



College of Letters & Science

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History alumna becomes an art Guardian

By Sarah Vickery, College of Letters & Science

If you want to make her day, ask Katie Steffan about her work. She's a self-taught archival box constructor and proud of it.

"I watched a YouTube™ video and kind of just ran with it," she joked. "I guarantee that if you use my custom box, whatever you put in it will last a lot longer than if it wasn't in my box."

It's one of the reasons she's so good at her job as the registrar at Guardian Fine Art Services.

Steffan is one of an eight-person team working at Guardian, which opened on W. St. Paul Avenue in 2017. Founded by John Shannon, an art collector and the husband of UWM alumna Jan Serr, the company provides storage facilities for art, helps collectors manage their art pieces, and even crates and packs art for shipping, among other services - like creating custom archival boxes.

Steffan has no background in art history. Luckily, she doesn't need to; she just needs to know how to protect the pieces in Guardian's care.

Registrars are responsible for implementing procedures and policies that dictate the care of collections under their purview. With the small size of Guardian's team, Steffan shoulders more responsibilities than most. From managing paperwork to implementing proper storage techniques to coding alarm systems to monitoring the HVAC system, she is tasked with ensuring the total safety of the art stored on-site.

"That's what I love doing – protecting things and making sure they're going to be around as long as possible," she said. "My role is to make sure the objects are cared for at museum-quality standards."

That means she has to know the proper way to store any type of art, paying attention to the temperature of the facility, the humidity in the air, how much light exposure the objects receive, and the type of materials they're packed in.

Her education is well-suited to the task; Steffan graduated from UWM in 2015 with her Master's in Public History and a certificate in Museum Studies. She completed internships at the Milwaukee Public Museum and met Guardian founder Shannon when she took an internship cataloging his collection. A treasure-trove of roughly 5,000 pieces of art.

When Shannon needed a team to staff Guardian Art Services when the facility opened in 2016, he tapped Steffan.

"I kind of just fell into it," she said. "I thought I was going to go into curation – that's the flashy museum job. The more I went into the program, the more I realized I'm definitely a registrar."

It's a demanding job; Steffan is on-call 24/7 to protect the art stored at Guardian. If the facility's motion sensors go off on a weekend or if HVAC system malfunctions at 3 Am., for example, she has to be up and ready to fix it."

"If my environment isn't 70 degrees at 50 percent humidity, the art could be damaged, and we don't want that," she explained. "It's incredibly stressful... [but] I love this job. I never knew this was a job someone could have. I didn't know art storage facilities existed. ...I don't do 'history', but the skills I learned from the UWM History Department are incredibly important to my job."

That includes skills like thinking through problems and understanding how to research and analyze art pieces. To protect client privacy, Steffan can't discuss what kind of art is stored on Guardian's premises, but some of the collection she's seen "I could believe we were getting to work with."

Her job is rather unique, but she does have some advice for people looking to break into similar fields.

"Be known as the person who works very hard," she advised. "I can't stress the importance of internships and jobs. You have to be willing to learn every day."

Even if that learning is how to run an HVAC system or construct an archival box. ■



History alumna Katie Steffan stands with some custom made archival boxes in a work room at Guardian Fine Art Services. Photo by Sarah Vickery.

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