

Definitions and Etymologies for archivist, curator, and librarian

Current definitions and notes from the Society of American Archivists' *Glossary of Archival and Records Terminology*:

archivist (RT: curator; librarian; manuscript curator; records manager)

n. ~ 1. An individual responsible for appraising, acquiring, arranging, describing, preserving, and providing access to records of enduring value, according to the principles of provenance, original order, and collective control to protect the materials' authenticity and context. - 2. An individual with responsibility for management and oversight of an archival repository or of records of enduring value.

Note: The archival profession in the United States began with the establishment of the National Archives in Washington, D.C., in 1934. Before that, historians and librarians had shared a common concern for the preservation of archival records and manuscripts, but there were few individuals who called themselves archivists. (*Adkins, Elizabeth W., The Development of Business Archives in the United States: An Overview and a Personal Perspective. American Archivist 60:1 (Winter 1997), p. 8–33.*)

librarian (RT: archivist)

n. ~ An individual responsible for acquiring, providing access to, and managing collections of published materials.

Note: If it were up to me, I would abolish the word entirely and turn back to the lexicological wisdom of the ancients, who saw librarians not as feeble sorters and shelvers but as heroic guardians. In Assyrian, Babylonian, and Egyptian cultures alike, those who toiled at the shelves were often bestowed with a proud, even soldierly, title: Keeper of the Books. (*Harvey, Miles, The Island of Lost Maps: A True Story of Geographic Crime. Random House, 2000.*)

Librarianship is an information profession wherein data are valued as independent entities, separate from the context that created them. By contrast, archivists must focus on unique documents created often as the accident rather than the object of an action. We are not information professionals like librarians – we are evidence professionals. (*Maher, William J., Archives, Archivists, and Society. American Archivist 61:2 (Fall 1998), p. 252–265. Incoming presidential address delivered 30 August 1997.*)

Curator (NT: manuscript curator; RT: archivist)

n. ~ 1. An individual responsible for oversight of a collection or an exhibition. - 2. The administrative head of a museum or collection. Notes: Often carries the connotation, especially in museums and galleries, of an individual who selects items based on artistic merit or connoisseurship.

Current Dictionary Definitions (<http://www.merriam-webster.com/>):

Archivist: a person who has the job of collecting and storing the materials in an archive.

-First known use of Archivist: 1753

Librarian: a specialist in the care or management of a library

-First known use of Librarian: 1671

Curator: one who has the care and superintendence of something; *especially:* one in charge of a museum, zoo, or other place of exhibit

-Origin of Curator: Latin, from *curare* to care, from *cura* care. First known use 1561

Etymology (<http://www.etymonline.com/index.php>):

archivist (n.)

1753, from Medieval Latin or Italian *archivista* or French *archiviste* (see *archives*).

archives (n.)

c. 1600, from French *archif* (16c.), from Late Latin *archivum* (singular), from Greek *ta arkheia* "public records," plural of *arkheion* "town hall," from *arkhe* "government," literally "beginning, origin, first place" (see *archon*).

librarian (n.)

"custodian of a library," 1713; see *library* + *-an*. Earlier form was *library-keeper* (1640s), and *librarian* was used earlier in a sense "scribe" (1660s).

library (n.)

place for books, late 14c., from Anglo-French *librarie*, Old French *librairie* "collection of books" (14c.), noun use of adj. *librarius* "concerning books," from Latin *librarium* "chest for books," from *liber* (genitive *libri*) "book, paper, parchment," originally "the inner bark of trees," probably a derivative of PIE root **leub(h)-* "to strip, to peel" (see *leaf*). The equivalent word in most Romance languages now means "bookseller's shop." Old English had *bochord*, literally "book hord."

curator (n.)

mid-14c., from Latin *curator* "overseer, manager, guardian," agent noun from *curatus*, past participle of *curare* (see *cure* (v.)). Originally of those put in charge of minors, lunatics, etc.; meaning "officer in charge of a museum, library, etc." is from 1660s.

museum (n.)

1610s, "the university building in Alexandria," from Latin *museum* "library, study," from Greek *mouseion* "place of study, library or museum, school of art or poetry," originally "a seat or shrine of the Muses," from *Mousa* "Muse" (see *muse* (n.)). Earliest use in reference to English institutions was of libraries (such as the British Museum); sense of "building to display objects" first recorded 1680s.