

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF A CURATOR

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Welcome!

Welcome to the brand new Musée de Saint-Boniface Museum blog, where you'll find all sorts of behind-the-scenes stories and never-before-seen artifacts!

But first... what in the world is a “curator”? In the museum world, a curator is the person who manages the collection and the museum's exhibits. They make sure the artifacts are well-displayed, provide accurate information for the public (in the form of a label or tour), manage new acquisitions, as well as plan and create new exhibits. In large museums, most curators are specialists in a specific subject; natural history (birds, mammals, insects), ancient history (Egypt, Greece, Roman Empire), ethnography (cultural groups), and so on.

In a smaller museum like ours, the curator becomes a jack-of-all-trades: they are the curator of all areas of the collection, collections manager and conservator. Not only do they take care of exhibits and displayed artifacts, but they must also manage all artifacts in storage, on display, on loan and take great care in protecting them from agents of deterioration (more on this later). I feel so fortunate I get to dabble in all these areas. It is an interesting challenge to learn about such a wide variety of objects and how to properly care for them. For example, gloves are essential when handling a metal object because fingerprints can easily stain or etch themselves into metal, while clean, gloveless hands are acceptable for handling paper objects.

Le Musée de Saint-Boniface Museum's collection consists of over 30,000 objects of all sorts: farm equipment, furniture, clothing, fine art, religious objects, medical equipment, and objects from many different ethnic and cultural groups in Manitoba. That's a lot for a single person to manage, isn't it? Well, it's a good thing I am not alone! We have a fantastic team of Museum Experience Ambassadors and volunteers who are dedicated to helping in collections and work tirelessly to keep things running. From doing inventory in the storage spaces, to entering data in our collections database, to cleaning the objects and their display cases, these staff and volunteers are a crucial part of the work behind-the-scenes.



Now that you know what my role is as a curator, let's look at the journey an artifact takes through the museum, from being offered as a donation to exhibition or storage. (NB: This is not the same for every museum).

The Offer

In most cases, this is where the story starts for us. We receive an email, phone call or visit from somebody with an object they think would suit the museum's collection. If they come in person, we don't take the object(s), but take pictures and ask them to send an email with more information and the history of the object.



The Committee

After gathering as much information as possible from the donor (original owner, use, historical significance, how it came into the potential donor's possession) as well as receiving pictures, the Collections Committee gathers to discuss the offer and determine if:

- it fits in our mandate (relates to the Métis, French speakers in Manitoba, Grey Nuns, Fur Trade, etc)
- if we have others in the collection – why would we accept this one?
- is it in good enough condition to store or display?
- do we have space to store it?

All these questions are discussed in this meeting, and an answer is given to the potential donor. If the object is accepted, a form is sent. If it isn't, I do my best to give them some suggestions of other museums or institutions that could be interested, or where their object may have more relevance.



The Cataloguing

Just like a library book, every object in a museum collection needs to be given a number to be able to keep track of where it is, and if there are multiple similar objects, which one is which. Different museums have different numbering systems. We use a combination of letters and numbers: the letters represent the category of object, and the number is given in order of cataloguing. This number is either written on the object itself using a product that does not damage it, sewn on or written on a label, all depending on the material and size of it.

Next, all the information provided by the donor, descriptions, measurements, and photos are added to our database.



The Storage

If there is no immediate need for this object to be put on display (as is usually the case), it is prepared for storage. This means considering what this object needs in terms of temperature, humidity, light and physical support. Some materials need to be stored in a higher humidity environment (ex. parchment), some in a very low humidity space (ex. corroded metal). Some can only be exposed to a very small amount of light (ex. old photographs), while others are much more resistant to light (ex. stone). Knowing what it is made of and how it reacts to those agents of deterioration* is key to making these objects available for the future generations.

We then package this object to make sure that it won't move in the box. The box gets a number, and we input the location of the box into our online database.

*Agents of deterioration are elements that can potentially be detrimental to the objects, such as light, humidity and handling.



That's all for today! Let me know what sort of topics you'd like me to cover in the future.