

Spring 2012

Art Museum Curators and Management

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Recommended Citation

Tyler, Tiffany, "Art Museum Curators and Management" (2012). *Celebration of Undergraduate Scholarship*. Paper 119.
<http://scholar.valpo.edu/cus/119>

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March 21, 2012

Core 115: The Human Experience

Prof. M Adams

Worker Profile: Art Museum Curators and Management

Most of us can remember those elementary school field trips to different museums and being guided along large rooms and magnificent displays of art, history, and innovation. Years later, I can still remember those trips and how I would wonder around in awe at the sophisticated cultured world shining through the exhibits hanging on the walls. What goes on behind the back doors that say “employees only”? Who can touch the work behind the “Do not touch” signs? Where does all this stuff come from? What is the job description of the staff? What exactly does a curator do? These questions and more have motivated me to go behind the scenes of the Brauer Museum of Art on Valparaiso University’s campus with assistant curator and registrar, Professor Gloria Ruff, for an inside look of everyday duties and challenges undertaken by the staff and what it takes to manage something as prestigious as a museum.

Before digging into understanding the management of museums, understanding its history gives more appreciation for what is being accomplished. In 1870, art museums did not even exist. American museums up to this point had been an adoption of their European cousins, and distant cousins they were. An 1865 Philadelphia newspaper wrote: “It is lamentable to think that of all the splendid and ambitious cities of this great republic, not one possesses even a creditable gallery of art or great public museum...” In England, Sir Henry Cole was leading South Kensington Museum with admirable success since 1857. So admirable were his methods that William Cullen Bryant, a renowned poet and New York Post editor, brought the idea of what

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would be known as the American Compromise to a board of would be directors for the first European styled museum in New York, it would be called the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

The American Compromise states that “for the purpose of establishing and maintaining in said city a museum and library of Natural History; of encouraging and developing the study of Natural Science; of advancing the general knowledge of kindred subjects, and to that end of furnishing popular instruction and recreation.” This compromise would also later be incorporated with the Met’s mission statement. Bryant stated at this conference with the board members of New York; “the influence of works of Art is wholesome, ennobling, and instructive. Besides the cultivation of the sense of beauty, ...the intelligent contemplation of a great gallery of weeks of art is a lesson in history,... biology... and the antiquities of different countries.”(Genoways). Going back to those elementary school field trips, had it not been from Bryant, it would have never happened. Museums were used to strictly house works of known artists or storage rooms for historical artifacts. It was unorthodox for anyone besides those artists to browse the gallery educationally, let alone recreationally. Bryant took Cole’s standards and applied them to the planning stages of the Met. These standards included: access to the museum library for public use, lecture series, circulation and traveling of exhibitions, and free admission on certain days.

Bryant was thereby appointed by the board as the Director, or to be put in better terms, “Trustee”, since he was entrusted to deliver such a promise of success and challenged to develop starting points in which the museum would stretch out on. Trustees are expected to conduct the business of the organization in such a way as to uphold the public trust and the integrity of the museum. In smaller museums, not as grandeur as the Met, such as the Brauer Museum, this responsibility of the trustee is handed directly down to the curators, and through them a registrar

and secretary. Where in that time of 1868, the board was comprised of investors, typically older men with long white beards and classy suits; now a days, they still have the classy suits but the same board that makes important decisions for the goings on around campus also make the decisions for the art museum (Genoways).

Also thankful for the work of Cole and Bryant were future individuals whose jobs were created for. Individuals such as Professor Gloria Ruff, who like many others, was given the opportunity to study and work with art perseverance. I was able to take a glimpse of a day in a life in the “dungeons” of the lower level workshops of a private, college, non-profit art museum. A typical day is that there is no typical day. A paradox, yes, but well justified. There is always the basic necessities of what has to be done but then there’s stuff that comes up along the way like projects small and large, correspondence with potential donors, maintenance that pops up along the way, the list can go on and on. Within the past decade, cuts to staff and endowments had to be made due to lack on monetary funds. Sense these cuts had been made, already delegated tasks had to be condensed further to accommodate a small staff size. For example; Professor Ruff started as a registrar but after the cuts were finalized, she was bumped up to assistant curator and registrar. Basic responsibilities of a registrar are to register and organize all the information pertaining to all the works of art housed by the museum in various files. These files include photographs of the art work piece, information about the artist, computer file (if applicable), insurance files, and maintenance reports. The curator part of the job comes into play with planning exhibits and shows.

Traveling exhibitions ideas and information is exchanged through out a network of museums. Sometimes works of art can be swapped out with ones that have been restored from

being inside one of the many vaults in the museum, or they can be collaborated by contacting other museums through this networking to get art work transferred, usually temporarily, to another museum for a show. Shows and exhibits are chosen by the curators based on factors in community interests or ideas are expressed during museum conferences. These conferences take place in different regions across the country. All of these conferences have their starting in Washington, DC, as American Association of Museums, or the AAM. The AAM than branches off; bring this wide picture closer to home is Indianapolis's annual conference for the Association of Midwest Museums or AMM. The AMM includes Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio, and Wisconsin. Museum curators come together to discuss latest successes, upcoming shows, show ideas, dealing with challenges, community reactions, and sharing ideas and insight with one another. AAM and the AMM and its relation to museum curators is not unlike a medical doctor who has to return to med school every few years to brush up old and new things. This is a perfect opportunity to begin networking with different museums to gain access to works of art that would fit with a exhibit or upcoming show. Professor Ruff explained her own membership with the MRC, Midwest Registrar Committee. "One thing we talked about was a flood that happened in Iowa that resulted in much of the collection destroyed." Protecting and preserving the collections and using the best of the assets of the museums are often top of the conversation.

Once a relationship has been established among museums, and the transfer of the art work has been arranged, it is up to the money changers. In a larger museum setting there are accountants and book keepers that manage the money. Monetary means primarily comes from donors and sponsors, next is any government grants and funding the museum director/trustee/curator can apply for, not unlike how a student applies for a scholarship; a lot of

work and research is involved with always someone to impress. Smaller museums, such as the Brauer compared to the Met, have endowments given by the Board of Directors of the Campus. These monetary funds are used to obtain works of art, insure them for travel just as one would ensure their car or “shipping and handling” services, any special packaging that may be required as most of the time one can not wrap a marble statue in bubble wrap and call the UPS man. “Gregg Hertzlieb, the museum curator, oversees the crating up of arts being shipped. This is usually done by interns”, Gloria explained. Crates are the most popular form of packaging for art on the move; made of plywood and stuffed with excelsior. Once arriving at the destination, the process begins again for the return journey home. Art work is not cheap, even when borrowing it. For a good basic show, it takes on average 3 years of planning. For a museum the size of the Met, it can be estimated at 10 years of prior planning.

After a short lunch break, the “typical day” of working in an art museum continues with any maintenance work that might pop up from a broken security camera, or loose canvas needing to be tightened, or a backed up toilet, something will always be backed up and odds are there isn’t someone to delegate all the work to. “Unless, of course,” chuckled Professor Ruff, “you’re working at larger museum.” As the basic stuff doesn’t stop going upward to as far as curators, administration tasks go downward to the very last janitor. In a work environment run on pure ambition, dedication, discipline, and volunteers, everyone is expected to do their part in helping the museum run to its fullest potential. This work includes personnel policies, performance evaluations, cataloging, inventories, and records.

Being a curator has more to it than just a director to order people around and work independently, innovated thinking is a requirement when one’s place of work is in a place

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dedicated to innovation. Lectures and publications get the museum name out to the public and the research done by the curator and the staff out in the open for recognition. Curators do not just put in an application and hope for the best, most museums require master degrees in, or relevant to, museum studies. Relevant fields included art history, anthropology, archeology, historical preservation, and conservation/restoration. Doctoral level programs of museums studies have yet to be established; however, there are some in some areas of public history and art administration. Museum studies itself as a course for higher education only recently came into sight for college bound students in 1983 when census caught a serious decline in museum technicians. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, occupational outlook handbook 2010-11, 50% of curators in American museums were banking between \$35,000 - \$63,000. According to Bureau of Labor Statistics projected in the next 10 years there will be a 25% increase of curator employment, and 16% in other museum related jobs. Despite such an outlooks, museum staffs are still being subject to cuts. Professor Ruff elaborated on why she as not able to attend the annuals meetings of AAM. "We simply don't have enough time nor means. With staff cuts, we have too much on our plates."

My investigation behind the scenes of art museums and administrative occupation enlightened those curious questions and enlightened myself as well with a better understand of a secretive almost invisible existence in the basement offices of the museum. Behind those "Employee Only" doors there are old works of art being restored by a team of interns. Those "Do Not Touch" signs were put there by people who worked day and night to ensure the safety of a unique piece of innovation would makes its way here with security. The staff members you may or may not see around the museum are working on year old projects that might last up to a

couple months on exhibition, or establishing relationships with known artists and selling the museum's qualities to potential donors. Starting in Europe in the 1870s and making it to America, no other establishment can take away the grandeur of the tall ceilings and provocative inventions brought up by the best creative minds world wide as that of what is within the hall of the art museum.