

*Creating Tomorrow's Curators Today:  
Student-curated exhibitions at the Sweet Briar Museum*

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I had an odd sensation as I read over the call for papers for this conference. It noted that the multiple challenges facing university museums form a daunting list. First, we must figure out how to make our museums relevant to new audiences in a multi-media world. That resonated with me, since I can't recall the last time I saw a student on campus without either an iPod or cell phone sprouting from her ears. Next, it went on, we must balance accessibility and programming with dwindling staff and resources. That too rang a bell, as I am a one-person operation with a budget of just over \$200 a month in discretionary funds; any more dwindling and the Sweet Briar Museum would disappear. Lastly, it said, we must reconcile our role as teaching institutions with our responsibility to preserve and maintain the objects in our care. Hmmmm. Do we tell our students about our collections, and welcome them with open arms, or play the role of a "little old lady petting her relics," loath to expose the precious artifacts to the masses?

This call for papers got my attention and gave me a sense of déjà vu as I have been wrestling with these issues at the Sweet Briar Museum since I became its director in 2002. I am here today to present some of the answers I have found to these questions and hope that they may benefit my colleagues in the community of college and university museums. Let me give you a brief history of the institution and my role within it. The Sweet Briar Museum opened in the 1980s as a shrine to the college's history. It was the brainchild of an energetic and dedicated alumna who spearheaded an effort to gather the historical artifacts of the college under one roof, which was a worthy goal, though she did so without the benefit of any formal curatorial training. Founded in 1901, Sweet Briar College boasts more than 100 years of college memorabilia, but the site is unique in that it

also possesses a significant pre-college history. Originally owned by the wealthy and influential Fletcher family of Virginia, Sweet Briar Plantation was famed for its architectural significance and advanced agricultural practices throughout the nineteenth century. The Fletchers decided to establish a women's college on their property in memory of a beloved daughter, Daisy, who died at the age of sixteen. They left the monetary legacy to establish a women's college, and they also left all of their personal possessions, thus endowing Sweet Briar with an encyclopedic collection of nineteenth century material culture, from high style to the vernacular, from furniture to clothing to silver, all collected by the family over the generations to outfit their homes and their persons. These items, numbering in the thousands, form a rich resource for today's students. But despite its value, both monetary and cultural, this treasure trove went underutilized for almost twenty years, which was due to this lack of curatorial guidance.

When the museum was founded, it was literally under the college's Alumnae Office, in location and administration. It provided a nostalgic touchstone for returning alumnae during reunions and homecoming weekends, when they reminisced about wearing the founder's clothing in school theatricals, or pretending to play Daisy's harp which had been displayed in Sweet Briar House. This was the founder's home, now on the National Register of Historic Places and the residence of the college president since the earliest days of the twentieth century. It retained most of its original furnishings, but anything the presidents didn't care to live with found its way to the museum. The alumnae came to the Sweet Briar Museum to peer into glass cases, where in addition to furnishings, exhibitions of college memorabilia such as class rings and old pennants remained unchanged since their initial installation. The museum was largely bereft of visitors except for these twice-yearly influxes of alumnae, with students making appearances only through the requests of their professors who occasionally—very occasionally—wanted to reference the collections for teaching purposes. One factor in the lack of visitation was the lack of regular hours. The museum

was open only 2 hours each day, and those hours varied. She saw the alumnae, not the students, as the museum's primary audience, so interested students might happen by only to find the museum doors locked. When it was open, it was quiet as a tomb, and these objects rested undisturbed, enshrined in their display cases or lined up like silent witnesses to the past along the galleries.

I don't like quiet museums. I think, as do many of you, that we fail to fulfill our mission if our galleries are quiet, let alone vacant. When I was appointed, it was because the college recognized the museum as a value-added resource, something that already existed and just needed professional direction to turn it into an academic resource. So my first mission was to get the students through the doors, and the best way to do that is to give them a sense of ownership over the collections. Faculty members at Sweet Briar College teach three courses each semester, or six courses per year. I teach two courses each semester, and my directorship of the Sweet Briar Museum counts as my third course. But because of my teaching duties, I couldn't be at the museum on a full-time basis. And although establishing regular hours was a priority, my budget certainly wouldn't support the hiring of a museum professional. So for me, giving our students ownership of the collections meant that I circumvented the problem of no funds for hiring additional professional staff like an assistant curator by hiring the students instead. Anyone who spends any time around students knows that they really like to talk, so if you have one student worker who gets excited about the collections, she's going to tell her friends. Currently we are open from 10 am-5 pm Monday through Friday, and staffed by student workers during these times. But student workers must be trained, and trained thoroughly if they were going to fulfill the role I envisioned for them at the Sweet Briar Museum. My solution was to develop and propose a course required of all students working in the museum. Its name is *Curating, Collecting, and Connoisseurship*, and it is the basis of my talk today.

In a previous session, Janet Marstine of Seton Hall University convincingly demonstrated that students can make effective curators as long as they develop a firm foundation of knowledge in three crucial areas of museum studies: best practice, object handling, and critical evaluation. I believe the areas of curating, collecting, and connoisseurship support the three points outlined by Janet and provide a working understanding of these areas crucial to the education of museum professionals. I am going to explain how we educate our students according to the “3Cs” of the course title. In addition to traditional assignments like readings and papers, there is a larger agenda. By the end of the semester, the student will be able to draw upon the information she has learned over the past few months to curate her own exhibition based on objects in the collection of the Sweet Briar Museum. What could create a stronger sense of ownership than seeing a museum exhibition through all of the stages of the curatorial process, from developing the concept to selecting the objects to writing the labels—and making the labels—to installing the exhibition, and preparing and delivering a gallery talk on it? The topics vary widely in focus, but they have this in common: all of them were developed, researched, and executed according to standard museum procedures or best practice. In addition, current students have a fresh curatorial perspective. They don’t get bogged down in the nostalgia of the college’s past the way that our alumnae do, and therefore are able to critically examine and interpret objects in a way that makes them relevant to external audiences, thus boosting the visitation and visibility of the Sweet Briar Museum.

Here’s how we do it. In addition to diverse yet fairly standard readings on topics related to “Curating, Collecting and Connoisseurship,” the syllabus includes assignments that round out the students’ experiences and offer exposure to key components of the museum world. In the order that they appear on the syllabus, they are as follows: the students profile a collector, conduct an interview with a museum professional, participate in an object-handling seminar, visit a museum to critique an exhibition, take part in our state museum conference (the Virginia Association of

Museums Annual Meeting) and attend a study trip. They are busy, as while they are completing these assignments, they are also at work curating their exhibitions according to a fixed timeline.

Since this course focuses on oral as well as written assignments, they are also doing a lot of talking. There's a good reason for this: when people are asked about their greatest fears you would think that poisonous spiders, rattlesnakes, scorpions, getting struck by lightning, or hit by a bus might top the list of things we fear the most. No. These pale in capacity to terrify when compared to public speaking, which is most people's greatest fear. However, the ability to speak in public, to communicate what is important about an exhibition or object not just in writing but also by talking about it, with knowledge and with confidence, is one of the most important skills that a curator possesses. So we make our students talk, first in front of the class, and then to people they don't know, and finally in a public presentation with a gallery talk on their exhibition at the end of the semester. In fact, we feel so strongly about this that our Arts Management program, which is the academic department of which I am a member, requires that our students take a course called Public Speaking from our Communications department.

The first assignment in the "Curating, Collecting and Connoisseurship" course is the profile of a collector. The students start by researching an influential collector, which helps her learn what motivates collectors, and how collections are formed. Each student selects a different collector, and presents her findings to the class, so the class has a variety of examples that contribute to her understanding of the field of collecting, which is the cornerstone of developing any museum. This initial presentation also helps alleviate any anxiety about speaking in public, as it takes place in a closed classroom setting. It's then time to move on to the next assignment, conducting an interview with a museum professional. This assignment requires some advance work on my part. I have had discussions with some of you over the past couple of days about the usefulness of the MuseumListserve, which is an international on-line discussion group for museum-related topics. It

has close to 3000 members, and one of the marvelous things about coming to these conferences is matching faces with the names you know only from the listserv. Earlier this week I had lunch with Andrew Simpson from Macquarie University in Australia, who remembered one of my postings. This on-line community of museum professionals is a great resource, and one that I have utilized to help my students.

Before the semester began, I posted a message to the listserv requesting that anyone willing to be interviewed via telephone by my students contact me. The outpouring of responses from list members was, as almost always, incredibly generous. Before the day was out, I had lined up a roster of interview subjects from museums throughout the United States. Among them were a registrar from the opulent Biltmore Estate in North Carolina, a curator from an austere Shaker Museum in New York, and an executive director from Graycliff, a house designed by Frank Lloyd Wright and now a museum. This is just a small sampling of the responses. I gave the students the names of the people they would interview, and sites where they worked, but not the contact information at that time. They researched their subject's position description and also the site so that they would be well informed when devising a list of questions for the interview. I must stress that preparation of the students, and careful shepherding of the process is key, not just for the success of the assignment, but also to insure that the experience reflects well on your institution. I don't want anyone making a "cold call" without an idea of the direction that the interview will take, although we do coach the students to pay attention to the conversation and pursue interesting angles that come up. When they have a solid and useful list of questions for their subject, they receive the contact information and schedule the telephone interview. This assignment also helps develop conversational skills, and a professional telephone manner, both of which are also very useful traits for a curator to possess. Once again, the students present the results of the interview to the class, so all benefit from multiple experiences and viewpoints.

At this point in the semester, we also devote several class periods to an object-handling seminar. The students are introduced to the proper methods of handling works in a variety of media, from furniture and silver to china, glass and textiles. Often this is almost a process of reeducation, as our first inclination is to pick up a chair by its back, or a teacup by its handle, or silver in an ungloved hand. After this training, the students are monitored individually, and then work in pairs to transport objects correctly from one space to another. I do all sorts of things like leave obstacles their paths to ensure that they get used to planning out their route, or ask them to take objects to places they won't fit, to train them to always measure the spaces before moving an object. They actually have both a written and practical quiz on this, which really makes sure they commit the proper procedures for handling objects to memory.

Next is the critique of a museum exhibition. Students must go off campus for this, to take advantage of the variety of museums available in any city in which they find themselves. Therefore, this assignment is due after a holiday break, during which all of our students will be traveling away from Sweet Briar. The sites they visit span the nation, and these museums were scrutinized for standards of labels based on information and overall appearance, as well as for the overall design and layout of permanent and temporary exhibitions. These standards were drawn from Beverly Serrell's *Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach*, which is a classic handbook for museum exhibitions. Accompanied by PowerPoint presentations that illustrate their findings, the students present their critiques and also lead a class discussion and field questions, sometimes argumentative, on the validity of their positions. This gives them another useful curatorial tool: being able to defend your viewpoint in the face of debate.

They get a chance to see this principle in action, as well. As I have said, I rely upon established networks to help my students. Sometimes they are virtual, as with the museum listserv; most often, they are not. One example is the Virginia Association of Museums, our state

museum association and the largest such organization in the United States. It is also committed to educating museum professionals—which is wonderful, because we are all always learning—but what is even better is that they offer each of my students a free day of conference attendance. This is a true gift from our state museum organization, and I believe their generosity will be repaid as my students begin to fill the ranks of professional curators.

At this point in the semester, they have already spoken to one museum professional via telephone, and the conference presents an opportunity for them to attend several sessions on diverse topics presented by professional staff members of Virginia museums. This gives the students insight into topics of importance in the field, as well as emerging trends, and they also visit the accompanying trade fair, where they can talk to vendors that supply museum services from gift shop items to gallery lighting to storage components. Most importantly, they have the opportunity to network during the breaks, developing their own relationships with museum professionals, some of who become mentors for our students, and many of who offer them internships and sometimes even future employment. But I don't want to get ahead of myself. While helping our students obtain professional curatorial positions may be the ultimate goal, there are a few more steps along the way.

As I've said, I'm a big believer in the power of networking. Perhaps because I come from a museum background, I know how delighted most non-academic museums are to get college students through their doors. The 18-24 age group is an elusive demographic as they tend to disappear after the mandatory museum field trips that they take in primary and secondary schools. At the college level, our visits to museums become study trips, but I don't just escort my class to a museum and turn them over to the docent on duty. However well trained that person may be, I don't think there's any substitute for meeting the actual curator of the museum, the person who has the visions for the exhibitions and develops the collections. I generally call the curator myself, and



explain that we don't want the typical museum tour, that we really want their unique perspective. Even when it's someone I don't know professionally, they rarely say no, because this what we all work towards, to transfer our knowledge to others. Most are delighted to meet with college students, but I really try to choose our visits wisely. I've found that students respond best to curators who aren't too much older than they are; I think this helps them picture themselves in that position, which provides an excellent example and role model. Your alumnae, both recent and established, are also a great resource for this, and fostering those connections benefits us all. The ideal trip also has a behind-the-scenes component so that the students are seeing storage, or perhaps galleries that are undergoing installation and are closed to the public. The opportunity to see something that not every visitor does is very special. These study trips provide useful reference points and examples to drive class discussion, and often influence the students' curatorial decisions as they continue to develop their exhibitions. As I've talked, you haven't forgotten that curating their own exhibitions is the point of the course, have you?

While all of these other activities and assignments have been taking place, the students have been working steadily towards that project, which comprises the majority of their grade. They follow a set schedule, much like the exhibition timelines that we all use at our museums. By certain dates in the semester, they must identify their topic, select the objects to support it, propose a space within the museum for their exhibition, draft label text, make the labels, write an accompanying brochure, and install the exhibition. Finally, during the formal opening of the exhibition, the students deliver their gallery talk to an audience of friends, family, and faculty, much as any of us would at our own openings.

In conclusion, after taking this course, the student workers who daily staff the Sweet Briar Museum are prepared to handle a variety of situations, from giving polished tours of the collections to handling objects without direct supervision to turning a critical eye towards the curatorial

process. This benefits me, and the museum, but these skills transfer to the professional world and thus our students are in a strong position when they are applying for their first jobs. After all, as museums affiliated with academic institutions, our contact with students ideally has a positive impact, both inside and outside the walls of our universities. Through taking the course “Curating, Collecting and Connoisseurship,” Sweet Briar College students learn best practice. They learn to handle objects. They learn to think critically about the museum. They add valuable new dimensions to their resumes, through attending a museum conference, publishing a brochure, curating an exhibition, and sharing it with the public. At the end of the semester, through their work at the Sweet Briar Museum, today’s students are ready to become tomorrow’s curators.