

**The best as the enemy of the good: utopian approaches
to professional practice in UK museums**

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Abstract

In the decades after World War Two, professional practice in UK museums was characterised by dissatisfaction with the status quo, accompanied by attempts to bring rigour and order to bear where before there was said to have been slovenliness and idiosyncrasy. Some of these initiatives were focused on the work of individual museums, others across the broader sector. Articulations of curatorial professional identity often relied on condemnations of the inadequacies of previous approaches and the adoption or attempted adoption of idealistic approaches to practice.

In some cases, these approaches were unrealistically onerous, advocating unworkably complex methods and letting perfectionism triumph over pragmatism. They also tended to privilege abstract ideals over the preferences and needs of visitors. This paper explores the utopian impulse as an aspect of professional practice in museums and considers whether those pursuing such approaches in the second half of the twentieth-century made ‘the best the enemy of the good’.

Key words

Professionalism, Curatorship, Standards.

The best as the enemy of the good: utopian approaches to professional practice in UK museums

I first came across the phrase ‘the best as the enemy of the good’ while working on documentation at the Victoria and Albert Museum in the late 1990s. It was a favourite admonition of my then boss, Alan Seal, who was head of the museum’s documentation and collections management department. He used it to caution against perfectionism and foster pragmatism: the best is the enemy of the good when a search for the perfect utopian solution stops practitioners finding workable solutions to messy problems in the real world.

This paper explores the impulse towards perfectionism as an aspect of museum professionalism, and suggests that an over-emphasis on ‘doing things properly’, on standards and correct procedures, has perhaps sometimes stood in the way of a full realisation of the potential of museums to inspire and delight their audiences. It focuses on the decades following World War Two in the UK, and draws on archive research using documents produced by museums including Annual Reports, reports to funders and governing bodies, public guidebooks and ephemera such as marketing leaflets, now in the collections of the

University of Leicester Library. It examines the way that museums present and construct their own practice in these documents.

The documents do not, in the main, have a named author, but use a collective, corporate voice, although in practice they would probably have been written by the museum's director, since very few museums had access to marketing or public affairs staff before the 1980s. In using these archive sources, it is important to recognise that they are not neutral texts and may purposely overstate the extent both of past failings and present success. These texts do not necessarily represent the author's candid assessment of past and present practice, but rather a version of that assessment deployed for a particular, if unstated, purpose. The accounts may aim to impress, to argue for additional resources or to defend against negative perceptions of the museum service. All are prone to put a positive gloss on the messy reality of day to day professional practice. Nevertheless, the trope of improved – or even perfected – professional practice is significant for what it tells us about the nature of museum professionalism and professionalisation in this period. The next section considers several examples.

Better collecting

Collecting practice was an early focus for attempts to bring more rigorous approaches to bear on museum work in the post-war decades. Whereas nineteenth century and pre-war museums were seen as having collected everything they were offered in an uncontrolled acquisitive scramble, new professional approaches emphasised the need for greater discernment and, in particular, a local focus.

The museum in Leicester was an important centre for the development of the museum profession in the UK, with staff often being at the forefront of professional developments in the post war decades. The museum published a brochure on its work in 1952, aimed at a public audience. It gives prominence to the contrast between good current practice and poor practice of the past and emphasises systematic approaches to collecting:

What happens in the museum?

Haphazard collecting has given place to a scientific collection primarily centred on Leicestershire, borrowing exhibits from other museums as required, to act as a reminder that we are not quite the centre of the universe (Leicester Museums and Art Gallery, 1953: n/p).

The rhetoric deployed here is significant. Past practice was ‘haphazard’, whereas current practice is ‘scientific’. The language implies precision, order and restraint. The reference to borrowing emphasises cooperation and collegiality which were seen at the time as a feature of professionalism.

Similar principles are embodied in a description of a temporary display at Bury Art Gallery, two decades later in 1973. The display had been designed to contrast collecting practice of the early twentieth century with current collecting practice, and consisted of two cases, one exemplifying collecting practice in each of the two eras:

The ‘then’ display includes a mongoose in the coils of a cobra, a small number of curios, representing the vast quantity of such items donated to museums all over the country and some ‘samples of colonial products’.

Nowadays we are on the lookout for the familiar, everyday objects of yesteryear, illustrated here by a posser, a donkey stone and a knife cleaner, amongst other items all of which will be familiar to people from ordinary families who can remember the days before the war. (Bury Art Gallery 1973: n/p).

The newsletter acknowledges that the difference between collecting practice in the two eras has been ‘exaggerated’ for effect in this temporary display but nevertheless asserts that ‘the difference between the whole outlook of museums then and now is a very real one.’ This text contrasts the active collecting of the current era (‘we are on the lookout for’), with the previous passive acceptance of a ‘vast quantity’ of donations. Again, a key difference between new and pre-war collecting practice is the local focus, which will be discussed further, below.

Better public service

I opened this survey of the ways in which museums discussed their modernisation with collecting, and collecting did tend to be at the top of most museums’ lists when describing their activity in the immediate post-war period. But an account of the work of the City Museum in Bristol published in 1955 and attributed to the museum’s director, F.S. Wallis bucks the trend in deliberately de-emphasising the importance of collecting, compared to activities with a public focus.

Museums used to emphasise ‘collecting’, but now the emphasis is on the proper display of this accumulated material in order that it may be of maximum educational advantage and recreational interest to the community. New techniques of display and arrangement have helped to bring about this change and the public has certainly shown its appreciation of the new liveliness and vitality. Museums are no longer

mausoleums but living organisations serving the community and performing a real function in any social unit (Wallis, 1955: 305).

It is significant here that Wallis stresses the public aspects of the museum's role, its commitment to display, education, and community service. Rhetoric that associates museums of the past with dead things ('mausoleums' here) is common in these descriptions of improved practice, but the authors frequently assert that, while museums of the past were dead, the museums of the present day are alive and ready to provide a service to the public. Similar rhetoric recurs in a description of the nature of a modern museum given in the Annual Reports for the City Museum in Sheffield, for 1958 to 1960 (published in a single volume covering two years).

In the nineteenth century, when most of the municipal museums were founded, a museum consisted of little more than a building, often quite unsuited for its purpose, containing a rich mixture of objects from the four corners of the earth.

...By the turn of the century...the unchanging displays had gathered dreariness and dust. In consequence, the very word "museum" acquired a distasteful flavour, which lingers yet.

The modern museum, accepting the challenge presented by this inherited connotation, seeks to change the image which the word creates in many minds by changing its own conception of the museum's place in the community. The museum no longer considers itself to be simply a building, with unusual contents, which the public may visit if they choose...It is now a service, more concerned with people than with things.

...The modern museum is alive; it is no longer a passive receiver of relics, but an active force in the community (City of Sheffield, 1960: 4).

Again, the report's author draws a contrast between the 'dust' of the past and the vitality of the present, with the museum being presented as 'alive' and an 'active force'. This report also presents the museum as moving beyond a focus on collecting and collections ('a passive receiver of relics', 'a building, with unusual contents') to a focus on serving audiences. For a museum in 1960 to claim to be 'more concerned with people than things' may seem surprising: we may think of a focus on people as being a more recent phenomenon in museums but this quotation shows that it - or at least the aspiration to work in this way - was a strand of museum practice over fifty years ago.

Better staff, better service

Descriptions of improvements to museums in this period often highlight changes to their staffing and professional practice. A brochure produced to celebrate the centenary of Leicester

Museum and Art Gallery in 1949, for example, concludes with the assertion that the museum ‘is adjusting itself to the needs of changing times’:

It has passed from the care of gifted amateurs to that of a professional staff and a specialised technique for the preservation and display of specimens has been developed (Leicester Museums and Art Gallery, 1949: 12).

This contrast between the work of ‘amateurs’ and the ‘specialised technique’ of a ‘professional staff’ recurs in a brochure produced to celebrate the centenary of Paisley museum in 1970, which serves as one final example to illustrate this utopian impulse. It emphasises the changing nature of the museum’s staff, contrasting an amateurish and self-serving approach from the past with contemporary professional approaches.

As museum collections have improved, so too have the standards of the staff who maintain them. No longer are these posts for retired service or professional men or for the local novice who will collect and preserve his own particular material to the exclusion of everything else. The museum staff of today are trained professionals, specialists in the field, who can bring expert academic knowledge and the necessary technical skills to bear on any problem that might present itself...The museum can now offer a comprehensive and professional service to its public (Burgh of Paisley, 1970: 47).

In both of these extracts, we see the professionalism of the museum staff brought into the public view for scrutiny, and presented as a condition of the museum’s modernity. This professional competence is seen as combining ‘technical’ skill and specialist ‘academic’ knowledge. This public focus on professionalism reflects the changing nature of work and the public sector during this period and I intend now to reflect on the construction of museum professional identity, and its utopian aspects, in its contemporary context.

A professional utopia?

In the post-war period and particularly during the 1960s, the notion of professionalism gained a wider currency in the UK. The definition of what constituted a professional expanded to cover people working in a wider range of occupations, whereas its application had previously tended to be restricted to a narrow group of specialist areas, primarily law, medicine and the church. In particular, people who worked within public sector organisations and in administration and management began to assert professional status and to use professionalism as a synonym for competence. In fact, the quotation from Paisley Museum exemplifies the shift in meaning of ‘professional’. The word is used both in its earlier, restricted sense

(‘retired service or professional men’) and then in its new, broader sense (‘trained professional’). This new, expanded professionalism is scrutinised in a 1964 study by sociologist, Geoffrey Millerson, *The Qualifying Associations*. Millerson uses the lens of the professional association as a means to scrutinise the diverse range of occupations then claiming professional status and his study includes, briefly, the Museums Association, demonstrating that people who worked in museums were perceived by others outside the sector as participating in this project of professionalisation (Millerson, 1964).

Millerson identifies a self-conscious approach to work and the status and nature of that work as a key element of professionalism. This kind of self-consciousness is exactly that expressed in the quotation above from Paisley, where the question of professional status is brought into public view. Millerson identifies a number of ways in which that self-consciousness around professionalism might be exhibited:

Growth of self-awareness probably constitutes the most important element contributing to professionalization. This display of self-consciousness is demonstrated in various ways, for example:

- (a) by dissatisfaction with available training and education for the occupation
- (b) by attempts to standardize practice and to introduce theoretical analysis of work.
- (c) by concern with low standards, bad workmanship, indifferent handling of clients
- (d) by attempts to establish co-ordination and co-operation between practitioners,
- (e) by protests about lack of recognition for the occupation,
- (f) by belief in the emergence of a new and different discipline with wide applications (Millerson, 1964: 12).

The examples cited in the first section of this paper relate specifically to Millerson’s point (c). The authors quoted identify shortcomings in earlier practice and use their condemnation of these low standards as a means of signalling distance from them and their own, superior practice. The utopian aspect of professionalisation, the idealistic drive for perfected standards and practice, can also be traced in other points on Millerson’s list, in particular point (a) on training, point (b) on the standardisation of practice and (d) on cooperation.

Attempts to establish better coordination and cooperation between people working in museums were a particular feature of this period. The sector-wide Museums Association (MA) had been in existence since 1889 (Lewis, 1989) but it was, by this period, seen as rather remote and unresponsive. The Museum Assistant’s Group (MAG), which had been

established in 1948 to represent more junior staff and which, over time, had come to act as a kind of ‘ginger group’ for the MA, was a forum for new ideas and the kind of yearning for better practice expressed in the reports quoted above (Mastoris, 2012). In the 1970s, MAG sponsored the establishment of a number of specialist groups, some representing subject areas such as geology and archaeology, some representing professional specialisms such as education. At the same time, other groups, not initiated by MAG, came into being on a wave of enthusiasm for working together (Smart, 1978). Although differing in focus, these groups were all characterised by a utopian desire to build a better museum sector.

Dissatisfaction with available training, Millerson’s point (a), led to the establishment of the first university course in museum studies, at the University of Leicester. The establishment of university courses is recognised in studies of professionalisation as a common stage in the consolidation of a sense of professional identity (Abbott, 1988). The Leicester course had been under discussion from the early 1960s and accepted its first group of students in the 1966 to 1967 academic year. The establishment of the Leicester course was shortly followed by a similar course at the University of Manchester course, with a fine and decorative art focus. These two remained the only post-graduate museum studies courses in the UK for nearly 20 years until University College London established an archaeology-based course in 1986 (Museums and Galleries Commission, 1987).

In its early years, the Leicester course had the reputation of providing ‘a licence to drive a museum’ (Mullins, 2012). It aimed to ensure its graduates had the combination of ‘expert academic knowledge and the necessary technical skills’ cited in the extract from the Paisley museum brochure quoted above. It included much hands-on practical training: students were taught how use Letraset in displays and how to make casts in plaster of Paris (Mullins, 2012; Kavanagh, 2012). It also aimed to build strong foundations of the specialist knowledge curators needed: until 1980, history students, for example, completed major elements of the Masters course in the Department of English Local History at the University of Leicester.

By the 1980s, however, new staff in the Department were encouraging a more theoretical focus. History students no longer studied with the Local History department but took in-house courses focusing on history in museums. The shift arose partly from a concern that some of the old practical training was redundant and that new intellectual approaches

were needed (Kavanagh, 2012). But it was also motivated by a desire to encourage students to think more critically about museum practice.

Around the time of the change, there was much criticism of the balance between practical, specialist and theoretical elements. Sam Mullins, a graduate of the course in its old format and then the editor of the newsletter of the specialist group for history curators argued, for example, that the ‘balance’ of the course had tipped too much towards theoretical ‘museology’ and away from the specialist and practical knowledge that historians would need if they were to ‘assess the priorities for research and collection...in their first post as the only social historian in a small county museum service or one-man band district council museum’ or to ‘deal with recording a building threatened with demolition, and ageing craftsman, a metal detector’s “treasures”, with picture research for a new exhibition’ or a number of other aspects of the curator’s role which Mullins argues are ‘an everyday feature of the job yet find scant mention in the Learning Goals of the Dept. of Museum Studies’ (Mullins, 1981: 2).

This conflict became particularly acute when the Department of Museum Studies in Leicester took on responsibility for delivering in-service training to people working towards the MA’s professional qualification, the Diploma. The very first course was so badly managed that students described a sense of ‘mutiny’ and drew up a list of grievances to present to teaching staff (GRSM, 1981). Although things improved after the initial, disastrous course, criticism rumbled on throughout the 1980s, which seems to have arisen in part from the difficulty of reconciling the theoretical and ideas-based teaching of a university department with a more pragmatic, worldly approach of experienced staff.

This conflict is unsurprising, viewed from the perspective of sociological studies of professional work and training. In his study of the professions, for example, Abbott gives the example of university librarianship courses. He argues the purpose of university training is more than merely utilitarian and that the presence of a body of associated academic knowledge, such as the theory of indexing systems serves to enhance to status of librarianship, legitimising it and increasing its cultural worth, so that ‘the true use of academic professional knowledge is less practical than symbolic’ (Abbott, 1988: 54).

Freidson’s study of professions and professionalisation identifies potential for a conflict between academic and professional approaches, arising from what may be the utopian impulse of the university:

[The university's] protected circumstances also encourage it to create standards for work performance that emphasize the ideal and demean the improvisations required of colleagues who must adapt to the confusion and impurity of practical affairs where knowledge is incomplete and resources finite (Freidson, 2001: 99 – 100).

The conflict between the 'ideal' and 'the impurity of practical affairs' was manifest other in initiatives designed to improve museum practice in this era and in the next section I examine one of these: the drive to improve documentation and to computerise museum records.

An information utopia?

The 1960s onwards saw significant investment in documentation in UK museums and there was an attempt to establish a consistent approach to data management across the UK museum sector. The Information Retrieval Group of the Museums Association (IRGMA) was established in 1967, with government funding to establish ways of standardising museum documentation, with a view to its eventual computerisation. The group began by developing a series of record cards, with the aim of there being one for each museum discipline, along with an instruction book describing how the cards should be used. By 1980 there were 20 cards and 18 instruction books available (Roberts, Light and Stewart, 1980). These cards and instruction books, each worked out by a group of curators from the relevant discipline, represented an attempt to standardise and professionalise the hugely disparate and individualised approaches to documentation of collections.

Using the IRGMA cards necessitated a highly structured approach to recording information, which all had to be assigned to a relevant field. Completing the cards was a labour-intensive and time-consuming task. In fact, the large-scale implementation of the IRGMA system was only possible because of the providential availability of large numbers of trainees, working on government-funded schemes designed to tackle the high levels of unemployment in the UK in the 1970s and early 1980s (Lees, 2012).

From the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s, both Labour and Conservative governments invested heavily in job creation and training through the Manpower Services Commission (MSC). The MSC's first training programme, the Job Creation Scheme had a very broad remit: any organisation could apply for trainees to work on almost any project that could be shown to have community benefit. Museums made extensive use of the scheme for a huge range of activities. A number of new open-air or site museums used MSC labour to rebuild historic buildings, or to establish parts of the site. And many established museums used

trainees to record parts of their collections using the IRGMA cards. Some of these trainees were graduates in relevant disciplines who were determined to forge a museum career, and a few were highly knowledgeable, with postgraduate qualifications. Others were simply unemployed young people who needed a job and the quality of their work was naturally variable (Lees, 2012).

The JCS was described by one curator writing in a contemporary newsletter as being ‘like manna from heaven’ (King, 1977: 1) in terms of the sudden availability of resources, but with serious implications for museums’ management of their collections: ‘If, for example, IRGMA is indeed meant to herald “the dawning of museum professionalism” why are we employing amateurs to work the system?’ (King, 1977: 2). King goes on to answer her own question, noting that underfunding leaves most museums with no choice: completing the cards was so onerous that this professionalisation of practice was only possible because of the availability of free and unprofessional labour.

Conclusion: a museum utopia for visitors?

In the development of the IRGMA system, we see one potential problem with the utopian impulse in professional practice: it can lead to the development of solutions which, focused on a theoretically perfect approach, fail to adapt themselves to the constraints of an imperfect context: funding limitations and a lack of staff time, for instance. In this respect, the best can be the enemy of the good if, by setting standards too high, organisations fail to get any kind of workable system in place. In practice, museums do seem to have found ways to compromise and get a good enough job done, the example of the extensive use of MSC trainees rather than fully-trained professional staff to complete the IRGMA records being one case in point.

However, there is a further potential problem with these utopian impulses: not that the best is necessarily the enemy of the good, but that the energetic pursuit of one ‘good’ can blind practitioners to other ‘goods’. Professional utopianism can lead to a focus on ideal practice as an end in itself, with practitioners losing sight of the impact of their practice in the world. The pursuit of high standards in collections care and documentation may lead to a neglect of other areas of museum practice, such as excellent communication with audiences.

It is perfectly possible to make the case that museums can only serve audiences well if the resources they need to tell compelling stories – their collections and the knowledge associated with those collections – are well cared for. But in the period under review, the

utopian idea of professional practice was arguably not focused on the needs of audiences and was certainly not always articulated in terms of a vision of how the public might be better served by better practice. This is not to imply that professionalism was self-serving: on the contrary, many people who worked in museums placed great emphasis on public service. However, their view of what constituted excellent public service was defined through a professional lens. In entering collections information onto IRGMA cards, for example, people who worked in museums were driven by a desire to care for public collections well, but had little notion of how the information they were recording might actually be put to public use. Professional utopianism is concerned with doing things right, with improving practice, but from the professional's point of view, not the visitors. Indeed improvements to practice were sometimes driven by professional dogma almost at the expense of audiences, in spite of the emergence of rhetoric such as that seen in the extracts from Bristol and Sheffield which attempts to emphasise the importance of visitors. An illustration of this can be seen in one final quotation from the professional literature of the period under review.

From the 1950s to 1970s, the UK Trustees of the Carnegie Foundation (CUKT) invested heavily in supporting museums, funding a number of initiatives by the Museums Association. They also supported redisplays in many UK museums but their approach was somewhat interventionist. They would only fund developments that adhered to a set of guidelines about good display and good collecting policy (Ross, 1960). One element of the Carnegie orthodoxy was that museums should focus on collecting and displaying local material, in contrast to the traditional local museum approach from the nineteenth century, which typically included small amounts of ethnography, archaeology and natural history from other parts of the world. This local focus had been recommended in the influential report on the non-national museum sector by Frank Markham, commissioned by CUKT just before World War Two (Markham, 1938), and professional consensus was emerging about the superiority of this local focus by the 1950s, as reflected in the extracts from the brochures from Leicester in 1953 and Bury in 1973, quoted above.

Elgin Museum was redisplayed, with funding from CUKT in the late 1950s. The curator of Elgin Museum, W.A. Ross, wrote a report about the redevelopment, and noted that after the initial burst of enthusiasm, visitor figures were disappointing and were actually lower than before the redevelopment. Reflecting on why this might be, he speculated that audiences and young people in particular might 'miss the wild things of wood and forest from overseas'

(Ross, 1960: 384). Ross uses romantic, evocative language here, very much at odds with the brochure from Leicester quoted above, which emphasised the superiority of ‘scientific’ approaches over ‘haphazard’ collecting. He suggests that the former approach favoured the unfamiliar and exciting, in contrast to an approach exemplified in the account of collecting practice in Bury which emphasises the ‘familiar’ and the ‘everyday’. In Ross’s account, something has been lost through the imposition of a correct, professional approach. His analysis hints at a fear that, although the new museum displays were, from a professional point of view, superior to the old displays, they lacked excitement and charm, and that visitors found them dry and boring.

Ross’s anxiety reflects the limits of the utopian pursuit of professionalism: it can be rather inward-looking and does not necessarily take account of what visitors want. More recent museum practice has recognised this and has tended to redirect the utopian impulse outwards, becoming more concerned with the impact of museums on their audiences and on broader society. In contemporary museum practice and contemporary museum studies, there is an increasing emphasis on the ‘rights’ of visitors and on museums’ responsibility to promote ideals such as equality, diversity and social justice (see for example, Sandell and Nightingale, 2012). Such approaches require new kinds of professional practice and a new, more expansive understanding of what is ‘best’ and ‘good’ within museums and within society. They reposition the professional ideal from being about the pursuit of excellent practice, to being about the impact on users and in doing so may seek to disrupt the traditional dynamics of the relationship between the professional and the user, decentering the professional’s practice, however excellent in favour of a focus on the rights and aspirations of users.

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