

Museums Career Guide

OVERVIEW

Museums offer a wide variety of interesting and creative career possibilities for graduate students and postdocs. As educational institutions with a public mission, museum careers offer those with advanced degrees the opportunity to draw on their expertise and skills to serve a broad audience and make a public impact. Whether your interests lie in educational outreach, exhibit design and curation, development and fundraising, or marketing and communications, museum careers are well suited to the kinds of research, writing, and pedagogical skills that graduate students and postdocs have developed. If you like the idea of bringing your research, writing, teaching, or design skills to an institution that serves the public in a direct way, you are likely to find fulfillment in a museum career.

Museums can range from very small, specialized institutions that focus on a single individual or topic, to extremely large institutions with a global focus and several departments and divisions. At smaller museums, one person might have several roles, for example giving tours, designing the next special exhibit, and writing press releases and marketing material. At larger museums, these roles are likely to be more compartmentalized and more highly specialized, but large institutions still offer lots of opportunities for collaboration across specialties. Below is just a small selection of the variety of career paths and roles within museums.

Career Areas	Sample Roles
Administration & Collection Management	Archivist, Data Management Coordinator, Director of Acquisitions, Guest Services Director, Librarian, Membership Coordinator, Registrar
Development & Fundraising	Director of Development Research and Strategy, Donor Relations Officer, Grants Writer, Manager of Annual Giving, Philanthropic Coordinator
Education & Engagement	Digital Learning and Engagement Specialist, Director of Community Programs, Education Programs Coordinator, Museum Docent, Student and Youth Programs Specialist
Exhibitions & Research	Audience Insights Researcher, Curator, Director of Visitor Experience, Exhibit Designer, Interaction Designer, Preparator, Researcher
Media and Communications	Digital Media and Marketing Coordinator, Editor, Graphic Designer, Publications Coordinator, Public Communications Officer



HOW GRADUATE SKILLS MATTER

Many of the skills that graduate students and postdocs develop through advanced degree programs are highly valued in a wide range of museum careers. Highly developed research and analytical skills form the foundation for careers in curation, exhibition design, and audience insights. Teaching experience, pedagogical training, and communication skills are highly valued in museum careers focusing on educational outreach, public marketing, and communications. Writing skills and knowledge of multiple languages are also important skills for a wide range of museum careers, including publishing, curation, and visitor services.

Humanists, social scientists, and STEM researchers can also draw on their methodological and theoretical training to emphasize the unique perspectives that their graduate education can bring to the work of museums. Humanists and social scientists are well-trained in questions that are central to both exhibition design and visitor experience, including methodologies of interpretation and analysis, archival preservation and documentation, and ethical questions facing museums. Scientists, meanwhile, have both research and communication skills and knowledge that can be especially valuable in museums with a focus on scientific inquiry, natural history, scientific education of the public, and technology. Many museums also include divisions specifically dedicated to scientific research and the science of conservation. The Field Museum, for example, employs more than 150 scientists in its Integrative Research Center, which draws on the vast museum collection to conduct scientific research and answer fundamental questions about the world and its inhabitants.

The specific research expertise that you have developed in a graduate degree—whether related to a world region, historical period, scientific phenomenon, or art historical context—is often directly applicable to museum careers in curation, exhibit design, and educational outreach, among other roles. When looking to enter the museum professions, some individuals pursue degrees or certificates in Museum Studies. While valuable in its own right, this particular disciplinary training is not typically required for museum careers when you have equivalent professional or graduate research experience. In many cases, a graduate degree in a research field directly related to the museum’s mission will be just as highly valued. Keep in mind also that not every role in a museum is curatorial or research-driven, but many roles outside of these are intellectually engaging and central to the life and well-being of the communities of learning that museums foster.

Regardless of your area of study, if you are interested in a career in museums it is highly recommended to immerse yourself in learning about the specific practices, issues, and challenges facing museums in the present day. Depending on your interests, this can include familiarizing yourself with theories and practices central



to the mission of museums, such as exhibition design, audience engagement, and modes of reception. If you haven't already had direct experience working in a museum, it can also be highly beneficial to gain some relevant experience on the ground. This may come in the form of part-time work, internships, or volunteering. Museums typically have well-developed volunteer programs where you can gain experience as docents, educators, and administrative staff, among other roles.

As is typical with many large non-profit institutions, it is often much easier to draw attention in the hiring process at museums if you have had the opportunity to network with and learn from current staff. Many museums have well-established volunteer programs that offer the opportunity to learn more about the museum, network with staff, and contribute to the museum's mission, but volunteering is by no means the only way to make connections. Reaching out to alumni for an informational interview can be a great way to start building your network (see the list of alumni at the end of this guide). You might also consider joining a professional organization like the Association of Academic Museums and Galleries (AAMG), where memberships for students are free.

COVER LETTER BEST PRACTICES

Unless the job is a research position that is specifically structured around a candidate's scholarship (in which case you will likely submit a CV), an effective cover letter will emphasize the range of skills that you can bring to the institution. This might include but should not be limited to describing your area of scholarly or research expertise.

Your letter needs to strike a careful balance between what you know and what you can do with the skills you've developed as a graduate student and/or postdoc. A letter directed to a museum should demonstrate a heightened level of enthusiasm and excitement for what they do, which, in most cases, means expressing enthusiasm for addressing and serving a wider swath of the public than one generally addresses in academia. Crucially: it demands that you demonstrate an understanding of the specific mission of the institution. You should have a very clear sense of how the museum itself articulates its value to its public.

Especially regarding educational positions within these institutions, sustained articulation of your excitement about diverse opportunities for public engagement will be key to a successful letter!



RESUME BEST PRACTICES

When preparing a resume for a museum position, make sure to focus on highlighting the specific skills that you have developed in your academic and professional experience. Depending on how closely the museum's mission fits with your academic research, the person reading the resume might be less interested in your specific research and more interested in the skills and expertise that you have developed in your research.

Try to highlight as well any projects, presentations, or work that you have done for a public audience. Museums must communicate their value to diverse audiences: the media, the general public, donors, granting organizations, and many more. Your ability to discuss (and demonstrate) experience communicating as a graduate student or postdoc can be invaluable here. This includes experience such as presenting at conferences, blogging activities, facilitating workshops, or giving a poster presentations, to name a few.

If you have teaching experience, it's wise to emphasize that in your resume as well. As an instructor, you developed skills in commanding the attention of an audience that wants to learn—but which perhaps needs a charismatic presence to provide the necessary energy. Whatever your area of specialized research, you will need to document that you are able to share your knowledge in a mode accessible to a broad, diverse, and unspecialized public. Experience tutoring, teaching in K-12 or undergraduate contexts, leading public seminars, participating in education outreach events, and even mentoring peers is all great experience to emphasize in this regard.

WHAT YOU CAN DO NOW

- Regularly research job listings at museums you enjoy and would want to work at, even if you're not yet actively on the job market. Reading job descriptions can help you understand the skills that will best position you for a certain type of position.
- Volunteer as a docent, educator, or administrative staff at a museum you're interested in. Alternatively, consider applying for a [GGI Internship](#) from UChicagoGRAD to support an internship of your own design.
- Reach out to a wide range of museum professionals to schedule informational interviews. These informal conversations can help you to learn more about specific career paths and to get advice and suggestions on your own job search in the museum field.
- Start a topic-focused blog, podcast, or social media channel that highlights your engagement with and thoughts on museums related to your field of interest. This can be a good way to demonstrate your interest in engaging with broader audiences outside of academia, if this is not already part of your experience.



- Develop and showcase your skills in digital collection management and exhibit design by exploring the resources or publishing content on [Omeka](#), a free, open-source digital platform used by many museums and cultural institutions.
- Put together an art, science, or cultural program with a local public library, cultural institution, or community organization—or look for existing programs that you can contribute to. At the University of Chicago, the Neighborhood Schools Program, University Community Service Center, and Office of Civic Engagement are great places to start when it comes to thinking about how to engage with groups that serve the Chicagoland area. If you are outside of Chicago, these offices might also be able to connect you with individuals in other cities.
- Seek out opportunities on campus that can help you develop experience or skills that are valued in museum careers. Joining a student organization, for example, can offer opportunities for developing skills in budget management, grant and proposal writing, or communications and marketing. Stay alert to innovative (even “disruptive”) changes in the landscape of institutional operations, for example, this fun resource: [Museum Hack](#).

ONLINE RESOURCES & JOB LISTINGS

MUSEUM ASSOCIATIONS: In addition to offering networking opportunities and online resources, these museum associations also post current job and internship opportunities:

- [American Alliance of Museums](#)
- [Association of Academic Museums and Galleries \(AAMG\)](#)
- [Association of Art Museum Curators](#)
- [Association of Midwest Museums](#)
- [Chicago Artists Coalition](#)
- [Chicago Museum Exhibitors Group](#)
- [College Art Association](#)
- [Illinois Association of Museums](#)
- [New York Foundation for the Arts](#)

ADDITIONAL JOB & INTERNSHIP LISTINGS: In addition to the professional associations listed above, the following sites also maintain job and internship listings in the museum field:

- [Global Museum](#)
- [Higher Ed Jobs \(Arts and Museum Administration Filter\)](#)
- [Idealist](#)
- [Museum Employment Resource Center](#)
- [Museum Jobs Online](#)
- [MuseWeb](#)
- [Smithsonian Institution Internship Opportunities](#)



SELECTED ALUMNI PROFILES

[Megan Dunning](#) (PhD, Genetics), Manager of Adult Programs, The Morton Arboretum

[Melanie Garcia Sympson](#) (PhD, Art History), Curatorial Associate, Block Museum of Art, Northwestern University

[Katie Grogan](#) (MA, Humanities), Director, Leadership Annual Giving & Engagement, The Shedd Aquarium

[C.J. Lind](#) (MA, Humanities), Associate Director of Communications, The Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago

[Leila Makdisi](#) (MA, Social Sciences), Education Coordinator, Student Experiences, Museum of Science and Industry

[Jason Pallas](#) (MFA, Contemporary Art Theory & Practice), Manager of Community Engagement & Arts Learning, The Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago

[Patricia Ward](#) (PhD, Immunology), Director, Science Exhibitions and Partnerships, Museum of Science and Industry

