

## **Uncle Couvi's Rules For Visiting A Museum to Perform Research**

### **1. Make an appointment**

- a. The museum business is a business with deadlines, timetables, workloads and irate bosses. Be prepared to adjust to their timetable since you are in their area of responsibility.
- b. Some collectors believe that museum personnel are sitting around with nothing to do and are just waiting for someone to come in, put them to work and berate them for their lack of knowledge on obscure and arcane subjects. This isn't so. They have a lot of things to do and very few resources with which to do them.
- c. This curator is responsible for a number of items in a number of fields. Your unexpected appearance may result in your being accompanied by the lady in charge of the pornographic Mayan ceramics and not the gun and saddle guy you expected to find. Be patient.

### **2. Be Polite and Considerate**

- a. Be prepared to quit at quitting time. Museum curators have irate wives, children, dogs and other familial and household responsibilities.
- b. This stuff may be endlessly fascinating to you, but this boy has seen it every day, all day for the past several years. Mama doesn't want to hear that she is late for her job, he is late for supper or he missed Lil' Nubbin's soccer match because he had a collector who wouldn't leave.
- c. If you can't live without this stuff for a few hours, maybe you should seek professional help.

### 3. Limit What You Want To See

- a. Know what you want to see and limit the amount of material to manageable quantities. Nothing is more frustrating to a curator than to ask a researcher what he or she wishes to see and to get the response, *"Everything."*
- b. Forwarding a list of artifacts of interest ahead of your visit will give them time to prepare the collection for your perusal.
- c. Remember, the curator has to also return this material to storage. This involves very careful inventory of all of the material used, possibly cleaning of this material, and the return of the artifact to its recorded location. It is not a simple matter of chucking it back into a closet after you leave.

### 4. Be Careful How You Handle Artifacts

- a. Pick up **nothing** without express permission.
  - (1) Many museum artifacts are very delicate. Its original strength is no indication of its current strength. One inconsiderate, ham-handed visitor can do a lot of damage by just picking up an object.
  - (2) I was once faced with the prospect of packaging a 300 lb projectile from the USS Cairo that is shedding sheets of wrought iron. That bad boy could pierce armor when it was built but is no longer so. A hundred plus years will do that.
- b. Bring the appropriate white cotton gloves and glove-up before handling artifacts.
  - (1) We don't want the stuff on your hands on our artifacts, and we don't want what's on our artifacts on your hands.
  - (2) I was very impressed by a collector who visited and his first act after entering the storage area was to pull a package of white cotton

photographer's gloves out of his pocket, gloved up and passed the rest of the gloves out to my staff.

## **5. Have Only Enough People in Your Party As Needed for the Job**

a. These people have the responsibility for the physical security in their collections, and they don't know you. They don't know if you steal, they don't know if you don't. One or two interested parties are about all one curator can manage at one time.

b. Nothing is more exasperating for a curator than a bored wife and a herd of dogs and kids running amok in a museum storage area while the collector looks at *"Everything!"* One researcher I dealt with brought his nervous, little, bug-eyed Chihuahua when he visited and placed the dog on the table with the artifacts. While this may be perfectly acceptable at home, it isn't to someone whose obligation is to preserve things for a millennium. This gentleman was truly hurt when I asked him not to bring his nervous little dog back.

## **6. Bring Your Own Photographic and Reproductive Capability**

a. In this day and age a digital camera is a necessity.

b. You may not be able to tote a copy machine with you but make arrangements for copying, packaging and mailing. Don't expect the institution to pick up the tab for your research. Pay for it.

## **7. Leave Something**

a. A donation is not required, but a check for \$20 to the museum fund goes a long way in opening the door for your next visit. Using your hourly wage figure out what it cost the management to supply the labor of a highly skilled curator for your research. With overhead, that price runs between \$50 and \$75 per hour. It isn't cheap.

b. If you have any publications that you can donate, especially new ones or reprints, try to leave one. This not only pays for this trip but also greases the skids for future trips. Leaving something like this when you go helps the

institution plenty; it especially saves wear and tear if they are using their own original copy.

c. If you write anything using information obtained at a museum, you owe them a copy or two. Sign it and thank them in print for their cooperation. This is not a gift; it is an obligation. Because you cared, their appreciation will be undying.

## **8. Be Careful Not To Mix Artifacts**

a. Ensure that any of your artifacts brought in are marked or tagged so they don't get mixed up with the museum's pieces. Ensure that the curator knows you are bringing them in. Don't put yourself in a position where the curator has to wonder if you are playing Three-Card Monte with his artifacts.

b. Make sure the curator is well aware that you are bringing in artifacts. He or she may want to segregate you and your artifacts from their collection to prevent mold, mildew or insect contamination. It isn't your deodorant. The environment in museum storage is different from your closet at home, and there are greater issues at stake. These people make their living by protecting their collections from factors of deterioration, be they microscopic plants or large, hairy primates.

## **9. Don't Become a Pain In The Posterior**

a. Make sure your conduct invites your return.

b. Space your visits so the staff can still perform their regular duties.

c. Make arrangements through the chain of command. Make sure the boss doesn't beat up the curator because you have commandeered the curator for your research project.

## 10. Be Helpful

- a. Offer as much information as they can absorb but no more.
- b. Volunteer to help when they have exhibit openings and museum events. You may end up parking cars, but you are still making a legitimate contribution. If nothing else, show up for the exhibit opening and compliment them on their efforts.
- c. Invite them to visit your collection. Interaction is a good thing.
- d. Assist in identifying artifacts and be able to prove it. Your positive reputation will be greatly advanced if the information exchanges go both ways. A couple of electrostatic copies can make a big difference to a curator with little or no resources.

## 11. Enjoy Yourself

- a. For a curator the visit from a good collector is like a free day off.
- b. Many curators will go out of their way for you because, more than the general public, you appreciate what they do and how they have to do it.

*Uncle Cowwi (Army Museum Curator-Retired)*