



RiR 2019:5

## Preserving the collections

– the security work of the Swedish national central museums' collections management

### Background and motivations

There is a multitude of museums in Sweden, with a variety of operational focuses, beneficial ownerships, organisational forms and management structures. Thirteen of these museums have special status, in that they are part of a government commitment that gradually emerged between the end of the 18th century and the 1970s. These museums are called 'central museums', and several of them include two or more previously independent museums (see annex). Their collections span different subject areas and include thousands - or in several cases millions - of objects. These items have often been collected over a long period of time and preserved in different environments, with conservation climates of varying quality.

The Swedish National Heritage Board has a special mission to promote development and collaboration within the field of museums. This mission consists primarily of providing all museums in Sweden, including the central museums, with technology and methodological support. In 2019, the total appropriation for the central museums (authorities and foundations) amounts to approximately SEK 1.6 billion.

The management of the museums' collections is central to preserving Sweden's cultural heritage, and is a core activity of the museums. Over the past decade, there have been several indications of security risks at the central museums that must be addressed. Given the important role of the museum collections in preserving and developing cultural heritage, the Swedish National Audit Office considers it important to examine how the central museums work with security within the context of their collections management.

## Objective and questions

The purpose of the audit is twofold. Firstly, the audit aims to investigate whether the security work of the central museums results in the satisfactory security of the objects in the collections. Secondly, the audit aims to examine whether, within the context of its museum mission, the Swedish National Heritage Board does enough to support the security work of the museums.

Security is defined relatively broadly, because collections management includes the management of a wide range of security risks. Security is defined based on three aspects that a museum must consider in order to preserve its collections:

- *traceability* (the registration and inventorying of objects)
- *theft and vandalism* (physical damage to the collections by staff or visitors)
- *destruction and disaster* (as a result of, e.g., deficiencies in premises, fire, natural disasters, pests, etc.).

If any of these aspects fall short, the entire security structure fails and the conservation of the collections is compromised.

The audit answers the following questions:

- Do the central museums conduct security work that ensures a reasonable degree of security for the objects in the collections in terms of:
  - traceability
  - theft and vandalism
  - destruction and disaster?
- Does the Swedish National Heritage Board provide adequate support for the security work of the museums when it comes to:
  - traceability
  - theft and vandalism
  - destruction and disaster?

The audit concerns all central museums, which means that the other national museums are not included in the audit. In addition to the central museums, the Swedish National Heritage Board is included in the audit. This is because since June 1, 2017, the Board has been tasked with promoting development and collaboration within the field of museums. A central part of this mission is the communication of knowledge and the provision of technical and methodological support, especially in the museums' efforts to preserve, use, and develop cultural heritage.

## The results of the audit

The overall conclusion of the Swedish National Audit Office is that the central museums conduct security work that does not adequately guarantee a reasonable degree of security for the objects in the collections. Furthermore, it is the assessment of the Swedish National Audit that the Swedish National Heritage Board can do more to support the security work of the museums within the framework of their museum mission. The audit shows that the work varies in quality between and within central museums, and that several deficiencies that have previously been observed persist. In this context, it should be noted that the conditions for maintaining a reasonable degree of security differ between museums. This is partly because some museum buildings do not permit security-related interventions that may damage their cultural value. Moreover, the fact that the museums' collections vary in size and that these have been assembled over a long period of time means that it can be difficult to establish traceability for all objects.

The main conclusions of the audit are:

- the traceability of objects is inadequate
- measures to prevent theft and vandalism are not sufficient
- there is good knowledge of how to prevent long-term destruction, but is difficult for the museums to live up to the desired level of prevention
- preparedness for a sudden disaster is inadequate
- The Swedish National Heritage Board must develop support in the area of prevention of theft and vandalism.

## Recommendations

The Swedish National Audit Office submits the following recommendations to the *central museums*.

- Prioritise efforts to increase the traceability of objects in the collections.
- Review the access restriction procedures.
- Create routines to minimize insider issues.
- Increase the level of readiness to handle an elevated threat.
- Ensure the availability of suitable warehouses.
- If the following is not already in progress, begin work on establishing and implementing a plan for rescuing the most value objects in case of fire etc., a security plan and a plan to get the most valuable objects to safety in the event of war, the threat of war, or other extraordinary circumstances.

The Swedish National Audit Office submits the following recommendations to the *Swedish National Heritage Board*.

- Develop advice on how museums can prevent theft and vandalism.
- Start monitoring how the Swedish National Heritage Board's support and recommendations are used by the museum sector. Furthermore, begin to systematically monitor which security incidents occur in the museums. Such a basis would make it possible to assess which additional efforts must be made to support the museums in their collections management.