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Gladsome moments: From the museum to the academy... and back?

“It made me gladsome to be getting some education, it being like a big window opening.” Mary Webb 1881–1927.

When I began my career as a curator I never intended to teach. Twenty-five years later, I cannot imagine how I could not. I practice as a curator at the Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia, where I also teach museum anthropology in the Department of Anthropology and Sociology. Moving between the academy and the museum can be challenging and there are times when grading papers and writing exhibition text compete for my attention, and I find myself having to decide which role, at that particular time, should take precedence—practitioner or teacher? This is not a new dilemma for those who practice and teach. Katharine Lochlan (1991), curator at the Art Gallery of Ontario, said “While spreading knowledge is clearly a laudable goal, and while curators are dedicated to furthering scholarship and have professorial qualifications, there are only so many hours to the day. The more energy a curator devotes to an outside activity such as teaching...the less he or she has for curatorial work...” (45). In this commentary, written as an autoethnography, I will share as analytically and objectively as I am able, my perceptions of how I became a teacher, why I have chosen to continue, and how my decisions have influenced my progress in the academy and my career as a curator.

1. Academic career

My career began from a discipline base, a BA in Anthropology at the University of British Columbia (1974), followed by a graduate certificate in Social Anthropology at Cambridge (1976). I studied social and political organisations, economics and technology, and the ceremonial and spiritual life of Melanesian cultures. Ethnographies and contemporary functional/structural theories took precedence over studies of historic material culture. However, during my undergraduate years at UBC I also took Museum Principles and Methods, a course created by Audrey Hawthorn in 1963¹ and later taught by Drs Marjorie Halpin and Michael Ames. Classes were held in a storage space that doubled as an exhibition gallery.² It was an “active teaching programme involving students in the use of the museum” (Hawthorn, 1976, 52) and based on a lecture and laboratory format. This included conservation and cataloguing methodologies, as well as curating a small display case. My first exposure to experiential-based learning opened my eyes to the possibility of a career in museums. I enjoyed working with objects that were tangible evidence of, with apologies to Roland Barthes, the “there then” in the “here now”. I enjoyed the privilege of having access to objects accorded only to those who had the “right” to be behind the scenes.

¹ In 1947 Audrey Hawthorn became the founding curator of the Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia.

² Dr Marjorie Halpin was a curator at the UBC Museum of Anthropology until her death in 2001.

2. Curatorial work

Hawthorn and Halpin were practicing curators who built the collection and created exhibitions and, in retrospect, emphasised the role of curator as pivotal to the realization of museum objectives. This role has changed over time, as it should, and I consider myself fortunate to have been taught by these women who encouraged me to view material culture as worthy of serious study.

After returning to Canada in 1976 from Cambridge, I began a 6-month contract at the Vancouver Museum where I prepared a cross-indexed data base of the Chinese collection. This involved examining and researching every Chinese object in order to construct an index that included shape, colour, material, decorative element and, when possible, function. This was a period when the primacy of the object was unquestioned and little attempt was made to seek any tacit knowledge that might be embodied in an object, or consider the possibility that it might serve utilitarian and social/ideological functions; that is, be both a tool and a sign. (Kingery, 1996, 196–7). It would be several years before the museum world began moving from an object-centred to a people-centred approach. I spent months documenting the physical characteristics of objects. Acquiring information about materials and techniques helped me discover some tacit knowledge embodied in objects, what might now be referred to as “agency”. Few models of material culture analysis existed at this time and none, to my knowledge, constructed by indigenous creators of the collections held in museums.³ All analysis of ethnographic objects was based on Western-derived theories born in the disciplines of anthropology and art history.⁴ Today, these are grist for criticism and reflexive thinking. Then, they were the lore of the land.

At the end of my contract, a collections assistant position became available. My academic credentials, my established work record at the museum, and my unbridled enthusiasm and persistence (I phoned every day) secured the position. My goal was to become a curator. Having limited knowledge of the scope of museum practice, I followed the cues of experienced curators who viewed other staff members—designers, educators, conservators—as supporters of the curatorial prerogative.⁵ I didn’t understand the complexity of their roles, and communication was marred by a hierarchy that was maintained by carefully patrolled borders. The resulting angst manifested itself at conferences and in the literature: “Educators find themselves marginalised. They cannot compete with the status conferred on curators by virtue of their proximity and control of the source of the museum’s prestige and power, the objects of the museum’s collection” (Harper, 1993, 21). All I really understood was that other professionals within the museum had been specifically trained to be competent in their practice. As a curator, on the other hand, I was well versed in anthropological theory and knowledge of specific cultures, but had no training in how to function as a curator. Clearly I needed help and nothing was available locally, so I enrolled in a 6-month, long-distance certificate programme administered by the Canadian Museums Association. This provided useful “how to” training (exhibit development, label writing, preventative conservation).

³ I was unaware of E. McClung Flemming’s article “Artifact Study: A Proposed Model.” In *Winterthur Portfolio* 9 (1974): 153–73.

⁴ Chinese material at the Vancouver Museum was situated in the ethnology division. In some museums such material might be found in a decorative and applied arts division; in an art museum it would probably be a department in its own right.

⁵ Although the role of the curator has changed significantly there remains remnants of those who may still think of themselves as omnipotent and omniscient (see Duncan Cameron’s article “Putting Public Relations in its Place” in *Curator*, 1961, IV/2, pp. 103107).

I also joined museum associations and attended conferences and workshops. None of these were paid for by the museum; they were viewed as a cost in lost curatorial time and tolerated as long as the time was taken as holiday. D. Thiery Ruddel (1991, 3), now director of museum studies at the University of Toronto, noted: "... by not participating in this task [of teaching], museums are preserving scarce resources now, but are doing little to ensure qualified personnel in the future. It took years for museums to view ongoing training as an important component of staff development and well-being.

3. Curating an exhibition

I had just finished my certificate programme when I began curating my first exhibition, an exhilarating and terrifying experience. It was presumed that graduate training in a discipline was sufficient to present material culture in some meaningful and accessible way. Based on knowledge acquired while "curating" a small (4' x 3') display case at the University of British Columbia, creating an "exhibition on commentary" as part of my certificate programme, and attending some conference workshops, I began work on "The Arts of Conflict." This was an exhibition of about 300 artifacts, displayed in a 3600-ft² gallery. There was a freedom born of ignorance that enabled me to take risks, make choices, venture into new territories, and learn new skills. Today, revisiting my mistakes and presumptions, I recognize this exhibition served as an excellent teaching tool, especially when critiqued by the exhibition curator. As David Lowenthal, political historian has commented: "If we cannot wholly expunge what once vexed or shamed us, we can tell our own tale better than anyone else" (David Lowenthal, 1998). Further reflection led me to write an article, which alerted other inexperienced curators to pitfalls in curating an exhibition. The article served to discourage me from reshaping the past.⁶ I now encourage students to read early articles, as well as critiques. Walk in the footsteps of

your ancestors, first, because as Claude Levi Strauss so succinctly says: "...in order to propose a different interpretation, without first agreeing to retread pace by pace an itinerary which, even if it led nowhere, induces us to look for another route and may help us to find it..." (Claude Levi Strauss, 1973, 83).

The exhibition was very popular (held over for 6 months), but I didn't really understand why. The field of visitor studies had barely broken ground and few tools existed in understanding what is popular and what serves the needs and expectations of visitors.⁷ The museum where I worked, and others, were not investing resources on visitor studies. This was the 1970s; funding was secure and plentiful and museums decided what the public needed. Just build it and people will come was the museum motif. A blissful ignorance, perhaps arrogance, permeated the museum world. During this period, and into the early 1980s, most curators believed their three major roles were to be up-to-date in their discipline, be involved in the growth of collections, and be responsible for the development of exhibitions (Villa Bryk, 2001, 40). These roles kept me ensconced in the museum, with an occasional foray out to meet collectors, attend conferences and lectures, and participate in workshops.

⁶ The tale of this exhibition was written up. See Mayer C.E., 1979. "Arts of Conflict: the execution of a first exhibition" *Gazette* (12)2:22–29.

⁷ Visitor Studies methodologies had not advanced beyond collecting data for quantitative surveys so there were no tools available for what became known as summative evaluations. It wasn't until 1992 that the Visitor Studies Association was incorporated and the opportunity arose to attend conferences and workshops.

4. International blockbuster exhibition

This changed in 1980, when I worked on an international blockbuster exhibition, “Look of Music.” Dr Philip Young, professor of music at the University of Victoria, had been contracted to put together a selection of instruments that illustrated the development of music from the 16th to the 19th century, and I was appointed the in-house curator. By the time it opened, I had written successful grant applications, travelled throughout Europe, negotiated with national institutions to lend rare instruments to a small city in Western Canada, and negotiated with the Canadian Conservation Institute to assign their top musical instrument conservator to the exhibition.

Collaboration with Dr Young continued in writing the narrative for the exhibition. Discussions were held with local instrument makers and museum programmers to create a workshop in the centre gallery; a partnership developed with a local multicultural radio station to produce audiotapes in nine languages. A CBC documentary during installation was generated, and artists and craftspeople were hired to work with in-house designers in the creation of exhibit fixtures. The designer made a model of the gallery to investigate sight lines. Educators determined where school groups would sit. Craftspeople estimated where their workshop would be located. Many meetings were held around this model and together we created a traffic flow that worked for everybody. It was a team approach, even though we didn’t know it at the time, and everybody involved had a sense of shared ownership of the exhibition. It was recognised that “all relevant museum staff must be involved in the early stages of planning” (Mayer, 1983, 30), yet “the curatorial voice remained the star of the show” (Vila Bryk, 2002, 41).

A few weeks before the opening, Russia invaded Afghanistan and the loan from Leningrad was in jeopardy. Canada cut off diplomatic relations, but with an exception for our loan. We were on the world stage. Two months after the exhibition opened, city personnel went on strike and we, as union members, walked the picket line. The museum was kept open by management. This whole experience forced me out of my reverie and into new contact zones that made indelible impressions. The idea of being “in charge” was deconstructed by global events and local politics, and the exhibition had been placed at the centre of an unfamiliar political arena.⁸ The process was as much about people as it was about objects. The curatorial role was changing and we were discovering that “curation is as much a political act as a cultural one” (Cash Cash, 2001, 140–141). I remember thinking the experience and knowledge we gained during this “on the ground” process should be shared with the larger museum community. How were other museum professionals reacting to a growing number of external forces that challenged their authority, and how could this inform the theory being taught in universities?

⁸ Our experiences were recorded in the publication “Anatomy of an Exhibition” edited by Robert L. Barclay, the conservator who was lent by the Canadian Conservation Institute.

5. Teaching

My teaching career began in the early 1980s, when I received a call from the Museum of Anthropology at UBC asking me whether I would train an intern for the summer.⁹ Like me, she had several years in museum studies and came well versed in theory, but not in practice. Cognisant of my own experiences, I suggested she begin by spending time in the different departments of the museum where she would learn how each area functioned, and where they placed themselves within the organisational structure. She worked closely with the conservator, designer, educator and me on the development of an exhibition.¹⁰

I wanted her to understand that “curators must recognize their dependence upon the skill and goodwill of people who may know much better than they do how to realize the conception that the curator has devised” (Storr, 2001, 15). She was expected to adopt my already polychronic¹¹ style, work with me not for me, and be capable of working alone, when appropriate. This was teaching by active sharing, an apprenticeship I assumed would produce an independent (and hopefully life-long) learner. I continue to work with interns because the rewards include meeting new colleagues, creating friendships, and enjoying the privilege of working alongside people who have continued on to become great curators. However, 25 years later, interns still arrive with degrees which have not prepared them to practice their chosen profession, even at the entry level.

In 1983, ICOM published the proceedings from a symposium that brought together members of the Committees for Museology and Training of Personnel to discuss the relationship between museology, seen as a theoretical discipline, and museography, seen as the practical application of that theory. Participants spent much of their time struggling with definitions of museology and, finally, realized there was no single one to be applied universally. As Burcaw (1983) noted: “the museology of developed countries is not entirely satisfactory in black Africa—an “African museology” is needed there...” (1983, 22). He also noted that “...theory and its application may grow at different rates” (1983, 23), leaving those teaching museology in the wake of those practising. Practice was still in the hands of the curator: “The coordinator of all activities in the museum... whose responsibility it is to inspire interaction amongst his colleagues in the furtherance of the objectives of his Museum...” (Gorahshkar, 1983, 40). Teaching museology, it appeared, still remained in the background of museum practice.

At the same time, the museum world was evolving. “It is a dynamic phenomenon that is always seeking a better or more effective fit with its larger context, which itself is in a state of flux.” (Spielbauer, 1983, 143). Questions were raised. Where did museology fit in the academy? How and where should theory and practice be taught?¹² All agreed a wide disparity in instructional syllabi existed.

⁹ Interns from the UBC Museum Studies programme were particularly welcome because they were well trained in collections care and documentation.

¹⁰ It would be few years before educators became team members in the development of exhibitions.

¹¹ Polychronic is not a word in common use, yet I found it the most appropriate to describe my work style. Marilyn Mets in her article *It's All About Time* says “The poly-chronic approach to time incorporates many complex factors that are typically made intuitively, at the moment, as events play out. Polychronic time values inspiration, imagination, flexibility, intuition and dedication—to name a few.” (www.addaq.ca/time.html).

¹² Concern about the quality of syllabi was echoed in Patrick Boylan’s commentary “Current Trends in Museum Professional Training” From *Museum Curatorship to Museum Management* (Boylan, 2001). He noted that there are more than 600 museum programmes in existence—yet the quality of many is in question.

Twenty years later, concern is still being expressed about the quality and relevance of instructional programmes.¹³ In 1983, “Learning by doing,” was not viewed as an adequate substitute for formal training, yet the idea was that formal training should be delivered by those with practical experience.

In 1987, two events happened that profoundly affected my role as a teacher. First, I moved from the Vancouver Museum to the Museum of Anthropology (MOA) at the University of British Columbia (UBC) and second, I was invited to teach “Communicating Through Exhibits.” at the University of Victoria (UVic).¹⁴ By this time I had curated a dozen or more exhibitions, supervised numerous interns, attended and led workshops at various conferences, published in museum journals and delivered a number of public lectures. The Museum of Anthropology is constituted “as an academic unit of the Faculty of Arts and affiliated with the Department of Anthropology and Sociology.” (Krug, Fenger, & Ames, 1999, 252) As a university museum “... it must practice the best to teach the best” (Krug, Fenger, & Ames, 1999, 252). I began teaching labs associated with the Anthropology 431 course, “Museum Principles and Methods,” the same course I had taken in 1974. These included Care and Handling, Preventative Conservation, Accessioning, Cataloguing, and the Documentation associated with acquisitions, loans, and condition reports. The “how to” aspect of teaching was subjected to “critical assessment”, rather than unquestioning acceptance. This perspective sparked my interest in teaching the lecture component of the course. Meanwhile, teaching at UVic was an opportunity to share knowledge acquired through 11 years of practice. I had read that “... in the teaching and/or training of museum professionals, the methods chosen come predominantly from the field of education or pedagogy and are didactic in nature.” (Spielbauer, 1983, 137). I took the methods by which I had been taught and selected those that had worked for me. I then based the curriculum on my own exhibitions, using the exhibition process as the organising principle. I organised a combination of lectures, debates, readings, site visits and practicum. Participants ranged from those interested in a career change, to those upgrading existing sets of skills. I was facing a very diverse community and we had to find ways to reach consensus about what our expectations would be. Student feedback mechanisms enabled me to improve the course, making it as relevant as possible to individual objectives, and I still teach in this programme. The courses are stimulating and challenging, and provide me with a continual learning experience. As with all teaching, one is encouraged to keep up with museum-related discourse and constantly examine what people are saying in the literature and what is practiced onsite. Also, it takes 1 week of my time (excluding prep and grading), which enables me to give it my sole attention and treat it as a specific project, separate from my day-to-day museum work.

¹³ When the Committee on Museum Professional Training (COMPT) of the American Association of Museums (AAM) attempted to apply some basic quantitative (not even qualitative) standards to USA university museum studies programmes (e.g. minimum teaching/study hours, at least one specialist and professionally experienced teacher, a minimum of 25 graduates over the past 5 years) they identified less than 30 met these criteria of the 400+ museum studies programmes and qualification then listed by the AAM.

¹⁴ This was an intense 1-week course taught as a unit within the Cultural Resource Management programme.

In 1988, I began research on a large collection of European ceramics at MOA in preparation for the opening of a new permanent gallery. In 1990, I began a PhD in Museum Studies at the University of Leicester, using my ceramics research as a basis for my dissertation *Metaphors and Ways of Seeing: The Study of a Permanent Exhibition*. I wanted to articulate the theoretical framework that informed my practice, and I wanted to do it in a way that was acceptable to the academy. Furthermore, I was interested in teaching at UBC, and a PhD made this more likely. I chose Museum Studies for two reasons: the interdisciplinary approach favoured by Museum Studies was a good fit for my proposed dissertation, and my fieldwork could be based at my own museum. Theories associated with Anthropology and Visual Arts informed my research, as did ideas found in organisational studies, material culture, and visitor studies. My measure of the interdisciplinarity of Museum Studies was assessed by how well it could be applied to my practice as a curator. The idea of interdisciplinarity is encouraged in universities, yet the assumption is that this kind of degree will still be situated in a traditional department. Would a PhD in Museum Studies be acceptable to UBC's Department of Anthropology? I wouldn't know the answer for a few years. For the next 5 years, with the exception of a 6-month leave-of-absence, I divided my time between being a PhD student, an exhibits curator, and a university teacher.

In 1993, a faculty member was taken ill 3 weeks before she was due to teach Anthropology 431: Museum Principles and Methods. This was the flagship course in Museum Anthropology and students were already enrolled. Given the short lead time, and with no other faculty member available, Dr Elizabeth Johnson¹⁵ and I were asked to team teach the course. What an opportunity! What a responsibility! Following the footsteps of Audrey Hawthorn, Marjorie Halpin and Michael Ames was intimidating. Throughout this course, students work with objects in a museum setting and, like other museum anthropology courses at UBC, the work is grounded in the theory and current practice of what might be called post-colonial applied anthropology. As with Museum Studies, this anthropology addresses the complex relationships among the standards of traditional, accepted museum practices; the social organization of museums; and the expectations of the diverse peoples represented in the museum's collection. Students challenge, debate, and demonstrate their understanding of these relationships by producing research papers, laboratory projects, and experimental exhibitions. They interact with staff members, many of whom speak about what they do, how they make decisions, and what the consequences of those decisions might be.

Hundreds of students have gone on to work in a variety of museums throughout Canada and other parts of the world. While we were following a grand tradition, we were exhausted and we were hooked.¹⁶ The students were exposed to our practice and questioned its relationship to the theory we taught. Such a possibility induces us to continually reflect on our teaching, whether it reflects

¹⁵ Dr Elizabeth Johnson is a curator at the Museum of Anthropology who had also taught the labs for this course. Her PhD is in Anthropology and her specialties are in Chinese Studies and textiles.

¹⁶ Anthropology 431 split into two courses for a number of years and Elizabeth and I taught both of these. We also taught directed studies and joined the graduate committees of students in anthropology and other departments. changes in the socio-political world around us, and stimulates us to imagine how we should/could do things differently. This reflexive cycle is invigorating, as the instructor interacts with students who bring their diversity of ideas, experience, cultures, and beliefs to the discourse. It keeps me teaching. My curatorial self also is invigorated by collaborating with artists, collectors and communities in the development of exhibitions and access to collections. However, teaching this particular course, with its

demands on my time and energy, has more than any of my other teaching, caused me to recognise just how delicate the balance is between teaching and curating.

6. Teaching and curating

The relationship between academic anthropology and the museum world has improved since the mid-20th century, but as Bouquet notes “...the sense of difference between these two institutions in their respective practices of making and transmitting knowledge remains sharp.” (Bouquet, 2000, 217). Museum people, she says, view academic interest in museums as “...naivety bordering on ignorance with which [they] the theoreticians pronounce on their new-found territory.” (218). She goes on to say that “some academics still appear to regard museums with a disdain comparable to philosophers of science who prefer to avoid the laboratory...that repugnant kitchen in which concepts are smothered in trivia.” (218).

Faculty research is directed to colleagues in peer-reviewed journals and this is used to support promotion through professorial ranks. An appropriate end product for curatorial research can be an exhibition and a catalogue “aimed at a general audience” (McGillivray, 1991, 64). These are assigned lower “grades” than articles in peer-reviewed journals. A curator who wishes to make progress in the academy would need to replace the exhibitions and catalogues with academic articles. Faculty members attend and give papers at conferences aimed at their discipline; curators at MOA are expected to “participate in museum associations...and task forces to further [their] understanding of museums...” (Krug et al., 1999, 252). For a curator who moves between both worlds, the challenge is how to stay credible and connected in both when each has a different set of expectations. Museum professionals are not eligible to apply to academic granting agencies for research assistance and have to seek funds from museum programmes that favour exhibits as the research outcome. Consequently, most research is exhibit-driven and, although exhibits are not acceptable by the academy as products of research, they are the primary product of the curatorial endeavour. This has proven to be an unbreakable cycle and a barrier to progress in the academy. Nevertheless, I, along with the two other teaching curators, in 1997, were appointed associates in the Department of Anthropology and invited to participate in caucus meetings. My teaching expanded to include participation on graduate committees and the supervision of students taking directed studies. My curatorial work expanded to include new research responsibilities for the museum’s founding collection of material from the Pacific Islands, and this resulted in extended travel and absences that had to be juggled with teaching commitments.

At the 2004 Canadian Museums Association conference, I attended a session called “The New Curators” at which one panel member discussed the polychronic role of the curator. She noted that it included research, management, collection development, international relations, travelling, working with an artist or with a committee drawn from a community, even “looking the part,” and sometimes teaching. This role, she said, demands a constant and shifting change of speed. Research is slow, as is writing and understanding of objects. When deadlines have to be met, decisions can be quick. Projects move along at varying paces, dependent on whose deadline is being met: programming, label copy, design, conservation, loan negotiations, and so forth. Other panel members warned that a dual role would not allow a curator to have time for reflection, writing and research. She/he would end up as a project manager. In other words, administration would jeopardize research. It’s not that any of this seminar conversation was new to me, but it struck me that these curators had re-articulated the dilemma that I had been facing for the past 10 years. Unlike me, they had made hard decisions about

what they could and couldn't do within the hours of a regular work day. Rather than trying to achieve it all, they organised their work days to facilitate "quiet" research time in the museum, and had afterhours studio visits with artists recognised as work time. The only snag is the expectation that faculty members work the hours necessary to achieve the requirements of their position, including research and teaching. Some successfully separate their professional and home life. But in order to follow the example of my colleagues in the curatorial profession, I would need to reconsider my roles as a teacher and curator, roles that demand more than a 9–5 workday.

I sometimes wonder what my choice might be if I had to choose between the two. At a recent conference, *Curating Now: Imaginative Practice/Public Responsibility*, Robert Storr, a curator, pondered the question: "... as a practicing curator, whose job it is both to please and to instruct...I try to do the teaching part well... if forced to make a choice between the two, I would favour the party of pleasure over that of instruction." (Storr, 2001, 21). These are tantalising words, but for now it continues to make me gladsome to be both a teacher and a curator.

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