

Smithsonian Culture: A Personal View



Marie Galloway, museum specialist in the Elephant House, began working as a volunteer at the National Zoo. As she explained, "The longer I was around here, the more it felt like everything I had done in my life had prepared me to come here."

Photo by Jessie Cohen, courtesy National Zoological Park

Marc Pachter

Washington, D.C., is a strange place to pursue the many professions we at the Smithsonian engage in. It is a city of politics, of journalism, and of the practice of the law, a place of "hard issues" and of "policy wonks." It is, above all, a city which defines you by the job you hold. Therefore, for the over twenty-one years I have been at the Smithsonian and a resident of Washington, I have been constantly challenged by the inevitable question, "What do you do?" and the difficulty of answering it in a way comprehensible to this impatient city.

For the fifteen years that I served as chief historian of the National Portrait Gallery, which commemorates the achievements of great Americans, I developed a ready answer: "I decide who shall live and who shall die in the memory of the Republic!" That usually stopped people in their tracks. If they really turned out to want to know more, I went on to say that I had a dream job for someone with

my interests and training, the task of helping the National Portrait Gallery Commission determine which individuals to include in the telling of centuries of American history, and that I couldn't believe I was paid to do what I so enjoyed doing.

In my native California, the question you are often asked by strangers is different: "What are you into?" That's because in that place, at least as I experienced it, one is defined more by one's fascinations than by one's job. It occurred to me as I sat down to write this essay, however, that my answer to the California question and to the Washington question is the same, that my passions are identical to my profession, and

that one of the things that marks the lives of many of us in the Smithsonian community is that we have arrived at that happy juncture — through various odd routes and what may seem to others odd interests.

There is an internal newspaper for the Smithsonian family, *The Torch*, and as I roamed through its "profiles" of Smithsonian staff to determine what shapes us as a community, time and again I ran across stories of employees who found themselves in jobs that were perfect "fits": the keeper of the five elephants in the National Zoo, who loved animals but didn't want to be a vet; the textile curator at the Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum, whose passion for textiles and particularly lace began in rural Pennsylvania at age six with his grandmother's interest in needlework; the head of horticulture, who was fascinated with gardens all her life but "didn't even know I could [work on them] for a living." There are others, too, in our diverse community of over 6,000 (employed in and

outside of Washington): lawyers who didn't want a classic law practice and put their training to the service of science, art, and history; retailers who found a unique satisfaction in selling objects linked to the national collections through our shops; and security specialists who enjoyed the great responsibility of guarding national treasures.

We're a motley group, drawn here by very different histories and tasks, and yet unified by a sense of purpose. There is no one way to get here: no one's mother raises him or her to be at the Smithsonian, after all, because one can't "expect" to get here through predictable routes.

For each of us, it has been a matter of a chance internship, the ad that catches one's eye, making a pest of oneself with a curator, delivering a passionate concern to the Smithsonian and making some museum director see its importance. It is the *drive* we have in common, and the *luck* — always the luck. And we are also joined by the goal *not of making money*, which is more likely in the for-profit world, *nor of making history*, which we leave to the politicians, activists, and generals, but of *holding on* to what is important for our generation and those of the future.

The more I think of what motivates us as a community, the more I am convinced that we are all, in one way or another, preservers and conservers. Many of us are collectors (often from childhood on), not only of objects, but of specimens, of ideas, of events, of techniques, of musical and oral traditions. When I was at the Portrait Gallery (I am now an administrator in the Castle), I characterized my favorite project there, a videotaped series of public interviews with notable Americans, as a way "to cheat death," by which I meant a way



to guarantee that the company of these wonderful people would continue to be available to generations of Americans yet unborn. We're all here involved somehow in "cheating" the ravages of time and memory, of holding on to what others might throw away, of preserving or reconstituting what might otherwise corrode or disappear, of presenting and explaining and guarding and celebrating, and above all, of trying to save it all.

If Americans are sometimes defined as only present-oriented and residents of a throw-away society, then we are very strange Americans indeed. Or maybe, better put, our society has created in the Smithsonian, and institutions like ours, a special place to remember and to transmit knowledge across the generations. We may do it through a curator prowling a political convention for the pins of defeated candidates, or a teacher at our Anacostia Museum showing young people how to collect in their own family and community, or a presenter of the traditions of Maryland oyster shuckers at the Festival of American Folklife on the National Mall. We

Oyster shuckers from the Eastern Shore of Maryland share their expertise and knowledge with visitors to the 1978 Festival of American Folklife.

Photo by Fred Herter, courtesy Smithsonian Institution



Edgar Perry (White Mountain Apache) visits the National Museum of the American Indian to pass along his knowledge of Apache culture to staff members, including curator Cecille Ganteaume. Perry explained the significance of his visit: "We are gathering the wealth of things worth remembering."

Photo by Karen Furth, courtesy
National Museum of the American Indian

certainly do it through the analysis of metals in our Conservation Analytical Observatory, or in the careful work of visual art restorers in studios throughout the Institution, and in the care our building staffs take in treating these wonderful old places as treasures themselves.

These are among the many reasons to count oneself lucky to be here. But having said that, I don't mean that everyone on staff is enthusiastic about all aspects of the modern Smithsonian. Some of this is an inevitable consequence of its size and complexity. To hear our old-timers tell it, there was more of a sense of family in the period up to the 1960s, when there were far fewer staff (about 900 in 1960) and more of them were occupied in similar pursuits, principally having to do with science. We have grown more bureaucratic and more diverse in our tasks, our backgrounds, our goals, and in the resources available to us. Some of us feel undervalued or undervalue the work of our colleagues. Our scholars and our managers are often at loggerheads. The very fact that the Smithsonian encompasses the disciplines of science, art, and history means that most of us have to reach to understand worlds we have never been trained in and, in down moments, we may suspect that others have the advantage in being understood by

decision-makers. The entrepreneurs among us feel that the Institution is reluctant to change, and the traditionalists feel that what is valuable and unique at the Smithsonian is under attack.

Some might say that much of this is true, in different forms, of the cultures of all organizations. But what seems unique about the Smithsonian culture, and is the source of both what is wonderful about it and also what creates tension, is the fact that there is no *one* definition of who we are. Everyone within the Institution, it seems, and many outside it have positive associations with the Smithsonian and tend to invest its high purpose with their own goals, values, and hopes. We all have a personal notion of what the Institution is or could be at its best and are perplexed when it disappoints us. So many among the staff know what they could achieve if only they were left alone to do it. Those who see the strength of the Institution, its very essence, in the individual museums, research centers, offices, and programs wonder at what seems to them a perpetual impulse at the center to amalgamate and generalize those specific strengths into an indeterminate whole. Others see the whole Smithsonian as greater than the sum of its parts and are convinced that the American public treasures that whole above all.

The good news is that the ongoing debate about the Smithsonian is a debate about an Institution that is valuable to its citizen-owners and to the staff which serves it. The question is not whether our mission is worthwhile but only how better to fulfill it.

The Smithsonian is a repository for much of what is important to our nation and to the world, and it is a privilege to work here. Even if it is tough to explain what you do.

Marc Pachter has been counselor to the Secretary of the Smithsonian since 1994, with responsibilities including oversight of electronic media issues for the Institution, chairing the Smithsonian's 150th anniversary, and facilitating international interactions.