

# Careers for Historians: Curators

By Beth Crist

Nothing brings history to life more vividly than holding a piece of it in your hands. For curators, the people responsible for museum collections, it's all in a day's work! If studying artifacts, conducting research, writing, and teaching interest you, you might enjoy a career as a curator.

Curators generally have bachelor's degrees in history or a related field such as anthropology or African American studies. Many have advanced degrees (master's degrees or Ph.D.s) in history, public history, or museum studies.

In small museums, curators oversee entire collections. In larger museums, curators manage defined areas, such as furnishings, military history, textiles, and political science.



*RaeLana Poteat, a curator at the North Carolina Museum of History, examines an artifact.*

Curators shape collections by deciding what objects to acquire (purchasing them, requesting them as loans from other institutions, or accepting them as gifts from donors). Because museums often have limited storage space and funding, curators must base their decisions on careful research.

Museums frequently offer free research services to patrons who request information about personal objects or about artifacts in the collection. It is the curator's job to conduct this research. For example, if a visitor brings in a quilt and wants to know when it was made and what the pattern is called, the curator examines the quilt and conducts research to find out the answers.

Curators play a big part in creating museum exhibitions. They produce the research and write the text; choose objects for exhibit from their collections and other sources, such as institutions and individuals; and choose photographs, documents, and illustrations that appear in exhibitions.

Curators work with conservators to ensure the proper care or restoration of artifacts. They provide conservators with information, such as what objects looked like when they were new, that will assist them in their jobs.

Along with their work in museums, curators speak to civic groups and other organizations. They also publish magazine articles and books on historical

subjects and make presentations at seminars and conferences.

Curators find employment at museums, historic sites, historical societies, conservation labs, universities, and even corporations. They enjoy fulfilling careers helping preserve history for future generations.

### To learn more:

- Check out the following Web sites:

#### **Museum Management: Curator Track**

(<http://www.nps.gov/training/npsonly/RSC/curator.htm>)

The National Park Service provides explanations of the knowledge, skills, and abilities it requires of curators.

#### **Introduction to Curation: What Is Archeological Curation?**

([http://www.cr.nps.gov/archeology/collections/intro\\_curo1.htm](http://www.cr.nps.gov/archeology/collections/intro_curo1.htm))

The National Park Service's Archaeology and Ethnography Program offers this introduction to archaeological curation.

- Read Michael Spock's article "'When I Grow Up I'd Like to Work in a Place Like This': Museum Professionals, Narratives of Early Interest in Museums" in *Curator, The Museum Journal*, volume 43 number 1 (January 2000). This publication may be available at local museum or university libraries or through interlibrary loan (request an interlibrary loan from your public library).
- Arrange a behind-the-scenes tour with a curator at a local museum. Come prepared with a list of questions: What do you do on a typical day? What is your favorite part of the job? Why did you want to be a curator? What is your educational background? What projects are you working on?

### Try it out:

- Collect eight to ten related objects, such as photographs, old magazines, toys, or even kitchen utensils. Research the objects, organize them into a small exhibit, write informational labels, and then present the exhibit to your family, THJHA club, or class.
- Museums occasionally discover that artifacts in their possession may have been acquired illegally at some time in the past. These objects may have been stolen outright, taken as the spoils of war or during colonization, claimed as bounty, or seized by treasure hunters. Curators must deal with the complex legal and ethical questions surrounding the ownership of stolen objects. In the group activity "Stolen Property or Finders Keepers" (<http://home.att.net/~tisone/problem.htm>), you will investigate actual instances of stolen objects. After your investigations, you will present a

case that will help determine the legal and ethical title of the rightful owners.

### **Interview with Raelana Poteat**

*RaeLana Poteat has worked as an associate curator at the North Carolina Museum of History since 1998.*

#### **Beth Crist: What is your educational background?**

**RaeLana Poteat:** I have a bachelor's degree from the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia, where I had a double concentration in history and international relations. I also have a master's degree in history from Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem, North Carolina.

#### **BC: Why did you become a curator?**

**RP:** I was always very interested in history, but I didn't necessarily want to be a teacher. I was drawn to the museum field and a career in which I could actively work with history. Working as a curator—doing historical research and working with artifacts—appealed to me.

#### **BC: Have you had any other history-related jobs?**

**RP:** Yes. I worked as a domestic-skills interpreter at Old Salem in Winston-Salem for two years before I came to the Museum of History. I wore a historical costume and talked to visitors as they toured the town. I demonstrated typical tasks, such as cooking, baking, gardening, doing laundry, and ironing, in the manner that women in the 1700s and early 1800s would have done them.

#### **BC: On a typical day, what work do you perform as an associate curator?**

**RP:** My workday depends on the project I'm working on at the time. In general, I read and conduct research, catalog artifacts, write label copy for exhibits, write and edit articles, and assist other curators with their exhibits and projects.

#### **BC: What do you like best about your job?**

**RP:** I like the variety. Since I've been at the museum, I've worked on exhibits about the Civil War, Special Olympics, Bull Durham (tobacco) products, and recent artifact acquisitions, as well as many other projects. I don't do the same thing day after day, month after month. I'm always learning new things, and that makes my job interesting.

**BC: What exhibit have you most enjoyed working on and why?**

**RP:** I enjoyed working on *North Carolina and the Civil War* the most. I liked working with the team members who put the exhibit together, plus I did a variety of projects within the exhibit. I worked on getting photographs and securing permission to use them, did research and wrote a little of the label copy, and worked on creating the computer interactives, which was fun and a great learning experience.

**BC: What advice do you have for students who want to be curators?**

**RP:** Sharpen your reading and writing skills because both are very important in this field. A well-developed sense of historical curiosity will also serve you well.