

The Future for Curators

Elise Coralie Edwards

UCL Institute of Archaeology

The role of the curator has changed and is likely to change in the future. Current issues of postmodernism have affected their authority and status, by calling on new voices and narratives. Criticisms continue to be levelled at curators for failing to change communication through display and to maintain subject-based expertise, while new technology constantly increases both the demand for and the supply of information. A survey of curatorial jobs in the *Museums Journal* confirms that the level of skills and knowledge required of curators has decreased. These changes will continue, as in the future curators will be affected by changes in technology, new computerised applications and competition for funding.

Keywords

Curators, knowledge, skills, *Museums Journal*, jobs

Introduction

The role of curators has evolved over the last 20 years, a transformation fashioned by the changing social and political climate. Social changes have arisen from the way in which communities develop, meaning that now a multi-voiced narrative needs to be heard: political changes have made education more central to museum operations.

Where once the curator needed only to be a specialist in their field, now they have to be communicators, computer and IT operators, fundraisers, outreach officers, research specialists, conservators, strategic planners, financially adept, project managers and on top of this...underpaid (Museums Association 2004: 3).

Using a collection of the personal views of senior members of the museum profession to define key points, this paper looks at the changing nature of curators' roles through a review of museological literature, an analysis of curatorial jobs' skills and knowledge and then considers the impact of particular future issues. The aim is to help the museums sector to fully understand, appreciate and be prepared to support curators in their changing roles.

Views from the Profession

In 2004, members of the working parties for the Museums Association report, *Collections for the Future* (Wilkinson 2005), contributed essays setting out their personal views on the current state of collections and collecting. The essays highlight the crucial role that curators will play in enabling the museums sector to have a successful future. Some key points from the submissions are discussed below.

Caroline Worthington (2004: 1) looked at the future of the curator in general, questioning how museums will be able to train and retain skilled staff and maintain an adequate level of curatorial knowledge. Kathy Gee (2004: 1) took this further by linking the value of curatorial knowledge to individual and community identities. As museums

are situated in communities and are instrumental in providing knowledge used for constructing and reinforcing identity, Gee wondered how museums will cope in an era of questioned authority (Gee 2004: 1).

The implications of ICT and digitisation were considered by Suzanne Keene (2004: 1), including a movement from classificatory schemes to enabling flexible searchability and interoperability between systems. The concept of the museum as a broker of knowledge was also put forward as an alternative to museums being only producers of knowledge (Keene 2004: 1).

Communication and the overlap between education and curatorial knowledge was discussed in a lively manner by Javier Pes (2004: 1-3). The objects and history from a fictional museum highlight the way in which communication can be used to give purely nonsensical information – for example, visitors can see the authentic Victorian Chemist Shop in a community that is only ten years old (Pes 2004: 1), emphasising the complexities and absurdities of the way in which postmodern museum theory can be interpreted.

One of the external factors that Michael Houlihan (2004: 1) saw as affecting museums is the market economy with its pressure on museums to adopt business functions like accountability and sustainability.

From these reports points can be identified that provide a basis for examining how the curator's role could be affected. The key points are curatorial knowledge, communication and management issues including accountability. Broadly these fall into two areas – current issues and future issues. Current issues are based around the state of curatorial knowledge and curators' skills. Future issues will be determined by the implications of postmodern museum theory, changing technology and its implications and funding.

To consider the current issues and the state of curatorial knowledge, I undertook a survey of curatorial positions advertised in the *Museums Journal* to see what changes had occurred in the level of skills and knowledge advertised. Skills were defined as abilities needed to be able to do the job, and knowledge was defined as what curators possess that relates to what they know and understand about their subject area. I was looking for changes that showed how the value, responsibility and expertise of curators had been affected by changes in the sector. Curators not only face challenges to their current roles but also from future developments. These may be harder to compensate for, but looking at current research can provide some clues as how things might develop.

In order to answer these questions it becomes necessary firstly to consider the implications of current theoretical understanding for curators and curatorial knowledge. A review of some of the main changes in museum theory shows that curators, in particular, have been blamed for the poor state of the sector and the current theoretical perspective does not bode well for the development of curatorial knowledge.

Museology: The Background

Theoretical approaches to understanding the functions and priorities of museums have multiplied in the last 20 years, with a veritable library now available to museum professionals. Yet even as a result of this reflective discourse changes have occurred to museum practice without the proper research into their long-term effects. By reviewing some of the key literature of the last few years, it is possible to see how curators have been affected by discussions challenging the value of their skills and knowledge.

The New Museology

One of the seminal works to underscore the development of a dedicated branch of museum study was *The New Museology* (Vergo 1988). This volume of collected essays, now a standard academic text, tried to develop a theoretical understanding of contemporary museum practice by comparison with historic practice and then outline possible new directions for the sector. Interestingly the first essay is by the current President of the Museums Association, Charles Saumarez Smith (1988). This essay on “Museums, Artefacts and Meanings” took a historical look at the way meaning, in relation to artefacts, has been constructed in a museological setting. It used case studies to highlight the complex nature of an artefact’s history and how this can change through time and circumstance (Saumarez Smith 1988: 6). While Saumarez Smith tried to keep this discussion on a museum-wide basis, he identified curators as the main offenders by saying that they were responsible for failing to recognise this complicated history by continuing with a simple level of classification and interpretation (Saumarez Smith 1988: 18).

Other essays in this volume also criticised the then current skills and knowledge of curators. Regarding communication skills, Ludmilla Jordanova (1988) critiqued the way in which knowledge is presented in museums and exhibitions. She suggested that curators failed to understand the multiple ways that information and therefore knowledge can be classified. As a result all they offered the audience was some form of ‘fantastical’ knowledge (Jordanova 1988: 23). Philip Wright (1988) considered art museums that failed to cater for non-specialist and new audiences in their exhibitions by using display techniques that required an art history background to appreciate them. Wright (1988: 146) suggested changing staffing structures as a way forward, including downgrading the status of curators/art historians. There is a detailed account of the legal principles and codes of practice which then affected museums and galleries (Palmer 1988). This essay outlined how cultural property does not exist in a vacuum and showed how a complicated system of legal precedents and codes of practice govern the rights of property and property holders (Palmer 1988: 172). This demands of curators an expansion in their knowledge, in particular an awareness of constantly changing and complex legal issues. These essays all contributed to the overall notion that the current skills and knowledge of curators, especially with regard to communication, were not adequate. For museums to be successful, answers seemed to lie in developing and recruiting new specialist staff.

Just as influential on museum development, given the size of the museum sector there, are the ideas of American author Stephen E. Weil. Weil suggested that American mu-

seums were shifting from a collections focus to an educational one, with an emphasis on measuring performance, as a result of making museums more for people than about objects. Weil (2002: 28-29) gave two reasons for this shift – the first was funding and accountability. With most money coming from the public sector there was a need to justify the existence of the museum to the public. A contributing influence was the rise in professionalism in the sector, with the development of professional bodies, museum codes of ethics and standards (Weil 2002: 28-29). The second reason was that the ‘non-profit’ museums sector had been required to adopt the business efficiency measurements of the ‘profit’ sector (Weil 2002: 35). Weil believed this at the time to be unique to America (2002: 35), but we can see that due to government policy and an acknowledgement of best practice it has happened in the UK as well (MLA 2004: 17-18).

From this discussion it is clear that the collection is no longer the centre of the museum’s functions. Rather, it is the management, marketing, education and business functions including communication, accountability and efficiency and effectiveness that will drive the museum forward. Weil (2002: 33) shows how this has influenced American museum accreditation, with assessment criteria extending to include ‘use’ of the collection and not just its care and this has happened in the United Kingdom as well (MLA 2004: 21-26).

If use of the collection includes education and exhibitions, then communication is a key element in providing that successful service. Communication is a major aspect of the postmodern approach in museum theory and political changes have ensured that this approach cannot be ignored. Changes in 20th century society have seen previously marginalised groups given a new stage on which to voice their own opinions, values and cultures. These ‘new’ voices have demanded a right to be heard and museums have been one of the forums for this to happen.

Communication faces two challenges, according to Eilean Hooper-Greenhill. The first is centred on issues of narrative and voice – whose voices are heard and what are they saying (Hooper-Greenhill 2004: 563)? The second is an issue of interpretation and has to do with the way in which people construct meaning from different forms of communication (Hooper-Greenhill 2004: 563).

Communication also changes because of developments in technology, in computers and digitisation, changing the way in which museums present information to the public. Suzanne Keene expanded on this change in her analysis of how the ‘information age’ has affected and will affect the museum sector (2005: Ch 9).

Changes to museum operations also result from political priorities. For example the UK government has foregrounded education in public services, and this has raised the profile and voice of museum departments other than curatorial ones. In response, the traditional role of the curator as main narrator and communicator of knowledge in a museum has had to evolve, a transformation fashioned mainly by the external forces exerted by the changing social and political climate.

It is clear, from this limited review, that curators are facing many challenges to their skills, knowledge and expertise, particularly in communication, business management and education. In order to see if the implications arising from the theoretical background have impacted on the role of the curator, I undertook a survey of curatorial positions advertised in the *Museums Journal* to see what changes had occurred in the level of skills and knowledge being advertised.

Current Issues: Jobs, Skills and Knowledge

The survey was designed to address two of the questions that arise from the review of the changing context for the work of curators. Is the proportion of curatorial jobs being advertised declining in favour of posts in other specialities? Are there changes in the knowledge and skills required?

In order to gain an overall sense of the total number and types of job being offered in the museum sector, I compiled a list of different job categories and determined the number advertised in each category. I surveyed vacancies advertised from January to December in 1990, 1995, 2000 and 2005.

Definitions and Methodology

I defined curatorial positions as jobs that had responsibility for:

- a single or combined collection in a museum or gallery, and
- serving a range of tasks, including documentation, collections care and interpretation.

For the purpose of analysis, I identified a number of skill and knowledge categories that could be expected to be required for curatorial positions. Skills were considered to be areas of experience and understanding of processes and procedures that an applicant needed in order to meet the advertised requirements for the position. Knowledge was determined to be education from school level to postgraduate level, or a requirement for specialist knowledge, for example knowledge about a subject based collection. I hypothesised that during my sample period there would be changes in the job specifications advertised for curatorial positions, and that over time employers would want a wider range of skills, with less emphasis on the level of knowledge required.

Limitations

The *Museums Journal* is not the only publication that advertises positions in museums and galleries but it does advertise a wide range of jobs in museums, covering most specialities. It seemed a reliable base for considering changes in the job market. Data was drawn from the main *Journal* only, not the recruitment supplement. In terms of knowledge required for a given position, I expected a number of differences between junior and senior vacancies, but I also expected a similar number of each to be advertised each year, so that any variation should be relatively even throughout the survey. However, further research would determine this. Skill and knowledge categories that were directly mentioned were recorded, as I expected these to be the most important criteria for employers. Some jobs may have had an implied level of skill or knowledge

not specified in the advertisement, but I took for my data what was actually advertised. There was also an unknown factor in not surveying the intervening years, as these may have shown different changes.

What Sort of Jobs?

The first survey examined the particular types of museum jobs that were being advertised. I used the following categories:

Curatorial – having responsibility for the collections

Education/outreach – learning or access officers responsible for education and event programmes

Museum management/marketing – museum administration and finance

Exhibition and display/technician – design and display officers and technicians

Documentation – specialist roles for cataloguing and accessioning

Special projects – usually one-off projects for a specific time period only

Visitor services – front of house operations

Directors – responsible for overall control of museums, regions or agencies

Conservators – specialist conservation roles

Lecturers – academic positions

Registrars – specialist registration positions

Policy and information/librarians – information based positions

ICT/digitisation – specialist computer skills based jobs, including web design and digitisation projects

Other – singular jobs not falling into the above categories

Table 1 summarises the results. It shows the percentage of each category of jobs advertised compared to the total number advertised in the year.

Results and Discussion

The area of work that has seen the most marked increase in the relative number of jobs advertised is education. This seems logical in view of national and local government policy to promote education in the museum sector and to support the need to recruit specialist staff. There has also been an increase in special project positions. This could be due to funding concerns over employing staff in permanent positions and the adoption of a project culture due to development funding from agencies like the Heritage Lottery Fund. The questions in relation to this are, will these increases continue, how will they be funded, and what will be the impact on curatorial positions in the long run?

Survey sample years	1990	1995	2000	2005
JOB CATEGORIES	% of jobs in year			
Curatorial	39	34.5	31.5	34
Education/Outreach	7	9	13	19
Museum Management/Marketing	11	17.5	20	12
Exhibition/Technicians	9	4	2.5	3
Documentation	6	4	8	7
Special Projects	2	5.5	5	8
Visitor Services	1	2	5	2
Directors	4	9	6	3
Conservators	16	8	1	4
Lecturers	2	2	1	-
Registrars	1	3	3	2
Policy and Information/Librarians	1	-	2	1
ICT/Digitisation	-	0.5	1	1
Other	1	1	1	4
Number of jobs =	213	183	234	258

Table 1. Percentage of the types of jobs advertised in the *Museums Journal*, 1990, 1995, 2000 and 2005. Percentages are of the total jobs in that year.

Along with education, museum management has undergone a significant examination by national and local government and by museum advocacy groups, as pressure has grown for the sector to adopt current business principles and practice. Is there an expectation as a result that non-museum professionals will be sought for management positions? The analysis here shows a rise in the proportion of management jobs until 2000, and then a decline in 2005. Is this because the *Museums Journal* is no longer used to advertise for jobs or are current managers being trained in new business practice? There has also been a decline in the relative number of positions advertised for top-level management and directors. This is interesting given the emphasis on adopting new business practices and further investigation would be needed to look at the cause.

What is of concern is the dramatic decline in the relative number of positions advertised for conservators and exhibition and display personnel. This result should be investigated further in order to see whether this reflects lower staff turnover or whether in-house skills and knowledge are being lost? If so, are they being outsourced instead to the private sector, or is the work simply not being undertaken? Exhibition and display losses are particularly unexpected in view of the sector's focus on communication and utility to the public. If we use Weil's (2002: 28-49) analysis we should be seeing an increase in this area and not a decrease. Has funding from this area been transferred to other museum functions, or are external contractors being used? Have funding cuts

resulted in a reduced exhibition programme? It seems an appropriate area for more investigation.

Changes to the public interface in museums are affected not only by exhibition and display but also by front-of-house operations. With only a small increase in the relative number of positions in visitor services being advertised, does this show that the museum sector undervalues front of house operations? Are such positions being advertised elsewhere or has funding cuts hit this area as well? This is another area that would require further research.

The percentage of documentation jobs advertised has remained relatively constant, with small increases and decreases over the period. This was surprising, as I believed that a large number of positions had been created to cope with the documentation demands of accreditation. It may be that curatorial staff are still responsible for documentation, and this is looked at below when analysing curatorial skills.

What is also surprising is that the proportion of curatorial positions remains relatively constant over the 15 year period. There has been a slight overall decrease in the relative proportion of curatorial positions being advertised for the sector as a whole, but they still represent more than a third of all jobs. This category of jobs has been analysed in detail below.

The last five categories reflect restricted specialist positions. Most surprising is the relatively small number of positions advertised for registrars. Could this be because only larger well-funded institutions can afford these personnel?

Requirements for Knowledge

While the proportion of curatorial jobs has remained fairly constant, there have been increases and decreases in other job types, like education and museum management. Have these changes had an impact on the knowledge and skills required of curators? Has an increase in the other voices heard in museums lessened the amount of 'knowledge' that curators are required to have? Has it affected the level of education or specialist knowledge relating to a particular type of collection?

I defined a number of knowledge-based requirements that could be advertised in relation to curatorial positions:

Specialist – this is where knowledge of a specific subject area was advertised for a particular job, at a senior or junior level

Postgraduate qualification/museums diploma – a requirement for a postgraduate degree either in museum studies or some other field. This also included the Museums Association Diploma. The highest education qualification between postgraduate and degree level only was recorded in each job advertisement

First degree – advertising for a person educated to degree level or with equivalent experience

Associate of the Museums Association (AMA) – a requirement for either a holder of an AMA or willingness to obtain one
A Levels or O Levels – a basic educational requirement

Survey sample years	1990	1995	2000	2005
KNOWLEDGE % of jobs in year				
Specialist subject	48	27	43	23
Post Graduate/Museums Diploma	35	51	46	38
Degree Level	26	21	28	17
AMA	-	-	3	2
A Level	-	2	-	3
O Level	5		1	-
Number of jobs =	83	63	74	89

Table 2. Types of knowledge required for curatorial positions advertised in the *Museums Journal*. Percentages are of the total jobs in that year.

Table 2 summarises the results of my survey. Percentages are shown against the total for each year of curatorial jobs advertising a requirement for particular types of knowledge. Jobs advertised needing several types of knowledge are counted more than once; however, only the higher of postgraduate/museums diploma or degree level was taken.

Results and Discussion

Over the survey period, more positions were advertised requiring postgraduate degree level qualifications than degree level, which seems to suggest that a postgraduate qualification is becoming necessary to enter the museum sector. Interestingly the 2005 figure is very similar to the 1990 figure, which might suggest the sector has always attracted, or required, postgraduates. More investigation would be needed to analyse the breakdown between junior and senior jobs. So far there has only been a small number of curatorial positions that have required an AMA. Maybe the effects and benefits of attaining an AMA are yet to be felt as this is in addition to any academic qualifications.

The percentage of vacancies requiring specialist knowledge fluctuates in the sample. In order to fully understand whether this is a real pattern or only due to the sample, analysis of the intervening years would need to be undertaken. However the trend seems to be an overall decline in the number of jobs requiring specialist knowledge. Is this because specialist knowledge can be gained on the job? There is a perceived loss of specialist knowledge and expertise, and this is one of the factors that has prompted the establishment of Subject Specialist Networks.

Summary

The analysis did not show a meaningful change in the level of knowledge sought for curatorial positions. More research is needed to establish whether this is a real pattern. Overall, the requirement for specialist knowledge appears to be declining, but there is a continuing requirement for postgraduate qualifications. Does this mean that curators' specialist knowledge can be learned on the job, or is it becoming less important to the role?

Requirements for Skills

Given changes in museum theory and practice, have the skills that curators need to do the job changed over the years? Skill requirements were defined as being abilities needed to do the job, including:

Collections Management - this included care of collections, acquisition, disposal, interpretation

ICT - this I took to be working knowledge of computer systems, multimedia, digitisation and how this can be effectively used in a museum or gallery setting

Documentation – specific requirements of documentation procedures and systems

Administration and Management – organisation ability, management of staff and/or volunteers

Finance – specific mention of budgetary, fundraising and financial skills

Interpersonal and communication - a requirement for the ability to work as a part of a team, communicate well with other museum professionals and community groups

Research and publication – previous skills in research and/or publications

Survey sample years	1990	1995	2000	2005
SKILL	% of jobs in year			
Collections management	67	86	43	83
ICT	5	21	30	20
Documentation	17	21	24	12
Administration/management	43	52	61	58
Finance	13	14	19	8
Interpersonal/communication	4	22	39	41
Research/publication	11	30	11	34
Number of jobs =	83	63	74	89

Table 3. Skills required for curatorial positions advertised in the *Museums Journal*. More than one skill may be required for a job.

Table 3 illustrates the results, shown as percentage of the total curatorial jobs advertising for a particular skill. More than one skill maybe required for a job and each skill if mentioned is recorded.

Results and Discussion

The greatest increase is advertisements asking for good or excellent communication skills. As museums develop and try to broaden audiences, being able to communicate across a wide range of differing groups has become more important. There was a rise in 1995 in vacancies requiring research or publication skills, but there has been fluctuation since. While specialist knowledge is still a component of the job description, the requirement for the scholarship aspect of the job has been consistently lower than that for collections management and administration skills. The focus of curatorial positions may be changing. Is the educational in-house focus taking away time and resources for this activity? Are museums concentrating only on interpretation and communication inside the museum rather than on written publication?

There has been a marked increase in the requirement for Information and Communications Technology (ICT) skills, highlighting the need for curators to be fully ICT aware. However, the analysis of job categories showed no increase in specifically advertised jobs for ICT. How are museums coping with these highly specialist requirements? Are curators the only source of ICT skills in most organisations? Are only the larger museums, with larger budgets, able to change they way in which they provide information to an audience which is becoming more technologically savvy? Or are jobs being advertised elsewhere?

Quite a high proportion of jobs required documentation skills, increasing over the periods up until 2000 and then decreasing in 2005. As the job category survey showed, documentation-only positions represent only a small number of jobs advertised, between 4% and 8% of the total (see Table 1), so this would seem to indicate no real increase in specialisation, and that curators are still responsible for documentation.

There has been a sustained increase in employers asking for organisational, administration and management skills. This is a clear indication that the complexity of the job has increased and that these skills are a fundamental requirement. However there has been a significant reduction in the number of positions advertising specifically for financial skills. This is in some way matched by an increase in the number of positions advertised for specialist museum managers and shows how this aspect of a curator's job has changed.

Of the job categories defined, I would have expected collection management skills to remain a relatively constant component of curatorial positions, and indeed it is by far the most common requirement for a curatorial post. However, there is a marked fluctuation, with a sharp decrease in 2000 followed by recovery in demand for this skill in 2005. It would require further analysis to understand the reasons for this.

Summary

Collections management skills are still a very important component of curators' jobs. However, the need for organisational and administration, ICT, communication and interpersonal skills has dramatically increased, showing some of the new skills required of curators. Overall there has been a change in the way that curatorial positions have been advertised with an increase in some skill areas and a change in the amount of knowledge required. However further research is needed to show whether these are true patterns or due to the survey sample.

Issues for the Future

Curators are not only affected by current issues: they will also be affected by issues that may arise in the future, although these will be hard to anticipate accurately. In the discussion below I identify three key points that have the potential to affect curators in the future – the changes predicted from social and political theory, technological changes and funding concerns.

The Implications of Theory - Knowledge

One of the criticisms of curators previously discussed is that they have failed to keep up to date with current ideas about communication and knowledge. However, particularly in regard to knowledge, there is more than just understanding current trends. There is a need to fully understand the implications for the future of current theory. In order to look at knowledge in relation to the curator it is necessary to look at what museums understand knowledge to be. One analysis of knowledge that the museum sector uses is that proposed by Foucault (1970) who identified three time specific constructions of knowledge epistemes dependant on cultural, social and political elements in society. These epistemes, Renaissance, classical and modern, represent shifts in the underlying world view from one period to another (Foucault 1970). Knowledge in the Renaissance was sought in order to explain the relationships, obvious and secret, between things: finding how things are similar to each other (Foucault 1970: 17). In the classical episteme, knowledge is based on classifications and the ordering systems that fed the age of exploration and discovery. Here the objective was to separate or discriminate between things rather than to find the similarities (Foucault 1970: 52). Foucault's modern episteme relates things on a more complex 'organic' structure, looking not only at identification but more importantly at the function – the way things behave as they do (Foucault 1970: 226-229).

Currently, much of the basis for academic knowledge is settled in this third episteme, the modern. However, museums are much criticised for the sort of knowledge that they generate, on the grounds that it is based in the classical age. Museums and curators thus appear to be out of step with the rest of society.

In looking at Foucault's work on knowledge, the Renaissance episteme considered things in pairs in looking for relationships; the classical looked at things in isolation finding differences and the modern looked at things as a whole (Foucault 1970: 346-347). Perhaps we are currently moving into a fourth episteme, the holistic, where things are considered in the totality of a group. In terms of Foucault's 'natural' analysis

this would be looking at the biosphere, at the interrelatedness of all things. In the Renaissance, magic was considered as a 'rational' basis for knowledge (Foucault 1970: 17); the classical looked to science (Foucault 1970: 57); and the modern to analogy and succession (Foucault 1970: 226-229). Perhaps this fourth episteme will include synergy (a partly magical element) where the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. For curators, would this mean another change in the way in which knowledge is based? For example, would we see curators who need to have a combination of academic, cultural and religious qualifications?

Political changes saw that the postmodernist approach could not be ignored and changes in 20th century society have seen previously marginalised groups given a new stage in which to voice their own opinions, values and cultures. These 'new' voices have demanded a right to be heard and museums have similarly been another forum in which they have wanted to be present. Curators as the main purveyors of knowledge could at this time be seen to be sitting on a knife edge that either threatened to slice them in half, if their voices were displaced by those of others, or to despatch them altogether if they failed to change. A seemingly lose-lose situation.

Another important body of theory has implications for museums and the curator's voice. The concept of postmodernism in museum theory implies that all knowledge is socially constructed: therefore there is no knowledge outside the individual (i.e. the visitor). Thus, in a museum there is no need for curators to provide knowledge, perhaps only a requirement for a cataloguer to label and describe. This paints a bleak picture for curators and one that we may hope will be avoided, but it is up to curators to voice their concerns and to keep their skills, authority and trustworthiness intact.

Hooper-Greenhill has discussed museums and postmodernism, and writes of the need to understand the different types of learning in order to be able to fully comprehend how meaning is made in museums (2004: 563-565). This particularly calls for another kind of voice to be heard in the museum, that of a specialist educator. While educators have been present in museums for many years, this type of approach signals the need for specialists above those already there, including the curator. However, is education in museums as postmodernist as it seems?

Shelton (1990: 80-81) used Bourdieu's analysis of museums acting as educational institutes to consider how postmodern practice in museum education developed. Bourdieu (quoted in Shelton 1990: 80-81) argued that education institutions were constructed to serve the purposes of the ruling class promoting the conformity of the population to the same set of standards and values. Even though society seems to be experiencing a postmodern turn, education could still be seen to be in a modernist phase, since only one voice, that of the government, is directing education policy.

Museums are seemingly held captive by a force that requires them to obey the agenda of the educational elite, by designing exhibitions, activities and events that match the curriculum so as to meet targets set by others. They are therefore not acting in a post-modern manner.

Technology and Knowledge

At the 2005 EVA conference in London, a postgraduate student outlined his computer-based research project, a program that would determine if any statistical relationship could be demonstrated by analysing the visual characteristics of three different kinds of Impressionist paintings. His results indicated a statistical pattern characteristic of each, in landscape, still life and portrait paintings (Zhou 2005). This may seem obvious to the skilled or even semi-skilled art historian, who knows what to look for in analysing pictures. However, for the public who have minimal or no art knowledge, it suggests that they may not need recourse to the art historian. In future they may use an 'art historian computer package' to tell them about the paintings. Logically, if this software can be applied to Impressionist paintings then it could also be used on other styles, other media, from any time or period. Similarly it could also be applied to three-dimensional objects, placing the social historian's role in jeopardy as well. The program could be used to recognise and analyse any type of object, giving a detached and seemingly authoritative view. Some might argue that this scenario may never happen, but the museum sector and curators need to be proactive to changing technology and developments rather than being solely reactive. Interestingly, there were few curators at this event to ponder the impact of this and other developments.

A group from the Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa is developing an Italian cultural portal. Their project will attempt to link together museum and gallery databases via one entry site or portal (Benedetti et al. 2005). This means that from your local node you can effectively access information on a particular subject from a comprehensive range of sources. For example you might want to search for impressionist paintings by Pissarro, asking for a list of all places that would hold pictures and information on them, including museums, galleries, libraries and archives. While this may be an excellent tool for curators to use in interpreting their own collections and undertaking research, ultimately the producers of this software see the public having access to the system as well. Does this mean that, again, curators face competition from outside the sector, by being sidelined by technology introduced by others as providers of knowledge and information to the public?

Curators need to realise that a large part of their audience is moving into more technologically advanced positions all the time. By understanding how new technology can impact on their role, they can better prepare to capitalise on any gains and mitigate potential damage.

Funding

The greatest challenge to funding the museums sector is set to experience is a change in government spending with the successful bid for the 2012 Olympic Games. If the museums sector does not bring the cultural impact of the games to the forefront in planning and allocation of funding then they may miss out or see a heavy reduction in funding for many years to come. The Olympic bid documents do mention the cultural value of the games:

[a]s an island, the United Kingdom is committed to using Olympic values to build bridges amongst our own communities and between ourselves and other nations

(Olympic Bid Candidate File: 173)

and then goes on to say...

[b]ased on the UK's rich maritime heritage, the 2012 cultural and educational programmes and the Opening and Closing Ceremonies will emphasise voyage and discovery; creativity and diversity; individual endeavour within the community and peace and respect for the planet

(Olympic Bid Candidate File: 173).

However the only mention of museums is in the following paragraph:

London's museums will stage a major exhibition of world art and artefacts. This 'Five Rings Exhibition' will be drawn from five continents and be curated by a specially-invited team

(Olympic Bid Candidate File: 177).

Questions that the sector should be asking are: What about museums in other places, where is the money coming from, how do we capitalise on the increase in visitors to London and the Games? While this may seem more of a problem for museum management, curators will be the ones who will be held accountable for not making the most of the opportunity.

Conclusion

This research has attempted to highlight the role of curators in the museums sector by considering some of the current and future issues facing them.

Current Issues

In order to look at how the museum sector perceives curators and their changing roles, museological theory was reviewed. *The New Museology* (Vergo 1988) brought a critical discussion of museum practice and communication, blaming curators for failing to move past 19th century classificatory systems and recognising that artefacts can have non-linear histories (Saumarez Smith 1988: 20-22; Jordanova 1988: 23). The traditional audience of educated art lovers was seen as the only recipients of art gallery exhibitions: curators were keeping out others by delivering exclusively to this audience (Wright 1988: 146). Understanding complex legal practice added to the burden that curators needed to shoulder (Palmer 1988: 172). Putting the collection second to the public has also changed the curator's role, with communication, business practice and education reducing their influence (Weil 2002).

The impacts on curators from these theoretical issues have manifested themselves in the way that the museums sector sees the role of curators. The survey of skills and knowledge specified in job advertisements for curators in the *Museums Journal* seems

to indicate that specialist knowledge is declining as a requirement of curatorial positions. Postgraduate qualifications may be the entry level requirement. Collections management skills are still seen to be an important component of curators' jobs, but there is a growing demand for organisational, administration and ICT skills, and above all communication skills. The reduction in advertising for financial skills was matched with a rise in the number of museum management positions.

What should be of concern is the relatively low requirement for research or publication skills. While further analysis would establish the extent, it is important to realise this decline not only impacts on knowledge about collections but the future of new knowledge built on it and its overall permanence. Sharp declines in conservation and exhibition jobs should also be investigated.

More research is needed in a number of areas to try and establish the effect of these changes and the true impact on the curator's role.

Future Issues

Could we be witnessing a fourth knowledge episteme, one that encompasses a holistic approach to understanding, beyond the postmodern? If this is the case then curators face even more challenges to their existing base of knowledge, in accepting ideas and concepts based in all facets of human life.

New computer applications pose additional challenges to curators' knowledge, authority and level of technical expertise, and the development of a computerised system of painting recognition is just one of the ways in which this is likely to happen (Zhou 2005).

The 2012 Olympic Games pose perhaps the biggest challenge to the museum sector and curators in particular. When government funding is being directed into sport, museums are going to have to fight hard to hold on to the share that they currently receive and curators already suffering are the ones likely to suffer the most.

The museum shares with the theatre and the cinematographic arts, the propensity to allow us to explore ourselves critically through our juxtaposition with the 'other', and in this resides its most extraordinary contribution, as yet little realized: the development and redefinition of our consciousness of ourselves and the phenomenal world and expansion of our field of liberty
(Shelton 1990: 99-100).

Curators, along with stage and film directors, are the ones best equipped to bring this realisation to life. If the museums sector and curators fail to realise their full potential, society as a whole will be the worse for this loss.

References

- Anderson, D. 1990. What shall we do with the curators? *Museum Management and Curatorship* 9 197-210.
- Benedetti, B. et al., 2005. The project for the Italian portal of culture. In *EVA London 2005 Conference Proceedings*, p. 1.1. EVA Conferences International.
- Foucault, M. 1970. *The Order of Things*. London: Tavistock Publications.
- Gee, K., 2004. *Uses of collections: identity and representation*. Unpublished report for the Museums Association.
- Hooper-Greenhill, E. 2004. Changing values in the art museum: rethinking communication and learning. In B. M. Carbonell (ed.) *Museum Studies: An Anthology of Contexts*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.
- Keene, S. 2005. *Fragments of the World: Uses of Museum Collections*. Oxford: Butterworth Elsevier.
- Keene, S. 2004. *Uses of Collections: Digitisation*. Unpublished report for the Museums Association.
- Keene, S. 1998. *Digital Collections: Museums and the Information Age*. Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann.
- Jordanova, L. 1988. Objects of knowledge: a historical perspective on museums in Vergo, P. (ed.) *The New Museology*, 22-40. Reaktion Books.
- MLA, 2004. *The accreditation scheme for museums in the United Kingdom: accreditation standard*. London: Museums, Libraries and Archives Council Publications.
- Museums Association, 2004. *Pay in Museums*. London: Museums Association.
- Olympic Bid Candidate File, Volume Three, Theme 17: Olympism and Culture [<http://www.london2012.org/en/news/publications/candidatefile>] [Accessed on 2 March 2007]
- Palmer, N. 1988. Museums and cultural property in Vergo, P. (ed.) *The New Museology*, 172-204. London: Reaktion Books.
- Pes, J. 2004. *Uses of collections: communication*. Unpublished report for the Museums Association.
- Saumarez Smith, C. 1988. Museums, artefacts, meanings in Vergo, P. (ed.) *The New Museology*, 6-21. London: Reaktion Books.
- Shelton, A. 1990. Post-modernist museography in Pearce, S. (ed.), *Objects of Knowledge – New Research in Museum Studies 1*, 78-102. London: The Athlone Press.
- Vergo, P. 1988. *The New Museology*. London: Reaktion Books.
- Wilkinson, H., 2005. *Collections for the future: report of a Museums Association inquiry*. London: Museums Association.
- Weil, S.E., 2002. *Making Museums Matter*. Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press.
- Worthington, C, 2004. *Uses of collections: the future of the curator*. Unpublished report for the Museums Association.
- Wright, P., 1988. The quality of visitors' experiences in art museums in P Vergo (ed) *The New Museology*, 119-148. London: Reaktion Books.
- Zhou, J., 2005. *Statistical analysis of Impressionist paintings*. Paper presented at EVA London 2005 Conference.