

Devon Murphy. *The Information Worlds of Art Museum Curators and Registrars: an Institutional Ethnography of Practice in North Carolina Institutions*. A Master's paper for the M.S. in I.S. degree. April, 2018. 97 pages. Advisor: Ryan Shaw.

This paper presents an institutional ethnography analysis of the information worlds of art museum curators and registrars to determine what information sources were used by art museum staff in specific work tasks. This study was conducted in four art museums in North Carolina; the Mint Museum in Charlotte, NC, the Ackland Art Museum in Chapel Hill, NC, the Nasher Art Museum in Durham, NC, and the Weatherspoon Art Museum in Greensboro, NC. Six curators and four registrars took part in the study, which consisted of interviews and information horizon maps. The results demonstrate a wide use of both digital and print sources used in work tasks, with an emphasis on utilizing document surrogates in lieu of the physical art object. However, difficulties in accessing information about art objects in other collections was widely reported, making planning exhibitions and conducting research more time-intensive. Further study into museum websites and catalogs is encouraged.

#### Headings:

Libraries & museums

Information-seeking strategies

Information resources

Museum curatorship

Collection management (Museums)

Institutional ethnography

THE INFORMATION WORLDS OF ART MUSEUM CURATORS AND  
REGISTRARS: AN INSTITUTIONAL ETHNOGRAPHY OF PRACTICE IN  
NORTH CAROLINA INSTITUTIONS

by  
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## **Introduction**

Museums, whether it be history, art, or natural sciences, currently face a wide variety of challenges; funding may be difficult to come by due to tighter state budgets, collections may lack a cohesive organizational system due to a varied or long institutional history, or visitor attendance may be dropping over time. Much of recent museology literature focuses on how to reorient these institutions to the present to overcome these issues. From the rise of interactive exhibits in the 1990s to the movement of “neighborhood” museums in the late 1990s to early 2000s to the increasing integration of social media in museum exhibits and practice in the present, museums have sought out a myriad number of strategies to stay relevant (Weil, 2002).

A crucial part of this program of strategies is the institutional mission or purpose, usually expressed as a mission statement on museum websites and related promotional materials. These statements, along with more specialized statements such as collection documents, define what the museum space is and isn't, and conversely, what it does and doesn't collect in terms of its object and text collections. However, few museums have a clear institutional history, often passing from different hands, such as the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) which derived its starting collections from one collector but gradually grew into a body administered by independent Native curators and the Smithsonian, or refocusing their purpose over time in response to the pressures listed above, such as the North Carolina Museum of Art (NCMA) in Raleigh, NC, which started its collection in Western painting, but in the 1980s refocused to include African and Latin American art as well (Lonetree and Cobb, 2008; NCMA, 2017). These changes are not made

independently, but with the involvement of a wide variety of stakeholders, including curators, registrars, administrative staff and directors, patrons (providing donations), and importantly, the collections themselves. There has been much scholarship in the fields of art history, museology/curatorial studies, and in library/information science on how museum collections are organized, displayed, and consumed, but little on the institutional life of those collections and those who do the work of creating them (Duncan, 1995; Carrier, 2006; O'Neill, 2012; Cherry and Cullen, 2008). Through examining museum professionals' actions and the documents they create, one can better understand how they play a part in influencing the systems of decisions that create a museum's lifeblood: exhibitions. Curators and registrars take note of what is and is not available in the collection to show, allowing registrars to buy or loan new objects, curators to assemble exhibitions, and related groups like marketing professionals, grant writers, and directors to draft materials that promote and fund the exhibition schedule. Without clear knowledge of a collection's history, as represented through its institutionalization through documents and decision making, an exhibition program can appear disjointed from the rest of the permanent collection, an object can be accidentally deaccessioned, or more seriously, a museum can lose its guiding focus.

To this end, I aim to examine the relationships between an art museum's collection (including permanent holdings as well as temporary or traveling exhibits), its curatorial and registrar staff, and other institutional bodies (leadership, professional organizations etc.) to evaluate the art museum as an information space. In doing so, I aim to describe the institutional informational worlds that curators and registrars use to make collecting decisions through the use of institutional ethnography, an approach defined by social science researcher Dorothy Smith in her book *Institutional*

*Ethnography: A Sociology for People* (2005), and refined by Marie Campbell and Frances Gregor in *Mapping Social Relations: A Primer in Doing Institutional Ethnography* (2004). Institutional ethnography aims to describe how information is created, used, and described in the everyday, through the examination of oral communication, texts, and objects. In doing so, these forms of communication can be analyzed to determine institutional patterns of behavior (Smith and Turner, 2014). Through this methodology, I can focus specifically on the information sources used by individuals working within a wider institution, and in turn, determine how those institutional values relate to the information sources used.

This line of inquiry also utilizes and builds upon the work of information worlds and horizons in LIS theory, as conceptualized by Savolainen (2012) and Sonnenwald (1999), the conception of information behaviors such as search and use by Case (2012), and on the development of work-task information searching/behaviors from Bystrom and Bystrom and Hansen (2007; 2005). While information behaviors have been studied in museum visitors, there is a dearth of studies about the information worlds and behaviors of museum professionals, let alone art museum workers such as curators, registrars and directors. Without a full understanding of what information sources art museum professionals consult to execute decisions that affect both the museum's trajectory and the programs/exhibitions that impact visitors, a full understanding of how curatorial work is accomplished is not present. In turn, studies on visitor engagement or exhibition development are incomplete without an assessment of how these programs are developed by their staff, and run the risk of wasting little funds and time on ventures that are not fully examined in the light of the museum's full range of information sources or of possible lacunas of information.

To accomplish this, I collected data in the form of interviews with art museum professionals (curators and registrars), information horizon maps from those same professionals, and textual analysis of various collections records to assess relationships between the staff's information horizons and needs and the wider institutional frameworks those are occurring in. I am choosing an art museum, specifically, as art museum staff are underrepresented in LIS information worlds/horizons literature, and because previous work available about museums and information behaviors/worlds has largely been constrained to the digitization of collections or records, instead of the wider constellation of information actors and objects in that environment (McGarrigle, 2015; Smith, 2016). Understanding the information space of the art museum through its most central staff to the collections can help uncover certain information mysteries, such as the reluctance to share images/information and the difficulty in creating standard museum cataloging systems.

## **Literature Review**

Curatorship has undergone a major shift since the late 1990s. This older museum model (Weil, 2002) placed a great deal of intellectual authority onto curators only, to a postmodern conception where curators and registrars must contend with a myriad of agents/authors (Dewdney, Dibosa, and Walsh, 2013; Merrit, 2017; Lucia Serrano, McTavish, Okwunodu Ogbechie, and Soussloff, 2011). This change demonstrates not only the new diversity of authors of museum exhibitions, but also the widening of curators and registrars' information horizons, as they must consider the needs of the communities served by their institution, the needs of their



donors/boards of trustees, and their own curatorial interests (Weil, 2002; Carbonell, 2012; Cameron, 2008).

At the same time, curators and registrars must be aware of their industry standards when making curatorial decisions, such as the American Alliance of Museum's standards on ethical treatment of collections and practices of accessioning and deaccessioning works (AAM, 2017), or the Association of Art Museum Directors and Association of Art Museum Curators guides to best practices in making curatorial decisions (AAMD, 2011; AAMC, 2007). The AAM's guidelines are especially important as lapses in following them can cause an institution to lose accreditation, in turn losing needed grants or partnerships with other organizations to fund their exhibition programs (AAM, 2017). These issues are outlined by Varner (2013) in her article exploring the deaccessioning process in American museums; unfortunately, not all these standards are followed, in part due to funding/staffing issues but also due to a lack of fundamental understanding of the collections themselves and of an information poor horizon (Gardner, 2012). Thus, an understanding of a curators' and registrars' full information horizon is key to understanding an institution's work and purpose, and to improve upon poor sources if needed.

However, the tools to evaluate curators and registrars' information horizons are not present in current museology/curatorial studies literature, thus the introduction of LIS work like Sonnenwald's (1999, 2001) work on information horizons, Wilson's (1997) and Bystrom and Harvelin's (2007, 2005) work on information behaviors as relating to work-tasks (searching, use, and Wilson's concept of the information feedback loop), and Savolainen and Case's (2012; 2012) introduction of context into the information behavior model are necessary additions to the understanding of the curating profession and how art museum curatorial decisions are made. Otherwise, a

visitor's understanding of the exhibition they see is largely a black box, with little information presented in the exhibition itself that points to any fact of its construction (Duncan, 1995; Cherry et al., 2008). While a variety of studies have been conducted (Chen, 2007; Skov, 2013; Martella, 2017; Kravchyna, 2004; Matassa, 2014; Anderson, de Cosson, and McIntosh, 2015) on the information needs of visitors and of museum workers' use of informational systems that assist their work, there is little consideration of what information is used by museum curators and registrars and how this information world affects the institution they work in. Thus, the articles chosen reflect recent LIS scholarship that focuses on museum curatorial/collections practices, demonstrating strong scholarly communication between the two disciplines, but not in the current field I aim to focus on.

There has been recent work in the fields of science and technology studies and documentation studies (often within LIS) on the history and epistemology of documents in various fields, including museums (Bowker and Leigh, 1999; Trace, 2017; Latham, 2014; Gorichanaz and Latham, 2016; Lund, 2010). These investigations often focus on the document's involvement in creating the various acts we associate with processes such as reading or analyzing works, in that its format or layout can shape our interactions (Latham, 2014) which Latham also applies to museum objects. Document work also focuses on the specific aspects of documents and the information they carry, which in turn can influence its content (Gorichanaz et al., 2016; Lundh and Dolatkah, 2016). This approach is highly similar to my chosen methodology of institutional ethnography, with the slight difference in that the latter includes in its framework speech as documents, and the more important differentiation in that this method focuses on an institution as a unit, using aspects like oral documents (interviews), text documents, and visual objects to examine an

institution and the people within it (Smith, 2006). However, Lundh et al.'s (2016) article arguing for more inclusion of this type of analysis in LIS research is relevant for my work, in that it argues for consideration of the information source's materiality and its wider network, which is very similar to my study's purpose and methodological underpinnings.

Marty (2007b, 2005), Bearman (2008), and Urban (2014) also all provide and argue for increasing incursions of LIS theory into the museum profession and museum scholarship, including art museums, and Marty states explicitly (2007) about the need for further scholarship exploring LIS concepts and their intersection with museum studies. This call has seen a rise in articles on collections management in museums and use of organizational and digitization technologies in these institutions (McGarrigle, 2015; Smith, 2016; Franklin, 2003), but little work on applying LIS theory to museum workers' information behavior; i.e. there has been more emphasis on the technical applications of LIS work such as organizational schemas and metadata systems than the study of human information interaction/behavior. While it is highly important to consider how new digital and organizational systems can influence museums' collections and in turn, curatorial practice, it is just as important to understand what other sources of information exist in the information world of a curator and registrar, as all of these sources collectively assist these professionals in their decisions on what to keep, what to get rid of, and what to show (Buck and Gilmore, 2010; O'Neill and Wilson, 2015). Thus, these articles illuminate a move towards considering LIS theory in museums, though largely in a technical manner; the call-to-arms series of articles by Marty is especially important to include to show a need for this research. A period of the last 10-15 years is used to define the museum

period in the post-modern curatorial period and past the beginnings of digital technologies in museum spaces.

Recent scholarship from the journals *Museum*, published by the AAM, and *Collections: A Journal for Museum and Archives Professionals*, are also necessary to consider as they provide examples of recent scholarship relating to the changing roles of curators and registrars, and the different information sources that now must be considered. While few if any of these articles explicitly refer to LIS theory, all implicitly describe similar concepts using different terms, such as “belonging” in Styles Tyson’s (2016) article on how museum collections should be constructed and Wood, Zemanek, Weiss, & Garron’s articles (2016) on the changing roles of curators based on the differing publics they are serving, thus needing to consult different sources of information. Hildreth Chen (2016) and Stiefel’s works (2015) are especially relevant as they examine the interplay of various actors in the construction of the art museum as an institution and its related curatorial mission, widening the potential pool of information sources that can be prevalent in a curator’s or registrar’s information horizon. Works such as Bellizi’s (2016) and Cameron and Mengler’s (2009) also follow this pattern, though the former focuses on the inclusion of non-traditional curators (such as members of the general public) as new sources of curatorial expertise, while the latter proposes a model of curatorship as a networked space. All of these articles, published in either *Museum* or *Collections: A Journal for Museum and Archives Professionals*, illustrate a growing trend towards the examination of a curator’s information space. My study intends to fit into this gap by researching those sources as a whole, including the collections documentation, curatorial decisions/stated information sources (which could include non-curators), and the wider institutional framework they operate in; the use of LIS information

world theory, more than just being novel in this case, aims to provide this holistic assessment.

To that end, considering an art museum curator and an art museum registrar's information world necessitates an understanding of their everyday decision making and what information sources they encounter. Smith's (2006; 2005) methodology of institutional ethnography helps parse everyday workplace actions as examples of institutional action, giving researchers tools on how to understand and define institutionally constructed information, terms, and methods of organization. Smith and Turner's (2014) updated manual on the subject allows for the consideration of texts as well as oral/interview data as ways to examine the information created by an institution, the placement of those actors, and what kinds of sources they use to construct this information. This methodology is especially relevant for my study of curator and registrar decisions, as it focuses on everyday work practices, examines workers' information worlds, and tries to make sense of more subaltern practices (i.e. decision-making that a regular participant or viewer is usually unable to see). The sources chosen to reflect this methodology provide a historic overview of its development from Smith's work as a sociologist to its later distillation as institutional ethnography and then application to different contexts.

Throughout the following sections, including the background, research findings, and data analysis, information derived from the interview subjects, in the form of interview data and information source horizon maps, will be used to illustrate these information worlds. This information forms the backbone of this study and greatly informs my presentation and representation of art museum work tasks and the formulation of these institutions.

## **Background**

Integral to examining the information worlds and needs of art museum curators and registrars, it is first important to understand what an art museum is and what work curators and registrars do. It is important to note here that curators and registrars in different types of museums may conduct different kinds of work or varying intensities of work; a curator in an history museum has different duties when it comes to acquisitions and gallery rotations than an art museum curator. This is not to say that this study's methods are not transferable to other settings or that the information work tasks of art museums curators and registrars are wholly separate from other types of museums, but that the different kinds of objects worked with affects what information work takes place in these art museum spaces. An art museum space, then, is one containing art objects, which can range wildly from paintings to furniture to plastic materials, depending on the collecting mission of the museum (Becker, 2008; Altshuler, 2006). For the purpose of this study, however, the terms art objects and art works will be used to refer to a wide panoply of items that include 2D works (painting, drawing, prints, photographs, etc.), 3D works (sculpture, furniture, jewelry and metalwork, fabrics etc.), and variable media (installations, videos, time-based art), as these are all items that the museums studied collect and are provided for as materials by AAMC and CAA (College Art Association) (AAMC, 2018; CAA, 2018). At the same time, items that were previously considered ethnographic, or the domain of the natural history/history museum, are also increasingly in art museums, such as art from Africa, Asia, or South America (Becker, 2008). To that end, the primary job of a curator, as defined by the Association of Art Museum Curators, is, "the care, presentation, interpretation, and acquisition," of those works of art that pertain to their collecting mission (AAMC, 2007, 7). In practice, this work includes

researching and presenting information about possible new artwork acquisitions for a collection, researching objects for exhibitions and gallery rotations, researching objects for exhibition-related publications, and researching objects for possible deaccessioning (AAMC, 2007). Also related to care is the careful negotiation of loans, both from the collection to other institutions and loans to the collection from outside museums (AAMC, 2007). Exhibitions often contain artworks from loans as well as from objects in the collection; exhibitions can also vary in type, including traveling (moving from institution to institution for a set period of time), gallery rotations (changing out museum gallery spaces), to special exhibitions (shows that last for a shorter amount of time from standard exhibitions), as derived from the interviews conducted. While both the AAMC professional standards and the interview data collected reflect a wide variety of tasks, from public outreach to working with other museum staff and partners on legal or fundraising work, the central task of the art museum curator is to manage the collection, furthering it through continued research and presentation (AAMC, 2007).

Registrars have a bit different job description; registrars still work with the art objects, but in a different manner, as they are concerned with the accurate recordkeeping and documentation of the objects in the museum's collection (Buck and Gilmore, 2010). These work tasks include upkeep of collections databases, handling accession and deaccession paperwork, filing and keeping loan/gift paperwork and facilities reports, managing curatorial, object, and/or artist files of the art objects, and shipping art (Buck et al., 2010). Registrars provide important layers of information assurance and security for the art objects kept by a museum and help the museum keep track of its institutional memory, such as in curatorial files or exhibition files (records of research by curators at the museum and records of a museum's

exhibition history respectively) (Malaro, 1998). Here, information work tasks still focus upon the art objects, but in terms of their physical location, condition, or ownership status instead of its aesthetic or cultural importance.

But what does that work look like in the specific institutions studied? Before launching into the study, an understanding of these institutions' history is crucial in order to follow why certain objects are in the museum, and in turn, certain types of information sources are used or why certain information needs are present. The institutions reviewed in this study include the Ackland Art Museum in Chapel Hill, NC; the Weatherspoon Art Museum in Greensboro, NC; the Mint Museum (Uptown and Randolph) in Charlotte, NC; and the Nasher Museum of Art in Durham, NC. These institutions, while all art museums, still vary widely in terms of their stated missions, collections scope, and institutional structure. The Ackland, Weatherspoon, and Nasher are all affiliated with universities, with UNC-Chapel Hill, UNC-Greensboro, and Duke respectively, while the Mint is an independent institution not affiliated with any school nor with the state government (Ackland, 2018; Weatherspoon, 2018; Nasher, 2018; Mint, 2018). While the first three museums have some funding arriving from their affiliated university, the Mint is primarily funded from endowments, donations, and trusts made by public and private donors (Duke, 2017; Ackland, 2018; Mint, 2017). These differences, while not substantial in terms of what objects or information is collected, still subtly affect what kinds of information sources curators and registrars can and choose to use for different kinds of information needs, as will be explored later.

Each museum has its own collecting focus, though their areas often overlap; this may explain why some of the information needs expressed by curators and registrars crossed over based on the time period or type of object collected. The



Ackland and the Nasher are the most alike, as both offer a broad survey collection of materials from ancient works (Greek, Roman, Ancient American) up to contemporary artworks, with objects reflecting various time periods and geographic regions in between (Ackland, 2018; Nasher, 2018). However, each also has its own focus, with the Ackland having a particularly strong collection of Japanese woodblock prints and works on paper, while the Nasher devotes much of its gallery space to contemporary exhibitions (Ackland, 2018; Nasher, 2018). The Weatherspoon historically has collected modern and contemporary works, with very little material dating from before the 1930s, and particularly has a large collection of works on paper, as well as modernist painting (Weatherspoon, 2018). The Mint is the only museum studied that exists in two locations, the Uptown location in downtown Charlotte containing contemporary, 21st-century decorative arts, while the Randolph location in the old U.S. Mint building contains largely 19th-century decorative arts and painting; these collections were severed in 2010 to allow for a better exhibiting space for contemporary works (Mint, 2018). In all, three of the institutions reviewed focus on or have materials from before the 20th century, while two, counting Mint Museum Uptown, only collect items from the 20th century onwards.

These different collecting missions reflect the varied institutional histories of these museums, providing that a museum's starting collection does have a substantial effect on future collecting efforts, in positive (continuing a collection) or negative (not collecting an area) terms. For the Mint, the museum originated as North Carolina's first art museum in 1936, in an effort by local citizens, collectors, and WPA workers to transform the defunct U.S. Assay Office into a public art collection (Weaver, 2017). These collections focused on decorative arts such as pottery, furniture, and silver, expanding into contemporary acquisitions as well as acquiring the older

collections of local collectors such as Mellanay Delhome over time (Mint, 2018). These actions prompted the need for more space to exhibit these contemporary works, prompting the initial form of Mint Museum Uptown, the Mint Museum of Craft + Design in 1999, later being moved to its current location in the Levine Center for the Arts (Weaver, 2017). Diverging from this genesis, the collections of the Nasher and the Weatherspoon were built from existing collections, the former acquiring some of Ernest Brummer collection of medieval works in 1969 and the latter a teaching collection of modern artworks built by art instructors such as George Ivy in the 1940s; both of these were the seeds for the wider collections surrounding them (Nasher, 2018; Weatherspoon, 2018). The Ackland was built from one individual's funds, William Hayes Ackland, who previously attempted to fund a university museum at Duke; his curious stipulations, including his body to be entombed in the museum itself, prevented Duke from acquiring the funds, leading UNC-Chapel Hill to be the next choice (Ackland, 2018). However, the beginning collections came not from Ackland but from UNC itself and from the Burton Emmett collection, consisting of various types of Western art (Ackland, 2018). While the scope of all of these museums have drifted somewhat, the primary focuses of each founding collection can still be seen in these museums' major areas of focus and are reflected in the collections management policies that the curators and registrars interviewed in this study use daily as part of their information worlds.

## **Methods**

### **Information Worlds and Horizons**

To adequately assess the information horizons of art museum staff as relating to their everyday work tasks (accessioning objects, deaccessioning objects, deciding

on exhibition content and related research), I interviewed art museum curators and registrars in a semi-structured format, along with collecting existing data in the form of information horizon maps (drawn by the participants) and museum collections documentation. The interview and map format are derived from the work of Sonnenwald, Wildemuth, and Harmon (2001), Sonnenwald (1999), Savolainen (2012), and Bystrom (2005, 2007). The existing documents/data I used are collection management policies, loan forms, and facility/exhibition agreements, all derived from the institutions themselves. These combined data sets fully explore what the art museum staff themselves report as vital information sources, comparing those results to institution-made documents to assess the varied layering of institutional information needs and singular needs. This analysis assesses the position of various parts of the institution and their relationships to each other, such as the permanent collection, curators and registrars' work tasks and expertise, and other staff/policies in the museum.

### **Interview Structure and Subjects**

My interview subjects are art museum curators and registrars from various art museums in the North Carolina. Participating institutions include: the Mint Museum (Uptown and Randolph locations) in Charlotte, NC; the Ackland Art Museum in Chapel Hill, NC; the Nasher Art Museum in Durham, NC; and the Weatherspoon Art Museum in Greensboro, NC. Institutions outside of these were also contacted. A wide swath of museum type, sizes, and structures were chosen to create a more generalizable sample. At least one curator and one registrar were interviewed at each of these locations. In all total, 10 individuals were interviewed. Out of these ten, four were registrars and six were curators. Out of the registrars, two were senior employees and two were mid-career, specializing in database management and loan

records respectively. For the curators, three were senior employees and three were mid-career. Each had a different specialty or scope of their position: curator of permanent collections, curator of exhibitions, curator of 19th-century decorative art, curator of 21st-century decorative art and craft, curator of Italian Renaissance/special exhibitions, and curator of permanent collections/special exhibitions. Of those without specific fields, two focus on modern and contemporary works only and the remaining two work at survey-style institutions, thus working with a diverse collection of materials. These individuals were chosen because of their professional expertise in this field, utilizing purposive sampling to choose these individuals.

Recruitment was accomplished through email using my institutional email, to give more authority, over the span of 4 weeks. This accounted for response time and the possibility that some curators were busy with catalogs/exhibitions. My recruitment email contained a shortened version of my proposal and an introduction to myself and my research. No monetary or physical items were given in exchange for the interviews. Instead, my position as a dual degree student at an area university who is both interested in studying their specific institution and interested in museum careers allowed me access. This in turn served the museums' obligation as a research institution as well as a place of display.

These interviews were semi-structured to allow for fuller answers to my questions, to give the participants the chance to fully contemplate their information horizons, and to invite other information I would not have considered that my participants find important (this is essential as they are the experts, not me.) Each interview lasted between 45-60 minutes, with the vast majority being 60 minutes long. I pre-tested my interview guide on some of my colleagues, though in different fields so as to remove any possible bias towards answering or understanding the questions.

These interviews were conducted on location in their office or in a relevant meeting space at the museum, in full privacy. Data collection took the form of audio recordings, the drawn information horizon maps, and notes to record what each curator and registrar provides. No video recording was needed, as I am not interested in affective responses or observable behaviors that would necessitate video recording. The notes acted as frames of the wider concepts/themes captured from the interview data, while the audio assisted in providing exact details and quotes. The information horizon maps drawn during the interviews were conducted at the end after the interview questions to allow the participants time to think over the different information sources they had discussed and their ways of using them, instead of blindly prompting them at the beginning. This allowed for richer information to be represented in the maps. This same structure is utilized by Sonnenwald, Wildemuth, and Harmon in their initial use of the method in their study on the information worlds of low-income students (2001). I did not provide any assistance or input on the drawing of the maps, even though I was requested to do so by many of the participants; I reiterated the prompt but did not give any further assistance than that. I did allow the participants to choose a specific work task to think about while making their information horizon map, to give a more specific context for the information sources and work tasks described earlier in the interview. These maps, hand-drawn on paper, and recordings were then kept by me on a password-protected computer with randomly-generated numbers as the names for the recording data. The document linking names to these numbers was kept on my personal private server, also password-protected. I then transcribed these recordings partially word-for-word and hand-coded them using the coding scheme provided by Smith and Turner (2014). These codes are elaborated further in the data analysis section.

All interviews utilized the same framework, with a semi-structured flow of questions and then ending with the information horizon map drawing. Each interview began with an introductory question about their position and what work tasks they completed in a normal work day. This opening question allowed me to probe for specific work tasks where I could then ask about the information sources they used to complete that work task, what sources they favored over others, detailed explanations about work processes/institutional processes, and how they used those sources and the associated information. (See the interview guide in the appendix for further information.) Each interview involved questions on these topics, even if they were not asked in the same way or at the same point in the interview, as that is the nature of the semi-structured format. For this reason, each interview contained specialized questions related to the registrar or curator's expertise and work. I also asked in each interview how the permanent collection was involved in their work tasks as an information source if it did not come up over the course of the interview in other questions.

Both of these items were analyzed utilizing content analysis, with institutional ethnography as the guiding methodology for choosing units of analysis in the data. In that process, I assigned a unique numerical identifier to each of my interview subjects (to keep anonymity), and then reviewed the interview data and maps to determine general themes. These themes are generated from the data itself and guided by the institutional ethnographic approach; this approach is similar to grounded theory, but diverges in that non-content related items such as specific format or arrangement of forms and maps, word choice, and word/concept order are used as well as general concepts described in the text (Smith et al., 2014). This methodology allows for analysis of the metadata of the interview, as well as the explicit content, and in turn,

aims to see if the information's composition is affected by its context. These practices and coding methods are from Smith (2005), Smith and Turner (2014), and Campbell and Gregor (2004).

### **Existing Data Collection**

Relating to my existing data, I chose documentation used/created by the museums that reflected the various work processes that art museum curators and registrars conducted and sought out information for. These documents include the collection management policy, an example loan form, and an example facilities report. All of these items are located permanently at the institutions I held interviews in, provided to me upon request by the museum's registrar. Not all institutions chose to send me documents, with the Weatherspoon citing their high similarity to example policies on AAM's website, which is accessible to current AAM members (though they do send copies on request to non-members occasionally.) Other institutions allowed me to look at these documents during my visit and take notes (Mint Museum) but did not provide materials outside of the museum space. Because of the high similarity between the policies viewed and the example AAM policy viewed at the Weatherspoon, it is not a significant limitation to the study to not have example documents from each institution. Curatorial and registrar policies are not owned by each institution, but instead are based on models set by professional organizations (AAM, Association of Art Museum Curators, and Association of Registrars and Collections Specialists) and are then tailored to the specifics of their information. These documents serve as an illustration of both the art museum curator and registrar's information horizon, as they are discussed in both the interview data and the information horizon maps, and help to illuminate the connections between

information needs expressed by curators and registrars in terms of their relationship to the needs of the wider institution.

### **Data Analysis Method: Institutional Ethnography**

Data analysis of my interview data, information horizon maps, and existing records/documents data took the form of content analysis, utilizing the methodology of institutional ethnography as a guide for generating codes for both items and for analyzing themes present in the maps, documents, and interviews. The inclusion of institutional ethnography is significant as its purpose is to illuminate the inner workings of everyday work tasks, namely, by coding and tracing language present in interviews and documents that reflect institutional values and practices. This can especially be seen in the codes provided by Smith and Turner, including suggested codes such as how work processes relate to the institution and existing informational orders (Smith et al., 2014). Features such as document headings, structure, and references are also just as vital as the body of the text, and are evaluated against interview data to discover what modes of discourse the institution uses to disclose its interests. This approach will allow me to mine my interview and maps data for information about what art museum curators and registrars value for their institution (and if institutional language forms a part of their work), instead of viewing their accounts in a solely personal, and thus restrictive, sense.

### **Data Analysis**

All of the interview data was qualitatively coded based on code categories derived from Dorothy Smith and Susan Turner's book, *Incorporating texts into institutional ethnographies* (2014). These codes are: information sources being used, skills/knowledge needed to use sources/conduct work, how work is related to



processes/order in the workplace, how the work is related/connected to others, troubles/successes/emotion of doing the work, and what work is being conducted (Smith et al., 2014). These codes aim to uncover what information needs are expressed in different work processes, what information sources are used in those work processes, what these information worlds look like as a whole, and how those information worlds and needs are shaped by the museum institution.

### **Information Work Tasks**

As defined by Bystrom and Hansen (2005) and Hansen (1999), work tasks are collections of behavior that occur in a workplace and are related to the work that the person is conducting. Bystrom and Hansen add to this concept of work task by describing some work tasks as “information-intensive,” meaning they require a large amount of information to initiate the task, carry it out, and complete it (2005, 1055). Understanding how information is used, an area that is still little understood as compared to other parts of the information searching process, is bound up in understanding what the tasks are that are enacted to retrieve that information and that also consume or require information to begin (Bystrom et al., 2005; Spink and Cole, 2006; Case, 2012). Bystrom and Hansen divide this process into three sections, of task construction, task performance, and task completion; the following sections below aim to describe the major work tasks provided by the interviewees in this manner to understand more fully what work art museum curators and registrars are doing to better contextualize the information sources used in these processes (2005). As their model, and Cool’s concept of situation in information-seeking, illuminates, information sources are sought out based on the task at hand in a workplace, and these sources are further influenced by the worker’s situation, experience, and context (2005, 2001). And thinking of Dorothy Smith here, the documents, databases, and

other materials that workers create or maintain also construct and reinforce an institutional context that can affect how these work tasks operate (Smith et al., 2014). As such, the work tasks are described below, then the information sources curators and registrars reported using in these situations, then the wider maps the interviewees constructed considering these items together, ending with my analysis on these information-seeking and usage practices in their specific, institutional contexts.

### **Acquisitioning**

Acquisitions are items that are purchased for the museum's permanent collection; works that are on loan from another institution or in traveling exhibitions are not considered acquisitions to the museum as there is not a permanent transfer of ownership between these parties. As described by the curators interviewed, acquisitions begin by curators searching for objects to purchase; this can either be with their department funds or with special funds that are earmarked for specific collections, such as North Carolina pottery or French Rococo painting. Acquisitions can also come in the form of gifts or donations from selling parties, a group as diverse as artists themselves to private collectors, families, museums, or even businesses and universities. After researching what objects are available to purchase, the curator then writes a short document called a justification to assert why the item or items fit that collection, how they further the collections management policy's goals and goals of the museum, how they have artistic/historical/material merit or are a good example of that kind of object, and if the museum is associated with a university, how it can be helpful to parties at the university. These justifications are no more than one to two paragraphs and also include photos of the object as well as its basic information. The curator presents these justifications to their board, director of the museum, and other curators in the department (here the levels of meetings and staff involved vary based

on the size of the institution, but generally the board and director are involved as the curators interviewed provided), and all take part in deciding if the item should be purchased.

Once it is purchased, the process of acquisitions moves over to the realm of the registrars, who then assign it a specific number which can be tracked in their database and in its related paper records, take photos of the item, and create files (physical and digital) of the work that include documents such as its deed of gift or bill of sale, a condition report, exhibition record (if it was from another museum or collector), and over time, any related curatorial research about it. Specific processes of how acquisitions are handled vary between institutions; some separate items into object files and artist files, each having different curatorial information, some separate curatorial research into its own file, and others separate new acquisitions and old ones, to reflect the legal status of that object moving from one state of ownership to the next. While not every new acquisition may appear on the front-facing website, two of the registrars interviewed noted putting them online was a priority over other materials, and all would be placed in the internal database.

### **Exhibitions**

Exhibition is a broad term, encompassing a wide variety of exhibition formats and work tasks that go into making an exhibition happen. At its basic form, an exhibition in an art museum is a public show comprised of art objects, assembled around a theme usually with supporting features such as wall text, labels, or interactive panels (Duncan, 1995). Exhibitions range widely in content, as they can focus on a single artist, time period, or medium, or explore a variety of items; exhibitions can also be assembled around historical or cultural themes. As a brief slice of the work that the museums interviewed conduct, curators and registrars described

current and upcoming projects as varied as fashion materials from Oscar De La Renta, to Wedgwood pottery, to art on the subject of fairytales, to the history of photography. The primary organizing item here, as stated by one of the curators at the Ackland, is that an exhibition is telling a narrative.

Exhibitions also vary on what kinds of materials are in them, consisting of either items from the museum's permanent collection or items on loan from other museums, private collectors/lenders, or other parties. These exhibitions can also be curated by the museum staff or can be hosted by other museums; each of which can also be called a traveling exhibit, which moves to other museums for a specified amount of time. Special exhibitions or temporary exhibitions are more generally shows that are only up for a short period of time as compared to other shows in the museum or to the exhibited permanent collection, with special also possibly referring to a loan show (many works from on loan) or on a subject that is not commonly on offer at the institution. The Weatherspoon curator's show on fairy tales or the Nasher curator's co-curation on Latin American Pop Art fall into this category.

While the exact work tasks differ based on the institution, generally it starts with the curators researching items in their collections or in other museums and lenders, collecting images of the desired works, and great deal of researching background information on the concept/narrative. These concepts, reported at various meetings with the other curators, board, and director, are then formulated into a planned exhibition with correspondence to any loaner institutions, a checklist of all the works in the show, and sometimes educational programming or a catalog manuscript planned alongside it. The registrars then keep that checklist and ensure updated records and location information for those works, managing loans from other institutions and tracking their records in the museum's database, shipping and

receiving artworks, and handling rights and reproductions of the art images in any publications. As reported by the interviewees, there is a great deal of communication between curators, registrars, and museum workers in many other departments such as education and marketing to ensure smooth installation and deinstallation of the exhibition, as each person's work is structured to be interrelated to the other (and in turn, seeking out information for these work tasks relied upon these chains of communication, as written about later.)

### **Gallery Rotations**

Gallery rotations is a work task that applies only to the permanent collection, as it is the movement of permanent collection items on display to other galleries or back to storage (Altshuler, 2006). This practice varies on the institution, on how large their permanent collection is, how much staffing they have, what their collections management policy states etc., but generally a museum will endeavor to move some items away from display or to other galleries over time. This can be for conservation reasons, for example, works on paper cannot be on constant display due to fading nor can fabric items because of fading and possible touch by visitors, or for updating the gallery's content; there may be a donation that the museum wants to highlight, a surge in a particular collecting area that has happened over the years, or maybe simply the gallery's theme is shifting to meet the needs of the public. These are less common than exhibitions however, when asking the the interviewees; a curator at the Mint provided that their permanent collection galleries change out only one or two objects over the course of a year and they are just now planning a whole new redesign after 10 years; the two curators at the Weatherspoon noted that their permanent galleries rarely shift but that the galleries were being uninstalled at the time of interview for a

gallery rotation after a similar length of time to the Mint. It is more common to change out one or two items than to change the entirety of the gallery.

The work tasks in gallery rotations are not too dissimilar from exhibitions, though, with the one exception being that there are no loans being requested. Objects and themes are researched by curators, object lists created from the collection (website, database, visiting storage etc.), objects are retrieved and tracked by registrars, their conservation information reviewed, and then installed by preparators (Becker, 2008; Buck et al., 2010). Items being removed from the gallery floor have more involvement from the registrars, who ensure they are placed in the right storage, update exhibition and location records, and conduct condition reports after the object has been exposed to gallery conditions for an extended period of time (Buck et al., 2010).

### **Loans**

Processing loans from other institutions has a series of work tasks in itself, for both curators and registrars. Loans, whether sought out from other museums or from private lenders, begin with the curator looking at and then talking to the respective museum's curator and registrar(s) or private collector to see if loaning the item is an option; the loan, if agreed upon, is then processed by both curator and registrar, in that the former begins to research the item and speak to that museum's curator or private collector about the object's history, while the latter also is in contact with the private collector or museum curator and registrar about the object's material information, insurance value, where it is located, shipping information, and, most importantly, who owns it. Ownership, as one registrar at the Weatherspoon provides, is integral to managing art objects as the museum cannot loan works that they do not have in writing in a loan form from the exact owner; for example, a work that the registrar

was trying to retrieve was in limbo briefly because the private lender was not able to be physically present to sign the work over to the museum. Documents such as loan forms and facilities reports act as intermediaries in this process, providing proof of ownership, exact locations, and security for museums in the case of the facilities report, which details exactly the kinds of conditions the hosting museum will have for that art object (Buck et al., 2010). A photo of the object and a brief description is also included in the loan form as well as information about the lender, providing crucial information about condition or installation. All is then entered into the registrar's database and records, so the item can be tracked if need be. These art objects are picked up by the registrars, sometimes in person, sometimes with professional art shippers, who then stay with the object constantly until it arrives at the museum. When the loaned period ends (usually for an exhibition), the work is then shipped back, in a similar manner as shipping to the museum, loan agreements are updated and filed away, to serve as a record of what items have been exhibited and to legally prove that the object is not in the museum's domain. As museum storage is massive and loaned objects indistinguishable from owned objects, documents both digital and paper are vital surrogates, like a museum on paper.

### **Deaccessioning**

Deaccessioning is a much more complex process than its sister, accessioning, namely because of previous scandals (of collections deaccessioning works for profit or to pay basic utilities) and because of the sensitive nature of the task; no one wants to admit that an object may not be the best fit for an institution (Genoways and Andrei, 1997). AAM and AAMC have many guidelines on how to deaccession materials, and AAM carries strict penalties if they are not followed, including de-accreditation (AAM, 2018; AAMC, 2018). Donor relations or legacies of past

curators are also important pieces to keep in mind when deaccessioning, as two curators related; if objects no longer reflect the mission of the institution or are being underserved because the museum does not have expertise in that area, then removal is best, but is done carefully in regard to those relations.

As described by the six curators interviewed, deaccessioning is a group process, not a solo one, because of that sensitive nature; no one person can be a target by a disgruntled donor and agreement from all parties in the museum can be ensured. The process begins with research about the objects by curators, much like accessions or gallery rotations, to find out about the object's history, provenance, and aesthetic merit; this is meant to see if the object should or should not be kept by the museum, to prove the curator wrong, as one interviewee put it. After research by the curator, this work is reviewed by other curators, or if in a smaller museum, this work is more quickly transported to a series of meetings with the curatorial and registrar staff, the director, and the board, in which at least a majority of the parties should agree on whether the item or items should be deaccessioned. As one curator described the process, the idea is to try and determine if the object has enduring value and relation to the collection and if there will be a reasonable expectation that there will be information gathered about that object. If not, then the item will be deaccessioned so other museums or collectors can research the material. This process is also mediated by documents, with justifications written for the object's removal and either updated object records or new deaccessioned records that indicate the removal or sale of the item. Deaccessioning is not a common event; only two curators had a ready example of when this had happened during their work.



### **Staying Current**

While not a formal process, staying current in the field was a commonly described work task amongst all curators and registrars interviewed. For curators, this consisted of keeping abreast of new artists or materials (especially for those in contemporary art) or new exhibitions, as well as keeping up with the academic scholarship in their specific area of collecting, whether that be Mayan and Aztec sculpture or Renaissance painting. Keeping in contact with colleagues (other curators, artists, art historians, professors, etc.) was also described in a similar manner, with curators reaching out to them for specific information about artworks or artists or to see what new art events were happening in that area.

For registrars, staying current also included keeping up with colleagues (on facilities information, conservation information, and specific materials knowledge, for example, what new archival sheeting is available), new materials for storage and conservation, new processes in conservation for new media (digital art, plastics, etc.), changes in museum database programs, changes in forms, or new developments in cataloging. Both curators and registrars reported that keeping current in their fields was a daily part of their work, either sifting through information sent to them through email or seeking out information when facing a gap in knowledge.

### **Information Sources**

In coding the interviews, ten categories of distinct information sources were found. There are myriad subcategories, of which a few I have chosen to elaborate further on for clarity or because there are significant differences between curators and registrars or between different types of information use. It is important to note that this is not reflective of the full breadth of materials that an art museum curator or registrar may use; I did not interview a curator from every possible subject specialty,

which may have a bearing on the types of information sources used, nor did I interview every type of possible position held by a registrar. Other information sources may be used based on these differing work spheres. This is because of time availability constraints in my area of study. The findings provided, however, have been coded based on their appearance amongst at least two interviewees, allowing for comparisons between curators and registrars and internal comparisons, as well as serving as a basic foundation for future studies. The majority of these categories were not prompted by specific questions during the interview, but came about from the semi-structured discussion about their work processes and how they sought out information to do that work; only the permanent collection and museum policies were explicitly asked about as information sources. Colleagues were referred to in one possible question but were not described as an information source in the question. The following data findings presented below are wholly derived from the interview data; any and all statements or assumptions stated come from this information.

### **Colleagues**

For the registrars interviewed (four out of ten participants), all spoke about working closely with the curatorial department, preparators/art movers, and education departments on specific projects that either linked those departments (education, marketing) or on a more long-term basis where information is constantly shared (curatorial, preparators) because of the constant exhibition cycle or acquisitions, which are always entered into the database. Two registrars spoke at length about the importance of professional networks of other registrars (represented by phone calls, list serves, conferences, websites, email) for information about new challenges in the workplace or for clarification about existing knowledge. For example, one registrar spoke about the new information acquired when working in a new building; their

museum is located near an active railroad, requiring new kinds of hanging and care of objects to ensure they are not affected by the vibrations. To find this information, they sought out information from other registrars as well as colleagues in the museum itself; interestingly, the registrar also noted that the change in institutional structure (previously worked at a museum not affiliated with a university) also affected who they could seek information from, citing a wider scope of individuals such as town and university partners, which do not regularly figure in the information worlds of independent museum workers.

While most of the registrars interviewed were comfortable with using other colleagues as an information source, one registrar noted that they would not contact the list serv for basic questions for fear of appearing unprofessional/unknowledgeable. This is likely due to their professional stature, as they went on to explain that the list serv and conferences were more likely to be used by newer registrars, and that to ask certain questions could betray a lack of expertise. On the whole, the registrars interviewed presented their professional contexts as a largely information-sharing one between other registrars both within and outside their institution, sharing information about industry standards, database tools, and facilities information. As one registrar put it when describing information-sharing efforts between registrars within the museum and to outside museums,

“Museums kind of help each other in that regard, where they understand that everybody’s information needs to be kept to as a limited number of people as possible, and so we all try to help each other out” (registrar, interview transcript, 2017).

While initially this seems to display a closed information world, what the registrar here is providing is that information about the institution such as facilities layouts and materials or conservation methods are shared within the registrar network but rarely outside of it to protect the wider institution from possible security threats. Registrars

across museums though do not silo their information but share it to other registrars, since the possibility that their work may be shown in that museum or vice versa means they should endeavor to have good relations and ensure all spaces are kept up to standard.

One registrar and two curators talked about differences between curators and registrars, stating that curators are less likely to share information between each other in a museum and to other curators elsewhere. The reasoning behind this was because of the specificity of a curator's work and information needs and, as noted by the registrar, because of a spirit of competition between curators. This specificity refers to the narrow scope of a curator's position, requiring them to collect and research information about a small subset of artworks; for example, curators interviewed included focuses such as contemporary ceramics and fibers, 19th-century ceramics and decorative art, Italian Renaissance painting, and 21st-century American fine arts. These focuses, as curators at the Weatherspoon, Mint, and Nasher noted, make it difficult to have cross-curatorial collaboration because each curator's job is highly specialized and there is not (usually) a depth of staff in one area. As shown in several of the interviews, information held by a museum about the collection is often viewed as proprietary, which may demonstrate why other colleagues is not a common information source used by curators. While this information is freely shared in the forms of exhibition catalogs, talks, and websites, these are also forms that the museum (curators and registrars alike) has control over, sharing their institution's specific narrative. It may also be, as one registrar suggested, that the information gathering conducted by curators is heavily academic in terms of focus and sources used and thus not readily shared. While this could be a factor, I would expand this view by considering how the curators interviewed spoke about their work tasks; most of the

curators introduced themselves as the main manager of a specific collection, and for those that were assistant curators, as the main head of a series of curatorial projects. Their institutional role is singular, and the curatorial information needed for work tasks like selecting objects for acquisitions or putting on exhibitions is highly specific to the collection being worked on and to the institution.

At the same time, two different curators talked about the need to seek out information from colleagues inside and outside their museum. The other two curators interviewed did not mention or stated they did not need information from other curators. Factors such as the objects worked with (the two who did not collaborate were primarily permanent collection workers) also may explain this difference. The two curators who did seek out information from other colleagues worked in temporary exhibitions and contemporary art, suggesting tentatively that the art objects/area of focus changed that information sharing behavior. Instead of viewing one's work as voice of a specific and institutionally-represented collection, those in temporary/special exhibitions and contemporary works are already oriented outside the institution based on the kinds of objects they work on. Works sought out for traveling/special shows, as reported by these two curators, exist in other museums, collections, or in the ownership of the artists themselves, while contemporary works often have little available scholarly information. Thus there is a need to reach out to these actors and share information in order to exhibit those works or learn about new artworks.

Temporary/special shows are also often collaborative efforts between institutions all across the country and world, requiring an open information environment to accomplish such work. Beyond the basic sharing of facilities information and object information, curators working on these special exhibitions also

must collaborate with other curators on composing the exhibition catalog, object labels, and any other text associated with the show, meaning that research information about the objects or themes are also shared. While this curatorial information is not commonly reported as shared between colleagues or sought from other colleagues as reported by the permanent collection curators interviewed, this does not mean that these curators have no interest in collaboration. One curator at the Mint Museum noted that they enjoy such opportunities when they arise, stating,

“We also really do like when there are opportunities to mix objects from different curatorial collections because we [Mint curatorial staff] all agree that generally makes the experience for visitors that much more meaningful, if they go into a gallery of 19th-century American art and not only see paintings and sculpture, but also silver and ceramics...that relate to the same culture and time period. It just makes a more well-rounded experience.” (curator, interview transcript, 2018).

Yet, the curator continues by stating that these collaborations are few and far between, with information-sharing behaviors between curators or using other colleagues as sources of curatorial information as a rare occurrence.

### **Subsection: University colleagues**

Three of the four institutions visited are connected to universities (Nasher Museum of Art with Duke University, Ackland Art Museum with UNC, and Weatherspoon Art Museum with UNCG; the only standalone gallery is the Mint Museum, Uptown and Randolph locations, in Charlotte, NC). All of the curators interviewed in these university-affiliated museums, comprising four out of six curators interviewed, noted other university staff as an important information resource, including professors (not limited to art history/studio art but also in nursing, kinesthesiology, humanities, etc.), staff at the university counsel office, budget office, provost office, and marketing department. Information sought out included legal counsel, information on donors/sponsorships, management of endowment/approval of

deaccessioning work, objects appropriate for collection, and exhibitions and programming appropriate for museum for students/professors to view. One curator at the Nasher described direct involvement with a professor in the planning of an exhibition, who provided a lot of the text and research for the show; this was the only mention of such direct involvement in the exhibition cycle, however, and when asking other curators if this occurred, I received negative responses. It was more common for curators to review what classes professors had planned or if there were university-wide initiatives to inform their exhibition or acquisitions schedule than to have the professors directly involved in the research.

Three registrars out of four interviewed (the fourth worked at the Mint, the only non-university affiliated museum interviewed) also noted the importance of university staff as an information resource, contacting professors to determine if specific objects needed to be on the database/on the website, university counsel for legal advice, provost/board of trustees for deaccessioning work, and facilities for information about the building. The staff interviewed at the Mint did not note any direct relationship to a school nor did they note such people as an information source, although the registrar regularly seeks out interns for assistance in their projects. This is not to suggest that the information needs sought out by university-affiliated museums differ from standalone institutions, as the registrar at the Mint noted similar needs to know about legal information for loans and rights and reproductions or information about what needs to be added to the database, and the curators also needed similar information about what objects or exhibitions should be made, legal counsel, information on donors etc. These needs are central to the operation of an art museum. What differs are the sources because of the linkage that the university-affiliated museum has, as it can depend largely on an existing institutional structure

for legal advice, endowment management, approval for accessions and deaccessions (more often the latter, for example, the Ackland has a board at UNC-CH that approves accessions but the director does this in their stead), and facilities management. At the same time, these museums have a mandate, because of this assistance from the school, to offer educational services to the university, including relevant exhibitions for student and professorial research, fostering/hosting visiting artists for studio programs, and other relevant programming for other departments. This also influences what objects are chosen to be accessioned or what directions the collection management policy will grow in. The curators interviewed would contend that this is not the only facet in mind when considering an object for accessioning or for deciding on a gallery rotation/exhibition, but it is a large factor, thus gaining this information from university colleagues is important to following that institutional mission.

For standalone institutions, this information is sought out either by departments internal to the museum (legal counsel, accessions and deaccessions, sponsorships, facilities) or by their board of trustees. This group functions in a similar manner to the provost or university board for university-affiliated museums. Information needed to put on exhibitions, gallery rotations, or accessions is mainly sought from the collection development policy, permanent collection, institutional mission, and the one divergence from university-affiliated museums, a generalized viewing public. Publics were brought up by one university curator as an information source she turns to for exhibition-planning, but they featured far more in the non-university curators. This is likely because, as the curator stated, they are the only modern/contemporary institution in the area, and thus fill a niche for museum-going individuals.



## Museum Websites

Museum websites were a highly sought-after information source, coming up in all interviews, including all curators and all registrars. There was no difference between type of museum, type of collection, or specific job title/focus and the intensity of use of museum websites, with all noting they use museum websites as an information source for their work tasks each day at the least. For the curators interviewed, all used museum websites, including both outside museum websites and their own institution's sites, for the purpose of researching objects in a collection. The types of research ranged from known-item search, largely if the curator was searching in their own collections for an object, to exploratory searches of different kinds of works. For example, a curator at the Weatherspoon described searching in their own collections website to view specific objects or group objects together for the purpose of putting together new shows, while a curator at the Nasher described using other museums' websites as well as their own to see what art objects other museums had in general so they could plan ideas for future exhibitions and related catalogs. This curator also noted frustration at museums who did not have online collections on their websites or who did not have a substantial amount of their collection available online, as it hampered their ability to research potential exhibited material; another curator at the Weatherspoon working with contemporary artworks also noted this difficulty. This frustration reveals a tension present in museums, who often do want their collections to be accessible to others but lack the time or funds to transfer those records online, or in some cases, create records for items in the collection (Alcorn and Mitroff, 2007; Roth-Katz, 2012). For example, the Ackland alone has around 17,000 objects, while the Mint has approximately 38,000; the scale of such projects is often immense and requires a larger registrar staff to photograph and describe the object as well as maintain its record (Ackland, 2018; Mint, 2018).

This work, as noted briefly above, is largely done by registrars; in the interviews I conducted, three described it as a major part of their work, with one of these working largely on putting photos of objects and records into their DAM (digital asset management) system which transfers information to the website, while the fourth did not mention working on their collections website in their work (although the curators at their institution did note that the registrar department was responsible for doing so, so it is likely that a colleague does this work instead or that it did not come up in the semi-structured interview). All three registrars also conceded that not all of the collections were available publicly online, even if more detailed records existed in their staff databases. In each case, it appeared from the interview that these registrars had to manage a variety of work tasks which meant that consistent transfer of records online was not possible, as well as the fact that the registrars interviewed put much more emphasis on creating and managing object records in the staff database (TMS, eMuseum, etc.) than adding them online. While this is a vital task for tracking and cataloging art objects, it is important to note that few curators reported looking at their museum database as an information source, more often citing the website whether because of ease of use or because of the different search terms and functions available. This is not to suggest that the curators did not use their museum databases entirely, which one stated they did if they needed to create complex reports and two noted occasional use, mainly for more detailed object records once they knew they wanted to include an object in an exhibition or in a gallery rotation. However, to better support art museum curators searching for potential new works, i.e. for browsing activity, a greater effort to put collections online may be a good focus, especially as the curators interviewed were all from different institutions, demonstrating this need dispersed amongst curators.

The registrars interviewed did not cite museum websites as a specific resource but rather as the environment they worked in; information needed to update the website, such as credit lines, images, artwork information, and so on, were derived from object and artist files, which can be further broken down into loan/deed of gift forms, condition reports, and exhibition records. These information sources are both created by registrars and used as a source to facilitate maintenance of the museum website amongst other tasks; registrars, then, act as a mediator in the curator's information seeking process.

### **Collectors and Art Dealers**

Only two of the curators interviewed noted private collectors or art dealers as an information source. These curators, one at the Mint Museum and one at the Ackland, both sought out these sources in fairly similar ways, with the former utilizing them to track market sales of art objects and keep current with what art objects are available to purchase, while the latter notes private collectors and dealers as a possible source to purchase or make acquisitions from. However, the latter curator also described frustrations in these negotiations, as the pricing of an art object could sometimes be exaggerated. This is in contrast to the other curator, who stated that their connections with private collectors and dealers was a two-way information conduit, sharing their curatorial expertise in exchange for information on where to purchase quality art objects. In turn, the curator hopes that these relationships may further benefit the museum through later donations. While it is odd that so few curators mentioned private collectors or dealers, it may be because of the objects they work with. The two curators who do use them as a source of pricing and object acquisition information focus on 19th-century decorative works and on the permanent collection, consisting largely of early modern works, respectively, in contrast to the

other four curators interviewed who largely work on modern and contemporary subjects. This is not to say that curators in those fields would not use private collectors or dealers as an information source, but simply that it did not come up in the interview data when asked about what information sources they used for acquisitions or exhibition development information. More common sources used were websites, exhibition catalogs, catalog raisonnés, and email/social media.

Of the registrars interviewed, three also mentioned private collectors, but not art dealers, as a source of information. The difference between the curators' use of this information source and the registrars, however, is the private collector is an actor the registrar directly works with to receive loans or acquisitions, not as a separate information source entirely used for a different work task. The registrars at the Mint, Ackland, and Weatherspoon cited private collectors as a source of loaned or acquired objects and thus a necessary information source for basic information about the art object being loaned/acquired, information about themselves as a lender/donor, and legal information about the object exchange. It is accepted practice, as provided by Buck and Gilmore (2010) and AAM (2018) to record this information in a loan form or acquisition form to ensure there is clear evidence that the object was transferred from the collector to the museum; this form codifies what information is needed by registrars from private collectors. The image on the next page (fig 1.) provides an example of a loan form used by the Ackland, requiring detailed information about the museum's facilities, security, staffing, and what exact materials are being transferred, along with their associated metadata. As Smith and Turner (2014) and Campbell and Gregor (2004) provide, the structure of documents demonstrate a hierarchy of information, where information outside of the delineated boxes and lines is not sought after. In some cases, as Campbell and Gregor illuminate, this privileging can be

negative as documents can leave out important information, as in their example of health workers leaving out patient concerns as there was no place for that on their forms (2004). The different kinds of information privileged by documents can lead to tensions between registrars and private collectors and dealers, as one registrar at the Weatherspoon recounted, describing great difficulty in getting accurate locations of works. For the collector or dealer, this information may be private (where is it located in the home, where is your home, what storage facility is it in, etc.) and may be unwilling to share exact locations of works of high value, or may prefer to have an intermediary meet the registrar on their behalf instead of providing all of that information on the form, as the registrar at the Weatherspoon and the registrar at the Mint also noted. While the registrars interviewed viewed these forms as integral to their work, their information needs, codified in institution-produced documents, may not always match up to the needs or information behaviors of collectors and dealers. More analysis about institutional information will be provided in the proceeding analysis section.

### **Auction Houses**

Auction houses were mentioned in two of the curator interviews, namely by curators working with older materials. For both, auction houses were a source of information about what objects existed on the market, not necessarily always to buy, but as a curator at the Mint provided, as a way to see what objects were available in general. This way, the curator could plan for future acquisitions or determine how much of a kind of art object would be available based on its appearances and prices in the auction house. The other curator, at the Ackland, also noted the use of auction houses as a source of information about prices for art objects, much like the use of private collectors and dealers as an information source. These values are not always

treated as reliable information, however, sometimes serving more as a general benchmark that the curator then needs to negotiate around rather than treating the price as a standalone fact. This is often because, as the curator provided, pricing information can also be derived from other sources (insurers, estimates from galleries etc.) which is then compared against the auction house information. This was not a common source of information, likely because of the nature of the objects these curators were looking for price information for; the two curators focusing largely on contemporary works cited sources such as art fairs, galleries, and artists themselves instead of dealers or auction houses, while the two curators that did cite auction houses as an information source dealt with 19th-century materials or older. The final two curators interviewed largely worked within the museum's permanent collections and thus did not need to seek out pricing information as they were not acquiring new items. Again, the object is of central focus here.

### **Museum Libraries and Museum Archives**

Of the six curators interviewed, all spoke about their use of the library as an information source for research about the historical or material context around an art object to be used in exhibitions, exhibition catalogs, provenance research, or sometimes for quick information to be used in justifications for acquisitions (though two curators noted they were more likely to use websites for writing justification pieces because of their shorter length and more concise content). Those curators working in museums associated with a university cited frequent use of their institution's library (i.e. anytime they were conducting research for an exhibition's wall text/labels or catalog/other publications) in terms of both requesting books and also using interlibrary loan. The curators at the Mint described use of their museum's own personal library, with one curator noting that they often browsed in the stacks for

materials as well as using ILL; yet, browsing was not a common information behavior noted in these interviews as only they and one other curator at the Weatherspoon stated they browsed in the stacks. All curators were uniform however in why they sought out this information source (exhibition text, exhibition catalog writing, provenance) as opposed to other sources; they needed the depth of information required for an exhibition catalog essay or for an article publication about an artwork, theme, or material. Two curators, one at the Mint and one at the Nasher, also noted the use of other museum libraries, though the selection of these depended on the specifics of the art objects they were researching; the former traveling to various museum libraries in the United Kingdom for more information about Wedgwood pottery, and the latter traveling to the Renwick Gallery in Washington D.C. for more detailed provenance information on a series of paintings in their collection.

More specifically, the kinds of items sought out at these libraries include: art historical monographs, exhibition catalogs (either from their own institution or from other museums), books (on materials, historical works, etc.), and sometimes artist's publications (folios). Exhibition catalogs serve a particular information need in that they provide an institutional record of the museum, allowing curators (as four have noted) to review what has been written about items in the collection previously, which can be revised for a new exhibition, or to see how exhibitions on similar topics were conducted in the past. The use of monographs is also interesting to note here, as many art librarians and publishers have noted the decline of the monograph as a publishing form for art historians, possibly making the research process for art museum curators more difficult (Tomlin, 2017; McGill, 2006). No difficulties were described by the curators, so this may be a future issue or possibly essays written in exhibition catalogs can fill the gap.

Museum archives were also noted by curators as an information source, for the purposes of exhibition/exhibition catalog research and provenance research. Four of the six curators described using museum archives in detail, with the latter two not citing them as an information source nor citing any other type of archive as an information source. These curators used archives in other museums as well as their own institution's archive, whether that be university-affiliated or located within the museum itself. Materials used include past exhibition records (containing ephemera from those exhibitions such as floor plans or press kits), curatorial files (if not in the registrar's department), ledgers (to determine provenance of an object), and letters/correspondence. There was no determining difference between information need and type of specific archival information source used.

Only one registrar, at the Mint, noted the museum library and archive as an information source, using the library and archive to look at past exhibition catalogs/publications, old exhibition layouts, and older records pertaining to the donation or care of objects. The latter is especially important for their work in maintaining care of the collection, as cataloging and description standards for objects changed several times over the life of the institution; in order to change those records to the current standard, the registrar has to refer to documents in the archives to do this work. This registrar also noted that their department keeps a separate internal registrar library of reference materials for description, conservation standards, database information, and some newer exhibition catalogs. The registrar provided that they would, in their research process to find information about their collections database or to add curatorial information to a record, turn to this personal library first; use of the museum library and archive centered more around older information/records. The other institutions interviewed besides the Mint do not have



their own libraries and archives in-house but are part of their campuses; while this may be a factor, it is more likely that the other registrars had differing locations for the same materials (located in a records file or in the registrars' department instead of in a separate archive).

### **Databases**

Databases are defined here as standard research databases, such as JSTOR or artnet, and also including the databases that registrars maintain, as they were referred to and described in similar ways by the interviewees. For curators, all six spoke about usage of both museum and research databases for their work, for the purposes of researching for exhibitions and exhibition catalogs, looking for objects from the permanent collection to put into an exhibition or gallery rotation, and provenance research. All of the institutions visited had access to a variety of research databases, whether through the university library or through the museum's library, as is the case at the Mint. Specific databases mentioned by name include artnet, for auction information or price information on works, JSTOR, and Oxford Art Online, the latter two for research and reference. Specific journals such as artforum or Art Bulletin (the CAA's journal) were also brought up as sources that were accessed through research databases. For provenance research, one curator at the Nasher noted the use of databases to find copies of ledgers or genealogical information in order to find out how an art object might have passed hands. Use of databases, as derived from the interviews, appeared to be common during the research process for exhibitions and exhibition catalogs. For the museum databases, uses were less frequent as compared to the museum's website catalog, but were still important for more detailed information about an object that the website does not provide, for example, condition reports, a full exhibition history, provenance, or more detailed information about the

medium. This information need is largely present when the curator is deciding to put something on display (gallery rotation, exhibition) and needs to know its condition and medium to ensure proper display or more detailed information for its label.

Of the registrars interviewed, none referred to the use of research databases, largely because their work does not center on creating curatorial information, but on preserving and recording it, thus there is little need to use a research database. The museum database is used often by registrars, and mentioned by all four registrars interviewed as an information source, using it to resolve discrepancies in records, process loans and acquisitions, create checklists of exhibition objects, and track objects as they move from purchase to actual ownership by the museum. These databases, while varying slightly from each institution as not all used the same systems (the Ackland and the Nasher use TMS, the Mint uses eMuseum, and the Weatherspoon uses Embark), all contain similar kinds of information: photos of the object, exhibition photos, basic information about the object, and attached records, such as a deed of gift, condition report, loan form, bill of sale, etc. Thus, the database is a vital repository for information about the art object and its status in relation to the museum (is it owned by the museum, on loan, deaccessioned, etc.); all registrars described using the database as an information source on a daily basis.

### **Professional Organizations**

While mentioned briefly in the sections on colleagues and museum policies, professional organizations and the resources they provide are another information source described by both curators and registrars, needing a fuller description of their use. Three of the four registrars interviewed described using materials from professional organizations, namely ARCS and AAM, including sample loan forms, facilities reports etc., conservation information, and lists of supplies and

manufacturers for different archival materials and shipping materials. These materials are hosted on ARCS and AAM's websites, which is how the registrars who described using these information sources accessed them. ARCS also has a list serv (the use of which was discussed earlier in the colleagues section) which two of the interviewed registrars use for more specific queries, such as how to store items of uncommon materials. Conferences are also hosted by ARCS and AAM, which were briefly mentioned by the same two registrars, but they did not attend, so these appear to not be major sources of information. The online resources and support of colleagues through list servs, barring one of the registrar's reservations, are the most used information sources in professional organizations, primarily for special cases.

The most common professional organizations amongst the curators interviewed are AAM, AAMC, and CAA, with AAM being mentioned by nearly all curators (five out of six), AAMC described by three, and CAA by two. Other more specialized professional organizations such as the American Craft Council, Craft Council (U.K.), The Furniture Society, or various ceramics organizations are also mentioned as important information sources for more specific types of works and mediums, which demonstrate that information need can also differentiate based on the curator's area of expertise. It is interesting to note that curators who had to work more as generalists did not mention any specialized group as opposed to those who concentrate in a specific time period or medium. CAA was also only noted by curators who worked with contemporary materials, which may be as CAA is also an organization for practicing artists and art historians, allowing curators in contemporary art access to artists they may like to exhibit or purchase from (CAA, 2016).

The types of information that curators reported using from these professional organizations resembles that of the registrars; copies of forms and policies (largely from AAM and AAMC), list serves and forums for specific queries, and conferences to meet with peers and stay current in the field. The only major difference here is that two of the curators described going to conferences for the above purposes. Since conference attendance is based on a multitude of factors, some of them personal, it is difficult to determine why this difference is present.

### **Online Materials**

Online materials are comprised of websites that are not run by museums or professional organizations, social media sites, and email. Across the curators interviewed, five out of six actively used non-museum or professional organization websites; these included artists' websites, Pinterest, and YouTube. These sites were used as information sources to seek out new artists or artworks that are not already owned by museums or galleries, making these sources particularly useful for curators who largely work with contemporary objects, as two of the curators themselves noted when talking about searching for new objects or artists. This is because many contemporary artists advertise themselves through their own websites as well as the gallery that represents them or the museum that may hold some of their work, and particularly new artists may be underrepresented in art historical publications (Budge, 2013). Some websites also may be better suited to showcasing some types of art, as described by one curator at the Mint, who recalled searching for information about lighting artists and designers. YouTube and even some social media sites such as Facebook and Instagram were able to provide video examples of these artists' works, which helped the curator see how the lighting art would look in a space, how the piece functions, and even how audiences may interact with it and how it can be installed.

These kinds of specific information are not readily available on museum websites and often entail detailed interactions between curators over email or on the phone, as a curator at the Nasher describes, noting these exchanges for information can sometimes be difficult because of that distance or inability to see exactly how a work will be presented (not the same as seeing it in person). Social media sites and artist sites can also provide information about a specific field that may take longer to find in traditional formats (magazines, journals, books etc.), such as new exhibitions, obituaries, or new uses of materials. Just as the internet age has made communications and transfers of information quicker, information about contemporary art has also increased in speed. The curator who did not cite these as information sources notably did not work with any contemporary works, but with 19th-century materials; this may be because there are not living practitioners of this work who are actively engaging on social media and websites as part of their livelihood and because information about objects in these time periods are largely written in monograph, catalog, or other print format.

Email, however, was widely used as an information source amongst all curators, regardless of focus. This does not refer to its use as correspondence, but instead as the repository of various email blasts and forwarded messages from museums, galleries, juried art competitions, and sometimes artists themselves, about new exhibitions, publications, art fairs, or other events. One curator at the Weatherspoon remarked that the volume of material was sometimes overwhelming, but useful to stay abreast of what was happening in their area, and they often use their email as a repository for that information by sorting different types of notices into folders into which they refer back to later when looking for works to include in an exhibition. Similar behavior and use was reported by both curators interviewed at the

Mint. All four registrars also reported using email for similar purposes, though to store different kinds of information. These registrars reported using email to keep track of rights and reproductions permissions, correspondence and agreements with lenders and collectors, and information related to the building or to specific materials. These items were based in correspondence, not as unsolicited blasts. As for social media or other types of online resources, two registrars discussed usage of TMS's forums to search for specific information about how to run certain features or fix bugs. Another registrar spoke about using a variety of different websites for conservation or storage information, namely the National Parks Service's Conserve-O-Grams when confronted with new materials to put into storage (an example they gave was a collection of ancient Central and South American objects that had round bottoms, so could not be stored on a shelf safely) and also Connecting to Collections, an online community of registrars and collections specialists, of which they have used their webinars on various preservation and storage topics. Only one registrar did not mention use of different online resources, but all did not report use of social media as an information source. This may be as the information searched for by registrars is largely technical in nature, and when discussed by the interviewees, they often had a known item they were looking for, unlike the curators who often described browsing or sometimes serendipitous finds amongst YouTube suggested videos or gallery flyers in their email.

### **Museums, Fairs, and Art Events**

Much like the auction houses, art fairs, special exhibitions/events, and visits to other museums were not a common information source amongst all curators, but were mentioned as information sources by three curators, two of which worked with contemporary objects and one with 19th-century materials. All of these events refer to

travel, with the curator leaving their institution to visit fairs, museums, or city-wide art events to seek out new works and artists and new art objects on the market; travel, then, works as an information source for acquisitions. These trips are not solely conducted with the intent to buy objects, but function more as a long-term browsing session. The curator working on 19th-century art objects emphasized this particularly, remarking that they rarely make purchases at pottery fairs and art fairs. The information about what art is on sale or available at the moment is invaluable as it helps them make long-term decisions on what to acquire for the museum, how much money can be put into the acquisitions budget, and what kinds of objects to avoid (too pricey, not many available, not of high aesthetic quality etc.). The two contemporary curators also visited fairs as well as museums and art events to keep current in their fields and see what possible artworks and artists are available to be purchased from or to take part in exhibitions. One curator, at the Weatherspoon, noted interestingly that these visits also served as inspiration for future exhibitions, both in terms of what art is available but also how other museums have hung or exhibited certain pieces or works by a specific artist, which they can transfer back to their own institution. Information about these specific events, museum shows, or art fairs are largely informal, built from networks of colleagues or from email blasts from those museums. Email as a source of information will be explored further in the “Social Media” section. No registrars interviewed used these items as an information source.

### **Museum Policies**

All curators and registrars interviewed utilized museum policies as an information source during their work, though in highly variable contexts and frequency. Two out of the four registrars described various museum policies important to their work (collections management policy, accessioning and

deaccessioning policies, facilities and loans procedures) but did not refer to them often; when asked, both provided it was because of their seniority and working familiarity with the material, making the need to refer back to the actual documents unnecessary. Yet, information derived from those documents were still important to their work, to fill out loan forms or record objects accurately. Here, information embodied as experience is likely the source, bridging the documents and institutional knowledge to the work task (Gorichanaz et al., 2016). The other two registrars did refer to some museum policies semi-frequently, with one at the Mint describing policies related to description, registration methods, and conservation methods being kept in their department's reference library for use, which they refer to during monthly meetings or when they have a new conservation or records issue. The other registrar, working more directly on the collections database and public-facing museum website, described referring to museum policies on photographing and branding standards. The collections management policy, containing information on what is and is not collected in the institution, how objects should be accessioned and deaccessioned, and other information relating to the care of the museum's collection, is central to all of the registrars' work, with all agreeing in its importance and several noting their involvement in updating the document. But, it is not referred to often as an information source but rather used as a guide, with registrar-specific policies, embodied experience, or, as provided earlier in the section on professional organizations, handbooks published by other registrars used for quick reference or long-term research into a problem.

The collections management policy was provided by all curators as an important museum policy, again with varying usage as an information source, but all curators described more intensive use of the document than the registrars. This is



likely because the focus of the policy is the definition of what the museum's collections are, serving as a guide for curators on what to or not acquire and how to shape the collection for the future purposes of the museum (for an example, please see Fig. 1). Two curators, one at the Mint and one at the Ackland, noted that the collections management policy was not the final word on what curators should acquire, but was still a useful guide for considering some purchases over others or as a helpful reminder to care for collections that had been instantiated earlier in the museum's history. For example, the curator at the Ackland described a collection of Japanese prints that had begun in the late 1980s-early 1990s, because many of the Ackland's board members at that time were experts in these materials. The curator uses the policy to remind that they, and by extension the museum, need to purchase good examples of Japanese prints from time to time to take care of that collection and show outside researchers and board members that they are still committed to that collection. Thus, maintaining a collection sometimes includes expanding it, which is then interpreted as a barometer for the health or success of the institution. At the same time, the curator at the Mint stressed that their work was not totally hemmed in by the policy, and if the curator wants to shift or grow a collection in a different way, they can do so by acquiring materials that relate to both the current focus of the collection and to the future focus they are envisioning. It is interesting that both of these curators did not want to assert too much primacy to the document, centering their own agency and other information sources they use for acquisitions (the permanent collection itself, university faculty, members of the public, research being conducted on the collection).

Specific goals for the development of the collection, including priorities for acquisition, are set out in a separate Collection Development Plan, drafted by the Acquisitions and Loans Committee and reviewed by the NAB

The Acquisitions and Loans Committee, in consultation with the NAB, should review the collecting focus of the Ackland Art Museum and update the Collection Development Plan periodically. Modifications may be made on occasions when outstanding opportunities to expand the scope of the Museum Collection occur.

### C. Classification of the Collections

The Ackland Art Museum maintains two categories of collections that are based on the historical significance of the object, its quality, and its intended use by the Ackland Art Museum within the guidelines of the Mission Statement. These categories, as defined below, are 1) Accessioned Collection and 2) Non-Accessioned Collection. Upon the acquisition of an object, the Curatorial staff will designate the appropriate category for the work. There is no assurance that objects will remain in their originally designated categories.

Classification or re-classification of objects must be approved by the Acquisitions and Loans Committee and the Director, using procedures described within this plan.

1. **Accessioned Collection:** Art works perceived to be of significant (or high) quality, historical importance, and value that support and reflect the Collection's focus and strengths. These are objects that are regularly utilized for the curatorial programs and related educational and research activities of the Ackland Art Museum. Requests by other institutions to borrow objects from the Accessioned Collection are evaluated by the Acquisitions and Loans Committee of the Museum, and granted only with the Director's recommendation.
2. **Non-Accessioned Collection:** Art works perceived not to fit the 'accessioned' category due either to their quality, historical significance, condition or value, incompatibility with the Museum's Collection Development Plan, or a combination of these factors. This portion of the collection provides research and educational material for students and scholars, but it also includes functional objects used for decoration and entertainment. Objects in this collection may be handled with fewer restrictions than those in the 'accessioned' collection, and may be taken from the building for outreach programs without the usual loan formalities. However, they may also be selectively exhibited on occasion.
  - a. **Educational Hands-On Collection (EHOC):**  
The Educational Hands-On Collection (EHOC) allows the Museum to obtain materials used in educational programming that can be handled by visitors with certain restrictions to be determined by the Education Department staff. The collection is made up of materials that are inappropriate for the permanent collection, typically because they are not considered to be authentic but which still embody the aesthetic of genuine

coll-mng. November 28, 2016

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Figure 1. Ackland Art Museum Collections Management Policy, 2016, 4. (Unpublished; provided to researcher upon request.)

Another important collection of policies that all curators and three registrars out of four described were deaccessioning policies. While most collections management policies include sections about deaccessioning, many institutions,

including the ones interviewed here, also have separate documents detailing the process; this is because of the larger scope of this action, which involves the board of trustees, museum director, as well as the curators and registrars, and because of the delicate nature of the action. There have been a number of high-profile scandals of museums during the 1980s-1990s, selling off works to gain money for the museum or letting go of artworks in unethical ways, and as such deaccessioning is a highly regulated process (Genoways et al., 1997). To that end, policies about proper ways to write justifications to deaccession materials, who to contact, and what to do with the funds if they are sold are highly used as an information source when deaccessioning is happening. It is also important to note here that these policies are often heavily adapted from templates provided by AAM or ARCS, indicating a shared legibility between institutions on loan, acquisition, and deaccession policies.

### **Permanent Collection**

As defined here, the permanent collection is comprised of the museum's constant holdings, not including artworks that are on loan or that are part of traveling exhibitions. These are objects that museum workers, curators and registrars, would have more consistent access to than items that are only part of the institution for a short time, and as these museums present on their websites (and as Becker also describes in *Art Worlds*, 2008), also are an integral part of the institution's identity. It may not be a surprise then that all curators and all registrars interviewed considered the permanent collection as an information source, with both curators and registrars stressing the importance of seeing the physical object as a way to understand it or understand museum processes related to it. While the physical aspect of the art object is the important source of information for both curators and registrars, the kinds of

information sought from the permanent collection differ between the two. They do not vary between the different subfields in curatorial or registrar work.

For curators, seeing the physical object provides both academic research information and more practical information about how it can be displayed, what can be displayed with it, how long it can be displayed etc. As one curator at the Mint provides,

“...if you’re writing a label, it’s really important to see the work in person, because it tells much more than just looking at a picture...A work of art’s physical presence is what gives it its value so being able to use it as a source of information for writing is crucial.” (curator, interview transcript, 2018).

The curator goes on to explain how examining the pigments and paint application on a work on canvas or if there are inscriptions in a metalworking piece can help provide more historical or material information about the artwork, which in turn enriches the work’s label, wall text, or essays in an exhibition catalog. The curator also notes that if there are specific details that a visitor may wonder about, such as a specific piece of jewelry worn by a figure in a portrait, close inspections in person can help to uncover that information as well. While the curator was talking specifically about searching for information for label or catalog writing, the objects in the permanent collection are also used as information sources for gallery rotations and acquisitions; three curators, at the Ackland and two at the Mint, talked about this specifically when describing the permanent collection as an information source and how they used it. Much like how the collections management policy is used, the curators describe how important it is to have a clear understanding of what is contained in the permanent collection, so that objects sought out for purchase either fit in with those collections or bridge between different ones. Collecting an item wholly outside of the collection without little supporting material is seen as irresponsible, as it can deprive other museums who do have experts in that area from developing their collection and cause an object to not

be used (it likely will not be put on display if it does not have any or only tenuous thematic relation to other items in the permanent collection). The permanent collection is thus an important resource to see what items do fit, what gaps exist, and what kinds of narratives can currently be told from that collection. As a curator at the Ackland provides succinctly, "...you kind of use the collection to guide what your priorities are" (curator, interview transcript, 2017).

Loans and traveling exhibitions are also informed by the museum's permanent collection in that sense, as they give the museum an opportunity to exhibit or show works that they normally cannot, or explore themes that connect to the permanent collection but do not have enough examples of in that collection. A curator at the Weatherspoon gave an example of this with an exhibition they were currently planning, which was a mix of loans and items from the permanent collection, all on the theme of fairy tales in art; while there are some items in the collection that use fairytales as a source of information, not enough existed in the museum to make a whole show based off of that concept, thus bringing in loan items that related to the theme.

As mentioned earlier, gallery rotations are another work task that prompts curators to look to the permanent collection for information, both for research and for technical information about an object's size, medium, and exhibition history. The latter is especially important as some works cannot be exhibited frequently to preserve them, especially works on paper, so looking at these items in the collection is vital to seeing how much damage has been done to a work or if the work is stable enough to be exposed to light. Exhibition record is also important to ensure an item has not already been on view, to ensure that the objects in the permanent collection circulate or that a donor's gift does not get a chance to be put on view. Size and medium, while

possibly obvious pieces of information, are crucial to understanding what works can be displayed together comfortably in a room or outside and if they can be installed or rotated safely; a curator at the Nasher noted how misleading photographs can be when it comes to an art object's real size, which in turn can shift how works are arranged in a space. Medium and size can also yield information about how to construct a legible narrative, especially if the galleries are organized based on medium or telling a story about how objects are made, as at the Mint Uptown; ensuring that the medium of the object best represents that concept means seeing the object and using the permanent collection to look for those objects is crucial.

Registrars too emphasized the importance of using the permanent collection as a source of information, also looking at the object's specifics such as size, medium, condition, and, crucially, location. Location of where the objects are kept is central to registrars' work in recording and safekeeping objects; reviewing those locations by looking at painting racks or storage shelves, while not common (as this work is often done in the database), is still important if there is a discrepancy in records. This was described in detail by a registrar at the Mint, who spoke about a project to properly document the fashion collection; the issue was that props made for display were improperly catalogued with actual permanent collection items, making it difficult to parse what items were collection items and what items were props that could be stored elsewhere or removed. Physically examining materials and their locations helped the registrar and their intern to better determine what items needed to be recorded into the fashion collection and what should not be, based on where these items were physically located. Size, medium, and condition are also key, as three of the registrars interviewed noted the importance of that information for proper packing and shipping, storage, and conservation of these materials; seeing the objects is necessary to

accurately assess this information, to build good supports for transport, storage, or to determine if an object needs to stay in storage or if it can be exhibited. Even if all interviewed registrars more commonly provided they sought out information about the collection through the database than in person, both demonstrate the centrality of the permanent collection to their work and as an information source.

### **Information Source Analysis**

From the interview transcriptions, there are a couple main themes that can be pulled out and examined in relation to the context of the participant(s) and the context of their institution. It is important to restate here that this study does not intend to generalize any findings or experiences across different curators and registrars because the contexts vary greatly between institutions, even just within the category of art museums. However, general patterns of information sources sought out can be described in these specific cases, which may inspire a local case study in a specific museum to better understand the information practices of their workers or a quantitative study to do that generalizing work.

One of the main findings here, and one that is likely most critical to information science, is that there is an increasing emphasis on the digital in these interviews. The curators and registrars interviewed described constant use of websites varying from the social (YouTube, Instagram, Facebook) to artist websites and most significantly, museum websites. As already provided in the previous section, museum websites are sporadic in terms of how well their collections are represented online, reported by both the interviewed curators and registrars and in various publications, all of which advise for more study and more emphasis placed on maintaining them (Roth-Katz, 2012; Kabassi, 2017; Marty, 2008). This tension, however, creates new spaces for potential research on how to fix the issue, and can encourage museums to

review website management schedules. The older methods of research, discussed by one senior curator, of relying on books and trade magazines is falling quickly out of fashion for quick information needs, especially for pricing/auction information or new artists. This kind of information changes quickly and older forms of communication cannot keep apace; museum websites, artist websites, and other online media will likely continue to be used by these curators and possibly by others. Supporting those resources is key.

This is not to say that print materials are not being used by the participants or even that they are not being used, only that the type of use is changing. This is a positive for those concerned about the declines in art publishing, as there is a market still for curators and some registrars who need catalogs or monographs for detailed research for exhibitions, catalogs, or description projects. Print materials were cited widely by both curators and registrars, but namely for long-term and complex information searching, not for quick look up of pricing figures, artist names, or dates. Art museum curators and registrars are also a group with a lot of familiarity with libraries, archives, and information systems, with one institution having their own library and archive on site, while the others had affiliate institutions; the participants themselves described specific library materials they used, methods of browsing, and how they used the catalog, demonstrating again the heavy use and importance of print items (items other than books and archival materials were not noted being used in a library/archive context here). Museum libraries may find it helpful to tailor their resources to these specific information needs.

Another major theme is the use of document surrogates to represent other materials, even if they are on hand, in this case art objects in both the permanent collection or loaned items. For loans, the reasoning is logistical; a curator or a



registrar cannot see the object in person until it is shipped and brought to the museum, unless the registrar conducts a site visit (while mentioned in the interview data, this was not commonly reported as a work task). For items in the permanent collection, this was a bit more surprising, because the materials are on hand in on-site or in nearby storage facilities. While both registrars and curators asserted the need to see or handle an object to understand it fully, whether for rehousing the object, describing it in a record, or determining its fit into a gallery, not many reported doing this often. This may be because of limited time during exhibition or gallery rotation, where an object is usually only physically accessed to ensure its basic information (size, condition, medium, etc.) is correct and appropriate for the display or to photograph it for the museum internal database/museum public website. This difference may also depend upon the materiality of the art objects, which in the interest of preservation, may not be able to be accessed often, especially with paper or fiber materials. Documents like accession records, object files, and museum database/website entries then act as surrogates or mediators between the curator/registrar and the object, standing in for an entity that otherwise cannot be viewed often. While all of the work tasks reported by the participants center upon the object or information about the object, the actual object itself is not often present. These documents can become the object instead, existing as exhibition checklists, museum websites, databases, personal curatorial files, accession files, object and artist files, condition reports, and so on. Much like how museum websites act as an entry point for those who may not be able to enter the museum or who are not there yet, these documents are entry points into a material that cannot allow frequent entry. While my initial question was to see how much the permanent collection figured as an information source and if it affected other sources/objects, and it does in the sense that traveling shows and loans are

picked to complement those materials, it appears more that the permanent collection is composed of more than just the objects, but a constellation of institution-made documents, representing the object through the information that that work task or department values most. Information about the object's content, for example, features rarely in the registrars' interviews or in the forms they utilize (facilities report, accession form, loan form etc.) while content is paramount to curators and is central in documents like justifications for accessioning/deaccessioning or object checklists. This is also reflected in how the participants described their work tasks, centering them around the needs of the form or record in terms of the registrars, or for the curators, around the needs of the object and the wider collections management policy. Both curators and registrars have a great deal of autonomy in their actions, my purpose is not to erase that, but instead to remind that the documents used, the information sources sought out (which again, are often institution-made documents and policies or documents that intercede on behalf of the art object), are as much a part of the process and an influence on the participants as their own motivations (interests in exhibits/collecting, interests in organization/rehousing, etc.).

### **Information Source Horizons**

Information source horizons, as defined in Sonnewald, Wildemuth, and Harmon's (2001) study, are the perceived fields or scope of information sources available to a person when searching for information. These mental maps change based on the information being sought out and on the context of the searcher, bringing in again the importance of context from Cool (2005, 2001) on the person searching (Sonnewald et al., 2001). These differing contexts would also then shape the information source horizon that is perceived by the person; different resources may pertain to different information needs, and depending on that person's affective,

action, or demographic context, the information sources that will be conceived in their source horizon will shift based on those considerations (Sonnewald et al., 2001). To that end, the interviewees were asked to draw a map of what their information source horizon looked like, much like the grade school students in Sonnewald et al.'s study (2001), to chart those varying contextual changes possible between different jobs (curator vs. registrar, specialty area), objects worked with, and the different types of institutions worked in. However, this process was tweaked a bit to reflect the study's recommendation for better data collection, namely that the drawing took part right after the interview for more accurate reporting and participants were not asked to focus on several tasks at once to draw maps for (Sonnewald et al., 201).

As both Smith et al. (2014) and Lisa Gitelman (2014) contend, these maps aim to visualize the web of documents (as applied by both Smith and Gitelman, documents refer to both paper items and information in the abstract), or web of information used by curators and registrars in specific work tasks and to trace relations between these institution-created materials and the searcher. Not only can these maps uncover what information sources or systems could be supported in the future to assist curatorial and registrar work, but also can help demystify the institutional context in information searching. This can help illuminate the links between tasks and information searching as posited by Bystrom in her 2008 article on use of tasks in LIS literature.

### **Information Map Analysis**

As stated previously, all ten interviewees took part in drawing an information horizon map. Each participant drew their map without assistance, verbal, gestural or otherwise, by myself, and largely in silence. Each interviewee chose a specific context for their information horizon map without my prompting; this is significant that the

participants pieced together what information sources they used (i.e. the content of their just-completed interview into a visual) in this way. All tailored it to a specific situation because any attempt to generalize the work quickly became too overwhelming for the participant if they first tried this option, and the participants often felt like they had left out important information. Even those who chose to describe several work tasks (three participants did this), cited specific tasks and provided different sources for each one (information source horizon maps, 2017-8). Focusing on a specific task elicited different, discrete sources, demonstrating the importance of work task context to the sources chosen. In thinking about Bystrom et al.'s (2005) model of work tasks in information seeking, the task acted as the context attribute, which serves to encircle and inform the information seeking session and the subtasks within it. Bystrom et al.'s model also acknowledges personal and situational attributes, the latter of which is described as the available resources to help the search (2005). These resources can include some of the intermediaries described by the participants during the information source discussion, such as colleagues or databases, which help to deliver the sought information or at the very least, satisfy a subtask that carries them to the next subtask. (The personal was not examined in detail in this work, as I am more interested in the institutional relationships between workers, the sources they use, and the information they seek out.) The maps then are a guide to contextual and situational (information source) aspects of information seeking for curators and registrars. The information reported below is wholly derived from the information source horizon maps drawn by the participants and from their interview data. For clarification, the information source horizon maps are cited to differentiate them from the content of the interview data.

The construction of the maps largely placed the information sources around the information seeker, with the information sources themselves drawn as discrete units (i.e. not with arrows linking them to other sources). Only four maps out of ten did draw such connective arrows, of two curators and two registrars (information source horizon maps, 2017-8). For the curators, both of these maps were describing the process of planning for exhibitions, in one noting the connections between dealers/collectors, colleagues, and museums in knowing each other or knowing experts that could point them to other objects to obtain, and in the other connections were drawn between the museum library and archive and to the online resources provided by the museum, such as a staff wiki, demonstrating the interconnectedness of the museum's resources that support curatorial research (information source horizon maps, 2017-8). For the registrar maps, one shows the connections between the museum internal database (TMS) and the various systems used to create reports and the software to improve object images uploaded to the database, while the other on the subject of loans illuminates again personal connections between museum professionals and private lenders and internal staff to make sense of what items are being received and who needs to know what information to ensure the objects change hands smoothly (information source horizon maps, 2017-8). Interestingly, while all registrar maps are discrete, dealing with different work tasks, the curator maps had two others that also dealt with exhibition planning but did not provide an order on how the information sources were consulted. This may be because of their varying construction; one dealt with several work tasks on the same page and the other wrote out the work task and directed all information sources to it. While the webbed diagrams infer a continuous information search (which one of the curators who drew

this map noted in their interview), the more discrete maps may demonstrate a more hierarchical process or simply a process simplified to meet this task.

All but two of the participants (one registrar and one curator) included themselves in their information source horizon map, often at the center of a web or line diagram with information sources used for the defined task branching off from that center. Only one in this group diverged from that conception, with one registrar placing the museum object as the nexus of all other searching relations, and themselves placed along one line that went from the object to the database, museum records (accession files and primary sources), and exhibition catalogs; all of these sources are used for solving records discrepancies in the museum image database (Fig. 3; information source horizon maps, 2017-8). A separate line extends from the museum object to sources used for rehousing objects for conservation and preservation, which include sources like professional organization resources, other online resources, and a vendor for conservation materials (Fig. 3; information source horizon maps, 2017-8). This focus on the museum object instead of the researcher is distinct from all other maps, and appears to suggest that it is not the searcher that prompts the information seeking task, but the object's presence and its related questions and needs that drives the search, as well as what sources are sought out. The object-centered approach is a common one in the museum space, as it is both what museums collect and how museum staff use to connect larger narratives or ideas to their visitors (Carter, 2016). And even though the other maps do not have this construction, the discussion on the information tasks and sources sought out reveal the museum object as the primary actor in the process. For this registrar, the objects or permanent collection is the first stop and the originator of inquiry.

For the other participants, the permanent collection appears as an information source to use, not the beginning of the search (usually prefaced by themselves as an actor, but in two cases the name of the task was written as the central or organizing object) (information source horizon maps, 2017-8). For the registrars, only one other besides the registrar above named the permanent collection as a source, using it during research tasks (like resolving records). This participant also listed “art” as an information source for acquisitions, likely referring to the acquired art incoming and the need to look to the object to record information like medium, size, condition, and other physical factors into the database, while the permanent collection is used more when dealing with existing records (information source horizon maps, 2017-8). The other two registrars did not reference objects or the permanent collection, with a greater emphasis on the databases, colleagues, online resources, and in one case, imaging software; both were describing the acquisitions process, with one having an emphasis on processing loans and the other on entering acquisition records into the DAM (information source horizon maps, 2017-8). While the object is definitely a source of that information being put into a DAM or on a loan form, these registrars represented this process through “TMS collection data” and the “lenders” respectively; while the object is still important, representation in a database or through the lender reflects the intermediary that the registrar must use to access that information, indicating that in some cases, ready access to the object may not be available or may be a more detailed map version than the ones described above, providing the necessary information sub tasks to get to the larger task of recording information about an art object. This is corroborated by one of the registrar’s maps, which has lenders as one information source, that is then connected to galleries/museums, then to that institution’s curator, indicating many levels consisting

of sources that are deeply knowledgeable about the art object (information source horizon maps, 2017-8). Also, for acquisitions, it may be more difficult to see the art object because it is not yet a part of the collection.

For curators, none directly referenced the collection in their maps by writing “object,” “collection,” “art” or other terms, but like the registrars, did name information sources that contained permanent collection information or acquiring/acquired/loaned object information, such as artist, curatorial, and object files, registrar files, museum websites, and databases (information source horizon maps, 2017-8). This is especially interesting as the curators interviewed also picked different tasks to visualize, including exhibition research, provenance research, exhibition catalog writing, acquisitions, teaching, and cataloging (information source horizon maps, 2017-8). Yet, even in all of those tasks, the use of museum websites and museum records (artist files, object files, registrar files, curatorial files) are constant throughout all maps and are present in two out of the four registrar maps. (This difference is likely because of the differing jobs of one of the participants, who is an art database manager, and the other did talk extensively about using files in their interview but it does not appear on their map about that same task, so it could have been forgotten or seen as ancillary.) Even if the physical object is not represented here, the information about the objects is again, still central, represented in digital and archival format. And while information derived from the object’s physical presence is central to the work of registrars and curators, as found in the interview data, digital and archival surrogates may be more accessible for one’s workflow or simply because objects in storage need to be preserved and objects on display are hard to remove and examine without disrupting the visitor’s experience. The issue of accessibility for workflow was brought up by two curators who noted that they did not have enough



time as they would have liked to view objects in person, with another noting that they sometimes got the chance to look at the objects but it was uncommon, comprising half of the interviewed curators. For the registrars, three reported consistently working with the objects, likely because they directly worked with conservation and storage while the fourth largely worked with the online records. Recording accurate information about the object is thus paramount if access to the actual item is infrequent and raises questions about the difference of use between museum databases/websites and records versus physical interaction with the object.

Comparing the maps more generally, information source differences between curators and registrars largely center around the use of more traditional academic sources, such as libraries and archives, monographs, and other kinds of scholarly publications. The sources in the registrars' maps, except for the mention of exhibition catalogs, were more technical in nature, such as TMS forums, registration/cataloging references, or museum policies (information source horizon maps, 2017-8). It is important to note here that these differences bear out despite the work task being described. This difference is likely because of the differing work tasks involved in registration work versus curatorial work; the latter is tasked with presenting the various narratives of the objects, requiring that kind of scholarly research, while the former are tasked with recording and maintaining the collection, which requires more use and knowledge of technical and policy-related documents. This is not to say that neither registrar or curator cross over in these areas, for example, one registrar described researching pottery marks to be able to differentiate object records, but that the focus of their jobs lie in these areas.

On the whole, the kind of information sources used, or put in Bystrom et al.'s terms, the kind of situational attributes present in this information seeking process, are

largely institution-created documents (2005). These include museum policies, museum records, museum websites, and museum databases or wikis (information source horizon maps, 2017-8). At least one of these items were present in all of the maps, curator and registrar, and while registrars more often had these types of materials as information sources present on their maps than the curators, their presence continued throughout each type of work task and searching context provided (information source horizon maps, 2017-8). While it may be evident that museum workers would use museum-created material for their work, what is important to notice here is that these materials create a specific kind of information horizon, one that is informed by and in some cases, wholly populated by institutional materials. In turn, the searcher is not just a user seeking information, but one inhabiting a role in a process mediated by those documents (Gitelman, 2016; Smith et al., 2014; Carter, 2016; Lund, 2010).

These processes act in a variety of ways with varying levels of influence by these actors. While a registrar may want to record more information about an object into the item record, the formation of that record either supports or inhibits that action, or in another case, knowledge about the specific location of the material is not known even though it is crucial to their work because the documents used do not have that breakdown available (and as such, the lender does not provide that information on the document). For curators, policies guide what collections are available and what and when to acquire materials, while museum records reaffirm the institutional manner in how objects are described, which is then repeated on the museum website or exhibition label. On a more positive note, these documents act as mediators in processes that are legal and often personal in nature (loaning artwork, acquiring or deaccessioning materials), allowing the registrar or curator to either step back from

the process or, in the case of deaccessioning, seek out information they might not have otherwise. In all of these cases though, what information curators and registrars are collecting is informed by the structure and content of the institutional information sources they seek out; this effect is heightened even further as museums have a great deal of institutional or specific information like facilities information, exhibition histories, or curatorial research on objects in a very specific and defined collection. The information source horizon then, while all maps encompassed a wide variety of materials, is still institutionally influenced (if not constructed) possibly because of the narrow context part of their information seeking model. It would be interesting to see if an institutional pattern of information seeking is borne out in other cultural heritage spaces or in libraries.

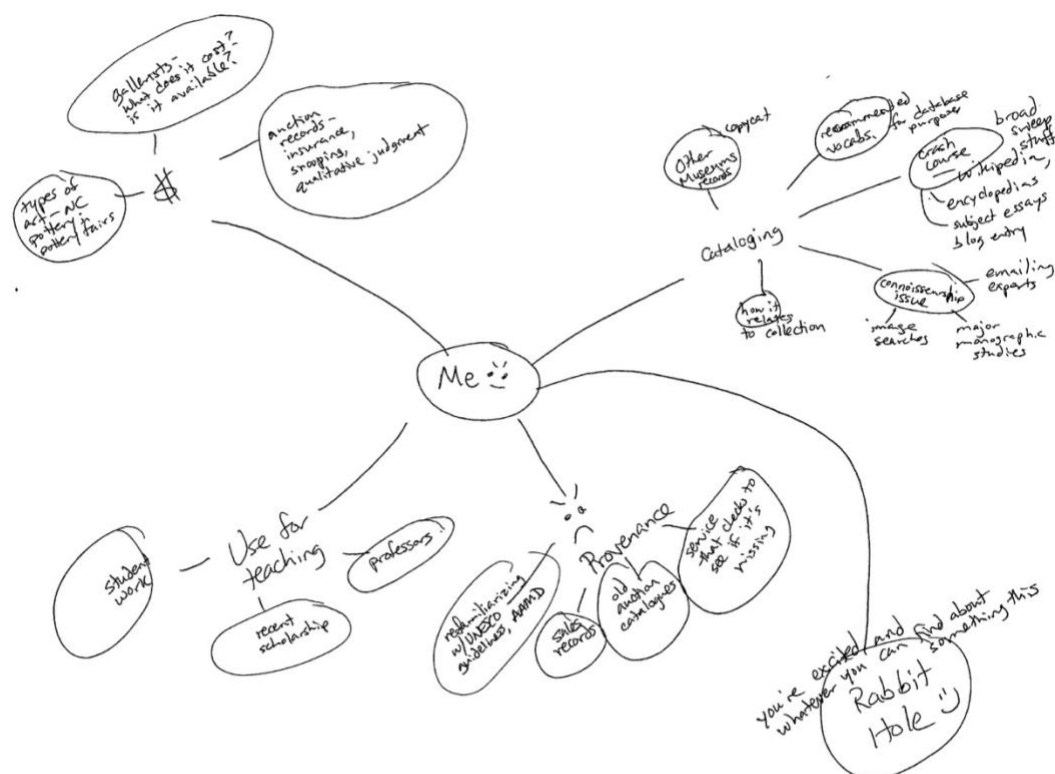


Figure 2. Information Horizon Map drawn by a curator, 2017.

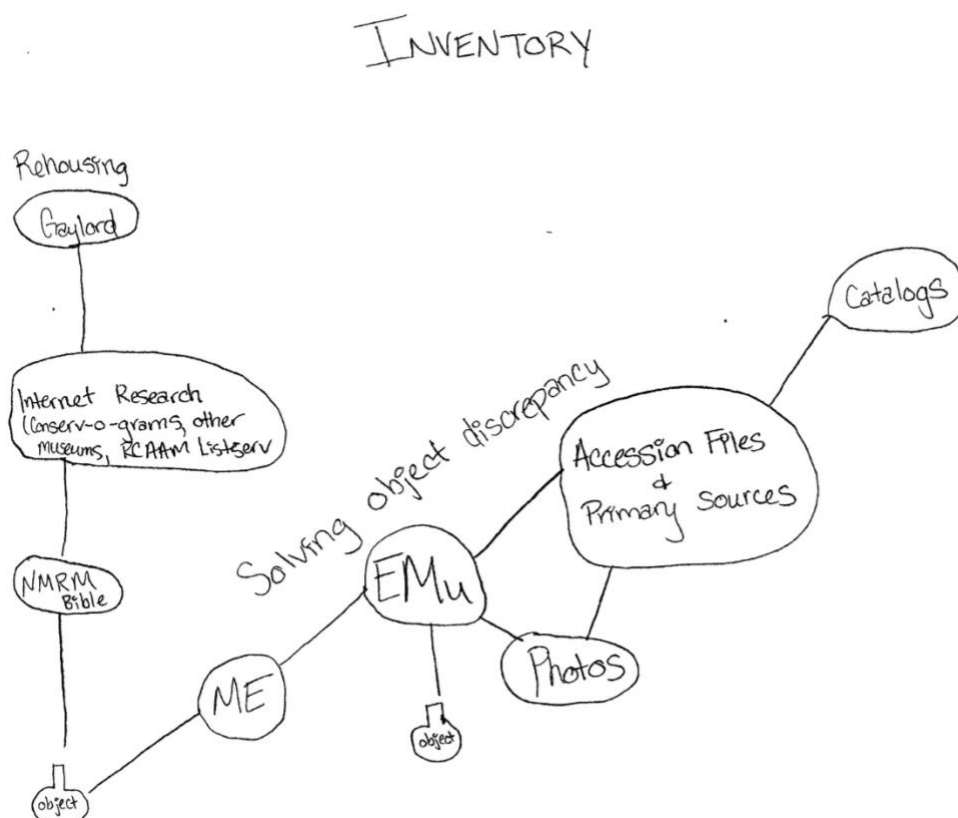


Figure 3. Information Horizon Map drawn by a registrar, 2018.

### Limitations

While I contacted around 40 individuals to participate in the study, only 10 were able to be interviewed. This is not a major limitation in itself, as I was not aiming to make my sample size representative of all curators and registrars; this would be an impossible goal as each institution is distinct from each other in its institutional history, collections, workforce, budget, context/location etc. Such generalizations could not be meaningful. My aim was to review the work of different kinds of art museum curators and registrars in a sample of those different kinds of institutions, ranging from the small to large, university-affiliated to independent, with a wide range of collections to a narrow focus. With this kind of sampling, a deeper exploration into the specific information worlds of these individuals can be made, and at the same time, allow for these methods to be transferred to other studies that can improve on this initial model. For example, my study focuses heavily on university-

affiliated museums and on curators, because those were the institutions that agreed to participate; a future study can interview more individuals from state-operated or private institutions and more registrars or could focus on one area entirely. Because my methodology focuses on analyzing those relations between the institution and the information sources available, changing the sampling or parameters of the study would not adversely affect its efficacy or truth-value, making the methods used transferrable to other future work.

It is also important to note that whenever one is working on interviews, the availability of those individuals is variable and especially so for art museum staff. As described at length earlier in the study, all of the institutions I spent time at or contacted had constant exhibition cycles, meaning that staff were away on travel for research, working on exhibition catalogs, or collecting works and thus were unavailable to interview for weeks or months at a time. This did require me to reschedule some interviews multiple times, and is a limitation to keep in mind for any future work with art museum staff populations. Even so, I still was able to interview 10 individuals for an extended period of time, and all those contacted were interested in participating, even if they could not do so immediately or within my time frame.

Another limitation, also described a bit briefly earlier on in the study, is that not all institutions are open to sharing their policies or documents. This can be for a variety of reasons; the major one I confronted was that the registrars stated the documents they used were too similar to other institutions to be useful. While this information sharing of policies and documents is very common amongst the registrars I interviewed, I contend that other factors such as concerns about security may also have an effect here. Documents such as loan agreements and facilities reports can contain sensitive information about the museum and the other parties involved

(private lender, other museum lender, artist etc.) that according to museum best practices, should not be shared widely [footnote here about the stolen works from that boston museum], thus making them less likely to circulate. These documents also usually only have two intended audiences, the host museum and the other lending or hosting party (docs from ackland/AAM citation). While a few institutions allowed me to look at these materials, usually blank copies, not all did so, thus leaving open future avenues for other studies.

### **Implications**

As noted previously in the introduction, there is a dearth of scholarship applying information worlds and source horizons theory to museum professionals, let alone those in art museums. While much work has been done on determining the usage of museums by visitors, including their information preferences and how the construction of the museum space affects their use of the varied information sources present in an exhibition (Matassa, 2014; Smith, 2006; Kravchyna, 2004; Skov, 2013; Anderson et al., 2015; Duncan, 1995), there is less work available detailing the specific resources that art museum professionals consult to create these displays as an explicit type of information behavior with varied information source horizons. Considering curation and collections management work in this light allows one to evaluate the “ecology of practices” (Olsen, Shanks, Webmoor, and Whitmore, 2012) associated with a profession in order to better understand its information needs, organization, and behaviors. In turn, this study’s findings applied to current scholarship on the information behaviors and worlds of museum visitors, as well as the discussion of critical museum/curatorial theory in museology, curatorial studies, and art history, aims to add to a fuller picture of the art museum landscape and understanding of its current practices. Internally, art museum curators who conduct

similar assessments of their work or others who work in similar institutions such as other museums and cultural heritage sites, could build off this work by assessing their own information worlds, which in turn may highlight underutilized assets and collections, applications or misapplications of museum-wide and national standards, and, on a more basic level, a better understanding of what it is that curators and registrars do from the perspective of other museum professionals and stakeholders.

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## Appendix A: Email Recruitment to Interview Subjects

Dear <Participant Name>,

I am Devon Murphy, a current graduate student at UNC-CH in Information Science and Art History. I am currently conducting research into the everyday work practices of art museum curators and registrars, and am writing to inquire if you would be interested in participating in my study.

The purpose of my study is to examine the various curatorial decisions and information sources considered by curators and registrars while conducting their work tasks. This examination hopes to uncover a wider ecology of practices that art museum professionals use when constructing exhibitions or accessioning/deaccessioning works.

To participate in the study, I will conduct one semi-structured interview with you (45 min - 60 min) with questions focusing on what types of information sources you consult while conducting various work tasks, along with a visualization section (drawing maps of one's information world); no drawing experience is necessary. All answers will be kept anonymous and confidential.

This information is part of my ongoing research in both Information Science and Art History at UNC, and will be used ultimately for my master's paper, culminating in the Master of Science in Information Science degree from the School of Information and Library Science at UNC-CH. Information collected may also be used for future publications.

If you are interested in participating in the study, you can contact me by email at [devondev@live.unc.edu](mailto:devondev@live.unc.edu) or by phone at 270-799-4643. If you wish to know more about me as a researcher/student, you may also contact my advisors; [Dr. Carol Magee](#), Department Chair and Associate Professor, UNC Art and Art History Department and [Dr. Ryan Shaw](#), Associate Professor, UNC SILS.

Thank you for your time,

Devon Murphy  
Research + Design Assistant | R.B. House Undergraduate Library  
Teaching Assistant | UNC Writing Center  
MA/MSIS | Art History Information Science 2019  
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill  
Pronouns: she/her/hers

## **Appendix B: Email for Permission to View Documents/Existing Documents**

Hello,

I am Devon Murphy, a current graduate student at UNC-CH in Information Science and Art History. I am currently conducting research into the everyday work practices of art museum curators and registrars, including analysis of the information sources they utilize. To that end, I am writing to inquire about access to related documents located in your records collection and library. I am only needing to take notes on the content and layout of the documents; they will not be reproduced as scans or photographs in my study.

Requested documents include:

- Initial donor agreement of the permanent collection
- Current collecting statement (museum-wide or by curatorial department)
- Current accession and deaccession policies
- Previous years' exhibition schedule/plans

This research will be used ultimately for my master's paper, culminating in the Master of Science in Information Science degree from the School of Information and Library Science at UNC-CH. Information collected may also be used for future publication.

I am available to make an appointment to view these documents if needed during the posted times on the website.

Thank you for your time,

Devon Murphy  
Research + Design Assistant | R.B. House Undergraduate Library  
Teaching Assistant | UNC Writing Center  
MA/MSIS | Art History Information Science 2019  
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill  
Pronouns: she/her/hers

## Appendix C: Email and Phone Follow-Up for Interview Subjects

Dear <Participant's Name>,

Thank you for interest in participating in this study. To reiterate the study's structure and expectations, you'll be asked to participate in one semi-structured interview (45-60 min in duration) with questions focusing on what types of information sources you consult while conducting various curatorial work tasks, along with a visualization section (drawing maps of one's information world). Note, you do not need to have any drawing ability to create these maps. All answers will be kept anonymous and confidential.

I am happy to meet at a location where you are most comfortable. Please let me know what times and locations work best for you.

Additionally, please let me know if you have any questions about the study. You will have the opportunity to ask additional questions before, during, and after the study.

Thank you for your time,

Devon Murphy  
 Research + Design Assistant | R.B. House Undergraduate Library  
 Teaching Assistant | UNC Writing Center  
 MA/MSIS | Art History Information Science 2019  
 University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill  
 Pronouns: she/her/hers

Hello <Participant's Name>,

I'm Devon Murphy, the graduate student from UNC-CH who emailed you earlier about the art museum curatorial practice study. Just to reiterate the study's structure and expectations, you'll be asked to participate in one semi-structured interview (45-60 min in duration) with questions focusing on what types of information sources you consult while conducting various curatorial work tasks, along with a visualization section (drawing maps of one's information world). Note, you do not need to have any drawing ability to create these maps. All answers will be kept anonymous and confidential.

Do you have any questions about this process/study?

(answer q's)

Thank you. Are you still interested in participating in the study? You will have the option to ask additional questions before, during, and after the study.

(answer q's)

Thank you. Would you like to arrange a time and place to meet? An example would be your office, but any location that you feel most comfortable in is preferable.

(answer q's)

Thank you for your time.

Source for email structures: Hannigan, E. (2017). Current Records Management Challenges at North Carolina State Agencies and UNC System Campuses. University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Retrieved from <https://cdr.lib.unc.edu/record/uuid:a313bc20-a225-495b-b1e2-d607d9da7aad>

## **Appendix D: Interview Guide**

What are the steps you go through when planning an exhibition? What information (can include people, documents, websites, etc.) do you consult when deciding upon an exhibition's theme and pieces, and why? What information do you not consult and why? Is there anything you've left out?

What are the steps you go through when accessioning a work? What information (can include people, documents, websites, etc.) do you consult when deciding upon a work and why? What information do you not consult and why?

What are the steps you go through when deaccessioning a work? What information (can include people, documents, websites, etc.) do you consult when deciding to deaccession a work and why?

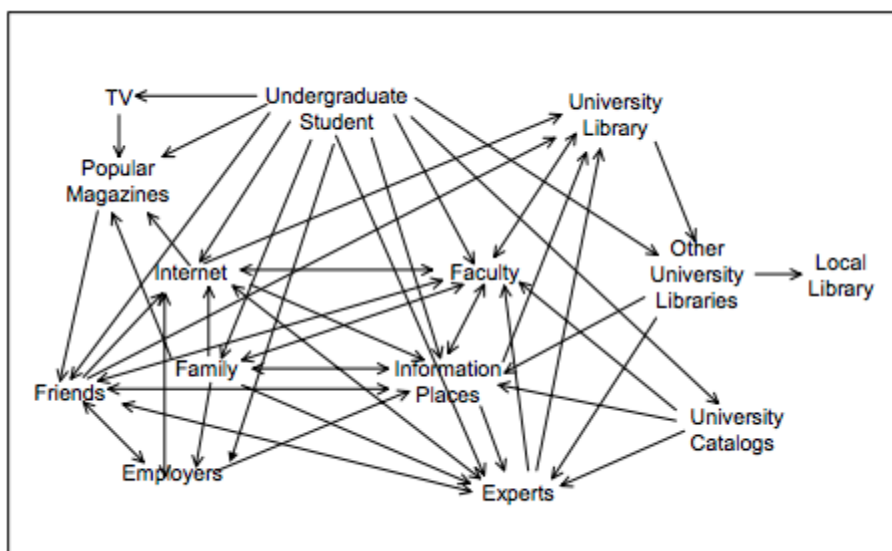
Do you use the permanent collections as a deciding factor in accessioning/deaccessioning/planning an exhibition? Why or why not? How do you use the permanent collection to make these decisions?

Are there any museum-created documents or policies you use when making these decisions? Who made these policies? How long have they been put into place and by who?

Do you consult museum staff to make the above decisions? In what formats (email, meeting, etc.) and at what points in the process?

## Appendix E: Interview Guide - Information Source Horizon Prompt and Map

Following the above questions, could you draw what sources of information you use/consult when completing a task? (This could be accessioning or deaccessioning a work, conducting research for an upcoming exhibition, or deciding on a display's new layout). Please feel free to draw your map as you wish, but be sure to include all sources of information you use and how they relate to you/your task.



(An example of what a map could look like).

Source: Sonnenwald, D., Wildemuth, B., Harmon, G. (2001). A research method to investigate information seeking using the concept of information horizons: An example from a study of lower socio-economic student's information seeking behaviour. *The New Review of Information Behaviour Research*, 2. 65-86

## Appendix F: Consent Form

### Participation in Semi-Structured Interview

**Study Title:**

“The Information Worlds of Art Museum Curators and Registrars: an institutional ethnography of practice in North Carolina institutions”

**Principal Investigator:**

Devon Murphy, BFA, MSIS/MA  
School of Library and Information Science, Dept of Art/Art History  
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill  
Phone: (270) 799-4643  
Email: [devondev@live.unc.edu](mailto:devondev@live.unc.edu)

**Faculty Advisor:**

Ryan Shaw, PhD, Associate Professor and Undergraduate Program Coordinator  
School of Library and Information Science  
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill  
Phone: (919) 636-9660  
Email: [ryanshaw@unc.edu](mailto:ryanshaw@unc.edu)

**Introduction**

You are invited to take part in a research study led by Devon Murphy, a graduate student in the School of Library and Information Science and Department of Art and Art History at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Taking part in the study is completely voluntary, and you may withdraw from the study at any time. The study's structure and expectations of participants are outlined below; this explains the anticipated benefits, risks, inconveniences, or discomfort you may experience during the study. Participating in the study may or may not benefit you directly, though the research may uncover new methods to create and evaluate exhibitions/displays, which could lead to benefits for other museum professionals. If you have any questions about the study, feel free to contact the principal investigator or faculty advisor at the contact information provided above.

**Scope of Study**

This research study aims to examine the information worlds of art museum staff, defined as curators and registrars, in order to determine what information sources are used by different staff when conducting everyday work tasks, such as planning an exhibition catalog or accessioning/deaccessioning an object. In turn, these findings could lead to the improvements of existing records, policies, and online databases or development of new ones. If you are over the age of 18 and currently work as an art museum curator or registrar, you are invited to participate in this study. The principal investigator, Devon Murphy, will be your contact and conductor of the interviews.

**Study Expectations**

If you wish to participate in the study, you will be asked to participate in an individual semi-structured interview, lasting from 45-60 minutes. During the interview, the principal investigator will ask you questions about what information sources you use when conducting specific work tasks (accessioning/deaccessioning a work, planning an exhibition, creating an exhibition catalog, etc.). You will also be asked to draw a visual representation of these information sources, described as an information source horizon map. No drawing experience is necessary; this is only an exercise meant to help you answer the interview questions. The interview will take place at a time and location of your choosing. There is an option for you to be audio recorded during the session; not being recorded is the default. If you wish to be recorded, please sign on the appropriate line at the end of this form. If you have provided explicit consent to be audio recorded, you may opt out at any time before or during the study. Extensive notes will be taken instead.

### **Confidentiality**

Your personally identifying information will be kept confidential throughout the entire study. Neither your name nor any other personally identifying information will be used in the study or any future publications; you will instead be referred to by a unique random number identifier. Documents that link you to this identifier will be kept in an encrypted document and folder on UNC's private network for the duration of the study. These items will then be destroyed at the study's end. Audio files, consent forms, notes/drawn maps, and any other data will be kept in separate locations on a password protected computer. Emails sent for recruitment for the study will be destroyed after the study's end.

### **Risks and Benefits**

The information from this study aims to use new theoretical tools in curatorship and to better organize information used for curatorial work. Any potential risks and discomfort from participating in this study are seen as minimal. You will be given the opportunity to review the transcript or audio recording of the interview to confirm the information you have provided; here you may remove information you do not want included or supply additional information if needed.

### **Compensation**

This study does not provide any monetary or goods compensation.

### **Questions**

You may ask questions about the study at any time during your participation. To do so, or to get more information about the study, please contact Devon Murphy at [devondev@live.unc.edu](mailto:devondev@live.unc.edu) or at (270) 799-4643 or Ryan Shaw at [ryanshaw@unc.edu](mailto:ryanshaw@unc.edu) or at (919) 636-9660.



If you have any questions about the ethics of the study or your rights as a research participant, please contact the Office of Human Research Ethics at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Phone: (919) 966-7879. Email: [irb\\_questions@unc.edu](mailto:irb_questions@unc.edu)

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Sign here if you wish to be audio recorded

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Date