

DISCUSSION:

The term “deaccession” refers to the procedure of formally removing an object from a museum’s permanent collection, after which the object may be considered for sale, exchange, gift, transfer to another entity, transfer to a collection other than the permanent collection, or – in the case of irretrievably deteriorated objects – disposal.

In advance of the renovation of the historic post office portion of the Museum of Riverside’s downtown site, a search for information about the dioramas resulted in the discovery that the painted murals (backdrops) appear to have been accessioned in 2006. Because the renovation work—expected to begin in 2024—will involve demolition of the dioramas and all other existing exhibitry in the building, staff gathered information to determine a path forward for the painted backdrops. A museum does not normally accession exhibit “set dressing,” and the long gap between circa 1970 and 2006 underlines former staff’s lack of clarity on how to classify these paintings. The record reflects that staff were eventually persuaded that “These paintings are unique works of regional art and could not readily be replicated or replaced.”

The three murals appear to have been installed with no provision for removal or relocation in the future. They are painted in oils on lightweight canvas. They were adhered very securely (“marouflaged”) to the sturdy curved walls of the three largest dioramas on the first floor of the Museum building. The remainders of these dioramas (rockwork, geology specimens, dry botanical specimens, taxidermied biological specimens, artifacts) were installed afterwards. In some areas, the rockwork abuts the painted edges of the murals. All but one of the natural history specimens to be retained have been removed, as well as all artifacts. Salvage of any one of the murals will require Museum staff to demolish existing elements in front of the painting, including the diorama floor, framing, and remaining rockwork, so that the conservator can gain access to detach the painting from its support.

In 2023, assessments and proposals for removing the painted murals from the back walls of the dioramas were solicited from two conservators who specialize in architectural and mural conservation: Sarah Devan with Architectural Resources Group and Susanne Friend with ConservArt Associates, Inc. Both conservators determined that it would be possible to detach the paintings from their supports and roll them on wide tubes (minimum 8 inches in diameter) for storage. The process is costly, and the resulting rolled canvases will occupy significant storage space after the tubes are settled on storage cradles. After assessing the costs (averaging approximately \$20,000 each to remove, based on the lower bid), impacts on storage, the time necessary to accomplish removal prior to construction in 2024, as well as the likelihood of future programmatic use of the murals, the recommendation is made to salvage only one of the three murals, the Ralph Love mural. City purchasing procedures require the Museum to contract with the low bidder, which is ConservArt Associates, Inc. Of the three paintings, the Ralph Love is aesthetically the stronger one, painted with a confident hand and composed in a sophisticated manner. The qualitative differences between the work of Love and Griffith are best assessed in direct contact with the works rather than through photographs. The Love is also one of the two smaller murals, thus will impact available storage less. While it’s conceivable that a method to install it in a future temporary exhibition may arise, it’s much less likely that this will be the case for all three. It is true, as former staff noted in their justification to accession, that the paintings are unique works of art, but it is also true that the Museum could commission artists in the future to create similar work and would in fact be well served by commissioning contemporary artists to create new work regularly, which is an appropriate feature of individual exhibition designs.

Ordinarily, provision for the accession and storage of such works prepared for exhibitions would be taken into consideration from project inception.

The recommendation to deaccession the two paintings by Marilyn Griffith is made in light of practical imperatives. It is argued that the deaccession criteria cited in the Collections and Exhibitions Management Policies that most closely align are:

- The Museum is unable to preserve or store the object/specimen properly and/or provide a proper or adequate environment for it, or the object/specimen poses a health or safety hazard;
- The object/specimen has doubtful potential to be exhibited or published in the foreseeable future, or the object/specimen's accompanying data are so incomplete that the item has limited or no cultural, historical, or scientific value.

STRATEGIC PLAN ALIGNMENT:

The activities of the Museum of Riverside align with the Strategic Priority, “Arts, Culture and Recreation” and in particular goal 1.1 (strengthening Riverside’s portfolio of arts, culture, recreation, senior, and lifelong learning programs and amenities), goal 1.2 (enhancing equitable access to arts, culture, and recreational service offerings and facilities), and goal 1.5 (supporting programs and amenities to further develop literacy, health, and education of children, youth, and seniors throughout the community).

1. **Community Trust** – Responsible management of the Museum’s collections to reflect accurately the community’s history requires judicious disposal of items that do not reflect the community yet require resources to steward. Thoughtful deaccessioning to build a strong collection builds community trust.
2. **Equity** – Deaccessioning is pursued to refine a collection and align it more closely to the Museum’s mission. This process consciously foregrounds equity across the community’s many neighborhoods and eras.
3. **Fiscal Responsibility** – Deaccession of objects determined to be out of alignment with the Museum’s mission reduces operating costs devoted to collection care.
4. **Innovation** – Steady efforts to bring the collection into alignment with the Museum’s mission can involve difficult choices that many museums choose to avoid. The Museum of Riverside models best museum practices in moving forward with these efforts.
5. **Sustainability & Resiliency** – Deaccessioning actions result in improved use of resources as well as a more accurate reflection of a community, thus sustaining it as it sees itself.

FISCAL IMPACT:

There is no fiscal impact associated with the deaccession recommendation in this report. The two deaccessioned objects will be demolished in the context of interior demolition that will occur within the scope of work to be undertaken by the main museum project general contractor.

Prepared by: Robyn G. Peterson, Ph.D., Museum Director



To deaccession: Marilyn Griffith, *Southern California Mountain Habitat*. Note: real and artificial trees, forest floor duff, and other three dimensional elements are not part of the accession.



To deaccession: Marilyn Griffith, *Mojave Desert*. Note: Joshua tree specimen to be salvaged; all other real and artificial vegetation, rockwork, and desert floor elements are not part of the accession.