

Atwater Kent Museum (Philadelphia History Museum at the Atwater Kent): Proposed Transition Plan

This plan outlines a partnership between the Trustees of the Atwater Kent Museum (AKM), Drexel University (Drexel), and the City of Philadelphia (City) for a sustainable plan to care for and steward the AKM's collection of more than 130,000 artifacts and objects that reflect 350 years of Philadelphia's history. The goal of this plan is to transfer the stewardship of the Atwater Kent Museum collections to Drexel University in order to increase access to the collections for exhibits, programs and research, and to ensure that the collections are maintained to professional standards and kept as an intact collection (the Atwater Kent Collections at Drexel) in Philadelphia.

Background

The AKM's mission is to collect, preserve, interpret, and provide exhibition and educational programs using its collection of approximately 130,000 artifacts amassed to tell stories of Philadelphia's past and to give context for the present. After years of financial constraints and a number of unsuccessful attempts to partner with other organizations to keep the museum open, the AKM trustees decided to close the museum's doors to the public and focus on developing a strategy with new partner(s) that will evaluate the more than 130,000 objects in the collection, and to cull it to a "core collection" that will include those objects with appropriate historical provenance and significance, and that can be used to tell the diverse stories of Philadelphia's history. The partner will need to:

- Have the financial, curatorial, and technological expertise to steward the core collection so that the collection remains in Philadelphia and is increasingly accessible to the public, educators, and scholars for generations to come.
- Continue to thoughtfully acquire objects that relate to Philadelphia's history.

Since the closing of the museum in July 2018, the City and AKM have received input from many of Philadelphia's stakeholders who are interested and concerned about the future of AKM's collection. All agreed on the importance of keeping the core collection in the City of Philadelphia to allow for the creation of exhibitions, educational programs, and future research around these historical items. A common thread among the stakeholders was that in the absence of a dedicated museum, a loan program of the core collection should be developed to allow exhibiting institutions, large and small, to use the objects to continue to tell Philadelphia's stories.

Why Drexel

The Trustees and City identified Drexel as an appropriate partner because it is a collecting institution that teaches museology and the professional management of museums and curates a number of public exhibitions annually. Drexel has the expertise to conduct a thorough collection evaluation and scale the AKM's collection to a core collection of artifacts. Drexel has existing partnerships with many cultural

institutions across Philadelphia and has experience in developing digital databases that would allow for other Philadelphia academic and cultural institutions to identify and request items from the collection for short- and long-term loans.

A partnership with the AKM, Drexel, and the City would support Atwater Kent's vision to use the collection to tell stories of Philadelphia and Philadelphians for many years to come.

Purpose of the Partnership

This plan outlines a collaborative partnership to ensure that the core collection remains in Philadelphia; the collection is accessible to the public; and that the mission to collect, preserve, interpret, and provide exhibition and educational programs using the collection continues. Drexel will not become a "museum" for the collection but will make the core collection accessible to the public through a loan process to Philadelphia's cultural and academic organizations and institutions. The plan will be accomplished by the following:

- The City will transfer ownership of the AKM collection and AKM's obligations under its agreement with the Historical Society of Pennsylvania and any other gift agreements.
- Drexel will conduct a collection evaluation that will include a review of all gift agreements or restrictions and identify collection items lacking historical significance (rare to the ordinary) and/or provenance, that are judged interpretively inadequate due to their condition or duplicative nature, or that do not have the capacity to be used either physically or virtually for display or educational purposes. These items will be deaccessioned, and the remaining parts of the collection, not deaccessioned, will be the core collection.

Items that are not historically, culturally, or artistically significant to Philadelphia will be made available for free to non-profit organizations in Philadelphia. Objects not wanted by Philadelphia non-profit organizations may be auctioned off and any proceeds will be used to support the collection evaluation while it is underway, and then for continuing storage and care of the collection, in a restricted, dedicated fund managed by Drexel.

- Drexel will establish two committees to assist in the collection evaluation.
 - A Collection Evaluation Committee will be established to advise on the historical value of the objects in the collection. This committee will be composed of a diverse group of museum, art, and history professionals from Philadelphia's cultural community. This committee will have the expertise and knowledge of Philadelphia's multiple histories and the diverse programs that could be supported by the collection. The City of Philadelphia's Public Art Director, Margot Berg, will also be part of the Collection Evaluation Committee.
 - A Transition Oversight Committee will be composed of a minimum of 13 members. There will be two representatives that are AKM Trustees, two representatives of the Kent family, two representatives from the City, and other members appointed by Drexel. This Committee will provide input and deliberation on any items considered for deaccessioning and recommend items

for deaccessioning from the collection to Drexel's Board of Trustees, per Drexel's deaccessioning policies. This Committee will also advise on the development of the loan program and the creation of the digital portal.

- Drexel will develop an active collections loan program for short-term and long-term loans of the core collection to other non-profit cultural institutions (including historical sites, societies and houses; libraries; and museums) and academic institutions in Philadelphia, and to other cultural and academic institutions outside Philadelphia, as appropriate and consistent with professional museum standards.
- Drexel will develop a searchable digital website portal, with a database of every object in the core collection and designed to allow other institutions to identify pieces of interest for exhibit. The portal will enable members of the public to learn about the collections, and will feature interactive elements, e.g., online exhibits curated by users.
- Drexel will continue to thoughtfully acquire objects that reflect Philadelphia's material culture that are relevant and related to Philadelphia's history.

Next Steps

The following are the major steps in the process:

- Hold public meetings to allow for open discussion (first public meeting held on February 27, 2019)
- Allow the public to provide input on the proposed plan on line (input received online through March 20, 2019)
- Revise the proposed plan to reflect input, as appropriate
- Finalize the plan
- Plan approval by the City of Philadelphia, Philadelphia History Museum at the Atwater Kent Board of Trustees and the Drexel University Board of Trustees
- File and follow the Orphans' Court process
- Approval by Orphans' Court
- Implementation of the plan as outlined above