"This book meets a vital need; for planning museum careers is the key to better museums – hence, a richer cultural landscape – for the twenty-first century."

Y.R. Isar, Director, International Fund for the Promotion of Culture, UNESCO

"The work you have done is monumental."

Paul N. Perrot, Director Santa Barbara Museum of Art

Museum work is becoming increasingly professionalized. The skills demanded by those who work in museums are increasing as technology advances and as society changes. This much-needed volume surveys the latest trends in museum work.

_Museums: A Place to Work, Planning Museum Careers_ is the definitive guide to the museum profession. It outlines in detail more than thirty museum positions, incorporates extracts from interviews with experienced museum professionals from many backgrounds and includes sections on the origins and history of museums, the importance of ethics, training, preparation, job-seeking, and the future for museums.

_Museums: A Place to Work, Planning Museum Careers_ provides indispensable information on how to find jobs in museums. It is aimed at those starting a museum career as well as experienced professionals wanting to change or advance their careers, museum studies and other university programs, and career counselors.

Jane R. Glaser is a special assistant for the Smithsonian Institution Office of the Provost and has been working in and writing about the museum profession for thirty-two years, particularly in the areas of museum training, education, management and career counseling. Artemis A. Zenetou is a museum associate for the Smithsonian Institution Office of the Provost, has written about the museum field; and has coordinated seminars and international exhibitions.
The Heritage: Care-Preservation-Management programme has been designed to serve the needs of the museum and heritage community worldwide. It publishes books and information services for professional museum and heritage workers, and for all the organisations that service the museum community.

Editor-in-chief: Andrew Wheatcroft

Architecture in Conservation: Managing developments at historic sites
James Strike

The Development of Costume
Naomi Tarrant

Forward Planning: A handbook of business, corporate and development planning for museums and galleries
Edited by Timothy Ambrose and Sue Runyard

The Handbook for Museums
Gary Edson and David Dean

Heritage Gardens: Care, conservation and management
Sheena Mackellar Goulty

Heritage and Tourism in ‘the global village’
Priscilla Boniface and Peter J. Fowler

The Industrial Heritage: Managing resources and uses
Judith Alfrey and Tim Putnam

Managing Quality Cultural Tourism
Priscilla Boniface

Museum Basics
Timothy Ambrose and Crispin Paine

Museum Exhibition: Theory and practice
David Dean

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Eilean Hooper-Greenhill

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The Past in Contemporary Society: Then/Now
Peter J. Fowler

The Representation of the Past:
Museums and heritage in the post-modern world
Kevin Walsh

Towards the Museum of the Future: New European perspectives
Edited by Roger Miles and Lauro Zavala
Museums: A Place to Work
Planning Museum Careers

Jane R. Glaser with Artemis A. Zenetou

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The growing literature on the history of museums, their management, and their social obligations and ethical concerns, has yet to include a comprehensive volume on museum careers. This lacuna is now superbly filled by an author who has devoted several decades to studying and defining the roles of the various specialties that make up what now can be described as the “museum profession.” True, this profession does not have the canons of disciplinary rigor of medicine, the law, or the sciences. Nevertheless, over the years certain basic principles have emerged, the requirements of various positions have been defined, and, taken together, they do indeed constitute a profession whose specialties, depending on the size of an institution, interact for the common purpose of preservation, presentation, interpretation, and transmission.

Museums in the aggregate are keepers of a substantial part of the tactile evidence of the earth’s evolution and of humanity’s development, from millennia past to the present. Through an analysis of their holdings, we can set new discoveries within a historical continuum and leave to our successors, to an unfathomable future, the resources through which they will be able to gauge the validity of our assumptions, and the results of their own creativity and discovery.

Seen in this light, the role of museums and related organizations has enormous importance. The resources they collectively hold represent irreplaceable values. In fact, these institutions are trusts, and this function imposes upon them an awesome ethical burden and one that should permeate all of their activities. Their aim should be the search for truth, and their goal the highest integrity in all of their activities.

As preservers, presenters, interpreters, and transmitters, museums are also centers for lifelong learning. Their resources stimulate the young, instruct the mature, rejoice the eye, and for all ages provide opportunities for quiet contemplation, for discovery, for that knowledge that can only result from asking questions, making comparisons, and understanding interrelationships. These attributes pertain to all museums, whether dedicated to art, history, science, or nature.
Since the objects in most art and history museums are the products of earlier civilizations, they are testimony of cultural development, and because culture is the collective expression of a society, museums must be boundary-free for all in society to enjoy. Museum staff must recognize that what they hold in trust is not the product of this or that elite but the tactile manifestation of what previous and present societies have accomplished. Hence, as they preserve the creativity of past societies, museums have the obligation to share this creativity with everyone in the present society.

Those museums that are concerned with natural history – the zoos, the botanical gardens, aquariums and others – must be equally open, since all of us are part of the natural order and dependent on that order for our continued collective existence. Through these institutions, we can obtain a heightened understanding of this interrelationship and be connected to our origins, enriched by the beauty of the biota, and become more sensitive to the growing threats to its viable continuity, indeed to its and our very survival.

All these considerations suggest the importance of museum careers since these have one common theme: to foster understanding of the past, enrichment and enjoyment of the present, and to be, as it were, a vote of confidence in the future. Hence, the importance of the training and professional commitment of those who choose a museum career.

As we face the twenty-first century, and this is admirably evoked in the latter part of this book, there are large clouds on the horizon: shrinking resources, overpopulation, urban blight, pollution, and the uncertainty caused by new technologies, some of which, by their very name, such as artificial intelligence, are highly threatening. In this perspective, museums have a renewed need to be clear in the articulation of their purposes and principles and, most importantly, to create a climate that will attract the best minds and the most enthusiastic attitudes to the various branches of the profession which is charged with their care.

This volume superbly introduces potential staff to the vast array of professional opportunities that are open, but it does more through its organization and thoughtful contents: it is a guide to those who, now or in the future, may be involved in museum training. In this book, Jane Glaser and her associates have produced more than an introduction to museum careers; they have produced a manifesto on their meaning.

Paul N. Perrot
Former Director, Santa Barbara Museum of Art,
Santa Barbara, California
Preface

Though the first museums were established almost half a millenium ago, at least 90 per cent, possibly 95 per cent, of the world's museums have been created since the end of the Second World War. This explosive growth in the number, range, variety, and richness of museums has been paralleled by similar developments in museum employment. From just two traditional types of employees – the scholar-curators and the non-professional support workers (technical, maintenance, and security personnel) – the museum workforce now includes an almost bewildering range of positions and job titles (though there remain major cultural differences between countries in this). The range of new museum jobs reflects both the widening educational and social role of modern museums and (much though many may deplore it) a marked decline in the traditional dominance of curatorship in present-day museum policy and management. In relation to both the debate about the future of museums in the twenty-first century and the growing importance of human resources management, this book is a timely and significant study, reflecting more than two decades' close observation of the changing nature of museum employment around the world.

Professor Patrick J. Boylan
United Kingdom

It has been said that museums reinvent themselves endlessly. So, too, the people who work in them reinvent museum careers. That's part of what makes museum work so intriguing and interesting.

The museum “profession” has been evolving in the United States over the past two hundred years, so it is not easy to define clearly what people do who work in museums. An amalgam of many professions within the museum has caused some to deny that there is a museum “profession.” But today, with an extensive body of literature, museological theories, professional and technical practices unique to museums, and codes of ethics, it is appropriate to take a closer look at museum careers as being in a profession.

It is time, as well, to assist those who contemplate museum careers in assessing their potential for success in the museum field. While many in the past have entered museum work “through the back door,” there now is a new degree
of sophistication among job-seekers. They are asking the questions of the museum "profession" that they ask of many other fields of endeavor. It is time to provide some of the answers, or at least to provide food for thought on what it entails to be a museum person. We approach this with a degree of flexibility so that our terminology and information will be adaptable for our international colleagues, their institutions, and individuals seeking museum careers throughout the world.

Research for this book included informal discussions with museum workers at all levels, in all sizes of museums, in all disciplines, "veterans" and newcomers, in all regions of the country and abroad. Many many museum professionals in various positions were formally and personally interviewed, most of them by Artemis Zenetou, for their museum life stories. They took time from their busy lives to share their experiences so that others might benefit from the lessons learned. You will hear their voices throughout the book (the quotes are extrapolated from the interviews), and we hope that this uniquely personalized approach will have a special impact on your decisions and plans.

In addition, we sent surveys to hundreds of museum people throughout the country asking them to help us develop descriptions of their positions. The response was overwhelming in their cooperation and enthusiasm for our project. We also sent questionnaires to administrators of museum studies programs and university career counselors asking them to tell us what questions are being asked about possible museum careers. Their prompt and supportive replies were extremely useful.

All current museological and career-related literature has been thoroughly searched and scrutinized for ideas, philosophy, data, statistics, and other opinions to share with you. We found very little on museum careers, reinforcing our views on the need for more basic information.

This book comes as a result of a thirty-two-year love affair with museums, what they are about, and, most important, the people who work in them. So many colleagues have demonstrated the special commitment and dedication, even passion, for public service that is required for a museum career. Their intellect, curiosity, good humor, and wit are not matched in any other field. They argue and debate the issues, and somehow reach a consensus when it is important to do so. They reinvent their jobs, and invent new ones as society and technology change.

Most important, the museum field has matured to a point of understanding the difference between having a "profession" and being "professional." The best of museum people are a source of tremendous pride for their accomplishments as leaders, managers, scholars, collectors, researchers, preservers, exhibitors, and educators of our cultural and natural heritage and for the publics we serve, and their work exemplifies the best in museum professionalism. They epitomize what we are trying to describe for you in this book.

Jane R. Glaser
Acknowledgments

A book of this scope draws heavily on resources and colleagues throughout the United States and abroad. Because it is written for and about the museum field, we reflected upon the accumulated experience of the happy and rewarding career of the author and those of hundreds of museum professionals who generously shared their views of what museum careers are all about. Their career paths, their interests, their goals, their problems, their successes, their sustained good humor, and their unusual exploits all contributed to the “drama” of writing about planning a museum career. We are extremely grateful to all of them.

We are especially deeply indebted to those who gave freely of their time for personal interviews and agreed to be taped for posterity. By sharing their insights, they demonstrated the meaning of professional service. Their words of wisdom appear throughout the book.

Of all the help received, no one has sustained commitment longer or more imperturbably than Artemis Zenetou, my associate. No one has worked more steadily, done more extensive research, carried more of the endless detail, responded more thoughtfully, maintained more stamina and good humor, and endured more of the author’s frustrations – all with flexibility and grace. Her patience and energy in conducting a great number of interviews, her tireless efforts to research and write one of the chapters and a unit of another, her intelligence and devotion to getting the book on track and “right,” made the project possible. I shall be forever grateful!

There is no one in the museum field to whom I am more indebted than to my friend and colleague Paul Perrot, who graciously agreed to write the foreword for this book. My indebtedness goes back twenty years, when he persuaded me to work at the Smithsonian Institution. His example of professionalism, integrity, and ethical conduct in the museum world remains an inspiration. He believed strongly in a global museum village long before it was the popular or “correct” thing to do. He promoted and doggedly fought for the recognition and importance of conservation. His influence in believing in a strong code of ethics and that we must assist one another in the museum field is indeed evident throughout this book.
Acknowledgments

We have been blessed with an editor, Ann Hofstra Grogg, who has had unfailing interest, patience, faith in the project, a marvelously critical eye, professionalism, a keen sense of the museum field, and the amazing ability to make the sometimes unintelligible into a literate document. She has calmly and wisely shepherded the book to a final manuscript. Our eternal gratitude!

My deepest appreciation to my friends and colleagues Marie Malaro and Bob Macdonald, who shared their special talents and expertise by writing three chapters of this book. This book would not be complete without their thoughtful and wise advice on governance, legal concerns, and ethics. Their sense of professionalism is a beacon to those considering entering the field.

For her invaluable assistance in compiling the bibliographies and the appendix, Maria Magdalena Mieri deserves a special medal. Her diligence, skills in sorting through voluminous information, checking and rechecking references, abiding interest, unfailing good cheer, and thoughtful judgments deserve special recognition. She was aided by Maria Mescua, who launched these special sections of the book in its beginnings. We are very grateful to her as well. Colleagues and librarians helped greatly in identifying sources and suggesting others.

A number of people have read or listened to parts of this book, and many have commented on it and made suggestions for improvements. I and the book have profited substantially, and changes were made from their observations. Among those whom I thank for their invaluable appraisals are the Glaser clan, Alexis Papahelas, Paul Perrot, Mary Grace Potter, George Robinson, and Philip D. Spiess.

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For use of their organization charts as examples: the Queensland Art Gallery of Australia, the Milwaukee Public Museum of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, The Exploratorium of San Francisco, California, the Virginia Museum of Natural History of Martinsville, Virginia, the Kentucky Historical Society of Frankfort, Kentucky, and the Museum of Hispanic American Art, “Isaac Fernandez Blanco,” of Buenos Aires, Argentina.

We are obliged to the American Association of Museums for permission to reprint the 1994 Code of Ethics for Museums, and to the American Association of Museum Volunteers for use of their first chapter as a starting-point for our chapter “Staff/Volunteer Relations.” We are pleased to have the endorsement of the UNESCO International Fund for the Promotion of Culture.

For generously contributing photographs for consideration, we are most appreciative to the California Academy of Sciences, the Denver Museum of Natural History, the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, the Kentucky Historical Society, the Goulandris Museum of Cycladic and Ancient Greek Art, the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities, the Smithsonian Office of Exhibits Central, the Smithsonian Institution Archives, the Smithsonian Conservation Analytical Laboratory, the Smithsonian Office of Photographic Services, the National Park Service, and Guy Hardy of the Quebec Federal Office of Regional Development.

To the hundreds of respondents to our surveys who rallied to the cause and shared their information we doff our hats. The hundreds who came for museum career advice and counsel over the years we salute for their inspiration for this book.

To those named and those unnamed (unintentionally) our deepest thanks. We found great satisfaction and enrichment throughout the process of writing this book. We have learned anew, and hope to continue the learning process for all our days.

Jane R. Glaser

Interviewees

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Acknowledgments

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Spencer Crew, Director, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC

Sue Dahling, former Director of Marketing, The Computer Museum, Boston, Massachusetts

Steve Di Girolamo, Exhibition Designer, National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC

Janet Dorman, former Museum Shop Manager, The Phillips Collection, Washington, DC

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Barbara K. Gibbs, Director, Cincinnati Art Museum, Cincinnati, Ohio, former Director, Crocker Museum of Art, Sacramento, California

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Laura Lester, Director of Public Affairs, The Phillips Collection, Washington, DC

Barbara Luton, Director of Development, Santa Barbara Museum of Art, Santa Barbara, California

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Philip Ravenhill, Chief Curator, National Museum of African Art, Washington, DC

Harry Robinson, Jr, Director, Museum of African American Life and Culture, Dallas, Texas

Belgica Rodriguez, former Director, Art Museum of the Americas, Organization of American States, Washington, DC

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Patricia A. Steuert, Deputy Director, The Children’s Museum, Boston, Massachusetts

Linda Thomas, Registrar, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Massachusetts

Edith Tonelli, former Director, Wight Gallery, University of California, Los Angeles, California

Bonnie VanDorn, Executive Director, Association of Science–Technology Centers, Washington, DC

William J. Voss, Chief Curator of Science, Fort Worth Museum of Science and History, Fort Worth, Texas
Acknowledgments

Susan Wilkerson, Collections Manager, National Building Museum, Washington, DC

Sarah J. Wolf, Director of Conservation and Collections Management, The Textile Museum, Washington, DC

Kenneth Yellis, Assistant Director of Public Programs, Peabody Museum, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut
Part I
The museum world,
its works and wonders
The museum world, its works and wonders: prologue

You may be among the curious who have had an abiding interest in museums and are considering launching a museum career, but you're not sure why or where to start. There is also a great deal you would like to know about museums and their origins. With this in mind, let us introduce you to the museum world, its works and wonders. This world has a long and interesting history, as you will see, and over the centuries it has attracted the interest and commitment of many thoughtful, wise, creative, and innovative people. From the historic yesterdays of museums, we present for you the time frames as museums evolved into both the unusual and the traditional educational institutions they are today.

Why are there so many museums? It may be as simple as that Americans are always at risk at being disconnected with their past, and creating museums is an effort to find a meaningful past. In a country whose history is as short as ours, and in a country whose attention span is as short as ours, I think that museums are part of our civic memory, and clearly people have that in mind. They are also making a statement of who they want to be so that museums are part of an affirmative proactive aspect of the American temperament which says we are not who we want to be or need to be, yet we are ready to make a down payment on that.

Kenneth Yellis, Yale University Peabody Museum of Natural History

The beauty of museums is that they are not part of the real world, and yet we have to make certain that in our museums what people see in our buildings has to relate to what they see outside – they can't be two worlds apart. If museums are meaningful, people are going to go to museums and say that the museum has some relationship to what people are doing outside the museum.

Kenneth Starr, formerly Milwaukee Public Museum

Museums, first and foremost, should be educational institutions. We may be a storehouse too because it is one of our functions to locate, obtain,
and maintain material culture that reflects history – and that means storing things in a positive sense. But dissemination of information is the key!

Spencer Crew, National Museum of American History

I think it is the duty of the museum to use the research in its education and public programs. I think this is the basic justification for why we are here, why we have the collections, and why we do the research.

Craig Black, formerly Los Angeles County Museum of Natural History

It's intellectually challenging and a tremendous privilege to work in a museum.

Barbara K. Gibbs, Cincinnati Art Museum

I like the environment of museums. People tell me how lucky I am – others spend their leisure time in museums, and I work there!

Janet Dorman, formerly The Phillips Collection

Outside people are fascinated by what museum work is – all they do is make money. They tell me that someday they wish they could do what I do.

Robert Macdonald, Museum of the City of New York

Embarking on a museum career you should have an openness, and perseverance. Museums are exciting.

Belgica Rodriguez, formerly Art Museum of the Americas (OAS)

If you are looking to do something that is useful to humankind, to make the world a better place, by all means, do it!! You should think about museums.

Glenn Guttleben, The Exploratorium, San Francisco

I find that the people who work in museums tend to be generally intelligent, sensitive, and well-intentioned people.

Peter Ames, formerly Science Museum of Boston

Museums are recognized as powerful centers of learning: they are a positive social force in their communities, they enhance their communities’ public reputation and economy, and they provide a place where diverse cultures can find values that unify them.

Susannah Simpson Kent, formerly Institute of Museum Services
So you want to work in a museum . . . Why?

You may have your answer already, but most people who ask about working in a museum are not sure why.

- Perhaps it sounds glamorous – it’s different from ordinary run-of-the-mill kinds of jobs.
- You have been collecting “things” for years, so don’t collectors belong in a museum?
- You have a solid background in a discipline, but you don’t particularly want to teach.
- You are a scholar, primarily interested in research and writing – where do you fit in a museum?
- You have been working in another field for five or ten years, and it’s time for a change.
- You have spent two summers working on an archeological “dig” and found it fascinating, but you want to see where those artifacts end up, and how, and by whom they are studied and cared for – is this a place for you?
- Butterflies and bugs had special places on the shelves in your room for years – if you work in a museum, will you be able to go out in the fields to collect and study the specimens you love?
- You are a computer “whiz” – do museums want you?
- You are passionate about the importance of education and are looking for an educational institution whose mission matches your drive – would a museum be a good place to work?
- You are artistic, so there must be something for you to do in a museum.
- You are curious about who does all the work in getting an exhibition together – what goes on behind the scenes?

“I think museums are in a marvelously interesting place in American society now. The largest issues that are in life center around values that have to do with things like tolerance, diversity, and freedom of expression which museums can translate against our own history.”

Edmund B. Gaither, Museum of the National Center of Afro-American Artists
"I am strong in my encouragement to people who are interested to come into the profession if they have a passion for it. If they have a serious interest in museums and museum work, then they are going to succeed."

Malcolm Arth, formerly American Museum of Natural History

- You are intrigued by all those works of art, objects, and artifacts, and, since you like to do research, you would like to get closer to them, study them and learn more about them.
- You are very well organized, methodical and neat – you would like to keep records and set up systems in a museum, you think.
- Perhaps you have a museum studies or an arts administration degree, and a museum should be for you, but you are not sure where you fit.
- You want to know if your training and skills in writing, public relations, teaching, law, marketing, management, computers, etc., are transferable to museum work.
- You have a high-school diploma or a technical-school certificate – what can you do in a museum?
- You are comparing the museum field potential with several other fields, and you want to know what the career tracks are and how well you would be paid.
- You have heard that museums are the “old boys’ club,” and you are anxious to know about gender equity in hiring practices.
- You want to know if senior-level positions are attainable for minorities in traditional museums – where do you start?
- You want to know if the Americans with Disabilities Act is really going to have an effect on hiring people with disabilities for many jobs in museums.
- You have a great imagination, are creative, and like people – shouldn’t you be working in a museum?

These are among the many approaches to inquiring about museum work that we have encountered over the past thirty-two years. All are valid, and all require answers, even though the ramifications and variables are endless. Of course, there is no one answer to these questions.

This is why we have written this book

We hope it will serve as a definitive guide, nationally and internationally, for those embarking upon a museum career, for high-school and university students and career counselors, for those changing careers, for museum studies students and instructors, for all university disciplinary programs students and instructors, for museum staff (those who hire, those who advise, and those seeking new or different positions), for career-reference shelves in libraries, and for those merely seeking information about museum work.
So you want to work in a museum?

"I work in a museum because I love the collections, the people – it's interesting, it's challenging, and there is always change."

Linda Thomas, Boston Museum of Fine Arts

The book provides factual and up-to-date information on the types of positions available, educational prerequisites, experience and on-the-job skills requirements, the nature of policy-making positions, important ethical considerations, diversity in the work-force, the use of new technologies, the importance of managerial acumen and entrepreneurship, museums as learning-environments, museum governance and its effect on museum operations, where training and professional development fit in, and the obligations of museum staff in the "global village." These and many other considerations are indicative of the higher standards and increasing complexities within museum work. These issues affect museum staff today and certainly tomorrow, and if you want to work in a museum, you need to be prepared.

You should love museums, of course, and you must be committed to the ideas they embody. Museum work is a life of dedication and public service. Careers are not nine-to-five positions; they require doing what it takes to get the job done. The rewards they offer are not generally financial, though salaries are better than they once were. If your goal is a very lucrative position, however, look elsewhere.

To give you some idea of the observations, philosophies, rewards, and satisfactions of museum work you will hear throughout this book from among the many museum professionals interviewed. This special feature brings you personal commitment and enthusiasm derived from their experiences as professionals in the museum field.

All of the information in this book can be of value to those seeking a career in museums, and who need to know about abilities and knowledge required for museum positions. For example, skills in marketing and fund raising are imperative in a contemporary society where museums are competing with a multitude of organizations for support, both private and governmental. Such skills, important as they are, are not necessarily a part of the traditional academic training which candidates for museum careers receive.

Planning and preparing for a museum career are relatively new courses of action, but wise ones. Competition for jobs is greater than in the past, when most people came into museums through other disciplines or accidentally and learned museum practices mostly by trial and error. Museums today have a whole new set of concerns and financial constraints in serving their vast communities, recognizing the diverse cultures and age groups as part of their constituencies, providing the public and the educational establishment with alternatives, and becoming agents of social change.

Despite current financial restraints, the museum field has been, and continues to be, a "growth industry." Changes in society, advances in technology, and
The museum world

"I like working in a museum because it allows me to use more of my skills than any other position that I have ever had in my life, and it allows me more control over what I am doing. I love the job."

JoAllyn Archambault, National Museum of Natural History

the "information age" of the 1990s are opening new avenues in museum work. At the same time museums are reaffirming their basic functions — collecting, preserving, researching, exhibiting, and interpreting — and must also include those added dimensions of knowledge and skills to prepare candidates for their roles in the museums of the twenty-first century.

To understand the museum "profession," take a long look at museums themselves. What is a museum? How do museums differ from or resemble each other? Exhibitions are one of the most visible products of museums, a bridge between the museum, its ideas, its collections, its research, and the public. How do they reflect their institutions? What do a museum's public programs, special events, publications, and facilities reveal about its mission and philosophy? That should give you some idea about the people who work in them, what their jobs may be, and the manner in which the museum operates. One of the main objectives of museums, as individualistic and independent as they are, is to build a sense of unity in their institutions and in the individuals who comprise the museum work-force.

Then read this book. We hope you will find answers to your questions about museum careers, and we also hope you will draw inspiration from those already committed to this career path. Why do they like working in museums?

One of the assets in terms of being in museum work is that you meet diverse people, you meet specialists who know incredible things about their subject-matter, so that if you have an interest you have access to people that will enable you to learn in depth about issues that concern you. Museums are full of the most creative and innovative thinkers that I've encountered. I love working in the field. I think museums celebrate the very best humankind has endeavored to give.

Claudine Brown, formerly Smithsonian Institution

I never regretted going into the museum field. It's wonderfully satisfying, endlessly satisfying. No two days are alike. It's like Alice in Wonderland. When you finish your book you will find that there will be a great variety of views, and this is one of the joys and satisfactions of the museum world in that we don't come out of a production line like doctors, attorneys, etc. You sit around a table with a group of museum people, and it's seldom that two come from the same background. That brings a great richness to the profession. There is great diversity and quality that adds immensely to the museum field.

Kenneth Starr, formerly Milwaukee Public Museum
I love objects. I love looking at them, working with them, and most of all I like the people in the museum. They are dedicated to what they do. Very few, if any of them, are motivated by finances, and therefore . . . they are content in their jobs in the sense that there are other things about their jobs that satisfy them.

Arthur Beale, Boston Museum of Fine Arts

I was lucky. I fell in the museum business, and I am enjoying it tremendously. It has given me the opportunity to live in different parts of this country, and travel around the world. It introduced me to interesting people from every walk of life, every situation. I encourage people to do it.

Robert Macdonald, Museum of the City of New York

Becoming a part of the museum field today, no matter in what capacity, requires a dedication and commitment as never before, and thorough preparation and planning for a museum career will lead to an understanding of the high level of ethics and professionalism that is required of all of us in the field.
"Isn't fascination as comforting as solace? . . . Isn't curiosity as wondrously and fundamentally human as compassion?"

Stephen Jay Gould, in his reflections on natural history, was referring to nature being “immeasurably more interesting for its complexities and its lack of conformity to our hopes.” We would transfer his message, to write of museums as immeasurably more interesting for curiosity, wonder, awe, and fascination. Full of complexities, and not necessarily conforming to any one set of rules, or even hopes, museums, past and present, offer a variegated and fundamentally human scene. We hope you will be fascinated by the world of museums as you ponder a museum career.

A logical first step in thinking about a museum career is to learn a little about the origins and the long past of museums and about the breadth of concerns these institutions embrace in the present. It is often said that museums relate and interpret the past so that we may understand the present in order to meet the challenges of the future. Similarly, if you plan a museum career, you will need to know where, how, and why museums began, in order to understand what and why they are today, in order to speculate on the ways they will meet the challenges in the future, in your future!

The origins of museums

The word “muse” means to cogitate, meditate, think, dream, ponder, contemplate, and deliberate. For more than two thousand years people have created places where very special and valuable objects, artifacts, and works of art provide the milieu for “musing.”

In fact, the word “muse” is derived from the Muses in Greek mythology. These were the nine daughters of Zeus who presided over arts and learning, including history, epic and lyric poetry, music, tragedy, dance, comedy, astronomy, and religious music. From these Muses came the Greek word, mouseion, “place of the Muses,” and our English usage of the word “museum.”
The earliest museum may have been in third-century Alexandria, Egypt. In ancient Rome museums were temples, and the colonnades surrounding the marketplace (agora) were full of works of art and historical objects (including military “trophies” from the Crusades), where beauty stimulated philosophical discussion. Like the Greek mouseion, they were dedicated to the Muses and ideal for public and philosophical discussion.

The term “museum” was first used to describe a collection in Renaissance Florence. Museums in the fifteenth century were art and objects amassed by the church or by wealthy and princely families of Europe. At the same time, humanist popes in Rome and other clergy and lay people started collecting classical, medieval and Romanesque statues and antiquities in Italy. Some collections were described as “cabinets of curiosity,” others as “cabinets of the world” (the “world” indicated that they were trying to represent the world as perceived by the owners). The very wealthy Medici family in Florence was among the princely groups outside the church who amassed great art collections for the pleasure and enjoyment of family members and friends. It was a very exclusive and self-indulgent patronage (even though of benefit to the artists of the time), because the families themselves, along with perhaps some royal and well-educated peers, were the connoisseurs, the “keepers,” and the only visitors. Eilean Hooper-Greenhill identifies the Medici Palace as the first “nodal-point” in the development of museums. Objects were not exhibited in any planned way but were rather haphazardly hung or placed in luxurious surroundings. Their purpose was to signify the importance of the owner. Gradually, throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, budding scholarship was brought to bear on these collections, and some rudimentary organization, usually by object type, began to be employed.

In the sixteenth century there were Italian gallerie (galleries) of pictures and sculpture and gabinetti (cabinets) of natural history collections. In the seventeenth century botanical gardens began to appear, and the first university museum was founded in 1671 in Basel, Switzerland.

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, many major European cities established museums of antiquities or created special galleries in existing museums. Most of the museums of that time were still exclusively for the noble, the elite, and the highly educated; they were not intended for the public. England’s first public museum was the Ashmolean, based on John Tradescant’s “cabinet of rarities,” which opened in 1683 at Oxford University, charging sixpence admission. The British Museum, which opened in London in 1759, a bequest of Sir Hans Sloane, was only a little more accessible than the museums of the Renaissance, as entry was limited to sixty visitors a day. The first true national museum, it was 1879 before it was open to the public on a daily basis. The Danish National Museum, which opened to the public in 1819, made a concerted effort to educate the “peasants,” as they would have been the ones most likely to discover the nation’s prehistoric artifacts while tilling the soil.

In the nineteenth century art museums “open to the public” (providing some kind of public service) included the Louvre in Paris (established in 1793), the
Prado in Madrid (1819), the National Museum for Greek Antiquities on the island of Aegina (1829), and the Altes in Berlin, which opened its doors in 1830. Governments in these nations were already housing former royal collections, usually in former royal palaces, and they were conscious of the advantages and goodwill generated by opening them to the general public. Indeed, the French Revolution, engendered by the "masses," contributed to the rise of nationalism, conversion to "public" collections, and the great national museums of Europe. At the beginning of the nineteenth century buildings began to be specifically designed and constructed for museums, including the Schinkel-designed Altes museum in Germany, although the Mint in Munich can be traced back to the sixteenth century. Other notable national museums of the period were founded in Budapest (1802), Prague (1818), and Stockholm (1847).

The development of museums in the United States

Quite the opposite of European museum history, public museums in the United States preceded private collections. They were established beginning late in the eighteenth century in fashions similar to the "cabinets of curiosities" and, like them, were not very accessible to the general public. There was, of course, a limit to what was available to collect: namely, local natural history, and art by American painters. Joel Orosz has described the impetus of our earliest museums as "cultural nationalism." Excluding European influences, "they were founded, for the most part, by Americans, in response to American cultural needs, and developed according to the imperatives of the changing American culture." 

John Adams, second president of the United States, predicted the future of cultural life in America in a famous letter to his wife: "I must study politics and war that my sons may have liberty to study mathematics, philosophy, geography, commerce, and agriculture, in order to give their children a right to study painting, poetry, music, architecture, statuary." 

Reflecting the evolution of American society, museum development in the United States might best be described in its various phases, with obvious overlaps: the age of the private society (cabinets of curiosities), the age of "popular" or commercial museums (self-education through entertainment), the age of the academic museum (research and teaching), the rise of the public museum (more democratic), the emergence of the educational museum (increasing professionalism), and museums as they are today – in crisis and diversity.

The few museums of the late eighteenth century were collections of miscellaneous materials displayed largely for society's elite. These included the curios of the Library Company of Philadelphia (with preserved animals, fossils, and coins) and the Philosophy Chamber (which meant science at the time) at Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts (with a telescope and "philosophical apparatus"). In 1773, three years before the Declaration of
Independence, the first museum for the public opened in Charleston, South Carolina, with natural history and other eclectic collections. It exists and flourishes today, though not with the same collections nor in the same building.

The unfamiliar flora and fauna of the New World inspired collectors, as did new patriotic sentiments for the new nation. Private committees and clubs, not governmental authorities, started museums in many areas of the country. Founders represented a broad spectrum of social, intellectual, and economic backgrounds; their efforts established historical societies and museums related to the natural sciences. Historical societies sometimes reflected religious interests as well as patriotic energies. The Massachusetts Historical Society is one example. Other states established historical societies in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and they amassed all sorts of collections. Art was not yet a focus for museum collections, as most art was still commercial, the product of an artist-dealer-patron nexus.

In 1785, Charles Willson Peale, an eminent portraitist who had an art gallery in his home, noticed that his visitors also took great interest in his shells, minerals, and mounted birds. Thus, the Peale Museum in Philadelphia was started for the purpose of displaying “natural curiosities”; it later evolved into the Academy of Natural Sciences, although most of the Peale collections are at Harvard University. More than that, and unique at the time, Peale’s museum had a mission that included both scientific and historical research and public education. Peale had a difficult balancing act of educating and entertaining while being a repository for collections and increasing the wealth of information. As Gary Kulik observes:

He was an artist, scientist, museum founder closer to the Renaissance. His long struggle for financial support, his efforts to create a museum that was both entertaining and scholarly, and his attempts to use it self-consciously as an instrument of democracy, compel him to us. His problems seem not unlike ours.  

Other museums of the period were the American Antiquarian Society in Worcester, Massachusetts, DuSmetière’s American Museum in Philadelphia, and the Wadsworth Atheneum (atheneums were originally private libraries used as “gentlemen’s clubs” to read and play chess) in Hartford, Connecticut in 1844. They were within the same tradition as Peale of presenting scholarly exhibitions, yet hoping to appeal to an, as yet, unknown or unidentified public.

The age of the popular or commercial museum

A significant development in the history of American museums occurred when the entrepreneur P. T. Barnum opened his American Museum in 1841 in New York City. With a bizarre collection of curiosities and exotic performers, Barnum exploited, in a commercial way, the demand for popular learning in the United States. In addition to collections of shells, rocks and minerals, and
fish, he had performing midgets, fleas, snakes, whales, and a white elephant from Siam. We are inclined to forget that most of the zoo animals we take for granted today were really exotic, indeed monstrous, in Barnum's day. He also displayed wax figures and panoramic scenes— forerunners of dioramas perhaps. Harold Skramstad said of him:

For Barnum, the curiosity, the excitement, and knowledge embodied in his strange museum was to be shared with visitors in an active way. Even in the exhibits that bordered on hoaxes, Barnum touched on what is still a touchstone of museum interpretation, the issue of authenticity. He realized that people took instinctive pleasure in uncovering process, and that learning, if properly administered in acceptable doses, was a major American pre-occupation with box office appeal.

It is easy to understand how Barnum’s traveling circus developed from his first “museum.”

Barnum appealed to a public seeking both reality and pleasure. He invited one and all to observe and learn how these exotic and strange things actually worked. He openly invited skepticism, challenge, and debate, and was a genuine pioneer in his understanding of the educational and entertainment power of museums.

Initially a center of science in a frontier “boom” town, the Western Museum of Cincinnati, founded in 1820, was another venture intended to entertain rather than educate. It attracted few visitors or patrons, and the founding fathers lost control of its administration and purpose. Louis Leonard Tucker quotes an English visitor’s comment: “A ‘museum’ in the American sense of the word means a place of amusement, wherein there shall be a theatre, some wax figures, a giant and a dwarf or two, a jumble of pictures, a few live snakes, and a stock of very dubitable curiosities.” Having been converted into a freak and horror show, the Western Museum became one of the best-known entertainment sites in the United States—the first “Disneyland” of the West, according to Tucker. These attractions, not museums in the professional sense of the word, had hustlers and promoters as “staff,” crude forerunners of our sophisticated and talented marketing people of today.

The age of the academic museum

In the first half of the nineteenth century, “public” and educational collections were established in academies, universities, and learned societies; some had staff, but “museum” duties related to collections were secondary. The emphasis was on scholarly research, and objects were arranged categorically for those purposes, as in many university science museums today. Indeed, most classification systems grew out of the need to organize for research purposes. The Columbian Institute in Washington, DC was established in 1816 for the promotion of the arts and sciences. Collections brought back by government-sponsored expeditions (the world-wide Wilkes expedition,
Museums - yesterday and today

1838–42, for example) were stored there, primarily because the government had nowhere else to put them.

Universities became enclaves for many collections, as that was where the scholars were located. At the same time, collections and the knowledge associated with them were considered important in a democracy. Ildiko Heffernan has observed:

American museums have been closely allied with the concept of democracy. Many were inspired by a belief in egalitarianism achievable through education. The relationship of museums to educational aspirations and political ideals is exemplified by the university museum whose development has been an integral part of higher education since the very beginning of our country.9

While the first college art museum, the Trumbull Gallery, was founded at Yale University in 1832, fine arts were integrally intertwined with natural history. James Audubon with his paintings of flora and fauna, and the Hudson River School of landscape art, for example, constituted an important genre in the early days of the United States that made significant illustrative connections for American collectors. The pioneers in a new land sought information that was immediately useful to them. Their natural environment and related phenomena were of greater importance, and that type of art was more closely related to their daily lives.

One of the most influential in the development of museums in the United States has been the Smithsonian Institution, established in 1846 following a bequest in 1826 by James Smithson, an Englishman and scientist, who had never been to this country. Smithson directed that the institution should provide for “the increase and diffusion of knowledge among men.” How the institution would fulfill that mandate was debated then and, in some quarters, is still debated today. While most people felt that research should play a prominent role, it has been argued over these many years that a balance with education should prevail, as museums have increasingly become major learning-resources for their communities.

The Smithsonian’s first secretary, Joseph Henry, a scientist, adamantly stated: “There are at this time thousands of institutions actively engaged in the diffusion of knowledge in our country, but not a single one which gives direct support to its increase.”10 Congress’ specific legislative interpretation of Smithson’s will was confined to provisions for a library, museum, art gallery, and lecture rooms. In 1847 the Board of Regents modified Henry’s elaborate research plan and, upon Henry’s death in 1878, with help from Congress, eventually established a national museum. Still in the 1930s a sign outside of the Smithsonian Castle building read: “The Smithsonian Institution is not a museum.”

It was said that Louis Agassiz, a scientist, dreamed of a museum that would be a library of the works of God. This dream was realized with the founding of the Gray Museum of Comparative Zoology at Harvard. Agassiz meant for