

## CODART TIEN congress: Workshop 3

### Professionalizing the Muses: to what extent do curatorial studies matter?

Chair: Manfred Sellink, Musea Brugge, Bruges

Secretary: Sabine van Sprang, Koninklijke Musea voor Schone Kunsten, Brussels

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#### Introduction

A growing number of universities all over the world propose a specialised training in museology, curatorial studies or museum management as a subsidiary course. On the other hand, France has a longstanding tradition of compulsory museum-oriented studies for future curators. What are the benefits of these two different traditions? What should curatorial studies imply anyway? What is (or could be) the role of existing museums in such a training? Is it really necessary for a curator to have been trained in museum studies, or do we best train them in-house? Do curators, in fact, need to know about management, communication, budgets and so forth or is a sound academic training in Dutch or Flemish art the best prerequisite for future CODART colleagues? The workshop addresses these issues with the French situation – much discussed outside France, but mostly without much knowledge of the system - as a starting point. Marie-Clarté O'Neill, associate director of the Institut National du Patrimoine will open the discussion with a brief overview of the French training that will serve as a basis for the discussion.

#### Speaker I: Marie-Clarté O'Neill, associate director, Institut National du Patrimoine

Centralism has always been a French political and cultural specificity, leading, as all strong choices, to happy or less happy consequences. The training of heritage professionals through a central entity, considered as the best way to excellence, appears to be an aim from the end of the 19th century onward. The need for training is identified as early as 1882, mainly around archaeology and national museums with the crucial aim of making France catch up with international concurrency in gathering new collections. Professionalism is then identified only as scientific expertise and École du Louvre is founded both to provide it and to share it with a new public of connoisseurs. The renewal of museums after World War II leads to an awareness about new professional dimensions: scientific knowledge about the materiality of collections, expertise in museography, need to understand heritage administration, etc. A specific year of training is organised around these new disciplines for young curators chosen among the best students of École du Louvre. The late sixties ask for an opening and a reinforcement of this attempt of building a strong professionalism among persons in charge of museums, whatever national or provincial. The eighties will witness a drastic broadening and diversification of the identity of museums and heritage institutions. New museums are implemented partly in historical monuments leading to archaeological excavations, essential stage before building new premises made necessary both for collection and public management. The figure of the heritage curator, at the same time specific to a function or a type of institution but open to all dimensions of cultural heritage seems essential to lead the change. L'École nationale du Patrimoine is progressively put in charge of recruiting and training this ambitious figure of *Conservateur du patrimoine*, ideally dually competent in scientific expertise and managerial skills.

**Speaker II: Blaise Ducos, curator of 17th-and 18th-century Dutch and Flemish paintings, Musée du Louvre, Paris**

Curators' work shows a tendency to become a multi-faceted, as well as highly specialized, activity. But is such a tendency aptly imported in the training of curators? Should it be? The profession is faced with the consequences of a two-fold process: "globalization" on the one hand, implying ever-growing interaction between cultural institutions stemming from different lands, fostering the selection of individuals with a cosmopolitan bent; a process, on the other hand, which demands from the curator an awareness of skills he cannot claim to be his own to the full. Rather than stressing the differences between the French system and that of other countries, one should ask the following question: how can the compelling changes in the international museum world be integrated to the curators' preliminary cursus? A clear definition of the code of ethics for the museum curator is the means of maintaining a proficiency which will find its expression in special instruction and practice. The history of museums' conception and treatment, according to time and place, of sensitive issues could thus nourish the curator's training. A training based on such a specific perspective demands time, but isn't this the path for curators to voice their concerns with efficiency?

**Speaker III: Joost Vander Auwera, curator, Koninklijke Musea voor Schone Kunsten, Brussels and guest professor in museology & cultural management, Ghent University, Ghent**

It is common sense to require museum curators to have management skills. At least, if those curators do not already have a manager pur sang as their CEO, or do not already work in tandem with a manager in the direction of their museum. Both solutions, as I know from experience and from discussions with numerous colleagues, can lead not only to greater success but also to a great deal of frustration and even anger. All too often, the value of management know-how is taken for granted, while the scientific or other more traditional qualities of the museum curator are relegated to the background. As a holder of both a Ph.D. in Art History and an MBA who has experience as both a museum curator and professor of cultural management, I would like to take a nuanced position in this debate. On the one hand, it is quite useful for curators to be familiar with the basic insights of modern management for at least two reasons: in the first place, to better understand their managerial counterparts or supervisors; secondly, to be able to distinguish sense from nonsense in the many consultants' reports that they are confronted with in the course of their professional life; and finally, to gain fresh insight into the best course of action in their own curatorial practice. On the other hand, managers – whether museum CEO or management partner – should also be willing to follow on-the-job training in the domain of the curator, in order to better understand their curatorial partners and the scholarly fields in which they must also operate. Last but not least, it is important for both curator and manager alike to remember that management is an instrument, not an aim in itself.

**Speaker IV: Uta Neidhardt, curator of Dutch and Flemish paintings, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden - Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Dresden**

There is no clear understanding of the practicalities of everyday museum work and of the daily tasks of a curator or exhibition organizer. There is a lack of desire or ability to make use of this excellent opportunity to work on and with the artworks, to which they are granted direct access, and no wish to work together with restorers or scientists. Perceptions of the amount of time available for research on detailed issues or larger themes, for example, in preparation for an exhibition, are completely inaccurate, at least as far as German museums are concerned.

From these observations, I conclude that it is essential for the ideal training course for museum curators to focus not only on in-depth instruction in art-historical issues and professional academic methods of working, but also to create opportunities for close contact with the original works of art.

The range of conventional (major) subjects for study in Germany urgently needs to be extended to include subjects such as museology, management (including the principles of business management) and the legal foundations of museums and acquisition policy (statutes of limitation etc.). An introduction to aspects of the scientific analysis of artworks (painting technique etc.) would also be an important addition, as would, for example, a course focused on interdisciplinary studies with other fields in the natural sciences and humanities. The idea that training courses for museum curators should offer the opportunity for months or years of uninterrupted research on special themes needs to be corrected, through greater practical relevance and a focus on collective work.

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## Report on the discussion

The originality of the workshop “Professionalizing the Muses” lay in the fact that Marie-Clarté O’Neill, Associate Director of the Institut National du Patrimoine, introduced the debate with a brief historical overview of the professional training of curators in France. As Mrs. O’Neill clearly stated, this centralised training specially targeted civil servants, aiming to offer a high quality level of instruction just as other high schools did, such as for example the high School of the *Ponts et chaussées*, created in 1747. From its inception, the training focused on the notion of “cultural heritage” rather than on what we would refer to today as “museum management.” Its central purpose was to help France catch up with international trends and standards of gathering new collections, particularly in the archaeological field. Despite the fact that the renewal of museums after World War II and the development of museography and museology introduced important changes in curatorial studies, especially concerning scientific expertise and the physical display of collections, the idea of training “heritage curators” still remains significant today. This accounts for the originality of the French style of training in comparison with most modes of curatorial studies, especially those in universities. Nevertheless, the growing need for new technical and managerial skills in the last decades has forced the Institut not only to adapt itself to these new realities but also to find a balance between specialisation and universal knowledge. To train curators for museums of different scales, with varying types of collections, seems more challenging today than ever. Since 1996, curators and conservators have been trained in the same institute, even though they do not share a single course. Still, it became clear in the following discussion that a balance between theoretical and practical training is difficult to find. Blaise Ducos, curator at the Louvre, who was trained by the Institut, insisted upon the danger of courses that are too practical, which have become obsolete. He also insisted on the need for training in legal matters as well as in the rules of the open market. More importantly still, the new globalisation forces the curator to be even more professional than before; as Ducos phrased it, “he has to adapt himself or he will vanish.” His training should therefore be at the same time more internationally oriented and based on a clear understanding of the code of ethics. In his view, the curator of tomorrow must open his doors to other cultures and be able to imagine new exhibitions that confront his specific culture with others. On the contrary, Paul Huvenne, director of the Museum of Fine Arts of Antwerp, insisted on the need for more practical and efficient training for curators, as he asserts that having theoretical knowledge is not enough and does not guarantee one’s skill as a curator. Joost Vander Auwera, on the other hand, reminded us that if it is important to have a strong command of basic managerial principles, it is even more important to take human nature into account and to be able to put the right person in the right place: management is a tool, not an aim in itself. Different managerial schools and systems are evolving simultaneously. Curatorial studies should therefore remain first and foremost an object-oriented training. Most of the participants agree that internships are crucial in this respect. To Uta Neidhardt, it is not only essential to create opportunities for close contact with the

original work of art, but also to learn how to deal with it firsthand. For Gero Seelig, curator at the Staatliches Museum Schwerin, the German system of interning is therefore of the utmost importance.

To conclude, the participants of the workshop all agree that a classical art historical training does not suffice for a curator. The efficacy of internships is also ambiguous, as it entirely depends on the goodwill of the museum involved. Curatorial studies are therefore essential. Apart from object-oriented training, the Institut should offer courses in managerial and legal matters, and, even more importantly, a clear view of the daily tasks of a curator. Exchange of information with both curators and conservators would also be very useful, as curators and conservators work together increasingly. Perhaps CODART could also play an active role in proposing summer courses led by some of its members and in displaying information about internship opportunities and expectations on the internet.

*Sabine van Sprang, June 2007*

#### **Participants in this workshop were:**

1. Joost Vander Auwera, Attaché, Koninklijke Musea voor Schone Kunsten van België, Brussels
2. Sylvia Böhmer, Curator of paintings, Suermondt-Ludwig Museum, Aachen
3. Henri Defoer, Former director of Museum Catharijneconvent, Utrecht
4. Blaise Ducos, Curator of 17th-and 18th-century Dutch and Flemish paintings, Musée du Louvre, Paris
5. Guus van den Hout, Director, Museum Catharijneconvent, Utrecht
6. Paul Huvenne, Director, Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Antwerp
7. Natalja Markova, Head of department of prints and drawings, Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow
8. Sanda Marta, Curator, The Brukenthal Museum, Sibiu
9. Uta Neidhardt, Curator of Dutch and Flemish paintings, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden - Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Dresden
10. Lawrence W. Nichols, Curator of European paintings & sculpture before 1900, The Toledo Museum of Art, Toledo
11. Lieneke Nijkamp, MA curatorial studies, Universiteit van Amsterdam, Amsterdam
12. Marie-Clarté O'Neill, Associate director, Institut National du Patrimoine, Paris
13. Maria Ordeanu, Curator of prints and drawings, The Brukenthal Museum, Sibiu
14. Zuzana Paternostro, Curator of foreign paintings, Museu Nacional de Belas Artes, Rio de Janeiro
15. Sabine Pénot, Research associate, Kunsthistorisches Museum - Gemäldegalerie, Vienna
16. Ruud Priem, Curator of Old Master paintings, Museum Het Valkhof, Nijmegen
17. Marringje Rikken, Assistant curator 17th-century Dutch painting, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam
18. Gero Seelig, Curator of Netherlandish paintings, Staatliches Museum Schwerin, Schwerin
19. Manfred Sellink, Artistic director, Stedelijke Musea Brugge, Bruges
20. Karin Sidén, Senior curator of paintings and sculpture / Old Masters, Nationalmuseum, Stockholm
21. Sabine van Sprang, Curator, Koninklijke Musea voor Schone Kunsten van België, Brussels
22. Robert M.G. Wenley, Curator of European art 1600-1800, Glasgow Museums-The Burrell Collection, Glasgow
23. Yao-Fen You, T.R. Post-Doctoral Fellow in European Paintings, Fogg Art Museum, Cambridge
24. Olena Victorivna Zhivkova, Head of department of European art, Bogdan and Varvara Khanenko Museum of Art, Kiev