

Copyright is owned by the Author of the thesis. Permission is given for a copy to be downloaded by an individual for the purpose of research and private study only. The thesis may not be reproduced elsewhere without the permission of the Author.

# **“JACKS OF ALL TRADES”**

**The Role Of Exhibition Officers In Regional Museums:  
Four Case Studies from the Lower North Island, New Zealand.**

**A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirement of the  
Master of Arts (Social Sciences) in Museum Studies  
at Massey University**

**Stuart Graeme McAdam**

**1996**

MASSEY UNIVERSITY LIBRARY



1062087659

## ABSTRACT

The aim of this thesis is to explore the roles of Exhibition Officers who work in regional museums in New Zealand. Research comprised interviews with the Exhibition Officers, Directors and Curators (or equivalent) of four institutions, and an examination of institutional documents, including job descriptions, salary scales and annual reports.

The roles of Exhibition Officers include the design, fabrication and installation of exhibitions; the design of publicity material and some functions traditionally regarded as "curatorial". The variety of roles is partly due to institutional requirements of these positions and partly because of the wide range of skills which Exhibition Officers bring from previous training and experience. The extent of the curatorial functions performed by Exhibition Officers depends on the boundaries of the Curators roles in each institution. Two of the participant Exhibition Officers had a major role in the curation of exhibitions. The flexibility of roles in some institutions makes it imperative that there is a mutual understanding of each other's roles by Exhibition Officer and Curator.

A discussion of the status of Exhibition Officers in their own institutions and among the wider body of museums was important to the discussion of their roles. While Directors spoke of the high esteem in which they held their Exhibition Officers, in most instances this was not matched by awarding them with a salary that equated with other high status positions such as the institutions' Curators. Where status may affect the performance of the Exhibition Officer is in resource allocation. It is clear that in comparison to curatorial functions, the exhibitions function in some of the case study museums has a low priority in the allocation of staff resources. It is likely that the lack of recognised qualifications held by Exhibition Officers constrains their status among the wider body of museum workers. This is hindered by the fact that there is currently very little appropriate training for Exhibition Officers.

MASSEY UNIVERSITY



1061097472

The informality of communication and exhibition planning documented in this study is at odds with the formalised and prescriptive approaches to be found in museological texts. There is a need for the development of literature on museum practice derived from ethnographic studies in New Zealand museums and museums of similar size and function in other countries. This will provide practitioners and students with a more accurate representation of issues and practices in museums than some museological texts drawn from the larger institutions overseas.

A discussion of exhibition planning in the participant museums showed that the inter-relationship between museums and the public needs to be enhanced by making exhibitions more visitor-focused. This may be achieved by instituting formal evaluation of exhibitions and focus group research. It was apparent that there was little critical feedback from the public on museum exhibitions. This makes it difficult for Exhibition Officers to ascertain if exhibitions are meeting goals, or if exhibitions are being provided that the public wish to see.

This thesis supports the contention that to understand the workings of museums, more research on the roles of museum staff and museum practice must be carried out.

069.5  
McA

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my gratitude to David Butts, Senior Lecturer, Director of Museum Studies; Dr. Juliana Mansvelt, Lecturer, Geography Department; and Henry Bernard, Senior Lecturer, Department of Social Anthropology, Massey University, for supervision and support; Vivienne Shaw, Secretary, Museum Studies, Massey University, for her support and assistance during the preparation of the thesis and Professor Keith Thomson for his comments on an early draft of the thesis.

My deepest thanks go to the staff of regional museums who participated in this research project:

Margaret Cranwell, Exhibitions Officer, Hawke's Bay Museum, Roger Smith, Executive Director, Hawke's Bay Cultural Trust, Roxanne Fea, Curator of Trust Collections, Hawke's Bay Museum; Lisa Stachurski, Exhibition Officer, Ron Lambert, Director, and Kelvin Day, Programme Co-ordinator/Deputy Director, Taranaki Museum; Bert Lett, Exhibitions Officer, the late Brian Henderson, Director, and Pat Stodart, temporary Curator, Whanganui Regional Museum; Jolene Douglas, Exhibition Officer, Priscilla Thompson, former Director, and Mike Spedding, Curator of History, Gisborne Museum and Arts Centre, and all other staff of these museums who made me feel welcome.

I am grateful to Greg McManus, Director of Gisborne Museums and Arts Centre, and Sharon Dell, Director, Whanganui Regional Museum for further information and permission to identify their museums in this thesis.

The research process was supported by a Graduate Research Award from Massey University, and a financial contribution from the Museum Studies Unit. My thanks are extended to both.

## PREFACE

I can always remember being fascinated by exhibitions in museums. In later years, through my working life and university courses, I developed an interest in the study of "work". This thesis gave me scope to combine these interests and ask "Who are the people who make exhibitions and what do they do?"

Margaret Cranwell, the Exhibitions Officer of Hawke's Bay suggested that a comparative study of the full range of functions carried out by Exhibition Officers in a number of museums would be interesting for her and other Exhibition Officers. She described the core of her duties as the design, fabrication and installation of exhibitions and wondered what duties were performed by Exhibition Officers in other museums. She also believed a study of this nature would be of use to those entering the workforce in gaining an idea of the range of duties encompassed by this occupational group. I decided to follow her suggestion, hence the subtitle of the thesis.

When looking at a listing of New Zealand Museums that contained names of staff and their positions, I noticed that the position of Exhibition Officer is common to a number of institutions, including museums of art, history and anthropology. Many of these were the generalist provincial museums, designated as "regional museums".

Having been a volunteer at two regional museums, Hawke's Bay Museum and The Science Centre and Manawatu Museum, I had some familiarity with and an admiration for the work of their Exhibition Officers. This positive pre-disposition was a factor in the decision to undertake research into the work of Exhibition Officers. However, from personal observation and a review of the literature, I also sensed that exhibition staff are sometimes accorded lower status in museums than other "professional" museum staff. The status of Exhibition Officers was therefore included in the inquiry.

The influences that affected the design of the research and the style of representation, stem from my background in Social Anthropology, especially in the attempt to represent the perceptions and experiences of those who participated in the research. However, I am also pragmatic and have no strict allegiance to one method or paradigm (Bryman, 1990:89-90; Patton, 1990:186-189). I have therefore combined some quantitative elements with the largely qualitative approach used in this research project.

Social Anthropology and Museum Studies stress an ethical approach to conducting research. I was most concerned that this approach be built into this research and made strenuous efforts to do so.

While this research takes an anthropological approach, I have attempted to address museological issues in this thesis, which I feel need documentation and discussion.

## CONTENTS

<b>1.</b>	<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>2.</b>	<b>Literature Review</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>3.</b>	<b>Research Methods</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>4.</b>	<b>Case Studies</b>	<b>27</b>
4.1	Margaret Cranwell, Exhibitions Officer, Hawke's Bay Museum	28
4.2	Lisa Stachurski, Exhibition Officer, Taranaki Museum	45
4.2.1	The Planning of Long-Term Exhibitions: Taranaki Museum	60
4.3	Bert Lett, Exhibitions Officer, Whanganui Regional Museum	64
4.4	Jolene Douglas, Exhibition Officer, Gisborne Museum and Arts Centre	84
<b>5.</b>	<b>Cross-Case Comparison</b>	<b>98</b>
<b>6.</b>	<b>Conclusions</b>	<b>108</b>
	<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>113</b>
	<b>Appendices</b>	<b>128</b>



## List of Figures

<b>Fig. 1:</b> Staff Structure Chart, Hawke's Bay Cultural Centre.	30
<b>Fig. 2:</b> Staff Structure Chart, Taranaki Museum.	46
<b>Fig. 3:</b> Staff Structure Chart, Whanganui Regional Museum.	65
<b>Fig. 4:</b> Staff Structure Chart, Gisborne Museum and Arts Centre.	87

## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

Regional museums in New Zealand perform many functions, including the preservation of historical, artistic and cultural heritage, exhibitions, public programmes and research. However, the experience that most of the public have of museums is provided by exhibitions. Thus it is the quality of exhibitions created by museum staff, including Exhibition Officers, that help shape the public's perception of museums.

There is little documentation of the work of exhibitions staff. While British and North American museological literature provides some discussion of the functions of these staff, there is virtually no discussion of the role of exhibitions staff in New Zealand or Australian museological literature.

The aim of this thesis is to initiate research and discussion on the nature of the work of Exhibition Officers by exploring the role (or roles) of four staff whose positions are designated "Exhibition Officer" or "Exhibitions Officer" (which collectively I refer to as "Exhibition Officer") who work in regional museums in New Zealand. The investigation examines the institutional requirements of this position, the ways in which Exhibition Officers and other staff perceive the role of Exhibition Officers, the implementation of these roles (through a discussion of the processes used in exhibition planning), and how these roles compare with one another. This study highlights the importance of researching museum practice and in particular that of New Zealand museums

A knowledge of museum practice is an essential prerequisite to a discussion of the existence or otherwise of a "museum profession". The "professional" status of museum practitioners is much-debated. The combination of manual, technical, and curatorial functions identified in

the work of Exhibition Officers in this study makes the issue of their professional status more problematic than staff with specialist roles, (such as Curators in large institutions whose responsibilities are clearly identified with an academic discipline).

The meaning of the term "role" used in this study is that of the "usual function" of Exhibition Officers. Through the presentation of the case studies, the thesis documents the "role" of four Exhibition Officers employed in regional museums in New Zealand.

Those museums that describe themselves as "regional museums" are those that serve an area wider than their town, city or district, often acting as the supporting agent for the smaller museums in their region. While regional museums employ Exhibition Officers or other generalist exhibitions staff, most smaller local museums do not. Interestingly, many provincial art galleries, which were outside the scope of this study, also employ Exhibition Officers (Cairns, 1994). The exhibitions staff of larger metropolitan museums are more specialised again, and employ staff with job titles such as Exhibitions Designer and Exhibitions Technician.

The regional museums of the lower North Island (Hawke's Bay Museum, Taranaki Museum, Whanganui Regional Museum, and Gisborne Museum and Arts Centre) were found to be comparable in terms of staff numbers and types of exhibitions. These institutions each employ approximately ten professional staff with a range of exhibitions that include history, ethnography, taonga Maori, art, and natural history. I sought and received approval to conduct research into the role of the Exhibition Officer in each of these institutions.

Case studies are based on research conducted in the four museums mentioned above. Qualitative case study research methods, including qualitative interviews, elicited information on the roles of Exhibition Officers from the points of view of a number of museum professionals. The case studies aim to represent the views of the research participants in as accurate and balanced a manner as possible.

The Thesis consists of six Chapters. Chapter Two presents a discussion of museological and other literature relevant to the thesis topic. It highlights the lack of literature of direct relevance to the topic. Chapter Three presents a discussion of methodology used in the research project. It clearly documents the rationale behind the choice of qualitative case study methodology, and discusses the design and implementation of the research strategies. Chapter Four presents four case studies which draw on the interviews and other research conducted in the participant institutions. Chapter Five presents a comparative discussion of the case studies. Chapter Six presents the findings of the thesis, and makes recommendations for future action and areas for further investigation.

Readers of this thesis should remember that the specific circumstances described in each institution reflect the time when research was undertaken in 1994 and do not necessarily reflect circumstances of an earlier or later date. Although the case studies are based in generalist regional museums, the findings of the study raise issues that are pertinent to the role of exhibitions staff in other heritage institutions.