of the message. A Plan of Action is recommended so first responders can assist when needed. These measures will require the cooperation and participation of the local police.

Security Technology

The use of security technology (electronic access control systems, building, space and item specific alarms, and video surveillance) is a very broad topic and requires careful planning and consideration. Generally, every device that is installed should have a very specific mission. Access control systems, alarms, and video surveillance systems



Figure 3. Scalable entrance station with multiple entry lanes and metal detectors to the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Photo by Francis Demes October 2023.

should be fully integrated with one another. They should be installed with consideration for optimizing the presence and function of what is usually the most expensive aspect of security, staffing. New and continuing risks to collections have always concerned museum leadership and their staff.

Civil Disobedience and Criminal Acts

Covert destruction is noted in a few collections, most notably Rodin's *The Thinker* that was intentionally damaged by an explosive device in March of 1970 at the Cleveland Museum of Art. The case was never solved (Figure 4).

Recent attacks by special interest groups like climate protesters make it imperative that institutions diligently research their collections for controversial pieces that may be at risk for attack. The logic of the attacks on collections or iconic pieces is to focus on threatening the beautiful, protected, and precious objects as a direct comparison to the destruction of the environment by our societal carelessness and



Figure 4. *The Thinker* by Auguste Rodin, Bronze, 1880–81, Cleveland Museum of Art, left damaged following the bombing of the artwork in the early morning hours of March 24, 1970. Photo by Francis Demes October 2019.

greed. The recent protests and attacks on collections typically resulting in minor damage and a disruption of collection viewing have been primarily in Western Europe but have begun in the U.S. as well.

Security personnel and responsible staff will need to pay more attention to soft targets like museums and private collections. Soft targets are typically defined as passive institutions like museums, universities, hospitals, and other facilities/events without military protection. The cost of doing business for museums will certainly

increase and the cost to insure both independent collections and traveling shows will increase as well.

Admissions Modifications

Museums may reexamine their rules of admission and will likely opt to further restrict items previously allowed in exhibit spaces to protect the collection. Policies regulating items on loan, may be tightened or have stricter requirements for on-site security. If threats increase, occupancy limits may have to be lowered, physical security technology improved (cameras, artificial intelligence/video analytics, proximity alarms, hard barriers, and plexiglass covering over 2D artwork or artifacts), increased security staffing, and hours of admission reduced.

Green Initiatives

If museums support and advertise their commitment to renewable energy and adopting green practices, protesters may find it harder to use museums as a soft target. Some museums have adopted LEED Certification (www.usgbc.org) to save water, reduce greenhouse gasses, improve efficiencies, and save money. Some organizations and facilities promote their LEED certification. One good example is the effort of The George Washington University in the design of GW Museum and Textile Museum in Washington DC (LEED Gold) in conjunction with the affiliated GWU Collections and Conservation Resource Center in Ashburn, Virginia (LEED Silver).

Progressive and interactive programs can be adopted to shed light on the climate crisis and educate the public. Specialized programs can be developed including youth programs illustrating the importance of conservation and how the specific institution has addressed the climate crisis. Many organizations already have a director or Coordinator of Sustainability. These positions should be public facing to show support of the cause and the reduction of the organizations carbon footprint.

Security Staffing Support

Finally, the importance of a professional security staff needs to be emphasized. Most institutions' security leadership have been asked to perform financial gymnastics to keep their security staffing to at least their minimum standards while keeping technological systems up to date. Institutions must have an ongoing commitment to recruit and retain security personnel that fit the culture of the institution. This means, pay, benefits, and training must be properly budgeted. The criticality of a well-trained security staff with experience, knowledge of the collections, pride, ownership, and the ability to integrate with other museum personnel cannot be overstated.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iD

Francis Demes  <https://orcid.org/0009-0008-7045-7504>

Author Biographies

Francis Demes has over 32 years of experience in security management and campus law enforcement. In recent years he has worked as a security consultant. Frank has the unique experience of serving as an internal security consultant in an operational capacity as well as for planning, construction, and design. Projects involved a variety of facilities including, medical, research, academic, residential, athletic, public safety, museum, mixed use and public access, many with LEED certification. Frank holds a BA from SUNY Albany and an MFA from The George Washington University.

Jaime Juarez, Director of Protection Services and Safety, has been with the Cleveland Museum of Art for 35 years. He is responsible for the development, implementation, and management of the security operations of the CMA and provides leadership in maintaining and increasing the museum's security to protect the buildings, collection, staff members, and visitors. Jaime holds a BA and MA from Cleveland State University.

James H. Clark, CPP For over forty years Jim has worked as an independent security consultant in a broad range of industries and institutions domestically and internationally in over 25 countries. For the past 20 years, he has focused on cultural properties including museums, libraries, archives, and historic sites. He has a B.S. in Criminal Justice from Buffalo State University and has regularly attended specialized training programs at the Smithsonian Institute, the FBI Academy, The Ohio State University and other institutions in Spain and the UK. He is a member of the IAPSC, the IFCPP, and ASIS-International.