

# Whither Museum Studies?

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In this article, we assess the state of museum studies, with special attention to programs in the United States. After briefly reviewing the historical trajectory of museum studies, we define this field of study and determine that it should more accurately be called museology. To investigate the most critical issues in current museological pedagogy, we then address museology's current status and, finally, its future through select critical issues in the field: museological thinking, the meaning of *museum professional*, museology as an academic discipline, and museological curricula.

**Keywords:** history of museology, museology, museology curriculum, museum professional, museum studies

In this article, we assess the state of museum studies, with special attention to programs in the United States. Between us, we have 78 years of work in museum practice and 35 years teaching in museum studies programs. One of us (Simmons) is a historian with a long perspective of the field, the other (Latham) is a theoretician of museology with a conceptual perspective. Although most of our experience has been in the United States, we have both worked extensively in other countries as well, giving us a broader, global understanding of the field. We acknowledge that museology as it is conceived in other parts of the world is understood through cultural and linguistic differences. Here, we position museum studies within the information sciences, following [Bates \(2012\)](#). However, we recognize that because this field is a meta-discipline (cutting across more traditional disciplines) and that its subject matter focuses on the relationships between people and documents—as Czech museologist Z. Z. [Stránský \(1987, p. 295\)](#) said, “the specific relation between man and reality”—it makes sense to place it in this context pedagogically.

In this paper, we organize our inquiry and statements into three sections. First, we examine what museum studies is and how it has developed historically, then its current status, and finally its future through select critical issues in the field.

## What is museum studies, and what is it not?

Museum studies is a field of academic endeavor that critically examines museums, their histories and functions, and their roles in society. It is an interdisciplinary field of research and scholarship that involves the development of theory and its application in practice (Latham & Simmons, 2014). Despite widespread misperceptions, museum studies is not simply a training program for people who work in museums. Museum work is a profession, a community of practice, that requires specialized knowledge and skill sets as well as an understanding of its theoretical bases. Museum studies programs that overlook the rich and growing literature on museums (see Kuo & Yang, 2015; Rounds, 2001; Teasdale & Fruin, 2017), or teach only the practical aspects of museum work while ignoring history and theory, do not produce museum professionals who are able to critique—and hence improve—the institutions they work in. A balance of theory and practice is essential for museum professionals.

Although museums have existed for hundreds of years, and collections for many thousands of years, the modern museum as we know it today came into being in only the latter 1700s (Simmons, 2016). As museums evolved over time, they have diversified into many different kinds of specialized, complex institutions, and, as a consequence, museum professional practice has become increasingly divergent and specialized as well.

In 1904, when David Murray published his comprehensive work *Museums, Their History and Their Use*, the museum profession was just

### KEY POINTS

- Museum studies, better known internationally as museology, is an interdisciplinary field of academic scholarship that critically examines the histories, functions, and roles of museums in society using theory and analysis of professional practice. Museology is often misunderstood to focus on museum practice when, in fact, it explores all theoretical and practical issues in museums and museal situations.
- Professional training in museology is diverse and diffuse, with both specialized and generalist programs, predominately at the master's degree level. Museological thinking enables meta-disciplinary approaches across a wide spectrum of related fields of study and informs the work of museum professionals.
- Although practical training is important for museum workers, academic programs must strive to present a balance of the theoretical and practical aspects of museology to produce professionals with an in-depth understanding of museums and critical thinking skills.

beginning to emerge as a distinct field. Within a few years, the “scholar-curators [who] undertook almost all of the museum’s specialized work” (Boylan, 2006, p. 418) began to be supplanted by a variety of trained museologists as museum staff professionalized. Llorente (2012) identifies three factors that were fundamental to the professionalization of museum staff: (1) an increase in specialized publications addressing museological issues; (2) the organization of professional associations of museologists; and (3) the establishment of university-based formal training programs.

The first museological publications were focused on museum practice, such as Samuel von Quiccheberg’s 1565 book *Inscriptiones; vel, tituli theatric amplissimi* (*Inscriptions, or, Titles of the Most Ample Theater*) on the organization of collections in cabinets of curiosities (Meadow & Robertson, 2013). What is widely considered to be the first true museological text was published in 1727 under the name Caspar Neickel, a pseudonym for Kaspar Freidrich Jenequel (Simmons, 2016), and included guidelines for acquisitions and collections care and the classification of objects in collections. Subsequent works continued to treat museum practice but were increasingly grounded on theoretical considerations (Llorente, 2012). The oldest organizations for museum professionals are the Museums Association (UK), founded in 1889, and the American Association of Museums (now the American Alliance of Museums), founded in 1906; the International Council of Museums (ICOM) was founded in 1948 (Latham, Simmons, 2015). Training for museum work started slowly, despite the fact that the earliest formal museum training program in the United States began in 1908 and the first university-based program started in 1910 (Cushman, 1984). However, throughout the first half of the twentieth century, formal training gradually shifted away from museums and to universities, so by the time Georges-Henri Rivière and Hugues de Varine Bohan launched *nouvelle muséologie* (the new museology) in the 1960s, the locus of training for museum professionals was in university-based academic programs. As a result, during the late 1970s, graduate programs proliferated in universities around the world, particularly in the United States (Knell, 2005; Simmons, 2007, 2016; Vergo, 1989). One indication of how important museological theory had become is that the vast majority of the new programs were at the master’s degree level. However, doctoral programs in museum studies remain extremely rare (Simmons, 2007).

It is unclear when the name *museum studies* began to be applied to academic museum programs. In English-speaking countries, the name *museum studies* reflected the discipline’s inclusion in the interdisciplinary area studies movement that became popular in the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom after World War II. The movement spawned degrees focused on such areas as Latin American studies, women’s studies, and African studies, promoted in the United States by reports commissioned by the Ford Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation, and the Carnegie Corporation, among others.

Outside of the English-speaking world, *museum studies* is most often called by the more apt name *museology*.<sup>1</sup> According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the first use of museology in English was in 1885, while the term *museum studies* does not appear in the OED at all. Museology is a more descriptive name for the discipline than museum studies because the former implies an in-depth scholarly examination of museums, which the latter does not. Nevertheless, due largely to the influence of the 1967 white paper “American Museums: The Belmont Report,” the name *museum studies* came into widespread use in English.

In short, museum studies is not a new field of academic study, and it should be more properly called museology in English-speaking countries as it is in the rest of the world. As stated by Jesús Pedro Llorente in his *Manual de Historia de la Museología* (2012, p. 11):

La museología es una disciplina científica que está en proceso de consolidación pero tiene ya bastante trayecto recorrido, pues los primeros tratados museológicos son prácticamente coetáneos con al origen de los museos.

[Museology is a scientific discipline that is in the process of consolidation but has already traveled a long way—the first museological treatises are practically contemporary with the origin of museums.]

For the remainder of this paper, then, we will call this field of study *museology*.

### The current state of affairs

The museological literature has grown substantially since 1900, and exponentially since the 1970s, and now consists of a wide variety of specialized and generalist journals, scholarly books, textbooks, and manuals of practice (Rounds, 2001; Simmons, 2016). Along with this there has been an increase in the number of museologically themed publications appearing in literature sources that are not directly museological (e.g., literary and social science sources), particularly utilizing key museological concepts such as museal, musealia, and musealization (Desvallées & Mairesse, 2010).

The development and implementation of museological theory and research are closely related to the growth of museum literature (Latham & Simmons, 2014). There is a rich tradition of both theory and research in Europe (e.g., Mairesse, 2005, 2016; van Mensch, 1992) and the United Kingdom (e.g., Marstine, 2006; Vergo, 1989). One significant contribution to museological theory is from Ivo Maroević (1937–2007) of the University of Zagreb. Maroević is best known in English-speaking countries for his seminal book, *Introduction to Museology: The European Approach* (first published in Croatian in 1993, first English edition 1998). In it, he situated museology within the information sciences and established that museological methodologies connect the applied and the theoretical.

Another related emerging area of recent theoretical development has been documentation studies (see [Gorichanaz & Latham, 2016](#), for review, and [Latham, 2012](#), for application). Other current theoretical approaches focus on museums as places of person–object interactions (for reviews, see [Message & Witcomb, 2015](#); [Wood & Latham, 2013](#)), and theoretical views of museums are appearing in anthropology, sociology, semiotics, and other disciplines (e.g., [Andrade, 2016](#); [Grethlein, 2008](#); [Teather, 1991](#)).

Academic training in museology has both increased and diversified greatly just over the last decade. A 2007 survey identified 31 academic museology programs in North America, 26 of them in the United States ([Simmons, 2007](#)). We recently conducted a Google search using only the search terms “museum studies” and “museology” (and their French, German, and Spanish equivalents) to see how degree-granting programs were self-described. The search turned up a total of 263 programs worldwide using one or more of the terms (see [Table 1](#)). A total of 135 (51%) of the programs were based in the United States. Using each program’s self-described specialization(s) we found a total of 55 descriptors, the most common of which was *museum studies* (used by 75 programs), with only one program using the term *museology* (see [Table 2](#); note that many programs listed more than one specialization). We did not attempt to confirm exactly what any of the programs taught—our interest was in how many programs self-described as museum studies and, of those, which specializations they claimed. What is significant is that not all of the programs that identify as museum studies programs actually focus on museology, further evidence of how diverse and diffuse the field is at present.

## Reflections on museology

This section is a series of reflections on enduring controversies in museology in four main areas—museological thinking, the meaning of *museum professional*, museology as an academic discipline, and museological curricula. Underlying all of these issues is the question of how to distinguish museology from other fields of study. What makes something museology

**Table 1: Academic “museum studies” programs**

Region	Number of academic programs
Africa	5
Asia and Pacific	15
Latin America and the Caribbean	23
Europe	34
United Kingdom	35
Canada	16
United States	135
Total	263

**Table 2: Descriptions of focus of academic programs**

Program descriptor	Number of programs in 2018	Program descriptor	Number of programs in 2018
American material culture	1	History and culture	1
American studies	1	History of collecting and display	1
Archival administration	1	Museology	1
Archives management	1	Museum administration	1
Art history	1	Museum and curatorial studies	1
Art museum education	3	Museum and exhibition studies	1
Art museum studies	1	Museum and field studies	1
Arts administration	3	Museum and gallery studies	1
Arts and cultural policy studies	1	Museum anthropology	1
Arts education	1	Museum communication	1
Arts management	1	Museum curatorship	1
Collection management and practice	1	Museum education	2
Cultural heritage	1	Museum exhibition, planning and design	1
Cultural resources	1	Museum leadership	1
Cultural studies	1	Museum management	1
Curatorial practice	1	Museum professions	1
Curatorial studies	3	Museum scholarship and material culture	1
Digital curation	1	Museum studies	75
Digital stewardship	1	Museum theory and practice	1
Exhibit design	4	Museums and digital culture	1
Exhibition and museum studies	1	Museums and society	1
Exhibition planning and design	1	Object studies	1
Heritage and museum studies	1	Preservation studies	1
Heritage resources	1	Public administration	1
Heritage studies for a global society	1	Public history	6
Historical administration	1	Urban museum studies	1
Historic preservation	5	TOTAL 54 descriptors	147
History	1		

rather than art history, social science, or public history? Should museology programs offer academic training or vocational training? Should there be a PhD degree in museology? What should museology programs teach?

### What is museological thinking?

Museology has been defined as a meta-discipline (Latham, 2012) because it cuts orthogonally across traditional disciplines (Bates, 2012). Museology is a thread that weaves through diverse topics including art history, history, geology, natural history, and anthropology. *Museological thinking* means understanding the complex relationships between people and objects (e.g., an interaction/transaction/encounter between a person/people/human and material culture/documents/things). The encounter—the coming together of human with object that results in a meaningful exchange—can be between any human and any object, no matter the subject, exhibit, or museal situation. Museological thinking is the product of consideration of this relationship, and from this flow functional approaches to museum work such as exhibition, education, visitor studies, and collection management. The core of museological thinking has always been the relationship between people and objects.

Museological thinking is grounded in theory (without theory, actions are performed without purpose). Although theory seems to be considered a “bad word” in some areas of museum work, this need not be the case. Theory is simply the why that surrounds the how and what we do in museums. Theory allows professionals to develop a philosophy underpinning museum work (e.g., Why are things collected and held in perpetuity for future generations? What value is there in doing this?). Over the past few years, we have begun to use the terms *concept*, *conceptual*, or *philosophy* rather than the word *theory*, because these terms seem to resonate with people better, promoting an open dialogue rather than a negative reaction. Outside of the United States, theory has been embraced for decades (however, in some instances, this is seen as a negative—see, for example, Grewcock, 2016).

Identifying museological thinking is critically important for several reasons. First, the value of museum work is often unclear to outsiders and perhaps even invisible outside of museums (Latham, 2007). More often than we’d like to admit, when we tell people we teach museology, the response is, “Oh, I didn’t know you needed a degree for that,” an indication that museum work is undervalued by society. Second, museum professionals understandably get bogged down in the minutiae of their daily work. The focus on the functional side of museum work often causes workers to forget the deeper purpose. Museological thinking is a way to bring us back to the reasons museums exist, the reasons we choose to work in them. This self-reflection is important regardless of one’s career stage.

While the field as a whole should have a shared understanding of what museological thinking is, as individual museum professionals we should each also have our own professional philosophies, developed from

reflection of field-wide concepts. Developing a museological lens as a member of a profession as well as a worker in a particular museum is an important ingredient in having a quality experience and effect. Furthermore, museological thinking is not reserved for museum professionals. There are many situations in which a museological lens is beneficial for seeing meaningful relationships between people and things. There are numerous examples of meaningful person–object transactions in all aspects of life, such as the keeping of family heirlooms, restaurants and bars that decorate their walls with antique objects to achieve a local sporting or historical ambiance, touring history sites, preservation of historic districts in cities, the fad for vintage fashions, the use of ritual in religious services and public events, and following certain holiday traditions.

### What makes a museum professional?

Museology is a rich and diverse area of study. This diversity keeps the field’s potentialities fresh but makes it difficult to define a set of shared standards or competencies (Boylan, 2006; Williams & Simmons, 2007). For example, what a curator does can be quite different from the director of marketing’s tasks, or the gift shop manager’s tasks. Added to this are the many content areas in museums, from natural history to contemporary art. While we celebrate this interdisciplinarity, its complexity has left the field without a shared understanding of what constitutes a museum professional (see review in Simmons, 2007). One of the reactions to this situation has been increased specialization in training. We have seen this in the proliferation of degrees geared toward various aspects of museum work, such as curatorial studies, museum education, and museum leadership.

While there is no doubt that each of the specializations that make up the whole of museum work have their own set of skills, knowledge, and principles, it does not erase our commonalities (the same could be said for museology and other information professions; see Latham, 2018). Attempts to establish competencies (Williams & Simmons, 2007) for museum professionals have not succeeded. However, there *is* a set of broad understandings that all museum workers should have, no matter what their specialization or content area might be. These core principles, or perhaps considerations (what every museum professional should understand), include reflections on the following questions:

- What is a museum?
- Who is the museum for (why does it exist)?
- What does the museum system look like (how do the parts interact, what do colleagues in other departments do, and why is it important that we know each other’s roles)?
- What is a person–document transaction (what are the kinds of relationships between people and things)?
- What does it mean when an object is musealized (how do we understand, interact with, and interpret the object)?

A curator, a marketing director, a museum educator, or a gift shop manager should be able to answer these questions. In fact, all museum professionals should ask (and answer) these questions based on their own experience, research, and knowledge of the literature. This thinking process will manifest itself in a multitude of ways and help create better opportunities and experiences for visitors. Consider the gift shop manager—even slight attention to the fact that what is unique about museums is the confluence of visitors and objects will help the manager understand the potential relationships formed in the museum, what visitors consider the most evocative interactions, thus enhancing the ability to manage the shop inventory.

### Museology as an academic discipline: balance is the name of the game

Silverman et al. correctly pointed out that “universities are places for the active generation of knowledge and theory” (Silverman et al. 1996: 235), rather than places for the passive transmission of knowledge.

—Simmons (2007, p. 16)

A good sense of balance is necessary to navigate conflicted issues and situations. As humans we have a tendency to conceptualize our choices as *either/or*, but in reality, the answer is often *both*. Many of the recurring issues we face in museology can be resolved by working from a balanced viewpoint. In particular, we see evidence of this in three sets of competing dichotomies in museology: theory vs. practice, horizontal vs. vertical, and object vs. visitor. Below, we attempt to dissolve the oppositional positioning of these dichotomies and show that they are, in fact, more valuable together in harmony.

#### *Theory vs. practice → theory and practice*

We are often confused by the negative reaction to theory among museum workers. We’ve observed this phenomenon for many years, talking to our colleagues, listening to conference presentations, and hearing comments from our students. The sentiment is consistent: Why do we need all that theory? Why can’t we just learn museum stuff? The problem is that theory and practice should not be seen as two distinct entities. In reality, they are two sides of the same coin; you cannot have one without the other.

While it is true that practice came first in the history of museum work (Simmons, 2007), theory provides the necessary critique (in order to improve practice) and guidance for practice and therefore is integral to practice. As we carry out our day-to-day duties we may not realize that the techniques we use, the rote of the procedures we follow, is far more complex than just doing certain tasks. We do them within a set of contexts, not in a vacuum. To understand why we do what we do, we need to understand those contexts and relationships. Museums are about multi-contextual

encounters between people and objects—within the institutions in which these relationships are transacted. Each element brings together many complexities that change over time. We do not simply catalog an object for the sake of cataloging an object; we do it for reasons that may include preservation for the future, learning from the past, inspiring ideas, learning about oneself, or questioning assumptions.

There is a tendency in the field to think that when instruction is systematized into an academic degree, it somehow becomes more theory and shuns the practice aspect. This is more fiction than fact. In a review of U.S. museology degrees, we found that the opposite has occurred—that instruction in academic courses has tended to stay with a how-to approach rather than a why-to approach. In other words, the typical master’s degree in museum studies seems to be more vocational than academic (Teather, 1991). It isn’t that more (or less) theory is needed but rather that a balance of theory and practice, or better, an integration of them, is needed. It does no good to pitch one against the other—it is about balance. In other words, it is not an either/or situation; it is a feedback loop in which theory feeds practice and practice feeds theory and the two interact together in a dynamic, ever-changing cycle. Theory is critical to providing an intellectual critique of museum practice, and there is fertile research available that will help workers understand their practice, answer questions, and provide guidance with future direction (Latham & Simmons, 2017). And practice—the reality of the work, the culture, and other dynamic interactions—is necessary knowledge in the development of theory. The answer is theory *and* practice.

#### *Horizontal vs. vertical → horizontal and vertical*

Because of the historical trajectory of museum training, museology has often been seen as an “add-on” or outgrowth of other, more traditional content fields such as art history or history. In fact, museology is a field that cuts across (horizontal) many other disciplines (vertical), reinterpreting content to analyze and disseminate information in different ways. The tension between the concepts of museology as an “add-on” versus a discrete field of study is reflected in the tenuous and shifting nature of museology programs, especially in the United States. It’s almost as if museology itself has an identity crisis. Museological thinking, encompassing both theory and practice, is necessary to understand and effectively communicate the relationships between people and objects in museal situations. At the same time, content balances are needed between other academic disciplines and museology (Singleton, 1987, as cited in Simmons, 2007, p. 12). Because museology cut across other disciplines (horizontal) and digs deeply (vertical) into their content (vertical), the answer is horizontal *and* vertical.

#### *Object vs. visitor → object and visitor*

Another dichotomy we see repeated in museum work and museology is that of visitor versus object. For many years, the emphasis in museums was on

the object, directed to the use, positioning, care, and (expert-determined) meaning of the object in an exhibition or collection. In the 1990s the emphasis shifted toward a user-centric view with an intense focus on the visitor, brought about in large part by refinements in our understanding of informal learning, how to measure it, and the application of constructivist principles to exhibit design (Simmons, 2007; Box 9.2). Since then, visitor studies, evaluation, and audience participation have become increasingly important to museums. As a consequence, objects have become less central, as reflected in the trend toward exhibits using fewer and fewer objects as well as the de-emphasis of their meaning and value.

It appears to us that the positioning of object vs. visitor is a reaction to several factors, including the long history of museums as authorities, and the viewpoint that objects are central to everything a museum does (Evans, Mull, & Poling, 2002). In seeking to right the balance, over several decades the pendulum has swung as far in one direction as the other, from the object to the visitor, until at present the visitor has become the main focus of the museum and the object has become inconsequential. As a result, this dichotomy has inadvertently created an opposing binary of object versus visitor despite the fact that a focus on the visitor to such a degree de-emphasizes what makes museums unique institutions in society as the main place where people can interact with three-dimensional, meaningful objects. The pendulum needs to regain balance in recognition that that it is not people alone that make museums unique, nor it is objects alone that make museums unique, but rather the relationship between the two—the person–object transaction (Wood & Latham, 2013). It is important to keep the big picture in mind, as it says a lot about what makes us human. A moment of encounter between a visitor and an object can connect us back more than 26,000 years to those unknown individuals who found value and made meaning by carving small female figures during the Upper Paleolithic. The answer is object *and* visitor.

### The terminal degree dilemma: where is the PhD in museology?

A cogent argument was provided by Silverman et al. (1996) that  
 “. . . the problem is that there is no centralized academic home  
 for the ongoing study of museums,” resulting in a fragmented  
 knowledge base rather than a weak knowledge base.

—Silverman et al. (1996, p. 234), as cited in Simmons  
 (2007, p. 16)

The reluctance to accept the importance of theory in U.S. museology has led to another sticky issue in museum studies education in the United States—the PhD in museology. There are critical ramifications that emerge from a lack of doctoral level work in museology, chief among them the lack of recognition of museology as a legitimate field of research and the

lack of people with PhDs in museology in tenure-track jobs at universities. Due to this dearth of PhD degrees in museology, academic museum studies programs are mostly led by professors with PhDs in other fields, while classes are largely taught by adjuncts with master's degrees in museum studies, many of whom are engaged in practice but not research. Scholars with PhDs in museology are needed to develop the conceptual guidelines that integrate theory with practice and to balance the input from practitioner instructors.

Consider an allied field, library and information science (LIS), that also offers master's level degrees for a professionally oriented field. In LIS there is an established system for both library professionals (primarily with MLIS degrees) and scholarship around library-related content at the doctoral level. Although both libraries and museums in the United States have had formal systems for training professionals for roughly the same amount of time (with museology lagging behind a few years), a snapshot of each field today shows a distinct difference in their historical trajectories. LIS has a clear set of standards for working professionals and an accreditation process overseeing graduate-level education (see ALA Office for Accreditation, <http://www.ala.org/aboutala/offices/accreditation/>). In addition, there is a rich tradition of scholarship in LIS. There are many LIS master's programs but also many LIS doctoral-level programs that promote targeted research on pertinent issues, dissemination of that research, and scholars who move the field forward through their research.

Current museology programs seem to be mired in a process that swirls in on itself, consistently teaching students how to do something based on the same material without regularly infusing new research or evocative challenges that produce innovation and progress in the system. In other words, although we are teaching the how very well, we are not asking the students to consider the why or to challenge the status quo that is composed of the role of scholarship, theory, innovative thinking.

In U.S. museums, people are still arguing about whether the master's degree is even necessary. Although we are not arguing for establishing strict standards for museum professionals, we want those in the field to at least be able to answer the question "What is a museum professional?" At a 2018 special panel session of the largest museum organization in the world (ICOM), no one on the panel entitled "What does it mean to be professional of museums today?" had a clear answer. In part, the reason for this inability to come to a single definition has to do with cultural, linguistic, political, economic, and historical differences in how "the people who work in museums" are categorized, trained, and perceived in their respective regions of the world (Desvallées, 1998). Even so, there is a healthy level of scholarly work going on in museology, particularly in Europe and the United Kingdom, but much more is needed and the mechanisms for dissemination need to be strengthened and increased.

### **The quality of programs: what should we be teaching instead of object marking 101?**

Another area of concern is the content of museology courses and programs. Indeed, a student looking for a museology program in the US faces a bewildering array of choices, ranging from undergraduate majors to master's degrees to graduate certificates (see [Table 2](#)). The available programs vary widely in requirements, emphasis, and quality of coursework. Despite the length of time museology has been taught at the graduate level in the United States—not to mention its importance to the future of the profession—there is no ready way to measure the quality of the programs, and no objective comparative evaluation of programs has ever been produced. We tell our students to be cautious about programs that are proclaimed “the best” because, in fact, there is no metric for what is the best in museology. In our experience, museum professionals in the United States are still divided about the value of obtaining a degree in museology, despite the fact that job advertisements increasingly call for one. The largest museum organization in the United States, the American Alliance of Museums, has historically not done a very good job of supporting degree programs (see the review in Simmons, 2007), beyond issuing a few publications directed toward potential students.

A look at online museum-related course descriptions reveals that while there are some courses with a healthy balance of theory and practice, it also appears that the American museological landscape is awash with functional courses that are effectively teaching students to keep on doing what we are already doing in museums—not to innovate and develop museums. Added to this, many students have difficulty differentiating between master's degrees and graduate certificates. A master's degree should teach foundational and theoretical museology to inspire original research and thinking and thus should produce graduates who can think critically and creatively in a system of complex relationships. A graduate certificate in museology requires significantly less academic investment (typically around 12–18 credit hours) and therefore should be more focused on practice and skills—in other words, more vocational. But in practice there is a lot of confusion on the part of students as to whether a master's degree has a greater value than a graduate certificate. That said, we also believe that it is critical that graduate training in museology include a robust internship component that enables students to experience museology in the workplace.

### **Conclusion**

Museology (museum studies) is well established as an academic field for the study of the history and functions of museums and their roles in society. Despite its long history, museology is often misunderstood to focus on museum practice when, in fact, it explores all theoretical and practical issues in museums and museal situations. Following [Stránský \(1987, p. 295\)](#),

museology is the study of “the specific relation between man and reality.” This makes its value more apparent on a higher level and supports its inclusion in the information sciences. Current theoretical work in museology emphasizes the importance of person–object interactions in museal situations. Such museological thinking enables meta-disciplinary approaches across a wide spectrum of related fields of study and informs the work of museum (and other information) professionals. Although practical training is important for museum workers, academic programs must strive to present a balance of the theoretical and practical aspects of museology to produce professionals with an in-depth understanding of museums and critical thinking skills. In particular, PhD programs in museology are long overdue and will do much to advance museological research. By asking “Whither Museum Studies?,” we are taking a long view of the field, but with a focus on current issues and some difficult quandaries. We don’t claim to have the answer to an unanswerable question, but we do hope to help clarify where museology could—and should—be headed.

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**John E. Simmons** has spent 50 years as a museum collections manager, museology instructor, and international museum consultant. He has a B.S. in systematics and ecology and an M.A. in museum studies.

## Note

1. For example, *muséologie* in French, *Museologie* in German, and *museología* in Spanish, as well as other names, including *Museumwissenschaft* (museum science) in German.

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