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# 'Self help is obviously the order of the day': forging the UK registrar profession, 1977–1991

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## ABSTRACT

Registrars are relative newcomers to the UK museum sector, only emerging as a distinct vocation with its own identity within the last fifty years. This article charts the initial years of the profession, characterised by the tentative efforts of the first British registrars to assemble networks of practical support. Their work in developing systematic collections management strategies attracted the notice of cultural bodies, who reported their growing exploits to the wider museum world. The registrars themselves also raised their profile by participating in occupational conferences and publications. Much of this early development was inspired by the advanced state of the profession in North America, whose representative groups the UK registrar network emulated and engaged with as it gained in strength. The paper concludes by drawing comparisons with the current state of the registrar profession and thereby reflecting on the significance of these early beginnings for its ongoing development.

## KEYWORDS

Museum registrars;  
collections management; UK  
Registrars Group; Museum  
Documentation Association

## 1. A slow start: the first British registrars

The appointment of registrars in UK museums is a comparatively recent development: until the early 1970s there were none. As recently as five years ago there were only three registrars in the UK – all in national government-funded art galleries in London.<sup>1</sup>

In 1988, three practising registrars shared this overview of the tentative beginnings of their profession within the UK museum sector. This seems almost unthinkable now in an occupational landscape where registrars are an established fixture, supervising a whole range of interconnected activities that are often grouped under the broad heading of collections management.<sup>2</sup> While calculating a definitive total of practitioners is never a precise art, over 500 people now identify strongly enough with the profession to hold membership of its representative body, the UK Registrars Group (UKRG).<sup>3</sup> This comparison provides a striking reminder that today's mainstream vocations often arose from humble origins. This current assurance can thus make it difficult to grasp that the first registrars were appointed less than fifty years ago in the UK and, even then, it took time for the position to become widely embedded within institutional structures. The National Gallery was the earliest adopter of a registrar post in 1977, with the

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National Portrait Gallery and Tate following suit soon afterwards in 1978 and 1979, respectively.<sup>4</sup> As conveyed by the introductory quotation, these art museums shared a number of defining features: national status, government funding, a high concentration of two-dimensional artworks, and a base in London. Beyond this narrow institutional grouping, the practical realities of museum management caused other organisations to be slower on the uptake. A registrar position was established at the National Museum of Wales no later than the end of 1986, for example, but it is revealing that this was only possible due to an employment freeze on an equivalent curatorial post.<sup>5</sup> The addition of a registrar to the payroll imposed an extra financial burden in the short term, one that only a few museums could shoulder. It was an uphill struggle to prove their value to a degree that could overcome live operational concerns about budget allocation and institutional restructuring. It is understandable then that national museums, generally the largest and best-funded institutions in the UK, led on the employment of registrars. This limited recruitment capacity meant that by 1988, there were only ten registrars in post across the whole of Britain.<sup>6</sup> Given the substantial overheads involved, museums were evidently hesitant to take the decisive step of appointing registrar staff to supervise the centralised management and registration of their collections.

Despite the low initial numbers of museum registrars in the UK, the process of professional association was apparent from the very outset. The UKRG may not have been officially established until 1991, but it was created out of existing informal networks that had slowly cohered over the preceding decade or so.<sup>7</sup> In the absence of a coordinated support group, how then did these early registrars navigate the complexities of their practice? Self-help was their only course of action, as there were no established training initiatives or a representative apparatus to harness at this formative stage. Soon after the first few UK registrars were hired in the late 1970s, they established regular contact with each other to discuss common issues such as shipping, packing, and negotiations with external agents.<sup>8</sup> The collective dialogue facilitated by these meetings helped a nascent conception of a national registrar profession to emerge between these practitioners. As more registrars entered the UK museum sector with the slow trickle of appointments throughout the 1980s, these small-scale conversations grew into more structured cooperation. This was partly the result of a greater level of engagement with partner organisations, manifested by the development of stronger working relationships and the participation of external speakers in the informal registrar meetings. The range of groups co-opted to support their work is quite impressive given the emergent state of the profession: government departments, security personnel, the police, fire services, shipping firms, packing suppliers, and airport staff.<sup>9</sup> This extensive list affirms that routine interdisciplinary consultation has been a longstanding feature of the museum registrar mindset. In collaboration with each other and relevant specialists, the practical resolution of shared challenges laid the foundations for closer occupational ties between the first registrars. Yet, it must be recognised that the realities of everyday practice are more fluid than formal labels often allow. Then, as now, role titles tended to proliferate, with collection managers, documentation officers, and loans administrators often fulfilling very similar functions to named registrars.<sup>10</sup> The idiosyncrasies of institutional nomenclature do not always map neatly onto professional groupings. This explains why the mailing list of the informal registrar network could embrace twenty-five

members in the late 1980s, despite there only being ten official posts across the country.<sup>11</sup> Although these figures may seem modest today, this represented a marked improvement on the situation a decade earlier when registrars were entirely absent from the sector. Museums were coming to recognise the value of a dedicated role to manage the growing demands of collections management. By the start of the 1990s then, a distinct registrar profession was visibly taking shape in the UK.

## 2. Occupational forums: organisations, conferences, and publications

A key driver of this outward interaction was that the role of the registrar soon began to be articulated beyond the immediate networks of support developed by the initial cohort of practitioners. The primary instigators of this process were the interconnected array of regulatory and advisory bodies that were starting to exercise greater oversight over museum activities. The first of these was the Museums and Galleries Commission (MGC), a consultative group that had been founded in the 1930s but whose mission and scope had recently been bolstered by a structural overhaul in 1981.<sup>12</sup> Following its reorganisation, it actively issued guidance on a range of pressing issues that would become central features of registrar practice in the UK. In its 1983 report on *Museum Travelling Exhibitions*, for example, the MGC considered loans programmes, exhibition management, packing, transport, and the new Government Indemnity Scheme.<sup>13</sup> It even recommended the creation of a professional group, foreshadowing the eventual self-organisation of UK registrars who would come to perform much of this work (although the report did not yet mention them). However, this situation soon changed. In the MGC's landmark *Museum Professional Training and Career Structure* report of 1987, registrars were identified as a distinct occupation within the museum ecosystem and so required distinct training needs in relation to documentation especially.<sup>14</sup> Registrars had entered the policymaking discourse only a decade after the first post had been created in a British institution. In a similar vein, registrars were also coming to the notice of the responsible government department of the time, the Office of Arts and Libraries (OAL). A 1989 report it published on the *Cost of Collecting* commented approvingly on the appointment of registrars at two unnamed national museums as a means of centralising record-keeping and combatting corporate inconsistency.<sup>15</sup> It did not go as far as recommending the wider adoption of registrars, but that is the implication suggested by its praise of their role in promoting efficiency and cost-effectiveness. A notable feature shared by both reports is the narrow interpretation of the role defined by its eponymous responsibility for registration. These references thus demonstrate that registrars and at least some idea of their potential worth to museum operations had already gained a measure of currency within official circles by the end of the 1980s.

Continuing the theme of documentation, the third contemporary organisation to report on the growth of the UK registrar profession was the Museum Documentation Association (MDA). Founded originally as the Information Retrieval Group of the Museums Association in 1967, it was remodelled as the MDA in 1977 to encourage a more concerted approach to documentation concerns.<sup>16</sup> It issued a number of key reports to this end, including one entitled *Planning the Documentation of Museum Collections* that happened to cover the nascent British registrar field in the greatest depth out of the publications discussed so far. Based on testimonies collected in 1982, it not only

highlighted the growing responsibility of registrars for record-keeping and loans procedures but it also detailed their specific contribution to a range of collections management processes at the National Gallery, the National Portrait Gallery, and Tate.<sup>17</sup> Through the systematic investigation of documentation practice in the UK, an expansive and nuanced picture of registrar had started to emerge that more closely resembled its current remit. But perhaps the most significant departure in the preparation of this report was the consultation of practising registrars themselves, a valuable opportunity to promote their utility. The MDA later provided another forum for occupational agency through its organisation of a series of annual conferences around museum management of collections, records, and information. While these gatherings did attract a range of curators, keepers, directors, consultants, and academics, registrars constituted a notable proportion of their contributors and attendees. Their concerns were often reflected in the event programmes. The first MDA conference in September 1987 centred on collections management, for example, included a panel devoted to the role of professional registrar groups.<sup>18</sup> Naturally, this session attracted the interest of prominent figures within the emerging UK registrar network. Three of its leaders, Fredericka Smith, Margaret Stewart, and Jonathan Mason, shared the group's work to date and called for the wider sector to undertake the systematic creation of registrar posts to better enable the responsible stewardship of cultural collections.<sup>19</sup> Engagement with more established networks of museum practice offered one route to greater recognition by the wider sector, especially in the absence of official registrar representation. By virtue of its operational support activities, the MDA thus served to encourage the growth of this emerging field through its active promotion of discussion and dialogue. Such discursive spaces were instrumental in negotiating the shared values that sustained the formation of a coherent registrar profession in Britain.

Alongside these initial sector exchanges, registrars also began to feature in the published occupational literature that was progressively growing up around museum practice in Britain. This began at an early stage, within five years of the earliest registrar appointment in a UK museum. In the first issue of the *International Journal of Museum Management and Curatorship* in March 1982, museum registrars were singled out as desirable contributors to a proposed 'Code of Practice for Escorts and Couriers'.<sup>20</sup> Their central involvement in the organisation of institutional loans was thus observable to an attentive audience from almost the very beginning of the profession. By carrying periodic articles of this nature, the *International Journal of Museum Management and Curatorship* became a key channel for the dissemination of collections management approaches – and to a lesser extent registrar practice – throughout the next decade. The publisher initially responsible for its distribution was Butterworths, whose output around museum practice was not solely confined to periodicals but also encompassed operational handbooks. Titles such as the *Manual of Curatorship* (1984) and *Museum Documentation Systems* (1986) identified the potential value of registrars as specialist administrators of the growing burden of systematic collections management, especially in relation to general pressures for higher documentation standards.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, a common theme within these works is the desire for more institutions to move to a centralised registry model to help resolve such issues.

As with the official reports, however, it was mainly other people sympathetic to this new occupation who extolled its benefits rather than the registrars themselves. One

salient reason for this was the modest size of the nascent profession in the UK. Another contributing factor would have been the perennial issue of capacity. In an environment of increasing institutional complexity and accountability, the early registrars were likely so busy carrying out their duties that they had very little time to reflect on it or write about it.<sup>22</sup> Striving to mitigate the realities of workload management somewhat, it was the MDA that again provided an exception to the scarcity of registrar representation. The published proceedings of its first conference released in 1988, for example, featured one of the earliest papers to have been authored by practising British registrars – a written record of Smith, Stewart, and Mason’s summary overview of the profession discussed in the previous paragraph.<sup>23</sup> The significance of such works was notable, acting as a platform to advocate for the profession on their own terms. It was not long before registrars began to contribute their broad knowledge of collections management to the wider museum studies literature.<sup>24</sup> By including regular examples of registrar practice and contributions by registrars themselves, this burgeoning literature helped to advertise their versatile expertise to the broader sector. Registrars were starting to make an impression on the UK museum discourse despite their limited presence.

### 3. The international dimension

Of course, the emergence of the UK registrar profession did not take place in isolation. Its early practitioners naturally drew on the models available to them as a means of cementing best practice and bolstering their credibility. Across the North American museum sector, registrars had installed themselves in a secure position by this stage and the US offered a particularly promising example of what could be achieved through professional organisation. In 1977 registrars in the US had come together to found the Registrar’s Committee of the American Association of Museums (RC-AAM); in 1984 they had released a *Code of Ethics for Registrars*; and by the late 1980s there was a growing body of literature explicitly dedicated to registrar practice.<sup>25</sup> It is quite understandable then that the nascent UK registrar profession would seek to emulate the marked success of their international counterparts. This was reflected in the publications produced by British practitioners during this time, which is full of favourable references to the work of their peers in the US and Canada. The varied content of these comparisons suggests that these international precedents inspired UK registrars in a number of ways. From an operational standpoint, their greater wealth of experience served as a benchmark for the institutional pursuit of effective collections management. The institutional working partnerships forged between registrars, curators, and conservators to this end was particularly admired.<sup>26</sup> Then there was the simple question of numbers. Contemporary registrars in Britain could hardly envision the prospect of a 300-strong profession, the total membership of the RC-AAM at the end of the 1980s.<sup>27</sup> Their desire to expand the pool of museum registration specialists was based on a clear blueprint. At a higher level, the existence of representative bodies in the US and Canada offered an instructive model of self-organisation. Their example proved that the formation of official registrar groups within national museum associations could play a key role in fostering occupational dialogue.<sup>28</sup> In short, professional representation was not only possible but desirable. British registrars undoubtedly had these existing bodies in mind when the UK Registrars Group was founded as an official entity only a few years later in 1991. It is clear then that the

nascent field owed much to the path forged by international colleagues, whether in the areas of operational practice, institutional adoption, or professional coordination. Perhaps of greater significance to the future development of the UK registrar profession, however, was the breadth of its corporate horizons from the very outset.

The first British registrars were not solely content to emulate the progress of their peers from afar, they also made active efforts to engage with them through various channels. One basic means of interaction was subscription to international publications, a considerable undertaking before the advent of digital distribution systems. In 1987, the *Archival Informatics Newsletter* (a US periodical about cultural computing for documentation professionals in both museums and archives) shared that its succeeding issues would be distributed in the UK by the MDA.<sup>29</sup> Through their close involvement with this support body, British registrars would have been able to access its instalments and similar resources like it. It was in their interest to follow the latest innovations in operational practice, wherever their origin. Then there were more interactive forms of external engagement, namely the occupational conferences covered earlier. The first MDA conference of 1987 in Cambridge, for example, proved to be a thoroughly international affair. Among the thirty or so speakers were representatives from mainland Europe, Australia, and North America, which included registrars from the US and Canada reporting the development of the profession in their respective national contexts alongside the British contribution.<sup>30</sup> Such gatherings proved an ideal forum to build up valuable contacts across the globe, even if they were not organised under the auspices of a dedicated registrar group yet. This was a two-way process, exemplified by intrepid practitioners who moved in the opposite direction. Fredericka Smith in her capacity as Registrar of the Victoria and Albert Museum travelled all the way to New York to attend the 1986 Annual Meeting of the American Association of Museums, where she established contact with its Registrar Committee and advocated for a closer working relationship between museum professionals in the US and the UK.<sup>31</sup> In this manner, the initiative of individual registrars paved the way for the development of more formal associations between national groups. The emerging registrar network in Britain was able to harness the networking efforts of its constituent members to better negotiate the complexities of routine practice. It was thus able to secure the assistance of institutional representatives from the US Federal Department of Arts and Humanities, the Metropolitan Museum, and the Louvre in establishing shared conceptions of responsible collections management.<sup>32</sup> Overseas connections of this nature would only grow in importance in an increasingly interconnected global heritage landscape. These early interactions thus anticipated the international outlook that would come to define the registrars profession as it further established itself as a fixture of the UK museum sector.

#### 4. Looking forward/looking backward

It is hoped that the numbers will grow and, with it, an open acknowledgement of the benefits that central registration can bring to any museum or gallery, whatever the size of its collections and the complexity of its internal structure. A society of museum registrars, or similar body, might help work towards strengthening and defining the role of the registrar.<sup>33</sup>

Through their own endeavours and in conjunction with sympathetic colleagues, registrars had thus done much to establish themselves as a recognised occupation in UK



museums by the start of the 1990s. Its constituent members certainly felt in a secure enough position to constitute a ‘society of museum registrars’ by this time, which Smith, Stewart, and Mason had advocated in the proceedings of the 1987 MDA conference quoted above. The foundation of UKRG in 1991 was the culmination of over a decade of building relationships, sharing practice, and, above all, pioneering the delivery of systematic collections management in the British context. There was good reason for the earliest registrars to reflect positively on their progress to date. Within fifteen years, the profession had grown from nothing to a coherent operational network through the persistent efforts of its first members. Recognising the overall success of these initial overtures, the cultivation of professional discourse was to be continued under the official auspices of the UKRG. The ongoing importance of this work was reflected in its inaugural constitution, with two out of its three founding objectives devoted to knowledge exchange. Its first aim was to act as a central forum within the British registrar community to overcome common challenges, while its second aim sought to encourage cooperation between registrars and other personnel to strengthen occupational ties.<sup>34</sup> Through this formal codification, the early prioritisation of sector dialogue was fully enshrined as a core value of the UK registrar profession. This initial communicative focus was further motivated by the registrars’ pursuit of formal sector acknowledgement. The appearance of the role in the accounts of leading cultural bodies such as the OAL, the MGC, and, above all, the MDA heralded its emergence as a new vocation in its own right. Registrars even achieved recognition from the Museums Association during this period, the overarching representative body of UK museums. In the 1987 edition of its *Code of Practice for Museum Authorities*, it urged institutions to harness the expertise of the specialist occupations that now populated the field – naming registrars outright alongside conservators, educators, and security personnel.<sup>35</sup> The registrar as a coordinator of the emerging domain of collections management, with particular authority for documentation practice, was becoming an accepted feature of the British museum landscape. Their systematic approach was gaining importance in a sector working through the practicalities of rationalisation and standardisation. By all accounts, it appeared that the registrar profession was here to stay in Britain.

Even so, it was also evident that the UK registrars still had plenty of work ahead of them moving into the 1990s. Their outstanding professional aspirations were very much present in the quotation from Smith, Stewart, and Mason that opened this section. While the goal of professional representation was achieved with the foundation of the UKRG not long afterwards, their statement acknowledged that the appointment of registrars to UK museums in sufficient numbers and the strengthening of the role’s definition would both require considerable labour. Firstly, the expansion of the registrar profession continued to draw opposition from certain quarters. This stemmed in large part from the position’s close association with contemporary shifts in the administrative structure of museums. There was a prevailing assumption that registrars embodied a process of institutional centralisation, which its proponents claimed could better deliver consistent documentation practice and coordinated loans programmes.<sup>36</sup> However, not everyone in the museum sector was convinced by the logic of concentrating collections management functions in a single role, which was visibly manifested in the gradual increase of registrar posts. Many museum personnel instead favoured a decentralised organisational setup where individual specialist curators retained



responsibility for disciplinary collections, a model that had long held sway in larger multi-departmental institutions.<sup>37</sup> It would be no easy task for the British registrars to overcome this alternative paradigm that ran counter to their very existence. This obstacle to universal recognition was only exacerbated by the nebulous concept of registrar practice, since it was difficult to articulate the scope of a role that was still in the process of emerging. There was general consensus that registrars were responsible for registration, as the name implied.<sup>38</sup> Beyond that, however, definitions of the field ranged from a narrow focus on museum documentation in its various forms to sweeping responsibility for a coordinated collections management operation that better resembles the current job description. The harmonisation of these competing visions would not be accomplished overnight. Indeed, there is a strong case to be made that a definitive remit for registrars has still not been reached today.<sup>39</sup> The haphazard creation of the initial registrar posts in the UK and the resulting fragmentation of the profession has exerted an enduring influence on the museum landscape. It is nonetheless admirable that the first British registrars had such grand plans for the field from its outset, even if these could not be implemented right away. Only so much can be achieved in fifteen years, especially when establishing a new profession from the ground up.

Looking back at the endeavours and aspirations of the first registrars in Britain from the vantage point of the twenty-first century is a rather revealing exercise. The informal coherence of the early occupational networks provides considerable insight into the nature of the profession today. At first inspection, any connections may seem far removed. Many of the challenges faced by the first UK registrars can appear distant as a result of intervening developments in the museum landscape. In the occupational literature of the 1980s, for example, lengthy discussions around the finer points of ‘computerization’ and the role of registrars in harnessing computer mainframes for collections documentation abounded.<sup>40</sup> This extensive discourse will likely appear obscure to modern practitioners, who operate in an environment where portable digital technology is ubiquitous and a daily reality of working life. Likewise, many of the key organisations that engaged with the early registrar network have since been superseded – the MDA is now the Collections Trust, the duties of OAL are now performed by the Department of Culture, Media & Sport, Butterworths has been absorbed by the Elsevier publishing group, and the MGC no longer exists at all (although some of its functions have since been assumed by a national consortium of Arts Council England, National Museums Scotland, NI Museums Council, and the Welsh Government). In many ways, the museum landscape is now unrecognisable from the conditions that prevailed during the formation of the British registrar profession from the late 1970s to the early 1990s.

Nevertheless, the underlying strategies of occupational self-organisation practised by registrars in the UK have remained remarkably stable in spite of the many transformations undergone by the museum sector. Nowhere is this better illustrated than the UKRG Constitution. Four out of five of the organisation’s current objectives can be traced back to the original ones adopted in 1992: to provide a forum for communication between members; to actively establish and promote standards of professional practice; to represent the interests of its members; and to increase awareness and understanding of the role of museum registrars.<sup>41</sup> The tenets of communication, representation, and dissemination have clearly been a common theme throughout the profession’s existence. Another pronounced continuity has been the active engagement of registrars with the

operational realities of working across national boundaries. The tentative connections forged by UK registrars during the early years of their existence have since been consolidated and even formalised in the guise of international assemblies. The first European Registrars Conference was organised in 1998 by UKRG at the National Gallery in London and this event has functioned as an important occupational forum ever since (its thirteenth iteration was held in Rome in November 2024).<sup>42</sup> This is quite a contrast to the professional conferences attended by UK registrars in the 1980s, where their modest presence caused their specific concerns to be subsumed into larger museum groupings. On one level, the success of these current assemblies appears to indicate an intervening shift in the focus of British registrars from North America to Europe following the creation of equivalent national professions in many European countries. Yet, it is also evident that a thoroughly international outlook has remained a defining professional trait from the outset of the early registrar network in the UK. Indeed, the European Registrar Conferences have continued its legacy in a number of profound ways: wide horizons, practical innovation, mutual assistance, and the centrality of dialogue. Many of the strategies adopted through necessity by the earliest registrars in Britain thus remain just as valuable to their successors nearly fifty years later. The networks that constitute the UK registrar profession may be larger, denser, and stronger today, but they essentially rest on the same fundamental principles.

## Notes

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## Notes on contributor

*Dr Stuart Bowes* is an early career researcher in museum studies who recently completed a collaborative PhD at the University of Leeds, which explored the legal and ethical issues surrounding the facilitation of public access by the Royal Armouries’ registrar staff to its weapons collections. His current areas of interest include registrar practice, critical collections management, occupational standards, museum research, and museological histories. He is currently employed in the Research Services department of Leeds University Library and prior to this has held collections management positions at the Royal Armouries, Leeds Museums and Galleries, and York Castle Museum, among other institutions.

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