

THURSDAY CAREERS CHATS

Date of Session: 3/3/2011 Title of Session: Museum Careers

Alumni Presenter: Wilford Scott Class Year: 1972

Title: Head of Adult Programs Employer: National Gallery of Art

Notes from Session:

Graduated as a double major in English and Fine Arts (Art and Art History were not divided at the time, he concentrated in Art History). Went right to graduate school at Florida State, a very good program but did not have exactly what he wanted at the PhD level, left there with a master and went to University of Delaware for a PhD. Had every intention of being a college professor, but a friend a couple of years ahead of him raved about working at the National Gallery of Art (NGA) in the position of lecturer and convinced him to apply. As a lecturer he acted as a docent for adults touring the museum. He also conducted lectures and training away from the museum. He then moved into training and coordinating volunteer docents working with adults. Eventually he became head of all adult educational programming.

What job did you enjoy the most? – Being a lecturer. The NGA is different than other museums as none have a full time staff of lecturers. All of the NGA staff have PhDs and write and lecture outside of the gallery. Other museums contract out the lecturer work or it is done as a side job by full-time staff. The downside of being a lecturer at NGA is that you do not get to work long-term with students and see them develop over time. You get some of that working with volunteer docents (he has worked with some for over 20 years) but nowhere near the degree that a faculty member gets with students. Regarding being a manager, the roll he fills now, it is never what you expect it to be and often involves solving difficult problems that are not a pleasure to deal with.

As head of the department, do you put on programming? Yes. Tours have been offered at NGA since opening day in 1941. Information is delivered to visitors in a lecture style. We are trying to change that, although the gallery is a government bureaucracy, so change is slow.

What other challenges does the NGA face? Funding – we are well funded by the federal government, but, while there is no talk of cutting the budget, it, like the rest of the federal budget is at risk. The recession really hit the funding from private donors, although it appears to be recovering now.

The Federal Government is facing a serious staffing issue with pending baby boomer retirements, is that true of the NGA? The NGA is a very desirable place to work, so it will probably be able to weather that. We have people with masters in clerical positions (usually working on their PhD) and can easily draw from that pool.

What other areas are in the NGA Education department? There are four areas in total:

1. Adult Education (his area)
2. Teacher, School and Family Programs – develop and deliver programming to each of those groups.
3. Academic Programming – Offer programming to people in academia
4. Education Resources – Develop visual and written material related to the NGA for print and web resources

What other options does one have as an Art Historian? Three primary career paths:

1. Academia
2. Museum
3. Business world
 - a. Art or Auction House
 - b. Corporate Art Collections (not as big a field as it used to be)

Does the NGA help fund graduate education for employees, so could someone go to work there and get help paying for a masters or PhD? No they do not. Most managers will allow flexible scheduling to help people attend class though.

Should someone go right to school or start a masters or PhD right away. Start right away if you know what you want to do. There is no reason to wait if you have the passion. Most of the grad school programs include internships which will give you the exposure to the field that a job would. That said, no one looks down on someone taking time off before going to grad school anymore. If you do not know you really want to do this or do not have a passion for it yet, do not go to grad school until you do.

Does the NGA take interns? There is a summer internship program. Undergraduates need to be at the top of their game to be competitive. A strong GPA, really good research paper as a writing sample and very strong recommendation are required. You will be competing with graduate students for the positions.

Do you need an advanced degree to be an art critic? No. you will need to demonstrate the knowledge to put what you are critiquing into historical context. Being an art critic is much more about whom you are, your unique perspective, insights and your approach. The internet has expanded the opportunity for people to get that out there through blogs and the like.

Which is better if you want to go into art education, a master degree in museum studies/education or art history? For the NGA, art history. The people who visit the NGA tend to be very sophisticated in their knowledge. He has been frustrated by studies and education graduates who put together programs that miss the mark historically or who are stumped by questions from visitors.

What about museum/education studies degrees for other museums? The education end has become more sophisticated with curriculum development and the like. There is a lot that now goes into developing education programs for K-12. If you have an art history masters and can demonstrate that museum education has become very audience centered and how to make that happen, you will be okay. A degree focusing on that component for other museums is fine.

What kind of salary can one make in the field? For PhDs, it matches what faculty at a college make. There is some difference between a small local museum and a large regional, with more money being made at the latter. Regardless, you can make a decent middle class living and most people do it because they love the work.

What about work life balance? Being a federal employee, it is great, work is pretty much 9-5. Other places may require more like 50-60 hour weeks, but again, people are there because they love the work.