

How to Find a Museum Job

Museum work is a rewarding career—most museum people love their jobs and would not want to do anything else. Not only is museum work intellectually challenging and personally satisfying, it is a profession in which you are expected to continue to learn new things throughout your working life.

As you might expect, the competition is tough for most museum jobs, even those positions that don't pay very well. Below are a few things you will find helpful as you start down the road towards a fulfilling museum career.

Reality Check

- Be realistic about how much money you can expect to earn. You won't starve as a museum professional, but you won't get rich, either. Museum pay tends to be lower than comparable professional positions, which is not fair, but it is a reality that you will have to cope with as a museum professional.
- Working hours can be long because museum professionals always have too much to do.
- Museum jobs often require the sacrifice of some evenings and weekends.
- It can be very hard to find your first career-track museum job—but if you really want to work in a museum, you will find a way.
- Despite these caveats, most of us in the profession agree that museums are wonderful places to work.

Do I Need a Degree?

Here are some facts to keep in mind:

- Only around 85% of Americans graduate from high school. Although this number may seem shockingly low, it is an all-time high for the United States. It still puts us at just #30 in the world.
- Just 32% of Americans earn a bachelor's degree.
- A mere 12% of Americans complete a master's degree or professional degree (e.g., law, medicine, engineering).
- Less than 4% of Americans complete a doctoral degree.

For most of museum history there was little or no professional training available for the museum profession. Most people who worked in museums were trained in some related field (such as art history or history) and learned about museum work on the job. Beginning in the 1970s, the importance of obtaining a master's degree in museum studies began to be widely recognized, but some museum professionals still believe that a museum studies degree is not necessarily the best preparation for a career. However, museum work is vastly more complex than it used to be—the core knowledge base of the museum profession has greatly expanded during the last 30 years. If you want to get a feeling for how much the profession has developed, a good index is the amount of museum literature (books and journals) published since 1980 compared to what was available prior to 1980.

A more important reason for the change to an emphasis on graduate training in museum studies is that the old system failed to leave much room for initiative, innovation, or progress in

museums. What museum professionals learned was what their colleagues already knew (because they were learning on the job). On-the-job training rarely prepares people to critique museums the way they must if museums are to continue to evolve.

For all these reasons, graduate training in museum studies is rapidly becoming essential for those entering the profession.

For advice on how to select a museum studies degree program, see *How to Select a Museum Studies Program*,

https://www.arcsinfo.org/content/documents/how_to_select_a_museum_studies_degree_program_logojan2018.pdf

Finding Your Dream Job

If you are interested in a museum career, ask yourself what your dream job is. What do you think you would like to be doing 15 or 20 years from now? Do you think that you want to be a registrar, collections manager, educator, exhibit designer, development officer, or a director? Study job ads for those positions (some sources for museum job ads are listed below) to see what your particular dream job requires and begin building your resume for that job. What level of education is needed, what skills, what experiences? What volunteer work, internships, and work experiences would strengthen your resume? The sooner you start building your resume the easier to get that dream job when you are ready for it.

Other Qualifications

A graduate degree in museum studies is fundamental, but the degree alone will not get you a job. Breaking into the profession can be difficult. Keep in mind that most candidates applying for the job you want have a museum studies degree and completed an internship. The trick is to make yourself a better candidate than your competitors. There are several important ways to do that:

- **Experience**—museums love to hire people who have already worked in a museum (this is because museum work is not for everyone, but if you have worked in a museum previously, you probably like it). Try to find paid hourly work in a museum to build up some experience on your resume. If you can't find paid work, then volunteer. Getting legitimate museum work experience on your resume is critical. Keep track of where you volunteer or work, what you do, and how much time you put in, and make sure that it is listed on your resume. Every volunteer or internship experience helps.
- **Professional development**—take advantage of workshops and seminars to add skills to your resume (pest control, lighting, grant writing, using a collections management database). You can find these opportunities online, at museum conferences, and in other venues. When you participate in a workshop or seminar, list it on your resume with a brief description of what you learned.
- **Be prepared to start small**—museums do not pay much, particularly the entry-level jobs, so accept the fact that you will start at the bottom of the pay scale.
- **Be flexible**—the jobs you find may not be where you live now or where you want to live, but try to be flexible, as you may need to relocate to get a good job.
- **Acquire diverse skills**—museums like employees who have lots of other skills (e.g., carpentry, working with technology, sewing, graphics, writing, facility in a second language),

so think about what skills you have that you can use to your advantage, and list them on your resume.

- ***Keep up with the literature***—reading and study don’t end with your last graduate school class. If you want to be a good professional (and move up the pay scale!) you need to be aware of what is going on in the field. Keep an eye out for journals and new books as well as on-line information and museums in the news, and read as much as you can. There is no such thing as too much knowledge in the museum profession.
- ***Make yourself visible***—no museum is going to come looking for you to offer you a job. If you are in the job market, then join a professional society (such as the Association of Registrars and Collections Specialists or a state or regional museum association), attend the organization’s meetings, and meet people.

Job Hunting and Application Strategies

Keep in mind that there are museum careers in places you might not immediately think of as museums, including:

- Archives
- Commercial exhibit companies
- Commercial museums
- Conservation
- Corporate archives
- Military museums
- Museum law
- Non-US museums
- Private museums
- Private and corporate collections
- Packing, shipping, and freight forward companies
- US Government service (e.g., the Department of the Interior alone manages more than 195 million objects in collections across the country)

You are now watching those job ads, and you find a couple that sound like a job you would be qualified for. What should you do next?

- Read the long version of the job ad carefully and make a list of all requirements (these are usually divided into “required” and “preferred” qualifications).
- Go over the list carefully and decide whether you think you have the right qualifications to apply.
- When you send in your application, include a cover letter directed to the museum in question that explains why you think you meet the qualifications. Do not use a generic cover letter—this indicates a lack of serious interest in the job. Instead, tailor your cover letter to the specific job you are applying for by briefly explaining why you think you are qualified for the job (don’t expect the search committee to ferret this information out of your resume for you). Double-check the spelling in your resume and cover letter (do not rely solely on automated spell checks!).
- Confirm that the individuals who have agreed to serve as references for you are willing to write a letter for you; then send each of them an updated copy of your resume, a copy of your



cover letter for the specific job, and a copy of the job ad—this will enable them to write the best possible letters they can.

The Interview Process

There are a few things you should do to prepare for a job interview:

- Know the big trends and controversies in the profession.
- Before the interview, learn as much as you can about the institution you are applying to (start by critically reviewing the museum's web site).
- Never try to bluff if you can't answer a question—it is much better to be honest and say you don't know the answer than to guess and make yourself look bad.
- Never apply for a job you are not seriously interested in—it is a waste of your time and the institution's time.
- Make sure your resume reflects you honestly, and includes what is most important about you.
- Tweak your resume to each job description you apply for (but be honest).
- Avoid gaps in your resume—explain what you were doing if there are gaps in your education or job history, and include any relevant volunteer experiences.

Resources:

ARCS (Association of Registrars and Collections Professionals)

<https://www.arcsinfo.org/>

Center for the Future of Museums

<http://www.futureofmuseums.org/>

Some Sources of Museum Job Advertisements

www.aam-us.org/aviso/index.cfm

www.globalmuseum.org/

www.museumjobs.com

<http://www.museumstudies.udel.edu/museweekly/>

<http://www.arcsinfo.org/membership>

<http://www.aza.org/jobs>

<http://jobs.aaslh.org>

<http://www.astc.org/job-bank>

Collections Stewardship Professional Network listserv

<http://si-listserv.si.edu/cgi-bin/wa?A0=CSAAM>

Museum-L listserv

<http://www.lsoft.com/scripts/wl.exe?SL1=MUSEUM-L&H=HOME.EASE.LSOFT.COM>

Professional Organizations

AAM (American Alliance of Museums)

<http://www.aam-us.org/>



ARCS (Association of Registrars and Collections Professionals)
<https://www.arcsinfo.org/>

AZA (Association of Zoos and Aquariums)
<http://www.aza.org/>

(AASLH) American Association of State and Local History
<http://about.aaslh.org/home/>

(ASTC) American Association of Science and Technology Centers
<http://www.astc.org/job-bank/>

(ICOM) International Council of Museums
<http://icom.museum/>

(ACM) Association of Children's Museums
<http://www.childrensmuseums.org/>

ALHFAM (Association of Living History, Farm and Agricultural Museums)
<http://www.alhfam.org/>

AAMC (Association of Museum Curators)
<http://www.artcurators.org/>

AAMG (Association of Academic Museums and Galleries)
<https://www.aamg-us.org/wp/>

State and regional museum associations (listed here)
<http://www.museummarket.com/AssocList.htm>