

CHAPTER ONE

**MUSEUM PAY:**  
**THE MORE THINGS**  
**CHANGE**  
**THE MORE THEY STAY**  
**THE SAME?**

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**IN 1971 I WAS HIRED** for my first full-time museum job. The starting salary was \$6,000 per year. That would be about \$37,000 in today's dollars. I was Assistant to the Senior Curator at the Museum of the City of New York. It was a new position. There was a package of benefits including health care, retirement, holidays and vacation time (four weeks a year). The museum had about eighty employees. Most were full-time and included security, maintenance, curatorial, marketing, image reproduction, sales shop and office workers. The museum is a private 501(c)3 nonprofit entity though the building and property are owned by the City of New York. The security and maintenance staff were city employees while all others were employed by the private museum operation. These divisions were a common arrangement for older cultural organizations on New York City property in municipal buildings.

If I were 23 today and were offered the same job at the same museum and at the chronologically adjusted salary would I take it? In a nanosecond. I would then, of course, figure out my domestic logistics as I did many years ago. These principally involve housing and food costs. Other expenses such as commuting, entertainment, clothing and personal incidentals would be factored in as they unfolded. My daughter has now addressed this same scenario. She decided to also work in a museum. She is with visitor services at a New York City Smithsonian Institution museum. Her salary is \$28,000. The benefit package is excellent and they cover monthly commuting costs up to a certain amount. She lives in an apartment with three roommates and gets no underwriting from other income sources, though she does also work one day a week in visitor services at another museum. She loves her job. I am appalled at her salary.

Employment realities such as low pay are common in lots of jobs. For the purposes of this chapter, however, we are discussing museum work. The focus is on private tax-exempt entities such as the Museum of the City of New York. Because the majority of museums fall into the 501(c)3 Internal Revenue Service profile, the chapter will reflect those. Some of what is mentioned relates to museums owned by governments, universities, corporations and individuals but these occupy different museum work-a-day realms.

Museum pay inequity conversations have tended to focus on, for lack of a better term, what we will call the “professional” staff. These are people who define their livelihoods as careers. The jobs require academic and resume credentials tailored to a designated category of employment. Their work calls for specific training, abilities, and skills unique to a particular set of responsibilities. In the museum world, professional staff includes curators, marketing managers, directors, educators, conservators, exhibit designers, and fundraisers, to name some of the most obvious positions. Many of these employees have graduate degrees, some at the PhD level.

Fortunately, other low income positions are now part of the compensation conversation. Pay for guards, housekeepers, docents, maintenance, and visitor services staff is coming to light for its often paltry sums. Previously this would occasionally be referenced in salary budget deliberations. Improvements would at best happen in a token manner. Increases would be part of annual across-the-board compensation adjustments, or change when a new person was hired.

Circling back to the start of my museum career, when I arrived at the Museum of the City of New York there were five

curatorial departments. Each had a curator and an assistant curator. The academic and experience profiles of these people reflected the end of a museum era in America. There were three male and two female curators. They had been in their positions for a long time. None had trained specifically for their work. Some only had an undergraduate degree. Their knowledge of the collections under their care was considerable. They learned on the job about the subject these things embodied. The curators were quite bright and diligent. The collections in each department were (and remain) fabulous. Temporary exhibitions were done with some regularity but long-term installations were the rule. Little was published by collection-based staff. There was no expectation for anyone to be a leader or even participate outside the museum in aspects of the subjects or objects for which they were responsible. There was certainly no pressure to increase attendance through the mechanism of the popular exhibition. All were white. Two men were gay. One was a leader in the gay community of New York. He married his partner who was a bishop in a gay New York City church in the early 1970s, which attracted considerable press attention at the time.

Regardless of the backgrounds and experience of the museum's curators, what was apparent was the fact that none had to work for a living. They either had private means or were married to wealth. This was also the case for three of the curatorial assistants. Only two of those employees (I being one) lived on his or her income alone. The comfortable finances in the curatorial ranks no doubt caused minimal pressure to improve our salaries in any meaningful regular manner. In fact, I don't recall any such conversations occurring formally or informally until

well into my career there when I mentioned it to the director. Overt complaints about pay were scant.

A related fact of museum leadership jobs at the time revealed that positions throughout the country were invariably held by so-called “upper class” white males who either inherited or married wealth. They were dilettants and amateurs in the field. Many had Ivy League undergraduate educations and attended elite private schools before college. The early years of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) illustrates this reality. It is clearly explained by Russell Lynes in his wonderful history of the founding and first decades of the museum.<sup>1</sup> The nature of the aforementioned employee profiles has not entirely disappeared when it comes to museum hiring and its influence on pay. Being independently wealthy reduces effective interest in seriously promoting staff compensation improvements.

I believe a key factor influencing museum pay problems stems from justifying a museum’s existence. Why on earth do we have these places? Heck, in the grand sweep of history they are not very old. The museum as we know it dates back only a few centuries. What do they mean and why? Isn’t it odd to have repositories dedicated to collecting, preserving and studying all manner of natural and humanly created objects which will be retained in perpetuity? Defining a museum is often at the core of internal fiscal decisions. Are they worth what they cost – especially when we consider the largest annual budget expense is for employee compensation?

From the outside it appears museums know why they are and what they are. In fact this is not always the case. While a mission may sound good in print, those who have to realize it in practice can often be at odds or even confused. Like the five

blind men describing an elephant, trustees and staff may have very different definitions of “their” museum. This confused state will have an impact on pay. What jobs are required and why? Will they be full-time, part-time, temporary, contractual or seasonal? What qualifications should employees have? Can work be done by volunteers?

Because few people in museum governance positions in particular know how these entities really operate and what employees do, they have little understanding of acceptable pay levels. A colleague who was recently forced to step down by ignorant trustees was a stellar curator at an art museum. She was asked by a trustee, “What do you do all day?”

Museums are places of explanation. They accomplish this for the public with diverse programming including exhibitions, publications, scholarship, collecting, and events. Internally one of the most important explanation requirements is to consistently explain the museum to trustees and supporters.

Directors must be lead explainers. It is a ceaseless task. The more decision-makers know about who does what and why in an organization, the better prepared they should be if they are setting compensation. However, I have witnessed trustees thinking certain employees were exemplary when in fact they were duds. I wanted them removed but that option was blocked. Naturally, when it was time for annual budget reviews these sacred workers were recommended for totally inappropriate raises. Fortunately this only happened twice in my long career but in both cases I clearly failed as a personnel explainer.

When it comes to setting pay levels in private museums the final deciders are its trustees. They approve annual operating budgets. Those budgets are initially put together by designated

staff and perhaps board committees that might have advisory oversight for financial matters, personnel, programs, collections, and buildings and grounds. Personnel committees are the ones to watch when it comes to salaries. They can support the recommendations made by knowledgeable staff or wander totally off track.

Once a draft budget is determined it is submitted to either the executive committee of the board or the full board itself for review and final approval, which may be subject to changes before acceptance. Budget retention of positions and what they are paid will vary according to several criteria. Some will correspond with generally accepted ideas about a position's worth, as might be the case with guards or a sales clerk. Other criteria too often reflect personal prejudices or ignorance. A trustee might like one staff person more than another. Those in the world of finance may think accountants deserve better pay than curators. Reconciling awkward and prejudicial input can be difficult for directors in particular.

And, speaking of directors, one of the most egregious affronts in the museum world is the often wide chasm between what directors are paid and what other employees earn. The difference percentage does not reflect museum size. Why is there such a salary discrepancy? Boards of trustees set the chief executive's pay. Their approach often parallels that of the corporate sector they understand or hold as a personnel model.

The role of trustees in setting budgets for private museums is critical to understand and accept. When they volunteer for these leadership roles they assume the position of fiduciaries for the nonprofit entity. This is a legal designation and one every trustee should take seriously. Most do. The outcome of

this duty means they can be extremely cautious when it comes to containing operating costs. Because staff pay is always the largest part of every museum's budget, those numbers are watched carefully. This is why pay is often below par.

We live in a capitalist society. Return on investment, profit margins, expense measures, and other customary operating metrics drawn from the business sector are increasingly influencing how museums conduct their work. The approach is rife on the governance level when trustees think museums should be profitable commercial endeavors. This is a fallacy for certain, yet the idea infuses compensation. Those who appear to bring in money get better pay while those who do not get less.

Complicating museum salary matters are suggestions – implied or actual – that prevent improving salaries and benefits:

- If you don't like the pay leave the job.
- No one forces anyone to work in museums. No judge has sentenced anyone to museum employment.
- Why do people take jobs knowing the salary, then complain about it?
- Museums pay what they can afford.
- Presumably museum work has meaning that goes beyond mere personal income concerns.
- People should be grateful for a museum job as they are fun and easy places to work.
- We can always find good employees at cheap rates.

These thoughts are never spelled out in any documented manner but believe me they lurk behind all personnel decisions, be they made by those seeking work or those offering work.

We read that the current strong economy is making it difficult to find employees. Clearly that depends on the work sector being analyzed. Museums seem to be immune to any lack of potential employees. Supply and demand is on their side: advertise a job opening and plenty of good applicants will surface. Obviously response factors depend on location, the particular job, and the museum seeking an employee.

For the most part museum hiring is a more disciplined and structured process than it once was, especially in large urban institutions. To start with, there are written job descriptions. Unless a position is being filled from within by a pre-designated candidate most openings are advertised in some manner. The ads list work duties, qualifications and application procedures. This employment professionalization reflects the professionalization of the museum field in general. Some applaud the development as a welcome improvement but some would note it lacks compensation improvements that would usually accompany the rise of a field's status. Salaries are often absent in job listings. Exceptions would be for government museums such as those owned and operated on the federal, state, county, city or local level.

With the marked increase in museum studies and related graduate programs has come a plethora of job seekers into the field. This means there is more competition to find work. Many of the candidates are highly qualified. It appears to be an employer's market. In fact that may only be true for certain positions in certain institutions. A small historical society in a rural community far from urban centers or health and other services can have difficulty attracting good director job applicants. A curatorial position at a major urban art museum, on

the other hand, will probably have a host of impressive candidates seeking to fill a vacancy for which they are clearly well-trained.

The challenges museum job seekers face today, by the way, are hardly new. In 1939, Laurence Vail Coleman, when he was director of the American Association of Museums, referred to it in his three volume series, *The Museum in America*:

It is difficult to enter the museum field. Not only is the number of openings during any year quite small, but there are many experienced people seeking museum employment or reemployment.<sup>2</sup>

If the past is any indication, even the most sincere efforts to improve museum pay may be disjointed and scattered. To begin with, who will organize initiatives and on what scale? How will pressure be sustained and maintained? Who will monitor and report on progress? How will acceptable pay levels be updated and, again, by whom?

Over the years occasional one-off corrective measures have happened to improve museum compensation. We saw this when some unionized staff at MoMA went on strike in 2000. The issues then and in subsequent contract negotiations were about pay, health and other benefits as well as protections against unwarranted dismissal or abrupt layoffs. MoMA is a large institution and staff can organize protests, join unions, and otherwise fight for personnel improvements. Staff in smaller museums can feel insecure when contemplating or suggesting corrective actions. Indeed, their employment may be threatened. Protective recourse can be absent unless they can

make a case that a job loss was retaliatory or reflected racial, age, or gender bias if there are defensive legal measures covering these employment categories.

Several variables go into deciding museum compensation. Pay and benefits depend on what the institution's leaders decide it can afford. Their judgments are influenced by a wide range of realities such as museum size, mission, location, professional competency, personal preferences and prejudices, budget, endowment (if any), and operational priorities. The realities trustees accept regarding the museum they govern when it comes to compensation can be briefly described.

Museum budgets are built from existing ones. The annual exercise of creating next year's operating budget starts with an analysis of how the income and expense projections and realities unfolded in the current year. Did the numbers meet, exceed or fail projections? The three outcomes will determine what to do going forward, and, what positions will be retained, jettisoned, added to, given raises or bonuses, or have compensation reduced.

Museums fortunate enough to have endowments will examine these to see how well they are performing and what impact that performance may have going forward – positive, neutral or negative. Most museum endowments are never sufficient to meet operating costs. Additional fundraising is always required. These hopes have to be factored into what trustees think can be raised philanthropically and with earned income. Operating track records will determine annual budget numbers.

The following factors will influence museum budgets and thus pay levels.

*Institution size* usually, but not always, suggests museum pay levels. Large institutions may have meager salaries while smaller ones could be quite generous. Trustees will use museum size as a reason for deciding pay levels. Boards responsible for large museums will note that their directors should be paid more than might be the case in small museums because they have more responsibility. Responsibility magnitude is defined by the number of staff to be managed, the scope of an annual budget, the physical size of a museum, and the breadth and expectations of the public served.

*Location* can have a severe impact on museum pay if earned income is of importance to annual budgets. Remote organizations with low visitation are often unable to provide comfortable salaries and will have limited staffing options. This will not be the case, however, if the entity is well-endowed or enjoys the generous support of wealthy governing leadership. The historic properties owned by Classical American Homes, and partly open to the public, offer a good example as the organization was created by a very rich individual. It subsists on his largesse. Though perhaps an exaggerated example, conversely the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City is ideally poised to attract millions of visitors annually. Having recently set a new admission fee for non-city residents its income has skyrocketed. Next to the Broadway theaters as a group, it is the most popular tourist attraction in the city. The impact of income accrued annually has a positive effect on staff compensation.

*Annual budgets* are discussed elsewhere in this chapter. They are key foundational documents when pay is being decided. However, they are always adjustable. Alterations will unfold

if a new programming initiative is set, or a museum adjusts or changes its mission.

*The number of employees* involved in setting job titles, salaries, hours, benefits or bonuses will vary widely. It is important for staff to know who the players are and how much authority and influence they have.

*Professional competency* can have a positive effect on museum pay, or at least provide a sound basis to argue for better compensation. The attainment of a relevant graduate degree during employment might lead to a raise. An impressive list of publications can be presented as a valuable museum asset. Efforts that increase revenue for the museum are always appreciated. Sometimes this can lead to a raise. Of course, the absence of professional competency can work against pay improvements.

Governance and management *personal preferences and prejudices* influence salaries to a larger degree than might be realized. These are implemented by decision makers who may feel an individual is more worthy of a raise than his or her work warrants.

*Operational preferences* will impact salaries. Certain high priority programs, capital expenses, and fundraising initiatives will result in less money for some staff and more for others.

*Long-term unrestricted endowments* must be more of a priority for museums. The larger these funds are, the less precarious a museum's financial position might be. When looking for work, prospective employees are encouraged to examine an institution's financials carefully, noting especially its endowment circumstances.

The idea of generally accepted updated pay scales for

museum jobs that budget developers could refer to is a nice concept but in fact there is no consistent reliable neutral source of this information applicable for every sort of museum. Interpretations of institutional needs and realities and aspirations vary. Trustees act independently and privately in setting their museum budgets. However, improvements are unfolding on this front. The American Alliance of Museums' 2017 *National Museum Salary Survey* offers a good framework to build upon.

Museums can be seen as luxury hobbies established by the rich and largely sustained through their generosity over the years. Given the history of most nonprofit private museums in America the notion is valid. Just about every museum was either founded or otherwise significantly funded by wealthy individuals. The 1% continue to be the principal museum supporters when it comes to significant financial donations. The magnitude of their giving will vary with the institution. Evidence of the importance and impact of private money on museums is often emblazoned on buildings and parts thereof and scattered throughout galleries on plaques and in other customary public recognition ways.

The financial prominence of those who significantly support museums can suggest that those who work in them do so for personal pleasure rather than livelihood necessity. It can be assumed that employees like being associated with powerful movers and shakers. To a degree this is sometimes the case, especially for directors. More than a few see the job as a way to advance their social status, in addition to earning significant salaries and benefits. A retired director of a large urban history museum I know enjoys an annual annuity far higher than most of the staff working at that museum now, in spite of the fact

that in nearly two decades running the institution he nearly destroyed it.

There are several myths about how museums get the lion's share of their funding. It is not from generous corporate underwriting, government largesse or sizable grant awards. To be sure, there are exceptions such as the municipal budget support which older New York City museums receive, and occasionally a sizable contribution can materialize through a significant grant or corporate donation. But for the most part, the lion's share of big money gifts to museums come from individuals.

So, what impact does major giving by individuals have on museum salaries? Good question. In the past, donations for such things as buildings, new wings, or important acquisitions had either no direct effect on staff compensation, or else connectivity was an accounting reality difficult to unravel. It was hard to quantify an actual numerical connection. Recently the old sort of individual giving has expanded to include museum jobs. It is quite common now to have museum directors and curatorial positions named for a donor. My first place of employment has the Ronay Menschel Director of the Museum of the City of New York. I am unaware of any "lowly positions" in the staffing chart hierarchies underwritten with donor support. Perhaps someday there will be financial contributions for maintenance, security, and docent jobs.

The idea of supporting individual museum positions with major contributions is welcome but how these are structured and what, if any, compensation requirements accompany them is usually private information. There are two reasons for this: first, museums rarely divulge actual details of what they consider confidential financial gifts (donors too may insist on

privacy); and second, museums hope to retain as much flexibility as possible in applying these sorts of endowments. It would be interesting to know if donors set salary levels for their contributions, or even what the magnitude of their support is.

The vast majority of people I have worked with over the years have a sense of pride both in their jobs and the institutions employing them. This is important. I have always said I work because I have to but I do museum work because I want to. This attitude might be admirable but it can be self-defeating when it comes to demanding a living wage, meaningful benefits, and professional respect. It suggests staff should do their jobs for intrinsic rewards rather than extrinsic returns. Ideally museum work is a calling – however, that calling should be properly rewarded in one’s pay check.

### **Conclusion**

The title of this chapter is worded as a question. The answer is yes and no. Many museum salaries remain low in spite of a welcome increase in the professionalism of the field since I started. To complicate matters, museums have all sorts of employment for all sorts of timeframes. They can be full-time, part-time, hourly, and seasonal. Add to this the fact that there are so many different sorts of museum in so many different parts of the country and pay levels are widely divergent. Moreover, they have and will continue to fluctuate dramatically in response to institutional fortunes or misfortune as well as the capricious nature of governing boards.

Museums are more popular than ever but they remain precarious financial operations. From a board of trustees’ perspective this means watching the bottom line. Because personnel

costs are the largest part of any museum expense line, pay and benefits are always targets for scrimping. To be sure, some progress has been made but much remains to be accomplished if the reality of “the more things change the more they stay the same” is to be corrected.

There is still a lack of acceptance that all museum jobs require specific training, knowledge, and abilities accompanied by commensurate pay! The concept that anyone can be a director, curator, sales shop manager, guard, educator, exhibit designer or receptionist persists in some circles. This hobby mentality results in meager compensation. Boards of trustees and enthusiastic founders of new museums who are woefully ignorant about them often succumb to this syndrome.

There are several ways to build on present salary improvements in private museums:

- Encourage unions for museum positions that qualify. Rank and file staff at the New Museum, New York City did this in January 2019.
- Foster museum mergers or take-overs if they will provide institutional financial stability and increase compensation.
- Require job ads to include a set salary or pay range.
- Consider listing museum personnel pay on websites, in an annual report, or in some other easily accessible document.
- Encourage museum profession membership organizations to insist compensation be commensurate with reasonable living wages for a location.
- Make staff pay a primary topic of importance for the

Museum Trustees Association.

- Establish an independent desired ambitious pay roster for the variety of customary museum jobs.

This could be an adjusted rolling calculation program of the American Alliance of Museums (AAM). It would need to be monitored and updated as local, regional and national economies ebb and flow. The undertaking should reflect cost of living adjustments as well as disasters like the 2008 recession which hit most museums heavily, especially when it came to pay and job retention. The AAM would be the ideal entity to establish the program and track pay as it serves a wide range of cultural institutions throughout the nation. The organization already defines a long list of positions, as well as understands hourly, part-time, and seasonal jobs. Benefits, including their value and extent, would also need to be considered in the program. Requirements to meet optimum compensation levels could be linked to the AAM's museum accreditation program. Both museums already accredited and those wishing to be would have to adhere to the pay program. The leadership provided by the AAM can be built upon the documentation of its 2017 *National Museum Salary Survey*.

Museum jobs can and will be subject to change. Consequently, how compensation is set will change. The AAM would, presumably, be the most knowledgeable party to effectively keep track of current employment circumstances, hence this recommendation. For example, the salary level for a scientist in a large natural history museum may not correspond to that of a curator in a small history museum – or, it may. That assessment would need to be understood and explained.

Because the AAM hosts an employment classified service on its website, the pay report could be linked to that. How informative would it be for job seekers to compare compensation noted in a job ad with what might be listed by the AAM for a similar position.

Public disclosure of museum pay is essential for future improvements:

Here's what we know about salary transparency: Workers are more motivated when salaries are transparent. They work harder, they're more productive, and they're better at collaborating with colleagues. Across the board, pay transparency seems to be a good thing. Transparency isn't just about business bottom line, however. Researchers say transparency is important because keeping salaries secret reinforces discrimination.<sup>3</sup>

If low wages and inequities are to be taken seriously and acted upon positively, leading voices in the profession need to speak out and speak up about the issue. While efforts can unfold on a grassroots level, those in positions of museum responsibility – trustees in particular – will have to embrace an all-out coordinated effort to strengthen compensation across the board. The work has to be accepted by governing bodies, with the guidance of directors and other executives as well as museum profession organizations. The conversation has begun. It cannot succeed without due diligence and constant pressure for reform.

## NOTES

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1. Lynes, R., 1973. *Good Old Modern*. New York: Athenaeum.
2. Coleman, L. V., 1939. *The Museum in America, A Critical Study, Volume 2*. Washington, DC: American Association of Museums. (398)
3. Wong, K., 2019. Want to Close the Pay Gap? Try Transparency, *The New York Times*, 21 Jan, B8.