Museum Careers: A Practical Guide for Students and Novices


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In recent years, the museum profession has had the good fortune of becoming the career objective of an increasing number of creative, bright, and engaged young Americans. In spite of the ambivalent, if not foreboding, messages that have emerged in national dialogues — the culture wars of the 1990s, dwindling federal and corporate support for cultural institutions in general since then, and a recent economic stimulus bill passed by Congress that almost excluded museums and still does not cover zoos and aquariums — interest in museum work continues to grow.

The proliferation of museum studies programs is evidence of this trend. Numerous colleges and universities have begun offering certificates and degrees in museology, museum education, and related programs. According to the Museum Employment Resource Center’s Web site, educational institutions in the United States and Canada now offer more than 60 such programs, many of which are full time master’s degree programs at major universities. Europe and Asia have shorter but equally prestigious lists of museum studies programs, including several in the United Kingdom that are venerable leaders in museum theory.

These programs will thrive — to the extent that students recognize their value in providing practical knowledge — serving as an entrée into a museum job upon graduation. But the path to a career in the museum field does not reside wholly in the world of museum studies programs. Many people arrive at museum work more indirectly: they first gain experience in a related (or seemingly unrelated) field, and only later become involved in museums. Museums, then, have a wide and increasingly talented pool from which to cultivate their professional staffs.

Regardless of which route they plan to take, museum hopefuls of all types will be a ready audience for N. Elizabeth Schlatter’s book, Museum Careers: A Practical Guide for Students and Novices.

Beginning with a general discussion of museum employment, Schlatter touches on common reasons people choose to work in museums, the definition of a museum, and recent trends in museology. Such a sweeping introduction runs the risk of superficial explanations that may unintentionally confuse the novices in Schlatter’s audience. Then again, a more complete treatment of these subjects belongs elsewhere (and indeed, can be found in many other books).

Schlatter goes on to make several astute and useful observations about employment trends in museums. Most importantly, she notes that many museum jobs are not to be found within museums, but rather in the world of contractors and independent firms doing consulting, marketing, design, and research — roles that can be every bit as gratifying as institutional positions. Revealing new avenues to pursue, this insight may come as a surprise...
Museum Careers shines in its review of the broad spectrum of museum-related jobs. Eschewing the dated classification by type of museum—jobs at art museums, jobs at science museums, and so on—Schlatter explores museum careers by function rather than setting. This welcome approach suggests that the museum world is flexible: that one can perform similar duties in various institutional settings. It also better reflects the reality of today’s job-seekers. Schlatter divides the museum employment spectrum into four broad themes: jobs focused on objects and/or exhibitions, jobs with a public focus, jobs with an administrative focus, and the director. Each section assesses responsibilities, advantages and disadvantages, typical salary ranges, required education, and resources for professional development.

This otherwise worthwhile discussion of career paths ends on a curious note, though, with a lengthy appraisal of the museum director’s role. Using commentary from 10 actual directors from institutions that vary in theme, size, and location, Schlatter explores the broad swath of activities that museum directors are involved in and the various paths that one can take to a leadership position. Granted, directing a museum is a complex, demanding, and fascinating role, but this level of detail may seem excessive, especially to the book’s intended audience. It seems unlikely that most novices and students set out with directorships on their minds. More thorough descriptions of entry- and mid-level positions might have served them better.

In contrast to the books written by outsiders to museums, Schlatter’s voice is clearly that of a professional with an expansive and nuanced understanding of the field. She currently serves as the deputy director and curator of exhibitions at the University of Richmond Museums and has held a range of roles prior to this position. In addition to her own first-hand knowledge, she weaves commentary from nearly 40 contemporary museum professionals throughout the text. We hear from illustrious characters such as Neil deGrasse Tyson, director of New York City’s Hayden Planetarium at the American Museum of Natural History (and People magazine’s Sexiest Astrophysicist Alive in 2000), as well as from staff at small institutions and newcomers to the field. Finally, Schlatter advises her readers to prepare for museum employment by reviewing various avenues of education—not just the museum-specific programs mentioned above, but alternative routes like degrees in the natural sciences, public history, and arts management. She illustrates the value of internships and volunteering as ways to gain concrete experience and often a competitive advantage for full-time entry into the field. A step-by-step tutorial on how to locate, apply for, and interview for a museum job follows, and it’s good enough to be used as a model for the broader non-profit and cultural sectors.

Rounding out her career advice, Schlatter recommends that readers engage in professional development through national associations, continuing education programs, and conferences. These provide information about industry standards and progress as well as a doorway into a world of networking that can lead to the right job. Among a handful of appendices, Schlatter provides a wonderful compendium of these professional associations, soci-
eties, and committees, as well as resources for job searching—Web site addresses included.

A handful of mildly confusing passages notwithstanding, Schlatter’s Museum Careers serves as a relevant and timely review of the information that beginners need as they embark on their careers in the museum field. The author examines the museum world with a discerning eye for what novices may encounter and what they may not have thought about yet. If her audience heeds her words, the pool of museum job applicants will become even more savvy and realistic about their careers. Then the really hard work—deciding which fledgling talents to hire—will shift to the museums themselves.