

Careers for Historians: Registrars

By Beth Crist

Wanted: History museum seeks an individual to oversee its artifact collection. Must be detail oriented and highly organized, and must work well under pressure. Qualifications: master's degree in history or related field, with two years' experience.

Does this job description sound interesting? It's taken from a classified ad for a museum registrar. In a nutshell, registrars keep track of a museum's objects and the information about them. This may sound simple, but registrars have many responsibilities and contribute to the smooth running of museums.

Registrars

- maintain information files and databases for all permanent and loaned artifacts in museum collections
- set up tracking systems to organize and locate artifacts in storage
- complete paperwork for donated artifacts and negotiate contracts for loans
- record the condition of artifacts and oversee their packing, moving, and storage
- help install and take down exhibits
- obtain insurance for collections and for loaned artifacts
- accompany artifacts that are being transported

The first registrars may have worked in ancient Greece and Rome, keeping records on clay tablets of household items for royal families. Record keeping has come a long way since then. Today's registrars must have excellent computer skills, including word processing, spreadsheet, digital imaging, and database management. Most registrars have master's degrees in history or museum studies. Strong problem-solving skills are also required for the job. Registrars enjoy the variety of their work and have the satisfaction of caring for irreplaceable pieces of history.

To learn more:

- Check out the following Web sites to learn more about becoming a registrar:
Career Exploration: Museum Registrar
<http://www.nextstepmagazine.com/NSMPages/articledetails.aspx?articleid=49>

Gatekeeper of the Art Museum

<http://www.princeton.edu/pr/pwb/98/0112/0112-maureenmcc.html>

- Arrange an interview with a registrar at a local museum. Come prepared with a list of questions: What do you do on a typical day? What is your favorite part of the job? Why did you want to be a registrar? What is your educational background? What projects are you working on?

Try it out:

- Give your family or class ten new pens to use. Develop a tracking system to follow the pens for a week. Lend a neighbor or another class five of the pens for a few days. What must you do to ensure that the pens come back undamaged?

Interview with Katherine Beery

Registrar Katherine Beery has worked at the North Carolina Museum of History for more than eight years.

Beth Crist: What is your educational background?

Katherine Beery: I have a bachelor of arts degree in American history from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and a master's degree in museum studies from George Washington University in Washington, D.C.

BC: When did you become interested in becoming a registrar?

KB: I had just finished my master's degree, and I needed a job in the museum field. A new registrar position was open here at the North Carolina Museum of History!

BC: Have you had any other history-related jobs?

KB: Yes, I worked at the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation in Williamsburg, Virginia, as a living-history interpreter and served in the Company of Colonial Performers. I also worked at the Daughters of the American Revolution Museum in Washington, D.C., as an intern, where I completed an inventory and survey of several collections.

BC: What do you do at work on a typical day?

KB: There is no typical day in collections management. Just a few things registrars do in a day might include working on the installation of an exhibit, doing condition reports, and making sure that all of the objects designated for that exhibit are where they are supposed to be. Or we may be at our desks looking up storage locations for artifacts needed for another exhibit. Or we may be entering new storage locations for artifacts that are being returned to storage but have to have new storage locations.

Registrars always have several kinds of ongoing legal paperwork to do, such as contracts for new acquisitions, as well as incoming and outgoing loan contracts. We also work with our insurance company to make sure that incoming loans have certificates of insurance sent to the lenders who require them.

We also supervise assistant registrars who do a variety of tasks, especially taking inventories of different collections. With the help of the assistant registrars, we edit information on the artifact database, making that information and any images we have of our collections available to the public via our Web site.

BC: What do you like best about your job?

KB: Being employed in my field.

BC: What advice do you have for students who are interested in becoming registrars?

KB: Get a museum studies master's degree with plenty of collections management training. You need collections management training whether you are a registrar, curator, director, or other museum professional. Knowing and understanding the legalities and liabilities of owning and managing a major collection, as well as the policies and procedures that lie at the foundation of owning that collection, are essential to the basic success of the institution.

BC: What has been your favorite project?

KB: I have not had a favorite project. Each task is different, and each requires the effort to use good standard museum practice (along with mounds of patience).