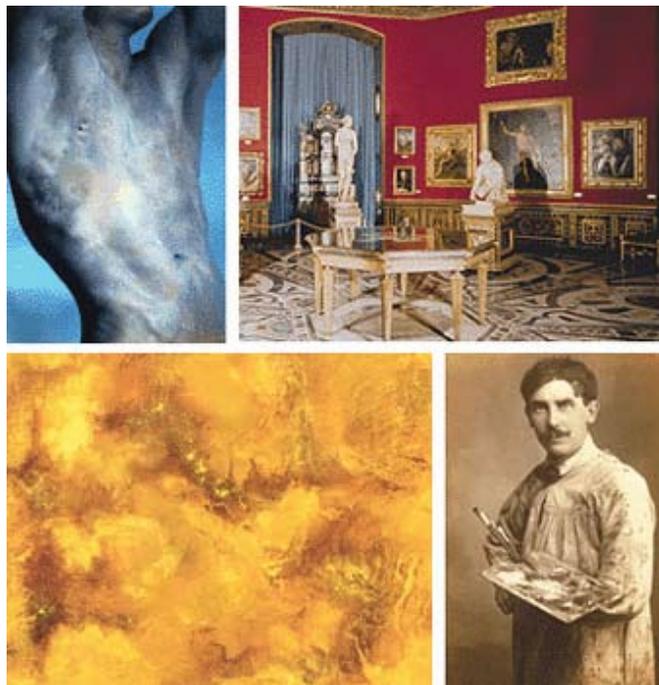


FabJob[®] GUIDE TO

**BECOME AN
ART CURATOR**



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1. Introduction

Welcome to the **FabJob Guide to Become an Art Curator**. In this guide we offer you the tools and techniques you need to enter the art field and work at a museum or freelance.

If you are a beginner, this guide will offer you the information you need to get started.

If you have experience as a curator, this guide will give you ideas to enrich and further your career as well as a way to expand your network of colleagues and artists.

The main reason to become a curator is a love of art—any type of art, from prehistoric cave paintings to Japanese pottery to video installations. Do you spend your free time reading art magazines or going to museums and art galleries? Do you try to surround yourself with objects that you love for all different sorts of reasons, such as their shapes and colors or their physical or emotional associations? Do you rearrange the photos and magnets on your refrigerator into visually pleasing configurations? If so, you should definitely consider this career!



Our guide offers you:

- **Insight** into the museum and art field.
- Different **avenues for gaining education** and experience.
- **Tips** on how to actually put an exhibition together and how to publicize it.
- Freelance **opportunities**.
- **Other jobs** in the art field that compare with curating.
- Suggestions for **staying on top** of your field.

Each section is set up for a distinct purpose.

The **Introduction** covers the essentials of being an art curator—what one does and how the position fits into the overall scheme of museum work—and basic resources within the museum field.

What an Art Curator Does explains literally how a curator does the job and the various responsibilities of curators at different ranks.

Developing Your Skills describes the importance of education (formal and self-driven), developing skills such as writing about art and schmoozing, and how to find volunteer and internship opportunities.

Getting Hired explains how to find job openings, how to apply for a paying position, and tips on preparing resumes and for interviews.

Independent Curating presents ways to find curating opportunities without having a full-time job at a museum, and shows you how to conceive and execute an exhibition from start to finish.

For-Profit Opportunities discusses other jobs, such as art appraisers, dealers, and corporate curators, which offer similar challenges as museum positions.

Conclusion/Being Successful offers tips on furthering your knowledge, networking, and job advancement.

The road to becoming an art curator is challenging, but this guide will help you navigate the process, enabling you to move from wishful thinking to the realization of your goal. The rewards of surrounding yourself with art and creative people can (and should!) provide you with motivation to jump out of bed every morning and tackle the world. If you are interested, please read on.

1.1 Becoming an Art Curator

1.1.1 What is an Art Curator?

Have you ever:

- Made a “wish list” of art you’d like to have in your home?
- Seen a work of art that you just can’t stop thinking about?
- Explained why you like a sculpture to a friend or family member?

If so, you may already have the passion and curiosity you need to become a successful art curator.

When museums first started forming, the curator was the person who oversaw and organized a collection of things, usually artifacts of some sort. Nowadays, as with other museum jobs, a curator's role has expanded to include **a wide variety of duties**. He or she typically has three major responsibilities:

Collections

In this traditional capacity, the curator studies a museum's permanent collection (art that the museum owns) for publications and exhibitions (see below). Some museums collect many different styles and origins of art. For instance, the **National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.**, has early Medieval altar paintings as well as contemporary American sculpture.

National Gallery of Art
<http://www.nga.gov>

Other museums have more focused collections, such as the **Asian Art Museum in San Francisco**.

Asian Art Museum of San Francisco
<http://www.asianart.org>

The curator also locates and evaluates new works to be added to the collection if funding is available or if a collector is interested in donating some pieces of art.

Exhibitions

The curator selects art to be featured in the museum's gallery spaces. This can mean choosing works from the permanent collection that revolve around a particular theme (such as Albrecht Dürer's influence on later printmakers) and possibly supplementing the collection with artwork borrowed from other institutions. The curator also works with curators at other museums to organize exhibitions involving a number of loans from each institution. In this case the exhibition usually travels between the collaborating museums. A contemporary art curator visits artists' studios to learn about their work and select pieces for exhibitions. At all museums, the curator provides input on the display of the work, from the hanging order to the label text.

Publications

Unless the institution is very large, the curator usually writes a variety of components for the show, including the exhibition panels and labels, exhibition brochures, and essays for accompanying catalogs. At larger institutions, the exhibitions department or education department may write most of the things read by visitors, such as labels and free handouts. Many curators publish their research on their museum's collection in art magazines, journals, and books.

All of these responsibilities vary depending on the size of the museum and the exhibition. At a large museum, such as **The Metropolitan Museum of Art** in New York, curators specialize in one style or period, such as Ancient Near Eastern Art.

Metropolitan Museum of Art

<http://www.metmuseum.org>

Ancient Near Eastern Art

<http://www.metmuseum.org/collections/department.asp?dep=3>

At smaller places, the curator might be responsible for everything, from conceiving the exhibition to hanging the work on the walls to publicizing the show. With the advent of digital and mixed media art, virtual museums such as **The Alternative Museum** are emerging on the scene. The Alternative Museum, which closed its physical space in New York City in early 2000, utilizes curators for Internet art exhibitions on its website.

The Alternative Museum

<http://www.alternativemuseum.org>

If a museum is small (a staff of thirty or less), it may have two or three people in the curatorial department. At a larger museum, the curatorial department includes a hierarchy of curatorial assistants, assistant curators, associate curators, curators, and chief or head curators. Some museums have a separate curator of exhibitions who focuses less on scholarship and publishing and more on project management, such as maintaining budgets, establishing schedules for exhibitions at the museum, and overseeing the design and production of exhibitions.

1.2 Why Be a Curator?

I was recently reminded how much I love my job when I edited a Baroque exhibition catalog over my Christmas vacation. Here I was, cuddled on my sofa, drinking a cup of coffee, fascinated by skeletons and other images of death found in early seventeenth-

century prints. Not your typical holiday activity, but I was in heaven. Obviously, I'm hooked.

1.2.1 The Reward is the Exhibition

Independent curator **Adam Lerner** says the thing he enjoys about curating is “meeting with artists who I like to exhibit and talking with the public about the works in my show. I love the feeling of seeing an exhibition come together, all hung and lit at 2:00 a.m. the night before a preview.”

J.W. Mahoney, a curator and art critic based in Washington, D.C., says that curating “is like making art. It's **bringing different parts into a whole**, and the sum is greater than the parts. The best is when you've completed your layout and you say to yourself, ‘This is good. This is fine.’”

Like Mahoney, I think that a well-curated exhibition is like a work of art itself. A handsome display and design combined with thoughtful arrangement and interpretation truly enhances a museum visitor's experience, exposing visitors to ideas and feelings that only emerge in the presence of art.

The exhibition also provides a sense of closure, something not found in all jobs. Exhibitions can take anywhere from a few months to several years to complete. Seeing the fruit of your labor on the walls around you provides an incredible sense of **accomplishment** and **joy**.

1.2.2 Turning on the “Lightbulb” for Someone

The elation of creating a good exhibition can rapidly deflate if no one comes to see the show. But even better than high visitation numbers are visitor excitement and understanding. Many curators give talks or other programs to engage the public in the art. When a small child creates a painting inspired by the work you've selected, it's quite a rush. Maybe you've helped this little person along their path to be **the next Van Gogh** or the next director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Adults tend not to be quite so open with their enthusiasm, although they might gush—or fume—in a comment book. But if they are taking the brochures and asking questions, you've done a good job. And if someone takes time out of their busy day to see your work, you've won half the battle.

I work in a university gallery, so just getting the college students to roll out of their dorm rooms and into our museum is a big accomplishment. I also give tours of our exhibitions to our student workers who man the galleries during open hours. During my first

tour, I faced a sea of twenty completely blank faces. I couldn't tell if I was talking below them or above them, and only one person asked a question. But a few weeks later I overheard one of the students giving a small group of visitors a tour of the exhibition. Not only was she repeating some of my points, she'd come up with wonderful new observations about the work on her own. And then I found out that another student was going to write a review of the exhibition for the school paper. I couldn't have been a prouder mama bear!

1.2.3 Constant Stimulation/Constant Learning

With a never-ending roster of exhibitions and new acquisitions, the curator **constantly learns** more about his or her field of specialty and meets people at other museums in the state and around the country. To research a work of art, the curator might talk to the original donor, a gallery dealer, a conservator, a librarian, and probably a curator or two at another museum that has a similar work. For exhibitions, the curator works with practically the entire staff of his or her own museum, as well as the artists and/or lenders; librarians; staff at lending museums; collaborators or other curators; funders; the press; and members of the museum.

Because the Internet is still not a substitute for seeing art in person, most curators **travel regularly** for research purposes as well as to scout out new artists or exhibitions. The profession also tends to sponsor conferences and seminars throughout the year to encourage new scholarship, information sharing, and most importantly, networking. It's also crucial for a curator to **be aware of local art activities**, so weekends and evenings may be spent visiting nearby museums and galleries, especially opening events and lectures.

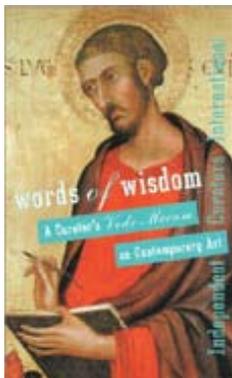
Which brings us to **parties**—another big perk of the job! Most museums host exhibition openings throughout the year, as well as fund-raising galas and special receptions for major donors. Curators are usually invited to these events to schmooze the crowd, so it's not a "lampshade over the head" type of event.

Staying abreast of trends in art also requires **constant self-education**, largely by seeing other exhibitions and reading art magazines, new books, newspapers with art reviews, and the Internet. A curator needs to know whose work is hot and which exhibitions critics have panned. Curators don't necessarily need to follow trends; in fact, many pride themselves on avoiding the hullabaloo of the art world. But those same curators still read about the latest developments so that they can argue against them intelligently.

My favorite aspect of being a curator, aside from working with art and artists, is being surrounded by **fellow art lovers** and **creative personalities**. Art museums have just as much politics as any corporation, but for the most part, your colleagues enjoy **intellectual and aesthetic stimulation**, because otherwise they wouldn't be there. I've

never met a museum worker who didn't have a sense of **humor**. After all, when you are installing a difficult sculpture for the fifth time on a Saturday morning before the opening that evening, temper tantrums don't help anyone.

To find out more about what contemporary art curators love (and even hate!) about their jobs, take a glance at the book *Words of Wisdom: A Curator's "Vade Mecum" on Contemporary Art*, which is an assemblage of short essays by curators compiled by Independent Curators International. All of these curators seem to like their jobs, but they have different ideas on how to enter the field, stay current, be successful, and, most importantly, find job satisfaction.



“Words of Wisdom: A Curator's ‘Vade Mecum,’” edited by Caren Kuoni
<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0916365603>

1.3 Where Do Curators Work?

Although most curators work in many different types of museums—national and local, large and small—many also **freelance** or work in **for-profit organizations** such as corporations that have art collections. Freelance curators work on contract with museums, corporations, local art galleries, and municipal departments.

Another section of this guide discusses jobs in for-profit businesses that touch on several of the same responsibilities found in curating, such as research and publication. Art galleries, auction houses, and a few corporations hire people with expansive knowledge of the art world to aid in their collections and sales.

The many types of art museums will be discussed in detail in chapter four, on “Getting Hired.”

1.4 A Day in the Life of a Curator

A curator's average day usually isn't focused on just one project. Here's a somewhat typical day for me in my current curatorial position.

- Breakfast time** *(At home)* Scan over newspaper headings. It seems one of our gallery patrons, Mrs. Bucket-o-Cash, just gave a million bucks to another museum in town. When I get to work I'll try to send her information on our latest shows and perhaps invite her for a private tour of our exhibition.
- 8:30 a.m.** *(At work)* Check phone messages and emails for any crises, such as a lender who reports that the art handlers didn't return their paintings on time yesterday. Also an art critic called and needs an image of our upcoming show to meet a deadline at 11:00 a.m. So I ask an assistant to swing by the newspaper with slides of the artwork.
- 9:30 a.m.** I can concentrate best in the morning, so I try to complete reading and writing exercises. I might edit a catalog manuscript from another curator or try to write labels for a selection of photographs in an upcoming show. Our museum staff is small (only eight employees), and I wear many hats. I also write our press releases, so I do a lot of research for every exhibition, whether I curate it or not. Our interns help out tremendously with research, but I still need to absorb the facts into my own hard little head.
- 11:00 a.m.** If there's an exhibition being installed that I'm curating, I supervise the placement of the works. I usually have a floor plan in mind beforehand, but sometimes you never know how things will look until the artwork is there in person. For a show of factory photographs from the late 1930s by Lewis Wicks Hine, we ended up hanging the images according to the sex of the subject. Women seemed to do more sewing projects and men worked on bigger machines and we hadn't really noticed this until we had all the images in front of us.
- Lunch** This hour is usually spent running errands (buy more coffee!) or working out at the gym if I don't have an afternoon meeting.
- 1:00 p.m.** I review the progress on the exhibition installation prior to a meeting with professors in the music and art department about an upcoming symposium on Baroque art and music. During

the meeting we brainstorm on programming ideas, such as a workshop on 17th-century printing techniques. After the meeting I draft a press release about the festival, which centers around an exhibition of Baroque prints from our collection.

- 2:30 p.m.** I pick up a candidate for a curatorial position at our museum from the Human Resources office. She and I discuss her experience, her goals, and the goals of our museums. I give her a tour of our facilities and introduce her to our coworkers before I hand her off to the director of the museum.
- 4:00 p.m.** Back at the desk. Return phone calls and make some of my own. We are traveling an exhibition of prints by an Inuit artist so I'm calling various colleagues to see if they would be interested in hosting the show. If they are, I've got a printed description and set of slides to send their way.
- 5:00 p.m.** Finish the day responding to calls and emails.
- 6:00 p.m.** Check in with my boss about the day's events and then head home.
- Evening** Read the rest of the newspaper (especially the crossword puzzle!), scan recent art magazines while watching the Food Channel, and read a book on the Inuit peoples. Vow never to live in the Arctic.

1.5 Care to Try It Out?

You can give curating a try on the website for the **Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco**. Here you can literally organize your own exhibition with thousands of items in the museums' collections. Even the top curators in the business don't have that kind of freedom! Try it out and see what you think. You can play around with groupings and see how adding just one work of art on a wall can totally change the look of the space. **Have fun!**

Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco: Virtual Gallery
<http://www.famsf.org/gallery/index.asp>

You have reached the end of the free sample of the *FabJob Guide to Become an Art Curator*. To order and download the complete guide go to www.fabjob.com/program/become-art-curator/.