

We the Museum Episode 11 Hiring Icks & Fair Museum Jobs (with Sierra Van Ryck deGroot, Ashleigh Hibbins)

EPISODE DESCRIPTION

There are a lot of systemic issues in our field related to labor. Ignoring these issues won't make them go away. In this episode, we're taking a closer look at the problems around hiring practices in both the US and the UK. I chat about salarcy transparency, degree requirements, accessibility, and more with Sierra Van Ryck deGroot (Museum Hue) Ashleigh Hibbins (Fair Museum Jobs). They share ideas on how we can disrupt legacies of inequity and do better by the workers who make museums possible.

EPISODE TRANSCRIPT

Hannah Hethmon (Narration): Welcome back to We the Museum: a podcast for museum workers who want to form a more perfect institution.

I'm your host, Hannah Hethmon, Owner and Executive Producer at Better Lemon Creative Audio, where I make podcasts for museums, history organizations, and other cultural nonprofits.

I love the museum field and the people whose passion and hard work make it so special. But as many museum workers know, loving our museums doesn't always pay the bills, and very often, it feels like our museums don't love us back.

There are a lot of systemic issues in our field related to labor. Ignoring the issues won't make them go away. So in this episode, we're taking a closer look at the problems around hiring practices in both the US and the UK. I'm joined for this conversation by two voices for change in museums, Sierra Van Ryck deGroot in New York City and Ashleigh Hibbins in Perth, Scotland.

I'll let them kick things off by telling you more about their connections to this subject, but first, I want to shout out our show sponsor, Landslide Creative. This podcast would not be happening without their support. Landslide Creative provides custom website design and development for museums who want to increase their engagement and connect with their visitors, donors, and volunteers. With a custom website designed for the unique needs of your museum, you can stop fighting with your website and focus on growing your impact. Head over to LandslideCreative.com to learn more.

Alright, let's talk about how to make hiring practice fairer in our field.

Sierra: My name is Sierra Van Ryck de Groot. My pronouns are she/her. I am currently the Deputy Director for Museum Hue, a professional organization for museum workers of color. My background is primarily in museum education. And I come to this conversation having a really rich. understanding of labor conversations in museums, especially over the past few years after working as co-president of the National Emerging Museum Professionals Network in the United States, as well as being very fiercely involved in the Pay Your Interns movement in museums and honestly just tagging along to lots of fun conversations about this work. So I'm very excited to be here.

Ashleigh: So my name is Ashleigh Hibbins. My pronouns are she/they, and I'm currently in Perth, which is in central Scotland. I'm originally from Canada. And I am here representing, Fair Museum Jobs, which is a grassroots collective, of museum

professionals, which has existed since 2018. And we campaign for fairer, recruitment, and working practices. in the museum sector. We do tend to focus on the uk, but we like to collaborate internationally as well.

Hannah: So I was hoping we could start off: if you were giving a performance evaluation to the field on their hiring practices and they came in for their annual evaluation...in a line or two, how would you tell them how they're doing and why, without getting into some of the specifics so far. Ashleigh, maybe you could give the UK museum field its performance evaluation on hiring.

Ashleigh: Okay. Can I first just say that I love that Sierra and I did like the exact same expression when you asked that question, which Is just like hand-to-mouth.

Hannah: Gasp!

All: [Laughter]

Ashleigh: Performance evaluation. Okay. I'm gonna have to go back to like school report cards for this one. And say I'd give it a C. It's not a fail. Yeah, it's not a fail, but it's not, it's not good. So, I would say, since Fair Museum jobs have kind of been in this space since 2018, so that's five years ago, I think there has been some improvements since then; there's a lot better pay transparency in the UK now than there was, before. And I'd like to think that some of that is down to our campaigning, though certainly not all. You also see a lot less things like degree qualification requirements for degrees and things like that on job applications now than you used to.

So both of those things are really positive. However, these are not consistent. We still continue to see things like salary secrecy, particularly things like a director and senior management level, which I find quite interesting that this idea that, oh, you know, kind of recruitment equity is sort of relevant to more junior positions, but not when you get to more senior roles. And I think that still says a lot. And obviously we still do see a lot of things like degree requirements and really onerous kind of exclusionary recruitment practices and interview practices. And fundamentally we haven't seen a huge—at least in the UK—we haven't seen a massive change in terms of who is actually working in the sector in terms of representing the communities they serve, which is sort of the whole point of having fair recruitment. So I'd say in

terms of outputs, it probably is a fail in terms of effort. It may be in 2017, maybe it was like an F and now it's maybe like a C. So yeah.

Hannah: Sierra, what about, what about our country? What about the United States? What is our performance evaluation for the museum field?

Sierra: I'm going to have to give it a similar grade, but I'm going to say C-. I think that in the last few years, we've seen a lot of growth in how we've moved towards things. I think the art and museum salary transparency spreadsheet—started by Michelle Millar Fisher, very much sparked by Kimberly Drew's keynote at AAM—really started, reignited some conversations that were happening across the field in a very important way. And I'm personally delighted with how those conversations have really sparked a larger conversation around salary transparency and equity. And then we're starting to see a little bit more of that nuance coming into that DEAI conversation that everyone seems to be hot and bothered about, but no one really seems to know how to do on like a larger sector perspective.

I think, very similar to what Ashleigh was saying, I think that we've seen more calls for paying interns and actual concerted movement. We know that several states across the country are now requiring folks to post salaries. And so we're starting to see some of these hidden salaries, especially from institutions who are notorious for hiding their salaries—looking at you big encyclopedic museums. But we are still seeing unpaid internships and advocacy for unpaid internships in the case of flexibility, especially at smaller museums who may not have a more extensive budget.

We're also seeing with the movement towards salary transparency, in terms of the jobs boards requiring salary, the really fun ways that organizations are going around that by giving wild ranges from like 30 to 100K, which is barely transparency, if at all. Very similar to what Ashleigh was saying, we're also still seeing a lot of the same folks ending up in the same positions. We're not seeing any real major difference in diversity in these positions. But I would also say not only are we not seeing diversity, we're not seeing retention of diverse hires in the country. I think we just saw a couple of great articles that have come out in the last few months around folks who have been hired into these roles that were hot and exciting in 2020 and 2021. And now many of them are either vacant or folks are leaving because of these toxic environments that they were brought into and a number of other reasons, but

we can definitely get into that. But a C-. So definitely growth, but definitely a need for more on our end for sure.

Hannah: Yeah. Salary transparency is, I guess the most visible. This is kind of the big issue that a lot of these conversations start around. Why do you think that issue is so important? Why is this kind of the one that we're, we're maybe not starting with, but that's getting kind of "let's hammer that."

Ashleigh: Yeah, I think it's just very material and basic, isn't it? Like we've all been in a situation where we're job hunting, and, you know, we all know from a job seeker position, the first thing that we're gonna look at is the salary. Because unless you come from a background of wealth, you need to work to make money. And that is the foundation of the capitalist society we live in. Some of us may wanna take down that system, but that is what we're in at the moment. And we need to make money to live. So, that is the number one thing that everybody's gonna look at. And when you can't even make a judgment about, am I gonna be able to pay my bills, support my family, you know, is it gonna be worth it to relocate for this job, which you often have to do, especially in the museum sector. That is such a basic fundamental thing.

I think there's a real toxic relationship in Western society in general when talking about money as a whole. And it's sort of seen as this kind of like, gauche, rude thing to ask about what your colleagues make, for example. And that's why salary transparency in organizations seems so radical. And really it's not. it's, It's like everyone wants to talk around the issue of a job and you know, this idea that you should work in the museum sector because you just love it and you just really love museums and you love the stories and, and you love the organization and or the objects of the institution or the communities you're working with.

I mean, yes, yes to all of that, but it's seen as inappropriate almost to talk about, okay, but how much am I gonna get paid? Am I gonna be able to survive when we're working in this sector? And that's almost viewed as secondary. And there's something about that is incredibly classist; basically, it completely precludes a huge number of people from ever being able to partake in that sector because it basically means in order to work here, you need to not have to worry about money and you need to be working basically for fun.

Hannah: It's very, "if you have to ask, you can't afford it." [laugh]

Ashleigh: Exact that. That's exactly it. Yeah.

Hannah: Which is a weird dynamic to have in a job where you're paying someone a wage. You know, again, it's not a hobby, it's not a part-time thing. It's not an after-work thing. It's the job you've chosen to make this your career. And there's like the expectation that yeah, it is probably gonna be low pay, but they won't even tell you. So you, you don't know how low it's gonna be.

Ashleigh: And the negotiation, there's lots of studies to show that, white, cis heteronormative men tend to be more successful in salary negotiations than people who are not in those positions of privilege. So when you're being told to negotiate a salary (or it's a competitive salary) if you are not within one of those privileged groups, you are already at a disadvantage. And if you have suffered from a gender pay gap, a racial pay gap, for example, and your next salary is gonna be based on the one you've had before, then you're just, you're just perpetuating that disadvantage.

Sierra: You touched on so much that I want to talk about. One of them, like the most recent thing you mentioned—which is being paid based off your previous salary—why are we as a sector still doing that? Like if we are talking about actual equitable work moving forward, why are we still basing it off the past salary? So say that you were a programs manager at a smaller institution, you were making \$55,000. If you make it to a larger institution and, in theory, the position was posted for \$80 [k] to 90 [k], and this is a step up and so forth, are you actually going to pay me at the same rate that I was before? Or are you actually going to pay me the rate that you have allocated for this position, instead of penalizing me because I was at a place that couldn't afford to pay me or didn't pay me the same amount?

That kind of thing riles me up and we can get into like a whole separate episode about that, but I feel so aggravated by people who first are told that their practices that they are working around for hiring, retention, recruitment, salary-related work, they're like, oh, we wanna talk to other people about how they're doing it. If you're actually thinking about an innovative and progressive model, it is very often that someone else has not done it yet. And like, I think that we as a sector need to be more willing to make, like take those risks and be willing to kind of make these big changes without reflecting on who else is doing it. I think not exactly related, but I think a lot about those early days of pandemic where it was like March 12th and people were like, "None of the large museums have like closed or started sending home staff yet, so should we?" Why are we waiting for these like giant institutions

who are usually the slowest bureaucratically to make a decision for us, a much smaller, more nimble, and often more community-focused institution?

Hanah: Well, you know, just based on what you're just saying about who do we base our model of what's good enough off, my last interview for the podcast was with Ben Garcia, who is the Executive Director at the American LGBTQ+ Museum. They were deciding their salaries: they're not gonna look at the AAM salary chart and try to just like, maybe get to 80% of that, right? They were like, what does it actually cost to live in New York City and have pay off student loans because you have advanced degrees and maybe put 5-10% aside. And that's how we're gonna calculate what our minimum, what our salaries should be. so basing it off of what seems fair and equitable in this space, not what can we get away with because that's what everyone else is doing.

Ashleigh: That is exactly spot on. We have a similar issue in the UK. We have a large sector body, called the Museums Association, who—they do some good work, I don't wanna be too critical of them—but one of our bugbears at Fair Museum Jobs with them is they have these salary guidelines that they publish every five years or so, but the methodology for how they produce these guidelines is completely flawed. So how they produce them is by just asking institutions across the country, what do you pay a conservator or what do you pay, you know, a visitor experience manager or whatever. And they kind of aggregate all of these salaries and then say, well this is sort of the average.

And then organizations will then use that resource as a justification for why they continue to pay at a certain level. But this is not an analysis of, like you said, Hannah, this is not an analysis of what it costs to live in a certain area or, what would be an equitable pay or what someone might be paid for similar skills in a different sector. This is simply a kind of broad survey of how lowly paid the sector is and then reflecting it back and then kind of justifying it by putting it in a document and then it just perpetuates the same problem again and again. And I guess one other last thing I'd like to say is, Sierra, you touched on kind of looking at different institutions and kind of looking in some of the wrong places for answers.

You know, I often think about other sectors, which aren't necessarily considered to be that ethical. You know, I think about things like the banking sector, like pharmaceuticals and those sectors I'm not sure about in the US but in the UK ethnically they and kind of class speaking, they actually are a lot more

representative of the country than, than the museum sector. And what is the number one reason for that? Well, it's pay. It's because those sectors pay people properly. And I'm not being advocate for big pharma [laugh] or anything, but I think you cannot deny the impact of pay on things like diversity in a sector, and people's ability to access it.

Hannah Hethmon (Narration): We'll be right back to my conversation with Sierra and Ashleigh, but first, it's time for a digital minute with Amanda Dyer, Creative Director at Landslide Creative:

Amanda Dyer: Hi, I'm Amanda Dyer, creative Director at Landslide Creative, and I've got a quick tip you can use to improve your museum website. Think of your website visitors as skimmers, swimmers and divers. Skimmers wanna get in, get the information they need, and get out as quickly as possible. Swimmers might be willing to spend a bit more time and are looking for content that piques their interest. And divers wanna explore and take it all in.

Consider each of these types of visitors in the website experience just like you would in your museum experience. For skimmers, make sure the most important information can be found quickly and easily. For swimmers, think about how you can use interactive content and media to encourage engagement. And for divers, offer more in-depth resources, and regularly add fresh content.

You can learn more about how to design for skimmers, swimmers, and divers on our website at landsidecreative.com/skimmers

Hannah Hethmon (Narration): And back to the episode.

Sierra: One of the other things I have kind of been starting to advocate for more so with this larger conversation around salary transparency is also benefits transparency, because if you're telling me, yes, I'm getting there. If you tell me that you're paying me 50K for a position, and then you're like, I have, you have medical, dental, vision, PTO, et cetera, and this is a very US thing, because I know the UK is a totally different healthcare setup, but for the US, that actually is a huge factor to play in. I mean, I have worked at institutions where my medical coverage has been entirely covered. And that's like a \$9-10,000 like cost of like, addition to your salary. And all these other things that kind of contribute to that larger conversation of your compensation. Like it's not only just about salary, it's also about like the whole

picture because if you are offering like a luxury, beaucoup healthcare plan where I am paying like 25 cents to cover myself and then maybe my spouse under that plan, that's a huge savings for our family.

Ashleigh: Yeah, if you have kind of like ongoing, if you or a dependent have ongoing healthcare needs, it, it would be a huge risk for you to move from one job where you kind of know what's covered and what isn't to another job. So, so again, that, that, that's being, quite presumptuous in, in terms of an organization to think that someone's not gonna be considering that when they move to another job.

Hannah: Like your money to live on, your benefits, your health and your, you know, your retirement, that's all tied to your job. So to just imagine that people can consider that separate from their job applications, even though there's no other way to attain it, it's just kind of bonkers. Like it doesn't, it doesn't work. And I've even seen organizations that I know have great benefits not putting their benefits on their listings and, you know, it is just not even considered that we would promote the good that we're doing in this department. Even if they're doing well there, it's just not even registering that they should make that visible, that people would care whether or not they get that.

Ashleigh: But Hannah, I do think that touches on another kind of wider issue that we think about sometimes FMJ, which is how often only certain departments in a museum are kind of engaged with thinking about social justice and equitable work, and sometimes HR and admin departments are not included in those conversations, especially at a bigger organization that, that has an HR department for example. On the one hand, you might have a bunch of staff in learning or community engagement or the curatorial department thinking about, oh, how can we kind of diversify our staff? How can we represent our local community better? And lots of really good work. But then the kind of backend admin side of things, in terms of thinking about how is the job posted, what does the application form look like, are benefits listed on it? Is salary listed on it? Sometimes those folks aren't always included in the conversation and it doesn't mean that they wouldn't engage with it if they were, but often if you go to like museum conferences and stuff, certain departments are really overly represented and not others.

And I can think of a specific example. So at the museum that I currently work at, I interviewed someone for a job a couple of weeks ago and a candidate told me after the interview they said, you know, I just wanted to give you some feedback that I didn't appreciate the fact that when I was invited to the interview, I was told that I

wasn't allowed to bring notes with me to the interview. And this was the first time I had ever heard that. I hadn't told them they weren't allowed to bring notes. I mean that, yeah, that would be completely against my entire kind of philosophy of working. But that was just something that, at some point in the past, the admin team had been told to tell people. And it had never been questioned or reviewed or anything. So I think there's a lot of policies like that that has a big impact on the workforce and the applicants, but it's just, it's not even seen, it's just kind of, oh, well that's just sort of the boring admin stuff, but actually it has a huge material impact on the workforce.

Sierra: And I think it's so great when applicants give you feedback because sometimes you just like don't even think about some of the things that are coming to their mind. And I say that as someone who has been hiring and definitely advocates for more equitable hiring practices. But I would say that, for whatever reason, when I was most recently hiring, we did not post the questions that we were asking on our website or offer them to applicants ahead of time. And a lot of folks came back and were like, we would love to get the questions that you're going to ask in advance so that we can kind of prepare notes and have information for that. And I was like, yes, duh, of course. Why wouldn't I do that? But it's one of those things where it's like, yes, when you are interviewing, it is not just you interviewing for a job as a candidate, you're also interviewing the organization to make sure that it's a good fit. And I think that organizations are not putting their best foot forward. I think that when you are putting out a job posting, you should treat it as a dating profile. Like, you should give me everything that I should possibly know about you upfront.

And I think Ashleigh brought up a really good point. If we're gonna be really serious about diversity and equity, access, and inclusion, we can't just be hiring DEAI folks in the HR department and calling it a day. How is that being interwoven within the entire institution? Because yes. most people are going to say more money is fantastic, like that's it, but that's not the only thing.

Ashleigh: There was an article in *Stylist* recently about this actually. It was about diversity washing. I don't think it was just about the museum sector. I think it was like just a general thing, but I just read it as museum sector cause I'm traumatized. There's this huge focus on public-facing accessibility, equity, diversity, but then there's often not the background work behind it. So yeah, let's make sure we get that lift or that elevator in for the, you know, for the visitor-facing areas. But then, you know, the staff area will remain inaccessible for, you know, years or decades to

come. And what is that saying? Is that saying we only care about accessibility when people can see it? Is that saying that accessibility is a PR exercise and not something that is actually fundamental to our values?

Hannah: Before we run out of time, I do wanna talk about degree requirements. because I think this is one of those things that—salary most people are gonna go, yeah, it makes sense to know where your salary is and have a fair salary. That's kind of hard to argue against, even if you can ignore it. Right? but degree requirements, people might say, well, you do need a degree to do this, right? This is an advanced skill. So talk to me about degree requirements and why there needs to be changes there and how people can shift their thinking about that.

Sierra: I have so many feelings about this. I'm also gonna fully acknowledge the fact that I did the whole Monty. Like I did my undergraduate degree, I went to graduate school, I got a graduate degree in museum education from Bank Street. If I could go back in time, I would absolutely do it again. However, do I think that should be a situation across the board? Absolutely not. Some positions I think are different. So like conservation, collections positions, like things that are a little bit more technical, absolutely. I think there should be support around that.

Hannah: loved my master's degree. I would, I would go back into a master's degree in the past, but I got a master's degree in Viking and Medieval Norse Studies. And that opened my door into the American public history field where I did marketing for my first job, which I had experience from before and during college. So did I ever once use any iota of my degree to do anything but gain credibility and clout? No. Did I love my degree? Was it useful to me as a person? Yes. was it necessary for that job? No.

Ashleigh: Something that we often say at Fair Museum Jobs is that a degree is a way of evidencing a skill. It's not the skill in and of itself. So we recommend, or we tell employers—museums—to focus on what skills that you actually want and then let people evidence those however they want to. And maybe that's through a degree, maybe that's through volunteering, maybe it's through work experience, maybe it's through a different sector. But when you prescribe it to one way of showing that skill, that's when it starts to become an equity issue. And also you end up missing out on potentially some really great candidates because you're prescribing in advance what you think is the way to get that skill.

And I think that is reflective of, again, kind of the lack of diversity in the sector. And so we have this huge range of people making decisions about hiring and they all come from very similar backgrounds. And so they, there's a lack of imagination there about how someone could get a skill that's not through that traditional route. And then that just keeps perpetuating itself.

Hannah: That's a great explanation of why that's important and offers an alternative. So I wanna wrap up 'cause I gotta get to the MVA and renew my driver's license, but let's do rapid fire. Sierra suggested "hiring icks," what we need to kind of get outta here or change.

Sierra: Definitely education requirements. I would love to see a relevant experience or education, but really leaning on that. Another thing that Ashleigh just mentioned, counting volunteer experience as experience. I hate seeing job postings where people are like, volunteer experience doesn't count. Why not?

Ashleigh: Capitalism, that's why.

Hannah: Let's go back and forth. Ashleigh. Hiring icks.

Ashleigh: Asking for previous salary because it just perpetuates those pay gaps that we know already exist.

Hannah: It's out the window. All right. Back to you, Sierra.

Sierra: A hiring ick is definitely hiring externally without considering internal candidates and not giving internal candidates as much opportunity to progress in the position.

Hannah: All right. Ashleigh, another one.

Ashleigh: Oh my God, I'm being put on the spot. There's so many. Not considering paying interview expenses. They might spend hours taking off their current jobs. They might be losing money, they might be paying for childcare, and then they might have to travel to a place to be interviewed, that is actually a huge amount of expense and for some people might be insurmountable.

Hannah: Or maybe even paying in advance for those things. One of my first interviews in the job field—which, if anyone knows I worked for, they're an amazing organization. Love them. And they paid me back for my travel expenses, but like, I didn't have any money at the time. So like I put that on a credit card.

Ashleigh: Totally. Yeah. Or, or offering, you know, again, nowadays there's absolutely no excuse to not do not offer Zoom or teams interviews.

Sierra: One more for me. More than two interviews for entry-to-mid-level careers. If you are asking me for multiple interviews, it better be a very, very good reason and I need to know in advance. Once you get to the leadership position, I could see like three or four if you're like meeting different departments, etc. But like, do not ask me for more than two, maybe three interviews entry- to mid-level.

Hannah: And part of that is all these stories in the emerging, museums of people who are like, I had a fourth interview and now I'm ghosted and I don't know what happened. And like, first of all, no ghosting at any point, but like, definitely don't ghost after four. Like they've been there twice in person. Like, they baptize your children, like, I don't know, like you, just, like you, you are like deeply involved in this, like they've introduced you—don't ghost at that point. Don't ghost at any point, but, but you know, at least send 'em an email, maybe a phone call.

Ashleigh: There is an inverse relationship too, I think. Like I've had more intense interviews for like entry-level positions than I've had for like, more senior positions. I don't know. It's really weird.

Hannah: Yeah. Mm. Well, there are so many other things. where should people go to learn more about this and start doing more homework on how to be a better hiring person?

Ashleigh: Well, you can go to Fair Museum jobs.co.uk or you can follow us on Twitter or Instagram. we're very, very active on Twitter, as most people know. We do mainly focus on the UK, but a lot of our work is applicable to other parts of the world as well. And yeah, definitely go take a look. We've got resources, we've got our manifesto, we've got a YouTube account with lots of previous kind of panel talks, and always just get in touch if you have, if you, if you just wanna chat or rant. We're always here. Yes.

Sierra: I want to co-sign, Fair Museum Jobs, a great starting point, even for our US folks. I would also say, I'm a little biased, but the Emerging Museum Professionals Network page is one of the most active and I think most resourceful spaces. it's a Facebook page, like definitely go on there. They do have a website that also has some great resources, such as which jobs boards are promoting salary transparency right now, as well as advocating for paid internships. Also, RIP Twitter, because I think Museum Twitter was one of the most valuable resources. And if you are still engaging with that corpse of a social network, please feel free to reach out to me and the folks that I follow on Twitter, because they are just incredible, including Ashley and Hannah, who I also follow.

Hannah: I'm not really there anymore. I have to be honest. I've jumped ship, a whole 'nother conversation. I should do an RIP museum Twitter episode.

Sierra: My God. Yes.

Hannah: Well thank you both so much for coming on here and giving us a lot to think about. And hopefully, it'll just tie into a lot of other conversations on the podcast. And, you know, for anyone listening, if that all doesn't work, you know, go back to episode two of the first season, where you can learn how to make a museum union.

Ashleigh: Join. Your. Union!

Hannah: Well, thank you both so much.

Ashleigh: Thank you so much, Hannah. It's been great and great to chat with you Sierra as well.

Sierra: Likewise.

Hannah (Narration): Thanks for listening to We the Museum. You've been listening to my conversation with Sierra Van Ryck deGroot from Museum Hue and Ashleigh Hibbins from Fair Museum Jobs.

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You can find all Fair Museum Jobs' resources on their website, fairmuseumjobs.org

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