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In defence of the curator: maximising museum impact

Timothy A.M. Ewin^{a*} and Joanne V. Ewin^b

^a*Department of Earth Sciences, The Natural History Museum London, South Kensington, London SW7 5BD, UK;* ^b*Conservation and Collections Care, Hampton Court Palace, Surrey, UK*

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There is little published evidence for the direct impact curators and curatorial knowledge have on museum activities and the communities they serve. There is also little direct justification for curators, nor explicit recommendations for museums to continue to resource them. In the last 20 years, the numbers of curators in the UK have fallen. In order to spark debate about the effects of this decline, those of us who have come together to create the Campaign for Good Curatorship explore the generic benefits of curators and their collections/subject/community knowledge, irrespective of subject, within a modern museum framework and the negative impacts of their loss. From this, we conclude that properly trained and integrated curators are vital to maximising a museum's impact and accessibility and so should be adequately resourced, irrespective of the budget or project. Curators should also be part of any decision-making process relating to museum work and their unique skills should be valued for the contribution they can make. In this paper, which is in effect a manifesto, we also outline several ways in which the decline in the number of curators may be slowed.

Keywords: curator; museum; benefit; impact; justification; defence

Introduction

Nick Poole's excellent blog, titled 'The Rise and Fall of the Curator' (<http://www.collectionstrust.org.uk/the-rise-and-fall-of-the-curator/>), lays out many of the reasons for why curators are currently regarded by many as superfluous within the heritage sector and ever-increasingly distanced from the decision-making process within museums. Although little research has been carried out in this area, what has been published (e.g. Fothergill 2001, <http://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/news/02042013-poll-is-a-decline-in-specialist-curators-bad-for-museums>) suggests that the number of subject specialists employed by museums is dropping and that within the UK heritage sector, curators and collections knowledge are negatively stereotyped, seen as not being worthy of investing scarce resources by many. As a result, curators are increasingly viewed as a luxury (http://www.museumsassociation.org/maurice-davies-blog/15052012-what-next?utm_source=ma&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=23052012). But are curators and their knowledge of collections and community heritage really something museums and society can prosper without?

In short, we do not think that any museum can flourish for long without curators and this article is written in an attempt to raise awareness of the many benefits curators

*Corresponding author. Email: t.ewin@nhm.ac.uk

and curatorial knowledge can bring to society and thereby all museums. This is something we (the co-authors and members of the campaign for good curatorship) feel needs to be publicised more obviously, as most UK advisory and professional guidance documents, for example, Museum Association ‘Code of Ethics’, (28/01/2015 <http://www.museumsassociation.org/ethics/code-of-ethics>), Museum Association, Collections for the Future 2007 (28/01/2015 <http://www.museumsassociation.org/download?id=11121>), Museum Association, Museums 2020 campaign, 2012 (28/01/2015 <http://www.museumsassociation.org/campaigns/museums2020/2020vision>), Arts Council England Designation Scheme (28/07/2014 <http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/what-we-do/supporting-museums/designation-scheme/>), Arts Council England Accreditation scheme (28/01/2015 <http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/what-we-do/supporting-museums/accreditation-scheme/>) rarely explicitly make a case for curators and specialist knowledge and the importance they have in delivering effective public services, although it is frequently assumed.

As curatorial skills and knowledge underpin most museum work, including those regarding instrumental impact, then these skills should, in theory, not be marginalised, ignored, nor regarded as ‘intrinsic’.

Before addressing what is uniquely important about curators, we will first outline what we think a curator is. This is important as a ‘curator’ has come to mean very different things in different organisations and also because there is no adequate nor indeed, an agreed-upon definition of a curator within a modern museum context. It is neither defined by the Arts Council England nor by the Museums Association. It is therefore important to understand what is unique about the curator’s work and thus what is lost when curators are no longer effectively used or replaced.

To our knowledge, the only attempt at defining a curator in a modern museum context has been undertaken as part of the Campaign for Good Curatorship. It is defined as

An employee of a heritage organisation (e.g. museum or art gallery), whose role it is to understand the heritage (be that cultural, historic or scientific) and objects pertaining to the heritage of the communities that organisation serves and make this information available to anyone who may wish to access it, facilitate dialogue surrounding it and develop and manage collections relating to it. (<http://campaignforgoodcuratorship.org.uk/defining-what-is-meant-by-the-title-curator-in-a-modern-heritage-context/>)

We feel that this definition is adequate for the purposes of this debate, but are aware that it excludes certain areas of the heritage profession, in particular those who ‘curate’ temporary exhibitions (e.g. in the contemporary art world) but also others who do purely research or managerial work. The reasons for this will become apparent below and are further expanded in a blog on the Campaign for good Curatorship website, but we feel that a curator is someone who is responsible for understanding and developing a permanent collection and the many varied issues surrounding this, beyond gathering content for an exhibition or a publication. We will now describe what work, skills and abilities we feel are unique to curators and why they are important.

What is a curator? For us, and here I am speaking for those who have joined the Campaign for Good Curatorship, a curator is someone who thoroughly understands the collections, their context to the history and culture of the communities they serve and in many cases, the academic subjects (cultural, historical and scientific) they pertain too; that is, they are an expert or a specialist on the collections held by a

museum, in trust for society. Curators know what the strengths and weaknesses of the collections are and its value. They have a clear idea of what is important and what is not so important, what should be kept, what should be disposed of and how the collection needs to be developed in order to maintain its usefulness and relevance for all museum functions and society. Curators also pair this scholarship with an understanding of how to manage, look after and use the collections to ensure its longevity and accessibility.

As members of the Campaign for Good Curatorship, we see curators as central to exploring and investigating our heritage in order to bring it to life in many different ways for all in society to enjoy and benefit. Curators keep our heritage alive through their understanding of cultural objects and their meanings. Curators are ‘keepers of the flame’ and people who can bring the past or a subject to life, can explain or can provide the knowledge for communities to come together or make this knowledge and passion available to other museum professionals to engage the public. A curator is someone who cares about the survival of our heritage and is a guardian and a conscience for the museum and society, someone who organises the collection, maintains records of our heritage and is responsible for the presentation and accuracy of these records.

Being a curator is not about spoon-feeding people with an ‘established’ idea, it is about inspiring people, enabling them to access the information they need, to engage more thoroughly with objects, to discover, empowering them to ask questions and giving them the skills to go on and find out for themselves. It is about planting ideas and providing the guidance to go on and explore and question those ideas and subjects. It is involving people and immersing them in their own heritage and enabling them to fully understand objects of cultural, historical or scientific significance and make full use of them. In other words, curators facilitate deeper, more meaningful access to heritage for all in society to benefit from.

Curators may not necessarily always be best placed (or have the right skill set) to deliver this knowledge directly to the public, although many certainly do. However, in making curatorial knowledge accessible to other museum professionals, curators make that heritage more engaging and authoritative. Indeed, this is an important and often underrepresented consequence of curatorial involvement in museums. Largely because it is delivered in conjunction with other activities (for instance, in exhibitions with designers or outreach programmes with learning officers) that are often solely given the credit, when really it is a team effort that includes curators.

As a consequence, we feel that curators are an integral part of all museum work. They should not be marginalised within museum activity decision-making or development. They should be central to museum processes and projects and as such, the balance therefore needs to be redressed. We do not maintain that curators should be put in charge of everything, just included with a meaningful ability to feed their unique expertise and experience into the work. Museums should refrain from producing content without meaningful input by a curator at all stages (from content design through to delivery).

That said, we understand that curators (as well as other museum professionals) are frequently expected to do significantly more, particularly with regard to collections management, management, conservation, exhibitions, outreach and so on. As such, we encourage everyone who is a curator not to exclude these additional responsibilities, but to ensure that adequate time is still given to the uniquely curatorial elements

of their work as well. Directors and managers also need to be aware that curatorial work is vital to the success of a museum, even though this may not be explicitly referred to in existing performance or guidance documents.

The public's expectations

Evidence for the strength of the public value of curators and their knowledge is largely anecdotal and so we would welcome meaningful research in this area. However, the 2013 Britain Thinks survey commissioned by the Museums Association (28/01/2015 <http://www.museumsassociation.org/download?id=954916>) highlighted that curatorial expertise is highly valued by society. In agreement with these findings, we have also always been struck at how the public seem to innately value curators and their knowledge of collections, even though they may not encounter them frequently.

A good example of where this value has been evident (to the first author) is involvement in the Natural History Museum's Science Uncovered initiative. Here, over 200 curators and scientists, most of whom either work for the museum or collaborate with museum scientists, set up a series of stalls and present their work to the public, thus providing direct public access to curators. This is a hugely successful engagement activity and although it only runs for a single night of the year, it draws about 10,000 visitors. During this event, there are thousands of interactions with experts and the satisfaction rating for the public is huge. I have personally been thanked for introducing people to subjects they had never thought accessible before and giving them an understanding of why it is important for museums to continue to understand their collections.

Indeed, valuing objects is *the* reason why, for many people, museums exist. This impact (museums being experts on their own collections and how they relate to society or a particular subject), which museums with curators and collections have on society, should not be ignored or just assumed to be intrinsic.

We are not, however, saying that storing and understanding collections are the sole function of a museum. As the 1980s demonstrated, such a reductive approach brings many problems that ultimately lead to a poorer public service (<http://www.collectiontrust.org.uk/the-rise-and-fall-of-the-curator/>). Museums should not neglect their responsibilities as centres of heritage and community knowledge, irrespective of the resources required, as seems to have been suggested by some in the UK museum sector (http://www.museumsassociation.org/maurice-davies-blog/15052012-what-next?utm_source=ma&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=23052012).

Furthermore, collections and heritage knowledge underpins most museum work, including exhibitions or outreach, and provision to maintain and develop this is crucial to maintaining a museum's relevance and to delivering beneficial 'instrumental' impacts and services to society. For instance, curators can tell you what the best object is to illustrate a story, they can provide the most inspirational story for an object, they can identify important objects and with their expertise make them more accessible. One need only look at the recent attendance figures and reviews of the British Museum's temporary exhibitions (such as *Life and death in Pompeii and Herculaneum*, March – September 2013) to realise that serious curatorial involvement at many different levels of exhibition planning has been hugely beneficial to their success. The kinds of richness that curators provide to the museum experience provide the depth of understanding necessary to render a complicated and detailed subject matter concise and accessible without losing authority.

For some, interaction on a superficial level with heritage is seen as adequate. This has manifested itself in presenting objects (or even just images) with minimal contextual information. We are reminded of an event entitled 'Dinosaur outreach' in a museum with a curator of Geology where members of the public made dinosaur-inspired facemasks without any reference to dinosaurs, even those displayed in an adjacent gallery. Curators provide the depth, the colour, the subtlety of expression and rigour to ensure that the information delivered on an object or subject is presented in the most accessible and inspirational way. I have lost count of the number of times I have seen something beautifully displayed only to realise that the design has compromised my interaction with object, such as when small objects are placed at the back of large cases or spotlights bleach out the contrast necessary to appreciate the subtlety of texture, or oversimplification distorting the meaning of the text – or simply not choosing the most inspirational object.

If resources are removed from curatorial posts, museums produce poorer services and risk losing the public's confidence. Anecdotal evidences suggest that this happens, although more research is required to confirm this conclusion.

Museums need curators

The great benefit of curators to museums comes when they not only make object and subject expertise available to all areas of museum work but when they have a thorough understanding of how this knowledge can be used to benefit other areas of museum practice, be it collections management, outreach, community engagement or exhibition design. Curators must play an active part in an integrated museum service and ensure that their work meets the museum's priorities and their expertise is shared widely and enthusiastically to all within museums and the wider community to maximise impact as required. Curators have not always made their expertise readily available nor ensured that their research meets the priorities of the museum (some even put their research before their responsibilities to the museum) and this paper urges all curators work to engage with other museum employees, be they designers or community engagement officers, to help them to make the museum more effective. Furthermore, curators need to ensure that their research not only builds upon the body of knowledge for their subject, but, more importantly, ensure that it meets the needs of the organisation and the communities which it serves.

Knowledge is fundamental to effective museum working and so knowledge of the collections and the community's heritage is essential to maximising museums' effectiveness and instrumental impact. The two are not mutually exclusive, but curators need time to gain this expertise. Furthermore, it has been contested that curators do not need to be experts, as all museums need to present is a concise story. However, we contend that in order to produce an authoritative, engaging, concise story requires a broad knowledge base in the first place. Curators need not actually tell the story themselves, but this expertise needs to be part of the process.

This increase in the quality of public offer, be it display, outreach or community engagement provided by curatorial knowledge, should in theory lead to increased audience satisfaction, visitor numbers and ultimately instrumental impact (as indeed has been shown by the British Museum temporary exhibitions and at the Science Uncovered event at The Natural History Museum, London). Curators should therefore be an essential part of the team at any museum, regardless of size.

Whilst many of the examples used in this paper are taken from national museums, we feel that these principals apply to organisations of any size and type.

We believe that there is a demand from the public to have access to people with expertise on heritage and the collections, rather than just simple information about objects/heritage delivered by non-specialists or displays. Curators should therefore take a more active role in all museum work. Without curatorial expertise, the impact of *all* the public-facing services is potentially poorer than it would be with their involvement. Thus, public offer without curatorial expertise should not be considered 'best practice'.

Curators can act as arbiters of information being collected via interactive media such as crowdsourcing. This will help ensure that valuable and novel information is retained and used (in effect what curators already do for physical objects). It is clear we do not believe that crowdsourcing can substitute for a curator within a museum, as it merely generates information which will need to be collated and verified later. Self-regulated crowdsourcing, like Wikipedia, is an effective way to generate information; however, its balance and accuracy are still limited. In all cases, museums will still need someone to have an overview of this information so that the content can be accessed and used effectively – the role curators already play for collections.

Museums need to thoroughly understand what they have in their collections in order to continue to operate effectively and remain relevant. Important objects are given the priority they deserve and can be made more accessible. We argue that curators, with their expertise of the collections, are also the only people who can make informed decisions about acquisition and disposal, thereby ensuring relevance and responsibility. Curators, along with conservators also ensure that collections are utilised responsibly, enabling maximum access to a communities heritage without compromising the objects future stability, a key function of a museum in the eyes of the public (28/01/2015 <http://www.museumsassociation.org/download?id=954916>).

Whilst databases are an excellent tool for managing collections and retrieving information, they do not replace someone with knowledge of the collection. This is largely because the database is only as good as the information it holds *and* the person interrogating the database. As such, databases are of limited use for public enquiries and other non-specialist museum employees unless there is an expert to guide them through the collections and act as a filter of results – a database will not tell you what an object brought in for enquiry is, nor which object is best for display or outreach nor how to get maximum impact from it. Thus, a curator is what museums need to really prosper and provide a quality service.

A curator can also be a knowledgeable ambassador for the museum. Their understanding of the importance of a collection, displayed objects, new acquisitions and community history, and, if properly trained, can maximise positive PR for marketing the museum and engaging the media. Curators can also be used to engage effectively with potential donors (in terms of both money and objects) and funding bodies, as they are able to make highly informed, impassioned approaches for acquiring, preserving or maintaining important parts of a community's heritage. Furthermore, this knowledge of collections, and the subjects they pertain to, makes curators perfect for establishing effective partnerships with other heritage organisations as well as tapping into expertise and forging strong and beneficial relationships with external stakeholders and communities.

Curators should be fully integrated members of the museum team and be prepared to understand how they can help others to achieve their aims and deliver on wider museum priorities. They should not be 'precious' or egotistical about sharing their knowledge. Instead, curators need to be open and generous with their knowledge to all who wish to access it. After all, that is what they are paid to do!

Museums without curators

Can museums exist without curators? Museums without curators would no longer be able to answer enquiries effectively nor develop, use or manage their collections as effectively and responsibly and would thereby risk losing authority and public trust. On a practical level, invaluable collections would become lost, forgotten, damaged, neglected or seen as burdens and disposed of without due care or consideration. Furthermore, collections would become static and no longer represent contemporary society, and no longer ensure that newly available, culturally important objects or specimens would be available for future generations.

If this happens, it would risk alienating public support for museums, and thereby increase the risk of cuts to crucial public funding. All these aspects must be in balance to deliver an effective public service. So, museums which solely focus on front-facing services cannot maximise a museum's effectiveness, as they will not be able to address much of what is vital for these functions to occur, as well as being unable to deliver on many of the other responsibilities museums have to society and the museum services which are desired by the public (28/01/2015 <http://www.museumsassociation.org/download?id=954916>).

Do all museums need a curator?

Due to the large range in size and scope of museums, it is not the place of curators to dictate how they are run. However, we would argue that every museum, irrespective of size, should have members of staff develop curatorial knowledge and understand what is in the collection as a core part of their role, even if they are not called a curator. They need to know more than just the museum's database.

In smaller museums, this need not be a full-time job; however, curatorial skills and a curatorial approach as described above should be seen as part of a designated role. For us, knowledge of the collection is what is important. We do not expect small museums with a varied collection including natural history, social history, art and archaeology to have four different curators responsible for only ten specimens. Rather, those responsible, irrespective of their actual subject specialism, should take the time to understand the strengths and weaknesses of the collection and its context. Many smaller museums have certain collection strengths and should employ people who have an expertise in that area but who are also capable and curious enough to understand the importance of other areas. Another option, which worked to good effect in the early 1990s for natural history collections, was to have peripatetic curators (Clare Valentine pers. comm. 04/02/2015) – perhaps this is something which regional organisations need to look at again, although this is beyond the scope of this paper. What is important is that permanent staff be given time to research collections and heritage as a core part of their work. This is not a luxury – it is essential if museums are to act responsibly, ethically and effectively in providing excellent public services.

How should we go about improving curatorial cover for collections?

To be more effective, curators need training in how their knowledge fits into the museum as a whole, and other museum professionals need to understand how to best get the information they need to perform their tasks. To do this, the sector needs to shift away from the negative stereotyping of curators and curatorial knowledge and the assumption that these skills do not need to be promoted as they are ‘intrinsic’ to museum work. Instead, the sector needs to recognise the huge importance and varied benefits curatorial knowledge can bring to all areas of museum work and consistently include curators as part of a multidisciplinary team undertaking any museum project, be it display, outreach, community engagement, collections management, marketing or advocacy.

Curators also need to be more visible, confident, capable and articulate about what value they offer museums and their communities. To assist curators in this and to start to build advocacy documents and examples of best practice, the Campaign for Good Curatorship (28/01/2015 <http://campaignforgoodcuratorship.org.uk/>) has been established by the Collections Trust to champion collections knowledge as a priority of any heritage organisation’s work and highlight the benefits and advantages of doing this.

Furthermore, to safeguard resourcing for curatorial knowledge in UK museums so that they are sustainable and behaving responsibly with regard to collections and heritage knowledge, the campaign is seeking to make explicit references of this within governance documents and standards of best practice such as the Museums Association Code of Ethics (28/01/2015 <http://www.museumsassociation.org/ethics/code-of-ethics>); Accreditation (28/01/2015 <http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/what-we-do/supporting-museums/accreditation-scheme/>) and Designation (28/06/2014 <http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/what-we-do/supporting-museums/designation-scheme/>). Without this, we believe that museums are failing in their responsibilities towards safeguarding society’s heritage. Thus, how can these documents, without reference to curators and curatorial knowledge, claim to do so?

Times in the UK may be tough, but museums need to continue to act responsibly with regard to the heritage entrusted to them. We need collections management, such as SPECTRUM benchmarking to ensure standards of care (as published by the Collections Trust 05/02/2015 <http://www.collectionstrust.org.uk/spectrum>) and public impact, such as outline in the MA’s initiative ‘Museums Change Lives’ (05/02/2015 <http://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-change-lives>), but museums should not lose sight of the other major public expectations and responsibilities. That is, to understand and preserve society’s culturally, historically and scientifically significant objects and share them with all of society.

Museums must not rely on volunteers, temporary project staff, crowdsourcing or databases to replace curators. Although these are valuable resources, their support can quickly be withdrawn or produce unreliable information leaving nothing to fill the gap, resulting in the erosion of public trust in museums. Permanent curators are needed as effective curatorial knowledge takes a significant time to acquire, well beyond the scope of most short-term contracts.

We hope that every museum starts to think seriously about developing and retaining knowledge within permanent museum employees alongside instrumental impact as this seems to us the best way towards a sustainable and vibrant heritage sector.

This needs to happen now, as many museum staff with extensive curatorial knowledge are approaching retirement and there are few adequately trained replacements. Indeed, many organisations are rapidly reducing their experienced curatorial cover. These cuts in the name of solving financial problems or focusing on 'instrumental' impacts must be more critically evaluated before museums make costly and potentially damaging decisions that will take a generation to reverse. Museums require a better balance between impact and value than is currently being proposed.

Conclusion

We believe that museums have an important role to play in a healthy, tolerant and inclusive society and that all museums need excellent curators to maximise impact and public benefit. Effective curators understand their collections and improve the impact, value and sustainability of all of the outward-facing functions of the museum. Finally, as all museums benefit from curatorial knowledge, better provision needs to be made for it. This should be effected through inclusion of curatorial expertise in Accreditation, Designation, Spectrum and the MA code of ethics. And so, we urge all to join the Good Curatorship Campaign so that society can share these benefits.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributors

T. A. M. Ewin has worked in curatorial posts in local, regional and national museums within the UK, largely specialising on natural history collections. As part of this work a keen interest has been fostered regarding how curators contribute to museum work and how they are perceived by other museum professionals within the UK. This has further led to the initiation of a campaign to raise awareness of the importance of curators called 'The Campaign for Good Curatorship'.

J. V. Ewin has worked in a variety of museum roles, mostly focusing on collections management and documentation of historical collections at local, regional and national institutions. Through this work she has perceived a lessening in the role of the curator, which has affected the quality of some aspects of museum work and is thus keen to promote the role of specialist curators in order to enable the public to get the highest quality experience.