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Curtis L. Carter
Marquette University, curtis.carter@marquette.edu

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Curating

Curtis L. Carter
Department of Philosophy, Marquette University
Milwaukee, WI

Overview

With respect to art, a curator is typically described as a keeper, or a person in charge of a museum or art collection responsible for the duties of managing or caring for the collection. Upon perusing various standard reference works, it is apparent that the word "curator" appears in intriguing linguistic company. A curate, for instance, is responsible for the care of souls and functions within the church as an assistant to the official clergy. Just a few entries away, the term *curare* refers to a crude, dark-brown to black resin-like substance derived from tropical plants and used by certain South American tribes as arrow poison and as a muscle relaxant. Curating extends beyond the care and exhibition of the artifacts to the "care of the souls" of the persons who look to the museum for knowledge and understanding. Drawing again on the suggested linguistic connection of the term "curator" to *curare* suggests that the curator may exercise considerable influence on the viewers' understanding of art. Like the poison of the arrow, the curator's framework may relax and free the mind for its own independent explorations or otherwise contribute to the viewer's mental atrophy.

What can be learned from examining these linguistic associations with the terms "curator" and "curatorial"? First, the position of curator has been one of authority and responsibility involving stewardship for the artworks within his custody. Art museum curators typically are trained in art history with expertise in a particular period such as Western classical, Renaissance, modern, or contemporary art. Alternatively, curatorial expertise is divided according to Asian, American, European, African, Latin American art, or by specialization in a particular medium such as sculpture or

decorative arts. The emergence of the media arts (photography, film, video, digital arts), performance, and installation art in the twentieth century and beyond has extended the range of curatorial specializations. The focus here is on curating in art museums, although curating in the broad sense may refer to the collection and display of other cultural artifacts.

> Two central tasks of curating are the preservation of cultural artifacts and making them accessible for purposes of study, enjoyment, and education. Activating art to these ends so as to put the viewers in a context where subtle and engaging explorations of the art are possible is the central task of curating.
>
> (Goodman, 1998, pp. 322–326)

A curator typically is expected to research, select, and organize works of art around a particular theme or concept so as to contribute new understanding that will edify both professional colleagues and public viewers. Labels, catalogues, lectures, and other pedagogical devices including lighting activate the works and are intended to inform the viewer’s experience. Additionally, the curators in a museum participate in acquisitioning and de-accessioning works in the museum’s collections. Standards for curatorial best practices in museums are now guided by such professional organizations as the American Alliance of Museums (founded as the American Association for Museums in 1906), the International Council of Museums (founded in 1946), and the Association of Museum Curators (founded in 2001).

The Emergence of Curatorial Practices

To better understand how curating has evolved, it is useful to briefly consider curating in the context of the museum. The term “museum” has its origins in the Greek word *mouseion*, which referred to a sanctuary dedicated to the muses of Greek mythology. The Greek author Pausianus reports that a building adjacent to the Propylaea on the Acropolis at Athens contained a hall called *Pinakotheke* where the public could view a collection of classical paintings (Hurwit, 1999, p. 66 fn. 9). This gallery was in fact one small part of a grand scheme of public art envisioned by Pericles in the Athenian democracy of the fifth century bce. Pericles selected Phidias, a prominent sculptor, to create a system of temples, monuments, theaters, and other public buildings to reflect the accomplishments of Athenian citizens. In ancient Rome,

architecture and sculpture was amply available in the temples, colonnades, the Forum, and other public venues.

There is no particular tradition of curating art that can be traced to early examples of Greek or Roman art practices. Nevertheless, two important ideas emerged from the Greeks and Romans with respect to curating. First is the idea of the arts as a source of inspiration and knowledge; the second is providing spaces in the community where art is accessible to the people. Both concepts have important consequences for the future of curating as it develops later in history.

The next important step in the development of curatorial practices was in response to the establishment of art collections initiated by the princes and the nobility throughout Europe. This process took place during the Renaissance and continued through the eighteenth century. In Italy, France, Scandinavia, Germany, and eventually in England, access to princely collections was primarily limited to members of the elite circles of the nobility, members of the court, distinguished visitors from home and abroad, and sometimes students.

A few examples from this era will help to bring into sharper focus the ideas governing curating and exhibiting the works of art. Between 1709 and 1714, Elector Johann Wilhelm built a separate gallery for his art collection adjacent to his house in Dusseldorf, and he engaged a painter, Lambert Krahte, to reorganize and install the collections. In his approach to curating, the major pictures were installed according to an aesthetic program, while the lesser pictures were relegated to a decorative role in the palace. Krahte organized the paintings on the walls of the palace using a basically symmetrical design. The paintings were arranged in a hierarchical schema where the great masterpieces appeared at eye level while the larger more decorative paintings were placed at a greater distance from the viewer's eye. Krahte chose not to cover the walls with pictures, preferring instead to provide breathing space around each picture. This arrangement allows the wall space to serve as a complement to the painting. He also organized the paintings into national schools.

A colleague of Krahte, Nicolas de Pigage in Rome, introduced the catalogue as an important aid to curating. Pigage saw the catalogue as a means of reaching new art audiences. He accordingly

aimed to avoid technical terminology in favor of reaching out to readers with sensibility and taste but little knowledge of art. In his approach to curating, he thus points to one of the unresolved tensions inherent in the process of curating: the tension between academic texts accessible only to scholars and students and texts intended for educating non-specialists.

Grand Duke Leopoldo opened the Uffizi Gallery in Florence to the public in 1769. This gesture was in part a response to the Physiocrats, who believed that it was the responsibility of the state to educate its people and make use of the arts to promote the healthy development of society. Leopoldo's plan was to make the Uffizi a public facility intended to function as a part of the education system. Initially the gallery was opened only to a limited public, which included the traditional categories of the nobility and foreign visitors as well as artists and students of art. One important fact to note is that Leopoldo created the Ufizzi as the first national gallery. Under a series of directors (Giuseppe Querci and Raimondo Cocci were the first two) the curatorial process began with a systematic organization of the collections and the creation of a separate Tuscan school collection.

In France the Luxembourg Gallery, which functioned from 1750 to 1779, and the Louvre, which opened in 1793, were the main sources of collections, followed by regional museums throughout France. The ideas of the French art theorists André Félibien and Roger de Piles were influential in shaping curatorial practices in the Luxembourg Gallery, whose mission included the training of aspiring artists and amateurs in determining quality in art. As de Piles wrote in 1677: "True knowledge of painting consists in knowing if a picture is good or bad; in being able to distinguish what is well done in a work from what is not, and then to explain the judgment one makes" (McClellan, 1993, p. 62).

Quality in this instance is estimated in terms of the artist's performance with respect to drawing, color, composition, and expression. The establishment of quality in art as the aim of the curatorial standard for museum experiences already presupposes a certain elite or aristocratic audience. As defined by the theorist Louis Petit de Bachaumont in his *Essay on Painting* (1751), the museum audience represents "men of good sense … and of good faith …" possessed of "sensibility and quality of mind" (McClellan, 1993, p. 68).

A certain level of social and verbal understanding, as well as visual literacy, was presumed of the intended audience. Pictures contained in the Luxembourg Gallery were drawn from the royal collections and consisted of a mix of Italian, northern European, and a single gallery of French masters. The pictures were not arranged into schools, and no labels were provided. Rather, the gallery was arranged to encourage comparative viewing of the paintings with respect to assessing the quality of drawing, color, composition, and expression.

The most notable change for curating art in France during the eighteenth century centered on the establishment of the Louvre in Paris in 1793. Initially planned as a part of Louis XVI’s grand cultural scheme, and orchestrated by his minister of culture, Comte d’Angiviller, the Louvre was conceived with three main objectives in mind: to reestablish state control of the arts, to show the artistic supremacy of France in the international community, and to commission artists to create art that would educate the public. The art planned for the Louvre drew upon French history and contemporary affairs and was intended initially to influence public support in favor of the monarchy. With respect to curatorial practice, a new system of classification based on national and regional schools, arranged chronologically, was introduced. For instance, a master such as Rembrandt would be placed in the context of his fellow artists of the Dutch school.

The French Revolution produced radical changes in all aspects of French culture, including the museums. After the collapse of the monarchy, the revolutionaries established the first national public art museum, giving all persons, irrespective of rank or profession, access to the art treasures previously reserved for the privileged audiences. The words of the painter Jacques-Louis David (b. 1748–d. 1825), uttered at a festival in conjunction with the liberation of the museum, captures the spirit of the day:

> All individuals useful to society will be joined together as one; you will see the president of the executive committee in step with the blacksmith; the mayor with his sash in color, beside the butcher or mason; the Black African, who differs only in color, next to the white European.
>
> (McClellan, 1993, p. 74)

The ramifications of this revolutionary concept of the museum for curatorial practice were substantial. People came to the museum lacking the basic education in matters of taste that had been previously assumed. And yet these people came to see the art with a new sense of ownership, as the works there now belonged to them. Still, the presence of visitors lacking the conventions for viewing art posed new challenges for the keepers of the collection. The curators heretofore were unaccustomed to having to address the needs of such visitors. Nevertheless, even less sophisticated visitors could appreciate that the art assembled by Napoleon during his conquests represented a testament to their national honor.

The new situation posed a dilemma for the leaders of the French Republic. As a symbol of their political success, it was imperative that the Louvre continue to display art in keeping with standards of connoisseurship and aesthetics held in other parts of Europe. At the same time, the new curatorial and exhibition program had to address the question of visual education for its new audiences, as well as satisfy those who were accustomed to the intellectual demands and learning opportunities provided by the museum’s collections. The immediate task for curating in this context, as Pierre Bourdieu might argue, viewing the situation from the mid-twentieth century, is to equip the viewers with the necessary perceptual skills and artistic knowledge to appreciate and benefit from the experience of visiting the museum (Bourdieu and Darbel, 1990, pp. 37–70).

Curating the Twentieth Century

Many changes occurred during the twentieth century, depending on the social and political climates under which curating developed. Perhaps the most radical challenges emerged in post-revolutionary Russia after the Bolsheviks had trashed the imperial collections in the Winter Palace. The debate centered on who should be in charge of the museums and what should be shown. The Executive Board of the Visual Arts Section of the state determined that artists should be in charge of the museum and that curating in the museum would be dedicated to an exposition of artistic culture, as determined by the avant-garde artists of their times. The first curatorial program for the new museum in Russia, developed under the leadership of Wassily Kandinsky, proposed that the museum be organized on the principles of formalist (or non-objective) experiments by artists. Art was allowed

from all periods, but the plan rejected chronology and great masterpieces as a basis for curating the art.

In contrast to Kandinsky's plan, Kazimir Malevich and Alexander Rodchenko proposed that museums should be a laboratory for living artists focusing exclusively on the future. The Constructivists further defined the exhibition space as an archive, where it was possible to see art transformed into labor in the process of solving problems of stylistic construction. Here, the emphasis on the artists and their needs called for a new program of curating, one based on showing invention, experimentation, and production. This new curatorial program would redirect the viewers' interests from contemplating representational or expressive images concerned with art's inner reflections or efforts to interpret the world outside of art. These reform efforts initially found favor with the Russian state but soon were deemed too narrowly professional and lacking in ideological and historical content.

Thus the Soviet Union redefined curating, substituting for aesthetic contemplation the notion of art as a utilitarian tool for ideological purposes. The curatorial program is thus reduced to a single agenda of socialist realism, featuring a type of art designed to maximize the continuity of art and life. Only art and curatorial presentations that eulogized the life of the workers and the values of the socialist state were permitted. Avant-garde art, which necessarily questions such premises, was categorically excluded. A similar model was developed in China during the reign of Mao Zedong from 1949 to the late 1970s.

In the United States, wealthy private collectors such as J. P. Morgan, Andrew Carnegie, and later the Carnegie, Rockefeller, Guggenheim, and Whitney families, and more recently the J. P. Getty and Eli Broad families, have had a significant role in the development of art collections and museums. If an ideological direction is evident here, it is perhaps in the advancement of curating as a celebration of capitalist successes and in a desire to show art as an important aspect of American society. Such successes enabled wealthy patrons to not only amass important private collections but also to fund the development of major museums such as the National Gallery in Washington, D.C. (created with a gift from Andrew Mellon), the Frick

Collection and the Guggenheim Museum in New York, and the Getty Center in Los Angeles, to mention a few.

Among the twentieth-century private entrepreneurs active in the shaping of the curating of modern art in the United States were the American industrialists Alfred Barnes (b. 1872–d. 1951) and Duncan Phillips (b. 1886–d. 1966). Barnes built a mansion in Merion, Pennsylvania, to establish his foundation for art education in 1922. Eschewing art history, Barnes may well be unique in applying aesthetic theories directly to curating. He developed his own aesthetics in collaboration with the philosophers John Dewey and Bertrand Russell. The works were installed with minimal curatorial intervention between the art and the viewers. In 2012 the Barnes Collection, noted especially for its extraordinary assemblage of master Impressionist and Postimpressionist art, was moved to downtown Philadelphia after years of controversy over the restrictions Barnes placed on the collection.

In 1921 Phillips established the Phillips Memorial Gallery (now the Phillips Collection in Washington, D.C.) as the first modern art gallery in the United States. His main contribution to curating was to establish a dialogue on the gallery walls between earlier master artists (El Greco, Goya, Chardin) and modern artists such as Degas, Renoir, Van Gogh, Matisse, and Picasso, and interspersed these with the American artists Eakins, Homer, Hartley, and Rothko. Phillips's ideas on curating focused on attending to a continuous tradition of art through the centuries by "bringing kindred spirits together" without regard for chronology or nationality. His ideas on curating were advanced for a time when in America modern art was not considered on the level of old master art, and American artists were scarcely thought to be worthy of being shown in the same context as European masters.

For the most part, a commitment to the finest quality art, and the visions of enlightened founding collectors aimed at making art an important aspect of national life, were the guiding forces of curatorship in this new era of capitalism. In most instances, the collectors were wise enough to rely on the guidance of expert curatorship to augment their own personal taste in forming and presenting their collections.

Alfred Barr, the first director of the then-private Museum of Modern Art in New York, which opened in 1929, offers another point of view on the role of curating. He reportedly once stated that museums should be platforms of the still controversial figures … as well as artists of classic reputation. He emphasized the necessity for museums that are open minded and unafraid of the advanced developments in art. In this respect he championed the notion that the task of curating is to initiate and engage in stimulating debate, possibly even suggesting a role for curating as an agent of social action.

Not surprisingly, certain contemporary artists have taken up the challenge by assuming a curatorial role. Although perhaps not as radical in their approaches as the Russian artists who assumed control of the museums in Russia at the beginning of the twentieth century, these contemporary artists have begun to weigh in on the role of curating. Using Dadaist-inspired tactics, Marcel Broodthaers created his own "Museum of Modern Art, Department of Eagles, Nineteenth Century" in 1968, locating it in his private Brussels apartment. This project consisted of an installation work created to analyze the traditional role of curating by creating representations of a cultural matrix within a given social context. "This privatized, pseudo or mock museum took the form of an arrangement of postcards, crates and inscriptions which Broodthaers contended was an invention of a jumble of nothing that related … to the political milieu in Europe and the U.S. during 1968" (Decter, 1990, p. 140, 141). Broodthaers's fictional museum featured a number of exhibitions, including one from which he borrowed two hundred images of eagles from various institutional sources, dealers, and collectors, emulating the practices of "real" museums. Through the use of parody, irony, and self-effacing critique and game playing, Broodthaers re-invokes the subversive manner of a Dadaist critique of culture, applying it to the curatorial stance of the late-twentieth-century museum.

Artists such as Daniel Buren, Michael Asher, Louise Lawler, Chris Burden, and Hans Haake, among others, have engaged in curating actual museum exhibitions beginning at the end of the twentieth century. These artists shared a concern with the intervention of external sociocultural values and practices into the structures and practices of museums. They invaded the space of the museum, assuming the guise of curating exhibitions. Their intent was political,

as it aimed to decode and or subvert the museum's conventions, and also to unmask perceived links between the museum and the dominant political and economic powers operative within the larger culture.

In 2010 artist Jeff Koons curated an exhibition at the New Museum in New York as one of a series titled "The Imaginary Museum." The exhibition, consisting of works from a private collector whose collection includes works by the artist, introduces another issue pertaining to curating: the ethical question of conflict of interest. Conflict of interest becomes a matter of interest to curating when it involves works borrowed from artists or private collectors who stand to benefit from exposure of works loaned for presentation in an exhibition presented by a museum or other not-for-profit venue.

Challenges of Art Curatorship Today

The role of curating in the twenty-first century is mainly in the hands of trained professionals. In addition to specialized knowledge of art, twenty-first-century curating requires knowledge of the techniques of exhibition development, including research, writing, visual display, educational pedagogy, preparation of scholarly catalogues, as well as fundraising. Strong communication skills are essential as the curator is accountable to both the scholarly community of his or her specialization and to the public.

Curating today faces numerous challenges resulting from societal changes. The following are some key issues:

1. A democratic role for curating that calls for modifying the traditional role of curator is suggested by Tony Bennett in *The Birth of the Museum*. According to Bennett, the role of the curator is "that of a possessor of technical competence whose function is to assist groups outside the museum to use its resources to make authorized statements within it" (Bennett, 1995, p. 104). Bennett advocates the participation of community members, including artists, alongside professional curators in determining the content of knowledge and its mode of presentation. Exhibitions curated according to Bennett's model are likely to address immediate social, economic, and political concerns, instead of focusing exclusively upon art.

2. Traditional tools that curators rely upon—research, interpretive labels, scholarly exhibition catalogues, and the organization of in-depth exhibitions—are being called into question by museum officials and exhibition sponsors. Some of these changes are driven by economic retrenchment, as museums face substantial budget cuts. Funding sources demand quantitative measurement of the outcomes of their support, forcing museums to adopt assessment means to outcomes difficult to quantify. Such matters demand a response from the curatorial practitioners, who must scurry to address such expectations.
3. The globalization of art has introduced new curatorial challenges. Independent curators with no allegiance to museums now operate within new contexts such as international art fairs and *biennales*. In the global art world, the curator becomes a mediator working to assist the public's understanding of the new global art. This process requires taking into account cultural and geographic differences as well as the nomadic character of the global artists of today.
4. The traditional focus of curating on original art objects is changing. Now curatorial effectiveness requires augmenting the traditional art historical, object-based understanding of art with the insights from other fields of knowledge. Among these are recent findings from research in neurosciences showing how the brain processes art experiences. For example, it is necessary to consider such matters as how much information the human brain can absorb in a given time frame of viewing art. Museums are increasingly investing heavily in assessment tools. For example, the Detroit Institute of Arts Museum is currently making video recordings of gallery visitors to gain such information to determine exactly how much time museumgoers actually spend on labels and texts that accompany the display of works of art in a museum setting.
5. The changing forms of art being produced in the digital arts, environmental arts, installation arts, and other new art forms call for specialized training in how to address curating these newer art forms. In the pluralistic art world of today, as well as in the future, there is literally no end to the possibilities for

creating new art, which may not fit traditional approaches to curating.

6. It is important to note that not all curating takes place in a formal museum setting. Street art and other alternative art spaces ranging from displays in uptown urban department store windows to inner-city storefronts now play increasingly important roles as the sites of innovative avant-garde developments in art.

7. Professional museum codes developed during the twentieth century for care and presentation of art in a museum setting represent another factor in museum curating. These codes establish guidelines for lighting, climate control, shipping, and handling that determine the conditions under which art may be displayed. Such restrictions may also serve as a point of contention when the interests of corporate sponsors, patrons, museum volunteers, and non-curatorial staff conflict with curatorial aims. In such circumstances, professional codes offer important guidelines for sustaining best practices by holding at bay other competing interests that might impede best practices of curating.

8. The needs of the constituent communities being served represent an increasingly important consideration in charting the direction for curatorial practices. For example, the relative lack of visual arts education in many school systems has led many art museums to bolster art education programs aimed at enhancing the visual literacy of its constituents through innovative approaches to curating. This development means less funding for traditional curatorial practices centering on collections and publications and calls for adapting curating to meet the new challenges. While electronic media and the Internet may assist in finding new approaches to curating, the keepers of museum art collections will continue to have an important role in curating.

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