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Interview Panel with Adam Erby, Emilie Johnson, and Teresa Teixeira

Adam Erby

George Washington's Mount Vernon

Emilie Johnson

Thomas Jefferson's Monticello

Teresa Teixeira

James Madison's Montpelier

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Interview Panel

This year, our interview feature includes a panel of curators from presidential museums in Virginia. This format will provide readers with a variety of perspectives and ideas from these professionals in the history field.

Adam Erby is an associate curator at George Washington's Mount Vernon in Mount Vernon, Virginia, a position he has held since June 2015. Mr. Erby is a graduate of the University of Virginia and the Winterthur Program in American Material Culture at the University of Delaware.

Emilie Johnson is an assistant curator at Thomas Jefferson's Monticello in Charlottesville, Virginia, and has worked there for the past two and a half years. Ms. Johnson is a graduate of the Williams College Graduate Program in the History of Art and the University of Virginia.

Teresa Teixeira is an assistant curator at James Madison's Montpelier in Orange, Virginia, where she has worked since January 2016. Ms. Teixeira is a graduate of the College of William and Mary and the Smithsonian-Mason Master's Program in the History of Decorative Arts.

1) What types of duties does your job typically entail?

Adam Erby: At Mount Vernon, the curatorial staff is responsible for taking care of, developing, researching, and interpreting the fine and decorative arts collection. We are also charged with interpreting the interiors of all buildings in the historic area and putting on special exhibitions. In addition to those typical responsibilities, we often manage special projects, cultivate donors, answer inquiries about the collection, and plan special events related to the collection.

Emilie Johnson: The curatorial department is responsible for the

care, maintenance, and research of the Thomas Jefferson Foundation collections, which include objects and furnishings relating to Thomas Jefferson, his family, and the enslaved community at Monticello. My job is a combination of research, project and program development and management, and reporting to various constituents, including institutional leadership, museum and academic colleagues, our education and visitor programs staff, and the general public.

Teresa Teixeira: Most of my week is taken up by researching room and object usage, placing certain objects in certain rooms, then finding those specific objects or a good representative replacement (a comparable period example or reproduction). I also spend time confirming (or more often disproving) claims of provenance, answering object-based queries, and doing object analysis. There is a lot of online shopping involved.

2) What made you decide to pursue this career path?

Adam Erby: I entered the University of Virginia intending to major in politics, and throughout my time there I worked on various political campaigns with the intention of going to law school and into the political field. Needless to say, my life took a different course. I had always been interested in architecture and antiques, and in my first year of school I took a class titled “The Arts and Cultures of the Slave South.” The class taught us how you could understand people through objects, art, and architecture. I was hooked! In my last year, I took the LSAT and decided law school was not for me. I went to Winterthur the next year.

Emilie Johnson: I have always enjoyed museum work, but as I went through my doctorate program, I intended to pursue a career in academia. I love to teach. My position at Monticello was an extraordinarily good fit for my research interests, training, and background. I felt like a position at a historic house would let me continue to teach, but in a museum setting rather than a classroom.

Teresa Teixeira: I had a very restrictive childhood, and the only media I was allowed to consume without supervision were books. In high school, I became very interested in historical novels, which led me into reading nonfiction history books. Living in agricultural California, I had very little interaction with history through school or museums, and the images I imagined through the books were my only images of history. My sophomore year of high school, we went to a student convention at Eastern Mennonite University with a side-trip to Colonial Williamsburg. Stepping onto Duke of Gloucester Street was like stepping into one my books come to life. After that visit, my only life goal was to work at Colonial Williamsburg. That obsession fueled my research into the field and helped me narrow down what exactly I wanted to do within museums.

- 3) What skills or attributes would you look for in someone applying for your position?

Adam Erby: Being a curator takes a lot more than just an ability to research; you have to be a multi-faceted person with an eye for objects, broad knowledge of your academic discipline, an understanding of the marketplace, and an ability to fundraise. You don't need to have all of these skills immediately, but you will need to develop them pretty quickly to be a successful curator.

Emilie Johnson: Curiosity, flexibility, and the ability to collaborate with others are attributes that I would consider. At a historic house museum, you often need to gain expertise (or, at least a solid working background) of a new subject very, very quickly. I would look for someone who is an excellent communicator – with peers, with fellow scholars, and with the general public. An ability to talk to a wide range of audiences is a great skill to have. It's not exactly a lack of ego, but a willingness to share ideas and research, a willingness to accept constructive criticism, and a willingness to shelve your project and switch to another one quickly would be good attributes for someone in my position.

Teresa Teixeira: The most important qualifier would be hands-on connoisseurship and research training in the material culture from the applicable period and geographic region (in this case, the early nineteenth-century American South). Another important skill would be the ability to both start with an object and move outward to determine its context, and to start with a context and zero in on an object.

- 4) What is the hardest thing about transitioning from a graduate student to a history professional?

Adam Erby: When we are in graduate school, we are taught to dream big and be very theoretical, but in the working world this isn't always possible. In the curatorial field you always have multiple constituencies to navigate to make any project a reality, and sometimes you have to move past that youthful idealism to actually get things done. You have to learn to be very strategic about the choices you make and also how to choose your battles. I feel like I came into the museum field with the idea that I could change the world immediately, but in reality I have had to advocate for positive change and slowly work towards broader institutional goals. The trick is to work hard to keep that youthful enthusiasm and to learn practical ways of implementing positive change.

Emilie Johnson: I think it can be a little different for everyone. For example, I did not have a problem adjusting to the schedule or the pace of the work. Especially during my first year out of school, I worked hard to develop my communication skills. I needed to transition from writing for an academic audience (papers, lectures, conference presentations, and articles) to writing for a professional audience (reports, memos, exhibition texts). Both types of writing convey ideas, but I worked hard to simplify and condense my writing, to make myself express ideas as clearly and succinctly as possible.

Teresa Teixeira: The expectations for projects are completely different, at least internally. The furnishing plans and other

material I wrote for graduate school were formatted like research papers. Those that I write for work are more like internet listicles made to be very easy to skim. One of my first positions prepared me for the disappointing reality that nobody loves your research as much as you do, so if you want it to be utilized, you have to make it easily digestible to people from every department and multiple educational backgrounds.

- 5) In your opinion, what do employers in the museum/historic interpretation field look for in cover letters? What should absolutely be included? Conversely, what pitfalls should recent graduates avoid?

Adam Erby: Your cover letter is often the only introduction you have to a potential employer. Once the employer has reviewed your resume to see if you are qualified, your cover letter will persuade them to call you in for an interview. The biggest issue I often see is sterile cover letters. You can often tell that the applicant has created a boilerplate cover letter that they use for every job. Do some research on the organization. Use what you learn to inform your letter. Ask yourself the question: What can I bring to the table at this organization? If you can do that, you are much more likely to get an interview. Also, I know this sounds silly, but please proofread. I have seen many an application disregarded because the individual did not correct typos.

Emilie Johnson: Please, please, please (I cannot say it enough) – proofread. Make sure that your cover letter is written to the institution to which you are applying. At Monticello, we have received cover letters that refer to Mount Vernon and George Washington, or Montpelier and James Madison. Those letters immediately go into the recycle bin. Make sure that your letter is the best representation of yourself, your interests and capabilities, as well as your background, with references to the job description for which you are applying.

Teresa Teixeira: My most successful cover letters were the ones

that showed I was clearly excited for the specific position. Like most people, I had a form cover letter where I could change a few sentences to be about the specific job, but there were a few jobs where I threw it all away to squeal about how the job fit perfectly with my studies or was exactly what I wanted to study. Those were the ones that got me interviews. A few basic Dos and Don'ts: Don't recite your whole resume, but do mention a related position/achievement vaguely enough to both impress them and compel them to look at your resume for more information. Don't write it like an application to grad school. Keep it short and to the point, without a thesaurus. With 100+ applications, convoluted and wordy letters get thrown to the side. One of my old colleagues told me about a position he was hiring for that got over 300 applications. It got to the point where if the applicant referred him to website portfolio, formatted their materials poorly, was a bad writer, or had any sloppy mistakes, he threw them out without even reading their resume.

- 6) Were you able to get a job for which your degree was suited fairly quickly, or did you have to work your way up from a lower position?

Adam Erby: I was really lucky in that regard. Because I am from Virginia, I have always been primarily interested in Virginia material culture, particularly from the eighteenth century, so Mount Vernon was a perfect fit. I joined as assistant curator.

Emilie Johnson: Yes, and I was very lucky. My position opened a few months before I defended my dissertation and I was hired a few weeks before my defense.

Teresa Teixeira: I was able to get a two-year position before I graduated that carried me through finding a permanent position. This outcome is unusual though, and many of the people I graduated with are still searching or working in part-time positions. Even though my process was fairly quick, I still ended up applying to around fifty jobs, three of which led to interviews, and two to

offers.

- 7) In your opinion, how essential are internships for students hoping to pursue a career in public history?

Adam Erby: Internships and volunteer opportunities are absolutely essential for the aspiring public history professional. If I had not had the specific experiences I had during graduate school, I do not believe I would have the position that I have now. Internships provide you with some of the hands-on skills that you will need to perform in the working world by providing you with firsthand experience with real life projects. They also give you a chance to prove yourself to established professionals, people who will hopefully become your advocates as you begin applying to jobs. Unfortunately, there are few paid internships, which makes participating in these opportunities difficult for many. Increasingly I think museum professionals are conscious of these limitations, and even if a student is not able to work during the traditional nine-to-five workday, there are flexible opportunities for outside research or weekend work that might accommodate his/her schedule. I encourage anyone interested in a specific institution to approach someone there and ask for an internship. Even if we have nothing available, we might know of something at another institution or in another department.

Emilie Johnson: Like graduate school, internships are a great way to establish and develop your network of colleagues and collaborators – through internships, you can expand your contacts with history professionals, which can be very helpful to getting a job. Internships are also a wonderful opportunity to try out different positions within an institution, to help you better identify the kind of work you want to do.

Teresa Teixeira: In my opinion, internships are the most important aspect of your education when it comes to getting a job. You can be the smartest person in all of your classes, but if it doesn't come across on paper, there's no way for potential employers to know.

Internships prove that you can apply the skills and knowledge that you learn in your classes in a job setting. Additionally, “entry level” curatorial position usually require three-five years of work experience, and internships are often the only way to get that while still in school.

8) What do you enjoy most about your job?

Adam Erby: The people. The museum field is full of people with a variety of backgrounds who have enormous amounts of energy and passion. I learn so much from my colleagues, and I feel like I have a community of scholars with whom I can share my own research and experiences.

Emilie Johnson: The discoveries – understanding an object, or a space, or a person differently by looking at the research from a different perspective, finding new sources, and putting the evidence together to answer new questions. All historians are shaped by their time, and it is exciting to recognize when you are approaching an object differently than your predecessors had done. The other truly enjoyable aspect of my job is the camaraderie. I am one of three curators, a collections manager, and a registrarial and preparation staff. We have historians, restorers, archaeologists, editors, horticulturalists, and interpreters on staff – all working on subjects relating to Thomas Jefferson. It is a community of knowledgeable people, so when I have a question about something, I can usually find someone to give me an answer – and the documentation behind that answer. Sometimes academia can be lonely, and I am thankful that my job is not.

Teresa Teixeira: My favorite part of my job is interacting with objects. Everything from staring at them up close for an inordinate amount of time, to finding out about every carpet someone ever owned their entire life, to explaining the larger context to guests. Mostly staring at the objects, though.

9) What is the most difficult aspect of your job?

Adam Erby: Finding the time to research and write is one of the most difficult aspects of my job. As a curator, you have many projects and deadlines at a given time. You also have email going all day every day. I find that I have to block out time to accomplish these two tasks and to try to ignore phones and email during that period.

Emilie Johnson: Some of what was brought up earlier – adjusting to the administrative duties associated with my position. It has been extremely valuable to develop those skills, but the learning curve has sometimes felt steep!

Teresa Teixeira: For me, the most difficult part of my job is letting go of my research and turning it over to someone else to implement. It was hard to come to terms with the fact that I had little control over much of the guest experience, especially after spending so much time with the material.

10) Have you encountered any on-the-job challenges that your training or education did not prepare you for?

Adam Erby: Fortunately, I really haven't. My graduate program did an excellent job of introducing us to the challenges of the museum field. We learned public speaking skills and donor relations in addition to the academic rigors of connoisseurship and research. The one thing I wasn't entirely prepared for was dealing with budgets and money, but these skills are fairly easy to pick up.

Emilie Johnson: No, but that is not to suggest that I have been automatically successful and wonderful at every project given to me! When I have been challenged at work, I will pick away at the research, think about the questions I am asking of the subject, and enlist help, advice, and support from my colleagues. My education and training taught me how to work through challenges.

Teresa Teixeira: While there have been several challenges that my education—specifically—did not prepare me for, having a broad

range of hobbies has served me well. Especially in small institutions, you may be called on to do any number of odd things from creating faux-flower arrangements, to sewing props, to singing a song for a wall panel. Having a broad range of interests and skills will really benefit you. The only things I was really never prepared for were politics and resource hoarding. There is a lot of diplomacy involved in the field when dealing with other departments, other institutions, and donors—navigating that can be difficult at first. It was also difficult for me to keep research findings secret.

11) Have you worked at any other institutions, and if so, what type of work did you do?

Adam Erby: Prior to this position, I spent a lot of time volunteering and interning. My first volunteer experience was at Prestwold Plantation, an amazing eighteenth-century house in Clarksville, Virginia near where I grew up. The house is well restored, but there is really no website, so the place was pretty sleepy. Most people came by word of mouth. On the weekends, I volunteered to give tours, which gave me the opportunity to really hone my message. Giving tours is an essential part of what any museum curator does; you need to be able to get other people excited about what you do. Because the museum was so sleepy, I also had the opportunity to explore the collection in great detail and get a feel for period objects.

Emilie Johnson: Yes, before graduate school I worked for the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., in the education department. I worked closely with our volunteer docents, who shared the exhibitions and works of art with the public. Throughout graduate school, I worked with art museums and libraries affiliated with Williams College and the University of Virginia on exhibitions in a more-curatorial capacity, researching exhibition content and writing for exhibition.

Teresa Teixeira: My very first position was in the Hirshhorn

library where I paid my dues shelf reading and photocopying materials for long-distance researchers. Then, at the National Museum of American History, I was a research assistant both doing documentary research and collection management. At Mount Vernon I did cataloguing, object-based research, and documentary research. At Monticello, I primarily did documentary research. At Colonial Williamsburg I did object and documentary research, genealogy, cataloguing, exhibition striking and installation, led tours, delivered papers, and proposed objects for accession and deaccession.

- 12) Finally, what do you think the job prospects are for graduate students in history who should be graduating within the next few years?

Adam Erby: In the next few years there will likely be quite a few jobs opening up in the field of American decorative arts. It seems that many people who came into the field just after the 1976 Bicentennial are reaching retirement age and their positions are becoming open. Many institutions are replacing these people with younger professionals who have not reached their peak salaries. Thus, the many institutions are able to save money in the short term and younger professionals are able to get stable, permanent positions.

Emilie Johnson: In the next few years, I think there will be some interesting jobs opening up for historians, especially relating to digital humanities. I am not sure it is a growth market, but I think young, creative scholars will be able to carve out positions that involve digital approaches to their scholarship. The museum world and academia, unfortunately, have fewer jobs than qualified applicants, which make getting the first job even more challenging. That is where the networks and colleagues that you have developed through graduate school, internships, conferences, and projects can come in handy.

Teresa Teixeira: This is a difficult question to answer. Since

curatorial positions are mostly collections based, a regular history degree may not be the best for quickly getting a position, especially in today's market. If curatorial work is definitely the goal, it may be best to look at historical institutions that do not focus on a collection, or places that do primarily text-based exhibitions. Small historic sites are good starter jobs for transitioning from plain history to public history or material culture. However, if working any position in a museum is the goal, look into education and interpretation departments, where your writing and documentary research focuses will be very useful. Your chances of quickly getting hired dramatically increase if you graduate with a good amount of work experience, be it from volunteering, internships, or paid jobs. A few of my classmates have gotten hired full time through their internships, and several more have gotten positions through people they met during internships. Others, who are very intelligent and qualified but graduated with no relevant work experience and little networking, are still on the hunt.