

The Art Police

Preserving and protecting valuable cultural arts and artifacts is a big – and competitive – job, so big that the Elvehjem has two people doing it
By Kathryn Kingsbury

Visiting museums, going to parties, traveling, gazing at art – most people think of these as leisure-time activities. But for art curators like the Elvehjem Museum of Art's Maria Saffioti Dale and Andrew Stevens, it's all in a day's work.

Okay, so maybe the parties and the travel aren't daily events. The modern art curator has a long laundry list of responsibilities, from conservation to fundraising (where the parties come in) to research and lecturing (two activities that sometimes necessitate travel). But it boils down to one thing: "The word 'curator' comes from the Latin word for 'to take care of,'" Saffioti Dale points out. "We are stewards of the collections we take care of for posterity."

Stevens puts it this way: "We understand that if you have a lot of books, you need a librarian. That's a lot of what being a curator is about."

As the curator of paintings, sculpture and decorative arts for the University of Wisconsin-Madison's art museum, Saffioti Dale is responsible for researching and cataloguing the museum's permanent collection of original art, preservation of works, and teaching museum courses to the general public. One day she might research the history of a Renaissance sketch, and the next she'll be lecturing on modern sculpture. "It's definitely not a job for people who can do only one thing at a time," she says.

Saffioti Dale inherited a love of art from her Italian parents. They took her on frequent visits to their homeland and always included art museums and ancient cathedrals on the itinerary. The magnificent buildings made a deep impression on her, and for a while she considered going into architecture. Instead, she opted for a major in art history at Princeton University, then received her masters from the Courtland Institute of Art in London, where she "got bitten by the bug of handling and examining and taking care of original art objects," she says.

She continued her studies at New York



Maria Saffioti Dale and Andrew Stevens are charged with the care and feeding of the Elvehjem's precious collection.

PHOTO BY MARTHA BUSSE

University's Institute of Fine Arts and interned at Baltimore's Walters Museum of Art before coming to the Elvehjem in 1999. A graduate degree and intern experience at one or several museums are prerequisites for most curatorial work, according to the U.S. Department of Labor, and competition for jobs can be fierce, especially at larger museums.

Stevens' path into the field was much less direct. He earned two degrees in English before a visit to a local museum's print room opened up a new world: "I realized that there are people whose job is just to look after this stuff, which seemed mighty interesting to me." So he left his teaching job to study art history at the University of Kansas, focusing on prints

and photographs. For the past 14 years, he has taken care of the Elvehjem's approximately 7,000 works on paper.

He organizes five or six exhibits from the museum's permanent collection each year, publishes a little under one catalog annually, keeps track of the values of the paper works in the Elvehjem's possession and oversees their care. Curators have two "mutually contradictory" goals to balance, Stevens says: "making things available for people to see, and protecting those things ... I am always thinking, 'In 50 years, what will be the impact of this decision on this piece?'"

Kathryn Kingsbury is a contributing writer to *Madison Magazine*.