Accounting, preservation and use of museum assets

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Executive Summary

The SAO audited the organisation of accounting, preservation and use of museum assets. The objective of the audit was to evaluate how well the museum collections as state assets are preserved and how is access ensured for the public.

There is no exact overview of all museum collections. All audited museums have not been able to take inventories as required. In some museums, the last thorough inventories took place 20 to 30 years ago. Thus, it is not sure whether all collected museum items (things of cultural value) have been preserved. All museums have not been able to take an extensive scientific inventory (scientific description of things of cultural value), and thus the state lacks a thorough overview of the cultural goods in museum collections. The Ministry of Culture inspected the museum inventories only once in the past three years.

Lack of space is a major problem. More than half of the collection storage facilities examined by the SAO lacked space and the opportunities for the growth of collections were limited. Several museums have had to rent temporary storage facilities (e.g. apartments, warehouses) to alleviate the lack of space or stow museum assets in workrooms. Of the audited museums, the preservation conditions have partly improved or are improving in Estonian National Museum, Estonian History Museum and Pärnu Museum in relation to renovation or building new storage facilities.

Once accepted, it is not possible to exclude the things of cultural value from the collection (except for the things that are damaged beyond restoration, destroyed or lost) and the existing collections can not be organised. In the situation where the collections grow approximately of a 90% scope from donation and the preservation of new museum items requires additional and constants expenses, the principles of collection need more attention. Estonian museums do not possess a clear collection policy, which should cover the principles of replenishment of collections and establish the conditions and limits for acquisition of new property. Also, a common collection policy has not been developed on state level, which would ensure the coordination of the museums' collection activities.

Only one third of the examined collection storage facilities possessed good or satisfactory preservation conditions of museum assets. The main problem in the storage facilities is maintaining the suitable temperature and humidity level. The preservation of museum items is jeopardised by risks arising from old power systems and possible water emergencies. In the opinion of museum employees, the museum items will preserve in current storage conditions for at least 5 to10 years and their condition does not worsen significantly. At the same time it is not known for certain whether the current storage conditions might shorten the life of the museum item and whether they will still be preserved in 50 years.

Sound preconditions for the use of museum assets have been not created. Up until now, no functioning information system has been created relating to current museum assets, which would enable to make the information concerning the cultural goods kept in museums accessible to the public. As the information system used up until now has not been applied according to expectation, the development of a new information system of museums has been started, this is supposed to be more user-friendly and enable access through the Internet to all the interested persons. Many museums can not provide suitable conditions for examining the museum items. Because of the size of collections and lack of conditions only 1.3 per cent of museum items can be displayed. In addition to preservation, the tasks of museums also include the intermediation of cultural goods.

Major proposals to the Minister of Culture

- Develop a long-term collection policy for state museums and based on this, require the museums in the area of administration to develop their own collection policy. This would provide prerequisites for a systematic, thorough and coordinated collection and preservation of museum assets.
- Amend the Museums Act so that it would be possible for the museums to organise the collections through clear and regulated procedures, and if necessary, exclude such museum items from the

collection that in the opinion of the experts on cultural goods should not be preserved as a museum item of the main collection. Organising of museum collections should be based on developed collection policy.

- Ensure the taking of inventories in the museums in accordance with the established procedure to verify the existence and condition of museum items.
- Comply with the requirement pursuant to Museum Act to carry out systematic inspection of museum collections, draw up an inspection plan.
- Draw up a museum investment plan based on " Estonian museums on the 21st century – development strategy for 2005 to 2015" that is yet to be adopted and the estimates of budget growth listed in the budget strategy of the Government of the Republic.
- In addition to collecting and preserving museum items attention has to be drawn to providing the examiners, interested parties and general public with examining conditions of museum assets. To this end, the common information system of museum items should be developed and require the museums to create user-friendly conditions, without jeopardising the preservation of museum items.

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The full texts of the official responses of the Minister of Culture and the Minister of Finance are given in the Annex of this audit report.

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