

MSL 2000H: Curatorial Practice
Winter 2017: Mondays, 6.30-9.30pm
Location: BL 538, unless otherwise noted

Instructor: Dr. Sascha Prieue
Office hours: by appointment only
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Statement of Acknowledgement of Traditional Land:

We wish to acknowledge this land on which the University of Toronto operates. For thousands of years it has been the traditional land of the Huron-Wendat, the Seneca, and most recently, the Mississaugas of the Credit River. Today, this meeting place is still the home to many Indigenous people from across Turtle Island and we are grateful to have the opportunity to work on this land.

ABOUT THE COURSE

Course Description:

Curation is no longer a practice solely attached to the museum as it has been co-opted by several communities and cultural producers, from bloggers to makers, and even chefs. It is in this context, full of contradictions about what curation represents – the skilled practice of the museum professional trained to take care of, research, and display artefacts, or the creative process, framed as democratic and inclusive, of selecting and re-arranging objects and information – that we situate our explorations of curatorial practice. This course, thus, explores the role of the curator (collector, researcher, storyteller, trendsetter, social activist, etc.) in various types of museums, from the art gallery to the heritage site, in order to reflect on different models of curatorial practice. These methods for curatorship will be discussed with an emphasis on their histories and their specific cultural, social and political contexts. Likewise, they will be explored as dynamic, complex and shifting practices highly influenced by institutional context, audience expectations and broader taste cultures. To understand the curator's place in contemporary cultural institutions, this class will explore a series of theoretical concepts such as author, connoisseurship, taste and visual culture, along with a series of curatorial research methods. Students will engage with professional and intellectual practices through a series of hands on projects designed to reflect critically on curation.

Course Learning Objectives:

By the end of the course, students will:

- Gain an in depth critical understanding of curatorship and curatorial practices in their cultural, social and political contexts;
- Explore important theoretical foundations for the study and practice of curatorship in art, history and science museums, along with historic house museums, heritage sites and private galleries;
- Build an understanding of the uses of “curation” that circulate outside the museum and influence the work of museum professionals;
- Reflect critically on the relation between curators and museum publics;

- Develop writing and research skills for a variety of curatorial activities;
- Understand the multiple roles of curators, also vis-à-vis non-standardized practices of curation.

Relation of CLOs to Program Learning Outcomes:

**For your reference, please consult the Student Learning Outcomes as defined by the Faculty of Information.

Museums are complex institutions which constantly pioneer new techniques to communicate with their changing audiences. Therefore, museum professionals must develop their practice through a refined and critical awareness of the contemporary global environment. The vision of the Master of Museum Studies (MMSt) program is “to inspire international leadership in museum studies through integrated research, teaching and professional practices.” Students completing this course will understand and have awareness of the fundamental concepts, practices and issues which define contemporary curatorial practices. Further, the mission of the MMSt is to “develop innovative museum professionals, capable of critical thinking”. Through course assignments (hands on group projects and individual presentations), in-class activities and in-depth discussions of readings, students will be equipped to develop innovative solutions to future challenges in museum studies, to communicate effectively with other museum professionals and diverse communities, and to contribute to the museum profession’s evolving body of knowledge.

DETAILED CLASS AND READING SCHEDULE

The syllabus may be modified as the course proceeds – you will be notified of all changes in class & on Blackboard.

Week 1 (January 9) - Introduction to the course

This class introduces students to the content of the course, its topics and assignments. The last hour of class is waived as students are expected to visit at least one exhibition for Assignment 1.

Week 2 (January 16) - Curating disciplinary collections

This class introduces students to the disciplinary developments of museums that have led to the specialization of knowledge that is inherent in much curatorial activity. We will look at curatorial standards for different types of collections, such as archaeological, ethnographic and natural history collections amongst others.

ASSIGNMENT 1 DUE

Readings:

- Baudrillard, J. (1994). The System of Collecting. In John Elsner and Roger Cardinal (eds.), *The Cultures of Collecting* (pp. 7-24). Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press. (Blackboard)
- Swain, H. 2007). *An Introduction to Museum Archaeology*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press. Chapter 6. (Blackboard)
- Clifford, J. (1988). *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press. Chapter 10. (Blackboard)

- Page, L.M. (2015). In Defense of Specimen Collecting, Natural History Collections, and Bioethics. <https://vimeo.com/130118373>

Week 3 (January 23) - Curatorial research methods

This class looks at various ways curatorial research is conducted.

Task: Students will be asked to bring an image of and briefly introduce their object chosen for Assignment 2.

Readings

- McClung Fleming, E. (1974). Artifact Study: a proposed model. *Winterthur*, Portfolio 9: 153-173. (Blackboard)
- Pearce, S.M. (1994). Thinking about Things. In Susan M. Pearce (ed.), *Interpreting Objects and Collection* (pp. 125-132). London: Routledge. (UofT Library e-resources; Blackboard)
- Kopytoff, I. (1985). The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process. In A. Appadurai (ed.), *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (pp. 64-91). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (Blackboard)

Week 4 (January 30) - Curating the contemporary

This class comprises a tour of an art exhibition of living and non-living contemporary artists at a private museum. We will discuss issues around the role of the curator, of the artist and attempt to understand complexities of their relationship.

Location: Scrap Metal Gallery, 11 Dublin Street, Unit E. To access Unit E, you must go down the alley beside 7 Dublin.

Guest lecturer: Rui Amaral, Director and Curator, Scrap Metal Gallery

Readings

- Hoffmann, J. (ed.) (2013). *Ten Fundamental Questions of Curating*. Milan: Mousse Publishing. Read the following chapters (Blackboard):
 - What about Responsibility? by Peter Eleey.
 - What is the Process? by Adriano Pedrosa.
 - What is an Exhibition? by Elena Filipovic.
 - Why Mediate Art? by Maria Lind.
 - What is a Curator? by Jessica Morgan.

Week 5 (February 6) - Exhibitions texts and object label workshop

This class introduces students to one of the main set of tools at the disposal of the curator: the object labels, wall texts and so forth. We will look at specific examples from museums in Toronto. Students will bring to class examples.

Task: Bring examples of labels and other texts in exhibitions and galleries.

ASSIGNMENT 2 DUE

Readings

- Schaffner, I. (2007). Wall Text. In P. Marincola (ed.), *What Makes a Great Exhibition* (pp. 154-168). London: Reaktion Books. (Blackboard)
- Serrell, B. (2015). *Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield. Part 2. (Blackboard)

Week 6 (February 13) - Curating difficult knowledge

In this class we will look into what it means to curate difficult knowledge, such as histories of persecution and genocide. Please note that you may find some of the content disturbing.

ASSIGNMENT 3 DUE

Readings

- Lehrer, E. et al. (eds.) (2011). *Curating Difficult Knowledge: Violent Pasts in Public Places*. Houndmills, Basingstoke Hampshire; New York, NY : Palgrave Macmillan. Introduction, Afterword and one of the following chapters: 1, 2, 4, 7. (UofT Library e-resource)
- Williams, P. (2007). *Memorial Museums: The Global Rush to Commemorate Atrocities*. Oxford; New York: Berg. Chapters 1 and 7. (Blackboard)

Week 7 (February 20) - NO CLASS (Reading Week)

Week 8 (February 27) - Curating historic houses

Historic house museums are one of the most ubiquitous types of museum in North America. We will visit Campbell House Museum, one of Toronto's many iconic historic houses, where we obtain a first-hand impression of the curatorship of such type of museum in conversation with its director.

Location: Campbell House Museum, 160 Queen St W

Guest lecturer: Liz Driver, Director/Curator, Campbell House Museum

Readings

- www.campbellhousemuseum.ca : Read up on Campbell House's history and mission.
- Harris, D.A. (2007). *New Solutions for House Museums: Ensuring the Long-Term Preservation of America's Historic Houses*. Lanham, MD: Altamira Press. Chapter 1. (Blackboard; Google Books)
- Forsyth, M. (ed.) (2007). *Understanding Historic Building Conservation*. Oxford, UK; Malden, MA : Blackwell. Chapters 1 and 3. (UofT Library e-resource; Blackboard)
- Butcher-Young, S. (1993). *Historic House Museums: A Practical Handbook for their Care*. New York : Oxford University Press. Chapter 10. (Blackboard)

Week 9 (March 6) - Non-Western practices of curation

Museological behaviour and curatorship are arguably universal phenomena. Nonetheless, in the course of the professionalization of the museum sector certain standards have prevailed and these are often at odds with indigenous and local practices and traditions.

Guest lecturer: tbc

Readings

- Kreps, C. (2006). Non-Western Models of Museums and Curation in Cross-cultural Perspective. In Sharon Macdonald, *A Companion to Museum Studies* (pp. 457-472). Malden, MA: Blackwell. (UofT e-resource; Blackboard)
- Clavir, M. (2002). *Preserving What is Valued: Museums, Conservation, and First Nations*. Vancouver: UBC Press. Chapter 3. (UofT e-resource)

- Simpson, M.G. (1996 or revised edition of 2001). *Making Representations: Museums in the Post-colonial Era*. London; New York: Routledge. Read all of Part 3. (Blackboard)

Week 10 (March 13) - Assignment 4 student presentations

Week 11 (March 20) - Assignment 4 student presentations

Week 12 (March 27) - Curators as diplomats

This class explores the role of curators as diplomats in the context of museums as actors in the field of international relations.

Readings

- Nye, J. (2004). *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*. New York: PublicAffairs. Chapter 1. (Blackboard)
- Gray, C. (2015). *The Politics of Museums*. Basingstoke, Hampshire; New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan. Chapter 2. (Blackboard)
- Mark, S. (2009). *A Greater Role for Cultural Diplomacy*. Den Haag: Netherlands Institute of International Relations 'Clingendael'. (Blackboard)

Week 13 (April 3) - The future of curating

In this class we will be exploring the future of curation in particular as it relates to technological change, societal trends, sharing authority and remaining relevant to today's audiences.

ASSIGNMENT 4 DUE

Readings

- Arnold, K. (2015). From Caring to Creating: Curators Change Their Spots. In Conal McCarthy (ed.), *The International Handbook of Museum Studies, Volume 2* (pp. 317-339). Chichester: John Wiley and Sons. (Blackboard)

ASSIGNMENTS AND EVALUATION

Assignment 1: Exhibition review (20%)

DUE: Monday, January 16, beginning of class

Students write a 600 word review of one of the following exhibitions:

- *Art, Honour, and Ridicule: Asafo Flags from Southern Ghana*, Royal Ontario Museum;
- *Small Wonders: Gothic Boxwood Miniatures*, Art Gallery of Ontario.

Both exhibitions are free with general admission.

While not required to cover the exhibition as comprehensively as suggested in the following article, students may find it helpful in structuring their thinking:

Moser, S. (2010). The Devil is in the Detail: Museum Displays and the Creation of Knowledge. *Museum Anthropology* 33(1): 22-32. (Blackboard)

Assignment 2: Curatorial object analysis (600 words) (20%)

DUE: Monday, February 6, beginning of class

Students select an object to research in depth using some of the curatorial research methods discussed in class. The object has to be part of a museum or gallery and students should have access to the object – the object should be on display currently so that students can engage with it visually.

Students must be prepared to briefly present their chosen object in class.

The object analysis should include:

1. Identification (not all may be applicable to each object):

- Illustration(s) of work
- Present location
- Name of artist/designer/maker/manufacturer with their dates
- Title of work
- Generic name of object type (e.g. painting, installation)
- Accepted stylistic grouping (e.g. Archaic Greek, Art Nouveau)
- Place, where made, or Culture
- Site where found
- Description of work
- Date of work
- Size
- Media, materials, techniques
- Signature/Marks (including details)
- Inscriptions (including transcription and translation into English)
- Condition assessment: Consider any existing or possible future problems that may arise in terms of conservation and physical stability. Describe any distinguishing features (e.g. damage, repairs) that could be used to identify the work if it was stolen. Describe appropriate storage and/or installation requirements.
- Provenance (history of ownership)
- Related works if work was produced as part of a series or ensemble
- Literature and Documentation

2. Current display context: Describe and evaluate the current display context by referring to its location, associated objects and so on. You may wish to refer to Moser 2010.

3. Suggested re-contextualization: Please suggest an alternative to the current display context. Note that this will be the basis for Assignment 3 (object label).

Assignment 3: Exhibition label (10%)

DUE: Monday, February 13, beginning of class

Students write one exhibition label for the object selected for the Curatorial object analysis. The label should explore the angle put forward in that analysis. Labels should be no more than 100 words in length and can incorporate visuals, such as maps, archival images, symbols etc.

Assignment 4: Exhibition proposal (40%)

DUE: Monday, April 3, beginning of class

Students write a 1,500 word exhibition proposal based on their presentation in class.

In-class presentation: Students present their exhibition idea to an imagined audience of museum professionals who will have to make a decision based on that presentation. The presentation is followed by question time to help the student hone the exhibition idea prior to writing it up.

The exhibition proposal must include the following:

- Exhibition title
- Museum/gallery/other venue
- Proposed display space
- Summary statement/executive summary
- Number of objects, categories, scale, and key items to be featured
- Sources of materials incl. loans
- Exhibition concept describing the overall framework, number and summary of sections, and including reference to key objects and their significance within context. It should address the following questions/aspects:
 - What is the overarching theme/concept of the exhibition?
 - What are the major strengths or unique qualities of this exhibition (new, controversial, contribution to scholarship, never before seen, treasures etc.)?
 - Why are you proposing this now? Are there are issues to do with timing?
 - How is the exhibition structured and themes developed?
 - What are the key/core objects?
 - What is its likely visual impact (and how do we ensure this)?
 - Is there a need for visual or other illustrations?
 - Any other outstanding aspects or supporting evidence.
- The proposal should also cover the following additional areas:
 - Public programming potential
 - Partnership opportunities
 - Evidence for related/similar exhibitions elsewhere

Assessment:

- 30% for the written part
- 10% for the in-class presentation

Participation (10%)

Participation grades include 5 % for being in class and on time and having done the readings necessary for participating in class and 5% for contributions to class discussions and exercises.

Attendance penalties: -.5 point for each missed class, -.25 for each late class.

Extensions and late submissions

- Assignments are due in class at the beginning of class on the date noted above.
- Late assignments will be subject to a 5% late penalty per day (including weekends). Assignments will not be accepted seven days after the due date.

- If there are extenuating circumstances (illness, death in family) that prevent you from completing an assignment on-time you must email the instructor as soon as possible, preferably BEFORE the deadline and NO LATER than one week after the due date. Requests for extensions will be granted if there are legitimate medical or compassionate grounds only. Documentation (such as the official UofT medical form, which can be found here: www.illnessverification.utoronto.ca) must be submitted.

Grading

Please consult the iSchool's Grade Interpretation Guidelines (<http://current.ischool.utoronto.ca/grade-interpretation>) and the University Assessment and Grading Practices Policy (<http://www.governingcouncil.utoronto.ca/Assets/Governing+Council+Digital+Assets/Policies/PDF/grading.pdf>). These documents will form the basis for grading in the course.

Writing Support:

As stated in the iSchool's Grade Interpretation Guidelines, "work that is not well written and grammatically correct will not generally be considered eligible for a grade in the A range, regardless of its quality in other respects". With this in mind, please make use of the writing support provided to graduate students by the SGS Office of English Language and Writing Support (<http://www.sgs.utoronto.ca/currentstudents/Pages/English-Language-and-Writing-Support.aspx>). The services are designed to target the needs of both native and non-native speakers and all programs are free. Please consult the current workshop schedule (<http://www.sgs.utoronto.ca/currentstudents/Pages/Current-Years-Courses.aspx>) for more information.

Academic integrity

Please consult the University's site on Academic Integrity (<http://academicintegrity.utoronto.ca/>). The iSchool has a zero-tolerance policy on plagiarism as defined in section B.I.1.(d) of the University's Code of Behaviour on Academic Matters (<http://www.governingcouncil.utoronto.ca/Assets/Governing+Council+Digital+Assets/Policies/PDF/ppjun011995.pdf>). You should acquaint yourself with the Code. Please review the material in Cite it Right and if you require further clarification, consult the site How Not to Plagiarize (<http://www.writing.utoronto.ca/advice/using-sources/how-not-to-plagiarize>).

Cite it Right covers relevant parts of the U of T *Code of Behaviour on Academic Matters* (1995). It is expected that all iSchool students take the Cite it Right workshop and the online quiz. Completion of the online Cite it Right quiz should be made prior to the second week of classes. To review and complete the workshop, visit the orientation portion of the iSkills site: uoft.me/iskills

Accommodations

Students with diverse learning styles and needs are welcome in this course. If you have a disability or a health consideration that may require accommodations, please feel free to

approach me and/or the Accessibility Services Office (<http://www.studentlife.utoronto.ca/as>) as soon as possible. The Accessibility Services staff are available by appointment to assess needs, provide referrals and arrange appropriate accommodations. The sooner you let them and I know your needs, the quicker we can assist you in achieving your learning goals in this course.