When Sir William Burrell gifted his collection to the city of Glasgow in 1944, he stipulated that it should never be loaned overseas. But with a planned refurbishment of the Burrell Collection likely to see the museum close from a shipping magnate, he saw as many as 30 of the ship bringing it home was torpedoed

Our priority is to ensure that the Burrell Collection is available for the enjoyment and generation of cultures to come. However, the building where it is housed, while still significant architectural importance, is in need of a major refurbishment. Only recently we failed to do: speak to the descendants. One responded that neither she, nor the wider family, had been consulted and that it was her suspicion that ‘they have tried to smuggle this through’, adding ‘this debate was thoroughly

It is worth noting that the national collections in England and Wales do not have to have the legislative route we are currently undertaking. They have the legal powers to overturn a bequest – without recourse to the benefactor’s heirs – after 50 years. In Scotland, the limit is just 25 years. Next year will mark 70 years since Sir William made his gift to Glasgow.

Sir William was not against lending, then he was against shipping by sea. In the 70 years since he gifted his collection of almost nine thousand artifacts to the city in 1944, his express wish has been that his trustees look after his interests with regard to the bequest. In 2017, the committee considering the arguments in the Scottish Parliament recognised that Glasgow Life, which delivers cultural and leisure services on behalf of Glasgow City Council, has stringent safeguards in place to mitigate against risk. Glasgow Life in partnership with Glasgow City Council have agreed a new Lending Code and, ultimately, Sir William’s Trustees have the power to veto any loan request. However, Sir Peter Huthinson, Chair of the Burrell Trustees, told the Parliament he cannot envisage a time when such a veto would have to be used. Our conservators and curators have devoted their lives to protecting the objects they care for – they would not put any at

It can be argued that transport across road and rail in the early part of the last century was inherently more dangerous than today. As a shipping magnate, he saw as many as 30 of his own vessels go down over the course of two World Wars. Indeed, he would have been well aware that his friend, Lord Carmichael, Governor of Bombay, had written a dejar un unique collection of Indian art, lost his treasures when the ship bringing it home was torpedoed off the Devon coast in 1917.

Sir William was not against lending, then he was against shipping by sea. In the 70 years since he gifted his collection of almost 9,000 artifacts to the city in 1944, his express wish has been that his trustees look after his interests with regard to the bequest. He donated a unique collection of Indian art, lost his treasures when the ship bringing it home was torpedoed off the Devon coast in 1917.

Yes, Sir William Burrell was not against lending. Across the 70 years in which he amassed one of the world’s greatest single collections, he continually loaned items to institutions across the world, will not raise cash – but it will significantly raise the profile of the collection and allow us to leverage to attract major sponsors for the refurbishment. Important as that may be, the benefit to scholars and researchers, by creating the opportunity to put objects which may have been part of a set together for the first time, is difficult to put a price on. As well as academic benefits, the people of Glasgow will benefit from reciprocal loan arrangements, which will allow us to host – across our nine civic museums – treasures from some of the world’s finest collections. The time is now to rise to this flagship collection with the world. It is an international calling card not only for Glasgow, but for Scotland. The Trustees and a committee of the Scottish Parliament agree with us, that Sir William’s fears have been well and truly allayed by the safeguards we have agreed and advancements in transportation and conservation. Sir William was never against lending. Now, as we prepare to refurbish the gallery – to make it fit for its gift – we have an opportunity to unlock the potential of this unique collection on a global stage.

Bridget McConnell is the Chief Executive of Glasgow Life.

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Michael Daley

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vertuning the terms of Sir William Burrell’s magnificent request to the citizens of Glasgow would be wrong in principle and dangerous in practice. Glasgow City Council’s irresponsible attempt to press an ethically unattractive and legally untenable case in a forum as open and probing as the Scottish Parliament was unwise, exposing the proposed changes to near universal scrutiny. It has drawn embarrassing acknowledgement that the clarity and force which accompanied the public loan projects – as set out in both his will and a separate agreement with the Council – precludes any reversal through the courts: ‘As there is no legal remedy which would allow all the restrictions on lending and borrowing to be relaxed, Glasgow City Council must pursue a private bill in order to achieve this end.’

ArtWatch UK was invited to give evidence as ‘campaigners for the protection of works of art’ (and has further submitted online documents and reports testifying to travel injuries that still arise during foreign travels). The National Gallery’s director, Nicholas Penny, offered confidential disclosure of travel injuries he has directly encountered as a curator. (His offer travelled worldwide when accidently posted on the Scottish Parliament’s website.) In the Museums Journal the Art Fund’s director of development, Amy Ross, argued that where no family members survive who might agree to renegotiate a bequest’s terms, existing arrangements should stand. A Sunday Times (Scotland) journalist, Mark Macaskill, did what Glasgow Council, the Burrell Trustees and their lawyers had all failed to do: speak to the descendants. One responded that neither she, nor the wider family, had been consulted and that it was her suspicion that ‘they have tried to smuggle this through’, adding ‘this debate was thoroughly

The present trail of parliamentary documents to the Burrell Museum exposes the culturally deadening and administratively debilitating consequences for individual art institutions of Glasgow City Council’s unhealthily top-down direction of the arts. When ArtWatch attempted to meet curators of the Burrell at their own museum, we were thwarted and met by three officers of Glasgow Life, the body which is both a charity and a company, whose officers are appointed by the Council. Burrell gifted a fabulous collection, and the means to house it, on condition that loans may be permitted within but not out of the city of Glasgow. We now know that Glasgow City Council neglected this jewel for years, allowing its award-winning building to leak to the point where entire galleries are closed, while others contain buckets to catch the drips. Had the Council acted in 2001, as it promised to do, the cost of all repairs and some improvements would have been £4m–£5m. Today the Council seeks £40m–£54m – which (unexplained) sum it hopes to recoup in part by local authority matching grants and contributions of all categories of work, including fragile textiles and pastels prohibited by Burrell from being loaned even within Britain, on a hazardous world tour, beginning for six months at the British Museum, and then to the Metropolitan Museum, New York, and elsewhere.

When US courts gave the Barnes Foundation in Pennsylvania, a separate agreement with the Council – unattractive and legally untenable case in a world tour, beginning for six months at the British Museum, and then to the Metropolitan Museum, New York, and elsewhere.

Now, as we prepare to refurbish the gallery – to make it fit for its gift – we have an opportunity to unlock the potential of this unique collection on a global stage.

Michael Daley is the Director of ArtWatch UK.