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6 tips for being a gallery curator

Héloïse Parke is the curator of The Aram Gallery, one of London's only non-commercial contemporary design galleries. She offers six pieces of advice for working as a gallery curator.



"Some of the best exhibitions I have seen have been where a curator has picked up on something often taken for granted."

1. Study something that trains you to observe

Curators need to be able to observe, analyse and critique. You can get good at these skills by studying something conventional, like art history, history or visual culture, or by doing a more hands-on course.

So many curators have a background in theory because it gives you an exceptionally good layer of referential knowledge. You are always learning on the job, but it's so valuable to be able to reference other pivotal moments in art or design history.

These types of courses also help you to develop in-depth research and writing abilities: a skillset you will rely on daily in your professional career. There is a lot of writing involved in running a gallery, so being rehearsed in many types of writing styles will stand you in good stead.

2. Curators must read

Read, read, read – and visit. Reading not only keeps you knowledgeable, but also helps you to form opinions and determine your views on a particular subject.

Visiting other exhibitions and events, not just in your discipline, is vital.

Visiting other exhibitions and events, not necessarily just in your specialised discipline, is vital. Practicing your observational skills in this way not only keeps them sharp, but also gives your brain a break!

When I get a bit bogged down trying to work through an idea for a new exhibition, I take a trip to Tate Modern or even just to Magma book shop for their range of magazines to visually refresh my mind.

3. Curators should be original

Original ideas make good exhibitions. As mentioned, the more you observe and read, the more you will be able to pick out unfamiliar territory in your chosen field.

You can then use what you find as a starting point for developing an original exhibition concept or an original moment in a much explored subject.

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The exhibition that inspired me to be a curator was Fabric of Vision at the National Gallery in 2002. I was fascinated by the painterly skill of the artists and by the fact that it was a blockbuster exhibition built on the curator's observations of the fall of cloth.

4. Curators need to be organised

If you're not naturally organised, find tools to help you: note-taking, reminders, apps... whatever works for you.

Make every effort to speak to people you don't know.

At the start of your career you'll be feeling your way in a new industry, whether working on big projects with many elements or lots and lots of small projects. To keep these straight you'll need to be very methodical and focused.

I am a fanatical note taker. As you become more experienced, you'll learn how good you are at remembering details, and thus be able to gauge how much detail you need to jot down.

Become familiar with Microsoft Excel. It is the most universally efficient tool for a) tracking multiple projects' progress and b) keeping on top of deadlines.

5. Talk to strangers

At industry events, make every effort to speak to people you don't know. It's often easy to get on the guest lists for small events by calling organisers in advance. At these events you may make a valuable connection with someone new, but not every conversation has to be treated like an opportunity!

Be friendly and listen well and you'll be remembered as approachable and a good networker, which is valuable for your future career.

It's always useful to have some business cards to hand at these events, and do ask for cards from people you would like to be in touch with. LinkedIn is a good way of connecting with people you don't exchange cards with.

6. Take pride in your work

Spending eight weeks on the logistics of shipping 30 works from all over the world is certain to give you a headache. Stay focused and you'll be rewarded when things slot neatly into place.

You have chosen this field because you are passionate about it. Let that be evident in everything you do, whatever the size of the task. If you can't, you're in the wrong job!

Find out more about [The Aram Gallery](#) and its temporary exhibitions.