Collections Assistant

Project & Job Description

Overview and History of the Project

The Agnes Etherington Art Centre is the art gallery for Queen's University and for the greater Kingston region. More than 36,000 people from Queen's, regional and international communities visit the Agnes annually to enjoy an average of 12 new exhibitions a year, the majority of which draw from our permanent collection of over 17,000 artworks. Diversely composed, the collection includes works that range from Canadian historical artists to historical European masters to Inuit artists and contemporary Canadian artists as well as a collection of 18th–20th century costume.

Currently two important and related projects are being undertaken at the Agnes: The last stage of the project to survey and assess the collection of the Queen’s University Collection of Canadian Dress (QUCCD) and the installation of the exhibition, Stepping Out: Clothes for a Gallery Goer.

The QUCCD comprises over 2,500 fashion items spanning the late 1700s to 1970s, primarily from the Kingston region. The emphasis is on women’s dresses, particularly from the 1890s to mid-20th century, but the collection also includes a range of accessories, as well as some children’s and men’s clothing. A professional survey of condition of all accessioned costume has just been completed this fall, providing a template for the last phase of the project, which will be to research and identify, inventory, catalogue, condition survey and properly house and store the nearly 200 costume items that have not yet been processed or accessioned. In a related program, in the late spring of 2019 the Agnes will mount the exhibition Stepping Out: Clothes for a Gallery Goer. The exhibition, which opens at the beginning of the SWEP term, highlights costumes from the permanent collection, including recent acquisitions and objects that have never been on display. The exhibition proposes outfits that one might imagine worn to a gallery, coupled with contemporaneous works of art. As part of the professional museum operation, the costume items in the exhibition will be examined on a regular basis throughout the run of the exhibition to monitor for condition, pest infestation, strain and/or damage to the costumes.

The Collections Management department at the Agnes is responsible for the care, access to, preservation, organization and proper storage of both the...
artworks and the associated records, which consist of all archival material, photographs and research related to each work as well as exhibition documentation. The survey and assessment of the QUCCD and monitoring of the exhibition fall under the joint responsibility of the Curatorial and the Collections Management department.

Relevance of the Project

As the steward of a public art collection, one of our very important responsibilities is to make Agnes art and costume collections and exhibitions easily accessible to the public, researchers, students and scholars. The survey and condition assessment of the QUCCD has greatly enhanced intellectual and physical access to and research of our remarkable costume collection. This final phase of the project, the inventory and cataloguing of the costume items that have not yet been processed, catalogued or given proper storage housing, will provide as-yet unknown information about the makeup of this part of the collection. The Agnes costume collection supports course work taught at Queen's. Most recently Queen's Religion, Art History, History, Cultural Studies, Art Conservation and Gender Studies classes have interacted with our costume collection. By improving its physical condition and intellectual access through exhibition, research, cataloguing and digital media the QUCCD will become a more actively used resource for teaching, learning and research.

This project offers a very relevant experience to the SWEP student who will inevitably use this job to build on art history, fine art or history coursework. The project fulfills one of Queen's stated priorities. The first driver of the Queen's Strategic Framework is to enhance the student learning experience and to "develop innovative ways to help students develop fundamental academic skills by providing experiential education opportunities." This priority is echoed in the Academic Plan, Pillar III, "Innovative community and place-based learning, increased emphasis on Field Studies, and community volunteer opportunities will enhance the pro-diversity approach to teaching and learning." Experiential learning is a priority for both Queen's and the Ontario Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development and this position will provide a student with an excellent experiential opportunity. The student will work closely with curators and consult with costume historians, research the history, use, cultural aspects and materials of our costume collection, identify museum objects, handle museum artefacts, and review and examine permanent collection artworks. This is an excellent opportunity to interact directly with museum objects, to develop safe handling practices and to gain exposure to a significant Canadian art collection. This type of experience is great preparation for a student intending to apply for graduate
studies in art history, art conservation, curatorial studies or museum work. In
the past eleven years, after completing a degree in Art History or History
augmented by a summer work term or a term of volunteering in the
Collections Management department at the Agnes, our past students have
gone on to take graduate degrees in Museum Studies, Information Studies,
Art Conservation, Art History or Curatorial Practice as well as internships at
Queen's, McGill, the University of Toronto, the Courtauld Institute of Art, the
University of Leicester, OCAD University, Christie's, Sotheby's Institute of
Art, Leiden University, the National Gallery of Canada, the Art Gallery of
Ontario, the Canadian Conservation Institute and the Art Institute of Chicago.

Description of the Role

In support of the project to survey and assess risk to and condition of the
QUCCD, the Collections Assistant will condition survey, inventory, catalogue
and properly store approximately 200 unaccessioned and undocumented
items in the QUCCD. This work will include researching use, materials and
cultural significance of the costumes; handling objects; labelling objects;
rehousing; properly storing; documenting and moving textile objects. As well
the Collections Assistant will organize and stage an imaging session to
photograph segments of the collection and upload those images to the Agnes
on-line searchable collections. To further support care of the collections, the
successful candidate will develop a monitoring program for the
exhibition Stepping Out: Clothes for a Gallery Goer, undertake the monitoring
through the work term and ensure that the monitoring plan can be continued
throughout the run of the exhibition. To gain an understanding of how works
are stored, identified and documented at the Agnes Etherington Art Centre,
the SWEP student will catalogue 10 new acquisitions of artwork made in
2018/19. In consultation with the Curators of Canadian Historical Art,
Contemporary Art, the Bader Curator of European Art and the Collections
Manager, the SWEP student will catalogue, prepare research files for and
find appropriate storage for these 10 works (which will include European and
Canadian historical, costume and contemporary works).

Required qualifications

The successful candidate will have:
At least 3 university-level courses in art history, fine art and/or history
Strong and demonstrated interest in visual arts
Superior hand skills
Basic art handling skills are desirable
Ability to do light lifting
Solid computer skills, especially in the use of databases
Sewing skills are an asset
Experience editing images using Photoshop or an equivalent software
Excellent organization and time-management skills
Concern for accuracy with keen attention to detail
Personal initiative and the ability to work independently
Good research skills
Superior written and oral communication skills
Sensitivity to confidentiality and privacy issues associated with museum work
Satisfactory Criminal Records Check

Learning Plan

The student will develop and demonstrate the following technical and professional skills as a result of the Collections Assistant position:

Enhanced understanding of Canadian historic and contemporary artworks as well as European works. The following opportunities/activities will facilitate this development:

- Referencing the artworks, research files and photo documentation
- Accessioning and cataloguing 10 newly acquired artworks
- Reviewing existing documentation on the Queen’s University Collection of Canadian Dress (QUCCD)

Knowledge of conservation and preventative conservation principles and practices. The following opportunities/activities will facilitate this development:

- Working with a professional museum staff
- Supervised by the Collections Manager, handling textile artefacts
- Learning how to properly house and store textile artefacts
- Learning basic textile display mounting methods
- Learning labelling techniques for museum textile objects
- Setting up and undertaking a monitoring program for the costume objects in the exhibition Stepping Out: Clothes for a Gallery Goer

Photo editing skills. The following opportunities/activities will facilitate this development:

- Using Adobe Photoshop to edit images of objects in the costume collection for upload to the on-line searchable collections

An understanding of documentation practices and manual and computerized record keeping systems in a museum context. The following opportunities/activities will facilitate this development:
• Training in the use of the Art Centre’s collection management database, MIMSY XG, the Art Centre's on-line collection highlights software, Mobius, and reporting software, Crystal Reports
• Reviewing the use of and creating object research files

Research skills as they relate to 19th and 20th century costume:

• Hands-on experience interacting with, handling and processing an important costume collection
• Collections assistant will learn a great deal about 19th and 20th century costume and develop knowledge of the history of this area and its people through their clothing
• Increased knowledge of costume and textile history, construction and technology

An understanding of the process of project management. The following opportunities/activities will facilitate this development:

• Reviewing the objectives of the project with the supervisor
• Establishing a reasonable timeline and milestones for the project
• Regularly assessing project progress
• In consultation with the supervisor, developing strategies to meet deadlines
• Organizing photography sessions

Increased awareness of time management issues, including development of good organizational skills and an ability to work to a deadline. The following opportunities/activities will facilitate this development:

• Developing a timeline for the work term with the supervisor
• Regular scheduled and informal updates with the supervisor

Familiarity with museum practices, standards, ethics and confidentiality, particularly as they relate to art museums. The following opportunities/activities will facilitate this development:

• Instruction in museum standards for collections management practices and registration methods, provided by the supervisor
• Experience moving and handling artworks

An understanding of safe practices in a museum. The following opportunities/activities will facilitate this development:

• Instruction in security, safety, protocols and operations of the Agnes Etherington Art Centre
• Instruction in the proper use of mobile stairs used in storage vaults, proper art handling techniques and safe methods of lifting
• Instruction on how to affix safe and inert labels on museum objects

The student will be able to participate in the following unique opportunities:
Opportunities to network with Art Centre staff, contemporary Canadian artists and peers through:

• Liaising with Art Centre curators for guidance in identifying costume artefacts
• Developing a professional network of peers including interns and other student volunteers and employees working in a number of different departments at the Agnes
• Consulting with textile conservators and historians