

Cultivating a love for art

BY DAWN WONG

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MR LOW Sze Wee, 35, is an art curator with the Singapore Art Museum (SAM). He joined the museum in July 2001 as an assistant curator and is now the acting assistant director for collections.

What do you do as an art curator?

I help the museum develop its collection and one such way is through acquisition of new paintings or art works.

I also assess whether we should accept donations because not all are of good quality. I do research on the work and the artist, which, in turn, helps me in another aspect of my work — organising exhibitions, that is, to curate.

When I curate, I first decide on the concept behind the exhibition. For example, whether the aim is to show the life of the artist or to explore themes such as art and history.

Then I work with conservators to see if the works are suitable for display and whether they have been cleaned or framed properly.

Sometimes, we may not have sufficient works so I approach

private collectors for loans. As such, I need to know the available paintings and in whose hands they are in.

I also write up on the artist. Most of the text in labels and catalogues are written by the curators.

I'm also involved in the hanging and display of the works. For example, in a big room, I might not hang a lot of small works because they can get lost.

How did you become an art curator?

Before I joined SAM, I was an administrative officer for one-and-a-half years with the department at the National University of Singapore that looks after its art collection. I did not curate and a curator's job was what I was more interested in.

Before that, I was a lawyer for two years. But I resigned and went to London to pursue a master's degree in art history.

I've always been interested in art since young. When I was a lawyer, I was volunteering as a weekend docent at SAM and enjoyed it immensely.

After two years in a law firm, I realised that job satisfaction was more important to me than financial reward.



An art curator has to have project management, research and writing skills, says Mr Low. He must also like to interact with the public and get along well with lenders of art works and sponsors.

What do you enjoy about your job?

I enjoy learning more about artists and art works and being able to translate that into an exhibition to share with the public. It gives me a thrill when visitors enjoy what I do and they start to appreciate art as well. Curators see themselves as translators as the artist is not there when visitors come.

What challenges do you face?

There is always a lack of resources, time and money to achieve the level of work I'm happy with. I also need to ensure I put across an interpretation which, if possible, conveys what the artist intended and

yet is flexible enough to allow the visitors to draw their own conclusions.

What qualifications does an art curator need?

A basic degree in art history or related subjects such as visual communications or cultural studies. The entry-level pay is between \$2,000 and \$2,500.

A curator is also a project manager. So project management skills are as important as research and writing skills. You must like to interact with the public and get along well with lenders of art works and sponsors.