

BETWEEN DISCIPLINARY IDENTITY AND PROFESSIONAL TITLE: ART-HISTORICAL JURISDICTION IN EIGHT SERBIAN MUSEUMS UNDER THE 2021 MUSEUM ACT

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Abstract: This article examines how disciplinary expertise acquires formal professional authority when the corresponding academic discipline is absent from a statutory hierarchy of occupational titles. It analyses the position of art-historical expertise in Serbia's museum system under the 2021 Law on Museum Activity. The study applies qualitative document analysis to the Law, two implementing rulebooks and operative organisation and job-classification acts from eight museums selected through maximum-variation purposive sampling. The documents were coded across seven dimensions: statutory title, disciplinary designation, organisational embedding, collection anchoring, qualification closure, task jurisdiction and continuity across higher professional grades. The national framework defines curator as a basic professional title and senior curator and museum adviser as higher titles, but reserves neither the professional examination nor these titles for art-history graduates. Institutional acts nevertheless produce different forms of disciplinary recognition: seven museums use an art-historical designation, four establish an art-history department, five connect the analysed post with an art, fine-art or applied-art collection, and four prescribe an exclusively art-historical qualification. The comparison demonstrates that an explicit art-historian designation may coexist with non-exclusive disciplinary entry, while substantial collection-specific authority may be assigned through generic curatorial titles. Drawing on Abbott's theory of jurisdiction and Fourcade's distinction between nested and state-centred professional structures, the article introduces vertically distributed jurisdiction as a configuration in which occupational recognition is regulated nationally, while disciplinary eligibility and object accountability are specified institutionally. The findings demonstrate that disciplinary designation is neither necessary nor sufficient evidence of formal jurisdiction and support the explicit alignment of statutory grade, qualification and collection responsibility.

Keywords: *art history; museum professions; professional jurisdiction; occupational closure; Serbia.*

Field: Humanities

1. INTRODUCTION

Professional authority is often inferred from occupational titles. In museums, however, statutory title, academic discipline, educational qualification, organisational position and collection responsibility may be regulated through different institutional mechanisms. An art historian may authenticate, research, document, interpret and publish a collection while being formally employed and promoted within a general curatorial hierarchy. The central analytical problem is therefore where art-historical jurisdiction resides when art historian is not itself a statutory museum title.

Museums provide a revealing setting for examining this problem because their research, collecting, conservation, interpretation, exhibition, accessibility and educational functions require differentiated forms of specialised knowledge (International Council of Museums [ICOM], 2022). Legal and organisational systems nevertheless tend to classify employees through a limited set of common occupational titles. A title locates an employee within an authorised hierarchy, a qualification determines eligibility for a post, a task description prescribes the work to be performed, and collection responsibility identifies the object domain over which expert judgement is exercised. These elements may converge, but none independently demonstrates professional jurisdiction.

Abbott (1988) defines jurisdiction as a socially recognised claim to control particular tasks and shows that legal and workplace settlements may differ. Freidson (2001) similarly connects professional authority with specialised knowledge, credentials and control over work. Fourcade (2009) distinguishes jurisdictions nested within other professions from forms of expertise built into state-centred professional structures, providing a basis for analysing systems in which the state defines an occupational hierarchy while individual institutions specify the disciplinary content of particular posts. Research on museum professions has examined changing competencies, professional identities, hybrid work and the limitations of inherited job titles (Evetts, 2011; Jensen, 2019; Khosrowjerdi et al., 2024; Noordeggraaf, 2015; Ripley & Hurley, 2025; Tlili, 2016; Yaron, 2024). It has not, however, established a systematic method for

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reconstructing formal disciplinary authority when titles, qualifications, organisational units, collections and tasks are regulated separately.

Serbia constitutes an analytically significant case because the 2021 Law on Museum Activity establishes a dedicated statutory framework for museum work. Article 51 links the performance of museum activities to appropriate education and a passed professional examination, while Article 52 provides that the examination programme is prescribed by professional fields. Article 53 defines curator as a basic professional title, and Article 54 defines senior curator and museum adviser as higher professional titles. Article 40(18)–(19) assigns the central institution separate responsibilities for organising the professional examination and conducting the procedure for acquiring higher titles. Neither passing the professional examination nor acquiring the titles of curator, senior curator or museum adviser is legally restricted to art-history graduates, and art historian is not listed as an autonomous statutory title under Articles 53 or 54.

Article 48 nevertheless provides that museum organisation is regulated through founding acts, statutes and other general acts. Individual museums may therefore prescribe designations such as curator–art historian, require an art-history qualification, establish an art-history department or assign responsibility for fine-art and applied-art collections. Formal disciplinary recognition consequently emerges through the interaction between national occupational regulation and institution-specific organisation. Serbian scholarship has examined museum policy and broader institutional tensions (Krivošević, 2011; Krstović, 2023), but it has not comparatively reconstructed this complete law-to-workplace normative chain.

The article therefore asks how the post-2021 national framework regulates entry, examination and progression through curatorial titles; how museum acts combine statutory title, disciplinary designation, organisational location, qualification, collection responsibility and tasks; and what the alignment or divergence of these elements reveals about formal art-historical jurisdiction. Empirically, it compares operative arrangements in eight Serbian museums. Methodologically, it treats the complete normative chain, rather than job title alone, as the unit of analysis and examines seven observable dimensions of jurisdiction. Conceptually, it introduces vertically distributed jurisdiction to describe a configuration in which occupational recognition is established through a state-regulated hierarchy, while disciplinary eligibility and object accountability are specified institutionally. Two propositions are tested: disciplinary designation is neither necessary nor sufficient evidence of formal jurisdiction, and collection accountability may carry disciplinary authority when occupational titles remain generic.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study employed qualitative document analysis, treating legislation, implementing regulations and institutional general acts as formal artefacts through which posts are authorised, eligibility is delimited and professional responsibility is assigned (Bowen, 2009). Article 48 of the Law on Museum Activity provides the statutory basis for this approach by placing museum organisation within founding acts, statutes and other general acts. The unit of analysis was the operative normative chain connecting national regulation with institutional provisions governing an art-related museum post.

The national corpus comprised the Law on Museum Activity and the 2021 rulebooks regulating the professional examination and museum-object documentation. The institutional corpus comprised operative organisation and job-classification acts from eight museums: National Museum Niš, Homeland Museum Priboj, Museum in Prijepolje, National Museum Šumadije in Kragujevac, City Museum Sombor, National Museum Zrenjanin, Museum of Applied Art in Belgrade and National Museum Pančevo (City Museum Sombor, 2018, 2024; Homeland Museum Priboj, 2024; Museum in Prijepolje, 2025; Museum of Applied Art, 2024; National Museum Niš, 2023; National Museum Pančevo, 2023; National Museum Šumadije, 2025; National Museum Zrenjanin, 2018, 2021). Every document was retrieved from an official museum or municipal repository.

Cases were selected purposively through a maximum-variation strategy covering geographical location, institutional scale, museum type and collection profile. The sample included complex museums with several disciplinary collections and a specialised applied-art museum. The latter served as a negative case for testing whether an explicit art-historian designation is necessary for substantial collection-specific jurisdiction. The sample was designed to compare different institutional configurations within a common national framework, not to estimate their frequency across all Serbian museums.

Documents were eligible when an official full text was publicly accessible, the operative documentary chain had been adopted, amended or expressly reconfirmed between 1 January 2021 and 25 August 2026, and the institution maintained an art or applied-art collection or systematised an art-historical post. Earlier base acts were retained only where post-2021 amendments confirmed their continued operation.

Vacancy announcements, staff webpages and employee biographies were excluded because they lacked equivalent normative authority. Information absent from an available operative chain was coded as not available rather than inferred from non-normative sources.

Each case was coded across seven dimensions: L1, statutory museum title and grade; L2, disciplinary designation in the local job title; L3, organisational embedding; L4, collection anchoring; L5, qualification closure; L6, task jurisdiction; and L7, continuity of the disciplinary designation across higher professional grades. A disciplinary designation was recorded only when art history or art historian appeared explicitly in a post or organisational-unit title. Collection anchoring required a named art, fine-art or applied-art collection or an express assignment of responsibility for such objects. Task jurisdiction comprised formally prescribed responsibilities for research, documentation, acquisition or valuation, protection, exhibition, publication and interpretation.

Qualification closure was classified as exclusive art history, art history among specified alternatives, broad humanities or arts, or not available. These categories describe formal eligibility for a post and do not imply equivalence among different forms of disciplinary training. Analysis proceeded in three stages: national instruments established the sectoral baseline; each museum was coded across the seven dimensions with document- and provision-level evidence retained; and the cases were compared through a matrix adapted from the Framework Method (Gale et al., 2013).

Alignment denoted convergence among disciplinary designation, qualification boundary and collection accountability where all three were observable. Formal decoupling denoted divergence between at least two of these elements. Title–credential decoupling occurred where an explicit disciplinary designation coexisted with non-exclusive disciplinary entry, while title–object decoupling occurred where collection-specific responsibility was prescribed under a generic occupational title. Claims of absence were made only where document scope permitted them.

Coding was conducted by the author. Interpretive reliability was strengthened through explicit decision rules, conservative treatment of missing information, preservation of provision-level evidence, cross-case comparison and deliberate examination of a negative case. The study analysed public institutional documents, involved no human participants and processed no personal data; ethical approval was therefore not required.

3. RESULTS

The national analysis showed that the Serbian framework established sectoral occupational closure without creating an art-history-specific statutory title. Article 51 requires appropriate education and a passed professional examination, while Article 52 permits the examination programme to be prescribed by professional fields. Article 53 defines curator as a basic professional title, and Article 54 defines senior curator and museum adviser as higher titles. Article 40(18)–(19) separates responsibility for the professional examination from the procedure for acquiring higher titles. Neither process is restricted to art-history graduates, nor does the field-specific examination programme not create an autonomous statutory title of art historian.

Institutional acts differentiated disciplinary expertise within this common hierarchy. Seven museums used an explicit art-historical designation, although art historian functioned as a modifier of curator, senior curator or museum adviser rather than as an independent professional title. The Museum of Applied Art represented the only case in which specialised art-related jurisdiction was organised exclusively through generic curatorial titles. Table 1 presents the complete cross-case comparison.

Table 1. Cross-case matrix of formal art-historical jurisdiction

Institution	L1-L2: statutory grade and disciplinary designation	L3-L4: organisational and collection anchoring	L5-L6: qualification and task jurisdiction	L7: continuity across grades
National Museum Niš	Curator/senior curator/museum adviser; curator-art historian	Department of Art History; assigned collections, art domain not separately named	Art history only; full task bundle	Preserved across the graded post
Homeland Museum Priboj	Curator; curator-art historian	Department of Art History; art-history collection	Art history or fine arts/academy profile; full task bundle	Not established in the analysed act
Museum in Prijepolje	Curator; curator-art historian	Department of Art History; art-related collection responsibility	Art history or fine arts/academy profile; full task bundle	Not established in the analysed act
National Museum Šumadije	Curator; curator (art historian)	Department of Art History; collection data unavailable	Qualification and tasks unavailable	Unavailable in the analysed amendment
City Museum Sombor	Curator/museum adviser; art historian retained in the title	Fine Arts Department; fine-arts collection domain	Art history only; full task bundle	Recorded at curator and museum-adviser levels
National Museum Zrenjanin	Curator/senior curator; art historian in both titles	Museum Activities Department; named Fine Arts and Applied Arts collections	Art history only; full task bundle	Recorded at curator and senior-curator levels
Museum of Applied Art	Curator/senior curator/museum adviser; no disciplinary designation	Collection-defined departments; named applied-art collections	Broad humanities or arts; full task bundle	Not applicable
National Museum Pančevo	Curator; curator-art historian	No separate art-history unit; object responsibility, collection not named	Art history only; full task bundle	Not established in the analysed act

Source: Author's research

Note. Full task bundle comprises formally prescribed responsibility for research, documentation, acquisition or valuation, object or collection protection, exhibition, publication and public interpretation. Unavailable fields were not inferred from other sources.

Organisational embedding assumed several forms. Niš, Priboj, Prijepolje and Kragujevac established a Department of Art History; Sombor used a Fine Arts Department; and Zrenjanin placed art historians within a broader Museum Activities Department while incorporating named collections into their posts. The Museum of Applied Art organised generic curatorial posts through collection-defined departments, whereas Pančevo prescribed a curator-art historian post without a separate disciplinary unit. Formal disciplinary recognition was therefore not dependent on an autonomous departmental structure.

Collection anchoring was explicit in five cases. Priboj assigned an art-history collection to the relevant curator, while Zrenjanin incorporated the Fine Arts and Applied Arts collections into the corresponding posts. Sombor and Prijepolje linked the analysed posts to art-related collection domains, and the Museum of Applied Art distributed responsibility through departments organised around named applied-art collections. Niš prescribed responsibility for assigned collections without separately identifying an art collection, while Pančevo prescribed art-historical research, valuation, protection and interpretation of museum objects without naming a collection.

Qualification requirements produced the clearest divergence. Niš, Sombor, Zrenjanin and Pančevo restricted the analysed posts to an art-history educational profile. Priboj and Prijepolje used the designation curator-art historian but admitted art-history and fine-arts or academy-trained profiles. The Museum of Applied Art combined generic curatorial titles and broad humanities or arts eligibility with substantial responsibility for specialised collections. Qualification closure was therefore exclusive in four cases, alternative in two, broad in one and unavailable in one.

The comparison identified three configurations. Relative alignment occurred where disciplinary designation, art-history qualification and collection or object accountability converged, most clearly in Zrenjanin and, through different arrangements, in Niš, Sombor and Pančevo. Title-credential decoupling occurred in Priboj and Prijepolje, where an art-historian designation coexisted with non-exclusive disciplinary entry. Title-object decoupling occurred in the Museum of Applied Art, where generic curatorial titles carried specialised collection and task jurisdiction. An explicit disciplinary title therefore did not necessarily establish exclusive disciplinary entry, while its absence did not demonstrate the absence of formal art-related authority.

4. DISCUSSIONS

The findings clarify the formally ambiguous position of art historians within the Serbian museum system. Art historian is not an autonomous statutory museum title, but art-historical education and expertise may determine eligibility for a post, organisational placement and responsibility for museum objects. Although Article 52 permits the professional-examination programme to be prescribed by professional fields, Articles 53 and 54 establish curator, senior curator and museum adviser as the relevant statutory titles. Neither passing the professional examination for curatorial work nor acquiring a higher curatorial title is legally reserved for art-history graduates. Art-historical jurisdiction must therefore be reconstructed from the interaction between the national title hierarchy and institutional acts regulating particular posts.

This configuration extends the application of jurisdiction theory to state-regulated museum work.

Abbott (1988) shows that professional jurisdiction may be settled differently in legal and workplace arenas. In Serbia, these arenas are formally connected because Article 48 authorises institutional general acts to translate national regulation into concrete organisational arrangements. National law determines recognised museum titles, entry requirements and progression through higher grades, while museum acts specify disciplinary designations, admissible qualifications, organisational placement and responsibility for collections. The result is a documented law-to-workplace chain in which different regulatory levels govern different components of professional authority.

Fourcade's (2009) distinction between nested jurisdictions and professional authority built into state-centred structures further specifies this relationship. Art-historical authority is not simply nested within another market profession. Museum expertise is incorporated nationally into a state-regulated curatorial hierarchy, while disciplinary authority is established institutionally through posts, qualifications, organisational units and collection assignments. Vertically distributed jurisdiction describes this allocation of regulatory functions: occupational recognition is established at one level, whereas disciplinary eligibility and object accountability are specified at another. The concept therefore identifies a mechanism connecting state regulation and institutional organisation rather than renaming Fourcade's category of nested jurisdiction.

The comparative cases revealed two forms of formal decoupling. The term is used in a restricted documentary sense to denote divergence among formally prescribed elements, not organisational failure or a gap between regulation and practice. Title-credential decoupling occurred in Priboj and Prijepolje, where the designation curator-art historian admitted educational profiles other than art history. Title-object decoupling occurred in the Museum of Applied Art, where generic curatorial titles carried extensive responsibility for specialised applied-art collections. These configurations demonstrate that nominal disciplinary recognition may overstate closure in one institution and conceal specialised authority in another.

The findings consequently qualify title-centred interpretations of museum professionalisation. Titles influence professional identity, labour-market visibility and perceptions of institutional value (Jensen, 2019; Khosrowjerdi et al., 2024; Ripley & Hurley, 2025; Yaron, 2024), but they cannot independently establish formal jurisdiction. Freidson's (2001) relationship among specialised knowledge, credentials and control over work provides a more adequate analytical basis. Collection accountability is especially important because it identifies the object domain within which acquisition, attribution, valuation, documentation, protection, research and interpretation are exercised. Although collection responsibility alone is insufficient, its combination with prescribed expert tasks constitutes a documentary carrier of specialised authority under either disciplinary or generic titles.

A common curatorial hierarchy should not be interpreted as deficient professionalisation. Multidisciplinary museums require shared structures for coordinating research, stewardship, documentation, exhibition and public functions (Evetts, 2011; Noordegraaf, 2015). The governance problem arises when identical designations communicate different qualification boundaries or when collection-specific responsibilities remain invisible. Institutional acts should therefore identify separately the statutory title and grade, the required disciplinary or interdisciplinary qualification, and the collection or object domain of accountability. This would improve recruitment, promotion, institutional statistics and professional mobility without introducing a separate statutory title for every academic discipline. It also extends Krstović's (2023) account of institutional misalignment by locating measurable divergence within the formal construction of individual posts.

The study is limited by purposive sampling, unequal public availability of institutional acts, temporal asymmetry and single-researcher coding. It identifies formal configurations rather than their national prevalence and cannot determine how responsibilities are informally distributed, how recruitment decisions are made or how employees understand their professional identities. Explicit coding rules, provision-level evidence, conservative treatment of missing information and negative-case analysis improved auditability but did not eliminate these limitations.

Future research should combine a national census of operative museum acts with longitudinal document comparison and interviews with curators, directors, examination bodies and higher-title commissions. Comparative application in other state-regulated cultural systems could establish whether disciplinary authority is carried primarily by titles, qualifications, organisational units, collections or their combinations, and test the wider applicability of vertically distributed jurisdiction.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The post-2021 Serbian museum system demonstrates that professionalisation cannot be inferred from an occupational title alone. Articles 51 and 52 connect museum work with appropriate education and a professional examination prescribed by fields, while Articles 53 and 54 define curator as a basic title and senior curator and museum adviser as higher titles. Article 40(18)–(19) separates the examination from higher-title acquisition. Neither route is legally reserved for art-history graduates, and art historian is not an autonomous statutory museum title.

Institutional acts translate this framework into different combinations of designation, qualification, organisational placement, tasks and collection responsibility. Priboj and Prijepolje show that curator–art historian may coexist with non-exclusive disciplinary entry, while the Museum of Applied Art demonstrates that specialised collection authority may be exercised through generic curatorial titles. Nominal disciplinary recognition is therefore neither necessary nor sufficient evidence of formal jurisdiction.

Vertically distributed jurisdiction describes a configuration in which occupational recognition is established through a state-regulated hierarchy, while disciplinary eligibility and object accountability are specified institutionally. Connecting Fourcade's (2009) distinction between nested and state-centred structures with Abbott's (1988) legal and workplace settlements, the seven-dimensional model reconstructs formal jurisdiction without treating title as its sole indicator.

The findings support explicit alignment rather than title proliferation. Institutional acts should distinguish statutory title and grade, required qualification, and the collection or object domain of accountability. Because the study identifies formal configurations within eight purposively selected museums, its conclusions require testing through a national census of operative acts and comparative research in other state-regulated cultural systems.

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