

CLASS INEQUALITY IN UK MUSEUM WORK

What is the problem?

While there has been a lot of research showing the problem of class inequality in UK creative industries, museums have been relatively overlooked. What we know suggests an unlevel playing field and that class inequality is difficult to see and define*.

Does class inequality matter?

If museums are committed to changing lives and telling the stories of all of us, then ensuring museums are ‘class-inclusive’ places to work is important. It can also help museums diversify a ‘stubbornly’ middle-class visitor profile (Taking Part 2019).



FOCUS GROUPS



INTERVIEWS

RESEARCH

This research conducted by Dr Samantha Evans (now at Royal Holloway, University of London) took a deep dive into UK museum work, to understand how it is structured, how to get in and get on and how do museum workers talk about class inequality. She conducted 56 interviews, 9 focus groups, and analysed secondary data (i.e. conference reports) and used Bourdieu’s theory of practice and discursive analysis to identify often invisible class barriers and the reasons they persist.

FINDINGS

The research identified three types of class inequality

A lot of the specialist jobs ... conservator, curator...you have to be able to work for free for months, years. So, perhaps you end up with a more privileged class of people who can afford to work for free.

Marketing Officer, Focus group

Once you're in front of house, you're invisible.

Front of house, Focus group

There's been a lot of debate about the V&A's job postings. They've been called out on the fact that their internship is actually a job. You're expected to have a postgraduate degree, but they're not going to pay you to do it.

Curator, Focus group

• A recent report noted that 5.2% of UK curatorial staff came from a working class background (McAndrews, 2024); while the *Character Matters* survey showed that 20% of museum employee respondents went to private school compared to 7% of the UK population (BOP, 2016). The use of occupation and education can only be a proxy for what is a complex and contested concept.

FINDINGS

There are various reasons class inequality persists in museum work

Broader social, economic and political systems

e.g. neoliberal ideologies have shifted responsibility for career from employer to the individual and weakened employee rights; UK government policies have limited museum funding

There's a reluctance to see that skills from the retail sector are useful for displaying objects for example, which they patently are.

Assistant Director, Interviewee

I think people need to start like my parents' generation had. You get employed to be trained. This job I applied for it's called trainee curatorial assistant. But you needed to have been an assistant curator, experience in documentation and exhibitions, to get on it. It's not really a traineeship then.

Curator, Interviewee

Sector-specific discourses, practices, structures

e.g. emphasis on specialist knowledge and qualifications exacerbated by increased competition for roles. Getting in also requires working for low/no pay; national museums seen as career pinnacles and limited opportunities for moving in and out of sector

Organisational discourses, practices, structures

e.g. limited career development support within organisations and some organisations more rigid and hierarchical

The chair of the board went up to the CEO and said, "Those fundraising girls were not really the right breed, were they?"

Membership Officer, Focus group

I've noticed that very few people from front of house 'make it' to back of house in our organisation.

Front of house, Interviewee

Individual assumptions and biases

e.g. individuals make assumptions of people's abilities based on accent and job role; some also 'mask' background so class is invisible

What can you do?

- Reflect on your own assumptions about people's accent, their background and the knowledge they have.
- If you are from working class background, consider joining [Museum as Muck](#) a networking and support group
- This infographic was designed and written by [Dr Samantha Evans](#) at Royal Holloway Business School, University of London, and shared under a creative commons licence [CC BY-NC 4.0](#). [Contact Sam](#) for more information
- Visit the [Museum as Muck](#) website for advice and free tools to help address class inequality

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