The Museum Registrar as 'Assembled Role': A Productive Conceptualization of Collections Management Practice?

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Abstract

Registrars are an integral part of many contemporary museums, yet theirs is a role that can be difficult to grasp with any certainty. By examining the interconnected functions and duties that constitute registrar practice, this article seeks to determine its scope with greater clarity. To establish the context and rationale for this study, I explore the reasons for the development of competing perceptions surrounding the registrar profession. The article then surveys the definitions of the role present in the published literature to identify the functions most commonly identified with registrar practice. Using the principles of assemblage theory, it fashions a new interpretation of registrar practice from the individual processes that are most widely ascribed to it. The resulting 'assembled role' encompasses the fields of resource management, logistics, and risk management. This concept is harnessed to explore the complexities of contemporary registrar practice by considering their role in the acquisition of a born-digital meme. The article concludes by advocating further critical examination of museum registrars and anticipating their continuing importance to the work of museums.

Key Words: registrars, registrar practice, collections management, assembled role, assemblage theory.

Registrars: Past and Present

According to Miller, 'The titles museum registrar and collection manager are given to staff responsible for museum collection record keeping and handling when objects are in storage or being moved. These employees are essentially the accountants for the collection' (Miller 2020: 140). On first impression this succinct description appears rather fitting. Expressed simplistically, curators curate, conservators conserve, and educators educate, so it follows that registrars register or, alternatively, keep records. The opening statement also captures their central role in the implementation of the sophisticated collections management strategies that characterize modern museums (Simmons 2015: 224). It would be difficult for contemporary museums to perform their expected functions – exhibitions, loans, collections stewardship, digital engagement, education programmes, community outreach – without these elaborate systems for the perpetuation of cultural heritage and the registrars responsible for maintaining them. But what this actually entails is harder to determine. On consulting the museological literature on registrars, perceptions of the role start to fragment. Numerous commentators from across the museum sector have sought to define registrar practice. Paradoxically, this has caused the role of registrar to accrue a variety of subtly distinct meanings over time (see Table 1, below), making it challenging to pinpoint their remit with precision. This difficulty is further compounded by a linguistic discrepancy: not all those who conduct registrar practice hold the title of 'registrar'. Those potentially responsible for its implementation seem to include the entire museum hierarchy:

That person may, in reality, be a registrar (chief, head, associate, assistant, assistant to), collections manager, curator (associate, assistant), director (executive, deputy, assistant), project director, keeper, conservator, collections technician, computer specialist, exhibition technician, mount maker, archivist, consultant, board member, or volunteer (Buck and Gilmore 2010: 12).

It is no wonder that a certain level of confusion prevails. For the sake of simplicity, this work will employ the term 'registrar' to describe those who primarily undertake the functions ascribed to registrar practice. Indeed, one of the main objectives of this article is to rescue the museum registrar from this disorder.

Considering the historical development of registrars' positions can help to explain the origins of this confused situation. Certain aspects of registrar practice have been implemented by museums from their inception. Procedures such as accessioning, cataloguing, and inventory, for instance, have been essential to the functioning of 'public' museums since the late seventeenth century, if not in their current form (Matassa 2011: 7). However, these practices were rarely allotted dedicated personnel, routinely being performed by curatorial staff alongside their other duties well into the twentieth century (Boylan 2006: 418; Simmons 2015: 223). In many cases, positions developed according to local needs and individual abilities. It was the emergence of collections management as an established field that brought registrars to the fore. Although registrars have been present in certain US museums since the late nineteenth century, it was from the 1960s and 1970s that museums frequently began to employ them – responding to the formulation of more rigorous benchmarks for collections stewardship, especially accreditation programmes (Buck and Gilmore 2010: 2, 6-7). What began as a North American phenomenon then spread to Europe, as practitioners and institutions there sought to emulate these professional standards (Vassal and Daynes-Diallo 2016: 61-3). Registrars have therefore become established in Western museums during the last 50 years as coordinators of increasingly complex collections management systems. Importantly, however, this was never a concerted programme. Instead, individual museums have appointed these dedicated specialists as necessary to meet new expectations (Roberts 1988: 1-2). The haphazard nature of this process has hardly been conducive to the development of a unified conception of registrars or their remit.

Instead of formulating another definition of registrar practice that would only exacerbate the current confusion, this article proposes to harness its previous articulations in order to reconfigure the role anew. To this end, it will utilize the insights generated by assemblage theory. Concerned with tracing the extensive networks of associations that constitute all social edifices, an assemblage perspective offers a way of acknowledging the complexity of cultural phenomena (Bennett and Healy 2009: 3-4). It is an approach that favours the study of registrar practice, complementing the constellation of functions and responsibilities that constitute it. This new articulation of the registrar's duties will serve as a model of an 'assembled role'. This concept acknowledges that the professions populating the contemporary museum are artificial constructions whose emergence was by no means inevitable. Clarifying the complexities of registrar practice should help us to understand better the deep-rooted interdependence of museums, their collections, and their staff.

Registrars: Existing Definitions

In pursuit of clarity, it is first necessary to establish an idea of the operations for which museum registrars are perceived to be responsible. Strenuous efforts have been made to conduct an exhaustive search for available definitions, starting with the key texts on registrar practice – such as *Museum Registration Methods* (Simmons and Kiser 2020) – and combing their bibliographies to source further definitions. But given the fragmented nature of the literature on registrars, there may be other texts addressing their practice that have so far eluded notice. The systematic nature of the preliminary investigations suggest that this list is at least comprehensive, if not quite definitive.

Now the definitions have been found, they then require classification. The initial categorization has been informed by the professional identification of 'information management',

'logistics', and 'risk management' as the three areas in which 'registrars are usually specialists' (American Association of Museums Registrars Committee 1984: 90). This formulation is adopted here with one minor change, replacing 'information management' with 'resource management' to reflect the registrars' responsibility for monitoring both objects and their associated information. The list of individual functions arranged under these larger groupings is not designed to be exhaustive. Duties linked to registrar practice by only a single commentator, such as object valuation, have been excluded to keep the data focused. Similarly, variations in terminology have been grouped, where possible, under a single term. The heading of 'Documentation' thus includes any mentions of cataloguing, recording, record keeping, or registration. Accepting these provisos, Table 1 summarizes the main functions currently ascribed to registrar practice in the literature.

	Function \ Source	Dudley and Wilkinson (1979)	Hoachlander (1979: 20)	AAM Registrars Committee (1984: 90)	Ricciardelli (1986: 66)	Schmiegel (1988: 93-4)	Case (1988: 17-8)	Buck (1998: xiv-xv)	Buck (2010: 15-6)	Miller (2020: 140)	McKeen (2020: 36-7)	US Department of Labour (2022)[1]
Resource Management	Accessioning	X	X		X	X	X			X	X	X
	Deaccessioning	X				X	X				X	
	Documentation	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
	Inventory Control		X	X		X	X	X	X		X	X
	Loans Management	X	X		X	X	X	X	X		X	X
	Rights Management					X		X	X		X	
	Exhibition Management		X		X	X	X	X	X		X	X
Logistics	Exhibition Installation					X		X	X			
	Storage	X	X			X		X	X	X	X	X
	Handling			X	X	X				X	X	
	Packing	X	X		X	X	X	X	X		X	
	Internal Movement		X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
	External Transport	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X
	Customs	X				X		X	X		X	
Risk Management	Collections Care		X	X			X	X	X	X	X	
	Condition Reporting		X				X	X	X		X	X
	Security						X	X	X		X	X
	Insurance	X	X	X		X	X	X	X		X	X
	Due Diligence					X		X	X	X	X	
	Legal Compliance			X		X		X	X		X	
	Ethical Compliance					X		X	X	X	X	

Table 1: Existing Definitions of Registrar Practice by Area of Responsibility

Before interpreting this data, it is important to note the rationale behind its compilation. The first major challenge was the selection of suitable definitions of registrar practice. Each definition included in Table 1 meets a number of carefully chosen criteria. Given the focus of this article, only those that address registrars explicitly and exclusively have been included. Hence, the current definition formulated by the representative bodies for US registrars has been omitted as it applies to 'collections specialists' in general – including archivists,

conservators, and curators – rather than registrars in particular (Association of Registrars and Collections Specialists and Collections Stewardship Professional Network of the American Alliance of Museums 2021: 2). The next feature that unites these definitions is that they have been published in writing. This should have allowed their authors the opportunity to reflect consciously on the nature of registrar practice, reducing the likelihood that they have accidentally overlooked certain key functions. It is not the aim of this article to consider how far these representations correspond with reality, but it has provided a measure against which potential discrepancies could be identified in future.

Another condition for inclusion was that they described the situation in the United States. While this is primarily because the registrar's role is best documented in this national context, a limited geographical scope assures greater conceptual unity. Although the registrar profession is now established internationally, the distinct circumstances of its development has caused the role and its corresponding duties to diverge across national boundaries (Vassal and Daynes-Diallo 2016: 60-2). Solely utilizing North American investigations of registrar practice thus minimizes any potential confusion from the subtle variations that distinguish the competing national visions of the role. The final condition is chronological; any formulation appearing before the late 1970s has not been included. The rationale for this decision is that this was the moment when registrars gained official recognition as a coherent profession (in the US), embodied in the creation of the Registrars Committee of the American Association of Museums in 1977 (Buck and Gilmore 2010: 8-9). By following these selection criteria, this study has sought a cohesive and comparable group of definitions in order to analyse the varied conceptions of registrar practice.

It is immediately clear from Table 1 that the functions associated with registrar practice are dispersed unevenly throughout the literature. Only one aspect of the role has featured invariably in the surveyed works: collections documentation. This is rather appropriate since the original meaning of 'registrar' was a person responsible for registration – the creation and maintenance of records (Matassa 2011: 7-8; Simmons 2015: 224). This etymological connection pervades the museological literature; the standard text for registrar practice is still entitled *Museum Registration Methods* after 60 years and six editions (Simmons and Kiser 2020). Documentation is even singled out by some authors as the foremost responsibility of registrars (Hoachlander 1979: 15; Schmiegel 1988: 93). There can thus be little doubt that documentation is a defining element of registrar practice. Beyond this point of agreement, however, consensus begins to dissipate. It is true that another sizeable group of duties are ascribed to registrars by a clear majority of commentators. Accessioning, inventory control, loans management, exhibition management, storage, packing, internal movement, external transport, and insurance are all mentioned by at least eight of the eleven sources (see Table 1). This certainly underscores the varied remit of the museum registrar, but it also stresses that even registrars' core duties may not be as universal as they might seem. From here, perceptions of registrar practice only fragment further as potential constituent functions are identified by fewer and fewer sources. Losing any semblance of agreement, the very scope of the role becomes open to question. Even within the narrow parameters set by this study, very different conceptions of registrar practice thus emerge. As a position largely concerned with upholding order and precision in the museum, it is rather ironic that registrars themselves defy easy categorization.

In pursuit of a firmer idea of registrar practice, it is important to understand the underlying reasons for this fragmentation. The first possibility is that these differences stem from the date of their publication. The chosen definitions are overwhelmingly confined to two periods, 1979-1988 and post-2010 (see Table 2, below). Not only does this provide an intriguing overview of the fluctuations of critical interest in the museum registrar, but it offers an opportunity to observe any major changes in the role's composition. Interestingly, however, Table 1 does not seem to exhibit any obvious evolution in this regard. All of the featured functions are identified by at least one source from both chronological groupings. Indeed, these definitions display a considerable, and perhaps surprising, level of continuity. The duties most commonly assigned to registrars – as outlined in the previous paragraph – were all present in the earlier definitions of registrar practice published in the late 1970s (see Table

1). There also seems to be little correlation between a definition's age and its overall scope, contrary to what might be expected. The interpretation of registrar practice produced by Karol Schmiegel in 1988 references nearly all of the functions assigned to registrars by the most comprehensive of contemporary definitions (Schmiegel 1988: 93-4). This suggests that the role of registrar as it is understood today had largely taken shape by the late 1980s and has remained broadly similar ever since. The lack of pronounced chronological disparities across the various definitions of registrar practice therefore emphasizes the relative long-term stability of the role's composition. It is necessary to look elsewhere for the roots of its fragmentation.

Source	Year	Occupation	Definition Type	Functions
Dudley and Wilkinson	1979	Registrar	Glossary	9
Hoachlander	1979	Education Consultant	Function List	12
AAM Registrars Committee	1984	Registrar Group	Summary	7
Ricciardelli	1986	Registrar	Summary	8
Schmiegel	1988	Registrar	Function List	18
Case	1988	Registrar	Function List	13
Buck	1998	Registrar	Function List	18
Buck	2010	Registrar	Function List	18
Miller	2020	Museum Professional	Glossary	8
McKeen	2020	Registrar	Function List	20
US Department of Labour	2022	Government Dept	Glossary	10

Table 2: Contextual Details of Sampled Definitions

Another potential cause of the discrepancies in registrar practice identified by Table 1 originates in the authors of the available definitions. Their differing experiences of the role might influence their perceptions of it. From the accompanying contributor biographies, it has been possible to identify the occupation of each individual or body at the time of writing, which has been summarized in Table 2. Out of the assembled definitions, only three were not produced by practising registrars or their representative bodies (see Table 2 and Appendix). It seems logical that those most familiar with the role have predominantly sought to clarify its remit. It lends the majority of these definitions a sense of authority borne of first-hand experience of the field and a practical grounding in the processes they seek to define (McCarthy 2015: xli). But that does not automatically lessen the value of external observations; they are less likely to be affected by entrenched occupational assumptions. The literature on registrar practice can thus be divided into two (uneven) categories of practitioners and non-practitioners. But does this distinction significantly affect their respective definitions? Considering the basic metric of total functions mentioned, it might be expected that the registrars themselves would provide a more extensive account than those not versed in the role's routine demands. While this supposition is broadly accurate, registrars have not consistently formulated more comprehensive definitions than non-registrars (see Table 2). Moreover, there is comparative affinity in the profile of these published definitions, regardless of their creator. All of the functions identified as constituting registrar practice by those outside of the profession are supported by multiple practitioners (see Table 1). Both registrars and non-registrars generally agree that the role is responsible overall for the fields of resource management, logistics, and risk management, even if they might differ on the exact proportions. If the content of these definitions has been influenced by their creators' experiences, it does not conclusively explain the prevailing fragmentation in the registrar's identity.

The third major differentiating factor between these conceptions of registrar practice

is the nature of the definitions themselves. They can be divided into three types (see Table 2 and Appendix): summary descriptions of a few sentences; glossary definitions that generally constitute a longer paragraph; and extensive lists of constituent functions. These distinctions in scope reflect a fundamental difference in purpose, a key factor in understanding the prevailing discrepancies. The summary descriptions are precisely that, a brief precis of the registrar's role that introduces more detailed discussion of specific practice (American Association of Museums Registrars Committee 1984; Ricciardelli 1986). As such, they include what their creators perceive to represent the most important aspects of registrar practice and little more. Next are the glossary definitions, which are typically discrete, making them easier to locate and consult as needed. Often, registrars are defined alongside other collections specialists like curators and conservators, the definitions' greater length facilitating more detailed comparison (Miller 2020)[2]. This leaves the function lists, whose enumeration of registrar duties is of another magnitude entirely. They have often been the result of substantial research projects in their own right, conducted through surveys (Hoachlander 1979: 20) or collated from job advertisements (Buck 1998: xiv; Buck and Gilmore 2010: 13). These lists thus encompass a large proportion of the responsibilities commonly ascribed to registrars by the literature (see Table 1). The summaries and glossaries may not aim to present a comprehensive analysis of registrar practice, but the function lists more than supplement any deficiencies in this regard. When these varying motives are acknowledged, the published definitions could refer to the same role after all, just approaching it from different perspectives. It can thus be argued that there is effective agreement about the registrar's general remit, even if individual articulations of their practice can vary somewhat within its accepted boundaries. Herein lies the conceptual value of the 'assembled role'. It enables the synthesis of these diverging interpretations of registrar practice into a single form, a clearer expression of the fragmented understanding that currently prevails.

The Registrar as 'Assembled Role'

The adoption of a composite, function-led approach to registrar practice has been heavily shaped by the concept of the 'assemblage'. Derived from innovations in science and technology studies, particularly the development of Actor-Network Theory since the 1980s, assemblage theory calls for researchers 'to follow the actors' (Latour 2005: 10-2). This entails establishing the contributions of all agents to any given phenomenon, without pre-emptively assuming their importance. Sharon Macdonald has outlined the consequences of this approach for the study of cultural heritage:

> Taking an assemblage perspective on heritage directs our attention less to finished "heritage products" than to processes and entanglements involved in their coming into being and continuation […] it focuses on tracing the courses of action, associations, practical and definitional procedures and techniques that are involved in particular cases (Macdonald 2009: 118).

This focus on 'processes and entanglements' certainly complements the workings of contemporary museums. They are institutions of profound complexity, constituted by ever-evolving networks of agents and relationships (McCarthy 2015: xlvi-xlvii). It thus follows that the assemblage approach has gained considerable traction within museum studies in recent years. Works by Laurie Waller (2016) on object interpretation within science exhibitions, Bethany Rex (2018) on the impact of accreditation frameworks, and Juhee Park (2021) on the agency of documentation systems represent just three examples of this burgeoning trend. A recent review of museological research in *Museum and Society* has even dedicated a section to the numerous studies of 'museums as assembled organizations' (Morse et al. 2018: 117-8). Conceptualizing the museum as an assembly of actors is thus clearly generating important new readings of the institution – the same is surely true of registrar practice.

If the museum as a whole can be conceptualized as an 'assembled organization', then it follows that the various professions that constitute it can also be envisaged as 'assembled roles'. This characterization feels particularly appropriate for the registrar, whose practice encompasses a series of duties that might not seem connected at first glance. There is no

express reason why an individual responsible for accessioning objects should also oversee the installation of exhibitions, for example. Their attachment to the same role owes as much to historical accident as to any professional design (Buck and Gilmore 2010: 12). The value of applying assemblage theory to the museum registrar lies in its emphasis of interaction, a means to assess the position's emergence through its constituent parts. Conceptualizing the role as a series of interrelated and negotiated processes makes it possible to articulate a holistic idea of registrar practice that accommodates existing discrepancies. Drawing on Table 1, the functions regularly cited in the literature form the basis of this new assembled interpretation. These have been reformatted for greater clarity in Table 3.

Resource Management	Logistics	Risk Management
Accessioning	Exhibition Installation	Collections Care
Deaccessioning	Storage	Condition Reporting
Documentation	Handling	Security
Inventory Control	Packing	Insurance
Loans Management	Internal Movement	Due Diligence
Rights Management	External Transport	Legal Compliance
Exhibition Management	Customs	Ethical Compliance

Table 3: Composite Interpretation of Registrar Practice

The result of aggregating the existing definitions of registrar practice, there are a number of reasons for adopting this composite approach. This conceptualization of the role is relatively comprehensive in scope without becoming too unwieldy. Thereby, it seeks to strike a balance between the condensed in-text or glossary descriptions and the extended function lists that currently predominate (see Table 2). It encompasses a broad array of functions across the fields of resource management, logistics, and risk management. Indeed, this conception of registrar practice bears close resemblance to that advanced by the most recent edition of *Museum Registration Methods* (McKeen 2020: 36-7), albeit expressed more succinctly (compare Table 3 and Appendix). It thus accommodates the haphazard accumulation of functions that has characterized the development of registrar practice and its published articulations. The assembled role also complements the mercurial nature of registrar practice. Professional parameters are constantly renegotiated across the sector (Merritt 2008: 5-6). The value of assembling an impression from the existing literature is that the sample of texts can easily be modified to reflect shifts in practice. By focusing on the constituent elements of registrar work and their interconnection, this approach repudiates any notion of the role's inevitability and instead stresses its ongoing evolution in response to new demands. It is impossible to predict how the registrar's duties will transform over time, so conceptions of the profession must be able to keep up with any significant developments (Vassal and Daynes-Diallo 2016: 69). The assembled role should ultimately be able to fulfil this requirement, as versatility is one of its major strengths.

        Taking an assembled approach to registrar practice should thus prove productive, provided its potential flaws are also acknowledged. For a start, this conception of registrar practice is nationally specific. As noted above, its source material is drawn exclusively from the United States. This means that the interpretation of registrar practice outlined in Table 3 only properly applies to the US (although it will likely share many similarities with the work done by registrars elsewhere). Yet, the advantage of the assembled role approach is that it could be applied to registrar practice elsewhere with relative ease. The difficulty lies in sourcing enough definitions to create an adequate sample size. Such comparisons are beyond the scope of this piece, but it is certainly a subject that merits further investigation.

        The use of assemblage theory also risks overcomplication, as the connections emanating from any observable cultural practice are theoretically limitless (Macdonald 2009: 131). Artificial boundaries must be imposed at some stage. With this in mind, the composite

interpretation of registrar practice developed here does not provide an exhaustive account of every task a registrar may perform. Not only would this be impractical to use in the further study of registrars, but it has already been done by the function lists cited earlier (Buck 1998; Buck 2010; McKeen 2020: 36-7). Moreover, the composition of the role is so malleable in reality that trying to develop an all-encompassing definition of registrar practice is arguably a futile endeavour anyway. For this reason, the group of functions assembled in Table 3 are presented as an interpretation of the registrar's work rather than a definition, as the latter implies a finality that may not be attainable. This study has nonetheless sought to advance a coherent conception of registrar practice, even if it cannot be fully definitive. In any case, it achieves its purpose of foregrounding the extensive contribution of registrars to the work of contemporary museums.

The 'Assembled Role' in Practice

Framing the museum registrar as an assembled role may offer a solution to the perennial challenge of definition, but what does it reveal about the realities of their practice? As a means of conceptualizing complexity, it seeks to illuminate the myriad connections and interactions that characterize their experience. The concept of the assembled role thus situates registrars – or, equally, other museum professionals – within the wider museum ecosystem (Rex 2018: 188). Adopting this approach acknowledges the diverse cast of agents that collectively influence their work: objects, policy, procedure, technological frameworks, professional expectations, interpersonal relationships, and so on. These networks of actors interact in countless ways to constitute the reality of registrar practice, but one example should suffice to illustrate its thoroughly interconnected nature. In an article discussing museological strategies for the collection of internet memes, Arran Rees has alluded to the role registrars might play in this process – specifically in relation to copyright (Rees 2021: 208). This section will expand on this brief mention to consider how a registrar might contribute to a museum's decision to acquire a meme. It seems a fitting opportunity to scrutinize the assemblages that structure their practice, as well as to showcase how this approach might be utilized to address current sector issues.

Internet memes pose a challenge to registrars insofar as they differ in a number of significant respects from a 'typical' museum object. They are born-digital, they evolve rapidly, their origins are often obscure, and their ownership is difficult to define (Rees 2021: 199-200). How might a registrar approach these unusual demands during the allied processes of acquisition and accessioning? Consulting the assembled interpretation of the role outlined in Table 3, the registrar's contribution would appear to correspond primarily to the function of accessioning. This certainly represents a significant part of their responsibility, but the demands of permanent acquisition also require registrars to draw on many other aspects of their practice. During the initial consideration phase, they are expected to confirm the legality of the acquisition, establish the relevant rights holder, and evaluate the institution's capacity to provide the necessary care and storage (Buck and Gilmore 2010: 48). These processes should be followed for all museum acquisitions, but a meme's particular qualities require a registrar to deviate from the norm in pronounced ways.

As has already been noted, it is difficult to establish conclusively the provenance of memes given the collective (re)appropriation involved in their creation. The comparative insignificance of original authorship and current ownership to online cultures makes the task of establishing a meme's full biography a difficult one (Rees 2021: 207). Nonetheless, museums are expected to make all reasonable efforts to determine the ownership and copyright status of all potential acquisitions, regardless of their origins (Matassa 2011: 39). As such, the registrar's performance of accessioning, rights management, and legal compliance all depends on effective due diligence. After sourcing as much information as possible on the provenance of the selected meme, the registrar would be better placed to recommend how the acquisition should proceed. Rees suggests shared ownership as a possible means of circumventing incomplete provenance and unclear copyright (Rees 2021: 212-3), but the registrar would have to canvass the acceptability of this approach among institutional stakeholders and devise alternatives in case of resistance. Alongside these ethical enquiries, the registrars

would need to provide for the meme's material maintenance. A digital object may be immune to physical deterioration, but it can be stolen, damaged, destroyed, or rendered obsolete like all electronic data (Simmons 2015: 235). The registrar would need to liaise with the relevant IT personnel to develop appropriate arrangements for the meme's permanent and secure storage. The registrar would also be responsible for documenting all of these processes to ensure institutional accountability (Matassa 2011: 75). With all these tasks completed (notwithstanding the contribution of other museum professionals), the museum might then be in a position to acquire and accession the meme. Thus, in practice, the ostensibly discrete duty of accessioning relies on the implementation of numerous other functions that constitute registrar practice. Collecting a meme is more involved than it might first appear.

It is possible to draw some valuable conclusions about registrars from this notional acquisition of a meme. First of all, it has demonstrated the profound interconnections between the functions constituting registrar practice. A registrar cannot accession an object, for example, without also performing the functions of rights management, due diligence, legal compliance, documentation, and so on. Following the principles of assemblage theory, the registration's implementation of each of these processes is in turn dictated by a series of policies, procedures, laws, regulations, and standards. It is a field characterized by complexity. While function and procedure are crucial to the composition of registrar practice, people are just as essential to its realization. This statement may seem obvious, but it is one worth emphasizing. Many intersecting processes determine a meme's acquisition by a museum, but it is individuals who ultimately carry out these duties and decide on the appropriate course of action. It is essential not to lose sight of the registrars themselves within the intricacies of their practice; one cannot function without the other. Even when managing an emergent object type like a meme, registrars need to utilize procedures that are already part of their remit – accessioning, documentation, due diligence, storage, security. Nevertheless, they may have to apply them in innovative ways to meet evolving realities and expectations. The vulnerability of born-digital objects, for instance, requires a rethinking of conventional storage strategies. Given the scope of their role, registrars regularly encounter the new, the unexpected, and even the downright bizarre. Their challenge lies in adapting and synthesizing aspects of their existing practice to address the situation at hand, whatever its complications.

Registrars and the Future of Museums

It has been the aim of this study to make sense of the roles of museum registrars. This has not been the easiest task, given the assortment of definitions now surrounding the role. Much of this variance can be attributed to the profession's haphazard historical development, with institutional adoption generally characterized by contingency rather than any deliberate plan. It is no coincidence that many museums first appointed registrars in response to growing professional regulation of collections management (Vassal and Daynes-Diallo 2016: 60-1). Indeed, the ongoing development of the registrar profession is profoundly intertwined with that of collections management. Herein lies the value of undertaking a sustained investigation into registrars and their practice. Objects are ultimately at the heart of everything museums do, from putting on blockbuster exhibitions to developing community outreach initiatives (Simmons 2015: 221-2). To study the changing nature of registrar practice is to study the very processes that underpin our engagement with material heritage in all its richness. Registrars are responsible for coordinating the everyday management of museum collections, ensuring effective and responsible stewardship of these invaluable cultural resources. They also provide vital logistical support, overseeing the constant movement and exchange of objects that facilitates innovative collaborative ventures. Finally, registrars are called upon to mitigate the risks that are inherent to the work of all museums, carefully balancing the diverse needs of institutions, individuals, communities, and objects. Given the scope of their responsibilities, registrars play a central role in making cultural collections accessible and relevant to contemporary audiences. What is the purpose of a museum, if not this?

This overview of the museum registrar has been made possible by viewing their practice through the lens of assemblage theory. The resulting notion of the 'assembled role' could be applied to the wider study of museum personnel. Registrars are not the only

museum professionals who are required to balance a host of competing responsibilities or whose development has followed an unusual historical trajectory (Boylan 2006: 418-20). The assembled role offers an opportunity to make sense of the elaborate tangle of expectations, associations, and practices that permeate any position. It is for this reason that the approach particularly aligns with the aspirations of 'critical collections management'. Its proponents look beyond the objects themselves to interrogate the established procedures and norms that constitute collections practice (Nichols 2021: 18). The entrenchment of distinct professional roles has formed an important part of this process, one which has had a considerable impact on the multifaceted relationships connecting museums and their collections. After all, objects become meaningful through the concerted efforts of museum staff to manage, research, and interpret them (McCarthy 2015: xlvi). Behind any collection lies a dense network of unseen conversations, decisions, and actions, the work of individuals whose role in this complex process is acknowledged by assemblage theory. Close analysis of collections-oriented positions in the museum, including the registrar, is key to realizing the potential of critical collections management. At a time when museum collections are coming under intense scrutiny, it has never been more important to address the underlying structures and processes that mediate our reception of cultural heritage in its many forms. The concept of the 'assembled role' should therefore prove a valuable addition to this emerging field, if only as an alternative method for scrutinizing the workings of contemporary collections management.

It seems fitting to conclude this investigation of registrars by looking ahead to consider what the future may hold for them. Given the wide range of key functions that they are expected to perform (see Table 3), it is unlikely that they will disappear from museums any time soon. Indeed, the continuing pre-eminence of professional standards in directing museum operations, especially collections management, suggests that their expertise will long remain in demand (Merritt 2008; Museum Accreditation 2018). This is not to say, however, that the representation of registrar practice articulated by this study will remain fixed in perpetuity. Understanding the roles that inhabit the contemporary museum is just the first step in responding to the changes that will continue to transform the sector. Registrars will be on the front line of this endeavour, adapting their practice to innovations in the nature, use, and management of material heritage. The acquisition of an internet meme is just one of many situations where registrars will be called upon to utilize their existing skills to address new and unanticipated challenges. In an environment where 'risk control, polyvalence and adaptability have become indispensable' (Vassal and Daynes-Diallo 2016: 69), museums will need registrars more than ever. By acknowledging the role's assembled nature, registrars can mobilize their expansive connections and abilities to face whatever lies in store. Figuratively and literally.

Acknowledgements

Notes

[1] United States Department of Labour, 'What Archivists, Curators, and Museum Workers Do', 2022. https://www.bls.gov/ooh/education-training-and-library/curators-museum-technicians-and-conservators.htm#tab-2, accessed 8 October 2022.

[2] United States Department of Labour, 'What Archivists, Curators, and Museum Workers Do'.

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