

Picture of an Exhibition

Behind the scenes with Sarah Otto '02, '03 (T5), exhibitions coordinator at the Cleveland Museum of Art.

Interview by Karen McCally '02 (PhD)

The Cleveland Museum of Art was the first museum I ever visited. I grew up in Cleveland, and my family took me there as a small child. I went to their summer art classes. It's a really cool thing that I work there now; it's really a full-circle moment for me.

Being an exhibitions coordinator is a very interesting vantage point, especially for someone who's always enjoyed visiting museums. We're the hub between all of the various departments, so it's a place to witness the whole process of putting an exhibit together.

It's pretty remarkable all that goes into an exhibit. Our exhibitions are in the planning stage for several years. It begins with things like requesting the loans, looking for another museum to partner with, and figuring out preliminary budgets; and when you get closer, refining the list of works in the show, developing the thematic organization, and of course, all the design. The artworks themselves might have to undergo conservation treatment. Then there's mounting preparation, and gallery construction. And the programming that accompanies the exhibit needs to be planned as well as the opening event.

Sarah Otto '02, '03 (T5)

Cleveland, Ohio
Exhibitions coordinator,
Cleveland Museum of Art

Best part of Rochester: "So many things. But the Take Five program alone, I tell anyone who will listen about it. It was just so geared for people like me. I double majored, dabbled everywhere, and still wanted to take a fifth year, to study music."



Working in exhibitions really requires you to be flexible and responsive because inevitably something is going to happen that you couldn't have predicted. The first exhibition that I worked on at the art museum was a show about an ancient Peruvian civilization called the Wari. Toward the end, a shipment of a number of our loan objects was delayed. The installation team worked around the clock. They really made magic happen. They were putting the last objects in cases moments before the donor reception. It was really, really down to the wire. But they did it. And no one in the public would ever have known there was a scramble like that.

Maybe it's old-fashioned of me to say, but I think there's a lot to be said for just a really beautiful design. I think an exhibit is really successful when everything—not just the artwork, but the colors, the lighting, everything—has conspired to transport you to somewhere else. So many subtle design decisions can create an incredible feeling in a space. I have a lot of respect for my colleagues in the design department for that reason.

I didn't start off in museums. I was a student at Harvard Divinity School when I got my first museum job, at the university's Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnography. I'd gone to divinity school to become a professor. I double majored in religion and psychology at Rochester. But I'm such a dabbler at heart. I'd gotten interested in sacred objects. I spoke to a curator, and that's when I really started thinking about working in museums. Even though I'd always loved visiting them, it had never occurred to me to work in one. I don't know why.

I didn't know the first thing about planning exhibits when I got that job. But museums are places where, once you get your foot in the door, you learn so much on the job. I started as a research assistant, then next thing I knew, I was bouncing from department to department, learning as I went along. Museums really are a place where you can start where you are. ®