

Becoming a(n) (art) librarian in The Netherlands: don't even think of it!

Intro

The danger of being an old fart is sounding like an old fart, so if the Statler and Waldorf level of my talk begins to annoy you, please start yelling and booing and throw things at me.

Because let's be honest, each talk about the current situation in librarianship, well, the current situation in about any field, will have the tendency to compare things as they are with things as they were. Most people don't like change, so they will automatically assume that the changed situation is worse than the original situation, forgetting that original situations can be quite bad too. Aristotle or Plato or whichever old Greek already complained that the youth of today (300 BC) was so much more stupid and less educated than the youth of 330 BC. And now 2317 years later we can put men on the moon, are discovering how to cure diseases that would have wiped out the whole of classical Athens within a week, and still we complain that the youth of today is so much more stupid than twenty years ago. Actually it is older people who are more stupid than before. They vote for Farage, Trump, Le Pen and all other empty windbags worldwide.

Actual situation Art Libraries

What I do know is that the situation in the art library world in The Netherlands is not wholly sound. From the late 1980s the number of people employed in art libraries has steadily dwindled. Libraries of Art Institutes in almost all universities where one can study the history of art have been combined with other libraries in the humanities to faculty libraries or have been absorbed by the larger mother university libraries. The position of subject librarian at larger university libraries has become almost extinct. The museum libraries too have suffered a loss of jobs. Some museum libraries have been closed to the public (Gemeentemuseum The Hague, Amsterdam Historical Museum, Centraal Museum Utrecht, Groninger Museum) some have disappeared out of sight completely because of lack of a librarian (Kröller Müller). In some cases this decision was understandable, like in The Hague or Utrecht, where large well equipped art libraries are available nearby. Others, like the Boijmans library that is in jeopardy, or the library of the Tropical Museum in Amsterdam, that has been brutally closed, are at the whim of politicians or museum directors with a short term vision which in library terms means no vision. The closing of the library of the Tropenmuseum was the act of a short lived cabinet in which the populist PVV party and the so called liberal party tried to outdo each other in destroying cultural institutions. The first action of this evil band of brothers was to cut 135 million on culture. 135 million euros, the cost of the tip of the point of the nose of one Joint Strike Fighter of which The Netherlands ordered 30. With obvious pleasure they scrapped a few very good orchestras, a few museums and the library of the Tropenmuseum. A disgrace: the library of that institute was one in its kind, and besides, made about 50% of its budget out of doing research and giving advice to NGOs in third world countries. Since aid to these countries was also disposed of by these nasty politicians this did not count for anything or so it seems. The nasty guy who was responsible as secretary of culture has one interest only, no, not culture, pigeon breeding. He wants to close the borders for all immigrants (racing pigeons excluded perhaps). Some of the collection of the library of the Tropeninstituut ended up in Leidens University Library, some of it in the library of Alexandria, but the cohesion of the library, the museum and the research staff was destroyed forever. A 100 years of hard work done away with one malicious stroke of the pen, and an important player internationally taken out .

Career possibilities

Recently the NRC Handelsblad, the Dutch NYT published a list of professions in which one had the best and a list of professions in which one had the least chance of finding a job. Your guess is right: Being a librarian you had the least chance of finding a job. Next were journalists, and in the top ten also figured library assistants (7th) and driving instructors. Strangely enough in our rapidly secularizing world the number one on the top ten of professions one should have chosen in order to find a job was 'clergyman'. I guess this also covers imams, because only then it makes sense. Medical doctors (duh), nurses and some technical specialties figured on this top ten too.

As Mark Twain said: you've got lies, you've got damned lies, and you've got statistics. I wonder if the list would have looked different if the word information specialist, or however modern librarians name themselves, would have changed the setup. Would the list have looked different if the librarian assistant could also be librarian? Well, whatever. The massive loss of jobs is quite clearly noticeable. It was never easy to find a job in the humanities, and particularly so in art librarianship. The last time there was a position to fill at the Stedelijk (all librarians have the same general job description that includes cataloguing, reference work, etc.) we got over 700 letters of which more than a 100 were really well qualified librarians.

How did this happen? : status, safety in numbers

Last year a group of Arlis librarians visited the Netherlands for a week, and were impressed by the compact, efficient, and close knit library services. Of course we presented ourselves at our best, and it is true that we still are blessed with a rich tradition and a rich infrastructure. I still count myself lucky to work in this branch, and have done my best to emphasize its importance and sing its praise.

Still, our position is vulnerable, and we need strong independent and professional librarians to take the stand if and better, before things go wrong. I am not by nature a worrier, but this IS worrying me.

As in other countries the status of our profession has never been very high, and the developments in web technology and the worldwide distribution of digital information has of course been an important factor in this: knowledge becomes more accessible, and more 'democratic'. I think, and recent incidents considering fake news only confirm this, that even or perhaps just because loads of information become public, experts are needed to make a choice based on quality and reliability. Last year I spent a weekend in Madrid with my brother in law, who is a successful medical doctor. We talked about the status of both our professions, and he said to me: strange that people view doctors as so much higher on the ladder than what you are doing, because in Holland there are thousands of us, and as far as I can see only a handful of you. I could not agree more and ordered him another large Spanish gin tonic for his wisdom. And talking of status: the son of my most reliable employee told one of his friends when asked what his father did: my father takes books out of boxes and puts them back in again. And my sons presented me once with a picture from Donald Duck. Donald suffers from burn out and at the employment agency they want to offer him a quiet job: the choice: night watchman in a mattress factory or librarian.

Not only status but also numbers are important. Whereas in the US ARLIS/NA has more than a thousand individual members and hundreds of affiliated libraries, ARLIS NL has 56 members in all, including six retired librarians and five libraries that are de facto no longer active. Sometimes I am jealous of the job mobility in the States, though I am not sure I could move easily from Amsterdam to Athens in order to make a promotion, something a librarian in the States does when moving from

New York say to Houston. The Netherlands has about the same size and the same population as the New York metropolitan area. Yet the executive board of the New York chapter of ARLIS/NA is almost as large as the whole of ARLIS/NL.

So there is no safety in numbers, there is hardly any job rotation possible, and there is a continuous threat of going under. Only a few libraries are fundamentally safe, well rooted and with sufficient funding. Even the library of the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, that has a world class reputation, has to be at its guard constantly to protect budgets and staffing. At the moment I am working on getting more private money to make sure that the library survives in the 21st century. This, for Dutch libraries is a new development, a trend also visible in the funding of Dutch museums as such. Forced by budget cuts I am working on a program that has two main goals: the first is to make sure the acquisition budget that the past years was cut with 25% will reach its former level, or higher, the second is to ensure that the skeleton staff I have been left with is again extended. I am quite positive with the outcome of the first challenge, getting staff payed with private money is a trickier question.

How does one become an art librarian?

There is not one clear path towards the uncertain goal of becoming an art librarian. Not only libraries have been struck with budget and staff cuttings, the library schools too, not unsurprisingly, have been reduced in numbers. Nowadays there are three paths possible to get to the pot of gold (metaphorically speaking of course). The first is taking a course at a HBO level. HBO stand for Higher Professional Education. These colleges give education at university level, but with a strong emphasis on skills rather than theory. There still are one or two places in Holland to follow a course as Information Specialist. The second possibility is getting a degree in art history and following a one year postdoc course in librarianship. There is only one place left to study this in The Netherlands and it will probably be canned next year. The third way is to find a job in a library somehow and to follow courses at mid and high professional education level. My colleagues at the Rijksmuseum, the Boymans, the Van Abbemuseum, The Rijksbureau Kunsthistorische Documentatie and Van Gogh all followed the path of becoming an art historian first and studying librarianship after. My career, if that is the word, followed the route of twelve jobs thirteen accidents – as the Dutch saying goes - I flunked my study of history of art, worked for years at a variety of menial jobs, from steelworks to bakery, from printmaking to concrete mixer, found a job as a cataloguer, did some courses for a few years and after seven years became assistant librarian at Boijmans, later head of library, than finished my University degree, became head of the library at the Stedelijk. It was all worth it.

A bleak future?

Perhaps my story sounds alarmist, but that is not my intention. I think that this profession needs well educated (whatever and however that education took place), dedicated persons, that are savvy in languages, communication, art history and IT, and above all in office politics. The only means to get where you want to get, is to stand for your, for our, noble course, and whether working in a museum or at the university to make sure to get heard and have a say at the highest possible level. That means: don't be afraid, don't be defensive, don't complain, be inventive, be unconventional, be rogue librarian without losing contact with the basis of your work. No one except ourselves are interested in the Paris principles, or Library of Congress classification, but we still need people to apply them. Translate your needs to the current situation. Even if you think the museum or university policy superficial, whimsical, fashionable and short term or downright foolish, use it to your advantage. Make sure that you get funding, that you keep getting funding, and above all: smile.

For those Dutch students who still read (and no, youth is NOT getting more stupid) and who long to become art librarian I have surprisingly good news. If you start now in about six years' time you will

have completed your studies. At precisely that moment there will be vacancies at many places. The heroic generation of art librarians, born in the late nineteen fifties will be retiring. Finally those dinosaurs that have been occupying their (your) place will make place. The Rijksmuseum, the Stedelijk Museum, the Van Gogh Museum, the Rijksbureau Kunsthistorische Documentatie, the Royal Academy in Amsterdam and the University of Amsterdam will have vacancies for you to fill. Get going!!! Go for it!!! Grab your chance!!