The Michael C. Carlos Museum's mission is to collect, preserve, exhibit, and interpret art and artifacts from antiquity to the present in order to provide unique opportunities for education and enrichment in the community and to promote interdisciplinary teaching and research at Emory University.

The permanent collection of a museum is the core of its identity; it provides the foundation for its research, exhibitions, and educational outreach. The Carlos Museum strengthens its ability to serve its audiences by making acquisitions of art and artifacts for its permanent collection through gifts, bequests, or purchases.

Many factors contribute to a work's suitability for acquisition, including artistic quality, intellectual appeal, historical importance, attributes which foster understanding of a particular culture or artistic movement, and a credible provenance, or history of ownership. Central to the Carlos Museum’s mission is the thorough research and documentation of each work of art in the permanent collection to evaluate its historical and social context and to determine provenance.

As an accredited member of the American Association of Museums and the Association of Art Museum Directors, the Carlos Museum’s collecting policy adheres to the 1970 United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Convention on Cultural Property, adopted into law by the United States in 1983. This legislation dictates works of art must have been exported from their countries of origin prior to 1970 or be accompanied by a valid export license from their countries of origin.

The Museum will not knowingly acquire any object that has been illegally exported from its country of origin or illegally imported into the United States. Any object surrounded by the suggestion of being illegitimate will also not be acquired. Additionally, the Museum does not acquire objects that it has reason to believe were obtained by seizure during times of war.