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CURATING COLLECTIONS IN LAMS

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Introduction

As the previous chapter in this anthology established (see Chapter 6, this volume), collections still form a part of the rationale for libraries, archives, and museums. This chapter, broadly speaking, is about what LAM professionals *do* with the collections as they acquire, manage, develop, preserve, safeguard, document, appraise, interpret, and display them in various ways. All these practices can be discussed under the notion of *curating collections*.

While curation as a practice spans across LAMs, the concept of the curator is more frequently used in museums (particularly art museums) than in libraries and archives. Thus, as we will get back to in our concluding argument, while LAMs have much in common as holders of collections, as "memory institutions" (De Kosnik 2016, 26), the curatorial practices reveal differences in professional organization, historical roles, and mandates. All the while, the rise of the digital, and pressures to open up collections and allow contributions from the general public, has shifted priorities in LAMs (Andresen, Huvila, and Stokstad 2020; Vårheim et al. 2020). Expert curators now share the stage with algorithms and amateurs.

We start this chapter with a short section on how to understand curation and the role of the curator before beginning to explore what it has meant and what it means to curate collections for professionals in LAMs, starting with museums. As we bring this discussion into the present, we discuss how digitalization and the so-called "participatory turn" have changed and challenged curation practices.

Curation and the curator

Curation as a concept has a long and complicated backstory, with diverging usages in different disciplines. Derived from the Anglo-Norman *curatour*, the

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common understanding is connected to the latin *cura*, meaning "to take care of" (also found in the modern term "to cure"). While the object and nature of this caretaking have shifted over the centuries since the first usages in the twelfth century (Oxford English Dictionary 2021a, 2021b), the objective remains similar: Someone is tasked with taking care of something. In our context, this something is typically a collection of artifacts or media (historical objects, works of art, documents, books, etc.), a comparatively modern notion dating back to the fifteenth century. An older, historical sense includes caretaking of "minors and lunatics" (George 2015, 2), as well as the priestly care "of souls" (Oxford English Dictionary 2021a).[1] A contemporary and broad definition of curation is offered by Bhaskar: "Acts of selecting, refining and arranging to add value" (Bhaskar 2016, loc. 146).

The person who takes care of collections will sometimes, but certainly not always, be called a "curator." "Curator" can be a job title but is also used more colloquially to describe functions carried out in relation to a collection. The contemporary understanding of the curator is carried over from how curation was redefined in the 1990s, primarily in the context of art galleries and art museums. Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, curators were elevated to the status of creators, even rising to become superstars on a par with high-profile contemporary artists (Altshuler 1994; O'Neill 2012).

As curators in the art world were assigned authority and power to identify and define art (Acord 2018), they also took significant positions in the field at large. O'Neill (2012) states that "the figure of the curator has moved from being a caretaker of collections – a behind-the-scenes organizer and arbiter of taste – to an independently motivated practitioner with a more centralized position within the contemporary art world and its parallel commentaries" (O'Neill 2012, 1–2). This independent curator is not responsible for the collection of any single institution but brings together works and artifacts from different collections for the purpose of exhibiting them. In a Scandinavian context, Solhjell (2006) has claimed that curators became the dominant force of art policy in Norway from the 1980s, taking over from the "art policy regimes" of academic and union representatives. The emergence of the "free art curator" in the 1990s, according to Røssaak (2018), brought a new paradigm: "In the art field, a new type of curator emerged at the end of the 20th century, one whose duties did not include functions such as purchasing and looking after collections" (Røssaak 2018, 128).

As the concepts of "curation" and "curator" have become buzzwords, the usage has been extended to new domains. Neologisms such as "wine curator" and "data curator" hint at extensions to new contexts, both professional and amateur. In the words of Bhaskar, "[c]uration is ubiquitous [and] we're all curators now" (2016, loc. 82). New uses of the curation concept also include individual and private curatorial practices, such as maintaining networks on social media or filtering content streams on digital platforms (Davis 2017; Merten 2020). The amateur work to document and preserve culture in digital format is increasingly

recognized as a way for individuals to wrestle power and authority away from the institutions and the state (De Kosnik 2016).

Under the notion of digital curation, we also find the concepts of "algorithmic curation" and "curation by code," deployed to describe how automated programs in online services filter content streams (Bandy and Diakopoulos 2021; Davis 2017; Morris 2015). While automated filtering processes are not typically seen to possess authority and expertise in and of themselves, algorithms and other "engines of order" (Rieder 2020) essentially sort, rank, recommend, and present items from a database, similarly to human curators.

What can we take from this multifaceted notion? We find it useful in this context to parse out *curation* along two strands (for a similar argument, see Smith 2012). On the one hand, curation, as evidenced by its historical and etymological origins, is connected to caretaking, preservation, custodianship, and acquisition. Simultaneously, curation, especially in the modern sense, implies selection from a larger collection for the purpose of exhibitions or similar. For the sake of brevity, we will refer to the former sense as the *caretaker curator* and the latter sense as the *exhibition curator.* To be clear, these are not job descriptions or mutually exclusive categories but should rather be seen as typologies (or Weberian "ideal types"). While the latter sense is probably the most widely used today, we also wish to highlight the relevance of the *caretaker curator*, as it remains vital for LAMs. We will return to these two understandings in the following section where curation and curating are discussed with specific attention to museums, libraries, and archives.

Curating LAM collections

Curating in museums

Museums employ curators to take care of, and to interpret, collections, thus invoking both our broad senses of curation. In the anglophone world, *curator* is a job title. As we mentioned earlier, the title is tied to care for collections, but has also gained traction as a designation for those curating temporary art exhibitions in recent decades. For non-English-speaking countries, there are a host of different job titles that are translated into English as "curator," in Danish "museumsinspektør" (museum inspector), in Norwegian "konservator" (conservator), and in Swedish "intendent" (keeper). Increasingly, however, versions of "curator" are also used as job titles in other countries. In a German introduction to museology, the author states that "Curator" is the English term for those taking care of collections, but also that the term is used more and more in German museums to designate employees that have expert knowledge connected to specific collections (Flügel 2005, 71). A curator is thus not only one who takes care of collections but also someone with specific knowledge of the collection in question.

Museums are defined by the nature of their collections, and those who care for the collections can have a wide variety of fields of expertise – as anthropologists, paleontologists, art historians, etc. In an introduction to a *Museum History Journal* special issue on "Cultures of Curating," Sarah Longair writes that "intellectual authority – the command over knowledge – might appear to be a fundamental component of curatorship" (Longair 2015, 1). Traditionally, much of the training for museum jobs has been done on-site, i.e., the specific skills required to take care of collections have been learned in a museum. The many training programs that have emerged worldwide since the mid-twentieth century have provided basic training for museum work, and for very many different functions in the museum. In most countries, no such training is required for getting a museum job, but curators are mostly hired for their knowledge of the field within which the museum collection is situated. However, there is a considerable difference between large and specialized museums and museums with a wide range of objects in their collections and few employees.

Taking care of a collection involves, among other things, preservation, safeguarding, and documentation. When the first large museum boom took place in the second part of the nineteenth century, a collection and the presentation of the collection would often be the same thing. The collection *was* the exhibition. Exhibitions and museums have different stories of origin (Heesen 2012). As museums began organizing collections in storage rooms and keeping only part of the museum open for public view, curating would involve a set of tasks directed at the public, not least curating exhibitions and giving public lectures and tours (Bäckström 2016). Today, many curators have little access to their collections, as the objects are housed in remote or limited-access storage facilities. Knowledge about the collection is based on the digital version of the objects and the printed or digital information connected to them. Museums were among the early users of digital collection management systems and were trying out digital ways of organizing the collections from the 1960s (Olsrud 2019; Parry 2010). Thus, digitization had an impact on curatorial work from an early stage, but basically on the "behind-the-scenes" work of the museum, only later to become an important tool for presenting and organizing collections for public view on the Internet and on social media.

The last decades of the twentieth century witnessed sustained criticism of museums from several directions. Artists were challenging the authority of the museum through interventions and institutional critique. The eco-museum movement, starting in France, developed radical ideas directed at conventional museums, claiming that museums belonged to the community, being a storehouse for memories as well as a laboratory for community experiments. Museums for ethnography were heavily criticized as much for displaying looted objects as for spreading racist ideas. And more generally, museums were described as disciplinary institutions that were instruments for control of the population (Bennett 1995). In the wake of these criticisms, museum workers have redefined what curating might mean. In the 1990s, letting the public in to

curate their own exhibitions, bringing their own objects, was one experiment meant to challenge the power relation between curator and visitor. The idea was to let go of the curatorial authority and invite people to participate on an equal footing. Participation as such was far from new, but sharing authority was (Pierroux et al. 2020). Participation became even more pronounced as a curatorial ideal in the 2000s, with Nina Simon's *The Participatory Museum* (2010) as a culmination. Curating in museums today is as much about inviting, organizing, and empowering people as it is about objects.

Curating has thus acquired a much wider meaning, as we outlined at the beginning of this chapter. In the art world, curators take care of collections, but curating is mainly connected to making exhibitions. Curatorship has even been seen as being akin to artistic praxis (O'Neill 2012). However, in the larger museum world, the word "curating" does important work, carrying notions of novelty and innovation into the museum sector and becoming something of a catchword for new museum ideals. Titles such as *Curating the Future: Museums, Communities and Climate Change* point to the role that curating has acquired as a way of making the museum socially relevant and future-oriented (Newell, Robin, and Wehner 2016). The traditional museum was a place where the curator exerted authority based on knowledge and control of the objects. Today, curating signals a distance from the traditional curator, and gives promises of change.

At the turn of the century, there was a widespread fear that digital technologies would render museums obsolete, that people would rather visit exhibitions online, and that authentic objects would lose their attraction (e.g., Conn 2010). This has hardly been the case, and museums take part in large efforts to make their objects accessible, both in-house and digitally. In Sweden and Norway, DigitaltMuseum has made millions of objects accessible online. The large database Europeana hosts museum objects from around Europe, and the text that greets you on their homepage is "Curate your own gallery." Museums seem to have embraced digital solutions as a means to become more accessible and to share curatorial authority via digital substitutes (Cameron 2021). Thus, caretaking is still a central part of the curator's role, but the collection can also be handled, curated, and displayed by and with a larger public.

Curating in libraries

Library collections have traditionally consisted of books and other published documents, but developments in media technologies and new roles of libraries have changed their historical mandates. The so-called transition "from collections to connections" (Mathiasson and Jochumsen 2020; Söderholm and Nolin 2015) has seemingly shifted attention from what libraries contain to what they can enable in terms of services, events, meetings, and other public gatherings. Thus, the role of the librarian as caretaker curator for the (book) collection persists but is supplemented with other duties and demands. All the while, the Scandinavian

library sectors, consisting of public libraries, academic libraries, school libraries, special libraries, and the vast collections of national library institutions, have become more specialized, going in slightly different directions.

The modern public library is a creature of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Inspired by the free public library movement in the USA (Frisvold 2021; Torstensson 1993, 2012), Scandinavian librarians opened up their libraries' collections and invited new groups, especially children, through the doors. To quote a Danish history of libraries, they changed from being for the few to being for everyone (Dahlkild and Bille Larsen 2021). Where previously libraries had restricted access to books and manuscripts, now the collections were brought up from the vaults and into the light where patrons could browse for themselves. This also involved a shift in the librarian's role, reducing some of the gatekeeping power that comes with the privilege of exclusive access. However, the professionals in public libraries still held significant power in their right to decide on acquisitions and, not least, by recommending books to library users. In both these capacities, librarians and library management could make selections and recommendations based on criteria such as quality and appropriateness. A patron could be persuaded to borrow a different book appropriate for age or reading skills, or instructed to include a nonfiction book with the lending of a fiction book (Frisvold 2021). As pointed out in a Swedish history of libraries, there is an element of paternalism in the social mission of public libraries to educate and enlighten (Frenander and Lindberg 2012). The paternalistic strand is also evident in libraries' attitudes to popular culture. In practice, in Scandinavia, it took until the mid-1960s and 1970s before libraries were open to include popular cultural media like cartoons, genre fiction (e.g., romance and crime fiction), films, and pop music (Dahlkild and Bille Larsen 2021; Frisvold 2021).

The situation was different in the libraries connected to universities and other organizations and corporations that had the resources to house separate libraries. In these, patrons were more likely to be able to suggest and even dictate what the collections should hold (Johnson 2018). Now, the digital development has shifted the roles of academic librarians from acquirers and caretakers of items in a collection to maintaining subscriptions and negotiating license terms for bundles of ebooks and online journals provided by international publishing houses – at steep prices (Suber 2012). As a result, enabling open-access publishing is one responsibility that has been added to the academic librarian's to-do list (Jurchen 2020).

Despite the turn in the past couple of decades toward events and services (Audunson and Aabø 2013), collections (physical and digital) still form important parts of libraries' offerings (see Chapter 6, this volume). Librarians are tasked with taking care of these collections, from analyzing the needs and wants of patrons to selecting, acquiring, maintaining, and weeding content and promoting this to the public. While these are practices that fall quite neatly within our definition of curation, they are rarely referred to as such (although there are differences here between the Scandinavian countries). Tellingly, when librarians

from a number of European countries were surveyed about professional groups with which they identify, "museum curators" came bottom of the list (Johnston et al. 2021). The common term for the caretaking aspect in English is "collection development," or "collection management" (e.g., see: Johnson 2018; Saponaro and Evans 2019). When Scandinavian librarians are creating displays, exhibitions, or events to promote items from the collection to the public, the common term used is "formidling," a difficult term to translate into English, but parallel to German *Vermittlung* (Pharo and Tallerås 2017; Ridderstrøm and Vold 2015, 16–17).

One of the instances where libraries and librarians *do* refer to curation is in the more specialized circumstances where highly skilled librarians are responsible for collections of rare and historical books or other rare artifacts. While the position of "collection manager" would seem to consign a certain amount of power over acquisitions, etc., responsibilities for collection management or curation are typically more of a collective nature in libraries than what is the case for the curator in the art world. Furthermore, the ideal for modern librarians is to be aware of what patrons and users desire and expect from their library (Saponaro and Evans 2019). Public libraries are seen as houses to be filled with the activities of the public, not as the sole domain of controlling librarians.

The turn toward digital collections and services has also seen library practices converge with practices in the media sector. While libraries are institutionally different from commercial media companies and public service broadcasters (Tallerås et al. 2020), they share a common mandate or remit to reach out and recommend items to the public. Thus, algorithmic curation practices are also relevant for libraries, and many institutions develop platforms and services that help them maintain collections as well as presenting them to the public (see Chapter 10, this volume). An example of the former is the Danish Lyngsøe Intelligent Material Management System, which uses data on historical lending to help "manage an item's life cycle from purchase to end of life."[2] An example of the user-facing aspect of algorithmic collection management is the system used by the Deichman public library in Oslo to provide automated recommendations similar to those systems that govern the presentation of items in services like Netflix and Amazon (Pharo and Tallerås 2015, 2017).

In essence, curation in the modern library is undertaken by a combination of humans and computer-assisted systems. Librarians engage in both caretaking and exhibition-related activities. The shift toward digital resources has nonetheless meant a reduction in the ability of libraries to control and uphold their collections (Perzanowski and Schultz 2016).

Curating in archives

In the archival world, curation is a core activity predominantly in our *caretaker* sense. Traditionally, the act of gathering documents into archives or fonds was performed by records creators themselves. The principle of provenance originally

defined archives as holdings created or received by the respective creating body, and subsequently kept by them until handed over to archival institutions. However, various legal regulations have made the process of shaping archival holdings into something beyond the control of creators only. Appraisal – selecting what records should be kept or disposed – has become a necessity because of the accelerating growth of records over the last century. The actual appraisal decisions have been made by professional archivists in some cases, when not already inscribed in regulations, or made by nonarchivists within original creating bodies (see Chapter 3, this volume).

A more active role in acquisition is common in the private sector, since it is generally not regulated by law. Institutions that handle private archives often resemble museums: Professionals reach out to the public, crowdsourcing has become popular, and for long they have collected records either themselves or indirectly by urging individuals or organizations to hand in their archives (e.g., in the city archives in Oslo and Malmö; cf. Huvila 2008).

The caretaker aspect of curating archives – arranging, describing, and safeguarding – is traditionally called "custody" in archival terminology. However, in recent decades, it has been argued that we have transferred into a "post-custodial" age. The arguments are both technologically and theoretically motivated. First, digitalization has been said to make older models obsolete. Traditionally, it was conceived that records have a linear life cycle, from "active" (regularly used within the creating body), through "semi-active" (typically some years old, kept by the creator since they might be useful at short notice) to "definite" archives, when handed over to archival institutions for the benefit of others. Custodianship was regarded as a central archival ethos in safeguarding records, especially in the final stage of the life cycle. With digitalization, the old life cycle model became problematic. Proponents of the so-called "records continuum model" have argued that in digital environments, there are no clear divisions between new active records and old finished ones – you do not just move papers between rooms anymore, and digital records may always change (McKemmish 2001).

The post-custodial discourse was originally shaped in the context of radical archival ideas from the 1960s and 1970s, which stressed that traditional archives mainly reflected the dominant layers of both state and society: Archivists must increasingly be active, indeed activist, leaving behind the traditional passive role of custodians of biased archives (Ham 1981). In the 1990s, poststructuralist adaptations gained influence within archival theory. Frank Upward, one of the main architects of the records continuum model, stressed that the model was both postmodernist and post-custodial (Upward 1996). In a similar vein, Terry Cook stressed that modernist "paper minds" must adapt to a new postmodern reality where archivists "can no longer afford to be, nor be perceived to be, custodians in an electronic world" (Cook 1994, 301). Cook emphasized that the new realities led away from custody – which he associated with passivity – to a more active role, since electronic records lacked the unity of content, structure, and context that were physically evident in analog papers. Archivists

must therefore document and preserve the contexts too as metadata information (Cook 1994).

In the 2020s, digital realities are even more complex and multidimensional. Today, the postmodernist jargon of Cook and Upward may seem somewhat outdated; in particular, Cook tended to emphasize a total societal shift from analog to digital, into fluid and multidimensional new (hyper)realities. Nevertheless, their call for more proactive archivists has not lost relevance. Modern digital records are primarily abstract and contextual phenomena, while their physical forms are temporary.

Nevertheless, the underlying ethos of archivists both before and after digitalization is the same: Their task is to preserve records – evidence of occurrences that have happened or come into effect – which are interesting as proof and/or for the information that may be extracted. In fact, the term "curation" is becoming increasingly popular when dealing with, in particular, digital archives (e.g., Cunningham 2008). Digital curation is used for stressing that the necessary work is multifaceted, caring for physical storage media, administrative control, and data security.

The wider meaning of curating as the appraisal and care of archival holdings continues to be the core activity for archivists, but with enhanced meanings in the digital world. However, throughout the LAM field, there is a tension between the two senses of curatorial practice. In archives, that contradiction is fully visible, and the trends seem to go in both directions simultaneously.

Just as in museums and libraries, many archivists now aim to reach out to the public more than before. Sometimes, such endeavors are combined with a general wish to democratize and broaden archives, generally stressing the power aspects of archives as a documentary heritage. Curating in the exhibition sense – organizing displays where certain archival records are selected – may form part of such archival endeavors, but only at the particular crossroads between archives and art would individuals responsible for such exhibitions be labeled "curators" (cf. Callahan 2022; Spieker 2008). Normally, it would be regarded as a pedagogic trick: To make people reflect on archives and memory, and to entice people into archival institutions so they may dare to engage in their own research. Not least in Scandinavia, archival pedagogy has emerged as a specialty within the profession, focused on transmission of archives for the public.

While this outreach ethos emphasizes archives as resources of identity and heritage, a seemingly opposite trend aims to stress archives as evidence, mainly due to the challenges of today's almost totally born-digital archives. Archives have long been kept for different reasons: In a shorter time frame for the creators' own needs, for economic and legal matters, and for the benefit of the public; and in a longer time frame for heritage purposes and research. Since digital curation of archives must start from the very birth of records, there is a tendency to argue that we must increase the emphasis on the necessary short-term curation rather than guessing needs in the future (cf. Shepherd and Yeo 2003). As such, we partly return to the "original" function of archives that mainly developed as byproducts of the creating bodies, which simply kept what was necessary for their own interests.

Conclusion

In the introduction, we outlined two broad senses of curatorial practice, identified as *the caretaker curator* and *the exhibition curator*. Both senses are present across LAMs. But libraires, archives, and museums differ in which sense is most pronounced. The most conspicuous representations of the caretakers are archivists and staff at special libraries with responsibilities for rare books; curators of art displays exemplify the latter sense as exhibition curators. Digitalization and pressures (external and internal) to engage the public have shifted attention toward the outward-facing exhibition curator. There is thus a historical trendline that can be discerned from these two broad notions: Caretaking, preservation, and acquisition are traditionally parts of the work of professionals in LAMs, while the creation of public displays and exhibitions based on careful and qualified selection are ideals for the contemporary LAMs. Digitalization has fortified this trend.

While the participatory turn has shifted some of the power to patrons and fans (De Kosnik 2016; Hvenegaard Rasmussen 2016), LAM professionals with curation responsibilities are nonetheless distinguished because of their knowledge of, and expertise in, the collection in question. In the new world, they just cannot expect this expertise to be left unquestioned.

Because of these technosocial trends, the institutions can arguably be said to be converging, but this is far from a linear development. LAMs maintain some specific characteristics that become visible through our discussion of curation. When we state that librarians and archivists rarely go by the name of "curator," it may seem paradoxical to engage in a chapter-long discussion of this concept across all three sectors. However, curatorial *practices* clearly take place within libraries and archives – just under different names. It falls outside the scope of this chapter to deal with *why* the curation concept is used or not, but we will argue that the flexibility afforded by our curation concept can be useful for scholars and practitioners who need to conceptualize both internal processes of caretaking and activities that bring collections out to the public.

Notes

1 In the Nordic countries, one can still be appointed as a curator for children, i.e., in the Child Welfare Services with responsibilities for children and young people who live in conditions that may be detrimental to their health and development.
2 https://lyngsoesystems.com/intelligent-material-management-system/.

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